

Part I

Friday, 0530 hours...The Day After Thanksgiving

Morning came quickly for the young woman. Sunlight was barely creeping into the small cramped bedroom, waking the pride of cats sprawled out on the bed covers. Mewing and stretching served as the alarm clock for the other occupant of the bed. "OK, guys, I get the hint," mumbled the strawberry blonde as she started to get out of the bed. With her eyes still shut, she crawled out, quickly grabbing her tattered, but favorite, flannel robe to guard against the chill of the early morning air.

"Guess I forgot to close the windows again last night," Katie advised the cats, who were now running back and forth in anticipation of their morning meal. "One of these nights, I'll remember to close that darn window *before* I wake up in the morning!" she admonished herself out loud. *I just like leaving it open so the kids can get some fresh air while I'm out*, she thought. The fact that her companions were cooped up for such long periods without any company while she was at work accounted for her open window theory of "cat entertainment".

Katie held three jobs to keep herself, and her felines, afloat in the current economic condition of the county. Living in a "tourist paradise" was not all fun and games, at least not for the non-tourist. The locals, who had to eke out their livings in a variety of ways, had to pay the same inflated prices for groceries, gas, fast food, pharmacy items, etc. that the tourists did, only they didn't have the bottomless wallets that the tourists seemed to possess. Since most of the area employers would not hire "full time", thus avoiding paying benefits, Katie worked three part-time jobs to make ends meet. Juggling the schedule for three jobs really took some master planning on her part, but she felt it was definitely worth the effort to keep herself employed in the town of her choosing.

"Let's see. Do you guys want *Captain's Choice* or *Gourmet Grub*?" she asked her attentive felines.

"Greouw," answered the chubby tortoise shell cat named Butter, followed by two more meows.

"Oh, *Grub* eh? Well, that works for me." She reached over to the top of the counter and grabbed the can opener, a spoon, and three saucers so she could divvy up the can's contents. Butter, Sugar, and Spice all chowed down and then finished with their morning ablutions. Katie watched them, still amazed at their precise motions: two licks of the paw, swipe behind the ear, down the side of the face, repeat three times, switch to the other side.

Finally, she decided it was time to attend to her own ablutions. Gathering herself up, she went to the bathroom to grab a quick shower before putting on her waitress outfit for the early morning shift at Burp & Freddie's Diner, a local favorite with the tourist crowd. Emerging from the shower, Katie wiped down the mirror and took a good look at herself. "Looking good. My little exercise program seems to be working out well. My instructors were right...when you're in the field you learn to make do and be inventive." She turned and checked out her back profile and nodded. "Who needs a fancy gym!"

Spice entered the tight bathroom and jumped up on the sink counter. The feline looked at her mistress and gave a loud meow of approval, squeezed her eyes shut in a quick blink then jumped down and sauntered out of the bathroom. Katie chuckled, "Thanks for the vote of approval," she said as she watched Spice leave.

Katie always took pride in the way she looked, but wanted to be extra cautious that her hidden strength remained just that — hidden. It was important that no one suspect this 5'6" blonde was anything but a single, young woman struggling to earn enough to establish her independence. She picked up her towel and put it on the rack to dry then finished getting ready for work.

On her way to Burp & Freddie's, Katie reflected on the current influx of tourists. It was the end of November and the height of deer hunting season. The tourists at this time of year were not like their summer counterparts, who were a lot more refined and at least knew what proper behavior meant. This lot was cut from different cloth, or perhaps, it was the season that brought out different mannerisms.

In addition, they were also not the best tippers, and hunting season was just starting. *It'll get worse!* she thought with a sigh. Katie pulled her pristine, turquoise blue, 1957 Chevy into the back of the parking lot that was reserved for the hired help. "Another day, another dollar," she quipped to herself. "It's almost not worth it, but I need this cover so I'll do what I gotta do."

Katie had been trying various ways of avoiding the verbal assaults that were typical of this year's batch of hunters. She was the most attractive waitress at the diner and had to put up with the brunt of their crude remarks, which made the job harder for her than for most of her fellow workers. She tried her best not to offend the customers, since her tips were greatly affected by her actions. Still, at times, the crudeness just got to her, and she'd have to do what she deemed necessary to maintain her dignity but not lose her job. She could tell from the moment she walked in that today was going to be one of those days that tested her to the limit.

"Hey, blondie!" A crass young man shouted at her from across the diner. "Bring me another cup of Joe, and put your lips to my cup so's I won't have to use any sugar." He leered and winked at her.

Katie assessed the group at table six and, by the looks of their rough beards and grubby attire, hunter number one and his tablemates were obviously up for hunting season. However, their lewd remarks and rude behavior suggested

that deer, at least the four footed kind, were not their current target. In addition to her observation of their actions, Katie knew that they smelled like they had spent the entire week so far in every bar room from Libertine to Cairo and back.

Katie switched her focus from her assessment back to the man waiting expectantly for her to bring his refill. *Yeah right, like I haven't heard that line before. Some men can't even come up with an original line*, she mused. It's not that she didn't like men, exactly; she just didn't like rude, dirty, grungy men, who thought they were God's gift to anything in a skirt. *Well, she thought, I know a few guys that occasionally like to wear skirts that would just love it if you'd talk dirty to them!* Smiling at this thought, she walked over to the table and began to pour the requested coffee into the cup.

"Hey, sweet thing, now how about putting them pretty lips on my cup?" the man insisted.

Oops, guess I should have wiped that smile off first before grabbing the coffee pot. Despite her inner disdain, she tried to maintain some distance and make light of the obnoxious request. "Now, why would I want to do that?" the green-eyed beauty replied evenly. "If I did that for you, then I'd have to do it for every customer. It's just way too busy for that today, so I guess you'll just have to stick to the more conventional sweeteners that are on the table." She kept her tone congenial, trying to avoid a direct confrontation.

"Well, sweet thing, if you want to make some extra cash, I know a few guys that would love to have you serve them some coffee...back at camp." He winked at her while his buddies chuckled in agreement.

Cringing at that thought, Katie answered, "No thanks, I like pouring coffee here, just fine. 'Catering' is not the way I earn my money." She turned to get away from the table, thinking that the guy was starting to get on her nerves and was probably the type to get more aggressive when he was unable to get a response from her.

Unfortunately, he didn't fail to live up to her expectations. Not willing to take "no" for an answer, the overbearing hunter thought he could convince her to change her mind. As she turned to leave, he reached out and grabbed her arm. "Now, I know I can make it worth your while," he drawled. "A pretty thing like you could make some good money working a little extra for some fine fellas like us." Smug, he searched his buddies' faces for confirmation.

"Yeah, Brad. We could use some domestic help back at camp," replied one of his table buddies, while the rest of the group nodded in the affirmative.

Katie was thoroughly incensed. She had put up with his running commentary, but this physical aggression was way beyond tolerable. For just a moment she had an intense desire to show him a thing or two about grabbing someone, but she was able to curb her natural reactions and responded in keeping with her position.

"I already told you I'm not into that kind of work, so please, just let go of my arm." She jerked her arm away from the man. In the process, her other hand sloshed hot coffee over the hunting party, with the majority of it landing on the hunter named Brad.

Matters quickly turned ugly as Brad jumped up and yelled at her. "Bitch!" he screamed, as he began wiping at the area where the coffee had made contact.

Katie mentally sighed, anticipating his next move and readying herself to fend off the expected retaliation. However, as he reached out to slap Katie, his hand was stopped in its forward motion by another strong hand clasped around his.

"Now, now, that wouldn't be a wise thing to do, would it?" a low rumbling voice asked next to his ear.

Brad turned to confront the mysterious voice only to stop short as he looked into the piercing sapphire blue eyes of a six foot plus beauty who just curled her lip, raised an eyebrow in question, and gave him her best feral smile. Recovering a little, Brad stuttered out, "And just who's gonna stop me? You?"

"Yes," came the very confident reply, "and with one hand tied behind my back, if you think that'll make things fair." She made a show of moving one hand behind her back while at the same time exerting pressure against the palm of Brad's hand, bending it back towards his wrist. Her action caused him to bend his knees to stave off some of the pain he was beginning to feel, and a little extra push effectively put him back in his seat.

Wanting to save face with his buddies and noticing that the entire diner was now watching, Brad glared back at the newcomer and spat out, "Come on, boys, the bitch isn't worth it. Let's get out of here." As his hand was released, he stared at Katie and under his breath threatened, "Until next time, bitch!" Then they all hurriedly left the diner without paying for their breakfast or leaving a tip.

Katie just stood there gazing at the tall, dark, and very beautiful woman who had intercepted her impending encounter with another batch of jerks that deer season in the Catskills seems to produce on a regular basis. She realized that she had been staring for what seemed like an eternity, when the mystery woman stepped up and asked her in a low, gentle voice if she was okay, and broke the spell. Regaining her composure, Katie nodded and said a simple, "Thank you."

As Katie moved to clean up the now-vacant table, her thoughts went to the tall, dark-haired woman. *Wow! That was pretty cool! Here I thought I was gonna have to come out of my shell to fend off that jerk, and I'm saved by a stranger.* She looked the woman over and a small smile appeared. *And what a stranger! Whoa...what eyes...and what a body!* Shaking her head, she went back to the task at hand, noticing they hadn't left any money for their bill. "Damn!" Katie mumbled.

"Pardon me?" the tall woman asked.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't...it's just that those creeps took off without paying their bill...or leaving me a tip...not that I expected one for that matter! My boss is going to be really mad at that little display, and I'll have to take the money for their bill out of my tips," she explained.

“Yeah, they were creeps alright. But it’s not your fault they skipped out on their bill or that they caused a ruckus,” the tall beauty offered. “Why should you be held responsible?”

“It’s just the rules here. If your table doesn’t pay up, you have to cover the bill. It’s the waitress’ responsibility to make sure the bill is paid. And, Carl is a real stickler about being nice to the tourists so they’ll come back often. He wants us to just smile and put up with all their macho crap. Carl says they don’t mean anything by it, that they’re just here for a good time, so we should ‘be good girls and go along’.” The frustration that Katie felt was evident in her voice as she explained to the woman. She looked up into those mesmerizing eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be going on like this to you; I don’t even know you. But I do want to thank you for stepping in. I can usually handle them with words and put up with the pawing, but it’s never gotten this close to being threatening before.”

“It’s okay,” the dark-haired woman replied. “Name’s Deanna. Dean for short. Glad I could help you, Katie.”

“How did you— oh, my name badge,” she mumbled as she began to turn a very lovely shade of pink. *Come on, kiddo, get your head back into the game. Don’t let a pretty face take your mind off of business. Yeah,* she replied to her thoughts, *but what a drop dead gorgeous face!*

Carl chose that moment to come up, interrupting the silence that lingered between the two women and forcing Katie to go back to the table and continue cleaning it up. He looked at her, and the coffee mess, and began a loud tirade directed at his waitress. “Just what were you thinking...spilling coffee all over them like that? You know they could come back here and slap me with a lawsuit over your carelessness!” He was shouting, heedless of who was listening. “Lord knows, there’re enough lawyers in this town who would be more than happy to represent them! And I suppose they took off without leaving the money for their bill?” Having reached the real heart of the issue, he looked directly into Katie’s eyes with an inquiring look.

Katie turned to avoid his look and was trying to formulate an answer when Dean offered Carl two twenties. “They musta dropped these on their way out the door,” she said, smiling at Katie, all the while trying to control her temper long enough to keep from taking care of Carl, too. Stay cool, Dean, she counseled herself. You’ve called enough attention to yourself for one day. She answered herself, chuckling internally.

Katie picked up the bill that was still lying on the table and handed it over to Carl. “Looks like they left enough to cover the bill and my tip.”

“Too bad that tip will have to pay for all the coffee you wasted!” Carl said to Katie as he took the money and the bill and walked to the register.

Katie just sighed and looked toward Dean. Sapphires and emeralds met as Carl walked away, and held just a moment longer before Katie broke the spell and asked Dean if she needed a table or wanted to sit at the counter.

“Counter’s fine,” Dean replied, “just as long as you’re the one waiting on me.” *Now where in the world did that come from?* thought Dean. *I thought my pick up days were long over.*

Katie smiled and a soft chuckle escaped as she led Dean over to her section of the counter. “Thanks for covering the bill,” she said in all sincerity as she handed Dean a menu.

“Who, me?” Dean arched an eyebrow and pointed a finger to her chest.

“Well, who else would have slipped two twenties from her jeans’ pocket when she thought I wasn’t looking?” Her green eyes twinkled in response.

“Caught me, eh? Must be getting old,” the tall beauty said. “Well, I’ll start with a cup of tea, herbal if you’ve got it”

“Coming right up,” Katie said as she went to the beverage area to select the box of herbal tea bags, cup, saucer, and hot water. On her return, she swung by the pastry display and grabbed a couple of fresh honey buns. “Here’s the tea selection we have; I hope you’ll find something in there that you like. And here’s a little something to say ‘thanks’ for what you did.” She smiled sweetly at Dean.

Dean took a glance at the honey buns and quickly wondered if there was more to it than just “thanks”. Raising an eyebrow, she looked at Katie and gave her a nod of appreciation. “You must be more experienced as a waitress than I thought,” she drawled. “Either that, or you can read minds.” And if that’s the case, she pondered, I had better be really careful here.

“No, on both counts. You just look like the ‘honey bun’ type,” answered Katie, immediately blushing at her choice of words.

Dean frowned, then let a small smile start in the corners of her mouth and said, “I hope you’re not saying I look fat?”

Katie gasped and quickly answered, “Oh, no, no, no...you’re absolutely gorge— I mean...you look fantas— umm...no, not at all...it’s just... unghhh!” Katie threw up her hands and began to blush even more deeply, then gave up trying to explain as Dean broke out into a hearty chuckle.

“So, can I get you anything else?” Katie inquired while looking around the diner and catching Carl’s stern eyes watching her.

“No, not right now,” Dean replied, “but maybe more hot water in a little bit. Thanks.”

Katie left to take care of her other customers, all the while sneaking glances at Dean every chance she could. The mysterious woman was at least six feet tall, dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, and a black and gold Army sweatshirt. Katie’s thoughts kept going back to the woman at the counter. She couldn’t help but find her interesting and she

definitely wanted to know more about her. Katie whispered quietly to herself, "You just never know what kind of information you can gather from the most unlikely sources."

Dean settled down to her honey buns and tea while opening the local paper to scan the news and finish with the real estate section. There wasn't much information in the weekly paper, mostly local school sport reports and miscellaneous articles on retirements, weddings, and such. She wasn't expecting to find a lot in the paper, but it provided her a means to seem occupied as she scanned the crowd in the diner. She looked up from the paper and her eyes tracked immediately to the blonde waitress. "Now, there's something interesting," she muttered softly. She watched as Katie took orders, expertly handled several trays loaded with full plates and seemed to easily carry several conversations with the diners as she did her job. Dean decided that a waitress may know more about the community and its residents than most people in the town and added her to the list to engage in "friendly" conversation. "After all, you just never know what kind of information you can gather from the most unlikely sources," she mumbled quietly.

Dean kept a very watchful eye on the diner and its occupants, assessing each as to age, career, local or tourist, socio-economic indicators, etc. She had a very keen mind and was able to categorize each occupant into his own little box for future reference. Some might be possibilities, others definitely not, but she never discarded anyone. She was very thorough. At the same time, she kept an eye on Katie and was very impressed with the young woman's ability to remember orders without writing them down, and her ability to put customers at ease and draw them into conversations. She mulled those abilities over and decided, with a smile, that it might even turn out to be fun.

On Katie's next pass, she asked if Dean was ready for that hot water. Dean nodded and when Katie returned, they both began to speak at the same time.

"So, how long—" Dean began, overlapping Katie's, "Do you live—" Politeness winning out, they simultaneously offered, "You first—" After the chuckling stopped, Dean waved the waitress on.

"So, do you live around here, or are you a tourist?" Katie asked.

"Just moving up to this area. I've been assigned to the local community college," Dean responded between sips of her second cup of Mint Medley tea.

"Assigned?" Katie looked at her curiously and fixed on the Army sweatshirt.

"Yeah, I'm the new commander for the ROTC unit at the college. I'll be taking over after the winter break," Dean responded.

"So you're in the Army?" Katie asked, pointing to Dean's sweatshirt.

"Yep. Guess I'm being rewarded for doing such a good job on my last assignment," Dean said lightly as she picked up her tea and took a sip.

"Wow! I never met a commander before. What are you? A general or something?" Katie asked with over exaggerated wide eyes.

At this, Dean almost choked on her tea, trying to keep it from spraying on the people sitting next to her at the diner's counter. "Not exactly!" Dean coughed out. "I'm just a lowly lieutenant colonel. I just got the promotion, as a matter of fact. Part of the reason I got this cushy posting." Dean sighed, trying to express pleasure with her new assignment.

"So, how long have you been in town?" Katie inquired.

Dean looked at her watch and said with a twinkle in her eye. "About forty-five minutes now. The current commander will be finishing out this semester. I came up early to get settled and see what the area is like."

Katie rolled her eyes and thought about the woman just getting into town and step into trouble with the hunters at her table. "Gosh, I'm sorry," Katie said.

"Why should you be sorry?" Dean asked with raised eyebrows. "Is the town that bad?"

"Oh, no. I'm sorry that the first thing you had to do when you got here was to get me out of a fix with some jerks." She gave Dean a dazzling smile.

"Oh, that. Hey, there's guys like that everywhere," she looked straight into Katie's eyes and added, "and it was my pleasure to give you a little back-up."

The intensity of stare immediately made Katie flush. "Uh...well...um," she hedged then added, "So do you have a place to stay yet?"

"Just the local Days Inn, until I can find something," Dean offered.

Seeing an opportunity to redeem herself, Katie said, "Well, it just so happens that my next job — after I get off this shift that is — is as a real estate agent for Catskills Properties." Katie bubbled with this information. "And, I happen to know of several very nice apartments and houses for rent. Unless, of course, you're looking to buy?" Bright green eyes questioned the deep blues opposite her.

"Mmm, 'no' on the buying, but a definite 'yes' on the renting," Dean drawled. "I'm not looking to settle down here, just get this assignment done."

Carl was walking over towards the two women now, clearly upset with the length of time Katie was taking to serve Dean. "Oh, oh. Better get going to my other tables," Katie whispered. "I get off at one from here and will be at the agency by one thirty if you want to meet me there." She quickly pulled out her agency business card and slid it over to Dean as she walked away.

Carl met her halfway down the counter and stopped her. "I thought I told you not to try and do real estate business on my time," he growled out. "It's bad enough you've been ignoring your customers for the last five minutes. Now either get to work, or get out!" he huffed at her.

Overhearing this, Dean slowly got up and approached Carl who was now standing alone. “Excuse me, but I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your employees here.” She smiled sweetly at him. “I’m new in town, and it’s not often that a new person is greeted with such warmth and friendliness. It’s a credit to you as an employer that you encourage this attitude in your staff,” she said, batting her blues at him.

Falling into her spell, Carl puffed his chest out a bit then stuttered out a “Why...thank you,” as Dean turned and went to the register to pay her bill.

Guess that’ll put his knickers in a knot for a while, she thought, chuckling to herself as she pocketed the business card and smiled, thinking about one-third and the beautiful blonde.

Same day, 0930 hours

Dean left the diner and got into her brand new black Dodge Durango 4x4 SUV. Just as she was exiting the parking lot, her cell phone chirped. Sliding the phone out of her belt holder, she answered. “Yeah?” The voice at the other end talked on for a few minutes before Dean replied, “Sunday, zero-two-thirty, affirmative,” and returned the cell to its holder. “Well, let’s see how much time a tour of this town will take,” she said as she pulled up to one of the few traffic signals in town. Main Street looked like many other main streets across the country. There were lots of empty storefronts and several people, mostly young men, standing around in the doorways smoking cigarettes. This main street, like many others, was being swallowed whole into the depths of oblivion thanks to the mega-mall concept sweeping the country.

In her travels both in the states and abroad, she saw many little towns trying to stay alive, but the economic machines were always running better in the big cities leaving the small rural towns to slowly wither away. Without large business or manufacturing, the brunt of the tax load was carried by the homeowner and sooner or later it becomes too much of a load to carry. Dean just shook her head as she drove through what once would have been a thriving business section. She wondered what these folks did for a living. She remembered Carl’s words about an abundant supply of lawyers in town and noticed that he was absolutely correct. Practically every building in town housed a law office and she wondered what kept them all in business.

She continued her ride and soon was out of the town proper and driving through steep valleys of pines and cascading brooks. It was a glorious November day with crystalline blue skies above. Considering she was in the Catskills, it was a very mild November day with a temperature in the low sixties. All in all, Dean was starting to perk up. The countryside was lifting the subdued mood which had enveloped her during her drive through town. She reached down and turned the radio on looking for something to sing along with. Eventually the dial stopped on an oldies station playing a marathon of Elvis songs that brought a smile to her face. Soon she was cruising through the country singing along to “Hound Dog”, “Blue Suede Shoes”, and “Love Me Tender”. That last one brought her mind back to the diner and the young beauty she was going to meet in another couple of hours.

If it wasn’t for the job at hand, Dean would have liked the opportunity to get to know the young woman. Somehow she just felt a connection to her and searched her memory to see if she could come up with a reason why. But, the reality of her real mission was dangerous and she knew it would be irresponsible to get involved. She never allowed her personal desires to interfere with an operation and now was not the time to start. “Yeah, but I need to get some basic info on this town, and a peek into its citizens, too,” she argued out loud. “And what better source than a talkative waitress who must know everyone in town — and a real estate agent to boot!” she concluded.

Dean mentally admonished herself for the path her thoughts were taking and decided she would stick to the K.I.S.S. principle. The word struck her and she immediately pulled up a vision of the young woman. The vivid green eyes and the soft full lips. Then she laughed out loud. “Dean, you’re a dirty old woman. Just stick to the K.I.S.S. principle. Oh, yeah...” She sighed and grinned a crooked smile as she sped down the road.

Katie worked extra hard the next few hours — concentrating on her customers and trying to soothe Carl’s ruffled feathers. But her mind kept wandering back to the enigmatic Dean. *I wonder what it would have been like if I had decided to go that route in college instead of the route I chose. Who knows, maybe I could have been a colonel, too?* She chuckled inwardly at that thought. *Who ever heard of a twenty-eight year old colonel?* Still, she had always had a soft spot for a military uniform. *Mmm...bet she looks great in her dress uniform.*

Katie went to a vacated table and began to clean up the dishes, but her mind wouldn’t get off the tall, dark haired woman. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath to rid her mind of her. She knew her job was too important to allow herself to get distracted, but she just couldn’t let go. Every time she tried, those damn eyes came popping back into her head. Maybe after the job was over, maybe then, she could... OK, Katie, snap out of it! You’ve chosen your path in life, and it’s not been that bad of a road either, she admonished herself. *If it hadn’t been for the last three months of last year, things would be really peachy. Ok, it wasn’t my fault, but we lost a lot of groundwork, and now I’ve got to start all over. I can do this without Gerry,* she thought, as her eyes started to tear. *Don’t go there, kiddo. It wasn’t your fault. There’s nothing you could have done.*

Then her thoughts returned to the tall Army colonel. Maybe she could use her as an asset. “No, she’s a desk jockey, what good will that do me?” she murmured. But, inside, Katie felt she was something more. She just couldn’t put a name to it. She continued with her inner conversation all the while she was taking orders and cleaning up the tables and almost missed the guys at table five as they got up to leave. As she watched them pull out the money for the

check, she caught a glimpse of a gun under the leather jacket of one of the Asian men. Intrigued, she nonchalantly moved closer to see if she could catch a piece of their conversation. "...meeting with ... two thirty ... Hollow Road."

Those were all the pieces she could snatch before they stopped their conversation and motioned her over to pay for their lunch.

"Can I get you anything else?" Katie asked with a sweet smile.

"No, thank you," came the answer in a decidedly Oriental accent.

Katie hesitated and said, "I guess you're not from around here. Are you passing through, or need directions anywhere?" she offered.

"No, we know the area quite well. Thank you," the man answered politely.

"OK then. Thanks for coming in, and maybe we'll see you again. I'll be back with your change in just a minute," she offered as she accepted their money and the check.

"Keep the change," the oldest man said as he and his two partners turned to leave the diner.

Katie nodded her thanks and began to clean up their table, all the while committing their looks to memory. Three Asian males, probably Chinese, two approximately 5' 8", 150 lbs., dark brush cut hair, very neatly attired, business suits, late twenties to early thirties. Third male, the one with the gun under his black leather jacket — 5' 10", 300 lbs., shaved head, scar over left eye, mid twenties. She looked up to see what kind of car they drove and saw them get into a black, four-door Lexus with a New York plate. She couldn't read the plate number from this distance, but noticed that the Lexus was trimmed in gold rather than silver. Hmm. Now that was interesting, she thought to herself. Could be some businessmen up from the city. But with a bodyguard? Definitely have to keep my eyes open for these guys.

Katie finished up table five and went to the back room to clock out since it was 1:10 PM. She went into the back store room and changed her clothes. Her thoughts now focused on Dean, she found herself smiling at the thought of being able to spend some time with her, even if it was for business. For some reason, she just felt very comfortable and safe around her. That realization brought her train of thought to an abrupt stop. She made a commitment to keep the relationship at a business level, deciding there was no time for fun and games. The job had to be the driving factor.

It was noon and Dean had some time yet to burn. She decided to stop at the local Wendy's for a quick bite of fast food instead of going back to the diner to watch Katie some more. This was her conscience winning out and losing at the same time. But by following her conscience, she decided she should receive a reward of a nice cheeseburger, fries, and a Frosty should be just the thing! She parked her SUV and entered the building.

Dean picked up her order and was walking over to a table in the corner when she heard a voice holler, "Dean! Is that really you?"

She turned to see an old Army friend sitting at a booth in the middle of the room. Smiling, Dean gave a big nod, then headed over to the table to join her. "Well, Tracy! What in the name of Athena are you doing here?" Dean asked.

"I work here," Tracy replied. Noting Dean's questioning eyebrow, she quickly added, "No, not here. I'm the Park and Rec director in this town. Got out of the Army a couple of years back. Couldn't stomach the hassles anymore. Finished up as a major though, just before I left," Tracy offered. "How about you? What are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

"I've been assigned as the commander of the ROTC program at the college," Dean supplied. "Guess I finally outrank you! I've just made lieutenant colonel." She winked and chuckled.

"Well, I'll be damned. How on earth did you do that? You're awful young to be a lieutenant colonel," Tracy commented. "Counting on my fingers, you should be a captain at most."

"Just in the right place at the right time. Got put on the fast track for promotion. If you remember, I was just a wet-behind-the-ears first lieutenant last I saw you. Been quite a ride since," Dean stated.

"So, you gave up Intelligence to ride roughshod on kids, eh?" Tracy shook her head. "Doesn't sound like you, old friend."

"Well, you know what it's like to follow orders, Major." Dean looked into Tracy's eyes and the knowledge passed unspoken between the two ex-comrades.

"Well, guess I'll have to take you out to my pride and joy sometime," Tracy offered, breaking the short silence that arose. "Got a park on the top of one of the mountains here. You can see forever in all directions. It's really quite something."

Dean nodded, storing the unspoken information for later retrieval.

"So when did you muster out?" Dean asked as she took a bite of her burger.

"Two years and four months ago. Decided Col and I needed to settle down in one place for a while."

Dean nodded and smiled. She often wished she had that someone special in her life to settle down with. "Glad to hear you two are still together. How's it working out here?"

"Real good. Col has a terrific job and I'm really enjoying mine."

"I didn't know you were into recreation," Dean asked as she finished the last of her fries.

"It was my undergraduate major in college. Figured I might as well put it to use. I was a little rusty at the start but I'm up to speed now. What about you? What have you been up to lately?"

"Now, Trace, you know if I tell you that I'll have to kill you." Dean smiled and picked up her Frosty.

"Well, I figured that line was in your blood, so it's got me wondering is all."

“Need to know, my friend, need to know.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. Well, just remember...if you need anything, it’s yours for the asking.” Tracy smiled and gave Dean a wink.

Deciding to change subjects and curious about the large number of lawyers in town, Dean asked Tracy, “What’s up with all the lawyers in this town?”

“Well,” Tracy replied, “it seems that our summer visitors don’t know how to drive too well, and we have a rash of auto crashes that result in lots of litigation that keep these guys employed.” Tracy chuckled. “You really do need to be very observant on the road in the summertime. We get an awful lot of folks up from the city who are used to driving wildly or not driving at all. Add to that all of the immigrants that work in the resorts, and you have quite an eclectic society here in our quaint little town. In fact, I was told that there are approximately fifty-seven different dialects spoken in this county.”

“Hmpf,” Dean snorted, “well I’ll mind my p’s and q’s then.”

Too soon, it was time for Dean to leave for her one-thirty appointment. Almost as an afterthought, Dean asked Tracy, “Do you know a waitress by the name of Katie that works at Burp & Freddie’s Diner?”

“Sure,” Tracy responded, with a little twinkle in her eyes. “Nice gal. Came here just about eight months ago. Lives over in the trailer court off the main highway going east. Has a great work ethic. Think she’s working two or three different jobs,” Tracy continued. “A really nice looking gal, too. Has eyes that can look right through you...kinda like yours, Dean,” Tracy added.

“How’d you get to know so much about her?” The eyes under discussion were reflecting the twinkle in Tracy’s.

Tracy smiled back. “She came in looking for a job when she first got to town. Didn’t have anything to offer her at the time. She occasionally takes a class from us or comes to the women’s open gym when she’s not working. Pretty good athlete, too. Not what you’d expect after seeing her in the waitress get up,” Tracy commented. “There’s something about her, though, that just doesn’t add up. Haven’t been able to put my finger on it yet, but I will,” she said. “Why the interest?”

“Just curious. I’m going to meet her now. I ran into her at the diner this morning, and she offered to show me some places to rent. I got the same feeling — about things not adding up, but that could just be habit. Well, thanks for the insight, and the reunion. It’s good to know there’s a friendly face in town,” Dean said, giving Tracy a pat on the back. After getting directions to Catskill Properties, Dean and Tracy parted, agreeing to meet again in the near future.

An agent named Tim was at the reception desk in the office when Dean came in. “Hi,” he said with a brilliant smile. “How may I help you?”

“I’m here to meet one of your agents,” Dean said, a serious look on her face.

“Who’s the agent?” he inquired.

Dean pulled out Katie’s card, realizing that she had never bothered to read it and only knew Katie’s first name. “Umm, Katie Miller,” Dean answered.

“She’s not here right now, but I’d be glad to help you,” Tim offered eagerly, just as Katie came rushing in the front door. “Oh, here she is,” Tim acknowledged, with obvious disappointment in his voice.

“Hi!” Katie slowed her steps as she approached Dean. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem,” Dean answered. “I just got here myself.”

“Come this way over to my desk and we can get started,” Katie said, leading the way back to a corner desk.

Dean followed, taking in the small cramped quarters loaded with notebooks and bulletin boards filled with a wide range of houses, businesses, and property descriptions and pictures. Maps of various parts of the town and county filled the rest of the walls. Stacks of flyers providing prospective homeowners with all sorts of information on shopping, churches, insurance agencies, and even the local parks and recreation flyer, topped the tables scattered about the room.

Katie eyed the tall woman taking in the organized mess that real estate offices tended to be. “Sorry about the clutter,” she offered, “but that’s the name of the game in this business. Have a seat, and we’ll get some basic information before we make a list of possibilities to view. But first, I need you to fill in some personal information on this sheet.” Katie’s polite request was business, but her interest was hardly strictly professional.

Dean took the sheet and began filling out the necessary information in her neat printing. While she was occupied with this task, Katie pulled out the rental notebook and began familiarizing herself with the current offerings while covertly watching Dean work on the sheet.

Katie sized her up and inventoried Dean’s assets: 6’1”, about 165-170 lbs., nice athletic build, no distinguishing marks or tattoos, about 32 to 34 years old, strong hands, expressive eyebrows, long silky black hair, fantastic blue eyes, inviting lips — *Whoa!* Her conscience screamed. *Stick to the basics, kiddo!* Feeling a little heat starting to creep up her neck, Katie decided to keep her eyes in the rental book until Dean was finished.

Dean straightened and handed Katie the sheet wondering where the slight blush on Katie’s face came from. Putting that thought out of her mind, she asked when they would be able to check out some possibilities.

“Just as soon as I see what you listed for price range and location. Ah, here we go, Miss Peterson, or should I say Lieutenant Colonel Peterson?” Katie asked with a question in her voice.

“Just Dean will do. I prefer to leave the Colonel part for the job.”

“Looks like you prefer a house over a condo or apartment and something in the \$800-1,200 range. Being close to the college is not as important as your privacy, I see. Same goes for me,” Katie commented. “I’ve got a small trailer out on the east side of town. It’s in a really nice park, especially this time of year. Not a lot of neighbors since most of them

are senior citizens that fly south like the geese for the winter. Not a lot of kids either, but that's okay too I guess; though I do miss hearing the pure laughter of children at play," she said cocking her head to one side. She realized she was rambling and needed to get back on track. "I think I know just the place for you. It's located on one of the back roads that will take you to the college. There's a nice stream that runs behind it that I'm told has a reputation as a trout fisherman's paradise...if you like to fish, that is," she inquired with a smile on her pretty face.

"Yeah, I do as a matter of fact. I have a rather unorthodox method, but it puts the fish on the table," Dean answered, fondly remembering her last fishing trip with her brother Thad.

"Well, that's not all. It's set on twenty acres of land, has two bedrooms, one bath, a fieldstone fireplace, eat-in kitchen that has recently been remodeled, a small den/living room combination, loft, and a fully screened porch. There are also two outbuildings: a two-car garage that's semi-attached to the house by a covered carport type of set up, and a small work shed. It's all stone exterior, so there's little maintenance." Katie took a breath. "It has a private road that's only a half mile off the main road. If I remember correctly, it shouldn't be a bad road in the winter, either. I can set you up with a plow service that will come in after a snowfall and clean it out for you, if you like. It even has an auxiliary power system in case of ice storms. Best thing is, it's available immediately," Katie finished with a flourish.

"Sounds good," Dean responded. "Can we take a look at it now? I'd like to get out of the Days Inn as soon as possible."

"Sure thing. I'll get the key and be right back." The blonde got up and went into the back room to retrieve a set of keys.

Dean picked up the spec sheet and reviewed it. It was perfect for her needs. Nice and private and the auxiliary power supply was a definite plus. Dean placed the sheet back on the desk as Kate returned with keys in hand and a smile on her face. "My car is right out front," Katie supplied as she reached for her backpack. The two women exited the office and walked over to Katie's car.

"Wow!" Dean whistled. "Nice car you've got here, Ms. Miller. Where'd you find a '57 Chevy in such cherry condition? Did you buy it this way?"

"No, actually, I inherited it from my great aunt. I did give it a new paint job almost a year ago, but the inside is as clean as the day it left the showroom. The mileage is accurate too. Only 28,535 miles! Carl keeps trying to get me to sell it to him, but no way. It's my baby!" Katie purred. "With a solid V8, this baby can really haul as— tires," she corrected quickly.

"Ass is more like it," Dean drawled, smiling back at the embarrassed young woman. "It's definitely a beauty. How is it in snow?"

"Haven't really had a chance to check it out that way, yet. We had a fairly mild spring this year, and I just got it right before I moved up from Virginia," Katie said, mentally kicking herself for giving away more information about herself in the last fifteen minutes than anyone else in town knew or had found out in eight months. She marveled at how comfortable she was with this woman and realized she would really have to watch her every action so she wouldn't draw any suspicion.

"So what did you do in Virginia?" Dean nonchalantly posed the question.

"Uhh, nothing really. I had just been living there with my great aunt before she passed away," Katie said as she unlocked the door and slid into the driver's seat. Dean got in on the passenger side and enjoyed the room she had for her long legs. "Let's go, shall we?" Katie suggested to Dean, and put the car in gear.

The ride out to the house was fairly short since the agency was on the east side of town, too. It took only twelve minutes before they were pulling into the covered space between the house and the garage. Katie jumped out of the car and pulled the house keys from her pants pocket. Unlocking the door, she turned on the lights so Dean would have a good view of the inside.

The place was really a bargain at \$1,150 a month plus utilities. Katie had toyed with the idea of renting the place for herself. Her cats would love the big windows and the wildlife outside would be sure to entertain them for hours when she was absent. But, a rental this costly would raise too many eyebrows and possibly blow her cover. The '57 Chevy wasn't the only thing Katie had inherited from her aunt. She had a sizable savings account back in Arlington, and could easily afford ten places like this.

As Dean entered, she looked around, checking the place out fully as she roamed from room to room. Security on the windows was pretty tight, the entrance and back exits were of solid construction, and views of the approaching road were very good. The place even had a security system and some basic furniture — not that she required much. And the fireplace was awesome and she could feel the warmth of a nice fire in it already. *Not bad*, she thought, *not bad at all*.

She went outside and walked the perimeter of the house, approving the inaccessibility to a rear approach due to the sheer cliff that rose up on the other side of the stream. The outbuildings checked out, too. The shed would come in handy for storing some of the stuff that would be coming in next week, and it was as secure as the house and garage. It even had a small wood stove for heat. The sheltered area in which the house was located might wreak havoc with her cell phone, but once she got the satellite phone in place, her communications system would operate fine.

"Well, I don't think we have to look any further. I'll take it." She smiled warmly at Katie. "Does the furniture stay?" Dean asked hopefully.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. Yes, it does, unless you don't need it. Then we would put it in storage for our client. The kitchen is stocked with plates, cooking utensils, and all the necessary gizmos that you need in a kitchen," she elaborated brightly.

“Great, I really don’t have much.” Dean only had personal basics with her now, but her technical supplies would be coming as soon as she found a place. She mentally took a note to call the office and have the supplies sent ASAP. “Let’s go sign the papers or whatever we need to do. You said it’s available immediately. Does that mean today?”

“Yep. All I need is the lease signed, six month minimum, and first and last month’s rent. The security deposit is one thousand. Hope that’s not too much at once,” she probed carefully. “The utilities are all on, and we can change them over to you on Monday.”

“Great,” Dean said. “Uncle Sam is pretty good about moving us around. I can cover the security deposit and two months’ rent without a problem.”

*They locked up and got into the Chevy to head back to town. Katie was feeling a little disappointed that her time with Dean was coming to an end so quickly and chided herself for not hauling her around showing her a few other places before coming to this one. *Bad Katie!* She thought. Her mental conversation was interrupted when Dean asked her rather loudly if she was okay. “Huh? Oh, sorry. Guess I was just getting all the paperwork together in my head before we get to the office,” she stammered. “What were you saying?”*

“I was asking you if you could recommend a good Chinese takeout,” Dean said, trying to interpret the solemn face that had replaced the blonde’s seemingly normal happy disposition. For some reason, Dean was very drawn to this young woman and didn’t want to see their time together end. This brought on a more somber demeanor within her, and she began to wonder if the young blonde was having the same reaction.

“Well, there are actually quite a few really good ones in town. But my favorite is next to the grocery store across from the office,” she stated, and then had a brainstorm. “If you’d like, after we get the paperwork taken care of, you could go back to the Days Inn and check out. Then pick up any odds and ends you might need to stock the fridge, linen closet, etcetera. After I get off work, I’ll stop by my place to feed my cats, then bring some Chinese food over to celebrate your new home.” Katie stopped and frowned. “That is if you would like me to?”

“Umm, sure. That sounds good to me,” Dean answered with a bright smile that almost made Katie shiver visibly. “But, on one condition — I buy. It’s the least I can do to show my appreciation for you helping me find a place so quickly. I was really dreading house hunting, but you made it quick and painless. Thanks.” She smiled again, and they locked eyes for a brief moment that made the world slow down around them.

A horn blaring brought them both back to the world and back to their own side of the road.

“Oops, sorry about that,” the blonde said nervously, aware that something had just passed between them and it gave her a feeling of anticipation that all would be right with the world. The rest of the ride, and the subsequent paperwork, took place without further incident. They parted, each to complete her separate tasks before they would meet again later that night.