

Ten minutes later Evan pulled into the parking lot in front of a bar and grill—a barn-sided building with bright red trim and a flashing sign that read *Out Back*—two words. Then he saw the logo—a hog wearing a chef’s hat and chewing on a barbecued rib? He stared, trying to understand the logic. The place looked tidy, if not fancy. Surely they had something simple. A burger at least. It was hard to screw up a hamburger.

He expected dark, dingy, and sparse as he opened the door. What he found inside was actually quite charming. Wood floors finished to a bright shine, a beamed ceiling, and framed photographs of cotton fields and river scenes, interspersed with sketches of dogs and cats. He looked closer. The animal drawings had 3x5 cards beneath them bearing the animal’s stats—name, age, breed, and availability. What were they serving at this place?

“You can sit wherever you like. I’ll be with you in one minute.”

The woman breezed by wearing black slacks and a snug vee neck t-shirt bearing the logo. The place seemed busy for a Tuesday night. He glanced around and found a two-top beneath one of the front windows. He swiped a hand across the red and white checkered plastic covering.

“Is there a problem with the table?”

He turned to find the same waitress staring at him. “Uh, no. It’s fine.” He sat.

“You want a menu or the specials?”

“What’s special here?”

She grinned. “Everything. But tonight we’re serving a fried catfish platter, a rib platter, or a pork chop platter.”

He stared at the dimples that appeared with her grin. “I’ll look at the menu, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.” She set a plastic-covered menu in front of him. “What can I getcha to drink?”

“I..uh... Do you have alcohol?”

“It’s a bar.”

“What kind of wine?”

“Red or white.”

“Yes, but what kinds?”

“Like I said—red or white.”

He grimaced. He’d never acquired a taste for beer and he was skeptical about the wine. “I’ll have iced tea.”

“Sweet or unsweet?”

“I..uh...sweet, I guess.”

“Be right back.”

He watched as she crossed the room, sliding gracefully around tables and chairs, and he noticed the sway of her hips and backside. Remembering the hell he’d recently endured because of a woman, he gave himself a mental head slap.

The menu was organized into sections—salads, soups, sandwiches, and—on the back—dinners. It was too late to eat barbecue. He’d taste it all night. Everything else seemed to be deep fried—catfish, chicken fingers. Pickles?

The waitress returned and set a large glass of iced tea and a straw in front of him. “You know what you want?” she asked.

Without looking up, he said, “Do you have something that won’t kill me?”

She hesitated. “Sure do.”

She walked away like someone a little pissed off, but maybe she was hurrying since they were so busy. He was stunned to silence when she hustled back to his table and placed an apple on a plate in front of him. “This won’t kill you. Unless you choke.” She had added a sprig of parsley for decoration.

He sat for a moment, staring at the apple. Then he saw an older man glance his way and motion for the waitress. She stood with her hands on her hips while the older man spoke to her and pointed toward Evan. She slowly turned around and plodded back to him. “My uncle owns this place and believes I’ve been rude. *If* I’ve been rude, I’m sorry.” She lifted her order pad and poised her pen. “May I get you something to go with your apple?”

“A cheeseburger, please. Medium. No onion. And I’ll have slaw with that instead of the fries.”

“Got it. No onion. Slaw instead of fries. You want some chips on the side?”

“Sure. Thanks.” He handed the menu back to her and caught her name tag—Alex. “You’re not going to do something to my burger, are you, Alex?”

“How do you know...? Oh.” She glanced down at her own name tag. “No. And I’ll be happy to slice that apple for you, if you wish.”

Evan picked up the apple, rubbed it with the napkin, and took a huge bite. The juice ran down his chin and he caught it with his free hand. “No, thanks. This is fine. Quite good, juicy.”