

Summer At Lake Elsinore

by Jerry Ratch

Bess spent the summer that year at a lakeside court in Lake Elsinore. They told her she only had to spend three months there, before she was allowed to have a spot of her own at the nudist camp. Just three months. But Lake Elsinore seemed like something stuck back in the 1930's. The lake water had risen up over the cement dance area, which used to be the popular place to come during the late 1940's, and early in the 1950's. Now it looked like something out of the National Geographic she'd seen once about Venice, the way the water was coming up and lapping over things.

There used to be a dance at this particular spot every weekend. Folks would come down from as far away as Los Angeles, and up from San Diego. It was the hot spot to come for a special date, or for those who were having a fling with someone they shouldn't have been with. Couples would stay in their cabins the entire weekend. You could tell which ones didn't want to be seen in public. Everyone always knew what was going on.

Now the place was something of an eyesore. The whole town, in fact, was dilapidated and full of eyesores. Abandoned cars were parked on the front lawn of nearly every house. A forlorn For-Sale sign was attached to anything that didn't move. You never actually saw people. All you saw was the results of them having been there. The entire area gave off the feeling of having been used up, discarded. It looked like a giant flea market abandoned overnight.

It was especially hot the summer they towed Bess' trailer down to Elsinore. They found her this cheap spot right beside the lake. The lake seemed dead to her. The water barely moved. It lapped weakly over the footings of the lampposts. Huge spiders came crawling up out of the stale water, while at the same time enormous power boats went around and around in circles way out in the middle of the lake with a noise that was like giant metallic

dinosaurs doing battle against one another. The worst part was, you had to keep your clothes on.

Quebec came down to visit only once that summer. Robbie and Gina came down to see her twice. It seemed to make Robbie sick, the heat was so great. All he could do was lay around on his back, drinking one beer after another the whole time he was there. He kept saying he was seeing his brother Harris in his sleep, in dreams.

Bess didn't drive, so she couldn't get over to the Senior Center for exercise. Instead she bought herself an exercise tape and a small TV with a tape player built into it. She taught herself how to operate the thing, and that way she kept up some amount of exercise. But one day at the end of her three months there, just before she was scheduled to go back to the nudist camp, something odd happened. That was the day Francine came sniffing around on a visit. She showed up out of nowhere while Bess was sitting at the entrance of the trailer in the hottest part of the day.

Robbie's theory was that it was Francine who was really responsible for the death of his brother Harris — because Francine and that boyfriend of hers, Donald, had gone into hiding with the papers for the business. And that was what pushed that madman John Lytle over the edge. Francine had to have known something was coming. Otherwise, Robbie said, why did she suddenly disappear and go into hiding like a rat from the sun?

"Hi, there, Mom!" Francine gushed, holding her arms out as if nothing had even happened. Francine put both arms around Bess, and Bess felt the woman's clammy dead-white skin attaching itself to her back. Francine had the appearance of the underside of a mushroom. She planted a big pink kiss on Bess' cheek.

"What is it you want, Francine?" It was 107° F. in the shade.

"Now, Mom, you don't want to be that way, do you?"

"Francine, I'd appreciate your not calling me Mom anymore. You and Harris were divorced." Bess didn't say anything more, but she kept a close eye on the woman.

"Bess, we were related for such a long time. You know how much I loved Harris, how much I miss him."

That is a fat lie, thought Bess. Her head wobbled a little. She looked down.

"My, it sure is a hot one today, isn't it?" Francine remarked. "You wouldn't have a little iced tea in your fridge, would you? I wouldn't mind a snort of something. If you could drop a little something in it, that would be nice too. Do you still have any of that brandy that you always went to sleep with, Bess. It sure is a hot one out today."

Bess got up from the stair she'd been sitting on, in the shade of the awning. The air looked yellow, it was so hot. You could smell things simmering in the waves of heat. Something oppressive and large had clamped its hand down on Lake Elsinore. Motors kept roaring out on the lake.

"All right," said Bess. "Just one drink, and then you'll be on your way, Miss. I'm aware of your tricks."

"Now, now, Bess, you needn't talk that way. We were related for the longest time. I was married for such a long time to your son. You were like my replacement mom. Don't forget how we always used to say that. You know how I loved your son."

"Oh, sure. Now that he's gone, you can say that."

"You know how much I loved your son, Bess. Harris was one heck of a swinger. You remember how we got married? It was in the nude, Mom, wasn't it? Sure. We sure surprised you one, didn't we? Remember that? And Bess, just look at who's the swinger now! My, things sure have changed, haven't they? It sure is one heck of a world, I'll say. Who would've ever guessed that you yourself would be living in a nudist camp too — like the rest of us, huh, Mom?"

"You'll get one drink," Bess said. "Then leave me in peace." She went into the trailer, and Francine followed her right inside. She seemed to swoon in the heat, and plopped down on the mini-couch.

"Whew, Bess," she said, waving a piece of paper in her face, "I'm afraid I need to sit for a spell. I believe the drive down here in this heat has got me sick."

Bess poured iced tea into a glass. She opened one of the overhead cabinets and took out a pint bottle of brandy. After unscrewing the cap, Bess topped off the iced tea with a shot of amber liquor. Then she handed the glass to her former daughter-in-law. The full glass trembled.

"What exactly is it you've come for, Francine? You're not here on a social visit."

"Bess, I brought this here piece of paper that I just need your signature on."

"Uh, huh. I thought so." Bess looked hard at the woman sitting on her couch. "They told me not to let you in the door if you showed up."

"Who said that?" Francine said, drawing on a face and looking hurt like a teenager, though the skin of her face was sliding to one side somewhat with age. She no longer had that crisp white cupie-doll look that she used to nurture.

"I was told not to sign anything, and I'm not signing anything of yours, so there. You can just drink up your drink, and I'll thank you to leave me be in this heat. I'm doing just fine by myself, thank you."

"Why won't you sign this one little piece of paper here, Bess? I'm owed this?"

"No, I won't!"

"It's just something about me being able to be in the nudist camp too, that's all. It's my right, Bess. I have a right to be there, just like you do. Why, you wouldn't even be there yourself if I hadn't planted the idea in Harris first."

"It was you that put him up to that?" Bess said, surprised.

"Of course it was me. Who do you think would come up with a plan like that? Quebec? Tuh! Not in a month of Sundays." Francine wiped the sweat from her armpits.

"Well, why?" asked the old woman.

"Because Harris was going bankrupt, Bess. Your money was the only way we could've ended up owning his place, to live free and clear. Otherwise, he would have lost that too. He couldn't afford to keep up those payments. Of course, he had to add on that family room for you onto the side of his trailer — to make it look like your money actually went to do something. That room didn't cost no stinking ten thousand dollars, I'll tell you that. Oh, no. I was the bookkeeper, I ought to know."

"Yes!" Bess spit out. "You ought to know. You know everything! It was you that withheld those papers, that made that man go crazy and shoot my son! You are shameless, that's what. You're just a shameless hussy!"

"No, it wasn't!" Francine retorted. "It wasn't either, me! I wasn't responsible for any of that. Who said I was? Who said that? I want to know who!"

"None of your business, that's who."

"Nobody ever said anything of the sort. Nobody, that's who! Nobody! Why, that is an awful thing to go around accusing somebody of! Harris should have known better than to keep on doing business with John Lytle after the bad blood between them, heading into bankruptcy. That was his own fault. He brought that on his own self directly. That was not my fault at all. That was not my fault, *do you hear?* If anybody, it was Quebec's. She should have warned Harris not to go near John Lytle. And not keep doing business with him. He was dangerous! Everybody knew that. Harris just got greedy! It's Quebec, that's who!"

Bess went and sat down on the stair outside her trailer and looked straight ahead at nothing in particular. Her face tightened around the distance. A frown came upon her face, which then fell into a serious droop, and tears that were hotter than the current temperature of the earth, slid down through the patches of rouge on her cheeks.

"Bess," Francine said, from behind her, "so — can I get your signature here?"

Bess didn't answer, because Bess couldn't hear her question. She hadn't put in her hearing aids that day. It was too hot out to be wearing a hearing aid. And when she turned her back on you, she couldn't see what you were saying. Bess was unsure if what Francine told her made any sense or not.

Mainly, she wasn't too certain about Francine. She never did like the woman. Francine had led Harris down the path to hell, as far as Bess was concerned, with her nude swinger parties and everything. So, why should she start to believe anything Francine had to say about her son now — since it was all over with anyway? Oh, what difference did it make now! What difference?

Quebec and Robbie, both had warned her about Francine, that she might try something — to be on the lookout and not sign anything Francine might bring around, no matter what. Oh, thought Bess, she wished Harris were here now! He would have advised her what to do. She should give Robbie a call. Maybe he would know.

Bess stared ahead directly in front of her into the heat of the day. Nope, she told herself, shaking her head. That stuff about Harris — there was just no way Harris would have been that way. No way at all.

"Okay, Bess, just sign this here," said Francine, "and I'll be on my way. I'll make sure they let you back into that Sun Club, once I'm there. Don't you worry about a thing. We're all going to be like one big family again. We're going to be okay. You'll see. Everything will be just fine. Sign it right — here. That's the way. Sure."

