

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

"Magic Ingredient" is a short story/anecdote from Kimberly Frost's Southern Witch series. The story takes place seven years before the first novel, *Would-Be Witch*, begins. For information about other stories in the Southern Witch series, please visit: <http://FrostFiction.com/>

## Magic Ingredient

A Southern Witch interlude

By: Kimberly Frost

The Cleary Hotel's terrace pool had been closed at three in the morning when Bryn Lyons had drawn power from the Perseid meteor shower. The ill-timed arrival of the custodian had forced Bryn to leave before he'd finished collecting the energy he'd summoned. The magic wouldn't normally have been so scattered, but he'd nearly depleted himself the night before. Bryn rolled his shoulders and yanked off his tie, restless after the long day.

Residual magic coated the building like stardust, and he felt its pull. He'd been steady for all the morning interviews, but the three-martini lunch with Sugg Reynor of Kulpacki, Dean & Reynor had left his control frayed. When the liquor had swirled in the glass like a whirlpool, he'd had to lean back and shove his hands in his pockets. Sugg Reynor had taken it as a sign of confidence and smiled a broad grin.

"We heard you're considering London, New York, and New Orleans."

"No," Bryn had said. "Not London. I plan to remain in the States." *An ocean away from the World Association of Magic headquarters*, he thought. He had a score to settle and when he

did, it would be safer to be out of the Conclave's easy reach. He hoped the power he'd sent through a transition mirror to his friend Andre had been enough to protect the underground network they'd resolved to join. Spending so much supernatural energy would be worth it if it protected his friends.

"We've heard about the New York offer," Sugg said. "How'd you get a firm that big to chase you with a number like that?"

*How does he know how big the number is?* Bryn wondered. "I interned there. They liked my work."

"Hard for anyone fresh out of law school to generate much. How are you going to earn that salary?"

"Hard work and quick wits?"

"Right," Sugg said with a grin. "Did you put in long hours with June Bigelow? I hear she's divorced again."

Bryn smiled. June Bigelow had been a consummate professional and a hell of a mentor until the day his internship ended. Then she'd propositioned him seven times in seven days. He'd wanted to sleep with her, but he hadn't because at that time he'd been involved with Gwen. Also, he wasn't a fool.

"Ms. Bigelow was a great mentor."

"Did she teach you about some things other than the law? Rumor has it she's worth the ride."

Bryn's fork vibrated with angry magic. *Easy*, he told himself. *Sugg Reynor's not a frat boy looking to swap stories. This is part of the interview, to see how I handle myself when forced into an awkward position.*

"If June Bigelow wanted to hire a gigolo, I imagine she'd pay him the going rate. Wasting money is not her style. She prides herself on the fact that she's been divorced three times without losing a cent."

"Hmm," Sugg said, tossing back the last of his martini. "You told Kulpacki you want to come back to Texas. We're the best fit for you in Dallas, and everyone knows it. But we were young hotshots once, too. We'd be a pack of fools not to find out what June Bigelow expects you to do for the salary she's offering."

"She expects me to make her a lot of money right out of the gate."

"How's that?"

"I met Nina Pearce-Owens on an elevator and gave her June's card."

"Nina Pearce-Owens. Who's she married to?"

"She's married to billionaire Nigel Owens. Not happily. He cheated on her with a trio of prostitutes. There is no pre-nup."

"And she told June she wants the good-looking lawyer she met in the elevator to handle her case?"

"I wasn't privy to the details of their conversation or even whether she called June. But when I told June I planned to move back to Texas, she offered me the largest salary a new hire has ever been offered in the history of Warner Bigelow."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I wish I wanted to live in New York," Bryn said, mock mournful.

Sugg threw back his head and laughed. "You're going to piss away the chance to get in on a multi-million-dollar divorce case with June Bigelow as lead? Now I'm wondering just what you expect from us? Because it won't be the salary June's offering. Nowhere close."

"I've got ties to Duvall, Texas. This is where I want to be," he said. It would be crucial in the coming months to be within driving distance of the Duvall tor. If Bryn needed power in a hurry, that was the best place from which to draw it.

"You don't want to spend even another year on the East Coast? You'd be in a better position to negotiate. A little seasoning would do you good."

"It would, but I'd rather get it here."

"Well, we've got an offer for you. High five figures and an office with a view."

"With a bonus if I bring in a desirable client?"

Sugg's brows went up, and his flushed cheeks grew ruddier. "A Texan? How desirable?"

"Someone like Cissy Lowell."

He let out a low whistle. "Boy, you've been living in New Haven. How'd you meet Cissy Stringer Lowell?"

"Met her on an elevator."

He roared with laughter. "You ride a lot of elevators."

"That's because I never meet anyone interesting on the stairs."

"So Cissy's thinking of leaving old Royce? He's not gonna like that. You know you probably shouldn't have told me. What's to keep us from reaching out to her on our own? If you don't bring her in, there's no bonus."

“I’ll risk it,” Bryn said, risking nothing. Cissy Lowell wasn’t leaving her husband. Becca Charles though, who shared Cissy’s pedigree and former sorority, was leaving her cocaine-addicted plastic surgeon husband at the end of the week.

“We can swing a bonus. You come on board and bring in the right client, and you can expect to reap the rewards.”

“Thank you, sir,” Bryn said.

They’d shaken hands, and Bryn had politely declined the invitation to have another drink. He needed to gather the residual power he’d left on the roof, and he couldn’t do that if he were passed out in his hotel room.

\* \* \*

Dressed in black trunks with a towel around his neck, he went to the terrace pool. A group of teenagers was in the deep end, splashing and playing. A flash of red hair caught his eye, the way it always did. He passed through fragile strands of magic that lingered just inside the gate. He slowed his pace, glancing down so he could say a few words to suck the power into him.

The slip of a girl stood next to the pool, staring at the water’s surface. Her friends called to her to jump in, but she remained motionless. He realized with a small jolt that he recognized her. She was Marlee Trask’s daughter. He hadn’t seen her in years. She’d been a funny-looking kid when in middle school and shy, looking at her shoes when he’d smiled at her on the street once. She’d had the flame-colored Trask hair, but he hadn’t sensed even a wisp of their magic in her back then.

Her mother and aunt were beautiful with bright green eyes and magic that floated by like feathers on wind. He'd felt sorry for the little girl, who'd obviously inherited her dad's quirky looks and lack of craft. But the duckling was all swan now. She was still thin, her shoulder blades poking out from under her golden skin, but she also had curves.

Her face was lovely, too. Even from a distance, he could see the high cheekbones, the gold-flecked hazel eyes, and the rose petal lips. That wasn't the intriguing thing, though. The remarkable thing about the teenage Trask was the way her head tilted as her gaze roamed over the terrace. The tip of her tongue parted her lips, like she could taste the spray of Milky Way he'd drawn from the heavens.

A tall athletic boy thrust himself out of the water and strode to her. "What's up?" the boy asked her. Bryn recognized him, too. In a town where football was king, the kid who was the high school's star running back was something of a rock star.

*Sutton*, Bryn thought. That was his last name. The oldest Sutton brother, George, ran the construction company they'd inherited from their father. The family was solid and well liked.

The boy's lips moved in a whisper. Bryn reached out with a spell to catch the words. He shouldn't have wasted magic for that, but curiosity got the best of him.

"Don't you want to play?" Sutton asked her, and Bryn realized they were waiting on her to play volleyball. "Did getting pulled underwater earlier spook you?"

Bryn waited. If he was her boyfriend, did he know she heralded from a family of witches? Bryn couldn't help but envy their intimacy. She'd slept with this boy and had perhaps trusted him with her family's secrets.

The girl shivered and turned her head toward the boy whose arms went around her. She didn't explain what she sensed or even hint at it. No, she hadn't told him. That pleased Bryn, though he couldn't say why. Not that her reticence was surprising. The secrets of real power were closely guarded. He'd never told his girlfriends who weren't initiated in the craft what he was. But holding back the basic truth about himself made a real connection impossible. Only his relationship with Gwen had gone deeper—until she'd shown where her true loyalty lay. Ambition before affection. She was the Association's witch. Not his.

"Yeah, hang on to me," Sutton said, playing gallant, but also clearly glad for the chance to be skin-to-skin with her. "I've got you."

"I'm okay. It's only—"

"What?" Sutton asked.

"Nothing," she said with a smile. "Day-dreaming." She ran a hand through the boy's blond curls and smiled.

Bryn stiffened, feeling like a splinter of ice had been driven under his skin. The reaction startled him. *Why do you care?* he asked himself, but no answer revealed itself.

Clutching the little siren to him, Sutton sprung up and forward. For a split second the girl's eyes found Bryn's. For a suspended moment, she looked surprised, but then she blinked, and he spotted the realization.

*She knows.*

She'd felt the magic and hadn't known where it had come from until she'd seen him. The instant they'd locked eyes there was a connection. Witch to wizard, to the very heart of

what they both were. His hand nearly reached out of its own accord. He forced it to rest at his side.

The splash of their bodies hitting the water sent out waves that rolled over their friends' heads. While they were all distracted, he waited, reaching out for her with only his mind. Her magic passed like fluttering silk. He smelled heather, like he was home in Ireland, and then other things, honeysuckle, citrus, vanilla. He drew it all into his lungs and hungered for more.

The kids spotted him, some waving in recognition. He'd lived in Connecticut for school, but he'd visited Duvall a lot and was known there. They all looked over. Except her. Bryn held up a hand to greet them and waited for her head to turn, too. But her face stayed stubbornly on Sutton. She kissed him, clinging to the kid's shoulders like she was at sea and he was a life raft. Bryn fixed his smile; it wouldn't do to let it slip. Several kids followed his gaze to the kissing couple. Bryn dragged his gaze away, staring instead at the dazzling Dallas skyline.

She was too young for him. Probably not even eighteen, and still in high school. He never dated girls younger than him. He'd barely dated girls his own age.

*She's not for you. At least not yet.*

He stepped forward and dropped into the pool, glad to sink to the bottom. The shock of cool water was what he'd needed. He swam, careful to avoid the kids. After fifteen laps, he walked to the shallow end, reached the steps and climbed out. Swimming always calmed him. A quick glance revealed that the kids, including the red-haired witch, had gone.

*Good, he'd thought.*

\* \* \*

At nearly the witching hour of three a.m., in the time that bridged night and morning, he'd returned to the roof. With a powerful spell, he'd restored his magic to normal levels, and then, against his better judgment, he reached for traces of her.

His muscles tightened when he caught the scent of vanilla and citrus. Her magic fluttered against his skin, causing a slow burn.

He pushed open the door to a stairwell, felt her more strongly and, heedless of risk, jogged down the stairs, flight after flight, until he panted for breath. He exited on the main floor, searching. Only a lonely clerk manned the desk. He offered a brief nod and continued the hunt.

Across the lobby, past the elevators, and around a corner. Closer. Stronger.

He passed into a hall that was meant to be used only by hotel staff. There she was, dressed in a faded black t-shirt, cut-off shorts, and canvas tennis shoes. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. With no makeup, she looked impossibly young. How old was she? Sixteen? Seventeen?

"A fellow night owl," he said.

Her head snapped up and wide hazel eyes met his. "Hi," she said, in a voice as soft as moonlight.

"I know you, don't I? You're from Duvall?" he asked, his legs chewing up the distance until he was only a couple feet from her.

She took a deep breath and blew it out. He tasted a hint of raspberries in chocolate sauce. He was caught, spellbound.

"Yes," she said. "I live there."

"I'm Bryn."

Her eyes glanced away and then back to him. "I know who you are. Everybody does."

"Is my reputation that bad?"

The corners of her mouth curved up, and she shook her head. He had the unprecedented urge to cut through the useless small talk and to tell her something real, to give up a secret so he could lure one from her. This odd child-woman had untrained and untested magic, but it raised gooseflesh on his arms. *Why? And how?*

"What's your name?"

"Tammy Jo Trask."

"What are you doing down here? Are your friends around?" Her friends could be in hell for all he cared. He wanted to be alone with her, to figure out how the unexpected connection had been forged. Beyond intellectual curiosity, he knew there was another, more personal, reason he was pleased to find her on her own. He tried to bury the attraction he felt, annoyed with himself.

"They're upstairs. I ought to go," she said absently, her gaze darted to a nearby pair of doors. From the look of them, they'd swing open if pushed.

"What's in there? The kitchen?"

"Yep."

"Are you hungry?" he asked, thinking he wouldn't mind something himself.

"No, I just thought I might take a peek."

"At what?" he asked.

"I wanted to see what kind of equipment they have in a kitchen like that."

“Are you interested in hotels? In food service?”

“I’m interested in kitchens. The fancy kind.”

“Why? Are you planning to be a chef?”

She nodded.

“Well, let’s take a tour then.” He pressed the door with his fingertips. It didn’t budge.

With a few words and a thrust of magic, Bryn tripped the bolt. He gave one of the doors a shove and it swung in obligingly.

“That door was locked. I tried it!”

“That can’t be the case since it’s open,” he said with a smirk. They both knew how he’d unlocked the doors, but it was okay if she wanted to pretend otherwise.

“I guess what I’ve heard is true,” she said with a small smirk that tied him in knots.

“Most lawyers are crooked.”

He laughed. “You’re not going to hold such a minor offense against me, are you? You said the word ‘kitchen’ the way a priest says ‘sanctuary.’ I assume you’re not planning to vandalize the place.”

“Well, I guess now you’d better hope not,” she teased. She edged toward the door slowly, like she didn’t completely trust him not to grab her. Crazy, his fingers itched to do just that. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

*Under no circumstances should you touch this girl. Even if she’s reached the age of consent by law, she’s still at least six or seven years younger than you.* He thought about the way the Sutton kid had handled her. Bryn was sure she’d slept with him, but even so, there was

something innocent about her. Also, since when did he make a play for a girl with a boyfriend? He never had before.

Trying to resist touching her made it harder. It was as though he were being bewitched.

*There's no way. Her magic's not that strong.*

"Thanks for the help. I'll go in alone," she said.

*Yes, let her go in alone. And while you're at it, get a bloody grip.* "What's Tammy Jo short for?"

"Tamara Josephine," she said, stepping a few inches into the doorway.

"I guess you and your friends are having a hotel party. How many kids do you have in the room?"

"A fair few."

"Well if you need anything, I'm in 617."

"I don't think we'll get in enough trouble to need a lawyer."

"You never know," he said with a smile. "Good night," he added, but he didn't leave. *For Christ's sake!*

Luckily, she did. "Good night," she said with a wave, and then disappeared into the kitchen.

It took him a minute to exhale. And a couple more to muster the will power to walk away.

\* \* \*

Tammy Jo couldn't resist the industrial-sized kitchen. Carefully noting where each thing belonged, she set to work making chocolate lava cupcakes. She'd seen the recipe in a magazine in the bakery. The new owner, Miss Cookie, had magazines stacked on a small table just inside the door for when the line got long around eight in the morning.

Miss Cookie had given Tammy Jo a part-time job helping mornings before school. She even let Tammy Jo make a couple of special pastries Tammy Jo had invented. When Tammy's creations had sold out, Cookie put them on the regular menu on the blackboard above the counter. Tammy Jo hadn't said anything, but inside she'd been proud.

Now she rummaged through the stocks and arranged the ingredients by memory and instinct. She hummed and worked, keeping careful watch of the time. She bet the staff would get to the kitchen around four or five a.m. to start the breakfast orders. She'd best be gone before that if she didn't want to get caught.

She set the ovens and mixed the batter. When the cakes were inside, she cleaned all the pans she'd used, dried them, and put them away. She looked down in the bowl of chocolate ganache frosting. It was almost as dark as Bryn Lyons's hair. Heat crept up her throat to her cheeks. He'd been a good-looking teenager, but now he was so handsome he could've been a movie star. She'd never been so tempted to flirt with anyone in her life, but even if she hadn't been in love with Zach, she wouldn't have had the nerve. Bryn was smooth as polished silver and perfect as the icing on a wedding cake. Whip smart and flawless. He made her uncomfortable.

Also, there was the family prophecy that made him off limits. She glanced around the empty kitchen as if her mom or Aunt Edie might pop up to scold her for talking to him.

*Actually, she thought defiantly, it's not my fault that I had to talk to him. I did my part to stay away. I pretended not to notice him at the pool, as if it that was even possible. And I convinced everybody to leave before he finished swimming. It's not my fault I ran into him in the hallway at two-thirty in the morning. That's either fate's fault or plain bad luck. How was I supposed to know he's an insomniac wizard? Nobody tells me anything about him. If Momma and Aunt Mel knew that, they should've warned me.*

*Of course, if they were here they'd probably claim I could've walked the other way, but that would've been really rude. There was no way to pretend I didn't see him when he was standing right next to me. And how bad can he be? He was sweet enough to break and enter me into this kitchen. Not fraternizing after he did me an illegal favor would've been bad manners, right? Right.*

Besides, it wasn't like he'd tried anything funny. From all the warnings, she half expected him to attempt to lure her Big-Bad-Wolf-style up to his hotel room. She swallowed hard. All right, he had mentioned his room number, but probably not with any plans to turn her into a human sacrifice in a black magic ritual or anything. She was pretty sure about that.

She bit her lip. Though if anybody was built for luring a girl someplace to do black magic it was that guy. She bet most girls would follow him to hell and back. It was pretty impressive that all she'd done was talk to him.

*Yeah, good job, Tammy Jo.*

She rubbed her arms, recalling the way her skin had tingled. Had it been magic? She'd never been able to feel magic, but there'd been something special surrounding him, something silky and delicious rising like steam from the pool. And again in the hall, she'd felt it, as enticing

as the flavor of sun-warmed strawberries bursting on her tongue or the smell of melting chocolate. The tension had made her want to yell at him. Or to grab him and kiss him six ways from Sunday. She gripped the stainless steel counter and shuddered.

*Okay, Tammy Jo, that's enough. Yep, he's cute and sexy, but he's trouble and he's all wrong for you anyway.*

*Think about Zach. Remember him?*

Her heart gave a little squeeze at the thought of how sweet Zach had been all weekend. Teasing and flirtatious, he'd invited her along to everything the guys planned to do. And he'd broken off from the protesting group to take her to a famous fudge shop.

"Gotta earn me some sugar by getting you some," he'd joked.

She'd kissed him, of course, and leaned against him when he put his arm on the back of her chair at the table outside the shop. She and Zach fit together like the pieces of a spring-form pan, snapping into place, a perfect match. Zach wasn't a dark mystery to be unraveled. She trusted him more than anyone. Always had.

When the cupcakes cooled, she iced them and put a single raspberry on top of each one. She put half the cupcakes on a dish and poked toothpicks into four of them so plastic wrap wouldn't stick to their frosting when she covered them.

She wrote a note: *Your kitchen is awesome. Thank you!*

She guessed she'd used about twenty-dollars-worth of ingredients so she left thirty smoothed out next to the plate. She bet no teenager had ever broken into a hotel kitchen before just to bake. She pictured the head chef's face when he found the cupcakes, surprised that someone had come in the dead of night to make a treat for him. She was like an East Texas

teen version of Santa Claus. Kind of. She had been inside without permission. She hoped it wouldn't cause too much trouble. Maybe she shouldn't leave evidence behind.

She cleaned every surface she'd used. When she was satisfied she'd left it spotless, she took a box and filled it with the extra cupcakes, counting to be sure she had enough for everyone in the hotel room. *Plus one.*

Bryn Lyons was probably asleep, which was just as well, but she couldn't resist one last quick look if he wasn't.

She rode the elevator up and shuffled down the empty hall. It was nearly four in the morning. She yawned, but resisted the urge to rub her eyes with her free hand.

She knocked gently and waited. She wouldn't knock more than once, she told herself. Her heart thumped anxiously.

*He's asleep. Lucky for you!*

As she stepped back however, the door opened. He wore jeans and a T-shirt that advertised Guinness. She couldn't picture him drinking beer in a college bar with a rowdy crowd. In her head, something set him apart. He was magical and mythic. At the end of the night she half expected him to disappear like a unicorn. It was a crazy idea, but he hardly seemed real. Just a name long whispered in her house. *Forbidden.*

"Hello again," he said, stepping back so she could enter.

*That's as bad an idea as trying to hogtie a bull. Don't you dare do it!*

She didn't even look past him. She wasn't going into a hotel room with a Lyons, no matter how curious she was. *Curiosity killed the cat. And a whole lot of dumb schoolgirls who*

*fraternized with strangers their mommas warned them about. What's next? Hitchhiking in a mini skirt?*

"I brought you this." She lifted a cupcake from the box and held it out.

"Still warm," he said, taking a bite. He had even white teeth and left a bite mark. Just like the Big Bad Wolf would've. He swallowed, and his smile made her breath catch.

"Now that's the way dessert should taste."

"It's a chocolate lava cupcake. It's got a center that's kind of fudge-y. It might seem like it's not fully cooked, but that's the way it's supposed to be."

"Come in," he said.

She took a step forward, like an invisible rope pulled her, but stopped. *Barely.*

"No," she said. "I just wanted to say thanks for breaking me into that kitchen."

"Did you vandalize it beyond repair? Should I expect a visit from hotel security?"

"It would probably serve you right for breaking the law after you just left its school." She grinned. "But nope. We're in the clear."

He stared at her, and the air thinned, making her dizzy.

"Well," he said softly. "It would've been worth it." After a pause he held up the cupcake as if that was what made the risk okay, but he never took his eyes from her face.

"I've been offered a job here," he said.

"Congratulations."

"Do you ever come to Dallas? There's a culinary institute and several five-star restaurants. If you want I could—"

“Thanks,” she said, taking a step back. “But it’s really late. I have to go. My friends might be looking for me.” She whirled and started blindly toward the elevators.

Over her shoulder, she heard him whisper, “Good night, Tamara.”

\* \* \*

The room was stuffy, the air thick with the smell of seven teenagers, drying swimsuits, leftover pizza and the last drops of beer in dozens of cans. She wanted to escape back to the sixth floor, or at least to the hall, but she padded silently into the room.

She cleared a place for the cupcakes that they’d eat for breakfast. She strained her eyes and stepped over a pile of clothes to where Zach had put their sleeping bag near the air conditioning vent. She found her oversized T-shirt nightgown that she’d left folded on the bottom of the bag and changed.

Zach woke when she unzipped the sleeping bag and climbed in.

“There you are,” he said. “Where you been, darlin’?”

“I sneaked into the hotel kitchen and made chocolate lava cupcakes. They’ve got a gooey center that’s delicious.”

“Sweet and soft. Just like a girl I know,” Zach said, pulling her against him.

*He* smelled good, like the hotel’s mandarin orange soap and his own clean skin. She pressed her nose to his neck.

“I was just dreaming about you,” he said in a low voice, husky with sleep and more. He slid his hand down. She caught his wrist.

“Told you,” she said, trying to keep him from pulling free. “We can’t fool around in a room full of people. You said you wouldn’t mind all of us sleeping in one room, but I bet you do now.”

“I bet I don’t mind a bit,” he said, dragging her hand southward. The wicked grin in his voice and the wicked intent of his fingers made her toes curl, but she grabbed a handful of his curls and pulled his head closer to hers.

“Cut that out, Zach,” she whispered into his ear. “Someone will hear.”

“Shh,” he murmured, and things quickly spun out of control. “We won’t make a sound,” he promised.

They were very quiet, although his breath sounded loud in her ear. She hoped Smitty’s snoring drowned them out. The thing about Zach was...he could do things that made her not care about anything besides the way his body felt. Strong muscles, smooth skin, getting closer than anyone else ever had.

Later when they’d caught their breath, he held her against him and whispered, “You were right. Michelle was pissed when we convinced Todd to come go-kart racing tomorrow. She kept bringing up the mall and how he’d promised to take her. Georgia Sue said you guys would go.”

“Georgia Sue likes to keep the peace,” Tammy Jo said with a grimace. Tammy was sick of Michelle Halpern. Ever since the girl had visited her snotty cousin who’d been a deb at a fancy ball, all Michelle talked about was how much things cost. Tammy Jo had rolled her eyes at Georgia Sue when Michelle gave them a lecture about how they weren’t farm girls and ought to throw away all their cowboy boots.

"I told 'em you were coming with us. You'd rather race carts than go look at designer clothes, right?"

"Yep."

"Smitty said you girls were all too pretty already. 'Gets so we can't cross the street without y'all stopping traffic. Let's not throw designer clothes into the mix.'"

Tammy Jo chuckled. "That was sweet of him. Knowing how she's glued to the mirror, that must've made Michelle happy."

"That girl's never happy except when Todd's spending money on her."

"I know."

"She saw that Lyons guy at the pool today, and her eyes almost popped out of their sockets. Word has it the guy's loaded. He invested in some companies that made millions or somethin'. Michelle wanted to try to find out what room he was in to *'say hello'*. She's looking to trade up, more like."

"I bumped into him downstairs. He's here for a job interview."

"Bet he's got a big room."

"I'd imagine so," she said, glad she hadn't gone in when she'd dropped off the cupcake.

"It won't always be like this," Zach said. "Us sleeping on the floor in a sleeping bag. Or fooling around in the back of my truck on an old quilt. I'll buy you a house as soon as we're married. GW, TJ and I can build it to keep the cost down, so I can afford it straightaway."

Tammy Jo didn't mind living at home, but she'd like living with Zach better. Her own kitchen. Their own bedroom.

"If I make it to the NFL, I'll buy you the biggest house in Duvall," he said.

“You better not! People might expect me to join the Junior League or something,” she said with a cluck of her tongue. She’d said it as a joke, but she meant it, too. She wouldn’t be comfortable with gobs of money, stuck with folks who looked down their noses at other people. “I just want a regular house. Maybe one that backs up onto the woods. I like seein’ the trees. And if we want to use this sleeping bag sometime for sentimental reasons, it’ll be a short walk into the wood.”

Zach’s laughter ruffled her hair. “That’s my girl. Now what about that February fishing trip? I really wanna go. GW says you’re invited if you want to come. You and I can celebrate Valentine’s Day on the boat.”

“Surrounded by buckets of fish guts? How in the world can a girl stand so much romance at one time?” She rolled her eyes at Zach’s grin. “You tell GW I said thanks for the kind offer, but no thanks just the same.”

“Damn. You were almost the perfect woman.”

“You know, Miss Dabby fishes off the dock every day. You could take up with her and have it made.”

“Yeah, I been tempted. She looks awful good in that thirty-year-old fishing cap with the rusted lures on it. If I treat her right, she might even let me wear it sometimes.”

Tammy Jo smothered a giggle. “Now I know what to get you for Valentine’s Day. Think she’d sell it for ten dollars?”

“Nice hat like that? All broken in. At least twenty.”

Tammy Jo’s laughter caused bodies to stir, and she clamped a hand over her mouth guiltily.

Georgia Sue sat bolt upright on the bed. “Kenny, don’t let that child invade Mexico.”

Then she fell back with a thump.

“What the hell?” Zach said, and they both had to muffle their laughter. Kenny was sound asleep and facing away from Georgia Sue.

Tammy Jo’s shoulders shook, and Zach squeezed her against his chest, shushing her between his own chuckles. Finally, they got a hold of themselves and settled down.

She curled so her back was against his chest and her head rested on his arm.

“If you really don’t want me to go on that fishing trip, I’ll stay home,” he said.

“That’s months away. We’ll worry about it later.”

“Yeah,” he said sleepily. “But it’s a charter, so they need to know whether to sign me up.”

“Well, go. We can celebrate Valentine’s another night.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’ll make you happy.”

“Hell,” he said softly after a pause. “I just might be him.”

“Who?” she asked.

“The luckiest guy in the world.”