

Lovers and Strangers

Excerpt - Chapter 1

"Since when did you start hiring high school cheerleaders to push drinks?"

Tim O'Casey looked up from the glass he was polishing. "Pardon?" he said to the lone man sitting at the bar.

Jack Shannon nodded toward the scene reflected in the long polished mirror behind the bartender's head. "She looks about eighteen." He blew a plume of smoke into the air and peered through it. "Nineteen, if you squint."

Tim didn't have to look to know who the other man was talking about. He'd only hired one waitress lately who looked as if she'd taken a detour on the way home from pom-pom practice. "Twenty-four, according to her job application." Tim placed the polished shot glass on the edge of the bar, lining it up with a half-dozen others, and reached for another one.

Jack stubbed out the second of the three cigarettes a day he was allowing himself this week. "Did you ask to see her driver's license?" he asked, his eyes still on the mirror, watching the scene being played out behind him. The waitress might not be quite so young in years as she appeared, he thought, but she was definitely young in experience. "Good old Freddie is putting the moves on her," he said, as Flynn's official Lothario put his hand on the young woman's arm and gave it a friendly squeeze. "She doesn't like it but she doesn't have the vaguest idea of how to stop it."

"I know," Tim said, glancing past Jack's shoulder to check on the situation. "But I'm giving her a chance to learn how to handle it on her own." A corner of his mouth twisted up in a pseudo-comical grimace. "My wife says I need to learn to control my Galahad complex."

Jack lifted an eyebrow. "Galahad complex?"

"Apparently women don't need men to come rushing to their rescue anymore." There was a trace of wounded male pride under the casualness in his voice. "They can take care of themselves just fine, if we give them half a chance. Or so I'm told."

Jack snorted lightly, a sound both noncommittal and commiserating, and lifted his beer to his lips. According to the scuttlebutt floating around the neighborhood, Tim was having trouble relating to today's modern career women but, hell, what man wasn't? It wasn't something Jack wanted to discuss, especially when the woman in question was the man's wife. He put his half-

full pilsner glass down on the bar, pushing it slightly away, and automatically reached for his cigarettes. "How's the script coming?"

Tim shrugged, accepting the change in topics like the good bartender he was. "The studio wants another rewrite. They said if I can beef up the female lead, Meg Ryan's people might be interested."

"Sounds promising," Jack said, absently fingering the pack of cigarettes, wondering if he should save the last one for later when he might really need it, or give in and smoke it now.

Tim shrugged again and added another shot glass to the row on the bar. "Three months ago they thought the female character was too strong, so I had to trim her dialogue. Make her less—and I quote—strident."

Jack nodded. "Development hell," he said, with the air of one who knew. It had been a long time, but he remembered just what it felt like to have the words you'd agonized over ripped to shreds and rearranged by some hotshot would-be producer whose only interest was the bottom line. He sighed, wondering if he had it in him to go through it again, and shook out the third cigarette. If he needed one later, he'd just have to tough it out. Or borrow from tomorrow's allotment. He bent his head to the flame Tim offered, his gaze straying back to the mirror as he sucked in a deep, satisfying lungful of smoke. His eyes narrowed.

"How long are you going to let that go on?" he asked, more irritated by the fact that he was irritated than by what was actually happening. It wasn't any of his business if some inexperienced little cocktail waitress couldn't handle a basic barroom come-on.

"I'm keeping an eye on it." Tim shook out the match and dropped it into an ashtray. "Freddie hasn't crossed the line yet. He rarely does," he said, nodding a greeting at the trio of businessmen who were settling onto the stools at the other end of the bar. "If you're worried about it, though," he added, lingering a moment more before going to take their drink orders, "feel free to step in and handle it for her. Who knows?" He lifted one shoulder in a shrug that said he didn't really believe what he was about to say. "She might even thank you for the help."

"Yeah, right," Jack snorted as the bartender moved away. No way was he going to get involved. No, sir. It wasn't any of his business. If she didn't know how to cope with the Freddie Bowens of the world, then she shouldn't be working in a place like Flynn's. She probably wouldn't thank him for his concern, anyway, like Tim had said, women didn't need men to go

rushing to their rescue anymore. Or so they thought. And who was he to argue with a woman's sense of self?

But he continued watching them in the mirror, anyway, his eyes hooded, his expression waiting and wary. He'd seen more than one seemingly harmless situation turn ugly in the blink of an eye. A man thwarted could become dangerous in a heartbeat; a woman coerced could turn as savage as a cornered cat. He'd seen it happen a hundred times, in a hundred different places. Not, he mused while staring at them through the drifting smoke of his cigarette, that either one of the participants in the little drama being enacted behind him seemed likely to act out their aggressions.

Freddie Bowen didn't have the juice for it. He was in his mid-forties, Jack guessed, and trying desperately to look younger. He was tall and slim, with a thirty-dollar salon haircut, a carefully trimmed mustache and an eye for accessorizing that would put most women to shame. His teal blue tie picked up one of the colors in his glen plaid sport coat, complemented the slightly lighter color of his shirt and echoed the herringbone pattern in his socks. Not the kind of guy, Jack thought, who would want to risk having his lapels rumpled by an angry woman.

The girl—*woman*, Jack corrected himself with a grimace as he blew another plume of smoke into the air. The *woman* wasn't nearly so young as he had first supposed. Not in years, anyway. But there was an air of wholesomeness about her, some elusive something that hinted at a decidedly old-fashioned kind of innocence. He studied her with his reporter's eye, trying to decide exactly what it was that gave her that look of fresh-scrubbed naiveté.

Her hair was just past shoulder length, the slight wave and light reddish brown color both completely natural, he was sure. It was simply styled, with two tortoiseshell combs holding it back from the pale oval of her face. As far as he could tell, the only makeup she wore was a soft rose-colored lipstick and, maybe—judging by the way her eyes dominated her face—a touch of mascara on her lashes. She was dressed in the same uniform all the other waitresses at Flynn's wore. She filled it out nicely, too, he noted, her softly rounded body neither model skinny nor sexpot voluptuous. But, somehow, the trim black skirt, fitted black satin vest, pleated tuxedo shirt and snappy red bow tie that made the other waitresses look sexy or sophisticated just made her look all the more country girl wholesome in contrast.

Jack grinned slightly, wondering where in the hell a juiceless dandy like Freddie Bowen got the nerve to lay so much as a finger on so much unsullied purity.

And then his grin faded.

"Damn," he swore softly, watching as Freddie moved his hand from the waitress's arm to the curve of her waist. "Knock that drink over on him, Angel," Jack said under his breath. "A lap full of wine will cool him right off."

But the young woman just smiled weakly, shaking her head in reply to whatever Freddie had said to her, and tried to edge away from the unwanted touch. Freddie's hand slipped from her waist to the curve of her hip, holding her where she was.

"You're stepping over that line, buddy," Jack muttered, waiting for the objection he was sure she would make now.

But she only stiffened, like a mouse caught between the paws of a hungry cat. She turned her head slightly, looking nervously toward the bar. Jack let his gaze follow the path hers had taken and found Tim busy mixing something in a blender, unaware that a line had been crossed. He cut his eyes back to the scene in the mirror and met her gaze, head-on.

They stared at each other for a frozen moment. Her eyes were wide and half pleading, her expression strangely apologetic. Then she flushed and looked away, shamefaced and embarrassed. She said something to Freddie, a word or two, no more. He laughed and shook his head, playfully refusing to release her.

Jack waited another beat, hoping Tim would look up and notice what was going on.

Freddie's hand slid lower, all but patting the waitress on her little round butt.

"Oh, hell." He really didn't want to get involved, dammit. It wasn't his responsibility. *She* wasn't his responsibility. Unlike Tim, he'd outgrown whatever Galahad complexes he might have been born with a long time ago. And several hard knocks since then had taught him that sticking his nose into other people's private business was a good way to get it broken.

But what the hell was a man to do?

With a resigned sigh, Jack took one long, last drag from his cigarette, then slowly crushed it out in the bottom of the heavy glass ashtray on the bar. Reluctantly, hoping she'd find a way to handle the situation before he was forced to step in and handle it for her, he unhooked his boot heels from the lower rung of the bar stool and stood.

"Miss," he said, as he approached the small round table where Freddie held the waitress captive in the curve of his arm.

Both Freddie and the waitress turned their heads to look at him.

"I'd like a Corona and a plate of nachos when you get a chance." Jack nodded toward the row of black Leatherette booths against the far wall. "Over there," he said. His words, addressed to the young woman, were casual and polite. His gaze, locked with Freddie's, was anything but. It bored into the other man's—a warning, a threat and a challenge, all at once. *Take your slimy hands off of her, buddy*, his eyes said.

And Freddie did.

Quickly.

So quickly that the waitress all but tumbled into Jack's arms. He reached out to steady her as she stumbled against him, grabbing her by the upper arms to keep her from plowing into his chest. The round plastic tray she held in her left hand bumped against his thigh.

"Oh," she said, distressed. The word was a soft exhalation of air, warm against the wedge of skin in the open V of his khaki shirt. "Oh, dear. Excuse me, I.."

"Hey, it's all right, Angel," Jack soothed. His fingers curled around her biceps, automatically flexing to test the warmth and resiliency of her, unconsciously holding her there in front of him. She was soft, small and delicate under his hands, and her hair smelled like baby shampoo and innocence. He felt old, suddenly—far older than even his forty-three years of hard living warranted—and strangely protective. He felt as if he should scoop her up in his arms and carry her away to a tower somewhere, to a place where she'd be safe from all the crude come-ons and heavy-handed passes men were wont to make. Safe from ugliness and greed and everything bad. Safe in a way he knew, from firsthand experience, that no one in the whole wide world was ever safe.

"Please," she murmured, her head still down so that he had to stoop a little to hear what she said.

"It's all right, Angel," he said again, his lips almost brushing against her hair as he spoke. He squeezed her arms comfortingly. "Take it easy."

She pulled back, reaching up to put her free hand against his chest. "Please, I—" she began, lifting her head as she spoke.

Their eyes met. Not in a mirror, with half the width of the barroom and a veil of smoke between them, but over a distance of inches, only. A foot, at most. The distance at which lovers gaze into each other's eyes.

Hers were that indefinite color called hazel. Neither green nor brown, he decided, but an intriguing mingling of the two, shot through with delicate tracings of gold. Large and wide-set, fringed with lush, thick lashes, they dominated the delicate oval of her face. The expression in them was unguarded and open, making her emotions as easy to read as those of a child.

She was embarrassed.

And frightened.

And angry. At *him*.

Jack stared back for a moment, stunned. He was the white knight here, wasn't he? He'd come riding to her rescue. Saving her when she couldn't seem to save herself. So why was she looking daggers at *him*?

"Please," she said again, more firmly this time. He could hear the sound of the South in her voice. And a hint of desperation. "Let me go. I have to put in your order." She pushed harder against his chest. "*Let me go*," she demanded.

Jack snatched his hands back as if she'd suddenly become too hot to hold. He raised them, fingers spread, palms out, as if to show her they were empty.

She shot him one long, last accusing look out of fiery, gold-flecked eyes, and fled.

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Faith burst through the swinging doors that led into Flynn's kitchen as if she'd been shot out of a cannon. She slammed her tray down on the metal service counter and then glanced around guiltily, ashamed of her display of temper and half expecting to be slapped down for it. But the kitchen was blessedly empty, the big clock on the wall informing her that it was barely four-thirty. Faith sighed and closed her eyes, thankful for the time alone. Emotional displays—her own or someone else's—always unsettled her, and she needed a few minutes of solitude to get her feelings back under control.

She stood very still, her hands braced flat on the metal counter on either side of her black plastic tray, her head bent, breathing deeply in an effort to compose herself.

It was bad enough that Freddie Bowen had thought he had the right to put his hands on her. Bad enough that she'd been spineless enough to let him get away with it. But what was worse, what was absolutely the very worst, was that the other man, the stranger at the bar, had seen her shame. He'd watched in the mirror as she let herself be pawed and she'd seen the expression in his eyes before he finally looked away: the disgust for her helplessness, the pity for

her weakness; that look that she could only describe as disapproval when he'd stared down into her eyes and seen her cowardice up close.

She knew it was unreasonable to be angry at him. He'd only been acting the gentleman by intervening, obviously doing what he'd seen as his masculine duty by rescuing her from an uncomfortable situation.

She should be angry at Freddie Bowen.

At herself.

And she was.

But, oh, how she hated the look she'd seen in the other man's eyes! The one that reduced her to a powerless, ineffectual, helpless nothing! It made her want to scream.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, she berated herself silently. *How can anyone be so stupid? So incompetent? So inept. So—*

"Faith? Faith, honey, what's the matter?"

Faith jerked upright, snatching at her tray with both hands as if she had somewhere to go with it. "Sammie-Jo." She forced her lips to curve into a smile of welcome. "You're early."

"Only a few minutes. I wanted to find out how you did on your own out there this afternoon. Thought you might need a pep talk before you felt up to facing your first Friday night Happy Hour at Flynn's."

"No." Faith shrugged, trying to look unconcerned and nonchalant. The effect was spoiled by the way she held the tray in front of her chest like a shield. "Everything's fine. My first solo shift went great."

"Sure it did." Sammie-Jo didn't even attempt to hide her skepticism. "What happened?"

Faith held her tray tighter. "Nothing."

"Don't you 'nothing' me, Faith McCray." Sammie-Jo's soft Southern drawl was equal parts exasperation and concern. "You're not the type who gets all upset over 'nothing.'" She reached out, putting her hand on Faith's fingers where they curled around the edge of the tray. "What happened?" she demanded, gently rubbing her thumb over the whitened ridge of Faith's knuckles.

"Nothing happened. Really. It was just..." Faith shrugged, still embarrassed by her loss of control and her failure to handle the situation herself.

If anyone had dared to try to take liberties with Sammie-Jo, she would have handled it with a careless laugh or a frosty glare and that would have been that. No fuss, no muss. No emotional upheaval. And no awkward, humiliating scenes for other people to witness. But Sammie-Jo was beautiful, smart and confident. She always had been.

Back at Pine Hollow High School in Georgia, Sammie-Jo had been a cheerleader, a member of the student council and the reigning star of the drama club. Despite the fact that she'd skipped a couple of grades, was three years younger than most everyone else in her class and smarter than Southern belles were usually allowed to be, she'd been elected Homecoming Queen by the football team and voted Most Popular Girl by the entire Senior class. To Faith, whose only extracurricular activity had been the Future Homemakers of America, beautiful, brilliant Sammie-Jo Sheppard had seemed like the epitome of sophistication and poise. It was a constant wonder to her that they had ever become friends in the first place, let alone remained friends over the intervening years since high school.

"Do you want me to go out there and spill a drink on some jerk for you?" Sammie-Jo offered.

Faith couldn't help but smile at that. "No, thanks," she said, moving around the counter to begin putting together the plate of nachos her customer had ordered. Strictly speaking, food service didn't begin until the Flynn's short-order cook arrived at five o'clock but Faith wasn't one to stand on ceremony. Anybody could make nachos—and the soothing routines of a kitchen had always been her refuge in times of stress. "It's time I learned to take care of the jerks myself."

"Amen to that." Sammie-Jo moved toward the swinging doors as she spoke. "Which one is he?" she asked, raising up on tiptoe to peer through one of the small round windows. "Maybe I can give you some pointers on—Oh, I see him." She lowered herself back to her heels. "How disappointing."

"Disappointing?" Faith murmured, her head down as she spooned refried beans onto crisp tortilla chips.

"He didn't strike me as a groper." Sammie-Jo sauntered over and leaned a hip against the counter, watching as Faith prepared the nachos with neat, economical movements. "I thought he'd have more class than that."

Faith looked up from her task. "But you warned me about him," she said, clearly puzzled by what her friend had said.

Sammie-Jo shook her head. "I don't know enough about Jack Shannon to warn anybody about him. He's only lived at the Wilshire Arms for about a month and a half and he hasn't been real sociable toward the rest of the tenants. Rumors have been flying around like crazy, of course, but nobody knows anything for sure and Mueller—" Carl Mueller was the building super "—is being mysterious and closemouthed, as usual. All anybody really knows is that he used to be some kind of a newspaper reporter. A war correspondent, I think."

"Rumors?" Faith prompted, knowing she shouldn't. Gossip was unseemly and sinful.

"According to what I heard, Irina Markova—You know, that sweet little Russian woman who brought us almond cakes and tea when you first moved in?"

Faith nodded and unsnapped the lid on a large plastic container of grated cheese.

"Well, Madame Markova has lived at the Wilshire Arms since practically before World War II or something and she said that she remembers that Jack Shannon lived there a long time ago. He and his brother and a bunch of other guys lived in 1-G." She lowered her voice for dramatic effect. "The very same apartment he's living in now," she said significantly.

"So?"

"So his brother died during a wild party at the Wilshire Arms," Sammie-Jo told her. "He fell off the balcony above apartment 1-G."

"Oh, how terrible," Faith murmured, instant sympathy clouding her expressive eyes.

"And that's not the best part," Sammie-Jo said with theatrical relish. "The best part is that it might not have been an accident."

"You mean..." Faith's gaze shifted toward the door. "Are you saying he *pushed* his brother off the balcony?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I mean, nobody ever actually accused him of physically shoving his brother over the balcony railing or anything. Officially, it was a suicide." Sammie-Jo shrugged, dismissing that bit of information as a minor technicality in her story. "But according to the stories I've heard, Jack Shannon and his brother didn't get along very well. Several witnesses said they'd heard the two of them having a loud argument that night."

"About what?"

"Who knows? But he disappeared right after the inquiry, didn't even stay for the funeral, from what I heard. And now he's back." She reached out and snagged a chip off the plate Faith was fixing. "Makes for an interesting story, don't you think?"

"It sounds awfully sad to me. The poor man's brother committed suicide."

"Well, yes, that part of it is sad," Sammie-Jo agreed. "But it happened a long time ago," she added lightly. "I was talking about now. What's going on *now* is what's interesting."

"Interesting how?"

Sammie-Jo shook her head in amused exasperation. "Are you kidding? A dark, mysterious man returns to the scene of the crime after who knows how long? Where's he been all this time? Why'd he come back? Remorse? Revenge? Did he return to finally make amends for the terrible thing he did or is he here to track down his brother's killer?"

"Killer? I thought you said it was suicide."

"Artistic license," Sammie-Jo said airily. "I tell you, done right, it would make a great movie of the week."

Faith had to smile at her friend's enthusiasm. "With you as the director, I suppose," she teased.

"Of course." Sammie-Jo grinned. "And Jack Shannon could play himself," she said magnanimously. "He'd be the perfect tough-guy hero." Her eyes narrowed as if she were actually considering him for a part in a real movie. "A sexy, good-looking guy, too cool for words and a little battered around the edges. Mysterious and aloof, so you're not really sure 'til the end whether he's the good guy or not. Kind of like all those characters Bogart used to play, only better looking. He'd be a huge hit with the all-important female television audience. Most women are suckers for guys like him."

"They are?"

"You mean to tell me you've been living at the Wilshire Arms for nearly a week and you haven't noticed how practically every woman in the building tries to bump into him in the hallway?"

Faith shook her head.

"Well, trust me, they do. But, except for Jill Mickelson, they haven't had much luck. He keeps pretty much to himself. That's probably why you haven't noticed him."

"Jill Mickelson?" Faith said before she could stop herself. Jack Shannon was a stranger and his private life wasn't any of her business. She shouldn't even be listening to Sammie-Jo ramble on about him, let alone encouraging her to do it.

"The divorcee in 2-B?" Sammie-Jo said. "She stopped to talk to us the other day as we were coming into the building with our groceries, remember? The tall, pretty blonde with the New England accent."

"Oh, yes, of course. I remember." Jill Mickelson was beyond pretty, Faith thought. She was tanned, fit and sexy, a typical California goddess, even if she had moved to Los Angeles from Boston. Faith could very easily picture the voluptuous blonde with the tall, dark man who'd rescued her. "She's an interior decorator, isn't she?"

"Interior designer," Sammie-Jo corrected.

"What's the difference?"

Sammie-Jo shrugged. "Darned if I know." She reached out and snagged another chip, one laden with refried beans, grated cheese and tiny slices of olives and jalapenos. "So what'd he do?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Who do you think?" She jerked her head toward the door. "Mr. Tall, Dark and Dangerous out there. What did he do to get you so upset? And *please* don't tell me he did anything so unforgivably crude as grabbing you by the ass. It would just about destroy my faith in my ability to judge men if he turns out to be that much of a sleaze."

Faith looked up at her friend. "I already told you. He didn't do anything," she said. *Except witness my humiliation.*

Sammie-Jo heaved a theatrical sigh. "We've already established that you're not the type to get upset over nothing," she said. "So give. What kind of pass did he make? Tell me exactly what he said and did and I'll tell you how to handle it next time."

"He didn't do anything like that. Honest." She opened the door to the microwave and slipped the plate of nachos inside. "It was Mr. Brown."

"Freddie?" Sammie-Jo's big blue eyes rounded in disbelief. "You let *Freddie* upset you?"

"You said yourself he was a real ladies' man."

"Well, yes, but—" Sammie-Jo lifted her hands in helpless exasperation. "Faith, honey, Freddie's *harmless*. All the girls know that."

"He put his hand on my... ah, hip," Faith said primly, unable to bring herself to utter the word *ass*. Repressed Southern ladies didn't use cuss words.

Sammie-Jo grinned. "If you'd looked at him like that I bet he wouldn't have dared."

"Looked at him like what?"

"Like an outraged Sunday school teacher."

Faith wrinkled her brow, clearly puzzled by the other woman's words.

"You really don't know, do you?" Sammie-Jo shook her head in amazement. "Well, tonight after we get off work we're going back to the apartment and you're going to practice in front of the mirror."

"Practice what?"

"All the expressions necessary for letting a guy know he's acting like a jerk. There's insulted." Sammie-Jo demonstrated by lifting her chin and looking down her nose. "Shocked." She widened her eyes. "Injured." Her lower lip quivered very slightly. "Angry." Her eyes narrowed menacingly. "And that's just for starters."

Faith couldn't help but laugh. "Where did you learn all that?" she asked, her tone half admiring, half despairing.

"Every woman's born with the basic skills, honey," Sammie-Jo assured her. "It just takes a little practice to perfect them, is all." She reached across the counter and patted Faith's hand. "Don't worry, I'll have you up to snuff in no time. And then—" she grinned evilly "—if any man dares to presume, you'll be able to cut him off at the knees with a glance."

Faith's gaze flickered toward the door leading into the bar. "Can you teach me how to do it in the next five minutes?"

"Well..." Sammie-Jo hesitated, her common sense warring with the hopeful expression in Faith's eyes. A woman didn't learn how to defend herself against unwanted advances in five minutes.

"Just so I can go back out there tonight and not make a fool of myself again."

"Okay, one quick lesson," Sammie-Jo agreed. "We'll keep it real basic," she warned as she came around the counter. She put her hands on Faith's shoulders, turning her so that they were both facing the shiny reflective surface of the industrial-size microwave oven.

"Okay, now, pay attention. Are you paying attention?"

Faith nodded, the solemn expression on her face telling Sammie-Jo just how seriously she was taking the lesson.

"Okay. Draw yourself up really stiff and straight. Shoulders square. Think of Miz Griffen at the library when somebody wanted to check out a book she thought was indecent. That's it.

Now, lift your chin like this. No, not quite so much, you don't want to look like you're staring at the ceiling. There, that's it. Now, lower your eyelids, just a little, and turn your head a tiny bit, real slow." She demonstrated the move. "Try to look like you've just spotted a nasty little pile of doggy-do on your hostess's living room carpet but you're too well-bred to say anything."

Faith surprised them both by chuckling.

"No laughing," Sammie-Jo said, the mock sternness of her tone belied by the twinkle in her eyes. "This is serious stuff. And don't wrinkle up your nose like that," she instructed. "You haven't actually *smelled* the doggy-do yet, you're just afraid you *might*. Here, watch me do it one more time." With just a slight lift of her chin, the minutest turn of her head, the tiniest narrowing of her eyes, Sammie-Jo conveyed a wealth of delicate, well-bred disgust. "Dignified and just too disgusted for words, okay? Now you try."

With an expression of utmost seriousness, Faith lifted her chin and did her best to imitate the look of slightly shocked disdain on her friend's face.

Sammie-Jo studied the results for a moment. "That's perfect," she decided, giving Faith's shoulders an encouraging squeeze before she let go. "I think you're a natural."

Faith continued to stand there, studying her reflection. The face that stared back at her was the same old face she saw in the mirror every morning of her life. Try as she might, she didn't see any of the dignified haughtiness she'd seen when Sammie-Jo had demonstrated the expression. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Sammie-Jo assured her. "Trust me. That touch-me-not look will make most of those Happy Hour Romeos filling up the bar out there think twice before they try anything." She thought it best not to mention the men it would present an irresistible challenge to. "And if one of them is insensitive enough to try something anyway, you just spill a drink right smack-dab in his lap. Or hit him over the head with your tray. Okay?"

Faith nodded. "Okay," she said, pretending a confidence she was far from feeling. She reached up and opened the microwave door, using a heavy napkin to withdraw the steaming plate of nachos. She placed it on a tray, added a rolled red napkin full of silverware, a sweating bottle of Corona and a chilled pilsner glass with a wedge of lime attached to the rim. With a lithe, practiced movement, she hefted the tray to shoulder height, balancing it on the flat of one hand.

"Remember," Sammie-Jo said as she pushed the swinging door open for her. "You're Miz Griffen at the Pine Hollow Library and if somebody looks like he's even *thinking* of making an indecent advance, you look at him like he's doggy-do."

Faith smiled grimly, afraid that it was going to take more than a facade of dignity to get her through her first Friday night as a cocktail waitress. Especially when the first customer she had to face with her new persona was a man who already knew, firsthand, what a spineless coward she really was.