

~ Tree Huggers, Children & Broken Decoys...

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by Ali Vali

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If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed move on, literally.

Sit back and enjoy the story and if you have any comments you would like to share please write to me at terrali20@yahoo.com.

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Jaden, Sue R and Den, you are all godsend. I bow to your grammatical knowledge.

This one is dedicated to every person that knows how to take a joke, April Fool or otherwise. Thank you all for reading and thank you for all the wonderful notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

Tree Huggers, Children & Broken Decoys...

You've Got To Be Kidding

By

Ali Vali

The three men standing on the edge of the rig could just make out the flame from the underwater welding equipment about twenty feet below the surface. A brilliant sun and calm water helped as they waited for their boss to make her way back to the surface. In the distance they could hear the prop of an incoming helicopter and the three scanned the skies looking for the incoming bird. They weren't expecting company today.

"Junior, you expecting anyone today?"

"Yeah, Possum, I got tired of looking at your ugly mug after all these weeks so I sent for Miss July to give me a lap dance tonight after dinner. Tell Ted to send the basket down, I'm finished." Possum clipped his radio back to his belt and laughed with the other two men at their boss's answer. A black fleck toward the southeast was all they could make of the chopper headed their way.

Below them, bubbles hit the surface just before Junior's head did, as she looked for the basket that would give her a ride to the surface. The tether for the unmanned sub had damaged one of their anchor cables and she had volunteered to go for a swim to assess the damage, and fix it if necessary. As she rode back to the super structure above her, Junior didn't take off her diving helmet so she could talk to her men standing on one of the rig's modules.

"Who's our company?"

"Don't know yet, boss. They're still about ten miles out."

From her seat, Jillian Sterling looked out over the blue green water trying to prepare herself for the sight of something in her heart, she knew didn't belong there. Beside her, her partner Tony Dorsett sat with his eyes closed taking a nap. It wasn't a short ride from the southern most point of Louisiana to the outer shelf of the Gulf of Mexico, but it was necessary if you wanted to visit the new super rigs as they were called.

Jillie expelled a sigh once it came into view. *Now I know why they put super in its name, but I suppose anything that can pump over a hundred thousand barrels of oil out of the Gulf a day needs to be big.* The massive structure that was actually floating in the water was a new creation in offshore drilling. Built of varying modules, it floated over ten thousand feet above the bottom of what was known as the outer shelf of the Gulf. Any company willing to try pumping the extraordinary amount of oil found at these depths was not only leading the industry in new technology, but they were getting a break from Uncle Sam. Every ounce of crude brought up was not going to be federally taxed until the company's entire research and development budget for the project was recouped.

"Good God, look at it." Tony's eyes had opened and taken in Baxter Oil's Pegasus Project. The pilot radioed ahead and was given the go ahead to put down on the northern landing pad and the OSHA inspector couldn't wait to take a look around what, in his mind, was history in the making.

"Quite the eye sore." Tony laughed at his partner's "green" thinking coming out in full force. When the Feds had started issuing leases for these depths Jillie had gone on about the potential for environmental disaster for weeks.

"Come on, girl, you have to keep an open mind before we get out there. Baxter has a fairly good record at working in harmony with nature wherever they drill."

"That's because they now have to contend with people like us, not because they are chartered members of Green Peace, my friend." A pad came out of her briefcase the moment her foot touched the surface of the rig. In one of the corners of the landing structure someone had left a welding torch and tank along with other various tools. Since there was no one welding, it was Baxter's first violation and Jillian was more than happy to write it up.

"Hello, and welcome to the Pegasus." Jillian continued writing and ignored Possum's greeting

until she was done.

"Hi, I'm Tony Dorsett and this is my partner Jillian Sterling. We're here to conduct your first inspection. Are you the person in charge?" Possum shook hands with Tony and tried to do the same with Jillian but the woman was still jotting something down on the pad in her hand.

"No, sir, the person in charge should be coming up anytime now."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jillian flipped the pad closed and directed her question to the Baxter employee.

The radio on Possum's belt came to life and the voice Ellis Gaston's, one of the men he had been standing with, was just heard over the dying prop of the helicopter. "The basket's up and we're done, Possum. Boss says to bring whoever landed over to the main deck."

"Roger that, buddy, we'll be right down. If you will follow me." The pilot stayed behind to secure the helicopter to the pad, then he was headed down to the mess hall for some lunch. This was his fifth trip out here and the Pegasus had the best cooks in the Gulf.

All three people coming down the steep stairs from the pad watched the tall figure standing at the bottom strip off a tank and other gear leaving her in only a short, sleeveless wet suit. She had already housed the helmet and flippers in the equipment closet, and as soon as the rest of the stuff was put away, she grabbed the towel she had left on the deck. A perfect tan colored every inch of the exposed skin from her feet up to her head, and the shaggy light brown hair was blowing in all directions in the breeze. Both Tony and Jillian watched as a large hand pulled the unruly strands back and put on an old Baxter Oil cap handed to her by one of the guys standing near her.

"Impressive, you have a female diver," said Jillian. As much as she tried, Jillian couldn't take her eyes off the body in front of her. A big part of her brain wanted to go over there and offer to finish the drying job for her.

"No, ma'am, Junior's not our diver. She just felt like getting wet today so she volunteered to go down and fix a little problem the Rover created." Possum hit the deck and guided them around some workers that were setting up equipment near the bottom of the landing pad. "Junior, OSHA's here for our first inspection."

The woman he called to put on a pair of sunglasses before turning around. Her old friend and employee had seen the slight tightening of her back muscles when he mentioned who was with him. Jillian was about to open her notebook and start writing again, but the woman the man had called Junior made her want to look more than she wanted to write up the next infraction she had seen.

She looked to be over six feet tall, tanned, muscled and mussed in an adorable sort of way. It was the best way that Jillie could think to describe her. Maybe it was the light brown hair that had been blowing around her head in a disorderly fashion before the ball cap was added that caused

Jillian to notice. But as unkempt as Junior's hair looked, that was where the analogy ended because everything else about her was all classic looking lines. Both Jillie and Tony waited for her to say something.

"Hello, I'm Tony Dorsett and this is my partner Jillian Sterling. We just need someone to walk us around or we could do it ourselves, however you want to work it will be fine with us."

"I'm figuring if you have this crap job, you never played for the Dallas Cowboys, Mr. Dorsett, and there's no way in hell you two are walking around here alone. Possum, take the inquisition for their inspection. If they start now, they might just be finished before it's too late for them to head back." *Just leave now and the woman won't think you are a total ass. What are you thinking, Junior?* Without another word Junior strode passed them and headed to her room to change. Junior wanted more than anything to stay and start flirting with Tony's partner, but figured it would come off as trying to soften up the outcome of their inspection. She hadn't gotten more than twenty feet when Jillian's caustic comments stopped her.

"Our job isn't crap, lady, it's important so idiots like yourself leave something of the environment for our children to enjoy. I don't want my kids to read about trees in books because there aren't any left. We haven't been here ten minutes and I've already found sixty thousand dollars worth in infractions. I can't wait for the rest of the tour." *Good looking but she's no better than all the other assholes I run into out here.*

"Possum, get moving." The old man pointed toward the other side of the rig and started walking. He was finding Junior's behavior odd since she just usually took these things in stride, but there was something about the small blonde behind him that had set her off.

Junior stepped into the living quarters and offices of the Pegasus operation trying to figure out why she was in such a bad mood. *Could be the bitchy tree lover writing up everything she can get into that notebook?* The little voice in her head was a constant unwanted companion, but more often than not it hit on the problem on the first shot.

"Boss, are there two visitors on board by any chance?" The radio operator Rick sat behind the desk at the entrance holding a message slip in his hand.

"Yeah, they just flew in, so please tell me all of our paperwork is in order?"

"The tour might be short. Their office just radioed over and one of them has to fly out to the Mobile operation. Jack's group hit some sort of snag in off loading into one of the boats and they had a minor spill."

"Fuck, that's too bad for them, and just Jack's luck in that he's getting the bitch from hell over there to add to his problems." The air was starting to get chilly against her still damp skin so Junior started toward her quarters.

"If her name is Tony then we'll say a prayer for him." Rick got someone to listen for any other incoming messages while he went off to look for Possum and their guests as his boss walked

down the hall cursing up a blue streak.

Jillian didn't hold out any hope that her partner was going to be back that night after the initial report they had gotten on the rig seventy-five miles away from where she was stuck for the night. The spill confirmed her fears of what could happen when you drilled at the depths these people were trying. She had finished her tour with the nice older gentleman named Possum pointing out where they needed some modifications and work before they would be given the go ahead to start drilling. Going against her gut, Jillian had cut them some slack in some areas after Possum explained that it had only been six months since they had started to put the platform together and would be at least another eight months before they even thought of letting Pegasus fly.

Dinner with the three main supervisors, Billy Bob, Ellis and her tour guide had been nice and Jillie had to agree with their pilot in that Baxter Oil did employ the best cooks in the Gulf. Her hosts had offered to walk her to the guests quarters, but the thought of being stuck in the living quarters until the next morning didn't sound all that appealing since it was only seven o'clock.

With the help of the rig's lighting Jillian made her way back up to the helipad, which was dark for the night. In her experience in coming out to the rigs, this was the best place to visit at night because it gave you the greatest view of the stars. With no buildings or city lights, the sky would come alive out here at night. It reminded Jillie of why she put up with the oilfield mentality on a daily basis.

Upon reaching the last step at the top she saw the glow of a cigarette in one of the corners as the person smoking it sat with their legs swinging over the side inhaling deeply. Without the ball cap her hair was flying in all directions again and it was then the inspector remembered the rude bitch was still on the platform. She was about to turn around and head back to her room for the night when the deep voice stopped her from moving.

"Please don't let me stop you from enjoying a pleasant evening, Ms. Sterling. Almost every constellation is visible tonight along with some of the planets." Junior took her eyes off the sky and turned her attention to the stairs to see if Jillian would take her up on her offer. When the blonde stepped up and started walking over, she never saw the smile on Junior's face as the woman headed toward her. Jillian took a seat close enough so the perfume she was wearing wafted over to where Junior was sitting.

Jillian sat back on her hands and looked up at the sky instead of at Junior. "You don't look like the stargazer type."

"I guess I didn't give you the best first impression, did I? Would you please accept my apologies for my behavior this morning, it was uncalled for and unprofessional of me. You were right in that you and your partner are only doing your job."

The blonde head did turn then as Junior took another puff of what Jillian could see was not a cigarette but a cigar. "You do know smoking on an oil rig is strictly forbidden, don't you?" The laugh was deep but it sounded to Jillian like that of a child's. The kind of laugh that came right from your belly and from someone who hadn't forgotten how to find humor in the smallest of

things.

"You can add it to the book you wrote today, ma'am, if what Possum tells me is true. Exactly how much did today cost me?"

"Enough to save some of those trees you think I love so much. Is your name really Junior?" Rick came up the stairs and called out to his boss interrupting Junior from giving an answer.

"Boss, I just got off the radio with Sally. She wanted you to know that the pipeline leases are coming up in the next two weeks, so she sending a bird for you tomorrow morning. I'll let the guys know so they can get with you if they need anything before you go."

"Sorry about that." Junior looked at her with an open expression that made Jillian feel like the most important person looking up at the sky that night.

"It's ok. What do you call that one?" Jillian pointed to the sky as the quiet enveloped them again. Junior turned out to be quite knowledgeable when it came to the night sky and charming in a weird sort of way. Jillian found she could have sat there and listened to her for hours. By the second formation Junior pointed out, Jillian had rested her head on the shoulder next to her. If Junior minded she never said anything however when Jillian tried to hide a yawn the lecture came to an end, but Jillian felt the beginning of something else when Junior smiled at her. Maybe the woman sitting next to her maybe wasn't the rough neck Jillian made her out to be.

"Please enjoy the sky for as long as you want, Ms. Sterling, I have to go and pack up if I want to be back in New Orleans early tomorrow. I'm sorry I went on like that, I didn't mean to bore you."

"You didn't bore me at all. If I'm assigned to come out here again we have a date right here so you can pick up where you left off." *Oh my god, I can't believe I just said that.* Jillian rushed on so Junior wouldn't think she was flirting with her. "Is there anyway to catch a ride in with you. Not that the hospitality isn't good but I don't know how long Tony is going to be." The cigar that wasn't as nasty as Jillian first thought was stubbed out in an ashtray next to Junior before the long body stood up and towered over her. *I thought she would have thrown it in the water, and does this woman ever wear shoes?*

"No problem, meet me in the mess at seven tomorrow morning. Good night, ma'am."

"Good night."

At seven the next morning Jillian was sitting in the mess hall waiting for her traveling companion and talking with Possum about the report she was going to submit. "Ma'am, I'm not trying to tell you how to do your business, but you might not want to talk about this with Junior on the way back. You are kinda cute and I would hate for her to throw you out of the helicopter miles from land."

"Thanks for the heads up." They both got up when they heard the helicopter touching down outside and Junior stepped in and motioned for Jillian to get moving. Before they left one of the

cooks came out and handed Junior a traveling mug, waiting for her to take a sip to see if there was anything else he needed to add.

"Perfect, thanks. Ms. Sterling, would you like a cup of coffee to go?" Junior toasted her with the mug in her hand.

Jillian shook her head and said sheepishly, "I know this is going to sound snobby, but I only drink Starbucks Breakfast Blend."

"Your in luck, ma'am, how do you take it?" The cook pulled out another mug and filled it with the coffee Junior supplied whenever she was working on the rig. The guys liked it so much that on the next supply run it was going to become one of their staples.

"A stargazer and gourmet coffee drinker, I may have misjudged you," said Jillian as she pointed to the pot of steamed milk the man had made for Junior's coffee. Junior's smile was infectious as Jillian mirrored it. *Jillie, oilfield workers are not your type.*

The helicopter ride was uneventful and Jillian was surprised when they landed, not in New Orleans, but in the small town of Morgan City. Two men came out to meet the Baxter chopper when it touched down on one of the company's field office helipads. Jillian followed Junior into the main building, hoping she wasn't going to have to take a cab for the eighty-mile trek back into the city if the Baxter employee wasn't going any further.

"I'll just be a minute. If you want, you can wait here or out in the car. The boys should be finished loading our stuff and bringing it around to the front." Junior pointed to the waiting room that housed one dusty potted plant and every oilfield magazine printed. Along the walls were pictures of all the offshore rigs they had put into commission over the years, and one of Baxter Oil Company's owner.

Avery Leland Baxter, Sr. had started his career as a wildcatter in Texas back in the fifties. Those in the industry back then said the man had a nose for crude like he was part bloodhound. Through his years of drilling he had moved the industry forward like few before or after him. The picture the company hung in the lobby was one of a young man surrounded by three other young men in front of a gushing well in the background. It was in black and white, but there was something about the man's smile and build that seemed familiar to Jillian as she studied it. In fact all four of the young men looked like people she should know.

"Ma'am, Junior's car is out front if you want to go out and wait, or if you want we can get you some coffee or something." She recognized him as one of the guys that had unloaded their bags and shook hands with Junior. Jillian smiled at him and followed him outside to find the oldest and rustiest looking pickup truck she had ever seen. The company logo was barely visible on the side it was so faded, and the windshield had more cracks than she thought looked safe to take on the road.

Figures, was her only thought as Jillian opened the passenger door grimacing at the groan the vehicle let out when she did. In a way it fit the shorts and sandal-wearing employee she had

flown in with, and it was only eighty miles. The laugh she had the pleasure of hearing the night before was back and right outside the window making Jillian open her eyes to see what was so funny.

"I'm sure Gator will give you a ride back into the city if you want, but if you want to come with me, I'm parked over here." Junior pointed to a black BMW 745 Li sedan parked on the other side of the truck, getting the woman in the truck to blush at her assumption.

Jillian put her shoulder into the door trying to get it to open, adding to her embarrassment when she couldn't get it to budge and Junior had to open it from the outside. Instead of giving her grief over her mistake, Junior turned her attention to the man she had called Gator giving him orders to get the door fixed. With a sigh of relief at the sight of leather seats and sparkling windshield, Jillian smiled up at Junior as the woman held the door open for her.

They hadn't made it to the front gate when Junior's car phone started ringing. "Junior, where are you?" The question was asked as soon as a long finger pressed the talk button.

"Hello, Sally, I'm doing fine. The flight in was great and the weather for the drive is looking good." Junior wiggled her eyebrows at Jillian getting her to smile before she continued to torment her assistant. "I just got in the car, Sally, take deep breaths and calm down. We should be in town in about an hour and fifteen minutes."

"We?"

"I'm giving Ms. Jillian Sterling a ride back into town, so I'm sure whatever you have can wait until then." From her office in New Orleans, Sally Breaux almost dropped the phone when she heard who was in her boss's car.

"You're giving Ms. Sterling a ride back into town?" The tone she used let Junior know she thought it was highly unlikely the inspector was in the car.

"Is there something wrong with the connection?" Jillian continued to smile at Junior while listening to the conversation coming over the speakerphone.

"No, it's just that doing that sounds mighty generous after the woman wrote you up for over one hundred and twenty thousand dollars worth of infractions." It was Junior's turn to smile at her passenger and wonder what would happen to the woman if she threw her out of the car going ninety.

"That's me, Sally, generous Junior they call me." They both laughed at the assistant's snort that came over the line. Sally filled Junior in on all the appointments she had waiting for her when she got back to the office while Jillian sat back and enjoyed the scenery they were driving through. It had taken the state years, but they had managed to carve out a highway over the swamp cutting the drive time into New Orleans by hours. The cypress trees stood right next to their new concrete neighbor as the moss in the branches swung in the breeze.

the city skyline. Her father waved to her from a table in the center, and her one hope as she waved back was that Junior wouldn't think she was following her, though now she would get a look at Maria.

"Hi, Daddy." Jillian bent down and kissed her father before one of the waiters came over and pulled her chair out for her. The table in the corner was set up for diners, with a crystal bucket of ice with vodka shots embedded in it. But for now it sat empty Jillian noticed. What made her take note at all was the brass plate on the wall over one of the chairs that said Baxter Oil Company.

"How are you, sweetheart? I'm beginning to feel like if I don't ask you out to dinner, I never get to see you." Behind Jillian the elevator slid open again and Junior stepped out. Gone were the shorts and the sandals, in their place stood the CEO of Baxter Oil. She was alone and the hostess showed her to the table after she kissed her hello.

"Ms. Sterling, nice to see you again. Robert, how are you?" Junior stopped at their table nodding to the hostess to just put the menus down.

"Junior, god how are you? You know Jillie?" Jillian's father stood up and shook hands with Junior as his daughter looked like she wanted to bolt from the table for some reason. If she had really tried, she could have talked her father into eating somewhere else but Jillian had wanted to see Junior's date. Now it was going to seem as obvious to the woman who had given her a ride as it was to her. *I didn't know she wore glasses*, Jillian thought as she looked up at Junior.

"Fine and yes, we've met. I just didn't expect to run into her again so soon. I was going over your proposal this afternoon and it's looking good. How about if I call you next week and set up a luncheon appointment?" Junior smiled, loving the blush that was coloring Jillian's cheeks.

"That sounds great." Robert was so busy talking to Junior that he never noticed his daughter's discomfort.

"I'll have Sally call you." Before she moved on to her own table, Junior bent down to shake Jillian's hand as well. "Nice to see you again, Jillie." Moving closer, Junior whispered, "She's just a friend." Jillian smiled at the laugh Junior was enjoying and because of the heat radiating off her ears.

"Where do you two know each other from?" Robert took a sip of his drink, as his daughter's eyes stayed glued to the Baxter table. Junior had sat down and picked up one of the vials of thick liquor out of the ice and tipped it back, draining it.

"I inspected Pegasus yesterday."

"Please tell me that you didn't slam her?"

"It's my job, daddy, and yes I'm afraid the price tag was fairly steep. What proposal did you submit?" Her father launched into describing a pipe contract his company wanted to enter into

with Baxter, but her attention was on the entrance as a tall blonde entered and headed to Junior's table. When she reached it, Junior was standing and the person Jillian assumed to be Maria fell into her arms giving her a not so "friendly" kiss on the lips.

"Honey...honey, do you know what you want to eat?" Her father's voice tore her eyes away from the table in the corner and the two women now seated there talking.

"I'm sorry, I'll have the Caesar salad with grilled shrimp, please." Robert Sterling handed the menus to the waiter and looked over his shoulder to see what his daughter found so fascinating.

"What did you think of her?"

"Who?"

"Come on, sweetheart, I'm your father. Tall, good looking and powerful - could be a real catch to the woman that snags her heart."

"Daddy!"

"I'm your father, Jillian, but that doesn't make me blind."

She sighed deeply, now sorry for the self-imposed rules she had set for herself. "Yeah, she's all that but she works in the oilfield."

"I work in the oilfield, Jillie, and you love me."

From her table, Junior listened to what Maria was telling her, but she was looking over one blonde's shoulder to the other blonde sitting three tables away. "Wait a second, could you repeat that last statement?"

"I don't want to talk about it here, Junior, but she changed the will and these are her new wishes."

"Maria, you can go back to her and tell her I'm never going to agree to this. You can't go back again, isn't that the old saying?" Junior turned her pale blue eyes to her dinner companion not believing what the woman was saying.

"It's you can't go home again, darling, and these are her wishes. As her attorney, I'm obligated to tell you about them." Maria removed her own vial and drained it; the next part of the conversation was going to send Junior into a tizzy.

"And I'm telling you, just because someone leaves you something in their will does not mean you are obligated to take it. Susan has other family, I'm sure they are more qualified to take on this job than I am, talk to her."

"Honey, I can't do that."

"Dammit, Maria, I don't want this and Susan is the least of it. Forgive me if not wanting to raise the children she had with that twit half brother of mine. It just isn't something I am anxious to do. You go back to her and tell her no."

"I can't do that, Junior."

"Why in the hell not?" The voice was becoming a controlled whisper but Maria could tell Junior was pissed. Susan Baxter had been the one woman that had broken through all of Junior's walls in college. The heir to an oil empire had fallen hard for the small town girl that wasn't interested in the Baxter fortune, and it had drawn Junior in.

Just before they had graduated, Susan met Junior's half brother on one of his trips to the campus to borrow money. It just so happened that her parents were also up visiting for the weekend and Susan was going to tell them she was in love and of her plans for the future. When Quinton Baxter walked into the room, Susan's parents assumed this was the wonderful Baxter she had just finished telling them about. Considering Quinton's feelings toward his sister, he had played it up as much as he could. A long talk with Susan later that afternoon, and he had her believing a line about Junior that had turned her head and closed her heart.

For Susan it felt like she was drowning in emotion, and before she got her head above water she was married with the last name of Baxter, but not to the one she had fallen in love with. The last time Susan had seen Junior was as she was making the trip back down the aisle to leave the church the day she and Quinton got married. A year later she and Quinton had their first child and with ten years of marriage had come two more.

"She's in a coma, Junior, that's why I'm here. I'm sorry to have to tell you like this, but I didn't want Sally telling you over the phone." Instead of ranting anymore or asking any questions about what she was being told, Maria was surprised when her dinner companion looked at her watch.

"Hot date?"

"No, I'm noticing that it's April first and this is the worst joke you have ever played on me. Keep it up and I'll have your pool filled with frogs or something." Junior laughed thinking she was off the hook.

"I wish it was a joke, my friend, but this one's true."

"What happened to Quinton?"

"He died at the scene and the doctors don't expect Susan to hang in much longer." Taking a moment for the information to process, Junior nodded her head and called for the check. They agreed to meet at the hospital where Junior would make arrangements for her brother, and his wife when the time came.

Jillian watched her walk out, wanting to follow Junior and ask her what was wrong. Something had happened from the stony look on Junior's face as she walked by not saying good-bye. As the

passes that I don't wish I had made different choices so long ago.

In all my mistakes, the three that I don't ever regret are my children. They are my true treasures and I want you to take care of them if I am not able. Even if Quinton should outlive me, please honor this one wish. I know with you they will be loved and cared for, and will have opportunities no one else could give them. It's not the money I'm speaking of, but the kindness that made me feel like the luckiest woman alive once upon a time.

Again I am sorry for all the hurt I caused you. I am being selfish but I want you to forgive me. I love you Junior. I never stopped. Take care of my babies and tell them I'll always be looking out for them.

Yours,

Susan

The next morning Sally found the letter lying on the floor close to the hand that was hanging over the chair. Junior's legs were stretched out in front of her and the glass on the desk was empty. Sally said a quick prayer for forgiveness for the woman that had died, even though there were days when she had wished that fate upon her for the hurt she had caused Junior. The last time Quinton Baxter had walked into this office was when he had come to collect the check for his share of the pie. Old man Baxter had only one heir could rule the empire and it wasn't his son. For that reason Quinton had never forgiven his half sister.

"Come on, Junior, we have a busy day ahead of us." Sally put the coffee cup down along with the morning paper and important messages that had already come in.

"Try not to sound so chipper and I might not have to kill you."

"With an attitude like that, Junior, you're never going to find a young woman to wake up with."

"And why in the hell would I want that, when I have you to wake up with?" Junior stood up from her chair and pulled her assistant into her arms and dipped her back. The older woman laughed, glad to see the sense of humor was still intact.

"Get into the shower with you. I left a change of clothes in there," Sally called out as Junior stepped into the private bath in her office. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, could you cancel my appointments for this morning? I'm going to drive down to see Daddy and break the news to him. Let's hope this isn't one of those rare occasions when he gets up wanting to read the paper."

"Honey, unless someone wraps it around a Jack Daniel's bottle, your father is not up reading the paper." Sally snorted when the pants Junior had on flew out of the bathroom and hit her in the head.

"Some semblance of respect please. The old coot is a handful, but he's my father."

"Ain't that the truth."

"What's that suppose to mean?" The owner and head of the company didn't look all that powerful standing there in her underwear arguing with her assistant was the thought that made Sally laugh.

"That the apple didn't fall too far from the tree, and the old coot, as you call him, thanks the heavens for it everyday." The statement got a Junior to take her hands off her hips and smile. Her relationship with her father had been the only constant in her life besides work. "Are you sure you want me to cancel all your appointments this morning?"

"Why do I have the feeling I'm going to say no? And I'm not the same apple, woman. I never chased you around the desk. That has to be one point in my favor, right?" The bathroom was starting to steam up helping the woman in the shower forget about what had happened the night before.

"Junior, I'm sixty-two years old, of course you don't chase me around the desk. I could be your grandmother for pete's sake."

"Ah, come on, grandma, you're still kinda cute."

"Be quiet and pay attention. That Sterling girl called bright and early this morning and asked to see you." Sally leaned against the door of the bathroom noticing that the hands which had been working up a lather in the light brown locks just stopped.

"I saw her last night."

"Really, do tell?"

"Not like that. I ran into her and her father having dinner." Junior went back to work on her hair making a mental note that she needed a haircut.

"Is she cute?" pushed Sally. Every so often Junior would notice there was more going on around her than work, so she had penciled Jillian in when she called that morning. If Junior had given her a ride home and not bitched at the fine, the young woman had to be spectacular.

"She's cute, but would probably find some infraction against me for telling her."

"She has to be gorgeous for you not to have gotten mad when she fined your ass. Your father would have thrown her off the rig in protest."

"It's a new day in the oil "bidness" and Branasourus Baxter would not have survived. Why in my day we would have given that guy in Alaska a medal for hitting the only land for a hundred fucking miles." Junior's Avery imitation sent Sally into hysterics. No one ever described Avery Baxter as a tree hugger. She was laughing so hard she never heard the door open behind her.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Junior." Sally closed the door to the bathroom and faced Jillian Sterling making a thorough assessment.

Jillian's hair was so blonde it looked white in the brightly lit office, and Sally noticed the young woman looked nervous as she swayed from foot to foot. Her slim build looked nice in the mini dress she had on with a blouse over it and flats didn't add any height to her five feet two inches.

"Miss Sterling?"

"Yes, ma'am, I know I'm early but.....," started Jillian.

"Nonsense, would you like some coffee? Junior will just be a minute so why don't you sit and wait." Sally left their visitor sitting comfortably in one of the chairs facing the massive desk and went to get everyone some coffee.

Left alone, Jillian couldn't help herself and started looking around. It seemed obvious now that Junior wasn't a company diver if this was her office. The carved cypress nameplate on the desk that read Avery L. Baxter, Jr., along with a picture of smiling man holding a child told Jillian otherwise. Behind the two smiling faces was the brilliant blue of a body of water, and enough equipment parts were in the frame to tell the viewer the two were standing on an oilrig. Jillian stood up and looked at the back wall where the company's founder smiled back at her from a beautiful frame.

"It was the only the second time I saw him in a suit." The voice right behind her left ear scared Jillian into clutching her chest and turning around.

"I'm sorry, you scared me." The tall woman she had been thinking about was standing there in jeans, a button down cotton shirt and wet hair. "Aren't you going to get in trouble?"

"For?"

"Being in the boss's office with no shoes on." Jillian pointed down to the big feet thinking someone in Junior's family must have been oriental.

"You are kidding, right?"

"No, I made an appointment to see you but the guard brought me here."

"That's because this is where you would find me." Jillian rolled her eyes at Junior and questioned her rationale for coming. "What can I do for you?" Continued Junior unaware she was annoying her visitor.

"I came to talk to you about a job."

"I know you fined me, Ms. Sterling, but I don't need another job." Junior went to the closet near

the bathroom and took out a pair of worn bucks.

"Not for you, for me. After everything I was able to find on Pegasus I thought you could use my help as a company inspector. So, I thought you could put in a good word for me." Jillian got the whole request out before she changed her mind then just held her breath waiting for Junior to say something.

"Wouldn't that be your equivalent of selling your soul to Satan?" This woman asking her for a job was the last thing Junior expected. She looked at the date on her watch again just to confirm it was now the second. "Yep, can't be a joke."

"If you could introduce me to Mr. Baxter, I'm sure he would agree." Jillian pointed to the desk making Junior smile at the woman's wish.

"I'm getting ready to go see him, want to tag along?" Sally handed them two travel mugs as her boss led Jillian to the elevator leading to the parking garage.

"Where are we going, exactly?" It was a strange time to be asking Jillian thought as the leather seat welcomed her back.

"Bayou Country. How about a muffin or something?" Junior pulled the car into a strip mall that housed a bakery and next to it a liquor store.

Jillian arched a pale brow at her trying to decipher what it was about this woman that she found remotely interesting. She had been rude right out of the box and her conversational skills were a little lacking. "Or something."

"Ok, a girl that actually eats, this will be a nice change of pace. You go get something in there." Junior pointed to the bakery and handed Jillian some money, "And I'll meet you back here in a minute."

When Jillian walked out with a large bag several minutes later, Junior was leaning on the passenger door waiting for her. Once they were both buckled in for the drive, Jillian handed over an apple fritter without asking, laughing when Junior almost ripped it out of her hand.

"Hungry?"

"I missed dinner last night. I take that back. I had three straight vodkas, but they weren't as filling as the steak I had planned on."

"You did leave rather suddenly and you didn't say good-bye." Junior looked over to her passenger before getting on the highway out of town. *It's just a comment, Junior, calm down. Maybe she's just worried about you.* It was too early in the morning to deal with the voice so Junior just talked over it.

"Just a little melodrama I had to take care of. The truth is I'm still not sure what to think about

it."

"Anything I can help you with?" Jillian turned a little to look at the profile next to her. Junior played with her sunglasses and thought about not answering.

"I'll take a rain check on your offer, I'm not ready to talk about it now."

"Then take this," Jillian handed her another treat out of the bag, "It will make you feel better."

Two hours later the car pulled off the highway and entered one of the quaintest towns Jillian had ever seen. Downtown Franklin was a collection of the greatest antebellum homes the city dweller had come across outside of Atlanta. Junior pulled into the last one on the main drag but was going a little too fast for Jillian to read the historic plaque posted outside the gate.

Six large pillars held vigil over the perfectly manicured lawn, and the house they were attached to could only be described as big and gorgeous. Junior smiled at the wide-eyed look Jillian had as she took in the house and grounds. "Welcome to the house crude built."

"You would need oil money to keep this place up," said Jillian leaning forward to take in the whole structure.

"Who said anything about oil?" Jillian laughed at the connotation of what Junior said and the laugh got louder when the driver started singing, "Let me tell you a story about a man named Avery."

"Junior, get your ass out of that car and come tell me hello." The front door had opened and an overweight woman wearing an apron stepped onto the wide porch.

"That would be our cue." Junior opened her door and ran around to the passenger side to get Jillian before she greeted her Aunt Minnie. Jillian almost started laughing again when Junior almost hit the ground as the affectionate woman slammed into her with a hug.

"How are you Minnie?"

"Fine considering I have to put up with Avery all day. You look too thin, and who's your friend?"

"My weight is fine and this is Jillian Sterling. Ms. Sterling, may I present Minnie Robichaux." Junior waited until they were done with their hellos and welcomes before asking about her father's whereabouts.

"Out back watching the water lilies float by. He'll be thrilled to see you, and don't start bitching, you are staying to eat." Minnie shook her head as Jillian smiled when Junior went back to the car to get the bag in the back seat. From the trunk she took out a long tube and her briefcase.

"Come on, Ms. Sterling, Mr. Baxter awaits." Jillian followed her companion around the corner along the porch that wrapped around the entire house. The back yard was an explosion of

different colored flowers and a giant pool. The very back of the property bordered Bayou Teche, a brown colored body of water that had a current more like a river than anything else and a long row of cypress trees that provided a wide patch of shade. "Look alive, old man."

Jillian watched as a giant rose from a chair facing the water. The guy had to be a foot taller than Junior, and she was no midget. Blue eyes twinkled at them from under a crop of snow-white hair, which had fallen into his face while he slept. He was wearing shorts, which made it apparent that one leg was a prosthesis, but it didn't slow him down as he ran to Junior and gave her a big hug.

"Junior." He squeezed her so hard her feet left the ground. *Wow he must be awesome to work for if this is the greeting you get*, thought Jillian as she watched the reunion. "Did you bring me anything?"

"Yes, but only one or else Minnie will throw me out on my ass." She handed him the brown paper bag and laughed when he headed back to his chair with it. "I'm beginning to think that's the only reason you look forward to my visits."

"Don't be goofy, Junior, you're my link to the outside world not just to Jack. With Minnie as my warden, I never have any fun." Junior pointed to one of the other chairs for Jillian to have a seat. Before she did, Jillian looked up at her and smiled. Mr. Baxter had set up three glasses on the small table next to him and was busy pouring amber liquid into each one. Maybe no one had told him it was only ten in the morning?

"Could you do me a favor?" She put her hand on Junior's arm getting the woman to bend down and nod her head. "Please stop calling me Ms. Sterling."

"What's new, Junior?"

"Plenty, but let me start by introducing you to Jillian Sterling. Jillian, this old codger is Avery Baxter." Shooting Junior a dirty look, Avery smiled up at the petite blonde then handed her a drink. "Jillian wanted to talk to you about a job."

"You wouldn't be **the** Jillian Sterling that caught Junior with her pants down, would you?" He had drained the first shot and was pouring himself another one while he waited for her to answer.

"Excuse me?"

"The inspector that fined her for everything but taking a shit at the wrong time."

"That would be me, sir."

"Don't call me sir, it makes my skin crawl. Only bankers and lawyers call you sir, and then they stick it to you without benefit of a jar of Vaseline. My name is Avery and if it's a job you want you need to talk to Avery Junior." Both Avery and Jillian looked at Junior wondering what she was up to.

"It was our Junior all right. Watching her grow up, it was hard to picture my sister having any input at all."

"You're Avery's aunt?"

"Yes, Hope, her mother, was my younger sister." Minnie went back to her kneading once she jutted her chin out to the pan of beans to get her helper going.

"What happened to her?"

"It's like having Junior back in here asking questions."
Jillian bit into one of the beans from the pan and blushed. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. My sister died when Junior was barely two. She got the flu one winter that kept getting more and more complicated until it killed her." Minnie stopped to wipe the tears from her eyes getting flour on her face. "You'd swear we were on a wagon train or something having someone die of what is ultimately a bad cold. I came to help him out with Junior, and I'm still here."

"That's so sweet. You must love them both very much."

"Those two are bad eggs, Jillian, but they are both my bad eggs and I wouldn't change them for the world." Jillian looked out the window and wondered what the two Baxters were talking about that required drinks at this time of the morning.

"Is Avery seeing anyone that you know of?" *Gosh that didn't sound desperate.*

"Yes, I assume she is."

"Oh." Minnie looked up after hearing the dejected answer, smiling that her guess was right the minute she saw Junior had run to open the young woman's door.

"I mean, I assumed she was seeing you, dear." The biscuits she had been busy with were formed and ready to bake so Minnie moved to the next item.

"Oh no, not me. I just came to ask for a job."

"Uh huh, and did you get one?"

"I start tomorrow."

"How many constellations did she point out before you figured out you couldn't live without her?"

"Three." The two in the backyard never heard the ringing laughter or saw the deeper blush it

"Want to go for a walk with me?" Junior asked Jillian after they had both helped clear the table and Avery had gone off to take a nap.

"Will you hold my hand?"

"No," Junior snorted, "I'm your boss now." Minnie closed the kitchen door behind them so they wouldn't think she was listening in on their conversation.

"Then I'm not going, and I don't start until tomorrow." She smiled when a big hand was offered up and Junior didn't say anything. "And if you pout I'm going without you."

"Why do you want to work for me?" They headed back down toward the water and a boat shed that jutted out into the water.

Jillian walked where Junior led her but didn't answer the question right away. There was no way to do it honestly since she hadn't come up with the idea until the night before, and admitting it was so she could be close to Junior didn't seem like a great response. Junior let go of her hand when they reached the wharf so she could unlock the door to the shed. Inside were a small rowboat and a speedboat; neither one looking like anyone had taken them out in a while.

"Are you going to take me out?"

"Are you going to answer my question, Jillie?"

"I thought I could help you. You know, become an important part of what makes Baxter work the best it can and still keep a clean environment." The small motorless boat made a splash as it hit the water and Junior moved to hook on the oars.

After a good dusting where Jillian was going to sit, Avery pulled it close to the side so Jillian could get on board. The dress Jillian had on wasn't going to make getting aboard easy, so Junior tied the boat securely and put her hands on the slim hips to give her a boost. The only problem was that once she had Jillian on the boat she didn't let go of her.

"Do you want to become important to me, Jillie?"

"Avery, how many girls have you brought out here for their first kiss from you?"

"None, you'll be my first kiss out here."

"Good answer." Jillian pulled Avery's head down and pressed her lips softly to the ones just above hers. As Junior's lips met hers, Jillian wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon out there committing them to memory. When they broke apart because of a lack of air, Junior kept her arms around Jillian's waist. The kiss was something Junior had wanted to do from the day she looked up and found this beautiful woman on her rig.

"That was nice," said Junior blinking down at her.

"Damn, I'm going to have to try harder if all you can say is nice."

"How about spectacular?"

"Better, but let's try it again and see if I can't change your mind." Jillian pulled Junior back down to her level by pulling on the back of her neck and kissed her again.

Not wanting to give her aunt and father a free show, Junior sat Jillian down and pushed off from the wharf. Before setting off she had pulled out one of the umbrellas her dad kept in the boathouse and offered it to her passenger. They looked like a picture out of a romance novel with Junior rowing the boat and Jillian looking at her from under the small canopy of protection.

"You may want to change your mind you know." It was the only way Junior could think of to start this conversation. She still hadn't made up her mind as to what she should do with her sudden inheritance, but dating a woman with three children would have made her run for the nearest exit and she intended to give Jillian the same escape.

"Avery, don't start making excuses not to see me. I'll be in the building and everywhere else you think to escape to, so don't even try it."

"You sure make up your mind easily, you don't even know me." The oar plowed into a batch of purple water lilies breaking them into four different floating bouquets.

"That's what we are doing now, getting to know each other. I already know you like fried chicken, apple fritters and expensive cars."

Junior stuck her tongue out making Jillian laugh. "There's something I have to tell you before you go packing the U-Haul."

"Is this where you tell me that you snore and leave the top off the toothpaste in the morning?"

"I snore and I don't brush my teeth so you won't have that problem." The white smile that could have been used in a dental ads told Jillian the comment was meant in fun.

"You're a great kisser so I can let the snoring and dental hygiene thing go. What else you got?"

"Three kids it would seem." The only thing that broke the silence for a good five minutes were the turtles sliding into the water as the boat floated by, and the sound of the oars churning through the brown current.

"You have three children?"

"Sort of."

"Could you come over here and sit with me for a minute?" Jillian moved over and pointed to the

space next to her. Junior secured the oars and carefully moved next to Jillian, confident the boat would float along in the middle of the waterway.

"They aren't mine, they belonged to my half brother and his wife."

"You have a brother?" This learning phase of their relationship was turning out to be a fruitful afternoon.

"Sort of."

"Will you stop answering my questions with that phrase, you're driving me nuts." Jillian slapped her on the arm and smiled to soften the reprimand.

"Ok, here's the scoop. My mother died a long time ago and Avery, from my aunt's telling, had a hard time dealing with the loss so he handled it the only way he knew how."

"That being?"

"Well suffice to say there were a few bottles of Jack and more than a few barmaids involved. One of those women was smarter than the rest and figured out who Avery was, or more importantly what he owned. I was five at the time and by then the boom was on and daddy was rolling in cash. Around then he also bought Huntington House and poured a ton into restoring it, but the house and the money aren't what Avery is about. He loves to have a good time and he loved to bed women."

"Something you two have in common?" Junior smiled at Jillian because of her question and shook her head.

"I wouldn't have time to work if I tried to match my father's exploits. No, he will go down as the Baxter woman finding champion. Back to this woman, Madeline was her name. When Avery sobered up to find a new watering hole and his next batch of conquests, she was pregnant with one Quinton Baxter. She expected to move into Huntington with her new bundle of joy so Avery could groom him to be heir to the royal treasure trove."

"Only Avery already had an Avery Jr., is that it?"

"Sort of." Junior almost tipped them over when Jillian pinched her leg as hard as she could.

"Sorry, I forgot. Avery wasn't interested in marrying her or anyone else. My mother was a one shot deal for him but he did offer to take care of them. Only problem was, nothing was good enough or just plain enough. She had him in court every three months wanting a raise for this or more for that, and in the end Avery ended up hating her more than he loved anything else. The one thing she never allowed was for us to see dear little Quinton. So I knew about him but I had never really met him. Until I went to college that is, then the lost prodigal son looked me up and started asking to borrow money. He had graduated from high school but wasn't interested in anything else since his mother had convinced him he was going to inherit half of Baxter Oil."

"What did you graduate in?" Jillian took hold of one of the hands that had been waving around as Junior told her story and held it in her lap. She had guessed that the story didn't have a happy ending and wanted to offer as much comfort as possible.

"Why is that important to the story?"

"It's not, I just want to know."

"I have a degree in Engineering."

Jillian rolled her eyes and laughed. "Figures. Go on with your story."

"Avery came by one day to visit me and ran into Quinton. After a long talk, Quinton was made more than aware that there would be no inheritance in his future and that Avery didn't want anything to do with him or his mother."

"How was he going to get around the inheritance issue?"

"He doesn't have to now. The law changed recently, but before then it was easy. When I was ready he gave me a really swell birthday present one year."

Jillian pinched her again when Junior stopped. "Tell me."

"I think I'm going to like having you around." They kissed one more time before the story continued. "He gave me Baxter Oil Company. As revenge Quinton took something from me, or should I say someone. I met a girl named Susan in college and for the first time in my life I was in love. And, Susan loved me not because I was Avery Baxter, but just because of me. She came from a strict religious family that lived not too far from here, but she was willing to go against all that and follow her heart. Don't get me wrong Susan was gay and wanted to be happy but I think she was more afraid of her father than anything else. In one afternoon Quinton managed to talk her not only into not wanting to see me again but eventually into marrying him."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? I'm not. I don't think things would have lasted between us if after one measly little talk she never wanted to see me again. What Susan and I had was something, but it wasn't love. When Maria told me she and Quinton had gotten into a car accident, as cold as it sounds, I didn't really feel anything. I'm afraid I have a bit of my father in me in that they both were dead to me a long time ago."

"When was the last time you saw them?" Jillian had put her head on Junior's shoulder glad that she had trusted her with this story.

"I settled with him for what he thought he had coming to him about eight years ago."

"But I thought you said you owned the company outright?"

"Her full name is Avery Baxter but everyone calls her Junior."

"My father didn't like her you know?"

"I'm sure he didn't, but I want you to give Junior a chance before you take what your father felt to heart. Do you think you can do that?"

Bailey looked up for the first time and nodded her head. Maria could see so much of her mother in her while the other two had been a surprise. Quinton had been the image of his own mother with his raven black hair, brown eyes and short stature. His two youngest children seemed to have inherited all the Baxter genes that their father missed out on, leaving only the oldest looking like Susan.

They both heard the car pull into the drive and a door softly close a minute later. The fact it took the doorbell so long to chime meant Junior was outside building up her courage. Bailey went back to looking out the window while Maria got up to answer the door. In the time Maria was gone, Bailey made a decision for her and her siblings and was determined to see that it worked. Her mother was gone so that left her in charge of Emmett and Kristen; Susan would have wanted it that way.

"Bailey, this is Junior." Maria was surprised by what happened next considering the child's demeanor since she had arrived.

"Hello, I'm Bailey Baxter and my brother, sister and I are packed and ready to go. If you want I'll help you bring the stuff out. Thank you so much Miss Maria for having us over but we'll get going now. Are you ready?" Bailey shook Junior's hand and walked out of the room to get her bags. Two baffled women remained standing in the foyer of Maria's home wondering what had just happened. One thought she was here to make plans for the kids' care and the other was trying to smooth the way for Junior to accept the responsibility.

Twenty minutes later Junior was sitting at home listening to a nine year old on the proper maintenance and care of her ten month old little sister. The adult holding the baby sat listening to the miniature child expert, nodding while the little voice in her head was going ballistic. *Junior, get up and run out the door. Just put the kid down and run. You know nothing about raising children and you are too old to learn now, and don't give me any shit about not being quite forty yet. You know oil, Junior, not diapers.*

"We need to make a run to the grocery before we run out of diapers and baby formula. You want to make the list or do you want me to do it?"

"Um..." Junior noticed that the kid she was holding had just spit up on her jeans.

"I'll do it and stop bouncing her like that, it's what makes her spit up."

"Ok. Could you hold her a minute while I use the phone?"

"No, silly, because I missed you too."

"That's sweet of you to say. I changed a diaper today." Jillian wanted to hold the laugh in but couldn't quite manage. "There's something I thought I would never tell a woman I'm trying to date."

"You are already dating me, Avery. It's time to move into the wooing and courting stage, honey."

"I wouldn't call an afternoon of listening to my father and rowing, a date."

"That was our second date. The first was you telling me about the stars. You did such an admirable job, it's what made me want to see you again."

"And the reason you kissed me, is?"

"Marking my territory, Avery. I wouldn't want some other girl fining you big bucks and having it turn your head. Could I call you back in about ten minutes?"

"Sure, I'm just lying here trying to recover from today. I'm not sure how it happened but I have three other people under my roof and they are planning to stay."

"Hang up, Avery, and I'll call you right back."

True to her word the phone rang ten minutes later waking Junior out of a light sleep. When she picked up the receiver Jillian instructed her to go to the front door.

"Hi, I didn't want to ring the bell and wake anyone up." Junior found Jillian standing on her doorstep wearing a robe and slippers.

"Don't take this as a complaint, but what are you doing here?"

"I thought you could use this." Jillian stepped in and wrapped her arms around her tired looking friend and just held on. Bailey walked in and found them in front of the door just holding each other.

"Junior?"

"Hey, Bailey, this is my friend Jillian. Jillian, this is Bailey. Is there something wrong?"

"Would it be ok if I left the light on in the hall? You turned it off and my little sister's afraid of the dark." Junior was about to answer her when Jillian took over.

"How about you and me go turn it back on and then get you back to bed?" When the child nodded her head and held up her hand, Jillian followed her to the back of the house. Junior stood in the doorway of the room she had put all the kids in, listening to Jillian tell the child a story. The sun going down had not only brought out the stars, but also the fears Bailey had held at bay

all day. The businesswoman watched as Bailey's eyes fluttered shut to the soothing tones of Jillian's voice. *Be careful, Junior, you could fall in love with a woman like this.*

The little girl relaxed to the fingers combing through her hair making her think of her mother. Junior was nice, but she was so different than her mom but this woman sitting with her wasn't. "Do you think Junior will make us go away because my daddy didn't like her?"

"No, sweetheart, I don't. Avery is going to make sure the three of you are taken care of. Do you miss your daddy?"

"He didn't come home very often, and he and my mom fought a lot. His joke was that they had made up three times and that's where we came from. I'm not sure what that meant, but it made him laugh. My mom told me about Junior though."

"Yeah, what did she say?"

"I always thought Junior was a fish, cause she would say Junior was the one that got away." Jillian laughed at the child's recounting of her conversations with her mother. "Do you like Junior?"

"I like Avery very much."

"Why do you call her that?"

"Because Avery is Junior's name. I'll tell you a funny story about how she got her name." Jillian recounted the story Junior had told her minus the drinking Avery Sr. had done. When she was done her audience that had been afraid of the dark was fast asleep.

"Thanks." Both Avery and Jillian stood in the doorway of the guest bedroom and looked at the three peaceful children sleeping inside.

"That is one beautiful little girl in there, Avery."

"It would seem that my brother and his wife did at least three things right before they had to depart."

"And your dad and mom did one that I know of." Jillian curled up next to Junior on the couch and kissed her. It felt great after the day she had experienced in the office to have the big body pull her in and just hold her. Her partner Tony had given her nothing but grief all day when he found out what company Jillian was going to work for. Jillian found the strong heartbeat under her ear so relaxing, she closed her eyes promising herself it was only for a moment.

There were two things that pulled Junior out of a sound sleep. One was lying on top of her on the couch and the other one was the small finger that was poking her on the forehead. When she tried to turn her head away, the little finger moved to her ear and that's when she discovered it was wet.

"I need to go out to Pegasus again and I'm not sure how I'm suppose to do that now. Bailey's a whiz with her siblings but I'm doubting that I can leave her alone with them for a couple of days." Junior played with Jillian's fingers wanting nothing more than to pull her into her lap and kiss her, but not knowing how she would take that at the office.

Seeing the small pout, Jillian made the decision for her. Taking up the position they watched television in once the kids were asleep every night and before she went home, when she went home, Jillian took a seat. Sitting in Avery's lap had become her favorite time of the day.

"Plan your trip, workaholic, and I'll take care of the rest." Jillian finished off with a small kiss getting Avery to lose her pout.

"I can't let you do that, they aren't your responsibility."

"Honey, don't you want me around?"

"You can't be serious? I would have gone batty by now just from the lack of sleep. I'm afraid if I don't ask you to marry me soon, Bailey is going to beat me to the punch."

"Maybe she can give you a brush up course in the romance department, Avery. Now kiss me and let me go, I have a meeting with a man named Possum. That might be a good story for the kids and I one night, how Possum got his name." Avery kissed her one more time before helping her to her feet smiling at how much better the day went when Jillian stopped by.

"Not until they turn at least twenty." It wasn't until Jillian left that her comment about romance hit Junior. Sally stood just outside the doorway and looked at her boss who had gone back to looking out the window.

"Something I can help you with?"

"I've gone from a confirmed bachelor who loved to work, to someone with a house full of kids and a girl that just keeps showing up without me asking in less than five weeks." The assistant couldn't decide if Junior was complaining or giving a report on her personal life so she prodded her a little.

"Is it the kids or the woman that is making you spend the day looking out the window?"

"Neither and both of them. I don't handle change very well and this isn't change, it's damn well redefinition."

"Junior, you're an engineer, of course you don't do well with change. You're just like your father, no wonder I never had any problems coming to work for you. Would you like some advice from an old lady?" Sally cocked her head to the side wanting to draw Junior out of the mood she was in.

"I know you, Sally, you are just going to tell me anyway, so asking you is a waste of breath on

in her new crib.

"Did Avery tell you she's leaving for a couple of days?" Bailey asked Jillian as the woman pulled the covers up from the foot of the bed. It was warm outside, but Junior kept the house so cold you could store meat in the living room.

"Yes, but Miss Sally and I are coming to stay with you guys so don't worry about it. Do you like Miss Cindy?" Jillian had refused to go to work until they found someone who would come to Junior's house and stay with them while they were at the office. After a solid two days of interviews she had found a nice middle-aged woman that the kids seemed to love.

"Yes, ma'am, she's nice. Avery's coming back, isn't she?"

"Oh, sweetheart, of course she is. Now go to sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

Jillian left the hall light on and headed toward the kitchen in search of Avery. Her father had grilled her over dinner to find out what Avery's intentions were, enough so that Jillian had told him to call her and ask himself. Shaking her head she entered the kitchen and found it dark except for the night light over the stove. A quick check of the study, den and living room also yielded no Junior.

"Maybe she's finally flipped and run away from home." Jillian was so busy talking to herself that she almost missed the trail of rose petals on the floor leading out the backdoor. Following them, she opened the screen door and found Avery standing with her back to her, looking up to the skies from the deck. "Want some company?"

"I was waiting for you." When Avery turned around, Jillian got her first look at the bouquet of roses in her hand. Avery had also brought out the radio and flipped it to a station playing romantic music. "Two very different women told me today that I'm not very romantic. Since between them they seem to know what they're talking about, I should take heed in the lessons they are trying to teach me. Dance with me?"

"Do you know how to dance?" When Avery's hand went up and played with her glasses, Jillian had her answer. "I know you are my boss and everything, but just follow my lead on this one until you get the hang of it."

Junior put her hands where Jillian had instructed and was swaying with her in time with the music. "This is nice."

"Just for the record, I think you are terribly romantic so don't go listening to other women on the subject. But dancing and flowers are nice, so keep that part of the advice. On another subject, my father is thrilled to know you. That must have been one dandy of a contract."

"Enough pipe to get crude from the Gulf through four different parishes when it gets to land should be enough of a commission for him to retire."

question. But the child was so serious, she just patted the mattress as an invitation for Bailey to join her like she sometimes did when Avery was out of town.

"I'm sure Avery will help you with whatever you want to do. What do you want to do?"

"I want to be a vet. I mean Avery is great, but when she talks about all that stuff she does, it sounds kinda boring. Promise you won't tell her?"

"I promise. Want me to walk you back?" When she laid down again, Jillian tried to stay awake to wait for Avery but the tired traveler found the blonde with her hands wrapped around Avery's pillow fast asleep.

When Jillian woke she found the pillow that she had been hugging had been replaced with a long warm body that was breathing deep and slow under her ear. Finding Avery in bed with her brought a smile to her face and she tightened her hold making the arms wrapped around her tighten as well. Avery took a deep breath and held it before letting it out in one long stream signaling that she was waking up.

"Good morning." The voice sounded deep and sexy to Jillian but still a little tired.

"Good morning, honey. I'm sorry I wasn't awake when you got here but this bed is some kind of comfortable." Jillian kissed her to both welcome her home and wish her a good morning leaving Avery fully awake when she was done.

"Kiss me like that all the time and I won't care when you sleep."

Jillian patted her on the stomach and smiled. "We need to buy a new house."

"I like this house, what's wrong with it? And how did we go from talking about kissing to talking about buying a new house?"

"Avery, this house has three bedrooms and you converted one into an office." Jillian stated the obvious, but she could see Avery was not comprehending.

"I know that."

"Honey, you have three little people in the only one that's left. That isn't fair to Bailey, especially when she starts school again."

Avery looked around the room wondering when she had lost complete control of her life then looked back to the pretty bright blue eyes looking at her and found the answer. "Ok."

"That was easy but trust me, you'll be much happier when you have a place where you can lock up all those decoys of yours."

An annoyed look came over Avery's face making Jillian break out in a laugh that she tried to

"Hi, buddy, did you break anything while I was at lunch?"

"No ducks here to play wiff."

"No ducks, buddy, that's right but you have Jillie to play with." When Avery sat down the baby came crawling over and pulled herself up by her pant leg. Jillian looked over enjoying the sight of Avery holding the two youngest Baxters. They had put Bailey in a school close to the house they had both decided on, but the invitation that Jillian was waiting for before she put her own house on the market had yet to come.

"If you make me fly to Houston, I'm telling Junior on you." It was the last thing Jillian said into the phone before hanging up. "When are you going to sweep me off my feet and make l-o-v-e to me?"

Avery smiled at her from the sofa in Jillian's office and talked to Emmett instead of the woman behind the desk. "Emmett, do you think if we asked Jillie to sell her house and move in with us, she would do it?" As an answer, the little boy pulled her glasses off and threw them across the room. "You are quicker than lightning, I swear." She got up and put him down next to the blocks he had been playing with before spotting her and moved to Jillian. "Can I talk you into leaving with me for a little while? Sally said she would watch destructo and his sister."

Some of the staff on the executive floor of the company smiled as the two left hand in hand. Any resentment Jillian feared over her job and her relationship with Avery had not materialized, and everyone under Sally's watchful eye was very supportive. In the garage, Avery opened the passenger door for Jillian and kissed her before the blonde got in. They didn't talk as they drove to the new house that was ready for them to move into.

Avery parked the car in the driveway and looked at the big structure in front of them. "I'm not really good at anything but pumping oil out of the ground, or I wasn't interested in being good at anything else until I met you." She got out and helped Jillian out of the car before she went on.

"I'm not real sure why you stuck with me all this time, but I wake up and you are always there. It still shocks me that you didn't freak out when I somehow ended up with three kids, but I thank the gods for you every day and I think the kids, in their own way, do to."

"Avery, honey, what's this about?" Jillian was getting worried when Avery started sweating when she started talking.

"Just let me get all this out and then you can talk ok?" Jillian smiled up at her and nodded her head, so Avery took her by the hand and led her around to the back of the house. "I want to apologize for taking so long to do this, but I just figured you would leave."

"Oh, Avery, I don't want to leave." When she got a pointed look from the tall woman Jillian stopped talking. "Sorry."

"I thought about how I could tell you how much you mean to me and the topic is so

overwhelming that it was hard to pick just one thing, but I think I finally have it." Avery opened the gate to the back yard and in the middle of the grass sat a big sycamore tree waiting to be planted.

"You bought me a tree?"

"I fell in love with a tree hugger so I thought it was appropriate."

"Run that passed me again." Jillian pulled them to a stop and looked up at Avery.

"I love you and I want you to move in here with us. I want you to put your house up for sale today and move all your stuff in here this weekend. Don't worry about arranging it, I called the movers and they'll take care of it, unless you say no."

"Ok, is it important to you to know that I love you too?"

"Sort of."

Only Avery would pick this moment to answer me like this. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not finished, and any declarations from you right now will make me forget what I'm saying."

"Ok, please continue."

Avery led her to the tree and dropped to one knee. "I want to wake up with you every morning, I want to build a life with you and the kids here, I want you to help me raise them as our own and I want you to know that I will always belong to just you. Will you be mine?"

"Can I tell you now?"

"It would seem the appropriate time, yes."

"I love you, Avery, you idiot. I can't believe you kept me waiting all this time, but I see it every time you look at me so I'll forgive you this once." Avery squeezed her hand to get her back on track and answering her questions. "Yes I'll move in, and I'm already yours and you know that. I have been ever since you sat next to me smoking that cigar and pointing out stars."

"Can I point out one more for you?"

"Tonight? You have a date."

"I was thinking about right now." Avery pointed to one of the low branches in the tree and waited. Jillian looked up to find a ring hanging from a string and when the stone caught the sunlight it did look like a star. The crying blonde pulled Avery off her knees since she couldn't reach the diamond and she wanted to try it on.

"It's beautiful, thank you."

"You're beautiful and I want to show you how much."

"In the backyard?"

"Nah, I had them move the bed early."

"Why today?"

"Because I couldn't go one more day without touching you, and it seems stupid to want to."

"Stupid to want to touch me?" The look of annoyance Junior was more than familiar with was starting to take shape on Jillian's face.

"No, Jillie, stupid not to."

Avery picked her up and carried her around to the front of the house so she could carry Jillian over the threshold. As the passion they had kept bottled up for months came pouring out, they never saw Avery Sr. pumping his fist in the air when Jillian shouted out a roaring 'Oh Avery'. His daughter had forgotten he and Minnie were coming in to look at the new house and help supervise the move. The elder Baxter was walking around the yard when Jillian's approval of whatever Junior was doing made him stop for a minute.

Inside Jillian was going to bite down on Avery's earlobe again but popped her head up instead. "Did you hear someone let out a whoop?"

"Actually all I can hear right now is blood rushing in my ears."

Jillian laughed at her exhausted looking lover and pinched her on the leg. "Avery Baxter, you have been holding out on me. That was fantastic."

"You provide really great inspiration." Avery looked down at the gorgeous body draped over hers and felt like doing everything they had just done all over again.

"Junior, get dressed and let us in." Her father's voice coming from right outside the window made them both break out into a full body blush.

"I may need therapy marrying into your family."

"He is a little bigger than life."

"If he tells anyone this story, he's going to be a big piece of toast." Jillian kissed the tip of Avery's nose to let her know she was joking before climbing off her and picking up her clothes.

Emmett and Kristen are loved and well taken care of. I wanted to come out today and thank you both for the precious gifts you entrusted to me. I promise to take good care of them and to tell them of the parents that loved them all."

Avery put the flowers she had brought with her in the vase between the two head stones and got to her feet. "Rest in peace and before I go I brought you a gift. It's the last one I have that Emmett hasn't gotten to, and I wanted you to have it."

She picked up her son and walked back to the car. A wooden duck stayed behind, looking over the peaceful setting just like he belonged there.

The End

Comments to: terrali20@yahoo.com