

Forever Woman

B.L. Wilson

*Forever Woman,
are you for real?*



by

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are you for real?

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Edited by BZ Hercules
www.bzhercules.com

CHAPTER ONE ...Meet the boss lady

The constant roaring sound grew louder and louder. "Jesus H. Christ! What is that racket?" the woman in the bed muttered, clearly annoyed by the loud noise. Her hand felt around the large bed until it touched her pillow. She placed it on top of another pillow. Her other hand came out and slammed down the two pillows, trying to block out the noise. "Goddamn it! I can still hear it. Esther?" she called out.

"Yes, Ma'am?" A young woman in a gray and white housekeeper's uniform stood by the door, waiting for instructions from Jenna Jacks.

The pillows muffled Jenna's voice. "Go find out what the hell that noise is," she ordered.

The young housekeeper shook her head no, forgetting that her boss couldn't see anything with her head beneath the two jumbo pillows. "I don't need to because I already know."

One angry eye peeked out from underneath the two pillows and glared at the young woman. "Well?"

"It's the sixth applicant for the chauffeur's job, Miss JayeJaye," Esther informed her, smiling at her boss.

Jenna pressed the pillows down over her head when the engine roared again. Oh God! She'd forgotten about the interview for a chauffeur this morning. Maybe she could convince Esther to tell the man she was too tired and reschedule the damn thing.

Esther watched her boss block out the motor's sound with the pillows. She never understood why her boss scheduled these interviews for early morning. Miss JayeJaye was never at her best until late afternoon. She stayed in a foul mood until then. While Esther felt sorry for the prospective candidate, she hoped her boss didn't try to sweet-talk her into canceling another interview. They needed a driver. Anybody coming all the way out here should be interviewed. The last two chauffeurs had quit within a month and the previous five interviews hadn't produced anyone she'd hire if she were running things. If push came to shove, the fourth candidate might work out, but he gave her the creeps when he stared at her. She sighed, watching her boss struggle to sit up, then stretch one hand over the edge of the bed, searching for a pair of hand-made leather thongs.

Jenna flipped long dreadlocks away from her face and then chocolate brown hands clutched at her head. She groaned as another loud roar emanated from the driveway. "I need an aspirin. What did the guy drive over here on?"

"A big black motorcycle, but it's not a man." Esther studied the top of her boss's head as she waited for a reaction to the cyclist's gender.

“I wanna to see that!” Jenna muttered, walking over to the nearest window that overlooked the driveway. She looked down in time to see a tall figure clad in all black parking the motorcycle. The cyclist swung one long leg over the bike’s seat and strode toward the front door as she unbuckled the shiny black helmet.

“Esther, show her to my office. Tell her I’ll be down in ten minutes.”

Esther nodded, watching her boss slip into a robe and then peek through the curtains to stare at the motorcyclist in the driveway again. “Yes, Ma’am, I’ll go down right now.” She turned around and made the short trip down the wide staircase. She hurried to answer the door before the doorbell rang again.

“Morning, I’m here for the chauffeur’s job. Is your boss in?” Florence Walker asked, noting the young woman’s uniform when she opened the door.

“Please come in, Ms. Walker. Let me show you the way to her office. She’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

Esther led Florence Walker to the rear of the mansion. They passed by a large sun lit room with an open skylight. The room looked like an artist’s studio, with easels, canvases, and paint tubes scattered throughout the room. Brightly colored paint splatters covered several areas of the floor and the smell of turpentine reached Florence’s nose soon as they stopped outside a small office next to the studio.

“You can wait here. Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?” Esther asked, then pointed to a chair inside the office space.

Florence smiled at the young woman. “Tea would be nice. I didn’t get a chance to have breakfast before I got here. I didn’t want to be late for this interview.”

Broad hands played with the helmet as Florence waited in the small office. Waiting for the interview gave her time to think about her decision to come here today. She’d decided not to wait for the old man to tell her about another one of his private clients. She’d find the next one on her own. Man, was she tired of listening to her clients brag on their cell phones how they’d just closed the deal of a lifetime. They’d just screwed this competitor or that one by out-maneuvering them or simply withholding crucial information. She wondered if they knew how many of their clever little deals hurt people. Some of the deals sounded like they put hundreds of hard-working men and women out of jobs. She was sick of hearing about their crap as she drove them to their various business meetings.

A few days ago, she asked one passenger, a man, if he cared about the effect his mergers had on people like her. He just looked at her with a blank stare, then told her to speed it up or he’d be late for the deal of the century. She was depressed when she returned to the old man’s garage that day. She needed a break from the indifference of her passengers. While waiting for her next client, she happened to see an ad about a chauffeur’s job in the local newspaper and asked around about it.

A couple of the drivers recognized the ad and warned her about it. When she asked, they looked at her, rolled their eyes, shook their heads, and sighed. Later on, one of the female drivers pulled her aside and said the job paid good money. She said the job paid way above her salary here, but

she'd better to be prepared to drive late at night and become a bodyguard and a psychiatrist. If she looked at the job that way, the money wasn't as much when she compared it to the late hours she'd work and the things she'd do. The female driver winked and said the boss could be friendly.

Florence sighed and wondered what that meant. It could mean the boss had hands like an octopus or the driver was exaggerating. She needed a change of scenery. The ad sounded like the perfect opportunity, so she called the number. A woman scheduled her interview for two days later. Voila, here she was at Jenna Jacks' home, waiting for a cup of tea.

The young woman returned with a beautiful silver tray that contained two china cups, a teapot, and a plate stacked with delicious-looking pastries.

Florence's eyes lit up when she saw the pastries. Her stomach growled. She pressed against it with a large hand, then looked embarrassed. "Excuse me." She took a pastry filled with apricot jam and slipped it in her mouth. "Hmm." She took several more, filling her napkin. "These are delicious, thank you. Do you think Ms. Jacks will mind this outfit? I didn't have time to change." Before the young woman could reply, another voice responded, "I find leather can be attractive...even stimulating on the right woman."

Florence turned toward the sound of the sultry voice. She was caught up—no, mesmerized by the stunning woman who entered the room. The woman had beautiful dark chocolate skin that made her think of the Hershey candy bars she was crazy about as a kid. She loved to break off small pieces of the candy bar and pop them into her mouth. She'd hold them there until they melted as she tried to make the sugar last. She wondered if the gorgeous woman in front of her was as sweet as her favorite candy.

The woman pulled thick, dark brown dreadlocks into a thin leather band. Her skin looked silky and smooth, but her eyes were far more interesting. From a distance, they were a sparkling blue-gray. They reminded Florence of laser beams. She'd bet nothing snuck past those eyes. Once they turned on you, you could feel the heat radiating from them. At least, Florence thought she could feel it.

The woman wore a tailored, soft gray blouse open at the neck and tucked into faded blue jeans that fit her like a second skin. The paint-splattered jeans had holes in them in strategic places on her knees and thighs. Florence bet the jeans had some holes at the hips as well. The jeans made her want to poke around in the holes and feel what was underneath them. Handmade leather sandals covered long, slim feet and painted ruby toenails peeked out from under the jeans. The woman was striking. She wondered why the two female drivers at the shop forgot to mention that. She'd bet Jenna Jacks stopped traffic all the time with her appearance.

"Hello, I'm Jenna Jacks, Ms. Walker."

Florence tried to balance the second pastry on her helmet, the teacup on her knee, and shake the woman's outstretched hand. The pastry tumbled to the floor along with her helmet. She quickly bent down to retrieve the pastry and clean up the mess she'd made when ruby toenails appeared directly in front of her. A chocolate hand reached down and picked up her helmet.

Florence flushed as she looked up at the woman standing over her with her helmet in a hand. She rose with the crumbs in one hand and searched for a wastebasket, towering over the woman by at least four or five inches.

"It's over there." Jenna Jacks' laser eyes stared at her, then nodded in the direction of the wicker wastebasket in the far corner.

Florence strode over to the basket, dumped the crumbled pastries into it, and then marched quickly back. "Sorry about the mess. I'm usually not this clumsy. I'm Florence Walker," she said, offering a large hand.

They shook hands.

Hmm, rough hands, Florence noted silently. *I didn't think someone who looked so soft could have such rough hands and strong ones too. They feel like my grandfather's hands used to feel..* His hands never did get soft, no matter how much lotion she and her grandmother would rub on them at night.

"Please sit down, Ms. Walker." Jenna pointed to the comfortable-looking chair in front of a small desk. She sat down behind the desk, in a chair directly across from the big woman. "Esther, bring a broom," Jenna ordered as she settled into the chair.

Jenna hoped the big woman's unseemly clumsiness with the pastry was just a fluke. She needed someone who was fast on her feet, had good reflexes, and a quick mind as well. The tall woman sitting in front of her looked like she could handle herself in a crowd and do it discreetly. Who could tell about these things? She didn't hear Esther's rubber-soled shoes as she quietly slipped back inside, but the Walker woman did. She turned at the sound immediately, then rose with the grace of a panther and went to help Esther clean the floor.

"That's okay, Ms. Walker. I'll do it," Esther murmured. She was surprised Ms. Walker would interrupt a job interview to help her clean up the mess she made.

"Nope, I made it. The least I can do is help you clean up."

Jenna watched the scene. This woman might be the person she needed as a bodyguard. She wondered if she could drive as well as she moved. She watched the woman help Esther. When they finished, Esther slipped outside the office as quietly as she'd entered.

"Do you have a resume?" Jenna asked as the woman settled back into the chair.

Florence nodded. "Yes, I do. And two letters of recommendation as well." She opened her leather jacket and pulled out the papers.

Jenna followed the large hand's journey as it unzipped the diagonal zipper of the short motorcycle jacket and then felt inside for the letter. She idly wondered how the Walker woman's hand would feel rubbing her back after a long day of painting.

Their fingertips brushed as the Walker woman handed her the letter. Jenna allowed a slight smile to pass her lips before she opened the envelopes containing the reference letters. When she read the papers, Jenna discovered they didn't tell her much about the woman sitting in front of her. All they proved was that someone thought she was an above average employee who had a clean driving record and came to work on time.

The leather outfit the woman wore and the motorcycle she rode told Jenna a lot more than the letters did. The bike said she was a woman who took risks but shielded herself by wearing protective leather gear and the helmet. The Walker woman calculated the risks and tried to control the danger; a wise move on her part, Jenna thought.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What would you like to know, Ms. Jacks?”

“Anything you want to tell me,” Jenna said, curious what the tall woman would say.

“Well, let’s see,” Florence said, thinking about how much to say to the good-looking woman who might become her boss. “I’ve been driving limos for about eight years with the same company. Before that, I was in the military. You know, join the Navy and see the world. I joined the Army and wound up being in the military police. I transferred out and worked as a drill instructor with a specialty in self-defense.”

Florence sighed before she continued. “I got caught up in President Clinton’s don’t ask, don’t tell policy. The army allowed me to resign my position before they could court-martial me for being a lesbian. After that, I joined the police force in Virginia for a couple of years. I worked as a bouncer for clubs there and out of state in my spare time. I still work as a bouncer on weekends.” She smiled at some unspoken memory. “I’ve used a few good moves over the years when a customer wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Oh?” Jenna remarked, suddenly interested.

“A tap in the right spot can make anyone leave you alone and go away. Even the most ardent drunk or the biggest guy will walk after he catches his breath again.” Florence smiled. “I’ve taken courses in defensive driving as well.”

“You mean the one given by Triple A?”

Florence Walker chuckled.

Jenna frowned. “What’s the joke?”

“As far as I know, the Automobile Club doesn’t give the courses I’m talking about. Several police departments around the country give the course. They teach law enforcement folks how to evade kidnappers, terrorists, and other people with bad intentions,” she responded casually.

Jenna studied the woman. “I see. Are you licensed to carry a gun, Ms. Walker?”

“Yes, I am,” Florence answered quietly and then looked down at her hands.

Something in the way Florence Walker said the last statement made Jenna want to know more, but she decided to let it go for another time, if there was another time. So far, the Walker woman ranked far above the other applicants. If Florence Walker checked out, she’d get the job, Jenna mused. She casually stroked the shiny black helmet. She had a few friends that could review the woman’s credentials and get back to her by this weekend. It would be perfect timing if the woman could start next week.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions, Ms. Jacks?” Florence asked, finally meeting her potential employer’s eyes.

“Sure, go ahead. Ask away.”

“What is the job?”

“You’d be my driver and...”

The phone rang, interrupting Jenna’s answer. She said hello and then suddenly swung her chair around to face the wall. She gripped the phone tightly, then whispered loudly, “I asked you not to call me again. How did you get this number? Don’t call me again!” she cried out, upset. She remained frozen in the same position for several minutes after the line went dead.

Florence could hear the dial tone before Jenna Jacks returned the phone to its cradle. “Ms. Jacks, are you all right?”

“What? I ... Just a...” Jenna stuttered. “There’s no need for you to get involved.”

When Jenna turned around, Florence could see she was extremely distraught. She tried to hide it by composing herself quickly. The panic left her features, but her eyes lost their sparkle. Florence admired the woman’s speedy recovery. Damn, the woman was good. She’d never seen anyone’s composure change that fast or that effectively. If she hadn’t watched the entire scenario from the beginning, she couldn’t have guessed how upset Ms. Jacks was. She cleared her throat, drawing Jenna’s attention. “I know it’s none of my business, but if someone is harassing you, why don’t you report it to the police, Ms. Jacks?”

“You’re correct, Ms. Walker. It’s none of your business. Someone will contact you about the job in about a week.” Jenna’s eyes narrowed and she glared at Florence. She placed the black helmet on the desk in front of her. She rose and quickly left the small office. Walking resolutely to the wide staircase leading to her bedroom on the second floor, Jenna hesitated a moment, then called to Esther from the hallway. “Please show Ms. Walker to the door, Esther.”

“I guess the interview is over,” Florence muttered, watching Jenna Jacks march out. She wondered what she’d done to aggravate her potential employer. What a shame if she didn’t get the job because she was curious about the woman. Her home wasn’t bad either. The leather office chair fit her backside like a glove. What little she saw of the studio before the little housekeeper whisked her into the office looked interesting. The bright, lively colors of the paintings caught her eye and the open skylight to the roof drew her attention right away. “Guess I blew the job, huh?” she muttered, feeling she wouldn’t hear from the gray-eyed woman any time soon. She picked up her helmet and walked to the door with Esther.

“Don’t mind my boss, Ms. Walker. She didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just that mornings are hard for her.” Esther sighed. “That call didn’t do much to help her mood. She’s been under pressure lately too.”

“That’s understandable, Esther. Try to get your boss to report the calls to the police or the phone company. They have electronic equipment to trace unwanted calls.”

“Okay, Ms. Walker, I’ll try.” Esther shrugged. She had accepted that her boss was stubborn about such things.

“Thanks for cleaning up the mess I made, Esther. I appreciate it.”

“That’s okay, Ms. Walker. I hope you get the job. We could use someone like you around here.”

“Thanks, Esther. See ya.” Florence nodded to Esther and then strode down the steps and over to her motorcycle. She snapped her helmet in place, then straddled the powerful machine and

started it up. She flew down the driveway, unaware that interested gray eyes watched her journey from the second floor window before marching into her bedroom.

Esther's cautious footsteps tiptoed up the staircase and stopped outside Jenna's door. "Are you all right, Ms. Jacks?"

Jenna Jacks was relieved to hear a friendly voice and sighed. "Good, you're here. Could you get me an aspirin?"

Esther frowned at her boss. "But, Ms. Jacks, Dr. Collins said..."

"Just bring it, Essie. He doesn't have to live with these headaches. I do." Jenna pushed herself up on one elbow and took the wet cloth off her forehead to glare at Esther.

"Yes, Ma'am," Esther murmured quietly and left to find the medication.



Later that day, Esther entered Jenna's studio with a plate full of sandwiches and a glass of milk. Jenna's work held her attention and she didn't see the young woman enter her studio at first. She was standing in a sweat-stained T-shirt, dusty overalls, and construction boots with a chisel in one gloved hand. She was feeling the rock that she'd just chipped away. She stepped back to study her handiwork with a frown.

"Damn it! Why can't I get it right? It still doesn't look like the shape that I imagined. Working this new medium is a bitch. I should stick with what I know, which is painting!" she muttered, blowing a loose lock out of her eyes. Sensing something, Jenna jumped when she suddenly became aware that Esther was in the studio. "Jesus, Woman, why didn't you cough or something?" she exclaimed, patting her chest with a gloved hand. "I'm gonna have to tie a bell on your shoes or something. I've never seen anyone move as quietly as you do, except that woman this morning. Walker, I believe her name was?"

"I'm sorry I scared you, Miss JayeJaye."

"So what did you think?" Jenna asked, sitting down on the stool. She glanced at Esther as she munched on a sandwich.

"Ma'am?" Esther was unsure of the question.

"The last applicant, the Walker woman, she moved quietly too." Jenna swallowed and took another large bite of the sandwich. "Mmm, this is good, Essie. What's in it?"

Esther grinned with pride. "I'd thought I'd try something I saw on TV. Alfalfa, bean sprouts, romaine lettuce, fresh tomatoes from the garden, Swiss cheese, a little secret sauce on toasted home-made whole wheat bread."

"Your talents are wasted here, Essie. You should consider opening up a restaurant in the Village somewhere. I could get my agent to start scouting locations. You just say the word."

"I'm not ready yet." Esther shyly looked back at her boss and then hung her head. "Thank you, anyway, Miss JayeJaye."

"It's okay, Honey. When you're ready, you'll let me know. There's no rush." Jenna smiled at the young woman. "You can stay here and work for me as long as you want to. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I know," Esther remarked softly.

"So what did you think of our last applicant?" Jenna asked as she wiped her mouth with the linen napkin Esther provided on the tray.

"I liked her."

"Why, because she helped you clean up the mess she made?" Jenna smiled when she said it. She remembered surprised hazel eyes looking up when she reached down to pick up the shiny black helmet with the bright red dragon on it.

The Walker woman had unusual eyes. When she wore green, they probably looked green with flecks of blue in them. Her hands were interesting as well...large and broad. She had the hands of a construction worker or somebody who used her hands to make a living as just she did. When she shook hands, Walker's handshake felt powerful. Her body looked strong too. The black leather outfit was tight in all the right places and fit like a second skin. The cycle boots added to the look of a woman who took risks and didn't mind who knew it. If what she said about the self-defense courses and being a bouncer was true, Florence Walker could be a dangerous woman when she needed to be. Walker might be just what she needed right now.

"I liked her because she was concerned about you," Esther said as a way of explaining her thoughts.

"Oh?"

"She asked me to tell you to report those calls to the phone company or the..."

Jenna interrupted to add, "I know...she suggested the police. You didn't find that pushy?"

Esther frowned. "I think she was concerned about you. Maybe she was being over-protective, but I didn't think she was pushy."

"I see. Hmm, I didn't look at it that way." Jenna stopped chewing for a minute to consider what Esther said. "You may have something, Essie. I felt the woman over-stepped her bounds by giving me advice when she didn't know my circumstances." Jenna shrugged as she reconsidered her feelings about the tall female candidate. "I guess she might have been trying to help. If her credentials check out, we may have a new chauffeur, Essie. We'll know by the end of the week."

"Yes, Ma'am."



The Walker woman was modest, Jenna thought after she hung up from the last of references listed on Walker's brief resume. The woman's resume understated so much of what she had accomplished, Jenna thought, scanning it again. It was as if she was hiding something. She didn't mention that she taught the classes in defensive driving. That the Virginia Police Department cited her for bravery in the line of duty several times. Jenna's contacts assured her that Florence Walker

was an excellent driver or bodyguard. Each one added that Walker should call them if she didn't take Jenna's job. That was good enough.

Jenna dialed the work number listed at the top of Walker's resume. "Good morning. May I speak with Florence Walker, please?"

A male voiced answered, "Yeah, sure, I'll get her. Hey, Flo, get the phone before the boss gets here. Some broad wants you."

"Jesus, Freddie, show a little class, would you?" Florence replied, walking toward the garage phone dangling from Freddie's hand. She was annoyed he shouted her business across the garage floor at the top of his lungs. "And stop telling my business all over the garage. You could've just come and got me, you know."

"Yeah, yeah." Freddie shrugged indifferently at the tall woman when he handed her the phone. As a dispatcher and the boss's right hand man, he was used to the drivers' complaints about how he did things. "Just don't stay on the phone too long. You know how the boss hates long phone calls." He stood nearby, waiting to hear whatever parts of Florence's conversation he could.

"Freddie, just get out of the office and give me some privacy, okay?" Florence snatched the phone from his grasp, then glared at him until he shrugged and made for the door.

Just before he closed it, Freddie turned and said, "You got it, Mommy," as he made a loud smacking sound with his lips, then said, "Ahh...Mira, Mommy, you so hot!"

Laughing, Florence waved him out of the small, dingy office. "This is Florence Walker. May I help you?"

"That must be some workplace. Do all the men call you 'mommy' before they blow kisses your way?" Jenna remarked, laughing into the phone.

"I'm sorry about that." Florence frowned when she realized who was on the other end of the line. "It's Ms. Jacks, right?"

"Yes, it's me. I just wanted to call you personally to find out if you're still interested in the job."

"I never thought I'd hear from you again," Florence mused.

"Well?" Jenna asked impatiently.

"Well what?" Annoyed by an interruption, Florence held one large hand over the receiver and glared at Freddie, who'd pushed the door open wider. "Hold on a minute, Ms. Jacks."

Jenna could barely make out the conversation Walker was having with somebody in the background.

"Freddie, get out, would you? I'm trying to talk."

"Okay, Mommy, but the boss will be here in about two minutes, so make it fast."

"Okay. Thanks. Hey, Freddie?" Florence blew him a loud kiss and winked.

Freddie grinned like a Cheshire cat that just had a good meal and quietly closed the door.

"Sorry for the interruption, Ms. Jacks. Yes, I'm still interested."

"That's good." Jenna was relieved the Walker woman accepted the job. She decided to push things along. "How soon can you start?"

Florence cleared her throat. She hesitated before she answered. She didn't want to sound too anxious, but she needed a change of scenery. "Would tomorrow morning be too soon?"

"I'm delighted, but don't you need to give your employer notice?"

"It's been taken care of, Ms. Jacks. I figured if I didn't get your job, another one would pop up soon. If not, I'd just take a vacation until something else did."

"Oh, I see. All right, tomorrow it is, then. See Esther at seven, tomorrow morning. She'll show you around. You realize the job comes with room and board?" Jenna added.

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, it does. With the late hours I keep, it's easier to have my staff living with me."

"Thank you, Ms. Jacks. See you tomorrow."

"Good bye, Ms. Walker."

The office door opened as Florence hung up. A short stocky man smoking a large cigar entered the room, frowning. "I'm just getting off the phone, Boss. You remember what we talked about a couple weeks ago?"

Her boss, Virgil Hunt, slowly sat down at the big, cluttered desk and put his cigar in the ashtray. He looked up at Florence. Damn, she had that look again. She was gonna take another side job. He wouldn't see her for a while. She was one of his best drivers. His clients liked her and requested her all the time to prove it. If he could, he'd duplicate her and make a mint. He didn't know how she did it, being as big she was, but she never made anyone feel intimidated. Short as he was, she even made him think they were the same height. Yes, the woman did have a gift, all right.

"You mean about you leaving again?"

"Yeah, Boss, that discussion."

"Tell me today's not gonna be your last day, Flo?"

"I wish I could, Boss, but you know me." Florence shrugged. "If something interesting comes along, I gotta go for it."

"What is it this time? Is it another job guarding bodies or are you training some lucky stiff to evade kidnappers?"

Florence laughed. "You're not gonna believe this, but I'm driving for an up and coming artist. I'm just driving, Old Man. It's nothing fancy."

Virgil Hunt smiled when she called him by his nickname. "You can do that here, Flo."

"Yeah, I know, but your clients don't live in mansions with huge lawns and swimming pools in the backyard."

"You remember Boswick, don't you? He lived in one. I'm sure he'd love to have you living in it with him," the old man added with a smirk.

"When hell freezes and pigs fly, Old Man! You know I damn near had to clock that bastard to make him leave me alone. He thought hiring me to drive meant he could get me to do other things too. Anyhow, the woman has an interesting house, Old Man."

"Ah! The boss is a woman, Flo?" The old man looked up at her and winked.

"You're a dirty old man. Did you know that, Virgil Hunt?"

"Us old guys gotta have a little fun sometime!" Virgil sighed as he studied Florence Walker. "You sure you're gonna be all right working for a woman again? I mean, you know how..." His voice trailed off when he saw a flash of pain cross her features for a microsecond and then it disappeared as quickly as it came.

"I'll be fine," Florence replied quietly.

"You know where to find me if you need to talk or anything. You still have my home number."

"Yes. Well, Old Man, I guess this is goodbye for a while. See you when I see you." Florence came around the large desk and gave the stocky man a hug, then stroked him affectionately on top of his hairless head. "I'll stay in touch and let you know how it goes."

Virgil watched Florence stroll to the door.

Florence turned at the door and held her nose. "Old Man?"

"Yeah, what?" Virgil remarked, blowing a thick smoke ring and watching it catch an air current, then float upward.

"Get yourself another brand. These things stink!" Florence winked and ducked out the door before the empty tape dispenser sailed in the air and hit her head.

Virgil blew smoke rings into the air and then he watched them as they floated away. *She'll be back when the romance and the excitement of the new job wears off.* He hoped she didn't get hurt again. It took a year for him to drag the story out of her about the last female client she fell in love with. That woman started out as Flo's boss too. But it didn't end that way. "Freddie, get in here!" the old man yelled through the half-closed door.

"Coming, Boss. I'm coming," Freddie responded as he hustled inside with the clipboard of the drivers' schedules in his hand. "What's up?"

"Freddie, we gotta change the schedule again," the old man remarked and blew another smoke ring into the air above him. "Flo is leaving for a while."

Freddie frowned. He knew something was wrong when she came out of the office and packed her stuff from little cabinet she kept next to his desk. She said a quiet goodbye. "That's too bad, Boss. She's a good driver and dependable too." He glanced at his clipboard. "So who do you want to replace her?"

Freddie didn't add how attractive he found Florence Walker. If she ever took him seriously, he'd ask her out, as if that could ever happen. A man could dream, couldn't he?

The old man watched a glazed look come into his dispatcher's eyes for a minute. "Freddie, quit daydreaming and pay attention. Is Mitchell still available?" he asked as he took another puff of the cigar.

Freddie coughed, choking on the cigar smell. He waved the thick cigar smoke away with his clipboard. "Yeah, he is."

"Then Mitchell it is. Tell him the job is for two months this time." The old man studied the smoke rings floating to the ceiling before he added, "Longer, if she doesn't come back."

Freddie gripped the clipboard nervously at the thought he might never see the tall woman again. "But she always comes back, Boss."

“I got me a feeling...Never mind.” He shrugged and then frowned. “Call Mitchell.” The old man blew another series of smoke rings and watched them float to the ceiling, then disappear outside. *It's just a feeling*, he thought.