

House of Twigs

Sherman Hall sucks on a Certs, waiting for Josie to register the last person who has come to this free seminar on How To Build Your Own Log Home. Out of fifty who signed up at the Asheville Home Show, only a dozen have shown up. Sherman prefers to talk to yuppies, who are as ignorant as he is about construction techniques and joinery. Instead, tonight he faces the pig eyes of greasy-haired mountain men, their hands hardened by years of under-the-table carpentry work. Such men always ask questions Sherman doesn't know the answers to. He checks the back of the room to make sure that Clive is stationed and ready beside a stack of sample cedar, pine and cypress. Clive is cut from the same timber as the guys in the audience. Sherman pays Clive to grunt technical answers when Sherman flashes him a particular "help-me-out-of-this-one" hand signal.

Sherman is tall and good-looking. He wears a full beard like his hero and fellow Illinoisan, Abraham Lincoln, though Lincoln was thin and Sherman is not. Tonight Sherman wears a pirate-style white shirt, pressed Italian-cut pants, and a gold bracelet that speaks of the wealth to be made in owning a log home franchise. He checks the audience for attractive women, a habit he's fallen into since he turned forty last year. Most of the women in the Day's Inn conference room are overweight and uniformly permed. They are here because their steady salaries give them power over family purse strings. There is one pretty face in the room, a young woman with light blue eyes and honey-streaked hair that touches her waist. She sits expectantly beside a skinny husband who is no more than a kid. Sherman knows from experience that for this couple a log home is an alternative to a trailer in some parent's front yard. He flashes the girl his warmest smile and gets one in return. He sucks in his stomach as Josie closes the door and motions for him to begin.

Log homes sell to married couples, and he and Josie have perfected a spiel that shows what a strong married couple they are. He starts with a practiced intro about the cost of log homes as compared to conventional frame houses, the resistance of cedar to insects, the merits of cypress over bowing pine. Josie works the Power Point presentation. The audience stares hungrily at gleaming redwood and cathedral windows that cost more than any one of them makes in a month.

"Honey," Sherman calls to Josie, "tell them about the hot tub we've installed in our own 2000-square-foot Lincoln Log Home."

"Sure, Sweetie." Josie follows their script. "It has a remote control that we carry with us in our car. When we're twenty minutes from home, we activate the control, and the water is hot by the time we roll into our driveway."

The audience murmurs appreciatively. A tiny smile plays around the mouth of the pretty blue-eyed girl as she thinks about soaking in that hot tub. Sherman catches her eye and almost winks. "Of course, you'll probably want to start out a little more basic than that. That's the beauty of a Lincoln Log Home. You can order it as simple or as fancy as you like, and we can build as much of it for you as you like. Some people want to do everything but the electrical and plumbing themselves. Others are happy to have us put up the whole thing. We can develop a plan to fit every need."

One of the mountain men asks a question about insulation, and Sherman gracefully hands it off to Clive in the back. The audience, including the blue-eyed girl,

turns to listen to Clive. Her neck is long and white. She turns back around and catches him looking. She gives him a smile. Sherman feels the beginnings of a hard-on. If he ever gets up the nerve to cheat on Josie, this girl is just the sort he'd like to poke. Sweet and soft. Probably smells up close like Ivory soap.

At the end of the presentation, Josie invites the audience to come out the next day to the site of a log home they are building. "We believe that every log home we construct should result in the sale of other log homes," she tells them. A few people, including the blue-eyed girl and her husband, stop to pick up a map to the site.

"Your kits are more expensive than Greenville Log Homes," the husband says.

"Shush, Duane," the girl says, embarrassed.

Sherman risks a real wink this time. "Well, Duane, my answer to that is, anybody with a planer can manufacture a log, but it takes more than a stack of logs to make a home."

The girl smiles at him, showing little square teeth. Sherman usually lets Clive and Josie handle the site visits, but he decides to go to the site himself tomorrow.

"Manager's looking for you." Clive says at his elbow. Sherman knows it's about money he owes the hotel from the last seminar they held there. When the audience is gone, he and Clive and Josie duck out a side door before the manager can corner them.

When he and Josie drive into their driveway Josie says tiredly, "The hot tub's clogged again. We're going to have to break down and call a plumber."

"When our cash flow gets a little better," Sherman says.

Sherman watches Josie wash dark mascara off her eyes and touch peroxide to the roots of her hair. They go to bed without speaking. She wears a sleeveless pink nylon nightie. Her fleshy upper arms are rough with tiny pimples. Sherman's penis lies flaccid against his thigh. When he's sure she's asleep, he starts to touch himself, thinking about the blue-eyed girl. The bed rocks gently as the girl sweeps his stomach with her hair.

Sun at the construction site the next morning assaults Sherman's hundred-dollar genuine aviator sunglasses, bought in better times from the Home Shopping Channel. Clive walks tight-lipped around him, and Sherman feels the way he always does at a site-in the way. The blue-eyed girl and her husband drive up around eleven o'clock in a beat-up 1974 Camaro that threatens to get stuck in the deep red mud left from clearing. Josie goes down the hill to meet them.

"I'm Josie Rawl-Hall," Sherman hears her reintroduce herself. She shakes their hands and begins to explain the layout of the site. Sherman doesn't understand why she's gone to using a hyphenated name, after twenty years of being just plain Josie Hall. Maybe she's thinking of leaving him, with the way things have been going lately, and the name change is just an interim step on her way back to being single. The thought raises his hopes and panics him at the same time. He heads down the hill to help her with the sale.

"I'd be doing a lot of the work myself," the husband, Duane, is saying, puffing a little.

“We admire the do-it-yourselfer,” Sherman says, hand out. When he shakes the girl’s hand it seems impossibly small in his own. Her name, it turns out, is Lolly. Lolly Lunsford.

“For the portions you might want help with, we can provide labor at \$8 per square foot,” Sherman says.

“That’d be a good idea on the roofing, Honey,” Lolly says to Duane. “I don’t want you falling off and leaving me to have this baby on my own.” She touches her flat stomach.

“Are you expecting?” Josie coos. “How exciting! No wonder you’re looking to build a nice home.”

Duane simpers, proud as punch to have knocked Lolly up. Sherman eyes her tummy again. Knowing she’s pregnant just makes him want her even more. He feels himself getting turned on and thinks fleetingly of what it would be like to take Lolly to the back of the half-built house and press himself against her, breathing in her smells along with the smell of cedar.

Clive leads them on a tour of the job site, the only site Sherman and Josie have where the customer isn’t mad at them. Lincoln Log Homes owes its kit manufacturer \$150,000. Outside licensed contractors have liens on the last three homes they’ve built. The money they get from new sales goes to pay old debts, not to purchase the kit the new customer has ordered. Josie’s main job these days is to make up excuses for why construction has been delayed.

As Clive explains the different ways logs can be fitted together, Sherman sees a sheriff’s patrol car pull up. He slips away from the tour and meets the deputy at the bottom of the drive.

“You Sherman Hall?” the deputy asks.

“Yes I am, officer. What can I do for you?”

“Got a summons and complaint for you, from a Jane and Thomas Radner.” The Radners are the last couple Sherman ordered a kit for before the manufacturer cut him off. Clive got the foundation laid, but Lincoln Log Homes hasn’t been back to the site in five months.

“I’m sure there’s just been some misunderstanding,” Sherman says. He glances up the hill. Lolly Lunsford is looking at him in concern.

“Yeah, whatever. Sign here, please,” the deputy says.

Sherman signs, and pockets the summons and complaint. He’ll read it later. There is no point in taking it to their attorney. Sherman owes the lawyer so much money the guy won’t take his phone calls until he comes up with a \$5000 retainer.

He heads back up the hill to rejoin Clive’s tour. Clive is explaining why most people choose to dry wall some rooms because they get tired of looking at cedar beams in every room. Josie stands close, ready to flatter Duane at every opportunity. Lolly trails behind.

“Is everything all right?” she asks him when he catches up with them.

“Absolutely,” Sherman says with a wide smile. “The officer was just telling me there are some teenagers who’ve been trespassing on this property, and that we might want to secure our materials at night when we leave the site.”

She smiles at him, reassured, and turns back to listen to Clive.

Sherman has never liked confrontation, and the encounter with the deputy leaves him upset. Sherman can say that he made it to his thirties with no regrets. Then one day he looked back over his shoulder, and here they came. He knows men his age who have children they can place their hopes in when their disappointments finally stop them in the road. Sherman has no children. His own fibs and failures eat away at him daily, the way powder post beetles attack untreated pine, leaving it porous and brittle. There is no part of his life anymore that feels whole and pure. Sherman takes off his sunglasses and squints at the sun, blinking his eyes when they water.

“We got the sale,” Josie tells him at home that afternoon. “They want either the Cape Codder or the Beach Comber. They’ll let us know in the morning when they bring their check.” She examines the complaint the deputy served that morning. “Not that it really matters what plans they want. It’s not like we can deliver.”

Sherman goes through the day’s mail. One envelope is more ominous than the others, return address the Internal Revenue Service. He opens it. The letter from Revenue Officer Myron Kittrick tells him that he owes \$25,000 in back taxes, and that if he doesn’t pay, the IRS will seize his house and all business assets.

“How much are the Lunsfords bringing by tomorrow?” he asks Josie.

“Twenty-five thousand in a cashier’s check,” she says.

Read the complete story in *Irons in the Fire*

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