

# THE CURSE

*By Sara James*



*ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS*

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A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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## THE CURSE

by Sara James

### **Romans 13:9**

The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and what other commandment as there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

### **Date Rape**

“No.”

Jack’s stopped kissing Rhonda’s neck so he could look her in the face. Her expression was almost one of pain. Her forehead was scrunched up and her mouth was half-way between a frown and a pout. She wouldn’t look him in the face.

*She’s got to be playing another game,* he thought in annoyance.

Jack had dated a lot of women in the twenty years since he had graduated from college, but none of them had ever played “hard to get” like Rhonda. After six months of wining and dining, she was still holding out on him in the area of physical affection. It was hard to resist his libido after having a relationship that long. Her being one of the most beautiful women he had ever met and fifteen years his junior made keeping his self-control intact that much more difficult, but the worst part was having her so near and so completely unattainable at the same time. It was the worst sort of torture.

Normally, the only form of physical affection they shared was a goodnight kiss that over the past few weeks had gradually been increasing in both duration and intensity. When she had showed up for their current date wearing a skirt instead of her usual jeans or slacks, he was certain that she had finally decided to relent. The fact that their plans had been for a romantic candlelit dinner in the privacy of his apartment only helped reinforce his impression.

That impression had helped relax him during dinner. Lately he had fallen into the habit of fantasizing about what their kiss would be like at the end of the night, making him tense and edgy during the dates themselves. With the certain sense that he would be getting more than just a kiss that night, the conversation during the meal had been buoyant and fun, just like their first couple of dates had been.

When they first starting going out, he spent a lot of time admiring her looks during their dates. Her tanned skin and waist-length brown hair were endlessly fascinating. Her face and body almost always brought questions from strangers who wondered if she was a model. (She wasn’t. She was working on a doctorate in Medieval History at the local community college). And she was tall; she was barely two inches shorter than

his own six feet. With all that going for her, Jack couldn't understand why she wasn't more interested in sex. After all, it wasn't like she couldn't find willing bed partners. And if she didn't like someone after going to bed with them, how hard could it possibly be for her to find someone better?

After dinner, they had retreated to the couch to continue their talk. Two bottles of wine and an hour later, the anticipated make-out session had begun just as Jack had expected.

Having Rhonda say "no" wasn't just unexpected, it was like being slapped.

"No?" he repeated stupidly. His mind was spinning, helped by the wine. "What do you mean, 'no?'"

"Jack," she whined, "it's your hand. Move your hand."

She was wearing a form-hugging black stretch skirt that left her knees and the bottom of her thighs exposed. Her top was also of some kind of thin stretch fabric, but it was a pale blue. It was, basically, a T-shirt, but the neckline was low, leaving her cleavage and the inner slopes of her breasts exposed. He had spent most of the time since she had walked into his apartment trying not to look at her breasts. It hadn't been easy.

When he slowly began playing with the lower hem of the top as they kissed, he expected her to object. He was encouraged when she didn't stop him. Over the course of several minutes he let his hand drift higher beneath the fabric of her top. She still didn't object. For the past several minutes, he had been cupping her breast, massaging the soft flesh covered by the silken expanse of her brassiere. Far from objecting, she had been softly moaning, seeming to enjoy the attention of his fingers as they caressed her. She especially seemed to like it when he ran his thumb over the thick swelling of her nipple.

And now this.

"I thought you liked it," he whispered. He began to tug at the lower edge of her bra again to get at the soft skin beneath.

"Jack, damn it, I said 'NO!'" She squirmed and pushed down on his arm, forcing him to fight her or remove his hand from beneath her top. Reluctantly, he removed his hand.

It was not a turn-on. With the heat of the moment gone, Jack took his arm from around her shoulders and folded his hands in his lap. "I'm sorry," he said softly, being anything but sorry. *Why does she have to be such a tease?* he thought morosely. While it was a good sign that they were kissing long before the end of the date, he was still hurt and disappointed...and a little angry. *How can she wear an outfit like that and expect me NOT to respond?*

Rhonda sighed and put one of her hands on Jack's thigh. "Please don't sulk. It's not that I don't want you to touch me, it's just that...well, damn it, you always have to push the boundaries! Can't you be a little patient? Don't you think I'm worth waiting for?" She put her other hand on the back of his neck, running her fingers in tiny cir-

cles on the skin. Now she could easily look him in the face. She stared at him, trying to see his response.

*I have been patient*, he thought. *It's been six months and all we've done is kiss. How patient do I have to be?* But he didn't let any of that show in his face. Instead, he smiled sadly and nodded. "It's not that I don't want to stay in the boundaries; I just don't know where they are."

It was a blatant lie. He knew perfectly well that the boundaries were wherever Rhonda wanted them to be. What Jack really wanted was for her to decide that there were no more boundaries. He had been daydreaming about her since the first time he saw her. He wanted to live out every one of those daydreams. How could he do that if she wouldn't even let him put his hands on her breasts? He hadn't even seen her in a bikini, even though they had recently been to the beach for the Fourth of July. Instead, she had worn a modestly cut one-piece that, while quite sexy, was not at all revealing.

She cocked her head, considering what he had said out loud. "Well," she finally drawled, "maybe it would be a good idea if we made some rules so that we both know what the boundaries are. How about this: we can touch each other anywhere we want, but all our clothes have to stay on." She smiled sadly. "And hands have to stay out from beneath the other person's clothes. No more putting your hand under my top, OK?"

It wasn't OK, but Jack said it was anyway. What he really wanted was to slap her as hard as he could and throw her out of his apartment. *No*, he amended mentally, *what I really want is to touch her wherever and however I want and to have her love every second of it!*

He soon forgot those thoughts as they began kissing again.

He moved one of his hands to her breasts. *She better not object*, he thought. *Not right after she said I could touch her anywhere I wanted as long I didn't try to get under her clothes.*

Her reaction assured him that she didn't mind. Still kissing, she began moaning her pleasure into his mouth. Squeezing changed the moans into animalistic grunting. She obviously liked what he was doing. Jack began to play with his newfound power, using his fingers on her breast like a conductor wielding a baton. First louder, then softer. Then a series of groans, each one louder than the last as he squeezed more and more tightly.

She broke the kiss and pulled him close, lost in the ecstasy of his touch. "Oh, Jack!" she moaned. Her breath was coming in ragged gasps now between passionate exclamations. "That feels so good!"

*This is more like it*, thought Jack. Reaching down with both hands, Jack reached around her and did his best to grab her ass, intending to roll her and pull her on top of himself. Instead, he lost track of what he was doing and pulled back in surprise.

"No, don't stop, Jack. That was nice." Opening her eyes fully, she got a better look at his face. "Jack?" she asked tentatively. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

Jack ran his hand over her thigh. “What is that?”

“My leg silly!” She smiled teasingly, knowing full well what he was really asking. “Unless you mean my fat hips.”

“No,” he said in a distant, almost mechanical tone. He began rubbing one specific spot on her thigh. “That, right there. What is that?”

She blushed. “Oh, that. It’s part of my garter.”

Jack kept his face blank. “Garter?”

“Yes, Jack, I’m wearing a garter belt.” She reached behind him and began playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

“You’re wearing a garter belt? And stockings?”

“Yes,” she whispered in his ear.

“No pantyhose?”

“No,” she whispered, following her statement with a soft bite to his earlobe.

Suddenly, Jack had an epiphany.

*She’s not playing hard to get, he thought with excitement. She’s shy! She been sending me signals for weeks and I’ve been ignoring them. She doesn’t want me to be passive and sensitive, she wants me to ravish her. Why else would she go from jeans to a garter belt? She wants me to satisfy her without having to feel like a ‘bad girl’ by asking me to give her what she wants! She wants me to take control. She wants me to...to...*

Rhonda squeaked when Jack picked her up in a fireman’s carry. “Jack,” she began in a normal tone of voice, “what are you doing?”

“Changing location,” he said with self-confidence.

“I kind of liked the couch,” said Rhonda still speaking normally.

“But *I* didn’t.” Her tone of voice left Jack convinced that he was doing the right thing. She obviously wasn’t upset; she was completely calm.

“So where are you taking me?”

Jack grinned. Even with being thrown over his shoulder, she had to know the answer to that question. His apartment wasn’t that big. “The bedroom,” he said simply, teasing her with what he was leaving unsaid.

“I think I like the couch better,” she said, ignoring the fact that he had already passed through the bedroom doorway. When he stopped moving, she began to slap his rear end with both hands. “Put me down!”

“Sure,” he said as he leaned forward and dropped her on the bed hard enough for her to bounce nearly a foot into the air above the mattress.

The moment she landed on the mattress, Jack felt a moment of indecision. What if he was wrong? If this wasn’t what she wanted, he was in for it big time. He watched her avidly, waiting to see what her reaction would be.

When she just continued to lie on the mattress instead of storming out of the room, Jack started laughing. *I was right*, he thought. *She wants me to ravish her. She wants to be absolved of responsibility for enjoying sex.*

“What’s so funny?” Rhonda didn’t move by so much as an inch as she stared up at Jack and watched placidly while he removed his shoes. She remained just as she had landed on the bed. Her hands were above her head, her long brown hair fanned across the down-filled comforter. Her thighs and knees were pressed together, but one leg was slightly raised and bent at the knee, her lower leg seductively trailing off at an angle.

Jack put his shoes in their place in the closet. “You are,” he said.

She finally decided to move, propping herself up on her elbows. “Jack, what are you doing?” she asked, repeating herself.

“I’m taking off my pants.”

“I can see that, but *why* are you taking off your pants?”

“Because it would be difficult for us to have sex with me still wearing them.”

She paused a second to digest that statement. “What makes you think we’re going to have sex?”

Putting his neatly folded pants on top of the hamper, Jack moved to stand in front of her and began to unbutton his shirt. “The fact that you’re wearing stockings and a garter.”

Her eyebrows drew together over her green eyes. “Let me make sure I’ve got this straight. I’m wearing stockings and a garter, so that means we’re going to have sex. Is that it?” She seemed dumfounded by what she was saying.

“Yep, that’s about it.” Jack was sure that this was just another way for her to feel good about not being a ‘bad girl.’ After all, a good girl wouldn’t ask to get laid, even if the invitation was as subtle as wearing stockings instead of pantyhose. Jack wouldn’t be surprised if she made a token effort to leave, forcing him to ‘make’ her stay.

She fell silent and continued to watch as he stripped down to just his boxer shorts, putting his other clothes in the hamper as he took them off. *Yeah, look at how she’s running away*, thought Jack with increasing confidence. When he finished, he returned to the foot of the bed. Rhonda hadn’t made any effort to undress. She was even still wearing her shoes. *She must want me to strip her too*, he thought.

They stared at each other for a long minute. It was Rhonda who broke the impasse by getting off of the bed.

“Where are you going?” asked Jack.

“Home,” she answered simply. She paused to pull her clothing into a semblance of order.

*Right on cue*, he thought. Jack watched the motion of her body as she tugged at the hem of her skirt with renewed excitement. The words that came from his lips were slurred with anticipation. “I don’t think so.”

“Watch me.” Straightening her shoulders, she moved to walk out of the room.

He barely had to move. He was already blocking her path to the door. When she moved to the side to step past him, he simply took a step sideways to prevent her from getting around him. A quick sidestep in the opposite direction blocked her second attempt to leave the room. It also left them standing right where they had been a few seconds before.

He smiled. "Care to dance?"

"What are you doing?" Her words were more tired than angry.

"Making it easier for you to make up your mind." He cocked his head as a thought came to him. "Do you want me to hit you?"

"Oh, sure." Her tone dripped with sarcasm. "Women love to get slapped around when they're out on a date. The more bruises the better."

He wasn't sure he liked that idea. It was bad enough that she was going to make him force himself on her. He wasn't sure he would have the stomach to actually hit her too. After a little thought, it was easy for him to decide that if had to, he would get physical with her, but he wouldn't out and out hit her. *In fact*, he thought, *maybe I could speed things up if...*

"Nah, no slapping, and no bruises. But I do think you should sit down." Putting his hand flat on the expanse of skin just above the deep valley of her cleavage, Jack pushed her as hard as he could. He had enough time to see her eyes widen in shock before she flew backwards.

Jack was a little surprised by how easy it was to push her down. The edge of the bed took her legs out from under her, adding a downward spin as she hit the mattress. The sound when she hit the mattress was like the slap of a giant fly swatter. The violence of the motion left them both a little startled.

Jack fished for words to break the tension of the moment. "So, uh, I don't think you're going to leave. Not just yet."

She was shaking. "What if I scream?"

Was she asking for his permission? he considered for a moment before he answered. "The people downstairs are away visiting relatives. Someone in their family is really sick. With the other houses as far away as they are, and my bedroom at the back of the house, I don't think anyone will hear a thing." He shrugged. "Scream all you want."

"You fucking bastard," she spat.

Jack smiled. "If you insist." He moved to join her on the bed.

She did a lot of screaming. It was, after all, a part of the act.

### **Aftermath**

Jack poured himself another glass of wine while he waited for Rhonda to finish putting herself back together. With the way she had struggled, he wouldn't have been surprised if she had simply fled the apartment. Instead, she had calmly retrieved the clothes that Jack had methodically stripped from her body and strewn across the



room. Taking her time, she carefully draped each piece of clothing over one arm as she retrieved it from the floor. Still naked except for her garter belt and stockings—the only clothing Jack had chosen not to strip off of her—she had padded into the bathroom and locked herself in.

Jack waited as long as he thought was sufficiently polite before he knocked on the door. After sharing two bottles of wine, he had to use the bathroom, too. When knocking on the door produced no response, he switched to pounding. She didn't even tell him to go away. If it hadn't been for the fact that the bathroom didn't have a window, he would think that she had snuck out of the apartment. Denied access to the bathroom and unwilling to break down the door, Jack used the kitchen sink out of sheer desperation.

After washing himself and the sink to the best of his ability, he retreated to the bedroom to get dressed again, this time choosing comfort over style. While returning to the living room to wait for Rhonda to emerge, he noticed that on her way to the bathroom she detoured into the living room long enough to grab her purse, but not her coat. When she didn't immediately reappear, he picked up his still half-full wine glass to finish its contents.

That was nearly two hours earlier. He was still waiting for Rhonda to come out of the bathroom. Jack was halfway through a third bottle of wine and feeling very, very good. How could he not? He had just made love to a beautiful woman. *No*, he thought with glee, *I just made mad, passionate love to THE beautiful woman.*

Unable to believe his good fortune, he looked at her coat which hung near the door. It seemed odd somehow. Lonely, perhaps. With Rhonda hiding in the bathroom, it was the only part of her left to him. It was early July, but the last few nights had been unseasonably chilly, so she had chosen a leather coat that fell to mid-thigh when she was wearing it. The front had buttons, but she always wore it tied at the front with the wide leather belt that circled it at the waist. He imagined her wearing it with nothing on underneath. It pleased him to think of her that way; wearing that coat, a pair of high heels and nothing else, walking down the street with a smile lighting her face.

His fantasy was interrupted by the sound of the bathroom door opening. He quickly finished the wine in his glass and stood up, setting the glass down on the coffee table near the empty bottles of wine. His eyes locked on the door, but she had only opened it a few inches. The sound of the toilet finally being flushed was followed by the sound of running water in the sink. After several minutes, she still hadn't emerged.

Jack was willing to be patient, even after the long wait. He'd never forced himself on a woman before, even if it was only playacting. It left him reluctant and mildly ashamed to face her. He had to admit to himself, though, that it had been an enjoyable fantasy. Rhonda had played her part to the hilt. It was mildly surprising that she hadn't fled the apartment to maintain the illusion that he had "raped" her. Part of him half-hoped that she wanted to do it all over again, but she had to reappear first before he could know if that was what she wanted from him.

That thought left him anxious. He didn't know what to expect from her when she reappeared. Would she still pretend he had raped her? Would she laugh about it?

Would she stay or leave? When she finally did emerge, what happened was the last thing he expected.

The door of the bathroom exploded outwards, almost as if she had kicked it open. She walked into the living room as if she had known exactly where he would be standing, moving forward with quick, mechanical strides. The cold intensity of her mien and the sharp purpose of her motions made Jack take an involuntary step backwards before he could stop himself. She didn't seem to notice his unease; she just kept coming..

Her hand raised and he thought for a moment that she would slap him. In an odd moment of clarity as her hand fell toward his face, he noticed she was wearing surgical gloves. That fleeting thought was erased in the instant the powder she had been holding hit him in the face.

Most of it went in his eyes. He wiped frantically at his face, expecting it to burn. It didn't. In fact, his eyes barely watered and his vision cleared in the time it took to blink twice. He looked at his hands and was amazed to see the white powder that looked almost like confectionery sugar turn clear and melt. He wiped his hands together to help dissipate the moisture, but his hands were already dry.

By the time he thought to look for Rhonda, she was already tying her coat shut. "What was *that* for?" he asked in a near whine. "And what *is* that stuff anyway?" He looked at her hands, but the gloves she had been wearing were gone.

Her face went red with suppressed fury. "What was that for?" She took one angry step in his direction before she caught herself. "What was that *for*?!? You *raped* me, you fucking bastard! How dare you question what *I* do to *you*!"

Jack blinked in surprise. "I didn't rape you."

Rhonda gasped and her jaw dropped open. "Like hell you didn't!"

"How can you say that?" Jack struggled not to slur his speech, regretting every glass of wine he'd had that evening. "You *wanted* me to do that. God damn it, you practically wrote out instructions for me!"

Her hand raised, like a traffic cop telling him to stop. "Wait a second. Are you insane? Are you so drunk you don't even remember what you did to me?"

Jack shook his head. "No, I remember what I did just fine, and you loved every second of it!"

Rhonda's hand slapped against her thigh as it dropped. "You *are* insane."

Jack giggled in chagrin. Could she mean it? Could he have been that wrong? Had he really just seen and heard what he wanted to? He didn't want to believe it, but looking into her face he couldn't believe she was lying to him. "Are you serious?" he asked timidly, hoping against hope she was playing some kind of joke on him. "You didn't want me to force you like that?"

Her voice was a thin whip of sarcasm. "Gee, that's a tough one. Let me think about that." She adopted a mock thoughtful pose. "Hmmm, let's see. I said, 'get the fuck off of me, don't do this, don't do this.' You laughed and kept right on poking yourself inside of me. I tried to force you off of me, and you just pinned my arms. I guess that would make your answer...NO, NO, NO, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!!!"

She might just as well have stabbed Jack for all the impact her words had on him. He sat on the coffee table with a thump, almost breaking it in the process. He heard the wine bottles fall on to the floor and a glass break. He didn't care. He was in shock.

"What have I done?"

Rhonda folded her arms beneath her breasts. "You *know* what you've done."

"Can you forgive me?" Jack winced even as the words were leaving his mouth. He knew that if she really meant what she said, nothing he could say or do would let her forgive him. His mind raced over the details over the evening and he realized that everything he had interpreted as a come-on had probably just been normal behavior for Rhonda. When he suddenly remembered a conversation on one of their first dates that she preferred stockings and garters to pantyhose because of 'bathroom access issues', he doubled over with the conviction he was about to lose the contents of his stomach.

"Yeah," sneered Rhonda, "that's about how I feel right now. Serves you right. I hope you puke all over yourself."

Jack just barely managed to rein in his protesting stomach before he embarrassed himself even further. He couldn't bear to look her in the face to see her reaction to his current display of self control. "Rhonda, I am so, so sorry. I'll do anything to make this up to you. I swear!"

To his surprise, she laughed with sudden mirth. He looked at her for a brief moment before dropping his head in misery. She was laughing so hard she was practically in hysterics. "Oh, that's rich! Little Jackie is volunteering to make it up to me without any prompting from anyone else! Isn't that sweet?"

He wanted to protest the way she was mocking him, but he knew he deserved it. She had never acted like this before. He knew that it was his actions that had turned her into this vile, sarcastic woman who took pleasure in his discomfiture.

The sound of the apartment door opening finally gave him the determination to at least look at her as she left his life forever. Rhonda was standing in the open doorway staring at him with disgust and anger warring on her face. "So," he asked, "what happens now? Are you going to call the police?"

"I should," she said in a quiet tone that dripped venom. "But even if they did their worst, it wouldn't be punishment enough. I'd rather wait and see what happens. I'm a firm believer in 'what comes around, goes around.'"

And still she stood there looking at him from the doorway. It was almost as if she was reluctant to leave. *Or, he thought wryly, she's waiting for lightning to strike me dead where I sit.*

"I guess this means that our relationship is over," Jack said. He knew the answer to that, but something compelled him to ask anyway.

"Well," she said, surprising Jack with the serious way she seemed to be considering his statement, "we are definitely never going to date again. Ever. But I think we might be seeing more of each other until this thing between us is resolved. I guess, technically, that means we will have a relationship of some sort. At least for a little while."

Her face hardened again. “But as for our romance, you killed that tonight. It couldn’t be more dead.”

Jack shuddered at her intensity. It was like an electric current woven into the air.

He looked at her standing in the doorway and tried to burn the memory of it into his mind. Jack knew it was over between them and he wanted the memory as a token of their time together. Her long brown hair floated around her head, a thick halo of silken ecstasy. The light of the room framed her in the ebony darkness of the porch beyond, a black velvet canvas that she floated upon with graceful dignity, even with the obvious signs of the pain he had caused her. The slick texture of the leather and the smooth expanse of her stocking-clad legs only added to the soft impression of the vision that was before him.

“I don’t want to hate you,” she said sadly, “but I do. I hate your fucking guts. It’s like you are the sum of every wretched part of every disgusting pig of a man I have ever met in my entire life. I know in my mind that it isn’t fair, but that is exactly how I feel. And do you know what the best part of all this is?” She smiled and the first tears Jack had seen from her began to slide down the delicate curves of her face. “The best part is that I can still find it in me to hope that you get everything you want out of life. I really do. In fact, I can almost guarantee that in time, you’ll get exactly what you want most.” She laughed. Her tears glistened on her face, the light of the room reflecting like an echo of her laughter. “I bet that you’ll barely have to think about what you want and you’ll have it. Just like tonight. Before you know it, everything you’ve ever wanted will be yours.”

And then she was gone. The door still stood open, but she fled so quickly that Jack somehow missed her departure.

It was ten o’clock on a Wednesday night. He stood up with a sigh to close the door and begin the long tedious process of cleaning the apartment and sobering up. The morning seemed like it was a decade away. He didn’t even want to think about having to drag himself into work.

### **The Subtle Scent of Beauty**

*At least she didn’t ruin my weekend,* he thought.

Twelve hours after the disastrous end of his relationship with Rhonda, Jack was struggling to get back on top of the world. After all, he wasn’t about to let a little romantic setback slow him down.

The first thing he had done was to tell someone in the office about the end of his relationship to Rhonda, omitting the more damning details of his behavior. Quickly, the whole office knew that he was single again. Of course he had chosen the one person he did tell with great care, making sure they weren’t normally an office gossip, but that they were good friends with someone who was. And now the women in the office knew he was single without it looking like he had made an announcement. The women would have shunned him then and that was the exact opposite of what he wanted.

After a lot of reflection when he had been pulling himself together the night before, Jack had decided that Rhonda bore most of the blame for what had happened. She may not have wanted to have sex with him, but he was convinced that she had deliberately sent him some very mixed signals. His discovery of her garters, for example. She had seemed to take pleasure in his discovery, and had even nibbled on his ear. How *could* she think he wouldn't take that as an invitation?

She also didn't know what she was giving up. Jack was prime dating material and he knew it. Not that he was vain. He knew he wasn't the best-looking of guys, but he knew how to treat women. Even his ex-girlfriends still liked him. Rhonda was the only one that had ever failed to succumb to his charm. Jack was convinced now that it was *her* failing, not *his*.

Most of the night before was a blur to him. Only a few details stood out clearly, like the ear nibbling and the memory of Rhonda framed within the doorway of his apartment right before she had fled into the night in tears. She was a beautiful woman and it was hard to believe that she was gone from his life. It was difficult not to dwell on their breakup. Luckily, he had his work to keep himself occupied.

He rated an office in his current position as a mid-level manager at an insurance claims center. It wasn't a very big office, but it was his. Its only drawbacks were that it was on an interior wall, which meant no outside windows, and that the entire wall that faced the office was made of glass. He supposed that some high-ranking manager had imagined that the mid-level managers would all goof off if the office staff couldn't keep an eye on them. Jack had to grudgingly admit that it *was* an effective measure. The glass wall had kept him from slacking off more than once. He often joked that he felt like he was working in a fishbowl.

Halfway through the afternoon, a knock on the door to his office made him focus on something other than the report he was preparing for his boss. Shelly, one of the younger girls in the office, was standing in the office doorway with a confused look on her face. Since he was working on a financial report that involved confidential information about employee efficiency, he saved the report and closed the spreadsheet application on his computer before waving her in.

"Come on in, Shelly. How can I help you?" She was a pleasant diversion. Having gotten an Associates degree from the local community college, she had applied for a position just the year before at the age of twenty. Her twenty-first birthday had been quite an occasion among the younger office staff. They made a special point of taking her out for her first "legal" night on the town, not that being underage seemed to stop kids from getting into the clubs and drinking.

She gestured towards the thin stack of claims folders she was carrying. "These claims are borderline and no one can agree how they should be handled."

Her hand raised, seemingly of its own volition, to tuck the long, honey blond curls of her hair behind one ear. It was a nervous gesture that Jack was used to seeing from her when she was in his office. No matter how hard he tried, she never seemed to relax around him. The only thing that seemed to help her loosen up was for him to act like some kind of father figure toward her and he didn't have the willpower or the energy to do that for her today. It was too much of a blow to his ego.

Jack vented a sigh, keeping it as gentle-sounding as possible. Shelly was skittish when she was unsure of herself and the last thing he wanted was to have to put up with her being apologetic and obsequious for disturbing him. "Let's have a look."

She promptly walked around the edge of his desk and set the folders in front of him. Rather than set the whole stack down, she opened each of the six folders she had been carrying, arranging them on the desk so that he could look at all the files simultaneously.

She went about the task as if her job were riding on doing it right. Jack, however, found himself in the pleasant position of having a beautiful young woman leaning over his shoulder, completely unaware that the combined action of leaning forward and arranging the folders was making her not-so-average breasts dance within the cups of her bra not ten inches from his face.

Jack forced himself to tear his gaze away and look at the folders on his desk. He hoped no one in the office noticed where his attention had been only a few moments before. If he had been younger, he might have gotten away with a few muttered comments if someone had seen him staring. At forty, it would be much, much more scandalous. The women would all treat him like he had committed statutory rape.

*Rhonda!*, he thought with a momentary pang of regret.

Before Shelly had even said anything, Jack knew what the problem was and how to fix it. He might be a lot of things, but he was good at his job.

Unable to indulge himself by looking at her, Jack allowed himself the pleasure of drinking in her scent. It was, as usual, rapturous. Shelly always seemed to smell so...feminine. It was a simplistic description, but it fit. It was like flowers and sunshine and fresh breezes with just a hint of the ocean. The smell of it made his nose tickle. It also aroused him more than a little bit. He flared his nostrils, deliberately taking in as much of the heady aroma as he could.

*This*, he thought with pleasure, *is how all women should smell.*

Suddenly, the tickle in his nose spread throughout his whole body. He shivered in delight at the sensation, causing Shelly to break off her description of her problem in mid-sentence. "Are you all right?" she asked. Her obvious concern touched him. At least until he remembered that she was treating him like he was her father.

"I'm fine." Jack wiped his hand over his face, hoping he wasn't too flushed from the intensity of his arousal. "Could we wrap this up, though? I didn't have the best night last night and I'm a little out of sorts."

It was obvious from her face that she knew exactly what he was talking about. "Should I continue?" she asked timidly, looking to him for permission.

"Please do."

He patiently let her finish her explanation before offering her a simple, fair solution. She absorbed his advice with relief before fleeing his office. Not caring who was watching, Jack put his head in his hands. He took a deep breath to calm himself, but Shelly's scent still lingered in the air, arousing him further. It was so potent he stood up to follow her into the office. Knowing he couldn't do that, he took a quick lap around his

desk instead, pausing to refill his mug from the pot at the coffee machine which was another perk of having an office. Only managers were allowed to have mini-refrigerators and coffee makers in their office spaces.

Sitting back down, he reopened the spreadsheet program. Calling up the report he had been working on, he typed in the necessary password and got back to work. He lifted the steaming mug to his face, inhaling deeply to erase the memory of Shelly's scent. His nose quickly forgot her. His groin, however, took slightly longer to forget.

The next morning, he discovered he was out of soap. An early riser by nature, he decided to go get more soap at the all-night drug store and stop for doughnuts on the way home. He had more than enough time; with it being so early, he doubted that anyone else would be shopping. He hated crowds when he shopped.

Dressed in sweats and a T-shirt, he put on a pair of loafers and made the short drive to the store. It was, as expected, nearly empty. Also nearly empty were the shelves where the soap was normally kept. A clerk who looked like she was half-asleep told him they were expecting a shipment, but it was several days late because of some trucking strike.

Jack looked over the brands that were available. All of them were scented moisturizing soaps meant for women. His pride made him reluctant to buy any of them. Smelling feminine was just about the last thing he wanted. He briefly thought about going to another store that he knew would be open, but it was pretty far out of his way, meaning he would have to sacrifice his doughnuts.

Being cheap by nature, he noticed that one of the brands was on sale. That made his decision easier. He even bought two packs when he noticed that the sale price was lower than the price of the brand he normally bought. The woman at the register didn't even blink at his selection when she rang him up, relieving him greatly.

Fifteen minutes later, he was carrying a bag of soap and a box of doughnuts into his apartment. He showered and got ready for work before allowing himself to relax by reading the paper and having a cup of coffee and a couple of the doughnuts. It was a familiar routine, and it comforted him.

While the unexpected didn't upset him, he preferred knowledge of what to expect from the day ahead. That was the main reason why Rhonda's departure was so easy to assimilate. As beautiful as she was, she was always a disruption to his routine. She enjoyed doing things on the spur of the moment. He did not. It was far more enjoyable for him to spend days, even weeks, savoring the anticipation of some special occasion. Christmas was the perfect example. He planned the whole holiday like it was an intricate military campaign. This day for buying and putting up the tree. That weekend for shopping. Another day was slated for putting up lights on the eaves of the house. It was always a familiar pattern that brought him an exquisite joy. Luckily, he had met Rhonda at a New Year's party. Having dated for only six months, she hadn't had an opportunity to interfere in his Christmas plans.

Her tendency to decide things at the last second was what had helped convince him she wanted him to take charge of the physical part of their relationship. He had believed that no one that flighty could know what they really wanted. If they *did*, they would be more decisive.

In retrospect, he couldn't have been more wrong.

For about the about the thousandth time in the thirty-six hours since she had left him, Jack forced himself not to think about Rhonda. Instead, he deliberately recalled the memory of Shelly leaning over his shoulder the day before. Even the brief glimpse he had gotten of her breasts stirring restlessly beneath her silken blouse was a balm to his aching heart. The memory of it was so strong he could almost smell her.

It took him several moment to realize that her scent wasn't just in his imagination; her smell was as strong as if she was sitting next to him at the kitchen table. *Hell*, he thought with surprise as he breathed in deeply to test the strength of her scent, *it smells more like she's sitting in my lap!*

Was he wearing the same shirt as the day before? *No, that one's in the hamper.* In spite of that thought, he lifted his shirt to his nose and tested its scent. Her smell was even stronger. *How could that be? This shirt didn't come anywhere near the other one.* Abandoning his breakfast, he went into the bedroom and dug the shirt he had been wearing the day before out of the hamper. Its only scent was his own familiar musk.

Just as he was beginning to be confused, he remembered the soap he had bought just that morning. Suddenly, he realized that the scent wasn't Shelly's scent, it was the scent of the soap he had bought! He rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and took a deep whiff of the bare skin of his arm. He jerked his head back in surprise. His arm smelled just like Shelly, only stronger. If anything, his arm, and probably his whole body, smelled even more fragrant and feminine than Shelly had. *It's probably because I just showered and the scent of the soap is fresher,* he thought with disgust, knowing that even if he had the time to take another shower, it wouldn't do any good until he got a different brand of soap. He would have to be patient and get a different brand of soap on his way home from work.

He only hoped that none of his coworkers would notice.

"Wow, Jack, you smell fantastic! Is that a new cologne?"

Jack flinched. He hadn't even gotten to his floor yet. He surveyed the woman who was standing next to him in the elevator for any signs of sarcasm. To his surprise, Andrea's interest seemed genuine.

"Um...no, I changed soaps," he said with slow uncertainty, uncomfortable with having someone notice the feminine fragrance of the soap. He fixed his eyes on the floor indicator, willing the elevator to get to the sixth floor more quickly.

Andrea leaned toward him and took a deep whiff. "It smells nice. Kind of floral, yet kind of earthy at the same time." Her eyes widened in apparent recognition of the smell and Jack's stomach dropped. "I know this may sound strange, but you smell a lot like Shelly."

Jack had to will himself not to groan. "I was out of soap this morning and I had enough time to run to the drug store. All they had left were women's moisturizing soaps." He shrugged and tried to look nonchalant. "One of the brands was on sale, so I bought a pack. I'm betting it's the same brand Shelly uses."



This response seemed to satisfy Andrea, and her eyes moved from Jack to the floor indicator over the doors. “I wish I could talk *my* husband into using my soap. If he ever smelled like you do right now...” She sucked air in between her teeth, her face etched with an expression of primal passion just as the elevator stopped and the doors opened. A few moments later, Jack was left standing dumbfounded in the elevator by himself. He had automatically assumed that smelling like a woman would turn women off, or at least, amuse them. It had never occurred to him that women might actually *like* the change in his scent.

As the day progressed, it became quickly apparent that the women in the office had all been told about the change in his smell. His office felt like the grandstand at a parade. All the women seemed to be making excuses to come see him about one issue or another, taking the chance to test his smell for themselves and comment favorably. When Shelly came in, he used the opportunity to ask her what brand of soap she used. Her response confirmed his initial guess; her brand of soap was the same as the one he had bought that morning.

By mid-afternoon when Patty came into his office, he was no longer surprised by the weak excuses that were being used to come see him. He was even able to streamline the process a bit, making himself overly friendly whenever someone came in to get the inevitable comment on his pleasing new smell out of the way quickly. It was Friday and he wanted to finish the report he was still working on before the weekend arrived. Unfortunately, the constant stream of women turned a job that should only have taken a few hours into an all-day process.

At first, Patty was no different from the others. She came in and he gave her an enthusiastic greeting. They chitchatted for a few moments before she made the inevitable comments about his new smell. He gave his pat answer about the change in soaps, and then he asked how he could help her. Her problem was easily solved, especially since it was most likely just an excuse for her to come in and check out his change in smell for herself.

Jack’s first hint that her visit was different came when, instead of leaving his office, she asked if she could close the door and talk to him privately for a minute. He was immediately on his guard. When an employee asked him if it was all right to close the door when they talked, it almost always meant trouble. Forcing himself to smile, he told her that of course she could close the door. He watched placidly as she closed the door and seated herself in one of the two empty chairs. Her back was to the office, but it was easy enough for him to see that her action had perked the interest of several people in the office. Jack wasn’t the only one who realized what an employee closing his office door usually meant.

She began simply enough. “I heard about you and Rhonda.”

Jack wasn’t sure to respond to that, so he took a moment or two to look Patty over while he thought about what to say. She was dressed immaculately, just as she was every day, wearing a black pair of pleated dress slacks and a pure white blouse made of some kind of manmade fabric that had a sheen that reminded him of lingerie. He wished some of the other women in the office would emulate her tasteful sense of fashion, not that all of the women could have worn the same outfit and looked good. It was

only next to a natural beauty like Rhonda that her figure seemed inadequate. Her hair was long and naturally curly, its color caught somewhere between red and blonde. In her late thirties, she looked ten years younger than Jack, even though she was barely two years younger than he. Until he met Rhonda, he had spent a lot of time trying to get to know Patty, but it had never gone past casual flirting. *Maybe that's why she's here*, he reflected thoughtfully. *I am, after all, single again.*

Eventually, he chose to take a more neutral tack. "What are people saying?" He tried not to seem too interested in how she might respond.

She tilted her head and folded her hands on the knees of her crossed legs. "Just that the two of you have broken up. There are a few versions as to why. I'm not sure that I believe any of them. My favorite, though, is the one where you left her because she wasn't able to satisfy you sexually." Patty gave him a sly smile that seemed to imply that Jack would never have that problem with her. "I don't suppose you would care to tell me the real reason?"

Jack felt himself pale slightly. That wasn't the reason he had originally mentioned for their breakup. He wasn't sure where that rumor had gotten started, but it was a little too close to the truth for his comfort.

"*She left me* actually. She's very focused on pursuing her doctorate and with the fall semester starting in a few weeks, she didn't want any distractions." He shrugged, mildly pleased with the reason for the breakup he had devised. Like all good fiction, it was laced with enough of the truth to make it seem real.

Patty leaned forward. Jack couldn't help but notice that her blouse had more buttons open than normal. "Is that how she sees you? As a distraction?"

"I asked her the same thing. She said 'no,' but I got the impression that even she didn't believe her answer. She gave me some excuse about how much I mean to her, but it was obvious that she cares more about history than she does about me." He winced. That part at least was the whole truth and nothing but. Even if history wasn't the reason they had broken up, he still felt like she had always had more passion for her doctorate than she had ever had for him.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Jack shrugged. "It's in the past. In retrospect, her leaving me shouldn't have come as such a surprise. We never had much of a physical relationship ..." Patty raised an eyebrow, making Jack painfully aware of what he had just said. Had he used the same line when he originally revealed their breakup? He realized that he must have and kicked himself mentally. His mind scrambled to remember where he had left off. "...and, uh, it was always more like a close friendship."

"How are you holding up?"

Jack nodded. "I'm doing all right."

His response seemed to relieve her. She took a deep breath before continuing. "Have you thought about when you might start dating again?"

*Jackpot*, thought Jack, trying not to let his excitement get the best of him. "Not really," he said out loud, hoping that his was heading where he thought it was.

“Do you think tonight would be too soon?” Patty smiled. Judging by her expression and her teasing tone of voice, he was doing a poor job of hiding his interest in her. Then again, his eagerness didn’t seem to be turning her off.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about the mall? Giorgio’s Restaurant is across the parking lot, then we could have dessert at one of the kiosks in the food court. After that, we could just browse through the stores, or maybe catch a movie.” She was pulling at one of her rings, turning it on her finger in a nervous gesture that Jack had noticed only once before: on the day of her initial job interview. That had been several years ago right after she had gotten divorced. Her ex-husband had left her high and dry when he had found out after years of trying that she couldn’t have children.

A thought came to Jack. He hated himself for bringing the topic up, even though he knew it was necessary. “That sounds good, but there’s one other thing we need to talk about before we make any firm plans.”

Patty held up a hand. “Wait, let me guess. You want to talk about the whole ‘manager/employee’ relationship. Jack, no one in the office will care. I even talked about it with Don last winter before you started dating Rhonda. He said that it was fine as long as we stayed out of the copier room. He’s your boss, and if *he’s* OK with it, no one else is going to say anything.”

Jack was dumbfounded. “You talked about this with Don? Last winter?”

Patty seemed uncharacteristically em-



barrassed. “I kept hoping you would ask me out. When things between you and Rhonda didn’t seem to be getting any more serious, I started thinking about what I would do if you two ever broke up. So here we are.”

Glancing through the glass behind Patty, Jack could see that work in the office was slowly grinding to a halt as everyone pretended they weren’t trying to guess what was being talked about in the office. “My, my, my,” he said, suppressing a grin. “Here we are just discussing the possibility of going on a date and already the office is abuzz.”

Patty glanced dismissively over her shoulder. “Let them buzz all they want.” Her eyes locked on Jack’s with a fiery intensity. “I’m the one that gets to keep the honey, Honey.” The possessive look she directed at Jack should have made him want to run for the hills. Instead, he found himself intrigued by her forthright expression of her intent, even if it was expressed in the form of a bad pun.

“Well then, it sounds like we’ve got a date,” he said with a grin.

### **Date at the Mall**

Jack had a great time. Dinner at Giorgio’s was always fantastic. That night proved to be no exception. As for their conversation, he and Patty had always gotten along well. They had long since gone through their major life stories in idle moments at the office, leaving them free to talk about other, more personal things. Fortunately for Jack, she had no urge to press him for details of his relationship with Rhonda, saving him from expanding on his story of why and how they had broken up.

Instead, their talk was of people they both knew and the hopes and dreams they had both embraced and discarded over the years. It was a pleasant change for Jack. *Old jeans*, he thought with amazement when she finished a sentence for him at one point, understanding his thought completely. *I’m comfortable with her, just like putting on a comfortable old pair of blue jeans.*

After dinner, they crossed the parking lot to the mall. It was packed. Neither of them was surprised; the mall was always crowded on the weekends. What surprised Jack was how easily he and Patty fell into a routine. Holding her hand without remembering how that had happened, he took turns with her pointing out people. It was like a little game of “find the eccentric person”. Jack had to admit that Patty was better at it than he was. He had to stop himself several times from pointing out women he thought were pretty. Not a good thing to do on a first date. At forty, Jack had at least learned that much about women.

They visited a number of women’s clothing stores at Patty’s insistence. Jack was sure she did it partly to goad him and partly to test his patience. Except for the lingerie store. He wasn’t sure why she had insisted on taking him there. To excite him, maybe? If so, she had succeeded. To embarrass him? That, too, was a success. He didn’t mind though. She ended up getting a taste of her own medicine when he dragged her into the sporting goods store to look at golf clubs.

As much fun as they were having, walking around began to wear thin after a couple of hours. Especially for Patty. They were both still wearing their work clothes. Jack

wore a suit and tie, and Patty still wore her slacks, blouse, and high heels. When Jack suggested that they catch a movie, she seized on the idea gratefully.

A few minutes later, they were standing in line to buy tickets. Jack watched Patty with concern. "Are you *sure* you're all right?"

Patty nodded and stopped rubbing her ankle. Jack tried not to be surprised that she could balance so well on one foot in high heels. She tried to look nonchalant as she returned her foot to the floor. "I'm fine. I'll be even better after we get our tickets and sit down."

They had quickly decided on a romantic comedy that they both wanted to see. The line for tickets was testing their patience though. Jack looked impatiently at the head of the line. "You'd think they would have more than one person selling tickets with a line this long."

"Typical," she said with a disdainful little sniff. "They know most people will wait in a line as long as it moves, no matter how slowly, so why pay more than one person?"

"Capitalist pigs!" he spat with a badly-done Russian accent. It made her laugh. He was rapidly learning to love her laugh.

He was just tearing his eyes away from the rear end of one of the teenage girls standing ahead of them in line for about the tenth time when he heard her gasp of mock outrage. At least he *hoped* it was mock outrage. She punched him in the arm. "Ouch!" he protested, trying to rub his arm and look manly at the same time. "No fair. You're wearing rings!"

"I saw where you were looking. You deserve it!" She was smiling, so she couldn't be too upset. She was also standing close to him so that her voice wouldn't carry as far. Very, very close. Jack could feel the warmth of her skin across the thin boundary of air. The smell of her was strong in his nostrils, arousing him. She smelled like...

*Shelly*, he thought with shock, realizing with mild horror that it was his own scent that was turning him on. With that knowledge, he could distinguish Patty's scent from his own. The smell of one of the perfumes she had tested was hard to miss.

"Are you OK?" She had noticed his chagrin and seemed concerned.

"Sorry," he said with a grin, "my mind wandered."

She let it go and quickly went back to teasing him. "She *does* have a nice ass, though. Do you want to touch it?"

"No, of course not." Patty had moved, probably deliberately, to a position that allowed him to stare at the rear end of the girl in front of them while seeming to listen to Patty. If he stared, it would just look like Patty was whispering in his ear. Which she was.

"Don't lie to me, Jack." Her voice was like the smoothest silk caressing a sheet of glass. "I know you want to rub you hands all over her ass. Take a good, long look at it. You want to, don't you? Admit it to yourself. Admit it to me."

"Patty..."