

The Female of the Species

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Extract

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So Help Me God

1.

Phone rings. My cousin Andrea answers.

It's a pelting-rain weekday evening last April, just past 7 P.M. and dark as midnight.

Without so much as glancing toward me, Andrea picks up the receiver as if she's in her own home and not mine, shifting her infant daughter onto her left hip in a way that makes you think of a migrant farmwife in a classic Walker Evans photograph of the 1930s.

Phone rings! I will wish I'd snatched the receiver from her hand, slammed it down before any words were exchanged.

But Andrea is answering in her wishing-to-be-surprised high school voice, not taking time to squint at the caller ID my husband, a St. Lawrence County law enforcement officer, has had installed for precisely these evenings when he's on the night shift and his young wife is alone in this house in the country except for the accident of Andrea dropping by with the baby and interfering with my life.

"Yes? Who *is* this?"

Andrea laughs, blinking and staring past me. Whoever is on the other end of the line is intriguing to her, I can see.

I'm checking the digital code which has come up
UNAVAILABLE.

Sometimes it reads NO DATA GIVEN, which is the same as UNAVAILABLE and a signal you don't want to pick up. At least, I don't. In Au Sable Forks, which is the center and circumference of my world, everyone is acquainted with everyone else and has been so since grade school. It's rare that an unknown name comes up; I can count on the fingers of one hand the people likely to be calling me at this or any hour, which is why ordinarily I'd have let UNAVAILABLE leave a message on the machine, figuring it must be for my husband.

UNAVAILABLE could be anyone. Like a hulking individual on your doorstep, wearing a ski mask — do you open the door?

I could wring Andrea's neck the way she's smiling, shaking her head, "*Which one? Who?*" opening the damn door wide. Wish I'd never called her this afternoon hinting I was lonely.

This pelting rain! The kind of rain that hammers at your head like unwanted thoughts.

Andrea hands over the phone, saying in a low thrilled voice, "It's this person won't identify himself, but I think it's Pitman."

Pitman! My husband. His first name is Luke but everyone calls him Pitman.

Andrea shivers giving me the receiver. There has been this shivery thing between her and Pitman dating back to before Pitman and I were married. When I'm in a suspicious mood I think it might predate my meeting Pitman when I was fourteen, an honors student vowing to remain a virgin all my life. I've never confronted either of them.

Pitman says my daddy injected my vertebrae with Rayburn family pride, why I walk like there's a broomstick up my rear. Why I'm so stiff (Pitman is just teasing!) in bed.

"Yes? Who is this please?" I'm determined to remain cool and poised, for Pitman and I parted early this morning with some harsh words flung about on both our sides like gravel. My husband is known as a man who flares up quickly in anger but, flaring down—which can be just a few minutes later—he expects me to laugh, forgive and forget, as if nothing hurtful passed between us. Pitman is a longtime joker and this wouldn't be the first time he has played phone games with me, so I'm primed to hear him in this deep-gravelly male voice so suddenly intimate in my ear asking: "Are you Ms. Pitman, the lady of the house?" Quick as Ping-Pong I say, "Mister, who are you? I don't talk to strangers."

You'd think that after living with a man for more than four years and being crazy in love with him for three years preceding you'd at least recognize his phone voice, but damned if Pitman hasn't disguised it with something like pebbles in his mouth (?) or a layer of some fabric over the phone receiver, and speaking with the broad *as* of a Canadian! Also, he's making me nervous so I am not thinking as clearly as usual. The voice is chiding, "Ms. Pitman! You sound like some stiff-back old Rayburn," which convinces me that this is Pitman, who else? My face is hot and eyes tearing up as they do with any strong emotion, sweat breaking out on my body; I hate how Pitman has this effect upon me, and my cousin a witness. The voice is inquiring, "Is this 'Pitman' an individual of some size and reputation?"—a strange thing to ask, I'm thinking. So I say, "'Pitman' is a law enforcement officer of dubious reputation, a cruel tease I am considering reporting to authorities."

My teasing with Pitman is never so inspired or easy as his with me; it's like wrestling with Pitman on our bed: I'm a scrawny ninety-seven pounds, half his size. The voice responds quick, as if alarmed, "Hang on now, baby. What authorities?" and I hear *baby*—this has got to be Pitman: *baby* in his mouth and it's like he has touched me between the legs and any ice-scrim that has built up between us begins to melt rapidly. I'm saying, my voice rising, "He knows who! So he'd better stop playing games," and the voice says in mock alarm, or maybe genuine alarm, "What authorities? Sheriff? Police?" and I say, "Pitman, damn! Stop this," but the voice persists, "Is this 'Pitman' armed and dangerous at all times, baby?" and there's something about this question, a strangeness of diction. The sick sensation washes over me—*This isn't Pitman*—and my throat shuts up, and the voice continues to tease, husky and breathy in my ear, "Fuck Pitman, baby—what are you wearing?" and I slam down the receiver.

Andrea takes my hands, says they are like ice.

"Oh, Lucretia! Wasn't it Pitman? I thought for sure it was."

Andrea thinks that I should report the call and I tell her yes, I will tell Pitman and he can report it. He's a law enforcement officer; he will know best how to proceed.

Things you do when you're crazy in love, you'll look back upon with astonishment. Maybe a kind of pride. Thinking, *That could not have been me; I am not that person.*

When I married Pitman, my daddy disowned me. Daddy had come to believe that Pitman had cast some sort of spell over me. I was not his daughter any longer. I had not been his daughter for some time.

My father was a stubborn man, but I was stubborn, too.

Eighteen when I married Lucas Pitman, old enough to be legally married in New York State, but not old enough to be so coldly discarded by my father whom I loved. I'd come to believe that I hated Daddy and this was so, but I loved Daddy, too. I would never forgive him!

My mother disapproved of Pitman, of course. But knew better than to forbid me marrying him. She'd seen how Pitman had worked his way under my skin, cast his "spell" over me. She'd known long before Daddy had. Back when I was fourteen, in fact. Skinny pale-blond girl with sly eyes given to believe that, because she's conceded to be the smartest student in the sophomore class at Au Sable High, she can't mess up her life like any trailer-trash Adirondack girl.

I never did get pregnant, though. Pitman saw to that.

Luke Pitman was the youngest deputy in the St. Lawrence County sheriff's department when we first met: twenty-three. He'd been hired out of the police academy at Potsdam and before that he'd served in the navy. There were Pitmans scattered through the county, most of them with reputations. To have a "reputation" means nothing good except when it's made clear what the reputation is for: integrity, honesty, business ethics, and Christian morals. For instance, Everett Rayburn, my father, had a reputation in St. Lawrence County and beyond as an "honest" contractor and builder. Everett Rayburn was "reliable" — "good-as-his-word" — "decent." Only the well-to-do could afford to hire him and in turn Daddy could afford to hire only the best carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers. Daddy wasn't an architect, but he'd designed our house, which was the most impressive in Au Sable Forks, a split-level "contemporary-traditional" on

Algonquin Drive. In school I hated how I had to be friends with the few “rich” kids. I got along with the trailer-trash kids a lot better.

There were Pitmans who lived in trailers as well as Pitmans in dilapidated old farmhouses in the area. Pitman himself was from Star Lake in the Adirondacks, but he’d moved out of his parents’ house at the age of fifteen. He told me he had a hard time living in any kind of close quarters with other people and if our marriage was going to endure I would have to grant him “space.”

Rightaway I asked Pitman would he grant me “space,” too, and Pitman said, tugging my ponytail so it hurt, “That depends, baby.”

“Like there’s a law for you, but a different law for me?”

“Damn right, baby.”

You couldn’t argue with Pitman. He’d stop your mouth with his mouth. You tried to speak and he’d suck out your breath. You tried to get serious with him and he’d laugh at you.

How I met Pitman was quite a story. I never told it to anyone except Andrea.

I was bicycling back home from Andrea’s house in the country. She lived about a mile and a half outside Au Sable Forks, which is not an actual town but a village. Summers, Andrea and I bicycled back and forth to see each other all the time; it was something to do. Andrea had more household chores than I did and my bicycle was newer and faster than hers and I was the one who got restless and bored, so it was usually me on my bicycle, slow and dreamy and coasting when I could and not paying much attention to cars and pick-

ups that swung out to pass me. It was late August and boring-hot and I was wearing white shorts, a little green Gap T-shirt, flip-flops on my feet. I wasn't so young as I looked. My ash-blond ponytail swept halfway down my back and my toenails were painted this bright sparkly green Daddy insisted I had to cover up, wear socks or actual shoes, at mealtimes. I was maybe smiling thinking of how Daddy got upset, or pretended to, at the least "infraction" of household rules on my part, when Pitman came cruising in the car marked ST. LAWRENCE CO. SHERIFF. I wasn't paying too much attention to this vehicle coming up behind me until a male voice came out of nowhere — "You, girl: got a license for that bike?"

I didn't know Pitman then. Didn't know about what you'd call Pitman-teasing. Almost crashed my bicycle, I was so scared. For there was this police officer glaring out his car window at me. He wasn't smiling. His aviator sunglasses were tinted so dark I couldn't see his eyes except they were not friendly eyes. His hair was tarry black and shaved at the sides and back of his head but grew long and tufted on top like a rock musician's. How old he was, I couldn't have guessed. I was so scared I could hardly focus my eyes.

What followed next, Pitman would recount with laughter, in the years to come. I guess it was funny! Him demanding to see my "bike license" and me stammering I didn't have one, didn't know you had to have a license to ride a bicycle . . . Fourteen years old and scared as a little kid, calling Pitman "sir" and "officer" and Pitman had all he could do to keep from laughing. He'd say afterward he had seen me riding my bike on the Hunter Road more than once, looked like I was in this dreamworld, pedaling along on an expensive bicycle

oblivious of other vehicles even when they passed close to me. He'd had a thought that here was a little blond princess needed a shaking-up for once.

I just didn't get it was a joke. The way Pitman grilled me, asking my name, my daddy's name and what did my daddy do for a living, what was my address and telephone number. These facts he seemed to be taking down on a notepad. (He was.) I was straddling my bike by the roadside trying not to cry, staring at Pitman who so captivated my attention it was like the earth had opened up; I was slipping and falling inside. Pitman must've seen my knobby knees shaking, but he kept on his interrogation with no mercy.

Daddy would say Pitman had cast a spell on his only daughter; when Daddy was being nasty he'd call it a sex spell and I concede that this was so: Pitman's power over girls and women was sexual, but it was more than only this, I swear. For there was this Pitman-soul you saw in the man's eyes when he was in one of his moods, or you felt in the heat of his skin — a soul that was pure flame, a weird wild happiness like electricity coursing through him. Just to touch it was dangerous, but you had to touch!

Can't take your eyes off him — he's beautiful.

"Well, now. 'Lucretia Rayburn.' Seeing as how you are a minor, maybe I won't run you into headquarters. Maybe just a ticket."

By this time most of the blood had drained out of my face, my lips must have been stark white. Trembling, and fighting tears. I was so grateful, Pitman was taking pity on me. But before I could thank him, he asks, as if the thought had only just occurred to him, how old is that bicycle, where had it been

purchased, and how much did it cost? “Looks like a pretty expensive bicycle, Lucretia. One of them ‘mountain bikes.’ You got the bill of sale for that bike, girl, to prove it ain’t stolen property?”

I did just about break down, at this. Had to say I didn’t have any bill of sale but my father might have it, at home. Please could I go home? Pitman shakes his head gravely, saying he has no choice but to “confiscate” the bike and run me into headquarters after all — “See, they got to take your prints, Lucretia Rayburn, and run ’em into the computer. See if they match up with known felons. For all I know, you ain’t even ‘Lucretia Rayburn,’ you’re just impersonating her.” And I’m stammering, No please, officer, please. But Pitman has climbed out of the cruiser to loom above me, frowning and severe seeming. He’s six foot two or three, a hard-muscled youngish man in a uniform made of a silvery-blue material and I’m seeing that he’s wearing a gold-glinting badge and a leather belt and holster and in the holster there’s a gun, and a roaring comes up in my ears like I’m going to faint. Pitman takes my arm, not hard, but firm, and Pitman leads me around to the passenger’s side of the cruiser, sits me down in the seat like I was a little girl and not this skinny-leggy girl of fourteen with a glamor ponytail halfway down her back. He notes the sparkly green toenail polish but refrains from comment. Takes from his belt a pair of metal handcuffs that are these adult-sized cuffs and says, still not cracking a smile, “Got to cuff you, Lucretia. It’s for your own protection, too.” By this time I’m sick with shame. I can’t think how this nightmare will end. Pitman takes my arms that are covered in goose pimples from fear of him, gently draws them behind my back, and slips on

the cuffs and snaps them shut. These cuffs twice the size of my wrists! Yet I still didn't catch on that Pitman was teasing. There wasn't much teasing in the Rayburn household, where I was the only child, born late to my parents and so prized by them you'd think I was sickly or handicapped in some secret way. Pitman would say afterward he was beginning to be worried, I was some poor retarded girl, only looked like a normal blond-princess type with the most beautiful brown doe-eyes he'd ever seen.

"You having trouble with them cuffs, Lucretia? Not resisting arrest, are you?"

This comical sight: I'm so scared of this uniformed man looming over me, I am actually trying to keep the damn handcuffs from sliding off my wrists behind my back.

Finally Pitman laughs aloud. And I realize he isn't serious, none of this is serious. Pitman's laughter isn't cruel like you'd expect from boys my age but a tender kind of male laughter that enters my heart with such suddenness and warmth, I think I began to love Pitman right then. This St. Lawrence County deputy sheriff who has scared the hell out of me has become my rescuer, hauling me up from drowning. Saying, "If them damn cuffs don't fit, how'm I gonna arrest you, girl? Might as well let you go."

For a moment I just sit there, dazed. It's like a bad dream ending; I can't believe that I am free.

The smell of the man (hair oil, tobacco, spearmint chewing gum) is close and pungent in my nostrils. The feel of the man (a stranger, touching my bare arms!) will remain with me for a long time.

Last thing Pitman tells me, deadpan, he won't be writing up his report—"Best keep it a secret between us, Lucretia."

Pitman climbs back into the police cruiser and drives off. But I know he's watching me in his rearview mirror as I get back onto my bike and pedal behind him, shaky and self-conscious. I can feel how my little Gap T-shirt is damp with sweat. I can feel the muscles straining in my bare legs as I pedal the bike, and I can feel the thrill of my quickened heartbeat.

Something has happened to me! I have become someone special.

Three years, two months and eleven days after the handcuffs, Pitman and I were married.

Daddy disowned me and good riddance! — I disowned *him*.

A wife cleaves to her husband and forsakes all else. I think so.

Mom was hurt, heartbroken, wet-hen-furious, but couldn't stay away from her only daughter's wedding. (In secret) she harbored a liking for Sheriff's Deputy Lucas Pitman herself.

It was hard to resist Pitman when he wished to make you like him. A man that size deferring to Mom, calling her "Mrs. Rayburn" like she was the most gracious lady he'd ever met. (Probably, Mom was.) Called her "ma'am" with such courtesy, like her own son, she'd forget objections she was trying to make.

Till finally Mom hugged me one day, conceding, "Your husband certainly adores you, Lucretia. Maybe that's all that matters."

"All that matters to me, Mom."

I spoke a little stiffly. In this matter of allegiance, a wife cleaves to her husband. She is reticent with her mother. Anything else is betrayal.

We had our honeymoon house. A rented winterized bungalow outside town. Pitman whistled, painting the outside robin's-egg blue that dried a brighter and sharper color than the paint sample indicated, and I made a mess painting the rooms inside: pale yellow, ivory. The little bedroom was hardly big enough for our jangly brass bed we'd bought at a farm sale. This bed for one oversized man and one undersized girl, I took pride outfitting with the nicest sheets, goose feather pillows, and a beautiful old handmade quilt in purple and lavender. This bed Pitman and I would end up in, or on, more times a day than just nighttime.

Only a coincidence: our honeymoon house was close by the Hunter Road. In the foothills east of Au Sable Forks, Mt. Hammer in the distance. Our bedroom overlooked a branch of the Au Sable Creek, which sounded like rushing wind when the water level was high and like a faint teasing trickle by late summer when the water level was low. Our house was exactly 2.6 miles from my parents' house in town.

Some months after we came to live here, Pitman was assigned to a new shift. Later hours, farther away. Now he and his partner patrolled little crossroads mountain towns like Malvern, North Fork, Chappondale, Stony Point, and Star Lake. From his miffed attitude I had to conclude that Pitman wasn't happy with this assignment, but he'd only joke: "That's where a cop can expect to get it. Up in the hills."

It's cruel for a law enforcement officer to joke in this way with his wife, but that was Pitman for you. Seeing tears in my eyes, he'd turn repentant, brushing them away with his big thumbs and kissing me hard on the mouth. Saying, "Never mind, baby. Nobody's gonna get *me*."

This seemed likely. Pitman was fearless. But Pitman was also shrewd and knew to watch his back.

This night. It was a turn, I'd come to see later.

Pitman came home late from his night shift smelling of beer, fell into our bed only partly undressed, hugging me so tight my ribs were in danger of cracking. He hadn't wakened me from any actual sleep but I was pretending. Pitman disliked me to be waiting up for him and worrying, so I had a way of feigning sleep, even with the bedside lamp and the TV on. In those early months I was grateful my husband came home at all, wasn't shot down or run off the highway by some maniac; I'd forgive him anything, or almost.

Pitman hid his hot face in my neck. Said, shuddering like a horse tormented by flies: "This thing over in Star Lake, baby. It's ugly."

Star Lake. Pitman's old hometown. He had family there he kept his distance from. There'd been a murder/suicide in a cabin above Star Lake, detectives from the sheriff's office were investigating. Not from Pitman but from other sources I knew that a Star Lake man had strangled his wife and killed himself with some kind of firearm. I had not heard that any Pitmans were involved and was hoping this was so. Pitman had many blood relatives with names not known to me, including some living on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation.

I had learned not to press Pitman on certain matters having to do with his job or any of his personal life, in fact. He'd promised he would always tell me what I was required to know. He would not upset me with the things he saw that upset him or things a woman would not wish to know. Law

enforcement officers have this way about them: they don't answer questions; they ask. If you ask, you see a steely light come into their eyes warning you to back off.

Pitman was asking did I know what a garrot was, and I rightaway said no, no I did not know what a garrot was, though in fact I did, but I knew that Pitman would not wish his eighteen-year-old wife who had only graduated from high school a few months before to know such a thing. Pitman raised himself above me on his elbows, peering into my face. He had horse eyes that seemed just a little too large for his face, beautiful dark-staring eyes showing a rim of white above the iris. They were eyes to express mirth, wonderment, rage. They were not eyes to make you feel comfortable. Pitman said, "A garrot is a thing used to strangle. It's two things. It's a thing like a cord or a scarf you wrap around somebody's throat, and it's a thing like a stick or a rod you twist that with. So you don't have to touch the throat with your actual hands."

Pitman was touching my throat with his hands, though. His hands that were strong, and big. Circling my throat with his fingers and thumbs and squeezing. Not hard but hard enough.

I laughed and pushed at him. I wasn't going to be frightened by Pitman-teasing.

I asked if that was how the woman at Star Lake was strangled, and Pitman ignored my question as if it had not been asked. He was leaning above me, staring at me. I remembered how at the wedding ceremony he'd been watching me sidelong, and when he caught my eye he winked. Just between the two of us, a flame-flash of understanding. Like Pitman was thinking of that first secret between us, how he'd handcuffed me in the police cruiser on Hunter Road.

How reckless Pitman had been! Risking all hell playing such a trick on a fourteen-year-old girl. Misusing his authority. *Sexual harassment* it would have been called if given a name. Except we'd been fated to meet, Pitman believed. That day or some other, in a town small as Au Sable Forks, we'd have met and fallen in love.

Of course I'd never told my parents. It was the great secret of my girlhood as it marked the end of my girlhood. Never told anyone except my cousin Andrea but by that time I was seventeen, a senior in high school, confounding my parents and teachers by deciding not to apply for college as I'd been planning and everyone was expecting of me.

(Secretly) engaged to Pitman by then. (Secretly) making love with Pitman every chance I had.

He was saying now, stumbling out the words as they came to him: "A garrot takes time. A garrot takes planning. Anybody who garrots his victim, it's premeditated. There's a sick purpose to it, Lucretia. You wouldn't know."

Damn right I wouldn't know! I was trying not to panic, pushing at Pitman's hands, easing them from my throat. His big thumbs I grasped in both my hands as a child might. It wasn't the first time Pitman had put his hands on me in a way to frighten me, but it was the first time when we hadn't been making love, the first time it hadn't seemed like an accident.

Pitman said, "See, if you garrot somebody you can strangle her till she passes out, then you can revive her. You can strangle her till she passes out again, then you can revive her. You don't exert any pressure with your own hands. Your own hands are spared. It's a cruel method but effective. It's the way Spaniards used to execute condemned prisoners. It's rare in the United States."

This was a long speech for Pitman. He was drunker than he'd seemed at first, and very tired. I knew not to let on any uneasiness I felt, for that would offend Pitman who deemed himself my protector. I only laughed now, pulling his hands more firmly away from my throat, and leaned up awkwardly to kiss him.

“Mmmm, Pitman, come to bed. We both need to sleep.”

I helped Pitman pull off more of his clothes. He was big and floppy like a fish. By the time I leaned over to switch out the lamp, Pitman was asleep and snoring.

It was that night the thought came to me for the first time:
It's a garrot I am in.

2.

“Such an ugly story! Those people.”

My mother spoke with repugnance, disdain. “Those people” referred to people who got themselves killed, written up in local papers. People of a kind the Rayburns didn't know.

I was in my mother's kitchen reading the *Au Sable Weekly*. For some reason our paper hadn't been delivered. On the front page was an article about the murder/suicide in Star Lake, fifteen miles to the east. The name was Burdock not Pitman. I resolved that I would not make inquiries whether the two might be related. It was my reasoning that mountain towns like Star Lake are so small and remote, inhabitants are likely to be related to one another more frequently than they are elsewhere. If Pitman was related to the wife murderer/suicide Amos Burdock, it wouldn't be helpful for me to know.

“I didn't actually finish reading it.” Mom sat across from

me, pushing a plate of something in my direction. It is a mother's destiny always to seduce with home-baked cookies evocative of someone's lost childhood, but I would not eat; I would save my appetite for my own mealtimes with Pitman. "I suppose Pitman knows all about it. Is he investigating?"

No mention of a garrot in the article. Only just the coroner ruled death of the female victim, the wife, by strangulation. The garrot was secret information, evidently. Known to only a few individuals.

"Pitman isn't a detective, Mom. You know that. So, no."

Strangle, revive. Strangle, revive. The way Pitman had teased me on the Hunter Road. Scaring me, then seeming to relent. Then scaring me again. Really scaring me. And then relenting.

Best keep it a secret between us, Lucretia.

Daddy's favorite music is opera. His favorite opera, *Don Giovanni*, which I came to know by heart, listening to it all my life. Daddy also took us to any production of any Shakespeare play within a fifty-mile radius and each summer for years to the Shakespeare Festival over in Stratford, Ontario.

For Daddy, *Don Giovanni* and Shakespeare were rewards for the time he spent in the world "out there." Dealing with men, customers and employees. Dealing with building materials. Making money. Pitman seemed to think a lot of money. *Your old man's a millionaire, baby. Why you're so stuck up. Hell, you got a right.*

When I'd wanted to rile Daddy up I would say the world isn't Mozart and Shakespeare, the world is country-and-western music. The world is cable TV, Wal-Mart, *People* magazine. I knew that I was right; Daddy's face would redden.

I was the bright schoolgirl, Daddy's little girl also something of a smart aleck, like Daddy himself. He's a handsome man for an old guy in his fifties with a high, hard little belly looks like a soccer ball under his shirt that's usually a white starched cotton shirt. Prematurely white hair, trimmed by a barber every third Friday. Daddy would no more miss a Friday in the barber's chair than he would miss his daily morning shower.

I knew that I was right but Daddy never gave in.

"Not so, Lucretia. The world is *Don Giovanni*, and the world is Shakespeare. Minus the beauty."

Not so, Daddy. The world is plenty beautiful. If you're lucky in love.

For a long time, I believed this. I think I did.

Soon as I married Lucas Pitman, I had to know the man was *vigilant*.

Through the day he'd call on his cell phone. Mostly from the cruiser. In his lowered sexy voice saying, "My little princess is never off my radar." Asking where was I, what was I doing. What was I wearing. What was I thinking. Was I touching myself? Where?

Pitman was proud of his little blond princess-wife. A rich man's spoiled daughter he'd seduced, slept with while she was in high school, and married soon as she turned eighteen, thumbing her nose at her old man. Pitman was proud of how she adored him, but he didn't like other guys staring at her. Well, he did, sure he did, but not too obviously. It had to be a subtle thing. It could not be crude. Pitman had a temper; his own friends backed off from him when he'd been drinking.