



HOUSE of CARDS

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Two Weeks in August

*To the many interesting people in the small towns where I've
lived. You've inspired this book.*

Acknowledgments

Thank you Bella Books, for bringing readers my way. And for giving me Katherine V. Forrest as an editor. She's amazing.

About the Author

Nat Burns has worked as a waitress, greenhouse laborer, cashier, book/movie/music reviewer, staff reporter, freelance journalist, teacher, media coordinator, journal compositor, managing editor, computer support technician and an editorial systems coordinator. Through it all there has remained one constant: she's always been a novelist.

CHAPTER ONE

Spring 1985

Another marathon gin rummy game was underway at Ellie Grayson's house just off Catholic Boulevard in the town of Freshwater, North Carolina. Unlike many card games, with smoke-filled dimness framing wary poker faces, this gathering was comprised of Craig County's finest matrons, prim and heavy from years of unwavering moral judgments.

On a nearby sideboard, on lace and silver, reclined sweet and salty tidbits, prepared earlier in the day by Ellie's "girl," Salutey Taliaferro. More compelling, however, was the rack of bottles standing ready for service behind the laden platters. Ellie's fully stocked bar was a source of great pride.

"Did any of you see *The Oprah Winfrey Show* Friday?" asked

Beverly Powell, loose skin under her chin trembling with each word. She asked the question of the room in general and her eyes remained on the fan of cards she held.

“What was it about?” queried Ellie as her dimpled hand discarded the king of spades.

“Exotic dancers,” Beverly returned. “Imagine the nerve of those women gettin’ up there and strutting naked as the day they were born. I’ve never seen the like.”

“Now, *that* I believe,” muttered Kaylen Stauder as she nudged Jane Anne Viar with an elbow just bony enough to be painful. Jane Anne snickered, trying to conceal the merriment with one hand across her mouth. Her cards, fanned neatly in her other hand, slid from her fingers and she swooped forward to catch them.

“I don’t know,” Ellie said, as she thoughtfully poked one thumb inward toward her plush, overweight body. “If I still had my figure, I might do it.”

“What figure? You never had a figure,” Margaret Trimbball said in a teasing way. She winked a bleary eye, clearly intoxicated. She allowed her tongue to loll from her mouth in a comic expression.

“I can see Ellie up there now,” announced Jeanie Saunders. “Shakin’ that thing.”

“Well,” Ellie muttered in her own defense. “They do have some big-boned gals who do that type of dancing.”

Kaylen belted out the first lines of Carole King’s song “I Feel the Earth Move” as she gathered up the entire discard pile.

“Why is it the skinny ones always pick,” Ellie whined.

“I enjoyed the one about the men who dress up as women,” interjected Jeanie, scrutinizing her hand.

“The one about transvestites,” offered Margaret. “I saw that show.”

“Transvestites?” repeated Ellie. “What’s that?”

“Like she said,” answered Margaret slowly. “Men who like to dress up in women’s clothes.”

“Oh, right,” scoffed Beverly. “Who’d want to do that?”

Margaret giggled, drawing all eyes her way. She waved the attention away and took another deep pull of her vodka tonic. But she squirmed, clearly wanting to say something. Faced with so many waiting faces, she succumbed.

“It’s not an illness, you know,” she informed the room a trifle too loudly. “It’s perfectly normal, really. Men have always done it. Women, too.”

Crickets sang love sonnets outside the open windows of Ellie’s antique-filled dining room, pale blue drapes slapped time with each gust of breeze. The musty scent of Ellie’s dusting powder hung heavy in the air and Kaylen began to sense trouble. It was a simple thing really, the portents; the subtle twitch of a lip, the raised brow, the indolent sniff.

Don’t say anything else, Margaret, Kaylen willed.

“It’s called cross-dressing,” Margaret continued, “and the number of people doing it is on the rise, or so I hear.”

“Cross-dressing.” This terse comment came from Beverly, who wore an expression of genteel repugnance.

The card game was forgotten as most of the women craned forward with slow eagerness. Jane Anne fiddled nervously with her fan of cards, the sound a loud staccato drumbeat in the silence of the room.

Margaret, who never remembered to stop at her third vodka, leaned forward, the smell of her newly-permed hair wafting to Kaylen.

“Can you keep a secret?” she asked, one forefinger crooking unnecessarily in front of her mouth.

Kaylen’s head began a slow monotone movement back and forth. *Margaret, no.* She wanted very badly to interject a new topic but her tongue felt thick and wanted to cling to the roof of her mouth. Then it was too late; worlds of damage had been done.

“Ernie and I do it,” Margaret admitted with a triumphant toss of her head. “Right down to our underwear.”

Silence swelled as all tried to picture rough Ernie Trimbball, who operated his own car repair business on Third Street, in lace panties and satin slippers. Almost as difficult was imagining

Margaret attired in jockey shorts and men's shoes.

A titter of laughter grew as the mental images found a foothold.

"It's all right," Margaret assured the women, her palms struggling to push down air in an effort to squelch the rising hilarity. Her face reddened and her dark eyes rolled wildly as she realized the trauma of her careless words.

"Ernie? Your Ernie? And you?" Ellie screeched.

"Once, we only did it once. Besides, I think it does people good to experience..." Her voice trailed off, lost amid a barrage of laughter and chortled comment.

Jane Anne turned to Kaylen, her dusky blue eyes troubled. Kaylen returned the glance, her own gaze conveying helplessness.

"Well, it's getting late," said Beverly, trying to inject a serious manner. Her thin fingers skittered across the table, gathering cards, as she choked back laughter.

Kaylen studied her, seeing a covered saucepan on the verge of boiling over. She can't wait to tell someone else, she realized with a lurch of distaste. She rose and carried her empty glass into the kitchen. Placing the glass in the sink, she leaned forward, feeling sick.

Supporting her weight with her palms and the twin pillars of her arms, she lowered her shoulders and stared into the dark void of the drain. Inside, as clearly as any soothsayer, she saw the future.

Within days everyone in town would know about the Trimballs. It was something new to gossip about. Best of all it gave the people of the town, especially those who may have fantasized about cross-dressing, a target and a scapegoat. Huge lace undies would be left in cars turned in for repair at Trimball's garage; a worthwhile joke even though it would lead to an inordinate number of mechanical breakdowns. Eventually Ernie and Margaret would leave town, find a new home.

After a lifetime of living in Freshwater, Kaylen knew what to expect. She'd seen it when Markie Ellis had fallen in love with

the married preacher. And when the Christie sisters had been arrested for working as prostitutes in a town forty miles north.

It didn't take much for arbitrary ostracism. It could be something as simple as allowing your goats to get into a neighbor's cornfield once too often. Kaylen sighed and peered out into the spring darkness on the other side of the kitchen window. The view reminded her of Freshwater. A black hole where people sometimes just disappeared, one way or another.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

