

# The Daycare Teacher

By Courage Knight

## Chapter 1:

“Teacher! Bobby won’t give me the yellow paint! Make him share!”

Kelly rubbed an ache behind her eyebrows as she turned towards the art corner. Four-year-old Nate was tugging on five-year-old Bobby’s arm, causing the loaded paintbrush to drip on the tile floor. Bobby gave Nate a shove. Nate shoved back before she could cross the busy playroom to stop him, and Bobby crashed into the double-sided easel. The easel collapsed, taking Emily Hunter down with it into a giant jumble pile of soggy artwork, torn paper, and spilled paint. Emily was howling. Bobby was using words a five-year-old had no business knowing, and Kelly was about ready to quit.

Except that most of the time, she loved her job. Kelly caught the culprit by the arm and directed him towards the corner. “Nate Barrows! You just earned yourself a time-out!”

Nate stuck his tongue out at Bobby on the way.

“And Bobby, what would your mother say if she heard you talking like that?”

He shrugged. “She’d probably tell me to shut the fuck up.”

Tom Cooper, the four-year-olds’ teacher, grinned. “You walked right in to that one, Teach.”

Kelly felt her face flush. It was probably as red as Emily Hunter’s pretty white sweater was now. What mother sent her child to day care wearing white? One who didn’t know kids, obviously. Kelly ignored Tom as she rescued the little girl.

“Those mean old boys! I’m so sorry, honey. Tell me where it hurts.”

“They - they - they ruined my picture!” she sobbed.

Kelly brought her to the sink and handed her some paper towels to catch the worst of the paint spills. The sweater was probably ruined, but if she had Emily change into something dry, she could try soaking it in cold water with a little dish soap and bleach.

“You can paint a new one,” she said, trying to sound encouraging.

“But I don’t want a new one! I want that one!” Emily was not about to be encouraged. She was the injured party, and she was out for blood. Kelly helped her into the extra outfit all the preschoolers were required to keep at Start Right Childcare Center, but the more she tried to calm her, the more hysterical the little girl became. Kelly felt her headache mushroom. She clenched her teeth, and if Tom hadn’t stepped in, she just might have done something regrettable.

“Hey, Emily. Your painting isn’t ruined. Come and see. I think if we cut off this part, and this part, and let it dry, then you can mount it on colored construction paper. It will look so nice, your mother won’t even know that part of it got damaged.”

“Do you really think so?” she asked, her big blue eyes gazing at the egotistical, mega-maniacal male chauvinist like he was the best thing to come along since the talking sponge and his square shorts. Strange, but everybody seemed to look at Tom Cooper like that. Marianne and Nancy, the teachers for the two and three-year-olds, Carla the cook, even Deb Ditmire, the Day Care Despot. They all drooled so much when he was around, it was a wonder they didn’t slip and break their necks on the wet floor.

Emily put her small hand in his great big one, and together they walked to the art corner to resurrect her masterpiece. They were kind of cute together. Emily was small for four, with pale coloring. Her blonde hair, blue eyes, and pink cheeks were washed out colors, like a digital photo when the colored inks were running low. Tom Cooper was ginormous. He was six foot six, with shoulders so broad they practically got stuck in the doorway. His black hair was thick and wavy. He started the day with it brushed back, but before long, it spilled forward, curling down over one eye like a pirate’s patch. More black hair framed his jaw with a rough stubble of new beard growth. He looked like he might be more comfortable on the football field than a playground. But as much as he irritated her like a poison ivy rash, Kelly had to admit he was a great teacher.

Kelly went to talk to Nate about why we don’t shove our friends. Nate had to apologize to Bobby before his time-out was over. Then together the boys helped clean the paint spills. All of that took thirty-five minutes. In the last ten minutes of free play, Nate and Bobby worked on a painting together. Their communal work of art looked remarkably similar to the mess they had just cleaned off the floor.

Kelly circulated through the large playroom, warning the children that it would soon be time to clean up. Three children had constructed a huge block structure and didn’t want to put it away. Kelly grabbed the Center’s camera and snapped several shots of it with and without the young engineers. “Okay, now you can put it away,” she said, before going on to the next play area.

One little boy had been in the listening center almost the entire period. Kelly discovered why. He was fast asleep. She felt his forehead and thought it might be a little warm. “Dakota? Wake up, honey. You took an extra nap. Was the story boring?”

He rubbed sleepy eyes. His cheeks were flushed. “Huh?”

That was when she loved kids the most. Either when they were sleeping, or half asleep and still cuddly. She folded her legs and drew him on to her lap for a few moments. He rested a sweaty forehead against her chest, his thumb in his mouth. She’d have to remember to talk to his mother when she came to pick him up. He was probably coming down with something.

Parents always hated to hear that. Kids couldn’t come to the center when they had a fever, but they got a lot more fevers than parents got sick leave. Kelly hoped that when she married, her husband would earn enough that she could just be a stay-home mom. Many years from now. Before she could get married, she’d have to meet someone who wasn’t a toad.

Tom Cooper rang the little brass bell they kept on a top shelf where the munchkins couldn’t reach it. Immediately groups of children stuffed their toys on the shelves in some semblance of order, and raced to find a spot on the big circle made with tape on the green carpet. Kelly brought a few children back to do a more thorough job on their clean up, but generally the kids knew what was expected of them. Then she sat on the circle. Tom picked a spot halfway around it. Several kids scrambled and pushed to sit next to “teacher”, but before long they were all seated and waiting expectantly.

Dakota raised his hand. “Teacher? I wanna sing the bear song.”

Of course he wanted to sing the bear song. Any hopes she had entertained that her headache might be short lived were quickly dashed. At least Tom knew that one. He could lead it. They sang all seven verses. Then they did three finger plays, two more songs, and finished up with “Did you ever see a whale?” - their all-time favorite silly song Tom had taught them his first day here, six months ago.

From circle time the children divided into groups. The four-year-olds went to one table on the east side of the room with Tom. Kelly’s five-year-olds took the other table on the west side. She pulled the heavy room-divider closed. Sometimes they left it open, but she didn’t need Tom’s silent criticism today when she was already irritable.

The Day Care planned their activities around a central theme - this week it was “sound”. Kelly had made a set of “sound cans” late last night, after watching a movie that was already overdue. She’d taken pairs of empty plastic film canisters and put things inside them. Two held a penny. Two held erasers. Two held marshmallows. Two more held sand, and she couldn’t even remember what the last two held at the moment. Then the lids were snapped on, and the cans mixed up. The children had to try to find the pairs by shaking the cans and listening to the sound.

That kept them busy for less time than it took to make the cans.

Next they played “I hear with my little ear” - a variation of “I spy” that was played with their eyes shut.

The children seemed unusually silly, though. They wiggled and pushed and teased and pinched, and Kelly felt like the entire morning was a waste of time. It wasn’t usually like this, but she had noticed a high correlation between their behavior and hers. She never should have stayed up so late! It was all she could do to keep her eyes open.

The morning passed in agonizing slow motion. After their unit activities, they put on sweatshirts or fall jackets and dashed outside for a half-hour of play. Kelly walked the perimeter of the playground, keeping an eye on the children and breathing deeply the fresh autumn air as she tried to clear her headache.

“A little tense today, aren’t you?”

The deep voice startled her. Kelly tipped her head back to glare up at Tom. “Don’t you have to push your admirers on the swings, Teacher?”

They called each other teacher mostly when they were pissed about something, or sometimes just as a joke. They had tried for months to get the children to call them by their names, with little success. It was just as well. If they went by “Miss Andrews” or “Mr. Cooper” some parents complained that they were too formal. If they tried “Kelly” or “Tom” other parents complained they were too familiar. So Teacher it was. Then because there were four teachers, an aid who circulated throughout the center, and the director, the children further identified them as “my teacher” or “Nate’s Teacher”. They didn’t really have a name for the director. Deb Ditmire kept any interaction with the children to the barest minimum.

Tom’s eyes narrowed. He knew she didn’t mean to be funny. “Got up on the wrong side of bed again, I see.”

Yeah, right. He was lucky she got up at all.

“Look, miss,” he said, his voice dropping an octave. Kelly felt prickles run down her spine whenever he talked to her like that. “You better find a way to hold yourself together, before you do something you’ll regret. They are just little children - it’s not their fault that you’re not mature enough to go to bed at a decent hour.”

“I did not,” she started to say, but he cut her off.

“I see dark circles under your eyes, and you’ve been yawning all morning, so don’t even think about lying to me.”

Kelly turned away before he could see the tears gathering in her eyes. Damn him, but he was right. At least he was smart enough to leave it at that. He returned to the swings, giving Emily and Jasmine pushes, and ending a fight between Nate and Bobby over the last available swing.

Why did Tom have to be so damn perfect! She never should have started dating him. She’d always heard about workplace romances, but until this year, she’d never had to worry about it. Day Cares tended to be staffed by an all female workforce, in part because the pay scale was too small for wage-earner husbands to support their families. But Tom wasn’t married. And he didn’t seem to mind the low pay. Kelly didn’t know if he was independently wealthy, or a free-spirit hippie type that didn’t pay taxes and didn’t own anything. Actually, for as long as they’d been dating - three weeks now - she hadn’t really learned much about him. Except that he was perfect.

Perfect Tom Cooper. Perfect looks, perfect grades, perfect manners. And now, perfectly right. Kelly rubbed her forehead and dashed into the bathroom to swallow a couple of Tylenol. Somehow, she managed to paste on a smile through lunch, story time, and then putting the children down for a nap.

All the five-year-olds slept, even though their parents often claimed that they no longer napped at home. Kelly was a firm believer in naps for children. The kids whose parents believed in naps seemed to be bigger, healthier, stronger, and better natured. The kids whose parents never made them go to bed, and let them stay up to watch Letterman and other inappropriate late-night television, were undersized, hyperactive, and often disruptive. Funny how the parents couldn’t see the connection.

Emily was one of the kids from a non-napping home. Getting her to sleep usually took either Kelly or Tom sitting beside her to make sure she stayed in a prone position, and rubbing her back with the lights turned low and sleepy-music piped over the speakers. Once she got to sleep, though, she slept soundly, and they often had to wake her. It was a Day Care rule that the children had to stay on their cots for thirty minutes, after which time the ones who were awake were allowed to play quietly with puzzles or picture books. When a few more woke up, one of the teachers took them outside while the others slept a little longer. But after an hour all the sleepers were roused, or the parents complained about getting them to bed at night.

The sleepy music had Kelly wishing she could spread out on a cot right along with the children. Her head was nodding, and her eyes felt too heavy. If only she could... just a few minutes would help. She straightened, shook her head, but before long she was nodding off again.

A firm hand rested on her shoulder, nudging her awake. “Kelly,” Tom whispered. “If you’re caught napping, you could lose your job. I’ve got this covered. Why don’t you take your break?”

She rubbed her eyes. “Wasn’t sleeping,” she whispered automatically, getting to her feet.

His hand rested on her bottom. He leaned over her - damn, did he have to be so tall! She felt about six-years-old when he was around. “That’s twice you tried to lie to me, Kelly. I think you and I have some things to discuss after work today. Got that?”

She scowled, ready to argue with him, but he was right. Shame colored her face, her ears felt hot. “Sorry,” she muttered, and hurried from the room.

Kelly grabbed her sweatshirt and tugged the zipper halfway up. She walked briskly until she was out of sight of the day care, and then she started to run. Damn, damn, damn! Was he going to break up with her? All because of that stupid video. No, it was more than that. Because she'd made a poor choice by staying up late, and she wasn't one hundred percent today. Because Tom was perfect, and Kelly could never meet his expectations. Tears streamed down her face. It was hard to run and cry at the same time. Kelly scooted behind the garage on Fourth Street, cut across the block, and plucked the spare key from under the pile of plastic dog poop to let herself inside the house she rented from the Harts.

Filling the teakettle with fresh water, Kelly took out her favorite mug with the Dalmatian puppies scampering around the perimeter and unwrapped a tea bag. No herbal concoction today. She needed the ultra-caff high-test brew of a good, strong Early Grey. Too bad she couldn't just inject it intravenously. A couple of chocolates and some no-doze tablets later, she thought she might just make it through the rest of the day.

The overdue video sat on the coffee table where she'd left it this morning. Damn! She meant to drop it off before work! There wasn't time now, she'd have to run all the way back to day care as it was, or the other teachers would not be able to take their breaks.

Nothing made the teachers angrier. Working with small children was intensive - a labor of love for most of them, but they only managed to maintain their sanity with the brief respite of the daily thirty-minute break. Unlike their public school counterparts, day care teachers were with their charges every single minute of the day. Their children didn't go to another classroom for physical education, or music. They didn't have lunchroom aides or play ground aids. The teachers didn't get health insurance benefits, paid sick leave, or even an equitable salary. Kelly grabbed the offending video and tucked it in her jacket pocket. If she left immediately after her shift, maybe she could get it back to Movie Magic before she was charged yet another fine.

Kelly was late by five minutes. Marianne glowered at her as she dashed out to her car, and then she was gone for thirty-seven minutes. By then the children were awake. Tom wouldn't get his break today. Kelly wiped damp palms on her jeans, dreading their after-hours conversation. Of course, she wasn't to blame for Marianne's tardiness, but that wasn't going to make a bit of difference to Tom.

The afternoon dragged. Kelly's pulse seemed a little rapid, probably from a caffeine overdose, or nerves, or maybe a bit of both. And the worst part was, she was still tired! Meanwhile, Tom bounced around the playroom with as much energy as the preschoolers. One minute he was perched precariously on a child-sized chair in the housekeeping center having a cup of imaginary coffee with Celia and a few teddy bears. The next he was doing puzzles at the table with Bobby and Nate, then pinning up more soggy artwork to drip dry, and he was still able to catch Emily, who had climbed up on a stack of cots to fetch a toy Jimmy John had thrown there, before she landed on her head. Kelly was exhausted just watching him.

At two-thirty Emily's mom arrived to pick her up. She was livid about the red-stained sweater, and used some language the parents didn't usually use in front of the children. Kelly rubbed her forehead, not quite reaching the ache. Tom stepped in, proudly offering Emily's mom the resurrected work of art, and somehow managing to smooth over the awkward moment. He even started talking with Emily's mom about the effectiveness of various stain-removers.

Kelly was never going to make it through the day. Her stomach was in knots. Her head was splitting in two. The caffeine had her heart racing, while exhaustion made her arms and legs feel like dead weights. And now, Perfect Tom was wearing on her non-existent patience like sand paper on a sunburn. She was about ready to scream.

By four p.m., her usual quitting-time, thirteen children remained. Kelly could not leave Tom alone with the children until one more went home. Which wasn't fair. Nancy got to leave at two, and Marianne at three. Kelly mentally checked off the remaining children against the memorized list of parents' work schedules.

Bobby was generally the very last one to go home, even though he came before seven in the morning. Technically, that wasn't even legal. The center was open from six a.m. until five p.m., but no child was supposed to be there for more than nine hours in a single day. Still, Bobby's mom was kind of clueless in the parenting department. He was probably better off at day care.

Nate, Celia, and the others were where they were supposed to be. Dakota! He was the one that should have left already. She'd almost forgotten him, as he was asleep again in the listening center. Dakota was one of the lucky few from a two-parent home. His parents were never late. If one couldn't get there on time, the other showed up. Of all the days to change their routine - when he was sick, and Kelly wasn't faring too well herself. She'd give them ten minutes before she started calling their emergency backup numbers.

"Teacher, tie my shoe!"

"Teacher, Bobby pushed me!"

"Teacher!"

Argh! Kelly whirled around, tugging her hair by the roots. "What!"

"Dakota frew up."

Just great.

Half an hour later, the mess was cleaned up and Dakota's parents arrived. They were at once apologetic and overly excited from a positive pregnancy test at the doctor's office. Kelly tried to be happy for them, but a small knot of jealousy stirred her stomach. They had everything. And now, they would have two of everything. At least she could finally leave. She'd swing by Movie Magic first, and maybe they would waive the late fee. Otherwise, she'd just keep the movie and watch it again. She tugged up her zipper and dodged for the door.

"Not so fast, young lady," Tom's deep voice whispered in her ear.

She spun around, startled by his sudden appearance. For a big guy, he could sure move quietly. "Huh?"

"You and I have some things to discuss."

"But, I have to go - I have this video to return, and - and, we can talk later. Much later. Like tomorrow, maybe?"

He shook his head, sensuous lips pressed together in a thin line. Kelly felt flutters in her belly. He couldn't be doing this - not here, not in front of the children. Couldn't he wait for a weekend to break up with her, so she could have two whole days to cry before she had to face the munchkins again? Little kids were so perceptive.

"Go ahead, run your errands. But meet me back here."

She nodded, staring at her shoes. She didn't trust herself to look him in the eye. He'd see how much this was hurting her, just how hard she'd fallen for him. She was a fool. They weren't really even dating. Maybe. Well, he had taken her out for pizza once, and he'd asked her to join him for cards. That had been the strangest date she'd ever been on. She had hardly seen him the entire evening. He played Five Hundred with a bunch of old people once a month, and he needed a fourth. She'd been his partner for the first game - which they'd lost. So they'd parted ways, and she'd spent the rest of the night at the same table playing with one old man after another, while Tom had worked his way to the head table. He and his new partner, a fashionable sixty-seven

year old woman with blue-gray hair, took the grand prize. A silly plastic trophy and ten bucks. The trophy was only theirs for the month when it would pass on to the next winners, and his share of the ten bucks wasn't even enough to buy a couple of drinks before going home. Kelly had had fun, sort of. Playing cards with old people wasn't something she'd ever deliberately set out to do, but they had made her laugh. And they treated her with respect, not like some dumb blonde bimbo.

But that was all. In three weeks she'd seen him outside of work exactly twice. He didn't call her at night. He didn't miss her. Maybe he didn't even realize that they were dating? The thought was just too depressing.

He caught her chin with a finger and tipped her face up. "Kelly? Are you coming down with whatever Dakota's got?"

His dark eyes were full of concern, two small creases puckering between his eyebrows. She should lie - for a third time that day. But Tom had an uncanny way of knowing every time she did. She shook her head.

He put a chaste kiss on the top of her head. "Be quick, then. The center closes in twenty minutes."

Kelly spun around, dashing into the dark before letting her tears fall.

# The Painter

By Courage Knight

## Chapter One:

Shannon checked her lipstick in the compact mirror, worrying that she should have gone with the Lush Red instead of Sugar Pink. Pink suited her complexion better, but made her look like jailbait. Even twirling her long whiskey-colored hair into a sophisticated twist did little to make her seem like the college sophomore she was supposed to be. She smoothed a nervous hand down the satiny tank and too-short skirt, and swallowed the nausea rising in her throat. She had to convince him she was perfect! Something her fire-and-brimstone father would never see.

The bus jerked to the curb, its doors spitting open with a rusty grind. Shannon dove through the mass of sweaty bodies with barely a second to spare before the bus lurched back into traffic. She checked the address again. It was hard to believe a world-famous artist would choose to live in such a dumpy neighborhood. Maybe those girls in the bar had known she was eavesdropping – maybe they had purposefully fed her the wrong information? Tears threatened to ruin her makeup. She dabbed carefully at her nose with a tissue.

Just put one foot in front of the other. She would follow this cruel prank to its bitter conclusion, and if she didn't get the job – the job those two models in the bar had intended applying for – well then, maybe she'd have to swallow her pride and ask where the nearest soup kitchen was. Models were supposed to be thin, but not faint from hunger. Shannon mustered up a smile, flashing her perfect white teeth – the minor orthodontia she'd had to pay for herself because her father felt if God had wanted her teeth straight, He'd have made them that way.

102 Breezy Way was a three-story corner building with a sports bar at ground level and apartments above. Shannon located Mr. Peyton's buzzer and pressed it firmly. The inner door clicked to let her enter. Nice security, but no elevator, which only reinforced her opinion of a less than savory neighborhood. And he would have to be on the top floor! Her stomach growled embarrassingly. She dug the last breath mint from the tight hip pocket and popped it in her mouth. She savored it, licking it with her tongue almost sensually, hoping the pitiful flavor of her saliva would quiet the hunger just a little longer. Then she scurried up the stairs before the last of her courage failed her. She reached out to knock on his door, but it opened quickly and her hand was inches away from pounding on his chest. Shannon let out a startled gasp.

His chest was partially bared; a paint-spattered work shirt hung unbuttoned over broad shoulders and strong arms. “You're early,” he barked. His voice was deep and rich, like the lead baritone back in college. She'd had a crush on the baritone her entire freshman year, until she saw that his tastes ran more for tenors than sopranos.

Before she had a chance to apologize, he barked again. “Well, let's get started. Drop your things on the bench and stand over there.”



Could it be that easy? Did that mean she had the job? An artist's model for the next six weeks? Oh boy! Maybe she could eat three meals a day again – and find a better place to sleep than on a bus. Shannon tossed her tiny purse on the bench and concentrated on moving gracefully to the designated spot in the center of his living room. Large photographer's lamps were positioned around the spot to cast lights and shadows on her. Already she felt their heat. Her smile was genuine as she imagined feeling truly warm on the inside for the first time in weeks.

Kerrick Peyton squirted thick blobs of paint on his palette, not even bothering to screw the caps back on the tubes. His dark hair was tied back carelessly; paint smeared his forearms where his shirtsleeves were rolled up. He placed a large blank canvas on a grubby easel, then glared at her.

“Well?” he demanded.

She was clueless. “What, Mr. Peyton? How would you like me to stand?”

“Naked!” he barked. “Drop your clothes, and let’s get to work!”

Shannon gulped, fear turning her stomach sour. Guys had often wanted to see her naked, but they'd never been so artless about it! “N–naked?” she stammered.

Kerrick tossed a fistful of brushes on the tray next to his easel. Some rolled to the floor, splattering paint on a scrap of canvas protecting the living room carpet. Then he marched towards her, his expression as dark as a summer storm. She flinched when his hand swung out, but he didn't hit her. He caught her chin with his fingers and turned her face in the light.

“The agency sent you?” he snapped. Didn't the guy know how to talk in a normal voice? She felt a silly giggle bubble up to cover her fear. All she managed to do was nod, hoping that the sin of nodding wasn't quite as bad as actually voicing the lie.

“And this is their idea of someone 'older'? God, I'd hate to see what their other models look like.”

“You wanted an older model?” her voice squeaked, tears filling her vision.

“Yes! Mature – I paint nudes, but I won't be accused of kiddie porn. What are you, seventeen?”

The insult strengthened her, banishing her fears. He was an artist, he painted nudes. It wasn't like he was propositioning her or anything. She slipped the first button loose and started on the second.

“I'm nineteen,” she said firmly. “And a half. I'll be twenty next summer.”

His lips quirked in a half smile, briefly showing white teeth in a ruggedly handsome face with a boyish dimple in his left cheek. But then the expression was gone, and his intense stare returned. “Fine, then. Strip. Stand. And don't move!”

He grabbed up his brushes, tucked two of them in his mouth and swirled the largest one in a mound of muddy brown and swashed it across the barren canvas. She'd never watched an artist work before. His passion, his intensity, it was all very exciting.

“Now!” he shouted.

Shannon peeled off her top and skirt before her conscience kicked into overdrive. Then her bra, shoes, and stockings. Then finally, her pink satin panties. Goosebumps popped out on her flesh, making her feel clumsy and boorish. Covering her private parts with small hands, she stepped into the circle of lights.

Kerrick wasn't even looking at her. He slapped the muddy brown paint over the outer edges of the canvas, leaving the center blank. Shannon relaxed a little, as she studied him.

He was older than she was, but not nearly as old as she had imagined. She'd never heard of him before yesterday, but had asked about him. She'd have looked him up on the Internet – if she'd had access to a computer. The library wouldn't issue her a library card without an in-state license, and she couldn't apply for one until she had twenty-five dollars and an address a little more respectable than the bus station. But word had it that he was world-famous, that his paintings were sold all over for tens of thousands of dollars. He didn't allow his work to be printed, so each painting was a one-of-a-kind original. She'd heard that he was obsessive, rude, and stubborn, but she hadn't heard that he was also the most amazingly attractive man she had ever seen before, either in real life or on television.

His black hair had a shine that reflected blue highlights, wild with untamed curls. He had a small gold earring in his left ear lobe that conjured up images of a pirate king with an evil laugh brandishing a bloodied sword. A fine sheen of perspiration dotted his forehead, which he wiped away with a paint-smeared forearm. The dollop of paint now covered his forehead, right between thick, black eyebrows. The only gentle feature about him was his eyes. They were pale blue, alarming in such a dark face, and framed with the longest, blackest eyelashes she'd ever seen on a man. She caught her lower lip with her teeth, and prayed that he wouldn't see how much he affected her. Her taut nipples were more from the cold than desire. Although, the lights had warmed her enough that the goosebumps were gone.

Kerrick snapped something at her, but she didn't understand his words around the brushes still between his teeth. He grunted impatiently, then tugged them out and stuffed them in a jar of turpentine.

“What do you like to do?” he repeated.

“Um. Like now? I'm a model. I like modeling,” she stammered, hoping that lying would come easier with practice.

His half smile made another brief appearance and was accompanied by a single grunt. “No. I mean, tell me about yourself. What's your name? What do you do when you aren't modeling?”

“Why do you want to know?” She cleared her voice, her hands once again slipping down to cover her modesty. She shook her head and clasped her hands behind her back. That motion made her breasts poke out and her nipples fairly beg to be kissed. She crossed her arms in front of her, but that wasn't much better. Finally, she dropped her arms to her side. She had thought that he would pose her the way he wanted her. She was no artist! How could she figure out an artistic pose?

“I don't really give a damn,” Kerrick snorted. “But I've found that small talk helps to relieve the model's initial reticence. I don't care if you tell me about yourself or read names from a phone book. But I want to find a natural pose, something that you can hold for hours on end, something that will tell the world who you really are. I don't just paint nudes – I paint women. Women doing what they do, just without clothes. So, talk.”

“Well, I, um,” she started. His eyebrows knotted together. He was clearly displeased. She'd better get to it quick before he fired her.

“My name is Shamika,” she lied, shaking her shoulders and striking a proud stance. Shamika sounded more like a model's name than her own boring Shannon Michaels. “Shamika Picard. I've only been with the agency for a little while, but I learn fast. I'm nearly twenty–”

“We established that already,” he grunted. It wasn't quite a bark like before, but he wasn't entirely happy yet.

“And a little while ago I had a fortune cookie warn me that when life gives me honey, beware of bee stings. Or something like that. So I figured it meant I should move away from home, where our neighbors raise swarms of bees, and try my luck in the Windy City.”

“Ah, a farm girl.”

“No! My father is NOT a farmer,” she said indignantly. “He sells insurance. The animals are all my mom's idea of fun.”

“What kinds of animals?”

“Llamas, mostly. A couple of sheep. Some dogs. A lazy cat. And a damn milk cow.”

Kerrick laughed. The sound was so startling that Shannon couldn't keep from laughing a little herself. Here she'd wanted to appear the glamorous model, and in a few short minutes, he'd wrenched the dark truth from her. Shannon was a hick.

“Milking a cow nude. Now that's one I've never tried,” he said, stroking his chin with a painted finger. Only the impish dimple belied his serious expression. He was teasing her. He couldn't be about to fire her if he could tease her. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves.

“What else? Where is this female-run animal menagerie located?”

He touched her shoulders, turning her slightly to the side. His fingers were warm, and the slight contact sent delightful shivers down her naked spine. Shannon bit her lip, praying he wouldn't notice the flush of desire on her cheeks. She didn't know why he did this to her. She'd never felt that way for a boy before.

And that was the problem. Back in college she'd only met boys. Kerrick was raw male sensuality wrapped up in the attractive package of a wealthy bachelor. She was an idiot.

He caught her chin again and tipped it towards the light with a slightly downward cast, and shook his head. “Well, maybe I can try to make you look older on canvas.” Then he caught the pins holding her hair up and tugged them free. The forty-five minutes she'd spent in the public restroom with a two-dollar package of bobby pins was wasted, as he tugged his grubby fingers through her long hair, splaying it over a shoulder. One lock tumbled down over her breast, but curled just short of shielding her nipple from his scrutiny.

“Are you cold?” he asked, reaching to turn up the thermostat. “You'll have to excuse me. I work up a sweat when I paint, so I keep it set pretty low. Still, I want to capture your innocent sensuality, not your goosebumps.”

Shannon gulped, praying the 'just cold' theory would hold. She conjured up an image of her father – guaranteed to drive all passionate thoughts away as he shouted some Bible verse at her, warning her of the dire outcomes of whatever frivolous idea had popped into her head. One time she had asked if she could get her ears pierced. Another time she'd wanted to go to see an R-rated matinee with a girlfriend. Both brought on an hour of lecturing, and being grounded to her bedroom for a week, while copying down pages and pages of Bible verses that reinforced his low opinion of her. She was a wicked daughter. And she would never make him proud.

Heat blew from the floor vent, strong enough to flutter the drapes. The smells of turpentine, fresh paint and sweat were almost overpowering. She shook herself again, only to hear him yell at her to stand still. Tears welled up. Her nose stung, her eyes felt puffy. She was going to ruin her makeup after all. She wasn't much of a model, or an actor either. She couldn't do this. She couldn't pretend to know what she was doing. And she was so hungry, if she didn't eat something soon, she was going to throw up. Again. The last time the spasms had been painful, even though there was nothing inside her to come up.

“Shamika, what is it?” His voice sounded very far away. The room canted awkwardly. She reached out for something to steady herself, but the flimsy light toppled to the floor. Then

Shannon destroyed any hope of keeping the job as hunger, fear and exhaustion overwhelmed her and she passed out.

\* \* \*

“Bloody fools.” Kerrick tossed his brushes in the turpentine, grabbing an oily rag to wipe his hands. Then he knelt beside the girl and felt for a pulse. It was there, if a little rapid. He patted her cheek and called to her. “Shamika, wake up. Come on, that’s a girl. Let’s get some food in you, then you can call a cab.”

Her eyes fluttered. She gasped, then a delightful blush colored her face. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened,” she lied.

Yeah, right. Skinny model, rumbling stomach, and an inability to tell the truth. He didn’t know why eating disorders followed models the way groupies followed rock stars, but frankly, he was sick of it. He didn’t like skinny women. He liked to paint their curves and folds. He didn’t mind a little muscle tone on them, but women should look like women, not Arnold Schwarzenegger.

He helped her to sit, then steadied her before letting her stand. He grabbed a throw off the back of the couch and draped it around her shoulders, which were shaking a little. He guided her to the kitchen and set her at the table, then started pulling things out of the fridge. Left-over pizza, left-over Chinese, bread, peanut butter, a zippy bag with baby carrots, and a half-gallon of milk. He sniffed the milk, then tossed it in the sink. She’d have to drink juice.

The girl just stared at him, tugging the crocheted throw tighter around her shoulders. It was kind of charming, as the crochets were quite large and it did little to cover her nudity. Maybe he’d paint her like that? No... he wouldn’t honor her stupidity. He’d have to call the agency to send a different model, one who didn’t have serious hang-ups about her weight.

“I’m really sorry, Mr. Peyton,” she blurted, fresh tears hovering at the edges of her mascara. “I don’t know what happened. I am so embarrassed. But I can do this, really. Please don’t fire me?”

“Eat something, then we’ll talk,” he grunted. She was getting to him. Another lost waif. He wouldn’t have it. Not again.

“Well, if you insist,” she murmured. Then she helped herself to the cold pizza and practically inhaled it. So maybe she was bulimic. She guzzled two glasses of juice and the rest of the moo-shoo pork before he grabbed up the left-overs and put them out of her reach.

“You shouldn’t eat too much when your stomach is queasy. You want to keep it down,” he warned.

Too late. She was looking green around the gills already. He grabbed her and half dragged her off to the bathroom, shoving her inside and slamming the door. He shook his head as he heard the unmistakable sounds of his intended dinner being dumped into the toilet.

The door buzzed again. Kerrick wasn’t expecting anyone, so he hit the intercom first. “Who is it?”

“Tamera Bankstead, from the Modeling Agency.”

Another model? Had they known he wouldn’t approve of the first girl? The girl who had come early? Or maybe they hadn’t sent her at all? Kerrick felt a slow burn. He buzzed the model up.

It took her long enough to climb the stairs, and she wasn’t quite able to mask her annoyance. She tossed her tawny hair over a bony shoulder and gave him a plastic smile. “Good afternoon, Mr. Peyton. I’m honored to meet you.”

He didn't understand it. She was exactly the type of woman he usually painted. Exactly what he'd told the agency he wanted. Twenty-five, medium height, long legs, some muscle tone, not too thin. She had the confidence of an experienced model, and would undoubtedly be able to hold a pose as long as he needed her to. But for some odd reason, his inner muse kept picturing the bulimic little liar in his bathroom. She'd ruined the day for him. He'd have to send this one away, and do whatever it took to get Shamika out of his system.

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time, Tamera. But it seems I won't need you today after all. I'll pay you for your inconvenience." He dug a couple of twenties out of his wallet and tucked them in her outstretched hand. "May I call you a cab?"

"Yes. Do," she snipped.

She would have made a shallow painting. Maybe that was part of his problem. His work was still selling, but he wasn't proud of it any more. Maybe the women he hired to model for him weren't revealing their inner spirit, so he couldn't paint it. Maybe he should find a model and use her over and over, although then he'd run the risk of her becoming emotionally attached, and he would hurt her when it was time to move on. Well, that wasn't his responsibility.

"I'll wait downstairs," she said, after he hung up the phone.

"Tamera, I'm sorry," he said again, softening his tone to make it sound like he truly was. "Thank you for coming."

She shrugged, flashing him a brief smile. "Another time, perhaps."

Kerrick locked the door behind her, and turned off the volume on the buzzer. He wouldn't tolerate any more interruptions. The urge to paint was fleeting, it might last only an hour or two, or a week or two, but then it would fade, and experience had taught him that any attempt to pick up a brush without his muse was only time wasted.

The bathroom door opened, and the little liar stepped out. Her head was lowered, the ridiculous throw still wrapped around her shoulders, ending just above a nicely rounded bottom. Hm... girls with eating disorders didn't usually have any curves. He studied her thigh, noting that it was shapely as well. Her cheeks were full, a hint of baby fat about them. Perhaps the girl really was just hungry?

That didn't sit well with him at all. The agency hadn't sent her. Somehow she'd heard that they would be sending him a model, though, and she'd come early, hoping to get the job. Was she desperate? Perhaps she was a runaway? Hick farm girl lost in the big city?

An image was starting to form in his mind. He was close to discovering his next painting.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Peyton," she murmured.

"Kerrick."

She nodded, risking a quick glance at him. Her eyes were wide and fearful. She should be afraid! She'd lied to him, and she'd tried to cheat another model out of a job. And if he guessed right, she'd lied to her parents and hurt them, as well. His hand itched to land on that rounded bottom to teach her a thing or two.

She removed the throw and folded it carefully, then walked back to the lights. "I'm ready now, sir. Kerrick."

He perched on the arm of the couch, his gaze focused on her bottom. She wasn't really sorry, not yet, anyway. But if he could get her to that state, that was how he would paint her. The Penitent. That might even be the title he gave this piece.

"Just a moment, now," he said sternly.

"Oh! Please don't send me away, Kerrick. Sir. I can do this! I just, I don't know what came over me, but I'm fine now. Really!"

“You signed my contract at the agency?” He didn't really have a contract, but if she agreed, then he would know for certain that she wasn't who she claimed to be.

Her lying head nodded vigorously.

“Good. Then you read the clause permitting me to chastise you as I see fit. You've wasted valuable time, something I cannot ignore. So I am going to spank you, and stand you in the corner. And then we will see about whether I paint you or not.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in a gasp. “You can't! Spank me? I'm, I'm twenty years old!”

“Not yet you aren't. Not until next summer. And there's one thing I cannot tolerate, Shamika, and that's a lie. But I will leave you the choice. Accept your punishment as you deserve, or you may leave. But if you go, I never want to see you again.”

She gulped, her hands creeping around to cover her bottom. Her shoulders curved inward, causing her full breasts to drop. Her nipples were still tightly puckered, although she couldn't possibly be cold. Kerrick clenched his fists, wishing the damned girl would make up her mind.

“All right, Mr. Peyton. You may... do that. If you must.”

# The Librarian

By Courage Knight

## Chapter 1:

“Dork!”

“Brat!”

“I am not a brat,” Bailey insisted, her lower lip protruding in a childish pout.

Ajay raised his eyebrow and gave her the look - the one that patiently implied he was not a dork, either. It didn't matter that his mother had given him a dorky name, that he'd been valedictorian of his class, or that he had a master's degree in Library Science. Albert Jethro Anderson Yates had also been an all-star athlete and still had the abs to prove it. And the biceps. And the occasional twinge in his right knee that would probably require surgery one of these days. Bailey chewed on her lower lip as she stared at those massive hands attached to the ends of well-muscled arms, and felt a quiver run down her spine.

“Put your nose back in that corner, young lady,” he said sternly.

“But this is so - so childish! I am not six-years-old!”

“I know. My six-year-olds are more responsible. And respectful. Do you know that not one of them has had an overdue book or video all year?”

“That's not their fault. Undoubtedly their mothers had a lot to do with that.”

“Perhaps. But if their moms can be that diligent, when they have a house, and job, and children to care for, then so can you. And I reminded you yesterday morning.”

“But, Ajay!”

“No more buts. Turn around, or you'll go over my knee first, and then return for more corner time.”

Bailey let out her breath with a loud, irritated grunt. Ajay was swift, landing a solid whack to her jean-clad bottom. She yelped, glaring at the two walls forming a corner that had comprised her entire world for the last forty-five minutes. This was so wrong! This was - childish!

She inhaled through clenched teeth, her fingers knotted into fists. Corner time could only mean one thing. She was going to be over his knee before the night was out anyway. Her husband was methodical in everything, even his punishments. One hour in the corner - half an hour for a minor infraction. Then half an hour over his knee, usually starting with his hand, but soon graduating to a hairbrush or belt or paddle or cane, depending on the severity of her crime. Then a lengthy discussion of said crime. And finally, she had to sit at a desk and write an essay, which would be graded and saved in a binder for her to read again and again. If she got spanked before completing her corner time, it didn't count and her second spanking was sure to be more severe.

Sometimes she hated him.

No, that was a lie. Ajay was wonderful - he was kind, patient, supportive, strong, loving, and even romantic at times. He never left the toilet seat up. He paid the bills and religiously tucked twenty percent of his income into their special savings account that would one day be a down payment on a home of their own, yet he managed their budget so that she could be a stay-home wife. She even had a small allowance to spend however she wished, to go shopping or take in a movie occasionally. He could probably have earned more if he had chosen a position in a major city, but Ajay said he wanted to raise their children in a small town.

So here they were - Small Town Wisconsin, like any other small town in Wisconsin. A tavern on every corner, two churches - one Protestant and one Catholic, a cemetery, a grade school, the feed mill, and a hardware store that carried practically everything. And of course, an historic library complete with efficiency apartment upstairs for their sole librarian and his young wife.

There really was no excuse for her to have a late fee. All she'd had to do was run down the stairs and plop it on the counter. He would check it in, and then he probably would have plucked her a bouquet of daisies from the front of the library. He'd have kissed her, and told her how proud he was of her. Bailey blinked away the moisture that gathered in the corners of her eyes. She didn't deserve his admiration. She'd forgotten, again, and now she was going to be spanked like a naughty little child.

It was just a stupid book! She hadn't even read it. She'd meant to. It was on the new-release shelf, and the whole book club was reading it. They met every second Tuesday over coffee and donuts to discuss the current read. She'd been to the book-of-the-month club a while ago, and she'd really enjoyed it, although she was the youngest person there by about thirty years. They didn't treat her like a child - not much, anyway. They did like to cluck over her, like some poor motherless waif, but they listened to her and seemed to value her input.

And she was motherless. Her mom had passed away years ago, when she was ten. Cancer. Her dad grieved for years, mostly ignoring his willful daughter until it was too late. She'd been arrested for shoplifting. The judge tried to scare her, threatening her with jail-time and a permanent blot on her record, or she could do a hundred hours of community service at the public library. She'd been no dummy. She took the community service.

What she hadn't known, was that the librarian fully intended to spank her any time she messed up, which was a lot. And the judge had known. And so had her father, who by then kept threatening to turn her naughty bottom over his knee, but he never made good on his threat. Ajay was not all empty threats. The first time it happened, she'd stormed into the judge's office, intending to file a restraining order against the much-loved town librarian, and the judge had laughed. He reminded her that she could either fulfill her service, or go to jail.

So at eighteen she got more spankings than she'd had in her entire life. At nineteen, she continued to work at the library, as the librarian was so cute, even though it meant more spankings. And at twenty, she'd gone and married him. But the spankings hadn't stopped. If anything, they grew more frequent. Only now, after he read her essay and graded it, part of the ritual included kissing, forgiveness, and hot, passionate sex. Bailey pressed her thighs together, as a warm flush washed over her. Yep, great sex.

"Okay, Bailey. It's time," Ajay said quietly.

She whipped around, her hands covering her bottom. "No! I mean, please, no? Sir?"

Ajay perched on the edge of the couch in the reading section, an array of easy chairs and end tables gathered about the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Lemonweir River. No curtains covered those windows. If anyone were out on the river, they would be witness to her



humiliation. Of course, it was late March, and the river had a thin layer of mushy ice over it, and anyone caught out on it fishing would be issued a steep fine. Still, if she had to be spanked, and knowing Ajay, that was inescapable, at least he could do it in the privacy of their small apartment. With the shades drawn, and maybe even the lights off. And loud music playing over the sound system, to drown out any noise she might make, as she kicked and cried and screamed.

He patted his thigh and gave her a patient look. Bailey squirmed, glancing out the window to the black beyond. "Please, honey? Can't we go upstairs?"

"This is where the crime was committed, Bailey. This is where the punishment must occur, so you will remember it well."

As if she could ever forget. She'd been spanked in the ladies bathroom at Kmart for shoplifting. In the car for speeding. Even in the middle of the street for jaywalking. Ajay didn't seem to care if anyone knew about this part of their relationship. Although, the middle-of-the-street spanking had been in the middle of the night when there was no traffic.

"I'm really sorry about the book, Ajay," she said sweetly, giving him her most penitent look.

"You can tell me about it in your essay, Bailey. Now stop stalling, or we'll have to increase the corner time."

Bailey scooted across the carpet to stand beside his knee. Her hands still covered her bottom. Dread settled low in her stomach. "I don't want to be spanked," she whispered.

"Good. No one likes to be punished, sweetheart. That's why punishment works. You are a grown woman, it's time you learned that your actions have consequences. If you are irresponsible in the little things, how can you be trusted with big ones?"

She blinked, and the tears that had hovered in her eyes finally spilled over and ran down her cheeks. She swiped them away, before returning her hands to their protective shield over her rounded bottom. Ajay made her think. She'd never thought in abstracts before him, never contemplated deeper truths like trust, honesty, or integrity. She could barely spell them. But now, she felt pain in her stomach that had nothing to do with her impending spanking. Sharp stabs tore at her. He had trusted her enough to give her a library card, and she had proven herself untrustworthy.

Ajay popped the snap on her shorts and guided them down over her girlish hips. She hated this part. Bending over his knee. The mild discomfort of feeling his legs against her stomach. Her hair spilling over her face and tickling her nose. Blood pulsing in her ears. Then he completed her humiliation by hooking her panties and tugging them down to her knees, baring her bottom completely.

She clenched her teeth, knowing she didn't have long to wait. Ajay wouldn't talk now. He'd wait until she was thoroughly chastised and crying hard, before discussing anything with her. His knees tensed as he raised his arm, and moments later a sharp stinging blow landed smack on the middle of her bottom. She let out a grunt, even though she had been prepared for it. The next swat landed more to the right side, and then on the left. Warmth bloomed across her bottom.

She glanced up, seeing her reflection dimly in the window, praying no one was outside getting a clearer picture. Ajay's strong arm raised and landed with methodical precision. It was oddly erotic, but also very painful. Bailey shut her eyes.

Her bottom was hot already. She shifted, twisting her hips, which was a wasted effort, but one she was powerless to prevent. The spanks just fell faster. She kicked. She squirmed, arching her back, but the arm around her middle was made of iron. Her nose was plugged and tears

washed down her face in waves. Still on he went. Probably only five minutes had passed, ten at the most. She had another twenty minutes or so to endure. All for a stupid book! She'd never read another book as long as she lived!

"Ow! Ajay, please! I'm sorry," she blurted.

He continued to spank her, unaffected by her heartfelt apology.

She tried again. "Ow! Please! Stop! I'll be good, I promise! I won't be late next time, ever again, ow! Ajay, that hurts!"

His hand stopped, but he reached down to pick something off the floor. Damn. The spanking wasn't over, it was just time to graduate up to whatever implement he had with him. She sniffed, hiccupping in her pain.

He held a small, wooden ruler in front of her. He wanted her to know the object of her suffering, and expected her to kiss it, and thank him for it. She glared at it instead. It was just a stupid little kid's ruler, like she'd had to bring to math class, but never used. At least it wasn't as thick as the paddle.

Ajay waited. She could almost hear him counting. Every second she delayed would add ten seconds to her spanking. She plopped a noisy kiss on the stupid ruler. "Thank you, sir," she snapped. "Oh, thank you so much for my spanking!"

Ajay chuckled. "You're mighty sassy, considering the position you're in." He brought the ruler down across her red bottom swiftly.

Any thoughts she'd had that the small ruler wouldn't be the same as a paddle were quickly dispelled. Although it wasn't as thick and solid, it was something of a cross between the paddle and a cane. It was small and flexible, and left a stingy welt in its wake. Bailey bucked, crying out in surprise.

Left, right, middle, thighs. Left, right, middle, thighs. Damn him. Ow! Did he have to be so orderly in everything? Oh! Three in a row, with an upward swing, right into the cleft between her thighs and bottom. Oh, that hurt! Then left, right, middle, thighs again.

Damn! Three to the cleft again. Now that was part of the pattern. Oh, damn, damn, damn!

Why hadn't her father spanked her when she'd deserved it? He should have spanked her the week her mother died. She'd been a brat. A terrible, horrible brat. She missed her mom, and wanted her back, so she'd done everything her mom would have spanked her for. Sassing. Chewing with her mouth open. Slamming doors. But mostly sassing. Perhaps in her ten-year-old mind she was telling her mom that she had to come back, just so she could give her that spanking. But her mom hadn't come back. And her dad hadn't spanked her. And so she'd learned that no one cared about her any more. No one loved her enough to make her mind.

Until Ajay.

He loved her. She knew he did. The first time they'd kissed, he'd had tears in his eyes. He'd been so overcome with emotion, that for once in his life he'd been at a loss for words. So they kissed again. And again. And he'd touched her breasts, and she'd felt something inside burst into flames. But then he'd stepped back, breaking the spell. He said he loved her too much to take her before they were married. Then she'd gotten nasty. He'd started something, and he damn well better finish it. He did put out her fire, in a manner of speaking. He'd put her over his knee for a sound spanking. Much like this one now.

Oh, oh no! Hurt, hurt! Stop, please! She shifted again, kicked harder, squirmed, but nothing stopped the relentless punishment. Who knew that a kid's ruler could be so awful? They ought to put warning labels on them, and sell them only in adult shops. She coughed, gasping for air, as her sobbing grew more desperate.

The cleft again. Four, five, six. All in one spot. That was cruel! Ow! Ow! Then the ruler shifted, going lower and lower on her thighs. Those welts would show beneath her shorts. She'd have to wear jeans for a few days, or try to explain the bruises to her nosey neighbors.

She'd been spanked there before, only once. She'd brought home a pair of really short shorts, and Ajay told her to return them. No wife of his was going to parade out in public in something so immodest. She'd stuck out her tongue, and he'd spanked her - still wearing those shorts, on the backs of her legs. He'd promised he'd spank her there every day if he had to, making sure she was constantly bruised so she'd never be able to wear them. She'd returned the shorts that day.

Ajay turned his wrist, probably looking at his watch. She felt three more hard, solid whacks, and then he stopped. Punctual, as always. Damn, why had she fallen for a college boy? None of her former high school buddies had even owned a watch.

"Tell me why you were spanked," Ajay said sternly.

"Because," she gasped, sputtering for air. "Because I forgot to return a damn -"

Three quick hand-slaps landed on her poor, punished bottom. When would her mouth learn that this was not a good position for sarcasm?

"Because I didn't return my book on time," she cried out.

Another swat.

"Ow! What's that for? That's the truth!"

Another three swats. He rested his hand on her hot bottom, caressing it absently. "That's not why you were spanked, honey. You didn't return the book, yes. But that is only a minor thing. It is a symptom of a bigger problem. What's the real issue?"

How could she think, when all she wanted to do was crawl into bed and cry herself to sleep? But he'd called her "honey". That was a good sign. He wasn't angry with her. She should be angry with him! He had no business spanking her like this. Other husbands didn't spank their wives. Did they?

Yet another solid whack found her sore bottom.

"Ow! I was bad. I was something. Um. Irresponsible, yeah, that's it!"

Ajay's deep chuckle warmed her. No matter how bad she was, he still loved her. She didn't know what she'd done to deserve his love, but it was comforting. And he promised he'd never leave her. Of course, it was a promise he might not be able to keep. Her mom had left her. An image of Ajay lying in a hospital bed, his sturdy frame emaciated by disease, overwhelmed her. Bailey gulped, new tears spilling down her face.

"Yes, you were irresponsible, but you weren't bad, honey. You are not a bad person. Bad people belong in prison. Judge Harcourt knew that you weren't really bad, which is why he didn't want to send you there. You are just irresponsible, and sometimes too impulsive. There are some things you need to learn yet, but deep down on the inside, I know you really want to be good. That's why I'm here to help you."

"But you're my husband! You're supposed to love me, to honor me and cherish me. You're not my father." She sniffed, wishing he would let her up so they could finish this discussion with her bottom in a less vulnerable position.

"That's a good thing. Your father failed to spank you. You remember in the wedding ceremony when your father walked you down the aisle, then handed you over to me? That's symbolic. And historically, the gesture meant that the father was transferring responsibility from himself to his new son-in-law, to take care of his daughter as he had done. In the past, fathers did spank their naughty daughters, and that duty was then passed on to the husband. This is my right

and my obligation. Once you learn to behave like a mature, responsible adult, you may not need to be spanked again, but it will always be my right to spank you.”

Damn. He made everything sound so reasonable. He should have been a lawyer. Except, it was kind of cool having a librarian in the family. Everyone in town looked up to him, like he was so much smarter than all of them. They asked him for help anytime they didn't know something. If he didn't know the answer, he knew where to find it. So they came to him with their tax questions and their marriage problems and their budget problems, and their problem children. And undoubtedly, many of his suggestions included giving someone a good, hard spanking.

“What's so funny?” His hand rubbed a circle on her throbbing bottom.

“I was just thinking, maybe people wouldn't complain about their taxes so much if they could give the IRS a spanking.”

Ajay burst out laughing. “You come out with the strangest things. I love that about you, honey. I never know what you're going to say.”

He let her up, then. She felt his eyes on her as she squirmed into her satin panties that were suddenly two sizes too small. She kicked off her shorts, not even bothering to try to pull them up.

“So what's my essay about this time,” Bailey asked, sighing wearily. She felt drained. She had no energy left to write the requisite paper.

“I'll tell you in the morning,” he said, surprising her.

“But?”

“Don't worry. Everything's okay. You've been punished and you are forgiven. But I want this next assignment to help you learn something about responsibility, so I want to think about it first. It's late, and you're tired. Let's just go to bed. Okay?”

“You must have been reading my mind,” she said. She closed her eyes and leaned into him. He gathered her in his strong arms and carried her upstairs to their tiny apartment, where he tenderly made love to her until she was almost too tired to breathe. Then she curled into his side and slept soundly.