

CRAWL BEFORE YOU WALK

You wouldn't think a woman who spoke in a voice that was almost a monotone, rarely varied her expression, and appeared to have no particularly strong emotions about anything would have very many friends. And such a thought would be correct. In fact, as far as Cassie Baird could tell, that girl had no friends at all. Becky was unusual: anyone could see that after talking to her for just a few moments. Cassie and one of the cooks at the restaurant where they all worked called poor Becky 'Wednesday' as a sort of jibe: she didn't seem to object. Cassie liked to think Becky was *her* friend, but what the other thought of her, she could only guess. Cassie certainly didn't understand Becky very well. They worked together waitressing, and had developed a sort of mutual respect borne of competence on both their parts. But they had never socialized—as near as Cassie could tell, Becky *didn't* socialize. But the incident that convinced Cassie that there was something *truly* out of the ordinary about Becky happened just ten days before a certain mini-tribe of college age man-children almost drove Cassie to a nervous breakdown. Becky then demonstrated that there was, indeed, something more than professional respect between them. Not long after that, they were both caught up in bigger concerns.

It was a typically busy dinner rush, and for what must have been time number one million, Cassie Baird cursed the sadist who had invented the ladies' high heel—and shortly thereafter, she wondered why the hell she ever chose them for a working day. *Wouldn't be so bad if I had a boyfriend to rub my feet for me*, she thought—not for the first time. But that answered her question, at least in part. While she didn't date customers or co-workers, Cassie *did* often get compliments, and heels *were* good at shaping up her legs and backside. Probably she'd decided she needed a little extra confidence this morning. Preoccupied as she still was, she *had* overheard a few of the guys commenting when her back was turned. Still, she was sure to regret the heels tonight. If the date she'd lined up didn't pan out, maybe she could rope her brother into a foot-rub. Then the evening might not be a total loss. Yeah, watching Josh rub her feet with a bad creature feature on the TV while her big tom-cat Clive warmed her lap: if the date went badly, that would be a pretty decent consolation prize.

Cassie's orders weren't quite ready yet, and she pulled off her shoes as she ducked into the kitchen in her stocking feet. It was a risky proposition, but she needed to

get out of those shoes, if only for a minute or two. Besides, Sharleen rarely spilled. Cassie found a spot to the right of the door where she was out of the way and could watch the middle-aged lady who did most of the cooking. "Hidin' from your customers again, Cass?" the frumpy, but good-humored older woman called as she saw Cassie duck inside. "Ain't gonna make many tips that way."

"Yeah, well, they don't give me a headache this way, either," Cassie answered with a grin, crossing her arms to stay out of the way of anybody who might cruise through.

Sharleen chortled at that. "If **all** they give you is a headache, that's lucky. But you know all about wringin' tips out of 'em, honey! That's cash out of their pocket and into yours. Might as well take 'em for what they're worth." Sharleen had been married more than once (Cassie had never managed to find out the exact number), and was renowned for her cheerful cynicism about life in general and men in particular. She reminded Cassie of Brenda, the aunt who had shaped much of her outlook on the dynamic between men and women. Cassie snarked a bit more with Sharleen about the virtues and drawbacks of having a man in one's life—as cynical as she was about them, Cassie preferred to hope that somewhere out there, there was one she might be able to get along with, who perhaps wouldn't look or act like a creep. If she was *really* lucky, she'd met him already: in just a few hours, she had a date—her first in three months. That, she guessed, was the real reason she'd decided on heels this morning.

Two days ago, in line at the grocery store, a man in a plum-colored polo with a carefully-careless looking hairstyle had struck up a conversation with her. The man's easygoing confidence had prompted a positive reaction from her—and the fact that he was nice to look at in her favorite color didn't hurt. He had introduced himself as Terry, and after he'd gotten a laugh or two out of her, he'd asked for a date, and her number. Although she'd deferred on the second, Cassie had agreed to a late dinner after her shift, and she was now wondering whether that had been a mistake. As she pondered the question and chatted with Sharleen, another of the waitresses popped her head through the kitchen door.

It was Becky: short and boyishly slim, with shoulder-length black hair and pale blue eyes. Becky appeared to have perhaps three facial expressions. Cassie had, on occasion, tried to flirt with the older dark-haired girl, but Becky appeared to have

no sex drive. If she did have one, she never let it out at work. Becky looked around the kitchen and her eyes fixed quickly on Cassie. "Your tables are going to be ready for drink refills in about five. Two of them are gonna need their appetizers cleared away," she said in her typical monotone before turning away. She didn't wait for a 'thank-you': she never did. Cassie sighed deeply and pulled her heels on again. She gave Sharleen a wave and left the kitchen—then let out a quiet, wordless exclamation of surprise as she found Becky still hanging around just outside the door.

"Is something going on?" Cassie asked hesitantly—Becky was usually all-business and rarely wasted time standing around, especially in the middle of a rush.

"I was about to ask you that. Everything okay? Seem a little off your game." Becky's counter (typically for her) was delivered with precious little in the way of expression or inflection, but the fact that she asked at all spoke of concern. Cassie was at a loss to guess where Becky had picked up the impression, but it wasn't wrong: she did seem curiously intuitive at times. Just two weeks ago, she'd guessed—without any verbal or body language cues that Cassie had been able to pick up on—that Sharleen had suffered some personal loss, and had enlisted Cassie's help to make sure the cook was alright. After repeated conversations, Cassie had pried the truth out of Sharleen: one of her ex-husbands that she remained on reasonably good terms with had passed. Her grief was mild, as such things went, but Sharleen still felt the loss.

Cassie had taken Becky's stand-offishness as a personal challenge, and had been trying to warm her up almost since they'd started working together. Her success had been limited, but the moments when Becky displayed an emotion, even in a muted or oblique way, served her well as gratification. More importantly, she had no wish to push away what appeared to be an attempt to connect. Cassie smiled and shook her head at Becky: "Nothing's wrong, I'm just a little keyed-up about this date I have tonight."

Becky's expression didn't change, but she answered with a curt nod of satisfaction. "Good. Glad you didn't pick up a stalker or something. Good luck tonight." Cassie had been about to chat a little more on the subject, but Becky was off to attend her tables—so Cassie left to deal with hers.

Becky was a conundrum to Cassie: she never seemed to want to get too close or reveal too much about herself, but she *had* warmed up over the last two years, if only incrementally. Maybe in another ten years, she'd actually smile regularly outside of work. *Yeah, and if I'm lucky, one of these dates might pan out by then.* Although she was mostly happy with herself, Cassie *was* often lonely, and she thought a lot about how nice it would be to fall asleep next to a man she cared about. Sometimes she wondered if her standards were unrealistic. But really, they weren't spectacularly high. When she considered the various points she was looking for, she never found one she was willing to budge on. *Somewhere out there, there's got to be a decent guy I can hold a conversation with.*

Cassie was used to getting stared at, but for some reason, it was getting on her nerves today—she'd been plagued with a bunch of posers and alpha-douches who refused to believe a woman could turn them down in good faith, let alone because she actually found their behavior irritating. Their tips were all pitiful, too (thankfully, the restaurant paid well enough). The **one** decent tip came from the single table that didn't irritate the piss out of her, and **almost** made her regret her 'no dating customers' rule. Almost. The table was a couple of shy younger guys—maybe not even out of high school, but somehow they'd heard about the sexy, flirty waitress here. One of them seemed especially taken with her: much as he'd tried, he couldn't keep his eyes from her bust when she bent over the table to lay out their meals, and she had felt a pinch on her backside as she'd turned away afterward. Ordinarily, that was grounds for, at the very least, a talking-to from the manager, but Cassie let it slide because they had otherwise been a breath of fresh air during her headache inducing day.

When she dropped off their check, she saw something behind the kid's eyes, but she didn't have time to wait for him to get his nerve up to make a pass at her that she was just going to have to turn down anyway. When she picked the check back up, he seemed to bite the bullet. His voice was quiet and the words came out in a rush: "Hey, I wanted to say, I'm really sorry about earlier, my friend dared me to 'cause I think you're cute. I'd really like to take you out for coffee or dinner or something sometime." Hardly the smoothest line she'd ever heard, but his admiration was honest.

"I don't date customers, sweetheart, sorry," was the only answer she could give. *Also, you look about four years too young for me,* she added silently.

At the end of the day, she headed to the break room to gather her things, especially to check her messages. She noticed a voicemail—*that* was unusual. She listened right away, and as the recorded words in the familiar voice of her twin brother played back through the earpiece, her heart began to pound a frantic, runaway drumbeat.

“Ah, Cass, it’s me. It’s, um, about eight, and... Jeez, I don’t know how to say this. Clive got out. I don’t know what got into him, but I was just going out onto the back porch and he ran out the door. Just bolted like his ass was on fire. I’m gonna look around the neighborhood, maybe I can find him. Call me soon as you get this.”

Cassie swallowed hard. She felt lightheaded, unreal. Tears were already welling in her eyes and Cassie blinked them away with an act of will. Things to do, no time to get weepy. She dialed Josh’s cell and got the situation report. He’d made several rounds through the neighborhood, but Clive was still at large. Cassie took a few deep breaths and thought through the problem. “Okay. Okay... I’m coming home. I need you to make up some posters. Use the desktop in my room: you should be able to find a recent picture where he’s well-lit, then use the word processor to build up a poster we can paste around the neighborhood. Um...” *Shit. How many do I need?* “Print up... Uh, about twenty at a time in color until the printer starts to run out of ink. I’ll be home in five.” She ended the call and turned with a start.

Becky was there, standing in the breakroom door, her wide-eyed gaze focused directly on Cassie, one hand gripping the door frame. Her expression was carefully controlled, as always, but she was obviously perturbed. “Guessing you’re not going on that date,” she said quietly.

Cassie shook her head, stuffing her phone back in her purse. “My cat got out, I’ve got to go find him.” She allowed herself a sheepish smile. “He’s been with me longer than a lot of boyfriends. Since sophomore year of high school.” She felt a tear roll down her cheek at that memory—the shame and trauma of what most people would probably term petty high school bullshit. And it was, but at the time, it felt like her whole world was ending. Her mother had managed to talk her through it—one of the few things Cassie was genuinely grateful to her mother for—but she’d still been in a funk for weeks. Then her older brother had told her:

his girlfriend's cat had a litter of kittens. Ever since then, Clive had been with her. Another tear. Dammit. She wiped the errant droplet away and shouldered her purse. "He's a little bastard sometimes, but I need to find him."

"I'll come with you. I can help."

Cassie was aware that Becky liked her as much as she seemed to like anybody, but this was an unexpected offer. She didn't have time to consider it: besides, she could use all the help she could get. Cassie nodded an assent, and they were out the door.

"Are you going to reschedule your date?" Becky asked in the car as Cassie sped home.

Cassie shook her head. "Can't. No phone numbers. Didn't want him to bug me if it went bad," she said with a roll of her eyes at her own paranoia. But it had saved her a lot of grief over the years. Still, it would have been nice to give Terry another chance. He deserved better than to think he'd been stood up for no reason. Probably. Maybe they'd be able to find Clive fast and she could still make it to the restaurant only a little late. Cassie sighed: she couldn't count on that.

They spoke little more on the drive: Cassie was busy concentrating on the cars around and in front of her, jockeying for position, trying to get home without wasting a single second. And Becky wasn't inclined toward idle chatter. Moreover, it looked like she was bracing herself in case of a wrong turn or a collision. She made no comment, though. That was good: Cassie would only have to ignore it.

When Cassie pulled the car up in front of her house, she brought it roughly to a stop and climbed out right away, making straight for the front door without waiting for Becky. She heard her friend—if that was the right word—ask where Clive had escaped from, and Cassie paused just long enough to indicate the back of the house before hopping up the front steps and ducking inside.

The living room was a mess—a consequence of her brother's visit, though she couldn't really turn Josh down. He was her twin, after all, and while Cassie had never gotten along with her mother, she'd never been the 'rebellious child'. That role was something Josh had fallen into. Their mother had tried to push him toward

intellectual pursuits like... Well, pretty much all the other kids. Dan, the oldest, could do anything he pleased, little Ken (though he was an adult now, just like all of them) was the brain out of the four of them. And then there were the twins: Cassie and Josh. They were all active children growing up, and most of them had maintained a healthy attachment to sports (at least until high school was over with), but when you got down to it, they were all readers and thinkers and dreamers to various degrees: except for Josh. Sports—and other games—were really all he cared about.

The thing was, Josh didn't have a whole lot in the way of motivation. Whereas most high schoolers would aim to get picked up by a good college, and from there try to be drafted by a professional team, Josh just wanted to play. He could barely motivate himself to hold down a job. All the other Baird kids had moved away from home long ago: Dan had a job in Spokane, Ken was out in Seattle working for a data-management company. Cassie, of course, had moved to Graycliff when Uncle Charlie had left her his house. But Josh had just stayed home, even though he had every reason to want to leave.

His visit had been mostly an attempt to get away from their parents, and Cassie was keenly aware that he might try to make the visit a permanent one. She had no objection to a social call—indeed, she felt she couldn't refuse her twin brother much of anything—but she had devoted a lot of time to thinking about how she might resolve his various issues. Or, failing that, at least convince him to go back home and be her parents' problem instead of hers.

But that was the last thing on her mind right now. She climbed the steps to the second floor in a rush and burst into her bedroom, where Josh sat at her computer. But the printer wasn't running, and he didn't appear to be doing anything. "Where's the first run?" she asked as she approached, and Josh turned to look at her, a wide-eyed expression of befuddlement on his face.

Joshua Baird, like all her brothers, was on the tall side, and red-headed, though Cassie seemed to have gotten the recessive gene there: most of them took after their mother, with auburn locks that could look brown or reddish depending on the light. Only Cassie had ended up with their father's coppery ginger. She glanced at the screen and saw what looked like a half-completed word processor document. Josh had managed to figure out how to change the font size and had typed 'LOST

CAT' in large caps, and then had at least put her contact info down, though there was practically no formatting: all the text was the same size and so wouldn't fit on a single page. Then the big problem: there was no picture.

Josh gestured vaguely at the monitor. "I couldn't figure out how to put a picture on there, did you want to print one off and paste it on afterward?" Cassie clenched her fists and made an exasperated noise, jerking a thumb to the side. *Get out of the chair.* Josh did, and he kept talking at her as she seized the seat and scooted up to the keyboard. The frustrating thing was, she *knew* he could do this. It wasn't his favorite thing, but Josh wasn't stupid: none of them were. He just didn't have any motivation to learn about things that didn't interest him. Cassie silenced her brother's chatter with a curt announcement that she needed to concentrate. She was probably a little more rude than she needed to be, but the worst he was going to do was pout.

She spent a precious few minutes finding a solid picture to import and cleaning up the rest of the poster, comforting herself with the knowledge that Clive had probably found a hiding spot, and if he had, he wasn't likely to leave it for a delay of a few minutes. She went over the poster one more time, then began printing. When she stood, Cassie made it clear to Josh *exactly* what he needed to do to print more of the posters, and he nodded, abashed. Fortunately, it was a simple task.

With a sigh, she headed back downstairs. It sounded like Becky had meant to head to the back yard, so that was where Cassie went as well, grabbing a can of wet food and a couple of Clive's favorite toys as bait on the way. She found her dark-haired friend standing by a lilac bush near the tall wooden fence. "This is where he went through," Becky said as she saw Cassie approaching. "Probably a broken slat or a hole under the fence in there somewhere."

Cassie fixed her friend with a suspicious look. "How do you know he went through here?" She hadn't even gotten that in the story from Josh.

Becky shrugged. "Should we start looking?" Since all the explanation she seemed to be willing to give was none, and there was no time to argue about it, Cassie agreed. They rounded the block, and while Cassie was looking for spots where Clive might have run through, Becky didn't appear to be looking at *anything*. When Cassie made a suggestion, she simply replied "Not here," and kept walking.

Suddenly, she stopped, swept her head slowly from one side to the other, and changed direction, crossing the street. Cassie followed, baffled.

They would walk for a while, pause, change direction, cut through an alley, all without a word. Repeatedly, Cassie asked how Becky knew which way to go, and got no answer. If she was lucky, Becky might shoot back “I know he went this way,” but never did she explain *how* she knew. But Cassie had no better ideas, so she followed. What else could she do? If nothing else, at least Josh was back home, printing up her posters. Hopefully.

Finally, they rounded a single block a couple times and Becky ducked down the alleyway, keenly looking for whatever clue it was she was following. Something was odd about her breathing, but Cassie was too distracted and upset to put her finger on it. As they walked at a quick pace down the alley, Becky slowed near a split-level house with a large porch protruding from the back door, the support struts shrouded behind a trellis. Becky stared at the house for a minute or so, then pointed. “He’s under there.”

Cassie scowled at her. “Are you a pet psychic or something?” she snarked, and Becky pointed again.

“Look. There’s a hole there—that’s probably where he went through. And you can just see him crouching over there, near the corner.”

Cassie looked, leaning against the chain-link fence. There was a roundish shadow, and she could make out a pattern of stripes. Her heart beat a little faster. Without waiting another moment, she opened the gate and stepped into the stranger’s backyard. She vaguely hoped there was no dog around, but if there was, Clive probably wouldn’t have chosen this for a hiding spot. She crouched near the hole and dangled a catnip mouse inside. “Clive? C’mere, baby, come on!” He had straightened into a sitting posture, but moved no closer to her. “Come on, sweetie, come get the mousie!” No luck. Time for the big guns. She pulled out the can of wet cat food and opened the top. *That* did the trick. He edged toward her hesitantly, extending his neck to sniff at what was in the can—but he recognized what it was, and the sound of it opening, and that did just what Cassie had hoped. It took several minutes, and quite a bit more coaxing, but finally, she got him out from under the porch, pulling the big tom-cat into her arms and holding the can for

him as he began to eat. Cassie laughed as she found tears running down her cheeks. Still holding both Clive and the can of food she stood and looked about. Inside the sliding glass door, there stood an older gentleman in khakis and flannel: he wore a warm smile and gave her a wave. Cassie nodded, and she made a note to remember the address and come back later. No time to chat now: she scurried out of the yard, careful to close the gate behind her. She exchanged an awkward half-wave with the man as she got back on her way, and looked around to find Becky, but without success. Clive squirmed a little as she cast about, calling for her friend, but there was no answer.

Cassie sighed, and began to get herself and Clive home as quickly as she could manage. Although he wasn't exactly comfortable, Clive seemed to be pacified by the food, and struggled only a little as she walked home with him in her arms. She breathed a sigh of relief once the house was in sight, and again once she had him safely inside. "If you hadn't worried me so bad, you'd be in for a real scolding, mister," she said with a shake of her head, leaving him on the floor of the kitchen to finish the can of wet food.

After he finished eating—which didn't take long, most of the work had been done on the walk home—Clive got back down to his usual business of watching her geckos. Cassie climbed the steps and let Josh know he could quit printing. It was a delicate job soothing his ego, but she managed it: they had always cut each other a little more slack than the rest of the family. Once she knew Josh wasn't going to spend the rest of the night pouting, she asked after Becky.

"Who?"

"My friend, she came home with me to help look for Clive. I guess she never came inside when we first got here. I wouldn't have found him without her, though. She vanished after she showed me where he was, I thought she'd headed back here." Josh shrugged and claimed to know nothing. "I was really hoping to thank her," Cassie muttered as she headed back downstairs.

The time, when she checked it, was much too late to head to the restaurant she'd agreed to meet Terry at: nearly an hour after their agreed-upon meeting time. That was a bit of a shame. She ducked into the kitchen and started fixing up a quick dinner. Josh probably hadn't eaten, either. As she heated up the stove and began to

pull out some vegetables and meat for a quick stew, she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye—it was in the back yard.

She stepped over to the window and peered out: it wasn't just any motion, it was the lilac bush. Was something coming through from the other side of the fence? If that was the case, it looked like it would have to be a big something. Cautiously, she stepped out the back door, looking for something to use as a weapon to scare away whatever the intruder was. It was coming out from around the bush pretty quick, and Cassie couldn't even find a respectable stick to scare it with.

Fortunately, it was no intruder. Cassie sighed: it had been *Becky* back there, of all things. "Think I found a rock to wedge in there," she said, casual as you please. Her work uniform was dirty and ripped, her hair full of sticks and leaves, but Becky herself seemed completely unperturbed.

Cassie shook her head and brushed back her hair. "Ahh, thanks. For closing the gap, and for finding Clive. It really means a lot to me."

Becky looked away, an expression of vague discomfort on her face, and folded her arms. When she met Cassie's eyes again, it was with an expression that approached smiling without actually reaching it: a certain softening around her eyes and mouth. "You're welcome," she answered in a quiet, almost shy, voice. After a deep breath, she seemed to come back to herself, her voice returning to her usual standard monotone. "I should really get going," she said.

Cassie asked—*begged*—her to stay for dinner, it was the least she could offer in thanks, but Becky insisted on heading out. "Don't worry about giving me a ride, I use public transportation pretty often, so it's no problem."

With nothing else she could do, Cassie threw her arms around Becky and felt the brunette tense up as she gave an affectionate squeeze of gratitude. "Well, thanks again," Cassie said, pulling away quickly and giving Becky a smile. "I couldn't have done it without you. I raised him from a kitten, so I really would have missed him if something happened. Ah, if you need anything, let me know, I'd be happy to do whatever I can to pay you back."

Becky folded her arms, her eyes sliding from one side to the other in a nervous little dance. At Cassie's offer, she looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook her

head. “No, nothing I can think of,” she answered in a quiet, timid voice. “I should really get going.” But before she did, she made Cassie’s night one last time: she *smiled*—for real, this time. It was fleeting, gone almost as soon as Cassie recognized what was happening, but it was a true-blue smile: it even reached her eyes. Without another word, she was gone, leaving Cassie to ponder the whole curious evening. Becky was a pretty girl, Cassie thought, but when she smiled, the brunette got a whole order of magnitude more attractive. As she ducked back into the house to get dinner back on track, Cassie reflected that she would like to see her co-worker—her *friend*—smile more frequently. But Becky wasn’t the sort to respond to a simple verbal prompt. So, she’d just have to do things that would put her in a smiling mood. That seemed like it would be an uphill battle, but worth it. Especially now that she knew it could be done.

The next time Cassie worked with her, she spent a lot of time tending to Becky’s tables when her own section slowed: refilling drinks, bringing bread, clearing plates—the minor stuff that could be a drain on your time and attention if you had other things to deal with. Becky wasn’t lax, but her section did end up busier, and Cassie was glad to lend a hand: the jobs would have gotten done, but they got done a little quicker with Cassie helping out.

“It’s so sweet of you to help out that dark-haired girl,” an older lady at one of the tables said. “Seems like she’s pretty busy tonight.”

“She’s my friend,” Cassie answered brightly. “Just be sure you give her an extra-nice tip, okay? She’s working hard tonight.”

She should have expected it, but she was startled when Becky stopped her outside the break room when she headed back a little over halfway through her shift.

“What’s going on?” Becky asked. “You’re not angling for part of my tips, are you?” The faint tone of suspicious confusion said she knew that wasn’t the case.

Cassie shook her head and told Becky the same thing she’d said to the old matron: “It’s just the kind of thing friends do. Is that okay? I don’t want to show you up.”

Becky’s expression slipped back to her usual neutral, though her brows furrowed slightly as she processed the question. “It’s okay.” After another moment’s

thought, she added. “And thanks for the help. I guess. Everybody seems to appreciate getting their stuff faster.”

Cassie grinned and patted her arm. “No problem: thank me by letting me take you to a movie or something sometime, okay? Girls’ night out.”

Becky’s mouth twisted in an adorably peculiar expression of surprise. “Um. I’ll have to think about it.” She ducked back into the dining room to deal with her still-busy section.

Baby steps, Cassie thought with a smile. As she slipped into the break room, she vowed not to let up until she’d taught Becky how to relax and have a good time. *Well, it might take a while, but what else do I have to do?* And pursuing a friendship was more healthy than a lot of other hobbies, both emotionally and physically. *Who knows, maybe we can even be wing-ladies for each other some day—wouldn’t **that** be fun?* She giggled at the thought and started warming up her lunch with a bright feeling of optimism. Her bed was still empty, and she felt bad about having to stand a guy up, but finding Clive and putting a crack in Becky’s heart of ice had brightened her mood to no end.

A week later, things *really* began to change.