

ROOMMATE WANTED

By Maggie Finson



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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ROOMMATE WANTED

By Maggie Finson

It had been a rough day for Martin Holtz. To begin with, the job he had taken with a large publishing firm as a junior editor was no longer available. He'd been hired straight out of college, was preparing to move to the city from his small town house and begin his new career when disaster had struck.

Just as he was preparing to leave the only home he'd known other than university dorms and apartments through his twenty two years of life, news reached him in the form of a sober faced state trooper that his parents had been killed in a traffic accident not ten miles from home. Simply a freak of damp pavement, an inexperienced driver in the other vehicle, and being in precisely the right place at the worst possible time, Martin hadn't even been able to blame the sixteen year old who had caused the crash. He hadn't been speeding, or intoxicated, just lost control, and would live with the consequences of that for the rest of his life.

Not a vindictive person by nature, Martin actually felt sorry for the kid even though bereft of the only family he had ever known. There were no aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents to offer support, no brothers and sisters to share the loss with. Just Martin, more alone than he had ever been in his life and wondering what he was going to do next.

A call to his new employers got a sympathetic reaction, with a promise to hold the job as long as they could for him. But making the necessary funeral arrangements, settling the estate, and several thousand other details consumed over a month. He was left with a modest inheritance, a paid off house, and no family ties.

Martin had sold the house to the first buyer who came along with a half decent offer despite the protests of his family lawyer.

He knew he could have gotten more for the place, but it held far too many painful memories, as did the small town it was located in. Always something of an outsider, Martin had no real friends left there, and simply wanted to get away and start his new life unencumbered with baggage, either real or emotional, that wasn't absolutely necessary.

Having successfully burnt any bridges left behind him, but without a job, (the firm had been understanding, but had needed that position filled before he was able to break away), he had come to the city confident of finding another similar position.

No such luck.

At least not through the first week of job hunting. With his inheritance, and the proceeds from selling the house, money wasn't going to be an immediate problem, but

with prices in the city, his funds weren't sufficient for buying a decent house, and he had few illusions regarding how long his resources would last if he remained unemployed for very long.

So, armed with a carefully worked out budget, he began hunting for an affordable place to live, just until a job came through, then he would be able to get something better, he promised himself. After a day of being shown nothing but cockroach infested dumps, postage stamp sized efficiencies, and bearable places in neighborhoods where Rambo wouldn't have felt safe, he was hot, tired, and discouraged. The most frustrating thing of it all was that he could afford better places than he had seen, but only for a few months at best.

Back in his motel room, showered, fed at the adequate diner attached to the establishment, and with the television turned to MTV with the sound turned way down, he began searching the evening paper for something he would be able to live with while living in it.

Roommate Wanted:

Spacious apartment, share housekeeping, rent, and utilities. Single male preferred. Will rearrange to suit. References required. Ask for Karen.

The ad fairly jumped into his figurative lap. Not only was the telephone prefix one used in the better section of town, the idea of a woman specifically asking for a male roommate struck him as something more than a little odd. Maybe she simply wanted a man around for the sense of security? Maybe she was hopelessly ugly, or had bad breath and was fat, and so was resorting to desperate means to get a man. Or maybe she was just kinky enough to actually want a strange man for a roommate.

Curiosity piqued, Martin reached for the telephone to call the number given in the ad, wondering what kind of woman would give her home phone number out with an ad anyone could read.

That question was laid to immediate rest by the answer he received on the other end. A pleasant feminine voice replied,

“Barlowe Pharmaceuticals, how may I help you?”

“Uh,” Martin berated himself for that intelligent response. “I'm calling for someone named Karen regarding an ad she ran in the evening paper.”

“I see.” The woman's voice cooled a little, as if she had fielded more of these calls than she cared for, and hadn't liked some of the respondents at all. “I'll see if she's in, please hold.”

There was only a slight wait, with no canned music much to Martin's relief, before another woman's voice, low and musical, came on the line. "This is Karen Abbott. You're calling in regard to my advertisement?"

Her voice was cultured, containing a self assurance that pretty well blew any theories of the woman being hopelessly inept with anyone, let alone men. Martin thought she had one of the sexiest telephone voices he had ever heard.

"Yes, I am. Thought I had the wrong number at first.

"My name is Martin Holtz, by the way," He hastily put in, "and I admit that your ad did catch my eye."

Amusement filled the wonderful voice at the other end of the connection. "Just a way of screening callers without giving out my home number, though Judy thinks everyone who calls about it is some kind of pervert. You aren't, are you?"

Taken by surprise at the last question, Martin bridled, drawing himself erect before realizing that Karen Abbott couldn't see his outrage at the question. "I sure hope not. I've never done anything kinky or illegal in my life that I know of."

"Okay, Martin." Karen stopped his avowals by interrupting. "Why don't you tell me something about yourself?"

Feeling as if he were at another job interview, Martin did just that. He approached the conversation as if it really was some oddball way of being interviewed for a position. Prompted by the woman, he actually ended up pouring out all the frustrations and grief he had been through over the past few months before he realized what he was doing.

Embarrassed at that, Martin's voice trailed off with the thought that he had really blown it, and was strangely saddened by that idea. He really wanted to at least meet the woman with a voice that stroked his recently battered psyche into giving up all those revelations.

"So you still haven't found a job?" Karen Abbott sounded sympathetic, but there was something in her tone that implied thoughtfulness. "And are completely unattached?"

"That pretty well covers it." Martin agreed heavily. "Though I do have enough funds to cover sharing rent and bills for quite a while, at least a year if I'm careful."

"I like your voice, Martin Holtz," she finished. "I'll check out the information you gave me, and get back to you. Where can I reach you?"

Not believing she would even consider him, and wondering why he was so happy she seemed to be doing so, Martin gave her the motel's phone number and his room number.

"I know the place," she replied. "That's where I stayed until I found my own place when I first came to town. I should be back to you in about an hour or so. That be okay?"

"Sure," Martin agreed. "I wasn't planning on going anywhere tonight."

"Good," the woman briskly replied. "I'll talk to you later on then."

"I'll look forward to hearing from you." Martin closed the conversation, hanging up the phone in perplexity at really meaning that. He was looking forward to getting a call from her.

Glancing at his watch, he was nearly shocked to discover they had been talking for over an hour. The conversation had seemed far briefer than that to him. A slight soreness in his ear, though, confirmed that he had spent the time with the receiver nearly glued to it.

"Probably won't come to anything," he muttered to himself. "Not even a place to live."

That surprised him a little. What was he hoping for? A meaningful relationship with a woman he had only spoken to on the telephone? Though he did have to admit that even the memory of her silky smooth contralto stirred reactions in his crotch regardless of how much he tried discouraging it.

In contrast, the following hour and fifteen minutes seemed to drag him through a reasonably close simulation of forever. Going back through the ads, looking for other prospects while telling himself that the Abbott woman would find some reason to turn him down gently and he needed to find somewhere soon and get out of paying fifty dollars a night for a motel room failed to hold his interest at all. As did any other activity he attempted.

When the telephone did ring, he reached it before the first ring was completed, then debated on whether or not to answer it at all for several more rings. On the fourth, he lunged for the receiver as if it were the most important thing in his life.

"Hello."

"Mr. Holtz?" It wasn't the voice he wanted to hear, but the young woman who had answered the line during his first call.

"Yes." Martin steeled himself for disappointment. Evidently Karen Abbott had clout where she worked, enough to have a secretary to herself, and was leaving the dirty work of letting him down to the girl. Characteristically, instead of getting angry at Karen Abbott, he felt sorry for the girl on the other end of the line.

"Dr. Abbott had to leave unexpectedly and sends her apologies for not calling back in person." The girl, Judy he thought her name was, sounded far more pleasant this time around.

"That's okay" Martin replied while thinking, sure she's sorry, here comes the let down.

"Dr. Abbott has asked me to find if it would be convenient for you to meet with her tomorrow morning at around eight?"

Prepared for a letdown, he was unprepared for that question.

"Sure, I guess so."

"Good," Judy responded, still a bit cool, but warmer than he expected. "She wants to see you in person, and give you a chance to see the apartment. Is that satisfactory with you?"

“Of course it is,” Martin assured her. “Tell her I'll be there, and thanks for calling.”

“I'll pass your message on to Dr. Abbott,” Judy responded, then finished with, “You're welcome, Mr. Holtz. Good-bye.”

Hanging up the receiver, he wondered what kind of doctor Karen Abbott was, and why she felt it necessary to advertise for a roommate, of all things? The woman had to have an income that precluded the need for anyone to share expenses, so again, Martin found himself puzzling over just why she was looking for a roommate at all, especially specifying a male. Maybe she was frumpy, or even ugly, a female nerd or something?

But memory of her very assured and lovely voice pretty well put those ideas out of any running for possibility. Some deep seated instinct clamored for him not to keep that appointment in the morning, that the woman had to be some kind of kinky freak.

Intrigued, and actually wanting to meet the woman face to face, if just to satisfy his own curiosity, Martin pushed his doubts aside.

After all, he still had the right to refuse even if she accepted him as a roommate.

Martin took special care with his appearance the next morning. He rose at 5:30 to shower and carefully shave his negligible beard, and made certain his sandy brown hair was going to behave itself for at least a few hours.

He had always been small, getting his size from his petite mother, along with her slender build and fair complexion. He'd never considered his face as anything special and fervently wished he could loose the smooth, boyishness it stubbornly held to. More androgynous than he cared to admit, his even featured face and slight build hadn't improved as he matured. It was still the same five foot seven frame he had suddenly found himself coping with through the summer of his thirteenth year, and that bone structure simply refused to support the bulk of bulging muscle he really desired.

Not that he was soft or overtly girlish either. Martin took care of his body, exercising regularly, and maintained very good male muscle definition without much real effort at all. Native American ancestry had come through in him with a dearth of body hair and very spotty facial hair. Even the little he did possess was the same light sandy color as his scalp, so it didn't show much at all. There were times when he could go for days without shaving at all and still have no more than many guys grew before five o'clock.

His appearance was something he had come to accept without rancor, or as anything he would be able to do much about beyond keeping his thick hair cut fairly short and leaving things at that. Cultivating a beard or mustache would have been worse than useless, patchy as his facial hair was, anyway.

Martin had never experienced doubts regarding his sexuality, either. Oh, he'd experimented just like any other youth, but had emerged fully confirmed as heterosexual and definitely interested in girls. With his smooth good looks, sense of humor, and undeniable intelligence, he'd experienced less trouble getting dates than many of the larger, “more masculine” guys he'd gone to both high school and college with.

The only problem with that was he had never been able to settle on just one girl, or woman, as he got older. Part of it was due to his naturally solitary nature. But honestly, he just hadn't found a girl he wanted to spend his life with. Someone would come along, he was sure, and was content to stay single and wait until he ran across the right girl.

Driving to the address given to him the previous evening, Martin began to wonder again at just why Karen Abbott wanted a male roommate, or required anyone to help with expenses. The neighborhood was a good one. Quiet residential tracts were interspersed with mini malls, the expected grocery and convenience stores, and a number of fairly up scale shops catering to many tastes and needs. It was about normal for a large city's suburban area, but nothing elite or unreasonably expensive in appearance.

Pulling to a stop at the curb fronting the address, he regarded the building critically. Part of a restored Brownstone, the town house appeared neither prohibitively expensive or much of anything else from the outside. It was obviously large, with three floors counting the basement, which showed curtains in the small windows, hinting at being finished as well as the rest of the building.

Recalling what some of the dumps he had already seen cost in the way of rent, Martin could begin to understand why a single person, no matter what their income, might want someone to share expenses in such a place. He experienced doubts that he would be able to hold up his end of any agreement financially even after he found a job.

But it was worth looking into, and by far the best offer he had yet received. Besides, the need to actually meet the owner of that seductively compelling voice was prompting him to go through with the meeting, at least. He had nothing at all to lose but a few illusions and a little time, after all.

Getting out of his three year old Pontiac, Martin made certain he was presentable, rechecked the address and time, then made his way up the marble steps to read the placard set above the doorbell button. "Abbott" was the simple inscription, but it told him he was at the right place. Drawing in a breath, he pressed the button, hearing musical chimes inside as he did.

Karen Abbott, if it was she who answered the door, was neither hopelessly ugly or a frump, far from it. Flame red hair done in a smoothly elegant chin length page boy, framed a beautiful face Martin knew could be breathtaking in the extreme with proper cosmetic enhancement.

Her slim, well proportioned figure was well set off in a simple lined business suit of lavender silk that was obviously expensive and carefully designed to enhance her femininity while declaring that the woman wearing it was someone who shouldn't be taken lightly. Martin immediately approved her sense of style, from the delicate white pumps, the uncluttered jewelry, the suit, all the way to her immaculate hair and make-up.

"You must be Martin?" Smiling, her voice left no doubt as to just who he was meeting.

"Yes." Martin managed not to stammer. "It's good to meet you, Dr. Abbott."

Laughing softly, she waved a hand to dismiss that title and invite him inside.

“Oh, don't take that too seriously. I'm a chemist, and very new to being called doctor. Just use Karen and I'm sure both of us will be far more comfortable.”

Closing the door behind him, Karen Abbott ushered him into a spacious living room filled with furnishings as elegant as herself.

“Would you like some coffee? I just put on a fresh pot.”

“That would be great.” Martin answered, still somewhat mesmerized by her presence. “Thank you.”

Soon, with a large china cup of fragrant coffee placed on the cherry coffee table in front of him, he found himself deep in conversation with this alluring young woman.

“If you don't mind my asking,” he began hesitantly. “Why in the world would someone in your position want someone to share expenses, especially some guy you've never even met before?”

“Well,” the redhead responded with a rueful smile. “I suppose that question deserves a legitimate answer, after the way I grilled you on the phone last evening.”

“To begin with,” she sighed, “I really do need some help around the place right now; with expenses, and the housework.”

Waving at their surroundings, she added, “I originally went in on this place with two other girls, but both of them have moved on to other things now and can't remain here. I could afford to pay all the rent, but it would leave me very little to spare just now. I only got my doctorate recently, and haven't gotten my first paycheck after the promotion that came with it, so you can imagine what state my bank account is in at present.”

Martin, a recent graduate himself, could easily sympathize.

“Sure, with that. But it doesn't tell me why you want a male roommate you've never met.”

“Oh, I have no problem meeting men,” she assured him with a quirk of full lips. “But any man I already know might get ideas if I asked him to move in. Ideas I don't have either the time or patience to entertain just now. But I do want a man around the house for a number of reasons having nothing at all to do with sex.”

Martin could see that this woman would have absolutely no difficulty finding willing partners, and could see her point, though being a non-threatening male presence even in potential was a trifle deflating to his ego.

Leaning forward gracefully, Karen indicated his nearly empty cup. “Would you care for some more coffee?”

Surprised that he had finished the first cup already, Martin nodded. “Yes, thanks. So what do you want out of a guy around the place?”

“Fair question, considering.” Karen grinned while refilling his cup. “Are you any good with tools, or anything like that?”

"I'm no Mr. all around handyman," Martin admitted. "But I can pound a nail straight, and clear a clogged drain if I need to."

"Good," Karen responded. "I myself, am hopeless with things like that, and prefer not resorting to professionals for the simple things if I can avoid it. Would you have a problem with handling the minor upkeep in the place?"

"So long as it's nothing major, I suppose so," was his reply.

"Fine." Karen nodded again, setting up delightfully feminine motions in her shining hair as she did. "And can you stay here without trying to `put the moves on me'?"

"Honestly, I don't know about that," Martin told her point blank. "All I can tell you is that I'll try to, and won't press anything you don't specifically want me to do."

"Good answer." She smiled again. "I think you'll do. Would you like to see the rest of the apartment?"

Still unsure if he was prepared for her terms, Martin shrugged.

"Why not? It looks like a really beautiful home from what I've seen so far."

Rising, Karen motioned for him to follow with an economical, graceful gesture.

"Come along then, and see if you like the rest of it."

Martin did, very much.

Even entranced as he was with the woman showing the separate rooms like a proud parent, he was fully conscious that the way the interior was laid out and furnished, it had to be far beyond his imposed means. The possibility of being in the same abode as the magnetic creature showing him around was another incentive to go along. Possibly her mind could be gradually changed about their relationship if he was careful about it.

"I really don't think I can handle the expense of living here," he regretfully informed her about halfway through the tour. "I hadn't realized the apartment was this big, or well restored."

"Could you handle," Karen put on a thoughtful expression, as if calculating to herself, "Say, four hundred a month?"

Surprised at the figure, which was far below what he had expected, Martin nodded. "Yes I could. But that can't be near half of the rent for a place like this."

"You're right," she responded crisply. "It wouldn't. But it will pay slightly over half my monthly mortgage payments. Which would be a tremendous help just now."

A condo. That explained a lot. No landlord to maintain it, or to approve or disapprove of anyone she decided was acceptable as a house mate. "That would be a whole lot better than I was thinking."

Doing some rapid calculations of his own, Martin decided the expense would be well worth it for the surroundings, and the companionship that came with them. "If you're still willing, I think I'd like to give it a try."

“Great!” Karen grinned, an impish expression he found nearly impossible not to respond favorably to. “I’m happy you feel that way, but there is one more thing you should be aware of.”

Wondering what could possibly foul things up at that stage, when both parties seemed in agreement, Martin raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Some deep, dark secret locked in the basement or attic?”

“Hardly.” Karen chuckled. “Come see for yourself before you make up your mind, though.”

The ‘one last thing’ turned out to be a nursery, with a sleeping infant nestled in an antique cradle.

“My daughter, Tracie,” Karen softly told him, keeping her voice quiet to avoid waking the child. “A mistake originally, but I love her in spite of the jerk who fathered her. Do you have a problem being around a baby? She goes to day care or a sitter when I’m working, so you wouldn’t be left alone with her.”

The infant appeared so peaceful sleeping with one chubby fist nearly crammed into her tiny mouth, Martin was taken with her at once.

“No, I actually like children.”

“See if you say that after one of the nights she isn’t quiet,” Karen told him. “But if you can deal with staying in the same place with an infant, I think we have a deal.”

“Like I said,” Martin withdrew from the nursery before replying, “I’m willing if you are.”

“Fine.” Karen smiled broadly. “Come on downstairs and I’ll get you a key and the papers you need to sign before moving in.”

At the mention of papers, she shrugged with a slight lift of one shoulder.

“Just a formality, stating how much you pay monthly, and things like a regular lease. No big deal, but my lawyer insists I have something like that before letting anyone move in here. Just to protect both parties.”

“I understand.” Martin nodded. “Bring them on and I’ll sign whatever you need to have.”

Her smile grew a little secretive with that, then warmed with an intensity he was quite certain would have melted the polar ice caps given half a chance.

“Okay, just make yourself comfortable in the living room while I get them. Help yourself to some more coffee while you’re waiting.”

Martin barely skimmed the paperwork he signed, still in a near daze at his good fortune.

Karen smiled cheerfully at him once he had finished.

“I’m afraid your room will be a bit on the feminine side for your tastes, but we can work that out as we go.

“Stephanie, my last room mate, still has to get some of her things out, clothes and cosmetics, mainly. The furniture is mine but could go into storage once we decide this arrangement is going to work out.

“The other bedroom has already been converted into Tracie's nursery.”

“I'm sure it will be fine,” Martin assured her, inwardly grimacing at the thought of spending much time in the feminine surroundings of the empty bedroom he had been shown, but rationalizing that his own possessions would quickly alter that, along with a different color of paint on the walls.

“Most of my stuff will be just fine in storage, but I would like to bring a few things. A small stereo, my computer, other little odds and ends.”

“That will be fine.” Karen nodded. “You can move in right away if you like. I know from bitter experience how living out of a motel room can be.”

“Thanks.” Pulling out his checkbook, Martin rapidly filled out a check for his first month's rent. “Here you go.”

“And here's the keys.” She explained which lock each key worked and Martin noted there was none for the basement. Seeing his glance at the door obviously leading downstairs, she grinned tightly. “My private lab. I don't really think you'd be very interested in the nuts and bolts of ladies' cosmetics, but I'll be happy to show you if you'd like. I am pretty insistent about no one being down there without me. There are things that could be harmful to the uninitiated, and secrets I'd prefer other chemists to not see. You understand?”

“Oh, sure.” Martin returned her grin. “I'm the same way with my computer. It's okay with me if someone looks at what I'm writing so long as I show them and they don't get into it without my okay.”

“Fair enough,” Karen agreed. “Your computer and my lab are strictly off limits to each other without specific invitation. Okay?”

“That's agreeable.” Martin held out his hand. “Shake on it?”

“You bet.”

Her handshake was friendly, in a business like manner, but contact still caused Martin to inwardly shudder with desire for the brief time her soft, smooth fingers clasped his own. This arrangement might turn out to be harder than he had first thought, was his near rueful internal response. He just might end up taking an awful lot of cold showers in the future.

By the time Martin had returned to the motel for his things, settled up his bill, then retrieved several items from storage and returned to his new dwelling, Karen and Tracie were both gone.

To work and the sitter, respectively, he thought.

Moving things into the room that was to be his, Martin grimaced at the not quite princess-like femininity of it. The walls were papered in a shade that seemed to combine a dusty rose with lavender overtones and highlights, with lace curtains of snowy

white nestled behind heavy, ivory toned drapes. The deep plush carpet matched the drapes, as did the ruffled spread on the large, canopied brass bed.

A matching vanity table, with large oval mirror attached, a huge free standing mirror, a delicate Queen Anne style desk, bedside tables of gleaming brass covered with ivory spreads, other delicate appearing chairs and twined columns of lamps with ruffled shades proclaimed the femininity of the room's previous occupant. As did the added touches of flower filled vases spread about the room, and the green plants hanging along the wall. Framed prints of twenties style women engaged in everyday activities were spaced along the walls without seeming to clutter things up at all.

Whoever had decorated the room, Martin thought, had been quite sure about what she wanted, in her surroundings and life, even if it was quite different from the decor the rest of the apartment showed.

The closet and dresser drawers were still filled with clothing, making him feel like an interloper, or Peeping Tom, as he sought enough room for his own meager store of clothing.

Stephanie's taste in clothing and jewelry seemed as selectively feminine while maintaining lines as simple as those in the room.

Martin briefly wondered why any woman would have left what had to be an entire wardrobe behind. Especially one as obviously expensive and carefully planned out as what he saw here. There had to be logical reasons he would find later on, but for the time, he felt as if he was trespassing on someone else's territory.

Even setting up his modest computer system on the desk and finding shelf space for the small stereo did very little to alter that feeling. With his small supply of shirts, pants, and suits huddling in a tiny section of the walk in closet, and his toilet articles carefully grouped on the bathroom counter, he reflected that his own additions barely dented the overall aspect of the room. They all had the appearance of transient masculine visitors in an unassailably feminine environment.

Unsettled with that perception, Martin spent the remaining part of the morning wandering through the rest of the apartment to both familiarize himself with the layout, and shake the nagging sense of being an outsider. That would fade, he was sure, in time. And he would feel much better once his room had been redone, and all those women's clothes and decorations had been removed by their owner.

He spent the afternoon calling about jobs, getting his mail forwarded and filing a change of address with the Post Office, not that he got much in the way of mail.

By the time Karen, with her infant daughter returned, he had managed to become reasonably comfortable with the new surroundings so long as he didn't spend too much time in the bedroom.

Over a meal he had helped prepare, Martin regarded his house mate and landlady quizzically.

“How come your last roommate, Stephanie was it?” At her affirmative nod he went on. “Left what had to be most of her personal things and all of her clothes behind when she left?”

Tilting her head slightly to the left, Karen gave him a distressed look, then sighed unhappily.

“She didn't just leave them behind, Martin.”

Troubled by her expression, Martin merely waited without saying a word. Sure that whatever the reason, it was unpleasant for her to relate. Giving her an apologetic smile he shrugged it off.

“You don't have to tell me, I was just curious, that's all.”

“You'll be bound to find out whether I tell you or not,” Karen evenly responded. Her usually melodious voice was flat with suppressed emotion. “Stephanie was killed a little over a month ago. By a rapist who attacked her right outside our door.”

Shivering, and holding herself tightly, she went on. “That's another reason I wanted a man around. They haven't caught the guy who did it yet and I'm afraid he might come back.”

Sobered, Martin nodded with a drawn out sigh of his own. “Let's hope he doesn't, and I'm sorry I pried into something so painful for you.”

Face tight with held in emotion, she curtly replied, “Not your fault. Let's just drop the subject, okay?”

“Sure.” Martin felt his skin crawling at the idea of even sleeping in a dead woman's bed, surrounded by her possessions. “I think that would be a real good idea.”

The rest of their meal passed in awkward bursts of conversation punctuated with silences seeming far longer in duration than they actually were.

Martin helped with the cleanup afterwards, and the atmosphere eased along with the simple shared acts of clearing the table, rinsing the dishes, then putting things away.

Karen excused herself to put a sleeping Tracie to bed, then returned within a few minutes with two glasses of white wine. Offering him one, she gave an apologetic shrug.

“We ought to toast your moving in, but I'm afraid this is about all I have in the place with any alcohol in it.”

Accepting the offered glass goblet with a murmur of thanks, he held it up to the ceiling. “Okay, let's toast to a mutually advantageous arrangement, and the hopes that it will continue without any major problems.”

At her answering smile, he sipped the wine, surprised at the sharply bitter under taste in it. Not unpleasant, it was still a little jarring, like everything else he had encountered in his new home that day.

Sipping her own with a slight grimace, Karen added. “surprises you, doesn't it? It really kind of grows on you after the initial shock, though.”

Taking another careful sip, Martin wondered about that, but didn't wish to spoil the eased mood between them by complaining.

"I imagine you're right. I never was much of a wine drinker, so don't really have much to compare this with, anyway."

Draining the remaining liquid in his goblet, he grinned.

"It isn't all that bad, after all."

They spent the rest of the evening quietly talking as the level of the wine in the bottle dropped gradually until there was nothing left in it.

Their conversation confirmed his first impression, that she was a very self assured young woman, and strangely not all that concerned about the rapist/murderer's potential return.

Yawning in spite of it only being a bit past nine, he passed off his tiredness as a combination of the wine and a very full day.

"I'm sorry, believe me it isn't the company causing this. I just think I've had a little too much wine after a little too much day is all. Think I'd better get to bed before I really give you a bad impression of myself by falling asleep right here on the couch."

"I understand."

She smiled across the room at him.

"I need to get some work done before I turn in myself. Good night, Martin."

Heading up the stairs to his room, the dead woman's room, he glanced over his shoulder.

"Good night, Karen. See you in the morning."

Her lazy smile in response to that altered into something harder once he had turned away. Giving his retreating back a speculative perusal, she pursed her lips thoughtfully, then nodded her head to herself in decision.

"I think you'll do just fine, Martin Holtz. You're exactly what I've been looking for lately."

Moving gracefully to the door leading to her basement laboratory, her expression became something predatory and feral.

"Yes, I think you'll fit very nicely into my plans. Very, very nicely."

Martin barely managed to undress and take care of his pre-sleep rituals of brushing teeth, washing his face, and putting on his pajamas before almost literally throwing himself into the bed without a thought about its femininity, or the person who had previously used it. For all he knew, the sheets hadn't even been changed since she had last used them. Not that it mattered at all at the moment.

Strangely exhausted, more so than sharing half a bottle of wine with someone could account for, he was deeply asleep the moment his head touched the ruffled pillowcase covering the softness he was barely aware of sinking into.