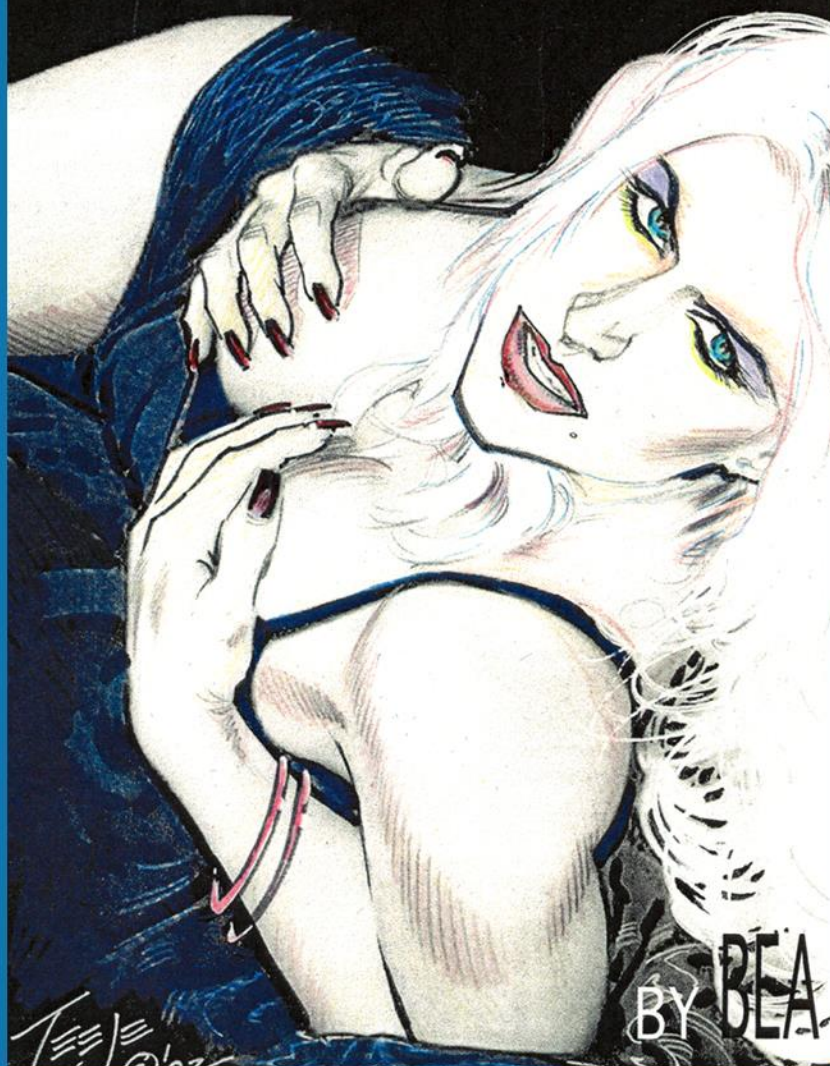


HOME IS WHERE THE HEARTH IS



Home is Where the Hearth Is



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CHAPTER ONE

I pay a small price for a roof over my head, and food in my belly.

I was absolutely broke. Flat. Stony broke. Busted - well, not maybe not quite 'absolute'. Counting the change in my pocket I had exactly forty-seven cents. Not counting it, I had zilch.

I had hitched a ride that morning, but the guy had gotten uncomfortable, sensing how desperate I was, and simply wanted no part of helping me by any appreciable amount. He had been nice enough to give me a couple of bucks - and I'd 'lunched' at the only McDonalds this small town could afford after he'd dropped me off. Sitting on a park bench, I pawed my way through an edition of the local newspaper that someone had left behind, and considered my options. What I could possibly do. There was nothing here for me in the way of jobs. The few ads seemed to be for farm help of one kind or another. On top of that, I'm too small for most physical jobs, and have no other type of skills worth talking about.

I wondered if I could go to the cops and get busted for vagrancy. The sun was shining, but I could see thunderheads off in the distance, and the threat of rain was in the air. If I was in jail, I'd at least be out of the elements - and maybe jail food was as bad as they say, but it beat nothing. There was one major catch though. I'm pretty small, don't look anywhere near my age. Have to shave once a month, whether I need to or not. On top of that, I hadn't had a haircut in months. I had it pulled back, and tied with a rubber band - but if that band ever was released, I would be very popular with some segments of the jail population-and that appealed to me not one bit. In addition? I wasn't sure what the sentence was for boosting a car, but it might give me longer in prison than I truly wanted.

I was down to the clothes on my back and one set of spares in my cheap carryall - and all of them needed washing - fumigating was more like it - and I knew I stank - God! What I'd give for a bath!

And there was my salvation, staring right at me from one of the articles that I'd skimmed past in my search for work. "Local author donates acacia tree to our local park" the small headline said.

I grabbed it up, and read the article. It had to be her - and yes, it

was. She was still writing under her married name - "Vivien Rawles" the name she'd started writing under when we were married. The reporter waxed poetic about this 'wonderful' woman who lived anonymously in the vicinity and, superstitiously, every time she finished a book had to have an acacia tree planted for luck. The reporter had found her identity by pure fortune and had been granted an interview - provided she did not reveal the writer's local name or whereabouts. The reporter then jawed on about this wonderful... Blah, blah, blah.

I saw a public telephone across the way and headed for it. I felt it in my blood - I knew how she was going to be listed - by her maiden name - Susan V. Allsworth. And she was. I found her telephone number in the directory in seconds.

Excitedly, I left the booth and walked in circles until I had laid out my plan of action. I had done her wrong - walked away from her, stolen her money. But at the same time, she really had always had a soft spot for me, so maybe I could steer myself past these obstacles? I also knew myself well enough to realize that though there was not much chance I could throw myself on her mercy right away, the situation was such that I couldn't be taking many chances by demonstrating too much self-pride either. I had to walk a very fine line between being needy - but not begging too much. If I played my cards just right, surely, for old times' sake, she'd help me out?

I checked out the local hotel, just on the other side of the park. It was a bit of a dump, but that would fit in with the story that was starting to form in my mind, without having me look like the total stumblebum I was. I went back to the phone, praying she was home - not off on some publicity junket. Used two of my precious dimes. The phone was answered on the third ring. I knew it wasn't her, as the lady who answered to me spoke in clear, but accented English - Austrian, German, one of the Nordic languages I guessed. I put a smile in my voice.

"Hi! Is Susie there?"

"Who is calling, please?"

"Oh, I'm a very old friend, just got into town. I'd really like to see her."

"She is engaged at the moment. Perhaps... If you could give me

your name?"

I didn't want to do it but saw no option. "I'm her ex-husband. Just passing through. I really would like to meet her again..."

Her voice was a lot colder. "I don't think she will want to talk to .."

"Please!" I interrupted. "I'm not going to be a problem to her.. But I am in trouble.. Please. At least tell her that, and ask her to talk to me, please?".

Her voice softened a little. "I'll ask." She said. "Please hold for a minute."

Nervously, I paced around, the phone to my ear. The chill was starting to get through my thin jacket. What was going to happen to me if she wouldn't... My thoughts were interrupted by my ex wife's voice in my ear. It was as frigid a tone as you'd ever hear, but at least I now had a fighting chance.

"Yes John. Olga said you sound desperate. But I don't really think that you and I have much to talk about.."

"Please Susie. Please let me come see you. I'm in trouble and I want to ask for your help, I'll say that much. But I promise. Promise! that if you turn me down, I'll leave. Never bother you again."

"My help! You must be kidding! After the shit that you pulled! Why should I help you? Leaving me damn near destitute - ruining my credit record. Spending everything on these damn drugs..."

"Susan! I've been clean for almost two years. (Not exactly two years - fourteen months was more like it, but I wasn't kidding on that score, I was clean.) Talk to me. Let me come and see you. Honest! You don't want to help? Kick my ass out of the door - I won't raise a fuss. Promise!"

She considered for what seemed like an eternity, probably ten seconds.

"You saw that dumb article in the local paper, didn't you?" She asked calmly.

"That's right." I replied, starting to feel a little better. She was still

cool, but warming to the idea.

"O.K. get a cab. We're only a ten minutes out of town.."

"Susie? I'm pretty broke. A cab would be stretching my finances right now."

"Jesus!" She said. But her tone had warmed by a few degrees.

"O.K. I'll have Olga come pick you up. Where are you staying?"

"A little place called the "Cattleman's Arms.."

"Beside the park?"

"Yes. That's it."

"OK she can pick you up at what? Say six thirty?"

"Susie? Could you make it sooner than that? I might have to leave town pretty soon.."

"Still not shy about asking for things, are you John? Hold on a second." She put her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone, and I heard a mumbled conversation. Then she was back with me. "Okay. She should be there in about fifteen minutes, tops."

"What kind of car will she be driving?" I asked.

" A big, light blue Caddy." she answered, "Why?"

"Oh. No particular reason." I lied. "Just so's I can keep an eye open for her."

I breathed a sigh of relief when she hung up. I'd done everything I'd set out to do. Let her know I was broke, but hadn't divulged the extent of my poverty - all I had to do now was meet Olga outside the hotel -and if I could con her into thinking I lived there - then, I'd keep some of my self-respect.

In the short time I had, I checked how Olga could possibly approach the hotel. To my relief, there was only the one street that it fronted on, so all I had to do was keep an eye open for her car and hope she didn't drive through to the parking lot at the back. But, as there were tons of parking slots right at the front, I didn't think she'd bother.

All together it took about twelve minutes after I'd finished my checking. I had taken a stand close to the front door of the hotel, where I

could see down the street in both directions but was shielded from the view of anyone driving on the street by a couple of small potted Ficus bushes in pots - there in the doorway to give the joint a little class I thought.

And here came a big, light blue caddy, cruising towards the hotel. I timed it perfectly. Walked into the foyer. Stopped, as if thinking about something. Indecisively moved forward, then back. Stopped. Thought again, then reversed myself and walked back out to the street, just in time to greet Olga getting out of the car.

"Oh my goodness!" I exclaimed. "Are you Olga?"

She looked confused. "Yes. Are you Mr. Rawles?"

"Of course." I answered. "But you were so quick. I wasn't expecting you for some time yet."

"But Ms. Allsworth said I'd be here in less than fifteen minutes. I heard her..."

"Oh dear. Well you know Susie. Not very good at time estimating..."

She drew herself back, and I knew I'd made a mistake. This woman liked Susie. Wasn't going to hear any criticism from me. Hurriedly, I changed my tack. "Well, probably more my fault. I'm not very good with time if you have to know."

Just in time, I thought. She softened a little. Opened the car door for me. I tossed my carryall in the back seat.

"What's that?" She asked.

"Just things" I replied vaguely - not wanting her to know it was the sum of my worldly possessions.

By the time she'd walked around to the other side of the car, she seemed to have forgotten all about it - and I wasn't about to bring it into the conversation. She started up the engine, checked her mirrors carefully and we took off.

God, it was wonderful being surrounded by comfort! I could have burrowed down into the warmth and luxury of that car and not come up for a week.

"Just passing through?" She asked carefully.

"Yeah." I said. "Seems like a nice little town."

"We like it." She said shortly, then, as if to apologize for her brusqueness "How do you like staying at the 'Cattleman's'?"

"Oh. Seems okay" I said, complimenting myself on not having to elaborate myself into any more lies than necessary.

"Looks like rain" I commented as a few drops hit the windshield.

"Yes. They're forecasting quite a lot of it." She answered. "But the farmers like it."

"Don't they always?" I said with a laugh. She grinned, and nodded in agreement.

Carefully, I tried to gauge my companion. On looking back to our meeting at the hotel. For some reason, she had seemed surprised when she had met me. I tried to figure out why.

As if reading my mind, she spoke. "You're not quite as I expected you to be."

"You did seem surprised." I answered.

A small smile touched her lips. "Having lived with Susie for as long as I have, I've heard quite a bit about you.." She gave me a sideways glance. "You're not one of her favorite people you know."

I smiled ruefully.

She continued. "I'd got the impression that you were much taller .. Heavier... More domineering somehow."

"Well, I haven't shrunk," I said "though I have lost some weight..."

She shook her head slightly. "I wonder what Susie will think." She mused.

She didn't say anything else and about ten minutes later, turned on to a tree-lined side road, and about a mile along that, was pulling up in front of a fair sized, pleasant looking house. Nice garden - with a few of Susie's lucky acacias there, I noticed.

She let me out, and I waited for her to park the car in the garage.

She activated the garage door while inside the garage, then stooped, and hurried out before it closed on her. "That could be dangerous" I said.

She grinned for the first time, and I got a good look at her. Fairly tall for a woman, maybe five foot eight or so - a couple of inches taller than me. Probably outweighed me by about fifteen pounds too - really looked in good shape. Strong features, blonde hair, large white teeth that showed well in her grin. Then she remembered that I was an unknown quantity, and closed up again. The raindrops were starting to get larger now.

"You should have brought your coat." She said.

"Yeah. Looks like it. It's back in my room though." I lied.

"Not going to do you much good there." She retorted.

I shrugged;

She went ahead of me and opened the door.

Carrying my carryall, I was let into the hallway. The house was lovely. Not what would be called a 'big' house - but spacious. Flowers - real ones - everywhere. A sense of comfort, welcome, and warmth. And I said the absolute best thing I could have - and there was no falsehood involved, it was perfectly sincere. "Oh. What a lovely home!" I enthused.

This, to a certain extent, won Olga over. It also made me God knows how many brownie points with Susie. I had not seen her come into the hall, and she had to know this. She also knew that my comment was made in total sincerity.

"Thank you." She said quietly, from behind me.

Quietly or not, I still jumped about a foot in the air, bringing a smile to both their faces. Scared though I was, I still couldn't believe my luck.

Everything I was doing was totally uncalculated, but was getting me through their defenses in a way that no rehearsed bullshit could have. I made as if to go forward to give her a kiss - a mistake. She backed away a little, and the smile left her face.

"Lost weight John? You look very thin." She turned to Olga. "All of a sudden, I have the feeling that you're feeding me too well dear -1

probably outweigh him now. Dear god, I don't WANT to go on a diet!"

"You look terrific Susie." I said sincerely.

She hadn't changed much in five years. Hair a shade or two lighter, still nicely waved around her face. Worn a little shorter. Not much makeup, frameless, rose-tinted glasses gave her a serious demeanor. A little taller than me in her heels. Had gained maybe a pound or so, but it looked good on her. She was wearing a pair of light blue linen pants and a flowing cream-colored blouse, with a yellow chiffon scarf inside the neckline.

"Thanks. No objection to the pants?" She said, a snide edge coming into her voice.

I grimaced, and spread my arms apologetically. "I was wrong" I admitted.

"Never liked me in pants." She explained to Olga. "Used to give me hell for wearing them. Said that he wore the pants..." She paused. "And I think you probably put me off them. To this day, I don't wear them too often." She paused again. "But let's get down to business. You wanted to talk to me. Olga love? Want to mix a couple of drinks for us. Gin and tonic for me.. John?"

I really wanted a drink, but turned it down. "Thanks. I'm not on the wagon or anything, but I'd better pass. Thanks."

Astonishment showed on her face.

"My god John! Would never have thought to hear these words cross your lips."

"I'm reformed." I admitted.

"Well. I'm not. I'll still have one. But how's about a coke? Soft drink?"

"Perfect - any kind of soda will do. Thanks."

Olga took off in one direction, while Susie led me into a comfortable living room, a nice fire burning in the fireplace. She had me sit in a comfortable chair across from the couch where she parked. I leaned forward to talk. She held up a hand to stop me.

"Wait. Olga is both my friend and advisor. I don't know what

you're going to ask of me, but I want her to hear it. I'll want her opinion."

I nodded as agreeably as I could and leaned back in the chair. Exhaustion washed over me. I wanted so much to give in to it - but figured that Susie would see any show of weakness as a calculated gambit on my part to win sympathy, so fought it off. Olga came back into the room a few moments later. A coke for me, Susie's drink, and something for herself. Handed out the drinks, put the tray on a sideboard, then sat on the couch beside Susie. They both looked at me expectantly.

"Susie? I'm broke.." I started.

"Not one goddam dime John!" She said firmly, her hand in the air quickly for emphasis. "No way! You stole my money years ago - and that's the last money you get from me. If you came here for money, you wasted your time, my time, and Olga's time. Not one goddam dime!"

I puffed my cheeks out helplessly. She sounded an awful lot tougher now, more self-assured - and I was sure that her saying it in front of Olga would strengthen her resolve. I could see a long uphill battle in front of me. Opened my arms again.

"Susie? I'm broke. I need help. Like I said on the phone, you say 'no', I'm out of here - and it sounds like that's what you're saying..."

"Yes John. It is. I'm sorry if you're having financial troubles, but you brought them on yourself I'd bet. When you left me in that godawful mess, I hated you. I swore then, I'd see you in hell before I trusted you again. There is no way that I'm going back on that..." She paused, obviously distracted, her nose wrinkling. "What is that smell?"

I didn't know what she was talking about, but Olga made some sort of eye contact with her. Susie blushed beet red. "Oh god John! I'm sorry!"

And a tide of humiliation washed over me - she had caught my B.O. When you haven't bathed in close to a week, the human scent can get pretty pungent. But she was just as embarrassed at her gaffe, and tried to make amends as quickly as possible. I was touched. She was a lot tougher than she'd been when we got married, but there definitely was still a core of decency there. She leaned forward and spoke again. "John? I'm sorry. I will not give you any money - but if you'd like to take

advantage of a warm bath - and a decent dinner, I won't grudge you that much."

I almost felt moisture come into my eyes at the thought of her offer. There was absolutely no way I could - or would - refuse. Unable to speak, I took a pull at my soft drink, then nodded my thanks. Olga stood up. "I'll go run a bath. You can have a nice long soak. While you're doing that, I'll throw some dinner on." She turned to Susie. "We've some of that pot roast from Tuesday. Will that do?"

Susie smiled, and looked at me. "You're in for a treat. She makes the best pot roast."

I didn't know what was thrilling me the most - the idea of the bath, or a decent home cooked meal, so just smiled my thanks. (Maybe once I was cleaned up and fed, I could talk her into some money?) But first things first.

Olga left the room. Susie stared into the fire and made it clear that she wanted no discussion without Olga's company. I left her alone and settled into the chair. Watched the fire bum cheerfully along with her. Gusts of wind rattled the house, rain spattered against the windows.

I may have dozed, I'm not sure, but in what seemed like minutes, Olga called out that the bath was ready. Trying to hide my desire to rush to it, I stretched, then stood up.

"Out into the hallway. Take the stairs up. Then it's the first bedroom on the left" Susie said.

"A stairway to paradise" I said. She gave a faint smile as I left the room.

I found the bedroom door she had mentioned. I knew I was right because the door was open, and I could see the steam coming from another open door. I didn't pay too much attention to the room. It was done in pastels, mostly yellows and blues. A canopied bed, chintz bedcover, drapes to match - a very feminine room.

Olga, bless her, had run a *major* bath. Deep, and layered on the top with about eight inches of tiny bubbles.

"It's kind of scented," she said apologetically, "but I thought..."

"Perfect" I enthused. "Thanks a bunch."

She nodded and closed the door, leaving me alone. I was stripped in seconds.

The bath was so hot that I had to inch my way in slowly, but I finally sunk deep down into the steaming water, feeling the tensions and cares start to wash out of my pores. A few minutes later, I heard her call out "Are you in the bath yet?"

"Yes" I replied. "Lovely!"

With that, she came into the room, and hung a terry towel robe on the door hanger. Picked up my clothes, and left, closing the door behind her.

I started to doze, so had no idea of how long it was before she was back at the door again. "Mr. Rawles? Mr. Rawles? It looks as if it is turning into a really miserable night. Susie wondered... Would you like to spend the night?"

"Tell her from me, that the gods will thank her in heaven." I answered. "I'll tell her you said thank you." She replied tartly. I smiled and settled back down into the bath. Things had gone better than I'd had any right to expect. Maybe my luck was starting to turn? I started to get drowsy again.

In what seemed like seconds, she was back at the door. "Mr. Rawles?"

"Yes?" I answered sleepily.

"Do you have the key to your hotel room?"

"Eh? Why?"

"Well, something has come up, and Susie thought that, as you are staying the night here, I could go and get a change of clothing for you?"

I gulped. Time for the truth. "Well... To tell the truth, I've already checked out.."

"But where are the rest of your things?" She asked.

"The only things I have are what I was wearing, and what was in the bag." I admitted.

There was a long pause. I knew she was there, but not saying anything.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Mr. Rawles. I've done something I shouldn't have .. But they were really filthy .. And from what you said earlier, I did think you had to have more clothes at the hotel... You did say."

"What are you talking about Olga?" I asked, sleepily impatient.

"I threw your underpants and one of your shirts in the incinerator. I'm sorry, but they really were ugly. Everything else... Is in the washing machine.

Oh dear!" I was too tired to care. "No problem Olga. We'll work something out."

But I heard her muttering to herself as she left and went back down the corridor.

After getting out of the bath and drying myself off, I washed my hair in the sink, then used a hairdryer to dry it off. Somehow or other, I'd lost my rubber band, but I figured there had to be more around. It was amazing how different it looked, waving around my face, dropping almost to my shoulders.

I found talc - the same scent as the bath salts, but I was chafed a little in the crotch, so applied some liberally. The bathrobe was terry as I'd thought - but it was a decided shade of pink, and somewhat feminine in the cut of the lapels. I shrugged in indecision, but there was nothing else. I put it on. It fit me very well. Had to be Susie's I thought, Olga's would be too big.

Another knock on the door. "Mr. Rawles?" "Yes Olga"

"I had thought I could get your nightwear from your hotel, but it now appears that I can't. You must have something to put on under the robe. Susie only has nightdresses, but I have found a pair of pajamas that are a little small for me - perhaps they will do? I don't know what shoe size you take either, but I've brought you a pair of my slippers. If they do fit, would you put on the socks I've left beside them? Otherwise, you'll have to go barefoot."

And the door opened a little and her arm appeared, holding out light blue slippers, and a pair of yellow pajamas - kinda satiny fabric. I took them from her with a mumbled "thank you." She closed the door again.

I took the robe off and put the pajamas on. The jacket was just a little on the big side, and the pants were a mite long, flopping over my feet. These were not men's pajamas by a long shot, but they were the first clean clothes I'd worn in weeks - and feminine or not, they felt wonderful. I put them on, and then covered them with the robe.

The slippers fitted just fine. They did have a little heel to them, but that reduced the overhang of the pajama pants. The 'socks' turned out to be a pair of smoky, knee-high stockings that she had stuffed inside the slippers. I could understand her not wanting someone else's bare feet in her footwear, but feeling decidedly peculiar, I put them on, and retried the slippers. They fitted even better now. I was starting to feel a little shy, but left the bathroom and went downstairs.

CHAPTER TWO

Olga Presents a Plan

Both women looked shocked when they saw me.

"Do I look *that* different with the dirt removed?" I asked, smiling uncertainly.

"No. That's not it." Susie said slowly. "But damned if you're not the spitting image of Marge with your hair like that. Isn't she?" she asked Olga, then stuttered "I mean.. I mean 'he'" then she tried to explain "Marge.. A good friend.." Then stopped. "Ah! The hell with it. Let's go have something to eat."

As we walked into the dining area, she smiled at me over her shoulder. "You look really cute." She said. I blushed. She grinned at Olga.

And, sleepy though I was, and informal as our meal was, I had the feeling that in my satin pajamas, ladies slippers and robe - carrying the scent of the bath - I was now at a different level of interaction with the two women - I had interrupted their lives and routines in a manner expected of males, but I now felt very vulnerable - and, at the same time, noticed that

there was a definite change in the climate in the room. It was friendlier somehow. I wondered if my new feminine image was less threatening to Susie. Felt her eyes on me more than once. The first few times I looked up and caught her, she looked away quickly. After that though, she just smiled at me, an appraising expression in her eyes. I stopped looking up after that, feeling strangely intimidated.

She finally opened the topic of conversation that I was most interested in. "O.K." She said, "Olga's sorry she ruined your clothes, but I'll buy new ones to replace what was destroyed - but only that. Before you leave - or if you want, I'll give you ten dollars tomorrow to replace them. Is that fair?" I dropped my eyes.

"Yes Susie, of course it is. But do I have to leave tomorrow? Couldn't you find something for me to do around here? Yardwork? Paint? Lend a hand?"

She pursed her lips. "C'mon John. I know how handy - or unhandy you are. There's no way I'm going to run you loose with a paintbrush or any other tool for that matter..."

Olga broke in, speaking slowly and with deliberation. "Well, maybe he could spend the day or a few days? - give me a hand with the housework? That doesn't take much skill. And I am getting to the stage of needing to do some heavy duty cleaning."

This was totally unexpected - to both Susie and myself. I don't know which of us was the more astounded. Susie recovered first.

"Well. O.K. " She said doubtfully. But then she turned back to me, her smiles diminished now. "But don't go counting on anything. I know you. Olga doesn't. So just let me tell you this. A one day stay -two at the most. You'll do what Olga tells you to do - and if I tell you to do something, you'd better jump!"

I was exulting inside - I had my foot in the door! At least one day to be all contrite and apologetic - maybe two! Surely, I could work something out? "Oh yes, Susie. Thank you." I blurted. "Thank you as well Olga. You won't be sorry."

I was babbling with relief and, at the same time trying not to appear starving as I attacked Olga's fantastic pot roast.



Later, I was having a helluva time staying awake, which wasn't lost on either of the women. We all finished up. Susie was the only one that wanted coffee, so she had her cup filled and took it off with her to her study, saying she had a chapter to work on. Just before she left, when I offered to help Olga with the dishes, she returned to her previous good humor.

"My. My? All domesticated now John? Or is it your nice new clothes making you all girlish and responsible?"