



The Red-Hot Chili Cook-Off

By Carolyn Brown



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More Than the Chili's Heating Up Cadillac, Texas

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Carlene's cohorts—and their mamas—plan to exact revenge on Lenny Joe where it'll hurt the most: break his ten-year winning streak at the prestigious Red-Hot Chili Cook-Off. Never before has a woman dared to compete. But the ladies of Bless My Bloomers are cooking up a storm...and it seems the whole town is taking sides in the showdown.

Welcome to Cadillac, Texas, where the chili is hot, the gossip is hotter, and friends stick by each other, no matter what the challenge.

Praise for *The Blue-Ribbon Jalapeño Society Jubilee*:

"Hilarious...fast-paced...A high-spirited, romantic page-turner."—*Kirkus*

"Humor and down-home charm make this a first-place prize winner."—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 Stars

"In this laugh-out-loud read, bestselling Brown takes her expertise in writing top-notch cowboy romance novels to stir things up...among four female friends."—*Booklist*

"Heartwarming and fun...Brown's story reminded me of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*."—*Long and Short Reviews*

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Editorial Review

Review

"With a cast of characters that will leave readers grinning, Brown's latest is delightful, humorous "chick lit"... Fun, fun and more fun is on hand in a story that wins a blue ribbon in both originality and wit. 4 Stars" - **RT Book Reviews**

"Fun, fresh and hilarious... The author showed that laughter is the best medicine and a sure fire cure for the toughest of challenges in life." - **Chick Lit Reviews**

"A fun romp through the world of the dignified South, where a group of women opening a lingerie shop is only slightly less scandalous than a woman divorcing a cheating jerk of a spouse." - **Calliope's Reviews and Stitching News**

"The characters are vibrant and engaging, the story is endearingly off beat and full of down home folksy charm. A wonderfully heartwarming and highly entertaining novel." - **Book Reviews and More By Kathy**

"Fun, sassy, and showing that you should follow your heart..." - **Book Girl of Mur-y-Castell**

About the Author

Carolyn Brown is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author with more than sixty books published. She writes bestselling single title cowboy and country music mass market romances, as well as women's fiction. Born in Texas and raised in southern Oklahoma, Carolyn and her husband now make their home in the town of Davis, Oklahoma.

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Chapter 1

Some men are just born stupid. Some don't get infected until later in life, but they'll all get a case of it sometime. It's in their DNA and can't be helped.

Carlene could testify with her right hand raised to God and the left on the Good Book that her husband, Lenny, had been born with the disease and it had worsened with the years. Proof was held between her thumb and forefinger like a dead rat in the form of a pair of bikini underwear. They damn sure didn't belong to her. Hell's bells, she couldn't get one leg in those tiny little things. And they did not belong to Lenny, either. Even if he had become an overnight cross-dresser, his ass wouldn't fit into that skimpy pair of underbritches, not even if he greased himself down with bacon drippings.

They were bright red with a sparkling sequin heart sewn on the triangular front. They'd come with a matching corset with garter straps and fishnet hose. Carlene recognized them, because she'd designed the outfit herself at her lingerie shop, Bless My Bloomers. They belonged to a petite, size-four brunette with big brown eyes who had giggled and pranced when she saw herself in the mirror wearing the getup.

Carlene jumped when her cell phone rang. The ring tone said it was Lenny, but she was still speechless, staring at the scrap of satin in her hand.

She dropped to her knees on the carpet and bent forward into a tight ball, her blond hair falling over her face.

She felt as if someone had kicked her firmly in the gut and she couldn't breathe. In a few seconds she managed a sitting position, wrapped her arms around her midsection, and sucked in air, but it burned her lungs. The noise that came forth from her chest sounded like a wounded animal caught in a trap. Tears would have washed some of the pain away but they wouldn't flow from her burning green eyes. Finally, she got control of the dry heaves and managed to pull herself up out of the heap of despair. Dear God, what was she going to do?

The brunette who'd bought the red-satin outfit had told her that she and her sugar daddy were going to Vegas, and she wanted something that would make him so hot he'd be ready to buy her an engagement ring. What was her name? Bailey? Brenda? No, something French, because Carlene remembered asking her about it. Bridget...that was it! Bridget had been to Vegas with Lenny. On how many other trips had he taken a bimbo with him and how many of them had been ten or fifteen years younger-and a size four, for God's sake?

In seconds, the phone rang again. She picked it up and said, "Hello." Her voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a well or, maybe, a sewer pipe.

"Carlene, I left my briefcase in my office. I slept on the sofa to keep from waking you, since I got in so late last night. Bring it to me before you go to work, and hurry. There's a contract in it that I need and the people will be here to sign in ten minutes. I'll hold them off with coffee until you get here."

No good-bye.

No thank you, darlin'.

Not even a please.

Did he talk to Bridget like that?

Anger joined shock and pain as she dropped the panties back in the briefcase and then removed the little card she'd made for him to find that morning. She'd written that she was sorry she had fallen asleep before he got home and that she'd make it up to him that night with champagne and wild sex. She stood up, straightening to her full statuesque height of just a couple of inches under the six-foot mark. Damn that sorry bastard to hell. How could he do this to her?

Ripping the note into confetti-sized pieces and throwing them in the air did nothing to appease her anger. Dozens of questions ran in circles through her mind. Had Lenny brought his twenty-something-year-old bimbo to her house for a romp on her bed while she was at work? Did that sorry sucker have sex with his mistress at noon and then with his wife that same night? Just how long had the affair been going on, anyway?

Among them all came one solid answer. She was not living in the same house with a lying, cheating, two-timing son of a bitch. She was leaving his ass and nothing or no one could convince her to stay another night under the same roof with him.

Five Red-Hot Chili Cook-Off trophies looked down from the mantle at her. She picked them up one by one and hurled them across the room. Not one of the damn plastic things broke, which made her even angrier, but she didn't go to the garage and get a hammer to work them over. Instead, she turned into a feverish packing fiend. In less than half an hour her van looked like an overflowing Salvation Army donation hut. Clothing and shoes were stuffed into the back like sardines. Plastic grocery bags filled with items from her dresser drawers were stacked in the backseat, and the briefcase sat right beside her on the front seat.

She gave it looks meant to fry holes through the leather, but it just sat there as cool as Lenny. Damn his black soul to hell for all eternity. She hoped that he was given a place sitting naked on a barbed wire fence and every time he fell off the devil shot him with a cattle prod.

From their house in Cadillac, Texas, to Lenny's car dealership in Sherman was exactly seven miles and she made it in a little less than five minutes. If it hadn't been for good brakes on her van, she would have plowed right through the plate-glass windows and rammed into that pretty brand-spanking-new red Corvette in the showroom. Some days started off bad and got worse as they went along.

Tears begged to be turned loose but she blinked them back. Be damned if he'd see her cry or reduced to a heap on the floor, either. It might happen, but he wouldn't bask in the glory of seeing it.

Her hands shook and her jaw ached from clenching her teeth. She took a deep breath and pushed open the door of her van, remembering to grab his briefcase before she slammed the door shut. Her bravado left when she looked through the window and caught sight of him through the glass windows in his office right off the showroom floor. Her stomach churned and nausea set in again. Could a person love and hate someone at the same time?

Her legs felt like they were filled with steel when she pushed open the glass door and headed toward Lenny's office. He looked up from behind his desk and with a flick of his wrist motioned for her to come on in.

She was still staring at him trying to figure out whether to beat him to death with the briefcase or just set it in the middle of the floor and get the hell out of there before she started weeping, when she saw a movement in her peripheral vision.

"Well, hello!" Bridget appeared from behind the Corvette parked just inside the doors. "It's good to see you again."

Either the woman did not know Carlene was Lenny's wife or she was a fool who'd caught an acute case of stupid from Lenny Joe Lovelle. Either way, she was crazy as hell and didn't value her hair or eyeballs. Anyone with two sane brain cells in their heads could see that Carlene Lovelle was a time bomb with a lit fuse.

Bridget's eyes twinkled and she lowered her voice to say, "The red outfit drove my sweet sugar daddy right up the walls. Honey, we had the honeymoon suite and we didn't hit the blackjack tables one time all weekend. He didn't even leave to go to his business meetings. We spent the whole two days in that big round bed or else in the heart-shaped hot tub. It was our five-month anniversary and he said that he got luckier in that room than he ever did at the gambling tables. I'll be back in to buy something else for the sixth month. We're going to Florida to celebrate my twenty-second birthday as well as our anniversary. I'm thinking naughty nurse so get the bling out and I betcha I get my ring on that trip. Oh, and guess what else? We are both members of the mile-high club now."

Carlene plopped the briefcase down on the hood of the Corvette and wished that she'd bought one of those shiny metal ones for Lenny's birthday instead of one made of soft kid leather. Hell, if she had a metal one, she really could beat him to death with it, but that fancy leather thing wouldn't even leave bruises.

Bridget's eyes widened out to the size of saucers when she saw the LJL initials on the top of the familiar case and had trouble staying in their sockets when Carlene popped it open. Right there on the top of a big manila envelope were the red panties.

Using a pen with the car dealership logo, Carlene picked up the underpants and threw them at the woman.

Then she dumped documents, pens, sticky notes, and everything else in the briefcase onto the tile floor and stomped holes in the papers with her spike heels.

Bridget caught the scrap of red satin and all the color drained from her face. "What are you doing with my panties? And why do you have Lenny's briefcase? Who in the hell are...oh, my, sweet Jesus!" She slapped a hand over her mouth. The panties hung on her pinky finger, and it looked like she was trying to swallow the evidence.

Carlene picked up the empty briefcase and lobbed it like a rocket toward the window between her and Lenny. It lost momentum and didn't even crack the glass but it made him drop like bird shit behind his desk.

"I...I..." Bridget stammered.

Well, praise the Lord, her vocabulary now had two vowels. Maybe by the end of the day, she could add a consonant or two and be able to speak in whole sentences again.

Lenny must've jumped up as fast as he dropped because suddenly he was beside her. "My God, Carlene, what in the hell...oh!" He stopped dead.

His eyes darted from Bridget to Carlene. "I can explain. Bridget, honey, tell Uncle Sam to close the deal with Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds. He'll have to reprint the contracts. And would you please clean up this mess before anyone sees it? Carlene, we'll go discuss this over some coffee in the lounge."

Then he proved just how damned stupid he was by reaching out and touching her shoulder as if he could charm her into forgiveness. Well, Lenny Joe Lovelle wasn't charming jack shit out of her that morning, and it would be a cold day in hell before she ever forgave him. Even Alma Grace, with all her religion and praying, would agree that the Good Book did not condone adultery or fornication-even though it didn't mention skimpy under-bitches.

She doubled up her fist and landed a good right hook in his left eye. He went down on his knees and yelled, "Why in the hell did you do that?"

"Because you touched me, you son of a bitch. If you ever lay a hand on me again, I will snatch you baldheaded and then start on your bimbo over there," she yelled.

Shit! Had she really raised her voice right out in public like that? Carlene Carmichael Lovelle was a lady who did not air her dirty laundry, but dammit, he'd broken her heart, twisted it up into a pretzel, and now he was acting like it was nothing. She glared at him, hands on hips and back as straight as steel.

Bridget instinctively covered her hair with her hands, the panties now looking like dangly earrings as they floated down from fingertips to shoulders.

He stood up and narrowed his eyes. "Come on, Carlene, we have to talk."

"You can talk to my lawyer."

He laid a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Darlin'..."

She slapped him with her open hand hard enough to put a blaze of red on his cheek, but he didn't drop to the floor. "Dammit, Carlene. You are making a scene."

"A scene. You want a scene? I'll give you a damned scene that a sugar daddy can appreciate." She placed the

toe of her high-heeled shoe on the bumper of the Corvette and marched up across the hood, leaving dents that looked like hail had peppered down on the pretty red car. When she was standing on the top of it, she looked right at Bridget.

"Bridget, honey, you had better never show your face at Bless My Bloomers ever again."

"Get off that car. You've already done thousands of dollars worth of damage. Sam is going to sue the hell out of you for this," Lenny shouted.

Sam, a robust man with a rim of gray hair, a belly that hung out over his belt, and five-thousand-dollar eel cowboy boots, rushed out into the showroom. "My God, Carlene, have you lost your mind?"

"She's gone crazy, Uncle Sam," Lenny said.

"You want to see freakin' crazy? I will show you crazy." She stepped down to the hood and did a stomp dance. By the time she finished, the showroom was full. She took a deep bow and hopped down from the hood. "When I'm done, you'll be damn lucky to have potatoes with your beans once a week, much less plan little weekend trips to honeymoon suites where you wallow around in a round bed with office girls rather than going to meetings. Dock his pay for the damage, Sam. You'd be wise to fire his ass, but since he's your nephew, that won't happen, will it?"

"Come on, Carlene, it was just a fling. It only happened one time and I'll never do it again," Lenny whispered.

"Fling! Just a fling?" Bridget's voice was as loud as a fire siren. "You promised me that you were leaving her. You promised me an engagement ring with a two-carat diamond as soon as you left your fat wife. You promised me we would have our own apartment by the time the chili cook-off happens and I could be your cheerleader for the event and you'd hang our picture above all those trophies in your office."

"Well, he's not leaving his fat wife. I'm leaving his cheating ass and he's all yours. Better keep him on a short leash. He charming, but he's a two-timin' son of a bitch." Carlene's high heels sounded like fire crackers as she stormed out of the dealership.

She drove until she reached the outskirts of town, pulled over, and laid her head on the steering wheel. That lyin' cheating bag of shit didn't deserve her tears but they flowed down her cheeks anyway as she sat there with the engine running and the air conditioner turning her warm, salty tears as cold as her heart felt.

Monday morning was Josie Vargas's favorite time of the week. She'd cooked all weekend, put up with whining grandkids and great-grandkids, sons in her living room arguing about football on the blaring television set, and daughters-in-law sipping iced tea at her kitchen table while they gossiped about people she didn't even know. The most beautiful sight in the world was the taillights as they all went home Sunday night after supper. Maybe by Friday she'd be glad to see them again, but right then she rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and gave thanks that she'd only birthed two sons.

"Okay," she muttered at the ceiling. "They say they are bringing the kids to see me so I don't get lonely since Louis died. Me, I think they are coming home to be waited on and to eat my cooking. Tell me I'm wrong. No? You can't lie?"

She warmed two leftover waffles from the day before in the microwave and drizzled a mixture of hot butter

and maple syrup over them. That and coffee would keep her until she arrived at Bless My Bloomers where she sewed fancy lingerie for all sizes of women. Crazy women who wanted pearls and ribbons and fancy crap all over their under-britches. Josie couldn't imagine wearing the things that she made. Plain old white cotton panties were good enough for her butt and Louis had never complained one time when he took them off.

He would turn over in his grave if he knew she'd gone back to work. She'd retired at sixty-five and she and Louis had twelve good years together before he died. But she got lonely after he was gone, and when Carlene came to ask her if she wanted a job at Bless My Bloomers, she'd jumped at the chance.

She was ten minutes early and parked her twenty-year-old car around back, leaving the curb space and driveway for customers. She was a short woman with a touch of gray in her hair and brown eyes set in a bed of wrinkles. She was eyeballing her eightieth birthday in another year and she loved those three girls she worked with as much as her own granddaughters. Before she got out of the car, she took out the little compact that Louis had given her for their first anniversary and reapplied her trademark bright-red lipstick.

No one else had arrived yet so she let herself in the back door with her key and headed straight to her little room. It had been the library when the house was a residence but nowadays it was her sewing room. The living room was the store. The parlor had been divided into four fitting rooms. The dining room was the stockroom and the walls were lined with basic bras, corsets, and panties in all sizes, shapes, and colors. There were three bedrooms upstairs, and sometimes the owners, Carlene, Alma Grace, and Patrice, kept extra stock up there if the dining room overflowed.

She'd been working on a fancy corset for a bride when she left Friday evening. She pulled up her rolling chair, picked up the pearls, and started sewing them one-by-one onto the lace panels between the boning. She'd always liked intricate work. Even as a child she was the one who loved embroidery and needlepoint.

"I don't remember Carlene ever being out sick before. I hope she ain't sick today. Alma Grace will have a prayin' fit if she has to fit all those choir women from her church without any help."

Alma Grace stopped by her mama's house on the way to work every morning so they could have a mother/daughter devotional. They read the daily pages from the study Bible, said a prayer, and then had breakfast.

Few people in Cadillac even remembered the Fannin sisters' real names. Sugar's birth certificate said Carolina Sharmaine, but she'd always been called Sugar. The same with Gigi; her real name was Virginia Carlene. And Tansy had started out life the day she was born as Georgia Anastasia. They'd each had a daughter within a year of each other twenty-seven years before. Alma Grace belonged to Sugar, Patrice to Tansy, and Carlene to Gigi.

"Are you planning a surprise for the Easter program this year?" Her mother pushed a strand of ash-blond hair back behind her delicate ears. Diamond studs glittered in the morning sunlight. Both of her sisters told her that the television show Good Christian Bitches had really been modeled after Miz Sugar Magee. Those women damn sure hadn't given up a bit of their bling or their style to be religious and neither had Sugar or Alma Grace.

Alma Grace's curly blond hair, the color of fresh straw, was held back that morning with a silver clasp. Cute little cross earrings covered with sapphires matched the necklace around her neck and her blue eyes.

"Now Mama, you know I never give away all my secrets about the Easter program. That's why we have such a crowd. Everyone knows it'll be spectacular and even bigger than the year before. But I will tell you this much. The teacher from the drama department at the school is working on a gizmo to make me fly as I sing the final song and there will be sparkles on my wings. It's going to be breathtaking. They'll still be talking about it at the chili cook-off. Maybe even at the festival this fall."

Sugar's eyes misted. "It will be the best thing that's ever happened in our church, and when your sweet voice starts to sing the final song, it will be like the heavens open up and the angels are singing."

Alma Grace dropped a kiss on her mother's forehead. "Thank you, Mama. I've got to go to work."

Sugar sighed. "Lord, I wish you wouldn't have..."

Alma Grace laid a hand on her mother's arm. "I prayed about it, remember? And God told me it was just underwear. Carlene, Patrice, and I are making a good living at Bless My Bloomers. And just think of all the happy men in the world who are staying home with their wives because of our jobs."

Sugar nodded seriously. "That's the only thing that I take comfort in, darlin'. Now let us have a little prayer before you go. We'll pray the blood of Jesus will keep you pure as you work on all those hooker clothes."

"Mama!"

Sugar tilted her chin up. "Well, God didn't tell me that those things were fit for decent God-fearin' women so I intend to pray about it every day."

"I've got to go or I'll be late. Dinner at Miss Clawdy's at noon?" Alma Grace asked.

"Not today. Gigi and Tansy and I are going up to Sherman to look at a new car for Gigi. She's still driving one that's four years old. It's a disgrace, I tell you. She's got a son-in-law in the business and she drives a car that old. Why, honey, it's almost a sin. I guess I should be happy that she's driving a car instead of a truck, but honestly, four years old!"

"Well, y'all have a good time and bring the new car back by the shop for us to see. That Lenny is so good to his family. Maybe someday I'll find a husband like him. Carlene is one lucky woman."

Sugar waved from the front door. "Yes, she is."

Alma Grace parked the car beside Josie's and went in through the back door. "Hey, no coffee? Where's Carlene?" she yelled.

"Ain't here yet. Hope she ain't sick. Y'all have got all those church women coming for a fitting today."

Alma Grace rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. She'd forgotten about that appointment. Thank goodness her mother was tied up with Aunt Gigi's new car business or she'd have had to cancel lunch with her. Sugar Fannin Magee pouted when she got all dolled up and didn't get to go out and it was not a pretty sight.

"Think I should call her?" Alma Grace asked.

"Hell, no! She'll call us if she's sick. Maybe she's finally pregnant and got the mornin' sickness."

"A baby." Alma Grace almost swooned.

"I didn't say that she was. I said that she might be, and if she is, she'll tell us when she damn well gets ready. Why don't you make coffee?"

"Because Carlene says that my coffee isn't fit to drink. I'll get the lights turned on and the doors opened. I'm sure she'll be along in a little while. Patrice is late all the time but I've never beat Carlene to work since we opened the shop last year."

The alarm rattled around in Patrice's head like steel marbles banging against the edges of a tin soup can. She groaned and shoved a pillow over her eyes with one hand and used the other hand to slap the hell out of the clock, sending it scooting across the floor. That the plug came loose from the wall was the only thing that saved the damn clock from being stomped to death that morning.

Damn Monday mornings after a weekend of hell-raisin' sex and booze. Wine, beer, Jack Daniels, and half a gallon of rocky road ice cream after the fight with her boyfriend did not make for a good start to a new week. Hangover, bloat, and tears were poor bed partners, especially on a Monday morning.

She kicked the covers off, took a warm shower, drank a cup of tomato juice laced with curry, ate half a can of chilled pineapple, and popped two aspirin. It was her special recipe to cure a hangover.

Her job at Bless My Bloomers was keeping books, inventory, and anything to do with a computer. Lord, she hated to face columns of numbers and deal with the wholesale sellers all morning with her head pounding like she was standing next to a jackhammer.

No one at the shop could help her, either. Alma Grace, bless her heart, could sell a blinged-out corset to a saint, but she could not add up a double column of figures even with a calculator. Carlene, God love her soul, could design something so sexy that the devil would hock his horns to buy it, but she was all thumbs when it came to keeping track of what went out and what came into the shop. If things got hectic in the sales room, Patrice could talk to customers, show them the merchandise, and even make a sale, but she didn't enjoy it.

The bathroom mirror brought about a loud groan. Her aqua-colored eyes looked like two piss holes in the snow and her platinum blond hair, straight from a bottle down at the Yellow Rose Beauty Shop, was only slightly better looking than a witch's stringy strands in a kid's movie. Hell, next week, she might cut it all off and wear it in a spike hairdo. It would damn sure be easier to fix than getting out the curling iron every damn morning.

"Grandma Fannin would have your hide if you did that," she whispered to her reflection.

When she'd done enough to cover up most of the hangover, she pulled a pair of skinny jeans from her closet, along with a tight-fitting shirt that hugged her double Ds and black, shiny, high-heeled shoes that she could kick off under her desk.

Evidently Lenny had brought Carlene to work that morning, since her car wasn't parked out behind the shop. Patrice laid her head back against the headrest for a minute and shut her eyes against the blinding sun, vowing that she'd find her sunglasses before she stepped out into the sun again. She needed coffee, good black strong coffee, and lots of it. Thank goodness Carlene always started a pot first thing in the morning.

Her head throbbed so bad, she'd almost be willing for Alma Grace to lay hands upon her and pray that God would heal her, but then she'd have to listen to her asking God to forgive her for drinking. She just needed something to relieve the headache. She hadn't killed her boyfriend, so she didn't need forgiveness, and even

Jesus drank wine, so Alma Grace could keep her preaching to herself.

Shading her eyes with her hand against the bright sunlight, she made her way to the porch. Coffee! She needed coffee and lots of it. Bless Carlene's heart; she always had it brewing first thing in the morning. But that morning the wonderful aroma of fresh coffee did not greet her when she opened the door.

"Dammit!" she swore.

"Carlene?" Alma Grace yelled from the front of the house.

"It's Patrice, not Carlene. Where is our cousin? She's never late," Patrice said.

Josie poked her head out of the sewing room. "From the looks of your eyes, I'd say you have a supersized hangover."

Patrice held up a palm. "Guilty. Don't tell Alma Grace or she'll start praying."

"Come on in the kitchen. I'll fix you up," Josie said.

"I already did my magic."

"Did it work?" Josie pointed at the kitchen table.

Patrice shook her head and it hurt like hell.

"No." She sat down, put her head down on her arms, and poked her fingers in her ears when Josie started the blender.

"What is it?" she asked when Josie set a green drink that looked like ground-up bullfrogs in front of her.

"Don't ask and don't come up for air. Drink it all down without stopping," Josie said.

Patrice did and then slammed the glass on the table with enough force to rattle the salt shakers. "Holy damn shit! That's hotter than hell's blazes."

"Yep and it'll burn that hangover right out of you in five minutes. Now let's go to work. Carlene's not here. I hope she's not sick. Y'all have the church choir coming today for fittings."

"Dammit all to hell!" Patrice groaned. "I'm not in the mood for praisin' God and blessing souls or fitting bras to those holier-than-thou gossiping women."

"Me neither but they've got boobs that have to be roped down, so suck it up. Must have been a helluva a weekend that you had." Josie smiled.

"I don't even want to talk about it until my head stops pounding. God, I hope Carlene isn't sick. I don't want to wait on customers today."

Alma Grace poked her head in the kitchen door. "I hope she's not sick, too, but it would be wonderful to have a baby in the family. My mama and your mama and Aunt Gigi are going to Lenny's this afternoon to look at a car. It'd be a shame if Carlene isn't here when they drive it by to show us."

Carlene breezed in the back door of the shop with an armload of clothing, her head held high, her makeup repaired, and a vow that no one else would ever see her cry again. That damned Lenny Lovelle would never, ever know how much he'd broken her spirit and her heart with his cheating.

"I'd appreciate it if y'all would lend a hand and help me bring in all that stuff in my van before customers start coming into the shop."

Patrice peeked outside and frowned. "Good God, girl. You did more than clean out your closets while Lenny was gone this weekend. Did you buy out a store? Are we going into more than lingerie or what? And the look in your eyes is damn scary. What's going on? You look like you could commit homicide on a saint."

"I'm divorcing that two-timing sleazy sumbitch Lenny Joe Lovelle. I should never have married him in the first place. Aunt Tansy read my palm and told me that you can't change a skirt chasin' bastard, but would I listen? Hell, no! Now are y'all going to help or not? And if you start praying, Alma Grace, I'm going to slap the shit out of you," Carlene said. She sounded mean, but truth was she was just like those hollow chocolate Easter bunnies. If anyone pushed her, she'd crumble into a million pieces.

"Dear Lord," Alma Grace whispered.

Carlene shot her an evil look. "I forewarned you."

"I wasn't praying, although I should be. You want that unloaded up in one of the bedrooms or where? I can't believe you are talking about a divorce." She whispered the last word like it was something dirty.

"Just put everything on that old sofa up there in the first bedroom on the left. I'll decide which room I'm going to live in and hang them all up later."

"Dios mio, tell us what has happened," Josie said.

"Help me get the van unloaded first to give me some more time." Carlene pushed the screen door open and it slammed behind her as she led the way outside to the company van.

"Shit!" Patrice followed her.

"Fool must've gotten caught," Josie said.

"Until death parts us. I heard her say the words," Alma Grace whispered.

"Yeah, well, way I see it is that don't necessarily mean death of the body, girl," Josie said. "I'll be right here when y'all get that stuff all carried upstairs. I'm not making trips up and down those steps with these knees."

It took several trips up and down the stairs to get everything brought inside. When they'd finished, the bedroom looked like a tornado had struck a clothing store. The sofa was completely obliterated and Walmart bags bulging and overflowing with panties, bras, and nightgowns were lined up against the wall.

"Why in the hell didn't you pack in suitcases? I know you've got at least three sets," Patrice asked.

"I was so damn mad I didn't even think about suitcases. He promised her that he'd be living with her by the time the chili cook-off happens and that's only a few weeks from now. And that he'd hang their pictures above those damned trophies. He doesn't have a picture of me in his den, in his office at work, or even in his wallet." Her voice quivered but neither of her cousins heard it or Alma Grace would have started praying again and Patrice would have got out a sawed-off shotgun.

Alma Grace touched Carlene on the arm and said, "Okay, darlin', tell us what happened and we'll take it to the Lord in prayer."

"Coffee first and the Lord can't fix this so I'll be damned if I take it to Him. The person that I'm taking it to is Carson Culpepper and I hope that he's as good as everyone says he is when it comes to divorce court."

"Poor old Lenny." Patrice giggled then grabbed her aching head. Laughter and hangovers did not go together.

Carlene whipped around and glared at her. "He deserves it."

"Hell, yes, he deserves it and Carson will make him wish he'd never even looked cross-eyed at another woman. Who was it and how did you find out?" Patrice asked.

"Remember that cute little brunette who came in here and bought that red corset and matching bikinis? Bridget is her name and we laughed about her going to Vegas with her sugar daddy. Well, she works at the dealership and Lenny is the sugar daddy."

"Then go get him, darlin'. I'm right behind you. You want us to shoot his sorry ass? Ain't a one of us that can't handle a firearm, and we're strong enough to dig a six-foot hole," Patrice said.

"Now girls, there's two sides to every story." Alma Grace folded her hands in front of her, shut her eyes, and prayed. "Dear Lord, please help Carlene forgive and forget. Help Lenny to mend his ways if he has transgressed and help them to work this problem out because they have both made vows to you. Amen."

Carlene glared at her cousin. Not one time in the past hour had she thought Patrice and Alma Grace wouldn't both stand behind her in any decision she made. True, they were all different. Patrice with her wild ways and cussing. Alma Grace with her religion. Carlene with her business sense. But they were knitted together with blood that ran as deep as sisters. So why would Alma Grace want her to forgive a two-timin', cheatin' sumbitch like Lenny? She reached up and caught a tear as it escaped from the dam behind her eyelids.

"Why in the hell would you pray like that? You should be praying for God to strike him dead," Patrice said.

"There's two sides." Alma Grace squared her shoulders defensively.

"You got that right," Patrice said. "There's the truth and then there's the lyin', cheatin' bastard's story. Which family are you in anyway?"

"I'll put Carlene on the prayer list and we'll all pray that God will guide you to make the right decision and forgive poor old Lenny for being so weak," Alma Grace said. "Now let's go have some coffee."

"There is no coffee because Carlene is the only one who knows how to make it, and if I was her, I'd poison yours," Patrice said.

Carlene was still amazed that Alma Grace hadn't supported her. Tears stung her eyes and her heart felt heavier than it had all morning. "Coffee might clear our heads," Carlene said as she started down the stairs.

They trooped into the big old kitchen: Carlene with curves that stretched a size sixteen; Alma Grace, the petite cousin; Patrice, the tallest one of the three at five feet eleven inches and slim as a runway model. Carlene put on a pot of coffee and then slumped in a chair. She started at the beginning. Surely when Alma Grace heard the whole story, she'd be more sympathetic.

"The sorry bastard. Let's poison him," Patrice said when she finished.

"You promised to love him through good times and bad. You need to give him a chance to make this all right," Alma Grace said.

Josie stood up from her chair, rounded the table, and hugged Carlene. "Honey, I'm not much younger than your Grandma Fannin would be and I got a feeling that she would tell you the same thing I'm about to tell you. Cut your losses right now and move on with your life. He's not worth it. Life's too short and hell ain't half full for you to put up with that kind of shit."

Alma Grace threw a hand over her eyes. "Dear God."

"You pray for me and I'll hurt you, girl. I swear I will," Carlene said.

"I wasn't praying. I promise that I wasn't. I just remembered that our mothers are going to Lenny's this morning to buy a new car," she said.

The sound that came out of Carlene's throat was somewhere between a giggle and a sob. It quickly turned into nervous laughter, followed by a guffaw that echoed off the kitchen walls, and then tears flooded her cheeks again.

She could tell by the looks on her cousins' faces that they thought she was laughing until she cried.

Patrice threw a kitchen towel across the table toward Carlene. "Dab, don't wipe or you'll ruin your mascara. What do you bet that he runs the other way when the Fannin sisters come through the door? He won't remember that Aunt Gigi has been talking about a new car for weeks. Enough of this shit. We've got a business to run."

Carlene pushed the end of the towel up under her eye. "And I've got to call the furniture store and tell them to deliver a bedroom suite before dark or I'll be sleeping on the floor."

"You can stay with me," Alma Grace offered.

"Hell, no! I'm staying right here. All I have to do is walk down the stairs into the store every morning. It's a perfect setup until the divorce is settled. I hope he loses that damn chili cook-off trophy this year. It would serve him right after promising that bimbo that he would hang her picture above the trophies. I threw them across the room but they didn't break."

"You will make the coffee every morning, right?" Patrice asked.

Carlene shot a look across the table.

Patrice fended it off by putting both her palms up. "Don't be killin' me with your mean looks, woman. I didn't cheat on you and I'm supporting your decision to leave that scumbag. I can't believe he's so stupid he didn't even check his briefcase."

"I can't believe you are so stupid that you married him. Everyone knew he was a skirt chaser," Josie fussed.

"Well, I can't believe you aren't going to live up to the vows you said before all three of our mamas and God. And the fact that the trophies didn't break is a sign that your marriage isn't broken, just cracked, and that it can be mended," Alma Grace sniffed.

"I thought he meant it when he said his womanizing days were over, Josie. I hear the front door. Let's go to work," Carlene said, walking out of the kitchen.

"And he broke more vows than Carlene did, Alma Grace, so stop your sanctimonious shit," Patrice said.

"It's going to be the ruin of us. The church didn't like it when I threw in with y'all to put in a lingerie shop but a divorced woman in the mix? I don't know what's going to happen to me," Alma Grace whispered.

"We've done got past the fifties, cousin. Divorce happens. Get over it and you better not ever let me hear you praying for that bastard again or I'll snatch you baldheaded," Patrice said.

Carlene returned with a white carryout box and opened it before she set it in the middle of the table. "That was Beulah from across the street. She ran over to Miss Clawdy's and brought us a dozen pecan tarts. Said that she'd heard the bad news and would be praying that me and Lenny could work things out. Don't you even roll your eyes at the ceiling Alma Grace! She said that she hoped that the tarts would help us get through the morning."

"Bad news travels fast," Josie said.

"Fat chance of working it out," Patrice said. "Lenny Joe has treated you horrible, Carlene. It's over."

Alma Grace reached for a tart. "You had these at your wedding. All arranged on a silver platter on the groom's table. You want one? Remember all the good times, Carlene. God wants you to forgive Lenny."

"I'd rather lick the white tops off of chicken shit." Carlene marched out of the room before she had another emotional outbreak just thinking about her wedding day.

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