

THE PERILS OF POLLY PT

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Chapter 1 *By Roseanne Woerner*

Were it not for the fact that Harley Anderson sat three seats behind me in sophomore biology, I would find it hard to believe that he turned twenty eight on July 15, just three days after me.

Harley has close-set eyes, thin lips and a beaky nose. A six foot-two inch stick figure with rounded shoulders, and a sunken chest, with a grimy-green seed corn cap that appears to be permanently attached to his head.

He has a shifty manner that causes my distrustful nature to rear its' ugly head every time he steps through the door. So when his neighbor reported that Harley had turned cows out on his CRP, I didn't hesitate to inform my boss that somebody had better go out to the country and check ASAP.

Incidentally, my name is Polly Price. I have been a PT in Bridge County for almost nine years. I have green eyes and red hair that is cropped closely to my head because it tends to get in my way. I am five foot five and single. I drive a black 1986 Grand Am that has an annoying tendency to die in heavy traffic, and I am the proud owner of a six-toed cat named Moochie, that appeared on my doorstep one day and wouldn't go away.

My boss informed me that he wasn't feeling well and headed for home, the field man was otherwise involved, so it was up to me to go check Harley's cows, which was fine with me. It was a bright, sunny day, the air, cool-crisp, with a lingering scent of fresh earth leftover from a heavy rain the previous week

Harley lives three miles south of town, on a gravel road that is pitted with ruts and potholes. The CRP, once a cow pasture until he cropped it two years to make it eligible for the program, is about a half-mile north of his house. It is completely fenced.

I was fairly confident that I could drive down a lane that bordered the fields, do a visual check from my vehicle, then head back to the office without setting foot on ground that might have been slightly soft, due to the aforementioned rains.

Unfortunately, my idea had some flaws. I stared down a lane that had turned all but invisible from lack of use. The ground had been taken over by brush and small trees. I was exposing my car to all sorts of possible damage and wouldn't you know, just when that light bulb flashed in my head, the wheels on the right side thumped down into

some kind of crevice, made soft and squishy by the rain.

Of course, I was wearing white pants and sandals. Having given no thought to the fact that I might have to actually leave my car, I saw no reason to run home and change into something more suitable.

What was I going to do? I couldn't just sit there, even though, that was my first inclination. I reasoned that if I got out and looked at the road, I could find the driest parts, get back on track and drive out of there. I shoved my door open, quite an effort since the car was tilted to the right, climbed out, while striving to keep my legs away from a vehicle that was now caked with mud.

Sorry to say, that particular maneuver didn't work out so well. As I hopped out of the car, not only did the back of my pants pick up every speck of mud on the driver's side, but I landed in mud as well. Great gobs of gooey mud, oozing through my sandals, in between my toes and literally covering my feet.

Wow. I was stunned. The land didn't look to be in such bad shape from the road.

I knew that my little Grand Am was never going to make it out of that mess on its' own accord, so I hiked down the road to Harley's, my pants adhering to my skin, my sandals making a suctioned kind of plop-plop sound with every step. Thank goodness my hair still looked good.

Harley's house was at the end of a long, winding drive that was studded with young maple trees and a fresh crop of daffodils. A small ranch, constructed with cream-colored brick, it had originally belonged to his parents, until they moved to town, several years earlier and Harley fell heir to their home.

I walked around to the back of the house and started hammering on the door, yelling Harley's name in conjunction with the pounding. Since he tends to ignore all callers, I was particularly amazed when he flung the door open right away.

"Huh, I thought you were someone else," he said, then peered around me, most likely to see if I was alone.

As he stood in front of me, dripping wet from a shower that I had obviously interrupted, my first thought was to scoot past him, grab the phone, call the office and confirm the fact that Harley's seed corn cap never left his head. My second thought was not to look down.

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Chapter 2 *By Roseanne Woerner*

Okay, I looked down. So sue me. At some point in time, while I was pounding on the door, Harley managed to slip on a pair of faded jeans that are frayed around the cuffs and saggy in every place they can possibly sag. Water beads up on his ghostly skin and his long, skinny toes knead the carpet-covered stoop as he glances from me to the driveway next to the house, where my car should have been.

"Harley," I say, in an accusatory tone that is admittedly huffy. "You really need to block off that lane next to your CRP field so some unsuspecting person doesn't try to pull in. Someone might lose their way and not see the trees right off you know."

"There's trees ten foot tall in that lane. No one I know is so stupid they'd even try to drive in there."

Well, someone Harley knows is stupid, but who am I to point fingers, especially at myself.

After he pulls my car out of the muck, Harley keeps muttering something about a U-joint. He tows the car to my mechanic's place, and we head to my house so that I can change. My clothes are stiff with dried mud and I need a shower in the worst possible way.

I arrive, safe and sound, at the office at three o'clock sharp. Beatrice, the acting CED, is sitting at her desk, glaring at me, as I walk through the door. Her work is practically perfect in every way, which makes me her biggest challenge. I don't share her zest for pickiness.

"It takes you four hours to do a drive-by spot check that's less than five miles away?" She blares this remark across the office, so that the guy at the counter and the two ladies who are seated in our faux vinyl lobby chairs all turn and look in my direction.

I am not in the mood to explain what happened, so I walk to my desk as a brief moment of silence ensues. I know by now she has thoroughly examined my mileage sheet and because she has an excellent grasp of mathematics, she has mentally calculated my miles. I hold my breath as I wait for her comment. I have heard it so many times; I can almost say it with her.

"You didn't fill this out correctly." She waves the form through the air, a red flag begging a bull to take notice.

"Did too." I veer over to the counter and motion the two ladies forward with Beatrice hot on my heels.

She shoves the paper in front of me as the ladies shuffle toward me, arms interlocked, acting a lot older than they look. "You omitted your return mileage," Beatrice says.

"I didn't drive back," I tell her and then I address the ladies before Beatrice can say another word. I give them the best smile that I can muster in such a stressful circumstance. "May I help you?" I ask, as Beatrice finally takes the hint and stomps back to her desk.

"You sent us a letter," the taller one says. She has coal black hair that I'm thinking has to be a dye job, however, her hair is dark and I don't see any roots. She is also gifted with the ability to arch one eyebrow while the other one lies completely flat. I have a hunch that she can whistle through her teeth too, another skill that I admire greatly, so I broaden my smile a bit, because I suspect that she and I will be fast friends. The lady with her has a round face that I would consider cherubic, were it not for the fact that her eyes are darting all over the place, like a lizard tracking a fly.

I address my new buddy in my most pleasant voice. "What did the letter say?"

The ladies look at each other and shrug. My buddy says, "I don't have a clue."

This is a typical response so I'm ready with my next question. "By chance, did you bring the letter with you?"

They look at each other again and shake their heads no, in unison.

"Okay," I say to my buddy. "What's your name?"

"Cynthia Lasley."

I already know we don't have one Lasley in the county, but I check my producer listing anyway because it's the professional thing to do. "Hmmm," I say. "I don't see your name. Are you sure the letter came from this office?"

"It was from the FSA office." Cynthia tells me. "This is the FSA office isn't it?"

"Yes," I say and try another tact. "Do you remember what the letter was about?"

"Lots of things," The Cherub answers.

Cynthia gives me a solemn nod. "Yes and we didn't understand any of it."

My smile diminishes as I blow out a breath. I look at the producer listing, hoping that the name Lasley will suddenly appear. Even though Beatrice is out of sight, I can feel her vibes and I know that she is sitting at her desk, eavesdropping on the conversation, and smirking all over herself.

I glance at the wall clock and will it to move forward faster. I inadvertently think about my car and wonder if my mechanic would consider charging by the job instead of by the hour and if he'd be receptive to a payment plan. I address the room at large. "Did anyone send Mrs. Lasley a letter?"

My co-workers all answer with a resounding no and just as I am about to have the pair locate their farm on a plat map, Cherub points to a stack of six-page newsletters at the end of the counter.

"That's it," she says. "That's the letter we received."

"Ahhhh," I say. "That's our newsletter. It's an informational bulletin that we send out periodically." I grab a copy and open it up for their perusal. "What part are you interested in?"

"We don't know," Cynthia says. "That's why we came in. We want you to explain it to us."

I angle my head so that I can catch one more glimpse of the slow-moving clock as I nod. On the other side of the partition that conceals her desk from the counter, Beatrice is laughing like crazy.

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Chapter 3 *By Roseanne Woerner*

I flatten the newsletter out on the counter and turn it around for their perusal. Cherub indicates an article about CRP with the longest fingernails that I have ever seen on a human being. Her talons are purple, almost spiky-looking, and bejeweled with little rhinestone insets that appear to be some kind of name, when she holds her fingers in line.

Cynthia says something, but I'm not paying attention because I am trying to decipher the name on Cherub's nails, however, I am cognizant enough to realize that she's waiting for a reply from me.

Okay, so deep in my heart, I know that this is not my day for clever solutions, but does that stop me? Heck no. "I'm sorry," I tell Cynthia. "No one here can answer your question and unfortunately my boss is out of the office, but if you'd like to repeat it, I'll jot it down and get back to you tomorrow."

Cynthia beetles her brow and says okay in the same kind of lethargic tone that psychiatrists use to calm down crazy people. Then she says, "I asked you if I could use the restroom."

There is an omnipresent silence in the room, the kind of dead quiet that precedes an expected plop of water from a dripping faucet or the kind that follows a gunslinger's smart aleck reply. Everyone within proximity of the counter is looking at me and I am blushing like crazy. "Oh," I say and point down the hall. The only thing that saves me from looking even more foolish than I feel is the fact that Cherub seems oblivious to what has transpired and still wants more details about CRP.

"How do you get in this program?" she asks.

"Well," I say, using my most patient voice. "First off, you have to own a farm."

"If we didn't own a farm, why would we have come in?"

My thought exactly, although I didn't want to say as much because I thought it might sound snotty or condescending. While I am thinking of a diplomatic reply, I angle my body sideways, so that I can watch the clock as I speak. Unfortunately, we have plenty of time; it's only 3:50 pm.

We locate the farm on a plat map and she goes into this wild story about the farm, the deceased, former owner and how she and her sister

fell heir to the place. Frankly, it was all too much for me to grasp. In the

middle of her monologue, I pull out a newly minted SCIMS worksheet and fill in the more obvious blanks, like female, for instance. As soon as I can get a word in edgewise, I ask her name, address and phone number.

She gives me her address and phone number and then she tells me that her name is Christine DePaul, but I believe that Cherub really fits her better. I'm thinking that I should suggest it to her, to use as a common name, but then I chicken out.

I go to the next question on my form. "And your social security number?"

My buddy Cynthia returns and resettles herself at the counter. I wait a couple of beats because I'm thinking that Cherub can't remember what her social security number is, and when I finally I look up, she is staring daggers at me.

"Why do you need that?" Cherub asks.

"Need what?" Cynthia says.

"My social security number. She wants my social security number. You people must not watch Inside Edition, because they told me, just last week, that I shouldn't give it out to anyone."

"Well, for the most part that's true." I say. "But if you don't want to give it to me, you will never be eligible to receive any kind of payment from this office."

Cynthia nudges Cherub with her elbow. "Give it to her she says."

While Cherub digs through her monster-sized purse, I glance at the clock again and am amazed to discover that we've come this far in two minutes or less. She shows me her license and covers everything she possibly can, but the number.

I copy it down and then I move on to Cynthia. When I have all of her information, I tell them I will enter their names in the computer and I ask if they have a renter. We have a brief discussion about CRP, LDP's, reporting crops, and conservation plans.

By now, it's about 4:10 pm. I smile at them both and I reiterate that I will put their names on the farm as soon as I get them into our system. They turn to leave, then Cynthia stops in her tracks.

"I guess you don't need our partnership name right now, or you surely would have asked for it," she says.

"Partnership name?"

"Yes, Christine and I have formed a partnership and we're using it for all of the farm business. Did you need to know that?"

I motion for them to come back to the counter and we go through everything again. I take the partnership information on another SCIMS worksheet and by the time we finish, it's almost 4:20 pm. They tell me good-bye, but I don't take a breath or make a move until I see them walk out of the door and get into the car.

I start to turn toward my desk as the door opens and Harley walks in with a couple of papers in his hand. "Should have brought these in earlier when I dropped you off," he says. "I need to LDP these beans."

I take the settlement sheet and start to stamp it, just as I notice a check number and dollar amount in the lower left hand column of the page. Attached to the settlement sheet is a check stub from the elevator for Harley's beans. "Oh, I get it. This is your production evidence for beans you've already LDP'd."

"No," Harley says. "I haven't LDP'd these beans yet."

"But Harley, you already sold them."

"Course I did. Sold'em last month when the price jumped eight cents and now I want my LDP."

"But they aren't yours anymore. You can't LDP a crop after you've lost control."

He gives me a skeptical look. "I know I'm doing it right," he counters. "Bunch of us talked this whole thing through this morning at the coffee shop."

I lower my head and bang it a couple of times on the counter as the clock chimes 4:30.

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Chapter 4 (6-02) By Roseanne Woerner

It is 7:15 a.m., a Monday morning, no less, when my boss, Stevie Corona, calls me into his office. This is not a normal thing. On Monday mornings, Stevie likes to be left alone, however, I am still in stupor-mode and the 32 oz coke that I pack in my hand like some kind of extended appendage, has done nothing to diminish my trancelike state.

I might interject here that Stevie went to Colorado last summer for a brief vacation and returned to us as a cowboy. I haven't seen him don a pair of khakis for almost eight months, nor have his feet known leather that is not genuine ostrich, in that same amount of time. He says that if he couldn't wear his ostrich boots, he would wear nothing. Just in case he means that literally, we are taking up a collection for his next pair. The 'nothing' connotation has us all pretty worried.

Stevie gestures me into a chair and says, "Have you heard about Hank?"

I shake my head as I muddle through a list of plausible reasons why I haven't seen Hank Gretcham, our field man, for a couple of weeks. He owns a farm, plus he helps a couple of his neighbors put in crops. It seems, that in all likelihood, he has just been too busy to stop by. "No," I say. "What's going on?"

"Hank's wife won some kind of extended Alaskan cruise," Stevie tells me. "It doesn't appear that he'll be available to help us out much this fall."

I'm thinking, so? Even though I only have a partially functioning brain at this point, I fail to see how this affects me. I would like to say as much, but I'm afraid of the answer, not to mention the fact that Stevie is a master manipulator and the more I say here, the easier it will be for him to trip me up. I stare at him. Admittedly, my mouth is gaping a bit, but at least I'm not drooling.

"We're going to need some help with field work," Stevie says.

"Field work?"

"Yeah, you know, what Hank does, like drive-by spot checks. Most of the stuff you've done before and certainly nothing you can't handle."

I am nodding my head when I have my first epiphany of the day. "Huh, who's going to measure bins?" I ask.

A slow smile spreads across Stevie's face. "That would be you," he says. "And thanks for volunteering."

"But I don't know how to measure bins."

He gives me a manly shrug. "No problem. Hank can show you how before he leaves."

"Why can't we hire someone else to do it?"

"Lack of funds, lack of available help. The list is endless."

"Then why can't you do it?"

Stevie eases back in his chair and props his feet on the desk. "The boots," he says. He leans over, and in an effort to wipe off a speck of dirt that isn't really there; he slides his thumb across the binding, where leather meets sole.

"You can't measure bins because of your boots?"

"The ostrich doesn't like heights and neither do I," he says.

"An ostrich is a bird."

"But have you ever seen one fly?"

In lieu of giving Stevie the response he truly deserves, I get up and walk out of his office. He is close on my heels, armed with all kinds of handy bin-measuring tools, a clipboard, a plat book, and a glow-in-the-dark tape measure that is large enough to do some damage, if I go with my gut feeling and through it at his head.

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Chapter 5 (10-02) By Roseanne Woerner

It's 10:00 am, and I have thoroughly convinced myself that I don't really want to measure bins after all. I'm afraid of heights, I don't like dust, and I have no idea what all those little marks on the tape measure stand for, which in my opinion, marks me for certain failure. I would gladly say as much to Stevie, but he and Gracie Lumpkis have been huddled together in his office, talking about the new DCP program for quite some time, so I haven't had the chance.

Gracie is a fussy woman, with short, gray hair and twinkling eyes. She wears good perfume and gobs of makeup that she applies with a skilled, artistic flair. Her purse and shoes always match and her clothing bears the scent of a ritzy department store.

It is 10:30 when Stevie and Gracie exit his office. Stevie says, "Let's have a staff meeting in the conference room, since everyone's here."

Gracie heads toward the conference room, loaded down with all kinds of stuff, like papers and tablets and pencils. She also has a big bag of treats, so I offer to help carry something, in hopes that she'll double my ration. She hands me a stack of calculators.

My stomach does a tumble as soon as I take them from her. "What are these things for?" I ask.

"We're going to go over a couple of DCP forms," she says.

"The DCP forms require math?"

"That's right," Gracie tells me.

"But I'm no good at math," I say.

She nods at the stack I am carrying. "That's why I'm giving everyone a calculator."

"But I can't do calculator math either."

She's walking slightly faster than me and I get the feeling that she's not in the mood to answer a lot of questions, which might put us in the same boat because I'm not in the mood to work on my math skills.

"The bad new is, you have to do it, whether you want to or not," she says. "And the good news is, you'll be a lot better at math by the end of the day."

I heave a sigh, a really big one because that's what I do when I'm trying to be especially dramatic. "Won't the computer figure this stuff?"

"It will," she says. "But if you don't do it manually first, you won't grasp the concept."

By now we are all assembled around the conference table. "I'm not a real good concept grasper anyway," I say. "I volunteer to head up the forms and then watch really close while everyone else figures them."

"Polly," Stevie says. "You're whining again."

"I know," I tell him. "Is it working?"

"No," he says and he motions for Gracie to begin.

"Wait a minute," I say. "Can I have a treat first?"

Everyone at the table gives me a steely-eyed look, in unison. I am thinking it's probably because, with the exception of myself, no one else in the room is a morning person.

"I can't help it," I tell them. "I didn't have breakfast this morning, so now I'm really hungry and I just know I'll concentrate so much better if I have a little something in my stomach."

Stevie sighs. He grabs the bag and pulls out a handful of tiny, foil-wrapped, chocolate treats. He throws me a couple and hoards five or six for himself, however, good manners stops me from making a point of this, even though I know that one of us is obviously going to be shorted if this is how he intends to divide the remainder of the bag.

"Okay," Gracie says. "I'm giving you all a couple of worksheets that I'd like to review, but first I want to tell you some of the basics. The producers are going to have five base options. Very few people will choose option one and three and if they choose option number four, which we'll refer to as updating, they'll have three yield options. I know this sounds overwhelming, but it's really not as hard as it seems, once you get onto it."

I raise my hand and say, "Wait a minute, I have a question."

Gracie sighs. "What is it Polly?"

I look at Stevie. "I'd just like to say that heights don't bother me a bit and all of a sudden, measuring bins seems like a piece of cake. How soon can I start?"

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Chapter 6 (3-03) By Roseanne Woerner

Lunch today is a bag of Cheetos and a quick perusal of last weeks People Magazine, which is why I am contemplating some fairly weighty issues as I return to my desk like, will there be a sequel to Joe Millionaire and just how many times can J-Lo throw a fit before Ben calls it quits. Up at the counter, my next appointment, Chester Hulsinki awaits.

Chester recently retired from his 'city' job, selling insurance for some fly-by-night company, which has doubled his time at MJ's, our local coffee shop, much to the dismay of the waitresses there because he never leaves a tip.

Chester is a robust man with a big, booming voice and a slightly manic manner. He is the rumormonger of his township; oftentimes purposely spreading fabricated falsehoods just to get a rise out of his neighbors. Because his stories usually bear some small speck of truth, his coffee buddies are most always taken in, at least for a time, although you would think that they would have learned by now. On the other hand who wouldn't want to believe that Congress intends to relax the rules on the DCP program, thereby giving every producer a one-time, two-week shot to receive 150% of the average county yield.

Chester is twenty minutes early, which is a slightly lesser annoyance than the fact that he is telling everyone within earshot that he and I have a date, and not just an appointment either. He is suggesting that we have a 'datie' date, as he whips out a box of chocolates, a free sample from the Piggly-Wiggly uptown and a couple of wilted flowers that he probably picked up at the flower shop for half price because they are nearly dead.

I grab his farm files from my desk and I walk toward the counter. He gives me a wink as I approach and extracts a sheaf of papers from a shoebox that are fairly wrinkled and pretty well stained. This sort of shoebox briefcase has been a joke at several meetings, but I have never seen one before, so I am instantly grouchy, which means that my tone might be less than forgiving for his early arrival and his referral to our aforementioned date.

"What's that Chester?" I ask.

He spreads the papers across the counter, rudely jostling Ben Quigley, another producer, in the process. "This is my production for corn," he tells me. "Now these papers here have been on my dash," he points to some documents as he piles them up in a heap. "So don't mind the marks. They're probably just coffee stains. But these," he says as he

points to separate pile. "I found these on my floorboard in the truck, so the brown stains could be about anything that you'd like to imagine. I do keep a few hogs around you know."

I take a step away from the counter and I notice that Ben Quigley has just followed suit.

"I want you to figure up my production in case I decide to go option four," Chester says.

I grab a blank form from a stack at the end of the counter. "Well, first we have to fill out this 658P," I tell him. Block five is where you enter your settlement sheet invoice numbers and then you just put your bushels in the corresponding year. See, like this." I grab one of his sheets from the 'coffee-stain' pile and enter the bushels in the form, just to get him started.

"Now that's going to be a problem for you," he says. "You're not going to be able to come up with all of my production, cause I fed some of my corn, but I brought in some scale tickets for my proof."

Chester is digging through the front pockets of his green, quilted jacket now and pulling out little swatches of paper along with a few kernels of corn, a piece of straw, and a small wad of blue-colored lint that must have formed on the last occasion that his jacket was washed, which was most likely a year or so ago. He plunks all of his little treasures on the counter and sorts the paper from the debris, completely unconcerned about the mess he's making that I am going to have to clean up as soon as he leaves.

As he unfolds the papers, I am thinking that they look a little more like the fortunes out of Chinese cookies than scale tickets because, not only are they written by hand, they are written in pencil to boot. I shake my head as I open the box of candy, pop a piece in my mouth and wonder how J-Lo would handle Chester. I wonder if I should put the flowers in water and try to save them. And most of all, I wonder if the chocolate I'm eating has been riding around on Chester's floorboard, neatly tucked between his production evidence and whatever else. Yuck!!!

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Chapter 7 (6-03) By Roseanne Woerner

Before my boss, Stevie Corona and I attend a meeting together, there is always a big debate about where we will sit. It usually starts when we receive the meeting notice and it ends when we get to the meeting. I like to sit up front because I can see and hear much better there. Stevie thinks that the people in the middle of the room are the most inconspicuous, so that's where we usually end up. However, I still feel compelled to voice my preference, just in case he wants to do things my way for a change.

So here I am, headed down a four-lane highway, sitting in the passenger seat of Stevie's bright, red, beefed-up truck, a truck with a temperamental engine that only runs part of the time, a truck that sits so high, semi drivers have to look up to make eye contact, a truck that has so many wheels, it resembles a giant pair of roller-blades. I am too embarrassed for words.

"I have to stop," Stevie says as soon as we are ten miles out of town.

"We can't stop now," I tell him. "We just left the office."

"Doesn't matter, I need coffee." He manages a yawn, which looks as fake as it sounds, and then he flashes me a very suspicious-looking smile.

We pull into the first town we come to, a little burg with one gas station that is directly across from the square. The lot is very narrow and very short and I am thinking that Stevie isn't going to negotiate the entrance...but when I finally do open my eyes, I see that, not only has he made the scary hairpin turn, but he has managed to park his truck precisely between the lines as well. That would be the lines for parking slots 1, 2, & 3.

He lures me inside by telling me that we probably won't make another stop, so if I want anything, or if I need to use the restroom, I should do it now. By the time I make it back outside, Stevie is already waiting for me in the truck. The only problem is, he's sitting on the passenger side.

"I'm sick," he tells me. "You have to drive."

He can moan a lot louder than I can argue (I did a test just to be sure), so I take a seat behind the wheel and start the engine. I could amass a bit of self-confidence here, if only I didn't have to put the darn transmission in gear, but as it is, I'm going back and forth so much, I feel like a ball that is trapped between two ping-pong paddles. With Stevie giving me his most expert truck driving guidance, it takes me about fifteen minutes to get out of that lot and if he was fibbing about being sick before, it's not a fib now. The man is downright peaked.

By the time we arrive at the hotel, the lobby is already filled with FSA employees and the lines at the front counter are long and slow moving. Stevie hands me his credit card. "Here, you check me in and I'll go stake out a couple of seats in the meeting room."

"Sounds good," I say. "Just remember, I like to sit up front."

"No way are we sitting up front," he tells me. "But I will compromise. You like the front, I like the middle, so we'll sit in back."

He wanders into a maze of people, and if I crane my neck just right, I can keep tabs on him. Big surprise, he doesn't walk toward the meeting room and look for seats. Instead, he strikes up a conversation with a couple of other managers from the northwest corner of the state. He looks fairly relaxed, from my vantage point. In fact, he seems to be content and pretty pleased with himself. I certainly can't say that he looks one bit sick and I am thinking that he probably had me drive so that he could sleep, or maybe he just wanted me to hear his broad range of snores.

It takes ten minutes to check in and by the time that I am finished, the lobby is nearly deserted. Stevie is still over in the corner, conversing with his cronies. When he sees that I have made it through the line, he breaks away. "Where did everybody go?" he asks.

"I don't know," I tell him. "Maybe everyone is already in the meeting room."

"No way," he says, as he checks his watch. "It's not supposed to start for another minute and a half."

We are still at the registration table when the meeting starts and I feel like a little kid who is late for school. We attempt an unobtrusive entry, but then it looks as if there is no place to sit. I stand at the back of the room while Stevie mills around through the crowd, looking for empty seats. He makes so much noise that we catch the eye of the specialist. The specialist stops his welcoming speech and points to a couple of spots at the first table. Everyone in the room is watching us now.

"Hey Stevie," I whisper as we walk up the aisle. "Thanks."

"For what?" he asks.

"For stopping at the gas station and then making me drive. If we'd come here straight from the office like I wanted to, we never would have gotten such great front row seats."

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Chapter 8 (10-03) By Roseanne Woerner

It is Monday morning. Cindy Sheryl, our automation PT, is on leave and I am filling in. I have watched her bring up the computer a million times. I have done start-of-day and end-of-day. I know how to queue. So, why am I nervous? This is the question I ask myself as I slip the key into the slot and flip the red power button. It's easy. I just flip the switch and...nothing happens.

I am thinking, maybe I should start all over. So, I flip the switch back, take out the key and then restart the process. Nothing again. I check the mainframe. There are lights. I check the LAN/WAN cabinet. Lights there too. I don't know what they mean, but at this point, I feel certain that any sign of electric power has to be good. I check the cables. I check every connection, everything that's hooked into something else.

When I am confident that the cables, buttons, and switches are pretty much intact, I call for help.

My point of contact is Joe Monroe. Joe has a precise voice and he uses the word 'exactly' in almost every sentence. I am thinking that Joe is really picky. I bet that he dry-cleans his blue jeans. I bet he presses his sweaters. I bet he is going to hate working with me.

"What does your screen look like exactly?" he asks.

"It doesn't look like anything," I tell him. "It's completely black."

"Completely black?"

"Yes, completely black."

Joe blows out some air. "Okay," he tells me.

"Let's proceed. First, we need to make certain that you have a power source, so look at the front of your computer and tell me what you see exactly."

"I see nothing, Joe."

"You don't see a light?"

"No," I say. "I don't see a light."

"Fine," he says.

"But then I don't see a place for a light either."

He blows out some more air, as if he is already annoyed with me, which would be a record since I have only answered a couple of questions so far. "Okay," he says. "Now this is important. We need to rule out a PBKAC problem." His words are drawn out and every syllable enunciated. "Where exactly is your machine plugged in?"

"Huh...into a wall socket of course," I try to muster a bit of indignation in my tone, so that he will think he's dealing with a true professional. "Rest assured, I checked every connection before I called."

He blows out air again. "Is your CAT5 cable connected to the Ethernet card?" he asks.

I am excited now. I know that one. "That's the blue cable right?"

"Exactly," he says.

"Yes, it's plugged in."

"Hmmm," he says. "I can't quite determine the problem exactly, but I think we need to move to the LAN/WAN cabinet and maybe we should have a conference call with Lola Falooza. She's really good at diagnosing PBKACs."

I figure that if Joe wants to call in reinforcements, by golly, I will too. I walk to the door while he has me on hold and I give a yell for Stevie Corona.

Stevie ambles over to the computer room with coffee in hand. He is wearing ostrich boots on his feet and an expression of boss bliss on his face. "What's up?" he asks.

"We're on hold," I whisper. "The computer won't come up and I need help. Here, I'll put the phone on speaker so you can hear what they're saying too, but you have to promise not to talk."

"But..."

"Promise or I'm getting someone else to help."

"But what if I..."

"Hand signals. You can do that, but nothing else. Okay?"

He thinks about it for a minute and then he gives me a nod.

"Lola," Joe says. "This is Polly. She can't seem to bring up her system this morning for some reason. She says she has power, but nothing is happening."

"Hey Polly, how are you doing there girlfriend. Can I call you girlfriend, even though we just met?"

Lola is way too cheerful for eight o'clock in the morning. She has one of those raspy voices, indicative of a heavy smoker or a former cheerleader, who is still living with the effects of strained vocal chords.

"Hi Lola," I say.

"Lola," Joe continues. "I think we have a PBKAC problem but I can't exactly define a plan of attack so I thought we could take a peek at the LAN/WAN."

"Terrific," Lola says. "Now Polly, I'm just going to hop into your system for a minute, if that's okay with you."

"Sure," I say.

I hear a lot of typing, some muttering, a few mumbled words, and then Lola says, "Polly, has anyone moved your jumpers?"

I am about to ask what a jumper is, but Stevie is already shaking his head no. "Not to my knowledge," I say.

"Okay, swell."

I hear voices in the background and I am thinking that Lola is carrying on several conversations at once. What a woman.

"Now Polly, the router is at the top of the cabinet and it's sitting on a shelf that can be pulled out. I want you to pull it out, locate the cable that runs behind the router and tell me if it's connected to the D1 slot or the D2."

Stevie listens to the instructions and nods. He is up on his tiptoes now. He's got the router pulled out. He's scrunched between the cabinet and the wall. His face is partially smashed and he can only see out of one eye. He says something.

"Did you say D1 Stevie?"

He nods yes, so I relay the message to Lola. "Absolutely terrific," she says. "You go girlfriend. Great answer."

I am smiling all over myself. I am blushing with pride. I feel like I just won a prize on a game show.

There is more typing, more muttering and then Lola says, "Now Polly, I'm going to ask that you move the LAN/WAN cabinet away from the

wall. Once it's away from the wall, I want you to check the back of the server at the bottom of the cabinet. Now, you'll have to get down on your knees to do this, but I want you to tell me what kind of lights you have and what color they are."

Stevie is so good. He moves the cabinet away from the wall and proceeds to get down on his knees. One gold light," he says. "And three green ones."

I am in the process of passing the message on to Lola when Stevie says, "Uh...Polly."

"Stevie be quiet," I hiss. "If you talk, I can't hear."

"Polly, look at me for just one second. Please."

Lola is saying something else, but I've already stopped listening because I'm looking at Stevie. He's still down on his knees, waving a plug through the air. "This might be the problem," he says.

"No way," I tell him. "I checked the outlet."

"Which outlet?"

I point to the most obvious outlet beside the monitor. "That one right there," I tell him.

"But that's the outlet for the printers."

"Then where is the outlet for the computer?"

"Polly...girlfriend...hey Polly. Are you there?" It's Lola.

"Sorry Lola," I say. I guess we found the trouble. I feel really stupid. The computer wasn't plugged in after all. Hey Joe, I guess it wasn't a PBKAC problem."

"Sounds like it was to me," Joe says.

"Oh...well...what exactly does PBKAC mean Joe?"

" It means PERSON BETWEEN KEYBOARD AND CHAIR," Joe says.

"Well, you know what I say to that, don't you Joe?"

"No," he says. "What?"

"Exactly."

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Chapter 9 (12-03) By Roseanne Woerner

We're getting new furniture in a couple of weeks and Gracie Luptkis is wandering around the office with a yardstick clutched in her hand, measuring every inch of available space. In fact, she's up at the counter right now, computing the distance between the typewriter table and where she thinks the copier should be placed, as Herbie Johnson strolls in.

Herbie reminds me of Roger Miller, a popular crooner from my mother's era. Mom always had a Roger Miller record playing on our old Hi-Fi, which is the reason I'm an authority on many of his songs. If she could see Herbie, she would swoon at first sight because he not only bears a striking resemblance to the singer, he possesses a similar deep, sultry voice.

He shakes a piece of paper at me as I approach the counter. No...let me rephrase that...the paper makes a giant swoop through the air as I approach the counter. (Herbie doesn't move fast enough to shake anything) "What can I do for you today, Herbie?" I ask.

"My crop report is all wrong," he says. "And my insurance company won't pay my claim until it's fixed."

Herbie has a share lease with a landlord who has CRP and I have an idea that we might have carried the landlord's CRP percentage through the remainder of the certification. We have made this error a time or two in past years...okay, okay...it's probably our most common mistake during certification and even though we make every effort to review our work, we still have to make corrections from time to time.

Gracie moves to the wall at the end of the counter and attempts to remove the bulletin board we use to post our county prices. I would like to tell her that she could pick a more opportune time to start rearranging stuff, however, the scent of her perfume seems to nicely mask the smell of Herbie's clothing, which is a cross between stale stogies and dirty, wet goats.

He hands me his certification and while I carefully peruse each entry, Gracie decides to start pounding nails. "Herbie," I say finally. "I can't find an error here." (pound, pound, pound) "Why does your insurance company say that this is wrong?"

Herbie doesn't speak at first. He's pretty distracted by Gracie, who is now using her yardstick as a level for the two nails that she just drove into the wall. "Uh," he says, "They claim there's a problem with the shares."

While his eyes are glued on Gracie, he does a quick side shuffle with his feet. This sort of foot maneuver is a definite red flag, and Gracie takes note of it at once. She turns our way for a couple of seconds so that she can hear our conversation. Being the payment limitation clerk, she's pretty keen on documenting changes in farming operations as soon as they occur.

"This certification says that you have a fifty percent interest in this ground. Isn't that right?" I ask.

Herbie's eyes dart from me to Gracie, who now has the hammer poised mid-air. He must find the hammer a bit intimidating because a thin, sheen of perspiration covers his lip. "Uh," he says. "How do you want me to answer that?"

"Correctly," I say.

"Well, Mike, that's my boy you know, he helps me some."

"Are you inferring that Mike had a share of this crop?"

"No," Herbie says and I breathe an immediate sigh of relief, until he adds, "I just give him my share of the crop and I keep the government check. It works out good that way."

My intestines knot up. I imagine that they resemble some cute little balloon animal. In fact, I think my innards are forming a toy poodle that escapes from my tummy as a gut-wrenching groan. It's never good to make a noise of distress, while at the counter, so I take a pause.

Herbie's eyes are speaking volumes to me right now. They say, I came here because I have a problem and I trust you to help me fix it. I am an honest person and I don't feel as though I've done anything wrong.

And me, I'm thinking in terms of Misrepresentation of Shares, penalties, fines, and loss of stature at the coffee shop...all the things that make my job just so darn pleasant.

I shove the certification aside. "Herbie," I say finally. "Have you ever thought about being a singer? You could go on the road and make lots of money, and then you turn your whole farming operation over to Mike, we won't have to bother with any of these pesky rules and forms. Here let me teach you the words and then we'll go practice on my mom. Sing along with me now, Herbie...I'm a man of means, by no means, king of the road..."

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Chapter 10 (3-04) By Roseanne Woerner

Last summer, Stevie Cornona, my boss and a man of many hobbies, added horseshoe pitching to his laundry list of passions. So, when he calls me in his office on Monday morning, it is no surprise to see him in his newly acquired, horseshoe-pitching stance. His legs bend at the knees and his body cants forward while one arm rises. He hushes me into silence as he pretends to ring some big, metal stake that only he can see.

After I clap and surmise the tally of his imaginary points, he is ready to get his workday started. "The D.D. will be here next week," he tells me. "Are you ready for your Quarterly Review?"

"I don't know," I say, as I inch toward the door. "I guess I am...maybe. What's he checking anyway?"

"That information would be in the handouts I gave you at the staff meeting last week, plus he wants to look at the food plot spot-checks that you did on CRP." He studies my face for a couple of seconds and then he says, "Tell me they're done."

"I could tell you that," I say. "But then, you'd be mostly responsible for my bold-faced lie."

He furrows his brow as he rubs his chin. "We need ten percent. How many more do you have to do?"

"I don't remember, I'd have to look..."

"Wind it up by Friday."

"Consider them finished."

I am hoping like crazy that he doesn't want see the list because too much time has passed and I can't remember exactly where I put the stupid thing. I scoot out of his office and he trails me to his door. "I assume you know that Hank went south for a couple of week's, so it looks like you'll be spending some quality time in the field. Make sure you dress for the weather."

"Not a problem," I say.

Only...it is a problem, because, after a quick review of the register that I made last fall, it appears that I have barely started my food plot checks and, out of the blue, we are hit with four inches of snow.

About 9.9% of the plots are located next to a road, so they will be easy to check, but that one last farm is elusive. From my cursory review, it looks like every other plot that I can find is located in some land-locked field that is surrounded either by timber or a creek, certainly not places I want to venture in decent weather, let alone with so much snow on the ground.

AND then I remember that Harley Johnson has a brand new four-wheeler and I am immensely cheered. I walk to the window and check the thermometer. It's thirty-four degrees. The sun is out. The snow looks scrunchy. I think that it would be great fun to make a snowman today, or to go sledding down Mulberry Hill, but since I'm working...I don't know...gee whiz...it might not be a huge hardship to go four-wheeling across Harley's big, open field, and hey, as long as I am there, I can check his food plot too.

I dash to my phone and dial his number. I know it by heart because Harley gets checked quite a bit for one reason or another. "Harley, I say. "How're you doing, guy?"

He doesn't answer right away. Most likely because I'm pretty direct and it's not my custom to schmooze him before I tell him what I want. "Well," he finally says. "I've been having this pain in my neck and I went to the doc today to see about it, but he said there wasn't anything wrong, so I made an appointment with a chiropractor that my cousin..."

"Okay," I tell him. "Okay, okay, okay. I was just wondering...did you get that ATV that you were talking about buying last week?"

"Uh...yeah."

"Great," I say. "I need to come out and check your food plot."

"Hum," he says. "I guess I should be around first thing in the morning."

"Not in the morning," I whine. "I already have appointments scheduled tomorrow. Can't you fit me in today? Please, please, pretty please?"

"Yeah," he says. "I could stick around here for awhile. Come on out."

I am giddy with excitement. "Sounds good," I say. I just needed to make sure that you had adequate transportation to get to the plot. I mean, from the map I have here, it appears to be way out in the middle of field #5."

"Yup," he says. "Big Buster will take us anywhere we want to go."

We make plans to meet at Harley's house at one-thirty and I am still chuckling as I hang up the phone.

Myra Watkins, who sits near the counter and just happens to be Harley's aunt, turns around in her seat and says, "You're going to Harley's today?"

"I have to," I tell her. "I have to get my spotchecks done by Friday. So, first, I'm going to Dawson's, then I'm going to McCree's, then I'm going to Harley's. Everyone but Harley is a drive-by, but guess what? As luck would have it, Harley has a new four-wheeler we can take out to the field."

"Harley doesn't own a four-wheeler." Myra tells me.

"Yes, he does," I counter.

My insistence causes Myra to use her stern, adamant voice. "No, he doesn't."

"Yes, he does," I tell her again. "In fact, he said that he was buying it last week when he came in for his loan and I specifically asked him today if he got it and he said yes."

"I know that, Missy. And what I'm trying to tell you is that he didn't buy it for himself. He bought it for his dad."

"Now, that just doesn't make any sense. If he doesn't have one, why did he just tell me that he would take me out to the field on Big Buster?"

Myra throws her head back and laughs and laughs. When she finally settles herself, her face is red and her eyes are leaking tears. She makes these muttering sounds and then she chuckles again.

"Would you please tell me what's so funny?" I ask.

She giggles again and then she says, "The jokes on you, Polly. Big Buster is Harley's old, cantankerous mule."

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Chapter 11 (6-04) By Roseanne Woerner

I guess it's a simple matter of fact that I get into trouble every single day. Sometimes I am the instigator of minor irritations with my fellow coworkers...I 'X' out of my computer before I shut it down...I don't tally my timesheet correctly...I act before I think, etc. Other times, I am the instigator of major irritations and people don't talk to me for days.

Take Stevie Corona for example. Last winter, I accidentally sent him on a food plot spot check where he had to ride a mule. Honestly, I intended to go myself, but when I reviewed Handbook Procedure, I discovered that I had to check fifteen percent of our food plots instead of ten. Stevie wanted them done right away and he even offered to help. So when I divvied things out, he wound up with Harley's map because it was in his area. Also, I found out about the mule just before I was ready to leave the office and I'm certain that I'm allergic.

I'll never forget how Stevie looked when he came back to the office. Even though it was winter, he was sweating. I think his perspiration level must have bumped into overdrive when the mule got spooked and took off down the hill with poor Stevie barely able to hold onto the reins. He also developed a stress fracture after the mule stepped on his foot, but the good news is that his limp is barely noticeable now, four months after the fact.

He was sullen after that for quite some time, but yesterday, when I was up at the counter certifying a producer, Stevie overheard the conversation. You see, I am a city girl and I've never had a chance to ride in a tractor, so when Stevie told me that I could come out to his farm and help, I was elated. And while I'm really excited about the opportunity, I'm also a bit scared because I'm thinking that he has a score to settle with me over the mule thing. I can see it in his eyes.

I'm uncertain about proper planting attire, so I show up at Stevie's house in my blue jeans and tennis shoes. Glenda, Stevie's wife tells me that Stevie has already gotten started and that we are supposed to meet him in the forty-acre field on the east side of their property. Glenda's pretty friendly and we have a nice little chat on the way, but I'm nervous because she seems to find a lot of humor in the fact that Stevie is letting me plant, plus she brings along **TWO** cameras.

Stevie is just finishing a row of beans when we pull up to the field, so he makes a turn, stops the planter and hops out of the cab, careful not to put too much weight on his bad foot. He hasn't had any breakdowns yet and even though the ground is dry, the beans are going in pretty good, so he is smiling as we approach.

He hustles me into the cab...well...he attempts to hustle me into the cab of the tractor, but the stairs are small and fairly steep. I'm not about to move too fast, no matter how close he is or how much he breathes down my neck. Glenda is already shooting pictures. I am thinking that Stevie will tell me what to do and then leave, but to my surprise, and probably relief, he sits down next to me.

The engine is still running and it's pretty noisy. We are in a confined space and my seat is so high I feel like I am perched in the air. There are gobs of levers and gearshifts to contend with, but Stevie assures me that all I have to do is drive and he will take care of the rest. "Push the right pedal," he says.

I do and we are off.

The first thing that I notice is the tires. They are smooth rubber with a ridge in the middle. Maybe, because they have no tread, I am settled with this floating sensation, as if I'm not really in control at all. I'm not scared though because we are slugging through the field at a snail's pace.

"Do you want to go faster?" Stevie asks.

I say no.

The steering wheel is big and it seems to have a lot of play. Stevie keeps looking over his shoulder at something, but I'm not taking my eyes off the deepest groove in the field, no matter what. Things seem to be going well, but then we near the end of the field Stevie starts to speak his sentences in threes. This drives me nuts because he makes these rapid-fire statements again and again. "Don't go so fast, don't go so fast, don't go so fast," he says. "Left pedal, left pedal, left pedal."

Okay, so there are three pedals on the floor and I'm wondering if he means the far left pedal or the left pedal that is next to the pedal on the right. Already I am confused, but I don't have time to ask which one to push because there is a strained sense of urgency in his voice. I take a chance and hit the far left pedal.

It seems to be the right choice and I'm assuming this will calm him down, but then he's yelling in my ear, "Don't turn so sharp, don't turn so sharp, don't turn so sharp," as we wind our way back from the opposite end of the field.

When we reach our midway point, he has stopped shaking, and as we approach the place where we started, the tightness in his voice has almost completely disappeared. I'm thinking that this is going to be a big forty acres if he loses control so easily, and I am happy to stop when he tells me. As soon as my feet are off the pedals and my hands are off the steering wheel, his smile returns. In fact, his smile lights up his face and he seems extremely happy as I exit the cab, I can only assume that he really enjoyed showing me how to plant. I notice that he's sweating a bit too and so I'm thinking that maybe he just sweats easily; maybe he just *seemed* nervous; maybe he really did have a good time after all.

He thanks me for coming out and I thank him for showing me the ropes. On the way home, I decide that Stevie's a pretty good guy and that I should try to reciprocate his kindness in some small way. That's when it hits me. I can be his planting buddy. I can take my vacation next spring and help him get his crops in. He can't possibly say no, especially now that I am so well trained.

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Chapter 12 (9-04) By Roseanne Woerner

It's Wednesday morning and we're well into CRP signup. Admittedly I'm a bit on the testy side, mostly because it stormed last night and my cat Moochie is afraid of thunder. So when the thunderclouds clapped, she yowled. Time of night made no difference to her whatsoever. Also, I spent the entire evening talking to myself about Ophelia Bedford and I know that I'm not going to settle down until I've had my say.

I stomp into Stevie Corona's office first thing, plunk my sleeping bag next to his desk and I tell him, "There's no room in my cubicle or in the hall closet for this, so I'm leaving it in here."

"Uh huh," he says. Since he's looking down, engrossed in notices, while slurping coffee, it doesn't dawn on him that I'm being a drama queen. (And a darn good one at that I might add)

I cross my arms...no reaction...I tap my foot...still no reaction...I clear my throat...twice. Finally he looks up. "What," he says.

"I'm leaving this here," I tell him again.

"I heard you," he says. "And I know I'm going to be sorry I asked, but why did you bring your sleeping bag to work?"

"I'm obviously going to have to stay all night and I think I deserve a decent place to lay my weary head."

He picks up a notice and holds it in front of his face. He pretends to study it so that I won't see that he's smiling all over himself, but his earnest act only makes my foot tap harder. "Why would you want to spend the night here?" he asks as soon as he regains his composure.

"I don't want to, I have to, and it's all your fault because you made an appointment for me with Ophelia Bedford for 3:30 this afternoon. You know how much she talks."

"Yes I do," he admits. "And I made the appointment for her convenience because she is a working woman with appointments of her own to keep, but I also told her that we close at 4:30."

"She sells Avon for pity's sake. She can set her own schedule."

"Polly, what is our first priority in this office?"

"Customer service," I mumble.

"And how do we provide good customer service?"

“By being friendly and putting the customer first.”

“Very good. Now, I will stay with you until she leaves,” he says. “But you know as well as I do that once in awhile we have to hang around a little later than usual. So you might as well put a big smile on your face and prepare to greet the day.”

Ophelia gets to the office almost forty minutes early, which I take as a positive sign. She wears a bright purple pantsuit that swishes when she walks. Plus, she has a paisley turban wrapped around her head and a big gob of clunky bracelets dangling from her wrists. She sounds like a walking wind chime. While Stevie talks to her about the point system, I study her face. It is an artful display of practically every item contained in the sample case she just ‘happened’ to bring along, in case anyone wanted to purchase her cosmetics. She is a veritable wheel of color, blue mascara, green eye shadow, and bright red lips.

I lay out a map of her farm and then Stevie and I start our spiel. She says that she wants as many points as possible, so I suggest that she might consider planting trees. Her face prunes into an instant grimace.

“I’m not interested in anything that permanent,” she says, and then she lightly touches Stevie’s hand. “I want my ground to rest, like a piece of freshly kneaded dough.”

Stevie explains seeding mixtures and I tell her about midcontract management. Ophelia tells us about the pies she baked last Sunday, the miles that she puts on her car every week, and the demanding life of a salesperson. I’m getting the feeling that she’s not the least bit interested in CRP, but I proceed with my explanation of the bidding process and I tell her that September 24th is the final date to offer a bid.

She talks nonstop about her parents, who are now deceased, the neighbors, who she doesn’t like, and how she might just opt to sell the farm because prices are good and she’d really rather live in town. At 4:27, she checks her watch. “Oh my goodness,” she says. “I have an important appointment at 4:30. I’m going to be late.” She rises slowly from her chair and tells Stevie that she’ll see him on the 24th if she decides to put in a bid.

I’m thinking that I should tell Stevie I’ll leave my sleeping bag in his office, in case she returns, but I decide that for once, I’ll keep my mouth shut. There is just enough time to clear off my desk before I leave, but then Wilbur Simmons walks through the door, carrying a flattened paper sack that is full of scribbles and scrawls...another story altogether.

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Chapter 13 (12-04) By Roseanne Woerner

I mutter under my breath when I walk in Stevie's office. "Stevie," I say. "I need to talk."

Gracie Lumpkis appears at Stevie's door. "You have a call on line two," she tells him.

"Thanks Gracie," Stevie says. Then to me he says, "Just a minute Polly." He picks up the receiver and has a brief conversation with someone about a counter-cyclical payment. When he hangs up the phone he returns his attention to me.

"What's that?" he asks and points to my hand.

"This? Oh, I guess I need to talk about this too." I hold up a sizeable piece of brown paper sack, emblazoned with a logo from the Piggly-Wiggly. "Wilbur Simmons brought this in last night. It's his hand-written bill for his CRP seeding. I was wondering if I could accept it."

Stevie extracts the paper from my hand and chuckles. "Pretty creative," he says. "Doesn't he own...I don't know...say, a spiral notebook perhaps or some sort of tablet?"

"Probably so, but I think Wilbur has a recycling bug."

Stevie turns the paper this way and that. "Obviously," he says. "And in a big way."

"But can I accept it?" I ask.

Stevie shrugs. "I don't see why not. Everything you need is plainly documented here, however uniquely."

Gracie appears at the door again. "I hate to interrupt," she says. "But we're swamped out here. Polly, could you help us out at the counter?"

"Okay," I say. "I'll be out in a second." I say to Stevie, "I still need to tell you something."

"So, come back in when the counter is clear."

As I approach the counter, I see that Roger Simmons is next in line. Roger inherited his ground last year from an aunt on his mother's side, so government programs tend to overwhelm him. "What's your LDP today on corn today?" he asks.

I glance at the board that hangs on the wall next to the calendar.
"Looks like it's thirty cents."

"Sounds good," he says. "I want to LDP then."

"Is your corn harvested?"

"You mean this year?"

"Yes."

"No. It's still in the field. Might be there till spring if I can't find someplace to store it."

"You can't LDP your corn until it's in a bin," I tell him. "Unless you're going to sell directly out of the field, and then you need to do a 709."

"I have corn in a bin," he says.

"This year's crop?"

"No, last year's crop. I wasn't smart enough to get rid of the stuff when prices took off. That's why this year's crop is still out in the field."

"You can't LDP last year's crop this year," I tell him.

"Why not? I couldn't LDP it last year."

"There wasn't an LDP last year Roger."

He bangs the counter with his hand and smiles. "My point exactly. If fair was fair, I should be able to go back and collect an LDP that wasn't around last year on grain that was."

"This is one of those twisty, theoretic scenarios you like to dream up isn't it?"

"Well," he says as he puffs out his chest a bit. "Am I right or am I right?"

I pull out a couple of forms from the drawer. "Okay," I say. "Let's start from scratch."

I spend over twenty minutes with Roger and by the time I finish, we're both shaking our heads. However, I think he now understands, the LDP process, DCP signup, and I'm hoping like crazy he realizes that if he

does plant an acre of grapes next year, he remembers to request a base reduction.

As soon as Roger leaves, I head back to Stevie's office. He's reading his email and murmuring something, but he looks up when I walk in. "Is this a good time?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "Come on in." Then he gestures to his chair and says, "Have a seat."

I would just as soon stand, say what I have to say and make a speedy retreat, but I guess it's only fair to look him in the eye when I deliver my news. I probably owe him that. "I'm leaving," I say.

"Yeah right," he says. "When the walls tumble down."

"No really. I'm serious. I requested a transfer to northwest Iowa."

"I don't understand," he says.

"I guess I just feel it's time for a change. But I'll write," I say. "I promise."

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Chapter 14 (3-05) By Lisa Forburger

While driving to work this morning I thought to myself, what a beautiful day. The temperature is above normal, the wind is not blowing, and there is no snow on the ground on this winter morning. I remember back when I was a child and how the winter never ended. I remember huddling in tunnels and caves fighting below zero temps to keep warm while playing outside with my brothers and sisters. I pull into the parking lot which is vacant, because I am the first one to arrive, open my door, put my foot out hit a patch of ice while I am beginning to stand up and do the splits. I always wanted to do that in high school but now is not the time to learn that task. I scream because I am in total shock and pain, and then I quickly look to see if anyone has seen my accomplishment and then I see a group of my friendly farmers have gathered at Casey's, right across the street, for their morning coffee. They all wave and I wave back. I find my feet, stand up, brush off my skirt, and I am up and on my way!

I find my Advil along with a hot cup of coffee inside the office. I decided to make my own coffee today instead of grabbing my usual cup at Casey's. I start the computer and realize that printer P1 is not working. I send in a trouble ticket and sit back for my repair man phone call. Two days pass quickly and I receive the phone call. We can never just have the IBM man come anymore in his cute little suit, and we have to go through a series of tests to make sure that we have properly identified there is a real problem. This time I am told to stick a scissors in the two slots in the front of the printer that I have it half way torn apart. This will supposedly trigger the sheet to feed and we can see why it is jamming. I have worn a beautiful white sweater but I believe that Oxy Clean will take care of anything. I have the phone tucked to my ear with the help of my shoulder, the cord stretched to the max, thinking of a cordless phone for the office supply wish list, and I am trying to follow my repair man's instructions. "I am supposed to what!!!!? Now wait a minute, the printer is on," I yell. "Are you sure this will not hurt me?" I ask fearing for my life. I do what I am told and a spark flies across the room and the printer dies. I stand up, brush my skirt off, and pick the phone back up. "Is it working?" The repair man asks. "Me or the machine?" I ask. In a low voice he says, "A new printer will be shipped today." I am excited.

Four weeks later the new old printer arrives. I guess a new one to our office, or maybe they call that refurbished. In the mean time, 65,000 copies have been run on the two printers that work. The entire office staff smiles when they see the big box. We even get a real live person to deliver and set up this machine. I mention port and address and he

says, "huh?" I turn pale for I know the stress of this ancient computer system. So he unpacks the new old printer and begins to plug it in and when he plugs in the blue cable I heard an awful beep and sounds like people talking in different tongues from employees that are using the old die hard computers and I know that he has knocked the run out. Great. He prints the config page and says looks like it is working and smiles. My face matches my white shirt but I sign his sheet, thank him and show him out the door. He leaves me the card that rates the service and I grab it with white knuckles. I immediately print my config and start tracing addresses and ports. As I drive home that night I look at all the beautiful stars in sky and wonder if there is life in space....wonder what that would be like?

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Chapter 15 (9-05) By Lisa Forburger

“Where did the summer go Polly?” my boss asks me after my returning from a “cram in whatever you can week” and it makes me think. It makes me think of seasons, 4 seasons that we are so lucky to have. First I tell him that summer does not end officially until September 21st. Many people evidently did not learn this in their school. Summer does not end when the school bell rings.

Spring in the office ended in total chaos. Our farmers were able to start spring planting but it was quickly halted when the rains began the first week of May. In many parts of the state, the wheels did not turn again until Memorial Day Weekend. We also received some late frosts which caused replanting. I remember taking my brother lunch on the first Saturday in May, soup of course, and it was snowing so hard we just laughed. Thank goodness it ended within minutes.

Our office staff soon began to sweat bullets in June when only about 25% of counties had acres reported with the June 30th, deadline date fast approaching. There was also that fear of extending that deadline which causes grief for my office with vacation scheduling. In the mean time my knee went out big time and I even had the number of that good knee doctor on speed dial waiting for me to hit the button. But of course I waited until things slowed down. June went faster than most months and we did get everyone in by the 30th and were able to relax with a long 4th of July weekend.

Then my boss began the speech, “summer is almost over, the 4th of July is here and gone.” Again, I questioned his education, if summer begins on June 21st and ends on September 22nd that would use 13 days of our summer and leave about 80. What part of this picture is missing?

July was very enjoyable with seasonal temperatures and humidity for most but not all. When the corn detasslers hit the fields, it would storm first, with rain and lightning, and then the sun would be out at it’s fullest and totally drain every ounce of water out of anyone’s body that was in that corn field. The corn plants were very uneven in height due to the cold wet spring which kept this job interesting and then to think that most of those kids never did sign any forms for employment, I think it was done by the parents. I still believe there is light at the end of that tunnel, think of LDP season!!!!!!

Now it is August and the weather is still very enjoyable. The lakes are still full of water and we get to enjoy that green, green lawn because we have had rain every week, sometimes even an inch or more. Even with the 90 degree temps in July, the grass is still very, very green and thick. Mowing weekly is almost unheard of in town, biweekly, is more like it!

Not all counties have had this kind of summer.

Now as I fill out my timesheet, I realize that 40 hours a week is reality and it is time to get focused on “getter done” because the rush is near. We have lots to do before harvest in the county office.

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Chapter 16 (12-05) By Roseanne Woerner

I want every single person in my new office to like me. Which is why I still use my company manners when I talk to people. I don't curse. I don't gossip. Plus, I go out of my way to be kind and polite to all of my co-workers. The problem is, I'm a big baby and a natural born whiner. So, if I deprive myself of the opportunity to expel whatever nit picking and nagging thoughts I might have on a regular basis, those thoughts will fester up inside of me and explode in a dynamic projectile that is akin to a rocket launch at NASA.

It's Monday morning and I have lots to say. I have issues. I decide to call Stevie Corona so that I can vent.

"How are you getting along Polly?" Stevie asks.

"Okay," I tell him. "I like the staff. I like the producers. It's fine I guess, except..."

"Except what?"

"I'm freeeeezing!" As I draw out my words, I rattle my teeth, just in case he doesn't get the point that I'm really cold.

He laughs, which I pretty well expected because Stevie has a tendency to laugh at everything I say.

"It's the middle of summer," he says.

"So."

"So, it's been ninety degree weather for weeks."

"So."

"So how could you be freezing in ninety degree weather?"

"First off," I tell him. "You have to remember that I'm farther north now."

"Okay, so how hot is it up there today?" he asks.

"Outside, the temperature is eighty-six degrees."

"And you're cold."

"Yes," I say.

"That's impossible," he tells me.

"No sir and I'll tell you why. It's about fifty degrees inside on purpose and it's that cold everywhere I go."

"You're exaggerating," he says.

"Only because I want you to feel my pain."

"I felt your pain for years Polly," he says. "It's someone else's turn. So, why don't you nicely ask your new boss if he would please turn up the thermostat?"

"He won't do it. He likes it this cold. Everyone here does."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because they have this little joke that they say when I mention that I'm going outside to warm up."

"Which is?"

"In northern Iowa, when it's twenty below, they put on a coat."

"That's the joke?" he asks.

"No," I tell him. This is the joke. When it's thirty below, they zip the coat up."

THE (Brrrrr) End

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Chapter 17 (3-06) By Roseanne Woerner

INTRODUCING TESSA STARR

It starts with an unassuming email to my best friend and co-worker Holly Gable. *Did you catch Tessa's outfit today?*

I type the words ...and frantically so because it's almost eight o'clock, which is my official start time. These emails that Holly and I exchange are akin to passing notes in school and totally discouraged by Tessa Starr, my boss. I hit the send button and in 35 seconds, I have a reply.

Holly is the fastest typist in the whole, wide world, plus she always tags her message on the email that I send her, which contributes to her speediness. (Not to take anything away from her flying fingers though because she does type really fast)

I know. Holly writes. *I almost fell on the floor laughing when she walked in this morning wearing that short, tight skirt. If I had knees that knobby, they would never see the light of day. I don't understand why the woman can't dress her age.*

We manage three more exchanges and then it's time to get to work. Plus, we have run out of catty things to say about Tessa, who, judging by her recent switch in clothing style, yearns to be thirty years younger and accomplishes that special goal by dressing like a teenager. Yesterday, for example, she wore a low-cut top, which was a nasty sight. There is an age when human body parts should be concealed, camouflaged, and otherwise disguised and I have to say that Tessa might have reached her limit for flashing flesh at least ten years ago.

Just before break time, Holly sends another message that is tagged on to our previous exchange. This time it's a joke, the kind where I have to scroll down to read the whole thing.

Hi, it says. *Some people have personality. Some people have looks. You're lucky because you have both.* I scroll down some more. *Don't be flattered,* it continues on. *Someone sent this to me. I just wanted you to read it.*

The phone rings as I scan the joke a second time and all the while, my inner self is laughing pretty hard. The guy on the phone is a producer who wants to know why his CRP contract acres have decreased. I stop scrolling and try to explain the whole GIS thing, but he just doesn't get it. He doesn't understand GIS. He swears he didn't receive his letter of

explanation or his revised map with new measurements. I'm running him through our process again when Betty Stabler leans over my cubicle.

"Hey," she whispers. "Send me that joke that Holly just sent you."

I nod okay. I click my contact list as I tell the producer that I'm going to get his file. I set the receiver in the cradle and because I can multi-task like nobody's business, I click Betty's name as I rise out of my chair. I completely forget about the message at the end of the joke as I push the hold button. Otherwise, I would do a quick cut and paste before I pass it along. I hunker over my desk as I hit send and voila, the message is gone. BUT, in that nanosecond of time, before the message completely disappears from my screen, I note that I totally missed Betty's name and clicked the next name on my list instead, Tessa Starr.

I react with a dizzy spell. The room whirs and I feel like I'm in the middle of a bad dream where I'm slugging through every movement and motion. Tessa's computer blares out Ode To Joy, which is her email notification sound. She turns around and I watch her mouse move. All the while, the phone line continues to blink. Tessa clicks a couple of times. I know she's opening my email. I just know she is. I see her brand new puffed-up lips form a smile. She's reading the first part of the message. Her smile broadens. She's scrolling down and down and then her smile fades. Her head jerks up and she glares at me. Uh-oh. I'm in big trouble...again.

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Chapter 18 (6-06) By Roseanne Woerner

Last month's unfortunate email incident has caused me to be on my best behavior in every aspect of my professional life, for the time being anyway. I'm not only working to my fullest capability, I look good too. I'm kind of a fashionista now. I'm paying extra-special attention to my wardrobe. I iron EVERYTHING! I figure, if Tessa likes clothes, the care I take with my clothes might have some sort of positive influence in her judgment of me. Today for instance, I'm wearing high heels and those knicker things. I don't know what you call them. They're definitely not Capri's or Beach Comber's. They're not a skort. Gaucho pants maybe.

So far, Tessa hasn't said anything, but I'm figuring that she's the kind of person who doesn't notice changes in other people right away because she's so self-involved, but that's a whole other story. (meow) So, I'm not deterred. Not yet anyway.

Tessa calls me into her office just after lunch. "We're going to the field," she tells me.

I look down at myself. "Uh...that really doesn't work for me. I'm wearing heels."

She looks up from the folder that she's been perusing and gives me one of those 'elevator eye' glances. Up and down. Up and down again. "Oh," she says. "So you are. Hmmm. Well, you know what, that's not going to be a problem because this CRP field that we're going to look at is right along the road. There's no reason to get out of the car that I can see."

"Oh. Well then. Fine. When are we leaving?"

"Now," she says. She hops up out of her chair and zooms past me. "Come on. I'll drive."

Tessa has so much stuff in her car, I have to stand next to the door and wait for three full minutes while she clears me a place. It's not that she's a messy person because all of her stacks and piles are neat, but gees; I was raised to believe that a car is a car and a closet is a closet and one isn't synonymous with the other.

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Chapter 19 (9-06) By Roseanne Woerner

It is the hottest day on record so far this summer, somewhere in the vicinity of ninety-eight degrees. I am out on a country road with Tessa Starr. The road is deserted, rutted, and dusty. It leads to nowhere. A baby cow hops the remnants of a barbwire fence and heads toward us. Another baby cow follows suite and now the pair is approaching us at a pretty fast clip. Tessa doesn't freak out yet, but she's close. No nerves of steel on this girl, I can see that already, and we have yet to encounter the bull.

We are supposed to be spot-checking REX contracts. Obviously, this plan wasn't my brainchild because I am wearing Gaucho pants and strappy sandals. The cutest sandals in the world, I might add. They are black and they have these little diamond insets...not diamond really...they just look like diamonds and they are clustered in the cutest design...but back to my story.

"I can't believe we're on a Dead End road," Tessa says.

"Not to be smart," I tell her...even though I really am trying to be smart...in a sneaky way though...she is my boss after all. "But that's usually what a Dead End sign means. You know, like the one we saw three miles back."

She holds a sheaf of papers in the air. "Map Quest says this road goes through."

I try to keep the exasperation out of my voice here, but it's a test. I am so hot I can't stand it. A baby cow is nudging my leg. My shoes are killing my feet and I can't take them off, lest they be pierced with gravel and whatever else. We can't sit in her car and run the air conditioner. Guess who neglected to check the gas gauge before we left town. Did I mention the flat tire as well?

"Tessa," I say. "You cannot do spot checks in the country with Map Quest. You need a county map or a plat book. You should also take an aerial photo of the farm along, so that you can recognize your surroundings a bit better."

"But Map Quest takes you right to the spot," she whines.

"And Map Quest is wrong ten percent of the time. I guess it was our turn to get lucky."

"I have my cell phone," she says. "I'm calling somebody."

"Who are you going to call and what are you going to say?"

"I'll say I'm out on (she refers to her Map Quest map) Thorn Road and I need someone to come and pick me up."

"Tessa," I'm using my exasperated breath now when I say her name, which isn't a good sign. "We already figured out that Thorn Road is over there somewhere, on the other side of the highway. We don't know where we are. We don't know what road we took to get here. So how can we give anyone directions? What are we going to say, Come and get us? We're at the end of some dead end road, near some cows in a pasture and a cluster of trees?"

"And what would you have us do?" she asks.

"I think we need to unload your trunk and fix the flat tire."

"Why do we need to unload my trunk for that?"

"Because that's where you keep your spare."

She throws her head back and laughs. "You are a silly goose," she tells me, a term I once heard in a 1950's movie.

By now the calf is nudging me forward. I fight to maintain my balance as I say, "It's the only sensible thing to do. Why is it funny?"

Her eyes are winced into tiny slits. Tears are streaming down her cheeks. She is red-faced due to the fact that she barely drawn a breath between her guffaws. "Joke's on you," she says. "There is no spare."

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Chapter 20 (12-06) By Roseanne Woerner

Jonathan Craig farms about a million acres (kidding) and he keeps adding ground. So, I guess no one in the office finds it particularly startling when he saunters in to tell us about his latest acquisition. What does startle us is the way that Tessa Starr dive-bombs the counter so that she can wait on him. Allow me to regress.

Jonathan is a nice-looking man and he smells really great. He's also sort of conceited, which is why most of us prefer to admire him from afar. Might I add, that our standoffish attitude is pretty selfless and works for his protection. For instance, if he thought that we thought that he was a hunk, his already-big head might swell to such a gargantuan size, eventually, he would not make it through our standard size door. Lest we impede any future visits, we make every effort to vigorously yawn before we greet him.

Jonathan gives us all a nod as he struts his way back to Tessa's office. Never before has he experienced this sort of service from any of us due to the above-mentioned reasons and so he is literally preening. He slides into a chair across from Tessa's desk and then horror-of-horrors, Tessa closes the door. As soon as we hear them speak, we gather at Kadie Vaughn's desk to discuss this debacle. We take a poll and we all find Tessa's behavior especially troubling. But we can't talk to her about it until Jonathan leaves.

Kadie is our most courageous employee. So, when Tessa's laughter peals a bit too brightly, Kadie offhandedly moves in front of Tessa's window, so she can see what's going on. Luckily, her extra forms are in a nearby file that allows her a birds-eye view of Tessa's office. We all give Kadie a thumbs-up sign and just as her head slowly swivels toward Tessa's window, Tessa opens her door.

Tessa shakes Jonathan's hand. She tells him that she will see him tomorrow and as he swaggers toward the door, he turns his head and winks at us. "Bye girls," he says. We can't help ourselves. We all say good-bye in unison. Too bad he's got such a winning smile.

When Jonathan is out of earshot, Tessa gives us her 'let's get back to work' frown and I'm thinking that this is not the time to give her our best advice. She seemed buoyant for a few minutes there, but her increasing frown suggests a possible dip in mood. Further troubling is her comment as we move to our desks. She says, "Jonathan will be in at nine o'clock in the morning to see you Polly. He needs a recon but he didn't bring his deeds."

"Deeds," I say. "With an S?" Tessa doesn't respond.

I get to work early the next morning. I want to pull all of the maps for Jonathan's farms and run his 156EZ's.

"New perfume?" Kadie Vaughn asks when I pass her desk.

"No," I tell her. "This is the stuff I got for Christmas. It's been wasting away in my cabinet, so I decided that I might as well use it."

"Uh huh," Kadie says and she chuckles a bit.

I walk into the map room where Darnel Finch is already busy with his compliance spot checks. He starts to say hi, but when he looks at me, he gets this startled expression and he says, "Wow. Big hair."

"No it's not," I tell him as I pat the top of my hair down. "I just decided to curl it this morning. Sue me."

"Yeah right," he says. He's chortling as I leave.

I walk into the break room, where Myra Stromberg is making coffee. I grab a can of Coke from the fridge and Myra laughs. "New outfit?" she asks.

"No," I say. "This is that dress that I bought on clearance for twenty bucks last spring. I just haven't worn it because it's really a winter outfit."

She can hardly control her giggles, which I find most exasperating. "Oh Polly," she says and she wildly fans her face. "You always do the sweetest, dumbest things."

I'm kind of irritated. I smooch my hair a bit more and I say, "What's with you guys? I always try to look nice. What does it matter if I happen to fix my hair a little and wear something new?"

"Nothing," Myra says. "Well...normally nothing." And then she lets out this giant guffaw.

"What!" I say, clearly exasperated now.

Myra puts her hands on my shoulders. "Now honey," she says. "Don't get upset. Jonathan is already here in Tessa's office and Tessa is wearing that very same dress."

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Chapter 21 (3-07) By Roseanne Woerner

Kadie Vaughn and I are working on eligibility reviews in the conference room. She is popping her gum...snap, snap, snap and marking her check sheet just as fast. It's getting on my nerves, the noise and the constant check, check, check. She quit reading the questions two months ago. "This is nuts," she mutters. Check, check, check.

I am so engrossed in all the other noises that she's making, her actual voice startles me. "What? Sorry. Did you say something?"

"Yeah," she says. Check, check, check. "Explain this to me. I don't fill in every single blank on a form, so they give me eleven more blanks to worry about. How does that make sense?"

Whatever I say here is only going to get me in trouble, so I keep my opinion to myself...for almost one full minute and then it's too much. She does that snap, snap, snap, thing again and I think I'm going to bust. I finally speak my mind. I tell her to stop grumping and lose the gum. Only, she doesn't take my suggestions well.

So...I am headed out in the country to do some FSFL spot checks. I was pretty certain that I knew where I was going, but now I'm thinking that I am not where I am supposed to be. Did I mention we have nine inches of snow on the ground? Did I say that all roads look alike to me when they are covered in snow? Did I point out that the thermometer hasn't risen to ten degrees for eight days in a row and that my heater isn't working as well as it should be, or that this ride is brisk to say the least? Worst of all, I was so steamed when I left I forgot to bring a plat book.

Myra Stromberg answers when I call the office. I try to disguise my voice when I ask for Darnel Finch, but it doesn't work. She knows it's me first thing. "Darnel," I hear her yell across the whole, entire room. "Polly's on the phone. No, she didn't say that she was lost again, but I bet she is...Well, hurry up. You know she's always running out of gas." And then to me, Myra says, "He'll be right with you Hon. Just hang on."

I try to reason this out in my head. Forty minutes ago, I was checking CCC-770's in a nice, warm place and doing the best job that I possibly could. Shortly after my spat with Kadie, Tessa Starr told me to help Myra update eligibility folders. Then the web went down, just when Tessa happened by.

"Is the web not working," Tessa asks. "Is that why are you staring at your computer screen?"

"It may look like I'm doing nothing," I tell her. "But really, I'm mentally tabulating our contest results."

“What contest?”

“The contest whereby everybody thinks of some, new creative way to say Page Cannot Be Displayed. Whoever is picked gets to report the problem to state office and say the winning phrase.” I give her a cheesy smile because I think I’m pretty clever.

If Tessa shared my opinion of me, I probably wouldn’t be driving around in the country right now. I guess some days are just like that. Nothing works and nobody loves me.

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Chapter 22 (6-07) By Roseanne Woerner

I like to make lists. I make them constantly. For instance, right now I am making a list of things that I absolutely **DO NOT** want to do. After careful consideration, my list includes, eating worms, mud wrestling, and stringing barbwire fence. Also, I do not want to drive to a meeting with Tessa Starr, which is what I happen to be doing today.

Tessa is pretty frantic when we pull into the parking ramp. She grabs the ticket from the machine and tosses it to me as the arm raises. "Put this in your purse for later," she tells me. "I think the hotel stamps it or something."

We're already late. We still have to find our meeting room. We haven't eaten lunch and we haven't had a rest room break for almost two hours. The fact that we're so crunched for time is making Tessa kind of nutty. She circles the ramp on two wheels, rams into the first empty spot she sees and then hops out of the car. She runs to the elevator at breakneck speed and barely waits for me to get in before she pushes the button for the first floor. We wind our way through the skywalk, pass through door after door and finally we happen upon the place where we are supposed to be.

I am loaded down. I have a suitcase, a purse, a notebook, two sacks of chips, a package of cookies, and a well-stocked cooler. There is no way that I can put the parking ticket in my purse, so I stash it in my pocket for safe-keeping. While I manage to keep track of the party items for later in the evening, I completely lose track of the ticket. I don't blame myself though. I blame Tessa for giving it to me in the first place.

Still, I am stewing and fretting the following day. I checked with the hotel and it will cost eighteen bucks to bail the car out if I don't locate the ticket. There is nothing to do but enlist the aid of several of my closest friends. We've spent some time at Happy Hour, so the gals are willing to give my plan a try. Everything is funny to us right now, even the fact that Tessa might possibly rip off my head if I don't find the ticket before we are ready to check out first thing in the morning.

As per my instructions, the gals assemble on the little platform next to the ticket machine. I count to three and we all jump. Nothing happens. So, we jump again. Nothing happens. Five grown women total. One is wearing clogs. Two of them are wearing strappy sandals. We jump and we jump and we jump again. We have completely lost our unison and still, the machine-thingy won't eject a ticket. It's all so hysterically funny, to us anyway. Not so, for the two drivers of the cars that we seem to be blocking. We decide to make another plan in my room and return when traffic dies down.

This is where we sort of lose our way. Instead of going into the hotel from the parking ramp, we take the outside street. I think we circle the same few blocks a couple of times until Keely Spivac finally spies the hotel. "Look," she says. "It's over in the next block. I can see the sign."

We're pretty tired by now and the effervescent feeling that we all shared awhile ago has completely worn off. We take the elevator to my room on the second floor, but when we get there, nothing looks familiar. My room should have been halfway down the hallway, at least it was when I checked in, but now it's not. We go back to the elevator, just to make certain that we're on the second floor. We see that we are, so we decide that there must be two elevators.

Hallway after hallway, we finally find my room. I search my purse and find my key. I slide it through the lock, but the door won't open. I slide it through again and again. Finally, Keely says, "Let me try." That doesn't work either.

"Did you have it next to your cell phone?" Tammy Anderson says. "It won't work if you have it next to a cell phone you know. It has something to do with the magnet."

"It wasn't near my cell phone," I tell her. I try it again. We all take turns. All five of us try to make it work. But it won't. So we troop downstairs. We go to the front desk. The man behind the desk is a different person than the one who checked me in. He looks grouchy and tired. I say, "I think my key got de-magnetized somehow because it won't work." I hand him the key.

He turns it this way and that. He says, "What the heck." He hands it back to me. "Is this a key for the Plaza House?"

"Yes," I tell him and I'm pretty indignant by now. "I think I know where I'm staying."

"You may know where you're staying," he says. "But you don't know where you are. The Plaza House is down two blocks that way."

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Chapter 23 (9-07) By Roseanne Woerner

At first, Homer Soleski was okay with paying a late fee because he didn't certify on time, but then I told him that we raised our rates this year. Now he insists that it's our fault that he didn't come in. Luckily, I am thinking fast on my feet today and I counter every accusation with a great response. "We put it in the newsletter twice," I tell him. "Plus, we had a reminder in the newspaper and Tessa mentioned it on her radio show. Heck, we even sent a postcard and you still didn't come in. It's not our fault Homer."

When I finally convince him that he's either going to have to pay a late fee or repay his DCP advance, he makes this 'humph' noise and pulls this little green book out of his middle overall pocket. He has a separate page for every field. The pages aren't numbered, nor are they consecutive according to farm. I see right away that this is going to be a sizeable commitment of time. Homer has twelve farms with lots of fields.

It takes about fifteen minutes to record crops and planting dates on the first farm. Since it's already after 3:00 P.M., I decide to ask for help. I turn around, but no one is at their desk. Everyone else in the office, including Tessa Starr, is glued to one of the three windows that line the back wall. Meanwhile, Homer is cogitating over some scribbles in his book and muttering furiously. I tell him I'll be right back and he waves me away.

I sidle up to Kadie Vaughn. "What in the heck is going on?" I whisper.

"This guy just pulled up in a truck and started changing his clothes," she says.

"You mean his shirt or something?" I ask.

"I mean his shirt, his pants, his shoes, you name it, he took it off," she tells me.

I look outside and see this big hairy back that is ghostly pale. I start to squeal, but then I remember Homer back up front, so I slap my hand over my mouth, in hopes it will muffle my shriek. "He's almost naked," I say.

"I know," says Myra Stromberg. "And if it was Matthew McConaughey out there baring it all, I guess I wouldn't mind. But this guy is gross. We should call a cop or something."

"Thank goodness his door is blocking most of the view," Tessa says as she stands on her tip-toes, and then cranes her neck as she moves from side to side.

Meanwhile, I remember Homer. I collect myself and ask for help as the man outside pulls on his shirt and slides his bare feet into a pair of loafers. Darnel Finch follows me up to the counter.

When I return to the counter, Homer is rotating his book this way and that. "I didn't bring my glasses," he says. "Some of this fine print is hard to read." He shoves the book across the counter. "I wondered where you went."

"Sorry," I say. "I went to get help but I got a little distracted."

"You must have been watching that naked guy." Homer tells me. "Who is that anyway?"

"We don't know him," I say.

"He's obviously from Missouri," Darnel says.

"How do you know that?" I ask. "Oh, I get it...you must have seen the license plate."

"I wasn't looking that hard," Darnel says.

"Then why are you so sure he's from Missouri?"

Darnel breathes out some air. "That's easy," he says. "Missouri is the Show-Me State."

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Chapter 24 (12-07) By Roseanne Woerner

I'm really not a conniving person, but most of the time; I know how to wangle things my way. Last week, for instance, I was trying to figure out how I could get the hot, new guy at NRCS to notice me. He seems especially immune to me, to my charm, my wit, my new clothes, and my perfume. I have used every female ploy that I can think of to make some sparks fly. So far, nothing works. I'm not discouraged though. There's always Plan B and my Plan B is pretty ingenious, if I do say so myself.

Tessa Starr calls me in her office for my performance review. "You're a very enthusiastic person," she says. "And I appreciate your help at the counter, **BUT**, and this is a pretty big, **BUT**, Polly...you don't know your program."

I fix an expression of concern on my face. "Does anyone really know CRP?" I ask. "I mean, I just get used to the rules and something changes. Plus, they keep adding practices. It's hard to keep up."

"That goes with the job," she tells me.

"Oh, I agree. And I know it would help if I came from the farm. I mean, it would probably make sense then."

"Hmmm," she says. "Maybe, but maybe not. I think if you put in some time with your handbook, you would see results. Now, what about your Individual Work Plan? Have you done anything with that?"

I do my best not to act too excited. "Well, this is what I was thinking. If I did some CRP status reviews with NRCS, I could see some of these practices for myself and everything would make more sense."

"You know that's not a bad idea Polly. But I don't know if they have time. Everyone over there is busy with CSP and EQIP."

"Gordon and Ty are working on CSP and EQIP, but I'm pretty sure that Andy is only working on CRP." (My heart actually flutters when I say Andy's name.)

Tessa crinkles her brow. "Who's Andy?"

I feel my face flushing, so I'm really careful not to make eye contact. "The new guy," I tell her.

"Oh...him," she says. "Okay. I'll see how busy they are. Meantime, you need to pull the handbook and review the practice standard every time someone applies."

"Wow. That's a great idea, Tessa. I'll start doing that right away."

Our NRCS office has five employees, including Andy. There is Brian, the D.C., Julie, the clerk, Gordon, the Soil Conservationist, and Ty, the technician. I get along with everyone, but I have to say that Gordon really bugs me because he never shuts up. Plus, he loves to poke people with this pencil that he wears behind his ear. Our contact is pretty minimal though, since he's never worked on CRP. Thank goodness.

Tessa buzzes me around three o'clock. "Polly," she says. "You and Andy are going to the field first thing Monday morning. Be sure and dress appropriately. Oh and you'll be walking a lot so wear some decent shoes."

I have an instant mental image of Andy and me, strolling across a beautiful green meadow. There are big, puffy clouds in the sky and a babbling brook at the base of the slope. We laugh. We talk. We develop a mutual crush. We date. We fall in love. Our wedding is perfect in every way.

Back to reality and the cold, cruel world. On Monday morning, Gordon appears at my desk and pokes me in the arm with his pencil. "Ow," I say. Even though it doesn't hurt, I'm trying to make a point.

Gordon chortles. "You better toughen up Girlie, if you're going out to the field with me."

"I'm not going with you," I tell him. "I'm going with Andy."

He gives me this really cheesy smile. "Andy was detailed to Blake County for three weeks. Looks like you're stuck with me, Kid."

So much for Plan B.

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Chapter 25 (3-08) By Roseanne Woerner

It seems like Tess just did my final Performance Review, but here I am mid-year, ready for another rating. In hand, I have a list of my accomplishments, since we met in September and I'm feeling pretty confident that I'll get the best possible score. When these reviews are finished, Tessa is usually exhausted and cranky, so the fact that she asks me in first, is in my favor as well.

I squirm a little in my chair, just to make her think I'm on edge. It wouldn't do well for me to appear too self-assured. She might mistake my poise for cockiness and if it's one thing Tessa hates, it an overly cocky person. Too much competition, I guess. (kidding)

So, here I am, sitting in the chair. She pulls out my evaluation and reviews each element. Her rating is, Fully Successful, for every, single Element. I am flabbergasted to say the least. My achievement list doesn't even change her mind because, according to her, I've only listed duties that are an expected part of my job.

"But I want an Outstanding rating," I tell her. "Communication, for instance. How many times have you said that no one talks more in this office than me?"

"First," she says. "Talking, while a big part of communicating is only one part."

"What's the other part?" I ask.

"Listening," she tells me. "And not your best talent. I'd have to say, even though you were gifted with ears, you don't use them much."

"I use them," I tell her.

She gives me her 'Yeah, right' look and I say, "Well, sometimes I use them."

"Secondly," she says. "Outstanding ratings are rare. I would rather see you hitch your star to a Superior Rating. You could certainly accomplish that in several of these elements, if you set some goals for yourself."

"I'd rather be Outstanding," I tell her. "It just sounds better and I know I could do it."

She hesitates. She says, "Outstanding ratings are for people who literally bleed FSA. I just don't think that's you, Polly."

I'm kind of perplexed when I leave the office. I need to show Tessa that I'm a dedicated employee. But how to do that right now, when we don't have a Farm Bill, and my regular work isn't even being judged. I think about it for the rest of the day.

It's just after 4:30 P.M. and everyone else has gone home, except Kadie Vaughn and me. Kadie is straightening the table in our entryway that holds our CRP pamphlets and extra copies of our newsletter. I am telling her about my review when I notice these little square things, that look like a glossy, oversized stamps, on the table.

"What are those?" I ask.

She picks one up. "I think they're tattoos. You know, for little kids. Tessa got them for the 4-H Fair last year and these were leftover." She hands me one.

It is some sort of picture, maybe a flag, and the printing is tiny, but I can make out the word, FSA. "Brainstorm," I tell Kadie. "What better way to show my dedication than to put a tattoo on each cheek?"

"I don't think, by showing dedication, Tessa meant to brand your self. And I'm pretty sure she wouldn't want you going to the counter, with FSA plastered all over your face. It would look clownish, if you ask me."

Not to be dissuaded by Kadie's objection, I pick up two tattoos, go to the Rest Room and I put one on each cheek. I am, oh so careful, when I wash my face, before I go to bed, later that night. I would hate to wash one off before I see Tessa's reaction.

In the morning, I notice a lot of cars in the parking lot, but I figure NRCS is having a meeting. I'm as quiet, as I can be, when I slip in through the back door because I want to surprise everyone at once. Even if Tessa isn't impressed, I'm thinking I'll at least get a laugh from the rest of the staff. Imagine my chagrin to find only Kadie sitting at her desk.

"Hey, where is everyone?" I ask, as soon as I step through the door.

"Polly," Kadie says as she rushes toward me. "Where have you been? I've been waiting for you. The SED is in Tessa's office. He's coming out for a tour any minute. You have to get those stupid tattoos off your face."

I rush to the Rest Room. Armed with a scratchy paper towel and a bottle of hand soap, I scrub. . .and scrub. . .and scrub. When I stop and rinse the lather, the only thing redder than my face is the flag of my tattoo. The word FSA is clear as clear can be. They must be made with indelible ink because they won't come off. At least Kadie is right about one thing, I look like a clown.

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Chapter 26 (6-08) By Roseanne Woerner

I have a mental, must-do list, if I ever get the chance to run the office for a day.

Man, oh, man. Would I make some changes. First off, I'd call the landlord right away and tell him to fix the potholes in the parking lot. They are enormous. They're soooo big; in fact, we even named some of them. Take the one closest to the mailbox, for instance. We call it Mr. T. because of the shape.

Maybe, fixing potholes wouldn't be the priority of most people. But since I have to get the mail, it makes a big difference to me. Yesterday, I wasn't exactly watching where I was going. (Okay, so a bunch of beefy-looking guys were jogging by and I was forced to turn my head at the most inopportune moment. Sue me.) Anyway, I sort of lost my balance and twisted my foot, which is still sore today, I might add.

I'm pretty sure that Tessa Starr won't address the problem until she has her own close call, which means that she has to get the mail. So, I've devised a plan. I even rented crutches.

It's Tuesday morning. Tessa has been waiting for a letter from a producer for six days now. He wants to appeal. Since the COC meets tomorrow, she has big hopes that the letter will be here by then. Did I mention that it rained all night?

Tessa comes to my desk around ten o'clock. "Did we get any mail today, Polly?" she asks.

I give her my best grimace and I follow that up with a heavy sigh. "I was about to go out," I say. "But my foot is throbbing right now. Must be the rain." I start to rise. "But I'll go out if you need it right now for some reason." I make half-hearted lunge toward my crutches.

Tessa glances around the office. She's probably looking for a temporary, mail proxy, but everyone else is busy. "Never mind," she huffs. "I'll go."

Tessa hates to get the mail. Even in perfect weather. It's not her thing. She wears these witchy shoes, six inch heels and pointed toes and I'm sure they crunch her feet so much, it's hard to walk. (Those tight skirts don't help her mobility much either, but that's just my opinion.)

As soon as she leaves the office, I go over to the window to watch her progress. Kadie Vaughn, who happens to be walking past, watches with me. It rained so much this morning; there are big, long ugly worms all over the lot. I haven't seen them around for years and years. Gross. It's kind of funny though, to watch Tessa tippy-toe around them. There are so many worms; she's walking along the side of the parking lot that borders the street. She looks like she's walking a tightrope. Her heels haven't touched ground since she stepped off the sidewalk.

Finally, she makes it to the mailbox, but her back is to the street now. She can't stand directly in front of the mailbox, because Mr. T. extends too far out on that side. She gets the mail and takes a step back. She's halfway turned around and headed back when WHOOSH, a car speeds down the road.

You guessed it. The car is driving too close to the curb. It hits a pothole that is filled to the brim with yucky, mucky water. It drenches Tessa. Her big, poufy flip goes instantly flat. Her very expensive, silky, white blouse is the color of dung and pretty much see-through. Even from this angle. She just kind of stands there like a statue for the longest time. Her hands outstretched; her mouth a big, gaping hole.

Kadie and I exchange horrified glances. "She wears shoes like that for a reason, Polly," Kadie says. "You better run."

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Chapter 27 (9-08) By Roseanne Woerner

I'm all-involved with one of those query-mail merge things and it isn't going so well. I can't make my columns line up, which means that only about half of the data I need transmits over from the System 36 side. I've done and redone, but it's still not working. Suffice to say, I'm in a zone. So much so, that while I feel a tap on my shoulder, I don't really recognize it right away. Not until it becomes urgent, nonstop, and pretty obnoxious.

When I finally look up, I see Tessa Starr hovering over me. She is waving a notice through the air and talking in those rapid-fire sentences that usually make me seek out higher ground. "Why didn't you send in this report?" she asks. "Didn't we just talk about this Tuesday at staff meeting? Didn't you give me every assurance that you'd take care of it?"

Admittedly, I'm a bit foggy and maybe the fact that I don't answer right away adds to my guilt, in her eyes. But I have no idea what she's talking about and since she won't hold the notice still for two seconds, I can't get up to speed.

I finally grab her hand and hold it so that I can read the notice. As soon as I see the number, I can feel my most superior-looking scowl spread across my face. "I sent this in last week," I say.

"Well, *if you did*, they didn't get it," she says. "I just got an email from the DD and we're on the STO list."

If I did. That kills me. I just told her I did, so why should there be any doubt. It was an odd report about cropland acres and farm bases. I specifically remember doing it because there was no pdf. Format. I had to type it and send it through the mail.

"I did do it and I can prove it," I say.

Tessa peers over my shoulder as I pull up Outlook and check my tasks. "See, I tell her. I marked it off, which means I did it."

"Okay, if you did it, where's your copy?" she asks.

I sort of go blank. "Copy?" I ask. "Why would I keep a copy? Nothing in that report was a resource for me."

Even as I say this, I recognize my own folly. The report took three hours to collate. Three hours that I don't have for a redo.

"Crap," I add. "Are you sure we're on the bad list. I mean, maybe it was an email with counties that did send in the report and we were just being recognized for our effort."

"Have you ever seen that happen?" Tessa asks.

"Point taken," I say and I breathe a heavy sigh.

I skip lunch, work through break time and I don't leave the building until shortly after six o'clock. Which means I miss my favorite Keeping Up With The Kardashians' rerun, where everybody but Kim jumps in the pool. The good news is, by the time I go home, I've pretty well duplicated the report, but I come to work thirty minutes early, the next day, so that I can check it over with fresh eyes, before I send it in. Kadie Vaughn comes in just after me.

Kadie isn't exactly a morning person. I don't speak until she's started her third cup of coffee and since she chug-a-lugged the other two, it's less than forty five minutes that I have to be quiet. When I finally do speak, she's her usual cheerful self. She holds up about five paint chips, all light gray in color with an almost undetectable difference.

"Look at these," she says. "I'm painting my bedroom this weekend. Help me decide which color would look best."

Even if I really scrunch my eyes, I can't see much variation, but I don't want to say so until she's either had two more cups of coffee or it's after nine o'clock. "I have to fax this report to the STO," I tell her. "I'll look at them when I come back."

"Oh," she says. "Speaking of the STO. Did I tell you yesterday that I resent your letter yesterday?"

"What letter?" I ask.

"The one you sent last week sometime. It came back without postage, so I mailed it again."

She beams at me.

"That was probably my report," I say.

She shrugs. "Could be."

"The same report I just redid."

“That’s kind of what we do,” she says. “Do, do and redo.” She opens a folder and starts to hum.

I fax my report, just to make sure one copy arrives safely and then I go to the break room and get a cup of coffee. Hopefully, it will make me hum too.

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Chapter 28 (12-08) By Roseanne Woerner

Bang! Bang! Bang! The noise nails me as soon as I walk through the door. Unfortunately, I haven't had an appropriate amount of caffeine to get me through the earsplitting sound of hammer striking metal this early in the morning.

"What the heck," I say to the room at large. I wait for someone to explain what's going on. When nobody does, I reluctantly follow the sound.

I find Myra Stromberg in the GIS room. She's sitting on her haunches and whacking the crap out of a typewriter. There is a zealous gleam in her eye and every time she hits the typewriter, her mouth contorts from grimace to smile. "This is so cool," she says, as she offers me the hammer. "Want to whack it a couple of times."

"I'll pass," I say. "What are you doing anyway?"

"I have to destroy this before I throw it away," she tells me.

By now, the machine is severely dented and the keys are crumpled. There is an array of parts strewn across the floor. "I doubt that anyone could use it now," I say. "I think you can stop anytime."

Myra stands up and surveys her handiwork as Keely Spivine bursts through the door. "Oh my gosh, you guys, I just saw a mouse."

"So," Myra tells her. "Set a trap."

Keely is an excitable person, very high on drama. She's not from the farm. In fact, she's not from anywhere that most of us can relate to. "Eewww," she says. "I don't want to kill it. I just want it to go away."

"We have to get rid of it before it settles in and invites friends," Myra tells her.

Keely squints and hops around on her tiptoes. "Do it then," she says. "But don't tell me about it or let me see it."

Myra sighs. She hands me the hammer. "I can set the trap, if you and Fearless Fred here will take this stuff out to the dumpster?"

"Okay," I say and then to Keely I say, "Here Keely, grab one end."

Keely and I walk the typewriter through the office toward the back door. She's yammering nonstop about mice and how yucky they are and how she wishes someone else in the office, beside her, would have experienced the brush of scuttling fur. She's not paying much attention to what we're doing so I tell her to take a breath and stop talking.

We finally manage to synchronize our steps and we make pretty good progress until she sees the mouse again.

She loses her grip right away, but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have dropped my end, had she not pierced my ear with her banshee scream. The typewriter plummets to the floor and lands mostly on my foot. I stand stone still for a couple of seconds. At first, my foot doesn't even hurt. It feels kind of frozen, like ice on skin, but when the numbness subsides...Ouch...big time.

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Chapter 29 (3-09) By Roseanne Woerner

Fred Burke is a wheeler, dealer and nothing he does is easy. Since prices went down, he's been buying and selling a lot of ground and it seems like most of his fourteen farms are in a state of flux.

When Fred visits our office; all five of us leap to the counter at breakneck speed to wait on him. Not because we like a challenge. Not because Fred is a pretty decent guy. It's because Fred brings food. Good food too. Today, for instance, the scent of homemade cinnamon rolls wafts through the air when Fred walks through the door. Did I mention that the rolls are still warm? I'm about to hyperventilate as I gratefully accept the box and carry it from counter to break room.

Back at the counter, Kadie and Myra are pulling Fred's farm folders, the ones they can find anyway. Fred asks Darnel Finch to measure some ground that he's going to swap. He tells me that he lost two landlords this year and when he blurts out that he's now a Trust, I hear Keely Spiva groan. She does Payment Limitations, and she'd be waiting on him too, but she's already waiting on someone else.

With everything he has going, the decent thing to do would be to bring Fred back to our inner sanctum, set him down at the extra desk in the back and work through all his issues. One of us will, eventually, but right now, we're waiting each other out.

Finally, Darnel mutters under his breath and tells Fred to follow him to the GIS room. We love to wait on Fred as long as he stays on his side of the counter, but when we let him on our side, the conversation always veers toward his surgeries. For some inexplicable reason, he feels compelled to show us his scars. This past year, alone, we've seen two toes, his left palm, and a snippet of his right ankle.

By now, the whole office smells like cinnamon and it motivates me. I can almost taste my roll, the ooey-goey inner layers and the buttery icing on top, as I pull Fred's eligibility folder. I start heading up forms, while Kadie and Myra run his DCP contracts. It's kind of a race between us, which they easily win, since most of Fred's folders are tagged for recons. Myra takes the DCP folders to Fred. She stands over his shoulder and points to the signature block while Darnel pulls up the right section map.

"I'll give you half my roll, if you help him with this 902," I say to Kadie.

"No way," she tells me. "He's all yours."

When Darnel is finished, he moves Fred to the extra desk and gets him all settled in. "You take care of yourself, Fred," Darnel says as I approach. To me, Darnel says, "Fred just got out of the hospital a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh no," I say. I turn toward Fred to inquire about his health when Tessa Starr bolts from his office.

"Polly, you have a phone call. Can I do something here?"

"You can help Fred fill out his Eligibility forms, if you want," I say.

"Okay." She smiles at Fred and says, "And how is Mr. Burke today?"

"Doing better," Fred says. "I just got out of the hospital though."

"Really," Tessa says.

"Yeah, I had an operation and it was kind of rough."

"Oh really," Tessa says. "What sort of surgery did you have?"

"Gall Bladder," Fred tells her as he jerks the tail of his shirt up, way past his tummy, before any of us have the sense to look away. "Look where they cut me. Did you ever see the like?"

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