

The Girl Next Door  
by Havoc

“Prejudice is a great time saver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts.”

- E.B. White

\*\*\*\*\*

“Chase! Can you come down and help me with something, hon?”

Chase looked away from his video game, glancing towards his cracked bedroom door. His room was up on the third floor of the house, but he could still hear his mother as clear as anything. That told him that she was probably on the floor below. The nineteen-year-old puma paused the game, setting his controller down. “Yeah, mom, what is it?”

“I’m trying to change a light bulb, but they’re up on the top closet shelf. I can’t reach them. Can you come get one down for me?”

Sighing, Chase stood up and walked out of his bedroom. Going down the stairs, he went to the second floor laundry room. When he walked inside, he saw his mother, Gloria, standing on her tiptoes at the back of the room, near the washer and dryer, straining to reach a box of light bulbs on a shelf high on the wall. A puma like him, Chase’s mother was almost fifty years old and stood five and a half feet tall, nearly a full foot shorter than him. She was a stay-at-home wife for the most part, although she did work part-time as a secretary at a local bank, the same bank where his father, Nathan, was the manager. A handy sort of woman who liked doing things herself, she preferred to spend her free time doing odd chores and fixing things around the house, but she wasn’t above asking someone else for help. As she was right now.

“Why do you keep them all the way up there?” Chase asked her, stepping up beside her and reaching up easily to pluck the box down. He handed it to his mother, smirking a little. “Every time a light goes out, you always yell for me or dad to come get a light bulb for you. As many lamps as there are in this house, you’d think you’d make the bulbs a little easier to access.”

His mother clucked her tongue as she took the box and opened it up. “Funny man. College has put a mouth on you, mister.” Gloria winked at him. “The reason I keep them up here is because I’ve always kept them up here. Simple as that. I have a system.” She pulled a light bulb from inside the box and handed it back to Chase, who placed it back up on the shelf, exactly where it had been before.

“A system. Right.”

“And I do not yell. I make a forceful request for assistance. So there.”

Chase shook his head, but he couldn’t help smiling. His mother did have a method to her madness, even if a person from the outside wouldn’t be able to see it. Whenever she needed something

around the house, whether it was an egg, a nail, a roll of tape, or even a light bulb, she always knew exactly where to find it. Even if she needed help retrieving it when she did find it. And for the last few months, Chase had been the go-to person for that. He had been away, out of state in the northern part of the country, attending college for his freshman year, but now that it was summer and he was back home, he found himself being roped into chores for his mother all the time.

Not that Chase minded much. He was very close to both of his parents, and especially his mother, so he liked helping around the house. It was the least he could do for them letting him live at home over the summer, rent-free, without harping on him too much about getting a summer job. Chase liked having his free time when school was out of session. Ever since before high school, he'd been the active sort. The puma enjoyed going out and running, lifting weights, and playing soccer, almost as much as he also liked staying home and playing video games. The summer was giving him a lot of time to engage in all of that, so it should have been great. However, he was barely two weeks in, and he was already getting restless.

"Thanks for the help, Chase," Gloria said. She walked out of the laundry room, heading for a sitting room on the second floor. He followed her idly, more out of boredom than anything else. "Nice to see you. You've been cooped up in that room all day. What do you do up there?"

"Video games," Chase said, shrugging. He watched as his mother unscrewed an old light bulb from a lamp in the room, replacing it with the new one. "Not a whole lot else to do. This town is a lot more boring than back at school."

Gloria straightened up and tossed the burnt-out bulb into a small waste basket by the door. "Oh, you. Spend a school year up in fancy New York, and suddenly you're Mr. Cultured." The middle-aged puma clucked her tongue again, then she chuckled. "Well, I'll have you know that exciting things happen around here, too, young man. For instance, someone just bought the Richardsons' place down the street."

Chase was actually a little surprised by that. "Really? After all this time?"

"The 'For Sale' sign is gone. And there's a moving truck out there today. If you'd bother to come down for anything other than food, you'd know that."

Four doors down and across the street from his family's house, there was a smaller, two-story home that had been vacant for nearly eight years. It had once belonged to an elderly bear couple, neighborhood friends who had been named Richardson. They'd had Chase's family over for dinner more than a few times during Chase's childhood, until the husband had passed away one day. The wife, unable to keep up such a large house on her own, had moved away and put the home up for sale, but for whatever reason it had never been bought by anyone. Every few weeks someone had come to cut the

grass and keep the place looking nice, but other than that it had been completely deserted.

“Wow,” Chase said. “That's kinda cool, actually. It's been a while since someone new moved into the neighborhood, hasn't it?” He rubbed his chin, waving his tail behind him. “Know who it is?”

Gloria shook her head. “No idea. Probably a family. I can't see anyone living by themselves in that house.” Then she smiled. “Why don't you go welcome them to the neighborhood for us? It'll give you a chance to get outside, anyway.”

“That's not a bad idea, I guess.” Truth be told, now that he'd heard about it he was curious to see who would be moving into the house. From growing up, he was unable to see it as anything but an old persons' home. Meeting the new people who'd be living there would be interesting. “Hey, maybe they have someone my age there. Like a daughter? I wouldn't mind having a summer girlfriend.”

His mother rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say, Romeo. I have to start getting dinner ready. Let me know what kind of people they are!”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Ma'am? Where do you want this?”

“Hm?” From where she was kneeling, in the downstairs living room area checking over some boxes, Ellen looked up at the pair of movers. They were carrying a large dresser made of a rich, dark wood, an heirloom from her great-grandmother. “That needs to go upstairs, to the large bedroom. I'm sorry, I know it's heavy...”

“No problem, ma'am,” the mover, a burly rhinoceros, said to her. His partner, a zebra male in just as good shape, helped him maneuver the dresser into a better position for carrying. “We can handle it. By the way, I noticed there were a few boxes in the truck that weren't labeled. I stacked them up on the ground and left a big marker on top. Would you mind going out and writing where they need to go? It'd help us out a lot.”

Ellen covered her mouth. “Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry! There was an awful lot to pack, so I must have missed a few things. I'll go take care of that right now.” Taking a preparatory breath, she got up to her feet. The movement made her feel nauseous for just a brief second, and she placed a hand on her swollen belly. She thought that she could feel the baby move, perhaps a little upset at all of the moving around she was doing today. She rubbed her stomach, and the nausea passed.

Walking out of the living room, she moved through the foyer and out the front door to where the moving van was backed into the driveway of her new home. As she came out into the late afternoon sunlight, she felt even better. The air seemed fresher in this city than it had in her old home, but maybe that was just her imagination, a byproduct of the change in surroundings. As she looked around at all of the trees and green in her new neighborhood, she felt like things were looking up.

Ellen was a white-tailed doe, average in height and weight with soft, gentle features that made her quite attractive. People often said that her best qualities were her deep emerald eyes and her smile. At thirty-five years old, she was in the prime of her life, or at least that was how she felt. She always kept her short chestnut fur in immaculate condition, and liked to keep a similarly neat home. Ellen was itching to be able to complete the unpacking and get her house in order. The two-story home had been a real steal; she'd heard that the owner had been looking for a buyer for almost a decade, so she'd been able to get a much better price than she would have otherwise. That was good for her, since her budget hadn't been all that spectacular to begin with.

In any case, Ellen was happy to be here. She was glad to be out of South Carolina, and perhaps Georgia would be a kinder place to her. The move had been stressful, but then moving always was, she supposed. Once she was all settled in, she was sure things would be just perfect. Taking another deep breath of the fresh air, she found the stack of boxes the mover had told her about and picked up the marker. Ellen opened up the first box, finding it filled with dishes and silverware. Closing it back up, she wrote "kitchen" on the top. Lifting it up, she moved it aside to go to the next one.

"Hiya. Welcome to the neighborhood."

Ellen jumped in fright, startled by the sudden voice so close by, and she dropped the marker. Turning her head, she saw a male puma fur standing next to her in her driveway. He was tall and athletic, and he looked rather young to her, perhaps eighteen or nineteen. Typical for his species, he had golden brown fur, white underneath his chin and around his mouth, and jagged black markings along either side of his muzzle. The young man had eyes of a very attractive shade of green, not unlike her own, and he was wearing jeans and a dark burgundy t-shirt with a college logo on it. He had a friendly smile on his face, nice enough to keep her from being too upset at being startled.

"Hi," Ellen said. She bent down to pick up the marker she dropped, and when she straightened up she smiled back. "Thank you. You're the first person to come by. Lucky you!"

The puma chuckled. "Lucky me." He held out one hand to her. "I'm Chase Marshall. My family lives down the street."

*Off to a great start already!* Smiling even more, Ellen took his hand. "I'm Ellen Powell. It's very nice to meet you, Chase." The doe turned back to her boxes, opening up the next one. This one was larger, and filled with books. She labeled it "living room", and then started to pick it up. The box was quite heavy, and she strained a little as she was trying to lift it.

"Hey, uh, let me help you with that," Chase said. He stepped over to her and took the box from her arms, setting it aside.

"Oh! Um...Thanks." Ellen felt a little awkward having the young man help her, but it was nice

enough of him to offer. "It was a long drive, so I'm a little tired."

"No problem," Chase said. "My mom would kill me if she knew I let a pregnant lady lift a heavy box like that. So, where are you from?"

"South Carolina," Ellen replied. She opened up the next box to check what was inside. "A small town a little south of Columbia, if you know about where that is. Not all that different from here, really." She closed the box back up and labeled it "master bedroom".

Chase brushed his hands off, and he leaned back against the side of the moving van. "How long?" At Ellen's quizzical glance, he nodded, looking at her stomach. "Until the baby."

"Oh!" The doe felt her face warm a little. "I'm at a few weeks over six months now, so about two to go." She moved the box she'd just labeled, which was a lot lighter than the one the puma had helped her to lift. She gave a rueful sigh, turning it into a bit of a laugh. "You're lucky you're a guy. You'll never have to deal with this."

"I guess not." Chase looked up at the house. "I bet you and your husband are both proud. Kinda surprised he's not out here helping you, actually."

Ellen was quiet for a few minutes, and she didn't look at Chase. She felt her heart rate increase, and she began to feel a little suffocated. To try to get the feeling of anxiety to subside, she changed the subject. "So, you've lived here your whole life, I bet."

"Huh?" The puma seemed confused by the sudden switch in direction. "Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah, I was born here and this is where I grew up. But I'm going to college in New York now, I'm just home for the summer."

"New York? Wow." Ellen put a hand on her hip, impressed. "You must have worked hard for that. What are you planning on doing with that kind of education?" She crossed her arms, eyeing the young man in front of her. He seemed like a really nice guy, a good quality to have for a new neighbor.

Chase kicked a small pebble from her driveway to the side yard. "Not really sure yet. I guess I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do with my life." He scratched behind one of his pointed feline ears. "What about you? What do you do?"

"Elementary school teacher."

"And what brings an elementary school teacher to Georgia?"

Ellen shrugged. "Change of scenery. The pay is better down here." She smiled. "I just felt the time was right for a change, especially with the baby on the way."

"Right. Well, like I said, welcome to the neighborhood." Chase checked his watch. "My parents are probably going to have dinner on the table pretty soon. I should get going. It was nice meeting you." He shook Ellen's hand again. "And hey, if you need anything, we're that yellow three-story on the

corner. Feel free to drop by anytime.”

The way he offered gave her a warm feeling. If she'd had good vibes about this move before, they were even better now. “Thanks. I feel at home already!” She watched the puma walk off, and she twirled the marker between her fingers cheerfully. *I hope everyone here is as nice as he was. This is going to be a really great place to live, I can feel it...*

\*\*\*\*\*

Dinner was excellent as always. Chase's mom was a great cook, and she always prepared a nice spread for the family. Tonight the meal was fried chicken, corn on the cob, roasted potatoes, and a chopped green salad, a quintessentially Southern repast. Fried chicken just happened to be one of Chase's favorite meals, and his father's as well, so Gloria made it at least three or four times a month. They all would gladly have eaten it every day if it wouldn't have made them balloon up to the size of whales. As it was, they probably ate more of it than was good for them, but that was a problem they were more than willing to deal with.

Placing the last clean chicken bone on his plate, Chase's father, Nathan, leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “Fantastic,” he said, looking supremely satisfied. The elder puma reached over and put his hand over his wife's. “Really hit a home run this time, honey.”

Gloria looked pleased, but she gave him a teasing shake of her head. “You say that every time,” she purred, her tail tip twitching with happiness. She got up from the table and started clearing up the plates. “I'd ask if you saved room for pie, but I was watching you. I think you'll pop if you eat another bite.”

“Well, my pants will, at least,” Nathan admitted sheepishly. “Your cooking is going to be the death of me one day.” He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and loosened his tie, looking across the table at Chase. “So, Chase, what'd you get up to today?”

Chase shrugged. “Not much. Stayed inside, mostly. Played some games.” He grinned, glancing at his mom. “Played the hero and got a light bulb for mom. I'm sure I'll get my name in the papers for that.”

“I swear, you tease me way more than necessary!” Gloria called from the kitchen. She leaned her head out into the doorway, winking at her son. “Both of you. One of these days karma will bite you.”

Her son chuckled. “Oh, I did go out once today, Dad. I went down the street and introduced myself to the new neighbor.”

“Oh!” Gloria came back into the dining room, wiping her hands off with a dish towel. She draped it over her shoulder, placing her hands on her hips. “What were they like?”

"New neighbors?" Nathan looked curious, turning his gaze from his wife to his son.

"The Richardson house, down the street," Gloria explained. "Someone just bought it, and they were moving in today?" She looked at her son. "So, dish."

Chase felt oddly like he was being interrogated, even though he'd promised his mother that he would tell her about them. "I only met one person," he said. "Her name was Ellen Powell. She's a white-tail deer, and she's an elementary school teacher. They moved here from South Carolina. She seemed really nice."

"She our age?" Nathan asked. "They have any kids?"

"She's a little younger than you guys," Chase replied. "She's pregnant, but I didn't see any other kids. I guess it's her first. She did tell me that she moved here because of the baby. Needed a bigger place, I guess, and she said the work was better here."

Gloria looked excited. "Oh, a baby, how nice! We'll have to get the other wives in the neighborhood together and throw her a baby shower. That would be a nice welcoming party for her."

"Well, what about her husband?" Nathan asked. "What does he do?" He sat up straighter, adjusting the cuffs of his shirt. "Hope he likes beer and baseball. Season's in full swing, and the Braves are having a pretty good year so far. I could always use a new game watching buddy."

Chase shrugged again. "I dunno. I didn't see him. I asked her about him, but she was kinda preoccupied, so she didn't answer." He wasn't that bothered about it. His parents were the ones who wanted to know everything about everyone in the neighborhood, not him, even though he was naturally curious about the new neighbors. "He was probably inside with the movers. Anyway, I talked to her for a little bit and helped her with a few boxes, then I came home. Like I said, she seems nice. Oh, and I told her that if she needed anything, she could come by. I hope that was okay..."

"Of course it was," Gloria assured her son. "What kind of neighbors would we be if we didn't offer to help out? We'll at least have to have them over for dinner sometime soon." She returned to the kitchen, waving her tail in an animated fashion. "So nice to have some new faces around here. I can't wait to meet them."

"I think you'll like Ellen, anyway, mom," Chase said.

"Mrs. Powell," his mother corrected him from the kitchen. "Honestly, your father and I taught you better manners than that."

With a little sigh, Chase rolled his eyes. *She's just as close to my age as she is to yours...* He caught his father's eye, and his father gave him a little nod and a shrug. He was clearly of the same opinion as his wife. Sometimes his folks could be so old-fashioned. *Some of my professors at school don't even mind being called by their first names. I guess parents are just like that.*

\*\*\*\*\*

A week went by, and the arrival of the new neighbors seemed to be pushed to the backs of everyone's minds. By the time the next weekend rolled around, most of the neighborhood had made Ellen's acquaintance, and a few dinner invitations for her and her family had been made. To Chase's knowledge, however, she had politely turned all of the invitations down. Most people assumed that the Powells were still getting adjusted to their new house, since Ellen seemed relatively outgoing. After the first few days, during which the house was presumably being put in order, she could often be seen out in her front yard, tending to the flower beds. The white-tail looked like a fan of bright colors, since she was planting rows of pansies and daisies along the front of the house and on either side of the driveway. Whenever anyone walked by, they'd greet her and she'd answer with a return greeting and a friendly wave.

One person who had yet to make an appearance was Ellen's husband. Ellen herself drove a small red convertible, which was almost always in the driveway, but nobody had figured out what her husband drove. Whatever it was, he seemed to work long hours, leaving early in the morning and coming back late at night, because his car was never there. Whenever someone asked her about it, she just gave an awkward smile and quickly changed the subject. Rumors were starting to rumble about the neighborhood. The more gracious of the rumors were that her husband was deployed in the military, off on some assignment that Ellen couldn't talk about, or that he worked for the federal government in Atlanta or even in Washington and was away a lot. The more gossipy neighbors, which Chase was sad to say included his own mother, were starting to whisper that Mr. Powell was involved in more seedy and unseemly business, like organized crime or something. Chase himself couldn't see such a nice woman taking up with someone like that, so he was more inclined to lend credence to the government rumors, but really he thought he probably just had a normal job that kept him out of the house frequently.

Chase didn't think about it all that much, and after he'd introduced himself on the first day he didn't say more than a passing greeting to Ellen. That was until the following weekend, when he was out for a mid-morning run. The neighborhood was pretty quiet for a Saturday, but as he ran past the Powells' house, he noticed that Ellen was in her front yard, digging around in one of her flower beds. The driveway, yet again, had her convertible in it but no other cars. The elusive Mr. Powell seemed not to be home, as usual. He decided to stop and say hello, and maybe satisfy a little of the curiosity surrounding the new arrivals. Turning into her driveway, he jogged up the gentle concrete slope and stopped next to the doe.

"Good morning, Mrs. Powell," he greeted her politely, breathing only a little hard. He'd already



been running for about fifteen minutes, having started by going up and down the main road outside the neighborhood.

Ellen looked up at him, blinking the morning sun out of her eyes. “Well, hello there, Chase,” she said. “Good morning. Out for one of your runs?”

“Yeah,” Chase said. He jogged in place for a few seconds before stopping. “I like to keep in shape. Plus, it helps when video games and TV get boring.”

“I’d certainly imagine you’re in pretty good shape, then,” Ellen surmised. “I look out and see you running all the time. That’s good. Young kid like you ought to be active.” She turned back to her flowers, digging the trowel into the dark brown soil. “I hate to see children wasting their time on computers and video games. A good book and going outside does wonders for the mind.”

Chase laughed. “Hey, I’m not one of your students,” he joked. “Don’t lump me in with all the little kids.”

Ellen laughed as well. The sound was light and pleasant, like a bird’s song. “No, you’re not,” she agreed. “I’m sorry, Chase. I was just making fun of you.” She sat up, dusting her knees off and shifting to sit on her front step. She was wearing an old pair of jeans and a large shirt, one that was loose enough to cover her pregnant belly. The neck of the shirt was sliding halfway off one shoulder, and Chase could see a little bit of the white fur covering her collarbone. “So, what brings you around?”

“Nothing much,” the teenage puma said. He sat down on the front step next to Ellen, far enough away to be polite but close enough to be friendly. “I just saw you outside and figured I’d take a break from running to say hello. I hadn’t said hi or anything since I introduced myself when you moved in. Everything going well with the new house?”

The doe nodded. “Pretty good. The interior is all set up. I’ve just been working on the yard these past few days.” She looked out at the front lawn, her short brown-and-white tail, which was poking out the back of her jeans, wiggling happily. “It’s all coming together nicely.”

“Looks like it. Your flower beds look really nice.” Chase gazed over the alternating rows of yellows, purples, whites, and reds. Then he glanced over the rest of the lawn. “Huh. Your grass looks kind of long, though. I guess the old owners stopped the landscaping service a little before the final sale.”

Ellen reached down from the front step, running her slender fingers through the tips of the grass. “They did. I have a lawn mower in the garden shed out back, and I’ve been meaning to cut it myself. But it’s been so hot lately, and I get sore when I spend too much time on my feet these days.” She shrugged. “I guess I’ll just have to hire a professional to do it for me. It’s not a big deal.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Chase said, almost out of reflex. “If you need your grass cut, I can

do that for you. I could do it right now, even, it's not that hot out yet.”

“Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that for me!” Ellen insisted, her eyes widening. She placed a hand on Chase's shoulder. “No, really, don't. I'm sure you have better things to do than cutting your neighbor's lawn. I'll get someone to do it.”

Grinning, Chase got up from the front step. “Hey, I was just running because I was bored,” he said. “I don't mind. I cut my parents' grass all the time, so it'll be fun to cut someone else's for a change. Seriously, let me do it.”

He thought that Ellen was going to refuse again, but then she looked out at her lawn and then back at him. “Well, okay. If you insist. The shed's in the back, and the lawn mower is in there. There should be a gas can next to it, if it needs it.”

“Sure thing!” Chase headed off around the house to where the garden shed was. He opened it up and found an old lawn mower, rusty in a few places and looking well-used. He wheeled it out of the shed and checked it over, finding that although it didn't look like much, it seemed to be in fine working order. Taking the gas can that was right where Ellen had said it would be, he added some to the tank and tried to start the contraption up. To his surprise, the engine caught on the very first try, and it ran like a dream. He set the cutting level to the proper height and got to work, starting with the side yard.

As he worked, he realized that he had no idea why he had offered to do this for the neighbor woman. He really couldn't think of any reason. The thought had just occurred to him as soon as he saw that her grass was getting long. Maybe he was just trying to be a good neighbor, to make the newcomer feel at home. Whatever the reason, her yard was big, so it was going to be a pretty long job, and despite what he'd said before it was going to get hot outside soon.

*Oh well. Little late to think better of it, now.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Ellen watched the puma disappear around the corner of her house, and a few minutes later she heard the familiar rumble of her lawn mower starting up. She felt a little guilty at what she was letting him do, but he seemed like he had really wanted to cut her grass for her. Her grass had been getting pretty long, though...It just felt to her like she was taking advantage of him, even though he had been the one to bring it up. She just didn't want the boy to feel like he *had* to help her, and she didn't want to seem helpless, either. She could take care of herself.

*Even though...well, I guess it would be pretty hard for me to get through the entire yard, right now,* Ellen thought, placing her hand on her stomach. A trip to the grocery store these days was tiring enough for her, and that was a lot less strenuous than mowing the lawn. *Just accept the help, El. You obviously could use at least a little of it.*

While Chase worked on her yard, Ellen kept going with her flowers. In South Carolina, she'd always had a lovely garden, one that her neighbors had been envious of. But it had been that nice sort of envy which made everyone want to come around and hang out, to look at and smell the flowers. It hadn't just been flowers, either. She liked growing vegetables as well, and she planned to put a vegetable garden in the backyard once the flower garden out front was completed. That might have to wait until the baby had been born, but it was something she definitely had planned. In fact, she already had the seeds she would need, stored in a small mini-fridge in her garage. They were a part of the sizable collection of gardening supplies that she had brought with her from her old house.

Other than her job as a teacher, gardening was Ellen's life. Whenever she was feeling stressed out or in need of something to do, she'd go outside and mess around with her plants, trimming and pruning where needed or adding new colors to the mix. The doe was always on the lookout for new flowers to add to her personal landscape. That was what she had been the most sad to leave behind when she moved from South Carolina; her garden had been a veritable rainbow of different colors, all of hundreds of different varieties of plants. The home and garden store in her old town had gotten at least half of its business, Ellen was sure, from her alone. She'd go in there at least two or three times a week, enough so that the employees there knew her by name.

*And that was where I met him...*

Ellen was surprised by how much it hurt, even with so much time and distance behind her. Just thinking about him made her heart ache. She tried to put it out of her mind, but the wound was still fresh. The move might have made her forget it for a little while, but it hadn't done anything to banish it completely. She looked up from her flowers, taking a few deep breaths as she felt a lump starting to form in her throat. Despite her efforts, the doe felt a few tears leak from the corners of her emerald green eyes. As that happened, Chase came around the corner of the house, apparently having finished with the side yard and starting on the front.

Quickly, Ellen put her trowel down, standing up and turning away from him. She was determined not to let Chase see her cry. If he saw that, he might start asking questions, and that would be very awkward. Questions, innuendo, and rumors were the whole reason she had decided to move, after all. Without glancing back at the young puma, she walked up the front steps and into her house, closing the door firmly behind her and shutting out everything except the now-muted sound of the lawn mower.

Once she was safely in the anonymity of her own home, Ellen covered her face with her hands and sank down to the floor, her back against the door as the tears began to flow freely. For almost ten full minutes, she sobbed into her palms. Her shoulders shook as the emotions flooded back over her,

feeling as real and as raw as the day everything had gone wrong. When she was finally able to stop, and to get control of herself, she looked herself over. The thin fur on her hands was streaked with tears, and still covered in dirt from the garden like her clothes. Ellen was certain that her face was just as dirty as the rest of her.

“I must look a real mess,” she said to herself, managing a quiet, watery laugh. Putting a hand back against the door to steady herself, she got to her feet. “A quick shower wouldn't be a bad idea right now.” Ellen glanced out of one of the front windows, checking on Chase's progress. He had already finished the side yard, of course, and he was about halfway done with the front yard. That left the rest of the front, the other side yard, and the backyard. She had plenty of time to have a quick wash.

For a few moments, though, she watched him work, leaning on the windowsill and gazing out at the front yard. The teenage puma was working hard, but he didn't look like he was straining too much. Ellen admired how in shape he was. She remembered back to her college days, when she had been in the best shape of her life. Not many people would have guessed from looking at her now, but Ellen had been on the track team from middle school all the way through her senior year of college, and she had won a good number of awards during that time. That was almost fifteen years ago, now. She remembered that Chase had told her he liked playing sports. The tall male fur looked like just the kind of boy that Ellen would have dated, back in her younger days in school. He was a very attractive young man, confident, and he seemed genuinely nice. Seemingly a rare thing to find these days...

Blinking, the doe straightened up, shaking her head a little. Of all the things, she had caught herself daydreaming. What a silly thing. He was over a decade younger than her, and they had only met a week ago. Besides, a boy just out of his freshman year in college would be far more interested in girls his own age, not a thirty-five-year-old schoolteacher two months away from her first child. A brief fantasy was all it was...All it should be...

With another small shake of her head, Ellen left the foyer, walking through her living room to the stairs that lead to the second floor. She walked up, leaning heavily on the banister as she went. Her ankles were getting increasingly sore more quickly as her pregnancy went on, so it was slow going. She could have chosen to put her bedroom on the ground floor, but she wasn't going to be pregnant forever, after all, and the rooms up on the second floor had more windows. The white-tail doe had selected the sunniest, largest bedroom to be hers. As she walked into it, she felt much better.

Unlike the rest of the house, she had set up the bedroom almost exactly the same way it had been back at her old house. Ellen didn't have a regular, rectangular bed. Her bed was circular, about ten feet in diameter, and it was placed perfectly in the center of the room, right underneath a huge skylight. Her sheets were earthy tones, muted browns and tan to blend with her own deer coat. The skylight was

made of stained glass of varying shades of green, which scattered patterns all over the bed, making it look like a sunny forest floor. This room and the skylight had been the big reason she had decided on this house, along with the favorable price. When Ellen was in here she felt like everything was just perfect, like nothing had changed in the last six months at all.

*This is just about the only place that feels like...home...*, Ellen thought. She sighed a little, forcing herself to smile again. All of it was behind her. She had more important things to worry about than her past. Going to the far side of the room, where her dresser and her laundry hamper were, she took her shirt and bra off. Ellen tossed them into the hamper, then peeled off her jeans and her panties and put them in as well. Then she walked into the attached bathroom. It was as luxurious as one might expect from a bedroom the size that hers was, with black tile floors and a glassed-in shower. She strode towards it, feeling the smooth tiles underneath her bare feet. Sliding open the door, she reached inside and turned the water on, adjusting the knobs to give herself what she hoped would be the perfect temperature. She was still trying to feel out the scale that this shower operated on. Waiting for the water to heat up, she turned around and faced the closed bathroom door. *Well, hello there.*

On the back of the bathroom door hung a mirror, just about as wide and tall as the door itself. Ellen could see herself reflected perfectly in it. Some people might call her vain, but she loved seeing herself in reflection. It gave her the chance to evaluate herself and gauge her appearance, something that she had become rather self-conscious about during her pregnancy. The doe turned this way and that, looking at her figure from several different angles. Her belly was quite large now, and in perhaps a month more her girth would be nearly double what it was before she'd gotten pregnant. She supposed she should be thankful that both she and the baby, thus far, were perfectly healthy. Ellen stepped closer to the mirror, looking more carefully at herself. The fur was thinner on her belly than it usually was, owing to how she was stretched, but really one couldn't tell any change in the lovely, creamy white color of her stomach fur. Turning her back to the mirror, she looked over her shoulder and examined herself from behind. The chestnut brown that made up the majority of her coat's color was still as gorgeous as ever. She wagged the tail that gave her species its name, giggling just a little. From the rear, one almost wouldn't have known she was pregnant; her fanny looked just as full and perfect, to her, as it always had.

When she turned back around, she frowned just a little, holding her hands up to her breasts. The nice thing was that they had grown several cup sizes over the last few months. She was now a D instead of a B, but it came with a cost. For most of her life, Ellen had been able to go without wearing a bra. She had been blessed with naturally perky, firm, supported breasts, and bras were a very recent introduction to her. Now that she was pregnant, her bust sagged a little due to the increased volume,

and they still looked strange to her. Still, she had to admit, when she did have a bra on and had a shirt over them, they did look pretty nice. And really, they weren't all *that* bad when she was naked, although she did hope they'd go back to their normal size once the baby had arrived. For now, though, she was satisfied with her appearance, and reasonably secure in the fact that even with the minor flaws she was still quite an attractive woman.

"You still have it, El," she remarked to herself, turning back towards the shower with a smile. The glass was fogged up now, and the temperature in the room had increased to the point where she thought the water was probably ready. Sliding the door open again, Ellen stepped inside, going under the spray of hot water. She took in a quiet gasp of pleasure as the cascade hit her body. "Perfect..."

\*\*\*\*\*

After finishing with the front yard, Chase was outside for nearly another hour. The side yard and backyard took only thirty minutes, but after he was finished with that he put the lawn mower back and retrieved a rake from the garden shed. Ellen's lawn mower didn't have a bag, so it had been spewing grass clippings all over the yard while he'd been cutting. Never one to leave a job half done, Chase spent the rest of his work time raking up the clippings into a neat pile near the fence line in the backyard. While he was raking, he thought about his new neighbor.

He'd noticed that while he'd been cutting the front yard, the doe had gone back inside of her house. Chase wasn't sure, but he thought that she had been upset. He couldn't think of a reason why that would be, but he didn't really know her all that well. Maybe something had happened recently to upset her, or maybe it was just pregnancy hormones, or something. He'd heard that being pregnant could throw your emotions all out of whack. One thing that he could be thankful he'd never have to experience, as a man.

Chase was increasingly curious about Ellen. He still hadn't seen any sign of her husband, and he thought it was a little unusual that he would be away from home this long on a weekend. Then again, depending on the job he had, it might make perfect sense that he'd be away for so long. Chase just didn't know enough to be able to say for her. All he knew was that if he had a wife as pretty as her at home, he sure wouldn't be happy about being away for such long stretches at a time. Six months pregnant, and he thought she was still pretty...Heck, she was beautiful. If she hadn't been married...But no, that was unrealistic. Ellen was so much older than him, and she *was* married. They probably wouldn't have much in common anyway, being of different species.

Once he was all finished, Chase closed up the garden shed. He was a little tired, and he knew that his muscles would be pretty sore in the morning. He had little bits of grass stuck in his fur as well, but all things considered he wasn't too dirty. He brushed himself off, and he was about to head for the

front of the house when the back sliding glass door opened and Ellen stepped out.

“All finished?” she called, smiling at him. Chase noticed that she had washed up and changed out of her gardening clothes. She was wearing a bright yellow, flowered sundress with thin shoulder straps. If she had been down in spirits before, she looked fine now.

“All finished,” Chase confirmed. He waved a hand down at the ground. “The grass should be fine for another few weeks.”

“It looks great,” Ellen said. She toyed with one of the straps on her dress. “I really appreciate it, Chase. I have some sweet tea in the fridge, if you want to come in for a glass. You must be exhausted after all that work.”

Chase shrugged, shaking his head a little. “It really wasn't all that much work,” he said, telling a little white lie. He started walking towards the house. “But it was pretty hot. Something to drink would be great.”

Ellen beamed at him, standing to the side and letting him in. Chase felt relieved when he walked into her house. The air conditioning was on full blast, and it was like jumping into a swimming pool to go from the oppressive heat outside to the cool air inside. He looked around the living room that he'd been brought into. From what little he knew about her, the place was pretty much what he'd expect. The furniture inside looked old, possibly antiques or things she'd inherited from relatives. Everything was made of heavy, dark wood. It had been a long time since Chase had been in this house, since he'd been a little kid when the previous owners had his family over for dinners, but he remembered the soft blue color of the walls very well. Apparently Ellen intended to keep the house about the same as it had been before.

One thing he did notice was the way the walls were decorated. In most homes, Chase would expect to see photographs of the family up on the wall. He did see a few photographs, but they all just had Ellen in them, along with two older white-tailed deer who he assumed were her parents. There were also other pictures, paintings, of landscapes. He didn't see any pictures of a man who could be her husband.

“Have a seat.” Ellen gestured to a large, round table that was near the entrance to the kitchen. A few chairs were placed around it. “I'll just pop into the kitchen. Won't be a minute.” She disappeared through the open doorway, and Chase heard the clinking of glasses and what sounded like a refrigerator opening. He pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. A few minutes later, Ellen came back out of the kitchen, holding two tall glasses of sweet tea with lots of ice. She set one down in front of him and took the next chair over.

“Thanks,” Chase said cheerfully. He raised the glass, taking a sip of the drink. His eyes widened

a little. "Wow...This is really good." The tea was flavored strongly, but not overpoweringly so, and it had just the right amount of sugar with a hint of lemon. "I mean, I always thought my mom made the best sweet tea, but I think you might have her beat, Mrs. Powell."

Ellen looked embarrassed but very pleased to hear that. "You're just saying that to flatter me," she teased him. But there was mistaking the dimples in her cheeks that marked a genuine smile. "And please don't call me that. It makes me sound old. Ellen is just fine."

*I told you, mom,* Chase thought. "No, seriously, it's really good. Okay, mayyyyyybe not better than my mom's, but it's at least a tie." He looked around the living room again, taking everything in. "I like what you've done with the place. I haven't been in here since the old neighbors lived here, when I was real little."

"Oh, thank you," Ellen said. She looked over her own living room as well. "Most of the furniture is hand-me-downs from my grandmother. When she died, I got a lot of what she had. Some of this stuff is older than my parents."

"I could tell." Chase scanned his eyes over the pictures. "I see lots of pictures of you here. I guess those are your parents with you?" Ellen nodded. "I don't see any of your husband, though. Where are the pictures of him?"

As soon as he said it, Chase knew that he'd said something wrong. Ellen went very still and quiet, and she looked away from him. For a moment he got a flashback to when he'd been cutting the grass, and he'd seen her looking upset. The doe's ears slowly lowered to her head, and her shoulders slumped a bit. He almost thought that she was going to start crying, because her eyes grew glassy and somewhat red. Then she got ahold of herself, took a breath, and turned back to him, setting her glass of sweet tea down on the table.

"There aren't any pictures of him," Ellen said shortly. "I don't have a husband."

Chase was taken aback by her answer. "You don't? I mean...I just assumed..." He closed his mouth and took a sip of his drink. "So...So you're not married."

The white-tail doe shrugged and gave a helpless sort of smile. "Hard to be if there's no husband, right?" She pushed her glass around on the table surface with one finger, leaving a faint trail of moisture from the condensation on the bottom. "Does it matter?"

"Well, I..." Chase blinked, feeling like he was being put on the spot. Ellen was watching him closely, looking for what his reaction would be. "No, it doesn't matter. Not to me. It's just that...I mean, you're pregnant. Everyone in the neighborhood kind of assumed-"

"They were wrong, weren't they?" Ellen said heatedly. "Everyone kept on asking me 'Where's your husband?' 'When do we get to meet your husband?' 'You and your husband just have to come over



for dinner sometime.' Nobody ever bothered asking me if I even *had* a husband, they just thought 'Oh, she's having a baby, she must have someone there with her.'" She stopped, seeming to know that she was sliding into a rant. She glanced away, looking out of the window. After she calmed herself down for a few minutes, she looked back at Chase. "I'm sorry, I...Can we not talk about it?"

"Sure....," Chase said. He leaned back in his chair. "Of course. Sorry I brought it up, I...I didn't know."

For a while, the two of them just sat at the table together without saying anything, drinking their sweet tea and avoiding each others' eyes. Chase was still reeling from the way that Ellen had reacted to what he thought was a simple question, but he had very clearly hit a sensitive spot with his inquiry. Even so, some of his curiosity had been satisfied, albeit in a roundabout way. Ellen was living here alone, and the father of her unborn child was apparently out of the picture. Now the way that she had brushed off everyone's questions about her family situation made sense. She was a single mother, moved to a new home, and from the way that she had acted when he brought up the subject, it seemed like she was running from something. While they sat, he saw a single tear roll down her cheek, but nothing more.

"Well, sorry for bringing the conversation to a screeching halt," Ellen finally said. She brushed the back of one hand over her face, swiping away the offending drop of moisture, and she let out a rush of breath. "Phew...How about we talk about something else? You told me a little about yourself when we first met, but I don't really know a whole lot about you. You grew up around here, right?"

"Yeah, I lived in that house down the street my whole life," Chase said. "Grew up here, went to school here. Cloverleaf Elementary, Conrad Aiken Middle School, and then Carson McCullers High School. I guess I went to New York for college because I was finally getting sick of staying around here." He laughed a little, thinking back to when he'd told his parents where he'd decided to go to school. They'd both been disappointed, especially his mother, Gloria. She'd cried for days, heartbroken that her son was going to be so far away from home. She'd tried to convince him not to go, but his mind had been made up since his junior year of high school.

Ellen looked surprised, and she smiled at him. "Cloverleaf Elementary? I'll be teaching there in the fall when the new school year starts. Second grade. Of course, I'll sort of be part time for a little while, since the baby will be arriving about then."

"Oh, good for you!" Chase congratulated her.

"Yes, I just got the offer a few days ago. I was lucky to find something so quick. It's a real relief. I made a decent profit selling my house in South Carolina and buying this one, but I didn't have enough to last much beyond Christmas." The doe was very pleased with herself. "I guess fate works out for the

better sometimes.”

Chase thought that was a peculiar thing to say, but he didn't remark upon it. He wasn't really a believer in fate or anything like that. “That's good. I'm sure you'll be a good teacher here, too.”

“You're assuming again,” Ellen pointed out. “How do you know I was a good teacher back h-...back in South Carolina?”

“Were you?”

Ellen thought about it for a few seconds, and she nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I think so. I was patient with my kids, and they always had fun in my class, and they learned. That's about all you need to qualify as a good teacher.” She leaned forward in her chair, smiling at Chase. “So you grew up around here, but you left to go to school. Leave a girlfriend behind?” She blinked, seeming to realize what she'd asked. “That's a little unfair for me to ask, isn't it? You asked me about the same thing, and I refused to talk about it.”

“It's okay, I don't mind,” Chase said, chuckling. “Nah, I...I dated a little in high school and all, but I never really had a steady girlfriend. There's nobody back in New York, either.” The puma shrugged.

“Ohhh, come now.” Ellen propped her head on one arm, pouting slightly. Her gentle deerish face made the expression adorable, despite her age. “Cute guy like you? You should have a girlfriend. I bet you could make someone really happy.” She offered another smile.

“Nice of you to say,” Chase said, his return smile a bit awkward. Hearing that from a woman sixteen years his senior was strange, but for some reason his tail was involuntarily wagging behind him. Thankfully, his body blocked it from her view. “It's not like I haven't been looking. I just haven't found the right girl, I guess.”

“You'll find her. A nice guy like you is a scarce commodity.” She lifted her glass to take another sip of her drink, but before she did she muttered, “Believe me, I know...” Ellen sipped at her tea, looking through the glass door to the backyard. The schoolteacher gave a fractional shake of her head, and then she looked back at Chase. “Well, I don't want to keep you all day. I'm sure your parents are wondering where you are by now.”

“Oh, crap...” Chase looked at his watch, realizing he'd been out for nearly two and a half hours by now. That was definitely longer than anyone ought to have taken for a morning run. “You're right. I should go.” He pushed his chair back and stood up. “Thanks for the tea.”

Ellen waved off his thanks, getting up herself. “Thank *you* for cutting my grass.” She walked him to the front door. He noticed that her hand lightly brushed up against his arm as she opened the door for him, and she turned to face him before he started walking out. “I'll have to think of some way

to repay you for that, Chase.”

“I had an idea about that,” Chase said. He put his hands in his pockets, leaning towards her. “You’ve turned down invitations to dinner from everyone in the neighborhood, including from my parents, I believe. I’m kind of hoping you’ll accept the invitation from me, now.”

Smirking, Ellen crossed her arms, leaning against the inside of the door frame. “And how is that me repaying you? A dinner invitation sounds more like you doing me another favor.”

“Oh, trust me,” Chase said with a wry grin, taking one hand out of his pocket and rubbing the fur on the back of his neck, “once you spend an evening listening to my dad ramble on about banking and baseball, you won’t think it’s a favor.” He grinned wider at Ellen’s laugh. “I guess it’s not really you repaying me, I’d just really like it if you came over for dinner sometime.”

The white-tail doe stopped laughing, with her mouth slightly open. “Huh...Ohhh...” She reached up with one hand, toying with one of her broad ears, and Chase saw something in her eyes change. Each time he’d seen her, Ellen had seemed outgoing and friendly, but now she looked almost shy. “The way you say that, it kinda sounds like you want this to be a date.” Her tail was flicking back and forth every few seconds, and he saw a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as he racked his brain for something to say to that.

“No, I, uh...I didn’t mean...,” Chase stammered. He was uncharacteristically flustered all of a sudden. His new neighbor was admittedly quite attractive, and the way she seemed to be flirting with him was throwing him off. “I was just being neighborly. I mean, you don’t like a lot of gossip, right? The more you keep turning down social invitations, the more people are going to talk.”

“Easy, Chase, I was just teasing,” Ellen assured him. He thought that he could detect a little hint of disappointment in her voice, nonetheless. “But you’re right, I guess. I haven’t been as open as I could have. People expect a new arrival to want to reach out and make new friends.” She looked out her front door at the street, where a few people were walking by. She put a hand underneath her pregnant belly, rubbing it through her sundress. “I’ll make you a deal. I have a lot going on right now, still settling in and getting prepared for the baby to arrive. Call me in a few weeks, when I’ll be more in order, and then I’d love to have dinner with you and your parents.”

Chase nodded. “Okay. It’s a deal.” He leaned forward, putting one hand on the wall above Ellen’s head, looming over her and looking deeply into her emerald eyes. He saw them widen a bit in amused surprise. Two could play at the flirting game. “But I don’t have your number, Ellen. I’m gonna need that.”

“You’re right,” Ellen agreed, her voice a little bit hoarse. “Stay right here.” She turned away, heading back into the house and to her kitchen. After a few minutes, she returned with a small pad of

paper and a pen. She scribbled a phone number onto the top sheet, and then tore it off and handed it to Chase. Their fingers brushed against each other as he took the paper from her, and they lingered for a second longer than normal before he drew his hand back. "Don't wait too long to call."

The puma glanced at the slip before folding it and putting it in his pocket. He gave Ellen a final smile, then he walked out of her front door, starting to jog again once he got to the end of her driveway, heading for home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ellen watched the college boy jog off down the street towards his house, her head a jumble of emotions now. She felt even warmer than the hot day should have made her, and her heart was beating faster than a hummingbird's. She had rather been expecting the invitation from Chase, considering that he was about the only person in the neighborhood that hadn't offered her one until now, but she hadn't been expecting him to flirt back at her. Or to do it so well. She'd seen the expression on his face when he'd leaned over her, and it had excited her. Ellen hadn't felt an excitement like that since...well, since back in South Carolina.

*I don't know if I should have laid it on that thick,* she thought. She hugged herself around the arms, feeling a small shiver pass up and down her spine. Flirting with the younger man seemed like such a bad thing to do, but the way he had responded had made her feel so good. The predator was so cute, too, and she could feel that he thought she was pretty from the way his eyes had locked onto hers just now. Was it so bad to think there could be something there?

"Oh, El," she said to herself with a sigh. "What are you doing to yourself?" She withdrew into her house, closing the door.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Chase got back home, he stepped inside and slid his running shoes off, leaving them in the front entrance. His clothes were sweaty and slightly dirty, covered with dust and bits of grass clippings. He hoped he hadn't left too much of a mess when he sat down in Ellen's house. He needed a shower and a change of clothes, and he was starting to get hungry, too. Lunch sounded like a good idea about now. Chase walked through the front hall, coming into the living room near the base of the stairs up to the second floor. He was stopped when he heard someone calling to him.

"That was a long morning run."

Chase turned and looked to see his mother and father sitting at the dining table off to the side of the living room, apparently in the middle of lunch. "Oh, hey. Yeah, I guess it was. Sorry, I got kind of caught up in something."

His mother, Gloria, looked less than pleased by that explanation. "Caught up in something'?"

What kind of something?"

"Nothing...crazy," Chase replied, a little taken aback by the accusatory tone in his mother's voice. "I was out for a run, and when I passed Mrs. Powell's house she was outside. I stopped to say hello. We were talking and I noticed that her lawn was getting kind of long, so I cut it for her. We talked a little after that. That's all."

Gloria frowned at him. "You could have called. I was getting worried."

"Gloria, don't nag," her husband cautioned her. "He was fine. He was doing a favor for a neighbor. There isn't anything to be upset about."

"Sorry," Chase said, annoyed by his mother's attitude. She was being unreasonable, and he didn't like it at all. "I didn't have my phone with me. I was only out for a few hours."

The older puma woman got up from the table, taking her plate with her as she walked towards the kitchen. "Excuse me for being concerned about my son, Nathan. I'm just trying to be a good mother. And I don't like the idea of him hanging around her house."

"What?" Chase burst out. He looked at his father with a disbelieving expression on his face, getting nothing in return. He followed his mother into the kitchen. "Where is this coming from? Last week you were all excited. You couldn't wait to welcome her to the neighborhood."

Gloria set her plate down on the kitchen counter, facing her son with her hands on her hips. "Well that was before she started acting so suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

"You know what I mean. She's at home all the time, and she always says she doesn't have time to socialize with anyone. She's expecting a baby, but we've never seen her husband! You don't have to be a detective to know something isn't right." Gloria crossed her arms, her long tail swishing back and forth in agitation. "She's up to something, and I don't want you caught up in it."

Chase rolled his eyes. "Oh, for God's sake, mom, you're getting caught up in the gossip. Ellen isn't 'up to something'. She's just getting a feel for the neighborhood. And you and your friends aren't helping things by spreading rumors." He waved a hand at his mother, getting agitated himself. "She isn't even married, so you're looking for something where there's nothing there!"

Chase's father leaned back in his chair, looking through the kitchen doorway. "She's not married?" he asked, somewhat surprised by the revelation. "Where's the father, then?"

Chase covered his eyes with one hand. He knew that he'd said something in anger that he probably shouldn't have, but it was too late to take it back now. "I don't know. She didn't want to talk about it, and I didn't press it."

"So she *is* hiding something," Gloria said.

“Come on, mom, like you've never had anything you didn't want the whole neighborhood to know?” Chase said, exasperated. “This is part of why I left home to go to college. I can't stand the way you ladies all gossip about everyone, even your friends! Why can't you just let people be?” He stormed out of the kitchen, the fur on the back of his neck raised up, not even bothering with more than a passing glance at the astonished expressions on his parents' faces. Going up to his third floor bedroom, he quickly stripped off his soiled clothes and went into the attached bathroom, turning on the shower and stepping inside.

As he bathed himself, he realized he hadn't said anything to his parents about the invitation he'd extended to Ellen. The way his mother was acting now, that was probably for the best. He could wait to drop that little bit of information until it was closer to the day.

\*\*\*\*\*

For the next few weeks, Chase and Ellen interacted with increasing frequency. He found himself going on morning runs more often, and whenever he did he'd find some reason to stop by Ellen's house and say hello. Every time she was there with a smile and a glass of sweet tea, or some cookies, or something like that, and she frequently had some chore that needed doing that would keep him there for an hour or so. One time he helped her fix a leaking faucet in the kitchen, and another time he swept out the attic for her, something that the cleaners hired by the previous owners had apparently neglected. Chase was happy to do the chores for her, and he felt like she was starting to feel more comfortable in the neighborhood. She was receiving a few other visitors besides Chase now, with some of the younger families in the surrounding houses coming by to say hello and share snacks.

Unfortunately, the rumors hadn't stopped, and if anything they'd gotten worse. Since Chase had let slip to his mother that Ellen was unmarried, that bit of information had curiously seemed to make its way around to just about everyone in the neighborhood. It made Chase's blood boil when he overheard the things that were being said about the doe, with some of the more outrageous rumors to include that she had been raped and was carrying the attacker's child, or that she was a prostitute who had moved to run from prosecution. He could have believed the former if it wasn't for the way Ellen acted and laughed, and he couldn't believe the latter for exactly the same reasons. Chase could have asked her, but she had made it pretty clear that she didn't feel like talking about the matter, and he respected that. He did wish that she would tell the truth, if only to put the rumors to rest, but that was her decision and he was sure she would come out with it when she was ready.

It wasn't until two and a half weeks later that Chase thought about giving Ellen a call for dinner at his parents' home. Before he did that, of course he had to bring it up to his mother and father. When he told them that he was going to invite her over the next coming Saturday, his mother was dead set

against it. She didn't want Ellen to be in her house, and she was furious that Chase was still spending time at her house after she had made it clear that she didn't approve. Under it all, Chase got the sense that what she was the most afraid of was what the ladies in the neighborhood would say if they knew that Ellen Powell was at her home. Thankfully, her husband brought her down from her fury. He pointed out to her that she had been the one to say it was okay when Chase said he'd told Ellen to come over if she needed anything. He also pointed out that Gloria had invited Ellen over herself a few weeks prior. Grudgingly, Gloria had to acknowledge that all of that was true, and she reluctantly consented to have the new neighbor over for dinner.

Chase was glad that his mother seemed to be seeing some reason, but he couldn't help but feel slightly apprehensive about it. He knew that rumors and gossip were central to his mother's life, and he just hoped that she could keep herself civil long enough for a dinner to last. He liked to think that she could. That Friday evening, Chase dug out the phone number that Ellen had given to him and gave her a call. After a short conversation, the dinner plans were made. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he thought that Ellen was more looking forward to having dinner with him than with his parents.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Is everything good, Ellen?”

Pausing with her fork halfway to her mouth, Ellen let her hand drop slightly, offering a sincere smile to Gloria Marshall. “It's delicious, thank you, Gloria,” she said. “I have to say, I'm impressed. I'm really not a very good cook, so having a homemade meal like this is a real treat.” The doe completed her fork's journey to her mouth, taking a bite of the wonderfully buttery lima beans that she was working on.

Ellen had been looking forward to the dinner invitation almost since Chase had first mentioned it weeks before. Despite her behavior towards interacting with her neighbors up to now, she really did want to make friends in the neighborhood, and accepting the first dinner invitation was a step she should have taken ages ago. When Chase called her, she'd accepted almost gleefully. He was a delightful young man, and she had been sure that his parents would be no less welcoming, and she hadn't been disappointed thus far. When she rang the front doorbell, Chase had greeted her at the door and brought her inside, where she'd met his mother and father, Gloria and Nathan. They seemed like decent people, though there was the usual first-time jitters of meeting new people in a significant manner.

The first thing that they'd done to make Ellen feel more comfortable was to show her around their house, which was impressive to her. She had thought her own new house to be rather large, but theirs was three stories and quite luxurious. She had already known from talking to Chase that his

father was a banker, and from the looks of where they lived it looked like he was a very successful one. The whole time they were walking through the house and chatting, her nose was tempted by the scent of what was cooking downstairs.

Ellen had been a little worried about what they would be serving, since they were a predator species, after all, but she was relieved to find that they were serving a vegetarian fare for her benefit. Besides the buttered lima beans, there was roasted corn, asparagus, fried okra and red peppers, and a fantastic salad made from field greens, carrots, fresh grated ginger, and a spicy vinegar dressing. She'd only mentioned in passing when Chase called that she was vegetarian, so it was very nice of his mother to accommodate that. She'd surely had a more carnivorous menu in mind, in keeping with what they probably ate on a regular basis. Even if meat had only been one dish being served, it might have been enough to kill her appetite, especially considering that the nausea with her pregnancy was starting to get worse lately.

Chase's mother offered a smile of her own. "Thank you for saying so. I'll have to try your cooking sometime to judge for myself, though. I'm sure you're a lot better than you're saying." She took a bite off her own plate, which was mostly empty. The meal was starting to wind down, but there had been the promise made of pound cake for dessert, which everyone was looking forward to.

"Well, maybe," Ellen said, laughing a bit. "But you might be disappointed in me."

"Can't be that bad," Chase said. "Your sweet tea was fantastic, and those cookies the other day were also great."

Ellen beamed at him, feeling a wash of warmth from the compliment. "I'm glad to hear that. It's nice to know I have some skill at something, even if it's just cookies." She put her fork down, finished with an empty plate in front of her. "But I think your mother definitely has me beat, at least."

Since everyone was finished, Gloria got up from her chair and collected up all of the dishes, taking them back to the kitchen. Her husband helped her by taking the leftovers as well, leaving Ellen and Chase alone for a few minutes. He was sitting across from her, and she leaned forward to whisper.

"Thank you for inviting me," the white-tail said. "I'm having a lovely time. Your parents are so nice!"

Chase gave her an oddly sheepish smile. "Yeah, I was, uh...I mean, yeah. They are. I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." Ellen saw his tail waving behind him. "I'm glad you could come. It was a shame, you being cooped up in that house all by yourself. I hope this means you're going to be a little more outgoing around the neighborhood."

"I'm sure of it," Ellen replied, winking at him. "But I hope you'll still drop by. I look forward to our little talks." She almost laughed when she saw the way that his feline ears pricked forward. She'd



clearly embarrassed him with her flirty comment, especially since his parents could possibly have overheard.

Before Chase could respond to her, his parents came back into the room. His mother was carrying a platter which a cake on it, and Ellen perked up even more when her sensitive nose detected the scent of lemon. Lemon pound cake was a particular favorite of hers. Nathan came in behind her with a steaming pot of coffee and four cups. They were all served a piece of cake, and everyone also got a cup of dark coffee, except for Chase. When everyone was settled in, the conversation started back up again.

“So, Chase has told us that you recently found a job?” Nathan asked her.

“Oh, yes,” Ellen said, glancing at Chase. “Yes, I’ll be teaching at Cloverleaf Elementary starting this fall semester. I’ll be teaching second grade.” She placed a hand on her belly. “Of course, I’ll have to take it easy for the first few months, while the baby and I are settling in, but I can’t wait to get back to teaching.”

Gloria picked up her cup of coffee. “You taught back in South Carolina, too, didn’t you?”

Ellen nodded. “I did. It was fourth grade back there, but still elementary school kids. I love kids. They’re all so much fun, still innocent and optimistic about the world.” She took a bite of her slice of cake, making a quiet noise of pleasure at the flavor. “Delicious! It’s so refreshing to see that sort of attitude, especially with all that’s bad in the world.”

“So what brought you to Georgia?” Gloria followed up with. She sipped at her coffee, and Ellen saw her eyes boring into her. The elder puma seemed to be watching her very carefully. “Sounds like you had things pretty good back where you came from.”

Ellen blinked. “Well, it just seemed like the time for a move.” She cut another bite of cake from her slice, moving it to her mouth and chewing slowly, trying to give the appearance that she was being thoughtful. Really, she felt that the conversation was starting to move in a direction that she didn’t want it to go. “I mean, the baby was on the way, and I was interested in moving on to better things. The pay is much better here, and I have a bigger house. It’s sort of a winning situation.”

“That’s all?” Gloria pressed her. Her eyes hadn’t left Ellen’s. “No other reason?”

For a long moment after that question, Ellen what sure what to say. She realized that her mouth was slightly open, and she quickly closed it so as not to appear rude. But her heart rate had increased and she was starting to feel just a little bit sick. All of a sudden it felt like everyone was staring at her, and the atmosphere was beginning to feel somewhat like an interrogation.

“I...I don’t...,” Ellen murmured, finding it hard to meet Gloria’s gaze. “I’m not sure what you mean.” She glanced over at Chase again, feeling like she needed some help here. He was staring at his

mother, and Ellen could tell from the way that his tawny fur was beginning to bristle that he had neither been expecting this nor approved of it.

Nathan cleared his throat, looking at his wife as well. "Gloria, I'm not sure this is the best-"

Ignoring him, Gloria continued on. "You have to be aware of some of the rumors that have been going around," she insisted. "People have been saying all sorts of things about why you moved here. I mean, you have to admit that it *is* a little odd for a pregnant woman to move all that way, with no husband or anything like that. Especially when she already has a job and a home of her own."

"Mom...", Chase growled, a note of warning in his voice. She ignored him as well, continuing to stare Ellen down.

Ellen's eyes widened, and she felt her mouth go a little dry. With her hand shaking slightly, she picked up her coffee cup and took a big swallow of the steamy liquid, working a little moisture back into her mouth. "I...I suppose it is a little odd, but I was really just looking for a change of scenery. I don't understand why you're asking. And I don't really pay attention to rumors. They're a lot of nonsense, in my experience."

"Are they?" Gloria put her cup down, the plate clacking sharply as she did it a little forcefully. "It's really strange to have a single mother in this area. We're all people who believe in strong families, and I don't see how a decent, hard-working woman could do the things that you do and think she belongs here!"

There was a scraping sound of chair legs on hardwood floor as Chase stood up. "Mom, cut it out!" he ordered. He was looking at Ellen with concern in his eyes.

"*What* things?" Ellen burst out. She was looking from Chase's mother to his father, then to Chase, and finally back to Gloria. A variety of emotions including betrayal, anger, and despair were going through her head. She was breathing faster and faster with each passing moment. "I'm an elementary school teacher, and I grow flowers! I don't understand what about me you could possibly think is indecent!"

"Please," Gloria scoffed. "Decent people who aren't married don't just go and get pregnant. What was it? Were you sleeping around with random men? Or are you one of those girls who doesn't do anything unless the price is right? Everyone has been talking about it!"

Ellen felt her breath catch in her throat, and that was nothing compared to the lump that was rising in it. The fork slipped from her fingers, clattering on the plate that her cake was on. She had gone cold, and everything in her head had gone completely blank. This was like back home all over again, except that she had thought that here the people were so nice. Chase's mother had been nothing like this when she had first arrived at the house, but now she was accusing her like she was some whore, or

some kind of criminal. Was this what she had been secretly thinking about her the entire time? Did she agree to have her over just so that she could be questioned like someone accused of a crime?

Ellen looked down at her lap, and a few tears dropped from her eyes, soaking into her dress. She was surprised to find she was crying, although she certainly felt like doing it. When she brought her head up to look at Gloria again, her lips were quivering, but she knew she couldn't do anything about that. "Is that what you really think of me?" she said quietly. "You really think I'm that kind of person?" Ellen slowly got up from her chair, brushing the tears off of her cheeks, only to have them replaced by more. "I'm...I'm sorry, I...I have to go..."

Covering her face, Ellen rushed away from the dining table, heading for the front door. Even if she hadn't been covering most of her eyes, she wouldn't have been able to see much. The door was blinded by her emotions, unable to do anything except hurry her way out of the house. She barely even heard Chase calling out to her as she slammed the door behind her and rushed in the direction of her own home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chase watched Ellen flee his parents' house, and he turned on his mother, doing his best to hold down the rage that was building up inside of him. His hands were balled up into fists, and he was shaking with anger. He glared at his mother. "What the *hell* is the matter with you?"

Gloria looked genuinely taken aback by the outburst from her son. "What did you say to me?"

"You let me invite her over for dinner, you spend the whole evening playing nice with her, and then you start berating her about being a single mother? Are you fucking serious?" Chase was livid. He couldn't remember ever being this mad in his entire life, especially not at his mother. She, along with her gossipy friends, had just gone too far this time. "You planned this the moment you knew I was going to invite her over for dinner, didn't you? What happened to all that talk about being a decent neighbor? That doesn't apply if someone just happens not to conform to your ideas of what life should be?"

"I...I was just..."

Chase's father stirred. "Chase, you shouldn't talk to your mother like-"

"And you!" Chase whirled on his father, his tail lashing the air furiously. "You just sat there and let her do it! You didn't think for one second that maybe you should step in and stop her? That this was probably the worst thing for Ellen right now?" He waved a hand in frustration. "I mean it's not enough that she's hundreds of miles away from everyone she used to know, in a new place, with a baby on the way and nobody to help her with it. She has to deal with rumors and prejudice and all of that, too! You couldn't just be nice to her and show her some hospitality?" He leaned towards his mother, his eyes

blazing. “She just ran out in tears because of what you said to her! And you had the nerve to say *she* wasn't the decent person.”

His parents were both staring at him, wide-eyed. Chase was sure that they'd never seen him get this worked up about anything before, and he'd certainly never directed anger like this towards them. Neither of them could respond. They both looked completely shocked by what he had said to them, especially Gloria. Disgusted, he turned away from the dinner table, going to the front hall of the house. His shoes were sitting near the door, as they always were, and he slipped his feet into them, bending down to lace them up. His mother came around the corner just as he was reaching for the doorknob.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Where do you think?” Chase growled, not looking at her. “I'm going to go apologize to Ellen for you. Might as well be me, since you probably don't even think you did anything wrong.” Without waiting for his mother to respond, he opened the front door and closed it behind him.

Being late in the evening, it was still hot outside although the sun had already gone down. The streetlights were on, and Chase walked quickly down the sidewalk underneath them. A few neighbors were out there, taking walks, but the puma didn't reply to them when they offered greetings. He just kept his eyes straight ahead, making right for Ellen's house. When he got there, he walked up her driveway, past the rows of colorful flowers and up the three brick steps to her door. He tried to calm himself down before he reached a hand up, knocking at the door.

“Ellen?” he called through the door. He didn't receive any answer, and he put his ear to the door, listening carefully. He thought that he could hear something faint inside, but he couldn't tell what it was. “Ms. Powell? Are you in there?”

Though he knew he hadn't been invited inside, Chase was determined to set things right. So, tentatively, he tried the doorknob. He found that the door was unlocked. Surprised, and a little concerned, he pushed the door open. Most of the lights were off inside, but he saw a glow coming from the direction of the living room. Chase stepped inside, his ears pricked up for any sounds. He could still hear what he'd heard before, but without the door blocking it the sound was unmistakeable. It was the sound of someone crying quietly.

“Ellen?” Chase closed the door behind him and walked into the living room. The space was lit by a single, small lamp, and the illumination it provided was quite dim. However, he could still see the form of the white-tail doe, curled up in a ball on her couch. She was the source of the crying sounds, and she was shaking with her face pressed into her knees. The sight was enough to break anyone's heart.

Chase went over to the couch, all of the anger at his mother evaporating at the sight of Ellen in

that state. He stood in front of her for a second, not sure what he should do, and she didn't react to his presence. She just huddled there and cried, seemingly oblivious to anything that was around her. He sat down on the couch next to her, behind her back. Reaching out, Chase put laid a hand on her shoulder. Finally, she realized he was there, and she gave a little jump of surprise. Lifting her head up, Ellen looked back at him. He felt a sharp pang in his gut at the sight of her green doe eyes brimming with tears, the fur on her cheeks streaked with them.

"Sorry," Chase said, feeling like he had to explain why he was there. "The door was open. I just wanted to see if you were alright."

Ellen nodded just a little, reaching up and wiping her cheek with her hand. She gave a sniff, blinking the tears away from her eyes, though they were soon replenished. She turned around on the couch, and to Chase's surprise she leaned against him, wrapping her arms around him as she buried her face in his chest. He was even more flustered now, having the crying woman pressed up against him like that. Without knowing what else to do, he put his arms around her as well, rubbing her shoulders as she trembled, her tears now soaking into his shirt.

"I'm not a bad person...," Ellen cried, her voice sounding very small and meek. She shook her head, her ears nearly flat to her skull. "I'm not...I'm not..."

"I know," Chase said, trying to soothe the older woman. He brushed her back through her dress. "You're probably one of the nicest people I know. My mother had no right to say any of those things." The puma leaned her back from him, looking her in the eyes. "I'm sorry for everything she said."

"It's not your fault," Ellen said. "Don't apologize for her. You didn't say any of those things. You tried to stop her. You had no idea she was going to do that."

Chase bit his lip, turning his eyes up to the ceiling. "I...sorta did," he admitted. He forced himself to look back at Ellen. "She didn't want you to come to dinner. She's one of the most gossipy women in this neighborhood. I was hoping she'd be able to keep civil for one evening, but..."

"It's still not your fault," the doe insisted. She sniffed again, and he saw her force a tiny smile. "You stood up for me. Nobody's ever done that before." She wrapped her arms around him tighter, resting her head on his shoulder. "Thank you."

Chase managed to smile back. "You're welcome, I guess. At least you got a decent meal out of it." Her watery laugh was like music to his ears. He put his hand on her head, coaxing her doeish ears back up. "I don't believe a word of any of those rumors. I just want you to know that."

Ellen was quiet for a minute or so after he said that. She kept her head on his shoulder, her arms still around him, and Chase was almost certain that she had drifted off to sleep before she spoke again. "Do you want to know why I really left home? Why I came here?"

Tamping down his curiosity, and his immediate instinct to just blurt out “Yes!”, Chase shook his head. “You don't have to tell me,” he said. “It's obviously something you don't like thinking about. I don't need to know.”

“It's okay,” Ellen assured him. She sat up, taking a deep breath and letting it out. “It's time I told someone. I can't keep it bottled up anymore or it'll tear me apart.” The doe swung her legs off of the couch, sitting back against the cushions. “I'm a bit thirsty, though. All this crying...Would you mind getting me a glass of water, first?”

“Sure.” Chase got up from the couch, going to her kitchen and rummaging around for a glass in her cupboards. He filled the glass from the tap and brought it back into the living room, handing it to her. He waited as Ellen took a few long gulps, draining half of the glass quickly.

“Thanks.” Ellen set the glass down on the coffee table in front of the couch. “You already know I was a teacher back where I came from. That's not really important to the beginning of the story. I guess it all started because gardening is my hobby, strange as that might sound.” She smiled. “The yard at my house in South Carolina was even bigger than this one, and pretty much every chance I got I'd work on filling it up with flowers and ornamental plants. I probably spent a lot more money than I should have at the local garden shop, but I couldn't help it. They always had something new to add to my garden.” She sighed quietly. “That was where I met Daniel.”

“Daniel?” Chase asked. “Is he...Well, is he the father?”

Ellen nodded, looking over at the puma seated next to her. “Yes.” She laid a hand on her swollen belly. “He's the father. A white-tail like me.” She smiled faintly. “I met him at the garden shop while I was buying some vegetable seeds. Daniel was picking up a new blade for a weed eater...or something like that. I don't really remember. I guess it doesn't matter.” She got a nostalgic look on her face. “That was two years ago, now. I can remember *him* as clear as day, of course. He was so handsome...I was attracted to him right away. He was a few years older than me. We got to talking, just standing in the aisle of the store. We must have chatted for an hour that first time, we really hit it off. He was a businessman...kind of like your father, I suppose. By the time we finished talking and made our own purchases, he had my phone number and I had his.” Ellen managed to giggle a bit. “I don't think I waited more than ten minutes after I got home before I called him for a date.”

“He must have made an impression.”

“I'll say he did,” Ellen agreed. “I was head over heels right from the start. We saw each other twice in the first week alone. I remember every date in perfect detail. Every kiss, every...ah...” She stopped for a second, and Chase saw her ears quivering in embarrassment. “Well, ah, I remember it all very well. He liked to take me to expensive restaurants, and we even went away on trips together a few

times. Eventually he was spending nights at my place, two, even three times a week. I was so in love with him...”

Ellen looked down at the floor, and Chase could see the tears starting in her eyes again. He still couldn't see what was so bad about her past, but he imagined that the story couldn't be as rosy as she had told it thus far. Probably the worst was yet to come. He wanted to prompt her to continue speaking, but he didn't want to push her too hard. So he held his tongue and waited for her to gather herself, and eventually she began to talk again.

“Well, he and I tried to be careful, but as you can see I got pregnant eventually. I tried to keep it a secret as long as I could, but of course he noticed when things got a little obvious. I didn't really care all that much. We loved each other, and I was certain that once he knew, he'd ask me to marry him. At least that's what I thought...” Ellen's lower lip trembled. “The day I told him I was going to have the baby, that's when I found out...I found out...” She straightened up and turned to Chase. The tears were streaming down her cheeks all over again, and she fairly launched herself against him, sobbing without restraint. “Oh, God, Chase. He was already married!”

“No...,” Chase breathed. “You're kidding.” He held onto Ellen tight as she cried, stroking her back in what he hoped was a comforting manner. It didn't seem to help this time, so distraught she was. Chase could tell that the emotions were still raw for her, even separated by months of time and miles of distance.

Ellen shook her head, choking out her words. “He led me on for two years. He loved me, I really, truly think he did, but he lied to me for so long.” She gave a loud sniff, gasping for breath. “He took off his wedding ring every time we went out on a date. Whenever we were together, he'd been telling his wife he was away for business. I never suspected a thing. How could I? I was in love.”

“You couldn't have known,” Chase said. “I mean, if he never said anything...”

“I was a stupid girl,” Ellen mumbled. “When I look back on it, there were signs. I just chose to ignore them because I thought he was the one.” She wiped her face with the back of her hand. “Well, when he found out I was keeping the baby, that was the end of it. He stopped answering my calls, and he refused to see me anymore. I didn't know what to do. I was scared, with a baby on the way, and I felt like I needed help. I at least wanted the child to know their father. So I did probably the dumbest thing I could have done.”

“What's that?”

The white-tail doe took a few deep breaths. “I went to his wife. I figured out where she worked, and I went to talk to her. I thought she'd understand my situation, or be sympathetic, or something like that. Of course it didn't work out that way. She was furious at her husband, and at me. She called me a

homewrecker, and a whore, and things that were a thousand times worse than that.” Ellen choked back another sob. “It didn't help that she turned out to be a city councilwoman. That's when the gossip and rumors began to spread. I guess I can't blame her too much. I was the other woman, even if I hadn't meant to be. She had every right to be angry with me, but what made it worse was that Daniel sided with her. Instead of doing the right thing, he completely disowned me, and what's more he said I was lying about him being the father. He started telling everyone that I was some spurned woman who was trying to get a payday by forcing a rich man to pay for her child. It was as bad as calling me the town slut, and who was everyone supposed to believe? The respected politician and her businessman husband, or the stupid woman who had a child out of wedlock?”

Chase felt himself growing angry all over again. “I can't believe he'd do that to you. The mother of his child?”

“He was looking out for himself, and his wife's reputation. I can't say for sure that I wouldn't do the same thing if I was him.” Ellen picked up her water glass, taking another long drink from it. “That's why I had to leave. I couldn't stand being the town pariah anymore. I needed a fresh start, and someplace where I could raise my baby without anyone knowing my past. I guess I accomplished that part, but you can't really stop people from making up their own truths...”

Chase didn't know what to think now. Even though he'd never believed any of them, he was relieved to know that none of the rumors about Ellen were true. Even so, the story was one that didn't present her in the best light, though what had happened could hardly be called her fault. He definitely couldn't blame her for wanting to keep something like that a secret from everyone.

Ellen let out a long sigh, sniffed, and dried her eyes. “Ahh...” Chase was surprised to see her tail wagging slightly. “I have to say, it does feel so much better to finally tell that to someone. Thank you for listening.” She rested her head back against the couch, looking at him. “So, what do you think of me now that you know the truth?”

It took him a few minutes to think of what to say to her. Chase was still processing everything that he had learned from her this evening, but he had to admit that he was impressed by how she had been willing to be open with him about her past. He didn't know if he could have told a story like that and managed to get all the way through it.

“What do I think of you?” Chase repeated back to her. He put his arm across the back of the couch, draping his furred hand over her shoulder. “You're still the nicest person that I've ever met, and I think that you're also probably the bravest person I know.”

“Brave?” The doe gave him a confused expression. “I don't know about brave. I ran away. Instead of facing up to what I had done, I moved away from it. How can you call me brave?”



“You're brave *because* you ran away, Ellen,” Chase said. He could tell that she still didn't believe him, so he explained further. “You had a job, and a home, and everyone that you knew back in South Carolina, but you knew you couldn't live there and raise a child with all of the criticism and prejudice you were facing. You did what was best for your baby, even though it meant uprooting and leaving everything behind. You took a risk, probably risking everything, in the hope that you could give your child a better life.” He squeezed her shoulder. “That's what makes you brave. You were willing to do whatever it took for the sake of your family.” Chase grinned, showing off his predator's teeth. “If it didn't sound so weird coming from someone twice your age, I'd say I was proud of you. But yeah. That's what I think of you.”

Ellen stared at him, her doe eyes shining in the light from the living room lamp. Chase couldn't decipher her expression, but he knew that what he had said made an impact on her. She was no longer crying and what tears were left in her eyes dripped out, not to be replaced. Then her cervine face slowly spread into a smile. She reached up with one hand, cupping her palm against his cheek. “I think that's the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me...”

Before Chase knew what was happening, Ellen had moved her hand to the back of his head, pulling him down until his lips met hers. His eyes went wide as she kissed him insistently, not having expected this outcome at all. But after a few brief moments of uncertainty, he relaxed against her, wrapping his arms around her back and pulling her close to him. She lifted her legs around, sweeping them up and over his knees until she was sitting on his lap. She was much lighter than he would have expected. Chase felt his heart beating rapidly in his chest, a surge of excitement going through his body as the older woman kissed him. Her face was still damp from her tears, and she smelled faintly of whatever flowery perfume it was that she favored. All other senses, however, were secondary to the sensation of her tongue playing against his lips. Feeling a thrill welling up inside, he let his mouth open just a little, and Ellen's tongue slipped inside to tease his own. She felt so nice against him, her body warm and soft against his harder, muscled form. Though this wasn't his first kiss, it still felt like he hadn't known until now what a kiss could be like.

When Ellen leaned back from him, Chase didn't have any words, but he knew that he didn't have to say anything. The way that they were looking at each other was clearly enough for the both of them. Smiling warmly at him, Ellen moved her hand back to his cheek, stroking a thumb over the golden tan and white fur of his muzzle.

“Such a sweet boy...,” she whispered. She pressed her hand against him, turning his head slightly to the side, as though she was inspecting him. “No, not just a boy.” With a sigh of contentment, Ellen laid her head down on his shoulder again, briefly kissing his neck.

Chase closed his eyes, resting against the couch with the comforting weight of the woman in his lap. He couldn't be upset anymore, not even if his mother herself was to walk into the room right now and start up her tirade again. For the first time this evening, things felt just the way that they should be. He rubbed Ellen's back, and he was surprised to realize that he was even purring a little. Other than that, however, the house was completely silent. Then, after some time of this wonderful stillness, Ellen spoke up again.

"Chase?" she murmured against his neck. Her voice sounded different, an undercurrent of anticipation in her normally tranquil tone. "Take me to bed..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Ellen watched Chase's reaction as she said those words to him. She saw his eyes shoot open, and he twisted his head so that he could look at her. She could see the same excitement in his expression that she felt inside of her right at that moment. Ellen almost couldn't believe that she had even said it, but they were the words she had most wanted to say. She stared deep into the puma's eyes, which were shining in the illumination of the weak living room lamp. In them she saw desire at just the same intensity that she was feeling, but she also saw apprehension. Ellen knew that right now he'd be afraid of taking advantage of her at a weak moment, and maybe there was a little bit of something to that worry, but Ellen thought that she knew exactly what she wanted right now. And she very much hoped that Chase could give that to her.

"Are you sure?" he asked her, a bit of a growl in his voice. The sound excited Ellen, and made her heart beat faster. She imagined it to be the sound of a predator watching his prey, though she knew Chase was nobody to fear. "You know it will be all over the neighborhood if I don't make it home tonight."

"I've never been more sure," Ellen said to him. She brushed her hand over the top of his head, flattening his feline ears for a moment. She could sense the emotion welling up inside of her once more, but she willed herself not to cry, though the tears would be for an entirely different reason this time. "Whether it means anything or not, and if it's just for one night, I don't care. And I'm tired of worrying what anyone else thinks. I just want to be happy. Take me to bed."

Chase looked over her face carefully for a long while, and then he smiled at her. Leaning down, he captured her lips with his once more, kissing her just as deeply as she had kissed him before. Then he hooked one arm underneath her legs, keeping his other behind her back, and he stood up from the couch. Ellen felt her heart leap into her throat as he lifted her like she weighed nothing at all. She held him around the back of the neck, her head resting against his chest as he carried her towards the stairs.

"To the left at the top, all the way at the end of the hall," Ellen instructed him. The puma turned

the way she told him once he got to the top step, and he walked to the end of the second floor hallway. Her bedroom door was slightly ajar, and he turned to the side to nudge it open with his shoulder. She looked inside once the door was open, seeing her familiar circle bed in the center of the room. Moonlight from outside was shining down through the skylight, bathing the bed in a shimmery glow.

“It's pretty in here,” Chase remarked. He stepped inside the room, and Ellen released her hold around his neck as he lowered her to her feet on the floor. He turned her so that she was facing away from him, towards the bed with her back almost against his chest.

“Thank you,” Ellen breathed, feeling a shiver as she heard the faint rasp of the zipper at the back of her dress being lowered. The doe lowered her arms to her sides, and Chase placed his hands on her shoulders, pushing the dress off and letting it fall to pool at her feet. As his arms came underneath hers to hug her around her pregnant stomach, she reached back, holding his waist. Ellen tilted her head back, her eyes closing as the young puma's hands rubbed the white fur on her belly. A quiet whimper of need escaped her lips. Chase responded by moving his hands up to cup her heavy breasts, and he began trying to figure out the front clasp on her bra. Ellen quickly took his hands in hers, guiding him through it, and in short order the hooks were undone and her bra was off.

She felt a wave of embarrassment as her breasts sagged a little, too big for her frame due to how they'd grown in her pregnancy. For a moment Ellen had the urge to push his hands away, but he seemed to sense how she felt right at that moment. Chase held each breast in the palm of one hand, squeezing the sensitive furry orbs as he bent his head down and kissed her neck tenderly. He whispered into her ear, “Beautiful.” Her heart fluttered and her face felt warm when she heard that.

“Flatterer,” Ellen whispered back, but her brown-and-white tail was wagging back and forth like mad. She felt pressure at the small of her back, and she allowed Chase to urge her forward towards the bed. When they reached the edge, he turned her around to face him, and then gently pushed her down onto it. She was guided onto her back until she was laying down on the soft surface of the bed, looking over her belly at him standing at her feet. Ellen saw his eyes moving up and down her body, as he took in the sight of the front of her body, covered in a layer of downy white fur. She wished he could have seen her as she normally looked, without being pregnant...But perhaps there was hope for that, yet. Either way, the way that his eyes had lit up told her that he really did think she was beautiful.

She saw him lick his lips, and then he sank down to his knees at her feet, passing out of her view. For a second, Ellen wondered what he was up to, and then she felt his fingers hook into the waistband of her panties. Understanding, she lifted her rear up, letting him pull the undergarment over her hips and down her legs. She felt another flutter of her heart as she was completely naked before him now. That flutter increased when his hands came underneath her knees, lifting them up and apart as he

spread her legs. Ellen knew that she was already wet, and she knew that his keen feline sense of smell would be able to detect her scent. She knew what he had planned, but it came as a surprise to her when he tossed aside all sense of subtlety and buried his muzzle in her pussy.

“Oh, God!” the doe gasped, her back arching up in an instant as she felt his tongue lap hard against her sensitive nether lips. Ellen's hands shot down between her legs, resting on the top of his head as he began to lick furiously at her. She couldn't remember ever feeling anything like this before in her life. His tongue was rough, much rougher than she'd been able to sense when he kissed her. He was like an animal, going as hard as he could at her pussy, though for now he only licked at the outer parts of her sex. She was gasping for breath almost immediately, the ferocity of his assault on her much more intense than she had expected.

Ellen clutched at the feline's ears, biting her lower lip to keep from screaming and alerting the whole neighborhood to what was going on in her home. Chase growled, and he moved his hands to slide underneath her rump, cupping it in his palms. Using his grip on her, he pulled her tighter against his face, and his tongue slipped inside of her, starting to lap around at her inner walls. Ellen really *did* scream then, her voice shrill as Chase pleased her with his mouth. Her hips were bucking against his muzzle, the sensation becoming overpowering in short order. He seemed to know just how to touch her, to tease her and coax out her pleasure in just the right ways.

He was the best. The best, she was sure, that she'd ever had. Ellen spread her legs wider, pushing down on the top of his head. The younger male responded just as she hoped he would, pressing his tongue deeper into her body. She gritted her teeth almost painfully, the muscles in her jaw throbbing in protest. Before she was finished enjoying it, before she even really wanted to, she gave a guttural moan and felt herself begin to cum. Ellen tossed her head back against the bed, her deerish ears going flat to her head as her climax washed over her in a haze of bliss. All the while his tongue never stopped, continuing to slurp around inside of her pussy right to the very end.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chase lifted his head up as he felt Ellen go limp in his hands. Licking his lips, savoring the flavor of her moisture clinging to the inside of his mouth, he looked down her body to her face. She had an expression of pure bliss on her gentle cervine features, and her full breasts were heaving with exertion. For a moment the puma was a little worried that he had overexerted her, but then Ellen looked to him with a smile.

“That wasn't your first time,” Ellen managed to say to him. She gave him a wink, lifting herself up on her elbows to gaze contentedly at him. Her emerald eyes were half-lidded, and she looked almost ready to pass out, but even as he watched her she seemed to regain some of her energy.

“All I said was I never had a steady girlfriend,” Chase reminded her. He got up from his knees, standing to his full height. “I never said I didn't have any experience.”

“I should have been paying better attention to you,” Ellen chided herself. She lifted a hand, crooking one finger. “I think it's time you joined me down here. But you're going to need to get rid of a few things, first.”

Chase was way ahead of her. The puma pulled his shirt off, revealing his upper torso to Ellen. He saw hunger flash across her face as she took in the sight of his muscled chest and tight abs. Chase had never considered himself a bodybuilder or anything close to that, but he was in as good shape as a nineteen-year-old college student could be. Then he unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, pulling them down his legs along with his underwear. Ellen licked her lips when she got a look below his waist. His cock was standing proudly out from his body, thick and dull pink in color. Thin rows of small, fleshy barbs lined his length. His whole front was covered in white fur, different from the golden tan of his back, not unlike the fur that Ellen herself had.

“God, you're gorgeous...,” Ellen said, her voice low and husky with desire. “Come here...”

Moving forward, Chase climbed onto the bed beside her. Right now, she seemed like the most beautiful thing in the world to him. He felt nervous, wanting to be the best that he could for her, especially since she was older and more experienced. He wanted to impress her. Leaning down, he kissed her again, and she moaned, wrapping her arms around his back and pulling him to her. His hard chest pressed against her breasts, soft and yielding, as he slipped his tongue into her mouth. He wondered if she could taste herself on his lips.

Then Ellen placed a hand on his chest, pushing him back a little bit. He looked into her eyes, confused, but she gave him a comforting smile. “Lie on your back. It'll be easier for me this way.” Chase did as she asked him, and she slid out of the way so that he could lay his head on the pillows, lying across the middle of the bed. The pregnant doe climbed on top of him, straddling his waist. He felt a thrill in his chest, knowing what was about to happen. Chase sucked in a quiet breath as she reached down and took his cock in her hand, stroking him up and down several times. Then she lifted her rear up, placing his cock at the entrance to her sex. He felt her warm wetness kissing the head of his member, and then Ellen took her hand away. They both moaned together as she gently lowered herself down, his full length sliding all the way up inside of her pussy until their hips were connected.

“Wow...,” Chase breathed. His hands came up to touch the front of her belly, sliding around until they were on her waist. She was gripping him tightly like a snug glove, feeling just perfect around his cock. Chase found it a bit difficult not to cum right away. He looked up at Ellen, and saw that she was shivering, her face screwed up in intense pleasure as she hugged her arms around herself.

“You're big,” Ellen said. She lifted her hips up slowly, and then pushed herself back down, experimenting. “Oh, God...Those barbs...Oh, it feels so...different...”

“A good different, I hope,” Chase said. He pushed his hips up, making her give a little squeak of delight, and he grinned. Ellen leaned forward, her breasts swaying over his chest, and she placed her hands on the bed on either side of him.

“Oh, so good,” she agreed. She bent her head down and kissed him, then she straightened back up and smiled. “Just let me do all the work, Chase. I'm in a delicate state right now, after all. Don't worry...I'll take good care of you.” She gave him another one of her little winks.

In the position he was in, Chase wasn't able to do much more than grin and nod his head. “Whatever you say, Ellen.” He took her hands in his, letting her steady herself against the strength in his arms. Then she began to move, rocking her body back and forth with his cock buried deep inside of her. The way that she was moving, he stayed almost all the way inside, never moving much in and out, but the way that his member stirred inside of her it was rubbing all around her inner passage. He kept his eyes on her expression, watching her as she rode him. Her eyes had drifted closed, but he could still see the reactions to the sensation of their lovemaking playing across her face. Chase knew that the fleshy barbs on his cock, designed for another feline but clearly still wonderful for her, would be teasing and tugging on her pussy.

Chase found it an entirely foreign experience to be having sex with a pregnant woman. Ellen was very gentle and gradual with her movements, seeming to be taking her time, never going quickly. At the same time, everything that she did seemed to be designed to maximize his pleasure just as much as hers. The puma soon found himself giving a little moan every time she rocked her hips. Her pussy was holding him like a vice, squeezing around his cock as though she was trying to milk him. Whenever he made a particularly intense sound of approval, he saw a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. It was almost as though she was more enjoying the fact that *he* was enjoying her body. In the back of his head, he wondered if she found this some sort of validation of her own womanhood, that she could be desirable even in the state that she was.

Though Chase eventually began to feel the urge to speed things up, he kept himself still, letting Ellen keep control of matters and go at her own pace. The only concession he made to his own instincts was little, barely noticeable thrusts upward every time she pushed down on his cock, forcing himself just that much deeper into her. Every time he did so, it sent an acute jolt of pleasure along his length. He could hear both his and Ellen's breathing growing louder and more rapid, in sync with each other while they made love to each other. While his cock was just begging to go over the edge, he fought to hold himself back. He wanted to cum at the same time as her, to reach his final peak along with Ellen

so that they could share the most intense moment that lovers may have with each other.

Fortunately for him, Ellen did not make him wait much longer after that. He heard her give a little gasp, and there was a slight pause in her movement. Then she hunched over, her body tensing up and starting to shake. He felt her pussy clamp down even tighter on his cock, rippling along his length as she began to cum for the second time. That feeling let Chase knew that it was time to let go. He moved his hands away from the doe's, placing them on her hips. Taking control for the first time, he pushed her down on his cock, lifting his hips up with a deep moan as he came with her. He saw her eyes open just barely as he started to cum inside of her, thick streams of his feline seed coating her insides. He quickly filled her up, the heat of his semen bathing his member, some of it beginning to leak out between the two of them, the fur between their legs matting with the sticky mixture of their fluids. They played off of each other, drawing each others' pleasure out, all in one long, intense moment of passion driven by their need for one another.

\*\*\*\*\*

It could have been ten minutes later, or it could have been several hours later, Ellen wasn't quite sure. All she knew was that her eyes had slowly come open, and she was resting on her side. Chase's arm was over her, around her stomach, holding her back firmly against his chest. His long puma tail was wrapped among her legs, curling around them like a furry blanket. Ellen could feel a low, almost inaudible purr thrumming through his chest. It had been a long time since she had felt this contented, this womanly. She pressed back against him, wanting to feel all of his warmth on her body.

“Are you awake?” Ellen asked, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Chase nuzzled at the top of her head, the fur on his cheeks tickling her ears. “Yeah. It's weird how I can feel so tired, but not want to go to sleep. I want this moment to last forever, and if I go to sleep, I'll miss it.”

Her heart nearly melted when she heard those words, because they summed up her feelings exactly. “Oh, Chase...Thank you for that. You have no idea...” She felt a catch in her throat, and she swallowed past it. “I just needed that. You turned a terrible evening into something special. I don't ever want to forget tonight.”

After that they laid together in silence, just enjoying each others' presence. They could hear crickets outside in the warm night, and the bright moonlight streaming in through the windows provided the perfect mood. Everything seemed just the way it should be. Chase's hand was stroking idly at the fur on her stomach, and every now and then Ellen could feel a slight movement of the baby inside of her. Perhaps he or she had been awakened by what had just happened. She tried to will her child to go back to sleep, silently telling it that mommy was sorry for the disturbance.

A few minutes later, when she thought that Chase might have fallen asleep, she spoke up again. “Chase...I have a small problem...”

His sleepy voice came back in a reply. “What's that, Ellen?”

She hesitated, almost afraid to put words to her feelings. “I think...I think I might be...falling in love with you...” Ellen closed her eyes again, scared of what his reaction might be. “But I'm not sure...”

Chase waited a long time in his response. When he finally did, he tightened his grip on Ellen, and he pressed his lips to the top of her head and kissed her there. “Well, we've got the whole rest of the summer for you to figure that out,” he said to her. He craned his head over her, and she lifted hers up to meet his lips for a kiss. “Just make me a promise. Whatever you decide, don't you ever stop letting me come over for those cookies and sweet tea. Those I *really* couldn't do without.”

Ellen laughed, swatting up lightly at his face with one hand. In that moment, she felt like she might already know. “It's a promise.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“A woman has got to love a bad man once or twice in her life, to be thankful for a good one.”  
- Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings