Silhouette

1798
January

CARA COLTER
CASSIDY CARON

LOVE'S NINE LIVES

SILHOUETTE Romance

PerPetually Yours
An Instinct for Romance

Cara/Cassidy Colter/Caron
Love's Nine Lives

Аннотация

HE HARDLY KNEW HER, BUT HE ALREADY WANTED TO BE A BETTER MAN….She made rugged contractor Justin West believe he existed only to protect those more fragile than himself. And that, more than anything, told him Bridget Daisy was trouble. Justin had experienced enough heartache to make him unwilling to settle down anytime soon. And the lovely librarian exemplified commitment–from her copper-colored bun to her big orange cat, who saw no room for another male in Bridget's life. Justin couldn't agree more. So he vowed to stop thinking of her eyes, and lips and his hands in her hair. He would be a perfect gentleman.There was only one problem. He had never been a gentleman.

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He was having the unfortunate and powerful effect of making Bridget completely addled.

Which she'd been from the moment she'd opened her door, looked way up and seen him push his fingers through the chocolate silk of his hair. His eyes had been mesmerizing—a mix of gold and green, with a light burning in them that even she could see was frank male appreciation.

The light had said Justin didn't see her as little Miss Librarian, despite the severity of her hairdo and the straight lines of her skirt. Somehow he had seen through all that as if it was nothing more than a disguise—a role she played. He had seen her as a woman and something shockingly primal in her had answered back.

Which was dreadful, of course. Because it went without saying that he was the kind of man she absolutely loathed.

Dear Reader,

Whether you're enjoying one of the first snowfalls of the season or lounging in a beach chair at some plush island resort, I hope you've got some great books by your side. I'm especially excited about the Silhouette Romance titles this month as we're kicking off 2006 with two great new miniseries by some of your all-time favorite authors.

Cara Colter teams up with her daughter, Cassidy Caron, to launch our new PERPETUALLY YOURS trilogy. In Love's Nine Lives (#1798) a beautiful librarian's extremely possessive tabby tries to thwart a budding romance between his mistress and

a man who seems all wrong for her but is anything but. Teresa Southwick returns with That Touch of Pink (#1799)—the first in her BUY-A-GUY trilogy. When a single mom literally buys a former military man at a bachelor auction to help her daughter earn a wilderness badge, she gets a lot more than she bargained for…and is soon earning points toward her own romantic survival badge. Old sparks turn into an all-out blaze when the hero returns to the family ranch in Sometimes When We Kiss (#1800) by Linda Goodnight. Finally, Elise Mayr debuts with The Rancher's Redemption (#1801) in which a widow, desperate to help her sick daughter, throws herself on the mercy of her commanding brother-in-law whose eyes reflect anything but the hate she'd expected.

And be sure to come back next month for more great reading, with Sandra Paul's distinctive addition to the PERPETUALLY YOURS trilogy and Judy Christenberry's new madcap mystery.

Have a very happy and healthy 2006.

Ann Leslie Tuttle

Associate Senior Editor

Love’s Nine Lives

Perpetually Yours

Cara Colter
Cassidy Caron

www.millsandboon.co.uk

This one is for Hunter.
Without you, this book, and so much more,
would not be possible.
Thank you for all the lessons and laughter.
Who knew so much joy could come from one small being?

Books by Cara Colter

Silhouette Romance
Dare To Dream #491
Baby in Blue #1161
Husband in Red #1243
The Cowboy, the Baby and the Bride-To-Be #1319
Truly Daddy #1363
A Bride Worth Waiting For #1388
Weddings Do Come True #1406
A Babe in the Woods #1424
A Royal Marriage #1440
First Time, Forever #1464
* Husband by Inheritance #1532
* The Heiress Takes a Husband #1538
* Wed by a Will #1544
What Child Is This? #1585
Her Royal Husband #1600
9 Out of 10 Women Can't Be Wrong #1615
Guess Who's Coming for Christmas? #1632
What a Woman Should Know #1685
Major Daddy #1710
Her Second-Chance Man #1726
Nighttime Sweethearts #1754
Love's Nine Lives #1798

Silhouette Books

The Coltons

A Hasty Wedding

CARA COLTER

shares her life with the man of her dreams, her spirited teenage daughter, Cassidy Caron, several spotted horses and a fiery orange tabby cat. Her perfect day includes writing, riding and reading. Cara has weaknesses for Tim Horton's iced cappuccino (a true Canadian pleasure), English toffee coffee and high-quality chocolate (the only known remedy for writer's block). Working with her daughter to create this story was one of the most gratifying experiences of her career.

CASSIDY CARON

Eighteen-year-old high school student Cass Caron has been an extraordinary explorer of the Canadian wilderness. She has participated in grueling back-country treks, horse-pack trips and fly-in adventures. Cass has sold articles to outdoor publications, trained horses and worked in an orchard. She loves cats and is frequently inspired by them. Her dreams for her future include a high-action outdoor career and a man who cooks!

Conan's "to do" list

1. Cat nap.
2. Inspect litter box.
3. Cat nap.
4. Exercise – half lap around kitchen table.
5. Snack – boycott diet cat food. Butter should be on counter.
6. **#1 URGENT:** Foil any attempt by Justin "the pest" West to romance Miss Bridget Daisy.

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Chapter One

"Conan, please."

He curled his tail more tightly around his body and squinched his eyes shut, feigning sleep. Unless she was offering sautéed shrimp, she could forget it.

"Conan, just try one little bite."

Something disgusting was wafted in front of his nose.

Diet cat treats. Ha, as if the words diet and treat could be used successfully together. He opened one eye, glared at his mistress and then snapped it shut again.

"Conan, you know what the vet said. You are a tiny bit overweight."

The vet was a horrible old man who smelled overwhelmingly of dogs. As if that wasn't bad enough, the good doctor's body odor and breath gave away an even more treacherous secret: vegetarian.

The veterinarian was a dog-loving vegetarian, and she was going to take diet advice from him? The man knew nothing about the delicacies of dealing with a cat, that had been obvious.

He heard his mistress walk away, so Conan opened one eye, placing an orange-colored paw carefully over it so he could watch her unobserved.

He felt momentarily contrite. Her copper-colored hair, usually so neatly put back into a bun, was hanging loose around her face.

Her green eyes were wide with worry, and there was a wrinkle in her normally unblemished forehead. She was still in her pajamas, something unheard of, even if it was Sunday morning.

She was obviously distressed, and it made Conan realize that she really was not as confident or mature as her primly done hair and straight-lined business suits suggested. Really he was partly to blame for that visit to the vet.

Okay, fully to blame. He'd been a free-roaming tabby his entire sorry life, until he'd found himself in lockup and had been rescued by her late last fall.

At first he thought he must have used up his ninth life, even though he'd been counting pretty carefully and thought he was only on seven. For it had seemed, after being adopted from the Hunter's Corner Pet Shelter, that he must have died and gone to heaven!

Miss Bridget Daisy was one of the few people he'd ever met who really deserved to own a cat. First the name: Conan. Celtic for "mighty one," she'd explained to him after days of making lists and debating over just the right name. Really, what could have been more suiting? The mighty one. Perfect.

And then the food! She was constantly delighting him: roasted chicken livers, succulent steak bits and his all-time favorite, sautéed shrimp.

Okay, okay, things were not perfect, even in heaven. When winter had come she had presented him with a sweater with his name on it. And a horrid little hat. A guy should have had

way more pride, but he had a weakness for the shrimp. Miss Daisy might look innocent, but she knew how to play a guy's weaknesses.

Right now, having been shrimp-deprived for three whole days, he'd probably wear a tutu for one small morsel of seafood, any variety.

But the biggest problem with coming home to Miss Daisy hadn't been the clothes, as humiliating as they were. No, it had been the fact that she wouldn't let him outside without a leash. A leash! Of course, in the winter, who wanted to go outside anyway? Winters were made for snoozing on the couch. But spring changed everything…

Which brought him to the visit with Dr. Veggie, the vet.

Conan had been perched in one of his favorite places—on the back of her couch—minding his own business, really.

And then the bird had landed at the feeder, a location that had seen dismally little traffic over the winter but was looking more promising now. The front-yard feeder was shaped like a little house, with shutters and cute signs all over it that said things like Open for Business and Birds Welcome. As if birds could read! The expression birdbrained had not manifested out of thin air.

The bird at the feeder had been a purple finch, something Conan adored even more than shrimp, if that was possible. He felt finch had the most delectable flavor—slightly wild and faintly smoky with just a touch of bitter aftertaste, probably from the feathers.

In no time at all, focused with hunter intensity on the bird, Conan had totally forgotten the window. He had gone into a crouch, his tail switching, his eyes narrowed on the prey. He'd waited, knowing the bird would make a mistake, land on the ground, greedy thing, wanting that one more tiny seed….

There it was. His moment. Even as he'd launched himself, he'd heard her voice in the background.

"Conaaaan, nooooo!"

Too late.

He'd bounced back off that window as if he was a tennis ball spiked from a racket and lay on the floor dazed, blood—important blood, his—splattering the carpet around him.

Hence the unfortunate meeting with Dr. Veggie, a white-haired antiquity with more wrinkles and creases than that Shar-Pei monstrosity Conan had been forced to share the waiting room with. Conan had hated the little winter balaclava Miss Daisy had made for him, but he hated this more—his whole head wound with white tape, his ears poking through two holes in the top, his face completely surrounded in white as if he were a nun wearing a wimple.

It was horrible. And was there a little sautéed shrimp to help him through his most humiliating moment? No, there was not.

Because the evil dog lover had pronounced him overweight. Nothing so scientific as a scale either. Just prodding with those poochie-smelling fingers that had been God knew where else that morning!

Miss Daisy could be counted on to be thorough, though. She had taken him home and put him on her bathroom scale. He should have known her gasp of dismay did not bode well for his culinary endeavors. She had actually thought the scale wasn't working.

"Twenty-six pounds! Conan, I don't think that's possible."

Of course it wasn't possible. He was a little portly, not fat. It was not at all his fault. His mother had also been big-boned.

But then Miss Daisy had weighed herself, and it seemed the scale had been correct after all.

So now he lay curled on the couch, looking like a cat extra for The Mummy and feeling slightly crazed from food deprivation. It was a low point in his life, he decided. He'd had a sniff of the diet food she'd put out and decided it was worth sulking for a few more days to see if he could make her come around.

He heard her pick up the phone and perked up slightly.

Maybe she was giving in. Would the pizza joint be open at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning? He got the pepperoni nicely gobbed with melted cheese, and she got the inedible portions—tomato paste and crust. There was simply no figuring humans.

"Dr. Thornfield?"

Conan groaned and put his head back down.

"It's Bridget Daisy. I'm sorry to bother you at home. I'm calling about Conan." There was a long pause. "No, no, his head seems fine. No, no blood seeping through the bandages. Of course it doesn't stink!"

The man was gross. Couldn't he word things more delicately than that?

Her voice went very low, as if she didn't want Conan to hear, but he was a cat, which meant superior hearing. Superior everything, come to that.

"I think he's depressed," she whispered into the phone.

Yes! Depressed. Treat immediately with vanilla ice cream, with just a little shrimpy-poo on top.

Miss Daisy was quiet for a moment and then when she spoke, her voice had an unfamiliar icy note in it.

"I can't believe you said that! You think I need to occupy myself? A husband? A child?"

Conan winced and barely staved off a painful flashback from his former life. Oh, no, he did not care for husbands or for children, and look how quickly she had taken the dieting advice!

But he needn't have worried. Her voice was now quite loud, shrill even.

"What a totally unprofessional thing to say! I thought you were a man of education and refinement. I can see now I was wrong. You are—"

Conan held his breath, waiting, delighted. You give it to him, Miss Daisy, he thought. He was streetwise enough to have various phrases at hand that he would have loved to hear her use on the evil dog-loving, diet-prescribing Dr. Veggie.

"You are—" her voice quivered with righteous anger "—hopelessly old-fashioned!"

Disappointment washed over Conan. Sheesh. Hopelessly old-fashioned? What about You are a dog-breathed poop eater? What about You are a birdbrained worm slurper? Sometimes Conan wondered if there was any hope at all for Miss Daisy.

She marched into the living room. “Why,” she said, her voice still quivering with indignation, “he’s just another barbarian. Just like all the rest of them in this town.”

Ah, yes, Conan had heard quite a lot about the town’s barbarians. That was how Miss Daisy referred to the male population. Beer-swilling barbarians whose idea of culture was growing in the bottom of their lunch pails. According to Miss Daisy, every single man in Hunter’s Corner, Ohio, loved duck hunting and fishing and playing pool. The name of the place should have given her a clue. Redneck heaven.

Duck hunting usually involved dogs of some sort, so Conan was against that, but he thought she might have been too quick to write off fishing. A nice freshly caught trout, braised in butter and garlic, was nothing to turn up one’s nose at!

He had no opinion on pool, but if it was one of the reasons Miss Daisy had ended up at the animal shelter seeking companionship, he could hardly condemn it.

She never really said she was lonely, but Conan could tell. She’d told him most of her life story his first night in residence, curled up together on the sofa, her popping little soft-centered nondiet cat treats into his mouth as she talked.

She was from Boston and had a master’s degree in library

science. When she'd been offered the position of librarian here, in this northeastern corner of Ohio, right after completing university, she had jumped at the opportunity.

"Of course," she had told Conan that night, "I always thought I'd move on. To a bigger place, a city bursting with art and live theater and music. To a place with corner cafés that serve lattes, quaint little bookstores filled with old treasures and outdoor flower markets."

She sighed heavily and pulled him more tightly into her bosom. "But, Conan, I have come to love my little brick library across from the town square. I've done so much with it in the two years I've been here! We have story time and a poetry club. The chess club meets there once a week. Why, the collection is marvelous for a small-town library! How could I leave it?"

Still, he could see her dilemma. How was a woman like her ever going to find companionship in a town where men drove pickup trucks with wheels nearly the size of her house?

At the animal shelter, of course!

Barring the sweater, hat and leash, it had not been an unhappy arrangement, really, until the last three days. Now Conan wasn't so sure if it was going to work.

"I've got it," she said suddenly, squatting down by the couch and running her hands tenderly through his fur. "I know how to make you happy."

He sighed with relief. Their first fight over, then. Of course she knew how to make him happy.

She was reaching for the phone book. Oh, goody. That meant takeout. Perhaps she had just realized the calamari was calorie-reduced. With a nice little side of salt-and-pepper squid…He began to purr happily.

She was frowning at the phone book. "How do I find a contractor?" she muttered. "Every single one of them will take one look at me and realize I'm a woman alone. I'll be overcharged for shoddy workmanship."

What the heck was she talking about? What did any of that have to do with honey-glazed salmon?

"I'll ask Fred, the maintenance man at the library," she decided, closing the telephone book.

Conan willed her to reopen it to the Yellow Pages, Restaurants, but she did not.

Instead she picked him up as if he didn't weigh anything near twenty-six pounds and waltzed around the room with him tucked next to her heart.

"Conan," she announced, "you are getting a cat door!"

His disappointment was sharp. A cat door was a long, long way from the little tuna sushi rolls that he favored.

"I'll have it installed in the back door and I'll have the fence replaced around the yard and then you can go outside and play while I'm at work. I won't have to worry about you going over the fence either."

My God, she thought he was too chubby to drag himself over a fence?

He glared at her, but she was oblivious to his mood, dancing around, blabbering about drawing up specifications.

Her mood was hard to resist, however, and suddenly it struck him what he was being offered.

Freedom. The great outdoors in springtime.

She had bird feeders everywhere in that backyard! It would be like having his very own drive-through window.

I'll have the McFinch, please.

Conan chuckled to himself. It came out as a deep, rich purr, and his mistress hugged him tighter.

"I knew I could make you happy," she said blissfully.

Justin West hopped out of his truck and eyed the house. It was in the older part of Hunter's Corner, a neighborhood called Honeysuckle, where small, postage-stamp-size houses sat on huge lots surrounded by the neighborhood's namesake. At this time of year the air smelled sweet with the scent of the blossoms that hung heavy in the shrubbery.

This house was extremely well kept, the shingle siding painted sunshine-yellow, the trim, stairs and window boxes white. Cheerful red geraniums were already planted in those boxes. A front window was open and a lace curtain danced on the light spring breeze.

"Thanks, Fred," Justin muttered.

Justin owned West's Construction, a construction company specializing in framing new houses. The north side of town was building up phenomenally as more and more people left the cities

looking for exactly what Hunter's Corner, population fifteen thousand, had to offer—a small-town feel and flavor.

There was no Wal-Mart, no Starbucks, no multiplex theaters. The town was tidy, safe and neighborly. For amenities, it boasted a town square with a park that children still played in. There was a library, a swimming pool that was open in the summer, two grocery stores, one ice cream parlor and close proximity to the great outdoors and all its attractions. People here sat on their front porches, grew gardens, threw out a fishing pole in their spare time. Kids rode their bikes down the tree-lined streets and walked unescorted to school.

Justin West had more work than he knew what to do with.

He didn't need the kind of job a tidy house in Honeysuckle implied—a little old lady who wanted a new washstand for the backyard. He'd be plied with cookies and tea—and get phone calls long after the job was done about imaginary popped nails or squeaks. When he arrived to investigate, there would be more cookies and tea and pictures of the new grandchild.

On the other hand, Fred had asked him to come and at least look at the job. And how could he say no to Fred?

In his seventies, Fred was still the town maintenance man, refusing to reveal his actual age or to consider retirement. He had also been Justin's father's best friend since the days when Hunter's Corner had been little more than an autumn retreat for city boys who wanted to bag a deer or two. Fred had been there through all those lonely, hard years when the Alzheimer's

took hold, wrapped its tentacles around Justin's father's mind, changing him from a powerful man into a baffled, helpless child. Fred had never once said, "I'm too busy," when Justin called in panic because he had to be at work and his dad was having one of "those" days.

His dad had gone finally, a bittersweet blessing. And now Fred was asking a favor of him, of Justin, for a lady friend.

Justin wasn't going to return the friendship and loyalty that Fred had shown his father with I'm too busy, even though he was.

Justin took the front steps two at a time, knocked on the door —loudly, in case Fred's lady friend was deaf. He thought it was nice that Fred had a lady friend. Fred's wife had been gone for nearly fifteen years. And his best friend for just over a year. It was about time—

The door opened, and Justin reeled back, nearly stumbling off the step. He grabbed the handrail and steadied himself.

The woman smiling tentatively at him was shockingly beautiful, maybe particularly in contrast to his expectation that the door was going to be opened by someone old and wrinkled and deaf.

Justin gauged her to be in her mid to late twenties. She had hair the exact color of shiny new copper, pulled back quite severely off her face. But the severity of the hairstyle only emphasized the loveliness of her features: high cheekbones, a pert nose, a small tilted chin, a gloriously generous mouth. There was the slightest smattering of freckles over milky-white skin, and eyes that were

huge and green as Smoky's Pond on a summer afternoon. She was slender as a reed and petite, the kind of woman that gave a man the dangerous feeling that he was big and strong and that he had been put on this earth for the sole purpose of protecting those more fragile than himself.

She had an enormous orange cat in her arms that was comically bandaged around its head. Justin had a feeling it might be a mistake to laugh at the cat, which was glaring at him with baleful dislike. She juggled its bulk to offer a slender hand.

"Justin West?" she asked.

He took a steadying breath and accepted her hand. It was cool and soft and small—and packed a jolt like a shock from a circular saw with a bad connection in a rainstorm. He held her grip a fraction longer than might have been necessary. The cat shifted its weight, forcing her to withdraw her hand or let the cat slide down her front.

"I'm Bridget Daisy. Thank you for coming."

So he did have the right address. She was Fred's friend, though obviously not his lady friend in the way Justin had imagined. He glanced at her ring finger. Bare. Lord have mercy!

"Come in."

He stepped by her, aware of a lovely fragrance, light and sweet, as he moved directly into her living room. The room increased his sense of being big and male, clumsy and uncouth. There were trinkets, potted plants, a vase of fresh flowers on the floor at the edge of the couch. If he breathed, he was going to

break something.

"Have a seat," she suggested.

Where? Everything in the room was small and frail-looking, not man-size at all. The tiny sofa was set on curvy legs and was covered in a fabric that looked suspiciously like ivory silk that would be destroyed by his just-finished-work-for-the-day jeans and T-shirt.

His gaze caught on an old leather wingback that looked slightly sturdier than her other furniture. The chair was rump-sprung, as if it was the favored spot of someone with a little more meat on their bones than her. Justin beelined for it, but her delicate cough stopped him just short of sitting down. He glanced back at her.

She smiled apologetically. "That's Conan's chair."

Conan? He felt a wave of relieved disappointment. Ring fingers didn't really tell the story these days. But he should have known a girl like her came with a guy named Conan. Muscle-bound. Big. Territorial. Couldn't the roommate build her washstand or whatever she wanted?

She moved by him and set the cat in the chair. "Isn't that right, Conan?"

Conan was the cat? The cat inspected the spot carefully, turned two full circles, then plopped himself down. The chair groaned, and the cat gave Justin a look of naked dislike, as if it was somehow his fault the chair was making noises. Then Conan dismissed their visitor by delicately lifting his tail and beginning his bath.

“I didn’t want you to get hair on your clothes,” Miss Bridget Daisy told him.

He looked down at his clothes. Like a little cat hair would hurt? But she gestured to the sofa, and he reluctantly perched on the corner, trying to make as little contact with the highly soilable silk as possible.

She took the far end of the same sofa, and now that she wasn’t hiding behind the cat, he could see she was wearing a businesslike suit in an unflattering color that flattered her nonetheless. Despite her slenderness, she had curves in all the right places. When she sat down, the tight skirt edged up, revealing the most adorable little kneecap.

“Sorry?” he said, realizing she was saying something.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice. Fred said you were very busy. How do you know him?”

“He’s my godfather. He and my dad were best friends since they were kids.”

She folded her hands primly over that delicate little knee and regarded him solemnly. “How long have you been building, Mr. West?”

“Justin,” he corrected her. “Uh, ever since I can remember. It’s a family business. Between my grandad, my dad and me, we’ve built just about every building in town.”

“Oh.” She looked very pleased by that. She slid a little clipboard out from behind one of the cushions and made a mark on it. “So is your work guaranteed, then?”

He realized, stunned, that he had somehow become an involuntary participant in a job interview. He ordered himself to wake up and quit looking at her kneecap, to take charge of this situation by letting her know in no uncertain terms he wasn't going to be insulted with an interview. That's not how it worked.

He came in, looked at the job, gave her a price. Take it or leave it. Unfortunately her eyes were every bit as distracting as her kneecap.

"I stand behind my work," he said shortly.

"Of course you'd sign something saying that?"

Devastating kneecaps and eyes aside, he could feel himself starting to get annoyed. "What kind of job do you have?" he asked. He hadn't even said he'd do the job, and she was talking about signing something? He had houses to build. He was doing her a favor by being here!

Almost shyly she reached behind her pillow again and came out with a thick manila folder, which she passed to him. The shyness—her dropping her thick lashes over the amazing green of her eyes rather than holding his gaze—made him bite back his annoyance and take the folder.

"This is my project prospectus," she told him happily, meeting his eyes briefly before looking away. Was she blushing?

He tore his eyes away from the heightened color in her cheeks and felt the weight of what had been passed into his hands. It was thicker than the Hunter's Corner telephone directory. What the hell was her project? A new shopping mall? The Taj Mahal

comes to Ohio?

He opened the cover of the folder. A full-color eight-by-ten glossy of the cat was clipped to the first page. In the photo the cat was wearing a knitted purple sweater and he looked none too happy about it either.

Justin shot Bridget Daisy a wary look. Was she nuts? What a shame that would be, but of course that would explain why a woman this gorgeous but single had gone undetected on the Hunter's Corner bachelor radar. Not that, God forbid, he was on the lookout for single women. After having had responsibility for his ailing father since high school, Justin West was enjoying freedom.

Getting tied down would not be his idea of a good time.

An evening with those kneecaps, though, no strings attached…

He looked hurriedly down at her "prospectus."

"I'll go make us tea while you have a look at that."

"Great," he muttered, but kissed his fantasy of an evening with her kneecaps goodbye. Tea? If the offer had been for a beer or, better yet, a whiskey, there might have been hope, but he could see there was not. She was not his kind of woman.

While she busied herself in the kitchen, he reviewed a two-page letter that invited him to study the Statement of Work—in brackets, SOW—for the installation of a Cat Door and Yard Fence and then sign the Contract for Work (COW) if he was in agreement with the SOW.

With growing consternation he studied her invitation. Lettered from A to I, she required a firm price, payment schedules, commencement dates and completion dates, warranties of workmanship and materials, proof of insurance, four references and any other information he felt might be pertinent.

He listened to the kettle whistle in the kitchen, eyed the door, thought of Fred and took a deep breath. He opened page one of her twelve-page Statement of Work.

On page three he got it suddenly. He peeked up from the document and saw her in her kitchen arranging cookies on a plate.

He slid a look around the living room. There had to be a hidden camera somewhere. The guys loved a practical joke, and this was a good one. Imagine them roping Fred into playing a part in getting him here. Pure genius, that one. This probably wasn't even her house. She was an actress, maybe even a professional one, though Justin wasn't sure how you went about finding someone like that in Hunter's Corner. He decided he'd play along until she said, "Smile, you're on…"

She came back in with a silver tea tray and set it on the coffee table. The teacups looked as though they held about a thimbleful of tea, which suited Justin just fine. He wasn't much of a tea drinker. He watched, reluctantly fascinated, as she poured. He didn't think the queen could do it any better.

"Have you had a chance to look things over?" she asked

eagerly, passing him a cup and a saucer. When he took it, the tea sloshed out of the cup. The cup was flimsy, as if it was looking for an excuse to shatter, and his fingers did not fit through the wispy little handles the way hers did. He could only hope it was a prop.

"This is a complicated job," he said solemnly. He took a sip of tea and tried not to wince at the bitter, weedy flavor, since he was sure that would entertain the guys more when they reviewed their videotape. He set the cup down, locked his hands together and leaned intently toward Bridget.

"You probably didn't know that the construction of the door affects the integrity of the structure of the house. It won't be cheap."

"That's what I thought," she said sadly.

God, she was good. The guys must have the tape running. He hoped so. Because he planned to have the last laugh when they all looked at it together later.

"For instance, this—" he flipped randomly to page four of the SOW "—about R28 insulation? That would make the depth of the cat door at least eight inches. And heavy. Not even Mr. Hefty over there could push it open."

"Mr. Hefty?" she said. Her voice had a little squeak in it that seemed quite genuine and her eyes sparked with indignation that looked real.

"Not to worry," he assured her. "All problems are surmountable. We'd have to install an electronic opener."

“For a cat door?”

“Well, you’re the one who specified R28,” he pointed out not unkindly, playing to the camera that he just knew was in here somewhere.

“I didn’t realize that would make the door quite so cumbersome,” she admitted.

She talked like a girl with a college education. Yeah, majoring in drama. She was frowning and looking anxious.

Playing it perfectly. And the Academy Award goes to…

He ignored the distressed look and flipped to another page of the SOW. “And this part here, about preventing rodent infestation? You have to take it further than that. You have to think of skunks and raccoons. Even a small break-and-enter artist—one of those young kids who hang around the park at night—might be able to squeeze through.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said nervously.

“No, ma’am. I can see that. Twelve pages of SOW and you missed the obvious. Luckily I have a solution.”

“You do?” she said hopefully.

“Yes, ma’am. I think we could rig a computer system that identifies your cat, and your cat only, by his nose print.”

She went very still. Comprehension dawned in her eyes. After a long time she said very softly, “Are you making fun of me, Mr. West?”

“Hell, yeah!” She winced when he said hell. “The game’s up. I know the guys put you up to this. A twelve-page prospectus for

a cat door! Ha-ha.”

He slapped his knee, but noticed uncomfortably that Miss Bridget Daisy was not laughing.

Chapter Two

Bridget stared at the big man, and she was struck again by how his big, powerful hand was making her teacup—a lovely Royal Doulton that she had inherited from her grandmother—look like a toy.

He was having the same effect on her sofa. With his huge frame jammed into the corner of it, a sofa she had always been perfectly content with suddenly seemed as though it belonged in a dollhouse.

In fact, Justin West, in the short time he had been there, was having the unfortunate and powerful effect of making it seem as if her whole life was make-believe, as if she had been playing with toys and imaginary friends and here was the real thing.

Justin West was real, all right. The man was one hundred per cent real—huge, handsome and infuriatingly male. She had felt addled from the moment she had opened the door, looked way up and seen him push his fingers through the chocolate silk of his hair. His eyes had been absolutely mesmerizing—a mix of gold and green, with a light burning in them that even she could see was frank male appreciation.

That light said Justin didn't see her as little Miss Librarian, despite the severity of her hairdo and the straight lines of her skirt. Somehow he had seen through all that as if it was nothing more than a disguise—a role she played. He had seen her as a

woman, and something shockingly primal in her had answered back.

Oh, not in words, thank God. In awareness. She had felt as though she sat on her edge of the couch practically quivering with nervous awareness—the easy play of his muscles; his scent, wild and intoxicating as high mountain meadows; the light in his eyes; the husky, deep sensuality of his voice.

Which was dreadful, of course. Because it went without saying that Justin West was the kind of man she absolutely loathed: full of himself, sure of his own attractions, shallow as a mud puddle. He would be just like all those athletic boys in high school and college who had known she was alive only long enough to poke fun at her. Justin West was one of the happy heathens of Hunter's Corner.

Any small and secret hope that he might be different somehow than the other redneck men of this town were dashed. If Justin was really different she would have seen him at the library where the more refined citizens tended to gather. And she had never seen this man in her library.

This man thought the cat door was some sort of joke. He was making fun of her, just the way all those handsome, cocky boys in high school and beyond had always made fun of her.

Miss Priss. Four-Eyes. Brainiac.

As if there was something shameful about being smart. The painful taunts came back as though he had uttered them…and so did her feeling of helpless fury, not that she would ever allow

him to see it. In her experience, showing vulnerability only made things worse.

With as much dignity as she could muster she said, “I don’t know what guys you are talking about, Mr. West.”

“Probably Harry Burnside, right?”

“Harry Burnside?” she said coolly. “I’m afraid I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Yeah, right.” But doubt flickered across his features, and he looked down at her carefully prepared folder and frowned. “Well, come to think of it, I’m not sure Harry could spell infestation. Or rodent.”

“And this is a friend of yours?” she asked, her tone deliberately controlled, faintly judgmental. Given the unsteady hammering of her heart, she was quite pleased with herself.

He didn’t seem to hear her. He looked at the document, then back at her intently. His frown deepened. “And Fred would never be party to a plan like this, no matter how good the prank was.”

“You think my cat door is a prank,” she said, and she could hear the dullness creeping into her own voice. “I think it would be a good idea for you to leave now.”

He looked at her sharply, his gaze too all-seeing.

Was that pity she saw crowding the male arrogance out of his handsome features? She got up, nearly knocking over her teacup. She folded her arms over her chest and then released one just long enough to point at the door.

“Get out of my house,” she ordered.

He swore softly—a word only a barbarian would use—got up and moved toward her. He towered over her, and she knew if she moved one inch, he would think he had succeeded in intimidating her.

"Are you telling me this is for real?" he demanded. "I am insulted that you would think this was anything but real," she said. She heard the hurt in her voice and tried to cover it by pointing at the door once more, more forcefully than the last time.

"You're insulted?" He took a deep breath, looked away from her, ran a hand through his hair and then looked back. "Okay, Bridget, it looks like I made a mistake. I thought the guys hired you to play a prank on me."

"Was that an apology?" she asked. "If so, I seem to have missed the I'm sorry part."

Her breath caught in her throat. The man was looking at her lips! As if he found her aggravating and unreasonable and knew of only one way to solve that difficulty!

Well, he probably did only know one way. These types of men had limited methods of communication. Though he did have amazing lips, now that she was focused in that direction. The top one was a firm, hard line, but the bottom one was full and puffy. He wouldn't dare kiss her!

But if he did, she wondered what it would taste like. Feel like.

"Get out," she ordered again, but she could hear a despicable weakness in her own voice, and apparently he could, too, because he made no move toward the door.

Instead he folded his arms over the enormousness of his chest and gazed down at her, aggravated.

"Just for the record, you aren't the only one who got insulted here. Lady, I have built whole houses on a handshake. I am not signing a twelve-page contract to build you a stupid cat door."

"Stupid?" she said huffily.

"Yeah, stupid," he said.

"Fine," she said stiffly. "I wouldn't offer you this job if you were the last man on earth. I will find someone to build my door who has enough integrity that signing a contract doesn't frighten them. And who doesn't think my project is stupid! And who doesn't think I'm an eccentric old—"

"Okay," he said, mercifully preventing her from having to say it—that she was an old maid. "Nice meeting you. Have a nice life."

He went to move by her and then paused, sending a wary glance at the couch to see if his work clothes had marked it. Bridget actually felt a treacherous softening for him when he looked relieved to see they had not. He edged his way to the door.

"Look," he said, an infuriating note of protectiveness in his voice, as if he was the big, strong guy and she was the frail, feeble woman. "Be careful."

"Of?" She tapped her foot and looked at her watch.

"Anyone who needs those kind of instructions for such a minor piece of work is going to be nothing but trouble."

"I'll judge that for myself, thank you."

“I’m just telling you this because Fred would probably kill me if I didn’t.”

“I am eternally in your debt,” she said, but he missed the sarcasm entirely and kept on talking.

“You can buy a cat door at the local hardware. If someone charges you more than fifty bucks to install it, they’re cheating you.”

“I don’t want the kind from the hardware,” she said tightly.

“Why the hell not? They’re not R28, but I’m sure they work fine.”

She debated telling him the truth. She did not want to, and yet the words just slipped out of her mouth. “Conan might get stuck.”

She felt an instant sense of having betrayed her cat.

Justin turned and studied Conan. “Why do I get the feeling if that cat was any bigger and I was any smaller, he’d have me for supper tonight?”

He doesn’t like you. He’s a good judge of character. But she retained any dignity she had left by not saying it.

“Okay, so you want a custom cat door. No more than a hundred and fifty bucks. The fence is the bigger job. I wouldn’t pay more than fifteen hundred for it, including materials. Two thousand if it’s cedar.”

She felt good manners entailed she should say thank you, but she didn’t.

The thought evaporated instantly when he spoke again

anyway.

"And don't show that SOW-COW thing to anyone. No self-respecting contractor will want to work for you. It makes you look like a nitpicking perfectionist."

A nitpicking perfectionist? That was at least as hurtful as being called Four-Eyes. Miss Priss. A brainiac. Old maid.

"And let me warn you, there are plenty of contractors out there who aren't the least self-respecting. Crooks, who would milk a girl like you for all you had."

"I did a lot of research to prepare that document," she said with all her dignity. "And I'm not a girl."

"I'm telling you that SOW COW spells one thing—T-R-O-U-B-L-E." He looked her over, put his hand on the doorknob and then grinned at her with seducing and wicked charm. "And so do you," he said.

Then he was gone.

Bridget snapped the front door closed behind Mr. West and then turned her back and leaned her full weight against it as if she had just narrowly escaped…well, something.

She wasn't quite sure what.

Or maybe she was.

Though she firmly ordered herself not to, Bridget drifted over to her front window and peeked around the edge of the curtain.

She watched as he leaped into a truck that she probably would have needed a stepladder to get into.

Despite her firm orders to her mind not to think about his

body, she remembered it in sharp detail: him sitting on her couch, the large muscle in his forearm jumping every time he took a sip of tea, his jeans molded over the ridged muscles of his thighs, his chest huge and solid under a stained T-shirt. He had probably done that on purpose, made those muscles leap, the swine.

"Well, who is swooning over the swine?" she demanded of herself. The truck started with a roar and pulled away from the curb in a spray of gravel.

He would do everything too fast. A blush heated her neck and her cheeks as her mind flew with that one. "I just meant," she told herself sternly, "that Justin West is a man of rough edges and no refinement whatsoever."

He had insulted her and treated her like an idiot.

"I'll show him," she told Conan. "You wait and see."

Conan opened an eye and regarded her, looking unconvinced.

But Bridget went right to the phone book and made a list of every contractor in the county. In the morning she would check them out with the Better Business Bureau. Within a week she would have a cat door, and Justin West would be a faint, unpleasant memory.

Only that wasn't quite how it worked.

Because a week later she was no closer to getting Conan his cat door. After submitting her prospectus by fax or courier to over a dozen contractors, she had been laughed at, sworn at and hung up on.

Even when she reluctantly retired her SOW, no one had the

time to do such a small job. The one quote she was given seemed outrageous, and it didn't even include an automatic cat-door opener. She was reluctantly grateful that Justin had given her a guideline for the pricing of her project.

To make matters worse, Conan seemed to be getting fatter. How could he be gaining weight? She was only putting out a limited amount of the diet food, and he barely seemed to be touching that. She could see the poor cat was depressed. She now saw he needed to be outside.

"Oh, Conan," she said, touching his head. "The hair will grow back where the bandages tore it off. And you lost a whole two ounces this week. I'm sure of it."

The cat seemed to know she was lying, just as her inner self knew it was totally untrue that she had not found Justin West just about the most maddeningly attractive man she had ever met.

The house was in darkness and Conan lay sprawled on Miss Daisy's favorite green Victorian armchair, relishing the amount of orange hair he was successfully grinding into the fabric. Some things were off-limits even to him—this chair and the countertops to name a few—but he considered his trespass a legitimate part of his ongoing protest campaign. As soon as he was certain she was asleep, he would make his nightly raid.

Meanwhile he contemplated how life had deteriorated from the dieting doldrums to just plain hell. Starving wasn't good enough. Oh, no, now he had to be bald, too. The bandage removal from his head had taken huge patches of his head fur with it. It

was an absolute assault on his dignity.

As if coping with the diet and hair loss were not bad enough, Conan could feel the most subtle shiver in the air since that nasty nail pounder had made his appearance to discuss the cat door. The man had been rather dirty, he'd been rude and he'd been unreasonable to poor Miss Daisy. Still, Justin Pest meant trouble, Conan sensed that as easily as he could sense the coming of a storm. Why else would his fifteen-minute collision with their lives still be creating ripples?

And creating ripples it was! Since that unfortunate incident, Miss Daisy had not been herself. She seemed constantly agitated, possibly because her attempts to "show him" had been largely unsuccessful. Conan had gotten to the point where he crept into the other room while she did her nightly relay of phone calls to yet more contractors. Her humiliation was painful.

Mostly since it meant she had forgotten on three and a half separate occasions to fill his food dish. Even if it was with diet gruel, the oversight was unnerving. So was the fact that she had been neglecting to scratch his belly on demand and wandering past him as if in a trance, her rumpled list of contractors clutched in one hand.

Judging by Miss Daisy's volatile reaction to the barbaric cat-door contractor, most inexperienced cats would say that Justin Pest didn't stand a chance of worming his way into her life. But cats were equipped with a sonar called instinct, and Conan had felt something powerful, perhaps even untamable, in the air

between Miss Daisy and the nail pounder. The man did possess a certain powerful ease with himself that a cat had to admire.

History had an unfortunate way of repeating itself, and Conan had lived through this particular scenario before. In his past life, he'd lived satisfactorily with a female of the human species, too. Oh, she had been no Miss Daisy—rather a washout in both the affection and culinary departments, actually—but she had been adequate. She'd opened and closed the door of her trailer home pretty much on demand, kept the litter box reasonably clean and kept the food dish full. Bargain-basement cat food, but at least not diet.

Then some canine-reeking slob had begun to make appearances. And then he had moved in. Before Conan had really adjusted to that, along came that nasty, smelly, screaming baby. And out went the cat.

"Babies and cats don't mix," his previous owner had told him as she'd tossed him from the car into a dark, filthy alley. "Cats have a history of smothering babies, so you have to go."

Of course, this statement was totally unfounded. Conan blamed that particular vicious rumor on those witch-hunting activists four hundred years ago. They had actually published a falsified drawing of a cat sucking the life out of a baby. Human history was rife with wackos! Not to mention barbarians.

Needless to say, although Miss Daisy's reaction to Justin Pest had seemed void of potential for the type of relationship that created yucky, stinky little humans, there was something about

her behavior Conan found disturbing.

Among a cat's many, many strong points was superior intuition. And Conan's intuition had gone on red alert when Justin Pest had entered the room. It was not like Miss Daisy to be so fidgety. And what had he glimpsed in her eyes every time her gaze had locked onto one of that man's many bulging muscles? Hunger.

Ah, yes, and Conan had become an expert on hunger.

Still, he could sense a very dangerous energy between the two. Miss Daisy had not been alone in sneaking peeks. Unless he was very much mistaken, Conan suspected Justin had liked her kneecaps. And more!

They were just a little too aware of each other in that way. Of course, it manifested as sparks, words spoken with a little too much heat.

Defense mechanisms. Thankfully Miss Daisy's defense mechanisms could rival those around Fort Knox. Hopefully they would protect a poor little cat who had already been abandoned once due to the inconveniences of human love.

It was really too depressing to think about, so Conan lifted his head off his paws and listened. Silence. The house was at rest.

He slithered from the chair and made his way on silent feet to the kitchen. Miss Daisy was in such a state of mind, she was not aware of the enormous butter consumption her household was suddenly suffering.

She had carefully weighted the fridge door with sauce bottles

and such so that Conan could no longer open it himself. She had also hidden his nondiet treats and food. Even the diet ration was stored in an inaccessible cupboard above the fridge.

Well, if she was determined to make him resemble a POW rather than a beloved pet, he was called to action. It was not enough to just sulk angrily, especially since she seemed somewhat oblivious to his moods this week.

With all her cat-food-hiding precautions, Miss Daisy had somehow overlooked the fact that she kept the butter on the counter.

Each night Conan delightedly helped himself, making sure to keep the half-pound portions in a reasonably square shape. However, in Miss Daisy's recent state of mind, he doubted that she would have noticed if the butter looked like Swiss cheese in the morning. But the risk of losing his source of saturates produced caution.

He had just had his first lick when he heard a sound. He catapulted from the counter just as the kitchen light was flipped on.

She padded out in her housecoat and slippers. He looked at her, all wide-eyed innocence, not that she seemed to notice.

"It's too late to phone," she mumbled to herself.

Not for pizza, it isn't. Conan rubbed himself against her legs. She reached down absently and petted him and then retrieved a package of graham wafers from the cupboard.

"Not that he looked like the type that would go to bed early.

Did he?"

Oh, God. Conan did not even have to ask who.

"Naturally I wouldn't hire him after how he behaved—"

Good.

"—but Fred says he's the best in town. Very fast. His work is apparently impeccable." She sank down on a chair and buttered a cracker. She popped the whole thing in her mouth and swallowed. Conan had the ugly feeling she hadn't even tasted it.

"I said I wouldn't hire him if he were the last man on earth," she reminded herself.

Exactly, Conan thought, and a better decision you have never made.

"He is the last man on earth," she wailed, unfolding her list of contractors and studying the crossed-out names bleakly. She picked up the phone.

Drastic measures were called for! Conan leaped on the counter and buried his face in the butter.

"Conaann!"

He hadn't heard such genuine distress since he had launched himself at the window. His face covered in butter, he leaped from the counter and raced down the hall.

After a full second he realized she was not following. He crept back down to the kitchen and peered around the corner at her.

The butter would be stored now, under lock and key, just like everything else. He had gambled with his last card in hopes of distracting her and he had failed utterly. Because she had the

phone in her hand and a look of fierce determination on her face.

"My cat is acting bizarre," she muttered, obviously working up her courage and her conviction.

Bizarre? Excuse me? Who was forgetting to fill the food dishes?

"Conan needs a cat door." She drummed her fingers on the tabletop, unaware that Conan had crept back and was watching her.

"Mr. West?" she said. "I'm sorry. Did I wake you? It's Bridget Daisy here." She tucked the phone under her ear and scraped the butter into the garbage. She closed the lid with a snap. "We need to talk about the cat door."

But Conan was sadly aware that whatever transpired between Bridget and Justin Pest next, the cat door was only an excuse.

Still, he had lost the battle—and the butter—but not the war. Surely he was a crafty enough cat that he could get rid of this new threat to his and Miss Daisy's world? That world was topsy-turvy enough with the whole diet thing, never mind adding the complication of a barbarian.

If he played his cards right, Conan thought there was a possibility he might get his cat door first before dispatching the barbarian.

Who needed butter when the world was full of purple finches?

It had been a bad week. Conan had been starved, he was bald and now he had been unfairly labeled bizarre. Still, all cats had been blessed with a gift that the great philosophers and spiritual

leaders of the ages tried, largely unsuccessfully, to emulate.

No one could detach from their difficulties and immerse themselves in the pure joy of the moment quite like a cat. Conan lifted his paw to his face and removed some of the lovely pale yellow substance that clung there. He licked it delicately and sighed with bliss.

Ah, Foothills. His favorite creamery.

Chapter Three

Justin folded his arms behind his head and stared up at his bedroom ceiling. He'd called Bridget Daisy "trouble" right to her face, and she'd still come begging, which probably meant she was double trouble.

Not, he decided, that you could call what had just transpired between them "begging." No, dear Miss Daisy had told him how it was going to be, right down to the price she was going to pay—two thousand one hundred and fifty dollars for a custom cat door and a new cedar fence, including materials and labor—and when she expected work to commence.

First thing tomorrow morning, as if he didn't have a house nearly at lockup and three other homeowners breathing down his neck.

A saner man would have just said no. But he already knew every other contractor in town had said just that. Except for Duncan Miller, who'd said he'd do the job for nine grand.

"I bet I'd earn every penny of it, too," Duncan had told the other contractors who generally gathered for early-morning breakfast at the Roundup Grill and Flap-jack House on Main Street.

Oh, yeah, Miss Bridget Daisy had been the talk of the morning-contractor crowd for a week now. They poked fun at her mercilessly. Several copies of her SOW and COW were in

circulation.

Justin didn't join in the fun. For one thing, he was at a disadvantage. He was the only one who had actually seen her. The rest of her contacts had been by phone or fax or courier. So all those guys poking fun at the eccentric old-maid librarian really didn't have a clue.

And Justin didn't enlighten them. He didn't tell them she wasn't old and she wasn't ugly. He didn't correct them when they guessed that her panty hose bagged around her ankles and that she bought her dresses in extra-large at Wilson Brothers Tent and Awning.

When the guys painted imaginary pictures of her with granny glasses, pinched face and pursed lips, Justin didn't say one word about eyes a shade of green that haunted him every night before he slept. Or about copper-colored hair that looked as if it needed to be freed from that bun, needed to have a man's hands hauled through it.

Justin told himself his failure to join in the funfest being provided by the circulating cat-door contract and prospectus was only out of loyalty to Fred. Who wasn't actually speaking to him and who had not spoken to him since he had mentioned that his meeting with Bridget Daisy had not gone well.

"Yeer tellin' me," Fred had said sourly, "that a big fella like you was sceered of her waving a few pieces of paper at yar? Poor girl. She must have been taken advantage of afore to be workin' so hard at protectin' herself."

Justin had not wanted to think about it in that light. But he had anyway. He'd thought of that every time another contractor sat down at the Roundup and entertained anyone who would listen with a tale of her call about her cat door. They made fun of what they called her "snooty New England accent." The sow and cow jokes were flying hard and heavy, with new ones created all the time. They conjectured about her looks and put warts on her nose. They wondered about the exact nature of her relationship with the cat, figuring she was probably casting spells at midnight.

Justin alone knew that with those eyes she didn't have to wait until midnight to cast a spell—or need the cat either.

Justin told himself he hadn't joined in because he had better things to do than poke fun at the town librarian. It bothered him that he saw men he had worked with and joked with and eaten breakfast with and drunk beer with in a new light—as if they were small and mean-spirited and didn't have nearly enough to keep them busy.

He felt he could probably attribute this high road of thinking to Fred, but he knew that wasn't the whole truth.

The whole truth was he hardly knew the woman and already their acquaintance was forcing him to be a better man. Justin hated them laughing at a woman who was misguided but not mean or vicious. She wasn't even that strange. She just didn't know anything about their world and how it worked. Was that a crime?

The whole truth was that Justin wished she wasn't scared of

being vulnerable, and after seeing the lunk-heads having such fun at her expense, he understood perfectly well why she was.

And now, staring at his ceiling, he told himself he was going to do the job because of Fred, but he knew in his heart of hearts that wasn't the entire truth either.

There was just something about Miss Daisy that was driving him crazy.

In that moment of vulnerability, shaken by sleep as he had been by the husky loveliness of her voice, he admitted what it was.

He wanted to see her again.

Ached for it.

"Trouble," he said out loud. "Justin West, she means trouble."

He was the wrong kind of man to deal with a woman like her. He was all rough edges, and she was all polished refinement. He had learned almost everything he knew about life—and he figured that was plenty—from the school of hard knocks. She came from an ivory tower. What she knew about the real world he could probably put into a thimble. And what he knew about her world—of books and culture and all that crap—could fit in the same size container.

"Hey, West," he told himself sternly. "You're going to build her a cat door. You're not proposing marriage."

Oh, yeah, she'd be that kind of woman. The kind who liked commitment and rings and church bells and everything done just so. He could tell by the way she kept her house and treated her

cat. She was just dying to get her hands on something worth caring about.

At least he knew for sure that was not him.

He liked putting his feet on the coffee table and eating supper right from the can. He liked fishing and hunting and a game of pool with the guys. He liked satellite TV because he could watch football and baseball and hockey until the cows came home. And he liked women who wore tank tops and low-slung jeans, who drank too much beer and sang rowdy songs in the parking lot after the bar closed.

But if that was true, how come not one of those women's eyes had ever haunted him long after he'd said goodbye?

He looked at the clock. He should call Bridget back and tell her he'd changed his mind. He'd checked his schedule, he couldn't do it.

This was already way more complicated than he liked his life, and he hadn't even started the job yet.

Of course, if he did tell her the deal was off, then he'd have to explain it to Fred.

And the truth was, he missed Fred. They had talked on a more or less daily basis for a whole lot of years. Fred was what he had left of family. The old guy was solid as a rock, loyal and wise.

And Fred liked Bridget Daisy.

"Okay," Justin bargained with the ceiling. "I'm doing the job. I'll do most of it while she's at work. It will be like my good deed for the year. There won't be any more thoughts of her eyes or

her lips or hands in her hair. Not a single one. I will be a perfect gentleman.”

There was only one problem. He wasn’t quite sure how to be a perfect gentleman.

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