

Madame Strange, Teller of the Future

By R. A. Conti

Book 1 - The Farm

Chapter 1

Bianca lifted her RV's creaky hood, propped it open with a stick, placed a distress banner in the window, and sat in the driver's seat. She waited on a desolate blacktop road in rural Pennsylvania. It was a warm October afternoon.

There were rolling fields as far as she could see and no people anywhere. No cell phone signal, either. Bianca didn't know if the road had a name. She waited for someone to come by and rescue her. She had waited on roads like this a few times. Someone always showed up to help. Men were often eager to aid an attractive stranded woman in what was nearly a wilderness.

But Bianca wasn't merely a helpless woman. She was so much more, as someone would soon discover.

It wasn't until dusk that a rescue looked possible. A tractor-trailer lumbered down the road toward Bianca. The truck slowed and its air brakes wheezed it to a stop. A gangly young man stepped down from the cab. He looked too young to shave let alone drive a huge semi.

"You in trouble, ma'am?" the baby-faced driver asked. He had a friendly voice and Bianca liked him immediately.

"Yeah. She broke down. No phone service out here. Nobody's been down this road for hours. If I didn't have a bathroom inside I'd a been in real trouble."

"I'm sure you coulda used the field, ma'am. The corn don't mind."

Bianca laughed. "I'll remember that for next time."

"Does this happen often?"

"Not a lot, but enough to piss me off. You know anything about motors?"

"A little. Let me get a flashlight."

"Say, what's your name? Mine's Bianca."

"Oh, how do you do, Bianca? I'm Rodney."

"Whatcha haulin', Rodney?"

"Dog food. *Lots* of dog food."

"Where you headed?"

"Warehouse in New Jersey."

"I'm no expert, but I think you're a long way from New Jersey. We're somewhere in rural Pennsylvania."

"Don't I know it!" *But where the hell am I in rural Pennsylvania?* Rodney thought. He was too mannerly to say it out loud.

He got a flashlight, looked under the hood, couldn't make any sense of what he saw there, and gave up. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Bianca."

"Sorry, Bianca. I can't see anythin' obvious that I'd know how to fix. I'm afraid I can't help."

“That’s okay. Thanks for stopping anyway. I’ll guess I’ll just spend the night here.”

“Reckon I will, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m powerful lost. Maybe I should just wait until daylight to start off again. Plus, my fuel’s low.”

“Oh, well, since we’re gonna be neighbors for the night, are you hungry? I’m broke down but I have lots of food and I haven’t eaten yet. You up for a hot meal?”

“Yes, ma’am! You wouldn’t also have a map would ya? My GPS is busted.”

“A paper map? You know, I think I might have one somewhere. C’mon in. I’ll look for it while supper’s warming up.”

Bianca stepped out of the driver’s seat and walked toward the RV’s back door. Rodney followed her and noticed writing on the side of the RV. *Madame Strange, Teller of the Future*. “Did you buy this RV recently, ma’am?” he asked as he stepped inside.

“No, I’ve had it for years. Why?”

“It has writin’ on the side. Musta belonged to someone else before you. You never had it wiped clean?”

“Oh, *that*. No, that’s me.”

“Oh. Yes, ma’am. Okay. I see. Hmm.” Rodney wondered if he should get back in his cab and drive down the road a piece to wait the night. Bianca saw his hesitation. She was used to people being cautious around her.

“Still want that map and dinner?”

“I guess so.”

“Have a seat. I’ll see what I can rustle up.”

Bianca found some leftover hearty soup. The RV’s propane tank was full. She put the soup on the stove to heat it up and found some day-old multigrain bread. “Not gonna be fancy but it’ll stick to your ribs, that’s for sure.”

“Thank you kindly, ma’am.” Bianca gave up wanting Rodney to use her name. She liked his formal respect. *Someone raised him right*, she thought.

She had a cabinet full of odd papers and rustled around until she found an old road atlas. “This thing’s probably outdated, but it’s all I got.”

“It’ll do fine, I’m sure.” Rodney said. He flipped through the pages. Bianca stirred the soup. She got out two bowls and spoons and then plated the bread. “Here it is!” Rodney found the Pennsylvania map page and tried to trace his route along the turnpike. Bianca served his soup, then her own, and then sat down at the cramped table. Rodney moved the map so she had room for the bread.

“Help yourself. Eat while it’s hot.”

“Thanks, I will. Just let me see. I think I got off here. But why? It’s nowhere near New Jersey.”

“Maybe the sign was wrong.” Bianca suggested.

“Musta been. Now, how do I get back on? This map doesn’t show roads like this one, does it?”

“Probably not. People use GPS now, anyway.”

“My GPS gets me in trouble even when it’s not busted. But this time I coulda probably really used it.”

“Eat your food, Rodney. The map can wait.”

“Okay, ma’am. Say, this is good. You make it?”

“Old family recipe. A blend of several different cans of Campbell’s soups, simmered to perfection, topped with fragrant exotic cheeses from the Seven-Eleven.”

“You’re a regular gourmet, aren’t you?” Rodney joked. He was starting to feel more at ease with Bianca.

“I often have to eat in a hurry so I’m good at improvising.”

“Well, I like this. Maybe you can give me the recipe. I get tired of sandwiches for every meal, ya’ know?” Bianca nodded.

Just then a horn sounded outside the RV. “Who’s that?” Rodney asked. He looked out as a white pickup truck stopped in front of his tractor-trailer. A woman got out, looked in the cab, then at the RV, and walked toward them. Bianca watched him. The woman knocked on the RV door and called out, “Hello? Do you need help?” She had the sweetest voice Rodney had ever heard.

“Please come in,” Bianca replied. The door opened. Rodney gasped when he saw the pretty girl (*woman*, he reminded himself, *they’re all women now*) step into the RV.

“You in trouble?” the young woman asked, smiling.

“Yeah. Thanks for stopping. I’m broke down and Rodney here is lost.”

“Is that your rig?” Rodney nodded. “You’re lost? Where you goin’?”

“New Jersey. I got off the turnpike. Somehow I ended up here. If I hadn’t seen Bianca here, I don’t know what I woulda done.”

“Hi, Bianca. I’m Cindy. And you are?”

“Rodney.”

“Nice to meet ya both. So, can I look at your motor, Bianca?”

“Can you fix it?”

“Ain’t many I can’t fix, but maybe this one will be different.”

“Wonderful. Let me get you a flashlight.”

“Got my phone for a flashlight. Only thing it’s good for out here in the middle of nowhere.” She looked at Rodney. He wondered if she was thinking he was a loser without a GPS or phone. Cindy noticed the map. “That won’t do you much good. It only shows the main roads.”

“We figured that out,” Bianca replied. “Does this road even have a name?”

“It probably does but darned if I remember what it is. Time’s a-wastin’. It’s almost dark. Been gettin’ colder at nights. Not pleasant to be out here even in an RV or truck. Lemme see what I can do to help.” Cindy walked to the opened hood, shined her light on the motor, reached in, tinkered with some wires, and walked back to the RV door. “Ma’am? You wanna gimme the key? I’ll try her out.” Bianca handed Cindy the key. A moment later she had the RV purring like it was new.

“Okay. That’s one down. Now you, mister.”

“Rodney.”

“Yeah, Rodney. Don’t know if I can help you as easy. We’re a long way from the turnpike. I might be able to show you how to get back.” Rodney hoped she would direct him seated inside his cab so he could be close to her a while longer.

“I could follow you and bring you back here so you could get your truck,” Bianca suggested helpfully. She had already noticed that Rodney was interested in Cindy and hoped Cindy might feel the same way about him.

“Well, that won’t work. I gotta be home soon. My uncle’s waitin’ dinner. It’s a long ride to the turnpike.”

“Is there a rest stop nearby? I’m low on fuel.”

“Boy, you really messed yourself up!” Cindy remarked. Rodney’s face fell. “Sorry. My bluntness sometimes puts people off.”

“I’m not put off,” Rodney replied, boldly. Bianca grinned. Maybe she’d just found out why she was there.

Chapter 2

Bianca and Rodney followed Cindy back to her farm.

“Uncle Jay! We got us some strays that followed me home.” Rodney bristled at being called a stray. Bianca grinned.

“They’re certainly welcome,” Uncle Jay called from the kitchen. “Come on in here, folks.” Uncle Jay smiled at Rodney and Bianca. She nearly swooned. Uncle Jay was gorgeous. *I hope there’s no Aunt Jay, Bianca thought. Down, girl. I’m here to help Rodney and Cindy, not to get laid. But if...*

“Jay Samuelson.”

“Rodney Young.”

“Bianca Estranho.”

“Unusual name,” Jay replied.

“My father was Portuguese.” She actually didn’t know what nationality Ambrose was. It never mattered.

“Uncle Jay, I found Bianca in a broke-down RV and Rodney lost and looking for the turnpike.”

“Turnpike! Boy, that’s a long way from here. How’d you get so lost?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Call me Jay. We’re all friends here.” *I certainly hope so, Bianca thought. Jay seemed the ideal burly, folksy farmer that welcomed strangers and exuded warmth. And charm, Bianca thought. Don’t forget the charm. But where’s the missus?*

“You folks hungry? There’s plenty of food. I usually cook several dinners at a time because we’re so busy. We work late and are too tired to make anything. We got plenty.” He gestured toward the kitchen table piled with food. Rodney saw mashed potatoes, green beans, corn-on-the-cob, a huge salad, and thick pork chops with onions.

“Uncle Jay, how many people did you cook for *this* time?”

“Well, just us.”

“But you put it all out like it was thanksgiving or somethin’.”

“Yeah, I guess I did. Maybe I had a feelin’...” Bianca loved men who ‘had a feelin.’ They were often the most fun to be with. She hoped she’d find out soon. If there was no missus.

They sat and passed plates around. Rodney and Bianca forgot about their meager soup and bread supper a couple of hours earlier. They feasted.

Jay launched into the history of the farm. Rodney would have preferred hearing Cindy's history but listened respectfully. The farm had been in their family for four generations. Jay and his brother Russ (Cindy's father) owned it together until Russ died. Jay raised Cindy and expected she would want to go off on her own, lured by the big city. She didn't. She wanted to be the fifth-generation owner of the Samuelson farm.

Bianca wanted to ask about Jay's wife but didn't want to appear too obvious. She hoped the information might come out in conversation. It didn't.

They finished dinner. Rodney helped Cindy clear the table. "When he cooks, I clean up. When I cook he cleans up."

"Which isn't too often," Jay teased his niece. "Fortunately."

"He thinks I'm a lousy cook," Cindy said. Jay rolled his eyes.

"You're still a damn sight better than your aunt," Jay commented. He didn't seem angry.

Bianca saw her opening. "Aunt?"

"Deborah- as she *always* reminded me to call her."

"She's not home tonight?"

"Hasn't been home for years now."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

"Did she pass away?" Rodney asked.

"No, she *ran* away. With some damn trucker." Jay glared at Rodney. Cindy smiled.

"Uncle Jay, you can't blame all truckers for what she did."

"Well, I ain't forgivin' them, either. And you should steer clear of truckers, niece. Some of them are no good."

"But Rodney's different, aren't you, Rodney?" Bianca said.

"Um, yes, ma'am."

"Rodney is a refined young man, very respectful, just starting out, aren't you?"

Rodney had no idea how Bianca knew so much about him. He forgot about the lettering on her RV.

"Yes, ma'am. This is only my fifth run. I'm still getting used to doin' it."

"Well, getting lost is nothing to be ashamed of, Rodney. I hope it won't discourage you."

"Discourage me? Hell, no! Oh, sorry folks. I don't usually talk like that."

Bianca grinned. So did Cindy. "Well, I'd be happy to do the dishes so you all can relax," Bianca said. I've been sitting all day and need to move around a bit before bedtime."

"Sure," Jay replied. "Knock yourself out. Cindy, please show Bianca where everything is."

"Why don't *you* do it, Uncle Jay? I'm still stuffed from all that food."

"Okay. Bianca, come with me." Bianca resisted thinking, *I hope I will*. She reminded herself to thank Cindy later.

Bianca thought Jay would show her the sink and then wander off to do whatever farmers did at night but he hung around. She hoped he might find her interesting but he didn't

say anything and she didn't talk about herself. She finished washing and drying the dishes. "I'll put them away. I know where they all go," Jay said.

"Okay. I think I'm ready for bed, now. I'll just say goodnight and head out to my RV."

"You're gonna sleep out there? Those mattresses can't be very comfortable. Plus, they're little. We have several nice big beds. You're welcome to one of them."

"I wouldn't want to put you out. You've been so kind already."

"It's no trouble. We rarely get guests. It's been nice having you two around. Besides, I think Cindy and Rodney will be up for a while."

"You noticed?"

"He can't take his eyes off her."

"She's a wonderful young woman," Bianca commented.

"I know. She was my brother's pride and joy. I wish he and his wife lived to see her grow up."

"What happened to them?"

Jay got a faraway look in his eyes as he recalled the accident. "First vacation anyone in this family took in years. They went, but they didn't come back."

"What happened?"

"Plane crash. It was a small plane they took somewhere out west. Bad weather. My brother was killed. My sister-in-law survived but not for long. I got to say goodbye to her but not to Russ. I've regretted urging them to take that vacation ever since. If I hadn't been so insistent..."

Bianca saw his distress and put her hand on his arm. "It wasn't your fault. You shouldn't blame yourself."

"Well, I do. I've raised Cindy the best I can but she should have her parents, you know? What good is an uncle?"

"I somehow don't think she'd agree with you."

"You're just saying that, but thanks."

"Look, Jay. You want some company tonight? We could talk some more. I'm not really sleepy. I just wanted to get out of your way."

"You're not in my way. And, yeah, I'd like to talk. I don't know anything about you. You wanna beer? I'd like to hear your story."

"It'll take more than one beer to hear all *my* story." Bianca had forgotten she knew how to flirt. She hoped Jay picked up the subtle interest in her voice.

"Okay. I got plenty."

Jay opened the refrigerator, handed Bianca a cold bottle, and then grabbed one for himself. "We got a nice gazebo out back. It's chilly on nights like this, but we got blankets and the sky is lovely this time of year. You wanna sit out there?"

"I'd love to."

Bianca didn't tell him her whole story. It was too long and involved and she didn't want to bore him. She had a highlights reel she unspooled for people she met. It left out important details but included some fun and unusual stuff people that liked to know.

"So, not always circuses, carnivals, and traveling shows?"

"No. I like to be on my own. Go where the mood takes me."

“Did a mood take you here?” Jay’s direct question surprised Bianca. She didn’t know how to reply.

“I don’t rightly know, Jay. I’d like to think it did because I’ve met you, Cindy, and Rodney. But I don’t know why a mood would have brought me here.”

“Do you need a reason?”

“There usually is one, yes.”

“What kind of reason?” Jay asked.

“There have been all kinds.”

“Is a lonely farmer a reason you would consider?”

“I don’t know any lonely farmers.”

“Would you like to get to know one? I think I might know of one nearby.”

“How nearby?” Bianca asked, coyly.

“Under the next blanket.”

“That’s pretty nearby.”

“Too close for you? I can back off.”

“Oh, don’t *please*. How about we share a blanket? It’s chillier than you made me think it would be. I could use some warming up.”

“You wanna go back inside? I could build a fire.”

“No, Jay, a fire is *not* the kind of warmth I want.” Jay knew what Bianca wanted. He slid closer to her on the gazebo bench and covered her blanket with his. They felt warmer immediately.

“You were right about the stars,” Bianca said. “It’s beautiful out here.”

“I come out a lot at night to think. Sometimes I can’t sleep, too.”

“Something wrong?”

“Everything.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

Jay sighed. “Farming ain’t what it used to be.”

“Nothing is, Jay.” Bianca liked saying his name. She hoped she would get to say it more passionately later tonight.

“I’m not joking.”

“Neither am I- but, tell me what’s changed for you?”

“When Cindy found you on that road it was because she was coming back from her job.”

“She has a job? Where?”

“There’s an Amazon warehouse not far from here. They pay her good, and..., well, if this farm is gonna survive we need the money.”

“I’m sorry. How’s she feel about it?”

“She’s not wild about the job but she loves the farm and will do anything to save it. The problem is that she has no time for a normal life. I worry she’s missing out.”

“Missing out?”

“She’s young, healthy, beautiful, and really smart. There’s boys she could be meeting, having fun with. She doesn’t get to do any of that.”

“Does she want to?”

“She says she doesn’t care.”

“But you do?”

“Yeah. I know how lonely life can be without someone...” Jay sounded wistful.

Bianca thought she should follow up with a personal question.

“You never looked after your wife ran off?”

“I looked. But I didn’t find, if you know what I mean. Nobody wants an old man.”

“You don’t seem old.”

“I feel that way.”

“Jay, when’s the last time you sat out here with a woman?”

“I don’t remember. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. You’re here with *me*, now. It’s pretty special to me. How about you?”

“It’s wonderful. Brings back old feelings. Feelings I’ve missed. But it can’t last.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re here now but you’ll be leaving.”

“And you want somebody who might want to stay awhile?” Jay nodded. “Let me tell you something. On the side of my RV, it says *Madame Strange, Teller of the Future*. The future interests other people and I make my living telling them their futures. But it doesn’t interest me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Jay, only the present interests me. We’re here together *now*. We might never get the chance to do this again. But chance has brought us together. I think that means something.”

“What?”

“The way I see it, we’re *supposed* to be together. I don’t know why and I don’t care. I would like it if you put your arm around me.” Jay did. He felt better. “That’s nice.”

“Yeah.” Jay didn’t want to admit to himself how nice it felt. Bianca thought he was still holding back.

“You could kiss me if you wanted to. If you’re not afraid.”

“Why would I be afraid?”

“Afraid of where it might lead, afraid of where you might want it to lead.”

“But where can it go?”

“Anywhere you want, Jay. We’re alone out here. The sky, the stars, the land, time, everything belongs to us in this quiet moment. Let’s enjoy it together, and not think of anything else. Okay?”

“Bianca, I...”

“...Want to take me upstairs and spend the night with me in your bed.”

“You know?”

“I’ve wanted *you* to take me there since the moment we met.”

Jay threw off the blankets, stood up, pulled her up, took her hand, and led her into the house. “There’s a back stairway,” he whispered. “Don’t want to disturb the kids.”

“Of course not,” Bianca giggled. Jay took her to his room. It had a simple orderly charm that made her like him even more. He opened the blinds. Stars shone in the window. Jay left the lights off. Bianca undressed and slid under the comforter. “This is lovely.”

Jay eased himself in next to her. “Yes, it is.”

They hoped it would be the longest night of their lives. It wasn’t, but it felt that way.

Chapter 3

Cindy and Rodney argued after Jay and Bianca went outside to sit in the gazebo. Cindy made the mistake of asking Rodney how he could have been so stupid to get off the turnpike and get lost. Rodney didn't like being called stupid. He'd been called that a lot when he was a kid.

Rodney wasn't good at school or book learning but he was smart in other ways. His grades were not good but his parents never criticized him. Neither parent had much education and believed a person ought to acquire practical knowledge that schools didn't teach.

They encouraged Rodney to try things. He built and flew model airplanes, tinkered with old radios, and collected stamps. He still carried the stamp album in his truck, hoping that he would find new stamps in places he stopped but there were rarely any stamps he hadn't seen before. *Maybe I'll just give that album to some kid, he thought, and let him or her start collecting.* Rodney hadn't yet met anyone to give the stamp album to. But he'd only made a few trips.

He wanted to impress Cindy. Being a trucker didn't impress her. Rodney couldn't think of anything else that made him special and he felt like a failure. But he had something going for him he didn't know about. He was a nice guy and Cindy didn't know many nice guys.

Rodney hadn't hit on her. Many of the guys she worked with had. Guys she met in town, too. Cindy felt like she must be the only girl who got hit on almost every day of her life. The only place she didn't get hit on was the farm. The men who dropped by to deliver stuff or who came to help during the harvest never hit on Cindy. Uncle Jay always watched them. If anyone got out of line with his niece he threatened to whack them with a two-by-four. Uncle Jay made sure they knew that the moment they stepped on the property. They didn't forget.

Cindy wasn't looking for someone special. She felt inclined to like Rodney just because he seemed nice. The problem was that Rodney was a long-haul trucker, still wet behind the ears, but in love with trucking. She didn't know what to do. Rodney didn't, either. They had reached an impasse.

Cindy didn't know Uncle Jay and Bianca hadn't reached an impasse. They never even approached one. They were already in bed for the night. Cindy and Rodney were nowhere close to a bed, together or alone. Neither knew what to do.

They sat in tense silence but then erupted at the same moment.

"Would you like to see the farm?" Cindy asked a split second before Rodney spoke.

"Would you like to see inside my truck?"

Great, they both thought, we still can't agree on anything. This night is going nowhere fast. Neither suspected they both wanted it to end in the same place. It would have felt special to spend the night together.

Cindy and Rodney were lonely kids with few friends and little time for pleasure or amusement. The weight of life's serious tasks had descended on them and their days didn't change much. Cindy looked forward to working at the Amazon warehouse and the farm. Rodney looked forward to miles and miles of lonesome roads, driving solo. Neither looked

forward to spending any time with someone they liked, cared about, and wanted to get to know better.

But there they were.

It's now or never, Cindy thought. "Well, I'm kinda tired. I think I'll turn in. You comin'?"

"I'll sleep out in my truck."

"No, you won't."

"Okay..., where?"

"Upstairs."

"Okay..., *where?*"

"Do I have to spell it out, Rodney?" *If she calls me stupid again, I'll drive away right now*, he thought. She didn't. Cindy kissed him on the cheek. "With me, if you wanna."

"What about Uncle Jay?"

"Who?"

Rodney grinned. He didn't know Jay and Bianca were already in bed. He trusted Cindy's casualness. *She doesn't care so why should I?* he thought. Cindy turned out the lights and led Rodney to the stairs. He thought it was the happiest moment of his young life. It wasn't. The moments they shared after they went to her room were happier by far. Rodney hoped he could remember every second. Cindy tried to make him forget everything in his life but her.

Neither succeeded, but they enjoyed themselves anyway.

Rodney had never heard roosters before. He sat bolt upright when they crowed. Cindy opened her eyes and laughed. "City boys!" she whispered, and then kissed him. He didn't want to let her out of bed. "I gotta pee. I'll come back, I promise." Rodney didn't think he could survive the wait but he did.

"I gotta get ready for work, Rodney. If I'm late, they dock my pay and we can't afford it. I'm sorry. I wish I could spend all day with you."

"So do I."

"Well, you could stay awhile. Uncle Jay always needs day helpers. I'm sure he'd put you to work." Rodney wasn't certain he wanted to work. He wanted to stay in bed and dream about Cindy all day.

"I don't know. He might be mad at me for-."

"What? *This?* Us? It's none of his business."

"If you say so."

"Uncle Jay won't care about you and me after spending the night with Bianca."

"She's still here? I didn't know what happened to her. I thought she was out in her RV."

"She's two rooms away in my uncle's bed." Cindy wanted to add that they were likely 'doing it' again but she didn't want to give Rodney any ideas.

"Okay. I'll stay. Dog food keeps, right?"

"You mean it? You just made my day. I'll go write Uncle Jay a note and leave for work. I'll make coffee for you guys, too. Oh, we have diesel here, if you want to fill up. Maybe you can work it off instead of paying for it."

“You think of everything, don’t you?” *Not everything*, Cindy thought. She didn’t want to think about how she would feel when Rodney had to leave. Dog food wouldn’t stay fresh forever. He’d probably lose his job if he stayed too long. Cindy decided to spend the rest of the day planning ways to keep him here longer. He decided to spend his day thinking about how to persuade her to leave with him. Lots of drivers traveled with companions. *Why not us?* Rodney thought.

They headed toward a new impasse, the most difficult one they yet faced.

Chapter 4

“It’s been a few years since I heard roosters,” Bianca remarked. “Some traveling shows used to carry chickens. We performers ate a lot of eggs!”

“Well, I’m a pretty good egg chef. I’ll make you something special.”

“Don’t go to any trouble.”

“It won’t be. I’d enjoy it. Besides...”

“Besides what?”

“Well, this is awkward, but I wanted to thank you.”

“For what?”

“Last night, under the stars in the gazebo...”

“And under the sheets, here.” Bianca grinned. Jay did, too.

“Yeah.”

“Jay, I can only stay another night.”

“I know. Can we have another date under the stars?”

“Oh, yes! I’d love that.”

Bianca spent time in her RV while Jay did farm chores. He dropped by several times to check up on her. *I think he’s hoping I’m horny*, Bianca thought. *I am, but I don’t want to interrupt his chores. We’ll have time together later on. I’ll make sure we get enough of each other then.*

Rodney followed Jay around the farm and watched him do chores. He jumped in when Jay needed help. Jay felt annoyed at first but then appreciated Rodney’s assistance. The boy had a knack for picking things up quickly. He even made a few suggestions about how Jay could improve his tasks. Jay found himself reluctantly liking Rodney. He wondered what Cindy was feeling at work.

So did Rodney. He couldn’t wait to see her when she came home. He didn’t know if Jay knew that they spent the night together. Jay didn’t but he wouldn’t have cared. Cindy was an adult and he respected her freedom to choose who she wanted to be with. He knew she would not do anything risky.

By the end of the day, Jay felt he knew Rodney well enough to feel he wouldn’t do anything to harm Cindy. But Jay wasn’t about to change his low opinion of truckers. Rodney was the exception. The rest were still filth. Especially the one Deborah ran away with. Jay would shoot that trucker if he ever saw him again. He wouldn’t shoot Deborah, though. He couldn’t. He still loved her.

“We’re eating up all your food,” Bianca remarked as they enjoyed a second lavish dinner. Jay had prepared enough food for several nights but felt happy to share it with guests, especially Bianca. Rodney, too. *The kid’s all right*, he thought, grudgingly.

Cindy and Rodney sat opposite and couldn’t stop looking at each other. Jay expected one or both to stab their faces with an empty fork because they weren’t paying attention to eating. Their minds were elsewhere. Bianca already knew where Cindy and Rodney’s thoughts were. Jay figured it out but didn’t know how he felt about it.

His doubts weren’t because he ought to protect Cindy but because he’d taken a liking to Rodney and thought he’d be sorry to see the boy drive off in his semi. Jay knew Cindy would feel the same way. He wondered if he could do anything to help them.

Bianca had thought about them all day. She understood the moment Rodney and Cindy met that the reason she faked a breakdown on that desolate rural blacktop was so they could meet. Now, it seemed obvious they ought to be together. But how? Rodney couldn’t stay at the farm and Cindy couldn’t go off with Rodney. Bianca decided she and Jay should discuss the kids’ dilemma when they snuggled under the blankets in the gazebo.

“Those kids...,” Jay said.

“Seem to like each other, wouldn’t you say?”

“Like isn’t the word I’d use.”

“I had the same feeling,” Bianca agreed.

“But their lives are completely different. I don’t see how it could work.”

“There *must* be a way. Do you think us old folks can come up with a solution?”

“Who you callin’ old? I was pretty young and feisty last night,” Jay reminded Bianca.

“Yes, you were, and I’m hoping you’ll be tonight if you feel up to it.”

“Uh, Bianca, I’m feelin’ up to it right now, if you’d like to check.”

“I’ll take your word. About the kids. You think there’s any way...?”

“I’d take the boy on tomorrow if Cindy asked me to. But I wonder if his heart’d be in it. He seems to love the idea of truckin’. All he talked about today was the places he wanted to see. I don’t see him puttin’ down roots.”

“I think he already has.”

“What do you mean?”

“In Cindy.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think they did after we went to your room?”

“Oh, I guess didn’t realize.” Bianca didn’t see Jay blush in the darkness. “I guess it’s serious, then.”

“You could say that. I don’t know what’s gonna happen when he goes to leave.”

Bianca paused. Jay waited. He felt there was more she wanted to say. “Speaking of leaving. I’ll have to be on my way tomorrow.

“So this will be our last night together?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Jay replied. “I’m not.”

“You’re not?”

“I knew you weren’t the stayin’ kind and I don’t care. Just havin’ you for two nights is more than I ever dreamed possible.” He squeezed Bianca and she sighed.

“Jay, why is a sweet guy like you not married? You’d make some woman very happy.”

“I would, but there’s no one around here. And I won’t leave to go anywhere else. You see the problem?”

“Yeah. I wish I could fix it.”

“Fix it?”

“It’s kinda what I do. I’m drawn to places because problems need fixing. Something-like God, or the universe, or fate- thinks I can help, so I go and do what I can.”

“Are you any good at it?”

“Pretty good, mostly. I’ve messed up a few times. Nobody got hurt but nobody got helped, either.”

“You can’t expect to be perfect.”

“I don’t, but I’d like to have some positive effect, at least. Right now, I’m stumped. I got two problems, and I don’t know what to do about either one.”

“Wait, Bianca- am *I* one of those problems?”

“Well, yeah. I think you and Cindy need help.”

“She may need a fairy godmother, but I don’t.”

“Don’t be offended.”

“I thought you *liked* me. Are you doing this because you feel sorry for me?”

“Not at all! I’m doing this because I liked you the minute I laid eyes on you. I prayed you didn’t have a missus so I could have you the way I wanted you.”

Jay didn’t reply. Bianca worried she’d offended him. Maybe they were not going to have another playful night of wonderful sex. *That’s how it works out, sometimes*, Bianca thought. *I’ll never get used to it, though.*

“Weather report said it might rain,” Jay commented.

“Really?”

“Yeah- see, it’s clouded up already. The stars are gone. No reason to stay out here in the damp.”

“You gettin’ chilly? Let’s go inside to warm up,” Bianca suggested.

“Good idea. I’d like to build a nice fire.”

“That’s not the kind of warmup I meant, Jay, and you know it.”

He laughed. “Yeah. Got no firewood, anyway.”

“That’s not the kind of wood I’m needing. Shall we sneak upstairs again? We don’t want to bother the kids.”

They didn’t. The kids were together in their little world.

Chapter 5

Somehow they all found their way to the breakfast table at the same time. Jay cooked a huge omelet. Bianca made pancakes and coffee. Cindy and Rodney sat opposite each other again. They seemed to be glowing. Bianca felt worn out. Her last night with Jay was better than the first. Their relationship was ending. Rodney’s and Cindy’s relationship was just beginning. Bianca had laid awake thinking how she could help keep it going. She had an idea.

“So, Rodney, got any plans for today?”

“You’re welcome to join me again,” Jay replied before Rodney spoke. “I enjoyed your company yesterday as much as my niece enjoyed it at night.”

“Uncle Jay!” Cindy muttered and then grinned awkwardly. She tried not to blush.

“Well, I gotta call my dispatcher. I’m probably in trouble already. I’m gonna tell her I broke down but got help and should be on my way soon.”

“And then what?” Bianca asked.

“And then he has to leave,” Cindy replied. “Work comes first. Right, Rod?” Rodney nodded.

“Unfortunately, yes it does. Those dogs want their food. They won’t wait forever.”

“But what about you, Rodney? What do *you* want?” Bianca asked.

The look on Rodney’s face told everyone what he wanted: Cindy. “I... I... don’t want to leave. But I have to. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Cindy soothed Rodney. They all knew it wasn’t.

“It’s obvious you kids were meant for each other,” Bianca commented. Cindy grimaced. “And I had a thought. What if you could be together without giving up what you cared about?”

“What do you mean?” Cindy asked.

“Lots of truckers take their wives along. They form teams and travel together. It can be a wonderful relationship with the road and each other.” Cindy’s face fell. She wasn’t about to give up the Samuelson Farm.

“And most farmers hire seasonal help. Sometimes there isn’t enough help around. What if Rodney worked the farm part of the year and he and Cindy worked the highways? Do you think that would make you both happy?”

“It would make *me* happy,” Jay volunteered. Bianca smiled at him. She felt sorry she was leaving in a few hours.

“I... I... don’t know,” Cindy replied.

“We could make it work if you wanted to,” Rodney said. “We could try it first before we make any decisions.”

“A wise suggestion,” Bianca agreed. “But you two should talk it over thoroughly before you decide.”

“We will, Bianca. Thanks. You’ve been a big help.”

“It was my pleasure. You’re both very special. We have each other’s phone numbers. I hope we’ll stay in touch.”

“So what are *your* plans for the day?” Jay asked. He already knew she had to leave but secretly hoped she might reconsider. He wanted to thank her alone for her suggestion about Cindy and Rodney.

“I have to be at a county fair in New York in a couple of days, so I’ll be on my way. Thanks to Cindy, my RV is fixed. I don’t anticipate any problems. I hate to leave. This place is lovely and you’re all wonderful. I’ll always consider you part of my extended family.”

“Does that mean you might visit?” Jay asked.

“I might drop in, yes, if it wouldn’t be any trouble.”

“It won’t!” Cindy and Jay replied simultaneously.

Bianca had a sudden thought. “But I don’t know where I am. I don’t know how I got here.”

“I’ll draw you the best map you ever saw,” Jay said. They all laughed and then got up. Cindy had to head off to her job at Amazon. She kissed Rodney before she left. Then she kissed Bianca.

“Thank you,” Cindy whispered.

“Thank-you. You fixed my brokedown RV.”

“It wasn’t really brokedown, was it?”

“It wasn’t?” Rodney asked. Cindy and Bianca grinned at each other.

Their time together ended. Not ready to move on, they knew they had to. Bianca hoped Cindy and Rodney would find a way to stay together and Jay would find a woman as wonderful as he was.

She felt ready to hit the road. Traveling was lonely but happy memories filled her empty hours. She’d made special memories with Jay, Cindy, and Rodney. Bianca would treasure them forever.