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# SENTRY SECURITY

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CHULA STONE



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Guarding Jenny  
SENTRY SECURITY BOOK ONE

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## Chapter 1

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She saw him across the room despite the noise and confusion of the restaurant. Most sports bars like this were not so big and open. She wished this one weren't, either.

"I've got to leave," she told her friends.

"Jenny, what's wrong?" Sarah asked.

*Try to recover. Get yourself together. This is 1990, not 1890. There's nothing to be so embarrassed about. "I... uh, I may have left the burner on the stove on." It could be true. I might have... I know I didn't do any such thing, but if he sees me, I'll die of embarrassment so I have to say something. I have to get out of here.*

Pushing past her friends as they waited for a table, she said to the hostess, "Just six now. I can't stay."

She made it to the pavement outside before the big man caught up with her. She tried to keep going, but that was pretty impossible when two hundred and thirty pounds of determined male were blocking the way.

"Please don't be alarmed, miss," he began. "My name is Jeep and I'm..."

"I know who you are. He sent you."

“Yeah,” he answered, visibly relaxing. He gestured with his hand, obviously expecting her to turn around.

“I’m not going back. He sent you to me. I’m sending you back to him. I know you’re a bit big for a carrier pigeon, but...”

“What?” Again, with the gesture.

“What’s with the signal pole? I’m not a train track crossing. Excuse me.”

He smiled. She couldn’t tell whether he was chuckling at her lame humor or her patently futile attempt to thwart his intentions. But it was unexpected all the same. It totally changed his face. As big as he was, that grin seemed to melt him down to a manageable size.

“Can’t do that, miss.” His formality was back. “Mr. Tobin requested me to bring you to him.”

“Kicking and screaming? Even in that melee in there, I think it would be noticed.”

His mood pendulum swung back to pleasant. Even in the darkness of the fall evening, she could see it clearly.

“Not so sure about that. I could be a rowdy fan celebrating a touchdown.”

He took a step toward the bar, but since she didn’t move, it brought them closer together. He looked down at her and the smile faded again. She could hear his intake of breath. It took all her will to stand her ground.

He tried again. “Please, miss, don’t make this hard on me. It’s my job. I’ll get in trouble if you don’t come talk to him. You don’t need to be afraid. What’s he going to do? It’s a crowded bar.”

“And this is a crowded street, but if I go back with you, I’ll be doing something I don’t want to do. That isn’t a good sign.” She hated the fact that he knew she was afraid, but at his size, she knew he was probably used to people being afraid of him. Not to mention his job. When you worked for Sentry Security, she figured, most of the people you met would be either afraid or

stupid. She'd been stupid when she'd first met Tobin. Now she was just afraid.

"I'll be there the whole time."

"And that's supposed to make me feel safer? As you just pointed out, this is your job we're talking about here."

Now the affability was replaced by affront. How that strong of a jaw, that wide of a cheek, and that broad of a brow could manage to convey affront, she didn't know. "Job or no job, I would never allow..."

Because Jeep was so big, Jenny didn't notice anyone else on the sidewalk with them until he was close enough to startle her. "Mr. Tobin!" Jenny cried. He was the last person she wanted to see out here on this street full of people who might gossip to her friends or parents. If she had known he was that determined to talk to her, she would have gone back into the bar with this giant and gotten it over with.

"Hello, Jenny, my dear. And it's 'mister' now? Surely you can remember I asked you to call me 'Tob.'" He looked at Jeep and continued, "What's the matter, Jeep? I'm not used to having to chase people down on the street. That's what I pay you for. I thought maybe Chalk had—"

"Chalk?" Jenny interrupted. That name snagged her stomach and pulled it to her throat. "You mean, the same Chalk I read about in that file?"

Jeep rolled right over her question. "No, Mr. Tobin. Sorry you had to come out here. She just didn't want to come."

It was Tobin's turn to look offended. "Why ever not?" His faint, upper-crust English accent became more pronounced with surprise, Jenny remembered.

"I don't know, Mr. Tobin."

"I'm right here," she began. *Though I wish I were anywhere else*, she thought. *The dentist's chair comes to mind as a more comfortable spot.* "So, I can answer your question. I didn't want to come because I don't want to see you again. I'm embarrassed, as you must be



able to tell.” She knew that her face must resemble a stop sign and there was a freight train running through her ears. Backing up, she stepped on Jeep’s toes and jumped off them into the street.

Reaching out to grab her, Jeep’s arm pulled her back onto the safety of the sidewalk and then curled around her protectively. “Job or no job, I wouldn’t let anyone hurt a bystander such as yourself.”

“Hurt?” Tobin continued, “No one is going to hurt anyone, Jenny. And you have nothing to be embarrassed about. You didn’t want to sleep with me. End of story.”

“It was our first date!”

Tobin’s blank look told her he was used to doing exactly what he wanted, when he wanted, and with whoever he wanted, but her world didn’t include such shenanigans.

She tried again. “I just don’t—”

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter. Water under the bridge, my dear. Come back to my table with me and I’ll explain why I wanted to see you. I only want to warn you...”

“No! I’m not going back in there. I’m going home!” Matching action to word, she freed herself from Jeep’s relaxed grip and stalked quickly down the street.

“Where are you parked, then? I’ll walk you to your car and tell you about Chalk. It won’t take long,” Tobin called after her. She could only hope that he had finally given up on pursuing her. Now if only this Jeep person would do the same.

“Out here on the street, Mr. Tobin? This isn’t the best neighborhood,” Jeep advised.

Tobin replied, “The lady won’t come in and she has to be told.”

“I can tell her. You can go back inside and enjoy the game.”

When she heard that last comment, Jenny sneaked a glance over her shoulder in time to catch Tobin pointing to Jeep and then to herself. She glimpsed Jeep’s acknowledging touch of his

temple in a kind of discreet salute before she turned again and doubled her pace, wondering why men had to be so dramatic with their little signals. *Couldn't they just keep talking? Then I would know where they are. I'm not sure that big guy is going to – oh!*

“Look, miss, sorry to startle you, but there’s no need to walk so fast. Especially in those heels.”

“How did you catch up so fast?”

“I’ve got long legs. Thought you might have noticed that. And I wear shoes made for walking. You’re easy to catch in those skimpy pumps. You’ll need to be more careful.”

“Never mind my shoes! Do you have to notice every little thing? Oh, forget it! I just want this to be over. Tell me whatever it was Tobin said you needed to warn me about and go away.”

She picked up on the scowl on his face before he answered. “Mr. Tobin is being extra cautious right now because a bad guy he put away nine years ago is out on probation. His name is Frank Chalk and he’s a real... well, he’s nobody I’d want you meeting.”

The way he put that gave her pause. Why did he care whom she met? “Why should I meet him? He doesn’t know me.”

“He knows Mr. Tobin and is having him watched. This morning at the office, we got a plain brown envelope hand-delivered. In it, there were several pictures of Mr. Tobin in different places with different people, all taken when we didn’t know he was being photographed. You were in one of the pictures.”

All the color of the moments before cascaded out of Jenny’s face. Her energy and nerve went with it, flowing out of her and landing in a puddle on the sidewalk that she nearly nosedived into. Jeep’s arm went out again to steady her.

“But how? I hardly know him. We only went out that one time and I shouldn’t have even done that. I mean, really! Dating the boss? How does that look?”

“You were a temp at the reception desk just one day, right?”

“Yes. It was summer vacation and I was waiting for school to

start so I could begin my time filling in for a teacher on maternity leave. I only ever worked the one day at Sentry.”

“Well, you weren’t really an employee after that one day, so I don’t see what’s so wrong with you going out with Mr. Tobin.”

*And you also probably don’t know why I understand exactly how dangerous this whole situation just became. I wish I had never read that folder on Chalk and the other one on Van Dyke. It was none of my business. If I had just been lazy and kept to the duties they had assigned me, I would never have caught that error. I would have never come to the attention of the boss. He would have never asked me out. I would have never entered their world.*

“What was wrong with it was that I was out of my league. I’m a substitute teacher, for crying out loud! I don’t have anything in common with that kind of... you know... wealth, power, whatever.” She waved a vague hand at the bar to indicate Tobin.

“If he only dated women with his kind of wealth and power, he’d be one lonely man, miss. But listen, my Suburban is back this way. Let me drive you home. It’s too far to be walking like this.”

She turned to look up at him with suspicion. “How do you know how far it is to my apartment? I never mentioned where I live. And how do you know I don’t have my car parked at the bar?”

“You dated Mr. Tobin.”

“And you checked me out. You know I hardly ever drive there.” Comprehension materialized slowly and brought no comfort with it.

“As you say, it is a different world.”

“And I want no part of it. That was my church group I was with. I like to bowl, for crying out loud. Why am I still dealing with the likes of him? It was just one day’s work and one date. And what’s he doing in a sports bar, anyway? Shouldn’t he be at some kind of yacht club or something?”

“Mr. Tobin goes where he wants to go. It might surprise you where he spends his time.”

She tried to turn left and ran right into him. He steadied her with his hands on her shoulders and she couldn't understand why it no longer made her nervous to be near him. “We need to go this way,” she said.

“Not down this little alley. The main road is better lit.”

“It's shorter this way.”

“Then let me drive you. You don't need to be walking alone at night around here.”

“I always go that way.”

“You don't anymore.”

If he had sprouted purple fur, she could not have looked at him with more incredulity. “Chalk?” That brought her back down to earth with a thump. “Chalk.”

“Already forgot about him, huh? I know by the way you turned white a minute ago that you know how serious this situation is. You can't be forgetting like that. Not 'till we put him away again.” He seemed to consider something and then added, “Actually, you can't be taking dark alley shortcuts even after we put him away again.”

She dismissed that comment with a roll of her eyes and a little whiney sound. Walking on, but taking his well-lit main road, she plowed ahead. “So, you're going to try to put him back in prison?”

“Sure. We have to. He's got too big a grudge against Mr. Tobin to be left on the loose like this. Mr. Tobin doesn't like having to keep a guard with him all the time.”

“I was wondering about that. I mean, he didn't have a body-guard when we...”

They walked on in silence for another moment before he answered, “When you went out? No, we had our eye on Chalk but he hadn't made any real threat then, so Mr. Tobin was just

using normal precautions. But why are you so embarrassed about your date with Mr. Tobin?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"With me, you mean?"

"With anybody!"

"You're blushing again. Not many women blush anymore. I think it's cute."

Her hands went to her face, as if she could cover her blazing cheeks. "I think it's ridiculous, but there it is. It's not something I can control. It's just another proof that I don't need to have anything more to do with your world. Here, we have to turn off the main road sooner or later. This is the biggest cross street."

They turned left and he answered her after another moment. "Mr. Tobin's world isn't my world. I just work for him."

"Yes, but take my word for it. Your world isn't my world, either." She didn't know why she was having this conversation with a total stranger."

"It could be. Can I call you sometime?"

"No, I learned my lesson." Here she paused, totally at a loss. "I don't know you from Adam."

"Sure you do. We met at work."

"I worked there one day!"

"So? It was still work. And we have a mutual friend."

"Who?"

"Mr. Tobin."

"Oh, please!"

"Anyway, we have something to discuss. I need to bring you up to speed on the Chalk case. And I need to take a closer look at your security arrangements."

She gave him another of the purple fur looks. "What?"

"To make sure you're safe. Just until we catch Chalk."

"Look, I don't want to be 'up to speed' on the Chalk case and I don't want your help with my 'security arrangements.' I haven't

got any security arrangements for you to take a look at, close or distant. Now, please just leave me alone.”

“I’m sorry to intrude, then, miss.” His injured tone had her regretting her impulsive words. “But it is my job, as I said before. If anything happened to you, it wouldn’t reflect well on Mr. Tobin.” Something told her he had more on his mind than professional concern, but she couldn’t figure out what.

She stopped and turned to him at the steps to her apartment. “This is my building. You can’t come up.”

His answer was muffled as he turned his head this way and that, obviously watching the street for a tail, she imagined. It sounded something like, “Wanna bet?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said I’ll need to come into your apartment to make sure it’s safe before you go in.”

*You said no such thing*, she thought, but let it go with another roll of her eyes.

“Do you always roll your eyes like that?”

Startled, she asked, “Like what?”

“I notice things. Don’t be so surprised.”

Suddenly, and she had no idea how it happened, he had her keys in his hand and was slipping inside the door, signaling for her to wait. He looked around the small entry hall, then stepped back for her to enter.

When she hesitated, he took her hand and gently pulled her in. “Hey!” she protested.

“What?”

“I’m not a three-year-old.”

“Then stop acting like one. Get in off the street and let me get you settled inside so I can get back to work.”

“I thought this was work for you.”

“It is.” The look he gave her dared her to ask him anything else. She wasn’t feeling anywhere near daring enough for that.

“And when I do a job, I do it right. I need to get this done and get back to Mr. Tobin.”

“Do you keep saying that name just to see me blush?”

“You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“Making this personal. Making me feel like a human being. Make up your mind. You can’t have it both ways.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Most people treat me like a piece of furniture. I’m there for a reason, not for fun, so I understand that. I’m just the guard. I’m a tool, not a real person. But you... you treat me like a person one minute, then push me away the next.”

She slumped. “That’s what I mean when I say I’m not in your world. That’s just the way I am. I treat everyone like a person. They are a person. I mean, they are people. I mean... oh, can’t I just be nice without you thinking anything else is going to happen here? And what are you doing in my bedroom? See, this is just the sort of thing—”

“I’m not in your bedroom. I’m checking out your apartment.”

*It’s all one room*, she thought. *What’s to check?* “But you’re near the bed area and that’s the closest thing I have to a bedroom, so I’ll thank you to get out of it. It’s not...”

“It’s not what?”

“It’s not proper for you to be there. Or here at all!”

“Proper?”

“Yes, proper. I’m old-fashioned, I know, but I mean it.” She stood by the door and pointed to the hall.

He approached her and stood too close. She figured from his grin that he had to know he was crowding her and just didn’t care, maybe even liked her discomfiture.

“I really think you do mean it. But think about it. You’ve got nothing to be afraid of with me. If I were the type of guy to hurt a woman, you’d have no chance of stopping me, anyway. It

would already be way too late. Fact is, I would never hurt you or anybody who didn't deserve it."

"I never said you would. I'm not scared. I just don't want any misunderstandings. I'm not a tease."

She didn't know him well enough to interpret the look he gave her, but his words made her forget her curiosity. "All right. Let me be clear. You should be scared, but not of me. Of Chalk. You need to be careful. Vary your routine. Change up your routes. Stay out of strategic weak points. Watch for ambush points. Guard your flank. Things like that."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"See? That's why we need to talk. I need to explain to you—"

"Can't I just take a class or something?" *I can see it now. A class at the local community college: 'How to avoid your local gangster,' or 'Thugs 101.'*

He just laughed. "I'll call you tomorrow. Now, bolt the door and..." He crossed to the window. "Was that a... No, he's gone."

"What?"

"It may have been nothing."

"You're just trying to scare me."

He stepped up to her again, this time even closer. "No, little one. If I wanted to scare you, you'd know it. And you'd be scared."

He was gone before she saw him leave. And while she didn't understand it, she had to admit that, breathless as she was, scared she was not.

---

"It was a tail, but not Chalk himself." Jeep could tell his report disturbed Tobin more than he'd thought it would, and wondered what he had already heard from other sources. This early morning briefing wasn't his usual way to start the day, but Tobin seemed to be relying on him more and more for advice as well as



muscle. Out in public, Jeep was all short answers, and “Yes, Mr. Tobin.” In the office, it was much more relaxed.

“Haskell made a tail on the cleaning lady, too.”

“Mrs. Dodge? And I thought putting Haskell on her to watch her was over the top.”

“She was in a photo.”

Jeep nodded. He remembered those pictures only too well. When he had seen Jenny’s face there again, the thrill he had felt, followed by the fear, stuck in his memory like a nail in a two-by-four.

“So, Chalk is going for the soft targets. We can pull Vinny off the lawyer,” Jeep suggested, referring to another of Sentry’s guards.

“The lawyer isn’t going to like that. He knows that Chalk remembers him from the trial. I don’t blame him for wanting protection.”

“We going to watch every Sentry employee?”

“If we have to.”

Jeep nodded. This was why he continued to work for Tobin. The man might have his faults, but he wasn’t the total jerk some guys might turn into after years of fighting the worst this world had to offer.

“What I want to know is, how did Chalk rebuild his organization so fast? He just got out. I thought Torino had a good hold on his territory.”

Tobin grimaced at the mention of yet another of the area’s most dangerous criminals. “The cops found Torino in the county land fill yesterday.”

“Oh, they did?”

“Anonymous tip. You were right about Foster being able to find Torino, by the way. Good call. Foster is one of my best investigators but even he couldn’t find any evidence to tie Chalk to it, of course.”

“But there’s no doubt, is there? There are other criminal operations hereabouts. The Shin family could possibly...”

“Not in this,” Tobin informed him. “Shin called yesterday and made that clear. We don’t have to worry about them, at least. It’s Chalk all the way. So, do you want Foster on the Nearfin girl?” Tobin gave him an odd look. “Or do you want to handle her personally?”

“Foster is good, but I think I’d better... Why would you put Foster on Jenny?”

“Foster’s married. She might feel more comfortable with a family man. Less threatened, you know. She’s a very traditional girl.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“I didn’t say there was. I admire that, in fact. And I don’t want her offended. Or pressured.” Again, Tobin cocked an eyebrow at Jeep. “Or even tempted. You won’t get anywhere with her.”

“Wanna bet?”

“If I couldn’t, what makes you think...?”

“You rushed her. And she knows you aren’t the marrying kind.”

“And you are?”

“Why not?” Serious. Considered. Decided.

Jeep could tell Tobin was appraising him like a pawnbroker looking at a used stereo. “No reason why not, if you really mean it. I can’t explain why, but I like that little Jenny. I won’t have her manhandled, or manipulated or hurt.”

Jeep understood his boss’s comments for what they were: a warning for him to be sure he was willing to not only protect her person, but her heart as well. “Nobody’s going to hurt Jenny in any way. Not Chalk, not me. I know what I’m getting myself into.”

Another crisp autumn evening and Jenny was walking home again, this time with yet another man. She was as tired of this date as she had been of the last one, just for different reasons. The first man had hardly said a word. This clown never stopped talking, but his sole topic of conversation was himself. She had begun to wonder why she was needed on this date at all. Vincent could keep himself entertained quite nicely. Why, as she walked home by this longer route, could she not clear from her mind the image of the tall bodyguard she had met just three weeks earlier?

Her date led the way to her door and turned, his hand outstretched, palm up.

“What do you want, Vincent?” she queried.

“Your keys. So I can let us in.”

“You’re not coming in,” she informed him. “You know that from my profile, and your profile said you felt the same way.”

“I’m not planning to spend the night,” he answered, his tone almost offended. “But you didn’t have your front door locked when I picked you up. That’s dangerous and you need to learn a lesson in safety. I’m going to see to that right now.”

“Wait just a minute. This is only our first date.” She drew back, rolling her eyes. This wasn’t the first time she had met up with a jerk in that discipline social club. Most of the guys were nice, but some were over the top. “Not on the first date. I hardly know you. I believe in traditional marriage, yes, but I don’t accept the right of every man to punish every woman he comes across. There has to be trust and love and...”

“You’re just trying to get out of a well-deserved bottom warming, young woman. Give me your keys and get inside, now.”

“No! You get out of here, now!”

“You heard the lady.” The shadow was that of a small mountain, the hand on her shoulder felt like the average elephant trunk, pulling her back away from Vincent and the voice was Jeep’s.

Vincent was standing on the first step of her apartment building and still had to look up to look Jeep, who stood on the sidewalk, in the eye. “Thi... thi... I... uh...”

“I didn’t hear him right, did I?” Jeep had dismissed Vincent from his mind, she guessed as she realized he was addressing her now. “Your door wasn’t unlocked, was it?”

*This wasn’t happening. Couldn’t be happening. Just not possible.* “I don’t see how that’s...”

Jeep looked from Vincent to Jenny, then to the door to the apartment building. “Inside. Everybody.”

She couldn’t figure out why she didn’t demand they both leave. She ought to. She knew that. But somehow, she couldn’t disobey him. Maybe it was his voice. Or his height. Or the gun in the shoulder holster, almost hidden by his flannel overshirt.

Once she had unlocked the door, he quickly pushed past her and took his usual tour of the room, then motioned them both in. He pointed to the bathroom door and shoved a stuttering Vincent inside it, shutting him in.

“You’ve got a choice to make, girlie, so make it fast. You’re going to get a spanking tonight. Him or me?”

“What?”

“I know all about that club you visit and the dating service you use. I know it’s for people who believe in spanking and I have to say at this moment, I finally understand the draw. There’s nothing I want to do right now in this world more than I want to tan your...”

She couldn’t help interrupting. “You what? How did you find out?”

“We’ve been monitoring all your communications, Jenny. Mail, phone, everything. What did you think, that I was going to leave you out here all alone? Without protection? If I had done that, you’d be over this creep’s knee by now, wouldn’t you?”

“You haven’t been watching me!” She was incredulous.

“Wanna bet?” He was smug.

“You have to be the most...”

“Make up your mind, girlie. I’m not going to force you, but here’s the deal. Either you agree to take what I give you, or, by gum, I’ll walk out of here right now and leave you to Vincent. Now, what’s it going to be?”

Her mind was in a whirl. He knew about the spanking social club. He knew about the newsletter and the dating service where she had been trying to meet like-minded men who believed in traditional marriage. Not even her family knew about this side of her life.

Logic had left the building, but bluster was a faithful friend.

“You have no right! Don’t you know it’s a crime to read other people’s mail?”

“You want to talk to me about crime? Chalk will make you think ‘crime’! Didn’t I tell you to keep your door bolted at all times?” Looking around, he continued, “And where’s the blocking prop I brought you? You should leave it in place whenever you’re home. I don’t even see it.”

“That was you? You left that thing? I didn’t even know what it was.” *Truth be told, it made a great prop for the window when I scorched the green beans yesterday.*

Vincent peeked his head out of the bathroom door, but one look from Jeep had him slamming it again with a yelp. “He’s waiting, Jenny, and so am I. What’s it going to be?”

“Neither of you.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Vincent,” she called. When he came out, she continued, “Both of you! Out! Now!”

Vincent looked at Jeep but Jeep only had eyes for Jenny. He gave a dramatic shrug of his ox-like shoulders and turned away. “Okay. If that’s the way you want it...” Jenny didn’t like the way she felt as she watched him lumber out the door and close it firmly behind him.

*Uh-oh. Vincent isn’t leaving. I forgot what brought Jeep out of the*

*shadows in the first place. With Jeep gone...* “You stay away from me!” Then it struck her, more forcefully than any potential spanking from this joker ever could: she had made the wrong choice. The thought of being spanked by Vincent left her cold. He didn’t care about her or her safety. He hadn’t taken the time to monitor her or give her things to keep her secure. Then again, to be fair, it was part of Jeep’s job to watch out for her, she reasoned. Still, she knew for a certainty that a spanking from Vincent would reach her heart about as much as a peanut butter sandwich. Less, in fact. Of all the dates she had gone on from the dating service, there were surprisingly few jerks, but he was definitely one of them.

Vincent had her by the arm. He made quick work of dragging her over to the couch. “Wait! Wait!” she tried to argue.

“No arguments. I don’t want to hear it. I’ll decide when you get punished and how. You women need to learn obedience.” His words were so right, but from this man and in this way, they sounded so wrong.

The door burst open and Jeep filled what had once seemed to her like a rather normal-sized opening. He stood there staring at her and she knew it would be drunken sailor stupidity to send him away again. “You! I choose you! Please help me.”

She was sure that Jeep didn’t really reach his arm all the way across the apartment to grab Vincent’s collar. As small as the space was, even the super-sized Jeep couldn’t manage that, but darned if she had any other explanation. One glance, Vincent was there, the next glance, a shaky, Vincent-shaped blur was almost detectable exiting stage left.

Jeep sat down on the couch with her in a disarmingly normal manner, which, of course, made her warier than ever, but despite her misgivings, she found herself relaxing after her moment of revulsion over Vincent. “What are you doing?” she finally asked.

“I’m getting comfortable.”

“Why?”

“To wait.”

“For what?”

“For you to get comfortable.”

“Why?”

“Are you always this full of questions?”

“Are you always this evasive with your answers?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never given a spanking before, so I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say. I think I’m safe in saying that whatever it was that numbskull was saying isn’t the right thing, though. It just sounded wrong. Why do you go out with jerks like that, anyway?”

*This can’t be happening.* “You want me to explain traditional marriage to you? Now? It’s kind of complex. I don’t even really understand it all myself.”

“No, no, I don’t want explanations about the lifestyle or anything. I mean why date those jerks? It’s been like a parade of idiots, watching them come and go.”

“That’s not fair. Tonight, was the first one who gave me any trouble. If you’ve seen them all, you have to admit that.”

“You still haven’t answered my question. Why?”

She sighed. “I’m ready to meet someone and settle down. I know what I want may not be for everybody, but it’s right for me. Why date guys who don’t want the kind of life I want?”

“Any guy would be crazy not to want you.”

“Some people think this is pretty quirky,” she protested.

“Quirks and all, I still say any guy would be lucky to get to be with you.”

“Thanks.” *Lame*, she knew, but what did you say when someone said something like that to you? Tomorrow she’d think of a hundred responses, but tonight all she could do was let him kiss her.

After a long, blissful moment, he pulled back and cleared his throat noisily. Shaking his head, he scowled at her. “If you’re

trying to distract me, you're doing a good job, but kissing will have to wait."

"No, I think we've done all the kissing we're going to do," she countered, hoping he couldn't hear her heart racing.

"Okay, fine. I guess it's time to get on to the spanking."

"What?"

"Unlocked door? Security prop?"

"I know where that is." She pointed in the general direction of the kitchen window and his scowl grew deeper.

"Knowing where it is won't save you. Nothing's going to save you."

*What's he waiting for,* she wondered. Finally, she couldn't just sit there any longer playing this bizarre game of chicken. She blinked first. "Then what are you waiting for?"

"I'm not Vincent. I'm not going to grab you and put you over my lap. Not tonight. It's too soon for that. But you did agree to me spanking you."

"Oh, now wait just a minute."

"You knew my terms. Are you trying to go back on your agreement?"

She took a moment to consider. "So, you're waiting for me to..."

He nodded, so she shrugged. How bad could it be? He was right. She had kind of agreed. She stood and laid herself over his lap, which was something akin to lying over a concrete patio.

As he raised her skirt, she raised her objection. "Hey! Hold on there!"

"Your newsletter says that spankings on the bare are best." He sounded as if he was quoting the latest item on the news.

"That newsletter is mostly for married couples. On the bare wouldn't be proper for us," she countered.

"At least, not yet," he agreed hesitantly. And cryptically. *What did he mean by...*



“Youch!” she squeaked, as she pitched forward on his lap. “You’re not playing baseball, here!”

“A little too hard, huh?”

“I nearly landed on the coffee table.”

“Sorry about that. The newsletter did say something about longer instead of harder.” He tried again.

“Hey, keep your hands to yourself,” she chided. “I’ll submit to a spanking, not a groping.”

“That was a swat.”

“Could have fooled me.” She could just picture that smug grin on his face.

“So, you want me to spank you harder?”

At this, she tried to push off his lap. “I want you to let me up. This is ridiculous. I don’t take kindly to being laughed at.”

He held her tight with his left arm. “I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing at myself not knowing how to do this. You have to admit, it’s a new skill. In a fight, I don’t generally have to hold back. It may take a while to learn some control.”

“Well, you can start by controlling your hand,” she scolded. She could feel how reluctantly he allowed her to push his palm from where it had been resting on her backside a little too long. Skirt or no skirt, it had no business there for more than the second it took to apply the next spank. Which he did. Several times.

“That any better?” he asked after two dozen hefty swats.

“Well, that depends on your goal,” she ground out. Her teeth were clenched against the desire to yelp again.

“My goal is to remind you that you need to lock your door, each and every time you open it. And use that prop. And vary your route to school. And the store. And use different stores. And...”

“I get the picture! Ouch!” Every item added to his list he emphasized with another set of swats. The sting building in her

nether cheeks was becoming intolerable, but on he spanked, even without more items on his list.

“How am I supposed to know when to stop?” he asked several minutes later.

“Oh, any time now, I’m sure would be fine,” she panted.

“No. I mean; I can’t see how red you’re getting. I think I need to at least sneak a peek back there.” He slid his hand up under her skirt but gave her little resistance when she caught at his wrist. She knew if he had wanted to, he could have done anything he liked.

“Take my word for it. My backside is as red as it is possible to be. If it gets any hotter, it will make the whole apartment explode.”

As she said that, she heard a crash. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash, but her mind could not perceive what was happening. She couldn’t process the motion of Jeep lifting her and depositing her on the floor with his body on top of hers to protect her.

“What was that?” she shouted over the roar of blood pounding in her ears and more splintering glass.

“The apartment exploding.”