

voice. After the final prayers, she marched outside with the rest of the congregation.

It was a beautiful morning, and sounds of birdsong from the trees surrounding the church competed with the shush shushing of tires on the nearby street.

HI

On a Friday in late June, an Irish setter urinated all over Cal, then topped this by defecating on the examining table.

Next, a cocker spaniel's owner cursed him in front of his staff because Cal's birth-control advice hadn't worked.

After that he had to perform surgery on a Chihuahua; the poor little guy had a bowel obstruction. The surgery went okay, but afterward the owner became hysterical when she saw some of her dog's precious blood and the tiny dog lying there, twitching, still half-conked out from the anesthetic. If she hadn't been allowed to shove her way into the operating room, she never would have seen him. Cal had never witnessed such a hysterical reaction. When he tried to explain that the dog was going to be fine, she became even more wrought-up, and said she wasn't going to pay him! She stomped out of the office, leaving the dog behind.

Maybe he'd keep the damn dog. But the last thing he wanted was a Chihuahua. He would give it to one of his employees, if someone wanted it. If they didn't, he'd take it to his mom at the shelter.

After all that, he had to bawl out his staff for letting the woman into the surgery. That made him feel worse than anything.

Nothing went right at home that evening either. He walked into his house ready to vent his miserable feelings on Millie about his God-awful day, and all she could talk about were problems with the kids. He barely had time to change into his jeans and polo shirt, and mix himself a stiff gin and tonic, before she cornered him in the den.

"Do you know what Coop has done now? That little tramp Cindy died his hair green, and he looks horrible—like something on MTV! I sent him away so I could warn you first. And Phoebe is giving me fits about getting something pierced; she doesn't care what or where, just so she can get mutilated someplace on her body. I said no, and you should have heard the screams and yells. You're going to have to deal with her, Cal!"

Cal groaned, sinking further into his leather chair, and raising his eyes to the ceiling as if in supplication to the gods. Was there a god for confused and desperate parents, one of whom was an overworked veterinarian?

"I'm not finished," said Millie, and he groaned again. "You won't believe what the twins did." She sounded angry and triumphant at the same time.

"Do I have to know?"

"Yes, because you're going to take them back to the store and make them return what they stole, and apologize— I said you would. Lark and Raven— both of them together— took a bottle of nail polish from Millikin's Variety, can you believe it? And I try so hard!"

Millie burst into tears, the second hysterical woman he'd had to deal with in the space of a few hours.

"I suppose next you're going to tell me Moose robbed a bank."

"I've been trying to handle it myself, but you're his father, and you should know. Brenden broke his ankle, and Ellen says it's because Moose dared him to jump off their garage roof!"

HI

Cal had heard about Carson Kolanski, and he'd made a vow to steer clear of her and her unwieldy collection of animals. His friendly competitor in Putneyville, Charlie Winslow, had told him at a district vet meeting that Ms. Kolanski was gorgeous, rich beyond belief, and that she expected anyone in vet practice to drop what he was doing as soon as he was summoned and show up at her private zoo.

Once, a year ago or so, she had phoned Cal's office, and that night he told Millie, "You won't believe who called today, that rich woman who has her own zoo. But it's all the way to hell and gone, and I'll be damned if I'll travel that far."

"I've heard about her," said Millie. "Kolanski— her father owned Kolasa Beer! She had her picture in the Denver Post last year, in color. She's not only rich, she's very beautiful. What's the name of the place, Eden Rocks?"

"I bet she's as spoiled as they come," said Cal.

It was when Ms. Kolanski called a second time, saying one of her llamas was very sick, and it was only because he'd had that horrendous day, with the shitting setter and the Chihuahua's hysterical owner, that he agreed to go. He needed to get out of town, if only for an afternoon. And he'd

never seen a private zoo; he was curious. He told Gracie, his middle-aged office nurse, to tell Ms. Kolanski he could come the next day at four. Since he was in surgery at the moment, he relayed through Gracie a temporary treatment, and told her to get driving directions.

Gracie said Kolanski sounded disappointed, almost angry, like she'd wanted him there now.

The place was eight miles outside Bertha's Falls, and thirty miles from Putneyville. He planned to charge her plenty for traveling time and gas. And since she was rich, he meant to charge the maximum price for his services. Millie wanted to add onto the house, and maybe Ms. Kolanski's zoo could fund a building project of their own.

The next day the weather was glorious, one of those clear Colorado days that made you itch to be outdoors. He headed southwest across miles of prairie, with scattered fields given over to pastureland; clover and millet, rye and sorghum. Along the roadway, goatgrass and thistle thrived. Cal felt his spirits lift right away. Fifteen minutes into his journey, he saw two prairie chickens running across a field of sagebrush and sumac; evidently they'd ventured away from their flock, and a few minutes later he caught a glimpse of two hawks circling in the sapphire sky. The sun started to set, and late afternoon light began to shed a golden cast on the landscape. It was good to get out on the open road, to feel responsibilities ease off his shoulders, even for a little while. Sometimes it seemed too much; the weight of his job, and the financial burden for the family resting on his shoulders alone.

Bert was a carefree bachelor, so why was everyone so anxious to get him married off? In Putneyville they wouldn't leave you alone until you were settled down.

Settled down and shackled.

That had been unfortunate last Saturday, when Bert dropped in at the wrong time. Tensions in the household were running high. He and Millie had just had a 'discussion' about the twins' constant arguments with Phoebe. Phoebe wanted her own room, and Lark and Raven said their big sister was bossy and hogged their space. It was also the day Coop had put a huge dent in the front-end of the Buick.

When Bert dropped in, Cal was glad to be distracted from all these domestic crises. He took him into the kitchen and poured coffee.

"Cream? Sugar? I've forgotten how you take it, Bro."

Bert wanted to ask him about the Threadgills, a new young couple in town who were hiring him for a big job; planting hundreds of flowering shrubs, building a pergola, gazebo, rock walls, and a koi pond.

"They want pay me when the work is finished, what do you think?"

Cal told him no way. "Tell them to get a loan from the bank. And they should pay at least a third down in advance!"

The brothers were sitting in companionable silence when Millie burst in. Her face was red, her hair disheveled, and she was clenching and unclenching her fists.

"Cal, how could you!"

"What'd I do now?" he asked, visibly flinching.

"You said you would put all the garbage cans out, and you forgot! The truck came while I was next door, and now they're gone, and we have piles of garbage!"

"Guess I'll be goin'. See you later," said Bert, easing out the back door.

Scenes like that could keep Bert single forever.

As Cal ascended the foothills of the Rockies, the habitat gradually changed. Instead of cottonwood trees, now he drove past stands of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir and aspen. As per Gracie's directions, just past a seedy motel he turned south onto an unpaved road, then traveled a few more miles, climbing steadily. A board fence led him to the wide entrance gate and a painted sign standing among a pile of large boulders.

EDEN ROCKS ZOO &
WILDLIFE REHABILITATION
CENTER

He drove into the compound, a collection of rambling, flat-roofed buildings. He couldn't see any cages; they must in back. He got out, carrying his medical bag, and walked toward what looked like the main building. Off several miles to the west loomed the Rockies, but in this place outcroppings of sandstone rock surrounded him. That must be where she got the name.

But why 'Eden'? Did she consider this some sort of paradise?

A man walked over and stuck out his hand, smiling. "I'm José, I'll take you to Miss Kolanski."

When Cal first saw her, she was under some trees near the small mammal cages, feeding a baby gray fox with a nipple and bottle. Her blond hair had fallen over her face, but when José spoke, she looked up. The slanting afternoon sunlight shining through her hair lent a halo effect, and the direct gaze of her blue eyes, full of gratitude and warmth, totally disarmed him.

"Oh, Dr. Cherrystone, I'm so glad you were willing to come all this way!" she said. "I'll pay you for gas and traveling time—I know you probably cancelled other appointments. José, take this little guy, will you, and put him back with his mama."

She handed the baby fox to José as if it were some magical, unearthly being.

Carson was even lovelier standing up. She wore a man's blue shirt, and a man's shirt had never looked so good. Brief white shorts set off her tanned legs.

"I'll be honest with you," she said, "I've tried a lot of vets. Most of them think I'm a fuzzy-headed dreamer. But this is what I want to do with my life!"

"I didn't cancel anything," he said, making an effort to keep his voice steady. "I start early, around eight, and I'm in surgery for two or three hours most every morning. My clients usually come in from eleven to three. By now, I'm usually winding down."

"Great! Okay, come with me." She started across the compound, and Cal followed. They passed three dozen wire enclosures filled with birds, then crossed over a gravel yard to a collection of larger cages. A couple of ringtails, a tassel-eared squirrel, and a bobcat with one hind leg in a cast were in separate pens.

Cal saw four peacocks and three or four dogs wandering around the place. No cats, probably because of the birds.

"My God!" said Cal. "You really like a challenge, don't you? How many people does it take to tend all these animals?"

"We certainly have a variety. We have eagles, hawks, kestrels, a bobcat, possums, raccoons, wolves, reptiles—we had a lynx last year who was one of the most beautiful animals I ever saw! Those pointed tufted ears, and the hugest paws! But we couldn't keep him alive. Gunshot wound." Carson gazed off in the distance, her face pensive. She still seemed to be mourning the dead animal. "It's not all wildlife reclamation, although I have all the permits, and we get inspected regularly. The reward is the joy of seeing an animal released back into the wild after it's recovered. Sometimes we have to have animals euthanized if we know they aren't going to make it, and I hate that. We all do!"

She looked up at him as they walked. "I have six helpers now, and I work along with them; sometimes we work twelve hours a day. There's always some chore or other, a sick animal or an expectant female, new babies born all the time. Last week we welcomed a baby black-footed ferret. I'll show him

to you, but first come see Sparky, our poor old llama. As I told your nurse, I'm really worried. We have a big enclosure for the llamas, but Sparky's inside the shed over there." She cautioned, "It wouldn't be fair not to warn you, llamas can be hard to handle. He'll probably kick and spit a lot."

The animal was standing. His abdomen was enormously bloated, and he had an emaciated look. There was smelly, runny-looking diarrhea all over the straw under his feet. Cal donned his gloves, but performing even a rudimentary exam was difficult. Sparky wasn't too sick to kick out and try to butt him with his head. The spitting was probably the worst thing, and he got Cal in the eye at least once. Cal found himself darting and weaving, but finally managed to get a fecal sample.

Breathing hard, he said, "Miss Kolanski, I don't know much about llamas, but it may be coccidiosis. I'll take this to the lab at home; then I'll probably call in a prescription. We have to find out if he's got a parasite, a virus, or if he's eaten something. Stay in touch with me by phone, so I can note his progress. Keep the floor as clean as you can, and keep plenty of water where he can get it." He washed his hands and arms with a disinfectant in the hospital area, relieved that the experience was over. He looked around. Prominently displayed on the wall were several framed federal and state permits to rehabilitate wildlife, as well as a license for caring for and holding migratory birds.

After he'd cleaned up, Carson said, "I want to show you the ferrets." She led him forty yards or so back to where they'd been earlier. They entered a large wire pen enclosing a tiny wooden house. "The mother's secured in there, she could bite me into tiny pieces," said Carson. "Wait, I'll get him out. We have to keep her sedated so we can tend to her baby." Donning a pair of leather gauntlets hanging from the fence, she reached in, her movements meticulously careful, and brought out a tiny, elongated creature with pale fur and a black mask over his eyes. His pointed nose sniffed and nuzzled at Carson, and he squealed all the while, sounding exactly like a baby kitten.

"They're so rare, one of our most endangered species, as you must know," she said. "A hunter brought the mother to me; she'd been caught in a trap, but was alive, and pregnant. This guy's littermate died." Cal started to stroke his fur, but the baby snapped suddenly at his arm. "Watch out for his teeth, they're just coming in! Isn't he amazing?"

"Who helped with the delivery?" Cal asked, pulling his arm back and deliberately gazing off through the wire cage at the surrounding landscape.

When he looked directly at Carson holding the baby animal, his heart started doing a crazy flip-flop in his chest.

“Me, and José and Pedro. We’ve gotten pretty good at obstetrics.” You had to admire a woman like that.

Driving home fifteen minutes later, he said it aloud.

You have to admire a woman like that.

But maybe what he was feeling was a few shades more than admiration. That first moment, when she looked up and the light shimmered all around her head, he had felt as if on the brink of some amazing, earthshaking discovery.

He had told her he would check on Sparky in person the following Friday. During the next few days he found himself wildly anticipating the next visit, and he felt guilty as hell about it.

HI

Every four years, two County Commissioners were elected to represent the two individual districts within Sandoval County. Besides these men (there had never been a woman in the office), were six elected County Supervisors. Recently two women had run for this office, and were now serving. The board of eight served as the administrative and policy-setting authority of Sandoval County, providing services outlined in the Constitution of the State of Colorado.

The Board was responsible for all administrative duties of running the county, and these included: Public Works programs (roads, waste water, solid waste, recycling, engineering, hydraulics); Personnel and Human Services; Health Department; Department of Community Development (planning, building, zoning, Fire Marshall); Central Communication Systems, Emergency Management; and Parks and Recreation. Other officials were Assessor, Auditor-Controller, Clerk-Recorder, Sheriff, Coroner, and many other department heads. All these departments were located in the county seat, Clearwater, population 45,000.

By the Fourth of July, Russ Broussard’s push for re-election in November as county commissioner was beginning to go into high gear. Sarge Livingston was the other Commissioner, a man in his late seventies who should have retired years ago but who was re-elected without fail every four years. He was rumored to be about to retire now due to ill health, and had mounted no campaign.

Sarge was a popular figure in this part of the state, a Korean war hero who, though wounded himself, had saved three injured soldiers, dragging them to safety in the mud and muck of the Pusan Perimeter. The high school gym was named after him, and back in the late fifties a bridge outside of town had been designated the Sarge Livingston Bridge.

It was remarked upon by everyone who knew them how Russ and Sarge were so different— Russ with his hearty glad-handing and unrestrained oratory; Sarge quiet, taciturn, with his best days behind him. He hadn’t come up with a new idea in two decades. “But what a great old guy!” people said. The two worked well together. They’d been a good team, getting those bonds passed for a new cardiac wing at the county hospital three years ago.

Russ’s only opponent in the fall election was a young agricultural agent named Lloyd Leydenhall, a Democrat. It was obvious that he had little in the way of a political operation, and even less in funding. He’d been urged to run by the opposition party, and people said whoever had picked Lloyd hadn’t put much thought into it. Occasionally his name surfaced in a newspaper story about soil conservation, and he sometimes did radio interviews about farm price supports, but everyone thought he was no match for Russ.

HI

Russell Broussard was a big man, six-feet-four, and even though Charlene had heard that his plentiful mass of hair was a toupee, she thought he was handsome.

Her daughters probably wouldn’t think so. He had a double chin, a too ruddy complexion, and was overweight by fifty or sixty pounds. Charlene, so intolerant of other people’s weaknesses— specifically, members of her own family, and having kept her own life untainted and respectable for lo these many years, found herself more and more in sexual thrall to Russell Broussard.

She had to drive forty minutes every day to get to his office in Clearwater, but she knew it would be worth it when she arrived. Commissioner Broussard always gave her the feeling that she had terrific potential, and that she had only begun to scale the heights of power in political circles. Plus she always got zinged with this little shiver, this hormonal charge, when she was around him. She was sure that a benevolent fate had intervened when she first saw his flyer at the League of Women Voters office asking for volunteers for his political campaign in Sandoval County.

Something made her write down the phone number, and she'd ended up working on Russ's re-election campaign. Politics in Putneyville were too small-time, she realized now; her talents were destined for a larger stage. Today she would only be stuffing envelopes and handling the phone, and there would be all these other people there— but still. She could feel her stomach tightening, goose bumps pricking her arms, as she parked her car.

Would he touch her today? The first time she showed up at his office, he'd taken her arm to show her the back room where his campaign literature was stored, and had brushed against her breast, not accidentally, she was sure.

When she had first walked into Russ's combination Commissioner's office and campaign center, she looked around in an eager state of anticipation. Not only was she glad to be away from her humdrum life in Putneyville, she was anxious to learn something new and exciting.

The outer room, where his campaign volunteers worked, was quite large, and opened onto the street. There were four desks outfitted with computers, with bulletin boards rimming two sides of the room. These were covered with graphs and charts related to the campaign.

"Hi there!" a young woman said.

Idabel Flemson, Mr. Broussard's secretary, greeted Charlene and escorted her to her own office, which was situated just outside Russ's. Idabel had a desk with a computer, also a small, slightly used-looking loveseat, which she said was used for people waiting to see Russ. She said she took care of Russ's County Commissioner business, scheduling business meetings, county finances, almost everything to do with Russ's elected position.

"My, that's a big job!" said Charlene.

Idabel nodded. "It's hard when people come in to gripe about one thing or another. You'd be surprised how much complaining goes on, right here in this room." She laughed. "Would you like to see Mr. Broussard's office? He isn't here."

Russ's office, in marked contrast to Idabel's area and to the campaign center, was a haven of comfort and luxury. There was a large walnut desk, a dark brown ultra-suede sofa with matching chair, and a heavy glass and iron coffee table. Sparsely filled bookshelves, mostly holding hunting and fishing guides and sports anthologies, lined one wall, and on the floor was wall-to-wall carpeting in a deep mushroom color. Off this room was a bathroom, and behind that an anteroom holding campaign posters, flyers and office supplies. Idabel reached up and pulled down a large box filled with manila envelopes.

"Mr. Broussard wondered if you'd mind telling the other volunteers how to stuff all o' these. He said you'd just be super-duper at it!"

HI

Russ had left town, but a week later Charlene finally saw him at the office, and he asked if she could drop by his house on the Fourth of July to get more campaign posters. He wrote down his home address and told her to come between one and three. They were having a barbecue, he said, but he would take time out to help her load up the car— just come around to the back of the house.

Charlene knew that as soon as he found out, Russ would appreciate all the tasks she performed. She had already organized a team of twelve volunteers in Putneyville, and each of these women had promised to find three more. Sometimes Charlene felt that the other volunteers resented the precision of her organizational abilities, the infinite degree of devotion she brought to the job. One day she was assigning distribution areas for campaign literature, stating in firm tones that at least an hour a day should be spent in service to Commissioner Broussard, when the hippie volunteer Toni Kupperman, who always wore her hair hanging down— looked like she was from California still living in the sixties— said, "You mean like we're handing out pamphlets for Jesus?"

All the others laughed, and it made Charlene feel like a fool. She was prepared to plan her life around Russ's political aims, and why didn't the others feel the same? Why did they even volunteer, if they didn't want to work? Never mind that it was occasionally demeaning, like the time she had to run around the street after a windstorm and pick up all the stray leaflets that had blown around, there must've been a thousand. And the time she had to clean the toilets when the janitor was out sick. Idabel said she wouldn't do it, that wasn't what she was hired for. So Charlene got down on her hands and knees and cleaned the two smelly bathrooms. She didn't know if anyone appreciated it; she didn't think Russ even knew. She was sure that Toni Kupperman would never collect leaflets off the street or clean toilets! And Charlene had heard from Idabel that Toni was a paid volunteer, which was infuriating.

Occasionally Charlene worried whether Russ would want her around when his re-election was over. She wondered if, after the election, she would ever see him again . . .

On the Fourth of July she pulled onto Russ's street, parking in the sweeping driveway behind a few other cars, and got out, smoothing her dress. The day was hot and sticky, and she raised her arms to check if she was wet under there. Just a little. She could feel sweat running down from under her bra, too, and her cotton dress felt like it was stuck between her legs.

She glanced up at pink-flowering crape myrtle trees framed against the sky, certain she would remember this day for a long time, and as she walked around the two-story white colonial, she thought how fitting its architecture was for this ruler of the people. It was stately rather than grandiose, reminding her of Monticello, where she'd visited once. Russ had Jefferson's strong chin and steel-grey eyes, too. Or was that George Washington? Their portraits blurred together in her brain.

She rounded the corner of the house.

"Charlene!" Russ boomed out. "Come over here and meet the family!"

Twenty or so people were collected on the broad lawn.

Russ was wearing a barbecue apron printed with THE BIG CHEESE in florid lettering. His face was flushed, and he waved a glass full of dark-colored liquid at Charlene and said to the woman standing next to him, "Wanda, this is my best helper! You never saw anybody take charge of things the way this little lady has!"

Charlene loved being called a little lady. Her family thought of her and Freddy as giants.

"So glad to meet you, Chahlene!" said Wanda, her arms holding a stack of plates. Wanda had light-brown hair floating around her face and large pale blue eyes. Russ towered over her.

"Wouldja like some bahbecue? I'll fill you up a plate, hon, just say the word!"

"No, thanks, I need to get home," said Charlene. "Our family is having a get-together too."

"Okay, let's go get those posters," said Russ.

On their way into the house he pointed to a lawn swing, where a young red-haired woman sat with her arm around a little boy.

"Over there's my niece Caitlin. Ever'body thinks she oughta be in the movies!"

The boy looked to be of African American extraction, although he wasn't very dark, more what Granny Esmey called mulatto. His hair was short and definitely Negroid-looking. Making loud zoom-zoom noises, he energetically waved a toy plane back and forth in the air.

Except for the family introductions, Russ was all business. He didn't touch her elbow or any other part of her, but when they reached his office and he handed her the stack of posters, he looked deep into her eyes and said, "Sure do thank you, Charlene. I'm gonna have to do you a real big favor one o' these days!"

HI

On a July morning, Caitlin Broussard and Trish Sanders arrived for work at the Clearwater Dress Shoppe. Margo Maddox, the shop manager, had asked them to come in early, because despite it being mid-summer, a new shipment of fall clothes had arrived.

Margo was a divorcée. She was small and slender, had short, dyed red hair, and wore round horn-rims, which gave her the appearance of a fashionable owl. Trish, a young woman with ample hips and bosom, was an excellent salesperson; customers loved her warmth. Her soft heart made her an easy touch with men, and Caitlin knew she had been through at least three failed love affairs.

The shop opened at ten, and they worked for two hours unpacking and touching up the new clothes with a steam iron in the back room, which was crowded with clothes racks.

"I think I've met someone special," Trish announced.

"What a surprise, what a bolt from the blue!" cracked Margo. "I think it was last week you said you met someone kinda special, but he turned out to be a real dud, as I recall."

"You mean that guy who cleaned the rugs at my apartment house? I never said I was interested in him!"

"Sure sounded like it. You said he was cute, with dimples and curly hair, and he made your motor purr."

"It turned out he was an Amway salesman on the side," said Trish.

Caitlin turned off the iron and hung a cashmere jacket on a hanger. "Trish and I have got to keep our eyes open for anything that comes along!"

"'Anything' is the operative word. And you don't have your eyes open, is what I'm saying. You're both still babes in the woods, and neither of you are spring chickens anymore!"

"Make up your mind!" said Caitlin. "Are we babes in the woods, or old worn-out harpies?"

Marianne Gage

Trish held a wool challis dress under her chin. "Would I look good in this? I love it! Oh gawd, it's a size twelve! You need to buy more sixteens, Margo! No, this guy was different. He told me at the car repair place my brakes needed re-lining, then he kinda hinted he wasn't married. So I said fix the brakes, and I started to leave, and he said, "Do you want me to deliver the car in person?"

"Omigod, you're hopeless! Caitlin, would you try on that three-piece suit real quick? I wanta see if it would work for Lorinda Appleby."

"Okay. I think Aunt Wanda and Serena Southworth are coming in this morning; I told Aunt Wanda we were getting in a lot of new stuff."

Margo rolled her eyes. "Why can't your aunt ever come in without that other spouting gasbag? Oops! I mean, it's better when we have only one customer at a time!"

Trish and Caitlin laughed. Serena Southworth's abrasive personality was well-known to all, and Wanda Broussard could be demanding and impatient. When something didn't look good on her, she tended to take it out on the salesperson.

The two women arrived around ten-thirty, and by the time they left two hours later, Trish and Caitlin were exhausted. But Margo was delighted; Caitlin told her they'd sold \$600 worth of merchandise.

"Bravo, girls! What'd they take? Did one of 'em buy that leather coat?"

"Yes, Wanda fell in love with it," said Caitlin. "And Mrs. Southworth took the purple sequin job. Oh, here comes someone. You go to lunch, Trish, I'll take care of it."

"Hi there!" she said, as Charlene Cherrystone Byers walked in.

Charlene blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. "Hi. I'm one of your uncle's volunteers, Miss Broussard— Charlene Byers. I saw you at the barbecue."

"Oh yes, I remember. Call me Caitlin! How can I help you?"

Mrs. Byers said she needed a belt, and Caitlin found one for her in brown calfskin. While she wrapped it, Charlene studied her. The girl was wearing a sleeveless grey sheath, and her hair was piled on top of her head in fluffy russet clouds. There was no ring on her left hand. The girl looked much too elegant for down-to-earth Bert, but there was something about her which was vulnerable and sweet.

"I hate to be pushy," said Charlene, "but I'd like to ask you something sort of personal."

