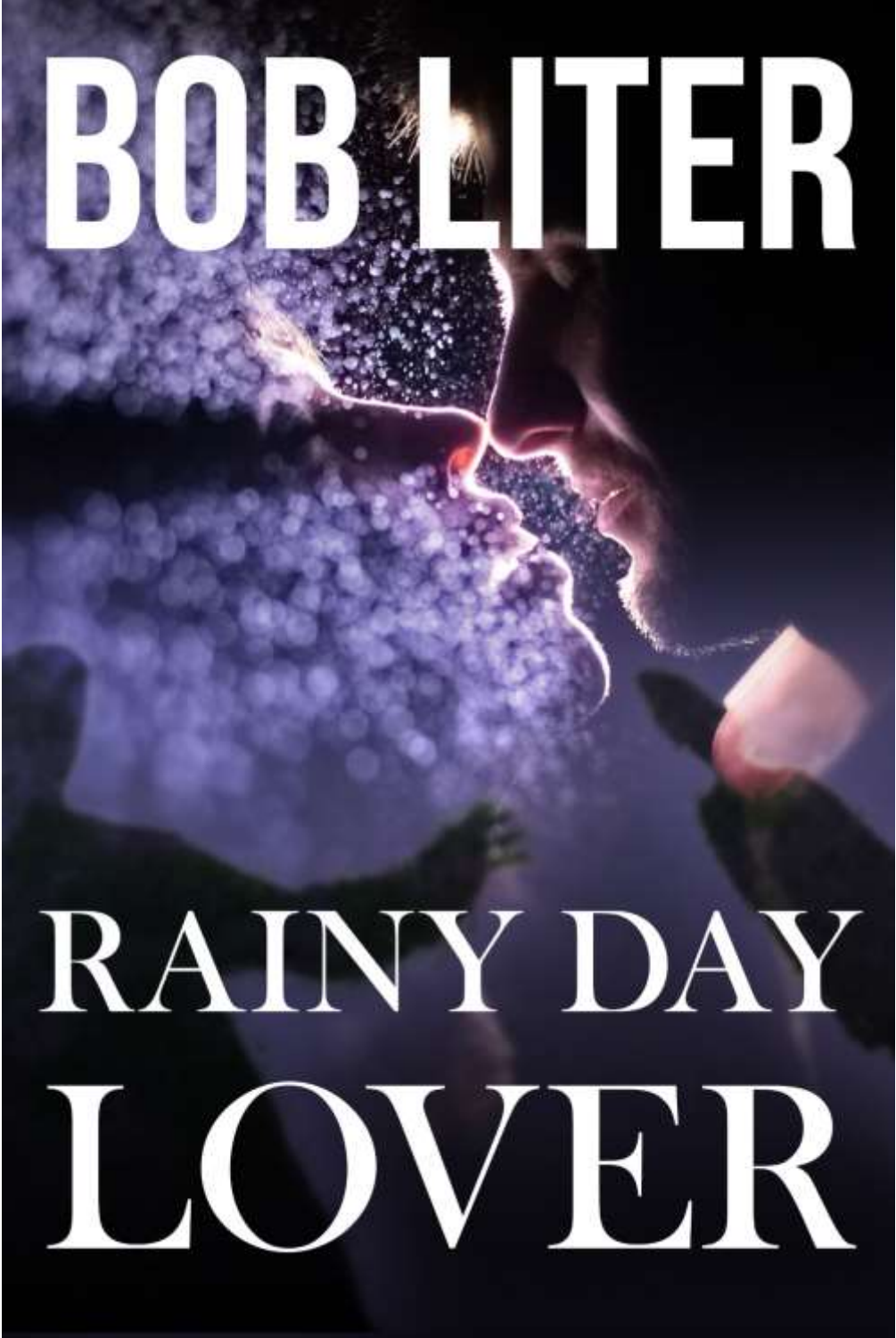


A romantic couple is shown in profile, about to kiss. The scene is set against a dark background with soft, out-of-focus purple and blue bokeh lights. A single red rose is held in the foreground, slightly to the right. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

BOB LITER

**RAINY DAY
LOVER**

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Content

CHAPTER ONE.....	3
CHAPTER TWO	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER THREE.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER FOUR.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER FIVE	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER SIX.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER EIGHT	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER NINE.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CHAPTER TEN	Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER ONE

A tear slid down Melissa Morgan's cheek. She swiped it away as she sat in her Escort and glared at the Lovin' Arms Apartments office and clubhouse. Light from an April sun, rising behind her, highlighted peeling, faded paint. What had she gotten herself into? She rubbed her right shoulder. It still ached from when Carleton Chase twisted her arm and insisted she give in to his sexual demands.

She sagged into the car seat, picked up the Lovin' Arms brochure she had been given in Chicago, and looked at the shiny new clubhouse pictured there. It was a lovely beige with dark brown trim. Brilliant flowers fronted the building in the photo. Nothing but dead weeds in front of the place now.

And the location. The brochure said Naperton, in central Illinois. The complex was five miles outside Naperton and surrounded by farm fields. Were the apartment buildings as run down as the clubhouse? Would she have any protection out here if Carleton Chase found her? She shuddered. If he did, she was afraid she would kill him this time if he didn't kill her first. She drove around the clubhouse. Dead leaves and other debris filled a swimming pool behind it. Screeching tires jerked her attention back to the road. A red convertible raced toward her. She braced herself and squeezed her eyes shut as she pushed frantically on the brake pedal. Tires stopped squealing. Silence. She opened her eyes.

The convertible had stopped inches from the front of her car. She took a deep breath, sighed, folded her arms over the steering wheel, and lowered her head. A moment later, a voice that seemed to rumble up from the earth asked, "Are you all right?"

She looked up into a man's dark, concerned eyes and his tanned face. Heavy black eyebrows arched below untamed black hair.

According to the nearby sign, why was this fool driving so fast when the posted speed limit was twenty-five miles an hour.

"What, who, I mean ... you were speeding. You nearly killed me," Melissa managed.

"You weren't looking where you were going. You were in my lane. Are you okay?"

The man's broad shoulders and chest muscles threatened to break the confines of a white T-shirt. Bulging biceps strained the sleeves. He towered over her. She felt dizzy. She wished the car door was open so she could escape.

"Want to get out of the car? See if anything is broken?"

He opened the door, held her under the left arm, and lifted her off the seat. He smelled of soap as if he'd just taken a shower. She imagined water cascading off his massive chest, down past his flat stomach, and... She shook her head, looked up, and said, "I seem to be all right. Let go of me."

"No problem," he said. "I've got to get going then if you're okay. Sorry I was driving so fast. I was in a hurry and didn't expect anyone around this early in the morning. If you're here to rent an apartment, you'll have to come back about nine. Our new manager is supposed to show up today. She should be here by then."

He backed the convertible and drove slowly around her. A colossal leather golf bag filled with clubs sat on the back seat. Its white leather matched the upholstery. The convertible roared out of sight as soon as it reached the country road. Melissa backed her car to in front of the clubhouse and sat there for a moment before digging into her purse to get the keys she had been given. Her image was reflected in the glass of the front door of the clubhouse as she approached. My God, she thought. What must he think of me, seeing me in baggy blue jeans and this faded, oversized jacket? I look like a stuffed monkey.

"Does it make any difference," she said aloud. "You came here to escape from a monster. You're twenty-three years old. Has your career come to this? You haven't been here long enough to see your office or apartment, and already you worry about how you look. Better you should always look this way."

She glanced about and was relieved to see no one saw her talk to herself.

Jud Wheeling saw a speed-limit sign beside the road and slowed the convertible. One more speeding ticket, he thought, and they'll suspend my license. I wouldn't need to speed if I wasn't always pressed for time. It was his father's fault, talking him into taking a job as a maintenance man in a run-down apartment complex.

His dad had been so reasonable. He said, "You're thirty years old, Jud. Your mother and I worry about you. Sure, there's enough money, it's not that. But don't play your life away. Take the challenge of this job, see if you can cope with real-life problems as well as you do with games."

Jud had hated to admit it, even to himself, but his father was right. All the excitement of playing golf, going to sporting events, and having affairs with the brittle women of his crowd had dwindled. And the job would get him away from Addy. He didn't doubt that she would hunt him down, but at least he would be away from her for a while. Maybe, eventually, she would understand that it was over.

He didn't take this job for where it would lead, possibly making him as narrow as his father, only thinking of profits, never having time to enjoy anything. And on the other hand, he didn't want to go back to college and study engineering again.

His dad had said, "It's time to settle down. You like to build things, repair things. Remember all the building sets you had when you were a kid? You could work at this run-down property, Lovin' Arms. See if you can turn it back into a moneymaker. As a maintenance man, you could learn the business from the ground up. You say you hate offices. This way, you could be outside a lot, at least in the summer."

His mother nodded, her brown, doe eyes pleading. He couldn't refuse. They had spent so much effort trying to make him happy.

I'm cheating, Jud thought as he pulled into the parking lot of Naperton's Bellwood Country Club. Playing golf won't get that place fixed up. At least I've been doing something, though, fixing up one apartment at a time. He looked at his watch. It was five minutes past six, and he was late for his tee time. He didn't care. He didn't feel like playing golf.

He was anxious to get back to Lovin' Arms. Why? Because of the woman in that little car he almost hit? She was a dumpy little thing, like a medicine ball in those ridiculously baggy clothes. He wondered what she looked like underneath. Her eyes. What color were they? Hey, hold on. Lose interest in golf and start on women again. No way. You promised to give this job a try. Get back there and do something. Clean out that pool, cover it, have it ready for the season-opening.

"Damn, I'll have to go to the library to learn how to take care of it. There ought to be enough money to hire someone, but no, I have to do these things myself. I promised.

"And now I'm talking to myself," Jud added. The sound of his voice evaporated into the air, swishing past as he drove back to the apartments. He noted the Escort parked in front of the clubhouse and thought of stopping. She wasn't in the car. He wondered where she was. He hoped she would rent an apartment. Then he couldn't help it if he had to do some work around her place. But what was this? Since when was he interested in dumpy women? He tried to remember the color of her eyes. Blue, maybe.

Melissa closed the door of the clubhouse and leaned against it. Couches, chairs, and coffee tables were scattered about a large lobby. Newspapers and magazines were piled on one of the coffee tables. Dust balls were scattered about on the dark linoleum floor. Near the middle of the room, the linoleum curled where it had been torn.

Across the room, sliding glass doors opened onto a patio that led to the swimming pool. Several dead flies cluttered the floor near the door. Melissa imagined the clubhouse when the furniture was new, and the floor was clean and polished. She checked the sliding doors, found they were locked, walked back to the middle of the room, sighed, took off her jacket, and sat on a couch. So much needed to be done to make the place presentable. The walls needed to be washed, the furniture needed to be cleaned or replaced. And what could she do about the flooring?

To the left was the office, her office. She struggled to her feet from the inviting softness of the couch, hitched up her blue jeans, and opened the office door. She flipped the wall light switch and was pleasantly surprised. The unworn light blue carpet was clean, uncluttered. A large desk sat near a picture window that looked out on the parking spaces in front of the building. The wooden desktop glistened. In the middle sat a paperweight the shape of a woman's ample breast. Filing cabinets to the side appeared to be relatively new and, on a table in one corner was a coffee pot, a can of coffee, spoons, sugar, and cups. In the corner near the window, an Underwood typewriter sat on a rolling stand.

She reluctantly touched the paperweight, felt its heaviness, and placed it in the empty top desk drawer. She checked the cups for cleanliness and made coffee. Maybe hot coffee would warm her spirits. Fresh air would help. The office window would open as she turned a side handle. The two portions of the window folded out against the wall, revealing a ripped screen that someone had tried to repair with string.

Melissa took a cup into the lobby when the coffee was made, pulled a chair and end table near the sliding doors, and sat down. She took a couple of sips of coffee, leaned back in the chair, and remembered.

She had been such a fool. Being hired as office manager of Chase Insurance Co. had been a better job than she had hoped for when she graduated from Illinois State. And then Carleton Chase, son of the owner, came into her life. She'd only been there two months when he started on her. At first, he always appeared in the cafeteria when she took a break. Then he asked her for a date.

She'd already heard office gossip about what a philanderer he was. There had been a newspaper picture of him posted in the women's restroom. His long, slender face had been decorated with a pointed black beard and pointed ears. She thought of that, but what could she do? Besides, he *was* charming. Maybe his beady eyes were a little too close together, but...

Her thoughts faded. She slept.

Scraping noises forced her out of a dream in which she snuggled against the bare chest of a massive, naked man. Carleton Chase appeared, racing toward her. The naked man dissolved, and she was under Carleton as he smothered her with clammy hands. A scream came from her throat. She rubbed her eyes and struggled up from her sprawled position. Where was she? Through the glass doors, the head and bare shoulders of a man were visible. Could she still be dreaming? The man was in a swimming pool. The scraping noise reached her again. Leaves were tossed out of the pool. The pool! She was at that horrible apartment complex she had agreed to manage. Who was the man? Could this place afford to hire a pool man? They had warned her the business was nearly bankrupted, that they weren't going to put any more money into it except for what she could generate by getting all the apartments rented.

Near-new blue jeans hugged this man's long legs and rounded bottom like a second skin as he emerged from the pool. He was barefooted. He raked the leaves and muck he had heaved from the pool into a large pile and moved out of view. A battered pickup truck was backed to near the mound. Melissa pulled the chair back from the sliding doors but not quick enough to prevent the driver from seeing her. He came closer. Was this the same man who had raced away earlier in the expensive convertible, apparently to play golf? And now, here he was cleaning leaves and muck out of the pool.

She discarded an urge to run, went to the sliding doors, thumbed through the keys she had been given, and finally found one that fit. She slid the doors open and demanded, "Who are you?"

"My name is Jud, Jud Wheeling. Who are you?"

"I'm Melissa Morgan. I'm the new property manager. Why are you cleaning the pool? Has someone hired you?"

"May I come in?"

Melissa stepped back, watched back muscles ripple as he turned and closed the door. She said, "I don't know who hired you to clean that pool, and I haven't had a chance to look at the books yet, but I doubt that we can afford you. The maintenance man will have to do that. And, judging from what little I've seen so far, there are plenty of other things that need to be done."

"I smell coffee. May I have a cup?"

Melissa hesitated. "Yes, I guess, but I just got here, and I have to get started. I don't even know where to start. Look at this place."

"This isn't so bad," Jud Wheeling said as he went into her office. He returned, picked up the coffee table while still holding a cup of coffee in his other hand, and placed the table near the doors leading to the pool. After setting his coffee down, he lifted two chairs and put them on either side of the table.

"Get your coffee and sit down," he instructed her.

Melissa resisted an urge to stamp her foot. Who did this guy think he was, telling her what to do? Just like Carleton. No, not like Carleton. He ignored her, but he didn't make her skin crawl. She'd just told him she had work to do. And how did he know where the coffee was?

"You didn't answer me. Who hired you to clean the pool and, and how did you know where the coffee was? Is your sense of smell that strong?"

"A lot of questions. Let's see. First, I was hired by the same corporation that hired you. I'm the maintenance man. My senses are pretty strong, especially right now, but I knew where the coffee was."

Anger rose in Melissa. How dare this man sit having coffee when there was so much to be done. Maintenance man, indeed.

"Now, before you fly off the handle, let me tell you I've only been here a week. I'm overwhelmed by what needs to be done. I've looked at the books to see how much money is available, but I hate business figures, don't want to understand them, hate 'em."

Melissa was surprised at his intensity.

"Maintenance men don't have to worry themselves about the books anyway," Melissa said. "That's going to be my job."

"Yes, I know, that's why you're here. How could I fix this place up, if it's possible, and have to worry about the confounded books?"

Melissa was glad there was a table between them. The man seemed so intense. She was afraid if they touched, however innocently, she would melt. How was that possible? After her horrifying experience with Carleton, she never expected to have such thoughts again.

"Of course, it's possible to fix this place up," she said. "Why wouldn't it be possible?"

"Didn't they tell you we can only do what we can pay for from the income of the property? There are nine buildings, fifty-four apartments. The buildings are in bad shape. Nearly half the units are empty, and there hasn't been a manager here for a month. This is an impossible situation."

"Maybe," Melissa said. "It sounds like just what I need to get my mind off ... well, anyway, I'm going to try. I think we should start with the clubhouse. How can I rent the empty apartments if the first thing customers see is this run-down building?"

"Actually," Jud said, "making the clubhouse presentable will be the easy part. All it needs is the walls washed, the screens fixed, and a general clean-up. I'll fix that linoleum and the screens. There are showers and restrooms and a small kitchen where food can be prepared.

"I understand they used to hold dances here on weekends for the residents, like neighborhood parties. But then the manager and the head maintenance man ran off and got married. They were gone for three days. One of the brains in Chicago found

out and fired them. There hasn't been a good manager here for two years, a resident told me."

Jud stood.

"I'll put the cups away and finish cleaning the pool," he said. He reached across to get Melissa's empty cup. Her eyes locked on his as their hands touched. He could flip me across this table right into his arms, Melissa thought.

After Jud was gone, Melissa shuffled through the files. There were purchase records, rent records, lots of records she would have to study. None of them appeared to be up to date.

She jumped when the telephone rang. She picked up the receiver, hesitated, and said, "Lovin' Arms Apartments."

"I want to talk to Jud Wheeling," a woman's voice demanded.

"He's not here; how may I help you?"

"You may help me by connecting me with Jud. That's how you may help me."

"I can't do that. Jud just drove away in a truck. He's hauling debris."

"He's what? That fool. You tell him Addy called. Tell him he can't get away from me that easy. I'm coming down there. I want to rent an apartment. There is one available, isn't there?"

"Yes, I'm sure there is."

"And don't get any ideas about latching onto Mister Wonderful. He's mine whether he knows it or not."

She's not as dumpy as I thought, Jud realized as he hurried into the office, washed the cups, and deposited them on the table. She could be a problem. He was determined to show his father he could turn this place into a moneymaker, but he couldn't do that if he became involved with another woman. He had to stick to business. He remembered his mother's pleading eyes. He'd do it for her too, work his butt off and get this confounded place in shape and then leave. He'd get a job on

some construction crew in South America, get away from Addy. The new manager's eyes were green. She blushed when their hands touched. Addy, none of the others, would have blushed.

Melissa studied the apartment complex ledgers. They went back twenty years. The latest revenue ledger indicated twenty-eight of the fifty-four units were empty. Seven of those occupied were behind on the rent, one three months. She'd have to do something about that right away. The rent was due on all the apartments in a week. She'd notify the occupants she was there and would be expecting the rent. She made notes.

Melissa jumped when Jud said, "I forgot to get you into an apartment. Do you want to move in now or wait? Sorry if I startled you."

Did he always creep around? Another Carleton? She had to stop thinking like that. Carleton was scum. That didn't mean every man was.

"I guess I'll wait. I'm just starting to get into these books. Do you know the occupants of one apartment are three months behind on the rent?"

She looked at him and returned her eyes to the ledger. What was the matter with her? Was she blushing? Was she going to do it every time she looked at this handsome man? Handsome? Yes, he was definitely that, but differently than other men she had known. There was something primitive about this guy, something down to earth. Something frightening?

"Sorry I bothered you," he said. He was standing in front of the desk, looking down at Melissa. She tried to direct her eyes away, but they were drawn to his as if he willed it.

"I'll move in after I close the office at four o'clock. Just give me the keys."

"Sure, but I'd like to help. The apartment is on the second floor of Building Five. I've been working on it. It's a mess. I'll have to clean it up before you move in. I live in one apartment until I get it cleaned as much as possible and then move to another. That way, I can work on the damned things in the evening instead of sitting around watching television. I thought maybe you could do the same thing if you want to."

"Me, work on cleaning the apartments?"

"Only if you want to. I'm trying to get this place in shape as soon as possible. I'll clean up your apartment as much as I can and see you about four then."

"Oh, by the way, someone named Addy called. She said she was going to rent an apartment. I assured her we had one available."

The outdoor smell of him lingered after he stomped out. Was he angry at her, or did it have something to do with this Addy? Melissa spent another hour examining the books, stretched, poured the cold coffee from the cup on her desk back into the pot, and went out to the lobby. She peeked at the pool from beside the sliding doors. The truck and Jud were gone. She walked outside, saw the pool was spotless, and wondered why he had bothered. It would be dirty again before it was opened, probably in a couple of weeks. Later, after cleaning the restrooms, she discovered Jud had covered the pool with faded blue canvas.

She cleaned the kitchen, and by the time she finished, she was sweating like a ditch digger in August. She didn't mind. The clubhouse looked presentable, good in fact. Jud would be impressed.

She collapsed onto a couch and thought how the place would look with the furniture pushed aside and people dancing, laughing, having a good time. Maybe Jud would ask her to dance. Perhaps, after everyone left, they would continue dancing until they collapsed on a couch, the one she was sitting on, and he would take her in his arms and...

"For heaven's sake, Melissa, what in the world is wrong with you?" she said aloud. "You're sitting here sweating, your hands and face smeared with dirt, and you think about ... you've been thinking about this guy all day. Stop it; you must stop it. Won't you ever learn? And, besides, he probably belongs to this Addy. She certainly thinks he does."

"Well, at least I haven't been thinking about Carleton Chase and how that bastard forced me to... I won't think about it. I won't. Damn, I'm talking to myself again."

It was almost four o'clock, and Jud hadn't finished cleaning the apartment for this new manager. The place still looked like hell on a bad day. He gathered up the paint cans and brushes and set them outside in the hall. He returned to the bedroom, the paint wet on the walls and the paint-spattered cover still over the bed. Tonight she

would be sleeping on that bed, he thought. He folded the cover and sat on the mattress, holding it.

He smelled something besides paint. Whatever it was, it wasn't right. He started sweeping the bedroom floor. Once he'd done that, he would have to get a vacuum cleaner from the second-floor tools closet and go over the whole place. Why hadn't he started earlier? He sat again on the bed, holding the folded paint cover. Addy was coming. How was he going to deal with that?

"What are you doing?" Melissa asked. She sounded out of breath. He turned. She stood with her hands on her hips, a large suitcase on the floor beside her.

With the cover pressed to his chest like a pillow, he stood.

"I was just resting," he stammered.

"I hope that mattress is more comfortable than it looks," she said.

"Oh, it's fine, at least it was for me," Jud said.

"Have you been sleeping in here? Is that what you do all day?"

"Now, just a minute. I slept in here – at night – after I worked on this apartment. As a matter of fact, I'm not quite finished. Still, some things to do in the bathroom."

"Why are you having me move in here then?" Melissa demanded.

Jud could feel the anger rise from his gut. Who the hell did this woman think she was? He'd been working his butt off getting the apartment as clean as he could, and she...

"I've been here a week, and I've cleaned and painted three apartments. I even cleaned the carpets as much as I could. The apartments were a complete disaster like the rest of the unoccupied ones. I've got twenty-five to go. You have three ready to rent. I'll have the next one ready in a day or two, and then I'll move on to another one. Or does her majesty want a permanent suite readied for her?"

She ignored him as her nose twitched.

"Something smells bad in here; can't you smell it?"

"Yes, I opened the windows, but it didn't do any good. I'll try to find it. Maybe your nose is better than mine. You find it."

Melissa thought, I don't care how tired and discouraged I am; I'm not going to cry in front of this arrogant maintenance man. Who does he think he is? I'm the manager. What kind of a place is this? She sagged to the bed, patted the mattress. It felt firm enough.

The mattress sagged when he sat down, throwing her shoulder against his. They each moved away from the other, like moths near a flame, but avoiding it.

"I didn't mean ... I was just testing the mattress. But you might as well sit. I'm sorry I'm so cranky. I'm tired and worried. Will we ever be able to put this place back on its feet? Is it even worth the effort?"

"Maybe not to you, but it's worth it to me. I'm out to prove something. Let's see if we can find the source of that stink. It's strong enough; we ought to be able to find it. Is it coming from the bathroom?"

Melissa cautiously opened the cabinet below the bathroom sink, afraid of what she might find. The shelves were empty and clean. Jud pulled the shower curtain back and looked in the tub.

"I had to replace the shower curtain," he said.

Melissa didn't reply, but she was far from pleased with the curtain's gaudy floral pattern. It didn't belong in this bathroom, probably not in any bathroom.

"I can't stay here alone all night with that smell." Would he think she wanted him to stay? "We've got to find it."

He held his arm above the bathroom door, inviting her to leave first. She could smell him; he was so close. He had been sweating, too. Her tired body suddenly was rejuvenated.

"I'll try the kitchen. Why don't you go ahead and unpack if you want to," Jud said.

He left the bedroom. Melissa was putting panties away in a drawer when he returned. Heat rushed to her face when she realized he was looking at them. She

stuffed them into the drawer and closed it. The warm, syrupy feeling left her face and flowed throughout the rest of her body. She resisted a rock-hard urge to collapse on her back on the bed.

"I found it," he said. "It was a bunch of cleaning rags, wet and rotting, under the sink in the kitchen. I sprayed some Lysol in there for now. Tomorrow I'll scrub it out, finish with this apartment while you're at work. In the meantime, maybe you can figure out how we can rent the apartments as we clean them. We need more income if we're going to make a go of it."

She did collapse on the bed, but after Jud left. He'd said, "We." She caressed the idea of working with him day after day, of ... hey, wait a minute, remember Carleton. You don't want to repeat that experience.