

A close-up photograph of a person's buttocks and upper thighs. They are wearing shiny, metallic pink shorts. Two hands are placed on the cheeks of the buttocks. The background is plain white.

# Spanking Tails

Volume I

Maren  
Smith

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Spanking Tails I  
*by Maren Smith*

## Spanking Tails

Volume 1

By

Maren Smith

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Dedicated to my husband,  
who has no trouble whatsoever ignoring  
some Honey-Do lists and yet paid  
surprisingly close attention to  
Saturday's Itinerary.  
Men. Go figure.

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### **Author's Note:**

Every now and then I sit down at my computer to work on a story I can get paid for, and come up with something totally useless. Saturday's Itinerary was one of them. It was going to be a story, but then after writing the itinerary, I realized anything else would have detracted. So, I left it alone. I also printed it out and stuck it to the fridge for my hubby's weekend Honey Do list.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't totally useless after all.

Saturday's Itinerary

9:00 am

Wake Up

Go to the Bathroom

Make Coffee

9:15 am

Drink Coffee

9:30 am

Spank Wife

Tell Her to Start Breakfast

Have Another Cup of Coffee

10:00 am

Eat Breakfast

Thank Wife With a Good Spanking

10:15 am

Have Another Cup of Coffee

10:30 am

Gather Tools/Start Installing Ice Maker

11:00 am

Take a Break to Spank Wife

11:15 am

Back to Work on the Ice Maker

11:30 am

Go to Jerry's for Supplies

But First, Spank Wife

12:30 pm

Back from Jerry's

Have Lunch

Wife's Been Lippy This Week, Better Spank Some More

1:00 pm

Back to Work on the Ice Maker

2:00 pm

Break to Really Spank the Heck Out of Wife

Cuddle and Talk on the Couch

3:00 pm

Adjourn to Bedroom

4:00 pm

Mow the Yard

Better Spank Wife First

4:30 pm

Have a Beer

Work on Project of Choice

5:30 pm

Don't Think Wife's Had Enough Yet

Spank Soundly

5:45 pm

If Wife is Still Sitting, Pull Out Paddle



Bare Bottom and Blister

6:00 pm

Hold Wife

6:30 pm

Take Wife Out to Dinner

Watch Wife Squirming Gingerly

Enjoy Sight

7:30 pm

Rent Movie

Cuddle on Couch to Watch

9:30 pm

Get Ready for Bed

Last Chance to Spank Wife, Better Make it a Good One

10:00 pm

Sleep

Repeat on Sunday

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## **THE BUTLER DID IT**

Milly sat at the edge of her bed, trembling. She hated the waiting. She twisted and twisted her fingers in the white skirt of her nightgown, hardly able to sit still. Her feet and soul were both restless enough to pace a furrow in the floorboards that extended from her bed to the small window that overlooked the road, but she made herself stay on the bed. Sitting. It would probably be the very last time she was able to do so in comfort. For a while, at least.

Guiltily, her eyes snuck a peak toward the window. She could barely glimpse the road through the trees. The very same road that her man, a groundskeeper at a neighboring estate, had taken right quickly down in those few horrifying seconds after they'd been caught together—by Dobson, no less—just before supper. Well, it was well past supper time now, and her belly rumbled in empty complaint. Still, she knew being sent to bed hungry was not going to be the extent of her punishment, and she quickly blinked back tears, jiggling her knees up and down, and struggling unsuccessfully to sooth the bubbling panic inside her.

She had only given her man a hug and kiss; a heartfelt thank you for the Valentine's gift he'd given her. And she was still wearing them, too. Silken knickers. She'd never felt anything so fine against her skin in all her life. And now she was going to lose her job because of them ... or really because of the affectionate display that had resulted because

of them. The prim and proper Dobson ran a very tight house, and he wasn't called the Dragon behind his back for nothing.

To tell the truth, she knew him perhaps better than any of the other servants in the Master's house, but he had always frightened her just a little bit. She didn't really know why. He was always soft spoken and had never said more than a handful of words to her at a time. As old as dirt, Abigail in the kitchen often said. A mean one when crossed, Sarah below stairs had once told her. And in the seven years since she'd first come to join the household staff, she could count on one hand the number of times she'd heard tell of someone 'getting it from ol' Dobby'. But for a young woman low down on the totem pole of rank, all of that had worked together to create a long-lasting and frightening image in her mind.

Footsteps coming down the outer hallway had her vaulting to her feet. She wrung her hands even tighter, knotting her fingers and whimpering subconsciously way back in the back of her throat as she saw a dark shadow stop right outside her door.

Dobson, despite his age, was a big man. Confident and broad of shoulder and without a hint of the customary frailty a man his age usually wore. He was tall enough to have to duck as he stepped through her door and closed it softly behind him. He cast a very stern figure, grim and unsmiling, as he crossed the floorboards with slow deliberate steps until he was standing right in front of her, less than two feet separating his polished shoes from her own bare toes, peeking out as they were from under the white hem of her nightdress. In his hand, he carried with him a long, sturdy

clothesbrush, the purpose of which was not a mystery to her. Her bottom began to prickle with absolute dread, but a well-deserved thrashing wasn't the worst of her fears.

"Am I to be given the sack, sir?" she quavered, blinking rapidly to hold back her tears and forcing her gaze from the terrible brush to his sober face.

"No," the elderly butler told her. "Though you would have been had someone other than myself seen you the two of you together, pawing one another so shamefully in the garden. What would your father have said?"

Mere mention of her beloved Da had Milly bowing her head, the tears she'd been fighting against all night finally breaking past the barrier of her lashes. "He'd not have been pleased," she wept, covering her face with her hands.

"He was an asset to his master's house," Dobson agreed. "He always knew his place and was a good friend. That's why I vouched for you, Milly McGuire. That's why I brought you here after your parents died. I gave you a position in this house, even though you came with little experience in service. I've done my best to guide you as you've grown up, to see you build for yourself a stable and secure future. And now," he shook his greying head, clamping his lips tightly together in disapproval.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Dobson," Milly sobbed, her shoulders shaking.

"That sort of carrying on, if you must indulge it, should be kept to your day off."

Sniffling and hiccupping, trying to rein in her tears, Milly bobbed her head up and down. "Yes, sir. I'll try, sir."

"I need not lecture you on the hardships that will be incurred should you allow ... complications ... to arise from such indulgences, needn't I?"

Milly shook her head. "Oh no, sir! I'd never do anything like that! It was just a hug and a kiss. To say thank you for the nice thing he gave me." Her cheeks grew warm as she realized the dour butler would likely have a prim view of what her man had given her. Oh Lord! What if he smacked her on the bare! Her eyes darted back down the length of his arm to drink in sight of the brush again.

Dobson sighed, the clothesbrush bobbing in his hand as he gripped and regripped the handle. "Well, no point in putting this off then. Stand up, Milly McGuire. You're no longer a knobby-kneed miss of twelve years, but I want no repeats of today's goings-on so I'll be making a good and proper job of this."

Milly swallowed hard, staring at the clothesbrush that dangled from his hand as he raised his arm and slowly, deliberately, began to turn up his cuff.

Milly wasn't a stranger to spanking. She had been on the receiving end of her Da's strong right arm twice in her life. The last time had been when she was nine, and it had been a stern and lengthy smacking for wandering from her mum's side at market time and frightening her no end. But her Da had never used aught but the flat of his hand and the brush looked very large and very hardy.

Her bottom cheeks quivered as she stood. Her knees all but knocked together. She clenched tight fists in the folds of her nightgown, not at all sure what to do now. Her Da would

have bent her beneath his arm, lifting her feet clean up off the ground as he warmed her bottom cheeks right properly.

"Remove your nightgown," Dobson told her, turning his shirt cuff all the way up past his elbow, exposing a length of sinewy forearm that could easily have belonged to a man many decades younger.

Milly's mouth ran dry. "Remove it, sir?" she whispered.

"A right and proper job," he reminded her. "You'll not be forgetting this lesson any time soon."

Milly quivered all over, but obediently bowed her head as she plucked with trembling fingers at the buttons that marched down the front of her white gown. She turned to face the bed, an ineffectual attempt to retain her modesty as she oh-so reluctantly pulled her nightdress up and over her head. She hugged the gown over her bare breasts, her earlier fear that he might catch a glimpse of her new silk knickers no longer the most humiliating experience that she could think of.

"Kneel up on the bed."

Milly swallowed hard again, but she did as she was told, reluctantly letting go of her nightgown to crawl up onto her mattress on hands and knees. There she knelt, staring at the mended quilt beneath her, at the ancient rose wallpaper, at the headboard ... anything but at the butler as he closed the distance between them and took up his position at her side.

He shifted the clothesbrush to his right hand. "Knickers down, girl."

Her bottom cheeks clenched tight together, only to relax again in defeat as she raised her hands to her hips to obey.

They felt just as silky falling off her buttocks, spilling down her thighs into a creamy off-white pool around her knees, as they had when she'd first gleefully pulled them on. The only difference was, she had enjoyed the sensation so very much more when under the hot gaze of her appreciative man than she did under Dobson's frowning features.

Dobson's cool hand settled in the small of her back, applying just enough pressure to direct her head down to the quilted mattress. She knotted her fingers in the bedding, closing her arms, her breath quickening as she offered up her tender bottom to the bite of the brush.

Dobson didn't make it easy for her either. The first solid spank nearly sent her knees scrambling out from under her. Her hands snapped back behind her, catching hold of her stinging nether cheeks as she vaulted upright with a shrill yelp of pain. She rubbed frantically, her fingers desperate to ease the hurt.

"Get back in position!" Dobson snapped, his frown darkening. "Disgraceful! A girl your age carrying on like this! You've earned every bit of this thrashing, Milly McGuire! Now get that bottom up for it, or not only will I put you over my knee like a disobedient daughter, I'll wear out my arm!"

Milly scrambled to get her knees back under her. She grabbed the blankets, pulling them in around her face and biting down on the excess cloth to mute her cries. And there were many of them. High pitched crescendoing wails that rose and fell as Dobson peppered her bottom with sharp cracks of that brush. He turned her bottom the color of sun-ripened cherries. He made them sizzle like the coals in the kitchen

stove. His mastery of that awful implement had her drumming her feet on the mattress, wagging her rump up and down and side to side, and reaching back to grab at her scorched and smarting backside.

"Move your hands," he told her unsympathetically.

So she grabbed her thighs instead, needing to hold onto something as her bottom was set to bouncing under the renewed onslaught of Dobson's strong arm. There was no counting the spansks; Milly lost track at four. All she knew was it didn't stop anywhere near soon enough to suit her, and even when it did stop, her bottom hurt so much she knew sitting would be impossible for days. Maybe even weeks. Maybe even for the rest of her life!

She sobbed, soaking the quilt with her tears. The entire surface of her bottom felt scorched. The throbbing sank deep into her flesh, radiating outward with agonizing heat. She didn't want to touch it but it was impossible not to, and thoughts of the vision she made as she rolled naked upon her bed—her knickers having been kicked off onto the floor at some unknown point in her chastisement—cupping and squeezing and rubbing in a vain effort to be free of the hurt, never even entered her mind.

Eventually the franticness of the pain wore her out and Milly was left weeping piteously and holding her well-spanked bottom with both hands. She barely felt it when Dobson tenderly lay her nightgown over her, covering her nakedness with cotton respectability. He lay the clothesbrush on her bedside table and the mattress gave a little as he sat down



beside her. His warm hand touched the small of her back, granting her a measure of comfort as she cried.

He said not a word and Milly was beyond the ability. All of her tears, coupled with the vigor of the spanking, eventually wore her down. But somewhere in the back of her mind, before the heavy mantle of sleep overcame her, she was aware when the mattress shifted again and an almost paternal kiss caressed her brow. She couldn't even bring her eyes to open as he tenderly folded her quilt around her, picked up the clothesbrush, and then left the room.

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## THE GOLDEN ADONIS

Graham Becker was her-best-friend's-brother's-friend-of-a-cousin-twice-removed, so it wasn't as though he were a stranger, Julie told herself. And, quite frankly, she needed the money that renting out the extra room of last summer's inheritance—her grandmother's old town house—would bring her. College wasn't cheap at the best of times, but with the economy in a slump and part-time employment at an all time low, it had come down to a choice between getting a tenant or start developing a long-lasting relationship with starvation.

So when she heard the polite, three-rap knock on her front door, she brushed her blonde hair back, wiped her dishwater hands on the seat of her black skirt, prayed, "Please, dear God, no drums," and went to open the door.

"Holy cow!" she blurted aloud, abruptly losing the cool-composure she'd worked hard all morning to perfect.

At the sound of her voice, the golden-haired Adonis turned away from the street and grinned back at her. "Close." He stuck out his hand. "Name's Graham."

You're staring, her brain told her.

You're also drooling.

She snapped her mouth shut, reached out to grasp his hand, and her knees lost all solidity. She grabbed onto the door frame to keep from sagging. He had a firm, warm, solid grip that just seemed to leech the strength from her legs.

"I'm Julie."

She wished she'd worn a dress.

She also wished she didn't have wet hand prints on the seat of her butt.

"Pretty name." His smile widened when she only stood there, moving nothing but his arm, which she pumped slowly up and down. Then he leaned into her, bracing his strong shoulder against the threshold as he lowered himself to meet her eye-to-eye. "May I come in, Julie?"

She snatched her hand from his, tucking her whole arm behind her back as she stepped quickly out of his way. Her face burning hot, she ducked her head and hastily cleared her throat. "Yeah, sure," she squeaked. "By all means. Please. Come on in. Living room's through that door. Take a seat. Need a drink?"

Stop babbling.

He chuckled, a full, rich sound. "No, thanks. I'm good."

Lord help her if those words didn't settle right into the pit of her stomach, warming her from the inside out.

She followed him into the living room so he wouldn't see the wet hand prints, and as they walked the short distance across the old hard wood flooring, she admired the way his Budweiser t-shirt stretched taut across his back and shoulders. He wore it neatly tucked into his jeans, too, providing a wonderful view of his narrow waist, lean hips, and a butt perfect enough to frame and hang on the wall. He'd brought a duffel bag with him, but that was it for luggage.

"So you need a room," Julie said.

He smiled back at her, his blue eyes sparkling. "It's preferable to a cardboard box, yes."

"Are you an axe murderer?"

His smile split into a grin, showing twin rows of straight, white teeth. "Part-time grease monkey at the Oil Can Henry's. My major's in physiology and I've got another year to go before I get my Master of Science degree. Environmental health. I like looking at diseases."

He sat down on one end of the couch and because it was the only sitting surface in the room, she took the opposite end, crossing her legs beneath her as she faced him. She half-raised her hand and confessed, "Archeology."

"Indiana Jones."

"I prefer Laura Croft. More money, less chin hair."

He laughed, warm and bright. She liked the sound.

"The room's two-hundred-and-fifty a month. It's the master and has its own bathroom. I'd like you to pay half of the electric and water bills and for all long distance phone calls you make. The back porch is screened in, and that's where the washer and dryer are. The kitchen's through there," she pointed to a door on their right. "Label anything you don't want me to eat, and if you use the last of it, please replace it."

"Simple common courtesy stuff," he said.

"Pretty much."

"You don't want any references or my past renting history?"

"You said you weren't an axe murderer. I trust you. And so long as you don't sit around in your underwear and scratch, we should get along all right."

The Adonis half-laughed, looking down at his lap as he shook his head, but he became her roommate and life got

pretty interesting. Particularly the next morning. Mostly because the first thing in the morning, before the coffee started perking, wasn't Julie's most functional time of the day. Having slept since he moved in, she'd forgotten all about Graham.

Standing in the narrow kitchen, she was in the act of pouring water into the Mister Coffee when she heard a small bumping noise coming from the master room. She didn't really even think about it. One minute she had a dishtowel in her hand; in the next, she was standing in the open bedroom door, staring into the bathroom at Graham, who stood combing his thick blonde hair in front of the medicine cabinet mirror.

He was partially naked, a form-fitting pair of jeans the only thing he wore. The broad expanse of his torso was as bare as his feet and, as he raised his arm to utilize his comb, the muscles jumped and played across his shoulders and back in vivid masculine display. Then his eyes found her in the reflective glass of the mirror and he stopped. His expression never changed, but the comb lowered a fraction of an inch and he turned his head to look at her.

By all accounts, he should have been angry. After all, she'd just invaded the privacy of his bedroom. But despite the 'move, move, move!' orders her brain was screaming to her feet, unaccustomed to seeing a man so intimately attired, Julie found her stockinged feet rooted to the floor.

"Is something wrong?" Graham asked, and Julie came sharply back to herself.

Her face turned a hot, slow shade of pink. "Um..."

She blushed even hotter and her hands began a rapid series of embarrassed half gestures. Silently opening and shutting her mouth, she pointed back at the kitchen over her shoulder, then at herself and then seemingly everywhere at once.

"I, uh ... was just ... um..." She stopped, mortified that her usually witty tongue would choose this exact moment to give up on her.

"Just what?" Graham smiled, now turning to fully face her.

Oh, God. His pants weren't even buttoned at the top. She tried not to look.

She looked.

He was a living, breathing, Bow Flex commercial. He had Popeye arms and six-pack abs, smooth, chiseled muscles that were fashioned washboard-hard all the way down his stomach. A thin line of dark hair captured her eyes and drew them inescapably down into the waistband of his jeans, straight to the heavy bulge beneath, which grew slightly as her gaze settled upon it.

Suddenly what she wanted didn't seem to matter. Julie didn't bother trying to finish her sentence. She stumbled backwards out of the room, grabbing frantically for the doorknob as she collapsed against the wall. She pressed herself flat against it. It was a mercy when the door shut softly between them. She closed her eyes, feeling strangely shaky, excited, confused and frightened most of all. Jesus, what had she gotten herself into?

The smell of percolating coffee was beginning to wind its way through the house and Julie staggered back to her

bedroom where, if there was a God, she would die peacefully and without further embarrassment.

All theology-versus-science debates were abruptly and single handedly solved when Julie shut her bedroom door and gazed into the full-length mirror that hung on the back. She had forgotten she was dressed in a short pink t-shirt with straw huts strategically located over each breast and the words, 'Tittie Tikki' underneath. The bottom of the t-shirt ended at her abdomen, which had not seen a Bow Flex, or even a sit-up, in quite some time, leaving her panties fully exposed. Was she wearing the lacy, sexy, black french-cut panties? Oh, no. White cotton with little pink hearts. Mismatched socks that came from trying to dress with her eyes closed were the crowning achievement of the morning, and proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was no God.

She fell face-first back into her unmade bed and lay there, waiting for Death by Embarrassment to afflict her. That was the problem with strong constitutions; a body rallies just too quickly and instead of a merciful end to all her suffering, she was forced to continue living out the day.

She faced Graham at the breakfast table over twin bowls of cold cereal and the newspaper. While he read the sports section, she stared blindly at the comics, holding them up to cover her still fiercely blushing face. There was absolutely no conversation and he got up to leave first. She listened to him rummage in his bedroom to pack his books into his duffel bag, then come back to the kitchen.

His warm hand settled on Julie's arm, forcing her to lower the comics. He then leaned over and kissed her on her bangs. "Don't worry about it," he said, then headed for the door, calling back. "See you later."

The Adonis left the house and his kiss on her skin leeched what little self-composure she had left. She slid off her chair and landed in a heap on the kitchen floor. Just a puddle of denim jeans, cotton shirt and flopping limbs under the table. She whined, covering her face with her hands and kicking her sneaker-clad feet against the floor. She had to get over this. She checked her watch. Ugh. She had to go to school. She was running late again.

A bad morning turned into a Let's Get Julie day. It wasn't helped along any by the fact that she got to her first class of the day twelve minutes late. The instructor gave her a hairy look while she made her way as unobtrusively as possible to the only empty chair in the room. Naturally it would be right up front.

As often as she was late, she would have thought he'd be used to her tardy tendencies by now. Apparently, however, that was an incorrect assumption as the note she found in her mailbox later that afternoon clearly stated. One more late arrival, the letter read on its no-nonsense university stationary, and she would be awarded an incomplete grade for the semester.

Perfect. The day couldn't possibly get any worse.

She dropped the letter on the couch, along with her books, and went to take a shower. She changed into a fresh pair of comfy coveralls, blow dried her hair into a shaggy mane of



unbrushed lazy waves, and painted her toe nails pink in an attempt to assuage her anxiety over the thought of what an incomplete grade would do to her scholastically.

By the time she was ready to leave the bathroom, her new roommate was home, standing behind the couch, his duffel bag of books leaning against his leg while he read her note. When she came into the living room, he looked at her over the top of the letter.

Ooo, nosy. Strike one against the Adonis.

"This isn't good news," Graham said.

A lecturer, too. Big ol' huge honkin' strike two.

She took the letter from him. "This is personal, and none of your business."

"No, that's a threat of expulsion," he said evenly. "Have you changed your mind about becoming an archeologist?"

"No, of course not!" she protested. "It was just ... an accident."

"An accident," he echoed. "What kind of accident could prevent you from getting to class on time?"

Well, the kind of accident that had dissolved her into a puddle of goo on the floor, naturally. And it had been his fault entirely, since he'd been the one to kiss her and leave her like that.

But it'd be a cold day in Hell before she 'fessed up to any of that. Instead she grumbled, "Never mind."

Boy, the hairy eyeball Graham gave her was even better than her instructor's.

Julie drew herself upright. "You've lived here less than one day. You don't get to lecture me yet."

She snatched the letter from his hand and walked into the kitchen with it. Unfortunately, he followed her. And he didn't let it drop, either.

"Are you trying to get yourself expelled?"

Slapping the letter down on the counter, she pulled a glass from the cupboard. "I can't believe I'm getting lectured by my tenant. This is my house, remember? Do you know what that makes me?" She tapped her chest with one finger. "The boss. Me. Which, by process of elimination, makes you the grunt. So start grunting and quit telling me what to do. Hey, I don't make the rules. That's just life on the social ladder. Get used to it."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Are you going to school on a scholarship?"

She pulled a jar of orange juice from the fridge, shutting the door a little harder than she intended in her annoyance. Glass in one hand, juice in the other, she shrugged at him. "Yes. So what?"

"So you get an incomplete and you don't get to continue your schooling next year. No school equals no degree, and your student loans will come due. You'll probably have to sell your house to cover the debt, and that does make it my business. I'd rather not be homeless."

She thunked her glass down on the kitchen table, but she couldn't think of a single rejoinder to that. She finally said, "I promise I won't be late again."

He leaned closer and softly asked, "How many times have you said that before?"

Julie cringed a little. "You don't know, I might really mean it this time."

Graham looked at her.

Groaning, she flopped down on one of the four dining chairs. Then she sighed. "I really do want to be an archeologist."

After a moment, Graham took the letter, pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. She watched him surreptitiously through her lashes as he reached over to take the juice from her hand and set it and the glass aside. He lay the letter before her and tapped the top with his finger. "This is serious business, Julie. One more tardy mark and the last three years of your life are wasted. You won't be permitted to enroll next year. If you continue your education at all, it won't be at this school. All your studying and hard work will have been for nothing. Good bye Laura Croft."

"Ugh! I know!" she groaned in exasperation. She flopped her head back, rubbing her face with both hands. Then said again, a bit more subdued, "I know. You're right. I'm sorry."

"There's no need to be sorry, Julie. Just don't be late."

Julie snorted. "Easier said than done. I've been trying for three years. I'm—" she sighed. "I'm just not a morning person."

"I'm going to help you," Graham told her.

She blinked at him twice. "You are?"

He nodded once, his eyes locked steadily on hers. "Will you accept my help?"

There was something strange about the way he was looking at her. Something strange about the way he suddenly

sounded, his words oddly weighted and his question with an almost ominous feel to it.

She blinked twice more, then cleared her throat. "Okay."

"I want you to say it, Julie. Will you accept my help?"

"Yes, I'll accept your help," she parroted back, feeling a bit foolish as she did so.

"I need you to trust me not to hurt you. You aren't going to like my methods, but I can guarantee you'll hustle yourself on out the door on time tomorrow morning, so the results of what I do will be well worth it. Do you agree?"

What, was he going to turn her alarm up full blast? Walk into her room in the morning, banging on pots and pans? Pick her up and dump her, sound asleep, into a tub of ice water?

She shifted on her chair, then cleared her throat again.

"Um ... yes, I agree ... I guess."

"Do you think you can trust me?" the golden haired Adonis, her-best-friend's-brother's-friend-of-a-cousin-twice-removed, that she'd only just met for the first time yesterday, asked.

The corners of her mouth turned up in the slightest of smiles. "Sure," she said weakly.

He looked at her for the longest time. Then he leaned back in his chair, one hand on the table, his thumb slowly, methodically, rubbing back and forth along the side of his index finger. Finally, he sighed and stood up. He went to the stove and, after several minutes silent, hands-on-hips contemplation, he selected a wooden spoon from the blue jar on the counter.

Question answered. He was a pot and pan banger.

Graham came back to the table, lay the wooden spoon down between them and pulled his chair a good two feet out into the middle of the floor. He sat down and looked at her. "Come here, Julie."

That odd, warm, melting feeling suffused her stomach again. It reached up to warm her cheeks, it flowed down to create a pulsing ache between her thighs. There was something so very intimate in the way he looked at her. As she slowly pushed back her chair, it made her legs shaky and reduced her normally confident, long-legged stride to small, timid steps that took forever to bring her around the table.

When she drew close enough, he reached out to take her hands in his. The intensity in his eyes had Julie catching her breath. Nervous energy made her stomach flutter wildly. She felt almost giddy, as if she wanted to laugh, but the tightness in her throat refused to let her.

"I need you to trust me," he said again. "Remember, I'm not going to hurt you."

"Right. Okay." His blue eyes pierced all the way to her soul. If she weren't trembling before, of a certainty she was now. "You won't hurt me."

Graham reached up and began to unfasten the breast clips of her coveralls, and Julie stopped thinking entirely. Her breath whooshed out of her as he lifted the first denim strap over her shoulder and let it dangle down her back. He did the same to the other, and her bib flap sagged down around her hips. His hand settled on her waist. His bare skin felt warm where he touched her between the bottom hem of her tank

top and the elastic band of her panties. White cotton with yellow flowers this time. Still no lace. Damn it.

Without taking his eyes from hers, he stroked her skin lightly, sliding his hand between her coveralls and herself and the heavy denim fell off her hips and slid straight down her legs to the floor. Julie almost closed her eyes without being able to help it and the next thing she knew, she was lying face down over his lap, staring at the kitchen linoleum. It needed mopping.

Julie froze for a heartbeat in shock. She had the most absurd urge to cover her bottom with her hands. But no, he did that for her. And as his broad hand settled over her panty-clad rump, it didn't feel anywhere near as comforting as it might have had she done it herself.

"G-Graham?"

"I'm going to impress on you the importance of being on time," he told her. "You can't afford not to be. Have you invested the last three years of your life in a career you've decided you don't want to pursue?"

"N-no," she quavered. Her mind was screaming for her to flee, or at least to struggle, but her body had an entirely different agenda, and she simply lay across his knees, unmoving, staring at the floor.

"I think by now you realize how I'm going to deal with you, don't you?"

The words that meekly fell from her lips left her stunned, and maybe even a little afraid. "You—you're going to spank me."

"That's right."

"I've never been spanked before," she confessed, clinging to the bottom of his chair legs.

"That's all right." He patted her thigh. "I know what to do, and I'll be doing most of the work anyway. All you have to do is lie there and make up your mind that you won't ever be late to class again." He was quiet a moment, then asked.

"You won't ever be late again, will you, Julie?"

"I sure hope not," she said shakily.

His warm hand suddenly abandoned the surface of her panties and her entire body jumped when it connected again, an instant later, in a very sharp and uncomfortable manner.

"Oh!" Julie squirmed on his lap, but he wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her securely in place. Her eyes wide, on the verge of either hysterical laughter or panicky screams, she blurted, "Hey, let go! That hurt!"

But Graham didn't let go. He didn't even loosen his grip. "Do you want to try that again?"

"No, I-I won't ever be I-late to class again," she stammered, then cried out, "Oh, NO! Wait!" as Graham's warm hand abandoned her tingling bottom again.

He began a hard, methodical assault against her upturned backside. Each swat of his hand flattened first one buttock, then the other, back and forth, hard but slow, with several seconds in between to allow the full heat of the slaps to sink into her flesh, to burn and to smart.

"Ow!" Julie clenched, struggling to tuck her bottom in as if she could protect it from further abuse. "Please, wait! I don't need any help! I've changed my mind! I've lost my mind! Wait!"

She screwed her eyes shut, hissing her breath through her teeth as he picked up the pace and his hand began to smack faster. And harder. And faster still, until Julie's bottom was bouncing beneath the vigorous application of his palm and there was no such thing as holding still.

She twisted her hips sharply from side to side as he expanded his target area to include the backs of her naked thighs. Her legs kicked, her toes scrapped the linoleum, and every time she let go of the chair and started to reach back, she caught herself and quickly latched onto the wooden legs again. But Graham wasn't swayed. Despite her protests, he turned her bottom a livid cherry red all around the elastic of her panties. Flushed hues of pink could even be seen through the white cotton fabric that stretched taut over the chubby curves he spanked.

"Oh please, Graham, stop!" Tears stung her eyes, but the tone of her pleas was changing. As he raised his hand again and again, she bucked her hips up to meet him. Though it hurt, the growing heat in her bottom was spreading out to her loins.

Julie panted. She could feel the pulsating rhythm of her beating heart pounding in her temples as well as between her legs. The sensation was new and unexpected and frighteningly intense. It turned her insides molten and quickly had the crotch of her underwear soaked with the evidence of her unwitting arousal.

Abruptly, the spanking stopped. Graham caressed her hot buttocks, soothing everywhere he had punished and eliciting soft, mewling gasps and groans from her. When his fingers



delved between her thighs, she parted them without being asked. A slow, shuddering sigh was the only sound she made when he stroked her through the wet, white cloth.

"You have a nice scent when you're aroused," he said mildly. "Though I certainly didn't expect it."

Confused, her bottom aching and on fire, Julie gasped out an apology. "I-I'm s-sor-ry!"

"Don't ever be sorry for being honest about how you feel." He stroked her once more, then took his hand away. "You've no reason to be ashamed. We are, however, going to have to take you beyond that."

She whimpered, though it didn't really sink in exactly what he meant until he hooked the elastic waistband of her underwear and pulled her panties down the backs of her thighs. Julie grabbed his leg, stiffening as she realized how completely naked her bottom was and just how much of her he could now see. She didn't realize Graham was picking up the wooden spoon until it splatted against her already well-paddled skin. She wasn't at all prepared for the intensity of that fresh burst of pain, and her cries turned into real tears and sobs for him to stop before he could even lay the first ten hard swats.

There was no lecture now. He simply blistered her, turning the hot, red color of her bottom to a deeper crimson hue. He now concentrated the majority of his smacks down low on the base of her bottom and the tops of her thighs, every place that would touch chair when Julie tried to sit later on, until she was sobbing and kicking and twisting her hips to escape the spoon just as often as she bucked up to meet it.

Though in reality, he didn't spank her very hard for more than half a minute or so, her pleas had turned to promises of good behavior long before she finally realized that he'd stopped. He held her over his lap, gently rubbing her back and letting her cry.

"That's it," he said. "We're all done."

Tears streamed her face as she slid from his lap to the floor. She knelt between his knees, shakily clinging to one leg while she gently explored her throbbing bottom with light fingertips.

"From now on," he said, "If you aren't in your seat a full five minutes before class starts, I will consider you late and we'll have to repeat this lesson." He took her hand and placed it on the biceps of his arm, which had so soundly spanked her. He didn't flex, but he didn't need to. "I'm not tired," he told her. "If I have to spank you for tardiness twice in the same semester, I won't treat you as gently as I just did. I want you to know that I can spank a long, long, long," he brought his face down close to hers, "long time, if I have to."

She gulped.

"No more late marks on your record. Agreed?"

With a hiccupy gasp, she nodded and let go of his arm.

"Do you like pepperoni pizza?" he asked.

She sniffled and nodded again.

"Good. Give me ten minutes in the corner, bottom bare, no rubbing, and I'll share my pizza with you."

"Extra cheese?" She wiped a stray tear from her cheek.

"You're the boss," he said, then kissed the tip of her nose and sent her to stand in the corner.

Julie Grant completed her final year of college in June of 2002. And though she found herself face-down over his knees frequently in the three years that they were roommates, and though she was barely able to sit throughout the ceremony due to a recent and fairly serious episode, no one clapped harder or cheered for her louder than her roommate and fiancée, Graham Becker, when she graduated with honors.

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## **THE GHOST AND MISS MOORE**

It was a quarter after midnight, and as far as her all-night cram session was going, Trina was beginning to realize there was no way she'd ever pass that biology test tomorrow. That test was three-fourths of her grade, too.

Damn.

Trina Moore leaned back in her chair, blowing out a frustrated breath as she ran her hands through her long, brown hair. Why couldn't college be easy? If it weren't for the fact that it got her away from home, living in a leased turn-of-the-century house on the outskirts of town, and a monthly living expenses check from her father, why, college wouldn't be worth the aggravation. She could have done quite nicely without all of that the going to classes crap and the nuisance of having to study. It was boring. It was slow. But it was also a sweet ride that she could probably milk for another four years before she had to graduate and get a real job.

Unless, of course, she failed this test tomorrow and flunked the course. Her overall grades couldn't take that. And the dean had already let her know in no uncertain terms that there were plenty of willing-to-study and ready-to-achieve applicants waiting to take her place.

She stared at her study books for a long time in silence, then blew out another breath that puffed her bangs up off her forehead. She stood up. Time to switch to Plan B.

She stopped by the kitchen first to make herself a pot of that strong, black, keep-your-butt-up-all-night coffee, then

jogged up the narrow wooden stairs to her bedroom on the second floor. Back in 1897, this house had belonged to the very first schoolmaster, back before the original Everston school burned down and the college was built to replace it. Only it was built two towns over so it would be closer to the state road instead of out in the middle of podunk nowhere, with the sheep and cows and all the Farmer Bobs, driving around in fifty year old trucks that lacked power steering.

But Trina didn't mind the commute to school. And, though small, she rather liked the house. It had a real historical feel to it. It felt like stepping back in time every time she lit the woodstove for heat or slid open one of the heavy wood-paned windows for some of that old-time air conditioning.

In her bedroom, she picked out the clothes she'd wear the next day: a cute pink sweater that showed a little navel and a lot of cleavage. And to balance it out, a white skirt that ended modestly at her knees. A little tight, but nothing too flashy. In fact, it was a rather sedate outfit for her.

She wiggled out of her jeans and climbed into the skirt. Studying herself in the mirror, she turned first one way and then the other. Yup. Just long enough to cover up the meatiest part of her legs—her thighs—the perfect canvas upon which to draw up the perfect cheat sheet.

Trina wore the skirt downstairs to get her first cup of coffee from the kitchen and returned to her books. Even sitting down, the hem of her skirt came only barely above her knees, leaving her with a lot of writing room. The pen of choice had soft pink ink, nothing that would stand out too obviously should anyone happen to glance her way, and yet

bright enough for her to be able to read within the shadows beneath her desk.

She bunched her skirt well up to the tops of her thighs, baring her lightly tanned thighs to strokes from her pen. Starting with her right leg and careful to begin high above the point where the white hem of her skirt would fall, Trina began to copy down some of the more pertinent and difficult to grasp information from her biology book.

"This is intolerable."

Trina nearly jumped a half a foot straight up out of her chair. Her pen clattered to the floor in her guilty haste to yank her skirt back down, and she turned around. Except for herself, the house was as empty as it should have been. There was nobody standing in the kitchen, which was where she thought the man's voice had come from.

She twisted in her chair, turning back the other way, but nope, there was nobody in the living room, either. And aside from the bathroom, that was it for rooms on the entire lower floor of the house.

Must have been a neighbor's TV. Yeah. It had to have been.

Trina eased back into her chair. As she leaned over to retrieve her pink pen, she tried not to think about her nearest neighbor, the sweet, little old lady who lived a quarter of a mile down the road. Boy howdy, she must have had the volume on the boob tube cranked up.

She pulled her skirt back up over her legs again, took another furtive look around the room, then lay her finger on

the page of her biology book so she could find where she'd left off.

*In the presence of lactose, E. coli cells produce large quantities of the enzyme b-galactosidase (b-gal.) from the lac Z gene. In the absence of lactose, no b-gal. is produced. An experiment to determine if the increase is due to an increase in transcription of lac Z mRNA...*

"Got it," Trina muttered, holding her thigh steady and taut as she carefully printed 'Lactose + E. Coli = b-gal (Z). No lac, no b-gal.'

"Shameful."

Trina dropped her pen again as she jumped up from the table.

"The only good to ever come from cheating has been the good delivered from the whippy end of a freshly cut switch."

She ran out to the empty living room to the front closet—which was also the only closet in the entire house. She grabbed her tennis racket for protection.

"Who are you?" she shouted. "*Where* are you?"

There was no answer.

With tennis racket held aloft, she flung open the front door and jumped out onto the porch. She glared right, peering into the dark past the rose bushes, its thorny leaves shimmering in the cool night's breeze, then followed the porch left as it wrapped around the side of the house. Still nothing.

"Trina," she told herself softly, "you don't get to lose it until after finals are over."

A gentle wind rustled the leaves in the tall maples that surrounded the house as she eased herself through the front door.

"Get back inside," she whispered. "Get back to work. Stop hearing things that aren't there."

Without lowering the tennis racket, she closed and locked the door. She even threw the dead bolt for the first time since she'd moved in three months ago. She turned around and promptly screamed. Clutching the tennis racket to her chest as though it were a protective shield, she flattened her back against the door.

He stood at the kitchen table with his back partially towards her. He had to be at least six feet tall and looked to be somewhere in his mid-thirties. Narrow at the shoulder, lean in the hips, his black coat and trousers cut a stern silhouette as he leaned over her biology book, the fingers of his graceful hand holding the pages open while he read. His blonde hair was slicked back, and he wore thin wire spectacles low on the bridge of his nose.

"Reading, writing and arithmetic," he said, his voice soft and low. "Taught to the tune of a hickory switch." He turned his head to give her a very stern glare over the wire rims. "If biology had an 'r' in it, that study would no doubt have made it into the rhyme as well."

"Oo ... o-o-o..." Trina couldn't quite get her lips to work. "W-who-o-o the hell are you?"

"Schoolmaster Nathaniel Barker."

"What the hell are you doing in my house?" Suddenly remembering the racket, she hefted it like a baseball bat. "I



know karate! I've got a scream that can shatter every glass window within a ten mile radius! The police'll get here before you can have your wicked way with me! I'm not kidding! They'll shoot your kneecaps off!"

He didn't look much impressed. "This is my house, Miss Moore. This has always been my house, and so it will always remain. I allowed you to stay because I thought you were serious about furthering your education." He lowered his head, glaring at her even more sternly over the rims of his glasses until she felt almost like a bug under glass. "I was obviously mistaken."

"You're a—" She swallowed hard. "You're a ghost?"

"If you like."

Her palms had begun to sweat, but Trina still managed to dredge up the nerve to take first one small step, then another, and then another. She crept across the living room until she was standing almost within his long-armed grasp. He didn't move so much as an inch as she reached out her tennis racket and poked him in the chest. She jumped back and was instantly Babe Ruth with the racket again. "You're solid enough for me to whack unless you go away! And I mean right now!"

He vanished. Instantly. There was no gradual fading away to nothing. No moment of transparency, or puff of smoke. One moment he was there, the next she was alone in her house, wondering if she were going crazy.

"I swear to God for as long as I live, I'll never eat Mexican food again." The salsa must have been bad. That was the only

explanation for any of this. Either that, or her sister was right and Pepsi really did rot your brains.

"I want you out of my house."

Trina screamed and spun around. The schoolmaster was standing bare inches behind her, his hands clasped behind his back, glaring at her over his spectacles again.

"Oh my god," she said, and lowered the useless racket. Her knees wobbled as she backed up. She sat down heavily, missing her chair and going straight to the floor.

"I want you," he repeated, his tone as hard as steel, "out of my house. I'll not suffer an unrepentant deceiver to live with me."

She blinked up at him. "Look, I have no choice, all right? If I don't pass that test tomorrow, I'll fail the course. If I fail the course, I won't be allowed back into college next quarter. My father'll kill me."

Hanging on the living room wall, the receiver suddenly fell off the cordless phone and clattered noisily to the hardwood floor. There was a click and the line connected light went on. She heard the brief buzz of a dial tone and then the musical tones of a phone number being entered.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Calling your father."

Her eyes bugged. "Oh, whoa!" She scrambled across the floor on hands and knees, grabbing the phone and shutting it off. "What's the matter with you?! Ghosts can't use the phone!"

Clutched to her chest in both hands, the phone clicked on again and the number was redialed.

She fumbled to shut it off, then reached over and, for good measure, yanked the phone wire out of the wall. "Cut it out!"

It clicked on again, and she stared down at the disconnect, no-way-in-hell-should-it-be-operating phone in her hands. Her parents' number was dialed.

She shut it off and quickly held up both hands to stay him. "Wait a minute, please! Look, don't—just—don't tell my folks, okay? It..." Trina looked at the phone and then back at him. "It would just kill them."

He stared at her without any softening or sympathy in his expression. "I will not suffer a cheater."

"Yeah, but I didn't actually cheat."

"Only because you were caught. And the intent is as good as the deed."

"What kind of goody-two-shoes, moralistic crap is that?" Trina snapped with exasperation. "The intent is as good as—" She heard the dial tone as the phone clicked on again. She fumbled to shut it off and held up her hands again. "You're right! You're absolutely right! The intent IS as good as the deed. I'm dead wrong. So just—" she patted the air between. "Just smack my hand with a wet noodle, I'll wash my legs, and we'll—we'll call it good, okay?"

His mouth thinned into a hard, disapproving line. "Your lack of sincerity leads me to believe it is not your hand that could benefit from a good smacking. Nor do I think a wet noodle capable of leaving a lasting impression."

Hugging the phone to her stomach, Trina stood up when he stepped towards her.

"But you'll not be the first errant miss I've set back on the straight and narrow path." He stared hard into her eyes. "Go and wash your legs."

"Are—" Trina stood up slowly. She fidgeted with the phone. "Are you going to call my parents?"

The schoolmaster frowned. "No."

"Are you evicting me?" she asked. "I'd like to point out, I do have a rental lease."

"I could care less."

Good rebuttal.

"Do as I've told you," the schoolmaster said. "We will continue this discussion when you return."

He held out his hand, and after a long hesitation, Trina lay the phone into his palm. Turning around, she walked slowly into the bathroom and closed the door. She sat down on the edge of the tub and stayed there for a good twenty minutes. Until her legs and her hands stopped shaking and she could think a little more clearly.

The schoolmaster was far from Casper, but he hadn't hurt her, either. She didn't think she had a ghost clause in her lease agreement anyway, so she was probably going to be stuck making a year's worth of payments whether she lived here or not.

Living with a ghost might not be all that bad, she tried to tell herself. She'd been here three months now and only seen him this one time. After tonight, she might not see him again before she graduated.

That was the cheery thought that helped to steel her spine as she washed the ink off her thighs, took two deep and calming breaths and opened the bathroom door.

He'd rearranged the kitchen furniture. Three of her four dining chairs were lined up against the wall while the fourth had been set in the middle of the living room floor. Her homework had also been cleared off the table, leaving it suspiciously bare.

As for the schoolmaster, he was standing beside it, his hands clasped behind his back and the ends of a long and whippy switch sticking out to either side of him.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic...

Trina slammed shut the bathroom door and locked it. She sat back down on the edge of the tub and probably would have stayed there all night if she hadn't heard him say: "You will come out and accept the consequences of your actions or I shall cast you out of my home and both your parents and the college shall be informed of your attempt to forge a successful exam."

The skin of her bottom tingled. It wasn't a pleasant sensation.

"I'm not going to let you spank me!" she yelled through the door.

"Then you will leave my home."

She felt the tiniest flutter of panic in her chest at the thought of showing up on her parents' doorstep and having to explain all this. "I won't let you throw me out, either!"

"Then you will accept the consequences of your actions," he repeated, calm and unyielding.

Another twenty minutes passed with Trina sitting on the edge of the tub, jiggling one leg rapidly up and down, trying to come up with an alternative. She couldn't think of a single thing.

From the other side of the door, she heard an almost casual drawl, "Should I start packing your things?"

Trina came out of the bathroom. "All right," she said as she stalked past him. "You can spank me. But it can't hurt."

Following her to the kitchen, he arched his brow at her presumption. The slightest of smiles tugged at the corners of his mouth as he said, "I see." He looked down at the floor and adjusted his spectacles on his nose. "Ah ... have you ever been switched before, Miss Moore?"

"No," she said.

"Ah," he said again, and gave one nod of his head. He looked at her over the rim of his glasses. "Sadly, it's not going to be a happy experience. If it were, everyone would cheat so they could have one."

"So it's going to hurt," she stated, her shoulders drooping. And he replied, "I'm going to do my best. Yes."

"I don't like you."

"That's inconsequential," the schoolmaster said. "Lessons that the brain refuses to accept can often be absorbed better through the bottom."

"I really don't like you," she said.

Again that flicker of amusement touched his eyes, and his mouth turned up in another brief smile. "Would you like to go over the chair or the table? That's as much choice as you're going to get at this point."

She bowed her head and headed for the table. She faced it as though it were her greatest nemesis, her mouth a moue of distaste. She couldn't believe she was doing this.

"I'm twenty years old," she said. "Twenty-year-olds don't get spanked."

"I partially agree. Most twenty-year-olds don't require it. Now, would you like to raise your skirt out of the way, or shall I?"

"What?! You never said anything about undressing!"

"Did I not?" He arched both brows. "Hm. I suppose, then, now would be the time to declare that your undergarments shall also be taken down."

"You—you're going to—" she lowered her voice, "—t-to spank my bare bottom?"

"And it's going to do you a world of good," he said.

"Evict me!" she snapped, and stomped away from the table. "Call my parents! I don't care!"

She ran up the stairs to her bedroom.

Five seconds later, she came back down the stairs, walked up to the table, stared at it and sighed. Then she gave him a rather disgruntled, sideways look. "I want my panties left on."

"You probably do."

But when he didn't add anything else to his quiet statement, and when he didn't make any further concessions, she sighed again, reached slowly up underneath her skirt and lowered her panties. Then she bent over the table.

"Grab onto the other side," he directed. "You're going to need something to hang onto."

The sound Trina made was like a self-pitying mew, but she reached across to take hold of the opposite edge with both hands and held on tight.

The first thing the schoolmaster did was to flip up the hem of her skirt and bare her partially panty-covered backside. He hooked her panties with two fingers and dragged them down her thighs to half-mast.

Trina mewed again and buried her face in her outstretched arms.

"Now," he said, trailing the switch through his hands.  
"Let's discuss the merits of cheating."

Oh lord, now he wanted to talk.

"What do you have to gain by it?"

"I pass the test and get a passing grade on the course," she said. That was one pretty good-sized merit in her book.

"Using information you don't know," he said. "So who does that help?"

When bare bottomed and bent over a table, there was only one answer to that kind of question. Trina sighed again, staring at the oak wood-grain bare inches from the tip of her nose. "Nobody," she said softly.

But it was still a pretty good-sized merit.

The switch made a high-pitched whistle as it sliced through the air. She felt the whuck as it burrowed into the fleshy base of her bottom, pushing her up on the table. And yet for the first half of a second, there wasn't any pain. That came another half second later, and it made up for the delay in sensation with a fiery vengeance.



Trina sucked in a noisy breath, her whole body stiffening with a jerk as the second one lashed into her a hair's-breadth above the first burning stripe. She screamed at three, and four and five slashed down with welt-raising intensity across her instantly clenching buttocks. They had her yelping and fighting to climb up on the table, and she had one leg up over the edge before he could grab her ankle. To her credit though, she didn't let go of the opposite site of the table.

"Put your feet down!" he ordered. He caught hold of the scruff of her shirt and hauled her back into place.

She snapped her feet up to cover her bottom. "Please! Owie! No! NO!"

"Move them!" the schoolmaster snapped. He flicked the switch across her shins and, though the blow was nowhere near as sharp as the ones he'd lain across her smarting backside, it was hard enough to raise a stinging welt, and Trina jerked her feet back down on the floor.

Yelping, she stomped on tiptoes, dancing in place as he continued to spank her. Her bottom felt so hot, and it stung so fiercely everywhere the switch had kissed it. Her hands slipped on the edge of the table as the number of strokes grew successively higher, and she yelled into her arms with everything she had.

The schoolmaster stopped at ten and waited for her to wind down, her screams and dry sobs dissolving into ragged pants.

"Ow!" she whimpered. "Oh ow! Oh thank god!" She started to push herself up off the table.

"We're not done yet."

Blinking back tears of pain, she meekly bent back over the edge.

"Tell me, if you don't benefit from falsifying your test answers, who does? What are you studying?"

"Veterinary medicine."

"Do you think your patients will appreciate your ignorance when it comes time to treat their ailments?"

Burying her face in her outstretched arms, Trina shook her head.

"Will it have been worth a passing grade if an incorrect diagnosis costs an animal it's life?"

Trina stared at the table. A sting of tears not entirely due to the sting in her bottom had her rapidly blinking again.

"No." She hadn't even thought of that.

The switch whistled sharply through the air and bit into her with a vengeance. He spanked her hard, each lash feeling like a slice of pure fire cutting into her. Every inch of her throbbing bottom was already covered in welts and, as the switch began to criss-cross all the tender places where it had already been, the slashes of fire became white-hot agony that felt as if it were cutting her to her soul.

It was a fight to keep her feet down, to keep from rolling onto her sides to avoid the sharp, whistling strokes he was lancing into her from behind. It hurt! Oh, it hurt! And her yelps turned into full fledged screams midway through the second set of ten.

"Noo!" she wailed. "Sto-o-op! Please stop! Please!"

As lost as she was in the pain, Trina didn't even realize that she was crying until the final swish-thwack! cut across

her scorched nether cheeks and the schoolmaster did, finally, stop.

Trina let go of the table, but didn't get up. Lying on her stomach, crying with a pain too deep for words, she grabbed hold of her bottom with both hands. It felt swollen and very firm beneath her fingers, lined in places where he'd caught her particularly hard. And even when the hurt finally receded slightly, leaving behind a pulsing ache, Trina didn't get up. She lay on the table until he took her by the arm and helped her to stand.

The muscles of her buttocks rebelled against the slightest of movements, and a whole new sizzling pain spread through them when she tottered a hesitant step.

"OoowwwWWW!" Her head fell back on her shoulders and she bounced up and down, clutching and rubbing to put out the heat.

"That," the schoolmaster said over her sobs, "is just a taste of what you'll get if I ever, ever," his tone dropped ominously low, "ever catch you cheating again. Am I very clear?"

Swiping at her tears with the back of her wrist, Trina nodded. "Y-yes. Oooh! Yes, I promise. Ow! Oh!" She bent over, clutching her bottom as, all at once, every welt he'd put on her seemed to suddenly flare with extra heat. She broke down into fresh tears. "I swear I won't ever do it again! Oh, I swear!"

"Good." The schoolmaster picked up her books and laid them out on the table. "You may pull up your panties now."

"Oh," she winced. "Do I have to?"

"Yes." He went to get her chair, probably so he could laugh at her while his back was turned.

Elastic was a heinous invention specifically designed to torment the freshly spanked. The scrape of her otherwise soft cotton panties made her eyes close and her teeth clench. She hissed as the leg bands settled into place right over the top of some of her throbbing welts.

The schoolmaster patted the seat of her hard, wooden chair. "Sit."

The cotton and elastic became sandpaper rough, scraping across her raw flesh as she limped the three excruciating steps to her seat and gingerly lowered herself upon it.

"Now." Taking one of the other chairs, he pulled it up to the table and sat down beside her. "I used to be rather good at biology. Where are you confused?"

She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt and sniffed. "Biology has probably changed since you were last in..." she looked at his clothes, "...in school."

Having pulled her book into his lap, he turned the pages back to the beginning of the chapter and laid the switch on the table between them. "You are going to get three of my best with that for every answer you miss tomorrow. Would you like help with this or not?"

She got up from the table and, holding her bottom and taking baby steps as well, walked into the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To get more coffee. I have a feeling I'm going to need it."

"Only half a cup," he told her. "I'll allow you to study another hour or so, but then you're going to get a good

night's sleep. Tonight will be the exception, but from now on you're to be in bed no later than eleven-thirty. No more staying up until all hours."

Her jaw dropped and she turned around to stare at him. "What?!"

"You heard me," he said and calmly turned the page he was reading. "And while we're discussing rules. I don't like that Jeff fellow you brought home last night. He was entirely too fresh with his hands. In fact, no more men in the house period."

"You were here while I—while Jeff ... How much did you see?"

"Just about everything." He flipped another page. "I can see in the dark."

She gaped at him. He wasn't a ghost; he was her mother.

"Get your coffee and come and sit down. We've got a lot of studying to squeeze into the next hour."

Trina got her coffee, but as she headed back to the table, she was already tallying how many days remained in her lease before she could find a new place to live.

"Two hundred and seventy-seven," the schoolmaster said, and looked at her over the rim of his spectacles, his mouth once more curling at the corners in a very knowing smile. "But don't worry, Miss Moore. I'll have made a model pupil out of you long before then."

Oh God....

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## THE VIKING

Svend kicked open the door to his hut, not because he was angry, but because his hands were full. Thrown over his shoulder was, without a doubt, the feistiest blonde-headed wench that he'd ever had the privilege of capturing. She was kicking and flailing and cursing him at the top of her lungs, and just generally looked so adorable in her flashing-eyed, red-cheeked outrage that it was all he could do not to laugh at her.

"Lumbering oaf!" she shouted, beating her fists upon his broad back. "Swine! Son of a coward and a rutting sow!"

That wasn't quite so humorous and Svend gave her upturned bottom a sharp smack before dumping her from his shoulder onto the bed. She bounced on the downy mattress and came up again spitting and fighting mad, one hand ducking behind her to rub the sting from her affronted backside. Now he did laugh. She was at least half his size and a female, and still intent on battling him. Her persistence pleased him.

"You may as well content yourself to my service," he told her. "I have taken you as my *ambatt*. You now belong to me."

Her cheeks flushed even hotter and she snarled, "I would sooner slit your throat!"

He arched his brows. "I have known women to be executed for far lesser insults than the one you just dealt me. Mayhaps you should pay heed to care and consideration where your tongue and I are concerned."

"I would sooner serve Hel in Niflhel, the ninth underworld, than to serve the likes of you!"

Svend merely nodded acknowledgment of her preferences and, tucking his thumbs into his wide belt, said, "Be that as it may, until the happy day when you might see that wish fulfilled, you shall attend my hearth and you shall do so with cheerfulness."

The gaze of her snapping blue eyes shifted from him towards the door.

Svend smiled. "If you attempt the sin of running away, I shall have no choice but to beat you. Come, woman. Do not force my hand into unpleasantness. Instead, up with you. It has been a long day and I would have my supper."

She looked from the door back to him, and then across the room to the cooking pit.

"Up," he said again cheerfully. "I would have my supper within the hour."

The look she gave him plainly said she'd have preferred to serve his own head up to him, but with one last wishful glance at the door beyond him, she turned and stalked into the kitchen.

Knowing better than to put his back to her, at least not without removing all knives from her reach, Svend seated himself at the table to watch as she knelt down to start the fire. She was quite capable. She built the fine tinder quickly and, within only a few strikes on the flint, bent all the way down to the ground, tucking her hair back with both hands as she gently blew to coax the flame to life.

His eyes followed her down, not minding a bit when the neckline of her tan woolen dress peeked away from the luscious curves of her pale breasts. He smiled when she sat up, completely nonplused when she only glared fiercely back at him. He had all night and even longer if need be, to soothe the buxom maiden's wounded pride. And whether she be won by a length of pretty ribbon, or a bolt of soft cloth, or fresh food upon the table, doubtless it wouldn't take him long to it shouldn't take too long. After all, she was only a woman, the prize of a battlefield, how difficult could it be?

\* \* \* \*

"Slavery is good for some women," Svend said amiably. "It teaches them obedience."

Eldrid nearly dumped his supper over his head. Her hands trembled to do it. Sheer force of will made her set the pot on the table and turn and walk away.

"You should be happy I've made you my *ambatt*." He took hold of the pot's ladle and began to transfer a hefty portion of stew into his trough. "Yes, you have lost your freedom. But at least you will not starve. And so long as you work hard and remain obedient, then I shall not beat you too often."

She spun back around to face him, but his eyes were twinkling in a way that suggested he was only teasing her. Still, she did not appreciate his humor and she all but bit off her own tongue in the effort to keep from telling him so. Instead, she grabbed a loaf of hard bread and thumped it onto the table beside him before walking past him to get the wine pitcher down from a wall shelf.



"You might also do well to rid yourself of all that extra spirit, my high tempered one," he noted, picking up the bread and breaking off a chunk. "Spirit is an admirable thing in a warrior woman. Not so admirable in an *ambatt*."

Pitcher in hand, Eldrid squared angrily against him once again. Her eyes flashed, her nostrils flared. She thunked the pitcher down almost upon his hand, and would likely have pinched his fingers beneath the clay pot had he not, in a moment of clairvoyant foresight, moved them out of danger.

"Is there anything else you'd like?" she asked, her voice trembling from the effort it took to be civil.

"Companionship while I sup would not be unwelcome," he said and patted the space on the bench beside him. "You may even share my plate."

Her blue eyes flashed. "I'd rather sup with the pigs."

"And you may yet," he agreeably said, "unless you sit yourself beside me, share my meal, and offer up civil conversation, as has been requested of you, my brash young slave, by your long-suffering master."

She glared at him, but after a moment, obligingly sat down beside him. He pushed the trough closer towards her. She'd have sooner dined on poisonous mushrooms, but when he broke off a piece of bread and forced it into her hand, Eldrid gave up on useless resistance. Going to bed hungry, she told herself, wasn't likely to have disturbed him as much as it would herself anyway.

Eldrid waited for what felt like forever with her heart in her throat, until she was sure he had to be well and truly gone by now. She stole a piece of fruit from the bowl on the table and

a hunk of bread, stuffing both deep into her skirt pockets, then she fled the cabin. She had no place to go, but anywhere had to be better than living out the rest of her life as a slave for that pig-headed brute of a Viking. She let the door slam behind her and was just coming down off the porch when she glimpsed a flash of movement from the corner of her eye. Her head snapped around just as Svend stepped out of the smoke house, a haunch of meat in his hands for their supper.

Eldrid froze in shock, and for a moment they simply stared at one another. Then his eyes narrowed and turning on her heels, she fled around the side of the house, running for all that she was worth for the forest and the mountains beyond them.

It was a venture doomed to failure from the start. Svend caught her before she cleared her first twenty yards of freedom, and tackled her to the ground. The minute she felt his hands fasten onto her, Eldrid became a screaming, clawing, bucking, scratching wildcat in his arms. He wrestled her onto her back, catching her wrists before she caught his face with her sharpened nails.

Incredulously, Svend began to laugh. "You don't give up. I like that."

There were no words to describe Eldrid's outrage. She spat at him instead, and his smile abruptly disappeared.

"I can see we shall have to do something about all this extra spirit."

He got up, pulling her to her feet by her arms. Before she could even catch her balance, he bent and his shoulder hit her stomach. She shrieked as her feet abruptly left the

ground and she was hoisted into the air, thrown over his shoulder like only so much bagged and unwieldy grain.

He carried her back inside the house, unshouldering her off onto his bed before turning around to shut and throw the lock on the door. Though she scrambled to get off the bed, he was back before she could manage it, catching her by the scruff of her dress and pulling her, tripping and stumbling off balance over her own feet all the way to the stool by the hearth.

"No!" she pulled back stiff-armed when he sat down, but one strong jerk of her arm and she fell sprawling across his thighs, still spitting and fighting but with a tinge of franticness beginning to taint her screams.

"You need to resign yourself to your new place in life, woman," Svend growled, catching her flailing wrists and pulling them behind her back.

She tried to roll off his lap, but he leaned against the small of her back, pinning her down until all she could do was kick her legs, drumming her feet uselessly upon the floor.

"I will have your respect," Svend said.

"When you are dead and with the gods!" she spat back.

Some of his good humor returned at that, and he actually began to laugh. But then he caught the back of her woolen skirts and suddenly Eldrid felt a cool rush of air as he pulled the back of them up her legs and tossed them back over her hips. She gasped and, for a moment, the shock of having her bottom suddenly bared to her Viking captor stilled her kicking.

Svend wasted little time in securing her legs between his own, securing his clenching target in the proper position to receive a dose of much needed discipline.

Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "Don't you dare!" she declared, twisting and pulling to free her pinned wrists and jerk her skirt back down to cover herself again. "No!"

"You have an unruly tongue," Svend said, amicably good natured, even now, his strong right arm rising up, his rough hand held high to deliver her a blow. "And if you will not mind it, *ambatt*, then I will mind it for you."

"No!" she cried again, a high pitched note of panic creeping into her voice.

His palm came crashing down anyway, catching the under curve of her right buttock, his hand molding and flattening the soft, springy flesh with the strength of the blow and leaving behind the pinkening imprint of his fingers and palm on her otherwise pale and unmarred skin.

Eldrid gaped in reflex, although the real discomfort didn't sink in, it seemed, until he took his hand away. Warmth flared through her buttock and the sharp sting intensified in that split second before his hand came crashing down again. Eldrid jerked, every muscle in her body tensing hard as he began to spank in earnest, every slap of his hand sounding as loud as a thunderclap in the close confines of the room. With each flat-palmed crack, the heat in her belabored bottom was growing as was the sting, increasing and intensifying until the ignominy of her positioning across his knee became a secondary consideration when compared to the fire he was rapidly igniting in her hinds.

And it wasn't just her bottom that paid the price for her attempted escape. With a hand that felt as hard as iron, he spanked so ferociously down the backs of her tender thighs that all sense of indignation turned instantly into self-preservation. She wrenched at her arms, but his grip was inflexible. Her toes scraped the ground, but she could neither push nor pull nor jerk nor squirm her way off his knee.

Without the slightest pause, his hand continued to rise and fall until everything behind her burned like fire, from the tops of her hips all the way down the backs of her legs almost to her knees. And along that smarting, aching seam where her bottom melded into her thighs and the pain of each thunderclap whap left Eldrid screeching at the top of her lungs and shimmying her bottom in a desperate effort to shake off the burning pain, that's where Svend suddenly turned his attention. He spanked her there until the surface of her skin felt swollen and scorched and mere pain seemed no longer adequate to describe her suffering. This was agony, and it broke her.

Her defiance crumbled beneath a wave of tears as she suddenly cried out, "Stop!"

Svend paid her no attention and his arm seemed tireless. Just when she thought she could bear no more, his focus shifted again to the backs of her thighs, first one leg and then the other, back and forth, relentless and merciless, until Eldrid was shrieking her pleas.

"Stop, my lord! Stop, I beg you! Please, by Thor's mighty hammer, I'll never speak another word against you! I'll hold my tongue! I'll hold my tongue!"

"You certainly will," he agreed, and returned his focus back to her bottom with a vigor that all but felt angry. Suddenly all the strength of his arm was behind each swat and there was nothing she could do to stop it. No direction that she could twist or turn to evade his discipline, and no plea that she could cry out to stay his punishing hand. Not until he decided that she'd had enough. And finally, with her face streaked by tears and no thought in her head but for the pain, his hand came to rest on her hot, sore flanks.

With a tender caress, he soothed the ache he'd created, letting her weep while the hurt receded into a smoldering pulsating heat that totally consumed her from behind.

He released her wrists and legs, saying, "Sit up."

She did, albeit with ginger motions as she pushed herself backwards off his lap. When she tried to kneel upon the floor, he stopped her, pulling her onto his lap instead.

"Come to me, *ambatt*." He patted his leg. "Show me your newfound obedience."

Moving made the heat in her buttocks and thighs flare as hot as the coals in the fire pit, but to be seen as disobeying him again already was the last thing Eldrid wanted.

Laying her hand upon his shoulder, she gingerly lowered herself to straddle his thighs. The tears started again the instant her hot bottom scrapped against his pants.

"Shh," he murmured, as he kissed them from her cheeks.

She bent forward, pressing her forehead to his shoulder and moaning softly when he cupped her aching bottom in his hands. He lightly squeezed, then rubbed, and that part almost felt nice. So much so that she didn't even protest when he

tenderly kissed her lips. In fact, sniffing softly, she even kissed him back

\* \* \* \*

Passion spent, they lay cuddled together in bed: he on his back, she on her side, curled up against him with her head upon his chest. Her arm was twined lovingly around his waist and the fingers of her right hand were interwoven with his own.

His chest rose as he took a deep contented breath and slowly let it out again. "Damn, honey, I can't believe how hot you get over this Viking stuff."

Her blonde hair tussled across his chest and down her back, her eyes sleepily closed, the woman only smiled.

"Want to play something else?" he suggested.

"Nope," she said.

"Oh, come on, Cheryl."

"It's my birthday," she said, lifting her head to look at him. "You said I could be anything I wanted to, even Eldrid, and that you'd plunder and pillage me all weekend. To my little black heart's content, you said."

"Yes, but it's a very scratchy hat. Now I know why the Vikings were so fierce. I'd be fierce too if I had to wear a hat like that all the time."

"Well, all right." Cheryl sat up. Her lower lip protruded in a half-hearted pout. "But won't you plunder me just one more time?" She walked her fingers up his stomach to his chest, deviating slightly to the right to teasingly caress a loving circle around his nipple. "Eldrid still has some naughtiness to

be spanked for. After all, a disrespectful *ambatt* is hardly a credit to her master's household."

His muscles were tensing with every passing circle of her fingertip. "But it's a scratchy hat," he protested, already weakening to her request.

"Just wear it once more, and then we'll play something else I promise," she coaxed. "We'll go down to the water and you can be the big, strong, sports fisherman, who catches a mermaid." She lay a path of teasing, coaxing kisses that trailed in the wake of her fingers, all the way up his chest to his chin, and then his mouth. Very gently, she nibbled his bottom lip. "I'll even wear the tail fin."

"The iridescent one," he asked, his resolve weakening even more as his breathing quickened.

"With the drop-seat," she affirmed. "So everything will be nice and accessible."

Svend smacked Eldrid's bottom sharply. "Up with you, wench," he said, grinning. "I'm hungry and want some supper."

"Fix it yourself," Eldrid snapped back. She tried to get up from the bed, but Svend caught her arm and pulled her, naked and shouting, back down across the bed and his lap. She bucked and wriggled, but he was still stronger and he held her easily in place.

He grinned even as his hand began that now familiar rhythm, smacking down again and again, despite her shouted threats and cries for him to stop, across her plump and already blushing backside. It was going to be a long time, but he was up for it. He continued to spank her, each juddering



bounce of her naked bottom cheeks and frantic kick of her legs, flashing him peek-a-boo glances of the quivering femininity that she, in her desperate struggles to get away, no longer bothered herself to hide.

Oh yes, he smiled, he was very 'up' for it, indeed.

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## **THE TOURNAMENT**

Northumberland, England

In the year of our Lord 1126

The whole of the tournament field was surrounded and partitioned out by a multitude of ribbons and brightly colored flags that snapped in the mid-summer wind. It was a warm day, the sun was shining, the sky was a brilliant shade of blue without a single cloud to mar the rich, sapphire hue, and Malcolm Hay of Yester had made it to the final jousting rounds. This in and of itself had been no small feat, considering that someone had been out to sabotage his efforts seemingly since the day he'd arrived to compete in the games Gerard Mayfield had arranged.

The first act of sabotage had been the disappearance of his lances. Every single one of them. Malcolm had sent young Ian MacDuff, his lanky, teenaged squire, all over the camp in search for them, but the lances didn't reappear until three days later. In the meantime, Francois had been more than willing to share his own supplies, which was all that had kept Malcolm in the tournament.

Then, of course, had come the mud in his boots. The bees' nest in his tent, the thorns under his saddle blanket that had pricked his horse until it reared in complaint, throwing Malcolm to the ground. And when his lances finally did reappear ... well, he shook his head. He was just grateful that

he'd discovered the sawn tips before he'd tried to use them in the competition. His misfortunes had already made of him a laughingstock among the spectators, as well as his fellow knights. He didn't think his pride could survive an accusation of cheating. He knew with certainty that what little favor he'd garnered with Mayfield, hard won that it had been on the field these last many days, would have dissolved to nothing should it be discovered that he'd made his points with deliberately weakened lances. Culpable or not, Malcolm would have been thrown from the game, and Mayfield would have bestowed his favor, as well as his handsomely dowered daughters, upon somebody else.

Not that Gerard Mayfield was anyone of serious import, but he did have money and that was what Malcolm needed.

One of England's wealthiest merchants, newly knighted by Henry I, Mayfield loved games. He had four daughters, two of which were now at a marriageable age, and it was for them that this tournament had been arranged. Katherine was the oldest, a sweet and biddable girl, ready with a smile, beautiful both in face as well as voice, a woman who would make an enviable wife.

Then there was Eleanore, just as beautiful, a dark-haired, dark-eyed siren like her sister, although that was where the similarities ended. Neither biddable nor sweet, Ellie was, instead, clever. She had wit and guile and, judging by the way she'd looked at him a week before when he'd first approached her father in the old knight's own Great Hall, seeking to join the ranks of the other hopeful competitors vying for her hand, she didn't much care for Scottish men.

"I will be dead upon my own knife," she'd announced, loud enough for everyone within a twenty yard radius to hear, "before I wed a savage Scot!"

"Do not embarrass me!" Gerard had snapped at her.

But she'd jumped haughtily to her feet just as quickly, saying, "You embarrass yourself by allowing that savage on the field!" And then turning on her heel, snapped her skirts up in her hands and stalked from the room.

Now, seven days later, the number of contestants had been whittled down to five remaining men: himself; Edward Marshall of Rutland; Hugh Urry of Wiltshire; Denten Speede of Anglesey; and Francois du Bois. All were English except for Francois, a tall and lanky Frenchman who was consistently quick with a joke and lop-sided grin. Malcolm genuinely liked him, despite the fact that the man was a bit ... well, flowery, both in prose as well as walk, and he wore more perfume than a battalion of brothel workers. And then, of course, there was himself. One of only two Scottish contestants. The other had been defeated early on in the game. He'd gone home days ago, not bothering to stay to cheer the final two victors.

Over two hundred contestants had crowded these fields. At least twice that number occupied the galleys, perching on hillsides and along the sidelines, anywhere there was a vacant space where the competitors could be glimpsed. All of them were eager to see if their favorite knight would outlast the rest and take home the prize.

Malcolm turned and his eyes scanned the covered stand where Gerard sat, the prizes, Katherine and Ellie, as well as his two youngest daughters, perched on tall-backed chairs to

his right. Malcolm shook his head. It was amazing, the lengths to which a man would go to win himself a wealthy wife.

Standing on the edge of the battlefield in full armor, Malcolm finished buckling his helmet into place. He looked down the length of the field at Edward and Francois, who were saluting one another, a prelude to lowering their lances and charging at top speed to see who could knock the other from his horse. Personally, Malcolm was rooting for Francois. Edward was an ass.

When he glanced back at Ellie, instead of finding her watching the contestants on the field, her dark eyes were on him. Her cheeks flushed, and she promptly lifted her pert little nose into the air and looked away. It was still enough to make Malcolm smile. He found the young Lady Eleanore very, very appealing. If he didn't stand to get run through for it, he was sorely tempted to ride down to the Mayfield stand, to pull her from her seat and kiss her soundly, boldly laying his claim before one and all. Unfortunately, such brass actions did not place one favorably in a future father-in-law's graces.

Francois and Edward charged headlong at one another, and Malcolm stole that as an excuse to whoop and cheer. His eyes, however, remained in the stands and on Ellie, who blushed fiercely, although determined not to look at him again. It was Francois who won the match; by skill or by happy chance, he broke one lance more upon the mighty Edward's chest and emerged victorious upon the field. His horse all but pranced up to the stand so that he could salute

Mayfield and his daughters. Now it was Malcolm's turn, and his opponent was Sir Hugh of Wiltshire.

To say that they were evenly matched was something of an overstatement. If anything, Hugh had a good deal more experience in the field than he did. It was even rumored that he wasn't as much in need of an heiress as he desired to meet the challenge of the game. With any luck, Malcolm hoped his own little bit of financial desperation would give him enough of an edge to see himself to victory.

He turned to his horse and, after a thorough check beneath the saddle blanket to make sure there were no thorns or burrs this time, mounted. Over his shoulder he saw Ian hurrying towards him on gangly, teenaged limbs, hauling the first of what would no doubt be a good many jousting lances in his skinny arms.

"You keep them comin', lad," Malcolm said, and Ian grinned up at him, squinting his eyes against the noonday sun.

"Aye, sir. Feed the mon a dirt supper!"

Malcolm grinned at him, and dropped the protective visor of his helmet down over his eyes. He felt his horse tense with the excitement of a battle charge, the equine's muscles bunching beneath his thighs as he turned his mount around and began to gallop towards the field.

In his heart of hearts, Malcolm knew if only he could have made it to the field, he might have had a chance at victory. Unfortunately, as fate would have it, he made it only halfway there before, suddenly, his secure seat gave abruptly way and both he and his saddle went tumbling to the earth. He

barely missed being caught beneath the galloping hooves of his own horse, which didn't stop merely because Malcolm was not longer riding atop him. And the momentum of the charge left Malcolm rolling in the dirt, a clanking mass of stiffened armor, until he finally came to a stop lying flat on his back in the dirt, stunned.

The sun was almost straight over head, blinding him, and despite his helmet and visor, he could taste the dirt in his mouth. It was also the taste of defeat.

Moving slowly, Malcolm picked himself up off the ground, the ringing in his ears gradually becoming a roar that distinguished itself, as he became vertical, into the sound of hundreds of people laughing. All of them laughing ... at him.

Beginning to shake, although whether from rage or adrenaline he wasn't sure, Malcolm picked himself up off the ground, not even bothering to brush off the dust as he walked slowly to where his saddle lay in the dirt not ten feet from the spot where he'd fallen. As he neared it, the reason for his unceremonious fall became unerringly obvious. The end of one half of the cinch strap lay against of clump of trampled grass, three-fourths of which had been quite plainly cut. Malcolm squatted down to pick up the end in his hand.

A shadow fell across him and he looked up to find Hugh, still on the back of his horse, raising his visor. "Are you yet in one piece, Scotsman?"

Malcolm turned the cut end over in his hand, the lingering laughter of the other knights and onlookers fanning the fury building within him until his face burned as hot as the sun basking across his armored shoulders.

"That has been deliberately severed," Hugh said, his face unsmiling as he, too, looked at the strap.

Malcolm looked at him. His mouth compressed in a tight hard line and he said nothing.

Hugh's horse shifted under him, but his opponent quickly pulled the animal back under control. "I would not win the match this way, Scotsman. I will best you in points or unseat you from your horse with the end of my lance. This," he nodded his head at the cinch strap, "is not of my doing."

And the real bugger of it was, as much as he didn't want to, Malcolm believed him.

"Have you another saddle?"

Malcolm nodded stiffly and stood up. He looked across the field, finally spotting his horse grazing along the base of a nearby hillside of spectators, Ian already halfway to retrieving it.

"Get it. We will match again after the midday meal." Hugh turned his horse towards the kingly dais upon which Gerard and his daughters watched the game. When he reached it, although too far away for Malcolm to hear what was said, Gerard's face lost all trace of amusement. Cheating in such a manner was a serious matter, but that didn't mean the old Knight was required to grant Malcolm a second chance. Still, Malcolm's shoulders eased a bit when he saw his host nod in agreement to Hugh's suggestion, although Ellie promptly stood up in a huff and stalked off the stage.

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Malcolm stormed across the makeshift encampment towards his own tent, his scowl as black as the midnight hour. Throwing his helmet down on the ground, he ducked his head and walked into his tent to retrieve his squire's well-patched saddle. He promptly stopped midway through the flap when he spied the richly dressed woman pouring honey from a heavy crock onto his cot just beneath the blankets.

"You!" he bellowed, before he even quite understood what he was seeing.

Jumping, the woman spun to face him and her face paled. She abruptly dropped the honey crock and fell to her knees, scrambling to get under the flap of the tent and away. But in four long steps, Malcolm was across the room.

He grabbed her by the ankles, hauling her right back under the lip of the tent canvas and caught hold of the scruff of her neck. He pulled her back up to her feet, spinning her roughly around and catching both her shoulders. He shook her, "Who are you, and why are you plaguing me?"

She slapped at his hands and kicked his shin, which likely did her more damage than himself, especially since he was still in full armor and the shoes she wore were soft and fancy.

"Speak!" he thundered, shaking her again. "Who sent you here?"

"Let go of me or I shall scream!" the woman cried. But her threat was undermined by her wide, frightened eyes and the trembling in her tone.

"Will you now? I find myself wondering if that might not be a good thing. Go on then. Scream. Bring everybody running to your aid, so I may show them the culprit who has been

sabotaging me from the day I arrived here!" Grabbing hold of her arm, Malcolm dragged her to his bed. "Better yet, why don't I help you with your screaming. I confess, I am angry enough now to provide you with a good deal of incentive!"

The woman stiffened her legs, drawing back when he sat down on the head of the bed and with little effort, jerked her down across his lap. She fell nearly face down in the honey she'd been pouring.

"Oh no!" She thrust a hand back, palm up over her backside to ward off blows. "No, no! Please, do not beat me! I did not want to do it! She made me!"

"Who?" Malcolm demanded.

When she hesitated, he took hold of her wrist and twisted it up behind her. When he raised his hand threateningly, she kicked once and cried out, "My mistress, Lady Eleanore!"

"You cut through the cinch of my saddle?"

"Yes!" she cried with another small kick, twisting her hips this way and that, clenching her bottom as she cringed in anticipation of feeling the force of the angry hand, threateningly raised high above her. Sniffing, she even began to cry. "Yes, she told me to cut your saddle so you would not stay in the game."

"And?" he growled.

She bowed her head, weeping. "A-and to pour mud inside y-your shoes, and honey in your bed, and unstitch your banner."

Malcolm's mouth tightened into a hard flat line, his palm just itching to paddle the sobbing girl's backside until the reason for her tears glowed right through the layers of her

skirts like a beacon of fire! Only by the most supreme effort, did he stay his arm.

"She does not like you," the woman cried. "She does not want you to win her father's favor! Please, my lord, don't spank me for obeying my mistress's commands! I had no other choice!"

Still seething, Malcolm nevertheless let go of her wrist, took hold of the scruff of her neck and pulled her roughly back onto her feet. "You will clean up this mess you have made. I will have a fresh and dry bed to lie upon tonight, or I will take my belt to your mischievous hide."

He gave her one last shake and then let her go.

Her eyes wide, the woman dropped into a hasty curtsy and fled the tent ahead of him in her rush for a bowl of water to clean with.

With long and angry strides, Malcolm followed her outside, but then turned for the Mayfield's great home, sprawled as it was just on the other end of the makeshift knights' encampment. He more stormed the distance than walked it, teeth gritted, broad hands fisted at his sides. He may have no more hope of winning a richly dowered Mayfield bride to help rebuild his clan, but before he left, he had every intention of teaching that clever young lady a thing or two about playing tricks on grown men of honor.

The dinner meal was well underway by the time he reached the Great Hall. His temper in full boil, he stalked down the aisle between the long tables where hundreds of men and women were enjoying their food and drink. Some laughed when they saw him, but Malcolm didn't spare any of

them so much as a glance. His eyes were locked on the lovely Ellie as he stormed the length of the Hall until he stood opposite of the old knight's table, right in front of his host's prankster daughter.

She set her goblet of wine down and stared haughtily back at him. If she felt any remorse at all for having made of him a laughingstock this past week, then she hid it well behind dark eyes that fairly crackled with derision.

"Have you come to bid me goodbye?" she asked. "Since you so obviously have little skill in sitting a horse, I doubt anyone would blame you for giving up."

Malcolm stared at her a moment, and then leaned across the table and grabbed her by the shoulders. She barely had time to gasp her outrage at being touched before he pulled her up and over her half-eaten plate.

Her gasp was echoed by the assembled diners. He heard the sharp whine as a multitude of knives were whisked from their scabbards and, as Ellie screamed and grabbed his hands, from the corners of his eyes, Malcolm saw a good dozen of Sir Mayfield's men leaping up from their seats to have at him.

It was Gerard Mayfield who came to his aid, holding up a hand to stay his rapidly advancing men as Malcolm dragged her across the table.

"Let go of me!" Ellie screeched, fighting and pulling at his hold even as he dragged her over the table. She beat at him with her fists and kicked out wildly, but between his armor and the skirts that hampered her, she did more to knock over the surrounding wine pitchers, goblets, and scattered meat

and vegetables flying from their platters, than she did to injure him.

Pulling her off the table, Malcolm tucked her, kicking, screaming, and flailing her limbs, like only so much cumbersome baggage beneath his arm. Stalking away from the table, Malcolm found an empty bench on one of the lower trenches and, hooking it with one foot, pulled it out into the empty space normally reserved for fools and entertainers.

"Get your hands off me!" Ellie cried, redoubling her fight as he sat down upon that bench and, without a word, muscled her down across his armored thighs. "Father! Help me!"

But Mayfield only leaned back in his chair to enjoy the spectacle. He popped a piece of pork into his mouth and shouted out an encouraging hurrah! with the other diners, when Malcolm threw all but one of her skirts up over her back and head.

Her limbs flailed in the hampering muslin and satin.  
"Beast! Savage, no-account.... Scotsman!"

"You will find, my lady Eleanore, that I am not so fond of pranks as you are," Malcolm told her, wrapping one arm securely around her waist and raising his other hand high.

"This is for hiding my lances!"

And with that he began to spank her, his broad hand swatting down hard across her unprotected bottom and jolting her whole body across his knees. She let out a scream that was more sheer rage than any real hurt, and he promptly spanked her again, laying five good blows for every offense he called out.

"And for sawing the tips in an attempt to besmirch my honor! For putting mud in my boots! Honey in my bed!"

Ellie's father was the first to begin laughing, although the rest of the assembled diners quickly followed suit, and at the sound of it, all of Ellie's fight came to an abrupt end. She lay stiff across his lap, as though determined to suffer this outrage in silence, despite the sting he knew he had to be putting in her disobedient backside.

"For the thorns beneath my saddle!" Malcolm continued, and for that he gave her ten for the discomfort suffered by his horse. "And the bees in my tent! And the next time you set about to playing your tricks on grown men," he caught her arm and in one smooth motion pulled her off his lap and set her back on her feet before him. "I suggest you think twice."

Red faced, her eyes flashing, Ellie grabbed once for her bottom and then snatched her hands back again as she looked at the people laughing all around them. Her looked turned as near to murderous as any woman's could, and drawing back her hand, she slapped his cheek, hard.

The laughter choked to a sudden silence and Malcolm, after a moment's stunned anger, stood up. He grabbed her arms and then he kissed her. The dining hall erupted into another bout of whooping and laughing, Mayfield pounded upon the table with his approval, the diners stomped their feet. Even the dogs began scampering and barking in all the excitement, and Ellie kicked and beat against him in an effort to break the long, angry kiss.

It wasn't until her furious cries began to dissolve into desperate squeaks that Malcolm finally broke his lips from

hers. Her hand flew to her mouth and, as she stared angrily up at him, he bent and scooped her up into his arms. Carrying her back to her father's table, he then dropped her bottom-first onto Mayfield's half-eaten plate of food.

"Your daughter is willful and spoiled," Malcolm announced loud enough for the entire hall to hear. "She needs a firm hand applied to her backside and were I you, Sir Mayfield, I'd ply it hard and often."

The hall grew very quiet as Malcolm turned around, seemingly about to dismiss himself and leave the Hall—as well as the enraged Lady Eleanore—behind, sprawled across her father's table with her smarting-bottom cushioned by a large platter of pork.

Even Sir Mayfield looked taken aback by Malcolm's sudden show of disrespect, for he straightened in his chair. Everyone held their breaths as Malcolm headed for the door, all except for Ellie, who kicked a tray of vegetables onto the floor as she rolled onto her knees, grabbed up her father's goblet of wine and drew back her arm to hurl it after him.

Gerard stayed her arm, catching a firm hold on her wrist.

"You have done enough for one day," he told her, and she stared at him in dismay when he called out, "My lord Malcolm, hold, if you please, sir!"

Almost to the door, Malcolm stopped where he was and turned part way around. He looked back at Gerard expectantly. "Sir Mayfield?"

Gerard smiled. "You're right. A firm hand would no doubt do my daughter a great deal of good, but I am an old man. I

have neither the strength of arm nor the fortitude of will to take on such an overwhelming task."

Malcolm narrowed his eyes in mock consideration. After only a moment, he came strutting back to the table, his chest as puffed as any overconfident rooster's in a yard full of hens. Ignoring Ellie completely, he reached over her to tear a tender strip of meat off the leg off the roasted suckling pig near her father's plate. Then, lifting one leg to sit upon the table's edge, he took a healthy bite, and then twirled it in the air as he asked, "So how much gold will you give me to take the wench off your hands?"

The tension suddenly gave way to another burst of incredulous laughter, and Ellie's face darkened even more. She whipped about on the table to stare at her father, but his eyes had turned crafty as he studied Malcolm, making no effort at all to restore her shattered dignity. "Her dowery shall be a holding in Northumberland, a hundred acres parcel to go with it, and a thousand crowns."

"Swine!" Ellie cried, kicking her foot in a platter of meat and gravy. "Betrayed! I would not marry a Scot—and certainly not this Scot, in particular—were he the last filthy beast to crawl upon the earth! I would rather die! I—"

Malcolm took a final bite and then calmly stuffed her mouth with the meatiest part. Sucking the grease from his thumb, to Gerard he then said, "I would take that holding and parcel, quite readily enough. But for a good a proper taming, I should think more coin than a paltry thousand would be appropriate. You know your daughter, sir. You also know I am not wrong."



Her face burning hot and red, Ellie spat the chunk of meat onto the table and scrambled to get off her father's plate. She stood before both men, her chest heaving, seething with a fury that roughened her voice to the hoarsest of whispers. "May the devil take you both!"

She turned and would have stalked from the Hall, but Malcolm caught her arm and down she went back across his knees.

"That is no way to address either the sire who spawned you, or the man who would be your future husband," Malcolm told her as he wrestled her bottom into a more prominent position upon his lap. "You see," he told Gerard as, ignoring her shouts and thrashing legs, he raised Ellie's multitude of skirts once more, leaving only her thin shift to cover her frantically bucking bottom. He had to speak quite loudly just to be heard over her furious screams. "This is quite a task I would take on for you." His hand once more flattened the scantily covered backside held pinioned across his knee. "What say you to holdings and parcel—" he paused in the negotiations to spank her yet again, "—and twelve thousand crowns by which to maintain them?"

He gave the kicking and thrashing Ellie another mighty wallop, strong enough to stiffen her over his lap and illicit a sharp cry that was more discomfort than anger from his soon-to-be-bride, and Gerard joined in the laughter that boomed through the Hall.

"Ten thousand crowns," he declared, laughing uproariously. "And a proper knife with which to cut the switches you'll need to aid your taming between here and

Yester. I give your hand six miles before she has worn you out!"

"Done!" Malcolm said, and Ellie wailed her dismay as her fate was sealed. He grinned down at the back of her head and then settled himself into sound rhythm, one that ensured his lovely new bride did not sit her horse comfortably for so much as a single step all the way home.

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## **HELL HATH NO FURY...**

There was nothing better than being barefoot in the sand. Under the two o'clock sun, the blindingly white granules were hot as the devil. Hot enough to send even grown men hopping for the nearest beach blanket and the dubious protection of sandals, canvas shoes and even flip-flops. But not Ruby. No, she loved the beach and she walked on it every chance she got. Hurricane winds, blinding rain, and blistering heat be damned, her feet had grown accustomed to it all. She flat out loved the sand.

Two years ago, Ruby had moved six hundred miles just so she could buy a house and live near the ocean. Her expanse of beach was as private as the Oregon coast would allow, a small two-hundred yard stretch of near white sand that was sandwiched between two sheer cliffs, which kept all but the most adventurous of beach-goers away. There were dozens of longer, wider, and infinitely more accessible strips of sandy heaven down around Newport and Florence just waiting to be basked upon. This small cove of seclusion Ruby had come to regard as her solely her own.

Surrounded by its tall rock guardians, it was overshadowed by only two man-made structures: Ruby's house, a three-story home made almost entirely of glass to let in as much sunshine as possible, and a slender, turn of the century ramshackle house that looked as if it were the hull of a ship planted upright in the sand, with two windows and door cut into the barnacled bottom, and covered with a roof.

Since moving here, Ruby had yet to see either hide or hair of her neighbor, although she had to assume there was one. Every so often, usually in the middle of the night, her bedroom would light up with the headlights of the car that would pull up to the boat-shaped house and park there, but that was as close as she'd yet come to meeting whomever lived next door.

At least that was true right up until the second week of July when suddenly her neighbor made his first intrusion onto Ruby's private beach. It wasn't even a full physical intrusion. In reality, it was only a chair, but that was still enough to irk her temper.

Ruby stood on the hot sand, staring at the empty wooden deck chair that sat in the exact middle of her beach, facing the water right where she had left her chair the night before. Her green and white-cushioned waterproof one which was absolutely nowhere in sight right now.

Ruby braced her hands on her sarong-wrapped hips. She turned to look back at her house and there, leaned up against the back door, right where she had to have walked past it without noticing, was her chair. Her mouth thinned, and her gaze slid sideways the hundred or so feet that separated her house from the monstrosity that looked like an upright boat.

"Of course, you realize this means war," she told the house, her brown eyes narrowing. Her mama had always raised her to be a lady, but she'd be a lobster's uncle before she allowed some shanty shack owner to take over her beach.

Turning on her heel, she made her way back up the burning sand to her back porch. Ignoring the chair, she

walked into her house and took an immediate left into the garage that was packed wall-to-wall with moving boxes (yes, still) and began to dig for her tool box.

She found it under her coats and winter clothes, both boxes of which were stacked on top of the lawnmower that hadn't been used since she moved here. God, she loved sand and ocean yards.

Picking up a Phillips screwdriver by the tip, she gave it a playful toss in the air, flipping it around and catching it by the handle. If only her purple and black striped bikini had sleeves, she'd have rolled them up as she headed purposefully back down the sand to the intruding deck chair. Without the slightest complaint from her conscience, she knelt in the hot sand and quickly unscrewed both leg bolts down to the very last turn, leaving just enough in each side to keep the chair standing.

"Ha!" she barked at the boat as she returned the screwdriver to her tool box. She then carried her chair back down to its customary spot in the exact center of the beach and right smack in front of the ugly deck chair so she wouldn't have to look at it.

With a self satisfied sigh, she flopped down on the comfy green cushions to enjoy the afternoon sun. She smiled, closing her eyes against the blazing yellow orb above, the rolling waves of the ocean beating out a rhythmic tempo against the shore ahead of her, and chuckled evilly as she imagined Shanty Shack's impending surprise.

\* \* \* \*

At ten minutes past midnight, Ruby was lying in bed, the rolling of the ocean waves singing her to sleep, when her bedroom wall lit up. The light moved across the plaster, over her closet doors to the headboard of her bed and then stopped. It lingered only a few seconds before abruptly dying and casting the room back into shadows. A half a minute later a car door slammed.

Ruby threw back the blankets and scrambled for the window just in time to see a dark figure step behind the trellis of morning glories that framed the boat-shaped house's front porch. Shanty Shack was home.

With a muffled squeal of excitement, Ruby ducked from her bedroom and ran down the stairs to her kitchen. Leaving all the lights off, she jumped onto the easy chair that was situated by the windows that overlooked the beach. Kneeling on the seat with her arms folded across the padded back, she glued her eyes onto the devilishly modified deck chair and waited.

The lights in the boat-shaped house came on one at a time, brightening the sand and chasing the darkness all the way down to the water. Through her giant, curtainless windows she watched as the back door opened and Mr. Shanty Shack walked outside.

He was dressed in a pair of jean cut-off shorts and a white t-shirt, and damn, but he was even kind of handsome for being a jerk. Tall, lean, with a narrow waist and shoulders that just made a girl want to smother him in Hershey's chocolate before licking off every last drop in little concentric circles.

Carrying a bottle of beer in one hand, Shanty Shack walked unerringly towards his chair, tossing one long leg over to straddle the plain wooden seat and then flopping down onto it like anyone would after a hard day's work. The legs gave out immediately, spilling both him and his beer backwards into the sand.

Even through the closed windows she could hear his shouted exclamations as he jumped to his feet, throwing his hands into the air as if to shake the spilled beer from his arms. He bent down to pick up his chair.

"Ha!" Ruby gleefully crowed, then quickly slapped both hands over her mouth as the figure down on the beach very slowly and deliberately turned to look at her. She knew he couldn't see her in the dark, but she still ducked down behind the chair. Afraid that he might hear her but too tickled not to express her delight, she drummed her feet on the cushions beneath her before peeking back around to catch another look at him.

The figure dropped his chair into the sand. Shadows hid his face, but there was a very disgusted set to his shoulders. It was also in the manner by which he braced his hands upon his slender hips. Picking up his now mostly empty beer bottle, he stalked back to his house. When the door slammed shut, Ruby stood up, grinning.

"Ha," she told her neighbor's house. "Hell hath no fury, buster."

Chin held aloft, her button nose high in the air, Ruby sashayed back to bed.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning when Ruby stepped outside to get the paper, there was a note tacked to her front door.

I know what you did, it read.

She harumphed. "What do you know, I live next door to Inspector Clousou."

Removing the note and tack, she walked over to her neighbor's boat, blew her nose on the note—for the first and only time in her life grateful for summer allergies—and then stuck it to the middle of his door where he was sure to find it. She then tucked her paper up under her arm and returned home for her morning coffee.

By noon there was another note on her door with only one word written on it: Gross.

Ruby snorted. Shaking her head, she glanced right and then left, looking for any signs of him before returning to her kitchen. After raiding a few items from her fridge, she strolled back outside and across the street to where their mailboxes were attached side-by-side on a roadside post. Opening his, she smiled when she saw the day's mail had already been delivered. His consisted of two bills and a handwritten envelope from one 'Grandma Parkin'.

"Oh, that's sweet," she said. "Mr. Shanty Shack Parkin, you still write to your grandma."

Uncapping the can of whipping cream that she'd brought with her, she shook it twice and then emptied the whole container on top of all three letters. She topped her creation with rainbow colored sprinkles and a maraschino cherry. With



any luck, the ants would find her sundae before he did. Smirking with satisfaction, she went home again.

Barely an hour later, dressed for the beach in her customary black and purple bikini, her thin black sarong wrapped around her trim waist, Ruby was watering a flowerbed of dahlias and snapdragons when she heard a door slam and glanced up. Mr. Shanty Shack was headed right for her, his face as dark as a thundercloud, and like a sudden absence of sunlight, a slight chill tickled its way down her spine.

"Hey!" he bit out, crossing the distance between their homes in long, angry strides. "Come here, lady! I want to talk to you!"

Ruby changed the setting on the hose from shower to spray and turned it on him full-force.

"Hey!" he shouted, throwing up his hands to protect his face. Swearing, he then turned and darted back across the sand far enough to be out of the hose's range.

When the water could no longer reach him, he spun around and glared at her, like a bull that had been pestered and had now finally had enough. Ruby could all but see the horns sprouting from his head and she thought she saw him paw the sand as he got ready to charge, but that might have been a trick of the sunlight and her slightly beginning-to-panic imagination. Instinct told her that hitting him with another icy spray of water wasn't likely to work a second time. She was going to have to run for it.

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind than did Shanty Shack break into his head-on charge. Ruby dropped

the hose and started to run for her garage before she remembered it was still locked. She'd come out through the sliding glass on her second story deck. She changed directions quickly but not before she saw how fast he was closing the distance behind her.

"Oh shit! Oh sh—" She scrambled up the porch steps as much with her hands as her feet, and laughed like a woman on the verge of hysterics when she slammed the sliding glass door shut with only bare feet between them.

"HA!" she yelled back at him, her mouth so close that she steamed the window while he could only brace his hands on the glass and glare down at her. Adrenaline was pumping through her veins and she couldn't help but jump up and down, pointing at him and shouting another victorious, "Ha ha ha! And ha AGAIN! So there!"

His face grew even darker—she'd not have thought that possible without seeing it for herself—and then he turned on his heel and beat an angry retreat back down the steps.

Panting a little, her knees felt suddenly shaky and weak while a flutter of butterflies shivered in the pit of her belly. Leaning in close to the glass, Ruby watched him stalk, not back to his house, but towards the spot where her chair was propped in the sand. All traces of humor vanished from her when he picked it up and headed for the ocean.

Her mouth rounded in shock and she threw open the sliding glass door. She barreled down the stairs after him without a second thought. "Hey! What do you think you're doing? That's my chair!"

When he reached the edge of the roaring ocean waves, he swung the chair back and then flung it out into the water as far as he could throw it.

"I'm putting it back where I found it!" he snapped.

Ruby ran past him into the retreating ebb of the tide, but stopped after only a few feet to watch helplessly as the fleeing water separated the cushions from the chair and sucked them both out to sea.

"Jimminy Christmas, lady!" he barked. "That's what all this is about, isn't it? You don't like it because I touched your chair? You left the damn thing parked so close to the water a couple days back, I practically had to swim to fetch it back again."

Ruby blinked at him. "You did?"

"If I'd known that by doing something nice for you I was going to start World War Three, I'd have let you sit in the sand!"

She probably should have been embarrassed, but it struck in her throat to offer him any kind of apology. Instead she blustered, "Nice?! You just threw my chair in the ocean!"

"You're lucky I don't throw you in the ocean!" he snapped.

Ruby spun around and glared at him, but he had already turned around and was stalking back for his house. Oh no, she wasn't about to let him get away that easily!

She ran up out of the receding tide and bent down to grab a beached jelly fish from the wet sand. She pegged him in the back directly between the shoulder blades, spinning him around and turning him into that pestered bull once more.

"You are out of your mind," he growled.

"You started this, not me!" she shouted back, and then it hit her. She wasn't hiding behind a sliding glass door anymore, and he now stood between herself and the protection of her house.

His knuckles crackled as he flexed his hands and then started toward her. Ruby backed up a step and almost tripped over a length of green kelp that a fresh wave had deposited around her feet. In for a penny, her mind said, and Ruby quickly picked it up and threw that at him, too. Then she spun and ran into the water. She had no idea where she was going, but at this point, swimming to Hawaii had an unmistakable appeal.

Shanty Shack caught her within the first six steps and they fell face-first into an inward rushing wave. Ruby let out a shrill gasp as the cold water washed over her. At first she thought it was the wave that rolled her onto her stomach until she realized that Shanty Shack had her pinned her into the wet sand and had yanked her sarong clean off.

Her eyes and mouth rounded in wide surprise as the wet cloth hit the sand in a sopping wet heap a bare instant before his open hand came cracking down on her bikini bottoms with a loud, watery splat!

"Oh!" Ruby jolted and tried to scramble out from under his weight. But like a landed sea turtle, all she managed to do was rearrange the sand with her arms and legs.

Practically sitting on top of her, Shanty Shack leveled a furious barrage of smacks all over her backside, pausing only to brace himself against the next wave that rushed in to

soothe the sting his hand was paddling into her bottom. The icy saltiness left her bottom even wetter than before.

When the wave retreated, she again tried to scramble out from under his weight, but his hand began another merciless volley of blows that stung even worse than before. Like a merciless sunburn, the sharp, burning pain began to grow until it was the only thing she felt, swat after blistering swat of his very hard hand.

"Ow! OW! Stop it!" Ruby screamed, but the steady smack-smack-smack continued without the slightest hint of reprieve. And the burning head became full-fledged agony before she could suck another breath to cry out.

It was the sea water, she thought wildly as the mounting hurt made the sting extended up to her eyes. She certainly wasn't going to cry, not from a spanking. But as his hand cracked again and again over places that were rapidly becoming unbearably sore, and each wave that washed over them wet her bottom with water that felt as though it heated the instant it touched her skin, the tears broke past her lashes and fell into the salty sand. She gave up on words and just plain screamed, she was so angry. She kicked her feet, her toes throwing sand into the air. She rammed her elbow into the middle of his back, but he only spanked faster until all she could feel was the sizzling heat of a bottom that felt scorched by the sun.

The spanking stopped with the next wave, a huge rush of frothy water that knocked him off balance and swept them a few inches apart. But it was enough.

Ruby was on her feet the instant the press of him left her back. She grabbed up her discarded sarong and slapped him with it, leaving him with a face full of sand and a tiny crab in his hair, and then turned and ran back to her house, holding her bottom with one hand the whole way.

\* \* \* \*

The heat hit a record breaking high of one hundred and nine degrees two days later when Shanty Shack held his mid-summer's beach party. Although a trip to Italy had spared her of the previous year's party, Ruby was unfortunately at home when his thirty some-odd guests arrived to take control of her private stretch of beach. Not that it was hers anymore. She hadn't even set foot on it since Shanty Shack had decided to revoke her adulthood and treat her like a naughty child.

Her bottom still stung in the very center of each cheek.

If there was any kind of justice in life, he'd choke on a sand flea and die.

Pouting, Ruby turned from her kitchen window so she wouldn't have to look at all the happy revelers littering their footprints all over her sandy heaven. Slipping her feet into a pair of sandals and gathering her purse and car keys, she decided she'd much rather go grocery shopping than to sit here all night and listen to the crush of people below despoiling her beach.

Unfortunately, her entire shopping trip took less than an hour and then Ruby had little choice but to go home again. Although she could eagerly have gone another two years without ever meeting her next door neighbor again, Shanty

Shack was waiting for her by the time she arrived home. He was sitting on his front porch, as if he'd known the exact moment when she was destined to turn off the street and coast down the slight hill to park in front of her garage.

"Oh God," she groaned when he stood up and started toward her. She glared at him, but he kept on coming and with every step he took, he whittled down her reaction options to either getting out and facing him or starting up the engine and taking an impromptu road trip. Canada was generally nice this time of year. There was an excellent museum in British Columbia.

Shaking her head, Ruby took the keys out of the ignition. Chances were good he'd still be waiting for her when she eventually came home. She may as well face the unpleasantness now and get it over with. With the utmost reluctance, she opened her car door and got out.

"Hey," he said, by way of a greeting and proving in her mind once and for all that she truly had found the missing family tree twig that linked modern species of humans to neanderthals.

Glaring at him, Ruby took a three foot long loaf of French bread out of the top of her grocery bag. Only just now beginning to recover from her last confrontation with him, she was taking no chances. If he took two more steps, if he showed just one little hint of aggression, she was going to club him.

Fortunately, he didn't look angry and as he drew closer he even went so far as to hold up his empty hands. A placating

gesture to be sure. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.  
"What do you want?"

"Peace," he said simply. "I've got a party in the back, I was wondering if you'd like to join us."

"You want me to come to your party?" she echoed in disbelief.

He shrugged. "It seems like a good way to bury the hatchet ... hopefully someplace other than in my back. I've got hotdogs," he coaxed when she hesitated. "Oscar Mayer. And hamburgers, twelve kinds of chips and two potato salads. I've got all the fixings for smores.... and cheesecake."

It was the cheesecake that did her in, she told herself firmly, not his handsome smile or his broad, hunky shoulders. Either way though, her resolve began to buckle.

"I have to put my groceries away," she finally said.

His smile widened. "Okay. Does that mean we can call a truce?" He raised his eyebrows in a slightly hopefully and yet vaguely suspicious sort of way.

Unfortunately for him, he'd spanked her, and Ruby wasn't quite willing to go that far. After all, she had two hand print shaped bruises on her butt. Although well on the mend now, two days ago they had been a bright shade of purple. The sort of color that looked good on a sweater, but not so good when it was that tender stretch of skin one generally had no choice but to sit upon.

"How about we talk about it after your guests go home?" she suggested.

He looked taken aback. "Okay." He nodded and smiled.  
"Yeah, okay, we'll do that."



"We'll do that," she echoed, watching him over one shoulder as she slowly made her way to her front door.

"You'll be over in ... what? Fifteen minutes?" he asked. He was also walking backwards towards his own house and his oblivious guests.

Ruby nodded, slowly climbing her front steps and opening her front door.

"Okay," he called, almost out of sight. "I'll see you then."

Just as she was stepping over the threshold, he turned and jogged out of view, hopefully going back to his party. Ruby continued on inside. Closing her door, she slowly counted to five and then crept far enough into her house to spot Mr. Shanty Shack hurrying to take up his position at the bar-b-que grill.

She put her groceries and loaf of French bread down on the floor. Digging into the bag, she pulled out a large package wrapped in plain brown butcher paper. As she tore it open, she glanced back up to make sure he wasn't watching her through her windows, but he was laughing and accepting a beer from one of the other guys there. He gestured to her house with the metal spatula in his hand, laughing and nodding to his friend, and a corner of Ruby's mouth turned up in a smirk.

The huge hunk of salmon had cost her thirty-five dollars, but no one ever said revenge was cheap. Ducking back out her front door, she jogged over to her neighbor's house on tiptoes. Bingo. He'd left his car unlocked and the front windshield was facing into the sun.

Ruby chuckled with sheer evil pleasure as she eased the car door open, releasing a billow of hot air and lay the huge fish across his dash, right where the sun would bake it to perfection, right where all those good fishy juices could drip down into his ventilation ducts and do the most good. Or harm ... depending on how one looked at it.

Carefully, quietly, she eased the car door shut and checked her watch. Two o'clock. Perfect. With any luck, that fish would bake in his car for another six hours.

"Now we're even," she said under her breath and went to wash her hands under the outside faucet before joining the beach party.

Hell hath no fury...

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### **.... LIKE A WOMAN SCORNE!**

Hunter Parkin's guests were all gone. The bar-b-que coals had cooked themselves down to embers, and empty plastic cups, still wet with beer, lay toppled in the kicked up sand all around his back door ... toppled much the same way that Ruby was, except that instead of lying happily in the sand, she was across his knee getting the blistering of her young life.

With one foot braced up on the half brick wall of his front flower bed, not five feet from his car, Hunter held his bucking, kicking neighbor pinned over one thigh while he lit a fire in her tail that she wasn't likely to ever forget.

Her skimpy black sarong lay on the gravel at his feet where he'd thrown it, her bikini bottoms were wedged almost to the point of disappearing completely between her buttocks to bare as much of her skin as he could, and the flat of his palm was beating out a blistering tempo of vengeance that had her shouting out within the first half dozen strong-armed swats. The wriggling mounds were already a bright crimson in color and she had long past the point of being able to simply hold still and bear it. And still he didn't care, anger made his arm tireless and, if Hunter had his way, her mischievous backside would be ten shades darker than it was now before he was through.

With every breath he took, Hunter could smell the salmon still sizzling on his dashboard. With every breath she took, Ruby was shouting obscenities, kicking her feet and waving

her fists with the utmost futility because he wasn't about to let her up any time soon. His hand hurt at least as much as her bottom did; his palm had to be just as red and still he continued to wallop her with all the avenging fury of a man who had just discovered that his 1971 Lotus Europa had been turned into fish cooker. He was even too angry to say anything, he just plain spanked her. And he kept right on spanking until, with a frenzy of wild kicking, she managed to roll off his thigh onto the ground.

He spanked her all the way down to the ground, and kept right on spanking while she scrambled to get her feet under her. He landed three more swats to her backside as she took off running, and then she was out of reach. Grabbing hold of her bottom, she ran all the way home, up the porch steps and quickly slammed the door behind her.

Panting and still more furious than he'd ever been in his life, Hunter was halfway tempted to chase her down, make her clean out his car right now before she did anything else, and then spank her rosy bottom all over again to make sure she never, ever, EVER did anything like this to something of his again!

Instead, Hunter turned on his heels and stormed into his own house. The first thing he did was get on the Internet. Finally, eBay proved useful for something. He bought two rattan canes (one slender and whippy, the other slightly thicker and more thudy), an old-fashioned, two-tongued Scottish tawse, and a paddle that was as long as his forearm, four inches thick at the business end, and looked as if it would be down-right lethal when applied to a woman's tender

derriere. It might have been the anger talking, but he bought three of those.

All four implements came from different providers, which meant they'd have to be shipped separately, but Hunter didn't mind the wait. Especially not when the creator of the paddles offered to engrave his handiwork for only ten dollars more. Hunter choose the words 'Ruby's Bad Girl Tamer' and happily paid the fee times three.

Ruby, he thought to himself, as he shut the computer down, was going to be one surprised young lady when he next got his hands on her.

Leaving his house, he was halfway to Ruby's when it tickled at the back of his mind to wonder if perhaps a wiser man wouldn't have given her more time to cool off. Or at least brought along some reinforcements. But the strong smell of freshly baked fish justified his anger and even helped to add a thud of authority to Hunter's knock as he pounded on her door.

"Ruby!" he shouted. "You get out here and clean up my car!"

Any other woman suffering the aftereffects of a spanking like the one he'd just given would have either meekly obeyed or hidden quietly in the depths of her house, pretending she wasn't home. But not Ruby. She came pounding down the stairs like an avenging fury in her own right, wrenched open her door, and the next thing Hunter knew, he had a face full of women's shaving gel. Pink. Floral smelling. Very feminine.

"Ack!" Hunter stumbled backwards, spitting shaving gel from his mouth as she slammed her door again. He swiped

the stuff from his eyes and mouth and then glared at the door.

Round two, coming right up.

He all but heard the ding of the prize-fighters' bell as he took one more step back, reared up one leg and then kicked her door down.

Having already retreated to the top of her stairs, Ruby spun around. Fury flashed across her face as she pointed at him. "Get out of my house!"

Hunter charged up the stairs after her. Although she tried to run, he tackled her in the kitchen and dragged her over to the table.

Kitchens, he was quick to realize, were wonderful places of discovery. For instance, he'd never before known just how much of a hand-saving device a wooden spatula could be until he was seated on a dining room chair, Ruby wrestled across his lap, and his already tender palm busily belaboring her backside for the second time in less than an hour.

Fortunately for him, she had a blue crockery jar next to the stove that was packed full of wooden spoons and spatulas of all shapes and sizes. He took his pick of implements and reclaimed his seat at the table. Wrestling his bucking, thrashing Ruby back across one knee, scissoring her kicking legs between his strong thighs, he took hold of the back of her bathing suit and skimmed the thin fabric clean off her bottom and all the way down to the backs of her thighs. Despite her shrieks and squeals, Hunter took his own sweet time in applying that spatula to the seat of learning most receptive to vigorously taught lessons of this type. And this

time, he didn't let her up until her woeful sobs held notes of genuine remorse.

Remorse most likely due to having been caught by him, but still it was remorse nonetheless. And at this point, hey, that was progress!

Her nates resembled darkly ripened cherries by the time he lay that spatula aside. He didn't let her up right away, but instead kept her pinned across his knees until her wild and frantic crying eased to sniffles and weakened half-hearted squirms. She kept trying to get her hands back to rub the hurt away, but Hunter caught her wrists to prevent it. He wasn't about to let her relieve so much as a twinge of discomfort. In fact, given his way, she'd be sitting on a well-roasted bottom like this every day for the rest of her life!

It might take him the next fifty years, but he could think of no more worth while project than that of taming Ruby. A corner of his mouth turned upwards as he watched her bottom wriggling upon his knee, bucking and bouncing beneath the implement he wielded, and the more he thought about it, the more he found himself liking the idea.

"Get your hands off me, you son of a—"

He switched his target from her bottom to her thighs and Ruby stopped shrieking insults. She just plain shrieked, and kept right on howling until he lay the spatula aside, grabbed hold of the back of her shirt and hauled her back up onto her own feet. Standing with her, he marched her out to his car.

"All right, young lady," he told her sternly. "You made this mess. Now you can clean it up."

And to make sure she did without adding any of her 'special' touches, Hunter stood over her the entire time, arms folded across his chest, frowning. He didn't help her either, but waited patiently while she washed out the inside of his car with a mixture of water, soap, and Febreze. No amount of cleaning managed to kill the fishy smell, however. Not even when he removed the dash so she could scrub down into the ventilation ducts.

Her revenge turned out to be a good one. After trying to scrub the salmon smell out of his car for the better part of a week, Hunter finally gave up. On the first cool day of fall, he sprayed down the entire car with a fresh bottle of Febreze, hide a dozen air fresheners all over the interior, and drove his Lotus Europa down to the nearest used car dealership. He traded it in on a 1965 Ford Mustang. He felt very unimaginative, but at least it didn't smell like fish.

\* \* \* \*

*I'm going to get you, Shanty Shack.*

Ruby watched as her neighbor pulled into his driveway in his brand new cherry-red convertible. Peeking out at him through the slit in her bedroom curtains, she watched him get out of his car and head inside his house. He only went about two steps before he stopped, turned to give her house—and in particular the bedroom curtain she was hiding behind—a steely-eyed look and then turned and went back to his car. He double checked to make sure the doors were both locked and the windows rolled up.



Her eyes narrowed but a corner of her mouth curled deviously upwards. It didn't matter. She could wait. All day and all night if she had to. She would wait.

\* \* \* \*

Five minutes after midnight one week later, Ruby was lying in bed with her hands behind her head when headlights lit up the wall over her bed. She got up just far enough to watch Hunter pulling into his driveway after work. When he disappeared inside his house, she got out of bed, already fully dressed in all black clothing, including her shoes.

Chuckling under her breath, she opened up her closet and pulled out a small pet carrier and a Slim Jim. Whistling softly, she headed for the Mustang to get her revenge for a week's worth of pillow sitting.

Thirty seconds with the Slim Jim at the passenger door got her into the car. A low unsociable hiss emanated from the pet carrier when she jostled it trying to open the car door and set it inside on the seat. Careful to keep the exit facing away from her and taking a moment slip her arm into a thick leather glove and sleeve that extended all the way up to her shoulder, she reached around to open the gate.

All she saw was a black ball of angry fur and claws dart over the seat into the back of the car. Ruby quickly yanked the pet carrier out of the mustang and quietly shut the door again.

"Go get 'em, Killer," she chortled gleefully. "Eat those nice, vintage leather seats!"

That would teach him. She cast a smug glance at Hunter's house as she turned on her heel and, nose in the air, went home.

\* \* \* \*

Hunter headed out the next afternoon for one more night on the swing shift at the hospital before the weekend. He'd held better jobs in the fifteen years that he'd worked as a doctor, but none were as rewarding as working in the critical care unit at Mercy General. With his coffee cup in one hand, he juggled his new car keys with the other and slipped it into the driver's side door.

A high-pitched yowl split the peaceful seaside quiet, and Hunter barely jumped back into time to avoid the small wild cat that leapt out of his car and ran off into the brush between his house and the road.

He stood for a moment staring in shock after the cat, then ducked down to check the opposite door. Nope, that was locked too.

Then his eyes fell to the shredded leather backs of both the driver and passenger seats. He stared, but it was not a trick of the light that automatically fixed itself when he blinked.

"I'm going to kill her," he said softly. A tickle of belated temper slithering through him as he turned to look at Ruby's house. The upstairs window curtain swooped immediately back into place, but not before he glimpsed her smiling face.

Laying his coffee on top of his car, not even bothering to shut the door, he unbuckled his belt. Yanking it free, he

headed next door. She only *thought* she'd been spanked before. He was about to show her just how wrong she was!

\* \* \* \*

If she ever sat down again, it would be a miracle.

Sniffing and hiccuping miserably, Ruby stood in front of her refrigerator, steeling ice cubes from the maker in the door and pressing them to her swollen, throbbing bottom. She didn't even want to think about having to pull her shorts and underwear back on. She didn't even want to think about bending over. She just plain didn't want to have to move!

Cool trickles of water were running down her legs as the ice cubes melted against her scorched nether cheeks and providing some slight relief against the deep burning hurt. And as Ruby sniffled, taking her breathes in shuddering gasps, she couldn't help but try and think of some way to get Hunter back for this. She had to do something. If she didn't, heaven forbid, but he just might think he was winning the battle between them.

In the driveway outside, she heard Hunter's car door slam and she closed the fridge door. Dropping the mostly melted remnants of her ice cubes in the sink, she hobbled over to the window and peeked out in time to see him revving his engine to life and drive away.

Oh yeah, she thought, wincing at the painful twinge in her backside as she shuffled slowly towards her toolbox in the garage. She was soooo going to get him!

\* \* \* \*

Hunter pulled a double shift and arrived home, midmorning the next day, tired beyond measure. With a four day weekend stretching out ahead of him, all he wanted to do right now was climb into bed and sleep.

He locked his car, glared at Ruby's house—with Ruby nowhere in sight—and headed up the walk, his keys jingling in his hand as he fished for the right one. As he climbed up the two steps of his front porch, he reached out to push the key in the doorknob, but only managed to slip it halfway inside before the entire door tipped forward and fell with a loud 'whump!' on the entryway carpet. The sound was startling, but even more so was the echoing whumps as the vibration of the fall caused every door he owned to follow suit and join the front on the floor.

His shoulders slumped and Hunter closed his eyes. He was too tired to get angry. He stepped around his front door and climbed up the stairs. Sure enough, his bedroom door was front side down on the floor.

Hunter climbed over that too, already stripping off his clothes so all he had to do was fall into bed and close his eyes. He had the next four days in which to deal with Ruby. He could afford to wait.

\* \* \* \*

Well, that was disappointing. Ruby stood at the kitchen window in shorts and t-shirt, two bright yellow, heavy-duty cleaning gloves on her hands, waiting for Hunter to come charging out of his house to get her. There was even a box of

over-ripe and beginning to rot tomatoes on the floor at the top of the stairs behind her.

Ruby had gone through great pains to prepare for his counter attack, which included spreading sheets of plastic over the stairs and the entryway landing below before smearing everything with a large bottle of vegetable oil to make it all nice and slippery. If by some slim chance he managed to make it up the stairs, she'd have been very surprised. She'd also have been pelting him with rotting tomatoes the entire time.

But now it looked as though he wouldn't be coming. Maybe he had given up. Maybe she'd already won the war, and just didn't know it. What a depressing thought.

Well, damn. Ruby took her gloves off and tried to feel victorious instead of depressed. Dropping the gloves by the sink, she leaned against the counter and stared at his house in consternation. Maybe he just wasn't feeling well. He had looked a little peaked when he'd walked into his house.

That must be it. He hadn't given up the war; he was just sick.

Feeling relieved, Ruby opened up her fridge and began pulling out the necessary ingredients for homemade chicken soup. There was nothing quite like it, her mom had always said, to make a body feel better again. And once he was feeling better, well.... Ruby picked up the box of tomatoes and stuffed them into the bottom of the fridge. They'd keep.

\* \* \* \*

Hunter stayed in bed until he was darn good and ready to wake up, and that generally happened about the same time that he noticed there were flies buzzing in his bedroom. He lifted his head and managed to peel open one eye long enough to focus on the alarm clock. According to the bright red digital readout, it was a quarter past one in the afternoon. He really ought to get up now.

With a groan, he dropped his head back onto his pillow and curled his arms around it. Well, okay. He could indulge in ten more minutes of snooze time.

Something landed on the back of his neck and tickled him with wandering feet. Hunter batted it away, but no sooner than did his arm flop back limp upon the mattress, than did the fly return to its chosen landing spot and walk around some more.

Hunter batted at it, slightly more awake than before and growing mildly irritated. He raised his head and looked around the room. Where the heck had all these flies come from? He glanced at the empty space where his bedroom door should have been.

Oh yeah.

With an even louder groan, he covered his head with the pillow, but sleep was now elusive. He had to get up. He had to deal with Ruby.

Hunter rolled reluctantly out of bed to shower and dress, and then wandered downstairs, stepping over his doors as he came to them, to fix himself some breakfast in the kitchen and plot out the best way to handle this situation.

As he was standing over the stove, frying up his eggs and bacon, he took a moment to dig through his counter drawers and test his spatulas and spoons against the palm of his hand. All of them were cheap plastic things, capable of delivering nothing more than the mildest stinging sensation. He tossed them back into the drawer and shut it with a small grunt of disgust. He could already see he was going to make a major shopping trip to the local Bed, Bath, and Beyond.

He started a list and pinned it to the fridge. Wood spoons were at the top, followed by a solid, wooden-backed bath brush. After a moment, he then added a pair of hard-soled slippers. With a woman like Ruby, he could see where it would be beneficial to have something conveniently within reach in every room of the house.

Dropping two slices of bread in the toaster and leaving the rest of his breakfast to sizzle in the pan, he went outside to get the mail and newspaper. As he stepped out onto the front porch, he almost tripped over a pot that had been left on his welcome mat. On the top of the lid was a card. A Get Well card, of all things. Hunter shook her head and glanced over at Ruby's, but he couldn't see her in any of the windows.

"If you think you can dig yourself out of a spanking by sending me cards and food, you can think again," he said under his breath. Immediately after breakfast, he had slated his time to pinning Ruby across his knee for a long, thorough dose of some well-deserved bare bottom medicine.

He picked up his newspaper at the end of the driveway, tucked it under his arm and then crossed the road to get his mail. There were two packages stuffed inside the box along

with his bills and junk mail. One he recognized right away. The paddle had finally arrived. He took the packages inside, along with the chicken soup and Ruby's thoughtful card.

He chuckled again and stuck the card to his fridge with another magnet.

Taking his breakfast to the table, he sat down to eat and read his mail. The paddle was the first package that he opened. It looked nice, well worth the extra ten dollars he'd spent, and the engraving in the back was absolutely lovely in its scrawled calligraphy: 'Ruby's Bad Girl Tamer'. He patted the paddle against his palm, just hard enough to feel some of the bite and sting that Ruby was certainly going to experience just as soon as he was finished with his breakfast.

He lay the paddle down, took a bite of eggs and toast and then picked up the second package. It was a large legal sized bubble-packed envelope and he still couldn't recognize the return address. New Orleans. Who did he know in New Orleans? He tried to remember where he'd ordered the hairbrush and cane from, but the package wasn't big enough for the cane and didn't feel heavy right for being a hairbrush. He gave the envelope a quick shake, but the sound was whisper soft, like the shaking of an envelope full of confetti.

Hunter turned it over in his hands, took hold of the upper corner and ripped the envelope open. Instantly hundreds of tiny black spiders poured from the package. They swarmed over his hand and spilled across the table.

"ARGH! Jesus!" Hunter dropped the package, jumping back from the table, both shaking and slapping the spiders from his hand. Already they had scurried up his arm and across his



chest. "Jesus!" he shouted again, and began slapping at the tiny black arachnids crawling on his pants.

By the time that he was spider free, his breakfast was lost. So was his table, kitchen and even living room. And spiders were still pouring out of the package.

*Ruby.*

"I'm going to kill her," Hunter snarled under his breath. He turned to glare at her house out of his living room windows and then snapped around to find the paddle. It was time to break that Ruby Tamer in. Except that it was covered in spiders, too.

Standing as far from the worst of the swarm as possible, he reached out to snag the paddle's handle and quickly shook and slapped it free of little black crawlers. Charging from his kitchen, he jogged down the stairs and stomped over the top of his front door. He could feel crawling on the side of his neck and up into his hair and he quickly swatted the spiders off his face, running his hands over his head to dislodge any there.

He was almost to her door when he heard a muffled, "Eep!" Looking up, he saw the swaying curtains of her kitchen window and stopped where he was. He glanced from the window to her front door, and his eyes narrowed. Abruptly changing directions, he ran around the side of her house to her back porch and charged into her house through the sliding glass door.

And there was Ruby, kneeling at the top of the stairs, a bushel of overripe tomatoes by her side and one in each

upraised hand, ready to bombard him the instant he came through the front door.

"Why you sneaky—"

Ruby snapped around, her eyes and mouth both wide with surprise as Hunter headed right for her. He was determined to let the paddle do the talking for him, and it was going to be one hell of a thorough discussion!

"Eep!" she said again, and then drew back her arm and hit him with both tomatoes. He kept coming anyway, catching up with her as she tried to jump over her bushel basket and retreat down the hallway.

Grabbing hold of her by the scruff of her neck, he dragged her into her own bedroom and threw her face down over the foot of the bed.

"Don't!" she gasped, twisting her face back to stare at the paddle.

It was the first and only sign of weakness that he'd yet seen in her, and for a moment Hunter was startled enough to pause. He could even read a distinct glimmer of fear and uncertainty in her face. But then she started to fight against his hold on her and the feeling of her claw-like fingernails digging into his leg and back was enough to snap him out of whatever reprieve he might have otherwise been willing to give.

It took him almost a full minute of blind fumbling to unfasten the front of her jean shorts, but after that her bottom was bare and the handle of that paddle fit into the palm of his hand as if it had been made for him. The Bad Girl Tamer flattened both of her red-hot bottom cheeks with the

very first smack, jolting Ruby across his lap with a loud gasp. For a full two seconds, she was too shocked to move. But he knew the exact moment when surprise gave way to a tidal wave of paddle-induced smart because her whole body erupted in a fury of fresh and inspired struggling.

Hunter wrapped his arm around her waist and tightened his legs around hers, keeping her easily pinned while he lay the next sharp smack across the same spot as the first. It was a long and slow spanking. With a good ten seconds pause between swats, by the time the first ten strokes had been laid into her, Ruby was in tears. He caught hold of her wrist to keep it out of his way at twelve, and by twenty she was sobbing so hard she could barely move. Just the sharp reflexive bucks that accompanied each new wallop of the paddle as it cracked across her livid nether cheeks, branding them in fiery agony.

Hunter lay the last and twenty-fifth stroke low enough to catch the tops of her thighs, inducing a whole new wave of frantic kicks and struggles that weakly died away even before he lay the paddle aside. Leaving her to cry in position, he lay his hand on her hot little bottom, gently caressing first one martyred cheek and then the other. It was quite a while later when he realized she wasn't crying any more, just lying still across his lap, her torso supported by the bed, looking back at him through red-rimmed eyes.

Hunter let go of her wrists and took his hand off her bottom. Very, very slowly, Ruby pushed herself back off his leg, sinking to the floor where she knelt, her hands shifting

behind her to tenderly frame her wounded bottom with very gentle fingertips.

She winced and a fresh tear trickled down her wet cheek. Craning her neck, she tried to glimpse the extent of the damage he'd done to her over one shoulder, then glared at him again, her rosy mouth drawing down in a frown that was only slightly pouty.

He couldn't help himself. Leaning down, he kissed her soft, unmoving mouth. Once, a soft and tender caress.... twice, sweetly cajoling.... three times, nibbling along her unresponsive lips in an effort to tempt her into responding and bolstered by the fact that she didn't immediately bite him.

Ever so slightly, her mouth began to tremble beneath his. He opened his eyes to find hers closed. A whole new onslaught of tears were streaming from out beneath her damp lashes and she was trembling.

Smiling, Hunter kissed her again and pulled her onto his lap. Letting her cry against his shoulder, he loved it when she wrapped her arms tight around his shoulders and totally fell apart in his embrace.

"Thank you for the chicken soup," he told her when her ragged sobs began to wane.

Still clinging to him, gasping and hiccuping, Ruby said, "I hope you choke on it."

But he couldn't help but note that there wasn't anywhere near as much rancor in her tone as usual.

"Do you want to come over and choke on it with me?" he asked, and after a moment, with her face still buried against his chest, she nodded.

They stood up together. While she winced and whimpered and struggled to pull her underwear and shorts up over her swollen bottom, he went into the adjoining master bathroom for some Kleenex to wipe her face and red-around the edges nose.

"On second thought," he said, as he tilted up her face to wipe away the last of her tears. "Maybe we should eat over here. I'm going to need to call an exterminator."

Taking the Kleenex from her hand, Ruby blew her nose. "The scorpions came already? That was fast."

Hunter froze. "Scorpions?"

Ruby also froze. She looked at him with big eyes and her fingers fidgeted. "Uh ... I meant spiders."

His hands went to his hips and he looked at her, his eyes narrowing. "Ruby."

"They both start with 's'. It's an easy enough mistake to make."

His eyes narrowed and he growled again, "Ruby...."

She turned around and started out of the room. "You go get the soup. I'll call an exterminator. And if you should get a Fed-Ex package from South America," just before she disappeared around the corner, she glanced back at him, "for God's sake, don't open it."

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## **REVENGE IS A FISH BEST SERVED OLD**

Hunter Parkin, aka Shanty Shack, had a pretty nice house as it turned out. Kind of rustic on the inside, with hardwood floors and nice white walls. It had thick barn-like, wooden beams that ran the length of the ceiling, white walls, and tiled floors in the kitchen, all two-point-five bathrooms and even in the entry way. The walls were speckled and white, textured and very nice. The house had a bi-leveled, redwood deck that was absolutely to die for, with its hot tub and built in bar-b-que pit, and did she mention it had white walls?

She'd gotten a real good look at those walls, particularly in the living room just past the big screen HD TV set, where they met and became a corner. Yeah. She was very familiar with that corner. In the first couple months since she'd started living with Hunter, it seemed as though she'd been sent to look at these walls, hands on top of her head, bottom bare and blazing hot, two or sometimes even three times a day. Lately however, it had dropped to a couple times a week. Ruby liked to think maybe she was improving.

Along with the walls, Ruby had also had plenty of opportunities to contemplate the floors. Nice, rustic, hardwood floors. Honey Oak in shade, which mixed in nicely with the ceiling beams and provided a crisp contrast to the white, textured walls.

Ruby sniffled. Dressed in only a t-shirt and socks and naked from the waist down, she stood in that blasted living room corner with her hands laced behind her head. As she

glared at the textured wall not two inches from her nose, she tried to pretend that her bottom wasn't sizzling as hot as the steaks in the bar-b-que pit outside. While she stood staring at the wall, Hunter was in the process of flipping them over before they burned.

He stuck his head in through the sliding glass door and asked, "How do you want yours done? Medium? Medium well?"

She sniffled again. "Medium well."

"Okay." Before he disappeared back out the door, he added, "If you think you can behave yourself, you can come on out now."

Ruby didn't move. Her eyes narrowed and she continued to glare at the wall, counting the speckled dots and wishing that the heat in her thoroughly paddled backside would go away. Relief was a two-edged sword. It was another five long minutes before the worst of the fire died away, only to be replaced by a dull, throbbing ache. But even that was a temporary relief. The minute she tried to sit or walk, she knew the hurt would flare back to life and very likely reduce her to tears once more. She swiped at her damp cheeks with the back of one hand and glared at the wall even harder.

It was several long minutes before Hunter stuck his head back inside the door. "Honey, did you hear me? You can come out now."

Honey?

Ruby snapped around, snarling, "I'm not yet ready to behave!"

She promptly whipped back around to face the corner again. It was only by sheer force of will that she'd avoided screaming at him, although he probably wouldn't appreciate her effort. He rarely did when it came to splitting the fine hairs that differentiated the subtle nuances of screaming, snarling, and defiant mutterings beneath the breath.

Tired of this penitent pose, she took her hands off her head and defiantly folded them across her chest instead. How dare he smack her bottom and call her honey! Her eyes began to tear once more as she thought he'd better not ever call her honey again. She'd rip his lips off!

She swiped away another angry tear and folded her arms across her chest again. A trickle of dread wove through the pit of her belly as she heard him come into the house behind her.

"Come here," he said.

"No." Ruby didn't turn around. Her sight began to swim, and she blinked rapidly to keep the tears in check. She wasn't going to cry. She refused to cry! She absolutely hated it!

Another tear slipped down her cheek.

"Sweetheart," he said.

"Don't you sweetheart me!" The threat was ruined by a choked upon sob. She flinched away when his hand touched her shoulder, but he insisted and pulled her from the corner, turning her around and tucking her into his embrace.

Ruby knew from experience that a punch in the nose would have gotten her turned back across his knee, but she was too angry to keep her fists to herself. She punched him in the shoulder instead.



"I know you're upset," he began, and she punched him again. "But you deserved every single cane stroke that I gave you. What's the number one rule?"

She stomped her foot, but he continued to hold her close until she answered. "Fish is not a tool of revenge." She sniffled and then her eyes narrowed. "Unless you're the son of a bitch bank manager who tried to screw me over!"

"Ruby." The disapproval was very clear in Hunter's voice. "Keep that up and I'll have you back over my knee sooner than you're going to like."

\* \* \* \*

Three days earlier...

Ruby had the whole night planned. It was their six month anniversary and despite all the odds—and her better judgment at times—she was not only still seeing the hunky spanker who lived next door, but she was now living with him. In his house no less ... most of the time, anyway. Now and then she still got mad enough at his high-handedness to leave him. Then they both lived at her house because Hunter, the cussed man, always followed her. Even when she locked the door on him, which would end up with her being tossed back across his knee, face down for another round of his iron hard hand while she contemplated the carpeting and made estimates on how soon she'd be sitting again. So far, out of the six months that they'd been dating, Ruby had been able to sit comfortably roughly one-third of the time.

And she was still with him. That was the surprising thing. Even more so, she was happy being with him. That part was down right astounding.

Hence the six month anniversary celebration. Any woman who could stand to live with a spanker for six months deserved to celebrate.

She started the day with a nap so that she'd be able to stay awake until Hunter got home at midnight and for at least an hour or two—maybe three, if she was feeling particularly kinky—after that. She got all the fixings for his favorite dinner, lasagna and garlic bread, as well as a bottle of Chardonnay, his favorite wine. She covered the dining room table and the kitchen counters in scented candles, and to put a topper on a thoroughly romantic evening, she purchased a brand spanking new French maid's outfit.

No self respecting maid would ever have worn something so skimpy, which was definitely part of its charm. The skirt was barely more than a bib, and even when tugged down as far as it would go, it barely covered what it should have in front and left the lower swells of her buttocks quite plainly exposed. The little white apron was even smaller and the bodice was cut so low that the lowest point of the v-shaped neckline was only eighteen inches from meeting the hem of her skirt.

Ruby liked that costume. She couldn't wait to try it on, to model it for Hunter as she served his dinner to him. With any luck, she herself would be dessert. She even spent an unheard of—for her anyway—two hours in front of the mirror, curling, spraying and fashioning her hair into a tight coiffure

of curls that spilled out of the lacy headpiece in golden ringlets. She even put on makeup, something Ruby detested doing, but she was determined. Their six-month anniversary was going to be a night to remember. It was going to be perfect, a spank-free evening. One that would leave him gasping for breath and exhausted in the bedroom, for once without the added motion of his shaking the sting out of his hand while she lay red-bottomed and wailing across his lap.

Yes, she wanted everything to be perfect, which is why she ended up running to Wal-Mart at nine o'clock at night in a desperate last minute search for a garter belt and/or fishnet stockings. She should have known it would be a doomed expedition from the start. After all, how often did Wal-Mart carry sexy lingerie. Still, it was nothing short of disheartening when she had to leave the store empty-handed.

Ruby sulked her way across the parking lot and climbed back into her car, but she could think of no place within fifty miles that would be open at this time of night and which had even a slim hope of carrying what she needed.

There was a Castle's Adult Store in Eugene, about an hour away. Ruby drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and thought about it. She could hurry home, get the lasagna ready, put it in the oven on the timer, and maybe if she drove like a bat out of hell, she could race out to Castle's, get her stockings, and return home hopefully in time to make things perfect before Hunter got off work.

She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel again. She really did want things to be just right.

She'd do it.

She cranked up the engine, put the car in reverse and, turning around to look behind her, backed out of the parking space. Just as she faced forward, shifted into drive and took her foot off the brake, her entire vehicle lurched as she was struck from the passengers' side. Ruby hit the brakes again automatically and looked back in time to see the back end of a huge, green SUV pulling forward until it was no longer touching her car.

So much for garters, stockings, and the Castle Adult Store. So much for a perfect evening with hunt.

"Damn it!" Shutting off her engine, Ruby got out of the car. "Are you all right?" she called to the other driver.

Climbing down out of the SUV, the middle aged man nodded. He laughed nervously as he said, "Yes, I'm fine. I guess it's both our faults, huh?"

Ruby's mouth compressed. Shutting her door, she walked around the car to get a better look at his rear bumper. A smearing of dust showed the contact point, but that was the extent of the damage done to him. Turning to look at her rear passenger door, Ruby started in surprise. The entire panel was caved inward. She covered her mouth with one hand.

The other driver laughed nervously again. "I guess we're both at fault," he repeated.

Staring at the door, she swallowed hard. "I'll get my insurance information."

She tried to open the front passenger door to get into the glove box, but the door was stuck, trapped closed by the bent panel of the one behind it. She had to walk all the way around to the driver's side again. When she returned with the

perforated card provided by her insurance agency, the other driver still hadn't moved.

"Are you going to turn this in to your insurance?" he asked.

Warning bells began to toll inside Ruby's head. Glancing back at her door, she handed him the card. "Yes, I think so."

"But it was both our faults," the man protested. "Look, I'm an insurance agent and I'm telling you, all that will come of reporting this is that they'll raise both our rates. All you've got is a little dent. You'll have to pay to fix it out of your deductible, anyway. What do you have to gain by involving your insurance?"

A bad feeling began to settle in the pit of her stomach. She really didn't have five hundred dollars to put into fixing her car right now, and that's what her deductible was. Glancing at the huge dent in the door panel, she found herself wondering if perhaps Hunter couldn't just pop it out himself. Maybe with one of those suction cup things she'd seen on TV.

"Can I get your insurance information?" she asked, handing him her card.

He took it and fingered the perforated edge. "This is nice. I wish my agency sent out cards like this."

"You don't have an insurance card?" she asked. Her bad feeling began to get worse when he shook his head.

"I work for Safeco," he said.

"Hang on." Ruby went back to her car for a pen and fished an old envelope out of her purse to write on. She got his name, his home address and his phone number. She wrote

down his place of employment, license plate number and hoped he wasn't lying.

"Are you going to report this?" he asked again as she was getting ready to go.

"Well, your car isn't hurt," she reluctantly said. "The only damage was done to my door. Maybe I can pop it out or something," she muttered under her breath.

The man seemed relieved. "Yeah, and it was both our faults. No point in having our rates raised over a little accident like this."

"Yeah right." Ruby got into her car feeling a bit used. He drove away while she sat there, fuming over her steering wheel. Was it both their faults? He'd backed into her, not the other way around. Why, if it was someone else's carelessness, would she have to pay for it?

She went home, no longer in the mood for the perfect evening that she'd so diligently planned. She threw the lasagna fixings in the fridge, instead of the oven and then, in an antisocial mood, left Hunter's house to spend the night in her own bed. She couldn't sleep, damn that nap, but that's where she was a little after midnight when Hunter came home.

Though her bedroom was dark and her eyes were closed, Ruby wasn't sleeping when she heard the opening creak of her bedroom door. His boots crossed her hardwood floor quietly and then the mattress shifted as he crawling onto the bed just behind her. His arm slipped around her waist and the hard breadth of his chest settled against her back.

He kissed the shell of her ear. "Wake-e, wake-e."

"I am awake," she grumbled.

"I saw the car," he said, snuggling in at her back. "Are you all right?"

Ruby just nodded.

"What happened?"

"Some jerk in an SUV backed into me," she said. Simply being held like this by him was making her heart pound and her belly warm. That warmth even trickled lower down and Ruby pushed her bottom back against him in the hopes that his hand might follow the heated path to that aching away-from-him spot between her tense thighs.

"But you're not hurt?" he persisted, and she shook her head again. "Are you mad at me for some reason?"

"No," she said, her voice cracking as his hand began to wander over the front of her nightshirt. Upwards first, brushing the soft underside of her breasts before cupping one in the warmth of his palm. He playfully passed his thumb back and forth across her stiffening nipple, the cotton of her shirt becoming sandpaper harsh as her sensitivity to tactile stimulation increased.

He growled, leaning forward just enough to take the lobe of her ear into his hot mouth. "Then get your sexy little backside back where it belongs." He nipped, just hard enough to make her gasp and then swatted her, the clap of his hand against her rump startlingly loud to her ears. "In my bed!"

Ruby scrambled to her feet, but not before his hand found her bottom again with another sharp slap that sent her scurrying from the room. She ran all the way back to his

house with Hunter fast on her heels, landing one swat after another all the way to his bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Ruby was lounging in her beach chair, reading a book the next afternoon when the cordless phone beside her rang. She picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hello. May I speak with Ruby Evans?" came a woman's tinny, disembodied voice.

"You've got her."

"My name is Carol Inverson, and I'm an agent from Progressive. It was reported that you were in an accident yesterday that resulted in massive amounts of damage done to another vehicle. We'd like to get your side of what happened."

Ruby put her book down. "What?"

There was a brief moment's pause and then the insurance woman began again. "My name is Carole In—"

"No," Ruby cut her off. "Massive amounts of damage? To his car?"

"That's what the Safeco claim states," Carol told her. "When you backed into him?"

Ruby's jaw dropped. "Bull shit! The only damage done was to my car. His tank of an SUV was just fine! And since cars don't drive sideways, he backed into me, lady, not the other way around!"

"Why didn't you report the accident?"

"Because the little weasel begged me not to!"



Carol was quiet. "Miss Evans, I'd like to hear your side of the story, but I'd like to record it for our records, if that's okay with you?"

"By all means," Ruby muttered, glaring at the sand. And as soon as the tape was rolling, Ruby told the insurance woman everything.

\* \* \* \*

One of the bonuses of living in a small coastal town was just that—it was small. A grand total of three hundred people called this place home. The annual social highlights took place in early spring with the Bark Dust Day Festival and the Lamb and Wool Festival, when everyone got together for the crowning of the new Miss Sheep and her three Miss Lamb runner-ups. With towns this small, there was a finite number of cars in them. Immediately upon completing her call with the Progressive insurance lady, Ruby jumped into her dented vehicle and began driving up and down the streets, searching for the familiar dark green SUV.

She found it parked in front of the city bank. Parking right behind him, Ruby walked into the bank. There, in a little glass office with a gold Bank Manager plaque on the door, was Ed. Good old Ed. Good old lying sack of all that was evil in the world, Ed. Her eyes narrowed.

She was so going to get him.

As if sensing the heat of her stare, Ed looked up from his paperwork and their eyes locked. He paled, and she narrowed her eyes at him even more. He even looked like a weasel, that bucked-toothed worm! That mealy-mouthed bastard!

Snapping around on her heels, Ruby stormed from the bank and, without preamble, drove to the grocery store. Thirty-five dollars bought a lot of fish. Twelve good sized rainbow trouts, and every one had Ed's name stamped on them.

Back at her house, she put them in a garbage can and left them to smolder under the baking influence of the sun for a three days. By Thursday night, even though she was careful to keep the lid on the garbage can and the can a good thirty feet from the house, when Hunter got home in the middle of the night, his first words were still, "Whew! What is that smell?"

"Something must have washed up on the beach," was all Ruby managed to say, hiding her smile. The fish were ready, now all she had to do was wait.

\* \* \* \*

Everything closed down by six o'clock in small towns. By ten o'clock only teenagers and die hard partiers were still on the roads. By eleven thirty the only other car she passed on the street was that of the county sheriff's and, thankfully, he was going in the opposite direction as herself.

Ruby parked in a dark alley a good block from the bank, well out of range of the security cameras. Dressed completely in black, which included a ski mask and gloves, and carrying a very smelly duffle bag over one shoulder, she walked up to the all-night drop box. Ignoring the cameras, it took all of five minutes to feed the trout into the deposit slot. Just imagining what the bank would smell like when the doors opened again

on Tuesday, Monday being Labor Day and a bank holiday, was enough to make her smile. She chuckled all the way back to her car.

Once home again, she had just enough time to change clothes, throwing everything, including the duffle bag, into the garbage before Hunter returned home.

"Whew! Something smells like fish!" was all Hunter said, and Ruby went to bed giggling. She had gotten away with it.

Or so she thought.

\* \* \* \*

On the way to cash his paycheck early Tuesday morning, Hunter walked into the bank and took his first whiff of the most God-awful, intense, and yet oddly familiar smell that had ever crossed his nostrils.

"Oh my God!" He grabbed his nose.

Stationed at the door, holding a handkerchief over his own, the security guard said, "Be grateful you don't work here."

"What happened?" Hunter asked, although he had a sneaking suspicion that he already knew. Somehow this smell had 'Ruby' stamped all over it.

"Someone put rotting fish in the night drop box," the guard told him. "Professional cleaners have been scrubbing the box all morning, but I can't see how the smell's improved at all."

Unable to bear the smell, Hunter beat a hasty retreat from the bank back outside where the air was fresh enough that at least his stomach wasn't roiling. He took several deep breathes, but his nose felt permanently assailed, and even

from halfway across the parking lot he could still smell rotting fish.

He was just getting into his car, when his eyes fell on the dark green SUV parked three spaces down, and the last traces of suspicion formalized in his mind. "That devious woman isn't going to sit for a month," he muttered under his breath.

\* \* \* \*

Ruby was sitting at the kitchen table dressed in shorts and a plain white t-shirt, one leg tucked on the seat beneath her, reading the morning paper and snacking on a grapefruit, when Hunter stormed into the house. He slammed the front door behind him and demanding, "What did you do?"

Ruby froze, glancing up at him mid-chew. Her eyes, instead of wide and confused, had a glimmer of curiosity in their depths. It was a very calculating look, particularly when she narrowed them at him and tipped her head slightly to one side as if trying to gauge just how much he knew. Or thought he know.

"Don't even think about lying to me," he warned.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

That was her first mistake, whether she knew it yet or not.

Hunter walked over to the table—rather calmly too, he was rather proud of that—and sat down across from her. He folded his hands in front of him and glared at her. Just glared. Grim and unsmiling, staring unblinkingly into her eyes until she began to fidget.

"What?" she hedged.

"Tell me about the bank."

A very distinct expression flittered across her face, one that clearly said, caught.

Ruby bolted from the table, but Hunter was faster. He picked her up, tossing her over one shoulder. With her kicking and screaming the whole way, he carried her down the hall to their bedroom.

"Don't you dare!" she shrieked when he got the cane down out of the closet.

"Then I suggest you start talking," he said bluntly.

And Ruby did, although babbled might have been a more accurate description. Hanging over his shoulder, staring down the length of his back to the cane he held, Ruby blurted out everything about the accident, the insurance call, about hunting the bank manager's car down and about buying, aging, and delivering the fish to her intended target. And then she lay tensely across his shoulders, the skin of her bottom crawling with dread as she watched him flex his fingers upon the leather wrapped handle of that slender rattan cane. She clasped her hands under her chin, praying fervently that he wouldn't spank her with it.

"What," he finally said, in deep and somber tones, "is the number one rule?"

Her prayers weren't about to be answered.

For a moment she couldn't breathe. All she could do was stare at that cane, knowing that the next few minutes would likely be the worst of her entire life. Certainly they'd be the most pain filled.

"Fish is not a tool for revenge," she finally managed to whisper.

He put her back on her feet for all of the three seconds that it took him to divest her of her shorts and bend her over the mattress.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in the living room in just her t-shirt and her socks, her bottom as red as twin maraschino cherries, striped with welts that blazed with a unique and pulsating heat all its own, Ruby curled into Hunter's embrace. She still thought black thoughts down on the head of that weaselly bank manager, but at least she wasn't angry anymore.

Hunter kissed her forehead. "Do you want to come outside and have dinner with me now?"

She sniffled against his chest and nodded.

"You can sit on my lap while you eat," he suggested, smiling down at her. "I'll even rub your bottom until it feels good again."

His very suggestion caused a tiny pulse of arousal to come to life between her thighs. She cleared her throat and managed to look away. After all, she didn't want to seem too eager to take him up on his offer. It wouldn't do to have him thinking that a few well placed caresses were all it would take to win her forgiveness each time he decided to indulge his penchants for over-the-knee barbarism.

"If you want to, you can even put on that sexy French maid's outfit you've got stashed in the back of your closet." He grinned and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"You weren't supposed to see that!" she protested. "It was supposed to be a surprise!"

"It certainly was a surprise to find it hanging there," he agreed. "Come on. Put it on for me. I'd love to see you in it." He grinned wolfishly. "My own personal and disobedient maid, with her welted and well-striped bottom on display and in desperate need of more spanking—I can't wait!"

He rubbed his hands, and Ruby punched him in the shoulder again for being so eager to inflict more discomfort upon her.

"It was supposed to induce a spank-free evening," she told him.

His smile turned even more wolfish. "Not in that outfit, it won't be. But I promise it won't hurt."

She frowned. "You could spank my bottom with a feather right now and it would hurt."

"Trust me," he said, his tone dropping to sultry growl that made her insides positively melt. "I promise, what I'm going to do, will do everything but hurt."

Her mouth ran dry. Ducking out of his arms, Ruby ran down the hall to the bedroom. One French maid, coming right up!

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### **Author's Note:**

I actually told the basics of this story in a chat room, and the ladies I was talking to said I should write it down. Nobody believes me when I say this, but as fantastic as it sounds, I actually did do this to my principal. What can I say? I was a rotten kid. I was in Junior High School at the time—eighth grade, I believe. I won't tell you which school, although I will tell you the names of the Principal and VP: Mr. Bonneville (principal) and Stonevich (the vice principal). Really. Honest to God. They were a 'vick' and 'vich'. Kids being kids, we automatically crowned the authoritative duo with the dubiously honorary nicknames of Boner and Stoner.

I swear, I'm not making this up.

Now, when I initially told this story, I got mixed up and said it was Stoner who had the glass eye. Well, my sisters say it was Principal Boner. Cut me some slack, it was a long, long, long (dinosaurs roamed the earth, I killed grizzly bears with my loose leaf notebooks) long time ago. Anyway, regardless of whose eye it was, this is what happened, told in the third person because first person accounts, for whatever reason, just aren't as good.

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## THE GLASS EYE

Denise sat in a chair that was mostly wood, with plush pea-green cloth cushions on the seat and back. The thin carpet under her sneakers was a mottled grey with a dark splotch of a coffee stain by the door. Two pictures hung on the wall: one being a carefully framed autographed magazine cover of Richard Nixon, who actually had not been the president of the United States for many terms, and the other was a hunter's wet dream of a peaceful pond, covered in Mallard ducks.

The window overlooked the school parking lot. It as a sunny Spring day, and the blinds were drawn down in an effort to block the blinding glare that bounced off some of the windshields. Behind her, the wall-unit air conditioner clicked on and began to rattle, and in the receptionist's area outside the principal's office, a phone was repeatedly ringing.

Dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt, Denise sat jiggling one leg nervously up and down. God, she hoped she didn't get spanked for this.

What was there to get spanked for, her brain promptly argued. Boner, as Mr. Bonneville was affectionately called, behind his back, of course, probably wouldn't even call her father. Eighteen year olds just barely a month shy of Graduation did not get their father's called.

And anyway, they couldn't prove she was ditching Choir. As far as the school knew, things were exactly as she'd said: she was going to the bathroom. And she had asked the

substitute's permission before leaving, that part wasn't a lie. So what if that had been over twenty minutes ago? Maybe she had a slight case of what her mom liked to call, Potty Problems.

Denise made a face. She didn't, but they didn't have to know that.

She jiggled her leg up and down again, sighing as she heard another phone ring somewhere outside Boner's office. This was nerve wracking, waiting like this. It was also the first time in her entire scholastic career that she could ever remember actually wishing she could just get up and go to class.

Scratching her chin, Denise glanced down at the wide expanse of the Principal's desk. She studied his name tag, desk calendar, pen holder, and for lack of something better to do, reached for the small wooden box set in front of his height-adjusting desk lamp with its neon green easily directable shade. Stiffening her spine and catching a quick glance out the door window, she then hunched down in her chair and opened the box.

"Holy cow!" She almost dropped it, for nestled inside on its own velvety cushion was a glass eye.

It looked like a marble, a big aggie, with a very distinct, greenish-blue-colored 'eyeball' like appeal.

"Sick," she said, awe-struck, and picked it up. It felt heavier than it looked, and she suddenly understood why Boner always had a slight droop to the right side of his face. Wearing the thing couldn't have been very comfortable. And then she realized, if this was here, what was he wearing in his

face? She'd never seen him with an eye patch. Maybe this was a spare?

"Sick," she said again, with even greater respect.

Hearing the low tones of a man speaking just outside, Denise started. Put the eye back, her brain quickly told her. She stuffed the eye into her pocket instead, snapped the wooden box shut and quickly dropped it back where she'd found it on her desk.

After all, any guy dumb enough to bring his fake eye to school with him was practically begging to have it stolen.

The door opened and Mr. Bonneville walked in, an inch-thick manilla file folder in one hand. He closed the door behind him, heading for his desk without more than a glance in her direction. Before he even reached it, he began to lecture. "You've missed ninety out of a hundred and eighty school days. What makes you think you're going to graduate?"

Boner was an unsmiling man who never minced words.

"Ninety days?" she echoed. That was a lot, although frankly, she wouldn't have thought she'd been here for that many.

He picked up the phone, hit one of the lit-up and blinking white buttons and handed it to her without another word.

Oh God....

Denise put the receiver to her ear. "Hullo?"

"Girl, you are in some serious trouble," her father snapped out on the other end.

Denise froze in her seat, determined not to wince in front of Boner. Meekly, she said, "Hi, Dad."

"You're going straight home after school and straight to your room. You and I have business, is that understood?"

Under Boner's hard gaze, even though it wasn't likely that he knew what her father was saying exactly, she still flushed a hot shade of embarrassment. "Yes, sir."

"Straight home," her father snapped again.

Denise fiddled with the corkscrew curls in the cord that connected the phone and receiver. "Yes, sir," she said again, a tiny hiccup of dread creeping into her tone.

There was a click as he hung up, and Denise stifled a sigh. Reluctantly, she handed the phone back to Boner, who hung it up. Then he opened her file.

"You've got two days of detention starting tomorrow," he said, and made a note of it in her scholastic file. Then he snapped it shut again, adding a curt, "Dismissed."

The rumor had been that Boner had spent time in Vietnam. Apparently, he'd never acclimatized to life outside the army.

Denise looked at his slightly sagging right eye. "Yes, sir." Gathering up her books, the wrongfully pilfered eye all but burning a hole through her pocket and into her leg, she walked out of the office and slipped back into junior highschool circulation.

\* \* \* \*

It was the last period before lunch and all through math class she half expected the door to swing open and for a darkly livid principal to storm inside, looking for her, not to mention his eye. He never did. Instead, she spent the fifty minute class studying her overall grade—seven percent—and

wondering if Mr. Martin had any extra credit assignments worth a gazillion points so she could at least catch up to a respectable 'D'.

And of course, she also had to figure out what to do with the eye.

Mrs. Hayworth was ridiculously susceptible to shocks, so it was a dreadful temptation to slip it into the English teacher's desk drawer or maybe leave it on the top of the projector, at right about face level so she'd be sure to see it. Of course, the effect might be better if she smuggled the head of the dissect-able mannequin out of Mr. Blair's health class, maybe smeared the brain segment with cherry Jell-O to give it that fresh and juicy look, and place the eye in such a way as to make it appear freshly popped-out—oh yes, she could already hear Hayworth's horrified scream....

Denise sat at her desk, blinking twice as a slight smile turned up the corners of her mouth. Actually, that idea wasn't half bad.

She chortled, her spirits lifting just a little. And for a very brief while, it didn't matter quite so much that she was failing everything but Choir. Or that, directly after school, eighteen or not, she was destined for a short, sharp uncomfortable trip to the bedroom with her very angry father.

No, for the moment, it was just her, the eye in her pocket, and all the dark and devilish possibilities for how best to use it.

\* \* \* \*

Denise slipped into the lunch line just as nonchalantly as she knew how. She'd have whistled she was so nonchalant, except that that might have looked suspicious.

She had deliberately held back in getting her lunch until all but the stragglers had already gone through the check out and found their seats. That left only five other students in the little room that made up the food and deli section of the cafeteria, and no one yet behind her, although she had glimpsed two girls running to throw their books into their lockers before heading for lunch.

It was the perfect set up.

Gathering a flat green tray and some silverware, she walked over to the hot and cold displays that were chock full of what the lunch ladies in charge of this school liked to call 'food'. If you didn't set your standards too high, some of it was even edible.

Glancing cautiously around her, Denise began to look over her selections. In either the pizza or tacos, the eye would have been too easily spotted. Two eyes would have looked better on the hamburger, and the salad was definitely not a good idea. A load of dressing coupled with a kid with a low IQ and teeth could get end broken or the eye ingested. Either meant a flop ending to what was shaping into a fairly decent prank.

The fruit cup had real possibilities, and she almost discounted the Jell-o the minute she laid eyes on it. Not only was it not red (today's flavor being lime), but it had miniature marshmallows floating frozen in the middle of each individually served square.

It was the marshmallows, however, that made her pause and look at the Jell-O a second time. Yeah. Okay, why not? She liked lime.

Denise ducked down surreptitious to see if any of the normally hawk-eyed lunch ladies were watching and then reached into her pocket. She looked to the left. Two kids were still waiting to pay, and another was standing indecisively between the two-percent and the chocolate milk selections.

To her right, the two girls had stashed their books and were heading straight for the lunch line themselves. They were talking and laughing back and forth. Young enough to be freshmen, they looked friendly and sweet, with a Valley Girl style innocent. In other words, she chuckled again, they looked like targets.

Denise pulled the eye out of her pocket. Glancing down to make sure the eye was positioned to stare, she quickly dropped it into the nearest bowl of jiggly lime and pressed it down into the center with the rest of the marshmallows.

Grabbing a slice of pizza and a Diet Coke, she quickly zipped down to the check-out counter to pay for her meal and then ducked out into the cafeteria to find a seat ... and almost ran smack into Mr. Boner. Had she not already had them removed, she'd have swallowed a tonsil she gulped so fast.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that you have something of mine." And then he glared at her. He was a really, really good glarer. Even with a droopy fake eye.

"Uh," Denise said eloquently. "I, uh..."

She was saved from having to answer by the ear-piercing scream and the clatter of falling lunch trays behind her.

"It's an eye!"

From all over the cafeteria, students stood up. As silent as lurking apparitions, they looked to the commotion, craning their necks to see what was going on.

The Principal gave Denise another scathing glare and then headed for the little alcove that housed the lunch line at the same time that Mrs. Fallen, the head lunch lady came barreling out, with two horrified girls clinging to one another just behind her.

"Who did this?" she screeched holding up the Styrofoam bowl that housed the eyeball Jell-O. "Was this some sort of joke?"

"It's an eye!" one of the teens behind her announced, shuddering.

Denise could hardly contain herself.

Fallen swung her head from side to side, like a bull on the verge of charging through the assembled students, until Principal Boner walked up to her. He plucked the disposable bowl out of her hand and reached for a spoon.

There in front of the entire student body, in four loudly slurped bites, he ate his way down to his eye. The dead silence of the cafeteria broke under a tidal wave of slightly disgusted but mostly delighted 'Ewww, gross' exclamations as he spooned his lime-flavored eye into his mouth and rolled it around.

Tossing the spoon and bowl into a nearby garbage receptacle, Boner then spat his glass eye into his hand, popped out the current one he was wearing and stuck the freshly warmed orb that Denise had pilfered into the empty



socket. It was a moment of unequaled grossness, and it captured the enduring respect of every highschool kid, from freshmen to seniors, sitting in that room.

"Carry on," he said calmly. He gave Denise another hard look, and then walked back to his office. A man that cool just had to be admired.

\* \* \* \*

Denise started the ride home chuckling under her breath, high-fiving friends and prank-envy acquaintances that came to sit by her and talk. But now, as the bus began to close the miles that stood between school and home, she was beginning to lose her smile.

One of the very last kids to be dropped off, the bus was nearly empty by the time they turned onto her street. She sat in the very back, her legs outstretched on the seat and chewed on her fingernails. Not for the first time, she wondered what she would tell her father—a question that really depended on how much he already knew. Knowing Mr. Boner, that was probably everything beginning with her poor attendance, a track record that stretched all the way back to the start of the school year and ended with the twenty minute break that she'd allotted herself this morning from the mind-numbing boredom of junior high.

She sighed. Her house, one of only five built along this stretch of country road, began to peek through the tall evergreen pines that bordered her family's property. They rounded another corner, and then the bus squealed to a stop at the tree-shaded mouth of her quarter-mile driveway.

"See you tomorrow," the bus driver said as she got off.

Denise waved back, but privately she hoped not. Privately, she hoped a tree fell over and killed her before she reached her house. She glanced up at the heavy branches optimistically as they swayed in a gentle breeze. Unfortunately, nothing looked ready to drop across her head. Heaving another sigh, she trudged on home.

Her dad's white Suburban was already parked under his favorite tree by the time she got there. He had come home an hour early in order to deal with her. That meant she was really going to get it.

Her stomach flip-flopped queasily the whole way up the front porch steps. She wiped her palms on her jeans and then, because she had no other choice, slowly opened the front door.

Her father didn't even look up from the computer. "Room!" he said.

Denise dropped her book bag in a corner by the door and promptly hustled herself down the stairs into the basement. Her room was at the end of the hall. She went inside and closed the door, knowing better than to lock it, although the idea was tempting. In the end, she sat down on her bed and waited. One minute felt like forever, and the three that passed before she heard the heavy tromp of her father crossing the floor above seemed a veritable eternity. But when she heard him start down the stairs, she picked up her pillow and hugged it fiercely to her chest. Biting her bottom lip, she stared at her feet, knowing there was nothing she could say or do to stop her father from coming down that hall.

Maybe he wouldn't spank her.

Maybe a snowball would roll through hell and come out the other side without have melted.

She bit her bottom lip again and chewed it fiercely until she heard his hand touch the doorknob. It turned, and for a split second, it felt as though her heart suddenly seized inside her chest. She clutched her pillow hard, knowing she was too big to hide under the bed, the way every muscle in her body suddenly tensed up to do, and it was too late to try stuffing Kleenex down the back of her pants. Not that a ploy like that would have worked anyway. If her father followed the same ritual that he had ever since she was seven, her pants would end up around her knees anyway.

The door opened, and he came inside. As he closed it behind him, her father did not look to be a very happy camper.

"All right," he said, sounding more weary than angry. "Frankly, I'd have thought you were too old for this, but if this is how you want it, let's discuss your skipping school."

Discuss.

The only discussion endured was that briskly delivered, one-sided kind. Denise's father had never been a big believer in lectures. There wasn't much to say anyway. It wasn't as though Denise didn't know she wasn't supposed to cut class or play hookie. And as it turned out, although she had been dreading it, her father didn't said word one about the ninety school days that she'd managed, either partially or completely, to cut from her daily life. He just took the pillow

out of her hands and tossed it aside with a cryptic, "You'll want to sit on that later tonight."

He took her pants down. It didn't matter that she was technically an adult, old enough to vote if not to drink, with a body that had well and truly reached adult proportions, abandoning its childishly straight frame for a woman's more curvaceous one. He simply pulled her to her feet before taking her place on the bed and unfastened her jeans, peeling them down her legs all the way to her knees.

She knew better than to protest when he lay her across his own. The only part of his 'discussion' that was actually vocalized came from Denise's side of it, beginning with the gasp and wail that met the first crisp, sharp smack of his hand as it flatted her bottom, sparking a fire that would burn beneath her skin for the remainder of the night.

Her hand shot back behind her within only the first few vigorous swats. Her father didn't even break his cadence, he merely snagged her wrist and move it aside, and then, if anything, his hand became harder.

Over the years, Denise had become something of a self-proclaimed connoisseur of spankings. She had even ranked them. Wooden spoons were bad, but switches were worse. Of course, switches tended to fray and eventually to break (generally not soon enough for anyone on the receiving end), but still that placed them better than hairbrushes with short handles. Which were nowhere near as bad as hairbrushes with long handles. Which tied right up there with supple leather belts as an all-time, avoid-when-ever-humanly-possible type of spanking. But above all of that, including the

belt, was her Dad's hand. It was hard and big, covering her whole bottom at once, and stung as bad as anything she'd ever felt when he really laid into her, like he was doing now.

It was impossible not to kick and flail and Denise even burst into tears, but when sound spankings were earned, her father more than delivered. Unswayed by crocodile tears, he blistered the seat of her panties with forty to fifty resoundingly hard smacks of his broad hand and finished the job with a good dozen to the backs of her thighs to make sure the lesson took.

It all left her bawling by the time he stood her up, and the last act of the spanking ritual was enacted. He hugged her, fierce and close, until her sobs turned to hiccups and sniffles and her frantic, hopping dance of pain slowed to an occasional bounce with a lot of rueful bottom-rubbing thrown in.

"You're grounded and in your room for the rest of the night," he said gruffly when she came back to herself enough to hear him.

Denise pulled back from his chest and swiped at her eyes. She nodded. "O-okay."

"Lie down," he said as he let her go. "You might want to rest for a bit. I'll be back in about a half hour."

Sniffing, Denise reached down to pull up her jeans, now all the way down to her ankles because she'd kicked so fiercely. Her shoes were likely the only reason they hadn't been kicked clean off her legs. "Back?"

On his way out the door, her father paused with one hand on the knob and gave her another hard look. "That's right.

You've missed half the school year, and I want to know where you've been. So we're going to discuss it."

Her eyes fell to his hand, the one that spanked. All ready it had that finger-flicking dangerous twitch to it, one she well recognized as a prelude to more bottom blistering. She swallowed hard.

"And tomorrow," her father continued somberly. "Before you head off to school, we're going to discuss the glass eye and what in hell made you think you could get away with something like that."

Denise let her jeans fall back down her legs as he softly closed her bedroom door. She reached back behind her, gingerly cupping her bottom, all ready as hot as the sun, throbbing and stinging so fiercely that she could barely stand to touch it. She flung herself down on her bed and once more hugged her pillow tight against her chest. She couldn't help but cry all over again.

Had it been worth it? Playing hookie probably had. Now that her father knew about it, he'd likely be in contact with Boner, and both would pay much closer attention to her attendance. It would likely be next year or later before she dared ditch another class. That part of her life was now officially over.

And as for the incident with Principal Boner's glass eye, well.... She rubbed her smarting backside and decided to wait until she could once more sit down before considering an answer to any kind of 'to prank, or not to prank' question.

After all, life-altering decisions should never be made on the spur of a moment or while under the influence of a sore and aching bottom.

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## **O CHRISTMAS TREE**

Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow ... for God's sake,  
somewhere else.

Angie Wilson was absolutely no good at driving in the stuff. She probably would have done better with chains on, but like Christmas presents this year, she just couldn't afford them. So instead she drove slowly. Very, very slowly. Not even ten miles an hour. And what with Bargain Bob's Discount Trees located on the far North side of the Wal-Mart parking lot in Lebanon, still a good twenty-two miles away, at this rate it was going to take all night to get a Christmas tree much less to get the thing back home again.

Why oh why did she have to live in the middle of absolutely nowhere? She should have sold her grandparents' house the day she inherited it. Uncle Russ had been willing to give her fifty thousand for it. Of course, even tiny two story farm houses in the middle of podunk nowhere were worth at least twice that, especially when they came with fifteen acres of land, and she'd never really liked Uncle Russ anyway.

Besides, she hadn't been ready to sell. Not for fifty thousand. Not even for fifty million.... Well, okay.... she might have considered fifty million. But the point was, the house held way too many fond memories for her to part with it just yet.

It was where her favorite grandparents had lived. It was the place where she'd grown up after her parents divorced, the one stable place that she could call home and always be



welcome. She'd spent her summers here, and all her holidays. It had always smelled of cookies and fresh baked bread. During cold winters, a warm fire had always crackled in the wood stove in the living room, and Grandma Baker had handstitched the rag comforter that she still slept under to this day.

Angie had taken her first sip of coffee sitting on the front porch between her grandparents on the morning that she turned nine. And long before she learned how to drive a car, she'd driven the tractor that plowed the fields where G'Pappy planted his pumpkins and corn. Mr. Ellison, the next door neighbor, had long since purchased those fields, but Angie still had the house and the barn, in the loft of which she had virtually lived out her entire childhood. She'd lazed away the summers reading, played with the newborn kittens in the hay, and watched dust dancing in the sunbeams that filtered in through the knot holes and cracks in the weathered walls.

But it was Christmas that had always been the best time of the year. She and G'Pappy went out every year to get the perfect tree and it was a family event to decorate it from the box of hand-made ornaments G'Ma brought down from the attic.

And that was it in a nutshell why she never sold the place. It was the kind of house that Angie herself wanted to be a grandmother in, so she could pass down some of these fond memories to her descendants. All she had to do was get through the next few years, get a better paying job, sell her manuscript to the right publishing house, and get over this

hard luck streak that she'd wallowed in for the last three winters now, and then it would all be easy street.

Angie glanced into the rear view mirror and her tentative smile faded. "Oh crap."

Twin headlights were speeding their way towards her at the impossible speed of forty or so miles an hour. Angie slowed down even more and hugged the right side of the road, or at least what she hoped was the right side of the road, it was hard to tell. A good foot of snow and ice blanketed the road and made judging where the pavement ended and the gravel ditch began a difficult task at best.

The four-wheel-drive endowed SUV sped past her without a care and the gust of wind that followed in its wake very nearly blew her smaller hatchback off the road. The whole car rocked and she made the mistake of slamming her foot on the brake. All four tires slid on the ice, and in slow motion, traveling at less than five miles an hour, she rolled sideways off the road and down into the ditch.

Angie sat clutching the steering wheel, her eyes as large as dinner plates.

Oh. Crap.

She frowned and glared at the taillights of the SUV just before it turned a corner and disappeared far down the road ahead of her. Great, how was she supposed to get back on the road? She turned the wheel and pressed on the gas, but finding no traction, the tires only spun and sprayed ice, snow and dirt across the trees behind her.

Double crap. So much for Bargain Bob's.

Shutting off the engine, she dropped her head onto the steering wheel. So much for a Christmas tree.

Sighing, she turned her head and looked out the passenger window. She blinked thoughtfully at the forest full of evergreens and pines. Too bad she didn't have an axe in the car, or she could have taken one home with her and nuts to Bargain Bob.

Angie blinked at the trees around her again, and then looked slyly back up at the road. There was no one around. Taking off her seatbelt, she got out of the car. Just to be sure, she looked up one way and down the other and then, whistling softly to herself, she moseyed on around the back of the car and approached a good looking pine.

She had no shovel and nothing to cut or chop with, so taking a whole tree home with her was completely out of the question. However, she wasn't at all opposed to taking a branch. It'd be.... like a Charlie Brown Christmas, but at least it would be a sweet-smelling green growing thing in the corner to hang her decorations on.

She had never done so much as even a slightly shady deed in all her life, but that didn't stop her from approaching a small sapling no taller than four feet. Dusting off her gloves, she planted one foot against the twiggy trunk of her Christmas selection, grabbed the tree about three feet from the top and did her best to snap it in half. Evergreens did not break easily. It bent over obligingly enough, but only the bark of the flexible tree split, revealing the fresh white wood beneath.

Angie applied herself with vigor. She bent the sapling rapidly back and forth, twisted and cranked the top until the wood began to splinter and then pulled with all her might. "Aaargh!"

The stubborn pine fibers finally gave up. She left the top of the severed trunk and the bottom of her newly appointed Christmas tree completely frayed, but at least now she had one to take home with her.

Panting from the effort, she held up the tree top and looked at it. Funny how victory had a way of making one a little blind. It wasn't until she heard the short-lived whoop of police sirens that Angie suddenly realized that red, white and blue lights were flashing up against the canopy of evergreen boughs all around her.

She spun around and looked back at the road. Sure enough, there was the Sheriff's black and white cruiser parked along the edge. The driver's door was wide open and the Sheriff himself standing in the gap, staring directly down at her behind sunglass-shaded eyes. He leaned down into the car to shut off the siren and picked up the CB, activating the speaker phone on top of his car.

"Please," he drawled in a voice as Southern as pecan pie, "tell me that isn't sweet Angie Wilson that I just watched mutilate that tree."

For the first time in her whole entire life, Angie totally panicked. Clutching her hard earned three-foot tree to her chest, she spun around and began to run/wade/bounce her way through the snow for her car.

"Don't do it," Sheriff Mason warned her.

The problem was the car was still dead in a ditch instead of on the road. Naturally she had a whole thirty feet between the cruiser and herself, and if he'd really wanted to, he probably could have trudged down into the ditch after her, arresting her before she reached the haven of her vehicle.

"Angie," the Sheriff drawled again, and then she heard the electrical click as he hung up the CB. "Don't you make me come down there after you. Be sensible about this. Come on up here and we'll talk."

She ignored him and slogged faster through the snow, each knee-deep step nearly knocking her down as she struggled to get ahead of him. It was a lost cause at best. For as she passed him, he closed his car door and walked along the roadside, keeping easy pace with her progress.

"You're not really, seriously going to run from me, are you? As if I didn't already know who you are and where you live?"

It was absolutely crazy to try, but that didn't put a stop to her frantic getaway attempt, nor did it sway her from throwing her ill-gotten treetop into the passenger seat.

"It's not too late. We can still talk about this, Angie."

She looked back at him over her shoulder. He was less than fifteen feet away; she knew she hadn't a hope of actually escaping him and yet she couldn't make herself stop either. She jumped into her car, shutting and locking the door between them. As if that alone could protect her from the ramifications of what she was doing. What was she doing? Oh crap!

"Don't do it, Angie," he warned, shaking his head.

She was not about to go to jail. Not at Christmas time. She dropped the keys three times before she got the right one in the ignition, and the car didn't start. It didn't even turn over. It only hiccuped and fell still. Oh crap, crap, crap! She pumped the gas and tried again. This time the engine stalled, coughing and sputtering before dying.

Angie beat on the steering wheel. "Not now, dammit!"

Sighing and shaking his head, the Sheriff walked down off the road into the snow and headed for her just as the ignition finally caught. The engine roared to life and Angie gunned it.

The tires spun wildly, splattering dirty snow all over the Sheriff's legs. He stopped walking and looked down at his uniform, his mouth drawing down in a stern frown.

"Oh no," Angie groaned, but that didn't stop her from trying again. This time gently applying the gas until the car began to creep forward.... and slid sideways again, further down the short hill, tilting sharply as the passenger side angled lower than the driver's side. Oh, this was not good.

"All right, young lady," Sheriff Mason announced in his most authoritative voice. "You stop right where you are. You don't want to make this any worse than it already is."

Once more he began stalking after the car, and she was going so slowly just to keep the tires from spinning out that he was actually gaining on her. But Angie didn't stop. She pushed the car forward, trying to turn the vehicle towards the road, but the incline only steepened and before she knew it, two wheels left the snow and the whole car rolled slowly over onto its side.

"Oh, craaaa—" Angie let out a shriek as the car kept rolling, flopping over onto its back in the snow, dropping her clean out of the driver's seat onto the ceiling, and with a last dying cough, the engine totally died.

Lying more on her neck than on her back, one shoe caught up in the wires under the steering column and the other leg tangled in the seat belt, Angie was helpless to do anything more than watch as the Sheriff waded up to the driver's side. The snow was thinner there, mostly because her car had scraped it away as it rolled over, and he was able to squat down far enough to see her face without dipping his fanny in the snow.

Removing his sunglasses, the Sheriff looked at her.

Unable to get off her neck, Angie managed a feeble and horribly guilt-laden smile. "Um ... is there a problem, Sheriff?"

Ever so slightly, the corners of his mouth turned upwards. "Do you know why I stopped you?"

"Well," she hedged, "I know it couldn't have been for speeding."

"Come on, Angie." He beckoned to her. "Out of the car."

"I can't. I'm stuck. It's not very comfortable, either."

"Unlock the door. I'll untangle your legs." The top of the door scraped a swath in the ground as he pried it open and crawled halfway into the car to free her. "This doesn't count as wearing your seatbelt," he said as he got her free. She fell flat on her back on the roof of the car. "That's a fifty dollar ticket right there."

Angie winced. "Would it help if I said I'm sorry, I don't know why I did it, and I promise never to do it again?"

"Nope. I'm still going to give you a ticket. We're also going to talk about your trespassing, destruction of personal property and resisting arrest." Sheriff Mason gave her a stern and knowing look. "Now, your grandfather was sheriff of this town for thirty-three years before he retired. He was the one who got me started on the force. He mentored me. That makes me think if he knew what his only pride and joy, the sweet little girl he thought turned the world around, was up to today ... well, I don't think he'd be very happy with you, would he?"

Angie could hardly meet his eyes. "No," she whispered. "He wouldn't."

He shook his head again. "Come on." He walked her to his patrol car and put her in the back.

Having to sit behind that wire mesh barrier was a very humbling experience. It was made even worse by the fact that instead of taking her to town, or even back to her place, Sheriff Mason drove her out to Doc Johnson's house.

Angie slumped in her seat, covering her face with both hands. She groaned. "Oh please, you can't mean to make me apologize!"

He looked at her in the rear view mirror. "Why not? Destruction of other people's property is a crime. At the very least, you ought to have the decency to tell him what you've done, apologize, and then pay him for the damages. That's just common courtesy. Knowing your granddaddy the way I do, I'm surprised he didn't teach you that."



"I'll put the tree back," Angie promised.

"Putting it back isn't going to make it grow again, now is it?" Sheriff Mason glanced back at her in the rearview mirror as they drove down the long and winding driveway. He took her right to the Doc's front porch, parked and got out of the car without another word.

As Angie waited for him to let her out of the backseat, she stared up at the wreath on the door, at the decoration of multicolored lights strung along the eaves and the stars winking cheerfully in the windows. God, she hoped no one was home. Because the very last thing she wanted to do was to have to march up onto that porch, look her childhood physician in the eyes, and confess to having vandalized part of his property.

"I will pay you all the money I have," she said as Sheriff Mason pulled her out of the back of his car, "just please don't make me do this."

Unfortunately, the Sheriff wasn't flexible. Putting his hand to the small of her back, he pushed her towards the house.

She cringed, but there wasn't much she could do because he followed right behind her all the way to the door. There they waited, standing silently side by side until it became overwhelmingly apparent that she wasn't going to knock. Sheriff Mason did the honors for her, and any last lingering hopes that no one would be home and that she would be spared this humiliating ordeal were dashed when she heard Doc Johnson's heavy footsteps tromping towards them.

He opened the front door and his surprised turned to a quick smile as he recognized his visitors. "Well, now! Angie! Sheriff! What brings you both all the way out here?"

"Just making my rounds," Sheriff Mason said. "And I happened upon something of a minor accident on your land."

Locking his eyes on her, the Doc's smile vanished behind an instantly professional mask. "Is everything all right?" At the same time, he cupped her chin and tilted her head up to the front porch light. "Your eyes don't look dilated. I don't see any cuts or abrasions. Do you hurt anywhere?"

His concern for her well being made Angie feel like a first class heel. "I'm fine, I'm fine."

Her embarrassment strangled a half laugh from her throat and she quickly waved off his hands. A pained look crossed her face once again and, realizing she had no other choice, she began to confess.

"I ran off the road into your woods a little while ago and, being on my way to Bargain Bob's and knowing I probably wouldn't be able to get there until very late, I decided since I was there and since there was some Christmas-looking trees there, I'd ... just take one." She reached into her back pocket and pulled out her wallet. Handing him the fifteen dollars that she would otherwise have spent on a tree, she said, "I'm very sorry."

"You cut down one of my trees?" Doc Johnson asked, his bushy white eyebrows rising up to his hairline.

In for a penny, in a pound, she thought. "Not exactly. I didn't have anything to cut it with so I just broke the top off a very small one."

"And that was supposed to be your Christmas tree?" he asked, even more incredulously.

He'd made no move to take the money from her and after a moment, she lowered the bills. "Well ... yes. I don't need much. I just wanted a little something. I'm very sorry," she offered tentatively. She took half a step back, as if she expected him to start yelling at any minute.

Doc Johnson didn't. Instead, giving both her and the Sheriff identical looks, he turned and yelled back into the house. "Hey, Carol honey? Where's my coat?" He gave Angie a quick wink. "Let's go get you a real tree."

\* \* \* \*

Other than the Sheriff's soft whistling, silence reigned in the squad car the whole way back from Doc Johnson's to Angie's house. This time, she was permitted to sit up front while her tree took up the whole of the backseat. Sheriff Mason had called a tow truck, but due to the worsening weather and the holidays, she wasn't likely to get her car back until Monday. So she was really rather grateful that he was willing to give her a ride home, instead of just letting her walk, which was probably what she deserved for all the trouble she'd caused.

"He wouldn't even take my money," she finally said.

Sheriff Mason stopped whistling in the middle of 'We Three Kings' and looked at her. "Awful decent of him, wasn't it? People tend to be mostly decent if you give them half a chance."

"I guess so." Angie picked at her hands, glancing guiltily at her front door as the Sheriff drove abreast of it and parked, shutting off the cruiser's engine. "Great," she said unenthusiastically. "Now I feel even worse."

"Good." Sheriff Mason smiled at her. "You wouldn't have a conscience if that had made you feel better." Taking the keys from the ignition, he then said, "Besides, I'm pretty sure I'll be able to help you with that once we get inside."

She blinked at him. "You're coming in my house?"

"Resisting arrest is still a crime, Ms. Wilson."

Angie winced again. "I wasn't going more than five miles an hour."

"Uh huh. In a direction that was opposite of where I was currently standing. So that counts."

"Are you going to arrest me?" she asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

He smiled. "And ruin my sterling record: two hundred and forty-four days without a single detainee in my jail. No, ma'am. Arresting you is not what I have in mind. Besides, the jailhouse spider has made itself a nice little web between the wall and key. I'd hate to disturb it. Come on, I'll help you carry your tree inside."

Angie had only thought that getting the tree into the back seat had been difficult. But that was nothing compared to getting it back out again. The branches kept getting hung up in the mesh screen that separated the arrester from the arrestee, and their feet kept slipping in the snow. While she stood on the passenger side, struggling to maintain her balance and push on the trunk at the same time, Sheriff

Mason worked on the other side, pulling at the top of the tree and disentangling branches from the mesh, the door, and the seatbelt. There was a reason police cruisers were not used to transport Christmas trees, and they had just found it.

"Why did we have to get a bushy one?" Angie said, her feet slipping out from under her and dropping her to her knees in the snow.

"Push," the Sheriff laughed.

"I am pushing." Leaning against the seat for leverage, she heaved obligingly to the accompanying crackles of snapping twigs. And then there was a much louder crack. "Uh oh, I think we broke a branch."

"That was my finger."

Angie immediately stopped pushing. "Are you serious?"

"No. I just whacked it on the door. Push."

They left a spray of pine needles and tiny evergreen tufts all over the back seat, but they did get it out of the car. Comparatively, wrestling the tree up the porch steps and into her house was much, much easier.

"Thank you so much," she said, both laughing and panting a little as she closed the door behind them.

"Any time." Sheriff Mason leaned the tree up against the wall by the stairs and took off his gloves, a sure sign that he was planning to stay a while.

For their talk.

Not knowing what to expect from him unnerved her a little, but any day that she didn't go to jail was a good one and Angie was determined to take full advantage of his generosity. "Can I make you some coffee?"

"Maybe later." He took off his coat and hung it up on a hook by the door. As he turned towards the living room, Angie couldn't help but admired his physique. She always had been a sucker for men in uniform, but his dark hair and blue eyes weren't helping any either. Or maybe the bullet proof vest he wore under his shirt was more to blame, but damn if he didn't cut a heart-throbbingly manly figure. His shoulders were broad, his waist narrow, and below all that was a tight, trim butt that she sure wouldn't mind getting her hands on.

She cleared her throat and forced her eyes off his backside. "Are you sure you wouldn't like some coffee?"

"We should get our business over and done with first, don't you think?"

"I don't know. I guess that depends," Angie said, making a stab at good humor, and followed his leisurely stroll to her sofa. "Am I going to get community service, Sheriff, or fifty whacks with a wet noodle?"

Sheriff Mason turned around in front of the couch, his everyday good-natured smile widening. "Funny you should say that. Fifty whacks sounds about right, but I really hadn't planned on using a wet noodle. This—" he held up his hands, twiddling his fingers at her, "—should work as well and might even leave a more lasting impression."

Angie stopped following him. "I'm sorry?"

"That's the general idea."

She started to laugh, a tiny knot of nervous apprehension building inside her belly. "You're not serious."

He sat down in the center of her couch, pushed back the coffee table and then beckoned to her with a very long, strong and authoritative looking finger. "Come here."

He was joking. He had to be. Angie looked at his face, but although he still wore that smile, there was an underlying steeliness about his eyes that left her wondering. "What if I don't want to?" she hedged.

"Then I take you to jail, ruin that poor spider's hard work, and first thing Monday morning you can talk to the Judge."

"Okay." Angie stayed where she was, picking at her fingers and trying to think of a way out of this, except that her mind had gone completely blank. "So, what if I do go over there? Then what happens?"

"Then I take you down across my knee, drop your pants down around your ankles and teach you a little lesson in taking responsibility for your actions. A lesson I'm pretty sure is going to feel just like the ones your granddaddy gave you when you lived here with him. I know if you had run from him the way you did from me, you'd be waiting for him down in the barn right now and it wouldn't be his hand that you'd be dreading, either."

"How do you know that?" Angie accused, the knot in her stomach now one of full blown alarm. "There's no way you could possibly know that!"

The Sheriff smiled. "You probably don't remember, but I was with your granddaddy the night he busted you and your friends at the kegger down by the creek. As I recall, he wasn't all that keen on your drinking four years before the legal age requirement."

Her face paled and she closed her mouth. No, he certainly hadn't been. And she hadn't touched a beer since.

"I really don't want a spanking," she finally said, wringing her hands.

"Sometimes what we want and what we get are two totally different things."

That wasn't very comforting. Sheriff Mason beckoned to her again, and Angie looked at his finger. Ever so meekly, she said, "I think I'd rather go to jail, please."

"Ain't gonna happen," he told her bluntly. "There is no way in hell that I'm going to incarcerate the favorite grandchild of the only man I loved as much if not more than my own father. Young lady, if you run from me right now, I will chase you down, but either way you're going to get your butt busted. You may as well suck it up and come on over here. Now. Before I start to get really irritated."

This was not at all what she'd had in mind when she pictured them 'talking' over her earlier misbehaviors. It was better than going to jail, a little demon in her mind whispered. A spanking would hurt, the rest of her replied. Yes, for a little while. But then she would recover and go on with her life, without having to appear before a judge, or having a misdemeanor count of resisting arrest added to her permanent social record.

She wrung her hands. But the plain truth of it all came down to a very simple equation: he was too big for her to throw out of her house without help, and she just didn't want anyone else to know about this.



And she deserved to get her fanny roasted, her mind interjected.

Shut up, she told it firmly.

Sheriff Mason beckoned one final time. "I'm not going to tell you again, Angie."

She bit her bottom lip, but lowering her eyes to the floor, she went to him. Her hands shook a little as she wiped her suddenly damp palms against her jean-clad thighs. Her knees almost buckled, as well, her legs trembled so badly, but it was only a half dozen tiny steps before she reached his side. After that, his hand was on her arm and she didn't need to worry about balancing on her own because he provided her with a sturdy, unwavering lap to lie upon.

There was a certain measure of disbelief that went into being dropped belly down across a man's lap, bottom thrust upright in the air and nose pushed all the way down to the floor. She blinked at the knots in the old oak floorboards, noticed a few dust bunnies under the couch and made a mental note to clean a bit better when and if she ever got up again.

"Lift your hips up," he told her and, obligingly, feeling all of about ten years old, Angie teepeed herself on fingers and tip toes, pushing her bottom up off his knees just enough for him to reach beneath her and unzip her jeans.

Angie's face turned thirteen different shades of red as his bare hand came to rest on the summit of her left buttock, half on and half off the elastic band of her panties. It wasn't even the good pair; it was the middle-school lunch lady every day white cotton sort that sagged in the back because she'd

owned them now for almost eleven years. A woman could survive a spanking if she got it in sexy red silk panties or pink lace or anything in black, because black was sexy no matter what else. But there was simply no way of recovering from a spanking received in lunch room lady underwear.

"You know," the Sheriff said conversationally. "I sure wouldn't mind seeing you in your underwear. I just wish the first time wasn't like this."

Angie's eyes and mouth both widened, but before she could recover her surprise, the minute warmth of his hand left her bottom and a sudden hard clap jolted her in place. The sound echoed through the living room, bouncing off the photo-covered walls even as his hand bounced back up off her bottom, leaving the blushing pink print of his fingers and thumb darkening on her skin where her underwear failed to cover her.

"Oh!" Angie kicked her feet, her right hand snapping back with fingers splayed to cover the smarting skin of her right bottom cheek. "Oh, wow!" That really hurt. Her mouth gaped and her eyes narrowed with incredulous disbelief for just how much it truly, honestly did hurt!

"It doesn't matter to me if you put your hands in the way," the Sheriff told her, his broad hand slapped down again, just under her fingers, and then full force on her left buttock, a solid, ear-splitting crack that had her bucking her hips and trying to roll off his knee. "My mind's made up to spank you. That means your little tail here is going to be brighter than Rudolph's nose before I let you go."

Angie struggled to fend off his hand, but no matter how she reached and flailed, his open palm found her bottom with what felt like earth-shattering force. Right, left, bottom, thigh, he spanked her until every inch of her bottom felt as if she'd been roasted. He reduced her to tears. Tears! And she never cried. She never kicked and flailed and bucked and shouted before either, but near the end when he merciless attacked the tops of her thighs, Angie squirmed and writhed with dervish intensity. At the tops of her lungs, she even wailed out every single promise she could think of, anything that might have had even a smidgen of a chance at ending her suffering, before bursting into ragged, heart-wrenching sobs.

Sheriff Mason's hand came to a stop on her aching hot flesh. For an ever so brief minute in time, he caressed her throbbing bottom cheeks and let her cry upon his knees until she didn't think she had a lick of moisture left inside her to weep.

He patted her hip. "Do you want to sit up?"

Spankings were exhausting work, particularly for the recipient, and he had to help her upright or she'd have fallen at his feet. Angie put a hand back to tenderly touch her martyred backside and dissolved into tears all over again. She barely felt it when he pulled her back down onto his lap, to sit this time, albeit with her bottom hanging awkwardly off his thighs since she didn't think she could bear a touch against it.

"There now," he crooned, wiping the tears from her face with the backs of two fingers. "You'll be all right." He smiled when she shook her head. "Sure you will. And I guarantee

you're going to think twice before you go ripping up other people's property. Particularly if I'm around to keep you right on the straight and narrow."

Hiccuping and sniffing, Angie looked at him in surprise. "What? You think you're just going to move in here? You don't know me; I don't even think I like you!"

"When a man is privileged enough to see a woman in her underwear, proper introductions aren't quite so important anymore. Besides, I think when you got to know me, you'll like me just fine."

She sniffled, staring at him grimly, not entirely convinced. Although he did have nice looking eyes. A nice butt. Broad shoulders. Strong hands.

Very strong hands, she winced and reached back to cup her aching bottom. Then she got up off his lap, pulling her pants back up into place. The denim scraped her extra sensitive skin like sandpaper, but that sort of discomfort was vastly preferable to walking around in front of him half naked.

"You owe me breakfast," she grumbled. "I don't move in with anybody unless they've bought me breakfast at least once."

"How about I make you breakfast tomorrow?" he countered with a grin. "And you can make me coffee tonight while we talk things over."

A little surprised at herself for not immediately throwing him out, Angie turned to the kitchen. "I don't even know your first name."

"Brick," he said helpfully.

"Brick Mason?" She snorted. "Boy, your parents must have hated you!"

"Naw, they just had a right good sense of humor."

And so did he, as she gradually discovered once the burning smart in her bottom had dwindled to a dull, pulsing ache, but that is a completely different story....

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