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OLD ENOUGH TO  
KNOW BETTER

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## Prologue

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**H**e took her gently over his lap, and despite how careful he always was, she knew it wasn't going to be good. There was always true regret in his tone at times like this, "I hope you know I can only do this because I adore you."

Unable to speak knowing the next few minutes weren't going to be pleasant, and with tears already gathering in her eyes at the anticipation of the coming pain, Cat nodded, hoping that would be enough. It wasn't always with him. He sometimes demanded more than she thought she could give, all in the name of making sure that she was true to herself, and to him.

"And that I wouldn't do this if I didn't think it was best for you," his lips whispered at her temple before kissing it.

Again, she nodded, biting her lip, feeling the way she always did when he had her in this position—naughty and obviously unhappy at having ended up in this position, sort of. She struggled as he brought her pants and panties to her knees, but not too hard, having learned from experience that resisting him too much really wasn't in her best interest.

His big, already warm hand covered almost the entirety of her bottom as it lay there, innocently enough at the time, patting and rubbing slowly.

*"Do you know how much I love you?" he breathed, his free hand wandering into the mass of her hair as it spilled down her back.*

*That was enough to send her over the edge. With him not having yet lifted his hand to crack it down onto her bottom, Cat dissolved into tears, reaching blindly back to capture that wandering hand with her own and grip it as the only solid thing in her world. "At least as much as I do you," she sobbed, kissing his knuckles.*

*Ignoring the tears in his own eyes in favor of what was best for her, he turned to the situation at hand and the lovely, rounded hillocks he'd much rather caress than spank, but his love for her was such that he would always do what he knew was best for her, without hesitation.*

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## Chapter 1

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She kept to the back of the gathering, as usual. These people had been her friends for years and yet she still felt somewhat out of place among them, more than ever since she'd lost Clint. He'd been her rudder at social events. Cat allowed herself a small, sad smile. Without Clint, everything seemed flat, even five years later. She'd pretty much given up the idea that that was ever going to change. When they'd said their long goodbyes while holding each other in their magical bed as the disease that ravaged him slowly claimed his body, everything in her world had adopted a varying shade of gray. Nothing had ever truly been right since, and she'd long since given up the idea that it would ever be.

She was dealing, she told her friends. She was dealing the best she could, which apparently wasn't the way they wanted her to. They—a relatively small group of very close friends she'd had since high school, some since grade school—had decided long since that mourning had gone out with the Victorians. Some of them had tried to set her up only months after Clint had passed on, and she had nearly cut them out of her life for that.

Just because they didn't have the kind of deep, abiding love relationship with their significant others that she'd had with Clint didn't mean they shouldn't respect the idea that she was still trying to come to grips with the fact that she'd scattered her heart along with his ashes over the rocks at Otter Cliffs.

Not that she'd ever been the life of the party, even with him standing strong and stalwart at her side. That wasn't her style at all. She was a quiet person, much preferring to be a homebody than the center of anyone's attention but his. Under his loving, benevolently strict gaze, she bloomed. He'd been her backbone when she had none, her ego, her conscience... her confessor. And no one, but no one, would ever, could ever, replace him.

She was a professional widow now. Every time she said that of herself, she remembered how her mother had come to call herself "a widow on a small, fixed income" whenever she spoke to anyone once Daddy had died. Thanks to Clint's almost obsessive financial planning, she wasn't on a small income. The house was paid for and she had a very tidy nest egg that would likely survive her. Not that she had anyone to leave it to.

Children had never been in their plans. They were much too involved with each other and had decided early on in their relationship that neither of them wanted to risk the perfection of what they'd found with each other to add a child to it. And although they would occasionally daydream about what a child of theirs would have been like, neither of them had ever felt they were missing out.

Clint got into the commercial real estate business early. As a matter of fact, he was still in college for his business degree and was always self-employed, although he took side jobs to make ends meet, as they both did. They'd married right out of high school and the two of them worked their butts off at any

job they could. There was no hope of getting ahead, at first, only making it through each month. Having met their financial obligations was an excuse to celebrate, cautiously.

But with Clint's natural financial acumen and both of their sheer hard work, they were able to scrimp and save and buy their first property together, then their first house, and they were off and running from there without ever looking back. Cat had wandered a bit, somewhat undecided as to what she might like to do with her life. In the beginning of their time together, she'd taken any job that would get her a stable salary and cover Clint for health and dental insurance, so she'd spent a lot of time at entry level jobs.

But as their own business flourished, they came to a point where they could afford to buy their own insurance and for her to come into the business as a partner. They found that they were living a retired lifestyle at the ripe old age of thirty-four.

They decided they wanted to do what they had been figuring on doing when they actually did retire, and that was to travel. So they installed Clint's neatnik sister in their house to housesit, knowing it would be in good hands, and set off on the occasional relatively long trip—spending a good amount of time in England, as that was one of Cat's favorite places. She was an unabashed Anglophile and dragged Clint from pillar to post, visiting all the places she'd read about, mostly dealing with the Tudor dynasty. They saw the continent, too, and made return trips to Paris and Rome in particular, although London was hands down their favorite. Clint had even toyed with the idea of gifting Cat with a small apartment there, considering how much time was spent over there, but he decided against it. They'd found a gorgeous bed and breakfast they adored, with owners who came to treat them like family, and he didn't want to change that.

And through it all, unlike a lot of other couples who might

have killed each other being together so constantly, it just brought the two of them closer together. They were truly two halves of a whole, each incomplete without the other.

And a large part of that was the fact that Clint always kept a somewhat benevolent, lovingly watchful eye on his wife at all times. He'd known her since she was a small child, and he'd seen the permissive way her parents had raised her. She was an only child, and although she was never truly a brat, she had never been given much in the way of rules or restrictions. In turn, she'd grown up expecting that things in her life would go a certain way and she could get away with doing certain things and no one would ever call her to account, as her parents had not.

Clint had set about disabusing her of that notion from day one of their relationship. She was spoiled, which wasn't her fault, but that wasn't something he could support or encourage. She'd grown up in a three-person family, in a beautiful fourteen-room turn of the century Victorian. He'd grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, in a five-room house with six people in it. Needless to say, their leaner years were much harder on her than they had been on him. He'd grown up on lean and could squeeze a nickel 'til the buffalo pooped.

The first time she'd crossed that boundary while they were married was when she'd blown one of her paychecks on a beautiful dress, which he certainly appreciated on her at the time, when she'd graced him with an impromptu fashion show in their three room apartment not far from where he'd grown up. He'd gotten home from a long day working at job number three just to help them keep body and soul together and, despite all of the whirling and twirling she'd done, showing off her purchase and the beautiful body beneath it, she'd ended up receiving a rather unexpected comeuppance, especially since the money she'd spent should have gone toward the alarmingly past due electricity bill.



Of course, they had pooled their money. Both of their parents had always had joint accounts and they couldn't imagine not sharing everything. But Clint's idea of sharing everything and Cat's had been two very different things at first, and Clint hadn't realized exactly to what extent Cat's upbringing would affect her spending habits. To his credit, he confessed that to Cat when he sat her down, still wearing the gorgeous dress in question, which he found was distracting him from his true intentions.

It was a royal blue confection that brought out the cornflower blue in her eyes and accented the wavy blonde hair that fell artfully around her shoulders with little to no effort on her part. Her skin leaned toward a paler than was popular shade, but she burned easily and didn't much favor the sun, making her skin that much softer because of it. When he put his hand on her upper arm to guide her in taking a seat on the bed next to him, it was all he could do to concentrate on what he wanted to say, to say nothing of what he knew he had to do. Everything in him wanted to press her back to that pretty crocheted comforter she'd had in her antique cedar hope chest and have his way with her in the manner he knew would pleasure her the most.

What stopped him was the sight of the envelope that was sitting on his nightstand, containing the electricity bill that they weren't going to be able to pay unless she returned the dress. That white envelope, with its fluorescent pink "past due" stamp on the front was more than enough to steel his resolve and help him remember that he needed to be strong for the both of them, or they were going to sink instead of swim. He gathered her tight against him, asking in a soft voice, "You have the receipt for the dress, right, Cat?"

She wasn't stupid, and he could feel her tense up immediately. "Yes, it's in the bag. Why?" It was impossible not to tense

up when she had a good idea what was going to happen, from his demeanor and his question.

Why, oh why, had she let herself be talked into buying that dress? She'd been out with some friends, just window-shopping. They were supposed to be just window-shopping! Clint had let her to go to lunch with them, even though that was stretching their budget pretty tightly. She knew he wasn't going to be going to a nice, sit down restaurant with any of his friends this month—or any month—but he was like that. He always did everything he could to make sure she got to see the girls, knowing it was important to her to keep in contact with the friends she'd had since she was practically a baby, even if he had to sacrifice a little more for her to do it. He loved her more than enough to eat peanut butter and jelly for lunch in order for her to go out with the girls, because it made him happy to see her happy.

She felt the same about him, of course, but he rarely asked, and when he did, it was something much less expensive—like an occasional fishing or hunting trip with the boys. Since they always went to someone else's lodge, and they split the gas and food bills, his outings ended up costing a lot less than hers did overall.

So she'd gone out, and it was wonderful, as always. But lunch was never all it was. They'd had to go to the mall, of course, and she'd seen this dress on sale, in her size, and it looked fabulous on her. Her friends practically wouldn't let her out of the store without buying it. Of the five friends she was closest with, only two of them—Jane and Rhonda—knew the kind of relationship she had with her husband. They knew he disciplined her when he saw fit, and they both gave her the eye as she brought her purchase to the cash wrap desk, as a picture of that blasted electricity bill, which was about the same cost as the dress, flashed in her mind.

But she wanted that dress, dammit! It looked so good on

her, and she hadn't had a new dress in ages! And he was so loving and wonderful and generous to her, how could she possibly complain to him about something frivolous like that, like the need to go out and spend money just because you found the absolute perfect dress at the absolute perfect price? No man was going to understand that, unless he was gay. And there was no question about Clint in that area.

So she'd bought it anyway, and now, here she was, in his arms, but not for the reason she wanted to be in his arms at all. Cat was already crying. His spankings were nothing to sniff at, and she knew that was where this scene was going to end up. She must've known it when she'd written out the check, but she couldn't quite stop herself.

He pressed his face against the side of her head, burying his nose in her hair and breathing deeply in her scent. "I think you know why," he almost whispered, and that was worse. "You know the money in our account was already earmarked for the electric bill. We just had that discussion a couple of nights ago, didn't we?" Clint's finger turned her face toward him as his lips settled ever so slowly over hers then retreated just slightly. "Didn't we?"

She knew he would wait for her response, but not long. "Yes," she sighed on a sob.

Bless him, he didn't ask her why she'd bought it. Somehow, he knew she didn't know the answer herself and would be much less able to give him a satisfactory reason. He kissed her again, then said in his no nonsense tone that was totally at odds with the tender way he was holding her, "Tomorrow, we're going to the mall to return the dress together, and then we're going to Central Maine Power to pay the bill before they turn our lights off, understood?"

He was never angry or nasty or mean with her. He almost never yelled, and if he did, it was very rarely at her and most usually at himself, or a football or hockey team on television

that wasn't playing to his specifications. In this situation, when he was going to discipline her, he was almost dichotomously soothing and sensitive.

Cat nodded, not that she really had a choice, tears falling from her chin onto the leg of his jeans.

"But what's going to have to happen in the meantime, my love?" he asked, adjusting his position a little so he sat straighter on the edge of the bed, less toward her, in preparation for what was to come. But he kept his arm around her, steady, not binding. He didn't fear she'd run away from him, but it was more to provide support and remind her that she could lean on him, even when he punished her. He always sought to remind her that the punishments he dished out didn't mean he didn't love her, and he never wanted her to forget that.

She hated saying it, and Clint almost always required it when he remembered and had the time to go through the entire ritual. He felt it was important for the both of them, so he tried to do it as often as possible. Sometimes, though, when it was a quick spanking, he didn't. Like when he just flipped her over his knee in the living room, or made her bend over in the kitchen, or wherever, usually for sassing him or using a word he didn't like, and there seemed to be an endless list of those, as far as she was concerned. She hated to hear him say her whole name, knowing what was coming next was a lecture about ladylike language, to be accompanied by the loud tattoo of his hand cracking painfully against her bare butt.

"We get to snuggle and make love?" she suggested hopefully, blatantly trying to kiss him into distraction.

Clint knew she didn't have far to go with that, but he had to be strong, for her, and he was determined to do so. So he unwrapped those silky arms from around his neck and set her away from him just a bit, trying to adjust himself into a comfortable position which was damned near impossible with

a raging hard on pressed against the zipper of his jeans. "None of that tonight, sweetie. You know the rule."

She knew it and didn't like it. No sex after a spanking; that was his rule. He didn't believe in pleasuring her after he'd punished her, thinking it diminished his efforts, somehow, and he could almost never be corrupted about that. He wouldn't even be dissuaded in the morning, either. She'd tried. They wouldn't be able to come together until tomorrow night, and it would drive her absolutely crazy.

Cat's only consolation was that she knew he would be aching at least as badly as she was—maybe even more, although she doubted it. There was always a conflagration when they came together. Like gasoline and a match, they lit up the sky with their loving, always had, always would.

"Answer my question, Cat." This time he wasn't fooling, and she knew she had better do as he asked, or she'd be getting two spankings—one for not answering him in what he considered to be a timely fashion, and one for buying the dress. Two Clint spankings in a row was never a good idea.

But still, making her say it was a torturous thing, and she squirmed, quite physically, as she barely eked the words out, "A spanking."

"Not just 'a' spanking," he corrected immediately, "*your* spanking. I don't bother to spank just anyone, do I?"

"No," she said, her voice small, repeating, because she knew he would require it of her eventually, "my spanking." She couldn't repress a small shiver.

"Good girl. Now," he patted his legs, "over my lap."

He rarely positioned her himself. Clint preferred that she come to him for her chastisement herself, of her own free will, as if physically consenting to it as well as inherently, every single time. Cat had known exactly what she had signed on to well before they'd actually tied the knot. This definitely wasn't something he'd sprung on her on their wedding night. He'd

made it very clear from the beginning of their relationship exactly what he expected from her and how he expected her to behave, as well as exactly how he'd correct that behavior, when needed, from the beginning—since before they were engaged. He'd never hesitated to keep her in line, which had always brought amused smiles to her parents' faces, she'd noted.

But it was downright awful to have to put herself over the lap of the person she knew was going to spank her. It was almost painful in and of itself, forget the spanking. Well, almost. His thighs were so big and muscular that they had a thinnish pillow that he kept at hand to put over them for her comfort, so her ribs and hips would have something to cushion them. But then it would move when she climbed on, and there was always a certain amount of adjustments that had to be made that just contributed to her humiliation.

He was tender and gentle but firmly resolved throughout, patient with her endless fussing and futzing until she felt just right. Cat knew she didn't need to be hurting anywhere else but where he was going to be focusing for the next while, so she was a pain in the butt about her position. She also knew that, true to form, she was going to be flailing about like a mad woman, trying to dislodge herself or avoid a swat or twelve, not caring much at the time which it was. So she needed to be sure she was going to be comfortable the whole time, which seemed like decades at the time, but she was sure it lasted only minutes... but maybe years?

She'd never been cognizant enough at the end to try to keep track. But it wasn't as if Clint beat her to a bloody pulp, either. Far from it. He was always very attuned to how she was responding to what he was doing and very careful not to overdo it. He wasn't a huge man, not a lot taller than she was, but he was definitely much more muscular. And she had to

give it to him, he was always scrupulously careful of her when she was in his arms or over his lap.

Her spankings weren't horrible, long, drawn out, torturous affairs, although they certainly seemed as though they were at the time, and she reacted as though they were, crying and kicking as if he was digging her heart out with a spoon. Clint made sure she regretted what she'd done; however long that took, and how harsh the punishment was entirely his decision. She always ended up with a bottom that was sore for several days later, not that he ever hesitated to scorch it again the next day, if he deemed she needed it, darn him.

Clint leaned over to brush her hair back from her eyes and give her a pillow that she could cry into. At that point, they were still living in an apartment building with tissue thin walls. One of their fellow tenants had already banged on the shared wall during a particularly loud punishment session, and Cat had been holding her breath ever since, waiting for the police to arrive on their doorstep.

"I love you, Cat," he said solemnly, for this was not something he ever undertook lightly, and she knew it.

"I love you, too, 'n I'm sorry," she sobbed, and it damned near broke his heart every time, the trust she placed in him and the love she had for him when she let him do this for her.