



· One Night in the Hole ·

Bess Dillard

"**W**hy does everyone think I'm gay?" Laurel asked.
I gave my sister a look. "There's nothing wrong with being gay."
"I didn't say there was. I just want to know why people think
I am."
"People like who?"

“Like that woman at the table by the door who’s been staring at me all night like she wants to take all my clothes off—you know, the way a guy looks at you.”

I stole a surreptitious look at the attractive dark-haired native woman that Laurel had to be talking about. She was dressed all in black—jeans, boots, T-shirt, bolero jacket, with a flat-brimmed black hat sitting on the bar beside her beer—and was wearing an incredible amount of turquoise jewelry: earrings, a half-dozen bracelets on either arm, rings on almost every finger, necklaces and a choker, more still sewn into her jacket and on her hatband. But for some reason, instead of appearing showy or affected, it worked.

“Maybe it’s just that she’s gay,” I said.

Laurel harrumphed.

“Or maybe she just really likes excellent fiddle-playing.”

“Now you’re sucking up.”

I smiled. “You should go talk to her. Sell her a CD.”

We’d just finished playing our first set at the Hole, in Tucson, Arizona, and were getting ready to take our break. The place was properly called the Hole in the Wall, but when we asked directions to the Barrio Historica at the front desk of our hotel, the guy with the purple hair told us everyone just calls it the Hole. He also told us that it’s a pretty much a dive, but he should see the roadhouses back home in the Kickaha Mountains. This old adobe building, right on the edge of the barrio, is like a palace compared to some of the places we’ve played in Tyson County.

And it’s très cool, as Frenchy’d say.

You come in off the street into a warren of rooms with saguaro rib ceilings, thick adobe walls, beautifully carved oak doors, and weathered wood plank floors. It smells of mesquite and beer, cigarette smoke and salsa. The band posters on the walls advertise everything from Tex-Mex and Cajun to bluegrass, reggae and plain old rock ‘n’ roll.

But the best part is that once you’ve threaded your way through the maze of little inner rooms you come out into a central courtyard, open to the sky. Clematis vines crawl up the walls. Mismatched tables are scattered across a cracked tile floor. And

there, under the spreading branches of a mesquite tree, is the stage where we've been playing.

It's a far cry from Tyson County, all right. But everything's been different for us since we took our music on the road.

Back home there's more of us red-haired Dillard girls than you can shake a stick at—seven of us sisters; nine girls altogether if you include our mother and Adie's little baby Lily. We range from the hopefully urbane like me and Laurel, to our hillbilly sister Sarah Jane who lives alone up on a mountaintop in the hills back of the farm where Mama and our other sisters live. I guess Laurel and I've still got some twang in our voices, but we've been touring for a couple of years now, meeting all kinds of people, all over the country, and talking with them has rubbed some of the raw edges off the way we talk.

Least I hope it has. It's not that I'm ashamed of our roots or anything. It's just that the twang makes people think we're dumb hicks and that gets old pretty fast. Especially when it's some club owner trying to cheat us out of what we're owed for a gig, or some slick city boy trying to talk us into bed. I can't tell you how many times we've heard, "So you're twins. Do you like to do *everything* together?," followed by a leer and a wink.

But they're the exceptions. Most folks that come to see us play, or happen on a gig in a bar like this and stay because they like the music, are good folks. The kind that don't set any warning bells ringing in our heads.

When we finish a set we've taken to sitting and chatting with people in the audience—and not to sell CDs. We figure, if folks like our music, we've probably got something in common with them, and when you're far from home, this is pretty much the best way for us to meet like-minded folks. It also raises the odds of getting picked up—which isn't necessarily a bad thing—but it's not something we actively pursue on a regular basis. Doesn't stop us from talking about it, though.

"Well, I like the red-haired guy at the corner table," I told my sister.

"His hair's not red," she said. "Our hair is red. His is more chestnut."

“Whatever. He’s been looking at me all night and I’d like to see what he’s all about.”

“Why don’t you go sell *him* a CD?”

I picked up my beer and stood. “Maybe I just will.”

“Aw, don’t leave me on my own,” Laurel said. “The next thing you know that woman’s going to be hitting on me and then where am I going to be?”

“Flattered?”

“You wish.”

“Maybe she’ll give you a piece of that turquoise jewelry—she’s sure got enough of it.”

“Bess...”

“I’d hold out for one of those bracelets,” I said, then I stepped off the stage and made my way to the corner table.