

GIRLS 'N' GRILLS

by Paul Watson

The Backwoods Bar 'N' Grill lives up to it's name, sitting a ways back from the highway on the very edge of town. Just close enough to pay taxes, just far enough away to dodge local ordinances. It looks rough from the outside, cut log walls, a chimney with actual smoke coming out of it. The whole thing is illuminated by a neon cowgirl who'd look more at home on the Vegas Strip, her leg kicking up and down in time. Her hands rest on a sign in flashing red light "Girls 'n Grills". Despite everything, the second apostrophe remains unlit, like it's been for more years than people care to count and I've been alive. Inside, it's more modern, booths and a long bar dominating but dimly lit, just so no one can see the local preacher or politician visiting. The exception is the stage with its runway and poles, brightly lit so everyone can clearly see the girls who are the bar's main attractions, and to make sure everyone can see *their* main attractions. There's another room out back that hosts private parties and numerous single rooms for even more private visits, if you know what I mean.

The owner is just as strange as his property. A small man with a Texan drawl so thick it has to be fake. Always clad in a white Stetson, 15 gallon, at least; a bootlace necktie bowed around his neck; and a shining white suit that stands out in every room he's in. The epitome of all hat, no cattle. But when he came to town years ago, no one quite seems to remember exactly how many, the cash he splashed freely around smoothed over permits, licenses and other issues enough that no one ever calls R.J.R. Ewing, yes, really, on it. And now, the place is the town's guilty secret. Not the sort of thing a good Christian place like Paradise should have nearby, but somehow it never lacks for custom, despite no one ever admitting to visiting.

The staff is at least 90% female, only the bar staff, chefs and bouncers exempt. The work uniform matches the cowgirl outside: white Stetson, red and white gingham tie-top, jorts ripped so close to the limits that the pockets hang over the frayed cloth and ubiquitous cowboy boots. Below R.J.R., who don't take much interest in the day-to-day: the bar staff occupy the highest rung taking day-to-day charge as they sling drinks and orders; dancers are next, all of type physically, using stage names like Crystal and Diamond to hide their profession from the real world; and finally you have the lowest woman on the totem pole, us servers, dressed in our tiny, exposing uniforms, overworked and undertipped. Of course, it's never quite that simple and each rung has strata within it. The Special girls are the ones taken to the rooms for private entertaining, mostly coming from the dancers, and ordered off the Special menu like they're just as much commodities as the food. Then there are the Deluxe girls in their white collars and superiority complex. None of us girls who aren't Deluxe really understands what makes them Deluxe. The Deluxe menu looks just like the regular menu only at five times the normal price. Finally us Regular girls just do the work, take the miserable paycheck and keep our heads down.

So, now that you're all acquainted with the place, let me introduce myself. Name's Paige, Paige Huntly. Been a lowly Regular Server since school. Don't judge me, the pay's lousy, sure, but compared to the rest of town, it's good enough. Never gonna be a dancer, even if I wanted to, given the titty fairy kept gettin' lost on the way to my house and sent her buddies, the glasses fairy and the braces fairy, instead. Ain't no chance for someone like that to be a dancer. I'm one of those cute, sweet girls-next-door. You know, the ones that all the boys want to protect but none want to actually date. And it's about half-way through my shift, so try to keep up.

Weaving through the tables, avoiding the hands that get too grabby. Not that there are many. That kind of thing's reserved for the Special menu and RJR don't like someone getting the cow for free on his dime. Makes this place safer'n most. Not nice, for sure, but safer.

"Move it, Paige. Got hungries to feed."

The girl who just bustled pass with trays all along her arms like it weren't nothin' while I can manage two at tops? Oh, you weren't lookin' at her arms? You were lookin' at how she's practically bustin' out her teeny tiny uniform, weren't you? Figures. Yeah, that's Miriam, Mirrie. She was my best friend through high school but since she got made Deluxe and got that collar she's been, I don't

know, distant. Like there's something going on that she knows about and I don't. It sucks when friends grow apart. Her late growth spurt didn't help, can't deny. One of the founding members of the itty bitty titty committee grows out of it and leaves me behind. Story of my life. So, she's hustling as the whole arse football team has just came in, Coach springing a real good time for winning this season. If she can dump her current batch, she's likely to get lined up for their tips. Back to it. Can't be narratin' my country song life through the fourth wall all day. "Your steak an' grits, sir. Extra gravy."

"Thank you."

Preacher Johnson. Always here in this house of sin. The girls all pretend we ain't seen him while he's preachin' about the sins of the flesh from the pulpit. Figure he's well acquainted with those, given I've seen him with some Special girls sittin' in his lap in very impure an' downright unchaste ways. Always tips with a bible verse, but at least there's some dollars with 'em. Anyway, job done, back for more orders an' see if I can grab helpin' Mirrie. And some of those sweet tips.

No such luck. Whole damn team ordered Deluxe on Coach's dime so she's gotta go do whatever magic Deluxe girls gotta do to justify the price. John at the bar runs the show tonight and he's talkin' awful fast with Louis the chef. Let's just scoot on over an' listen for gossip.

"...out?"

"Miriam is busy serving the sports team and all the other girls are already..."

"All of them? Well, that's just great, ain't it? And it's the Mayor. RJR ain't gonna want any trouble from that way in an election year."

Chef shrugs, his neck jiggling. Man enjoys his work, if you know what I mean.. "It's not as if we can conjure a new Deluxe girl out of..."

Lightbulb moment. "Uhm, John, sir, I could do it."

John whirls towards me, looking me over with those dark intense eyes of his. He runs a hand through his lustrous hair, no, I don't have a thing for him, shut up.. "You? Paige, I'm not sure if..." Chef leans in, whispering. Can't make it out. I push on, pulling out the big ol' baby-doll eyes. "It's not like this is a Special girl job, is it? I saw Mrs Mayor with him, so no 'dancin'. It's just servin', and you know I can do that."

"It's not...No, you're right, George." he digs under the bar for a long minute before pulling out a collar that practically glows white. "Guess you're Deluxe now. Put this on, take five minutes to get yourself cleaned up good and go to room 7."

"Really?"

"Really. Now get."

"Yessir." Gotta admit, I'm clutching that collar tighter than my Momma's hand and run for the ladies' like a jackrabbit with a coyote on its tail.

Inside, starin' at the mirror, anddddd breathe, Paige, breathe. I look down at the collar in my hand. Feels warm, must have clutched it too tight. Still, here goes. It closes around my neck easily, definitely warm, and tingly from finally gettin' this chance. I try a few breaths but it don't get in the way. Okay, time to look good. I touch up my make up, make sure the clothes are as decent as I can make 'em. Adjust the little cross on my neck chain so it's dead in the centre. Pull out my pigtails, don't judge me, cute gets more tips than sultry when you got nothin' ta show off Brush the hair down. Make it shine. Stand up straight. No slouchin'. You got your chance. Do. Not. Blow it. Give the mirror a kiss for luck 'fore I walk out. John grabs me, giving me a tray, glasses and a big ol' bottle of wine.

"Good luck." He never says things like that. This must be important. I make sure the tray's balanced perfectly and set off though the bar and into the Deluxe rooms.

Room 7. I knock on the door, not hammerin' it, but loud enough to be heard over anything inside. It opens. "Evenin', sir. I'm Paige. I'm your ser...your Deluxe server today."

"I was expecting Miriam." Never seen the Mayor up close. Always knew he was big, but up close there's muscle under the fat. Wisps of silver. Strong jawline. Can see how the ladies get pulled onto him.

"Yes, sir. She's on duty, but is busy servin' the football team."

“That explains that. Those boys will have powerful appetites.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, you'd best come on in, Paige, wasn't it?”

“Yessir, thank you, sir.” So I enter the room. It's like a formal dining area. Tablecloths, a whole array of cutlery that looks like torture implements more'n a knife and fork. Mrs Mayor is sittin' at the table lookin' as elegant as a fourth wife twenty-years junior is gonna. Not my business. There's a big ol' smoker grill nearby for ambience, really sellin' the backwoods of the place. I'm tremblin' a little when I shove the corkscrew in. What do I know about wine? Fortunately Mr Mayor takes over and makes it look easy. Then he pours, givin' me tips on how to do it right. Doesn't feel like he's comin' on to me, 'specially not with his lady-wife right there. “Do you want me to wait outside until your food arrives, sir?”

He laughs at that, Got a real deep belly laugh. I don't get it. “I reckon our food's already delivered itself.”

My face must look a picture 'cause my brain is not makin' that make no sense.

“First time Deluxe serving?”

Face feels hot at that. “Yes, sir.”

“They didn't tell you what Deluxe is for?”

“No, sir. This is kinda a last-minute thing.”

“Well, this should be good then.” An' then he just smiles, not a politician smile, like he means it, and opens up the smoker. No idea why but the collar's almost as hot as my face. And then my arms are moving on their own. Like I have no control of them, but they're untying the shirt. God, what is happening? How? Why? Just droppin' it to the side leaving me topless in front of these two strangers. Worse, arms won't do what I tell them and cover me up. Can't even stammer out an I don't know? Apology? Call for help? But they don't seem to mind as my traitorous hands are joined by equally seditious legs and shimmying my jorts down my legs leaving me in the all-together, naked as a jaybird. I swear, I'm blushing so bright you can see me from the Moon, every inch flushed crimson.

“Here, honey, let me help you with that.”

I give a strangled gasp that's supposed to be a plea as Mrs Mayor unclasps my cross and sets it onto a little plate while my body pulls off the boots. Mr Mayor pulls off the Stetson and my glasses. The collar flashes heat against me again. My body moves forward. I have no idea what I'm doing here. I catch a glance in a mirror. God, I look perfectly calm. Just going for a stroll naked in front of the Mayor. No biggie! And now I'm walking over to the smoker. Why am I? Oh, God, I'm climbing into it. What I think is about to happen can't be... The Mayor just closed it!! I'm trapped! I'm...what was that click?? Why would there be a click?! What...the grill is...he turned the grill on?? While I'm inside?? He's going to kill...cook...they're going to eat me! I knew politicians were freaky, evil but...Getting hotter. Red light all over the place. And that bacon smell...that's me. That's me, cooking! But...it doesn't hurt? How can it not hurt? It just feels like I'm in a warm shower, soaping myself up with warm water beating down, but I'm cooking. That makes no sense. Hold it! Brain, hold everything! No panicking!! Deep breaths, that's it! It doesn't hurt, which means you've either gone completely nuts, granted a possible reaction to being cooked alive and then presumably eaten, or...or...or something else is going on.. I mean, this seems to be what a Deluxe girl does from what they said, but, well, Mirrie is Deluxe and she is distinctly not dead. Or she's the most lively corpse I've ever seen.

So, if I'm not crazy, and what I'm feeling is real...I'm being cooked. But it doesn't hurt. Which is crazier than I am. But it seems to be what's happening. My body doesn't respond, and...how does the collar feel hotter than the grill? It can't actually *be* hotter than the grill, but...waitagoddamnsoorrymamaminute! All the “Deluxe girls” wear those collars. So the collar must be doing something to me. It can't be...it can't make me survive being cooked alive, can it? I mean, I'd better hope it can or this will be the shortest job I've had! Ever! Oh, God, I'm making jokes while I'm dying! If I'm dying. Which I, by rights, should be. But...I don't think I am.

Dammit, John, you could have fucking warned...yeah, that conversation would not have gone well.

I'd have thought he was joking, or setting me up. I still can't think this is real so without it happening, what would I say? What would anyone say if someone told them their job was to be eaten? Can you even imagine? Is the warmth dying down? It's over already? Wow, people cook fast! Or Deluxe people do, at least. The collar must be doing something for that. What I do not even want to think but...Why, hello, Mr Mayor, that is a mighty long fork you're hold...eeeeeeeee, that tickles! "Yup. She's done. Nice and tender. Do you want leg or shank?"

"Oh, I'll have some rump, please, dear."

I am not meat. I am...fuck, right now, I guess I am meat. Collar even makes that thought feel good. How?! The why is obvious. Eeeeeeee, I can still feel that knife? But no pain. It's literally cutting into me and I'm feeling nothin' but good?!

"Well, she's cooked perfectly. The meat just slides off her bones."

And there he goes, knife slicing through me, carving me. He's doing a good job, even slices, getting good cuts, back rump and sides. Well, that clinches it. I have gone absolutely doolally. I'm piled on plates and I'm complimenting the guy who cut me up? Eeeee. Hold it!!!! I felt that? I can still feel those slices. They're still me. But they're on the plate and I'm still on the grill. Just one more impossible thing before breakfast. Wait, will I be breakfast too? Is there a Deluxe breakfast menu? Would that feel like this or....ohmygodohmygodmohmygod, she bit me. Chewing, fuuuuuuuuuck, that feels...I've never felt anything like that. Not even when I...never you mind what I was doing, you nosy pervert!! It feels...good, ok, fan-fucking-tastic, but that's all you get.

Man, they're done? I'd be panting if I was able to.

"Dessert?"

"Oh, I'd love to."

Well, at least I get a...whelp, apparently I don't. What is he...ulp. Well, if I wasn't sure something weird was going on, which I was, to be fair, him cutting off my fucking head and putting it on the table like a centrepiece would sure convince me. Now wha...that is one freaky looking spoon, but what....okaaaayyyyyyy, do not like this, do not like this, leave my eyes alone! Well, that was effective. Really listened to me and fed my damn eye to his wife and....fuck fuck fuck, now he's done my other eye for himself. It feels kinda good, granted, but getting your eye bitten through is a very weird. And now I can't see, so no idea what they'll...There goes one ear, and the other so soon deaf and blind as they're, nnnnnngggg, chewing me up. And still going. How hungry are they? Something sharp across my forehead, going, going, scalped. I've been scalped. And something is gripping my skull and squeezing, must be that giant nutcracker, which means...yup, my damn skull just broke like an egg and...they're not...they are, scooping my brains out like my head's a bowl of ice cream. Freaky...And that seems to be it. No more weird feelings. Table shifts under me. They're done, getting ready to leave. Wonder what happens to the me they didn't eat. Seems a shame to...why am I thinking of myself like that? I don't even know I'm coming back! Oh, head picked up, hair, all piled into the smoker. Shake as it closes and then...then...fuck...heat...flaring...hot, so hot...and nothing. Can't feel a...

...thing? I can feel. And I feel...something slimy all over me. Wet. Cool. Minty fresh. Quick check. Hands? Yup. Feet? Toes wriggle fine, ma'am. Eyes? Can't open them but I can see colour flashes. Tongue? No braces? Weird feeling. I've had those for years. Something outside my mouth, tastes...blech. Like soap. What's that feeling? Suction, the slime pulling off me. Eyes open. I'm in a small booth. White, glowing from everywhere. Looks like something from Star Trek. Hold on, I can see. Without my glasses! That's gre...oh, I'm naked. No surprise there. Hold up, hold up, those can't be real. Whoa, they are real. And...sensitive. I have breasts. I mean, not huge ones, but there's something there now, maybe even enough to fill a cup size. Hissing? Oh, door's opening and....gaaaaah!!! So many people! Face flushing, hands flying to cover me, so at least they're working now. Everyone's got a collar. And...not a lot else. Ok, ok, so nudity is de rigueur. Deep breaths. You can do this. Move those hands, girl. You're among...fellow meals. Where's, whooof. There's Mirrie.

"Hey, Paige. Welcome to the Deluxe club."