

It Only Occurred to Me Later  
By Anne Laughlin

When my boss told me we were heading to Cheyenne, Wyoming for a four-month federal trial, my first thought was how nice the hotel room was going to be. Not nice as in fancy. The place was called Little Sister Hotel, so my expectations weren't high in that regard. But the room would be all mine. I could clomp around as loud as I wanted. I could go a whole day without saying I'm sorry. And when I returned home, Jane and I would both remember what it was that brought us together in the first place. As it was, I had no fucking idea.

We worked twelve to sixteen hours a day, so I didn't see much of that hotel room. We were preparing the evidence needed to bore an unsuspecting jury into a catatonic state. The issues to be tried were so astonishingly tedious that I never did wrap my head around them. It didn't matter. I managed case logistics. I'm not a lawyer, thank God.

The weeks started to roll by. It was summertime and the air in Cheyenne was gloriously warm, clean and dry. Back home in Chicago people were dropping like flies from a horrendous heat wave, while the only discomfort I felt was during my daily phone calls with Jane. They were growing increasingly strained.

“I don't think you understand what this heat is like,” she complained one day.

“I'm sorry you're having to go through this.” I made it sound like it was my fault.

“It's horrible. You can't even breathe outside. Megan picked me up last night and we drove around to stay cool.”

Hmm. That was the second or third time she'd mentioned Megan, who was a friend of mine from college. When did they become buddies?

“Isn’t the air conditioner working?” I said.

“It’s good to get out. She took me for ice cream.”

Little flares lit up in my chest. Even if the city was under a state of siege from the heat wave, there was something off about Jane and Megan suddenly hanging out together. It only occurred to me later that it might have been a good idea to ask Jane about it. Honestly, that kind of communication wasn’t natural to either of us.

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During the few hours I had off from trial work, I’d drive around in my rental car. I was astonished to find that the second you crossed the Cheyenne city limits you were in wild country. It seemed wild to me, anyway. Huge, empty expanses of land kept appearing around every bend in the highway, one after another. From Chicago, you couldn’t drive far enough in a day to reach that kind of emptiness. It opened me up and at the same time made me nervous. I was used to feeling nervous, since it was my default state of being, perhaps for as long as I’d been with Jane. But the opening up was new. I didn’t understand it, but I felt it. I suppose it was like a flower turning toward the sun, though that would seem an unlikely direction for me. I tended more toward the shadows.

One Sunday afternoon, I drove toward Laramie, just over a mountain pass from Cheyenne. It was a university town and from the top of the pass it looked like it had been placed on top of the landscape by a giant hand. I was hoping for a good bookstore, maybe a shop or two to poke around in. After two months in Cheyenne, I needed new things to look at.

My phone rang as I parked near campus.

“You’re birthday present’s all done,” Jane said without preamble.

“What are you talking about?”

“The new driveway. The one I bought you for your birthday. The asphalt guys just left, though I don’t know how wise it was to lay an asphalt drive when it’s a hundred degrees out.”

How is it possible that I forgot Jane was giving me an asphalt driveway for my birthday? I must have filed it in the “things that aren’t quite right,” drawer of my brain. That drawer was getting close to bursting.

Jane and I had just moved into a new house when I left for Cheyenne. I don’t suppose she was too happy being left to supervise all the work that needed to be done on the place, hence the unusual birthday present. It was a grand passive-aggressive move on her part. Driveways aren’t cheap, but it’s not like I could brag about the expensive birthday gift my girlfriend gave me. Nothing says ‘I Love You’ like an asphalt driveway.

“I can’t talk now,” I said. I couldn’t stand to, really.

“Me neither. Megan’s picking me up. We’re going to the Ferris Wheel at Navy Pier.”

There were those little flares again. There were enough of them now that I could see them lighting up the car wreck of our relationship from five hundred yards.

“Well, have a fabulous time,” I said grumpily and hung up. I hoped they got stuck at the top of the wheel and roasted. Who goes on a Ferris Wheel in that kind of heat? People who are about to become lovers, that’s who. They do dumb things like that and then giggle about them in that private joke kind of way that’s so annoying.

I got out of my car and peered around. I’d forgotten my sunglasses, which is practically dangerous around here. All that Big Sky and piercing sunlight. The campus

was on my right, and the town on my left and I wondered how well they fit together.

There were sure to be queers on the campus. Could they cross the street and walk into the Silver Saddle Saloon for a drink? I decided to head over there myself for a beer, figuring if they pegged me for a dyke – and they'd have several reasons to do just that – I'd find out soon enough how friendly the town had become since Matthew Shepherd was killed. I was just in the mood to poke a bear.

First I stopped at the kiosk that held scores of flyers for campus events and other goings on in Laramie. It looked like the town wasn't as sleepy as I'd presumed. It also became clear that the Silver Saddle wasn't the place to go if I wanted to spend some time with my people. The most colorful flyer on the kiosk (naturally) was for a gay bar advertising a traveling drag king show that had taken place a few weeks earlier. I checked my map of Laramie and headed over the two blocks to the Fancy Man, wondering if the place would have any women hanging around on a Sunday afternoon. The name wasn't all that promising.

I hadn't yet gone into the only gay bar in Cheyenne. I wasn't much of a drinker, and going into a gay bar was usually for a single purpose – to find The One. The one for the night or the one for forever. I'd met every girlfriend and one night stand I'd ever had in a bar, which is saying something for someone who doesn't drink very much. I didn't care for hanging out if I wasn't on a mission. So what was I doing going into a bar with a five-year relationship hanging around my neck like a yoke? Good question.

The Fancy Man wasn't all that fancy. Wooden bar and shiny bottles, postage stamp dance floor, and, reassuringly, the obligatory pool table decorated with lesbians standing around its perimeter. The guys were hanging out at the bar, most of them

wearing softball uniforms with Fancy Man written on the back. I wondered what kind of league they were in out here, and tried to imagine a tense play-off game between the Fancy Man and the team from the local feed store.

I ordered a beer from the bartender, who looked like the woman who ran the divorce ranch in the movie *Desert Hearts* – handsome and warm, sort of rakish with a red bandana tied around her neck. She swiped the bar in front of me before putting down my bottle and flashed a smile at me. Within ten minutes she had my whole story – the long stay in Cheyenne, the girlfriend going astray. She stood there with her arms across her button down shirt, shaking her head when she heard about the Ferris Wheel.

“That’s no good,” she said. “Even I’ve got the feeling they’re messing around and I don’t know them in the slightest.”

I drank from the bottle and it tasted good. Maybe it was the dry air out here that helped it along for me. It was the best tasting beer I’d ever had.

“Maybe I shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” I said, as if that would stop me from jumping to conclusions.

“But you will anyway,” the bartender said. “My name’s Deirdre, by the way.” She reached over to shake my hand with a solid pump and then pulled her arms back across her chest. “What are you going to do about the situation?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.” I took another drink from the bottle. Delicious.

“Here’s what I think you should do,” Deirdre said. “All the girls from around here are about five miles down the road at Pam and Molly’s ranch for their annual roast and I’m going to send you over.” She started reaching for her phone.

“Wait! I can’t do that. I don’t know a single person there.”

“What does that matter? Do you know a single person here?”

I looked around as if I might find someone to refute her argument and my eyes settled on the group of butches around the pool table.

“Forget about them. They’ll be out at the ranch soon enough,” Deirdre said. “And I’ll be there tonight, after this damn shift ends.”

“Really, I can’t do this. I can’t just show up somewhere uninvited.” I noticed that I was talking to myself, since Deirdre had reached someone on speed dial and had her back to me.

A guy a few stools down leaned my way. “Don’t bother trying to reason your way out of this with D. And anyway, you should go. We all would go in a heartbeat if they’d let us. It’s the only time in the year when the women go separatist on us. No boys allowed.”

A vision of a hundred dusty cowgirls came floating into my brain. I ordered another Bud from Deirdre and let her convince me I’d be a fool to not go to the party. She jotted down directions and shoed me out of the bar. From the Fancy Man to the Double Circle Ranch was five miles of sere land that by now was getting under my skin in unexpected ways. The open landscape was as forbidding as it was welcoming and I found it calling to me every time I drove out of the tiny Wyoming cities, flung almost instantly into its midst. I wondered about the women who lived here, tried to imagine how different they must be from my city friends. I realized that I had, at most, five or six friends in Chicago, my social circle having shrunk considerably since I got together with Jane.

The Double Circle would have been impossible to miss. Rainbow streamers decorated the two uprights that framed the entrance to the drive into the property, and a tall woman wearing a cowboy hat was leaning against one of them, a radio dangling from one hand and a cigarette from another. She raised her hand as I pulled up to her, dropped her cig and ground it out with the heel of her boot. I rolled down my window and looked up at her. She had a big smile on her face like she'd just stumbled upon a rare species of some kind.

“You must be the Chicago gal Deirdre called us about. Angie, right?”

“That’s me. She said it would be okay to come, but I still don’t feel quite right just showing up at your party like this.”

“Oh, hell. As soon as you get back there you’ll see there’s nothing to it. There’re always new women here. I’m Dar, but you probably won’t remember that once you get overwhelmed with names. I’ll find you after my shift here and make sure you’re getting on alright.”

I thanked her and she directed me on, telling me it was two miles to the ranch buildings. Two miles seemed like an excessively long driveway. I suppose I could brag about a birthday driveway that impressive. But there was no asphalt here, just gravel and dry earth kicking up dust. The first thing I saw after the bumpy ride was a big jumble of cars and trucks parked off the road, just before what looked like a corral, if that’s what they called it. I found a spot to tuck my rental and trudged up the road, dust filtering through the webbing on my Keen sandals. Somehow I’d suspended any reluctance to move forward, perhaps aided by the two Budweisers and the loneliness of being stranded in Wyoming for two months, with no desire to return to a lonelier home in Chicago.

The corral was surrounded by women leaning against the fencing, watching two stupendously aggressive women barrel race their horses up and down its length. I knew what barrel racing was from spending five minutes on the wrong TV channel one afternoon at home with a head cold. The TV cameras had failed to capture the look of these women's thighs gripping their horses as they flew around the barrels. I'm sure they could have squeezed the life out of a sumo wrestler in no time flat. My mind, however, skipped right past contemplating this sort of application of their strength and right to how those legs would look stripped of their blue jeans.

Barrel races last not much longer than it took me to think these thoughts. The riders pulled up their horses and jumped off in tandem, like a circus act. Apparently the show was now over. All of the women began to move away from the corral, just as I'd snugged my way into a spot and hitched my sandal onto the lower fence rung.

"You've got the look of someone who's never been to one of these roasts before."

I looked to my right and saw that another woman was still leaning on the fence, a few body widths away from me. She didn't look like she was from the area anymore than I did. She wore linen capris and a silk t-shirt and she was tall and graying and really smart looking. I don't know what it is that makes a woman smart looking, but when my pheromone factory detects it, it goes into overtime.

"You're right, I'm a roast virgin. I'm not even sure how I ended up here."

She turned fully toward me and smiled. "Did you stop in at the Fancy Man?"

"I did."

"That's what happened to me last year. I'd just arrived in town that week and was checking out the bar. Before I knew it, Deirdre had me out here. It was fun."



“Yeah?” I must have looked skeptical. She stepped toward me and gently spun me around toward the ranch house.

“Come on. I’ll show you around and you won’t feel so awkward. My name’s Carol, by the way.”

“Angie,” I said.

“There’s a big yard between the ranch house and the barn. That’s where everyone’s gone.”

Carol had a long stride and a determined pace. She seemed like a blend of friendly and all business, which somehow worked for her. I was a little intimidated.

“Do you live in Laramie?” I asked. I looked at her profile and saw that the gray hair was probably premature. The lines around her eyes were there, but still etched only lightly into the skin. I put her in her early forties, about the same as me.

“Yes. For the past year, as I said. I teach in the English department at the university.”

Oh, crap. I had a bit of a thing for academics and it had been my undoing in the past. I’d been an undisciplined college student who then made indifferent career choices, so I put on a pedestal anyone who had the wherewithal to get a Ph.D., especially if female and attractive. This reverence diminished somewhat after I became lovers with a professor some years ago. She regularly toppled off the pedestal in her all too human way, so I’m a bit more realistic now. But still, it’s a thing.

“What are you doing in Wyoming?” she asked.

I could feel her looking at me, but I kept my eyes forward. I was afraid I was about to lie and say I was something I’m not, like a writer or painter, something I could

fake pretty well. Telling her I was here to put numbers on exhibits and black tape on redacted documents felt humiliating. I had to give myself the pep talk about it being okay to be me, the talk I regularly failed to listen to if I even remembered to recite it.

I turned to her. She looked interested in what I was going to say.

“I’m working a trial in Cheyenne. I’m the lead paralegal and it’s insanely boring. We’ve been at it for two months already.”

“How much longer will it last?”

“Probably a couple months,” I said. “Or we could settle at anytime.”

“I hope it lasts the two months. Maybe we can get to know each other a bit.”

What does that mean? My brain started spinning. We reached the edge of the lawn between the ranch house and an enormous white barn. Women were spread out and sprawled out and it was hard to tell how many were there. Maybe fifty? Certainly it had to be every lesbian in a hundred mile radius.

There was a clearing in the rear of the lawn where a four woman string band played country music. They seemed to be pretty good. They were just finishing a song as we approached and the singer announced that the next tune would be the Something Something Valley Yodel, which made Carol and I look at each other in alarm. The mandolin player stepped to the microphone and went right at it, her yodel piercing my brain in an instant. Honestly, you could record that and play it on continuous loop at Guantanamo Bay.

Carol took me by the elbow, which seemed rather courtly, and steered me around the edge of the lawn toward the barn. Staged to its right was a team of women setting up food tables. I could see smoke rising behind them, but no evidence of any grills. As we

passed the food tables, Carol nodded to the women who were moving casseroles around like carnies working a shell game. There was an unbelievable amount of food, and when we finally got past the tables I saw a pit dug into the earth, over which an enormous pig, head and all, was hanging from a spit. Its feet were pointed skyward, feet that would perhaps one day be pickled and kept in a jar at the Silver Saddle Saloon. Or maybe that was just a southern thing. What do I know?

Carol stopped in front of the pit, where two sweaty women were keeping watch. She took her hand from my arm and I felt the loss.

“Hey there, Carol. Glad you could make it,” said the woman standing by the spit. She looked to be about sixty, but that was a complete guess. Her face was weathered while her body was strong and slender. She looked able to master any task put before her.

“I wanted you to meet Angie, who’s a newcomer here,” Carol said. “This is Molly, and that’s Pam, overseeing Molly, as usual.”

Molly took off her asbestos gloves and shook my hand. “Welcome, Angie. Deirdre called to let us know she was sending you over.”

The communications network these women had was impressive. They could form a deadly resistance cell.

“Thanks for having me,” I said.

Pam walked over to shake my hand and give Carol a quick hug. “You’re just in time for food, the most important part of the day. I’d say this pig is about perfect, wouldn’t you?”

I grimaced. “Don’t ask me. I’m from Chicago. The pork I see doesn’t look anything like that, I’m somewhat relieved to say.”

“Give us another hour and we’ll have her cut up and more familiar to your city eyes.” Pam looked me over with a smile on her face, but I realized I might have sounded like I thought they were crude, which I suppose I kind of did. Maybe if they’d taken the head off that poor pig I wouldn’t feel so disturbed. But I wanted them to like me.

“I’m sure it’s delicious,” I said.

Carol intervened. “This party is to celebrate Pam and Molly’s anniversary. How many years is it now?”

“Twenty-seven,” Molly said. She looked proud. Pam moved next to her and gave her a kiss. She was a little on the rotund side, but when Molly wrapped an arm around her you could see how well they fit. You could almost hear a *snick* as their bodies came together.

“Congratulations,” I said. “I don’t know anyone who’s made it that long.”

Molly laughed. “You make it sound like an endurance test. Every year with Pam has been a joy.”

“And every year it gets even better,” Pam said.

I didn’t want Pam or Molly to ask me if I was in a relationship, which is what people in happy relationships seemed to feel compelled to do. From their perspective, there was no other road to happiness and they wanted to be sure to give you directions if you weren’t already well along that road yourself. I wanted to be the one to tell Carol about my relationship, but I wasn’t yet sure what I wanted to say. I wasn’t even sure there still was a relationship.

Carol took my arm once more as we left Pam and Molly and walked around the back of the barn to look at the ranch land. I could see pastures and cattle and a burbling

brook, all stretching out toward the mountains. It was hard to imagine owning property like this.

“I feel like I made a lousy impression on Pam and Molly,” I said.

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Everything came out negative. I didn’t mean to sound that way.”

Carol led us over to some boulders that seemed to be settled into the clearing for no reason at all, as if they’d rolled off a foothill that had long ago been erased from the earth. She sat on one and patted the one next to her. I felt the warmth of the rock when I sat.

“You’re pretty hard on yourself,” she said.

“There’s no one else to do it.” I couldn’t understand why I’d just said that. Jane was certainly hard on me, but worse, I was implying that I was on my own.

Carol was watching me carefully. I imagine she sensed my nervousness. “You’re single?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Only because it sounds that way, that there’s no one close enough to be truthful with you.”

That was accurate enough. At the moment I didn’t feel close to Jane, nor did I believe she was truthful with me. How long had I thought that way?

“I don’t know how to answer you,” I said.

“Really? That’s intriguing. Usually a person knows if they’re single or not.” Carol looked genuinely curious.

“Why don’t we join the party?” I said. “You can give me the gossip on who’s sleeping with who.”

Carol stood and reached out to pull me up. “I understand. You don’t want to talk about your girlfriend. But I won’t promise to not bring it up again.”

“I didn’t say I have a girlfriend,” I said.

“Please. You don’t know me, but you should give me a little credit. Now, let’s join the others.”

“What about you. Are you in a relationship?”

“Not since I’ve been in Wyoming,” Carol said. “And yes, it feels like a long time.”

I wondered if she meant it had been that long since she had sex. Surely with all these energetic women around she didn’t lack opportunities. She led me back to the lawn where we settled in near a group of women Carol knew. Our awkward dance around availability faded quickly. We talked and listened to music and ate an enormous amount of food. We drank a fair amount. As the day turned to evening, Carol was still by my side, apparently disinclined to spend time with anyone else. I found myself at ease, but with a strangely elevated heart rate.

The band started their after dinner set with “The Anniversary Waltz,” and everyone watched happily as Molly spun Pam around the lawn. I was a bit in awe of them. They looked so damn happy together. And for twenty-seven years! My parents and all their friends fell far short of that mark, and they didn’t seem at all happy at any point in their marriages. None of my Chicago friends had been together longer than my rather impressive, or so I thought, five years with Jane. I wondered if I’d been operating under

the assumption that Jane and I would grow old together in that new house with the new asphalt driveway, or did I assume instead that something would throw a wrench in the works well before then. It occurred to me that I'd never asked myself that question. It seemed preposterous to think Jane and I would grow old together.

"I'm sure I've never been that in love before," Carol said. Her eyes were tracking Pam and Molly. Other women were starting to pair up, forming a ring around the star couple as if it were their wedding dance. I was hugging my knees to my chest, rattled by the revelations about my feelings toward Jane. I'd been living in fear for a long time that she'd dump me, while at the same time I never believed we would have a long-lasting relationship. Clearly my commitment to therapy had ended a year or two too soon. There was so much about myself I wasn't even aware of, as if a very circumspect stranger lived in my body and served up defining character traits when it damn well suited her.

"What about you, Angie? Have you ever been that in love?" Carol nodded her head toward Pam and Molly. The song was coming to an end and Molly dipped Pam and gave her a nice long kiss, which was romantic and also pretty impressive, given Pam's extra padding and Molly's wiry build. Carol kept looking at me as everyone clapped. The band switched gears and moved into a sort of country rap sound that quickly had everyone moving.

"I should tell you that I don't dance," I said.

"Okay. I guess you were thinking I was going to ask you to dance," Carol said. She was stretched out on her side, holding her head up with her bent elbow and plucking at the grass.

"Were you going to ask me?"

I was still hugging my knees. She made it hard for me to concentrate on what an idiot I'd been to stay with Jane for five years when I'd only been happy for six months. The sex months. Carol and I were the only two not dancing, but she was concentrating on me and not the dancers. I could see Pam looking our way and whispering something in Molly's ear. Whatever it was, it would be all through the ranch and back at the Fancy Man in short order.

"I'm not sure I had anything in mind," Carol said. "I'm trying to figure you out. I'm not sure if you know this or not, but your face changes expression like a slide show. You might want to take a pass if anyone invites you to play poker."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can tell what you're thinking from your expression. It moves from reserved to vulnerable to annoyed to flirtatious. You get the idea."

"Flirtatious! I do not have a flirtatious expression. I wouldn't even know how to imitate one."

"You have one, and it's quite original. But just as I get up the nerve to take advantage of it the expression changes to defensive or embarrassed."

Carol was smiling, but I felt stripped bare. "It makes me sound like an imbecile."

"I think it's adorable," she said. Her hand reached over and rested on mine, still clasped at my knees, the knuckles gone white. "Isn't now about the time you should tell me about your girlfriend?"

In the swirl of confusion dusting my brain, I now considered the fact that to tell Carol about Jane might mean the end of Carol's apparent interest in me, and I wasn't ready to cut that loose. On the other hand, I didn't want to bed Carol now and tell her



about Jane later, thereby killing what may be something special. I was feeling something from her that was different than other women I'd been with, and way different than the almost business like way that Jane and I had got together. Maybe I could navigate a middle path and tell her I was living with someone, but it seemed like it was falling apart. That would be honest. And she still might sleep with me.

“See, your face is doing that thing again,” Carol said. “I wish you could see it.” Now she sat up so that we were knee to knee, facing each other. “Why don't you just tell me? Maybe it's not such a big deal.”

How humiliating. There Carol sat, composed as can be, while I apparently looked like I was doing warm-ups for a clown parade.

“I have a girlfriend,” I said. I looked off to the side, not able to look her in the eye. The party didn't seem to be slacking off at all, from what I could see. From the corner of my eye I could see Carol lower her head, and then her hands came off of the top of my hands.

“How long have you been together?” she said.

“About five years. But since I'm being honest, I have to say that since I've been here in Wyoming, the relationship seems to be rockier than when I left, and it was rocky enough then.” I turned to look at her, to see if she believed me.

“Rocky how?” She was looking straight at me again.

I took a deep breath. The idea of Jane having an affair was supposed to be deeply painful, but truthfully, it didn't feel that way. “I'm almost certain that she's having an affair with a friend of mine, or about to have one. They've gotten very chummy since I've been away.”

Carol took this in quietly. I heard a truck pull up somewhere behind me and Carol started to rise. “That’ll be the first of the shuttles back to Laramie,” she said. “I think I’ll grab it.”

“Oh. I have my car here. I could drive you back to town.”

“Nope. It’s against the rules. Unless you’re a pre-registered designated driver, Pam and Molly won’t let anyone leave the ranch behind the wheel.”

“But what about my car?”

Carol grinned. “This whole thing is run like a vast military campaign. You can bivouac in Laramie and then a shuttle in the morning will bring you back to your car. There’s no point arguing.”

There must have been some choice expressions racing across my face over this news, because Carol started laughing so hard she had to bend over. This caused me to see down the top of her V-neck shirt and the rather intellectual desire I’d been feeling for Carol all evening suddenly flared into something more elemental. It was the first physical desire I’d felt for a long time. Maybe I’d share with Carol the news that Jane and I hadn’t had sex for over a year. That couldn’t be anymore embarrassing than my freakishly mobile face.

“And where do I stay in Laramie? My hotel’s back in Cheyenne.”

The woman driving the pick up had moved to the truck bed and was unloading a big pile of pup tents and tarps. Other women gathered round and started helping.

“You could pitch a tent and stay here; lots of women do that,” Carol said. “Or you could spend the night at my place and we’ll take the shuttle together back to the ranch in the morning.”

Christ. I had no idea what the right thing was to do. I clamped my jaw shut and fixed my eyes on the pickup truck, determined to not let Carol see what I was thinking. But I knew what I wanted to do, had probably known since she said hello to me at the barrel races. I turned from the truck and found Carol standing right in front of me.

“Just so we’re clear,” she said. “I’m not going to try to seduce you. If it’s going to happen, you’ll have to be in charge of that. So if you just want a place to sleep, that’s fine. I have a second bedroom and I also have boundaries. I’m not into one night stands, even though I live in the middle of fucking nowhere and should learn to take it when I can.”

That was a little earthy sounding for the professor. She couldn’t be hurting for company. She was gorgeous, and there were all those gorgeous cowgirls. My mind whirled thinking of them in bed.

“There’s opportunity for them,” she continued, “but it’s just not sexy for me if we don’t have something in common. Sadly, I just don’t with most of the women here. And I do respect them a great deal. And here you come, the first woman I feel some connection with, and you’re involved in a crumbling relationship and only here for two months, maybe not even that, and despite those very good reasons to suggest you stay at the Travelodge in town, all I can think about is having you in my little house and hoping you’ll break down and make love to me.”

“I thought you just said you’re not into one night stands.”

She sighed. “I’m afraid I’m not making much sense. That’s part of what tells me this is something a little more complex.”

The driver called out that the first shuttle would leave in five minutes. I had to run to say my good-byes to Pam and Molly and then run to my car to get my backpack. When I made it back to the pick-up, Carol was sitting in the bed of the truck with a few other women. She'd saved a place for me and I lowered myself down next to her. The other women were much drunker than we were and as we took off with a roar they fell all over each other and could not stop laughing. It was contagious. Carol and I started in, and when we hit a bump in the gravel road that made us all nearly bounce out of the truck, I thought we'd pee our pants. Carol and I held on to each other, and we didn't stop when the truck moved onto the smooth pavement of the interstate.

Our backs were to the sidewall of the truck bed and I found myself leaning into Carol, maximizing our area of contact. I was giving her my answer, even if I wasn't ready to actually say that I would be willing to cheat on my girlfriend.

"Let me see a picture of her," Carol said.

"Why?"

"It might remind you of what you have at home and how you want to try to fix it. I'd rather you know that before you decide what you're going to do in Laramie. Surely you have a photo in your phone."

I pulled my phone out of my pack. I didn't have a photo of Jane in my phone. I hadn't taken a picture of her since I'd gotten the phone, which was quite a while ago now. I guess that said something right there. I pulled up Facebook, because Jane had a ton of photos of herself there. Carol was looking over my shoulder as I pressed my way to Jane's page. The Wyoming cellular access was surprisingly good, so after just a few seconds the first photo on her page appeared. I gasped. There was Jane and Megan on the

fucking Ferris Wheel at Navy Pier, lip locked as they were being let out of their chair. It wasn't a peck on the lips kind of kiss. It was a how far can my tongue go down your throat kiss. The caption below said "Megan and Jane after a hot ride." Who knows who took it? Some friend of Megan's not clued into the fact that Jane had a girlfriend. Or maybe Jane had given the okay to post the damning shot, figuring it a much easier way to break up with me than actually talking.

"So that's Jane, is it?" Carol said.

I nodded. "She's on the right. It's odd to see what she looks like being kissed. Normally I'd be too close."

"Because it would be you kissing her," Carol said.

"Yeah. Though I haven't kissed her like that in a long time. It looks like she's enjoying it."

"And that shot was taken when?"

"Today."

Carol leaned back against the truck bed and pulled me against her. "Do you feel awful?"

"I'm not sure. What does my face say?" I turned to her and tried to not have any expression at all.

"Your face says you've had a lot going on tonight."

The five-mile trip to Laramie didn't take long. Not long enough for me to decide if the absence of feeling about Jane and Megan was true disinterest or just numbness. But there was no denying the sense of freedom and liberation that was making its way from

my toes up. We climbed out of the truck in front of the campus and stood there as the truck pulled away with its raucous passengers.

“What would you like to do?” Carol asked.

I looked around me and found the street largely deserted. Then I pulled Carol toward me and leaned in for a kiss. She seemed surprised, but recovered quickly. Her arms came up around my neck and she opened her mouth to mine. She was lovely.

“I don’t think this has to be a one-night stand, do you?” I asked.

“It can be a two month stand,” she said. “At the very least.”

That seemed like so much more than I’d had over the past five years.

She led me toward the faculty housing, just a few steps from our drop off point.

“Caution would have me suggest we take it slow and see how you digest this news,” Carol said.

I loved how she talked – a bit formal, even when speaking of very personal matters. It was sexy, a challenge, an invitation to get behind the precise diction and undo her a little. We stopped in front of her door and faced each other, her keys dangling from one finger.

“Maybe caution would be the worst thing for us. Who knows how long I’ll be here,” I said.

“That’s something to consider. We can talk about it.”

Talk about it? Hadn’t we talked all day? Hadn’t there been enough talk already?

“That doesn’t mean we’re going to talk all night, does it?”

“I doubt it,” Carol said. Then she unlocked her door.

