

Chapter 1

Berry Knudsen eased her battered army surplus Jeep over to the curb, pulled the emergency brake on, and studied the only mailbox in the deserted cul-de-sac. No name. No street number. Terrific. She squinted into the blackness and reread the address taped to the large pizza box on the seat next to her. 5077 Ellenburg Drive. This had to be it. This was Ellenburg Drive, and this was the only house for a quarter- of a mile. She thunked her forehead onto the steering wheel and groaned. Last delivery- of the night, and it had all the earmarks of a prank.

The house was a three-story Victorian perched on a small hillock. A sliver of moon ducked behind the clouds throwing ghostly highlights over the house, and a chill March wind moaned through a giant oak standing guard over the lawn on the south side. Berry grimaced and decided Jack the Ripper would have felt comfy here. Quasimodo could have added a bell tower and been happy as a clam at high tide. And Count Dracula would have traded half the blood in Transylvania for a house like this. But it's not in Transylvania, Berry-reminded herself. It's in suburban Seattle and probably belongs to some nice little old lady and her nephew . . . Norman Bates.

She grimly noted that there wasn't a light shining anywhere. No car in the driveway. No sign of life that might require a large pizza with the works. Damn. She really should go up and ring the doorbell. How bad could the thing lurking behind the ornate, hand-carved front door be? Probably just some hungry pervert, sitting in the dark in his boxers, waiting for the pizza delivery lady.

Berry pushed her short blond curls behind her ear. She was being

ridiculous. How did she come up with these ideas? Mr. Large Pizza with the Works simply wasn't home. He probably went out for a six-pack of beer and maybe a hatchet. Happened all the time. And since he wasn't home, there certainly wasn't any reason that she should go up and ring the doorbell. What she should do was get her keister the heck out of this creepy cul-de-sac.

A cat cried in the distance, and the hairs on Berry's neck stood on end. Beads of sweat popped out on her upper lip. She held the steering wheel in a death grip, and the pathetic little meow, filled with fear and wavering uncertainty, echoed through the still air again. Berry closed her eyes and slumped in her seat. It was worse than a cat. It was the cry of a kitten. She was doomed. She was a sucker for lost dogs, fallen nestlings, and stranded kittens. It called out again into the darkness, and Berry grabbed the pizza box and set off across the lawn, drawing courage from the fact that the Victorian house looked less sinister at close range. It had been freshly painted lemon yellow. The intricate gingerbread trim sported a new coat of white. The windows were curtainless, but the panes reflected a recent cleaning. The cat looked down at Berry from a tall oak tree and swished its tail.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty," Berry called softly.

Meow.

Berry bit her lower lip. The dumb cat was stuck in the tree. A blast of wind ruffled the kitten's fur, causing the little ball of fluff to huddle closer to the limb. Berry rolled her eyes and plunked the pizza box on the ground beside the tree.

"Don't get me wrong," Berry explained to the cat as she scrambled to shinny up the tree. "It's not that I don't like kittens. And it isn't that I mind climbing trees. It's just that I've about filled my good deed quota this week." She grasped at the lowest limb and hauled herself up in perfect tomboy fashion. "Do you know what I did this week, kitty? I advertised for a delivery boy, and then I hired three little old ladies instead. Now they're doing the baking, and I'm doing the delivering." Berry stopped to catch her breath. "I'm not a delivery sort of person. I get lost a lot, and I'm not too brave about knocking on strange doors. And if that isn't bad enough, I moved the old ladies into my apartment."

The kitten looked at her and blinked.

Berry sighed in exasperation. “Well, what could I do? They were living in the train station.”

Berry wriggled next to the kitten and looked up toward the stars. It was nice in the tree. The wind whistled through the limbs and whipped her short hair around her face.

“People should sit in trees more often,” she said to the cat. “It’s peaceful and exciting, all at the same time. And you can see forever. Practically clear down to the little bridge at the lower end of Ellenburg Drive.”

She watched in quiet fascination as headlights smoothly moved over the bridge and snaked uphill toward her. The soft rumble of an expensive car broke the silence.

“Just great,” she breathed, suddenly aware of her predicament. “Large Pizza with the Works is coming home, and I’m sitting in his tree!”

A Great Gatsby-type car purred up the driveway. It was a large, cream-colored machine with a brown leather convertible top, spoked wheels, and running boards. The garage doors automatically opened, swallowed up the antique car, and closed with a neat click, plunging Berry and the cat back into quiet darkness.

Berry exhaled a low whistle. “Impressive,” she remarked to the cat. “What was that? A Stutz Bearcat? Or maybe a Stanley Steamer? Definitely something old and flashy, and perfectly restored. I’ll say this for Quasi, he has style and money. I bet he’s some eccentric gangster. Some drug runner who’s watched too many old movies.”

Berry imagined him as looking like Quasimodo in a panama hat. The white pizza box on the ground caught her attention. She should probably deliver it, she thought guiltily. Quasimodo was home now and might be hungry. After all, she did take pride in her job.

“Neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow shall keep me from delivering pizza,” Berry explained to the kitten. Of course there was nothing in that zippy little slogan about weird people and spooky houses. Maybe what she’d do was leave the box on the porch, ring the bell, and run like heck. She tucked the kitten under her arm. “Don’t worry, cat,” she whispered. “If I got up this tree, I can get down this tree.”

Berry slithered toward the trunk, looking for a branch within stepping range. A hall light sparkled at the other side of the house, and then a light flashed on directly in front of her. It was a bedroom. Quasi's bedroom. And she was sitting eye level to it, getting a crystal-clear picture of the most mouthwatering male she'd ever seen—more than six feet tall with broad shoulders and slim hips and wavy almost-black hair that curled over his ears and scraped his crisp white shirt collar. Definitely not Quasimodo.

He flung a book onto the bed and popped the top button of his shirt open. Then another button. Then another. Berry involuntarily inched closer to the window. After all, she rationalized, if he was a gangster she would need to be able to give the FBI a detailed description. She should watch closely and check for hidden weapons and identifying scars.

He pulled the shirt off and draped it over a chair. Berry closed her eyes for a split second, swallowed, and made a mental note that there was no hunchback on Quasi. Just lots of muscle in all the right places, and a flat stomach with a thin line of black hair, leading to his . . . Holy cow! He was unzipping his pants.

Berry panicked.

"I've got to get down," she whispered to the cat. "I've got to get out of here."

Berry desperately looked for a foothold, willing her eyes to behave themselves and not return to the window. This wasn't the sort of thing pizza delivery ladies were supposed to do. Peeping in men's bedroom windows was a definite no-no. It was rude and immoral and could get you into a whole bunch of trouble. In fact, Berry decided, there was something about this man that smacked of trouble. He had the ability to fascinate, to mesmerize, to incite riot in a woman's body . . . in *her* body. Berry's body hadn't rioted in a long time. Working fourteen hours a day making pizzas didn't leave much time or energy for romance. Lately she'd been convinced her hormones were in premature retirement, but there was something about this man that caught their attention. The way he moved with the fluid efficiency of an athlete, plus something else, something more elusive than perfectly toned muscle. There was a good-humored set to his mouth.

Berry's pulse quickened. With or without clothes, the man was a menace to mental health and glandular stability. And she was dying to take one more peek. Her eyes focused on Mr. Large Pizza with the Works. He had stripped to a pair of navy bikini briefs. He stuck his thumbs into the elastic waistband, gave a downward tug, and . . . "Holy cow!" Berry gasped, covering her face with her hands. Her heart jumped to her throat, she lost her balance and went over backward, tail over teakettle, frantically grasping for branches as she fell, her leg scraping against a lower limb as it cracked under her falling weight. Then *whump!* She landed flat on her back, knocking the air out of her lungs. Little black dots floated in front of her eyes, and the ocean was pounding in her ears.

A few seconds—or was it hours?—later, Berry blinked at the hunk of masculinity that bent over her. "Am I dead?"

"Not yet."

"I feel dead. I must be bleeding. My back is all warm and sticky."

The hunk squatted beside her and looked more closely. "I don't see any blood, just some pizza sauce oozing through this crumpled box. Lady, you've squished this poor pizza to smithereens." He extracted the pizza box. "Is this mine?"

Berry nodded. She was relieved to find that he was fully clothed in a pair of jeans and a navy hooded sweatshirt. She made an attempt to sit up and began a methodical check of any bones that might be broken.

"What happened?" he asked. "I heard something crashing around out here, and there you were, flat out on my pizza. Are you okay?"

He picked bits of bark from her tangled hair. He glanced at the profusion of broken branches scattered on the ground and his attention turned to the tree, his gaze traveling up the height of it, resting on the large limb just outside his bedroom window. Incredulity registered on his face.

"Lady, you must be kidding! You can't be that hard up to see a naked man."

"I'm not hard up at all," Berry said with a toss of her head. "I've seen lots of naked men."

He raised his eyebrows. "Lots?"

“Well, maybe not lots. A few. Actually, not too many.” She threw her hands into the air in frustration. “Well, dammit, I’ve been busy. I don’t have time to go around looking at naked men. I have a pizza business to run. I have old ladies to take care of. And anyway, you’ve got this all wrong. I was rescuing a kitten.”

They both looked up at the tree. No kitten.

Berry pointed. “There was a kitten up there!”

“Uh-huh.”

The hunk didn’t believe her! Of all the nerve. Berry tipped her nose up and gave him her most withering look. Well, phooey on you, her most withering look said. I don’t care what you think, anyway. She retrieved the crumpled pizza box and thrust it into his hands.

“Here, this is yours. Seventeen ninety-five, please.”

He looked down at the flattened box that was oozing pizza sauce. “Shouldn’t I get a disaster discount?”

Berry had to admit, seventeen ninety-five was a little high for a smashed pizza. “Fine,” she said, “it’s on the house.”

“Thanks. The strip show is on the house, too,” he said, smiling. “Now we’re even.”

Berry looked at him. Two eyebrows, nice nose, suspicious brown eyes. And a mouth that looked like it might be laughing at her. His mouth wasn’t too big, and wasn’t too small, and it was slightly turned up at the corners. Truth was, it was probably the greatest mouth she’d ever seen.

“Are you going to kiss me?” he asked.

Berry snapped to attention. “Certainly not!”

Laugh lines crinkled around his eyes. “You were staring at my mouth.”

“I thought it might be laughing at me.”

He looked at her tangled blond curls, big blue eyes, and cute little nose. And he looked at her mouth. Full and soft. *Not* smiling. His gaze moved south over her red down vest, long-sleeved shirt, and faded jeans. She was slim. Maybe five-five. Hard to tell her age. Somewhere between sixteen and thirty-two, he guessed. He hoped she wasn’t sixteen because he was having thoughts about her that would be inappropriate if she was sixteen.

“Jake Sawyer,” he said, extending his hand. “How old are you?”

“I’m too close to thirty.”

“I suppose you’re the owner of that dilapidated Jeep.”

“That Jeep is *not* dilapidated. That Jeep is almost in A-one condition.”

As if on cue, there was a loud *sprnnnnng* at curbside, and the Jeep slowly began rolling backward, down Ellenburg Drive.

Berry gasped. “My Jeep!”

The Jeep picked up speed on a downhill curve, jumped the curb, merrily bounced over a grassy area, and headed for an opening between two large birch trees. Berry took off running and raced alongside, trying to get a grip on the door handle. Her fingers had just touched metal when Sawyer tackled her, and they both went down to the ground. She picked her head up in time to see the Jeep squeeze between the two trees and catapult itself off a twenty-foot cliff.

“Get off!” she said, twisting under Sawyer. “You must weigh two hundred pounds.”

“One-eighty and it’s all muscle.”

Berry already knew the part about it being all magnificent muscle. Besides being permanently engraved in her brain, she could feel it being firmly pressed into her. His knee was cozily nudged against the inside of her leg, and his delicious mouth was hovering just inches above her own.

“You’re staring at my mouth again,” he said.

And he kissed her. Nothing serious. Just a single, testing-the-waters kiss.

“Jeez,” Berry said.

“Is that good or bad?”

It was terrific, Berry thought. Not that she would admit it to Mr. Large Pizza.

“It was entirely inappropriate,” she said, wriggling out from under him, getting to her feet. “And that was *my* Jeep. I needed it. I can’t deliver pizzas without it. You had no business jumping on me like that.”

“Are you crazy? You would have killed yourself.”

“Well, fine. Now I’ll slowly die of starvation because I’m deprived of earning a living.”

Good grief, Berry thought, she sounded like an uptight, whining moron. It was so unfair. Why couldn’t she have met this gorgeous guy under more favorable circumstances? Like maybe winning him in the lottery. She turned on her heel and strode off to the birch trees to inspect the damage.

She’d gotten the Jeep two years ago, the day after her divorce had been finalized, and it had never given her a moment’s trouble. Of course, she had to give it a quart of oil every Friday, she thought. And it did look a little disreputable with all that rust and the coat hanger antenna, but those things were cosmetic.

They stood at the edge of the cliff and gazed down at the Jeep, belly-up and slightly squashed in the moonlight.

Berry sighed in morose resignation. “It’s dead.”

“Doesn’t look good.”

Berry was at a loss for words. After all, what on earth can you say when your entire future has just gone over a cliff? What can you say when faced with certain bankruptcy? And I’m not going to cry, she told herself, frowning. I absolutely am not going to cry.

He studied her face in the moonlight. “You’re not going to cry, are you?”

“Absolutely not.” A large tear oozed over her lower lashes and streaked down her cheek. “Damn.”

She was pretty, he thought. And she was nice to kiss. But she was a little nutty. Not that he would hold that against her. He put an arm around her shoulders and wiped the tear away with his thumb.

“It’s okay,” Jake said. “The insurance will pay to replace your car.”

Berry slumped and did another sigh.

“You don’t have insurance,” he guessed.

“Not that kind. Only if I run over somebody.” She squared her shoulders and turned on her heel. “Well, good-bye.”

Good-bye? He wasn’t ready for good-bye. He wanted to look at the blond curls some more. He needed to know *why* she didn’t have insurance. And what was her favorite ice cream flavor? And when was her birthday? And was she really okay after falling out of his

tree? And in fact, he wouldn't mind knowing what she thought of him naked, but probably he shouldn't rush that one.

He walked beside her. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"That must be miles from here."

Berry shrugged. "It's not so far."

May as well get used to walking, she thought, I'm going to be doing a lot of it. Anyway, she could use the exercise to get rid of the nervous stomach caused by Mr. Large Pizza with the Works and his navy briefs.

No way was she walking home, Jake thought. It was dark, and late. She could get mugged or snatched by a maniac serial rapist. And she smelled like pizza. She could get attacked by a pack of hungry dogs.

"If you'll wait a minute, I'll give you a ride," he said to her.

"Thanks, but that's not necessary. Besides, I'd get your fancy car all dirty."

"My fancy car has leather seats. They wash. Wait here."

Berry kept walking. "Really, it's not necessary."

He grabbed her firmly by the shoulders and plunked her into a sitting position on the edge of the curb. "Wait here!"

"You're awfully bossy."

"So I've been told."

That intrigued her. She watched him jog away and wondered who else thought he was bossy. A girlfriend, maybe? A wife? She was still wondering when the cream-colored car rolled to a stop in front of her. She removed her vest and carefully placed it on the floor, mozzarella side up.

"This is very nice of you," Berry said.

"Yup, that's me. I'm an all-around nice guy." He cut his eyes to her. "You haven't told me your name."

"Berry Knudsen."

"Berry? Like in holly berry or cranberry?"

"Lingonberry. My mother was inordinately proud of her Scandinavian heritage. So, who else thinks you're bossy? Your wife?"

Sawyer mumbled something unintelligible.

"Excuse me?"

“My kids,” he said on a sigh.

His kids? He had kids. And a wife. And he’d just kissed her. She was going to go straight home and brush her teeth.

“How many kids do you have?” she asked.

“Twenty-one. This morning they all told me the same thing you did. They think I’m bossy.”

“Twenty-one kids?”

“I teach first grade.”

“So you’re not married?”

“No.”

Berry almost swooned with relief. He wasn’t married. Not that it really mattered to her. She wasn’t interested in men right now. She especially wasn’t interested in this man. Still, it was good to know she hadn’t kissed a philanderer. She hadn’t spied on someone else’s private property. She hadn’t smashed a family pizza. And this tantalizing hunk of manliness, driving a megabucks car, taught first grade. Imagine that!

“You don’t look like a first-grade teacher,” she said.

Jake let out a low groan. “I know. I’m too big. I don’t fit in any of the little chairs. My fingers aren’t good at holding crayons or safety scissors. And I can’t get the hang of barrettes at all.” He slumped in his seat. “I wasn’t cut out for first grade. This is the toughest thing I’ve ever done.”

The image of Jake Sawyer playing mother hen to a group of seven-year-olds brought a smile to Berry’s lips. If she’d had a first-grade teacher that looked like Jake Sawyer, she’d have done anything to stay after school. Her first-grade teacher had been five feet, two inches tall and weighed close to two hundred pounds. Mrs. Berman. Berry shivered at the memory.

“Earth to Berry.”

“Sorry. I guess I drifted off.”

“I was afraid you might have sustained a head injury when you fell out of the tree.”

“No. The only thing damaged is my pride and your pizza.” She squinted into the darkness. “Turn right at the next light. Then just go straight until you see the sign, pizza place.”

“This isn’t exactly a ritzy part of town.”

Berry shrugged. “It’s an ethnic neighborhood. Italian bakery. Vietnamese laundry. Ethiopian restaurant. Everybody’s struggling to make a start, like me.”

Jake executed a smooth corner at the light and frowned at the dark street lined with grimy stores and intersected by narrow alleyways.

“Why have you chosen to work in this pizza place?”

“Why did you choose to teach first grade?”

Jake smiled wryly. “If I tell you, will you tell me?”

“I hope your story’s more interesting than mine.”

“I invented Gunk.”

“Gunk?”

“It creeps. It crawls. It comes in five scents and three flavors. It’s edible. It’s freezable. It’s disgusting.”

“I’ve seen it advertised on television.”

“I invented it. I was working for Bartlow Labs, looking for an inexpensive organic glue, and I discovered Gunk.”

“Are you a chemist?”

“I used to be. I quit the second I sold my Gunk rights. I hated the fluorescent lights and the nine-to-five routine. And it was boring. Glue is boring.” He smiled proudly. “Now I’m an inventor.”

“What about teaching first grade?”

“Guinea pigs. I have twenty-one kids to test my new ideas. Besides, I had a teaching degree and I needed the money. I squandered my Gunk money on this car and that monstrous Victorian house.”

Berry wrinkled her nose. The man had forsaken a respectable profession to invent future Gunk, and thought of seven-year-olds as guinea pigs. Prince Charming had some frog in him.

“How did you ever get the school board to hire you?”

“Luckily, Mrs. Newfarmer had a nervous breakdown and suddenly abandoned her first-grade class. When I applied for a job as substitute teacher, they were desperate enough to consider me.”

“Nervous breakdown? Must be some group of kids.”

“The kids are terrific. Mrs. Newfarmer had marital problems.”

Hmmm, she thought, I can relate to that. Marriage could easily

give somebody a nervous breakdown. It could give you hives, and dishpan hands, and paranoia.

Berry knew firsthand. She had tried marriage. Four years of struggling to put her husband through medical school, and then she'd found him playing doctor with Mary Lou Marowski. Yes sir, she knew all about marriage.

"Well? What about you? Why are you working in this neighborhood?" he asked.

"I was married while still in college. We couldn't both afford to go to school full-time, so I quit and went to work. When my marriage fell apart after four years I didn't think I could manage a job that required much mental concentration or emotional energy. I wanted something to do with my hands. Something that was physically exhausting. And I wanted something that was close to the university so I could return to school part-time. Well, here it is. The Pizza Place. I worked as a pizza maker for a year, and when the owner retired seven months ago, I scraped together every cent I could find, mortgaged my soul, and bought the business."

Jake parked at the curb and considered the two-story yellow brick building. A gaudy red neon sign flashed out pizza place in the ground-floor picture window. White ruffled curtains hung in the four second-story windows.

"You live upstairs?" he asked.

"Yup."

"Alone?"

"Not anymore. I adopted three old ladies this week."

Jake raised his eyebrows.

"It's a long story."

Berry eased herself out of the car, relieved to say good-bye to Jake Sawyer. The man was physically disturbing. He gave her hot flashes. She wasn't even sure if she liked him. He bought extravagant cars and eccentric houses. He thumbed his nose at security. The man was a risk taker with big dreams.

Berry had small dreams. She wanted a college education. She wanted a window that overlooked a meadow, or a creek, or a green lawn bordered by flower beds. She wanted a nice, boring husband

who believed in monogamy, but she didn't want him now. First the college education, then the husband, then the lawn. That was The Plan. It certainly didn't include breaking out in a sweat over awesome Jake Sawyer. And the worst part about all this was that she'd acted so dopey! She'd fallen out of his tree onto a pizza. Yeesh.

Berry mumbled an embarrassed thank-you, carefully closed the door of Jake's expensive car, and beat a hasty retreat to her apartment. Her back ached, her arms were scratched, and her jeans had a large hole in the knee. Not one of her better days. She'd peeked in Jake Sawyer's bedroom window and ogled his body, and now she was being punished. How else could you explain the Jeep suicide? Berry trudged up the narrow stairs. At least the score should be even now. Her Jeep for thirty seconds of Jake Sawyer practically nude. It seemed like a fair price, but she didn't know how she was ever going to replace the stupid Jeep. She didn't have a dime in the bank, and she had nowhere to go for credit. What a rotten break. Just when she was making some progress. Last week she'd gotten two lunch contracts at local businesses. How was she going to deliver pizzas without the Jeep?

"Damn," she said, trudging up the narrow stairs. "Double damn."

Mrs. Dugan stood ramrod-straight with righ-teous indignation at the head of the stairs. "Hmmm, fine talk for a young lady. I may as well tell you right now, I don't tolerate cussing."

A second gray-haired lady appeared in the doorway. "For goodness' sakes, Sarah, all she said was *damn*. *Damn* doesn't hardly count as a cussword. Young people say things like that nowadays."

A third voice chimed in. "You're right, Mildred, what should she say? Oh, fudge? Darn? It's not the same, not the same at all. Sometimes you need to let loose with a good cuss. In fact, I feel like cussing right now." The plump old lady uttered an expletive that made double damn sound like polite conversation and raised everyone's eyebrows, including Berry's.

"Mrs. Fitz!"

Mrs. Fitz slapped her leg and laughed out loud. "That was a beauty, wasn't it? See, I feel much better now."

Berry wearily walked across the room and sank into the Boston

rocker.

“Good heavens,” Mrs. Fitz exclaimed. “What happened to you? You’re a mess.”

“I fell out of a tree onto the large pizza with the works. And then the Jeep drove itself over a cliff.”

Mrs. Dugan set a bowl of soapy water at Berry’s feet and began gently dabbing at her scratched cheek. “You aren’t hurt serious, are you? You have anything worse than these scratches and scrapes?”

“Nope, I’m okay.”

Berry smiled. It had been a long time since she’d had this sort of motherly attention. Her own mother was miles away in McMinneville, Oregon, and Allen, her ex-husband, had never given her much attention. She was still amazed at how marriage could be such a lonely way of life. Four years of living with a man who never remembered her birthday or noticed a wayward tear. She’d been so impressed with his cool intelligence and professional aspirations that she’d jumped into marriage without considering his emotional limitations. Thank goodness all that was behind her. She was older and wiser and pleased with her hard-won independence.

“Hello,” Jake Sawyer called from the top of the stairs.

“Goodness,” Mrs. Fitz exclaimed, “who’s the hunk?”

“I’m Berry’s friend.”

Mrs. Dugan gaped at him in dumbfounded silence, her hand frozen in midair.

Jake noticed the water and blood dripping from Berry’s arm and gently removed the wet cloth from Mrs. Dugan’s fingers. He soaked the cloth and applied it to Berry’s scratches.

Having Mrs. Dugan swab away the dirt and blood was one thing. Having Jake Sawyer minister to her wounds was another. It was disturbingly tender and caring and absolutely unwanted. Berry clenched her teeth, narrowed her eyes, and hoped she looked menacing.

“What are you doing here?” she asked Sawyer.

“Damned if I know,” he said. “I was sitting down there at the curb and couldn’t get myself to drive off. I kept getting this mental picture of you standing out on the highway, thumbing a ride with a pizza box

stuck under your arm.”

“So?”

“So I didn’t like it.” His dark eyes searched hers. “You’re really in a bind, aren’t you?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

Jake’s mouth quirked into an embarrassed grin. “I have a confession to make. That was my neighbor’s cat in the tree. She gets up there all the time.”

Berry’s eyes opened wide. “You acted like I was a Peeping Tom.”

“Well? Were you peeping?”

“Only a little!”

She felt her blood pressure rise. It wasn’t her fault. She had been in that tree doing a good deed, and he’d practically flaunted himself at her. She sprang out of the chair and stood with her fists on her hips.

“What was I supposed to do? You got undressed right in front of the window. Don’t you believe in shades? What are you, some kind of exhibitionist?”

“I just moved in. I haven’t had time to put shades up. Anyway, there aren’t any neighbors for miles.”

Berry turned on her heel and glared at the three ladies who were “tsking” behind her. She frowned and gave a look that said, One word out of any of you and it’s back to the train station.

Jake held his hands up. “Wait. I didn’t come up here to discuss your voyeuristic tendencies.”

“Voyeuristic tendencies! Of all the . . . You are the most . . . I am not!”

Berry closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. She opened her eyes and made a flamboyant gesture with her arm, pointing to the door.

“Out!”

Jake took a seat in the vacant rocking chair and accepted a cup of cocoa from Mrs. Fitz. “Boy, she sure can get riled,” he said.

“Yeah, ain’t she a pip?”

That was the perfect description, Jake thought. Berry Knudsen was a pip. He’d dated lots of women and none of them had been exactly right, and now he realized none of them had been a *pip*.

Berry spun around and flapped her arms at Mrs. Fitz. “Mrs. Fitz, anyone can see this man is leaving. We don’t serve cocoa to men who are leaving.”

“Nonsense. He’s all settled in here.” Mrs. Fitz pressed her lips together in satisfaction. “Don’t he look nice and comfy.”

Mildred Gaspich brought him a plate of chocolate chip cookies. “We just baked these fresh tonight.” She turned to Mrs. Fitz. “Goodness, it’s nice to have a man in the house.”

“Makes me want to put on some fresh lipstick.” Mrs. Fitz laughed. “Too bad I haven’t got any.”

Miss Gaspich put her arm around plump little Lena Fitz. “That’s okay. Pretty soon you’ll have money to buy some lipstick.”

“Berry’s hired us,” Mrs. Fitz explained to Jake. “We were just about scraping by on our social security checks, living in the Southside Hotel for Ladies, and then they decided to renovate the building and turn it into fancy condominiums. We couldn’t afford anyplace else. We looked real hard, but there just wasn’t a room cheap enough. Finally, they evicted us. We were temporarily holed up in the train station when we saw Berry’s ad in the paper.”

Mrs. Fitz grinned. She was five feet tall with short steel-gray hair that had been permed into two inches of frizz. She was apple-cheeked, with an ample chest and dimples in her elbows and stout knees.

“We know we’re a bunch of old ladies,” Mrs. Fitz said, “but we figured the three of us together might be able to hold down a job. Sort of a package deal.”

Miss Gaspich pulled a kitchen chair close to the rocker. “We walked all over town for days trying to get a job and then Berry hired us. We’d just about given up.”

“This business with the Jeep isn’t gonna change things, is it?” Mrs. Fitz worried. “How bad is the Jeep?”

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t put the Jeep back together again,” Berry told her.

Jake downed the last of the cocoa and stood to leave. “It’s okay, Mrs. Fitz. Berry’s going to use my car until she can replace the Jeep.” Berry looked at him wide-eyed. “I can’t deliver pizzas in your car.”

Jake somberly chewed a cookie. “It was my cat that started this

fiasco. I feel responsible.”

He leaned close to Berry and whispered in an aside, “Besides, I liked kissing you.”

Berry ignored the heat that burned in her cheeks. “I can’t deliver pizzas in a megabucks car!”

Mrs. Fitz whistled behind her. “You mean he looks like this, and he’s rich, too?”

“I invented Gunk.”

Mrs. Fitz’s eyes popped wide open. “That disgusting slimy stuff you can eat? I love that stuff.”

Jake turned to Berry. “My school is just three blocks from here. I’ll drop the car off on my way to work tomorrow morning.”