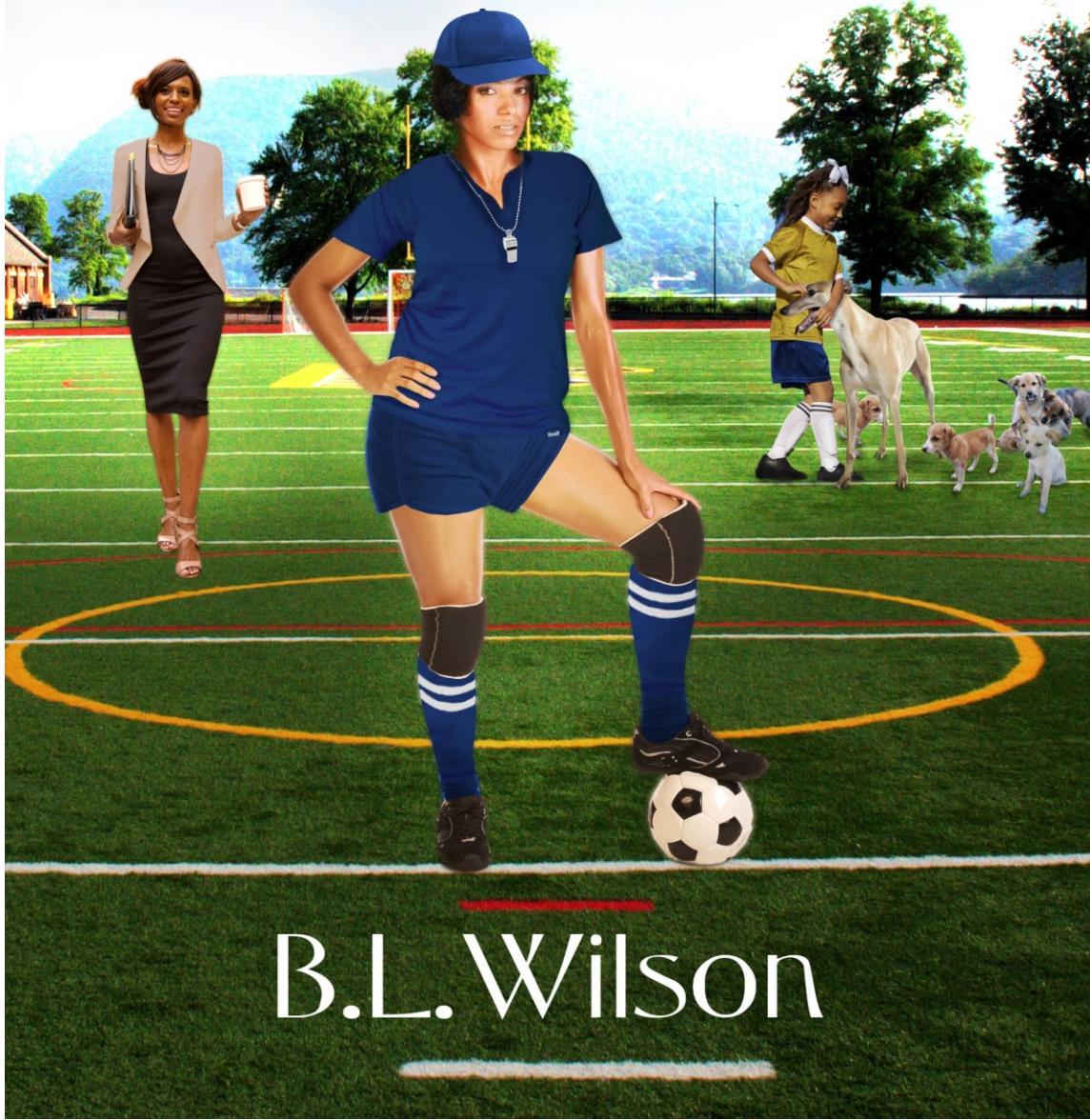


Books, Balls and Dogs

An Ohio love story.



B.L. Wilson

BOOKS, BALLS, AND DOGS,
an Ohio love story
Chapter 1

by

B. L. Wilson



Books, Balls, and Dogs, an Ohio love story
Brought to you by
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Chapter 1...I need a doctor

Jamie Underwood was grumpy and hot as she signaled motorists to slow down as they moved through the work zone. The work zone reduced the main road from four lanes to two lanes as she and her crew repaired the potholes. God, she hated being out here on the road in the summer heat. It wasn't the heat she dreaded as much as the dust from the heavy trucks hauling dirt onto the highway or the nauseating smell of burning asphalt that they used to fill in the holes. Somehow, the smell wasn't as bad in the winter or fall. She liked the flagger's job even less, but, thank God, it was only temporary for today.

Usually, she was the crew chief. Today, the new flagman had called in sick, so she found her role expanded to include flagger until he returned, if he did. She had her doubts whether the new kid would stay longer than the summer. He looked a little too preppy for roadwork and she doubted if he'd ever worked a day in his young life. Looking at his soft hands yesterday, she doubted if he washed his own dishes or cleaned his own clothes.

Surprised out of her musings by the sound of a horn blowing, she noticed a car pull up alongside her and then stop. She bent down to look through the passenger window. "Miss, you can't stop here like that! Can't you see you're blocking traffic?" Jamie yelled as she signaled the driver behind the stopped car to slow down before there was a serious accident. "Come on, Miss. Move it along," she warned, waving the car along with her flag.

The driver ignored her direction to move. Instead, she rolled her window down, letting the cool air escape from the car, and stuck her head out. "I need to find a doctor. Could you help me, please?"

"Do I look like a travel guide to you?" Jamie snapped as she lifted her hardhat to wipe the sweat pouring off her forehead. It was too hot out here for silly questions. She suddenly realized what the driver had asked and studied her. The woman didn't appear to be sick, so why the request for a doctor? It wouldn't be the first time she'd had odd request from a motorist. For some reason, motorists seemed to think construction crews should know where everything was in town, as if they were tour guides.

The female driver lowered her sunglasses. Dark eyes appraised Jamie from her booted feet to her hardhat. Her glance took in the sturdy legs, narrow waist, and muscular arms folded over medium-sized breasts. "No. You don't look like a travel agent."

Jamie sighed and thought, *You don't look sick either.* "Miss, you have to move. You're blocking traffic." When the motorist didn't drive away, she leaned down and tried to look intimidating. "Are you gonna move your car or am I gonna have to call the cops to move you?"

The female driver scowled at her. "Can't you just answer a simple question, Miss?"

A motorist behind her honked his horn impatiently. Another man behind him stuck his head out the window to yell, "Let's move it!"

"See, Lady?" Jamie shrugged at the driver. "That's what I'm talking about. You're blocking my road." With a thumb, she pointed to the growing line of cars stuck behind the woman's car. The driver's lower lip trembled and she looked ready to cry.

"My daughter and I are new in town. Our dog, Lady D, is ready to give birth. Please, just tell me where the nearest vet is."

She looks desperate, Jamie thought, feeling guilty for being rude. It wouldn't hurt to show a little courtesy to a new woman in town. "Ride me over to the shoulder." Jamie pointed. "Over there."

The driver followed the direction of Jamie's finger to a shoulder about fifty yards away, then frowned at her. "Why should I do that?"

Jamie shrugged. "I'm sorry I was gruff with you. I'll give you directions to the vet," she remarked as she stood up from the car's door. "That way, we won't be holding up traffic."

The woman unlocked the passenger door and Jamie climbed inside.

"Whew! It's hot out there!" Jamie remarked as she wiped her brow and then radioed the crew supervisor. "Ed, I'm giving the lady in the minivan directions. I'll be back in a minute. Take over for me."

"Roger that, Jamie."

"You look like you've been driving all night," Jamie said, noticing the ashen cast to the driver's brown skin and the dark circles under her eyes.

The driver nodded. "They offered me a job at the local library. I start this Monday. I'm trying to get everything done before Monday."

"Oh, I see," Jamie remarked sympathetically. She studied the female driver's face again and then glanced behind her. She spotted piles of neatly folded and stacked clothing surrounding a sleeping child. The kid had fallen asleep with her arm around a pregnant dog. The dog appeared to be a mongrel of some sort. She wouldn't know one breed from another. It was hard to tell what the dog looked like with all the clothes stacked around it.

She didn't hate dogs, but she didn't want one either. They seemed like a lot of trouble to her. An owner had to walk them, play with them, and feed them on a regular schedule. That was too time-consuming for her. It was almost like having a baby, at least, that was what Ed Nash said, and he should know. He had four kids and two dogs. His kids were all adults who'd moved away to start their own families, but Ed still had the dogs to keep him busy.

It was a good thing the female driver had a minivan. All the stuff she carried wouldn't fit into a smaller car. It looked like she had everything in the van but the kitchen sink and her living room furniture. Except for the clothes around the kid and the dog, she'd stacked the rest of the stuff in boxes that had been arranged according to their size and seemed to have color-coded labels as well. The driver certainly was organized, Jamie mused as she lifted her hat to scratch her head.

"The only vet I can think of is on Water Street, right off Main Boulevard. He's Doc Phillips. Least, I think he's still there."

The dark-eyed woman frowned as she glanced at Jamie. "I'm afraid that I don't know where Water Street is."

Jamie nodded. "I forgot that you're new in town. Okay, how about I draw you a map?"

The female driver nodded. "That sounds good."

Jamie drew a rough sketch that noted local landmarks, street names, road signs, and stoplights on the way to the vet's office.

The woman studied Jamie's map. It made her smile when she noted the small humorous drawings that represented an intersection, a department store, a gas station, a pizza parlor, McDonald's, and Burger King.

"Can you read my writing okay?" Jamie asked, watching her read the map.

The woman nodded. "Thank you so much. I appreciate this." She smiled with an engaging grin

that showed off a dimple, then shook hands with Jamie and prepared to drive off. "Maybe I'll see you at the library some time."

Jamie shrugged. "I don't know; maybe." She strolled back to the repair site, deep in thought. "Books aren't my thing and neither are libraries. Give me a ball and I'll be happy to show you how to play with it," she muttered to herself.

Baseball was her favorite sport, but soccer and volleyball were close seconds. She'd approached one of the schools about setting up a junior league for kids interested in soccer since the school didn't have the money to spend on a league team, so she'd put together a group of sponsors that were waiting anxiously to put their names and logos on team jerseys. They were willing to pay the big bucks to do it too. She'd use money for equipment, uniforms, and rental field time.

The sound of honking horns brought her back to her present situation. She glanced at the long line of cars waiting to pass through the work site and then sighed. She'd do that if she survived this heat. She couldn't believe it was almost September and it was still Sahara Desert hot. She hoped the weather cooled down before school started so the kids could play all the games she planned for them.



Taylor Price was hot and tired but not too weary to look in her rearview mirror. She watched the flagger take her time strolling back to the truck containing the steaming asphalt. *What a good-looking Black woman*, Taylor thought, driving off to find the vet. She had great legs in those snug fitting-jeans and a nice ass too. She looked solid with her muscular arms. *I wonder what she does for fun*. She gazed through the windshield, noting the expanse of trees and fields of corn, and frowned. What did anyone do for fun in this place? The town seemed small. At least, what she'd seen of it. Compared to New York City, most places seemed small. She couldn't get the raises she'd needed to support Kelly and herself in the city. She thought it was best to find a place where the cost of living was less. She kept looking until she found Dalton Falls, Ohio. She found it just in time too. The Big Apple's newly elected mayor was making very vocal noises about closing more library branches. She couldn't go through the nightmare of do-I-still-have-a-job-when-I-get-up-in-the-morning routine again.

She remembered the last contract the City had with her union. The City negotiated with every other local in the union but hers. Most city workers didn't get the raises they wanted, but they weren't laid off either. The former mayor promised there would be no layoffs unless the local was vocal in their criticisms of the administration. Her local's president was the loudest critic of the former mayor, so she and her fellow librarians took the brunt of the layoffs and library closings.

She monitored the political climate of the City after the last series of crazy remarks her local president uttered. She realized that she might need to start looking for another job in private industry or train for another career since she didn't have the seniority most of her colleagues did. It seemed to Taylor that most librarians died on the job after working for the City thirty to forty years. She only had eleven years in the City's system, so she'd probably be in the first or second round of layoffs.

She remembered another layoff about twelve years ago. She was in private industry at the time and didn't have a child yet. She'd just gotten her Master's in library science and was still working as a sales clerk because she couldn't find a library position. The retail industry was suffering

through a slump. Some of the larger stores were either declaring bankruptcy or merging with other department store giants as discount stores started to encroach into their markets. Anyway, it was the same old story of last one hired and first one fired. She didn't have enough seniority as a sale clerk, so when she finally lost her job, she filed for unemployment.

The unemployment center told her to go out on job interviews to keep getting checks. Oh, how she hated going out on those job interviews. Employers interviewed her, then politely told her how overqualified she was for the job. Potential employers expressed doubts that she'd stay once she realized how difficult the menial tasks were for such a small paycheck. To make matters worse, when she called back to check on the status of her application, the jobs had disappeared.

One of her career counselors, the new name the government gave to the nasty little clerks who monitored her job progress, called her to the side and mentioned a possible job. Thank God, Taylor finally met someone who, unlike her predecessors, reviewed her educational record and job history, then suggested she apply for a job with the City.

The counselor, Dana Burkes, said she'd noticed Taylor's small rainbow pin during one of her weekly visits to the office. Dana made a comment about how pretty the pin was and then told Taylor about the job postings at the City's Department of Personnel at 2 Washington Place. Dana said that it might take a few weeks before the City got in touch with her after she applied, but it was worth a try. She claimed the City's benefits were excellent. She'd confided to Taylor that her girlfriend worked in the Department of Sanitation. Her girlfriend said the pay was fabulous and so were the medical benefits. Dana suggested while Taylor waited for the city job that she should continue to go on interviews. If the city job didn't pan out, one of the other jobs probably would.

"At least you have options. Most of them don't," Dana whispered, nodding in the direction of the long line of clients waiting for counseling in the crowded unemployment office.

Dana Burkes was right. The librarian's job with the City was more than Taylor hoped it would be. It offered her generous maternity leave, which she used after Kelly was born. It also guaranteed her a job when she returned from leave. The job provided Taylor with the opportunity to work in a field she loved, doing things that she loved.

She started her career in library science working at the Donnell Children's Library on 53rd street off of 5th Avenue. It was the second best location for her and she loved it. The library catered to children and young people. The colorful display shelves advertised the latest new books for young children, including the Harry Potter series, the Dr. Seuss collection, and classics like *Little Women*, the Hardy Boys, and the Nancy Drew Mystery Series.

Taylor and her colleagues changed the displays on a weekly basis, depending on the topic and the season. For instance, during Black History month, they found unusual books by less well-known African-American children's authors. They included them in the display along with books about Michael Jordan, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Dr. King, General Colin Powell, Dr. Kenneth Clark, Justices Clarence Thomas and Thurgood Marshall, Attorney Anita Hill, abolitionist Sojourner Truth, writer Zora Neal Hurston, civil rights activist Ida B. Wells, writer Charles Chestnut, African-American cowboys, and other African-American heroes.

She enjoyed working with the children who came into the library. She loved finding the books they needed for school or giving short, lively seminars to elementary students, teaching them how to use the library. It was fun showing the Dewey decimal system to the children or teaching them how to search the system using the library's CATS and LEO Intranet. She didn't even mind restocking the shelves or alphabetizing of the books by the author's last name. Yes, she enjoyed her first city job.

Taylor rubbed tired eyes and then yawned. She drove slowly down Main Boulevard, looking

for the turn off to Water Street. An impatient driver behind her gunned his motor, then he called out, "Drive the speed limit, Miss." But she was afraid she'd miss the turn off onto Water Street if she drove faster. She signaled him to go around and slowed down to look for the series of fast food places the flagger's map described. He finally drove around her van, scowling as he sped past.

"If this had been the city, he'd have given me the finger. How different this place is," she muttered as she scanned the street again, finding the sign for Water Street on the right. A few doors down on the left, she spotted the veterinarian's office. She breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled into the parking lot next to the office. She glanced into the rearview mirror to see if her daughter was awake. She smiled at the image of her daughter's arm resting protectively around Lady D's neck.

Lady D was the ugliest dog she'd ever seen. She recalled when Kelly brought her home from school one day. Her daughter claimed the dog followed her home and wouldn't go away, even though she resorted to throwing things at it. Taylor knew Kelly well enough to know when she telling the truth. She smiled at the little white lie Kelly told to keep the dog. Kelly wouldn't have the heart to throw anything at a living soul, including cats, dogs, pigeons, or fish. She loved animals. If Taylor let her, Kelly would have filled their three-bedroom apartment with every imaginable stray animal that could fit in it.

As it was, their apartment contained—Taylor smiled, then corrected her thoughts—well, it used to contain a cat, a dog, fighting fish, and two goldfish housed in a separate tank until they moved here to Dalton Falls this morning. According to Kelly, the fighting fish named Harry might eat goldfish June and Maymay if they lived in the same tank. The two goldfish raced around the small plastic traveling bowl like tiny, crazed women trying to get used their temporary living quarters.

Harry, on the other hand, was languidly resting at the bottom of the second container. He seemed content to watch the world whiz by him. Kelly's cat, the one-eyed calico named Xander, died several weeks ago; make that six weeks ago, to be exact. She remembered the date because it was the same date that she closed on their new home.

Taylor opened the passenger door in the back, reached in, and gently shook her daughter's shoulder. "Sweetie pie, wake up." Kelly didn't move, so she shook her harder and raised her voice. "Come on, Kelly; we need to take Lady D inside."

Sleepy brown eyes stared back at Taylor. Kelly sat up, then frowned. She stretched and looked around. "Are we there yet, Mommy? This doesn't look like a house to me. It looks like a parking lot. Why are we in a parking lot, Mommy?"

"I thought we should have Lady D checked out before we went to the house. I want to make sure she's all right before we settle in to the new house. We don't want her to have the babies in the car, Kelly. Do we, Sweetie?"

Kelly shrugged. "I could deliver the puppies, Mommy. I read a book on how to deliver puppies. It showed the birth process step by step. It had pictures how to deliver them and everything too. It looked easy to me."

Taylor smiled at her daughter's overconfidence. She smoothed loose strands of hair away from Kelly's eyes. As much as her daughter liked to read about anything and everything, she was casual about her looks, especially her hair. Her two thick braids seemed to have a mind of their own. They were untamable. At least that was what Kelly claimed when they came wildly loose. Give Kelly a couple of animals, a beat-up sweatshirt, a dirty pair of sneakers, a ragged pair of jeans, and a couple of balls ... make that soccer, volleyball, or baseball ... and she'd be ecstatically happy.

"Why don't we meet go meet the doctor and see if Lady D likes him. Okay, Sweetie?" Taylor

prompted.

Kelly shrugged, then helped her mother lift the dog out of the car. Lady D waddled slowly behind her mistresses.

Taylor found the vet's waiting room small and it looked nearly empty. There was one other patient waiting. A boy about her daughter's age was holding a cocker spaniel with a cast on his front left paw. The dog was beautiful—golden beige with long, silky ears, a wavy soft coat, and large, alert brown eyes. The boy looked at Kelly and Lady D and grinned. He moved over and offered her a seat.

"What kinda dog is that, Miss?" He stared at Lady D in all her pregnant glory. "She sure looks fat."

Kelly sighed. She was disgusted with the boy's lack of knowledge. She blew the hair out of her eyes. "That shows you how much you know, Pal! She's not fat. She's pregnant."

"Oh wow!" The boy gave Kelly an admiring look and then glanced at Taylor. "Do you think I could be there when she gives birth? I've never seen a dog give birth."

Taylor frowned at the young boy. "I don't know, Sweetie. Don't you think you should ask your mother first?"

The veterinarian came out of an office just as the boy was formulating an answer for Taylor. "Jeremy, what are you still doing here? I thought you told me your mother was coming to get you and Taffy."

"She is, Uncle Allen. I mean, I think she is." Jeremy scrunched up his face, trying to remember what his mother had said earlier this morning.

"Never mind, son. I'll call your mother after I see this patient. Just sit with Taffy, okay?" The big man in the white lab coat frowned as he looked down at his nephew and shook his head. He walked over to stand in front of Taylor. "What can I help you with today?"

"Hello, Doctor. I'm Taylor Price and this is my daughter, Kelly." Taylor squeezed her daughter's shoulder.

Allen Phillips nodded at Taylor and winked at Kelly. "And who do we have here?" he asked, squatting down to look at Lady D.

"That's Lady D," Kelly remarked. "We think she's ready to go into labor either today or tomorrow. I know she's losing the hair on her belly. And I saw the puppies moving around when she was sleeping."

"Did you?" Dr. Phillips eyes widened as he looked at Kelly with a new appreciation. "We don't get many patients whose owners are as knowledgeable as you seem to be, young lady. How far along is she, Miss Price?"

Kelly calculated the figure in her head. "I'd say about seven weeks."

Allen Phillips looked Taylor and winked. He stood up. "Well, let's bring her inside and double check your theory, shall we?"

"Yes, Sir." Kelly guided Lady D into one of the examining rooms that the doctor pointed out. She watched as he lifted the dog onto the stainless steel table.

"Haven't seen you around here before, young lady." Dr. Phillips opened a drawer under the table. "Are you and your mother new in town?"

"Yes, Sir."

Dr. Phillips laid Lady on her side and petted her coat. "That's a good girl, Lady D." He snapped on rubber gloves and took her temperature. "Hmm," he muttered when he looked at it. "Your calculations are a little off, Kelly," Dr. Phillips said as he took off the gloves and threw them into the wastebasket. "Lady D won't be delivering puppies today. Did your vet say how many she's

carrying?"

"Yes, he said the x-ray showed seven puppies."

Allen Phillips nodded. "I think she'll give birth in another week. So where are you from, Kelly?"

"New York City."

Allen Phillips nodded. "Ah, the Big Apple; that's a mighty big place. What brought you and your mother here to our little burg?"

"Everything here is micro compared to New York," Kelly grumbled. "My mom says country air is healthy air. We should breathe it as much as we can. But I think we moved here because she was tired of her job."

"What did your mom do in the city?" Dr. Philips asked, digging around the drawer, searching for something.

"She was a librarian."

Dr. Phillips smiled. Hmm, so the woman outside was the candidate who got the job. He missed the final series of interviews with three top contenders for the position of head librarian. He had to deliver a breech calf for Marty Hanson. "Okay, Kelly, we're all finished here. Lady D is a healthy mother-to-be. Whatever you and your mother are doing, keep doing it. You should be seeing those puppies in about week."

Allen Phillips gave Lady D a milk bone treat, which she politely munched as the doctor petted her and then lifted her down to the floor. "If she looks like she's having difficulty with the delivery, call me, Kelly." He handed her a business card. "I don't think she will, but you never know. Put me down for one of those puppies. Okay?"

Kelly stared into friendly dark blue eyes and smiled.

What a pretty girl when she isn't so busy being serious, Allen Phillips thought. Kelly Price resembled a miniature version of her mother. The mother seemed like a nice, attractive woman. Humph, he found the mother more than a little attractive. He followed the daughter back into the waiting room. He spotted Kelly's mother talking to his kid sister. He groaned inwardly. It looked like Mary the Matchmaker was at it again.

"Hello, Allen." Mary Hughes greeted her older brother with a wide, mischievous grin. "I was just asking Taylor about coming to dinner next weekend. You know, Allen, to our regular Friday night dinner date. I thought since she's new in town, she and Kelly might enjoy a home-cooked meal. And it would give her a chance to meet some of her fellow townspeople."

Allen Phillips grinned at the two women. "Well, I see you've met my sister, Ms. Price."

Taylor rubbed at her eyes. "Call me Taylor. Ms. Price sounds far too formal."

She looks tired, Allen thought. *I bet she drove all night to make sure she was here by this morning.* "I don't mind the company. I'd be delighted, but will you be settled in by Friday, Taylor? I'm sure you have plenty of unpacking to do between today and next Friday."

"Oh, don't worry about me. Kelly and I should have everything done by then. Right, Kiddo?" Taylor turned to look at her daughter.

Kelly shrugged.

"We'll gladly accept your dinner invitation, Mary." Taylor turned toward the pretty woman with the dark blues eyes and brown hair to smile. Then she turned to the vet. "Dr. Phillips, how much do I owe you for the visit?"

Dr. Phillips pointed to the sign. "The first one's always free. If you like my service and come back, it ranges from ten dollars to fifty dollars, depending on what's wrong with the animal. Course, I have been known to accept a puppy in lieu of payment." He winked at Kelly and then

grinned.

"Thank you, Doctor. Do we need to come back when she goes into labor?" Taylor asked, just to make sure.

Allen shook his head no. "No need to see me again. Lady D is as healthy as a horse. Unless she's in distress with the delivery, which I sincerely doubt, I gave your daughter my business card."

"Could I come over and watch the delivery, Kelly?" Jeremy begged, looking at Kelly first, then eyeing her mother. "I've never seen a delivery before. My uncle said I could watch the next one."

Kelly sighed heavily, then rolled her eyes skyward. Her silent gestures said, *Do we have to put up with this kid?*

Taylor whispered in her daughter's ear not to be rude.

Kelly reluctantly agreed to her mother's wishes. "Okay," she responded in an annoyed tone. "You can come over and watch. Just don't call my dog fat again!" she warned.

Jeremy grinned broadly.

Taylor looked at her daughter, then rolled her eyes and sighed. "Be nice, Kelly," she reminded.

Mary squeezed Taylor's arm sympathetically. "Don't worry about it. Jeremy won't take it personally. He never does. How about if we exchange phone numbers?"

Taylor nodded. She wrote Mary's address in her book, then gave Mary a slip of paper containing her cell phone number. "It was nice to meet you, Mary. We'll see you on Friday about seven." She walked Kelly and Lady D to the door. She suddenly snapped her fingers and returned to the little waiting room. "I forgot to ask. How do I get to Willow Road from here?"

Mary broke out into a broad, knowing grin. "You're not going to the big, old rambling house at the end of the street, are you? The two-story brick house needing carpentry work, among other things? Has a huge backyard with a two-car garage and a workshop behind the house?"

Taylor nodded, then smiled. "Yes, that's the one."

"Christ!" Mary exclaimed with a frown. "I wondered who Madden persuaded to buy the darned thing."

Allen cleared his throat twice to warn his sister to be quiet when he noticed Taylor's discomfort.

Mary sighed, then studied Taylor's scowling face. "I'm sorry. It's just that the realty company you dealt with probably didn't explain the house was a fixer-upper. Did they?"

Taylor's eyes widened. She shook her head no.

Mary noted Taylor's shocked look. "I didn't think so. My company refused to sell it for the owner because of the deceptive way he wanted it advertised. In my other life, I sell real estate when I'm not busy being a mother, president of the PTA, and playing matchmaker to my friends." She smiled at Taylor. "Look, I live about three streets from you. Why don't you follow me? I'll show you how get home from here. We can talk about the house when we get there. I have a couple of good contacts in the repair world ... carpenters, plumbers, and electricians. They're inexpensive but good. I could set you up with them if you'd like, Taylor."

Alarmed by her new suggestion, Taylor asked, "How bad do you think the house is, Mary?"

Mary patted her arm in sympathy. "It's not that bad. Your house is livable, but you'll want to do replacement repairs. The first floor is okay, but the second floor, where the bedrooms are, needs work. The former owner did work in the kitchen and the bathrooms, but that's about it. I bet you fell in love with the place as soon as you saw the fireplaces and the huge backyard. You probably didn't pay much attention to anything else," Mary remarked with a knowing grin.

"How did you know?" Taylor was amazed that a stranger gauged her reaction to the house

accurately without being there.

"Years of experience with clients, Taylor," Mary said as she linked arms with Taylor.

Allen watched his sister walk out the door with the attractive new librarian. They strolled to the parking lot together. "So that son of a bitch Madden dumped on another client," he muttered as he locked up the office. He considered the town's biggest realtor unscrupulous. He and Greg Madden had been classmates in high school and roommates in college. Truth be told, they were more than just classmates. Greg Madden used to be his best friend during their school years.

Greg was always a quick thinker and an even faster talker, which made him a great salesman. In school, he was the one who created the best last-minute excuses when papers or projects were late. Most of the time, teachers believed Greg when he told his sad tale of woe. He somehow managed to include his best friend Allen in a pivotal role in the stories. They got away with plenty of mischief and misrepresentation when they were kids, Allen mused. They must've had the luck of the Irish with them because they still managed to graduate in the top ten percent of their class despite the tricks they played on the adults in their lives.

They went to Ohio State University. He decided to become a veterinarian. Greg took business and management courses. Graduating on time, he was accepted into the state's school of Veterinary Medicine while Greg enrolled into the MBA Program. They remained roommates through graduate school until Greg graduated with his MBA and moved on.

Allen told himself that his best bud, Greg, had moved away because the MBA program ended two years earlier than his vet school program. In his heart, however, he sensed Greg was changing and that he wanted to move far away from everything he'd known as a child. Greg believed his own hype about how great he was and how much money he was going make before he reached thirty.

He sighed glumly. Greg earned his first million in the stock market by the time he turned twenty-eight. He didn't learn that fact until much later because by then, Greg was a stranger. He sent a postcard once a year at Christmas but made no other effort to see his former friend. According to newspapers and magazine articles, Greg Madden lost his second million in the market before his thirtieth birthday. He decided to come home to invest the remainder of his fortune in real estate development.

Allen shrugged as he checked the door locks to his clinic. "It doesn't give him the right to cheat damned near everyone he's sold property to," he muttered as he started his Subaru.



Meanwhile, back on the road, Jamie watched the woman's minivan kick up a cloud of dust and gravel as the driver pulled onto the roadway from the shoulder. *That driver was an interesting woman*, she mused, walking back to the work site. *I don't know if I could just pick up and leave town. It takes a special person to do that, especially with a kid in tow.* She felt a tug on her heartstrings when she thought about the sleeping child in the backseat of the woman's minivan. The kid reminded her of Joey. But then, every kid she saw evoked memories of him. She shrugged wide shoulders. That was enough about Joey. This wasn't the time or the place for such thoughts.

I wonder how our little township compares to the Big Apple? Jamie mused as she drew closer to her road crew. *I bet everything here in Dalton Falls looks countrified to the woman from the big city.* She could imagine how quiet this place must seem to the woman after living in a large, noisy, overcrowded urban city. *But would I want it any other way?* she questioned. *Nah, I love every*

blade of grass, every house, every pothole, and every person in it. I guess I just love my little town.

She removed her hardhat to wipe the perspiration accumulating around the rubberized hatband. Focusing on the same topic, she wouldn't consider moving to the Big Apple or anywhere else besides here in Dalton. She hoped the woman in the minivan found whatever she was looking for in the little burg.

"Ed, I'm back." Jamie spoke into the radio as she walked to the truck with a load of heated asphalt. "Thanks for taking over." She patted his arm once she reached the truck.

The big, quiet man named Ed Nash smiled. "It's my pleasure, Jamie. That lady in the van, you gave her directions, right?"

"She'll be working at the library, starting Monday."

"Oh?" Ed raised an eyebrow.

"Yep, she needed directions for the vet. She has a dog about ready to pop open with puppies. She had a kid in the car too."

"You sure found out a lot about the woman in two minutes, Jamie!"

Jamie grinned as she glanced at her watch. "It wasn't two minutes, Ed. It was more like ten."

"I'm heading back to my rake." The big man handed Jamie the vivid, orange signal flags and slowly walked back to the truck carrying the hot asphalt. He took his place among the repair crew.

The men waited for the melted asphalt to push through the chute into the next hole as the driver moved slowly along the roadway. As soon as the asphalt spilled onto the road, the men raked the hot, steaming, lumpy substance into the potholes. A steamroller waited behind the men. Once the men moved to the next hole, the roller flattened the lumpy black substance until it was flush with the road's surface. Hot tar provided a waterproof patch around the outer edge of holes until the next year's snowplow scraped it off.

Jamie wiped her face again as she looked into the baking sun and shook her head. It could be worse. She could be working on the line like Ed and raking red-hot asphalt into the holes or driving a metal roller over the boiling mess. Then she'd be saturated with sweat like she'd just come from a sauna. A nice cold beer would taste great. She chuckled. It would help if she liked the taste of beer, she thought as she signaled the cars to move through the work site.

The cold, pale, golden liquid always looked so good in a tall frosted glass, with the thick layer of foam at the top. It invited her to savor its taste, she mused as her mouth watered. *There's only one problem*, she thought wryly. It happened whenever she tried to sip the beer. Her reaction was always the same. The stuff smelled bad. A larger worry was how to get through the unpleasant odor to savor its taste. She never made it beyond the smell.

Jamie shrugged as she waved the next car through the work area. Beer was definitely an acquired taste. She just never liked it. She couldn't look at a glass of beer without thinking about her father. He was a real bastard. Then there was her weak-willed mother who kept taking him back after he'd beat the spirit out of her. Thank God, she didn't have a man like that in her life. The only men she knew were good men like Ed Nash and the men from work crew she supervised. Speaking of that, they were patiently waiting for her to direct the next group of cars away from the work site so they could unload more asphalt into the potholes. Embarrassed to be caught daydreaming again, Jamie rushed to direct the growing line of cars through the construction maze to the other side. Then she got on the radio to Ed Nash.

"Sorry about that, Ed. It must be the heat today. It's making me wish that I was lying on a beach somewhere."

"I know the feeling, Jamie. Would that beach include anyone on it or would you be there alone?" Ed added, smiling.

"Why? You wanna come along to my beach, Ed?" Jamie laughed into the radio as she watched Ed grin and give a thumbs-up signal. "You must have a death wish, Old Man! Wilhelmina would kill me first and then you." An image of a tall, dignified Black woman, aiming a gun at her, popped into Jamie's head and she burst out laughing.

"Aw, quit giggling, Jamie. It wasn't that funny!" Ed grinned and gave her an exaggerated wink. "Are you still coming to the house for dinner, Kiddo?"

"Excuse me? Did you just call your boss 'Kiddo,' Mr. Nash?" Jamie grinned at him.

"Yeah, I did, if you just called me an old man! But with the static on the line, maybe we coulda heard wrong." Ed laughed. "See you in the office later, Kiddo."

This wasn't quite the way Jamie liked to spend her weekends, but Saturday work meant she was paid overtime—time and half. She couldn't afford to pass that up. She wasn't the workaholic Ed Nash claimed she was. She just liked to keep busy. She was using the money to pour into her growing sideline business. When she wasn't on a ball field doing her sports thing or coaching somebody into doing theirs, she was in the workshop behind her house. She was always building something or getting ready to build something.

Jamie felt the sweat dripping down her back. She silently prayed for a sudden rainstorm or three o'clock to hurry up and get there. At this point, she didn't care which one came first. She felt like a popsicle turning to mush as she quickly melted in the hot sun. She hated the way wet clothes stuck to her body every time she moved an arm to direct another car through the construction. She sniffed the air and frowned. She was sure her deodorant had lost its potency several hours ago too.

They'd be done with this stretch of the road by tomorrow afternoon. That would be good because they'd be ahead of schedule again. Jamie sighed. She looked up into the too-bright sky. There wasn't a rain cloud in sight. It wasn't gonna rain today. "Well, three o'clock, come on down!" she muttered. She checked her watch for the hundredth time. "Good; only thirty more minutes to go."

Much as Jamie would have liked to let the men go home early today as a reward for working hard, she knew word would get back to the boss that she released them early again. She didn't want more trouble from him. He hadn't been too happy the last time she made what he considered the wrong decision. That time, she'd let the men go home fifteen minutes early.

It was during a rainstorm that had gotten worse. The storm filled the sky with thunder, lightning, and torrential rains. She was afraid the lightning would strike the metal on a truck or the shovels they were using to flatten the asphalt, so she released them early. She didn't have a problem because it was only fifteen minutes. Besides, she was worried that somebody might get hurt on the barren stretch of highway. The torrential rains reduced visibility to one foot in either direction. She didn't like how the cars were whizzing by dangerously close to the work site either.

Her boss didn't say anything about her decision to release the men early, but her next paycheck was smaller, missing the exact amount that each man would have lost by leaving early. She let loose with a steady stream of curses once she realized what her boss, Thomas Naper, had done. She was all set to confront him, but Ed stopped her. He told her to rethink the whole matter and cool down before she spoke with the boss. He said the missing money was that "extra" she wouldn't have had anyway. He asked her if the confrontation she wanted with Naper was worth losing her job. Once she calmed down, she could see Ed's point. He was right too. The deductions weren't worth losing a good paying job. She decided to let the matter pass.

Jamie checked her watch again. It was quitting time at last. She radioed Ed to tell the men. As crew chief, she waited at the site until the men secured the equipment in storage lockers and locked up the steamroller. The asphalt driver gave her and Ed a ride back to the office in the truck while

the rest of the crew drove their cars to the office to clock out.

"Man, am I tired," Jamie muttered. All she wanted to do was go home and sink into a tub full of ice water or stay under a cold shower for the rest of the night. She'd nearly forgotten about the invitation to Ed's house tonight for dinner. She waited for the big man to come out of the office.

Ed spotted Jamie waiting beside his car. His gaze took in her exhausted face. "Bet you ain't coming to dinner tonight, are you, Girly?"

Jamie shrugged. "Nope, I'm too tired. Sorry, Old Man. Tell Willie I'll call her tomorrow."

Ed raised an eyebrow as he studied her face again. "You sure you're all right, Jamie?"

Jamie smiled. "Yeah, I'm just hot. I'm going home and soaking in a cold tub until tomorrow morning."

"Talk to ya in the morning, Jamie."

With her hardhat in hand, she trudged over to her car. The first thing she did was turn on the air-conditioning. "Ah," she murmured as she leaned over the vents to let the cool air blow against the front of her T-shirt. Then she moved so frigid air could hit her face. "Ooo, just what I needed. I'm feelin' almost human. If I could figure out how to bring the cold air into the house with me, I'd be happy as a pig in crap," she muttered. She drove into the garage behind her house. She remained frozen in place, enjoying the coldness of the air-conditioning before she stepped into the sizzling night air to make the short trip into her house.

She stopped at the entrance between the garage and the kitchen to kick off her tacky, steel-toed construction boots that smelled like week-old dog shit. Wiping her forehead as she padded to the back of the small house, she stopped inside the bathroom to turn on the tub. Then she peeled off her sticky, damp clothes. "Whew! I stink!" she muttered, sniffing the air.

She threw the sweat-saturated T-shirt down at her feet. The socks came off next and then work jeans followed the socks. She padded to the kitchen in bare feet and peach-colored underwear that used to be white until the orange safety T-shirt faded on them. She poured a glass of iced tea and gathered the mail off the kitchen table. She decided to sort through it as she relaxed in the cold water. A quick sort through the mail showed most of it was junk, so it went into the wastebasket under basin.

One letter from her sister looked interesting. "Ah!" she murmured, slipping into the cool water, then lay against the end wall as she read her sister's letter. Her two nephews said hi. They thanked her for teaching them some pass moves with a soccer ball. Brian scored the winning goal in a tight game where Benjamin was the Goalie. The two boys were the thirteen-year-old twin sons of her big sister Ida and her sister's husband, Marshall Rice. The letter said things were working out between the two of them.

Jamie breathed a sigh of relief. Her sister and brother-in-law had been going through some rough times when Ida discovered Marsh was sleeping with his secretary. Marsh said the woman meant nothing to him. *Didn't cheating men always say that?* she mused. Marsh claimed he'd begun the affair because Ida stopped paying attention to him ever since she'd become a full-time assistant professor.

She knew her older sister could be determined when it came to getting whatever she wanted. Ida could be a little too persistent and too narrowly focused in her efforts to obtain a goal. She was likely to ignore her family while she climbed the academic ladder to success. This was one of those times, which meant Ida probably did ignore Marsh. But he should have tried harder to get Ida's attention before he carried on the affair with his secretary, Jamie reasoned.

Another thing Marsh should have known; he'd never be able to keep the affair a secret from Ida for long. He was a confessor. He confided everything to Ida if she applied the right pressure.

He'd been that way since the three of them were kids growing up together. Ida knew the right buttons to push in Marsh's head. She'd bet he spilled the beans about his affair with just the slightest threat from Ida. Her sister probably made a threat about leaving him and taking the boys with her. Jamie knew Ida would never do it, but March thought she would. There was no way Ida could handle those twins alone. If Marsh ever called her bluff and left, Ida was in deep doo-doo.

Marsh had developed a way of handling the twin demons Ida couldn't figure out. On the other hand, Ida was smart enough to know exactly how far to push her husband, so she never had to do much figuring. Ida told Marsh that she'd done her duty when she carried the boys for nine months. Now, it was Marsh's turn to do his. He took Ida at her word and became the main caregiver for them. He was the one who checked homework, met with teachers at parent-teacher conferences, consulted with doctors when the twins were ill, cheered them on at games, and did all the other duties mothers did for their kids.

They agreed before they had the boys how this would be necessary for Ida to advance in the communication technology field she'd chosen. Once they created the routine, it was hard for them to change it. The boys were older now and didn't need their father in the same way they had as babies. Ida was close to her career goal of a full professorship. Meanwhile, Marsh was probably feeling left out. Jamie sighed. She hoped, with the right marriage counselor, they'd be able to work things out. She put the letter on the countertop and closed her eyes, enjoying the cool water against her skin. Too bad she couldn't sleep here in the water tonight, she mused as she drifted off, leaning against the tub's back wall.