

Desperate Measures

by

Josephine Allen

A policeman waving his light-stick on the other side of the road caught Derek's attention, just before he was stopped by a line of stationary traffic. The booze bus again.

The driver who'd just been breathalysed accelerated away. Derek didn't see the testing officer until she straightened up and looked towards the next in line, presenting her profile to him.

Derek did a double-take. It was *her*, the cute policewoman who'd just moved into their block of apartments!

The toot of a horn from the car behind reminded him he'd slowed right down. He gave an apologetic wave and returned his attention to the road, drove on and swung into the supermarket car-park.

As he trudged the aisles and filled his trolley, Derek's mind wandered to the Winsome Walloper. He found the sight of her in uniform incredibly sexy — even to the utility belt with its weapons slung on the curve of her slim hips. *It'd be a pleasure to be arrested by her! Wonder if I'm an unconscious bondage fancier?*

He'd tried to catch her eye on the two occasions they'd shared the lift at home, but she had seemed preoccupied. Or uninterested. Or in a relationship. Or gay. He'd cursed his chronic inability to think of something smart to say; cursed his habitual shyness with attractive women.

On his way home, her burly partner waved him over behind a line of waiting cars. Derek felt a thrill of excitement. He could almost wish he was drunk, so she would be forced to have some interaction with him.

A crazy plan bloomed in his mind. *Would methyl alcohol react the same as ethyl...?*

A big delivery van in front hid his car from the gaze of the Traffic Goddess. He reached into the back seat before he could change his mind, fumbled in the bags and found the bottle of methylated spirits he'd bought for cleaning, cursed as he struggled with the child-proof cap, finally got it off, took a deep breath and swilled a swig around his mouth.

God! It was vile. He gagged and almost swallowed it, but managed to buzz down the window and spit it out on the road, the instant before the van moved off. The poisonous fumes reamed out his nasal passages as *she* waved him forward.

"Blow into the mouthpiece, please, driver."

A voice of honeyed command. He blew the breath he'd been holding into the tube.

She glanced at the gauge, then stared, her eyes widening. "All right. Out of the car."

He got out and found himself looking down at her. What lovely brown eyes she had, and such a kissable mouth.

"Is something the matter, officer?"

"There certainly is! You've blown nearly four times the legal limit. How much have you drunk?"

"Nothing at all today. There must be some mistake."

"The machine is accurate ... at least, in my experience..."

Derek could understand her uncertainty. He should have been legless, but his speech and movements were precise. He kept breathing deeply. The fumes dissipated.

"Could you test me again?" he said.

"All right." She reset the machine, and fitted another mouthpiece.

Derek blew. She looked, and her fine dark eyebrows rose. “Point oh-one. Just.”

“There. It must have been a malfunction the first time. As you can tell from my speech and demeanour, I’m perfectly sober.”

He stared at her, as if noticing her as a person for the first time. “Haven’t I seen you in our—”

“Cat!” the other cop bellowed. “Over here! This *lady* refuses to speak unless it’s to a *female* officer!”

“Coming, Front!” She turned back to Derek. “Sorry for the error. You can go.”

Seething with disappointment, Derek watched her walk away. He hadn’t had a chance to try any small talk on her. “*Speech and demeanour.*” *Oh, please. You’re not in the courtroom now. She’ll probably remember me as a pompous git. If she remembers me at all.*

At least he’d found out her name. Cat. Catherine?

Constable Althea Grant took particular care for the remainder of her shift, with the inexplicable malfunction preying on her mind. When they packed up for the night her partner remarked, “Good haul tonight, Cat, we’ve covered our wages for a month. We’ll give it a week then hit ’em here again. What was that kerfuffle with the tall bloke in the Mazda?”

Althea hated her nickname, but knew better than to complain. Nicknames were part of police culture. The derivation of hers was a bit obscure. Front’s was a little more obvious. He was built like a front-row forward.

“He blew point-one-nine, but when he got out of the car he was quite steady and spoke clearly. I tested him again and it barely registered.”

Front’s heavy face creased in a frown. “That’s a queer one. Better turn your blower in for a decoke and valve grind.”

Althea remained silent as they drove back to the station to clock off, thinking about the driver. Being one-eighty centimetres tall herself, she noticed men who were significantly taller. That had been the main impression she’d got. It had been too dark to see his features properly.

He’d had a nice voice, though. What had he been about to say to her? Something about seeing her somewhere...?

Much to his frustration, Derek saw no sign of the Winsome Walloper in or around the building over the next fortnight. If only he knew which apartment she was in, maybe he could get up the courage to knock on her door. In desperation he got on the internet to check out recent sales in the building. The only one in the last three months was to an Althea Jean Grant. No-one with a name corresponding to the initial C.

She must be a renter. Unless — horrible thought — she didn’t live here at all, but had been visiting a boyfriend.

Driving to the supermarket on Friday evening, his heart leapt when he saw the booze trap set up in the same place as before, on the opposite side of the road. If *she* was on duty, he’d know for sure she’d be out of the building for some time. He could have a leisurely dinner, then lie in wait in the lobby. Then oh-so-casually join her in the lift, do a big double-take and remark on their previous meeting—

A big black SUV waiting to be tested suddenly roared out of line, crossed to the wrong side of

the road and accelerated to pass the booze trap. Derek didn't have a chance to take avoiding action. As the glaring headlights blinded him, he heard a crash like the crack of doom.

"*Shit!*" Althea broke into a run to the wreck, screaming, "Stop the traffic!" to Front, who stood as if paralysed.

The SUV had ridden right up over the bonnet of the smaller Mazda 3. The door above opened; the driver tumbled out, staggered to his feet and headed at a stumbling run into the park opposite.

Althea caught up within twenty metres and tripped him. He went down face-first into a pile of mulch under a sapling.

"You're under arrest!" she yelled, grabbing her handcuffs and dropping to one knee on his backside. "Leaving the scene of an accident, dangerous driving, probably drunk, and just pray it's not manslaughter as well! And don't even *think* about adding resisting arrest!"

She cuffed his wrists then handed him over to Front, who came puffing up. Althea ran back to the wreck, pulling out her torch. She flashed it inside.

All the airbags had blown. One of the SUV's wheels had gone through the windscreen, atomising it. The driver lay slumped in the seat, blood running from his forehead. The granules of glass glittered in the torchlight, refracting all the colours of the spectrum, looking as if he had been sprayed by a bizarre shower of diamonds.

Althea reached to feel for a pulse in his neck. It was there, strong and fast from the adrenalin rush. At her touch his eyes slitted open, and a slow smile formed on what was quite an attractive face, in spite of the blood.

"We can't go on meeting like this," he muttered, then passed out.

His name was Derek Matheson. She'd got that from his driver's licence before the ambulance arrived. By then she'd put the story together: his cryptic cliché, his height, the sound of his voice; and realised he was the man involved in the breathalyser malfunction. Which was still unexplained, as the machine had tested okay.

Back at the station Althea stored her utility belt and cap in her locker, shook out her hair and went to get her car. Driving home she approached the hospital and, on impulse, turned into the car-park. Her uniform secured cooperation, and soon she was talking to the doctor in charge.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries she asked, "So how is Mr Matheson?"

"Pretty good, considering his car was a write-off. The head wound's superficial, but he suffered a mild concussion so we're keeping him in for some scans and observation."

"Can I see him?"

"Sure. He's just down the hall, in Room 12."

She hesitated at the door, then entered the room and pulled a chair over to the bedside. He lay on his back with his eyes closed, and his injuries made him look very young and vulnerable. She took in the two black eyes and the four stitches closing a gash in his forehead, just below the hairline. He seemed to sense her presence and his bloodshot eyes opened, then crinkled in a smile.

"Catherine! What a wonderful surprise!"

"No. You're confusing me with someone else. You've had a really serious bump on your head."

He frowned. "That's not your name? Then what's Cat short for?"

She laughed. So, not confused. "It's just a nickname. My name's Althea."

"Aha! Althea Jean Grant, of Unit 15!"

"How do you know that?"

He reached up and flinched as he felt the stitches pull, then blinked rapidly a few times. "I looked up the recent sales. I was trying to find what apartment was yours, but I was looking for someone with the initial C."

"Why did you want to find me?"

Wincing some more, he struggled up to a sitting position.

"I saw you twice in the lift."

"Yes, I think I remember that."

"But I didn't know what to say to get your attention ... then I saw you on the breathalyser. I got this crazy idea on the spur of the moment that'd give me something to talk about next time I saw you, but then—"

"Whoa." Althea cut him off. "Back up. *What* crazy idea?"

He looked like a kid caught with his hand in the biscuit jar. "I rinsed my mouth out with metho."

She stared at him in shock, then closed her gaping mouth.

"When you saw me in the lift, couldn't you have just said, 'Hello, welcome to the building, my name's Derek,' instead of going to all that trouble?" she asked reasonably.

He squirmed. "Like I said, I get tongue-tied when I try to chat up a beautiful woman."

"That's ridiculous! You're not a bad-looking guy, in spite of all the damage you've done. And not all women go for the look-at-me-I'm-God's-gift types. I reckon plenty would find you attractive."

"*Really?*"

"Yes. Really."

"Um ... do *you?*"

Althea pretended to give the matter some thought, before saying with a smile, "You know my apartment number. Come round when you're fit and find out."

He gave her a broad smile. "Thank you."

"Don't I scare you off, by being a cop?"

"Not at all. I'm sort of in law enforcement myself. I'm a solicitor in the Crown Law Office. Tell me, why do they call you Cat?"

She grimaced. "Althea, Allie, alley cat, Cat. Cops always give each other nicknames."

"Alley cat doesn't suit you. I'd say a pedigreed cat of some sort. With your hair colour ... hmm. A sable Burmese."

"Funny you should say that. It just so happens I *have* a sable Burmese. Basil."

"There. I knew you'd be a woman of taste."

Althea laughed, and rose from her chair. "I must go. Come round when you're ready and we'll see if we approve."

Althea did. So did Basil.

For many years after, they dined out on the story of how they'd met.