

TORNADO BAIT:
A Mystery Featuring Tina Anderson

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Tornado Bait

By Amy Eastlake

Chapter 1

"Tina, Babe? I need you." An intensively male voice.

My insides got a little wobbly at the sound of it.

I hid the ice cream bowl behind my back and opened my door.

The trailer door veered at a crazy angle, threatening to come off in my hand. Lucky me. Since I'd taken the job as trailer park manager, a day hadn't gone by without something breaking.

My high school classmates had called me clumsy Tina. And those were my friends. My enemies called me Tornado Bait Tina, or Trailer Trash Tina when they were in a really uncharitable mood. I was living up to their expectations.

It figured that too-cute Billy Love would drop in when I was porking out on ice cream, didn't have a lick of makeup on, and my hair hadn't seen a comb in better than twenty-four hours.

"What is it, Billy?"

He scowled at me. When he'd moved in, he'd asked me to

call him William. He seemed more like a Billy to me.

Besides, I liked bugging him.

"My trailer stinks," he told me.

"For two hundred a month, you're lucky it doesn't get up and walk away."

He looked at me as if he had no idea what I was talking about. Then his pretty face cleared. "I don't mean it's a dump. It smells bad."

I pulled the ice cream from behind my back and dug out one last spoonful. Too often, stink means plumbing. Pipes kill my appetite.

I swallowed the ice cream, savoring the high-fat taste. I wondered if Billy would taste like that, cool and rich. So much for the fantasy life of a late twenties trailer park manager.

"Let me get my plunger."

I got the tool, then followed him across the trailer park, trying to keep my eyes off his butt. He was about my age, but that was the only thing we had in common. He drove a BMW, of all things. It didn't fit the trailer park image, not like my Geo Storm, which described me to a T. It ran, got pretty decent mileage, and on a good day could be described as vaguely cute in a low-class way.

"I noticed it when I got home from work today," he

explained.

It took me a moment to realize he wasn't talking about his butt. I was the one who always noticed that, ever since he'd moved in. "If you don't take out your trash," I reminded him, "it's bound to smell."

Billy shrugged. "You'd know, I'm sure."

I took a deep breath, then let it out. A man is entitled to defend himself, I guess. My housekeeping skills didn't come close to Home and Garden standards, but I did take out the trash twice a week. "Trust me, I've learned a lot about what stinks in the past six months."

Two things struck me when Billy unlocked his door. First, he'd fixed up his trailer special. None of those rent-to-own dinette suites or anything. Furniture, rugs, even pictures on the wall, all were first-class. Second, he hadn't been kidding about the odor. Unfortunately, it didn't come from his trash.

"I think I'm going to be sick," he announced.

"You do, you clean it up," I said.

I kicked off my sandals to enjoy the sensation of Billy's two-inch-thick antique Persian carpets and headed toward his bathroom with my plunger.

Damned if Billy hadn't ripped out the toilet and replaced it with one of those black low-rise things. I'd priced one

like it at five thousand dollars once, back when I'd tried the rich thing. Billy was making less and less sense. Anyone who had enough money to fix up a trailer like this had enough money to live somewhere else.

"Do you see what it is?"

Billy leaned over my shoulder, his breath tickling my ear.

"It isn't a toilet, it's Count Dracula's coffin," I told him. "That's why it smells so bad."

"Very funny."

I hadn't had a bedmate in a couple of months and was due. In the two weeks since Billy had moved in, I'd been fantasizing about him, even to the point of taking him a plate of brownies one afternoon. He hadn't responded with anything more than a polite thank-you.

It was just as well, I told myself. I'd finished my rich phase.

Billy walked around his trailer ostentatiously holding his breath and jerking up windows that had been painted shut back in the fifties.

I admired Billy's testosterone display for a few seconds before approaching the toilet and flipping open the lid.

"Is it backed up?" He shouted at me from his kitchen.

"You didn't bother to look before you came over and

bothered me?"

"I'm saving you from eating too much ice cream. You don't want to lose that figure, do you?"

"I'm finding more of it."

"I like it pretty much the way it is."

Finally, a mild flirtation. His timing could have been better.

I flushed the commode. It ran a little sluggishly but it also belched a truly fetid swamp-smell into the bathroom.

I gagged, fighting down the need to vomit.

"What the hell did you do?"

"Shut up and open some more windows," I told him.

I wasn't sure my plunger was going to do the job, but it was here so I decided to give it a try. First, though, I needed to get some air.

When I emerged from Billy's trailer, half the park's residents stood in a respectful circle around it. About twenty feet seemed to be the safe distance, so I walked out to where Hank Harrison, my next-door neighbor, stood.

"Smells like something went and died," he told me.

"Yeah."

"I got a case of beer. Want to come over to my place after you're done here? I'll hose you down good." Hank was persistent, I had to give him that. If he ever lost fifty

pounds, stopped looking in my window when I showered, and took a few baths himself, I might let him have what he wanted. His odds were just slightly better than winning the Texas lottery.

"I guess not," I told him. "Billy just reminded me I've got to watch my figure."

"I can handle watching it for you, honey," he said.

I'd gotten all the breathing I needed and headed back.

If anything, the inside of Billy's house smelled worse than when I'd left. I braced myself against the stench and pushed myself back into the bathroom. If I wanted to keep this job, I had to respond when paying tenants had problems.

"Have you got it figured out yet, Tina?"

I was glad Billy sounded twerpy when he tried to talk with his fingers pinching his nose shut. He wasn't perfect, just kinda cute and rich. I had to keep reminding myself that "rich" was a bad thing.

"I'm working on it."

"I'd help but--"

"Yeah, yeah, sure."

Billy wasn't going to go any closer to that smell than the open window he guarded.

I took a determined step closer to the toilet, instantly regretting it as my bare foot slammed into a sharp corner of linoleum that edged up between two of Billy's rugs.

That made me mad, and that's when I made my next mistake. I slammed that plunger into Billy's toilet, flushed, and gave it a hard push-pull.

I use a heavy-duty model plunger. One of the ones that are almost cylindrical and generate fantastic pressure. In the trailer park, you don't go for halfway measures.

More stink came up from Billy's toilet, so I gave it another couple of hard yanks.

Something black and filmy got sucked into the toilet bowl. I almost flushed it back down, but then I recognized it. A bra. From the size of it, 42 super D, it had belonged to Linda Trujillo, the woman who'd lived in that trailer before Billy had moved in.

I hoped it was hers, anyway. Imagining Billy wearing something like that would mess up my fantasies, but good.

I grabbed a wire coat hanger from the towel rod, bent it out, then used the hook to grab the thing. "This might be your problem."

"What the hell is that?" Billy stood directly behind me, almost close enough to touch. His curiosity must have been sharper than his nose. Better than his eyes, too.

I tossed it into his bathtub and flushed again.

The water level rose, threatening to overflow the basin. "On the other hand, maybe that isn't your problem."

I pumped at that plunger as hard as I could. What kind of an idiot walks into a bathroom and starts plunging without her shoes on, anyway? I didn't think Billy would be impressed if I got stinky water all over my feet.

"Oh my God." Billy gave a little gasp.

I stopped and looked into the bowl.

It was bloated, gray, and disgusting but it was recognizably a human hand.

I couldn't contain myself. I turned and barfed all over Billy's Gucci slippers.

"My slippers." Billy's priorities were way misplaced.

I pointed the plunger at the hand. "It's--" I bent over and vomited again. It would have been disgusting enough had the hand been attached to something, but seeing it floating there all by itself was worse.

"Whoa, Tina. Are you all right?"

I truly regretted that second bowl of ice cream because I had a feeling I'd be seeing more of it.

"We've got to call the police."

"You mean the sanitation department."

Either the love of my hormones was terminally stupid or he still hadn't recognized what had come out of his toilet.

"I don't think anyone should be in here."

Patrick Adams caught me as I stumbled out the door.

"What's the matter, Tina?"

Patrick, who lived next door to Billy, hadn't paid his rent since I'd taken over management of the park, so I was half-way surprised he knew my name.

I headed toward his place. "Is your phone connected?" I asked urgently, figuring he might not pay phone bills, either.

"Yeah, but I'm downloading something from the Internet."

"You can look at your naked pictures later. This is an emergency." At least, I was pretty sure the cops would consider a dead hand in Billy's toilet pretty urgent. I pushed my way past Patrick's soft body, opened his trailer door, and picked up his phone.

The receiver gave the modem squawks. I didn't have time for protocol. Instead of logging Patrick off properly, I yanked the computer's power cord out of the wall. That got me a dial tone in a hurry.

"I told you I was in the middle of something," Patrick whined.

I'd never liked it when guys whimper. Especially when they're the kind of guy who would rather make it with a computer girl than a real one. "Trust me, you want me out of here before I heave all over your computer."

"Are you sick?"

"No. Green is the new color for makeup this year," I

snapped. "Of course I'm sick."

"So, what did you find in Billy's toilet?" Nothing like something truly morbid to bring out the worst in someone.

"Nothing you'd want to put on the Internet."

"I wouldn't do that."

I waved him off. "I'm on the phone."

After the twentieth ring, I started to wonder whether the 9-1-1 operators had all gone out for donuts with the cops.

"Operator." She sounded just a little out of breath, like she'd been blowing on her nails and hadn't wanted to pick up the phone until they were safely dry. "What's your emergency?"

"I've got a hand in the toilet," I explained. "You'd better get the cops over here."

"Have you tried calling a plumber?"

"It isn't my hand."

"Well then, whose hand is it?" Pretty clearly this operator hadn't been chosen for her smarts.

"Look, lady," I told her. "It's a severed limb. And it looks like it's been rotting for a while."

"Oh." From the moment of silence I guessed I'd finally gotten her attention. "I'll dispatch a unit."

She confirmed the address and made sure she had my name. "Don't go away," she warned me. "The police will want to talk

to you."

Before she got off the phone, I heard sirens.

"You called the cops? From my phone?" Patrick looked a little green himself.

"Don't worry, they aren't interested in you."

He leaned toward me breathing a nauseating mix of Twinkies and cheap coffee. "You know they'll use this as an excuse to shut down this trailer park."

"If you're so paranoid, why don't you just delete your dirty pictures," I suggested. "I'm going out to talk to the cops."

Patrick gave me a look like I'd suggested he slice up the Mona Lisa, but then he scurried to plug back in his precious computer.

I headed outside and waited for the police.

You have to give cops credit--it didn't matter what they were supposed to be doing, I don't think a single cop missed tromping through Billy's house and checking out the hand in the toilet. Poor Billy had enough mud tracked onto his Persian carpets to build a brick wall.

The stink had gotten worse since I'd started plunging and nobody in the park wanted to get too close. Even so, the cops made everyone move back. Patrick was right about one thing, cops don't have much use for people who live in trailer parks.

I sat on Patrick's stoop and watched the excitement, ignoring his efforts to shoo me away.

After about half an hour, a crime scene unit van appeared on the scene along with half a dozen plain clothes detectives. I figured it was just in time because the uniformed cops had finished making a mess of the place and showing off their uniforms. A few of them had lost their studliness barfing in the bushes.

Two of the detectives headed for me and another two marched toward Billy. None of them looked especially friendly. Maybe they thought I was supposed to make popcorn for the show.

"You're the manager?"

I'd been hoping the young cop with the cute butt would come and interview me. Billy got him. I got a bald guy who looked like Mr. Clean from the commercial, and his partner, whose mis-matched socks and turned around tie made him look like the absent-minded professor. The professor had one of those wandering eye things that make you wonder whether he's talking to you or to somebody behind you. Fortunately, Mr. Clean did the talking.

"I'm Tina Andrews," I admitted.

"We're going to have to take apart that trailer's holding tank."

"Who's going to pay for it?"

He shrugged his shoulders and the professor snickered.

"That's why you've got insurance."

I had a sneaky suspicion the management company would find a way to take it out of my hide.

"That appears to be a human hand in Mr. Love's toilet."

"No kidding? Why do you think I called you guys in?"

'Cause I thought you'd enjoy the ambiance?"

"It's odd that you find this so amusing, Ms. Andrews."

I like to think I've got as good a sense of humor as the next guy, but the cop was right. There wasn't anything funny about chunks of corpse turning up in my trailer park and there wasn't anything funny about what this was going to do to my business.

I also didn't like guys pushing me around. Just because I'm five-foot two and one-fifteen soaking wet doesn't mean I wear a kick-me sign.

"Do you guys have a search warrant?"

"Give me a break." Despite the January weather, Mr. Clean wiped his face with a handkerchief that looked like he'd been using it since he'd joined the force. "You called. That Love guy opened the door and invited us in. We don't need a warrant."

"Oh."

"The crime scene folks and the M.E. are going to do their job. If your trailer gets a little messy ..." He gave a shrug.

Like everything in a trailer, holding tanks are designed for assembly and can be removed without too much problem. I pointed that out to Mr. Clean.

He ignored my advice. "Tell me how you happened to find the hand."

Right about then a couple of uniformed cops fired up a chain saw and started in on the tank.

"Hey."

"Lady, you could be in a lot worse trouble than that cheap trailer," Mr. Clean insisted as the professor nodded cheerily looking off into who-knew-where. "A murder on your premises and all."

I told them the story of how Billy noticed the smell, and my expertise with a plunger. It wasn't much of a story and I could tell Mr. Clean wasn't impressed.

I wasn't either, but I wasn't in the mood to make up something to satisfy him. My stomach still hadn't settled down. Worrying about what was going to happen to me when the management company found out one of their units got chopped up by the police didn't help.

"You know, Ms. Andrews--"

Before Mr. Clean could inform me of what I knew, the bottom fell out of the holding tank.

If the smell had been bad before, and it had, this was ten times worse.

At least I didn't see a body in the gelatinous mound that had fallen out.

"Oh, my God, I think this is a foot." A girl-cop with tits the size of watermelons held up something with one rubber-gloved hand.

Clean rushed off. Apparently protecting his treasures won out over harassing me.

My stomach started to gurgle. "You'd better move," I suggested to the professor.

"Don't threaten me."

I heaved on the professor's shiny leather shoes. Apparently this was my day for soiling men's footwear.

The professor hurried off to join his partner.

I guess it says something about humanity. The few residents who'd ignored the whole thing until then started wandered over to check out the assortment of body parts the cops fished out of the muck.

Mr. Clean directed traffic and threatened to arrest anyone who crossed the yellow tape line the uniforms strung.

When I thought my stomach would stay in one place I walked

over toward where the cute detective was still working on Billy. I flashed him a sympathetic smile, which he didn't return.

"Do you know a Ms. Linda Trujillo?" he asked.

I leaned a little closer, wanting to know how they knew about Linda. She'd split before Billy showed up, although I guess he could have heard her name from one of his neighbors. I always thought maybe Patrick had something for her.

"What makes you think it's her?"

The cop smiled. "I never suggested the body was Ms. Trujillo."

"Give me a break. Why else would you be asking about her?"

They should have been asking me those questions, not Billy. I was about to suggest that, but Billy spoke first.

"I met her once."

"Oh?"

That wasn't the answer they'd expected because Detective Cute Butt retreated to confer with an older guy who was standing around directing traffic. I tried to step closer and hear the conference, but one of the uniformed cops stopped me.

The conference didn't take long. Cute-Butt hitched back his jacket showing off his shoulder harness and automatic.

"Perhaps we could continue this conversation down at the

station."

One of the uniforms half-way dragged Billy over to one of the squad cars, patted him down, and then sat him in the back seat. Not a good sign.

I figured it was time to do something. "Yo-hoo, Mr. Clean?"

Someone must have told him about that resemblance before because my detective gave me a dirty look. "You got something to say, lady?"

"What makes you think it's Linda?"

He held up a purse. "We're playing the odds. Most people don't shove their wallets down the chute. Especially when they're full of money.

"Linda didn't have any money," I pointed out. "She hadn't paid her rent in months."

"I guess she found some. Didn't do her much good though, did it?"

"Hey Tina, are you there?"

I took another slug of cheap red wine and stumbled to the door. "What?"

Angie Jefferson looked like she'd just gotten off work. Her fluffy, bleach-blond hair was flattened in back and her shiny blue eye shadow had settled into the creases of her

eyelid. Despite the near-freezing weather, her boobs practically popped out of her little tank top and her shorts were pulled up so high I could see her crease. Angie was a hooker, one of eight who lived in the park, but she was also my best friend.

"I heard about what happened today," she offered. She'd probably just gone to work when the whole mess had started, so now she had to visit me at three in the morning to get the complete scoop. "I saw your light was on, so I figured you might want to talk."

I held the door open and let her in. She smelled like cigarettes, which I'd been trying to quit smoking for the past year, and sex, which I hadn't been trying to quit but had been going without anyway.

"Do you want a drink?" I asked.

She nodded. "I can't believe they carted William away."

I motioned to my couch and filled her a tumbler of wine. "It turns out he knew Linda," I explained. "The police thought that was suspicious, so they asked him to come down to the station."

"That's just a nice way of saying they arrested his ass." Angie took a sip from the glass of wine I'd handed her and made a face. "How can you drink this shit?"

"I got no class."

"Me neither, but I wouldn't drink horse piss."

I didn't tell her not to mix her metaphors. Instead I retrieved her glass and belted down the wine I'd poured her. Waste not, want not. Even though my stomach had calmed down, I wasn't in the mood to start back on the ice cream.

"I was thinking we should bail him out." Angie fished a business card from her huge purse and handed it over to me. "This guy can help. He does all of the hooker cases."

According to the card Angie had handed me, Big Bob Baker not only made bond, he also sold Amway products and had a personal relationship with God.

"Look," I explained, "I'll probably lose my job over this, I'm drunk out of my head, the guy I've had the hots for over the past week had a chopped-up dead body in his goddamned sewage tank, and you want me to go down to the police station and bail him out?"

She shook her head. "It's easier than that. You just go down to Big Bob's office. He'll handle the rest of it."

"So why don't you?"

"I'm not the one who has the hots for William," she reminded me. "This is your chance to do him a favor. Maybe he'll be grateful."

I should never have told her about my secret fantasy. "If you saw his house you'd have the hots for him too," I told

her. "He's got class and he's got money. I think he's gay."

"I've seen his house. He serves better wine than you. And he's not gay." She rolled her green eyes at me in a meaningful way.

I grew very still. "You banged Billy Love? After I told you I lusted after him in my dreams?"

"Business is business. Besides, you told me after I did him."

Curiosity overcame jealousy. "What was he like?"

Angie shook her head. "Serves good wine. Oh, he likes classical music."

"That's not what I meant."

"You know I tune out what happens in bed."

I'd finished Angie's wine, so I went back to my own glass. It was looking a little low so I topped it off.

Billy had gone to bed with Angie. I couldn't believe I'd made him my special brownies and he'd just said thank you when he'd paid to do it with Angie.

"Maybe he likes blondes," I rationalized.

"Maybe he likes whores." She shrugged and one of her tits popped out. She shoved it back in. "Honey, he's a man. If you want him, you can get him."

"I don't want him. What I want is to get his unit put back together and rented out to someone stable. Someone who

won't get killed, won't end up in jail, and who'll pay his rent on time."

Angie gave me the look most people reserve for a dead cat on the side of the road. "William can't pay his rent if he's in jail, can he? We've got to get him out. You're the one to do it."

This wasn't my day.

"I'm not going to bail him out," I told her. "What if he killed Linda? You should have heard what that cop said. Somebody's got to hate women a lot to chop one up like that." I couldn't believe I was quoting Mr. Clean. Still, what did I know about Billy, besides that he had a nice car and a body to die for. I admit to being a little superficial at times, but my life is precious.

"You don't really think he killed Linda. So what have you got to worry about?"

"I could end up like Linda. Nobody even thought to look for her when she split."

"I'd look for ya, but maybe I don't count, huh. What about your ex?"

My wine had disappeared so I stepped into the kitchen, grabbed the wine box and pushed the little plastic nob until my jelly-glass was full to the brim. "If you went to the cops to report me as a missing person, would they listen? No way.

And who said I was ever married?" It was my deepest and darkest secret. I wasn't ashamed of Andy. Hell, I was still in love with him in a sick sort of way. That doesn't mean I wanted everyone to know that I'd hooked one of the richest men in Texas and then let him get away.

Angie smirked at me. "I looked in your closet. You still got your wedding dress."

"Snoop."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Well, anyway, my ex wouldn't notice. We didn't have kids, so there's no connection between us anymore."

Angie shook her head. "Man, you've drank yourself into a real snit, haven't you. You think your heartthrob killed somebody, your ex doesn't care what happens to you, and your best friend is just a whore who's no account anyhow. I sum it up about right?"

"Angie, I'm sorry. I'm just afraid. It brings out the worst in me." I hadn't admitted being afraid to anyone since I'd gained a tattoo and lost my virginity both on the same day. It made me feel sort of empty, like I'd turned myself inside out and exposed everything so people could poke my secrets with a stick.

"If you're afraid, girlfriend, imagine how William feels. Somebody has to help him out."

Chapter 2

I hopped out of the shower, my eyes squinched shut from the blast of cold that had signaled I was out of hot water. One of these days I would buy a full-sized water heater. I reached for a towel and opened my eyes just in time to see Hank stroll past my window. That pervert had done it again.

I snatched the towel around myself. "Hank!" I yelled through the glass. "Why don't you just go down to Northwest Highway, and you can see as much as you want."

He waved as if he heard my voice but couldn't make out the words.

I draped another towel over the window and turned my attention to making myself look like a presentable member of the community.

My hair had gotten a little long, so I dug a pair of scissors out of the box I'd taken when I'd left Andrews Software six months earlier. After hacking bangs out of my face I was tempted to just leave the hunks of light brown hair lying around the bathroom. But I caught a sudden and temporary case of neatness and swept them up instead.

My hairdryer lasted about five seconds before plunging my trailer into darkness.

That did it. I threw the thing into the Andrews Software box. It could rot there for another six months. Maybe by then, I could have the wiring redone.

I keep a box of fuses in my living room so I stumbled out there. The coffee table must have moved from where I'd left it, because I smacked into it in the dark. I'd have a bruise on my shin for sure.

I barely resisted the urge to kick the table and dragged out the fuses.

Of course the fuse box was outside. I pulled a jacket on over my towel, added my fuzzy bunny slippers to complete the look, and stepped outside into Dallas's version of winter. A cold blast of wind blew up my towel and goosed me.

"Looking good, Tina."

"Hank, if I catch you looking in at me when I'm in the shower one more time, I'll cut off your nuts."

He leered at me. "When you see what I've got, you'll love it, not cut it."

I changed my mind. He could lose fifty pounds, bathe in Mr. Bubbles, and get a job as Chairman of the Board with IBM. It wouldn't matter. I still wouldn't go out with him. I tossed him the fuse. "Make yourself useful, Hank. Put this

in for me."

I could do it myself but that would involve lifting my hands over my head. My towel probably wouldn't fall off if I did that, but didn't want to take the chance with Hank watching.

"Sure, Tina."

He smelled like beer and sweat as he walked up my stoop and opened the fuse box. "Which one do you think it is?"

I snarled at him and grabbed the fuse back. "It's the one that's burned out, moron."

Naturally the blown fuse was at the very top. I unscrewed the old one and tossed it in the general direction of my trash can. It missed.

"Wait, I can do it now, Tina."

"Just go away." I felt around until I got the threads lined up and screwed it in.

My towel came undone just as the lights came back on in my trailer. I grabbed the traitorous thing and held it up as I ran back inside and slammed the door.

"See you around, Tina," Hank called to me through the door.

"In your dreams, Hank."

I looked at the mirror on the back of my door and shuddered. My eyes were bloodshot and my hair looked like

something could make a nest in it. I'd be looking good for Billy, that was for sure.

Angie had kept after me for about an hour the previous night, finally managing to persuade me that rescuing Billy was the only thing to do. In the harsh light of day, the idea sounded even dumber than it had the previous night. Still, I'd promised so it was too late.

I consoled myself with the realization that I wouldn't actually have to see Billy. Big Bob would handle everything.

Big Bob's office was in a broken down strip-shopping center with a cut-rate liquor store on one side and a 'Church of the Whole Bible' on the other. The 'W' was hanging loose from the church's sign. I already knew I had a hole in my head for going through with this. I didn't need divine guidance.

All three storefronts had those portable marquees in front. The liquor store's said 'REMEMBER US WHEN YOU PARTY.' The church said 'PARTY NOW, BURN LATER.' Big Bob's read 'IF YOU'RE IN TROUBLE, I'LL BAIL YOU OUT.' I wondered if the church and Bob shouldn't get together and work on this sin and redemption thing. Then I realized that all three signs used the same design. Maybe they'd thought of that before me.

Nobody was in Bob's office when I opened the door, so I sat on his broken down couch, moving around to get away from

the springs that kept creeping up my crack.

"You want sump'in?"

Big Bob had to weigh three hundred pounds, but he stood barely taller than me. He'd obviously been in the liquor store and carried a couple of boxes of the same brand of cheap wine I drank. Maybe we could do some bonding.

He also stank. Part of the smell came from the wine, some from that pall that sort of sticks to smokers even when they aren't near a cigarette, but most came from Big Bob. From the looks of him, he hadn't had a shower in way too long. His stringy hair looked like it could become a major energy source next OPEC crisis.

I took a quick breath through my mouth. "A friend of mine got arrested yesterday," I explained. "I want to bail him out."

"Yeah. What's his name?"

"Billy--I mean William Love."

He scratched his head, then looked at whatever he'd caught. "What's he in for?"

"I don't know. They found some body parts in his trailer so they carted him off. Turns out he knew the dead woman."

"Darlin', you need a lawyer, not a bondsman. Know what I mean?"

"I knew the dead woman, too. That doesn't mean

anything."

He shook his head at me like I was some cute five-year-old spouting nonsense. "Sure honey. It means maybe he offed her."

So far this wasn't going well. I decided to try one more angle. "My friend Angie Jefferson said you could help."

"Oh, hell. I didn't know you were a whore." He gave me a big smile. "How come I ain't seen you around?"

"Never been arrested," I told him. We were big friends all of a sudden. I didn't think it would be smart to correct his assumption.

"I sort of like the ones with the big hooters," he confided. "Still, you want to stop someplace warm one night, swing by. I might have a little something for you. And when you do get arrested, call me. I'll give you a good rate." He pushed a grimy business card into my hand.

I'd assumed the card Angie had given me was filthy because she'd been carting it around in her purse. It looked to me like maybe Big Bob had them printed that way.

"Thanks," I told him. "What I really want right now is help with Billy."

"I'll tell you what, girlie. I'll just call the station and find out if they've set bail for him yet. Know what I mean?"

I nodded. He hadn't exactly challenged my understanding yet.

He seemed to be best friends with whoever answered the phone because he'd made a bowling date before he hung up the phone. "Good news, darling."

"You can make bail?"

"Better for you. Not so good for me. He's posted bond. The best news is he's getting processed out now. By the time you get to the Justice Center, he'll be ready to go."

"But--"

"I told them to make him wait. That you'd be there to pick him up."

"Thanks, I guess."

I retreated to my car. Of course Billy could make bail. He was the one with the BMW. If I hadn't been drunk when Angie had laid this guilt trip on me, I would have thought of that. So why had I gotten myself involved? It wasn't like I had the cash sitting around to play the rescuer.

"Don't forget to look me up," Big Bob called after me as I headed out the door. He'd already poured himself a big glass of wine. To my surprise, it actually smelled pretty good. Maybe I was turning into a lush.

"And on Sunday," he hollered out the door as I got into my car, "stop by the church."

I decided to drive back to my trailer, fire up my PC, and lose myself in work. Instead, I turned left on Commerce and headed for the Justice Center.

"What are you doing here?" Billy stood, leaning against the wall, chatting with a cute girl-cop. After a night in the lock-up, he was supposed to be dragging tail. Instead, he looked as good as ever and I was the one with the hangover. It didn't seem fair.

"Do you want to walk home?"

"I planned on a taxi."

"I'm about to get off duty," the girl-cop offered. "Wait ten minutes and I'll take you anywhere you want to go."

"I'd better go with the landlady," Billy conceded. "I'll see you around, though, Connie."

He didn't say anything as we walked out to the parking lot. I thought some appreciation was in order, but he disappointed me. Typical.

"You buy this on purpose?" he asked when I opened the door to my yellow Storm.

"No," I answered. "I was playing poker and I lost." I knew it was silly, but I was mad. Okay, jealous. I didn't trust him, I worried that he might be a murderer, but I certainly didn't like the way he flirted with everything in a

skirt and treated me like one of the guys.

"Are they hard to maintain?" he asked as he yanked open the passenger door.

"Change the oil every three thousand. The clutch every twenty."

"Oh. Ouch. What are you trying to do, give me a do-it-yourself vasectomy?"

I'd forgotten to warn him about the sprung spring in the passenger seat. I didn't quite manage to hold back my snicker. "Guess you should have caught a ride with your slut-cop."

"Connie was just being nice."

"I'll take you anywhere. Anywhere at all," I mimicked.

Billy waited until I started the engine and turned out of the lot. "You don't seem to be in a very good mood. Want to talk about it?"

I couldn't help it. I pulled over to the side of the road, turned off the engine. The horror of the last twenty hours of my life suddenly caught up with me. I bit my tongue to keep from crying like a sissy.

I decided to get mad instead. "Why the hell should I be in a bad mood? One of my residents is dead and chopped up into a couple of hundred bits, another was arrested for possibly doing it. Your unit won't be livable for weeks, if

ever, and I'm stuck paying for all of this. A bail bondsman thinks I'm a hooker, and all you can think about is bopping some cop named Connie."

He smoothed back my hair, running his fingers through it. It felt good, and made me happy that I'd at least hacked away the worst of the split ends that morning.

He waited until I'd finished. "Is that everything?"

I snuffled, then nodded. I wasn't going to tell him how betrayed I felt that he'd gone to bed with Angie. If I did that, I'd have to tell him I'd wanted to take him into my own bed. That would be way too humiliating, not to mention I'd be practically issuing an invitation to chop me into bits.

"You don't look like you got much sleep last night," he told me. "Do you want me to drive?"

"I slept fine," I lied. "I like worrying about getting chopped up in my sleep."

"You have to believe me, Tina. I didn't do it." He dabbed at my tears with a handkerchief.

"I'm not crying. It's these allergies."

"Sure."

"And I'm not an idiot. I figured you weren't stupid enough to stuff Linda's body down your toilet and then invite me over to plunge it out," I told him.

"Let alone stupid enough to rent the scene of the crime,"

Billy added.

I grabbed his handkerchief and blew my nose on it and handed it back. I felt better for a second, then looked at his face. He stared at the handkerchief with a sort of horror.

I snatched it back. "I'll wash it," I told him.

"That's all right." But I could tell he was relieved.

"Besides, I may need it again before the day is over." I looked at the scrap of cloth wondering who had come up with the idea that handkerchiefs were supposed to be romantic.

I cranked the engine, giving the Storm gas as it trembled back to life.

"They carted me off before they'd finished with my trailer," Billy admitted as I got the car back on the road.

"I don't suppose it's livable."

"It's still taped off and the bottom of the tank is lying on the ground."

It was also stinking up the neighborhood. If the cops didn't take down their crime scene tape soon, I doubted I'd collect rent from half my residents on February 1.

"Do you have any other trailers vacant?"

"Oh, great." I slapped my hand against my forehead.

"What?"

"I hadn't thought about where I was going to put you."

Damn."

"I take it you don't have any empty trailers."

I'd been real proud of myself for filling the complex and had already spent the bonus I had coming. "I guess you can live in my trailer for a while."

He looked grim. "I don't think that's a good idea."

It stung, but only a little. Guys are supposed to be looking for action all the time. "I meant, you could live there while I got yours back together. I'll live with Angie."

"Angie Jefferson?"

"She's my best friend."

"Oh." His voice got small. "I wouldn't feel right kicking you out of your home."

So offer to share it with me, already. Did I have to rub his nose in it?

"If you don't, I'd have to put you up in a motel." As if I could afford that. Why hadn't Billy been one of the ones who didn't pay his rent--then I wouldn't owe him anything. I tried to remember how much I had in my bank account. I figured I could scrape up enough for a week at the Hispanol Motel down the block or half an hour at the Hilton, assuming they rent by the hour. My place was no jewel, but it was nicer than the Hispanol and a lot cheaper for me.

"I'll tell you what." Billy gave me a smile that could

have melted rock-hard ice cream. "How about I buy you breakfast and then we'll figure out what to do next?"

When we finally made it home, we had a plan and a bag of clothes for Billy to wear. We'd both use my place during the day, since it would be a royal pain for me to move all of my equipment over to Angie's house. I'd sleep at Angie's at night. It wouldn't be much of an imposition on her since she didn't normally get home until about four in the morning. Best of all, Angie and I could check on each other and make sure nobody had done the ax thing. It was all very logical.

"Mind if I take a shower?" Billy asked me as we walked in the front door.

So much for logic.

For half a second, I thought about jumping in the shower with Billy. Then I thought about what my bathroom looked like.

"Just a minute." I ran into the bathroom, gathered the bras and panties I had hanging on doorknobs and towel racks, and pulled one of my fluffy special-occasion towels out of the cupboard. I had to take the price tag off the thing. I hadn't had many special occasions lately.

"Ready," I called. Hank might get himself a surprise next time he peeped.

"You don't have to shout." Billy stood maybe three inches behind me.

"I didn't hear you sneaking up on me." Goose bumps ran up my legs, then down my spine. I wasn't certain whether Billy's nearness frightened or excited me more.

"I would have thought you were more the cotton underwear kind of girl."

"Is that what you like?" I could do that.

"Ah, no."

I couldn't help myself. I had to look. He had a boner. At least he wasn't totally indifferent to me. Maybe I should have left my underwear hanging around.

That idea was a little too sick, even for me. I closed the bathroom door with him in and me out.

Billy spent the day poking around the park talking to anyone who would talk to him, which meant he wasn't under foot most of the time. That was just as well, as he basically made a pest of himself whenever he came back home for a soda. I'd grown up in a trailer even smaller than this and I was used to how you kind of have to press yourself against the wall to let people past you. Billy didn't have the instincts.

While Billy had been trying to solve the mystery of what had happened to Linda Trujillo, I'd spent the day on my

computer working on an equally intractable problem--figuring how to minimize the bandwidth required to download a rough-textured smooth-scrolling wall segment of the game I was working on. I was feeling pretty good about my approach when Billy wandered in and plopped himself down on my couch.

"I'm beat," he admitted.

I thought I'd cheer him up with my success.

His eyes glazed over right when I got to the part about using a fractal engine to create incredibly realistic interior landscapes. The beauty is, you only download the engine once. From then on, just change the variables and you get a new smooth-scrolling environment. Lara Croft, watch out.

My mother had always told me to get men to talk about themselves and I decided to give her idea a try. Not that it had ever worked before. I think most guys are afraid to talk. That's why they invented the T.V.

"Find anything?" I asked him.

"Edie Bernstein thinks I'm a pervert and is certain I'm going to saw her to pieces. Hank said he didn't see anything, that he always minds his own business."

"Yeah, right."

"Patrick was downloading, uh, software from the Internet--"

"How could he know that?" I said. "Unless he knows when

Linda was killed."

"Doesn't matter. Patrick was always downloading from the Internet."

"Good point. Go on."

"Paul claims he never met Linda but thinks he might have seen her at the New Age Theater a time or two. Oh, and I poured some Clorox in the swamp the police left."

"How come?"

"Because it'll kill germs. I didn't want the entire park coming down with typhoid."

"What if you destroy evidence?" I was ninety-nine percent certain Billy was innocent. That one percent kept poking up and saying it was still there.

"They had plenty of time to collect all the pieces they need. I can't see how giving the rest of us typhoid would help their case."

"I guess."

"So, what did you have for lunch?"

I gave Billy a blank look. When I get going on a project, I lose track of food. Considering the way I eat the rest of the time, that's probably a good thing.

"Nothing."

"That's what I thought. I got Thai food from Toy's."

I was all ears. "You didn't happen to, uh--"

"Get any of the jelly beans?" Billy finished for me.
"Eat your dinner first, then if you're good, I'll give some to you."

I'd always thought the little paper boxes for Chinese food were movie props. Places I went packed up the extras in Styrofoam. Billy proceeded to unload about eight of those boxes from a large plastic sack.

I didn't see the jelly beans and tried to peak into the bag but he snatched it away from me. "No fair looking for dessert."

"All right, let's eat." My stomach gave a gurgle.

"How about a glass of wine with dinner," Billy suggested.

If I hadn't known better, I would have thought he was getting just a little romantic. Unfortunately, I'd been around men enough to know that an occasional boner doesn't mean a lot. "I'll see if I have any left." I had an uncomfortable feeling I'd killed off the entire box the previous night.

"I brought some." He pulled a bottle out of another sack.

"You don't have to do this," I told him. "I am perfectly capable of preparing my own meals."

He gave me that cute little grin and shook his head.
"Uh, Tina."

"Yeah?"

"I looked in your refrigerator. Besides three flavors of mustard, a lettuce that looks like you bought it last June, and eight different boxes of ice cream, there's nothing there."

"You looked in my refrigerator?" You can lie in your diary, but you can't fool refrigerator snoops.

He nodded solemnly. "It wasn't a pretty sight."

"At least we can have ice cream for dessert."

"I wouldn't count on it."

"How come?"

"All eight boxes are empty."

I felt about two inches tall. One reason I'd left Andy was because I couldn't stand the way he tried to overlook my low-class idiosyncracies. I didn't want to be the object of pity. I didn't want to be ashamed of where I'd come from and the lives that my sisters and mother lived. Of course, this was a little different. My mother threw away her empty boxes. She never stuck them back in the freezer in a vain hope that the tiny specks of butter brickle still clinging to the lid might somehow reproduce.

"I'm sure that was a lot of fun for you," I told him.

"Don't get mad." He held out a hand in the universal stop sign. "We're sharing a trailer, remember? I didn't see

room for two refrigerators so it made sense for me to see what I needed to buy. I started with dinner."

I eyed him carefully. If I'd seen the slightest sign of pity, I'd have tossed him out and let him experience the Hispanol motel. At his own expense.

"What?"

"I don't trust you," I told him.

"That's probably the first thing they teach in pretty-girl school. Don't trust a man."

"Very funny." Still, the compliment felt good. If Billy ever poured that wine and kept pouring out the compliments, I might just get a little buzz on.

"Anyway, do you want to set the table while I put the food on plates?" Billy opened one of the boxes. It was shrimp in peanut sauce--my personal favorite.

I opened my mouth to protest but it was watering so hard I had to shut it and swallow. "Okay."

"Good." He walked toward the kitchenette. "Oh, I didn't see your corkscrew."

I started to giggle.

"What did I say this time?"

"I push in the cork with a screw driver." When I bought wine that didn't come in a box. Which was never.

"No corkscrew. Check."

Dinner was delicious. Even though Billy had forced me to eat a huge breakfast, I was ravenous. Unfortunately, Thai food is one of my weaknesses. I've got a lot of weaknesses, but Thai food is near the top of the list. My mother had lived in L.A. for a couple of years when I'd been young and she'd been trying to make it as an actress. Back then we'd pretty much lived on Vietnamese, Chinese, and Thai food. You learn to like it or you learn to go hungry.

Billy used chop sticks and I stuck with the knife and fork.

He told me about playing football at Texas A&M until he'd blown a knee. I told him about how I'd discovered computer programming almost by accident one summer, and had glommed onto it like marshmallows onto cocoa. While my friends played Donkey Kong Country or EverQuest, I'd tried to figure out how the programmers had made it work.

Billy hadn't seemed much interested when I'd taken him through a little code earlier, but he seemed plenty interested now.

"So what do you do?" I asked him when I'd finished the story of my first successful shareware game--the one I actually sold for three thousand dollars to a Dallas games company that had used the engine to develop a million-dollar hit. "Now that you can't play football."

"I'm in, ah, human resources."

"You mean like hiring and firing."

"Sort of."

"I didn't know that paid well enough to buy five-thousand-dollar toilets."

"It depends on where you work."

Billy didn't seem that comfortable with this line of conversation. It seemed funny because he'd been happy to tell me about being a college football star. Maybe he was ashamed of working in human resources.

I figured it was a little too early in our relationship to let him know that I thought a guy with a good, steady, boring job was about the most exciting thing I could think of. I didn't want Billy thinking I was desperate for his body. It had been painful enough to hear that he'd paid for Angie. If he finally got around to doing me and then I found out I was just a pity-fuck, I'd probably have to become a nun.

We didn't talk about Billy any more. Instead we talked about Linda Trujillo.

Billy explained, in vague terms, that he'd met her only briefly in the course of his business. She was the one who'd told him about the impending vacancy at my trailer park, because she was planning to upgrade. He was interested in everything I knew about her. Where she'd shopped, who had

been her friends, whether she got a lot of mail. When I told him she'd paid her rent in chunks, for three or four months at once, he actually got up and wrote that down in one of those leather organizer books.

"Why are you so interested?" I asked.

"So far, you're about the only person who doesn't think I killed her," Billy admitted. "Unless I manage to get twelve of you on my jury, I'm in big trouble. So I have to figure out what really happened before they bring the case."

"Aren't the police supposed to do that?" Not that I had a lot of faith in the police. In the neighborhoods where I'd grown up, police were bad guys out to harass hardworking people.

"Yeah, right."

We nailed Billy's bottle of wine and I ate more Thai food than I needed. When I couldn't stuff another bite into my mouth, Billy pulled out a bag of Toy's jelly beans.

Toy's jelly beans are the biggest and best tasting jelly beans I'd ever experienced. The restaurant keeps them in a bowl by the door. When you leave you're supposed to take one or two. I'd never been able to hold back and always walked away with a handful. I'd never been bold enough to cop an entire sack of them, though.

"Didn't they tell you to stop?"

"One of the waitresses gave them to me."

"Let me guess. The young one, right?" The one with the legs that went all the way up.

"How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess." I happened to know that the other ones were all married. The young one was working on it. Hard.

"Open your mouth," Billy tempted.

I wanted to tell him to keep his jelly beans. He'd probably flirted with that cute Thai waitress before she'd given him the goods. Hell, he might have done her in the back of the restaurant behind the 'restaurant staff only' sign.

I opened my mouth instead.

Billy amused himself by tossing beans one at a time into my mouth. I caught them and ate them feeling somewhere between an amorous date and a trained seal.

When I was absolutely sure the bag was empty, I struggled to my feet and waddled toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Where do you think. We had a deal, remember? I'm spending the night at Angie's."

"I thought you might want to take this with you."

He held a small cloth bag and rattled it. More jelly beans.

"Gimme."

He closed the distance between us, put the sack in my hand and, before I could think, brushed his lips against mine.

"Good night, Tina."

My insides got all wet and mushy all of a sudden and I looked into his eyes for a hint that he wanted me to stay. It was wishful thinking. No great message shined through.

Then I wobbled the rest of the way to the door and out to Angie's house.

We hope that you have enjoyed these sample chapters from Amy Eastlake's TORNADO BAIT. To purchase the entire novel for only \$1, please visit www.booksforabuck.com