

~ Community Service ~

by KG MacGregor

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A little something for Valentine's Day, 2007

We were in for a beautiful day-lots of sunshine, not too hot-perfect for getting a lot of work done outside. I leaned over a five-gallon paint bucket that propped open the front door of the block house. "You in here, Phil?"

"Back here," he answered from somewhere down the hall. "What's the crew like today?"

I checked my notes. "We have the choir from the Mount Hope Methodist Church, five men and fifteen women."

"Old? Young?"

"Both...not all that young though." No one under fifty, from the looks of things.

"That's too bad. I need to get that pile of blocks moved from the back yard out to the curb, but I don't want any heart attacks on the worksite." Phil emerged from one of the roughed-out bedrooms, wiping his hands on his khaki workpants. "I guess we'll paint the outside today. Everybody likes that."

"Okay, I'll get folks organized. Their minister's here. You want him to lead the prayer?"

"Fine by me."

I stepped off the concrete porch and started toward the cluster of cars where the volunteers were gathered, all talking excitedly and sharing coffee from a giant thermos. I liked how happy everyone was first thing in the morning. Church groups worked hard and seemed to stay happy through the day. It was usually the corporate types that started groaning by the first break.

"Good morning. I'm Alice Boyd. I'm the volunteer coordinator for Habitat for Humanity. Let me be the first to say thank you for-"

My welcome speech was interrupted by a white sports car that skidded to a stop on the gravel at the shoulder of the road. I glanced back at the group for signs of recognition, but they all seemed curious about this new arrival too. The driver gave no sign of getting out, so I approached the car and tapped on the darkly tinted glass.

With the engine still running, the window lowered to reveal a woman in dark sunglasses, the word Versace etched in the arm. She held a cell phone to her ear. "...if you just pull the portfolio and send it to my building." Without making eye contact, she held up a finger to indicate...

To indicate what? That she would only be another hour or so? For me to be quiet because she was busy? This wasn't a choir member. No, this woman had a strong sense of self-importance and entitlement. And she wasn't a volunteer. People like her showed up only when they had to-under court order.

"If you want credit for the day, you need to hang up and join us for the morning prayer in fifteen seconds. Otherwise, just go home and come back another day."

I whirled around and stormed away, satisfied to hear the slamming door and shuffling of feet behind me. Score one for the good guys.

"...yes, I'll look at it tonight and-"

I spun back around and glared at her, whipping my hand across my throat as a sign for her to cut it. Then I joined the choir circle and bowed my head, annoyingly aware that something about the way she carried herself had just sent my gaydar off the freakin' scale. "Reverend Marshall, will you lead us in prayer?"

The woman whispered one last thing and finally closed her phone. Then she stood quietly as the reverend offered his prayer for the home, the family that would live there, and the blessed hands that would build it.

When the prayer was finished, I looked over my clipboard and back at the group, my ire temporarily on the back burner. I was a volunteer myself, so I didn't have to take this on as my problem. Besides, community service workers were a pain in the butt, but once the workday got started, they usually blended in with everyone else.

"As I was saying earlier, my name is Alice Boyd, and I'm the volunteer coordinator. My job is to give you the lay of the land and remind you about some of the safety rules from the orientation. You all attended the orientation, right?" I looked up to see heads bobbing in unison, all except the newcomer, who was fidgeting with earphones for her iPod. I laughed to myself when it struck me that her designer jeans and bright white athletic sneakers would be covered with dirt and paint by the end of the day. Served her right. She was tall and slender, with long blond hair pulled through the back of her ball cap. Naturally pretty, but way too irritating to swoon over. "Excuse me, we don't allow earphones on the worksite except during breaks. Same with cell phones. It's a safety issue." I finished that with an insincere smile.

The woman made a face and tucked the device into her shirt pocket.

"Our job today is to paint the exterior of the house. Phil is our site leader and he's getting the equipment together now. We'll break up into four teams and each do a side of the house. Anyone on a ladder has to have someone holding it, okay? And please remember to be aware of your surroundings at all times."

I watched as the volunteers organized themselves into groups of five, leaving Miss Don't-Chip-

My-Nails behind. I pulled a form from the bottom of my pile and placed it on top of my clipboard. When the others walked off to claim their brushes and rollers, I approached her, figuring it was time to address her sullen mood. "I'm betting you don't want to be here."

"Is it that obvious?"

I smiled in spite of myself, but I wasn't about to cut her any slack. "No offense, but we can spot the community service people a mile away. They all have this 'kill me now' look."

"They don't give us a lot of choices. It was forty hours of this or ten days in jail."

Ninety percent of our community service workers were drunk drivers, but their sentences were usually a hundred hours or thirty days. Hers was probably an interesting story, but I couldn't afford to set a precedent for chatting. We were here to work.

"You should join one of the groups."

"They all...they're friends. They know each other. Do you have anything I can do by myself?"

Keeping this one out of the church crowd was probably a good idea, though I doubted she would last long at the other job. "Phil needs those cinderblocks moved out here by the curb." I pointed to the massive pile out back and watched as her face fell. "Did you bring work gloves?"

She nodded. "I guess I'd rather do blocks than people."

"Suit yourself." I handed her the clipboard with the blank form on top. "You need to fill that out. We break for fifteen minutes in the morning and again in the afternoon. Lunch is at noon for a half hour. Clean-up starts at three. That gets you eight hours."

"Whoopee," she muttered. "Only thirty-two more to go."

As the weekend volunteer coordinator for Habitat, I was used to dealing with the surly attitudes of workers thrust upon us by the courts. I even tried to cut them a little slack because I figured they were already tired from carrying those huge chips on their shoulders. But I didn't credit them for time spent loafing.

I needn't have worried about Brenda Scott. She had worked her tail off last week, earning an early break after lunch while Phil searched for something else she could do. I only had to speak to her once, to remind her of our "no cursing" rule when she dropped a block on her toe.

And here she was back for her second week, on time no less, and dressed more appropriately in cargo pants, work boots and a black T-shirt that hugged every curve on what appeared to be a lovely body. I liked looking at her, but that dour disposition had to go.

"Good morning, Brenda. Nice to see you back."

She grunted her displeasure. "It's Bren."

All right, I was an idiot. She was probably an axe murderer awaiting trial, but I liked being privy to her nickname. I handed her the court form and gathered the rest of the crew, a bunch of bank tellers and loan officers from First Trust. I admired companies that invested their resources in Habitat. It didn't matter that most of the folks were here only to impress the boss. Anything that motivated them to give their best worked for me.

Phil led us in a group prayer before gathering everyone inside with more paint buckets and rollers. Like last week, they broke into teams of friends to do various rooms, leaving Bren again as odd one out. Fortunately, I was prepared.

"You're welcome to work with the others if you like, but I thought you might be interested in doing the baseboards instead."

"You mean crawl around on the floor with a paintbrush?"

"No, the baseboards haven't been attached yet. We don't nail them on until the tile has been laid. They're out back." I led her to the back of the house, where baseboards of varying lengths were stacked beside two sawhorses. "We paint them here and lay them out in the yard to dry."

She pushed her hands in her pockets and shrugged. "I guess I can do that."

I almost laughed at her attempt at nonchalance. She was thrilled to be out here away from everyone else. "And just so you know...no one's going to bust your chops if it takes you all day to do this."

She nodded, apparently getting my message.

I left her to her task and went back into the house to supervise the painters. But that didn't mean I wasn't thinking about her every six minutes. In the three hours before the morning break, I probably peeked out back about thirty times from the bedroom window. By that time, she had finished more than half of the pile. "Hey, slow down. Remember what I said."

"I did the easy ones first. The rest of these have rough spots. They need to be sanded before they're painted."

In my three years as volunteer coordinator, it was rare to see a volunteer labor over details like that. Most of them came with an attitude of "beggars can't be choosers." Once in a while, we were lucky enough to get professionals or hobbyists on site, but few of our ordinary volunteers

and hardly any of our community service workers paid attention to the little things. As a result, our regular work crews had to go behind them on Monday morning to fix things that were done haphazardly. But they weren't going to have to clean up after Bren.

"You look like somebody who's done this before."

"Not exactly." She wiped her hands on a rag and drew a bottle of water from the wide pocket on her pants leg. "But I've hired people who did it wrong the first time and I know how shi"-she caught herself-"how crappy it looks." She tipped her head back and squirted her mouth full from the sports cap.

It wasn't all that hot outside, but my temperature shot up ten degrees when I saw the water dribble down her bare throat to soak the front of her tee. The question on the tip of my tongue would have embarrassed us both. Yes, she was wearing a bra, I decided...a thin sports bra that molded to her wet skin. My kingdom for a cool breeze. Too bad I didn't have a kingdom.

"When is this house supposed to be finished?"

"Three more weeks. If you come every Saturday between now and then, you should be able to finish up on the day we deliver it."

"How do you decide who to give it to?"

That question was covered in the mandatory orientation, but knowing Bren, she probably sat through it with her earphones in. "We don't give it to anyone. Miss Annie is taking on the mortgage when she moves in here with her three grandchildren."

"Mortgage? I thought the whole idea was to build houses for people who couldn't afford to buy one."

"Not exactly. It's to build affordable houses, not free ones. We use volunteers and donated materials to keep the costs down, but we have a paid crew too. Everyone who moves in has an interest-free mortgage, which we use to build more homes. But we treat it just like any other mortgage. If they default, we foreclose and move someone else in."

"Alice?" It was Phil calling from the back door. Our fifteen minute break was up. "Do you have T-shirts for these guys?"

"Coming." Yes, I had T-shirts to hand out-big baggy ones that wouldn't look good at all on Bren. Maybe I wouldn't have enough.

The teenage boys jostled one another as they waited for Phil to join us for the morning prayer. Of all the groups that volunteered with us, youth groups were the most rewarding, and simultaneously, the most challenging. I loved the message of hope they carried about the coming generation, but I feared every day what might happen on the job site as a result of their instinctive horseplay.

"Where's your hammer, homo?" one asked another as he pushed him playfully into Phil's truck.

I was about to pinch the kid's head off when the now-familiar Porsche Carrera pulled in behind my Toyota Prius. Bren climbed out, sporting her new baggy Habitat T-shirt, damn it, and the cargo pants she had worn two weeks ago, the last time I saw her. I have to admit, I was peeved that she had blown us off last weekend. People who volunteered-or in Bren's case, who were here to work off community service hours-didn't seem to understand that we depended on them to be here when they said they would. Only three of the dozen teens we had expected today had shown, and all said they had to leave at lunchtime. When people let us down, everyone else had to work harder to meet the deadlines.

With her fancy sunglasses still in place, Bren shuffled in behind the teenagers without as much as a hello. When the prayer was finished, she looked around in apparent boredom, no doubt assuming I would track her down and give her a special job so she wouldn't have to be around other people. She was in for an unpleasant surprise. She was going to lay sod with the rest of us. It was backbreaking work, and with only the few of us, Phil and I would probably have to work until dark to finish.

"You have something for me?"

"No one's special today. We're all going to have to lay sod and get it watered before dark."

Even I was surprised by the clip in my voice, and her semi-cheerful expression-the only one I'd ever seen-faded in an instant. "I was talking about the community service form."

"Oh...sorry." I shuffled the papers to place her form on top and handed her the clipboard. I rationalized to myself that I didn't have to be sorry for being miffed that she hadn't shown last week. At least she could have offered up some excuse, even a flimsy one, especially after I had told her how much better it would be if she got her hours in without having to move to the new site.

She scribbled her name and case number on the sheet and handed back the clipboard. Then she disappeared without another word into the back yard, where they had already started laying out grass squares at the corner of the lot. I felt like a snippy bitch.

Our crew of six worked at grueling pace for almost three hours, each of us alternating between the tasks of loading the sod into a wheelbarrow, trucking it across the loose dirt, and dumping it so it could be dropped in place. We were barely finished with a third of the yard when Phil called first break.

I felt like I needed to say something to Bren, something joking to take the edge off what had happened this morning. But she spent the whole fifteen minutes at her car pacing and talking on her cell phone. Probably bitching to someone about me.

I knew I ought to suck it up and apologize for my attitude, but when she came back after the break, she immediately joined two of the boys stacking the wheelbarrow and left me with Phil and the other teen. We stayed that way for an hour then swapped jobs, keeping us on opposite ends of the yard. By lunchtime, we had finished the whole back yard and part-way around the sides, but the boys had to leave. The three of us were going to be hard-pressed to finish the front yard, especially with Bren leaving at three-thirty.

"She's a hard worker, that one," Phil said as he sat down on the front porch with his lunch. Bren was walking back and forth in front of her car, on her cell phone again. She had a sandwich in her other hand.

"We don't get many like that through the courts, do we?"

"You reckon she was driving drunk?"

"I don't think so. She's only sentenced to forty hours. Most of those guys get a lot more."

"Maybe she winked at the judge."

"Does she strike you as someone who would do that?"

"I see your point."

With my sunglasses lowered, I could watch Bren without her knowing it. I'd been doing a lot of that, especially since two weeks ago when she'd worn that tight T-shirt. She was about my age, late thirties or early forties. And given her fancy car and clothes, she was probably a well-paid professional. Just my type. Everybody's type, actually.

"If I don't get up now, I may not get up at all," Phil groaned.

I understood that for myself when I tried to stand up and every muscle screamed. Even the stoic Bren was rolling her head around her shoulders to loosen the muscles in her neck as she walked over. And given my train of thought, the first thing that went through my head was a picture of my fingertips digging into her bare shoulders with a little massage oil.

"Another hour of rest would have been nice, huh?" That was my lame overture to get a half-smile out of her, but it didn't work. She did manage a groan of her own, though, and I decided to take that as a positive sign. At least she wasn't ignoring me.

Not ignoring me wasn't the same as being sociable, however. We worked in silence for more than an hour, each of us lost in our own thoughts. My thoughts were about Bren, mostly, like

how strong her hands looked, and how agile she was using a carpet knife to shape the sod around the sidewalk and shrubbery. It was nearly time for our second break, and I was excited to see Miss Annie pull up. At fifty-nine years old, Miss Annie had logged more than two hundred hours of labor at the worksite. Now Bren could get a first-hand look at the woman who would soon be calling this house her home.

"Good afternoon. How's my girl today?"

I liked Miss Annie and she liked me. But she had never called me "her girl" before. And apparently, she wasn't doing that now, since she walked straight to Bren, who stood and brushed off her hands to give her a hug. What the heck was that about? Two weeks ago, Bren didn't know a thing about Miss Annie and now they were hugging like old friends. And Bren was actually smiling at her. No fair!

They talked until the break was up and then Miss Annie made her way over to me. "The children went to a birthday party, so I thought I'd come by and see if I could help out for a while. Good thing I did. I hear your volunteers ran away."

"Yeah, it's just Bren this afternoon."

"She's sweet."

Sweet to look at, maybe, but her charm ended there. She had Miss Annie snowed. "You two know each other?"

"Just from the other day. We laid the floor together in the bedrooms."

"You laid the floor?" Had I had a lobotomy or something? "What day was that?"

Miss Annie scratched her head. "Let's see... Thursday, I reckon."

Thursday. So Bren had worked on Thursday to make up for not coming last weekend. That made me a first class jerk for assuming she had just blown us off. I owed her an apology for even thinking that. And she owed me nothing, not even a polite reply.

Miss Annie took over as Bren's assistant for the next couple of hours, handing her patches of sod to fill in the irregular spaces. I went back and forth with the wheelbarrow to keep them supplied. Phil was in the back playing with hoses and sprinklers to get the new ground cover saturated. Our usual quitting time came and went, with only Miss Annie leaving to go pick up her grandchildren. The three of us plowed on, even Bren. It was nearly dark when we finished watering the front yard.

"I'm tempted to let you hose me down next," Bren told Phil. "I'm too nasty to get in my car."

I could take her home! Except the cat had my tongue and Phil beat me to it. Damn cat.

"I was just kidding. I probably have a beach towel or something in the back."

"If you're sure." He tossed the last of the tools in the wheelbarrow and carted them around to the shed, leaving Bren and me alone together for the first time all day.

She pulled off her cap and loosened her hair, which was matted to her head from a day's worth of sweat. The rich black dirt from the sod was caked under her fingernails, in rings around her neck, and in her crow's feet. She was still gorgeous. I was busy admiring that when my feet got tangled in the hose and I went sprawling backward onto my butt.

"Are you all right?"

I looked up to see her hovering over me, checking me out in the waning light. I wanted so bad to be hurt somewhere so she'd comfort me, but I had an unfortunate lack of real pain. "I think I'm okay."

"I'm surprised that didn't happen sooner. For somebody who's so concerned about people staying alert, you don't ever pay attention to anything but me. Are you afraid I'm going to try to escape?"

"I wasn't...I haven't..." Shit. I was busted. The question was how bad.

"Whatever. I'm not going to slack off and give you any reason to tell the judge I haven't met my obligation."

She held out a hand and I took it, struggling to my feet. So she didn't know exactly why I'd been staring at her all this time. So much for her having gaydar. "Are you kidding me? I've been watching you because I was amazed. You've worked harder than just about any volunteer we've ever had."

She shrugged and put her hands in her pockets. She was positively adorable. "I figure if it's worth doing at all, it's worth doing right."

Now it was time for the buttering up. "You've met Miss Annie, so you know it's worth doing, Bren. And we couldn't do it without the help of people like you."

"You mean like me and Judge Haskins." That last bit she said with a chuckle as she turned toward her car, effectively cutting me off from asking the one question I was dying to know-how a nice girl like her had ended up in a place like this.

I was also interested in whether or not she'd marry me and let me drive her fancy car sometime.

Nothing made us prouder at Habitat than handing over a brand new house to its owner. It wasn't just the workmanship, though I had no doubt we could match our homes against those of any builder in town and win. What made our homes special was the love that went into them, from the donors to the volunteers to the owners themselves.

We didn't schedule volunteers on the days we did the handovers. Miss Annie's house was nearly perfect, except for a handful of tiny items on a punch list, like smoothing out a caulk bead or scraping paint off a window with a razor blade. The last person walked through with a paintbrush doing touchups on places where the walls and baseboards were scuffed.

My pulse shot up its usual twenty beats when I saw Bren's car pull up. This would be the last day for that. With her extra time from last week, she was out of here for good at eleven.

I didn't have many chances to meet women like Bren Scott through Habitat, sophisticated professionals who sent me falling over water hoses. And now that I had, it sucked even worse that we both had managed to put our worst foot forward. At least it was my worst foot. For all I knew, surly was the only foot she had.

She was wearing her cargo pants again, this time with a sculpted short-sleeved Henley that hugged her body tightly. As she approached the porch, she tipped her sunglasses up on her forehead and actually sort of partially smiled. "Where is everybody?"

"Hi. It's just the three of us today. There isn't much to do, and we have the presentation ceremony at noon."

"Just tell me where to start."

"We need to do the prayer first." She gave me a questioning look. "It's part of the program. Let me get Phil."

A few minutes later, we started in on the punch list, me scraping windows, Bren stripping and reapplying the caulk around the shower, and Phil working to make the kitchen drawers open smoothly. The morning flew by, but we worked steadily and got through everything on our list. I hadn't even realized it was eleven o'clock already until I heard Phil out on the porch calling goodbye to Bren.

She left without even saying goodbye! I took back what I was thinking earlier about not meeting enough women like Bren Scott. Even meeting one who ripped my heart out so callously was one too many. Okay, that was pretty melodramatic. My heart was intact, especially since she'd barely given me the time of day the whole time she was on site. But I was disappointed that our time together at Habitat had been so clumsy and disjointed.

Phil and I broke early for lunch so we could set up for the ceremony. We had a table for refreshments and a podium to stand on the porch. The crowd would assemble on the front lawn, atop the thriving grass we had laid only last weekend.

One by one, the dignitaries and guests began to arrive. Our executive director was on hand to talk about our mission at Habitat. The councilman for this district would boast about the city's commitment and the land they had donated to the partnership for housing. Even I was on the program, slated to thank the volunteers whose hands had hastened the work. Phil would then present Miss Annie with the house keys and a Bible, and she would finish with a few words of her own.

We were moments away from starting when I saw a familiar face at the back of the crowd. Knock me over with a feather. Bren had returned, now dressed in dark slacks, a white shirt, and a navy blue silk vest. I wanted to marry her after all, right here on the steps the second this ceremony was over.

"I wasn't expecting you back for this part."

"Miss Annie invited me. Is it okay for me to be here?"

"Of course." I was ashamed that she even felt she had to ask the question. "Look, Bren...I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot when you started here. You did a great job and I really liked having you around." I felt myself sinking into the ground as I waited for her to say something in response.

"Want to get a cup of coffee when this is over?"

Instead of getting married? "Sure."

As Bren waited for her latte, I sat at a small corner table and studied her, more nervous than I wanted to be. Part of that was because I was still in my grubby work clothes and she looked like a million dollars. I should have suggested dinner tonight instead so I could go home and get ready, but for all I knew, she had thrown in this invitation as a way to kill time before her real date.

"Is it too late for us to get off on a better foot?" she asked, taking the chair across from me. Her back was to everyone else, which meant she had only me to look at. That made me nervous too.

"I hope not. Why don't I just get my apology out of the way?"

"Apology for what?"

"For getting in your face the first day you were there."

"In that case, I should apologize too for being such a princess."

"Believe me, the way you worked, nobody was going to mistake you for a princess."

"That's because you scared the crap out of me. I figured if I rested for longer than ten seconds, you wouldn't give me credit for the day. I needed to finish my hours and get this bogus case off the books."

"What bogus case?"

"I pleaded guilty under an agreement to do the community service and have my record expunged. I can't be out there trying to sell stocks with a criminal record."

I wasn't surprised to hear she was a stockbroker. She fit the all-business profile of the financial people at the foundation where I worked as human resources director. "Do you mind if I ask what you did?"

She shook her head and looked out the window, clearly embarrassed. "I'm your classic litterbug."

I was surprised by how much that bothered me. Throwing trash out of a car was a crime against everyone, something only lazy, selfish people did.

"Well, maybe not your classic litterbug." She took a sip of her coffee and leaned back, seemingly at war with herself over how much she should divulge. "I found out a few months ago that my girlfriend-my ex-girlfriend, I should say-was having an affair, so I gathered up all of her stuff and dumped it on the other woman's front lawn."

I almost laughed out loud. "And that's considered littering?"

"It is when the other woman is a cop and wants an excuse to put your ass in a sling."

"I see. A cop with a vendetta."

Bren had the most puzzled look on her face. "Why are you smiling?"

Because she'd just told me for sure she was a lesbian. No wonder I sucked at poker. "I was just picturing the scene you described. I would have done the same thing if I'd caught my girlfriend having an affair." Except I didn't have a girlfriend. "Except I don't have a girlfriend." That wasn't quite what I needed to clarify. "I mean, if I had a friend, it would be a girl. But I don't...have a friend, that is."

There it was again, that almost sort of semi-smile. "In other words, you like girls and you're single."

"You betcha." I was pathetic.

"Don't you get tired of dealing with the justice system rejects like me?"

"If they all worked half as hard as you did, we'd be down at the courthouse begging for more. As it is, I'm tempted sometimes to just fill out their paperwork and cut them loose." I wanted to talk about me not having a girlfriend some more.

"I'm glad I ended up here. It's gratifying to see something come up from nothing and become such a wonderful thing. Miss Annie and all the children were so excited."

She went on to talk about how Miss Annie had laid out the whole house in her head, who would sleep in what bedroom, and where the furniture would go. The children would get sheets and towels to match their new curtains, the ones she would make on her own sewing machine.

Bren's voice was like a lullaby as she talked of things so near and dear to my heart. People who really got what it was all about were plentiful, but none of them had ever sat across the table from me in a beautiful package like Bren Scott's. I was about to ask her to go back to the porch and marry me when her phone rang, calling her to another meeting with an important client who expected her to jump for him on a Saturday afternoon.

"We have twenty-three today, Phil. Fifteen men and eight women." It was our first Saturday on the new worksite, and today's volunteers were from the downtown merchant's association.

"Good. We should be able to get these walls up today."

Laying block was a big job, but it was rewarding for the volunteers to see the house take shape so quickly. "I'll get them briefed and you can come over whenever you're ready to do the prayer."

I stepped across the deep utility trench to where the workers were gathering and introducing themselves.

"Hi, everyone. I'm Alice Boyd, the volunteer coordinator at Habitat. We've got a great job for you today. We're going to--"

A familiar white Porsche rumbled past to take a parking space at the end of the row. In seconds, Bren got out and hurried to join the group.

"Sorry I'm late."

I looked at my watch and back at her, unable to suppress the stupid grin on my face. "You're

actually one minute early and you haven't missed a thing." I gave my safety spiel until Phil joined us and offered the morning prayer to kick things off. Then the group divided itself into teams and set off to get instruction in the proper techniques for laying cinderblock. Only Bren was left behind, looking like a vision of loveliness in faded jeans and her baggy Habitat T-shirt. I had thought of her no fewer than two thousand times since she ran out of the coffee house a week ago with no promise of ever seeing me again.

"I don't suppose you have jobs for anti-social people?"

"A truly anti-social person wouldn't be here unless she had to be. Did you get yourself arrested again?"

"Not this time." She dazzled me with a full-fledged smile. "But I do have an ulterior motive."

"And what's that?" Marriage on the front porch steps was out of the question until we got the front porch built.

"I've come to make you a deal." She pulled her gloves from her back pocket and worked them onto her lovely hands. "I'll put in a full day getting bossed around by the volunteer coordinator if I can leave here with her phone number."

"I don't give that out to just anyone."

"In that case, could I also get you to promise not to give it out to any cops with bad attitudes?"

"Sure, but that's going to require an extra Saturday."

"How about a Saturday night instead?"

"You drive a hard bargain." And a Porsche.

She started toward her car. "You have exactly fifteen seconds to give me your answer. Otherwise I'm just going to go home and come back another day."

My answer was yes-to everything.

Thanks very much for reading. Drop me a note if you like at kgmacgregor@yahoo.com.