

SmarteePantz

By

Lynn Forest

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CHAPTER 1

JoEllen Bynum stood behind the bar in the dim light of the tavern on a warm August Thursday evening and watched, but really didn't notice, the college girl who was wiping off the tables on the far side of the large open room. She was still too stunned from the news she had just received during the impromptu meeting after the establishment had closed for the evening, forty-five minutes before, to try and do anything productive.

Suddenly, she saw a hand waving right in front of her face. She turned to see her coworker, and kind-of boyfriend, Loren Hampton standing next to her and smiling. "I didn't think you would be happy after hearing what we were just told. But, now it's our reality as long as either of us works here."

She smiled grimly in resignation and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I knew that old Lyle was ready to retire and sell the place. But selling it to Jerrold Warren of all people... I guess I should have seen that coming. After all, we all heard through the grapevine that his grandmother had left him a lot of money."

Loren put his arm around her shoulders. "At least you're going to be the full-fledged, top dog operating manager of SmarteePantz now. That's a pretty good move up from being the day shift supervisor."

She placed a kiss on his cheek. "That's why I like you. You always try to get me to see the positive side of things. Nonetheless, I'm still going to find it difficult to adjust to that arrogant man being the owner as well as my boss. I don't like his condescending attitude."

Loren turned his back to the bar and placed his elbows on it. "But, he does have a Master's Degree in business administration, and since Lyle's health began to falter last year, you have to admit that Jerrold has made a lot of changes that's brought more revenue into SmarteePantz. And revenue is good for everybody who works here. Even for a combination bartender and bookkeeper like me. We all got that unexpected raise last month. Even this proud lackey."

JoEllen punched him teasingly in the shoulder. "You say that like you're not that important to the place. You know better than that."

"Actually, I really like working here. Of course, the fact that I get to hang out with the good-looking new operating manager and steal an occasional kiss from her is not too shabby."

JoEllen laughed and shook her head. "I think that you are more fortunate for your paycheck than being able to spend some time with a plump girlfriend." As she said that, she patted herself on her hips with both hands.

Loren's hand joined hers on her right hip, and said, "Whenever you call yourself plump, you need to insert the word 'pleasingly' in there. You are a pretty lady. You have a lovely face, pretty blue eyes and I love that soft, long brown hair." He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. "I have an early class. Too close to getting my degree to mess up now. Night."

"Night, Loren." She watched as the stocky, blonde haired man walked away, and had the same wave of confusing feelings about him that often washed over her.

She liked Loren more than she was attracted to him. For that matter, she was uncertain as to whether they were really dating or just hanging out together as friends who shared the occasional kiss and nothing more. Neither of them dated anyone else, but Loren was so busy with his job at SmarteePantz and his final college classes that there was not really much spare time.

JoEllen was even more crushed for time than Loren. Waiting for her at home was her younger sister earning money for her own college tuition, while looking after little Andrew who would be in bed before JoEllen arrived home this evening. Working at a large and popular tavern was not exactly ideally compatible with raising an eight-year-old son.

But simply thinking about Andrew brought a smile to her face as she picked up her purse, pulled out the keys to the building and locked the door behind her. As she walked to her car in the large, empty parking lot, she reminded herself that she and the little boy were fortunate that she had found a stable position working in an increasingly popular venue.

As she drove the five-minute route home, she tried to convince herself that her good fortune and dependable income far outweighed her angst over having to follow the orders of Jerrold Warren from that day on, as long as she worked at SmarteePantz. After all, he had never given her any indication that he disliked her in any way.

She simply did not like him. There was just something about him that got under her skin and raised her hackles every time he spoke. Lyle was laid-back and easy-going as the tavern owner. Of course, since Jerrold had been given more responsibility, she had to admit that business had picked up. He may have been overconfident and too sure of himself, but he was creative and worked very hard.

She finally shook her unhappy thoughts about developments at the tavern from her mind as she walked up the stairs to her tiny and cramped second-floor apartment and went inside. She said hello to her sister and talked for a minute, but the younger Cynthia was ready to go home to their parents' house and finish her studying.

After Cynthia left, JoEllen walked to Andrew's bedroom door and opened it slowly. She walked silently to sit down on the bed next to the sleeping blond haired boy and pulled the cover a little higher up on his shoulders.

It was the first she had seen him since their uncomfortable breakfast conversation when he had asked again about his father. JoEllen found it extremely awkward and difficult to explain to such a young child that she had no idea where his father was. Whenever the subject came up, she walked through an emotional minefield. Andrew was conceived during the course of the most irresponsible night in her life, eight years before, when she was a twenty-year-old college student on spring break in Florida.

She had too much to drink, hooked up with a guy who was a little too good-looking, and ended up losing her virginity, but gaining a son in a low priced motel along the beach. As she kissed the fellow goodbye the next morning, as she departed for home with three of her girlfriends, she realized she did not even have his last name or any way to contact him.

She decided that she could waste her life by wallowing in self-recrimination, or face reality and live up to her obligations to the little guy who slept beside her at the moment. So she had the baby and went back to Starlight Lake, Arkansas to live with her parents, work part time and go to school. She got very little sleep, but she did earn a two-year degree in business. She worked for a construction company as a bookkeeper for four years, before her father's friend Lyle hired her to help him operate the largest Tavern in Starlight Lake.

JoEllen leaned down and kissed the sleeping boy, then went to her own bedroom, stripped off her clothes and pulled on an oversized T-shirt and crawled beneath the covers. But as soon as she closed her eyes and tried to go to sleep, she found herself tossing and turning as her unhappiness about having to take orders from Jerrold Warren seized her consciousness.

They had clashed since he had come to work at SmarteePantz two years ago. Actually, she had often taken issue with his ideas... and his attitude... while he had typically sat listening to her often caustic comments in silence with his arms folded.

She was typically civil when the owner Lyle was present, but in his absence she did not refrain from telling Jerrold that he held his own ideas in too high esteem. Every time she did offer an idea or directed some criticism his way, he listened intently, then usually silently nodded to confirm he understood what she had said.

JoEllen had often seethed in reaction to his seeming nonchalance toward her frequent disagreements with him. On rare occasions, he would nod and say that he agreed with her, but most of the time he would simply thank her for her input, then inform her that he still held his stated opinion. And to her consternation, Lyle had usually agreed with Jerrold.

There was no question that as Lyle delegated more and more responsibility to Jerrold, the newcomer was turning into the de facto manager. And even JoEllen had to admit that Jerrold's ideas on changes to the menu and drink selection had been well received by regular patrons, and attracted many new ones. There were also changes made in bringing in live entertainment and even some matters of decorations and ambience at SmarteePantz.

No longer was there the embarrassing scene on weekend nights with too many tables sitting vacant. Now SmarteePantz was the most patronized tavern in Starlight Lake, Arkansas. Often the staff was finding nearly all the one hundred and twenty-five available seats taken while three bartenders and four kitchen personnel were kept quite busy.

But there was something about the man and his self-assuredness that made her...oooohhh...just want to follow through on her fantasy and slap both sides of his face with all of the might that her 5'3" frame could muster.

JoEllen had often poured out her frustration to her best friend from high school, Linda Fallon. But to her further frustration, each time she would sit down with Linda she would inevitably begin to rage about her insufferable coworker. And each time that happened, she would grow so animated that Linda would begin to laugh until she cried.

JoEllen tossed and turned once again, pounding her fist into a pillow. SmarteePantz would open to the lunch crowd the next day at 11:00 am, but Jerrold had told her that he wanted to meet with her at 8:00 am to go over some "ideas" with her. It's certainly had not taken long for him to start bossing her around.



JoEllen kept a close watch on the wall clock as she and Andrew finished their breakfasts. She would have to rush him to the day care center a little earlier on this Friday morning so that she could be on time for her meeting with the despised Jerrold.

They nearly ran to her small car, and after several minutes she was kissing him goodbye in the colorfully decorated childcare building. Breathing a deep breath of relief that she was not going to be late, she got back in the car and began to focus her attention on her upcoming meeting.

As much as she dreaded it, she also reminded herself that her first meeting as operating manager with the new owner Jerrold Warren was likely to set the tone for their relationship from that day on. She knew that she had responsibilities to herself and Andrew that took precedence over her displeasure with the developments at SmarteePantz.

When she got to the tavern, a smiling Jerrold was sitting at the one desk in the office. The door was open and when he saw JoEllen he motioned to a chair and asked if she would like some

coffee. She shook her head briskly, then took a deep breath and settled into the chair to see what her new boss had up his sleeve.

Jerrold held up several sheets of paper displaying numbers in columns. “I’m changing our drink selection menu. Later today I’m going to be giving you a list of suppliers for you to contact to see what kind of price breaks we can get on the projected volumes.

“I’ve been looking over our sales records and noticed that some of the varieties of beer and liquor we have in stock have been falling out of favor with the customers. So, I would like for you to get me some numbers so that we can make up a new drink menu and pricing sheet.”

“Whoa, Jerrold. Just like that you’re going to dump the traditional drinks customers have been buying here for a long time? Isn’t that idea rather ill considered?”

Jerrold did not react to her tone of voice. “Actually, JoEllen... I have the sales records here if you want to examine them for yourself. But some of the brands have been decreasing in sales here by as much as 20% per year.

“On the other hand, I’ve been doing some marketing research on products that have been gaining popularity in other locales with similar economic conditions and demographics.”

“And that boils down to what?”

Jerrold leaned back in his chair and began to animatedly move his hands. “It appears almost certain that we’re going to get that big auto assembly plant coming in next year. That means that young people are going to have a chance to earn better wages. It’s also going to bring in an influx of everyone from assemblers to engineers. They’re going to have money to spend, I want them spending their money at SmarteePantz on brands of beer that their friends are finding popular to talk about on social media.”

JoEllen leaned forward and squeezed the edge of the desk with both hands. “Jerrold, you may be the owner now, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be so sure of yourself that you give the boot to things that Lyle did so quickly. He had this tavern for a long time, and one day in your new ownership you think you know more than he ever did.

“Look, Jerrold. You and I are both twenty-eight years old. You spent more years on the baseball diamond than you have in business. If I were you, I wouldn’t be so eager to cast away the tried-and-true ways.”

Jerrold folded his hands and placed his fingertips to his lips. “I mean no disrespect to Lyle. He was a good boss, and he is a friend. But the reality is that for the past five years, the cash flow coming into SmarteePantz has had a net reduction of 25%. Is it lost on you that fewer people work here now than when you arrived on the scene? I know that you have been here longer than I have, but the business records speak for themselves. The business at the tavern has been on a steady decline.

“At the same time, we also have the largest seating capacity of any establishment in town. We also have a substantial parking lot. What I’m saying is that we have the potential and the tools to rebound. We are still the premier tavern in a twenty-mile radius, but just barely. I want for us to stay firmly on top as a favorite place for people to go to have a good time.

“Just look at the growth we’ve had over the past several months since we started offering those lunch specials. Everybody working here got the first raise in three years. That’s the kind of results we want.”

JoEllen shook her head. “And you are claiming that is because of the lunch specials? And does my memory serve me correctly that those lunch specials were your idea? So you’re saying that your ideas are responsible for this recent uptick in business?”

Jerrold finally displayed a hint of irritation as he once again held up the sheets of paper. “JoEllen... I know that you don’t like the fact that I’m the new owner. For the life of me, I really can’t understand that, because we’ve never really been able to nail down why there seems to be a problem between us.

“Lyle told me that you were very good at your job, and he was right. But we all have our levels of responsibility here, and mine is to make the final decisions as to how we market ourselves. Your job is to carry out the operations to make those decisions work.

“So, as to whether I am taking responsibility for our recent good fortunes, yes I am. At the same time, if things go downhill, that will also be my responsibility.”

Jerrold rose slowly from his chair, then leaned forward partway across the desk and rested on the palms of his hands. “Can I make that any clearer to you, Miss Bynum?”

Rattled by seeing the intimidating stance that was out of character for Jerrold, JoEllen simply shook her head slowly as she stood. Her words in response were halting, “I... hear... you. Uhm, anything else?”

She seemed to be seized by Jerrold’s piercing brown eyes as they began to burn into her own through narrowed slits. This was far different from the “So what?” response that had typically followed her less than enthusiastic interactions with him.

He slowly stood up straight, and then closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead for a moment. “There’s more I need to talk to you about, but I don’t have everything ready yet. Maybe early tomorrow morning, say 8:00 am. Let’s just count on that.

“I have the inspector coming from the health department at any moment for a routine run through. So, tomorrow morning I need to fill you in on a pretty significant change coming to the tavern.”

It was all that JoEllen could do to refrain from snapping at him once again. It was another change that she was going to be informed of, instead of being consulted on. The man was nothing if not insufferable and full of himself. It was going to be a long day ahead of them, in their first day in their new positions.



JoEllen had indeed put in a long day, as the entire crew made adjustments to the new supervisory structure and changes in procedures and practices. Now she was getting out of bed to hit the shower and prepare for another equally long day considering her already scheduled early meeting with Jerrold to listen to his latest bright and brilliant idea. And to top it all off, she would have to get Andrew up a little earlier than normal.

As she drove Andrew to the early morning day care program at his school, she was trying to force herself to accept the reality of having to take marching orders from Jerrold. She had conceded to herself the importance of the meeting by putting on one of her nicer dresses. It was a black pleated dress with a red and white floral pattern, rather short, the one that she felt made her look slimmer. It was going to be her second day as operating manager, and she was going to make it a point to emphasize contact with customers, so she may as well look nice in the process.

As soon as she arrived at the still silent tavern, she took a deep breath and began to walk around the bar to the short hallway that led to the office. In an hour, a couple of the cooks would arrive and begin to prepare the breading for the deep-fried foods and ready the various sauces for the chicken wings that were popular at SmarteePantz. Before she entered the hallway, she looked up again at the five-foot long SmarteePantz logo that had been selected by Lyle twenty years earlier.

That logo was a cartoon image of a young woman in her undies bending far over and smiling. In fact, an ornery Lyle had come up with the idea for the drawing in spite of the scolding comments from his wife, and the new name of the tavern resulted from the finished image.

Just as she turned the corner into the hallway, she encountered her nemesis. Much to her surprise considering how their previous day had begun, he smiled at her widely and greeted her, then gestured toward her dress, “You look very nice this morning, JoEllen. Very pretty dress. If you don’t mind my saying so, you look very attractive in it.”

JoEllen whispered a thank you, struggling in vain to conceal that she had been taken by surprise by the comment, and most of all that she had enjoyed hearing it. As they walked into the office and Jerrold closed the door and gestured for her to sit down in front of the desk, she could also not help but acknowledge to herself that he did not look so bad himself that morning.

In spite of her dislike for the man, she could not deny that the twenty-eight-year-old former minor league baseball player was an eyeful in his own right. He definitely had the build of an athlete, and his deep brown eyes set off a very masculine face outlined by wavy brown hair that grew down over the top of his collar. In his khaki slacks, a blue dress shirt and red power tie, he looked very much like a man in charge in spite of his age.

He leaned forward with his hands clasped and elbows resting on the desk. “I’m really looking forward to seeing what we can do with SmarteePantz. And I want to say again, that I’ve always been impressed with your efficiency and your hard work. I have always noticed that whenever you were given a responsibility, you saw it through and did it right.”

JoEllen was somewhat taken by surprise by the complementary comments. “Thank you, Jerrold... I’m very pleased to hear you say that. But I must say, I’ve always felt that you were kind of skeptical and dismissive of my suggestions.”

Jerrold nodded his head. “Fair enough. One thing I owe you is honesty. It is true that you and I do not see eye to eye a lot of the time when it comes to concepts. But you are excellent at fulfilling your assigned duties. The two things are not mutually exclusive... I mean, concepts and following instructions.”

JoEllen wanted to slap him so badly she could feel her palm itching. “Do you mean that you don’t find me to be creative? I need to understand my role here. Or perhaps, I should say that I need to know my place.”

There was an edge in her tone of voice that was unmistakable to Jerrold. “Please don’t take what I’m saying the wrong way, JoEllen. You are extremely valuable here. We all have to play our role. What I’m saying is, that you are nothing short of excellent when it comes to functional matters. You get things done and get them done quickly and correctly. I hope you understand how much I respect and appreciate you.”

“But what you’re saying is, that my opinions don’t measure up to just completing routine work assignments?”

He laughed and held both hands straight up and laughed. “Please, JoEllen I’m complimenting you.”

JoEllen took a deep breath and reminded herself of her good fortune in having this job. “But what you’re saying is, I’m not much of one for coming up with good ideas for making changes?”

Jerrold was resting his chin on his hands. “Wow! Let’s just try to move ahead, okay? I want to tell you about a new thing we’re going to start doing to liven up the place. And I must

say, this is not an original idea of mine, but it's something that's being done at other American taverns and restaurants.

"JoEllen, are you familiar with a few establishments around the country where customers get spanked with a paddle for one reason or another?"

The question had certainly taken her by surprise. "Well... I've heard of a few of them. Are you thinking of...?"

With a grin on his face, Jerrold opened a desk drawer and pulled out a fraternity style paddle. But instead of Greek letters, it was adorned with the SmarteePantz logo and the name of the Tavern across the top. "What do you think? I'm arranging for us to serve 'Jerry's Radiant Moonshine' and, last but not least, 'JoEllen's Ass-Kickin' Red Wine'.

"So, when somebody partakes of one of the special beverages, the server gives them some whacks. Female servers will give it to men or women customers, and the male servers will do the honors for female patrons. Of course, no one will be pressured to do it, and it will all be in fun, but at least the last smack would be for real."

JoEllen leaned back in her chair, her hands raised palms up. "You're talking about a major change in the atmosphere of the tavern, and you've already ordered these new specialty drinks and... made this paddle? I mean, come on Jerrold. The idea is fine, but you should have talked to me before you went that far with it."

"But, in all candor, JoEllen, I had my mind made up to do this, so I just went ahead and did it. We'll start it Monday night. I already sent a news release to the paper about it and...".

JoEllen sprung from her chair. "But when Lyle announced that you were the new owner, you said that I would be consulted on changes. But here you go, just shutting me out of any decision-making process again."

Jerrold sighed deeply, then got up slowly and walked around the side of the desk to where JoEllen was standing, her hands on her hips and obviously fuming at what she considered to be one more slight among many. "Come on, now. What I said in the meeting was that I would consult you frequently. I didn't say all the time. And I had my mind made up about this idea, so that's why I didn't talk to you about it first. You should understand all of that."

JoEllen was waving her hands animatedly. "This is just the kind of stuff I knew was going to happen. You just don't think that I have any good ideas of my own. You don't want anyone else to be able to take credit for something new and different that might have good results."

Jerrold shook his head slowly back and forth. "You need to understand this, JoEllen. You are excellent with the practical logistical things. But you just haven't ever exhibited a knack for new things... I mean new things that I would agree to."

JoEllen responded through clenched teeth, "You think I'm lacking in intelligence?"

"I said no such thing. What you need to understand, is what I say around here is the way that it's going to be. No if's, ands, or buts about it. Do you get that?"

Suddenly, JoEllen's pent-up anger and dislike for the man overtook her common sense and judgment. She shouted, "Yes! And do you get this?" She could no longer draw the line between fantasy and self-preservation, and all of a sudden there was a loud SMACK and a red handprint on Jerrold's left cheek.

With the quick hands of the second baseman he used to be, Jerrold had taken hold of JoEllen and bent her across the back of the chair she had been sitting on. Simultaneously, as she squealed to be let go, she felt her hands being grasped together at her waist in the back as she dangled over the chair watching in shock as Jerrold reached for the paddle with his free hand.

She began to shout and kick her legs. “Jerrold... don’t you see that I’m wearing a dress?”

He went still for a moment. “Yes you are, and first of all, I must say, you have lovely legs. And right now I can see and appreciate most of them. And second, wasn’t that kind of a silly question you just asked me?”

Then, without any words of warning, Jerrold brought the paddle down on her helpless bottom with a smack. “No... you can’t do that to me. That hurt.”

Jerrold continued to hold the squirming woman in place. “Really, JoEllen, I barely smacked you.”

A furious voice responded, “You have no right to do this. It makes no difference that it didn’t hurt very much...” WHACK! JoEllen began to squeal in desperation as the fiery sting spread across her bottom.

The paddle was dropped back onto the desk with a rattle and she was helped to stand upright again. She stood staring at Jerrold in disbelief, her bottom on fire and her eyes burning in fury at the man who stood with his arms crossed as casually as if he were gazing out a window.

Nothing could have infuriated her more, and two seconds later the first imprint of her hand on his face was overlaid with another. And before she could regain her senses, she was again dangling over the back of the chair receiving a loud and painful WHACK from the paddle. Then before she could even manage a squeal of protest, the paddle landed on her lower bottom with even more force.

As she stood up again, frantically rubbing her behind, the sight of Jerrold Warren standing there with his hands on his hips totally unmoved by her embarrassment and discomfort, only moved her farther up the spectrum of irrationality, and she continued to glare at him.

Finally, he shook his head and smiled. “You know, JoEllen. You do that one more time, and I’m going to up the ante. Of course, I’m more than willing for that to happen.”

“Oooooohhhh...” Suddenly, her left hand provided an outline of itself on his right cheek. And just as quickly as before, she was over the back of the chair, looking down at the seat while her feet barely touched the floor. And, once again, she could see the movement out of the corner of her eye as Jerrold’s hand reached for the paddle and retrieved it from the desk.

This time, the paddle landed with a much more forceful WHAM... WHAM...WHAM and each of those sounds was followed by a high-pitched squeal. The paddle was dropped on the desk with a loud clank, but this time she was held in place over the back of the chair. That was when she felt Jerrold’s hand pressing up against the center of her sizzling, upturned bottom.

As she protested the hand pressed slightly against her, she heard Jerrold’s slow deep voice, “I think we have to make this a little more personal than using a paddle.”

That was when she responded in a slow, indignant manner, “I demand... that you get your hand... off my ass... right... now.”

“That is something I can agree to.” His hand was no longer pressing against her burning backside as she had requested, but two seconds later it returned with a sharp CRACK... CRACK... CRACK!

In a second, JoEllen was standing up, her face a deep red and her eyes large and round in shock and humiliation. And then, as if nothing of consequence had just taken place, Jerrold leaned back casually against the desk, picked up the paddle and turned it back and forth as if to examine it. “So, I suppose that you’re the only person who can really answer this question... Will this thing be suitable for what I have planned?”

Her eyes still open wide and round and her mouth hanging open while she rubbed her bottom, JoEllen simply nodded her head up and down slowly. That was when Jerrold placed the

paddle back on the desk, crossed his arms and smiled at her. “Well, then I had better get about five more made. Thanks for coming in early this morning. That was all I wanted to talk to you about. I have to go check in on the kitchen now. Catch you later.”

Just as he was about to go through the door, he turned to face her. “By the way, thanks for helping me test the paddle. If any of the crew members have questions about its proper use, I’ll refer them to you.”

As she rubbed her scorched bottom in a state of disbelief, JoEllen watched as Jerrold casually strolled out of the office. She turned slowly back toward the desk, and stared for a while at the paddle that had teamed up with his right hand to give her the first and only spanking she had received in her adulthood.