



Ardie Stallard

Switch  
*A Tale of Spanking, BDSM  
& Romance*

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Switch:  
A Tale of Spanking, BDSM, & Romance  
by Ardie Stallard  
ISBN: 978-1-954079-25-0  
A Pink Flamingo Ebook Publication  
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To My Muses:

N. R.

J. M. S.

F. K. R.

D. P. B.

and

B. K. A.

Prologue

It was a warm balmy Thursday evening in mid-May, almost time to go to work, and Felicia was getting ready.

She'd already showered, towed off, dried her long, thick, dark brown hair, perfumed herself, and put on

makeup. Now to complete the look. Since this was going to be an outcall, she couldn't very well wear her ornate black butterfly mask and she'd have to dress more conservatively than she would if her guest were coming to her apartment, but she was just as glad that he wasn't. She didn't like doing incalls with complete strangers, and a hotel room, such as the one she anticipated visiting tonight, was often the safest place for an initial meeting where she could get a vibe, more or less, of what her client wanted. So: black bra, thong, and fishnet hose held up by lacy garters; snug-fitting jeans this time, instead of her leather trousers or her tight leather skirt, in deference to the fact she'd need to walk through the lobby of the customer's hotel without attracting too much notice; a black bustier that showed off her pert breasts to the greatest advantage, cautiously covered by a sheer black silk blouse she could remove later when, or if, things got going and she felt the customer deserved it; and finally, black high-heeled knee boots, which went without saying for either incall or outcall. Once she was dressed, Felicia checked her look in the mirror again to make sure she'd not accidentally applied too much eye shadow. She smiled briefly. Just enough dark makeup to give her the imposing look she needed. Long, soft nearly-black hair, lightly tanned skin, deep piercing blue eyes, and a touch of complementary eyeliner; what submissive male could resist?

Felicia—or Lady Antonia, to her customers—was almost twenty-two years old and had just finished her junior year in college as a Psychology major. And she was also a Dominatrix, had been more or less ever since the beginning of her second semester in college when she was nineteen and couldn't yet even legally purchase a drink for herself. Oh, she'd tried waiting tables and clerking in the college book shop when she'd first moved to Memphis, but there was no way she could make the kind of money from tips that she could from the men and women, young and old,

who paid her to tie them up, give them a feeling of subjection and make them break down and cry and beg her for mercy. In the more than two years she'd been active, first with the Lady Callipygia (Miss Callie for short), the older Domme who'd taken Felicia under her wing and shown her the ropes, and then later in her own right after Miss Callie had left the business and sold Felicia much of her equipment, the younger woman had gotten quite the underground reputation as a firm, strict disciplinarian. The only complaint any of her customers might have voiced was her insistence on keeping herself so aloof from them as people, much more so than Miss Callie ever did—but then again, mystery worked well as part of the Dominant persona, so her careful standoffishness had its own singular appeal. She knew that many people would probably classify her as a sex worker and in fact she always carried condoms in her supply kit, but she didn't consider herself a prostitute because she never consented to sex, either oral, anal, or traditional, with any client she entertained. She'd caught a great many customers, both male and female, discreetly pleasuring themselves during her attentions, though. If she observed a male client in such an act, or even in the beginnings of arousal, she'd haughtily toss the offender a condom and order him to suit up with it immediately, because she didn't want any of his disgusting jizz on her clothing, her person, or her rugs. Cleaning up his mess wasn't her responsibility. She was there for the client's discipline, not to be his sex toy. For females in the same predicament she brought along hand sanitizer and baby wipes if they could maneuver around within her skillfully woven Kinbaku-bi, or Shibari, knots enough to need them.

She had turned herself out entirely to her own satisfaction this evening, but suddenly she looked down at her boots with mild annoyance. She'd almost forgotten that this new customer had specified that he wanted her to give him an old-fashioned, Southern country punishment—to

“take a switch to him,” as he’d put it—and all the effort she’d made in polishing those elegant boots would be wasted if she had to traipse through grass and dirt and possibly lose a heel in a hole simply to find a switch to cut. And then, like as not, run afoul of the law for damaging public property and that’s the one thing she didn’t need. Felicia was a city girl, but she hadn’t always been a city girl and she didn’t think she’d ever understand the strictness of some municipal zoning regulations. She looked at her watch, her annoyance increasing, pulled her phone from the hip pocket of her jeans, and dialed her favorite BDSM shop near the Mississippi riverbank on the other side of town. A bored male voice answered immediately. “Lucky Stiff.”

“That you, Ed? It’s Toni. Got a specialty request.”

The boredom left the voice on the other end of the line. “Lady Antonia! How’s the sexiest, prettiest young Domme in Memphis?”

Felicia’s usually severe facial expression relaxed into a soft grin. “Flatterer!” she retorted. “If I was first-rate I’d be making a lot more money than I am right now. But I take what I can get—well, within reason. Got a client who’s asked specifically to be switched. You know, the old-fashioned way, like parents used to, I guess. Do you have any switches, or know any place convenient where I can cut a couple without running into trouble with City Zoning?”

“Hmm,” Ed answered, a slight degree of additional interest in his voice. “A cane or a crop won’t do? I’ve sold you both. Or a singletail or dragon tongue, maybe. Got some new ones of those.”

“Guy specified a switch, so I guess I’ll have to invoke the spirits of all my long gone back-country Arkansas ancestors, find a limb or two somewhere, and meet the task. Can you help me at all?”

“You learn all that flowery prose in college?” Ed chuckled. “You should be a poet, like my Ruthie! But yeah. Tell you what I’ll do. Down on the riverbank behind here near the

levee there's a few little willow saplings that ought to have branches that are just what you're looking for. I'll get my nephew that's clerking for me to slide down there and cut you two or three. Give any of 'em to you at a steal, for thirty dollars."

Felicia's frown returned. "Thirty?" she huffed. "You trying to bankrupt me, you old skinflint? I'll give you ten for the trouble!"

Ed laughed heartily now. "Same Lady Antonia I know and adore!" he chortled. "Awright, then, twenty-five."

"Fifteen!"

Ed sighed. Dominatrices were among his most stubborn customers, but one supposed that such was to be expected from them. "Twenty-two and a half," he countered.

Finally they settled on twenty dollars for two to three fresh, thoroughly peeled, limber switches full of sap, from which Felicia would pick the best-looking to use on her new client. She told him to have them ready soon, because she'd be on the road in only a few moments. She hung up, stuffed her phone into her purse, and looked again at her watch. In spite of all the times she'd met new clients, a first encounter still made her a lot more tense and apprehensive than she liked to admit, even to herself, and this evening she needed something to ease the nerves that were already starting to make her guts flutter. She'd left a small roach in the bathroom ashtray, the last of her current supply of marijuana, so now she fished an alligator clip out of a pocket, clamped it to the end of the thin half-smoked joint, re-lit it with the flip of a lighter, and drew deeply, holding in the smoke till it caught in her lungs. She coughed as she finally exhaled. It was good weed, and she'd likely need only one more deep toke to reach the level of calmness and mellowness she sought. And the roach looked like it had just enough bud in it for her purposes.

After her second toke Felicia coughed again and flipped the near-microscopic remaining stub of the joint into the

toilet, almost simultaneously reaching for her eye drops and then, her bottle of mouthwash. The stuff never gave her the giggles, but if she smoked too much she occasionally became a trifle paranoid. No worry of overdoing weed right now, though. After rinsing away the taste of singed hemp—she always thought of burnt rope when she smelled or tasted marijuana smoke, regardless of how high-quality the product was claimed to be—she picked up a bottle of cologne and sprayed it lightly over her hair and upper body. She didn't want the client to smell pot on her breath, her hair, or her clothing, and the slight, diluted patchouli fragrance of the cologne was a heady complement to the perfume she had already applied. She sighed. I wonder how my faculty advisor would feel if she knew about my weed habit, she reflected sardonically. Oh, well. It's my only vice so far, hopefully things will stay that way, and I won't need it any more when I get out of this line of work. After all, even Freud used cocaine. At least I've not yet been suckered either into that, or the cheap heroin that's taken so many girls down.

Thinking ahead further, she left the bathroom with the cologne, zipped open the top of her suitcase, a medium-sized conservative-looking four-wheeled American Tourister, and squirted a few spritzes of the scent inside. Besides the short-shorts, fresh underwear, thin knit top, narrow belt, and sandals that Felicia always brought along just in case she needed to change but so far had never had reason to use, and her sanitary equipment, it contained a pair of leather gloves and half a box of latex ones—all black, of course—and was full of hand and ankle cuffs with shiny chains, candles and candle holders, soft ropes, cords, spreader bars, a riding crop, a few ball gags, single-tail and cat whips, wooden and leather paddles, one cane of rattan and another of bamboo, a couple of martinets and a brand-new doeskin flogger, a roll of cloth tape, one leather hood with eye and mouth zippers, and a few other incidentals. She



absolutely refused to mess with the more extreme stuff, the sort of tools and practices that drew blood, cut off circulation, stretched and tore orifices that were never meant to be stretched and torn, or blocked airways, though not a few of Miss Callie's former clients had been bitterly disappointed in her refusal to continue the older Domme's riskier practices and had stopped seeing her for that reason. Better to be safe than sorry, she figured, and she'd seen enough "sorry" out of her old partner. Felicia always gave her implements a thorough cleansing with Clorox wipes, especially the ball gags and the hood, after she'd used them on a client, and the cologne would ease the sharp residual smell of the bleach. Time was running short, especially since she'd need to pick up her switch, or switches, at Ed's Lucky Stiff Souvenir and Hobby Shop, and she still had to lug her supplies down the three flights of stairs from her apartment to the parking lot.

The phone rang again. Felicia's brow wrinkled. It was the new client, calling back. "What is it?" she demanded abruptly by way of greeting. Guys often liked her to be in character from the very first.

"L-L-Lady Antonia? You still coming? Ma'am?" asked an uneasy male voice with just the hint of a quaver.

"Of course I'm still coming! Place is only a hop, skip, and a jump from here over in the Medical District, isn't it? Do you think I make my money being a liar? I'll be there exactly at the time you specified! Now are you gonna be there, or wuss out? You did give me the right room number, didn't you?" growled the young Dominatrix.

"Okay, okay, I believe you, Ma'am, but I just wanted to request a couple things more. I-is that okay? And about the room, please—don't call me through the hotel operator, okay? I've gotta have some... discretion about certain things."

"Gotta turn in your papers for the ol' expense account at work, huh? I really doubt they'll monitor calls you get, only

the ones you make. But okay, I'll go along with it. Sounds like you already get whipped regularly," opined Felicia with a chuckle, rolling her eyes. "All right, you're paying for this, so let's hear what you want. Now's the time to negotiate, not later. Just remember: no sex. You get horny, deal with it afterwards on your own time. That said, go ahead and shoot, boy."

"Oh... okay, then. Well, since I gave you my room number already—when I meet you at the door the first thing I want you to say to me is 'On your knees, Wormy!' Can you do that?"

"Sure, sure, whatever you wanna be called," replied Felicia with another sardonic grin on her lips. She was glad she'd availed herself of that joint now. It had definitely improved her humor. "Just so long as I don't have to scream it. No extra donation so far, Ducks. Or Wormy, I guess I should call you now. So, what else you got on your mind?"

"Uh—uh—well—"

"Spit it out, now, Wormy! You're taking up the Lady's time!" Sharp and good-natured simultaneously. Perfect technique. Callie would be so proud.

"I—err—if—if I were to appear to be resistant at first—like maybe I was pretending I didn't even know who you were or why you were here—I want you to have the switch ready to put me into submission. Just—just start on my shoulders and work down and—I'll kneel and submit and let you in. Can—can you do that for me? Please? It'd be really important to me."

"Gonna play that one by ear, little darlin'," answered Felicia more thoughtfully. "I don't want to draw any attention to you or me, either one, from the hotel staff or anybody in the other rooms near you, especially considering the extra effort Lady Antonia's making for you. We'll have to see. The more crowd there is, the more risk we run, and so the more it might cost you. Or I might not be able to do it at all."

“Well, that’s—that’s—good enough, Lady Antonia, Ma’am. Thank you. I’ll expect you at—eight, then? Goodbye?”

Felicia grinned again. Time for the big tease now, just like Callie had taught her. One had to keep one’s submissives, both regular and prospective, on their toes—sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally, sometimes both. So she answered, “Now, honey, don’t you worry for a minute. Mama’s gonna make a really good boy out of you tonight,” and with a soft, sexy, only slightly-forced giggle she clicked the icon ending the call. She so hoped that nothing more extreme was on this guy’s menu, something he hadn’t worked up the courage to tell her yet. She simply didn’t feel up to a bargaining session with a horny submissive man right now. Felicia would argue the point with the customer as long as she could, but if he insisted on something beyond her strict self-imposed limits, she’d simply have to leave and take the monetary loss in stride, maybe keeping a few dollars for “her trouble.” CBT—cock-and-ball torture, one of the extremities that Felicia avoided like the plague—had been the end of her friend Lady Callipygia’s career in BDSM. About eight months beforehand, the older Domme had accepted a fabulously well-paid outcall from a rich horse farmer on the other side of the Mississippi who, for reasons known best, and probably only, to himself, had long entertained the fantasy of being gelded just like one of his prize Thoroughbred yearlings. No doctor nor even veterinarian or farrier for him, though; only a good, strict Mistress with a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a boxcutter knife or straight razor was capable of performing the procedure to the turfman’s own satisfaction. Callie had asked, even begged, Felicia to accompany her that night, offering her a sizable cut of the extraordinarily large fee, but Felicia had balked, using the college term paper she’d been working on as one excuse to dog off. Term paper or no, though, the whole idea was both so nauseating and

horrifying to her she didn't think she'd be able to hold down her cookies even simply guarding the door for her friend, and besides that, the horse breeder lived in Felicia's home state and she had no desire whatsoever to return to it even for one night. So Callie had gone on her own, but about one o'clock the next morning had returned in a panic, pounding on Felicia's apartment door begging her to split just one joint with her, please, and offering to sell Felicia nearly her entire stock of BDSM gear for a bargain—between bouts of throwing up in the younger woman's bathroom. She wouldn't tell Felicia, or for that matter anyone else, the entire story of her venture, but she was convinced she'd made it back across the de Soto Bridge just one step ahead of the law. Ultimately she might as well not have panicked. She'd been gloved the entire time she was at the turfman's and thus hadn't left any fingerprints, and the horse breeder, nearly bled dry but still alive, absolutely refused to press charges or give any evidence whatsoever against the "unknown female" who'd dialed 911 from his home. The newspapers had had a field day with the "mystery woman" aspect of the mutilation case, especially once the Associated Press got hold of the story, but in spite of Callie's colossal blunder Felicia still refused to believe most of what the papers speculated and never asked her friend for further details. She had her own reasons for despising the Associated Press. And so Callie was now in a more conventional lifestyle—holy matrimony and a job as a makeup saleslady, that is—and Felicia was the heir to her BDSM practice. The less extreme portion of it, anyway.

Felicia looked at her watch again and with her right hand lifted the handle on her suitcase as she shrugged her purse over her left shoulder. The wheels of the suitcase were never any help on stairs, but she was a well-muscled, wiry girl and in spite of her less-than-imposing height, only five-five in her high heels, she never had any trouble with the weight of all the hardware she had to tote to an outcall. The

bigger and taller the customer, the smaller and shorter he wanted his Dominatrix to be, it seemed. That's what Callie, who was a tall, buxom five-ten in flats and whose male customers, with one notable exception, were short, small men, had always said, and it was one of several reasons she'd asked Felicia to work with her and to cultivate her abilities. But the few men who had made the mistake of trying to take advantage of Felicia's diminutive size to collect unsolicited favors had almost all experienced ball torture, if not cock torture, of a type they'd never ever wanted, as well as metatarsal fractures, eye, face and neck scratching and as much other damage as she could inflict in the minimum time. Though Lady Callipygia and others had taught her a lot of effective defensive moves, Felicia had been no weakling to start with and her usually on-edge nerves gave her just enough of an extra dose of adrenaline to make her a physical opponent to be feared. All the cheerleading acrobatics, she reflected for a half second—but oh, crap, that was everything it took for the topsy-turvy past that she'd tried so hard for three years now to drive completely out of her mind, to come back full-force in a fleeting moment and as unwelcome as ever. The cheerleading had led to the kiss, and in turn the kiss had led to the rejection, which had led to... Felicia just hoped she could at least bundle the memories back into their own dark corner once more before they ruined another entire evening for her, as they so often did. Dammit to hell.

When all's said and done, I'm a professional Dominatrix, she brooded as she locked her apartment door, because of the kiss. One stupid kiss between one stupid, prima-donna quarterback from a stupid excuse for a high school in a stupid little backwater town in the Ozarks—and one stupid, spoiled-rotten little prima-donna cheerleader who'd never yet known a hard time in her life. Everything followed from that. Oh, what the hell. Time for some more exposure

therapy. Maybe one of these days I'll get enough of it under my belt for it to work permanently.

Hefting her suitcase and purse, Felicia stepped out and down the stairs into the fading sunset and to her work.

PART ONE: HIGH LONESOME

## Chapter One

At a few months before her twenty-second birthday the professional Dominatrix Lady Antonia—known by her real name, Felicia Rose Culbertson, to only an extreme few, and those extreme few weren't talking—had actually experienced real sex a grand total of one time in her young life, and the one thing that could send her into a cold fury in an instant was to have someone refer to her as The Homecoming Queen. She'd suffered worse nicknames a few years before, but most of them had held sway only for a brief time and then been forgotten. The royal title, though, was the one that had stuck, and it housed a host of evil memories all its own. Her nickname and sexual history and practices were inextricably connected, and the combination was why she was holding out for the one, remaining aloof and trying to act regal just like she imagined Queen Elizabeth I might have done, and doing her best to forget the other.

She was the youngest daughter of the owner of the single filling station and convenience store in Hannahsburg, Arkansas, a little town in a tiny farm county nestled snugly in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains ("WELCOME TO OLD-FASHIONED SMALL-TOWN AMERICA!" the sign at the city limits proclaimed), and she'd grown up in comfort as the pet of her parents, her big brother, and her three older sisters. From her time in kindergarten—her folks had actually held her back at home a year extra—through eleventh grade, all that time spent safe and secure within the womb-like halls of a small consolidated elementary, middle, junior high, and senior high school that served the entire population of Hannah County, she'd both studied and played with the same kids year after year, and they all knew each other virtually inside and out. Newcomers to the school, at least those who couldn't claim relatives as classmates but sometimes even those who did, were generally treated to a short period of hauteur, pranks, and hazing but then

accepted as one of the gang, taking their own places in the student pecking order. Felicia herself had always managed to stay in the highest tier of this universal school pecking order, a big fish in an extremely small pond. As she grew to maturity her thick dark hair became ever more lustrous, offset by fair but easily-tanned skin and a pair of eyes so deeply azure they made one take a double- and even a triple-take before accepting that they could be real. The cheerleading squad, of which she had been a member ever since fifth grade for the elementary and middle school teams and later for junior and senior high, was active all through both football and basketball seasons, and when she reached her full growth, the vigorous exercise had kept her figure supple and light but well muscled: perky apple-sized breasts, swimmer's shoulders, well-shaped legs, and a bouncy little firm heart-shaped behind to complement the classic beauty of her face and hair. The only thing about her appearance she might consider worthy of change was her ears: they were just a bit too prominent for her liking, "jug" ears in her own discriminating estimation, and so she was at some pains to keep them covered as much as possible by her thick, luxurious brunette mane. She'd never been shy, simply because she'd never had to be. In short, she was the archetypal Good Girl character—or perhaps caricature—so favored in young-adult books and teen movies, and yet she really did exist. For the time being.

Students were one thing, teachers another. Sometimes, anyway. Understandably there was resentment within the lower ranks of the class pecking order towards the higher-ups, and although such ill feelings could be strong at times and even flare up occasionally, they were mostly latent. Surprisingly, almost none of the few flare-ups were related in any way to racial issues. But some of the less-intelligent and less-capable teachers (and yes, surprise, surprise, there are such teachers) not only recognized the school pecking order but even encouraged it. They themselves too



frequently made fun of one or more of the clumsier or less attractive students for the laughs they garnered from the rest of their pupils, especially those of Felicia's higher caste. Felicia never realized the wrongs in this system because no one had ever pointed them out to her and even if someone had tried, she'd never been on the receiving end of this kind of mistreatment. In the wake of the numerous school shootings that rocked the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, her Junior English teacher had had her class read and talk about the Flannery O'Connor short story "The Partridge Festival" as a possible means to understand the violence that was becoming increasingly common in American school settings. The whole discussion had gone completely over Felicia's head. She simply couldn't conceive of an individual's harboring that much resentment over a little rowdy horseplay from his neighbors. One should simply try harder to fit in. It was easy, after all, and then one could join right along in the good clean fun.

Still, no matter how fair or unfair any of the teachers tried to be, all of them expected as a matter of routine that Felicia and her fellow caste members would be their class's leaders. Throughout her formative years she'd been in one minor office or another: Class Secretary, Reporter, Vice-President, and once even President, from Middle School and Junior High into her tenure in Senior High, all in addition to her cheerleading and the half-dozen or so other extracurricular activities she might have going on at any given time. And strangely enough, although it wasn't unknown for her and one or more of her female classmates to be pulled from their own studies to "substitute" for an absent teacher in a younger class—if the system could keep things under the table it saved the School Board money not to have to call in a qualified substitute teacher—nobody, neither her parents, her brother and sisters, nor her own teachers ever really stressed academics to her. Straight B's

all too easily gotten, not really earned, with the occasional C and an even rarer A on her report cards seemed to be fine with every one of them, and apparently she and all those around her were content that she should remain a little social butterfly with nothing in her experience actually preparing her for the real world. A high school student majoring in High School, a cheerleader majoring in Cheerleading: that was Felicia Rose Culbertson at this point in her life.

She'd gone steady with Eric Stapleton, the son of the owner of the feed and farm supply store who lived just down the block from her, ever since they were both fourteen, and though her parents forbade her to go out with him on car dates until the boy's parents trusted him with a vehicle of his own, the travel ban was never a drawback. Eric was unable to drive until he turned sixteen and his parents wouldn't consent to buy him a car until he reached eighteen, and so he was welcome at the Culbertson household almost any afternoon, evening, or weekend so long as he "behaved." The only criticisms that Felicia's parents ever voiced against Eric, and those surprisingly rarely, was that the boy had an appetite like a horse, and that over time he'd adopted the annoying habit of lying down full-length on the Culbertsons' sofa and ordering, not asking, Felicia to bring him food and drinks. Felicia's father's frequent admonitions to her that "you ain't that boy's barmaid" always went in one of her ears and straight out the other.

For both her sophomore and junior years Felicia had been elected by her friends to be her class's attendant at the Fall Homecoming Court, and with Eric as her escort both years everyone praised them as being every bit as beautiful and handsome as the senior class' Homecoming Queen and her escort, themselves. By the end of Felicia and Eric's junior year they were head-over-heels in love—or at least that's what Felicia thought, since to her they were the epitome of

the perfect couple. For all his lazy, arrogant ways, through his own sophomore and junior years Eric, or Rick as he was called by both Felicia and his teammates, had steadily and patiently worked his way up through the Senior High football ranks to become second-string quarterback. There was a good chance he'd make it to first-string in his final year, and there'd even been talk of a college football scholarship in his future. Felicia was angling for a similar place as captain of the cheerleading squad, and so what could be more proper than that they should be together and in love? Though Rick hadn't yet declared his affection for her, he was bound to feel the same as she did.

Everything in Hannahsburg and Hannah County wasn't quite the Mayberry-style idyll that Felicia's and Rick's lives were. In addition to the rare racial difficulties, oxycontin and later, heroin had made inroads into the area, creating havoc with young and old alike but especially among the lower-caste students and their families. It had become a more or less common occurrence for the county sheriff and the state police to do random locker searches, with drug dogs, at the high school. They actually never found all that much: here and there a bottle of prescription narcotics or a bag of weed, always ending in the arrest of some "loser" boy or girl on minor charges but still, every article the weekly Hannahsburg Herald printed about the drug busts brought more and more calls for reform and stricter law enforcement. And so a few years before, about the time Felicia and Rick began Senior High, Hannah County voters had elected a new "reform ticket" School Board that included a fire-eating local fundamentalist pastor who, though he was actually little more than a schoolyard bully himself, enjoyed the respect of a great many people in city and county alike. This newcomer had a brother-in-law with the barest minimum qualifications to serve as County Superintendent, and so as soon as the preacher got the chance he proceeded to strong-arm the Board into replacing

the retiring Superintendent with his sister's husband. After he accomplished this he virtually ruled the entire roost. Arkansas was one of nineteen states, mostly Southern, that still permitted public school officials to use corporal punishment, and so among the minister's first School Board accomplishments was to call for an increase in its application in the Hannah County school system out of respect for "good old-fashioned Christian family values." Of course he got his way, though the action caused no end of annoyance to Luther Mangrum, the much-respected principal of the Senior High School. A few years before, a reality-television program filmed elsewhere in the state had featured an obviously staged version of the practice in a school setting, and the show had proven to be so embarrassing to Arkansans in general that the Principal had been trying his best ever since to phase out corporal punishment altogether at Hannahsburg Senior High.

The biggest stink the preacher had caused so far, though, had been at the Fall Homecoming football game in which Felicia had served as Sophomore Attendant. A tradition as old as Hannahsburg High's Homecoming game itself held that the Homecoming Queen was to be crowned, presented with a bouquet of roses, and then kissed by the captain of the football team. Despite this public display of affection that most fathers in the community still would have considered scandalous if it had taken place in their living rooms, neither students, teachers, nor parents seemed ever to have thought to question the practice. That is, until the team captain that year, a young African American, had planted a kiss on the lips of the white Homecoming Queen, who had proven perfectly willing to go along with the tradition, skin color be damned. One would have thought the Apocalypse had come. At the very next School Board meeting the irate minister, red in the face and spittle flying from his lips as if he were delivering a hellfire-and-damnation sermon, had demanded that the Board pass

a measure strictly forbidding the Homecoming kiss tradition and imposing the most serious penalties the school system had to offer for any student who dared violate the new rule. And of course, the preacher's personal will once again prevailed and the new Superintendent rubber-stamped the motion. There was to be no more kissing among the "royalties" at the Homecoming Game. Even so, that hadn't stopped nearly the entire crowd of both students and visitors at the following year's Homecoming, where Felicia was once again escorted by Rick as the Junior Class Attendant, from yelling "Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!" over and over again at that year's football captain as he presented the new Queen with her crown and bouquet. It had been an embarrassment for everybody in the Homecoming Court, but both captain and Queen that year upheld the new rule.

And so this was the setting in which Felicia Culbertson began her senior year of high school, with one more unexpected but very welcome privilege. Besides being picked as captain of the cheerleading squad for the year almost as soon as cheer practice began, she was also given the chance to substitute her study hall period one hour a day to serve as a volunteer worker in the school office, one of a few positions that were usually reserved for the "best" girls. Naturally she'd accepted, and had quickly become a favorite of both the secretary, Mrs. Green, and school guidance counselor, Mrs. Fletcher, as well as Mr. Mangrum himself. All of them were her parents' neighbors and had known her almost since birth, and one of her older sisters had actually dated Mr. Mangrum's son briefly before he left town for college. The Principal she respected especially. He had an imposing, strict, and formal demeanor but was obviously deeply concerned about the welfare of all his students, and he seemingly always knew exactly when to be stern and when to be kind and forbearing. According to Mrs. Green and Mrs. Fletcher, he had even gone to bat for a

number of reputedly very bad boys with the County Sheriff because he believed they were worth defending, and occasionally one or more of these former students would drop by to see him and pay their respects.

But Felicia's first real glimpse of the Principal's character was the bare-bones, intentionally frightening psychology he used on miscreants, and it occurred as she heard him lecture a Sophomore girl that had been sent to his office for repeated tardiness to her classes. Because of the School Board's attitude Mr. Mangrum hadn't yet succeeded in ending corporal punishment entirely, though he had managed to begin to offer it as a choice rather than a necessity in many cases. And so Felicia heard his deep bass voice rumble inside his office addressing the trembling, intimidated Sophomore: "Now, Morgan, you've got the option of taking Saturday detention for two weekends, or getting five swats with the paddle. Let me tell you right off, I am urging you in the strongest way I can to choose the detentions. There're at least three reasons for that. One: you're a young lady, and getting paddled is anything but ladylike. Two: according to regulations I'd have to call somebody into the office of your own gender to serve as a witness to the punishment. That most likely means Mrs. Green or Mrs. Fletcher, and neither of 'em like to witness punishments and I'd think it would be embarrassing for both you and them. Three: I hate doing corporal punishment, and if anybody ever takes the option that forces me to paddle 'em I make sure they never ever want to make that choice again. Do you understand me, young lady? If you choose corporal punishment, I promise you I'll raise you up from the high lonesome!"

"Y-y-yes, Sir!" the terrified girl had squeaked in return, "I'll take the detention! The detention, please!"

"Okay, then," Mr. Mangrum had replied calmly as Felicia heard papers rustle. "Just sign on the dotted line, there,

Morgan, and we'll expect to see you the next two Saturday mornings."

Poor Morgan burst into tears from sheer relief as she scrawled her name on the proffered form. "Th-thank you, Sir! This'll never h-h-happen again!" she sobbed and hiccuped as she practically ran out of the office door—and right into Felicia, who was carrying a sheaf of papers for the guidance counselor. Felicia, whose own heart had started to thump simply from listening to the lecture, gave her a brief hug, and she blushed as Mr. Mangrum emerged from the office and the scared-witless Morgan scuttled out of the office with a nervous glance over her shoulder. The Principal bit his lip to suppress a grin and said quietly to Felicia, "People will usually do the commonsense thing if you give 'em all the facts. She's a good girl; she won't be back in here."

Felicia briefly wondered what it meant to be raised up from the high lonesome, and shuddered inwardly. It was one of Mr. Mangrum's trademark sayings, but she never dared ask him about it. She was too worried that she might not like the answer at all.

"Yes, Sir," she answered finally with a meek smile, though her own guts remained in absolute turmoil for the rest of her work period simply from overhearing the exchange. She'd been spanked—mostly gently—at home as a young child, once even with a flyswatter very lightly wielded by her mother, but never at school, although she'd seen classmates in the earlier grades paddled occasionally by one teacher or another with a foot ruler or, sometimes, a small paddleball-game style paddle. But both Mr. Mangrum's threats, and his paddle, were a lot more intimidating. Felicia had seen it lying on his desk: perhaps two feet in length, maybe four inches wide, and about half an inch thick, it had black electrical tape wrapped tightly around its handle and both sides of it were covered with the scrawled names and dates of punishment of those brazen enough to ask to sign

it after it had been used on them. The whole idea of even being threatened to have to bend over Mr. Mangrum's desk to subject her bottom to an assault with that big frightening board, not just a simple spanking, disturbed her in ways she couldn't even articulate. And signing it afterward? Good God, she thought to herself. I hope he never has to talk that way to me. Much less raise me up from the high lonesome. And have a reason to offer it for me to sign! I'd melt right into the floorboards.

Of course, one couldn't always expect teenagers to make smart choices, and a few afternoons later Felicia witnessed something that unsettled her even more. This time it was two Junior boys whom Mr. Mangrum and Mr. Beatty, the head football coach, had had to separate in the hall before they knocked one another's front teeth completely out. Mr. Mangrum burst through the main office door red-faced, holding one boy by the scruff of the neck, Mr. Beatty bringing the other along in tow, and the men hustled the two boys into Mr. Mangrum's office and slammed the door behind them. Felicia tried to busy herself with the task Mrs. Green had just given her, but it was no use. She knew both boys, she suspected what was going to happen, and her own knees were trembling and her pulse racing as soon as the office door shut. She could hear Mr. Mangrum's deep voice again and knew that he was offering the two students their choice of punishment. Apparently both of them insisted on getting things over with right then and there, perhaps to try to show each other how tough they both were. Before another minute had passed, the sounds of their punishment penetrated right through the closed door: five quick, hard strokes on one denim-clad behind followed by five more on the other, cracking over and over almost as loud and as sharp as rifle shots. A moment later both boys emerged with swollen lips from their fight and deeply red faces from its aftermath. Felicia couldn't help glancing sideways at them and one, with an angry glare, flipped the bird at her before



he stormed out of the office. She blushed and gasped at the rude gesture and looked helplessly at the secretary, her mouth suddenly so dry she was unable to speak or even swallow for a moment.

“Bet those boys’ rear ends are even redder than their faces,” chuckled Mrs. Green quietly to Mrs. Fletcher and to Felicia, but she shushed quickly as Mr. Mangrum and Mr. Beatty themselves emerged from the office, both of them looking as if they were completely worn out. Finally finding her tongue, Felicia excused herself to go to the restroom and sat there several minutes longer than was necessary, still trembling and trying to calm down from what she’d just seen and heard. She suddenly felt an empathy toward her fellow students that she never had before, and her thoughts were haunted by the pain and humiliation those two boys had just chosen to endure. I would simply die if that happened to me, she thought once more. I would just die.

## Chapter Two

At the end of September, Homecoming season rolled around once more and Felicia had every reason to anticipate that this game and ceremony would be the most memorable of her life so far. She was correct, although she didn't yet know how much so.

The football team enjoyed a hot streak all through the months of August and early September, winning each and every game they played, and team captain Eric Stapleton had quickly become the idol of Hannahsburg's sports fans. He was widely considered, even by Mr. Beatty and his assistant coaches, to have become the best quarterback the Senior High's team had known in many a year, and the possibility of a football scholarship to a prestigious university—perhaps even with the Arkansas Razorbacks!—looked more and more real. And at the sidelines through every game was Felicia, leading her cheer squad and yelling her heart out for the boy she was convinced she'd love forever and beyond. As a Senior she was of course in the running for Homecoming Queen this year, and although she was never haughty or cruel to her competitors she could hardly wait to feel the tiara on her head, the rose bouquet in her hands, the shouts of adulation from the stands, and Rick's soft kiss on her lips... oh, wait. No kissing at Homecoming now. Right. Perhaps that was a good thing, after all. The off chance that one of her classmates might win the tiara rather than her could have meant that Rick would have to kiss the winner instead of Felicia, and she couldn't have tolerated that.

Hannahsburg High's Homecoming Celebration was most often a Saturday-afternoon affair that carried on into the night, and the clove of seasons between summer and fall usually provided the perfect weather for the football game. The festivities began at about one o'clock with the crowning of the Homecoming Queen just before the game and concluded that night with the Homecoming Dance in the

school gym, to which all students and alumni were invited. Friday was preparation day for all the activities, and the whole school got caught up in the excitement. After lunch, Mr. Mangrum suspended classes for all the football players and cheerleaders for extra-long practice sessions for both teams, and the Homecoming Court candidates, those who weren't cheerleaders already, were included so they could run through the ceremony they'd enact tomorrow. Felicia thus had to split her time between two practices, and the plan, agreed to by Felicia's parents, was for Rick to bring her home after both drills in the brand-new Chevy Camaro his parents had just bought him for his eighteenth birthday. Pumped by the additional anticipation of her prospective ride in Rick's new muscle car and having celebrated her own eighteenth birthday three weeks or so ago herself, Felicia shared a lot of laughs with her friends at both cheering and Court rehearsals as they speculated on who'd win the tiara tomorrow afternoon. And then when Mr. Beatty strode over to the sidelines and asked the young cheerleading coach, Miss Gullett, if he could make a brief announcement to the girls, she felt that her joy was complete. "Listen up, ladies," Mr. Beatty had proclaimed, "I want you girls to cheer extra hard and extra special tomorrow, because there's going to be a scout from the Razorbacks and another from the Sooners over in Oklahoma here to watch Rick Stapleton play! Now, I ain't expectin' you to start doin' the Razorback Hog Call, but let's see if we can make a Razorback out of Rick! Or if they ain't got sense enough to take on the best young quarterback in Arkansas, a Sooner!" The entire squad had gone wild, but Felicia most of all.

Perhaps Homecoming Eve ended the way it did partly because of Felicia's unsettling thought of another girl wearing the Homecoming tiara. Or maybe because Rick was genuinely as nervous as the proverbial cat over the prospect of being scouted by both the Razorbacks and the Sooners on the same day. Mostly, it occurred simply because Rick