

# Catch Of The Day

Keeping his eyes tightly shut, Kyle Curtis hoped it wasn't time to get up. Like his sister, he'd inherited the sleepyhead gene.

Thinking of Kris, the tousle-haired man realized why he'd awakened. In the room next to his, his sister was in the shower, a steady stream of water beating against tile testimony to her activity. Rubbing his eyes, Kyle looked to the ornate clock on the wall, trying to decipher the elegant Roman numerals. For a Saturday, it felt entirely too early to be getting out of bed.

When his eyes finally cleared, the man cursed as he saw it was only eight o'clock. He didn't know what Kris had planned, but it needed to be good to get him up and about before nine. Dressing quickly after Kris had finished her shower and had enough time to dress, Kyle made his way to her door.

She opened it wearing a pair of casual khaki slacks and a matching tan sweater. Her blonde hair was still wet, sticking out at all points on her head. The smile on her face made Kris look younger than she had since Kyle had got off the plane.

"You're stirring awfully early. What's up?" he asked after being admitted to the room.

Kris shrugged and picked up a hairbrush. "I just decided I needed to get out today."

"That's probably a good idea," Kyle said. "Where are we going?"

Smiling sheepishly, Kris turned to her brother and put a hand on his shoulder. "I thought I'd let you sleep in today, Kyle."

"Oh," he responded, not liking the mysterious look on her face. "What will I do here alone?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something," she said. "There are a million things to do in the manor, or you can go into town."

The older man nodded, yawning. "Okay, I guess I can do that. Can I ask what you're going to do?"

"You can ask, but that doesn't mean I'll tell," she answered, but smiled when he scowled. "Oh, all right. I'm going to take your advice."

Blond brows drew together as Kyle tried to determine her meaning. "What advice, exactly?"

"I plan to wound Edward today."

Kyle tried to remember when he'd advocated violence, but then remembered their last conversation. "In the pocketbook?"

"Right where it hurts," she confirmed. "Would you like to give me a wish list?"

Laughing, Kyle shook his head. "No, I'm sure you will do splendidly on your own. Don't hurt yourself, okay?"

"I'll be careful," she said, but the twinkle in her green eyes told another story.



Rahne O'Connor's work as district attorney often interfered with her relaxation time, so Saturday mornings and all they involved—an extra hour or two of sleep, making love with Trent, a quiet breakfast spent staring at the man she loved—were eagerly anticipated. This Saturday hadn't gone as expected, but it wasn't due to the pressures or demands of her job: it was because of her worries over Trent.

Rahne sat at the breakfast table and huddled deeper in her robe. She gladly took the cup of steaming coffee Trent poured for her. "Thanks," she smiled and sipped the coffee. "You're up early."

Trent Beckham took the seat opposite Rahne's. "I suppose so. I didn't turn up the thermostat because I didn't want you to roast in bed," he said as he adjusted the device. He returned to the table, sorted through the morning paper, and withdrew the business section of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*.

Rahne studied Trent's face. His brown eyes were shadowed with dark circles and seemed to be focused on something other than the newspaper. "You haven't been sleeping well lately."

Trent looked penitently at her. "I'm sorry if I've kept you awake. Maybe I should go back to my own place for awhile."

"No, don't do that. I didn't mean that you'd been disturbing me. I was just making an observation."

Trent nodded and returned his attention to the newspaper.

"Okay, I'm worried about you," Rahne blurted. She felt flushed by the admission.

Trent's grin was lopsided. "I'm fine, Rahne. No need to worry." He shrugged. "I guess I'm still a little bothered by the Stevens case, that's all."

Rahne nodded. Trent's answer came a little too quickly to be the complete truth, but she decided to accept it for the moment. "Have you been in touch with the clinic she's in?"

Trent took a long swallow of coffee. "Yes. She remains unresponsive."

Rahne shook her head, trying to imagine the level of trauma it must take to make one completely withdraw from the world around them. There had been times when Rahne would have welcomed the opportunity to permanently ignore the world, but if the cost of that was to suffer as Tiffany Stevens apparently had, Rahne was grateful she'd skipped the experience.

She looked again to her lover's face and tried to decide whether to let the matter lie. But settling for half-truths wasn't her nature, and she pressed on. "Trent?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you sure that's all that's bothering you?"

Trent raised his eyebrows. "What else could there be?"

Rahne bit her lower lip, then said softly, "You've called your mother's name twice in your sleep this week." The stricken look on Trent's face told Rahne she shouldn't have uttered the words.

"Oh." Trent swallowed hard, but quickly recovered. His facial expression became neutral, the way Rahne imagined it must when he was with a patient. "How odd."

Rahne stared at him, awaiting further explanation. When none appeared to be forthcoming, she opened her mouth to try to elicit a response, but her effort was interrupted by the ringing of Trent's cell phone.

There was no mistaking the look of relief on Trent's face as he spoke to his patient, or when he kissed Rahne goodbye, leaving her alone with unanswered questions.



"No more coffee for me, Heather. Thanks." Kyle Curtis smiled up at the young maid.

"Anything else for you, Dominique?" Heather Patterson asked.

Dominique Carpenter held up one hand in staying motion and waved the other over her still half-filled breakfast dishes. "I'm good."

"Okay." Heather smiled, then turned and walked out of the room.

Kyle couldn't resist a lingering look at Heather's rear as she left. A chuckle from his far left drew his attention, and he turned to find Dominique smiling at him. He smiled sheepishly in return.

"You like that, huh?" she grinned.

"Of course. What's not to like about a maid's uniform?"

Dominique laughed. "I think you were less interested in the uniform than what was under it."

Kyle grinned. "Okay. You got me."

"Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

Kyle smiled. "Kris told me you were good at keeping secrets."

Dominique nodded. "Your sister is a sweet girl."

"She is," Kyle said. "And she's told me how kind you've been to her. Thank you for being there when she needed you."

"No need to thank me," Dominique smiled. "Like I said, she's a sweet kid."

Kyle nodded. "Sure is quiet without her around here."

Dominique laughed. "She can talk, that's for sure. I'm surprised she didn't take you with her."

"Something she wanted to do on her own, I guess." Kyle shrugged.

"Well, it'll probably be quiet around here until she gets back," Dominique

confided. "Lisa's taking her boys shopping, and Molly will spend the day worrying about what to wear for her date tonight. And Mama and her boys are huddled in their quarters, getting ready for next week's big editorial meeting."

"Leaving us alone with a late-morning breakfast." Kyle pursed his lips in a fake pout.

"Could've finished breakfast long ago if you weren't ogling the hired help," Dominique said.

Kyle laughed. "Honest and direct. I can see why Kris likes you."

Dominique grinned. "So what do you do for a living, Kyle?"

Kyle shrugged. "I basically live off my investments."

"Stocks?"

"And real estate. Among other things."

Dominique shook her head. "Dow Jones been eating you up?"

"Lately, yeah. Thank goodness I have other things to fall back on, otherwise I might actually have to get a job."

"Nice to see you put your daddy's money to good use," Dominique grinned.

Kyle laughed. "I made my money the old-fashioned way: I inherited it."

Dominique joined Kyle in laughter.

"So what do you do?" he asked.

I have some investments, too. Nothing as risky as the stock market, though."

"A little risk can be fun."

"Maybe." Dominique sounded unconvinced.

"You inherit your money, too?" Kyle asked.

"Actually, yes. But it wasn't from my daddy, or from my mama."

"Rich uncle?" Kyle grinned.

"My daughter," Dominique said quietly.

"Oh." From the look on Dominique's face, Kyle immediately knew he'd said the wrong thing. Why hadn't Kris mentioned that to him? "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay. Really." Dominique smiled, regaining her composure.

Kyle didn't know what to say. Despite Dominique's words to the contrary, he knew his careless words must have stung.

"You don't have kids?" Dominique asked. "That you know of, I mean" she added with a smile.

Kyle grinned, grateful that Dominique had filled the silence. "None that I'm aware of."

"Plan on having any?"

"Maybe someday."

"Boy, you better get busy. You're thirty, right?"

Kyle nodded.

"Wait too much longer and you're gonna be too old to keep up with a baby."

"Right now I'd rather keep up with the babes." Kyle chuckled.

Dominique shook her head. "Seriously, why haven't you settled down?"

Kyle shrugged. "Haven't met the right girl, I guess."

Dominique rolled her eyes. "Boy, that's some lame excuse. Ain't no such thing as the 'right' girl. You find a *good* girl and spend the rest of your life making things 'right' together."

"If that's true, why aren't you wearing a wedding ring?" Kyle grinned.

"Kiss my ass," Dominique said, turning back to her plate.



Yawning, Bruce Dooley stumbled from his bed, trying valiantly not to fall on his face. The doorbell, its buzz louder than it had a right to be, had shocked him out of pleasant sleep. If he opened the door to that reporter again, she was going to get a big piece of his mind.

Pulling the heavy metal door, the big man's mouth dropped when his eyes focused on Kris Hollingsworth. Realizing he was wearing only pajama bottoms, Bruce pulled the door partially closed and hid his chest. Kris simply smiled.

"Hi, Kris," he croaked.

After a small giggle, the woman said, "Good morning, Bruce. I didn't mean to get you out of bed."

"No problem," he smiled, embarrassed. "I sleep late since I have such long nights," he offered.

Kris rocked on her heels, her hands behind her back. "You don't have to explain to me."

"I know," he said, debating on whether to ask her inside. *What the hell?* he thought. She appeared to want to visit. "Would you like to come in?"

"Yes, I would," she said confidently.

Swallowing hard, Bruce escorted her toward his recliner. He felt awkward about the lack of luxury he could offer her, but he was even more nervous about the strange look on his friend's face. Far be it for him to complain about having the pleasure of her company, however.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

"I remembered your address from court," she said, examining the meager apartment.

The bartender pointed to his lone chair. "I don't have much furniture, but you're certainly welcome to the fluffy chair." As her eyes strayed to his chest, Bruce rubbed a hand through the hair there.

Kris wore a casual pair of slacks and a sweater that revealed little, but she looked great just the same. Her short blonde hair was combed back as she usually wore it. She looked ready for a casual Saturday outing. Bruce thought if he was included in her plans, he might keel over on the spot.

Settling in the blue recliner, Kris pushed into the surface, testing its softness. "Nice chair. Where are you going to sit?"

Shifting on his feet, Bruce looked around, realizing he'd never had anyone in the apartment on a social call. "Uh, the floor?" he asked, smiling sheepishly.

Shaking her head, Kris said, "It's okay. We don't need to get too comfortable in here anyway." Her beautiful eyes strayed to the bedroom.

Bruce felt a little lightheaded. "We don't?"

"No," she said with a coy smile. "How have you been, Bruce?"

Licking his lips, Bruce tried to shift his thoughts into a purer area so he could intelligently participate in their conversation. "I've been okay," he said. He was actually much better than he had been a few days ago. Settling the lawsuit with Kirk Griffith had taken a huge burden off his shoulders.

"That's great. I've been kind of out of touch lately. I missed talking with you, though."

Brown eyes looked away, then back to Kris. "I missed you too," he said quietly. "How was New York?"

"There was one enlightening moment. The rest was unremarkable. Did you ever buy a car?"

Bruce wanted to talk more about her trip to the Big Apple, but felt obligated to go with Kris' flow. "No. I've been occupied lately and haven't gotten around to it. Why?"


Kris nodded and smiled brightly. "Good. Get some clothes on."

Feeling suddenly naked, Bruce glanced down at himself. The only response he could muster was a weak, "Okay."

He could hear Kris laughing as he scurried back to his bedroom for a decent set of clothes. Personally, he didn't care what she did, as long as she didn't leave. When he returned in a pair of jeans and a plain T-shirt, Kris stood to greet him.

"Come with me?" she asked, holding her hand out to him.

Without hesitation, he took it, following eagerly behind the spunky young woman as they left the apartment.



"This sucks," Mark Hollingsworth declared as the minivan settled into a parking space at the crowded shopping mall.

Lisa Hollingsworth turned off the engine and glanced over at her oldest son, trying to control her own irritation. It had begun last night when Martha Hale had phoned just before the end of the 72-hour deadline the school board had given themselves to render their decision. The school superintendent had informed Lisa that the board had agreed to grant the request to remove the suspension from Mark's record. Lisa was positive that the board had made their decision much sooner, but Superintendent Hale had decided to make her worry until the last possible moment. "I know you're unhappy, Mark. I got that the first hundred times you complained."

"I just don't see why we have to wear uniforms at that stupid academy," Mark said as he climbed out of the vehicle.

"Because it's their rule. Just like there were some things you weren't allowed to wear in public school."

"There's a difference between not being allowed to wear something and being made to wear the same thing as everyone else," Mark said.

"At least you get to wear your choice of underwear," Lisa said, trying to lighten the mood.

"I want Scooby-Doo underwear," Nathan chimed in as they walked toward the mall entrance.

Mark looked aghast. "You do not!"

"Yes, I do."

"Nathan, you're going to get beat up if anyone sees those! You're too old to wear cartoon underwear!"

Nathan frowned. "I'm not too old, am I, Mom?"

"Not if that's what you want to wear," Lisa said, shooting a warning glance to Mark.

Mark rolled his eyes in disgust as Nathan gloated.

"Wearing uniforms is gonna be cool, Mark," Nathan said. "We can dress like cops!"

Lisa smiled. "They're not that kind of uniform, honey."

"Then what are they?"

"Dork designs," Mark replied.

"Mark," Lisa chided. "Nathan, the uniforms are white shirts, navy slacks, and a belt."

"We can't wear shoes?"

Lisa sighed. "And black shoes. With white socks," she added hastily.

"And Scooby-Doo underwear," Nathan said to Mark.

"Not for me," Mark said.

"Aw, come on, Mark," Lisa teased as they entered the department store where Sheltered Oaks Academy's director had informed her the uniforms were available for purchase. "Live a little."

"I'll pass on the cartoon characters, but I do need some new shorts," Mark said quietly.

"Didn't we just buy some when school started a couple months ago?" Lisa matched his low tone.

"Yes," Mark said patiently, "but they're getting too tight in the waist and they're gapping in the front. Ever since you took me out of school, Molly won't stop feeding me."

Lisa laughed. "Okay, we'll pick up some boxers while we're here. But not too many. You'll probably drop the extra weight once you're back in school."

"Fine."

Lisa gathered the boys' uniforms while they searched for new underwear. Their clothing sizes were always filed somewhere in her brain, but she insisted they try on anything before leaving the store. They grew so fast that it seemed as if one or the other changed sizes every month.

"Okay," she said when the boys came back. "Go try these on." She exchanged the clothing she held for that which they held. "Mark, take your brother in the dressing room with you."

"Mom!" Mark protested.

"Just do it," Lisa said.

"Great," Mark grumbled as he walked away, Nathan in tow. "Like I needed to be reminded that I can't wear Nike."

Lisa sighed as she moved into a sentinel position near the open doorway that led to the dressing rooms for men and boys. Mark was obviously unhappy about making the change to private school, but she and Harris were convinced that it would be in the boys' best interests. Sheltered Oaks Academy was widely recognized as having excellent teachers and a strong curriculum. Tuition was more expensive there than most other private schools, but if attending the academy gave Mark and Nathan an advantage when it came time for college, no price was too high.

Of more concern to her than Mark's attitude toward school was his attitude toward life in general. Tiffany's rape had brought a change in Mark, causing him to distance himself from his family, and Lisa wasn't sure that she liked it. She also didn't know how to deal with it.

"Geez, when did you get all that hair down there?"

Lisa's jaw dropped as she recognized Nathan's reedy voice.

"Shut up and quit looking," Mark hissed.

Lisa smiled. Maybe she'd been mistaken about the source of Mark's moodiness. Tiffany's rape might not be the only reason. Perhaps hormones and typical teenage awkwardness were partly to blame. *And by the time Mark is out of his teens, Nathan will be starting them. Which means I can reasonably expect this sort of behavior for roughly the next decade.*

"Get out," Mark said, shoving a half-dressed Nathan out of the dressing room.

"Mom!" Nathan, wearing only his white shirt and underwear, stumbled toward her, his face contorted in a pout.

*One day we'll all look back on this and laugh, Lisa thought. Yeah, right.*



"Where are we going exactly?"

Kris looked excitedly to her passenger, a broad grin on her face. She couldn't wait to see his face when he realized what they were doing. "We'll be there soon enough. Patience is a virtue, you know."

"So I've been told, but I get a little antsy when I'm being kidnapped," Bruce said with a quirky smile.

"Kidnapped? Ha! I can take you back to your little cubbyhole if you'd like," she said, her voice light and playful. The sparse nature of Bruce's apartment had not escaped her, nor had his lack of clothing. She'd discovered that her friend's every aspect was rugged, except his personality, which almost bordered on timid.

"No, no," he answered, holding up a hand. "I'd just as soon stay with you so someone will be around willing to get you out of whatever trouble you're going to get into."

Kris laughed, pressing the pedal on the Mercedes-Benz a little harder, anxious to get Bruce to his surprise. Part of her was doing this to get back at Edward. Another part, though, simply wanted to do something nice for her friend, who had already done so much for her without asking for anything in return.

It didn't take very long to get to the Magnificent Mile of Cars, just north of downtown Gossamer Falls. Edward had brought her here to buy her car two years before and she hadn't been this excited then. As she slowed the car to turn into the first lot, she looked at Bruce, noting his crinkled brow and suspicious expression.

"We're here," she said, pulling into a parking space in the Volkswagen dealership.

"Are you buying a new car?"

"Yep."

He raised an eyebrow, and she giggled. "What's wrong with this one?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm not buying a car for me," she said, picking up her purse and

searching for her wallet.

Unbuckling his seatbelt, Bruce shook his head. "Then who are you—Kris, you aren't trying to buy me a car, are you?"

His face held an adorably stern expression. "That's exactly what I'm doing. You need a car and I need to spend some money."

"Then spend your money on yourself. I don't need you to—"

Gently, she placed a small hand over his mouth, obviously startling him. "I know you don't *need* me to buy anything for you. That's not the point. I want to do this for you. Please let me."

His brown eyes softened. "Kris—I just—it's a lot of money and I'd feel weird."

The blonde waved a black credit card through the cab. "This little card right here means I have unlimited credit, so that's no problem. If I wanted to, I could buy you a 747. And if you don't accept my offer soon, I just might."

"I really appreciate the offer, but I can't except a gift so expensive," he said, shrugging helplessly.

Kris almost felt sorry for him. He was probably the noblest man she'd ever met. Nonetheless, she was determined to carry out her will. Turning to the big man, she expanded to her most intimidating physical presence, which wasn't much. "If you don't let me buy you a car today, I'll come back later and pick one out for you myself. So if you don't want a purple Beetle, you'd better accept this as a friendly gift and help me shop."

A reluctant smile slowly broke across Bruce's face, and he looked into his lap at his hands rubbing together. His shoulders shrugged almost imperceptibly, then he said, "I guess I can't let that happen."

"Great!" Kris exclaimed, bouncing in her seat. She unfastened her seatbelt and jumped out of the car.

When she pulled open his door, Bruce remained seating, looking up at her with a petulant smirk. Without heed to his hesitation, Kris reached into the compartment and took his large hand, pulling him out of the vehicle. For a moment, his hand was loose in hers, but as they began walking, his strong fingers closed around her palm. Volkswagens were definitely not the big man's style, so she ushered them onto the next lot, one that prominently proclaimed it sold Mercedes-Benzes.

As they glanced over the luxury SUVs, Kris retained possession of her friend's hand. She'd always enjoyed the warmth of holding hands, but she'd never managed to find a man who shared her feelings on that subject. Edward certainly didn't. There was just something sweet about the gesture that touched her heart, conveying a trust and security that nothing else could.

The next car dealership contained a lot full of Jeeps. Bruce's interest appeared to be piqued for the first time, so they carefully explored the selection.

"Now this isn't bad," Bruce said, pulling a door open on a red Jeep Wrangler.

Kris looked inside and laughed. It was a nice car, but much too barren for her tastes. "We're getting you a car to keep you warm during the winter. This thing looks like a rolling refrigerator if you ask me." She fingered the vinyl top and made a disapproving face.

Laughing, Bruce rolled his eyes and closed the door. "I guess you're right about that. How about those?" he asked, pointing to the larger variety of Jeeps.

A pesky salesman was only too happy to give them the keys and send them on a test drive in a top-of-the-line Cherokee. The burgundy leather seats were a nice complement to the white exterior, and there was a much higher degree of comfort in the model. Kris didn't know if it was exactly what she had in mind, but she did plan on giving the bartender some say in the matter.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's a nice car," he said. Slowly pulling onto a main road, Bruce sped the car well past the speed limit, testing its power.

Kris gripped the right armrest tightly, not scared, but certainly anxious in the moderate traffic. "The first car I had was a '94 Toyota Camry. I thought I was so cool. It didn't have much in the way of power, though."

"Toyotas aren't known for that. My first car was a 1977 Ford Ranger with a 455 under the hood. That truck could haul ass," he said, looking a little sheepish for cursing.

The young blonde just smiled and watched the traffic whiz around them. "1977? How old are you, anyway?" She thought they knew each other well enough by now to ask that personal of a question.

"Too old for you," he answered diffidently.

"Oh yeah? You forget who I'm married to. I know you're way younger than him. I go for you old guys."

Bruce laughed. "Is it the gray hair or the beer belly that attracts you?"

Kris shrugged. "Neither. It's the big bank accounts."

"That makes sense," he said, still smiling. "I'm thirty."

The Cherokee maneuvered back toward the car lot, this time through several upper-class residential neighborhoods. The ride was very smooth, but still not the quality of Kris' Mercedes. Somehow, the car didn't quite seem right for Bruce. He deserved better.

"That's not so old," she said as they pulled back into the parking space. "And with that body of yours, it's gonna be a long time until you look less than desirable." The thought had fallen out of her mouth without her considering its appropriateness, but for some reason, she was glad she'd said it.

Bruce did not comment, but as he was getting out of the car, she noticed that his face was a nice shade of red. Being able to make a man blush was new for Kris. She quickly decided that she liked it.

They both stood in front of the white Cherokee, biding their time until the salesman returned. "I say we keep looking," Kris said, taking his hand again.

"It's a nice car."

"Not nice enough," she responded forcefully.

Bruce smiled and shook his head, but did not dissent. He deftly handed over the keys and assured the leech that they would return to the lot after shopping around. They proceeded to the next lot, a Cadillac dealership, where the clientele, as well as salesmen, seemed of a higher class. Kris didn't even know that the sophisticated automobile manufacturer had an SUV in its line, but the Escalade they encountered turned out to be an aesthetically pleasing version of a well-done format.

Bruce focused on a sleek black one with tinted windows. His eyes grew round when he looked at the window sticker, but to his credit, he moved on and inspected the car.

A tall, thin man approached them, his nametag indicating that he was called

Carl. "Hello. She's a beauty, isn't she?" he asked, a tight smile on his incredibly white face.

Knowing the bartender wanted to test drive the vehicle, Kris pulled him to the salesman by the hand. "Yeah, it's nice. We want to test drive it."

A wheel clicked in place in Carl's brain, his face turning even paler, taking on a desperate, needy expression. "Mrs. Hollingsworth, of course we can do that." He looked down at their linked hands and swallowed hard. "I'll get the key."

Kris watched him walk away, a strange feeling tickling her mind. Looking down at their linked hands, for the first time she completely grasped what she was doing. Here she was, a very married, very publicly recognized woman, parading around town with a hunk, not caring who saw them. If any of the photographers that occasionally hounded them got a picture of her and Bruce like this, Edward would flip his lid.

She felt a gentle squeeze on her fingers and looked up into two seas of soft brown kindness. With a skip of her heartbeat, she decided she didn't care who took a picture of them or what they wrote in the paper. Nothing she'd done today had been wrong, and even if not everyone approved, she actually felt good for once.

The Escalade drove smoother than her Benz and had tons of room and high-tech features. Bruce seemed to like the car's get-up-and-go, not to mention the way it hugged corners, which Kris had endured with her mouth firmly shut. It was the perfect blend of superfluity and toughness, a wonderful match for her friend.


When they returned to the dealership, they both stood in front of the car's grille, Bruce stroking his beard, Kris anxiously looking at him. "Well?"

"Will this make you happy?" he asked.

She smiled, thoroughly enjoying being asked the question. "It doesn't matter what will make me happy. I want it to make you happy."

The large man, a cool breeze brushing through his hair, turned to her, and the short blonde looked up into his eyes. A little awkwardly, as if it wasn't exactly what he wanted to do, Bruce took her upper arms in his grasp and looked at her intently. "*I like the car.* This day has made me happy," he said lowly.

Tears suddenly threatened to fall, so Kris did the only thing she could. Throwing her arms around his neck, she pulled Bruce into a fierce hug, burying her face in his thick shoulder. "It's yours, then," she whispered.



Molly Crenshaw cautiously opened Leyland Cross' front door and sniffed the air for hints of smoke. When she'd called Leyland from his gate's intercom, he'd sounded out of breath. She'd announced her arrival, then he'd said, "Oh, Molly, just drive through and come on in. I think my nuts are burning!" He'd then severed the connection and opened the gate for her. Molly hadn't been sure whether to be amused or distressed by his apparent predicament.

"Leyland?" she called as she entered the house.

A meow greeted Molly as a familiar yellow form darted into the foyer.

"Scarlet!" Molly scooped the animal into her arms. "What is yer daddy up to?"

Scarlet closed her eyes, pressed her chin against Molly's already scratching fingers, and purred in response.

"Let's go find yer daddy, shall we?" Molly asked the feline as she began walking toward the kitchen. "Leyland?"

"I'm in the kitchen, Molly. Please come in."

The aroma of cooking enfolded Molly as she neared the kitchen. She could smell something unfamiliar, but not unpleasant. "What've ya got cookin'?" she asked as she entered the room and put Scarlet on the floor.

Leyland Cross adjusted his flour-spotted eyeglasses on the bridge of his nose. His sparse red hair was mussed, and he appeared to be out of breath. "It's pecan-coated fried chicken."

"Oh." Molly had never heard of such a thing.

"You don't think it sounds good?" Leyland's face was pinched with worry.

"Oh, I'm sure it's fine." Molly wondered if she sounded more convincing than she felt.

"I did warn you about what might happen if I cooked." Leyland wagged a finger at her.

"That ya did," Molly grinned. "But I think it'll be just fine." A plate full of oddly shaped cookies caught her eye. "What're those?"

"Ah, those are butter pecan something-or-others."

Molly laughed. "They're shaped like little acorns."

"Yes. They were dipped in melted chocolate and rolled in chopped pecans. I didn't know what a double boiler looked like, so I melted the chocolate in the microwave. The package said I could," Leyland said earnestly.

"That's fine." Molly nodded, hoping to ease his anxiety.

"The recipe said I should cool them so the chocolate would set. I did those first, and the others ought to be ready to get out of the fridge any second."

"Out of the fridge?"

Leyland stared. "Did I do something wrong?"

Molly somehow managed not to smile. "Ye're doin' wonderfully, Leyland. Is there anything I can help ya with?"

"No. No, I said I would cook you a meal and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Nice ta see ye're a man of yer word," Molly grinned.

"That I am," Leyland nodded. "So why don't you have a seat in the dining room, and I'll be there in just a few minutes."

"Okay." Molly walked into the dining room and sat down. Leyland, bless his heart, was trying so hard. But who on earth would've ever thought of cooling cookies in the refrigerator? Or putting pecans on fried chicken? Molly hesitated to say anything because she wasn't sure of the recipes' origins. As soon as she corrected his cooking behavior, she just knew he'd tell her that that wasn't what his mother or grandmother's recipe had said to do.

She waited only a few minutes before Leyland, bearing an assortment of dishes, entered the room. Her efforts to help him were politely refused, but it felt odd being the person served instead of the person doing the serving. Perhaps mistaking her discomfort at her role as guest for displeasure with his dinner, once seated, Leyland asked, "Does the salad look okay?"

Molly surveyed the mingled spinach, bacon, mushrooms and eggs. "It looks wonderful, Leyland." She tasted a forkful to prove the statement. She hoped

her expression adequately expressed the salad's deliciousness. When she looked at Leyland, he was staring at her with obvious relief.

She finished half of her salad before realizing Leyland hadn't yet touched his. "Aren't you going to eat?" she asked, suddenly self-conscious.

Leyland looked miserable. "Actually, I don't think I can. I was so worried that things wouldn't turn out okay that I kept tasting the dishes while I was preparing them."

Molly laughed. "Ah, Leyland. Ya shouldn't have gone through all that trouble."

"It was no trouble," Leyland said earnestly. "I did it for you."