

*The Heroes of*  
HASTINGTON

*by Carlton Phillips*

# THE HEROES OF HASTINGTON

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# Chapter One

Spring had finally arrived. The warm sunny days of late April were a welcome change from the bitterly cold winter we'd endured for so long. All of the trees were now fully adorned with lush green leaves, and the sounds of birds and insects permeated the air once more. But in addition to all of nature's glorious signs, there was yet another unmistakable indication that spring was truly here. It was the announcement of the coming of the big charity carnival that was run by the local college.

This annual event, which raised money for the Children's Hospital, had long been a tradition in our town. Students were encouraged to design, construct and operate game booths, and to solicit local merchants for their financial support. It was all quite competitive, because the group of students who raised the most money would be awarded a special prize along with certificates of commendation from the mayor.

One particular group of five seniors, who'd been good friends ever since their freshman days, were determined to win this year. They wanted their game to be very unique and exciting, but they just couldn't think of anything that hadn't already been done. Nevertheless, they decided to go into town to request donations and pledges from shopkeepers and business owners. And being the true optimists that they all were, they were also hoping to get some ideas and suggestions for their booth.

They had just arrived at Bob Nelson's store, a place where fine custom cabinetry was built and sold. Bob greeted them warmly, and he seemed very eager to lend his support.

"We want our carnival game to be really special," said Jason, a rather tall athletic-looking young man.

"Yeah! We want to attract the most attention, and raise the most money!" added Jen, a strikingly beautiful blond coed.

"Everyone does the same old boring games, like ring-toss and throwing darts at balloons," Brad lamented.

"Mr. Nelson, we hope you can give us some NEW ideas!" exclaimed Michelle, an extremely cute petite redhead.

"I think I can be of some assistance," said Bob, who'd had an idea for a carnival game for years and was thrilled to now be sharing it with these students. "What if the object of your game was to make someone *laugh*, while that person tried very hard *not* to laugh?"

The students seemed puzzled, yet very intrigued.

"That sounds really interesting but how would it be a game?" Mike asked.

“Okay, here’s my idea,” Bob said with a wily grin. “Back in Colonial days, those found guilty of committing a crime were usually punished in public. As I’m sure you all know, offenders were often forced to stand all day with their head and hands stuck in the pillory. Others, at least got to sit down. But that was only because their ankles, and sometimes their wrists, were locked into the holes of the stocks. Being confined as they were, I’ve often wondered if the villagers had ever thought to remove the prisoners’ shoes and tickle their feet! Although I’ve yet to read a credible account of it actually having happened, it sure seems like something that *could* have happened! And it also seems like the perfect premise for an exciting and challenging, fun-filled GAME...a game in which you’d win a prize if you could make the prisoner laugh! It would certainly attract lots of attention, and raise lots of money for your charity! In fact, for every dollar that you collect, I’ll donate TWO dollars! And I’ll even build the stocks, make the signs, and provide everything else that’s needed!”

“Wow! That really IS a whole new idea for a game!” cried Jason. “But just who gets to be the ‘prisoner’? And what would the rest of us be doing?”

“I would suggest that two of you alternately play the part of the prisoner, while the remaining three each play an ancillary role such as that of the village magistrate. Of course, you realize that in order to attract lots of people into playing the game, the prisoner’s reaction to being tickled would have to be spontaneous, fairly intense, and genuine. Faking it is definitely *not* an option, so I hope that at least two of you are ticklish!”

The students responded with spirited laughter, and many more questions.

“Would we all be dressed in Colonial costumes?” Mike wanted to know.

“Yes. It would add realism and authenticity to the premise. I guess you could rent them, but it’d be much more fun if you made them yourself.”

“Exactly how would this game be played?” Michelle then asked.

“Well, are your feet ticklish?” Bob inquired.

“Oh, my God! Yes...very!” she giggled.

“Great! Then let’s suppose that it’s *your* turn to be the prisoner!” he replied, evidently delighted by her candid confession. “You’d be seated on a wooden bench with your ankles securely locked in the stocks. And to totally convince everyone that you couldn’t possibly escape, your wrists would also be bound. Your shoes and socks would then be removed, thus leaving your bare feet prominently protruding from the front of the framework. A large sign written in old English would inform the passersby that their help is needed to punish you for your ‘crime’ of, let’s say, swearing on Sunday! But in order to do so, they must first donate five dollars to charity. They would then have one minute to tickle your feet, while a timing clock counted down the seconds. They’d win a small prize, like a stuffed toy animal, the moment you began to laugh! Players would also have the option of buying additional ‘tickle minutes’ to help them increase their chances of winning.”

Jen, who was beginning to appear a bit nervous, remarked, “That sounds really great, Mr. Nelson, except for one thing. I just know that I couldn’t keep from laughing, not even for a minute, if someone was tickling me and I couldn’t even move! They would surely win every time!”

“That’s fine,” Bob assured her. “The more winners, the more players! Oh, and I’ll even buy all of the prizes as an added donation. Remember, you’ll be collecting five dollars a minute, and I’ll be matching that with double dollars! That’s *fifteen dollars* for every minute you’re being tickled! Not a bad deal, right?”

They all nodded in agreement as Brad exclaimed, “Yeah! I’m sure we’ll attract loads of attention with all that crazy laughing and screaming going on! Everyone will be coming over to OUR booth to see what all the noise is about! And with us collecting fifteen dollars a minute, we’ll definitely win the prize this year!”

The five happy students thanked Bob for his brilliant idea and amazing generosity, and then left his shop, still bubbling with excitement.

With more than a week remaining before the carnival, Bob had plenty of time to build the stocks and make the other items for the booth. He was a master carpenter with a well-equipped shop, and he cheerfully worked late for several nights. Meanwhile, the students experimented on each other to determine who had the most ticklish feet. They quickly discovered that Jen and Michelle shared that dubious honor. In fact, not one of the boys even came close. And so, recalling what Bob had told them, the girls reluctantly agreed to take turns being the prisoner in one-hour shifts. Michelle had wanted the sessions to be a half-hour, but Jen finally convinced her that it would disrupt the momentum of the game if they were to switch ‘prisoners’ every thirty minutes. The three guys, on the other hand, had absolutely no trouble deciding who’d play the role of magistrate, official timekeeper, and cashier. With the aid of Jen’s history professor, and a few needle pricks to the finger, they each made a very authentic-looking costume. And knowing that their bare feet would be on public display for all to see, touch and tickle, both girls decided to get a pedicure on the day before the big event.

The sun was shining brightly on the morning of the carnival, and the air had already taken on a delightful warmth. It was still quite early, and only a handful of students had begun setting up their booths on the great north lawn of the college campus. Bob casually leaned against his truck, sipping a cup of coffee, as he patiently waited for Jen, Michelle, Brad, Mike and Jason. All of the items that he’d made for their game booth remained covered with a big black cloth atop the flatbed truck. Within a few minutes, the five enthusiastic students arrived, each proudly toting their costume in a shopping bag.

“Good morning, Mr. Nelson!” they chimed in nearly perfect unison as they gathered alongside the truck.

“This game is going to be so exciting!” Jen said with a dazzling smile.

“Yeah, none of the other students will have anything like OUR booth!” Mike boasted.

“And we just can’t WAIT to see what you’ve built!” Brad exclaimed as he unabashedly tried to peer under the cloth.

Bob just smiled and climbed up onto his truck. He then pulled off the drape with a flourish, thus revealing everything all at once. The stocks appeared to be much larger and far more robust than the students had ever imagined. There was also a tall cashier’s podium, a huge rack stuffed with prizes, a beautiful antique timing clock, a very large sign propped up on an easel, and a stack of sealed cartons. And to give their booth a finished look, Bob had even made a colorful cloth backdrop that was suspended across a light wooden frame. The students’ eyes grew wide with astonishment and awe as they silently surveyed Bob’s extraordinary handiwork. But the one item that literally caused their jaws to drop was, of course, the stocks.

The finely crafted set of sturdy stocks was mounted onto a heavy raised platform. A wide cushioned bench was also bolted to the platform, and rising up from behind it stood a tall wooden post that was fitted with a pair of black leather wrist cuffs. A horizontal plank had been mounted between the front edge of the bench top and the lower stock. It was equipped with two brown leather straps that were in approximate alignment with the ankle holes. Curiously, each ankle hole had a big bull’s-eye target consisting of red and white circles painted around it, and a loop of red ribbon positioned above it. The ribbons had been threaded through small holes in the upper stock, and they were situated slightly toward the midline of the framework.

Weighing nearly three hundred pounds, it took all six of them to lift the massive contraption off of the truck and place it into position.

“This thing’s incredible!” Jason marveled while gliding his fingers along the front of the stocks. “Wow! It even *feels* like a piece of fine furniture! You really did a fabulous job, Mr. Nelson!”

“You sure did!” Jen agreed. “And it certainly resembles what I’ve seen pictured in history books. But it also looks like you’ve added a few extra features...like that post, and the board with the straps!”

“You’re absolutely right, Jen, I *have* embellished ye olde stocks a wee bit!” Bob replied with a comical brogue. “Remember I said that your wrists would also be bound? You know, to make it all look convincingly real? Well, as you’ve probably figured out by now, they’ll be shackled above your head to that post! Traditionally, stocks sometimes included an additional row of holes that were used to confine the wrists of the wrongdoer. But that arrangement would’ve caused you to lean forward, putting a lot of strain on your back, shoulders and legs. Trust me, you’ll be much more comfortable with my design!”

They all giggled as Bob went on to say, “And speaking of comfort, those wrist cuffs have a soft lamb’s wool lining, and the holes of the stocks are cushioned with a generous layer of felt. And to top it all off, your ankles won’t even have to bear the weight of your legs. That’s because they’ll be supported by that other thing you mentioned...the board with the straps! Of course, its primary purpose is to restrain your legs and prevent you from bending your knees. That, combined with the snug-fitting ankle holes, make my stocks completely inescapable!”

Jen and Michelle felt a sudden twinge of uneasiness as they imagined themselves being torturously tickled while helplessly held in the grip of this devilish device. Michelle began to scrutinize the stocks with heightened curiosity and interest. She tugged vigorously on various parts of the framework, and then pounded the bench cushion several times with her fist.

“Yeah, it really *does* look inescapable,” she admitted. “But why are there targets around the holes, and what are those ribbons for? I’ve never seen THOSE things in any history books!”

“The bull’s-eyes will draw everyone’s attention to your feet,” Bob explained as he began to open one of the cartons. “And the ribbons will be used to tie your big toes to the stocks. Players will surely be delighted once they realize that you can’t even wiggle your feet to avoid their fingers, or anything *else* they may happen to use!”

Bob pulled back the flaps of the carton to reveal a large assortment of feathers, brushes, Q-tips, plastic forks, and a variety of other items obviously intended to serve as tickling implements. Jen and Michelle both gasped and giggled, the two reactions seeming equally appropriate.

“As you can see, everything’s been carefully designed to make your feet look irresistibly ticklish so as to entice lots of folks into playing the game! And that *is* what we want, isn’t it?”

“Yes...yes it is,” Michelle answered softly.

Despite her affirmative reply, Michelle had now become even more apprehensive as she continued to contemplate her impending ordeal. She was also quite surprised by how much time, money and effort Bob had invested in their game booth, and by how much thought and planning he’d obviously put into the project. Sure...helping to raise money for a worthy cause is always a noble act, she thought to herself. But it certainly seemed as if there was more to it than that. Little did she know how right she was, as the following days and weeks would ultimately prove.

The students carefully unloaded all of the remaining items and began to assemble the booth. They soon found that Bob’s colorful backdrop actually served three functions. It provided an aesthetically pleasing rear ‘wall’, it helped to conceal various items such as the cartons containing additional prizes, and it acted as a privacy screen behind which the girls could rest betwixt their stints in the stocks.

Once everything had been completely set up, Bob moved his truck to the parking area behind the college library building. Upon his return, Jen and Michelle stepped behind the backdrop and changed into their costumes. When they were done, the three guys went back there to change. Bob smiled approvingly at the five youths as they now stood before him dressed in their early American attire.

“You should all be very proud of yourselves. You did such a fine job on your costumes...and they look so real!”

“Not nearly as real as those STOCKS look!” cried Michelle, after which all six of them burst out laughing.

Their laughter caught the attention of three students who were setting up a nearby booth. Being curious, they decided to come over and see what could possibly be so funny. They were completely taken aback when they saw the stocks and costumes, and then read the large sign.

One of them, who just happened to know Mike, remarked, “What a STUPID game! Mike, tell me this is a joke! People ain’t gonna pay money to tickle your girlfriend’s feet! You guys’ll be lucky to raise even a hundred bucks! Now, what WE got over there is a REAL game! Folks will be lining up to play it, and WE will walk away with the prize this year!”

Mike looked at him sternly. “First of all, neither Michelle nor Jen is my ‘girlfriend’...we’re all just good friends. Secondly, why don’t you keep your big mouth shut until AFTER the carnival’s over! THEN we’ll see who’s got the REAL game!”

The three students just snickered and shouted more disparaging remarks as they walked back to their own booth.

Jen and Michelle, in particular, were extremely offended by the nasty comments. Now, more than ever, they were determined to make their game an enormous success. Any feelings of anxiety and trepidation that they’d experienced earlier had now been completely extinguished by the thought of putting that ‘smart-ass’ in his place. Feeling confident, fearless, and with their team spirit fully renewed, both girls were now eager to assume the role of ticklish prisoner. So to be fair, they decided to toss a coin to see who’d go first.

Jen won, so she keenly stepped onto the platform and positioned herself on the bench. Sitting with her knees pulled in toward her chest and the soles of her shoes pressed flat to the plank, she grinned with anticipation as the boys slowly opened the stocks. Once it was open, she pushed her legs straight out in front of her and slid her shapely ankles into the cushioned holes. The guys closed the stocks and fastened the clasp, and then they securely strapped her shins to the plank. Jen found it a bit disconcerting to have her ankles and legs so tightly confined, and yet she willingly raised her hands so that Mike could then buckle the leather restraints snugly around her wrists.



“Only one thing left to do!” Jason declared while walking around to the front of the stocks.

He unlaced Jen’s shoes and removed them, and then he slipped off her thin white socks.

“Oooh, that feels so nice,” Jen sighed as she felt the morning air gently caressing her slender bare feet. She then rapidly wiggled her pastel-pink toes in a playful attempt to avoid having them tied.

“Aw, come on, Jen! You *know* this is part of the overall effect! More people will want to play our game when they see that even your big toes are tied up! And we *do* want to win that big prize, don’t we?”

“Yes...yes, of course!” she agreed. “Go ahead, Jason, tie up my toes. I’ll do almost ANYTHING to make that idiot eat his words!”

Jason nodded to Jen reassuringly as he snared her left big toe with the loop of red ribbon. He then reached over the stocks and began to slowly pull both ends of it. He stopped the moment her toe made contact with the wood, and then he tied the ribbon ends in a bow. Using the other loop of ribbon in the same manner, Jason carefully tied back Jen’s right big toe. With the last detail having now been completed, the four students stood back and admired their game booth.

“Wow! You were right, Mr. Nelson!” Brad exclaimed. “Everyone who sees these two pretty feet centered in our targets will certainly want to tickle them! It almost looks as if Jen’s feet are *begging* to be tickled!”

“Exactly,” Bob chuckled while placing the feathers, brushes, and various other items onto a tray. “And LOOK...the carnival’s now open!”

## Chapter Two

Jen watched with excitement as a group of teenage boys quickly approached the booth. Being both stunned and amused, they just stood there gawking at the strange, almost surreal sight. A beautiful, blond, barefoot girl imprisoned in stocks certainly wasn't something they'd expected to see at a college fundraising carnival.

"What's THIS all about?" one of them asked with surprise.

"Read the sign, me lad!" Mike instructed, sounding more like a character in an old pirate film than a Colonial American.

The boys read the large sign that explained Jen's predicament, and the object and rules of the game.

"Oh, I get it! We're supposed to tickle her feet, and we'll win a prize if we can make her laugh! What a fantastic idea for a game!"

Jen flaunted her big blue eyes at the young man. "I beg of you, kind sir! I am deathly ticklish, and my foul words truly meant no harm."

"Yeah, *right!*" he retorted. "That SIGN says you gotta be punished!"

He and another boy eagerly pooled five singles and handed the money to Brad, the cashier. They each selected a long stiff feather from the tray and then chose a foot to tickle. Jen was actually glad that the game had now officially begun. She was hoping to prove to herself that she could meet the daunting challenge of not allowing herself to laugh.

"Ready?" Jason asked, glancing at Jen.

"Yes, I'm ready," she boldly replied.

Jason nodded, and then pressed the start button on the big timing clock. Jen closed her eyes and tried not to flinch when she suddenly felt the tips of the feathers begin to dance upon her helpless bare soles. She immediately discovered that being tickled while virtually unable to move was an extremely unsettling, yet curiously exciting, experience.

"Tickle, tickle, tickle, tickle!" the boys taunted as they rapidly wiggled their feathers all over Jen's feet. "Laugh, you baaaad little girl, LAUGH!"

"P...Please stop t...tickling me!" she stammered. "I am not a b...bad girl!"

Jen almost laughed when they began twirling the feathers between her toes. But she was able to remain quiet, knowing that the minute would soon be over.

"Time's UP!" Jason shouted as the final second expired.

"Aw, we were *this close*," the first boy said disappointedly. "Hey, maybe we'll come back later and get her REAL good!"

"Yeah!" the second boy agreed. "Tickling a college girl is so much fun!"

Jen and her friends were thrilled. The carnival had just opened, they'd already collected some money, and many people were now beginning to gather around their booth. An older woman, who had elegant white hair and silver-rimmed glasses, smiled at Jen as she stood in front of the stocks and read the sign.

"Good Heavens! You really *are* stuck in that thing and can't pull yourself out!" she exclaimed with utter disbelief.

Jen just looked at her calmly and returned the smile. But her rest period came to an abrupt end when the woman suddenly handed Brad a crisp, new twenty-dollar bill.

"Four minutes!" Jason declared as Brad slid the bill into the cashbox.

The woman slowly raised her hands in the air so as to show everyone, including Jen, her long red nails. Her facial expression had also changed dramatically. No longer was it warm and sympathetic. Instead, it was now harsh and scornful.

"What is your name, young lady?" she snapped.

"Jennifer," she softly replied.

"Let's see if little Jenny is ticklish!" said the woman, turning to the crowd and then back to Jen. "You *know* that a good Christian girl is not supposed to cuss and swear, especially on the Sabbath. It is disrespectful to our Lord, and you must be severely punished!"

Jen was very impressed by how easily this woman had gotten into the spirit of the game. It almost seemed as if the clock *had* been turned back three hundred years and that she really *was* about to be punished for her sins. But before Jen could even think of a clever reply, she felt the woman's nails gently scraping upon the balls of her feet. It was absolutely maddening, and it certainly tickled much more than the feathers. Jen tried to move her feet, but she was only able to wiggle the four unbound toes of each foot. She began to thrash and vigorously struggle against the restraints as the tickling became even more unbearable. But this was merely a reaction to the mild panic she now felt, and in no way did it offer any possible means of escape.

"Laugh for me, little Jenny, LAUGH!" the woman cackled with apparent delight. "You know you can't hold it in...so LAUGH!"

Failing to get the desired response, the woman ruthlessly raked her nails along Jen's smooth, milky-white soles. Still, Jen did not laugh.

"Jenny, you've been a very naughty girl! So I'm now going to tickle each one of your pretty little toes!"

"Oh God, not my toes!" Jen begged, noticing that the woman had taken a small paintbrush from the tray.

"This little piggy is ticklish! And THIS little piggy is ticklish!" chanted the woman as she rapidly stroked each toe in sequence. She then used the nails of her left hand to torture Jen's soles while continuing to tickle her toes with the tiny brush.

“P...Please! Oh, please! H...Have you n...no mercy in your heart?” Jen implored, still trying to remain within character. But it tickled so much, just getting the words out of her mouth was difficult.

The urge to laugh had been boiling up inside of Jen like an enormous volcano about to erupt. She desperately struggled to maintain her silence, but as hard as she tried, she simply could not. Jen closed her eyes tightly and took a long deep breath.

“HeeeHeeeHaaaHaaaHaHaHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Jen continued to wail, even after the tickling had actually stopped. The old woman proudly threw her fists in the air as a gesture of success, and then she selected a prize from the rack. The crowd enthusiastically cheered her victory as Mike placed the small furry bear into her arms.

There were now almost forty people lined up in front of the booth. Most of them were laughing and grinning while anxiously waiting to play what they’d started to call ‘the tickling game’. Even Bob Nelson, who’d been standing off to the side, was surprised to see this many players so soon.

Brad gladly accepted a ten-dollar donation from the newlywed couple who were the next ones in line. The timing clock was then quickly started, even though Jen hadn’t fully recovered from the intense tickling she’d received from the old woman. Instantly, she felt her feet being assaulted by twenty nimble fingers. The young couple didn’t taunt Jen, nor did they say anything to each other. They just tickled and tickled as fast as they could, almost as if they were having a race. And it wasn’t very long before Jen’s melodious laughter filled the air once more.

“Oh, NO! Hahahahaha! Please! HeeHeeHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHA!”

They immediately stopped tickling Jen, even though there was more than a minute still left on the clock. They just happily chose a prize, and then the next person in line stepped up to the podium.

The game continued in this manner for the remainder of the hour, as nearly every player succeeded in making Jen laugh within the allotted time. She tried her best to remain in control, but she ended up losing the battle nine times out of ten. The situation became even more arduous for Jen when a player would choose to tickle her for the entire time that he or she had paid for. And in most cases, that was well beyond the point of actually having won.

The crowd gave Jen a big round of applause when she was released from the stocks at the end of the hour. She acknowledged them with a graceful bow, picked up her shoes and socks, and then slowly walked behind the backdrop to take a well-deserved rest. Jen was thoroughly exhausted, drenched with perspiration, and her ribs were sore from laughing so much. And yet, she couldn’t be any happier.

“Jen, you were *spectacular* out there!” Michelle gushed as the two girls hugged like sisters.

Michelle had been behind the booth the entire time, watching everything through a small hole in the backdrop. She’d chosen to remain hidden during Jen’s hour in the stocks, thus allowing her to make a dramatic appearance when it would be her turn to play the prisoner. That time had now come.

“Bring forth the NEXT sinful young maiden!” Mike shouted, prompting Jason and Brad to go fetch Michelle. They returned a few moments later, leading her by the hand to the waiting stocks.

Hoping to lure even more people into playing the game, Michelle decided to inject some humor into her character. She suddenly stopped, dead in her tracks, and swiftly pulled her hands free from the boys’ grasp. She then stood with her arms folded and her nose defiantly in the air, apparently refusing to take her punishment. Jason and Brad both winked at Michelle, instantly knowing what she had in mind. As expected, the crowd responded to her amusing antics with fervor and zeal. They began jeering loudly and waving their fists in the air.

“Tickle her! Tickle her! Throw her in the stocks and TICKLE her!”

Mike reached down and grabbed Michelle’s ankles, causing her to lose her balance. She started to fall backward, but Jason and Brad easily caught her by the shoulders. Yelling, screaming, and with her arms flailing in the air, the three guys literally carried Michelle to the stocks. She fought playful as they locked her ankles in place, strapped down her shins, and shackled her wrists to the post. Then, as if to demonstrate the integrity of the restraints, Jason began tickling Michelle’s armpits through her thin costume blouse.

“HeeeeeeeaaaaahahahaHaHaHaHAHAHA!” she shrieked while struggling in vain to pull her arms down.

“Aye, she’s a ticklish one, indeed!” Mike grunted as the throng reacted with riotous laughter.

Brad stepped to the front of the stocks and promptly removed Michelle’s shoes. But when he tried to pull off her socks, he couldn’t. They were hopelessly stuck in the felt-lined holes and absolutely refused to come off. Michelle gave Brad a mischievous grin, knowing full well that the long, thick woolen socks she’d intentionally worn would be extremely difficult to remove with her ankles clamped in the stocks. Brad then gave it another try, pulling much harder this time. But he suddenly lost his grip, fell over backward, and comically landed right on his buttocks. Seeing Brad’s obvious frustration made everyone laugh even harder. It also encouraged some folks to shout out various suggestions.

“Open the stocks and THEN take them off!”

“RIP them off her feet!”

“NO! NO! Leave ‘em ON! We’ll tickle her with them ON!”

Jen had been laughing hysterically ever since she'd exchanged places with Michelle. Although she had intended to take a much-needed rest, she simply couldn't resist peeking through the hole in the backdrop just as Michelle had done. Jen was amazed by the ingenious humor of Michelle and the boys and she knew that the crowd was enjoying it immensely. Feeling somewhat left out, she decided to contribute to their zany theatrics. So she rummaged through Bob's toolbox until she found the large pair of scissors that she'd seen him use earlier while setting up the booth.

The crowd went wild when Jen suddenly appeared, waving the big shiny shears high in the air. She handed them over to Brad, stuck out her tongue at Michelle, and then scurried back to her hiding place behind the booth. Jen was delighted to hear the uproarious laughter and scattered applause that she knew was meant for her.

With a devilish grin, Brad carefully snipped completely around the ankle of each of Michelle's heavy woolen socks. Then following Mike's lead, and with much anticipation, the crowd began to yell.

"FIVE!.....FOUR!.....THREE!!.....TWO!!.....ONE!!!"

Brad yanked off both severed socks with a single swift motion, instantly exposing Michelle's little feet. She let out a gasp and frantically wiggled her toes while feigning a look of sheer terror and shock.

Mike and Jason grabbed her squirming feet and held them still so that Brad could place the ribbon loops around her big toes. As she felt her soles being slowly stretched back and her toes securely tied, Michelle realized that her horrified facial expression wasn't completely bogus. She knew that dozens of eyes were now staring at the bottoms of her feet, and that she was about to receive the most dreadful tickling of her life. But she quickly suppressed her anxiety by thinking about how great it would feel to win the big prize. More than anything else, Michelle wanted to pick up where Jen had left off so that their game would continue to raise lots of money. And she was willing to do just about anything to make that happen.

Many people were still laughing and smiling, having truly enjoyed the hilarious little diversion that the quick-witted students had so cleverly improvised. But with the new prisoner now barefoot and ready to accept her punishment, they just couldn't wait for the tickling game to resume.

## Chapter Three

An extremely handsome young man who'd been waiting at the head of the line stepped forward and neatly placed a five-dollar bill onto the podium. Michelle found him quite attractive, and she was delighted that he was the very first person who would try to make her laugh. She also thought he looked vaguely familiar, admitting to herself that she certainly ought to remember a face as gorgeous as his.

"I consider it my duty to assist in the punishment of this wayward young woman!" he bellowed, pointing an accusing finger at Michelle. "Tickling her naked feet whilst she be helplessly confined in the public stocks seems quite the appropriate method to silence her blasphemous tongue!"

The moment Michelle heard his slight British accent she remembered where she'd seen him before. He was a checkout clerk at the supermarket and she'd been to his register several times. But she never recalled having heard him speak with such arrogance and pomposity while ringing up her groceries. Even so, she couldn't deny that she was somewhat aroused by his lean muscular build and piercing blue eyes.

"Sir, you have one minute...beginning NOW!" Jason announced as he started the timing clock.

The young man smiled at Michelle and began to gently stroke her right foot with his fingertips. But instead of looking down at her feet, he stared deeply into her lovely green eyes. He deftly tickled her heel and sole, never once looking away. He then traced tiny circles around the ball of her foot and playfully pinched her toes.

Although it tickled considerably, Michelle managed to maintain her composure. She even found it quite pleasurable in that the combination of his steady gaze and delicate touch sent shivers racing up and down her spine. But when he started tickling both feet, her self-control quickly waned and muffled giggles began to escape through her nose. Michelle pressed her lips tightly together and tried forcing herself not to laugh. But it was no use. She was now on the verge of laughing out loud, yet only ten seconds remained on the clock.

Realizing this, the young man tickled Michelle a bit more aggressively right in the center of her soles. Her mouth instantly popped open and a torrent of ticklish laughter poured out.

"HeeHeeHeeHaHaHaHaHaHaHa! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Michelle had actually enjoyed being gently tickled by this great-looking guy, and she didn't even mind that he'd won. She was, however, a little disappointed in herself for not holding out for those final ten seconds.

After receiving his prize, the young man leaned over the stocks and said, "I'd like to thank you for being such a good sport. It takes a lot of courage to do what you're doing, and I really admire that quality in a person. By the way, my name is Ben Richardson. And you are...?"

"Michelle...Michelle Sullivan," she answered warmly.

"Well, I work at Christy's until six o'clock on weekdays. Maybe you'd care to stop by one day after work so that we might chat. Or, perhaps you would enjoy conversing over dinner sometime?"

"Yes, that sounds very nice. But there's just one thing you should know. I really don't have a blasphemous tongue!"

"Oh, sorry about that, Michelle!" he said with a laugh. "I truly apologize for my pompous-ass opening rant. But after watching that amusing little skit you and your friends put on, I just couldn't resist playing along!"

Michelle gave Ben one last friendly smile as he walked away from the booth. She was very glad that they'd spoken briefly, and she definitely intended to take him up on his offer for dinner. In fact, she was so enthralled by him, she didn't even notice that she was about to be tickled by three of her classmates.

"SIX MINUTES!" Jason exclaimed, proudly proclaiming the largest single donation thus far.

Michelle was jolted back to reality when she suddenly realized that three girls from her calculus class had just given thirty dollars to Brad.

"Oh, no! Not YOU guys!" she cried with despair.

Michelle had refused to help them cheat on the calculus midterm back in March. She recalled how much it had angered them, and she knew that they still held a grudge.

The three young women grabbed some items from the tray and then stood in front of the stocks, glaring wickedly at Michelle.

"Hello, Michelle! Guess what time it is...it's PAYBACK time!" snarled one of the girls while slowly scraping the palm of her own hand with a white plastic fork.

"That's right!" a second girl agreed as she twirled the pink toothbrush she'd chosen. "Maybe you'll think twice the next time we ask you to do us a favor!"

Waggling a fistful of Q-tips, the third girl crudely remarked, "So get ready to scream your pretty little head off 'cause we're gonna tickle the shit out of you!"

Almost in tears, Michelle looked woefully at Brad, Mike and Jason.

"Guys...PLEASE...you CAN'T let them play! They don't even CARE about the game! They're just looking to get even! Believe me, they're really going to TORTURE me!"



“Hey, that’s not FAIR!” shouted the first girl. “Our money is JUST as good as anyone else’s! You HAVE to let us play!”

Several people in line began voicing their agreement with the girls. Understandably, they, themselves, didn’t want to be denied a chance to play if Michelle decided that she ‘didn’t like’ them.

Brad, Mike and Jason huddled together to quickly assess the situation. They recalled that one of the things they’d talked about at their pre-carnival meeting was what to do if a player became overzealous or abusive. The students had read that in the past, occupants of stocks and pillories were often pelted with objects like rotten fruit, mud and stones, and that injuries were quite common. Of course, they weren’t expecting anyone to be hurling rocks at the girls. But a pie in the face or a dousing of water wasn’t totally out of the question, considering that there’s a prankster in every crowd. They realized that Jen and Michelle would be unable to defend themselves since, in the interest of realism, they’d agreed to the use of actual restraints. Therefore, it was Brad, Mike and Jason’s responsibility to quickly intervene if the health or safety of the girls was ever in jeopardy. They also agreed to eject anyone who didn’t abide by the rules of the game. And one of those rules clearly stated that tickling was the only form of punishment allowed to be inflicted upon the prisoner. As the boys saw it, Michelle’s classmates were obviously seeking revenge. But their only intent was, indeed, tickling.

“I’m sorry, Michelle,” Jason apologized. “It really wouldn’t be fair to turn them away. As long as they stick to the rules, we have to let them play.”

Michelle’s initial reaction was to call it quits, right then and there, but then she quickly changed her mind. She realized that the guys had actually made the right decision. As long as her classmates did nothing more than tickle her feet, there really *was* no good reason to refuse their money. And besides, quitting would be admitting defeat, and those three rancorous girls would then have won by default. So Michelle mustered every ounce of her courage by focusing her mind on the important issues at hand. She thought about all of the seriously ill children who would benefit from the medical research that was being funded by today’s event. A couple of hours of ticklish discomfort sure seemed trivial when compared to the suffering of those kids. She also reminded herself that the girls’ donation was actually worth ninety dollars, thanks to Bob’s two-for-one pledge.

“Start the timer, boys!” Michelle boldly declared with an astonishing look of determination and resolve. “I can take ANYTHING that those bitches can dish out!”

“Oooh, little ‘Miss Perfect’ really *does* swear on Sunday!” the second girl remarked. “Well, let’s see how tough she really is! Ready, girls?”

Brad collected the money from the next person in line and the tickling started all over again. And in a matter of seconds, Michelle began laughing uncontrollably.

Without exception, everyone who tickled Michelle was easily able to make her laugh. And just as was the case with Jen, some players continued to tickle her long after they had officially won. Many folks found that tickling Michelle was even more fun than winning the prize itself. They loved making her laugh and squirm and bounce around on the bench. And they especially enjoyed it when she'd toss her head from side to side, causing her long red hair to lash wildly against the wooden post to which her wrists were bound. It was obvious that Michelle was even more ticklish than Jen, and it was truly amazing that she could withstand being tickled so much. But Michelle had a remarkable amount of determination, resilience and fortitude, plus a deep sense of commitment to the charity. She was, without question, a true role model amongst her peers.

Michelle was promptly released at the conclusion of her first hour in the stocks. She smiled to the crowd as they applauded and cheered, having wholeheartedly appreciated her great performance. Michelle's smile grew even wider when Brad whispered to her that there was nearly six hundred dollars in the cashbox. She rubbed her wrists and ankles, and then slowly walked behind the booth where Jen was waiting to greet her.

"Michelle, you were just great! You hung in there like a real trooper!"

"Thanks, Jen! By the way, we've already collected about six hundred dollars, and that line of people keeps getting longer. If things continue like this, we're a shoe-in for that big prize!"

"*Shoe-in?*" Jen giggled, looking down at Michelle's bare feet and then at her own.

"Very funny!" Michelle snickered. She then sat down on the grass and began pulling off what was left of her socks. "Jen, I couldn't believe it when you came out before, waving those big scissors! It sure was hilarious. But just look at these socks! They're ruined!"

"Not really. You now have a nice pair of leg warmers!" Jen quipped as Michelle held up the two limp woolen tubes. "Well, I better get out there before the boys come and drag me off to the stocks!"

Jen strolled around to the front of the booth, stepped onto the platform and sat down on the bench. The guys securely restrained her wrists, ankles, shins and big toes, just as they'd done before. Once again, Jen's feet were trapped in the stocks with a big enticing bull's-eye encircling each of them. Jason and Brad then quickly replenished the nearly empty rack with more prizes that would undoubtedly be handed out during the next two hours.

## Chapter Four

Unlike the other four students who were all from out-of-state, Jen was born and raised in this small college town. She knew almost everyone, and many of them were here at the carnival today. One such person was Dr. Paul Goodwin, who now stood before her smiling and ready to play the game.

“Hello, Jennifer, how’ve you been feeling?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Okay, I guess,” she answered softly.

“Well, I think you should have your Babinski reflex tested,” he said as he removed a pair of tongue depressors from the inside pocket of his sports jacket.

“Bab-WHAT-ski reflex?” she asked with a puzzled look on her face. “I never heard of a BabaaaahhHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Jen continued to laugh as Dr. Goodwin scraped both of her soles with the ends of the tongue depressors. “HeeHeeHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHA! Is my BabahahHAHAHA okay? HeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Satisfied that he’d won so quickly, the kind-hearted old doctor stopped tickling Jen and said, “Yes, your Babinski reflex is fine. And judging by the sound of your hearty laughter, I’d have to say that your lungs are perfectly normal, too! By the way, I’ve been to most of the other game booths and yours is, by far, the most creative, original and fun! I must congratulate you kids for coming up with such a great game!”

“Thanks, Dr. Goodwin, but we really can’t take all the credit. You see, it was actually Mr. Nelson’s idea!”

“Bob Nelson’s idea? Hmm...now *why* doesn’t that surprise me?” he rhetorically asked, his eyes widening with amusement behind his golden spectacles.

Jen didn’t quite understand Dr. Goodwin’s last remark, but she continued to ponder it as the next player came forward. Jen knew the young man because he worked in the college bookstore. But what she didn’t know was that after he’d finished drinking his Coke, he’d dipped his fingers into the crushed ice that remained in the cup.

“AaaaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!” she screamed as his frigid fingers made sudden contact with her soft sensitive soles. “Oh, God! It’s COLD, it’s COLD! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP! AaaaaaaahHA!!”

Jen laughed even harder when the brazen bookseller began worming his icy fingers between her toes.

“YaaaaaahhhhhhHAHAHA! NO! NO! NOT THERE!! Aaaaaaahhhh! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Stop it! HAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP IT!!”

He actually *did* stop a few moments later. Fortunately for Jen, he’d only made a five-dollar donation and his time had run out.

Jen was unable to contain her ticklish laughter during the remainder of the hour, and she didn’t even attempt to get back into any semblance of character. That became especially evident when a former boyfriend named Brian played the game. He was still extremely fond of Jen, and he really hoped they’d get back together again. So he decided to leave her with a little souvenir, one that would clearly make his true feelings known.

“Brian! How are you? I...I’ve been meaning to call you,” Jen fibbed, trying to play down the fact that it was her idea to end the relationship.

But he saw right through her subterfuge and chose not to reply. Instead, he slowly removed a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket.

“Oh, NO!” Jen shrieked as he began writing little love notes all over her feet. “HaaHaaHaHaHaHaHeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! NO! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! PLEASE! HAHAHAHAHA! The pen tickles too much! HeeHeeHeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! AaaaaaahHA!!”

He finished his amorous memento by drawing a tiny heart onto each of her ticklish toes. From that point on, everyone who played the game had an opportunity to read what Brian had written on her feet. And as embarrassed as she was by that, Jen was absolutely mortified when several people actually read the intimate inscriptions out loud.

When Jen’s tickle-time was finally over, Michelle quickly took her place in the stocks. Michelle wanted the final hour of the game to be even more successful than any of the previous three. But she was also quite tired despite the fact that she had rested. So instead of putting up a mock fight as she’d done earlier, she just sat there calmly while the boys locked her ankles in place and tied up her toes. She even held up her arms voluntarily as they securely strapped her wrists to the post.

Just as before, everyone who tickled Michelle got her to laugh within seconds. It was becoming a challenge for her to simply catch her breath and to keep from passing out. But her team spirit remained very strong and she refused to quit, especially since she knew that the carnival would soon be over. And being able to see the cashbox from her vantage point was yet another source of encouragement. It had become so overstuffed with bills, the lid could no longer be closed.

Jen really enjoyed watching the game through the hole in the backdrop during Michelle's final hour. But she, too, was extremely tired and could barely stand up. So she decided to lie down on the grass and rest. That way, at least she'd still be able to hear what was going on out front. But Jen was even more tired than she'd realized, and within a few minutes, she was sound asleep.

Michelle breathed a long sigh of relief as she watched the last group of people in line pay their money and step up to the stocks. They were Mr. and Mrs. Henderson along with their seven-year-old son, Johnny, who was contentedly consuming a huge vanilla ice cream cone. And since it was such a beautiful day, the Hendersons had also decided to bring their two dogs. Michelle knew the young family well. Their house was located right down the street from the building in which she shared an apartment with Jen. Mrs. Henderson had often invited the girls over for a piece of her homemade pie or a tall glass of lemonade. And it always proved to be a wonderful treat, especially after a long hard day of classes.

“Oh, hi Michelle!” chirped Mrs. Henderson. “I almost didn’t recognize you in that lovely costume! Well, I think it’s just *wonderful* that you’re helping to raise money for the Children’s Hospital by letting people tickle your feet! I *never* would’ve thought up such a crazy game! But we just made a ten-dollar donation, and we want to win a toy for our son. So, get ready to be tickled!”

As Mrs. Henderson reached for a feather, Johnny's ice cream cone, which was melting profusely, began to drip onto Michelle's right foot.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!!” she screamed as the frigid liquid oozed between her toes. But instead of protesting Johnny’s accidental spillage as one would’ve expected, she suddenly burst out laughing.

“HeeHeeHeeHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!  
HaHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“Oh, my Lord!” cried Mrs. Henderson. “Look! Duke is *licking* Johnny’s ice cream from her foot!”

Sure enough, the big black dog was happily licking Michelle's right foot. Mrs. Henderson instinctively grabbed Duke's leash and quickly pulled him away. She was even going to apologize to Michelle for her son's careless behavior. But just as she was about to speak, Mr. Henderson interrupted her by suddenly whispering into her ear. She began to giggle and nod to her husband as she continued to tightly hold onto the leash. Michelle looked at both of them with bewilderment and uncertainty. But it wasn't long before she realized what her normally benevolent neighbors were planning to do.

“Johnny, give me your ice cream,” Mr. Henderson said to his son. “I promise I’ll buy you another one later.”

Flashing an adorable grin, Johnny surrendered the cone without hesitation as he undoubtedly began to visualize his father's devilish little scheme.

Mr. Henderson turned the melting cone upside-down and held it directly above Michelle's left foot, thus allowing it to drip like a faucet. He then held it over her right foot, and then again, over her left foot. He repeated this process until both of her feet were completely covered with a thick sticky layer of melted vanilla ice cream. Next, he guided their other dog, Daisy, over to Michelle's left foot since Duke was still hungrily eyeing her right foot.

Michelle silently watched in total shock and disbelief. The two big dogs, each still held by a leash, were now poised mere inches away from her cold naked feet. Mr. Henderson then winked to his wife, and the two leashes were simultaneously released. Both dogs instantly lurched forward and began rapidly licking Michelle's captive bare feet. They licked and licked and licked at every single square inch, every cute little crease and crevice, of her incredibly ticklish feet.

Michelle went completely berserk. She thrashed violently and screamed at the top of her lungs with deranged maniacal laughter.

"HEEEHEEEHAAAHAHAHEEEHEEEHAAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!  
YIIIIIIEEEEEEEEHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

The crowd also went wild with laughter as they watched the two playful dogs licking Michelle's feet and making her howl like a lunatic. Amazingly, they kept on licking and licking even after there wasn't a single drop of ice cream left on her feet. With her ankles held firm in the stocks, and with her big toes tethered and her wrists tightly bound, there was no possible way for Michelle to escape those relentless canine tongues.

"HELP!! HAHAHAHAHELP!! HELP!! HEEHEEHEEHAHAHA!!"  
she yelled to Brad, Mike and Jason.

But they were of no use at all. Instead of helping her, they simply stood there laughing hysterically just like everyone else.

Jen was slowly awakened by Michelle's horrific shrieking and desperate cries for help. It sounded much worse than her usual screams of ticklish laughter, so she immediately got up and ran out front to investigate. It didn't take long for her to realize that Michelle was in serious trouble. Jen quickly grabbed the two leashes and pulled the dogs away from the stocks. Mr. Henderson took the leashes from her and then gave them to Johnny to hold.

"Oh, my God! I...I thought I was g...going to die!" Michelle stammered while trying to catch her breath. "Girl, am I glad to see YOU!"

"Yeah, I'll bet you are!" Jen replied as she began untying Michelle's toes. "Come on, guys, let's get her out of this thing! She's had enough fun for one day!"

The boys unstrapped Michelle's wrists and legs, opened the stocks, and helped her up from the bench. Although it had only been a few minutes in duration, Michelle's ordeal seemed like an eternity to her. Her throat was sore from laughing and screaming, and every muscle in her body ached.

After stumbling a few steps, Michelle sat down on the edge of the platform and leaned forward, allowing her head to dangle between her knees. Brad, Mike and Jason cautiously gathered around her. They knew that they had some explaining to do.

"Michelle, I don't know what came over us," Mike said as he gently rubbed her shoulder. "It was just such an outrageous scene seeing those dogs driving you nuts like that!"

Michelle looked up at him wearily. "You guys were supposed to protect us if things got out of hand! Remember? We even talked about it at the meeting!"

"Yes, yes, I know we did," Jason admitted, "and we're really sorry we didn't put a stop to it right away. But it was almost as if we couldn't!"

"That's right," Brad agreed. "We were so overcome with hysterics, it was almost like we were *frozen* with laughter! It was really weird!"

Jen sat down next to Michelle and gave her a big hug. Michelle slowly stood up, and then each of the guys hugged her, too.

"Okay, boys, apologies accepted," she sighed. "Oh, and you're right about one thing, Brad...it *was* really weird!"

Feeling a bit guilty for what they had done, the Hendersons walked over to Michelle and offered her an apology as well.

"Honestly, I don't know *what* we were thinking," Mrs. Henderson said with a shrug. "I guess we just got caught up in the heat of the moment. We're both really sorry, and we want to try and make it up to you."

Mr. Henderson withdrew a one hundred dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Michelle. "Here...we'd like to make an additional donation. It's the least we can do, considering what you and Jen have been through today. I also hope that you girls are still willing to be our guests the next time Sarah bakes one of her 'world-famous' lemon meringue pies!"

"Thank you, both," Michelle said with a smile as she crammed the money into the cashbox. "Those kids in the hospital will be helped even more now. Oh, and we could *never* refuse a piece of your pie, Mrs. Henderson! Right, Jen? Oh well, I guess I'm really no worse for wear...and I still got all my toes!"

Michelle looked down and wiggled her toes, assuring herself that all ten of them were, indeed, still attached. Everybody laughed. They were all very happy to see that Michelle was back to her usual self, wisecracks and all.



Brad and Mike began counting the money in the cashbox as the other three students eagerly looked on. Bob Nelson soon joined them, arriving just in time to hear Brad announce the total amount they had collected.

“One thousand, one hundred eighty-five dollars!”

“Outstanding, truly outstanding!” Bob praised. “And now it’s time for me to fulfill *my* part of the bargain.”

Bob immediately wrote out a check for twice that amount, thus bringing their grand total to nearly three thousand, six hundred dollars. The students were overjoyed as they excitedly awaited the announcement of the winning game booth, which was to take place in less than an hour.

After the college fundraising committee had completed their official tally, the closing ceremony got underway at the band-shell. As in previous years, and to the dismay of some, the festivities began with a rather long-winded speech by Mayor Jenkins. Once the applause that followed his speech had subsided, he cleared his throat and continued.

“And now, it gives me great pleasure to introduce a group of remarkable young citizens! Not only have these dedicated students succeeded in raising the most money at TODAY’S carnival, they’ve actually raised more money than has EVER been raised by ANY group of students in the forty-three year history of this splendid event! The prize for the most successful game booth at this year’s Brenner County Children’s Hospital fundraising carnival goes to...THE TICKLING GAME!”

Jen, Michelle, Brad, Jason and Mike proudly came forward as their names were announced and joined Mayor Jenkins on stage. They were all still wearing their Colonial costumes because they thought it’d be more fun to accept their awards dressed that way. Jen and Michelle hadn’t even bothered to put their shoes back on. Remaining true to their characters, both girls stood barefoot while smiling broadly into the large crowd of spectators.

Mayor Jenkins enthusiastically shook the students’ hands. He then presented each of them with a beautifully framed mayoral citation, and a large envelope containing several hundred dollars worth of gift certificates that were donated by local businesses. After peeking into her envelope and quickly thumbing through them, Jen started to giggle.

“Michelle...look! Here’s one for a free pedicure!”

Everyone laughed, including Mayor Jenkins. He then asked the girls if it was all worth it. And to that Michelle instantly replied, “Well, yes...except maybe for those damned DOGS!”

## Chapter Five

Michelle slowly opened her eyes, but all she could see amid the eerie darkness was the faint flickering of distant flames. She was confused and frightened, not knowing where she was or how she'd gotten there. As she gradually became more aware of her surroundings, she made several alarming discoveries. She could tell that she was lying on some sort of table with her arms extended above her head and her legs spread slightly apart. Michelle began to panic when she suddenly realized that she couldn't move her limbs, and felt the cold metal shackles that tightly encircled her wrists and ankles. She then noticed that the flames had begun to approach her. They grew nearer and nearer with each passing second. And feeling the chilly dampness of the air against her trim petite body made her shockingly aware of one more fact...she was totally naked!

Michelle was now terrified as a group of people, if in fact they actually *were* people, began to silently surround her. They appeared to be faceless figures cloaked in black hooded robes, and several of them were holding torches. The flames allowed her to now see that her long red hair had been woven into a pair of braids that flowed down her shoulders and onto her breasts. Completely petrified, Michelle began to scream.

"HELP! HELP!"

The robed figures did not respond in any way. There was only deafening silence. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a metallic clicking sound, and Michelle felt her arms and legs being stretched even more tightly.

"Oh, my God! You've put me on a RACK! Who ARE you people and why are you DOING this to me? HELP!"

Again, there was silence, followed by a slightly different clicking sound. Michelle then felt the middle of the table pushing up against her lower back, causing her belly and hips to be raised several inches higher than the rest of her body.

"Why are you TORTURING me? What've I done WRONG?"

Once again, there was total silence. Michelle began to wonder if there'd be yet another dreadful clicking sound accompanied by an even more hideous stretching of her nude body. But instead of hearing sounds, she felt fingers...long, cold, grotesque fingers...dozens of them. And they began tickling every inch of her body. Several fingers tickled her soft smooth belly in its arched-up position, while a single ugly one mercilessly probed her quivering navel. A number of others grasped the ends of her braids and used them to tickle her armpits. Many more fingers quickly joined in and tickled her ribs, thighs, hips and knees. Still others tickled her wiggling bare feet from her heels to the tips of her toes.

“HAHAHAHAHA! You BASTARDS! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Stop tickling me! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I...HaHaHaHaHa...CAN’T...HeeHeeHeeHaHaHaHaaaaa...BREATH!”

Michelle was now coughing and gasping for air, and she was beginning to lose consciousness. Then suddenly, she felt a warm hand tugging on her arm and heard a familiar voice calling her name.

“Wake up, Michelle! WAKE UP!”

The evil darkness of the dungeon slowly melted away as it was gradually replaced by the sunlight that was shining through her bedroom window.

“You must’ve been having a really bad dream,” Jen said to Michelle as she hugged her. “You were screaming in your sleep!”

“Oh, it was horrible! I was naked, and on a torture rack, and all these awful tickling fingers were...”

“I can *imagine*!” Jen interrupted. “It’s no wonder you had such a terrible nightmare after what we went through at yesterday’s carnival! And speaking of which, you gotta see this! Look, we’re famous!”

Jen held up a copy of the local morning newspaper. The headline read, “A TICKLISH SITUATION”, and there was a big front-page picture of Michelle being tickled by Dr. Lasky, her dentist.

Michelle’s pretty green eyes widened with amazement. “Unbelievable! How did we make the papers?”

“Mike drove you back here right after the closing ceremony because you said you were just too tired to help tear down the booth...remember? Well, you collapsed on the bed and fell asleep. And I guess you weren’t kidding about being so tired because you’ve actually slept straight through ‘til this morning! Anyway, after Mike returned to the campus, a reporter from the *Hastington Herald* came over and interviewed us. He’d also taken a bunch of pictures during the carnival. Here, read the article!”

Michelle excitedly took the newspaper from Jen and began to read it out loud.

“Butler College coeds Jennifer Adams and Michelle Sullivan were literally laughing for dollars at yesterday’s annual fundraising carnival; \$3,555 to be exact. It was all part of a clever game in which they portrayed two unruly Colonial girls who’d committed the ‘crime’ of swearing on Sunday. So to teach them both a lesson, carnival goers were encouraged to tickle their feet as they sat helplessly locked in a set of old-fashioned stocks! Clad in Colonial costume, they each spent two tumultuous one-hour sessions with their bare feet trapped in the large frame-like device that was built by local craftsman, Bob Nelson. Mr. Nelson also pledged a double-dollars matching fund which helped their innovative ‘tickling game’ raise the most money at the carnival. In fact, their record-breaking grand total was, by far, the largest amount ever raised by a single group of Butler students since the inception of the event forty-three years ago.”

Michelle smiled with satisfaction as she continued reading aloud.

“Dozens of people eagerly lined up to pay five dollars for each minute that they were permitted to torment the ticklish tootsies. In addition to the fun of ‘punishing’ the young women for their petty offense, players also won a prize if they could make the lovely lasses laugh. So, how did our pretty prisoners fare? Well, let’s just say that a lot of prizes were won! Also to be commended are Jason Carver, Bradford Simmons and Michael Romano for their realistic and humorous supporting roles. At the closing ceremony, Mayor Jenkins acknowledged the admirable achievement of the five resourceful students by presenting each of them with a framed certificate and a generous prize. All proceeds from the carnival will go to the Brenner County Children’s Hospital for pediatric cancer research.”

Beaming with pride, Michelle handed the newspaper back to Jen.

“Oh, and look here, Michelle! There are two more pictures on page three...one of *me* laughing like a hyena, and one of *you* with Duke and Daisy licking your feet!”

“That tickled the worst! Another minute, and I would’ve gone totally out of my mind! Thanks again for coming to my rescue!”

“Hey, what are friends for? Well, you better get up now or *we’re* going to be late for classes!”

Michelle immediately jumped out of bed, took a brief shower and quickly got dressed. The two girls then left the apartment and headed off to school.

That evening, Jen and Michelle were still laughing and joking about the carnival. Just then, the telephone rang and Michelle answered it promptly.

“Oh, hello Mr. Taylor...”

There was a moment of silence as Michelle listened and nodded.

“Um...okay, I’ll tell her. I’m sure we’ll both be able to come. Bye!”

“What was *that* all about?” Jen asked.

“That was Henry Taylor, you know, the chairman of the Town Board of Trustees. He wants us to come to a special meeting at Town Hall tomorrow night at eight PM. He wouldn’t tell me on the phone what it’s all about, but he did say that Brad, Jason, Mike and Mr. Nelson will all be there.”

“Hmm, I can’t wait to find out what’s going on,” Jen said with a grin.

The students arrived at Town Hall on the following evening without a clue as to why they’d been asked to come. As they entered, Bob Nelson waved and then pointed to the five front-row seats he’d saved for them. Henry Taylor, Judge Potter, Mayor Jenkins, and Police Chief Edwards were seated at the long front table. Many prominent citizens, business owners, and college faculty members were present throughout the large meeting hall.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you all for coming!” Henry Taylor began. “I’m sure that most of you are wondering why you are here. Well, we have a problem in this town...a BIG problem! Would the Butler College students please rise!”

The students looked at each other nervously as they slowly stood up.

“These five young people represent what ISN’T our problem! In fact, they exemplify what creative, honest, and civic-minded youth are capable of. As virtually everyone knows, these ingenious students have raised nearly three thousand, six hundred dollars for a very worthy cause! I would especially like to commend Michelle Sullivan and Jennifer Adams for their exceptional bravery, perseverance, and stamina! You may all be seated.”

A thunderous round of applause greeted the students’ ears as they proudly took their seats. Chairman Taylor then continued.

“Now that we all know what ISN’T our problem, let me tell you what IS! Tonya Sheppard, Laura Pierce and Jodi Blake are names that, unfortunately, most of you know all too well. During the past two years, those delinquents have been the source of so much grief in this town! They’ve been arrested many times for shoplifting, vandalism, graffiti painting, and numerous other crimes. And yet even after serving time in jail, they arrogantly and boldly continue to assault our community!”

Henry Taylor nodded to Judge Potter, who then began to speak.

“They were arrested again...on Sunday, at the carnival. Ironically, they were caught trying to steal the cashbox from one of the game booths! All three of them were found guilty at yesterday’s trial, and they’re now in the county jail awaiting my sentencing. Sadly, their parents have given up on them long ago and they’ve refused to post bond. At the trial, as in all the other times they’ve appeared in my court, they showed no sign of remorse whatsoever. Completely frustrated and stymied by the cavalier attitude of those three young miscreants, I decided to discuss the situation with the Board of Trustees, Chief Edwards, and one very concerned citizen. As a result of those discussions, I am now considering an extremely drastic, but hopefully effective, solution. Would Mr. Bob Nelson please come forward!”

Bob rose and stepped to the podium that was adjacent to the front table.

“Thank you, Judge Potter, and good evening everyone. Most of you know me as a carpenter by trade, but I also happen to have a keen interest in American history. Three hundred years ago, our small New England town wasn’t even called Hastington. It was a tiny Colonial village known as Hodge’s Landing. Right outside this building, on the very same parcel of land that’s now our Town Square...stood the village stocks! There was also a pillory and a whipping post! Back in those days, the punishment for even a minor offense was often quite harsh. And as a result, there was very little serious crime. Now, I’m certainly not suggesting that we *whip* these three defiant girls, but I *do* think we should consider using some of those historic devices to lock them firmly in place...right in Town Square! That way, everyone could watch as they receive *another* form of punishment! I’m thoroughly convinced that they can be *tickled* into becoming law-abiding citizens!”

Whispers, murmurs, and even a few giggles echoed throughout the room as Bob continued to speak.

“I know, I know...many of you think that sitting in the stocks and having your feet tickled isn’t so bad. After all, these two lovely young ladies each agreed to endure two hours of it at the carnival. True. They *did* volunteer to be tickled, hoping to raise lots of money for charity. And as we all know, they’ve certainly succeeded!”

Bob motioned to Jen and Michelle to come forward. They quickly stood up and joined him at the podium, Jen to his left and Michelle to his right.

“Things got off to a really good start, didn’t they, Jen? You were able to hold back your laughter as those teenage boys tickled your feet with their feathers! It even seemed like you were having fun with them, and that the game was an exciting challenge for you. The look of satisfaction on your face after you’d beaten them was priceless!”

“Yeah! It *was* a great feeling to send those boys packing...*without* a prize!” Jen exclaimed.

Bob smiled broadly and said, “Michelle, I’ll bet that you really enjoyed being tickled by your first opponent, too. It sure *looked* like you did! And I couldn’t help but notice how that handsome young fellow took quite a liking to you!”

Michelle’s face broke out in a blush that was almost as red as her hair.

“Oh, God! I was hoping it wasn’t *that* obvious! But you’re right about the tickling, Mr. Nelson. His soft touch actually gave me the quivers!”

Bob spread his arms widely and placed his hands on the girls’ shoulders.

“But as the game progressed, things didn’t remain so pleasant for these two courageous young women. It wasn’t long before they realized that they might’ve gotten more than they’d bargained for. And when it was finally over, they’d each found the whole experience to be quite an ordeal!”

“He sure is right about THAT!” cried Michelle. “I even had a horrible nightmare about tickling that I still can’t get out of my mind!”

“It really *was* an excruciating ordeal!” Jen agreed. “At times, it was pure agony! Some folks kept on ticking and tickling even AFTER they won a prize!”

Bob reassuringly rubbed the girls’ shoulders and said, “Well, you each had a moment or two where it looked like you might’ve actually quit. But neither of you did! And you should both be extremely proud of that fact, as WE are all proud of YOU!”

There was another deafening round of applause. But this time, it evolved into a huge standing ovation. Bob thanked Jen and Michelle for all of their help and then they both returned to their seats. Once the din had finally diminished, Bob continued to address the meeting.

“All that having been said, I can assure you that their carnival game was a proverbial ‘walk in the park’ compared to what I’m proposing as punishment for Miss Sheppard, Pierce and Blake! For the most part, the tickling was done in good fun and spirits. Many of those who played the game knew Jen and Michelle personally and admired them for what they were doing. And although a few players went far beyond merely winning a prize and seemed hell-bent on torturing the girls, many other folks were actually quite gentle and had mercy on their soles!”

There was a sudden burst of laughter in response to Bob’s obvious pun.

“Now...imagine being locked in a pillory or in stocks, right in the middle of Town Square...with every ticklish part of your body fully exposed and stripped down to the bare flesh! Then, imagine being tickled without mercy...for an entire day! *THAT’S* what I’m talkin’ about! And it certainly would *not* be voluntary for those three delinquents! They would *not* have the option of ‘quitting’! They’d simply have no choice but to withstand as much ticklish torment as we’d be willing to subject them to!”

A few people whispered and giggled as they’d done before, but many others began to applaud.

Mayor Jenkins then turned to Bob and said, “Mr. Nelson, you seem to be quite a tickle expert and I’m truly fascinated by your ideas. But for your plan to be effective, those three troublesome girls would have to be ticklish. I’m not an expert like you, but I *do* know that not everyone is ticklish. How can we be sure that they are?”

“Dr. Goodwin has graciously agreed to help us determine if they are ticklish, and to what degree. Of course, if none of them are, we’ll just have to think of something else. But assuming they *are* ticklish, and depending on *where* they’re most ticklish, they would each be confined in the most appropriate way. The stocks that I built for the students’ game booth is more than adequate for restraining a ‘real’ prisoner. Jen and Michelle would surely attest to that fact! And in keeping with our town’s history, I plan on building two more items...a specially-designed pillory and, not a whipping post, but a *tickling* post!”

Chairman Taylor smiled at Bob with approval. “Thank you, Mr. Nelson. You’ve obviously made a very strong case in favor of your somewhat unorthodox, but certainly provocative, suggestion. I’d now like to open the floor to those of you who have questions or comments.”

Reverend Thomas was the first one to raise his hand and ask a question.

“Like everyone else, I’m thoroughly fed up with the appalling behavior of those three troublemakers! But can this be done *legally*? I realize that corporal punishment such as public flogging was routinely meted out even after the Bill of Rights was adopted in 1791. But by today’s standards, wouldn’t tickling someone against their will be considered cruel and unusual punishment?”

“Yes, Reverend Thomas, it probably would,” Judge Potter replied. “The Constitution is generally considered to be a ‘living document’ and it is usually interpreted as such. By today’s standards, it probably *would* be a violation of the Eighth Amendment if a court-appointed individual were to administer any form of physical punishment. And that is precisely why my sentencing would make no mention of tickling. The sentences would merely stipulate that the prisoners are to be confined in public, rather than in jail. It could easily be argued that public detention can serve as an excellent deterrent aimed at those who might be inclined to break the law. Brenner County corrections officers are, of course, permitted to use handcuffs, leg irons, and various other restraining devices. In this case, they’d simply be instructed to use some really old ones! Now as we all know, our town has a very small police department. So it *is* possible that our officers might be a little ‘too busy’ on that particular day to notice if any of the *townspeople* happen to tickle the prisoners! Isn’t that right, Chief Edwards?”

“That’s right!” he agreed. “It’s impossible for us to be everywhere!”

Reverend Thomas couldn’t keep from laughing as he took his seat.

Miss Weaver, owner of The Hastings House of Beauty, was the next person to be acknowledged. Her business was very successful in that it was the most popular salon in town.

“What about the girls’ physical health?” she asked with a genuine look of concern. “Suppose one of them has a bad heart...or asthma, or something? We might not like them, but we sure as hell don’t want to KILL them!”

“Excellent question, Miss Weaver!” Chairman Taylor remarked with a chuckle. “Dr. Goodwin, would you care to comment on that?”

Dr. Paul Goodwin, the physician who’d tested Jen’s Babinski reflex at Sunday’s carnival, stepped up to the podium.

“I’ve been asked to give the prisoners a complete physical examination tomorrow morning. We must be absolutely certain that they don’t have any respiratory or cardiac problems, and that they’re all in excellent health. And just to be on the safe side, I suggest that they be granted a brief rest period every so often.”

Chairman Taylor nodded appreciatively. “Thank you, Dr. Goodwin. It appears as if Miss Weaver’s concerns have all been fully addressed. But I also have a question for you. Bob Nelson said earlier that you’ve offered to help us determine if the prisoners are ticklish. Would you please explain exactly how you plan to do this?”

“Certainly! Following their physical exam, they will each undergo a special neurological evaluation, which I’ve personally devised. It’s designed to reveal which of their anatomical areas are ticklish, and to measure the tickle-sensitivity of those specific areas. The results of both the physical exams and the neurological studies will then be given to Judge Potter.”



Dr. Goodwin slowly returned to his seat. His cunning grin clearly indicated that he was probably going to enjoy administering those special exams.

The questions and comments continued for the next two hours. By that time, Judge Potter was completely convinced that tickling the young culprits was a terrific idea. And even though he had the authority to sentence the prisoners as he saw fit, he didn't want to make the final decision alone. So to make sure that he had the full backing and support of a majority of those who were present, he requested a vote be taken. It was, and the resolution was overwhelmingly passed by a margin of ten to one. The meeting was then adjourned and people began to leave.

Before going home, Judge Potter and Dr. Goodwin stepped into the Town Hall office and faxed two documents to the county jail. One was a court order that authorized Dr. Goodwin to examine the prisoners, and the other was a detailed description of the special exams. The second document also contained a list of equipment and supplies that were to be set up and ready for use in the infirmary.

"You know, Paul, those girls ought to be grateful to you," Judge Potter said as the last page inched its way through the fax machine. "They'll all be getting a free physical tomorrow."

"Yeah, I'm sure they'll be tickled to see me!"

## Chapter Six

Dr. Goodwin arrived at the Brenner County Jail early the following morning. After displaying his credentials and stepping through the metal detector, he was politely greeted by the attractive young nurse who worked in the jail's infirmary.

"Has the room been prepared exactly as I've requested?" he asked as they briskly descended the stairway that led to the basement.

"Yes, Dr. Goodwin. We got your fax and everything's all set up. Wrist and ankle restraints installed, patient monitor powered up and tested, EKG leads, BP cuff, pulse-ox, swabs..."

"Okay, that's fine," he interrupted. "I can see that you're very efficient!"

"Thank you, doctor. By the way, I had the prisoners temporarily moved to a small holding cell at the end of the hallway. After each girl has had her exam, she'll be taken directly upstairs and returned to the cell that they've been sharing since their arrest on Sunday. That way, even the last girl who's examined won't be tipped off about your 'special' exam. As far as they know, it's just a routine physical!"

"Good thinking," he praised.

Upon entering the infirmary, Dr. Goodwin took a moment to inspect the equipment just to be sure that everything was in order. Seeming quite satisfied, he handed the nurse a clipboard that he'd brought with him.

"Here are the charts I've prepared. I'll need you to enter the results in the appropriate fields as I call them out to you. Any questions?"

"No, Dr. Goodwin. It actually seems quite simple."

"Good. Then I guess we're ready to begin."

The nurse pressed a button on the wall-mounted intercom and called for the first prisoner to be brought in. A few minutes later, a rather robust female guard escorted Tonya Sheppard into the infirmary.

Tonya was nineteen years old, extremely tall, and was, without question, the most troublesome of the three girls. She was wearing a bright orange jump-suit and white canvas shoes, which is what all prisoners, both male and female, were required to wear. She had long, shiny, dark brown hair and very intense hazel eyes. She was really quite beautiful. In fact, one would think her a fine young lady...until she opened her mouth.

"I don't need no fuckin' CHECK-UP!" she snarled, standing with her arms folded tightly across her chest.

"Watch your language, young lady, and get undressed!" snapped Dr. Goodwin. He hastily grabbed a light-blue paper exam gown from a nearby shelf and tucked it between her arms. "I want you to go behind that curtain, remove everything except your panties, and put that on!"

Tonya stared at him angrily for a moment, but her eyes were soon drawn to the brown leather restraints that dangled ominously from both ends of the examination table.

“Okay, okay,” she muttered as she grudgingly stepped toward the curtain.

After changing into the gown, Tonya was weighed and measured, the results of which were one hundred forty-two pounds and five feet eleven inches, respectively. Dr. Goodwin then asked her a variety of questions concerning her medical history.

“Okay, I need you to sit up on that table and take some nice deep breaths,” he said as he slipped his stethoscope on.

Tonya climbed onto the table, albeit reluctantly. He listened carefully to her lungs and her heart, measured her blood pressure, and peered into her ears, nose and throat with a lighted instrument.

“Now, please lie on your back and extend your arms up over your head,” he instructed while winking to the nurse in a way that Tonya couldn’t see.

“NO! I won’t fuckin’ do it!” she barked.

“GUARD! We could use your help over here!” shouted the nurse.

Without saying a word, the big burly matron took Tonya by the shoulders and pushed her down, flat on her back. Then she grabbed Tonya’s arms, pulled them up over her head, and held them down firmly against the padded exam table. Seizing the opportunity, the nurse buckled the two leather cuffs securely around her wrists. Tonya began kicking and thrashing wildly, and she tried rolling herself off the side of the table. The matron had to literally wrestle with her flailing long legs before she was finally able to pin them down. She then laid across them with her full body weight, thus allowing the nurse to fasten the other pair of restraints around Tonya’s squirming ankles.

“Why are you strapping me down?” she screamed. “What the fuck are you gonna DO to me?”

Without answering, Dr. Goodwin slowly tore open the paper gown and pulled it off of her body. He then applied several small white discs to her chest and attached a wire to each of them.

“What’s that machine you’re hooking me up to? You’re gonna fuckin’ electrocute me, aren’t you?”

“Actually, it’s a Hewlett Packard 1175A patient monitor and I can assure you that it’s perfectly safe. It will provide me with a simple, basic EKG of your heart. Following that, it will monitor your vital signs during the second phase of the exam. The court has mandated these tests, and you really have no choice in the matter. So just lie there quietly until it’s all over.”

He wrapped a gray velcro cuff around her left arm, and clipped a white plastic tube, which opened like a clothespin, onto her right forefinger. A thin flexible cable extended from each of those items to a connector panel below the monitor screen.

“Please remain still for a moment and try not to move,” he told her.

Surprisingly, she obeyed. He then pressed a button that caused a strip of paper to emerge from a slot near the bottom of the monitor. He tore it off and studied it carefully.

“Fine...perfectly normal sinus rhythm. Now for your final test.”

Dr. Goodwin took a long cotton swab, dipped it into a bottle of lotion, and then used it to gently stroke Tonya’s left armpit.

“HEY! HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa! Stop that! It TICKLES!” she cried.

He totally ignored her protesting and began stroking her right underarm.

“Nooopleeeeee! HeeHeeHeeHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHA!”

He put the swab down and then rapidly tickled both of her armpits with his fingers.

“Shit! HaHaHaHaHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHA! Stop! HAHAHAHA!”

He glanced at the monitor, and then he turned to the nurse and said, “Armpits, seven.”

He then proceeded to tickle her ribs with his fingers. He started just below her armpits and gradually worked his way down her sides.

“Heeheeheeheehee, what kinda stupid test *is* this?” she giggled.

“Ribs, three,” he said, and the nurse dutifully wrote it down on the chart.

Using precisely the same technique, Dr. Goodwin methodically tested her belly, hips, thighs and knees. Since none of those areas were remarkably sensitive, he hoped that her feet would prove to be at least as ticklish as her armpits.

He took a fresh cotton swab, dipped it into the lotion, and then lightly tickled her right sole with it. She immediately gasped and grimaced while struggling forcefully against the restraints.

“HAHAHAHAHAHA! NO, not my FEET! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

He swirled the slippery swab around the ball of each foot and then drilled it into the spaces between her toes.

“AaaahHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh, shit! HAHAHAHAHA! Stop that! HeeHeeHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

He tossed the swab aside and began using his fingers, making sure not to leave a single spot on her rather large feet un-tickled.

“HEEHEEHEEHAHAHAHAHAHA! SHIT! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP, STOP! You motherfuckaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Dr. Goodwin noticed that Tonya’s heart rate had risen to one hundred and twenty-two beats per minute, and that her respiration was fast and erratic. Her blood pressure was also somewhat elevated, but her oxygen saturation level remained safely within the normal range.

“AaaaahHAHAHAHA!” Tonya continued to wail. “Fuckin’ STOP IT! AaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! SHIT, NO MORE!!”

Dr. Goodwin finally stopped and declared, “Feet, ten! And that concludes phase two of the examination.”

The matron unbuckled the restraints while the nurse quickly removed the electrodes, arm cuff and finger tube. Tonya slowly got up from the table and was allowed to rest for a moment. She got dressed, and then she was taken upstairs to the cell in which she and the two other young women had spent the last three nights.

"I know you just *hate* being in there alone," the matron sarcastically said as she swung the door shut and turned the key in the lock. "Well, you just relax, honey. Miss Pierce will be joining you shortly!"

The gargantuan female guard went back to the holding cell where Laura and Jodi were being detained.

"You're next!" she exclaimed, taking Laura firmly by the arm.

Laura Pierce was an extremely pretty eighteen-year-old girl who probably would never have been in any trouble had she not been so easily swayed by Tonya. Her long, silky blond hair and soft, baby-blue eyes gave her a look of innocence. As the matron escorted her down the dark narrow hallway, she began feeling queasy from the odor of alcohol. For as long as she could remember, the smell of alcohol in a doctor's office had always made her feel that way.

Once inside the infirmary, Laura felt even more nervous and edgy. The pale green walls, harsh fluorescent lighting, and mysterious-looking medical equipment gave her a strange foreboding feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Please get undressed behind that curtain and put this on," Dr. Goodwin instructed, handing Laura a disposable gown. "You can leave your panties on, but don't forget to take off your socks."

Laura quickly complied without a single complaint. After being weighed and measured, she sat quietly on the edge of the table while Dr. Goodwin examined her. She received the same array of tests that Tonya had received, and her medical history was taken as well.

"So far, so good," Dr. Goodwin said as he motioned for her to lie back on the table. "Now, please raise your arms above your head."

"Why?" she asked.

"Just DO it!" the matron commanded.

But Laura refused to cooperate, fearing that something just 'wasn't right'. So, as was the case with Tonya, the matron had to forcibly hold Laura down while the nurse applied the wrist and ankle restraints.

"Please, PLEASE, don't tie me down!" cried Laura, her eyes bulging with panic. "I...I'll be good! I'll do whatever you say!"

"I'm sorry about the restraints, Laura, but they're absolutely necessary for the second phase of the exam."

Dr. Goodwin tore off her gown and applied the chest electrodes, velcro cuff and finger tube. Nearly naked and bound to the table, Laura was more nervous than ever.

“W...what kind of test are you doing?” she asked tensely.

“It’s just a simple electrocardiogram,” he assured her. “It’s important that you have a healthy heart, and I can see that you do. And now it’s time for the second phase of your exam.”

As he had done with Tonya, Dr. Goodwin began by tickling Laura’s armpits. And once again, shrieks of laughter filled the infirmary as the nurse diligently wrote on the clipboard.

“HeeHeeHeeHee! Hey, stop that! HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHA!”

“Armpits, six.”

“No! HaHaHaHa! Stop it, PLEASE! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“Ribs, seven.”

“SHIT! YaaahHAHAHAHAHA! HaahHaahHaahAHAHAHAHAHA!  
HeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHA! NoooaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

“Belly, nine!”

“OH GOD, NOT THERE!! HEEHEEHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

Dr. Goodwin carefully observed the monitor screen as he probed Laura’s incredibly sensitive bellybutton with a lotion-soaked swab. He was amazed at how her heart rate would jump with each flick of the slick little stick. He also kept a close watch on her other vital signs as he continued to tickle her navel. He wanted to be sure that she could safely tolerate being incessantly tickled on what certainly appeared to be her most ticklish spot.

“OH SHIT!! STOPaaaahHAHAHAHA!! HEEHEEHAHAHAHAHA!!  
NO!! YeeeeeaaahHAHAHAHAHA!! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

“Umbilicus, ten!”

“Stop TICKLING me! HaHaHaHeeHeeHaHaHaHeeHeeHaHaHAHA!”

“Hips, six.”

“Damn you! Heeheeahahahahaheeheeahahahaha!”

“Thighs, five.”

“HaHaHaHa! No, Please! HaHaHaHaHeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHA!”

“Knees, six.”

“Heeheehee, untie me, you bastard!”

“Feet, two.”

Laura was released and then told to get dressed, but she didn’t retrieve her clothes right away. She just stood there for a moment, clad only in her panties, glaring at Dr. Goodwin resentfully.

“DAMN you!” she suddenly cried. “My bellybutton is so fuckin’ ticklish and you just wouldn’t stop! What kinda dumb-ass test *was* that? And what kinda crazy doctor *are* you?”

Laura stormed behind the curtain, still fuming with anger. Once she was dressed, the matron took her upstairs and locked her in the cell with Tonya. She then went and got Jodi Blake from the holding cell and brought her into the infirmary.

Like Laura, Jodi was also eighteen years old and blond. But Jodi wore her hair in pigtails, and her large expressive eyes were chestnut brown. Standing barely five feet tall, she was also the shortest of the three girls.

Jodi seemed rather fascinated as she stood at the infirmary entrance, her eyes slowly scanning the room like a searchlight. She was actually familiar with most of the medical equipment since, at one point in her life, she'd considered becoming a doctor...a pediatrician, most likely. It was right before she became friendly with Tonya and Laura and had subsequently gotten herself into trouble with the law. In fact, Jodi was an exceptionally bright student during her freshman and sophomore years. She showed great potential, especially in science and math. She was still very intelligent, but her dubious behavior during the past two years had all but obliterated her chances of graduating from high school, let alone, going to college.

After donning a paper exam gown, Jodi was weighed and measured and her medical history was taken. Dr. Goodwin told her to sit up on the table, which she did willingly, and then he began to examine her. She did notice that there were leather restraints affixed to the table, but she wasn't overly concerned. She assumed that there'd be no reason for them to be used on her during a simple, routine physical exam.

"How does my heart sound? And what's by blood pressure?" she asked.

"Your heart sounds fine, and your blood pressure is an excellent one ten over seventy," he answered, somewhat surprised by her inquisitiveness. Of course, he didn't know that a small spark of desire to become a physician still burned deep within her soul.

"Jodi, I need you to lie on your back with your arms extended above your head," he said, giving the nurse a quick nod.

Jodi complied with his request, thinking that she was going to receive a breast examination. She closed her eyes in nervous anticipation of what she considered to be a somewhat embarrassing, yet necessary, exam. She was totally unaware that the nurse had reached under the table and was now holding the two wrist restraints.

Jodi's eyes popped open with disbelief when she suddenly felt the leather cuffs being quickly slipped onto her wrists.

"HEY! What are you doing? You don't have to strap me down for a breast exam!"

"Breast exam?" chuckled the nurse as she tightened the buckles. "That *isn't* exactly what you're going to get!"

The nurse then moved to the other end of the table where the matron already had Jodi's legs helplessly pinned. A few moments later, Jodi's ankles were also securely restrained.

Dr. Goodwin ripped off her gown, applied the electrodes to her chest, wrapped the velcro cuff around her arm, and clipped the white plastic tube onto her finger.

Jodi recognized all of those items, so she knew she was being connected to a monitoring device. Still, she could not understand why she'd been strapped to the table, but she decided to hazard a guess.

"You're doing an EKG, right? Well, I know it's important to stay still during the test...but this is ridiculous!"

Jodi tugged on the straps to emphasize her point. She then laid perfectly still, hoping to prove to him that the restraints were totally unnecessary.

Her astuteness made Dr. Goodwin smile as he examined the tracings on the paper strip. It also compelled him to justify why she'd been bound.

"The restraints are necessary for this next test, which will measure the sensitivity of the nerve endings of your skin. But don't worry, it's not painful. In fact, many patients find that it actually tickles. And that, consequently, might cause you to become agitated, jumpy, or even violent. Some patients have actually rolled off the table during the exam, and I've been kicked in the head more than once! So we now use restraints to protect both the patient and the doctor from injury. In addition to that, restraining the patient helps to ensure the accuracy of the monitor readings."

Dr. Goodwin's plausible explanation and thoroughly professional manner had actually convinced Jodi that she was about to receive a bona-fide medical test, and that the restraints were required for reasons of safety. As intelligent as she was, she was also quite gullible.

"Okay, then I guess that's how it'll have to be," she said with a sigh.

Jodi was trying very hard to be a cooperative patient, but she also knew that she was extremely ticklish. She just couldn't wait for this bizarre test to be over and done with.

"HeeeheeeHAHAHAHAHAHeeeHeeeHeeeHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Jodi burst out laughing the moment that Dr. Goodwin gently stroked her right armpit with a cotton swab. Next, he tested her left armpit and got similar results. He then looked up at the monitor and began tickling both of her armpits with his fingers.

"STOP! HeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Please, STOP it! HeeHeeHeeeeeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAaaahhhHAHAHAHA!"

"Armpits, eight," Dr. Goodwin called out to the nurse.

"Oh...oh, my God!" cried Jodi while trying to catch her breath. "I know you said it might tickle, but I never expected anything likeaaaaahHaHaHa! HAHAHAHAHAHA!! WAIT!! HAHAHAHAHA!! STOP!! HAHAHA!! HeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHA!! WAIT!! HEEHEEHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Ribs, nine!" Dr. Goodwin exclaimed, not wanting to stop and waste any time.

Jodi's belly, navel, hips, thighs and knees were then tested and her reactions were carefully noted. Those particular areas ranged between three and six on Dr. Goodwin's scale of one to ten.



Although they were proportional to her diminutive stature, Jodi had about the smallest feet he'd ever seen on a grown woman. He also never recalled having seen toenails adorned with blue polish...at least not on the toes of his patients. Nevertheless, he thought it looked rather adorable. Grinning at the sight of her cute little feet, he took a swab in each hand and began tickling both of her soles.

"HeeeeHeeeeHeeeeHaHaHaHAHAHAHEEEHEEHEEHEEHAHAHA!  
Oh NO! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP IT!! HeeHeeHeeHAHAHA!!"

Then, using his fingers, he tickled her feet vigorously for several minutes while carefully observing her vital signs.

"HeeHeeHaahHaaHAHAHAHAHAHA! HaahHaahHaHaHAHAHA!  
NooooHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHaaahhHAHAaahhHAHAHAHAHA!!"

"Feet, nine!" he proclaimed with a smile.

"Is...is...the test...ov...over...yet?" she panted.

"Yes, Jodi, we're done for the day."

Dr. Goodwin took the clipboard from the nurse and ensured that all three charts were attached. Then he folded up the EKG strips and placed them under the clip.

"Oh, my God!" Jodi exclaimed. "That test was awful! It tickled, just like you said it would. But you never said it would tickle that much! I would've preferred a fuckin' colonoscopy!"

Dr. Goodwin couldn't contain his laughter as he tried to imagine which of the two tests he, himself, would choose to endure.

The restraints were removed, along with the electrodes, velcro cuff and finger tube. Jodi was allowed to get dressed, and then she was taken upstairs to the cell where Laura and Tonya were anxiously waiting for her.

"That doctor's weird and totally fucked up!" Tonya said with indignation.

"Yeah, the guy's a real perv!" Laura added. "He even seemed to *enjoy* doing that stupid test!"

"Well, I'm not so sure it even *was* a real test!" Jodi remarked. It had finally occurred to her that she'd never even heard of a test like the one they'd just undergone.

"Not a real test? Then that makes it even *more* fucked up!" Tonya laughed. "Anyway, it really doesn't matter 'cause we'll be out of this rotten place before you know it! Judge 'Potbelly' is gonna tell us our sentences tomorrow morning. We'll probably get ten days, just like the last time we got busted. We've been in here since Sunday, and they always take off the time already served. So, we should be out of here in a week!"

Tonya had a real knack for rallying the girls together and uplifting their spirits. They smiled, giggled, and hugged each other, thinking that Judge Potter would be very lenient. Of course, they had no way of knowing what their actual sentences were going to be. Needless to say, they were in for quite a surprise.

Back in town and later that day, Michelle Sullivan looked down at her watch and grinned. Just three more minutes remained before the bell would ring, signaling the end of her calculus class. It was the last period of the day and she was completely exhausted. She couldn't wait to get home, take off her clothes, and slip into a nice, hot bubble bath with a glass of white wine conveniently resting on the edge of the tub.

The bell finally rang. Michelle quickly gathered her books and stuffed them into her backpack. As she and the other students were preparing to leave, the professor made an announcement.

"Your attention, please! Miss Johnston, Steinberg, Reyes and Sullivan, please see me after class!"

"Oh, no," Michelle whispered to herself, knowing that her hot bubble bath would now have to wait. Worse yet, Ashley Johnston, Jill Steinberg and Brenda Reyes were the ones who'd ruthlessly tortured her for six solid minutes at the carnival because she wouldn't help them cheat on the midterm.

Michelle had a really bad feeling about why Professor Palowski had asked the four of them to stay after class. Did she find out about the girls' nefarious little scheme and think that Michelle had actually agreed to help them? That question was about to be answered.

## Chapter Seven

“**Y**ou four young women have one thing in common,” Professor Palowski began. “You each scored an A on the midterm back in March. But Miss Sullivan is the only one who actually deserves that grade! She *earned* her A by working hard and studying diligently, just as she’s been doing all semester!”

Professor Palowski then looked directly at Ashley, Jill and Brenda.

“It has recently come to my attention that **YOU** three women did **NOT** earn your grades! Instead, you decided to **CHEAT** by breaking into my computer and procuring a copy of the test ahead of time!”

The three girls gasped in shock. Michelle, conversely, breathed a sigh of relief as the professor continued to speak.

“I’ve also learned that you tried to coerce Miss Sullivan into helping you cheat! You knew she possesses remarkable computer skills and could probably hack her way into any machine. But she refused to do it!”

“You little snitching bitch!” cried Ashley. “I knew we should nev...”

“**SILENCE**, Miss Johnston! **SHE’S** not the one who told me! Although Miss Sullivan certainly had every right to inform me, she chose not to.”

Ashley, Jill and Brenda stood speechless, their eyes avoiding contact with Michelle’s.

“In any case, you somehow managed to steal the test without Miss Sullivan’s help. But what I find even *more* disturbing is how you tried to even the score with her. I was at the carnival on Sunday and I saw what you did to her...and now I know why! Miss Sullivan gave of herself for charity in a way that you three women would never have even dreamed of. She, along with her friend, Jennifer Adams, devised an extraordinary game in which they placed raising money for children far above their own personal comfort. But **YOU** three ladies decided to take advantage of that situation! You should all be ashamed of yourselves!”

“But there were lots of other players who also tickled them for the entire time that they paid for!” Ashley insisted. “Why are you so down on us?”

“I admit that some folks *were* quite fervent, and a few even got carried away...like that couple with the dogs! But the difference, Miss Johnston, is that their actions were spontaneous and their intent was clearly benign and without malice. You, on the other hand, did it to satisfy a personal vendetta! You couldn’t have cared less about the game, or the spirit in which it was supposed to have been played. Instead, you saw it as the perfect opportunity to exact your revenge on Miss Sullivan, then walk away smiling...and with a prize, to boot!”

Professor Palowski opened her desk drawer and removed a notebook, a red pen, and three stacks of paper, each of which was stapled together.

"I should've known that something was up when you three ladies got an A on the midterm, considering that you were all just barely passing the course up to that point. Well, your midterm grades will now be changed to an F, and you all risk failing for the semester. By the way, Miss Steinberg, I understand that your particular course of study requires a passing grade in calculus. Without it, you won't graduate next month."

"Oh, God! My father will KILL me if I don't graduate!" cried Jill. "You *know* him! He'll freak out if I don't get my diploma!"

"Yes, I certainly *do* know your father," Professor Palowski said as she opened the notebook and turned to the page that listed all of the test scores. She then picked up the pen as if to change their grades right before their eyes. But in true dramatic fashion she stopped and said, "Oh, I almost forget to mention that in addition to receiving an F on the midterm, you will all be reported to the Dean of Women!"

Brenda was flabbergasted, having already been reported to the Dean for an incident that occurred last semester.

"Oh, no," she moaned. "I heard that if you're reported to the Dean two or more times it'll go on your permanent transcript."

"That's right," Professor Palowski agreed. In truth, she really didn't know if such a school policy actually existed. But if Brenda believed it was true, so much the better.

Michelle found it difficult to stifle her grin. But she did manage to remain silent the entire time, thus allowing the professor to do all the talking. And in Michelle's estimation, she was doing a terrific job.

"Well, ladies, contrary to popular opinion around here, I'm not totally heartless. In fact, I'm going to give you a chance to redeem yourselves. I will allow you to re-take the midterm exam...right here and right now. Of course, it'll be a different version of the test from the one that you stole! The grade that you receive on this exam will be in lieu of the F that you would've otherwise received. In addition, your actions will not be reported to the Dean. There is, however, one stipulation."

"Ugh! I knew there'd be a catch!" Ashley grumbled. "But before you tell us what it is, I have a question. If Michelle didn't blow the whistle on us, who did?"

"I DID!" answered a voice from out in the hall.

Jen emerged from her hiding place outside of the open doorway. She triumphantly entered the room and then stood alongside of Michelle.

"I just couldn't stand by and watch them get away with it. I hope you're not angry that I took it upon myself to speak with Professor Palowski without telling you first. But I don't think you'll mind, once you see what we've got planned!"

Michelle wasn't upset with Jen. In fact, she was delighted that her best friend had secretly orchestrated this wonderful little surprise.

"Miss Adams certainly *was* instrumental in helping me determine the best way to handle the situation," Professor Palowski remarked. "Now, about that stipulation I mentioned a moment ago. Miss Adams, would you mind lending me a hand?"

Jen and Professor Palowski immediately began to re-arrange some of the classroom furniture. They placed three desks in a row, with nothing else to the sides or in front of them. Each desk was basically a wooden chair with a single arm that flared out to a writing surface, a style commonly found in many older colleges. Ashley, Jill and Brenda watched with perplexity as Jen and the professor then dragged a long heavy bench from the rear of the room and placed it directly in front of the three desks.

"Ladies, please have a seat," the professor then said. "And don't forget your pencils and calculators!"

She closed the classroom door and placed a copy of the midterm exam onto each of the desks. Ashley, Jill and Brenda removed the necessary items from their backpacks and then cautiously took their seats.

"So, what's the stipulation?" Jill asked. The slight tremble in her voice suggested that she already knew what it was.

"Feet up!" Professor Palowski commanded.

"What?" Brenda exclaimed. "You're not going to..."

"FEET UP!" she ordered again.

With looks of consternation, the girls slowly raised their feet straight out in front of them. They knew that if they didn't comply, they'd have to suffer the consequences of their actions. Professor Palowski slid the bench under their legs and positioned it so that their feet just overhung the last slat. She then opened the bottom drawer of her desk and removed several lengths of white cotton rope, which she'd previously stashed in there. With Jen's help, she slipped the ropes between the slats and then snugly tied all six ankles to the bench.

"I think I know what the stipulation is," Ashley groaned. "You're going to tickle our feet before you'll let us re-take the test."

"No, that's *not* what's going to happen. *I'm* not going to tickle you, *THEY* are!" said the professor, extending a hand toward Jen and Michelle. "And you won't be tickled *before* you take the test...you're going to be tickled *WHILE* you are taking the test!"

"You can't be serious!" Jill retorted. "There's no way we can consent..."

"Oh, I'm very serious!" the professor replied as she plucked off Jill's pretty white sandals. "By the way, I happen to know that all three of you are quite ticklish. And don't even bother asking me how I found out 'cause I'll never tell!"

Ashley was also wearing sandals and they, too, were promptly removed.

Professor Palowski unlaced Brenda's sneakers and yanked them off, instantly revealing the gaping hole in each of her rather dirty pink socks.

"Miss Reyes, you *really* should invest in some new socks!" she laughed. "Here, let me get rid of these dreadful things for you!"

Professor Palowski stuck her fingers into one of the holes, which made it even bigger, and then ripped the sock completely open with a single strong pull. Brenda gasped as her foot, still moist from the sneaker, was suddenly exposed to the air. The professor tore the other sock open in exactly the same manner, and then she pulled the tattered remains of both socks down to Brenda's bound ankles. Having been humiliated by her teacher and embarrassed by her own untidiness, Brenda just sat there, sheepishly wiggling her big bare feet.

"You'll have one hour to complete the exam!" the professor announced.

"You're going to let Michelle and her blabber-mouthed friend tickle us for an hour?" Jill griped. "That's really not fair! We only tickled *her* for six minutes!"

"Need I remind you that you've all been caught CHEATING? Were YOU being fair to all of the other students who studied hard for the midterm? I don't think so. Besides, you're playing by MY rules now...take 'em or leave 'em! I could just as easily give you the F that you truly deserve, and report you all to the Dean! Is THAT what you want, Miss Steinberg? Is that what ANY of you really want me to do?"

Ashley, Jill and Brenda looked at each other and then slowly shook their heads to indicate no.

"Fine! I knew that you'd all agree to my little stipulation. Oh, and just so you know, I'm going to let Miss Sullivan decide when you've had enough, shall we say, *distraction* during the exam. Your feet...er, *fate* is in her hands! Ladies, please turn over the test papers because your time begins...NOW!"

"HaaaaaahhHAHAHAHaaaaahhHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Brenda shrieked as Michelle began worming her small nimble fingers between her big fleshy toes.

"HeeeheeeheeeHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa!" was Ashley's instant response to feeling Jen's fingertips dancing upon her soft sensitive soles.

Jill, who was seated at the middle desk, began punching the buttons on her calculator and scribbling numbers down on the page. She'd almost finished the first equation when Jen and Michelle each freed up a hand. Michelle reached over and tickled Jill's right foot as Jen began tickling her left foot.

"HaHaHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Jill screamed as the calculator flew out of her hands.

Jill was determined to keep on working, knowing that she absolutely could not afford to fail the course. So she reached down and retrieved her calculator, and then continued to work on the equation. She laughed and squirmed the entire time, yet she was able to remain reasonably focused on the test. Professor Palowski couldn't help but notice, and she was quite impressed by Jill's valiant effort.

Evidently lacking Jill's self-control, Ashley found it nearly impossible to think clearly while being tickled. As hard as she tried, she simply could not solve the first problem. Jen and Michelle decided to show her some mercy so they gave her a short break. They thought it would be fun if they both tickled Brenda for a while.

"Oh, Brennda! I'm baaaaaack!" Michelle teased. "Girl, your feet are soooo big, it's going to take four hands to really tickle them!"

The girls raked their nails along Brenda's vast soles, they scrabbled her heels and pinched her plump toes.

"Oh, NO! HaHaHaHaHaHaaahHaaahHAHAHAHA! Please, you guys! HeeheeheeHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa! I can't THINK!"

Indeed, Brenda couldn't concentrate at all. Laughing hysterically, she threw down her pencil and began pounding the desk with her fists. Her toes spread and curled uncontrollably, and her eyes quickly welled up with tears. She also began tossing her head back and forth, causing her long black hair to slice through the air like a whip. Ashley and Jill worked feverishly to try and get through as much of the test as possible, knowing that they could be tickled again at any moment.

"Please, HaHaHaHa! No more tickle!" Brenda begged. "HeeHeeHee HaaHaaHaHaHaHa! Please, I gotta take this TEST! HAHAHAHAHA!"

Jen and Michelle finally gave Brenda a break and allowed her to continue taking the exam. They had so much fun working together as a team, they decided to give Ashley the same tickle treatment.

"AaaaahHaHaHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Ashley exploded with laughter as Michelle began using the eraser end of a pencil to torment her left foot. Jen, meanwhile, teased her right foot with two long feathers she'd removed from her backpack. A few minutes later, they went back to tickling Jill, and then Ashley and Jill were both tickled. Next, Brenda and Jill were tickled together, followed by all three girls being tickled at once.

Professor Palowski just sat at her desk and grinned as she watched the two girls systematically tickle Ashley, Jill and Brenda. And although she was tempted to join them, she decided to let Jen and Michelle have all the fun. And they did, for nearly half an hour.

"I think they've had enough!" Michelle finally declared. "We've decided to show them some mercy and let them finish taking the test. Is that okay with you, professor?"

“Yes, Miss Sullivan, that’s fine with me. As I’d said earlier, the decision would be yours.”

Michelle yearned for the bubble bath that she would’ve already been soaking in, had she not been detained by the recent turn of events. Jen was also anxious to leave. She’d skipped lunch today and she was starving. So they thanked the professor for the amusing time they’d had, and then they sarcastically bid farewell to Ashley, Jill and Brenda. They grabbed their backpacks and began to leave, but they just couldn’t resist giving each of the girls one final tickle before finally heading out the door.

“Professor, could you please untie our feet?” Brenda requested. “They’re gone now, so the stipulation’s over. Right?”

Professor Palowski picked up one of the feathers that Jen had left on her desk and dragged it slowly between her fingers.

“No, Miss Reyes, the stipulation is not over! Your ankles shall remain bound to the bench for the duration of the hour. And if I see any of you so much as glance at your neighbor’s test papers, or if I hear any whispering amongst you, I’ll come right over there and tickle all of you for the *next* half hour! Is that clear?”

The girls nodded reluctantly, and then they continued working on the midterm. Surprisingly, all three of them were able to complete the test within the allotted time.

“Okay, ladies, I see that you’ve managed to get through the exam, even with some slight distraction. Maybe you’ve actually learned something from this little experience today!”

Professor Palowski collected the test papers and tossed them onto her desk. She untied Brenda’s ankles and then Ashley’s. She was just about to untie Jill’s ankles when the classroom door suddenly sprung open. Dr. Steinberg, head of the Physics Department, stared in disbelief as he slowly entered the room. He’d merely stopped by to return a book that he’d borrowed from the professor.

“Emily, WHAT’S going on here? Why is my daughter TIED UP? Why are her shoes off? And why are these other two girls walking around barefoot? You’ve got some serious explaining to do!”

Professor Palowski had no choice, but to tell him the truth. She explained everything, hoping that he would understand why she’d chosen to use such extreme measures.

“Jillian, is that *true*? Did you cheat on the midterm along with these other two students? Answer me!”

“Y...yes Dad, it’s true,” she admitted. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way, and I know you’re very disappointed in me. But as Professor Palowski explained, we were allowed to re-take the test. And I think I even did pretty well on it.”





Ashley, Jill and Brenda sincerely thanked Professor Palowski for giving them a second chance. Ashley and Brenda said goodbye to Dr. Steinberg, Jill gave him another hug, and then the three of them left the classroom. Dr. Steinberg decided to stay and chat with Professor Palowski for a while. They both had lots to talk about.

Michelle closed her eyes, utterly consumed in the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of her long awaited, steaming-hot bubble bath. And, yes, she'd even poured herself a glass of white wine and placed it onto the edge of the tub prior to immersing herself into the fragrant soapy froth. It felt really good to be back home. And it felt even better that "home" meant a lovely spacious apartment, and not a tiny dorm room. Even with having part-time jobs, most of the other students could not afford to live in an apartment as nice as this one. But then again, none of the other students had Jen as their roommate. And Jen's wealthy grandmother just happened to own the apartment building.

"Mind if I come in and keep you company?" Jen asked, standing at the open bathroom door.

"Sure, come on in and have a seat!" Michelle answered.

"Well, it's sure been a crazy day," Jen remarked as she closed the toilet seat lid and sat down.

"Yeah, it was unbelievable. In fact, these past few *days* have been unbelievable! Let's see now...our *tickling* game won the big prize at the carnival on Sunday, and it made front-page news Monday morning. At last night's Town Hall meeting, we learned about Judge Potter's plan to punish those three defiant girls by sentencing them to a whole day of *tickling*. This morning, Dr. Goodwin was supposed to go and examine them to make sure that they're *ticklish*. And this afternoon, we both got to *tickle* Ashley, Jill and Brenda! Jen, do you see a pattern emerging here?"

"Yes, I sure do!"

Jen reached over and tickled Michelle's toes, which were sticking out of the water with dollops of suds still clinging to them.

"Exactly!" Michelle giggled as she quickly submerged her feet. "All of a sudden, tickling seems to be on everyone's mind!"

Jen nodded and said, "But up until two weeks ago, I'll bet that you hardly ever *thought* about tickling!"

"You're right. But ever since the day we met with Mr. Nelson and he gave us that great idea for our game, it seems like that's *all* I've been thinking about! Before then, I must've been eight or nine years old. I was in camp, and there was this boy who'd just love to sneak up behind me and..."

The telephone rang, interrupting Michelle's anecdote. Jen quickly got up to answer it.

“Michelle, we both must have ESP! Mr. Nelson’s on the phone and he wants to know if we’d be willing to come over to his shop tonight. He needs our help in putting the finishing touches on those things he’s building for Judge Potter.”

“Of course, we should go!” Michelle replied. “Considering everything he’s done for us, how could we possibly refuse? Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, definitely. I’ll tell him we’ll be over in about an hour. Is that okay with you?”

“Perfect. I’ll just shower off quickly and wash my hair. I’ll be ready before you know it!”

Jen went back to the phone and told Bob that they’d be happy to assist him in any way that they could.

After showering, Michelle stepped out of the tub and wrapped herself up in a big fluffy towel. She blow-dried her hair, got dressed, and finished her glass of wine. The girls had a little extra time so they sat and relaxed for a few minutes before leaving the apartment. On the way out, Jen grabbed the keys to the black Mercedes that was parked in front of the building. The car did not actually belong to Jen, but she did have use of it nearly all the time. It was just another perk associated with having a wealthy grandmother.

## Chapter Eight

Jen and Michelle could detect the aroma of freshly sawn wood as they got out of the car and walked to the back entrance of Bob Nelson's cabinetry shop. Michelle anxiously rang the bell, and Bob came to the loading-dock door a few moments later. He looked really tired and drained, and yet he managed to greet the girls with his usual warm friendly smile.

"Thank you both for coming," he said, brushing the sawdust from his jeans. "I've been working almost non-stop since the meeting last night because Judge Potter wants everything ready by Friday morning. Can you believe that?"

"I guess in a small town like this, justice *is* really swift," Jen surmised.

"Well, I'm glad that Frank, my assistant, was willing to put in some serious overtime. Thanks to him, we're practically finished! Anyway, the reason I've asked you to come over tonight is to check the sizing of some of the dimensions, and to test the new toe restraints I've designed for the stocks. Michelle, I know you're a bit taller than Jodi Blake. And Jen, I realize that you're a few inches shorter than Tonya Sheppard. But don't worry, you'll both do just fine. So, come on in and let me show you what we've built!"

Jen and Michelle were awestruck by what they saw as they entered Bob's spacious woodworking shop. Joining the stocks were two additional structures that appeared equally massive and intimidating. And just like the stocks, they'd each been mounted onto a heavy raised platform.

"These things are unbelievable!" Michelle gasped. "You're an amazing carpenter, Mr. Nelson."

"Thank you, Michelle. And from now on, you can both call me Bob. I think we know each other well enough by now. And besides, I'm only thirty-eight. I was beginning to feel like an old man with you guys calling me 'Mr. Nelson' all the time!"

"Okay, Bob," she giggled. "Oh, so *this* must be the special pillory you mentioned at the meeting. Wow, it sure looks different from the one in Jen's history textbook!"

"Well, it should since this one's been specifically designed for tickling. As you can see, the frame is positioned slightly lower to the floor, and the neck and wrist holes are lined with the same thick felt that I used for the stocks. You've probably also noticed that the wrist holes are spaced very far apart. Can either of you guess why?"

"I think I know why," Jen said with confidence. "It'll keep the prisoner's arms away from her sides so she won't be able to protect her armpits!"

“That’s right,” Bob confirmed with a nod. “Now, directly behind the pillory frame you’ll notice that I’ve installed what appear to be two large steps topped with black vinyl cushions.”

Jen and Michelle moved to the side of the platform and observed the two padded surfaces that Bob was referring to. The steps were approximately sixteen inches wide, and they were bolted to the platform as well as to each other. The higher step was positioned against the back surface of the pillory with its cushion just slightly below the level of the neck hole. The second step was about fourteen inches lower than the first one, and there was a set of ankle stocks mounted along the rear edge of it. The holes of the stocks were spaced roughly ten inches apart and they, too, had been lined with felt.

“Oh, so besides getting her head and hands locked in the pillory in front, the prisoner *also* gets her feet locked in those stocks in back!” Michelle theorized.

“Exactly. If I’d built a conventional pillory, the prisoner would be forced to stand up. And that would make tickling her feet a bit difficult. With this design, the prisoner is sort of on ‘all fours’, with her knees and chest fully supported by those two cushioned steps. I’d like to make sure that my dimensions are correct, and check the comfort level and overall sturdiness of the device. Michelle, would you mind being our first ‘test pilot’?”

“Not at all. I’d be happy to help. Just tell me how to get into this thing!”

Bob unfastened the clasps and opened the pillory and ankle stocks. He then took Michelle gently by the hand and helped her up onto the platform.

“Okay, here’s how it works. Lift your knees up onto the lower step while holding onto the upper step for balance and support. Center your knees on the cushion, and then slide your ankles into the stocks behind you. Next, slowly lean forward until your neck is resting in the large middle cutout, then place your wrists into the two outer cutouts.”

Michelle did exactly as Bob had instructed, requiring no assistance from him at all. She even knew to toss her hair forward so that it wouldn’t get caught between the two halves of the frame. After ensuring that Michelle was properly positioned, Bob closed the pillory and stocks and engaged both clasps. Jen watched with keen interest, knowing that she’d likely be the next ‘test pilot’. Frank, who’d been working at a bench on the other side of the shop, also came over to observe.

“How does that feel?” Bob asked. “Are you comfortable? Do the holes seem tight enough? Make sure you can’t pull your hands out!”

Michelle struggled hard to work her hands free. She knew that pulling her head out was impossible, and she could barely move her ankles.

“Bob, it’s perfect! The holes are really snug, but the felt lining makes them quite comfortable. And these thick cushions that my chest and knees are resting on also feel very good. They seem to be supporting all of my weight, so there’s no pressure at all on the front of my neck or my ankles.”

“Great! But just to be certain that you can’t pull your hands free, I’m going to have Jen tickle you. Okay?”

“Oh, God, I *knew* this was going to happen! But if you really think that tickling me is the only way to put this contraption to the acid test, then I guess it’ll be okay. Go ahead, Jen! Try and make me bust out of this thing! I’ll bet that you can’t!”

Michelle’s last remark almost sounded like a dare. Suddenly, and much to her surprise, the thought of being tickled by Jen seemed like a lot of fun. Was it because she was going to be tickled by someone she really liked? Or was it because she assumed it would only last for a minute or two? Perhaps it was just the realization that she’d probably get to retaliate when it was Jen’s turn to be locked in the pillory. Whatever the reason, Michelle was now eager to put Bob’s carpentry skills to the ultimate test.

Jen stepped onto the platform and began to playfully tickle Michelle under her arms, on her ribs, and along the sides of her belly.

“Hahahahahahahahahahaha!” she laughed while unconvincingly trying to pull herself free. “Heeheeheeheeheeheehahahahahahaha!”

Michelle was actually enjoying Jen’s gentle stroking and poking, but she also wanted to prove to Bob that the pillory was solid, sturdy, and above all, inescapable. And she knew that in order to do so, Jen would have to be far more aggressive.

“Hey, Jen! Is that the *best* you can do? Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha!”

Jen took the hint and began tickling Michelle’s ribs in earnest, causing her to shriek and struggle more forcefully.

“AaaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Okay, okay, but what about my feet? HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! You know how ticklish *they* are!”

Michelle was so anxious to have her feet tickled, she decided to save Jen the trouble of removing her sandals. So she relaxed her toe-grip on her blue flip-flops and wiggled them until they dropped off her feet like coconuts from a tree.

“Okay, Michelle, you really asked for it!” Jen teased, feeling somewhat deprived of the opportunity to flick off the flimsy footwear herself.

“HAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh, NO! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” Michelle cried out the instant she felt Jen’s nails raking her soles. She struggled much harder to pull her hands free as she continued to scream with laughter.

“How’s THAT? Am I doing a good job *now*?”

“HeeHeeHeeHAHAHA! YES! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Jen noticed that there was a small paintbrush protruding from Frank’s apron pocket. “Mind if I borrow that?” she asked.

“Help yourself,” he replied with a chuckle.

She removed the paintbrush from his pocket and began using it to tickle Michelle’s toes.

“Oh, GodaaahHAHAHAHA! You can STOP now! HAHAHAHAHA! I really CAN’T escape! AaaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I SWEAR!”

Indeed, Michelle was helplessly stuck in Bob’s unique pillory. No matter how hard she struggled, and no matter how much she was tickled, her wrists remained tightly trapped in the holes.

Completely satisfied that his clever creation was comfortable, sturdy and sound, Bob motioned to Jen to stop tickling Michelle. He released the clasps, opened both frames, and then helped her out of the device. Michelle grinned as she put her flip-flops back on, not wanting to get her feet dirty from the workshop floor.

“You’re a real trooper, to say the least!” Bob exclaimed. “Thanks for putting the pillory through such a rigorous test!”

“Yeah, it was pretty intense,” she admitted. “But it was also fun in a strange sort of way.” Michelle walked over to Jen and put her arm around her waist. “So Bob, don’t you think it would be a good idea to see how well *Jen* fits into that thing?”

“Yes, it would,” he agreed. “In fact, I was just about to make that suggestion myself. Jen, you’re a lot closer to Tonya Sheppard’s height. I want to be sure that the pillory would comfortably accommodate her in the event that she’s the one who is sentenced to spend the day locked in it. Oh, and there’s one more feature that I’d like you to evaluate. Okay?”

“Sure, I’m game,” she replied.

Jen tied back her long blond hair with an elastic scrunchie she’d plucked from her purse, and then she climbed up onto the platform. A few moments later, her neck, wrists and ankles lay cradled in the appropriate cutouts, her flaxen ponytail dangling lazily down the left side of her face.

Bob closed the pillory and ankle stocks, and then he carefully studied the way Jen’s body was positioned between the two wooden frames.

“Looks good!” he declared. “The only difference is that your knees are resting more forward on the cushion, and your buttocks seems to be angled slightly upward. Jen, you’re about five foot nine and there’s still plenty of room in front of your kneecaps. I’d estimate that the device could hold someone well over six feet tall. So, how does it feel?”

“Well, it’s certainly not the most flattering position, what with my ass sticking up in the air! But it’s a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be. The holes are definitely tight enough but there’s no discomfort at all. In fact, everywhere that my body touches feels soft.” Jen began tugging her arms quite forcefully. “And look! There’s no way I can pull my hands out! So it’s really not necessary for Michelle to tickle me. Right?”

“Oh, come on, Jen! Don’t be such a wimp!” Michelle goaded. “Let’s show Bob that even you, Miss ‘I-work-out-at-the-gym-all-the-time’, can’t escape!”

Michelle dug her fingers into Jen's lower ribs, knowing that it was one of her most unbearably ticklish spots. Jen cried out with a long guttural laugh while thrashing wildly within the confines of the rigid structure.

"AaaaghaHaaHaaHaaHaHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHA! Michelle, STOP! HaaHaaHaaHaaHaa! Oh, my God! AaaaghaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Michelle actually did stop, realizing that she'd sufficiently proven that Jen couldn't wriggle her hands free. She'd also kept the demonstration brief because she was very curious about the pillory's special feature.

"So, what's that extra feature you mentioned before?" Michelle asked.

"Yeah, let's see what else this thing will do!" Jen added, still catching her breath.

"Okay, guys, now watch this!" Bob said with a boyish grin.

He grasped a lever that extended out of a slot on the right side of the platform and pressed the red button on the end of its handle. He then swung the lever all the way down and gave the pillory a firm push. The entire contrivance began to rotate on the platform like a carousel. The front frame, the rear stocks, the two cushioned steps, and of course, Jen were all now spinning as one. Bob pushed it some more, thus making it turn even faster.

"Oh, my God, this is incredible!" cried Jen. "I can't believe this thing! You're a genius, Mr. Nelson...I mean Bob, heeheeheehee! But please stop spinning me around 'cause you're starting to make me dizzy!"

Bob slowed the rotating device by gradually pulling up on the lever. Once it had come to a complete stop, he pulled the lever firmly until several loud clicks were heard.

"The mechanism is similar to the parking brake of an automobile," he explained. "By disengaging it and then rotating the device, the prisoner's face and hands, or her feet, can be aimed toward the crowd that will undoubtedly be assembled in Town Square on Friday morning. Of course, continuously spinning her around offers many other amusing possibilities!"

Bob released Jen from the pillory and then helped her to her feet. Still a bit dizzy, she was thankful to no longer be in a position in which she could easily be tickled. Michelle, on the other hand, apparently couldn't wait to get back *into* such a position.

"I want to be the first one to try out THAT thing!" Michelle boldly announced, pointing at the tall structure as she walked over to it. "This gotta be the tickling post 'cause that's *exactly* what it looks like!"

The post was solidly anchored to the wooden joists below the surface of the platform. It passed through a square cutout in the center, and then it majestically rose to a height of eight feet. The whole thing looked rather simple and sparse, almost resembling some sort of minimalist art sculpture. But the small winch mounted on the back of the post, the pulley wheels atop it, and the two black leather loops suspended from a steel cable suggested that its intended purpose was far more specific.



Michelle leaped up onto the platform and stood with her back pressed flush against the massive oak timber. Bob quickly joined her on the platform while Jen and Frank gathered in front of it.

“Okay, now raise your arms high,” Bob said as he went behind the post.

He turned the winch handle counter-clockwise, causing the two leather cuffs to slowly descend. Once they’d been sufficiently lowered, he securely fastened them around Michelle’s wrists and then he cranked the handle clockwise.

“Heeheeheehee, I’m being stretched up like a rubber band,” she giggled.

“Yep, that’s exactly what it should feel like,” Bob replied. He turned the handle a bit more and then stopped. “There...I’ve tightened it to the point where your feet are just barely touching the platform. I certainly don’t want you to be hanging by your wrists, but I do want you to experience what it’s like to be tickled while *nearly* hanging by the wrists. Is that okay with you, Michelle?”

“Yeah, let’s do it! I’m ready to take this thing for a spin. Uh oh, bad choice of words! Hahahahahahaha! Unless it *also* turns around!”

“No, sorry, it doesn’t,” Bob sighed. “But now that you mentioned it...”

All four of them broke into a hearty laugh. A rotating post with its victim being swung around like a yoyo was just too funny to imagine.

Once they’d all stopped laughing, Bob said, “Michelle, I appreciate your willingness to be tickled and I’m sorry for asking you to go through it again. But it’s the only way to really be sure that this device will be absolutely devastating for the ‘lucky’ prisoner who’ll be bound to it.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I really don’t mind being tickled by Jen. In fact, I’m even starting to like it!”

Bob removed three leather straps from a box behind the platform. He wrapped one of them around Michelle’s arms and the post, placing it midway between her elbows and armpits.

“Oh, no! What are you doing *now*?” she asked with feigned panic.

“These straps will immobilize you even more. You’ll experience a heightened sense of vulnerability...and so will the prisoner!”

Michelle already felt quite vulnerable in her sleeveless lavender tank top. But when she felt the strap tightening just inches above her bare armpits, that sensation of vulnerability seemed to double.

Bob fastened another strap around her thighs just slightly above her knees, and he used the remaining one to snugly bind her ankles to the post.

“Oh, my God!” she cried. “I can’t move anything but my head, fingers and toes!”

Michelle also realized that being stretched up had caused her tank top to rise several inches above the waistband of her blue denim shorts. She watched anxiously as Jen stepped onto the platform with the tiny paintbrush clutched in her hand.

“Don’t you DARE tickle my bellybutton!” she cautioned.

But Jen knew that Michelle’s ‘warning’ was really an open invitation to do just that. So with a grin that was both playful and wicked, she wiggled the brush in the air while slowly bringing it closer and closer to Michelle’s exposed navel.

“AaaaahHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” she erupted as Jen began tickling her bellybutton and the sensitive skin all around it.

Bob carefully observed Michelle’s explosive reaction to being tickled while so totally restrained. He truly admired her for being such a willing, enthusiastic, and dedicated test subject. But even *he* was stunned by what happened next.

“HaHaHaHaHaHa! Jen’s doing great on my belly! HaaHaaHaaHaaHaa! But Frank should...HeeHeeHeeHee...ALSO tickle me! HaHaHaHaHaHaHa! I want you guys to...HaHaHaHaHaHa...push me over the freakin’ EDGE!”

More than happy to lend a hand, Frank eagerly mounted the platform and went behind the post. He reached around it with both hands and began tickling Michelle’s armpits and ribs. He also tickled her thighs and knees and the tops of her flip-flop-clad feet. Jen, meanwhile, continued to tickle her belly with the brush and then with her fingers. Michelle was now being tickled completely out of her mind while virtually unable to move a muscle. She soon realized that she really *had* been pushed over the edge.

“Okay, HAHAAHAHAHA! That’s GREAT! HaaHaaHaaHAHAHAHA! HAHAAHAHAHAHA! ENOUGH! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh, my God! HeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP! AaaaghHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Jen and Frank kept tickling Michelle, just to be sure that they’d actually fulfilled her request. Once they’d finally stopped, Bob removed the three straps, and then he lowered the wrist cuffs and unbuckled them. Michelle was gasping for air and she seemed a bit wobbly, but she also looked quite satisfied. Everyone knew that Michelle had done her utmost to test the effectiveness of tickling post. Without a doubt, she’d given it her all.

“Bob, this thing is AWESOME! Believe me, the girl who ends up on this post is in BIG trouble, even if she’s only HALF as ticklish as me!”

“Excellent! That’s exactly what I was hoping to hear! And thanks for encouraging Jen and Frank the way you did. It obviously enabled you to give the device an honest and thorough evaluation. I really appreciate all the help you girls have given me tonight.”

“We’re happy to do it,” Michelle said as she pulled her tank top back down to her shorts. “I know it’s important to test these things out the way that they’ll actually be used. And like I said before, I really don’t mind being tickled.”

“I’m also glad we can help,” Jen added. “Although I have to admit that tickling still drives me nuts! But what’s fair is fair, so I guess it’s now my turn to be stretched up on that thing.”

“Jen, your additional height isn’t a factor because the wrist restraint cable is fully adjustable from top to bottom,” Bob explained. “It’s also getting rather late, and Michelle has already demonstrated the effectiveness of the tickling post far beyond my expectations.”

Jen looked very relieved. She was about to thank Bob for the apparent reprieve when he said, “But I *would* like you to try out the new toe restraints I’ve designed for the stocks. After that, we’d be done for the night.”

“Um...okay,” she replied, not wanting to disappoint him.

As Jen slowly walked toward the stocks along with the others, images of Sunday’s carnival game flashed vividly in her mind.

“Well, it looks about the same to me,” she declared. “It still has the post with the leather handcuffs and that board with the leg straps. And I see that you’ve even decided to keep the bull’s-eyes painted around the ankle holes!”

“As I’m sure you’d agree, those restraints worked rather well. And surrounding your feet with those targets sure seemed to attract lots of attention! The only thing that really needed improvement was the method of toe restraint. Although neither of you complained, I could tell that the ribbons used to bind your big toes were somewhat uncomfortable.”

Jen nodded. “Yeah. After a while, they did begin to hurt a bit. I think the ribbons became curled, so it felt more like a piece of string instead of something flat.”

“That’s exactly what it felt like,” Michelle agreed. “But with the excitement of the game and all, I really didn’t notice it that much.”

Bob gave the girls an understanding smile. “You were each in the stocks for an hour at a time. I spoke with Judge Potter this morning and he said that the sentences would probably be eight hours. I realized that tying one’s toes for that long would be rather painful, and it could even cut off the circulation of blood. I was also hoping to find a way to keep the prisoner’s feet completely motionless, or nearly so. Well, I think I’ve come up with a solution that’ll provide comfort, safety, and added restraint.”

Bob removed several items from a small plastic bag that was lying on the edge of the platform. Then, with his back to the girls, he began working busily at the front of the stocks. When he’d finished, he turned around and faced them.

“You’ll notice that four loops of ribbon have been passed through small holes in the upper stock...two above each ankle hole. You’ll also notice that there’s a small piece of rubber tubing threaded onto each of them. They will greatly redu...”

“Let me guess,” Jen interrupted. “You’re going to tie back my big toes *and* my pinky toes! And those pieces of rubber tubing will act as little cushions.”

“Very good, Jen, that’s precisely how it works,” Bob said as he opened the stocks. “So, come on up here and take off your shoes!”

Jen hopped onto the platform, sat down on the bench, and kicked off her stylish Steve Maddens. She then swung her legs up onto the plank, ensuring that her heels just overhung the two cutouts. As she felt the stocks closing tightly around her ankles and her shins being strapped to the plank, those images of Sunday's tickling game began to play in her mind once again.

"Didn't think you'd be back in here so soon, did ya?" Bob chuckled as he opened the buckles on the wrist cuffs.

"Okay, you know what comes next," Michelle prompted. "Up with 'em!"

"Bob, do you really have to tie up my hands?" Jen asked, seeming a bit confused. "I thought I was just trying out the new toe restraints."

"Well, it would be extremely helpful to me if you were to judge how they feel in conjunction with the other three points of restraint. That way, you'll experience exactly what the prisoner will be experiencing. It'll only be for a few minutes. I hope you don't mind."

Jen slowly raised her arms above her head. "Sure, I understand. And I certainly don't want Michelle to call me a 'wimp' again!"

Bob shackled Jen's wrists with the two leather cuffs, which were affixed to the sides of the post with metal brackets and amply spaced ten inches apart. Jen recalled how this arrangement had made it impossible for her to free herself, since the fingers of one hand couldn't reach the buckle of the cuff that was used to restrain the opposite hand.

Bob walked around to the front of the stocks where Michelle had already staked out a position. She watched closely as he looped the two innermost ribbons around Jen's big toes. He made sure that the rubber cushions were placed so that the ribbons themselves didn't make contact with the tender skin at the base of her toes. He then reached over the stocks, grasped the ends of the ribbon that encircled Jen's right big toe, and began pulling them slowly. When her toenail touched the front of the stocks, he stopped, and then he tied the ribbon ends in a bow. Satisfied that the cushion was perfectly aligned in its final resting position, he proceeded to tie back Jen's left big toe.

"Let me do her baby toes!" Michelle insisted, giving each one a playful tweak.

"Okay, Michelle, it's your show!"

Michelle carefully hooked the two remaining ribbon loops around Jen's pinky toes. She then cinched them up snugly and tied them with bows, just as Bob had done.

"Great job!" he praised. "It's perfect!"

"Thanks," she replied while stepping back to observe the final result of their efforts. "Jen, your feet look like they've been plastered against the stocks and your toes are spread wide apart!"

“Yeah, I know. I can tell by the way it all feels. But it’s really quite comfortable. In fact, it’s a lot more comfortable having four toes tied this way than having my big toes tied with ribbon alone. Those little cushions make such a big difference! Bob, I don’t think there’ll be any problem keeping the prisoner’s feet tied this way, even for hours at a time. Once again, you’ve proven that you’re a real genius! So, how about letting me out of this thing?”

“I’m thrilled that it’s as comfortable as I’d hoped it would be. The prisoner shouldn’t have any complaints about sore toes...at least not from the method used to tie them! There is, however, just one more thing that I’d like to check. Jen, try moving your feet. I want to see how much mobility you actually have.”

“That’s it,” she sighed, her feet barely budging. “That’s as much as I can move them.”

“Bob, I don’t think she’s trying hard enough!” Michelle interjected. “Maybe I ought to give her a little incentive!”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” he agreed.

Although Jen was willing to assist Bob in every conceivable way, she simply was not looking forward to any more tickling. Moreover, she could not understand why Michelle now suddenly seemed to enjoy it. But then it occurred to her that maybe it had something to do with *who* was doing the tickling. And the more she thought about it, the more it made perfect sense. They’d been best friends for nearly four years. Jen knew that they would never, under any circumstances, do anything to hurt one another. In fact, everything that they did together was fun...or at least they *tried* to make it fun. Jen was now determined that this was to be no different. So with that thought in mind, she looked Michelle squarely in the eye and gave her a very conniving grin.

“Okay, you’re right! I’m NOT really trying that hard! So, what ya gonna do about it, girl? Tickle the shit out of me? Ha! I don’t think you’ll even come close!”

Michelle was completely astounded. She could hardly believe her ears. Jen’s audacious challenge was even more daring and forthright than the one that she, herself, had asserted earlier.

“Oh, my God! Jen, what’s gotten into you? All night long, you’ve been trying to weasel your way out of getting tickled. But now, all of the sudden, you’re provoking it. I don’t understand, but I’ll be happy to indulge you!”

Michelle immediately began tickling Jen’s slender bare soles. Her small agile fingers scurried and scampered across them like spiders.

“AaaaHaaHaaHAHAHAHAHA! Okay, okay, I’m really trying now! HAHAHAHAHAHA! Are my toes wiggling yet? HAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“No, they’re not! Keep trying, Jen, keep trying! And I’m not stopping ‘til I see some results!”

“Oh, God! HAHAAHAHA! Please! HAHAAHAHAHA! I can’t STAND much more of this! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“Wait a minute...yes...YES!” cried Michelle. “Your three middle toes are wiggling! Not much, but they’re definitely wiggling now! Success!”

“GREAT! HaHaHaHaHAHAHAHA! So STOP! HAHAAHAHAHA!”

Michelle stopped tickling Jen and then gave her one of the biggest smiles she’d ever given her. Bob and Frank also couldn’t keep from smiling, knowing that Jen had truly outdone herself. None of them could’ve been any happier, especially Jen.

Bob and Michelle quickly untied the ribbons and released Jen from the stocks. Frank, meanwhile, walked over to a small refrigerator and then returned with a handful of cans.

“Would you ladies prefer regular or diet?” he asked, offering both.

“Diet Coke for me,” Jen replied while smooshing her toes into a small mound of sawdust.

“Me, too,” answered Michelle. “Jen, aren’t you going to put your shoes back on? Your feet will get dirty if you keep doing that.”

“I don’t care. I love how it feels. It’s kinda like cool sand.”

Giggling, Jen kicked some of the sawdust in Michelle’s direction.

“It looks like you two *never* stop playing,” Bob said with a grin. “Well, I think that’s great! And it sure made a big difference in the way you helped test those devices. You didn’t hold back one bit. Thanks to you, we now know that all our hard work has paid off.”

“Bob, I couldn’t agree with you more,” Frank remarked. “I just hope that on Friday, those three teenage troublemakers don’t have as much fun as you girls did!”

“Oh, don’t worry, they won’t!” Jen assured him. “Being teased and tickled by your best friend for two minutes is one thing. Being relentlessly tortured for hours by a bunch of really pissed-off townspeople is something entirely different!”

“Yes, it certainly is,” Bob agreed as he popped open a can of root beer. “By the way, do either of you have classes on Friday? I remember my senior year at Butler and how we always tried to work out our schedules so that we’d have Fridays off.”

“Well, I guess some things never change,” Michelle giggled. “Actually, we’re both off on Friday!”

“Terrific! So, would you guys like to help with the ‘festivities’ in Town Square?”

“Sure!” they answered together.

“Great! I spoke with Brad, Mike and Jason this afternoon and they’ve also agreed to help out. So it looks like our whole team is back together again! Now, here’s what’s going to happen...”

## Chapter Nine

Laura Pierce threw down her forkful of pork and beans in disgust.

“Yuck! How can you guys *eat* this shit?”

“It was the only thing on the menu,” Tonya quipped. “I guess they ran out of lobster!”

“Laura, it’s really not that bad,” Jodi chimed in. “And besides, beans happen to be an excellent source of protein and fiber.”

Laura stared down at her tray with revulsion. “The only thing that beans are a good source of is gas. And now you guys’ll be keeping me up all night long with your disgusting farts!”

“Oh, cool your jets!” Tonya retorted. “I never fart...unless I really want to. Here, let me show you what I mean!”

Just as Tonya was about to demonstrate her flatulatory prowess, the guard began banging her keys against the bars of their cell.

“One hour to lights out! And you better get a good night’s rest because you’re all due in court for sentencing tomorrow morning. Have a good night, and please...try not to soil the sheets!”

Tonya, Laura and Jodi laid on their cots and talked for quite some time, but they eventually fell asleep. At seven o’clock the following morning, they were rudely awakened by the matron’s abrasive voice accompanied by the familiar sound of keys being hammered against the jail cell bars.

“It’s time to get up! I’ll be back in ten minutes with your breakfast trays and you ladies better be dressed! At eight o’clock sharp, you’ll be taken by van to the courthouse in Hastings. Any questions? No? Good!”

At exactly eight o’clock, the matron and a tall male guard entered their cell. Tonya, Laura and Jodi were handcuffed behind their backs, and then marched outside and placed into the rear of the waiting van. The girls remained in handcuffs, thus allowing the matron to sit up front and chat with the attractive young guard as he drove the twelve-mile route to Hastings.

Meanwhile, back at the courthouse, Bob Nelson and Dr. Goodwin had begun to meet with Judge Potter in his chambers.

“I have good news, and great news!” Dr. Goodwin declared as he removed several sheets of paper from his attaché case. “The prisoners are in perfect physical health, and all three of them are extremely ticklish! I’ve prepared these color-coded drawings of the human body in order to illustrate the sensitivity of their various anatomical regions. The colors red, orange, yellow, green and blue represent the degree of ticklishness, with red being the highest and blue being the lowest.”

After carefully studying the diagrams, Bob said, “This is *perfect*. It’s so obvious as to which device each of them should be confined in.”

Bob took a pen from his shirt pocket and wrote the word “pillory” next to the name of the prisoner on one of the drawings. He wrote “stocks” on another drawing, and “post” on the remaining one. He then handed them all to Judge Potter.

“Well, what do you think?” Bob asked. “Do you concur with that?”

“Yes, I completely agree with your recommendations. Gentlemen, thank you very much for all of your help. And of course, you’re both welcome to stay and join me in court for the official sentencing.”

They nodded to Judge Potter as he donned his black robe, and then they left his chambers and walked into the courtroom. They had to settle for two seats in the rear because so many townspeople had come to observe the sentencing.

“All rise!” shouted the bailiff. “The Honorable James Potter presiding!”

Everyone stood as Judge Potter entered the courtroom. He took his seat on the bench, and then everyone else sat down.

“Tonya Sheppard, Laura Pierce, Jodi Blake...please rise and face the bench!” Judge Potter bellowed, prompting the girls to stand once again.

“This is the FIFTH TIME that you three young women have appeared in this courtroom for sentencing, because for the fifth time in less than two years, you’ve each been found guilty of committing a crime! This is also the fifth time that you’ve declined legal representation and chose to act in your own defense...a foolish decision, to be sure. As you’ve been told numerous times, you have the right to an attorney even if you cannot afford one. In any case, you’re about to be sentenced for having been found guilty of your most recent transgression...attempted petty larceny. I had originally intended to sentence each of you to serve ten days in the county jail. And as I’m sure you’re aware, you’ve already spent four days there. So you probably think that you’ll just be sent back to jail for six more days. Well, I don’t think that a mere jail sentence will deter you from future criminal activity. It certainly hasn’t worked in the past! Frankly, I’d like nothing more than to NEVER see any of you in my court again! So, I’ve decided to try something different this time...something VERY different! You are each hereby sentenced to spend the rest of today and tonight in the Brenner County Jail, and then to be publicly incarcerated as follows. Tonya Sheppard, you are to be confined in the STOCKS for a period of eight consecutive hours, commencing at nine o’clock tomorrow morning! Jodi Blake, you are to be confined in the PILLORY for a period of eight consecutive hours, commencing at nine o’clock tomorrow morning! Laura Pierce, you are to be bound, hand and foot, to a wooden POST for a period of eight consecutive hours, commencing at nine o’clock tomorrow morning! Guards, please escort the prisoners out of the courtroom and return them to the county jail! Court is dismissed!”



Tonya, Laura and Jodi stood speechless, ostensibly baffled by what they'd just heard. They stared blankly at Judge Potter as they felt the cold steel handcuffs being snapped onto their wrists once again. They were then ushered out of the courthouse and placed into the van, still saying nothing to each other. Finally, Laura spoke.

"What the hell just happened in there? Pillory, stock, post? What did he *mean* by all that? Tonya, you said we'd just get a few more days in county!"

Tonya shrugged. "Well, that's what I *thought* was gonna happen! And as for those things he mentioned, I don't know what the fuck he was talkin' about!"

Jodi rolled her eyes, amazed by Laura and Tonya's apparent ignorance.

"Don't you guys know *anything*? Stocks and pillories were a form of punishment used hundreds of years ago! They were these big wooden frames that people were locked into, sometimes for days. It really sucked because they also got stuff thrown at them, like tomatoes, rotten eggs...even dog shit! If I remember correctly, the pillory was the one with holes for your head and hands, and the stocks had holes for your feet. Haven't you guys ever seen pictures of them in books, or seen them in movies?"

"Oh yeah, now I know what you mean!" Tonya exclaimed. "I saw one at the Salem Witch Museum a few years ago, but I don't think it was real. The holes were so fuckin' big, people just poked their heads right through for pictures! But I never saw one of those things in *this* town! Not even a fake one. Potter's a real bastard for yankin' our chain like that!"

"But what if he's not kidding?" Laura nervously asked. "Maybe they do have a pillory and a stock, and they just keep them hidden away somewhere! He also said that *I'm* the one who's gonna be tied to a post! That would totally freak me out! Oh shit, maybe they really *will* do all those horrible things to us!"

"Nah, Potter was only bluffing! He was just trying to scare us. Come on, you guys, *stop worrying*! We're going back to county for a few more days. That's it. That's all that's gonna happen."

Somewhat relieved, Jodi smiled at Tonya and said, "I sure hope you're right. Being stuck in a pillory all day would be awful! Just being handcuffed behind my back like this is bad enough, especially now that my nose is starting to itch!"

Jodi tried unsuccessfully to scratch her nose with her shoulders, but she was finally able to relieve the annoying itch by rubbing her nose with her knees. Her comical contortions made Tonya and Laura giggle. And by the time the van had arrived back at the Brenner County Jail, all three girls were laughing and joking. They were convinced that the sentences handed down by Judge Potter were bogus, and viewed them as nothing more than a pathetic attempt to frighten them.

Tonya, Laura and Jodi spent the rest of the day in their cell playing cards and reading magazines. And to help keep them quiet and occupied, the matron had even brought them some board games, which they gladly accepted. The day passed without incident and they all went to bed earlier than usual. The girls were enjoying the best night's sleep they'd had since their arrest when they were abruptly awakened the following morning.

"It's seven o'clock! Time to get UP and into the showers!" the matron shouted while smacking her keys against the bars.

"What the fuck for?" Tonya growled, clearly incensed by the sudden interruption of her blissful slumber.

"Oh, weren't you paying attention in court? It's Friday! It's your big day! You ladies are being released from jail this morning! Come on, get up! The van back to Hastingson leaves at eight-fifteen! You *don't* want to be late!"

"But we're supposed to be in here 'til next Wednesday," Tonya asserted.

"No, you've already served the first part of your sentence. Don't you remember what the judge told you?"

"So then...what's the *second* part of our sentence?" Laura asked, visibly shaken by what the matron was beginning to imply.

"Oh my, you really *weren't* paying attention in court! You're going back to Hastingson to be publicly incarcerated for eight hours, just like Judge Potter said. And it's going to be done right in Town Square, so I'm sure that lots of your fellow citizens will be stopping by to say 'hello'!"

"Oh, my God!" cried Jodi. "He WASN'T joking! They really DO have a pillory and stocks, and some kind of a post for Laura! Shit! I can't believe they're actually going to do this!"

Grinning, the matron unlocked the cell door. "Okay ladies, we've wasted enough time chit-chatting! Into the showers!"

She escorted the girls down the dimly-lit hallway and into the women's shower room. They silently got undressed and then entered the green-tiled stalls. When they'd finished showering, they each grabbed a towel from the rack and returned to the dressing area. They were surprised to find that the freshly laundered clothing, which was normally left on the bench, wasn't there. Clean orange jump-suits, underwear and socks had always been issued to them following each of their previous showers...but not today. They also noticed that their white canvas shoes were missing.

"Hey! Where's our clothes?" Tonya grumbled.

"*This* is what you'll be wearing today!" the matron replied.

She took six white boxes down from a shelf and placed them onto the bench. Two boxes were marked "TS", two others were marked "LP", and the remaining two were marked "JB".

“By the way, all of this stuff’s been donated by Donna Houston, owner of Donna’s Fine Fashions. It’s simply her way of saying ‘thanks’ to you girls for all the times you were caught stealing clothes from her store!”

Tonya, Laura and Jodi opened the boxes and slowly began to get dressed. When they were done, they were each identically clad in a tiny, pink, sleeveless cropped top, a pair of skimpy, blue denim shorts, white sneakers, and white ankle socks. Even though the weather had been unseasonably warm all week, they were shocked that they were to serve out their sentences while dressed in such scanty attire.

“Hey, we’re not wearing much more than bikinis!” Jodi exclaimed. “This must be some kind of a joke! Whose crazy idea *was* this?”

Instead of answering Jodi’s question, the matron just snickered. She then marched the girls back to the cell where their breakfast trays were waiting.

“Now hurry up and eat because the van leaves in thirty minutes! Oh, and ladies...I’d go a little easy on the coffee today if I were you!”

The matron’s snickering slowly grew into an all-out belly laugh as she walked further and further away from their cell.

“Easy on the coffee? What did she mean by that?” Laura asked.

Jodi shook her head in disbelief of Laura’s naiveté.

“Don’t you get it? They’re going to lock us up for eight straight hours! That’s what Judge Potter meant by *consecutive* hours...one after the other. There WON’T be any potty breaks! NOW do you understand?”

“Oh, my God! I didn’t even think of that! This whole thing really sucks! How did we ever get ourselves into this mess?”

“Hey, you guys, it’s really not all that bad,” Tonya insisted. “We just gotta deal with their shit for eight hours, but after that, we’re FREE!”

Laura was almost in tears. “That’s easy for YOU to say! They’re gonna put your feet in that thing...the stocks, right? And that means YOU get to sit on your ass all day, doesn’t it? But I gotta STAND for eight hours with my hands and feet tied to a post!”

“Come on, Laura, we thought we’d be in this shit-hole for six more days being bossed around by that horse-faced bitch! So you stand there for eight fuckin’ hours, but then you get to go home! That sounds like a *much* better deal to me!”

“I don’t know, maybe you’re right. I’m sick of all this gross food and sleeping on those damn cots. It sure *would* be nice to get back to our own place tonight.”

“Okay, ladies, it’s time to go!” the matron announced as she and the tall male guard swiftly entered the cell.

For the second time in as many days, Tonya, Laura and Jodi were placed in handcuffs, taken outside, and shoved into the back of a big blue van. The twenty-minute ride seemed like an hour to the girls as they stared out the window and silently pondered their fate.

Word had spread quickly throughout Hastingson following Tuesday night's Town Hall meeting. Everyone knew what was going to happen to Tonya, Laura and Jodi today. Everyone, that is, except the girls themselves. Many people had taken the day off from work so as not to miss the big event and some business owners had even decided to close their establishments entirely. All over town, the mood was undeniably festive and holiday-like.

Bob Nelson drove his flatbed truck into Town Square promptly at eight AM. He was delighted to see that a large group had already gathered at the site that he and Judge Potter had chosen to stage the public incarceration. The location was deemed ideal because the ground was completely level, yet most of the surrounding land had a slightly upward slope. They felt that this would provide a very stable foundation for the three large structures, while offering spectators unobstructed views and lots of soft comfortable grass to sit on.

Bob smiled to the throng of familiar faces as he parked his truck and climbed out of the cab. Many folks gladly volunteered to help him lift the three enormous devices off of the truck and set them down onto the ground. They placed the stocks in the center, the pillory to the left, and the tickling post to the right. Several cardboard boxes and some hand-painted signs were also unloaded. Bob wanted to keep those particular items hidden from view, so he covered them up with a large piece of cloth.

At eight-thirty, Bob moved his truck off of the lawn and parked it onto a side street. By the time he'd returned, the crowd had nearly tripled in size. He also noticed that Judge Potter and Dr. Goodwin had both just arrived, so he walked over to cordially greet them.

"LOOK! They're COMING!" some people began to shout when they saw the large blue van approaching.

The guard cautiously drove the vehicle onto the lawn and parked it about fifty feet from the site. He and the matron then quickly got out and pulled open the two rear doors. Still in handcuffs, Tonya, Laura and Jodi were taken out of the van and then slowly led toward the crowd. Nothing could have prepared the girls for what they were about to behold. With their mouths agape, they silently gazed at the stocks, the pillory and the tickling post. They were stunned, bewildered and completely overwhelmed by the sight of the three daunting structures that now loomed before them.

Bob took the matron aside and explained to her how each of the devices worked. And just to be sure that the prisoners were properly confined, he also offered to assist her.

"Let's do her first!" the matron exclaimed, pointing at Jodi and then grasping her arm.

She led Jodi up onto the pillory platform and removed her handcuffs.

“On your knees...up here!” the matron commanded while patting the lower step with her hand.

Jodi obediently climbed onto the padded plank. A few moments later, she felt her ankles being thrust into the cutouts of the lower stock, and then pinioned by the two mating cutouts of the upper stock. Bob secured the stocks by fastening the clasp, and then he quickly swung open the pillory.

“Lean forward and put your neck and wrists in those holes,” said the corpulent female guard.

Again, Jodi did exactly as she was told. The matron flipped her blond pigtails forward, closed the pillory, and engaged the clasp.

Jodi’s head and hands were, indeed, trapped in a large wooden frame as she’d expected they would be. But she never imagined that her feet would also be confined. And instead of standing erect, she found herself bent over with her chest and knees resting on two cushioned steps. She was also quite surprised that all of the holes had been lined with felt, but she was very glad that they were.

Bob removed two chrome-plated padlocks from his pocket. He snapped one of them onto the clasp of the pillory, and the other one onto the clasp of the rear ankle stocks.

The matron walked back to the spot where her colleague was guarding the other two girls. Laura assumed that she would be next when she saw Bob lowering the wrist restraints that dangled from the top of the post. She was then swiftly escorted onto the platform and her hands were un-cuffed, thus leaving no doubt in her mind that her assumption was correct.

“Stand with your back against that post and hold up your arms!” the matron sternly instructed.

After Laura had reluctantly complied, the matron fastened the two leather cuffs snugly around her wrists. Laura then heard the ratcheting sound of the winch being cranked. She felt her arms, and then her entire body, being slowly pulled upward.

“Good, that’s tight enough!” Bob said to the grinning guard when he saw that Laura’s feet were just barely touching the platform.

He then bound her firmly to the post with three leather straps, just as he’d done when Michelle had so willingly tested the device in his workshop. He placed one of them around her arms, another around her thighs, and the third one around her ankles. He secured the winch handle with a padlock, and then he walked with the matron to where Tonya was still being held. Bob had a feeling that the guards might need his help getting her into the stocks. His intuition proved to be right.

Tonya had remained surprisingly quiet while Jodi and Laura were being confined. But now that it was *her* turn, she decided to break her silence.

“Get your God-damn hands OFF me!” she screamed as she was dragged to the stocks. “There’s no fuckin’ way you’re puttin’ ME in that thing!”

Tonya put up quite an impressive struggle, despite being handcuffed behind her back. She offered so much resistance, the guards really *did* need Bob's help. It took all three of them to hoist Tonya onto the platform and toss her down on the bench. She continued to struggle fiercely, but her ankles were finally locked in place and her legs tightly strapped down.

After removing her handcuffs, the young male guard grabbed Tonya's right arm and held it firmly above her head. Bob did likewise with her left arm, and then the matron shackled her wrists to the post that was positioned behind the bench. Bob triumphantly pulled yet another padlock from his pocket. He slipped it through the clasp of the stocks and quickly snapped it shut.

The big Town Hall clock then chimed out the hour. It was exactly nine AM. Bob handed the padlock keys to Judge Potter as he stepped forward to address the prisoners.

"Tonya Sheppard, Laura Pierce, Jodi Blake...the public incarceration to which you've been sentenced shall now commence! I will return promptly at five o'clock, at which time you will be released. It is my sincere hope that during these next eight hours, you will each begin to recognize and to understand the error of your ways!"

Judge Potter placed the four keys into his pocket and then slowly walked away.

After thanking Bob for his assistance, the matron and her partner got into the van and drove away. They really had wanted to stay, but they were needed back at the county jail because two other guards called in sick today. Of course, they had a sneaky suspicion that had they remained in Town Square, they probably would've encountered those other two guards, each having been miraculously cured of their respective affliction.

# Chapter Ten

Bob uncovered the cardboard boxes and signs, and then he stepped up onto the pillory platform and faced the huge crowd that had gathered.

“Ladies and gentlemen! I’d like to get things started here today with the help of some good friends! As many of you know, these five young people already have some experience in these matters!”

Jen, Michelle, Brad, Mike and Jason received a rousing cheer as they emerged from the crowd and quickly came forward.

*Jen and Michelle walked over to Tonya  
and stood to the sides of the stocks.  
The two girls just stared at Tonya’s trapped feet  
still clad in white sneakers and socks.*

*Mike went over to the tickling post  
where Laura stood helplessly bound.  
Then Bob released the pillory brake  
and spun Jodi half-way around.*

*So Jodi’s stockinged feet were now facing the crowd  
and her pilloried head faced away.  
The three wayward girls still had nary a clue  
they’d be tickled to death on this day!*

Jason and Brad stood on the pillory platform along with Bob, who then held up one of the signs that he’d made and showed it to the crowd. It read:

HI, I'M TICKLISH TONYA!  
I LOVE TO BE TICKLED,  
ESPECIALLY ON MY FEET  
AND UNDER MY ARMS!

The townspeople roared with laughter as Bob held up another sign. It said:

HI, I'M TICKLISH LAURA!  
I LOVE TO BE TICKLED,  
ESPECIALLY ON MY TUMMY  
AND BELLYBUTTON!

With a huge grin, Bob showed the crowd yet another sign, and it said:

HI, I'M TICKLISH JODI!  
I LOVE TO BE TICKLED,  
ESPECIALLY ON MY RIBS  
AND MY FEET!

On Bob's cue, Jen and Michelle began to untie the laces of Tonya's sneakers.

"Hey! Stop that! Leave my feet alone!" she demanded.

But the girls just ignored Tonya's griping and proceeded to pull both of her sneakers off. Bob walked over to Tonya and held up the sign that he'd made for her.

"Holy shit!" she gasped, her eyes bulging with stunned disbelief.

Her intense hazel eyes widened with even greater panic and shock when she realized that her socks were also being removed.

*Some folks in the crowd whistled and cheered  
while some others were content to just stare.  
Sill others began to loudly applaud  
as Tonya's big feet were stripped bare!*

Jen and Michelle tied her toes to the stocks using the new restraints that Bob had devised. They carefully placed the four ribbon loops around her big toes and pinky toes, making sure that the small rubber cushions were positioned correctly. They then pulled the ribbon ends snugly from behind the stocks and tied them all securely. Tonya's soles were now stretched smooth and taut, and her outer toes were spread widely. But the unbound middle toes of each foot pointed straight up like three little shrimp standing at attention.

Bob tacked the sign to the top of the post to which Tonya's wrists had been shackled. She grunted and groaned as she desperately tried to move her feet, hoping to possibly avoid even a small amount of the torment that was to come. But all she was able to do was just barely wiggle those six little 'shrimp'.

Bob nodded to Mike, who then opened the top button of Laura's blue denim shorts and tugged them down as far as he dared to go. Laura was mortified that he'd exposed her belly nearly down to her pubic area, and she couldn't imagine what his intentions were. But it all became crystal clear the moment Bob showed her the sign that he'd made for her.

"Oh, my God!" she cried. "The judge didn't say ANYTHING about THIS!"



Bob just chuckled. He then tacked the sign to the tickling post directly above her struggling bound hands.

Jodi, who was locked in the pillory and still facing backward, couldn't see what had been happening, nor could she see that Bob had just motioned to Jason and Brad. Suddenly, she felt her sneakers being removed.

"Don't take them off!" she implored.

But off they came, along with her socks.

"Hey, come on! Being stuck in this thing is bad enough! Why do I have to be *barefoot*?"

Jodi's question was promptly answered when Bob stepped to the rear of the platform and held up the sign that he'd made especially for her.

"Oh, NO! You're going to TICKLE us!" she shrieked. "You're going to tickle us for the next EIGHT HOURS! Oh, please, no! NO! NO!!"

Many people began laughing at the sight of Jodi's buttocks bobbing up and down and her little toes wiggling uncontrollably. They could also hear her vociferous howls and screams emanating from the rear of the platform. And even though her face was not visible, they could easily imagine the expression that must've been on it. Bob tacked the sign to the pillory, and then he turned the entire contraption around to its original position and locked the brake. Now everyone *could* see Jodi's horror-struck face, and the large inviting sign that hung right above it.

Incredibly, Tonya, Laura and Jodi had not previously made the somewhat obvious connection between their unusual sentences, Dr. Goodwin's 'stupid' test, and the skimpy clothing they were required to wear today. But now, they finally realized exactly what was in store for them. They watched with trepidation as Jason and Brad placed a large cardboard box onto each of the platforms. The lids were still on the boxes, but the girls had a pretty good idea as to the contents.

Bob and the students then stood to the sides and began inviting everyone to come up and meet their captive audience.

"Come on, folks! Don't be shy! Let's all say good morning to the girls!"

That seemed to be all the encouragement they needed, and it wasn't long before all three platforms were brimming with townspeople.

"Well, well, if it isn't Miss Blake!" chuckled Tom Browne, one of Jodi's former high school teachers. "I can see that things haven't changed very much since you made that stink bomb in my chemistry class!" His voice then took on a more serious tone. "Jodi, you're such an intelligent young woman and you have so much potential. It's really a shame that you've chosen to throw your life away."

He moved to the side of the platform and placed his hands on her ribcage.

"P...Please, please, Mr. Browne! Don't tickaaahahaHaHaHaHAHAHA!"

"Maybe I can tickle some *sense* into you!" he scolded, digging his fingers deeply into the spaces between her ribs.

“Stop, STOP! HaHaHaHaHa! Oh shit, don’t tickHeeHeeHeeHAHAHA! STOP! HeeeHeeeHaaHaaHaaHaaHaaHaaHaa! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

A young man who’d been standing at the rear of the platform decided to lend Mr. Browne a hand. So he began tickling Jodi’s feet with some lollipop sticks that he’d found in the box.

“Oh, NO! HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa! Not my feet, too! HaaHaaHaa! HeeHeeHeeHeeHeeHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Jodi quickly discovered that her particular confinement was especially maddening since her vision was very restricted by the pillory. She couldn’t even see if someone was *going* to tickle her feet.

Two women who worked at Miss Weaver’s salon were determined to give Tonya a tickling she would never forget. Armed with a bag full of hairbrushes, they’d obviously come well equipped for the task.

“PLEASE don’t do this to me!” Tonya begged.

She closed her eyes, clenched her fists, and struggled mightily against the restraints. But as tough as she was, she was still no match for the rock-solid stocks and strong leather straps that held her securely in place.

“Aw, wouldya look at that! Her feet are stuck right in the middle of those two ridiculous bull’s-eyes!” one of the women teased.

“Yeah, and just look at how nice her pretty toes are tied up,” the other young lady remarked. “Hmm...that sign says she likes to be tickled, so let’s give her a little treat on her feet!”

They lightly stroked Tonya’s soles with a pair of nylon brushes. Their touch was extremely delicate, barely grazing the skin.

“Heeheeheeheeheeheeheeheeheeheeheeheeheeheehee!” Tonya giggled.

“Oooh, look, she really *does* love to be tickled! Hey, Martha, let’s REALLY give it to her!”

They began rapidly raking her feet with the stiff nylon bristles, instantly driving her into fits of wild hysterics.

“HaHaHaHaHAHAHA! HaHaHaHaHAHAHA! God DAMN you two! STOP IT! HaaHaaHaaHeeeeaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

The women tenaciously tortured Tonya for nearly ten minutes. They would have gone even longer, but Mr. and Mrs. Freundlich, owners of the local hardware store, insisted that it was now their turn.

“YOU were the one who broke my store window last month!” Mr. Freundlich declared as he stepped to the rear of the platform. “It cost me two hundred dollars to fix, and I want to get paid back! RIGHT NOW!”

He stood directly behind Tonya and waited patiently as Mrs. Freundlich searched through the box. Once she had found something to her liking, he began tickling Tonya’s armpits with his fingers...and his wife proceeded to tickle her feet with the most perfect pair of turkey feathers she’d even seen.

“HeeHeeHeeHeeHa! AaaahaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa! HeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Mr. Freundlich suddenly drilled his thumbs deeply into the hollows of Tonya's underarms. It caused her to thrash and buck so violently, she nearly banged her head on the rear post.

"HAHAHAHA! You BASTARD! HAHAHAHA! Fuckin' STOP IT! HAHAHAHAHAHAHeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

At first, the large group of people who'd gathered around Laura just stared at her bound, barely-clothed body. Laura looked back at them fearfully, dreading the thought of being tickled while unable to protect herself in any way. She knew there'd be no escaping the severe punishment that was undoubtedly moments away. And she also knew that it was going to be much, *much* worse than spending a few more days in the county jail. Suddenly, eating 'gross food' and sleeping on an uncomfortable cot didn't seem all that bad.

John Brewster, a loan officer at the Provident Bank, was the first one to approach her.

"Is it *really true* that you love to be tickled?" he asked with a devilish grin. "Well then, where should I start? Maybe...right...*here!*"

John pointed at her navel, nearly touching it. Laura nervously watched as he drew imaginary circles around it with his finger. Again, extremely close, but not actually touching it.

"Or maybe I'll tickle you...*here!*" he then said with excitement.

His hands were now poised at the sides of her torso like two giant spiders about to pounce on their prey. Laura remained silent as the panic she felt inside of her quickly began to grow. The anticipation became even more unbearable when he began to wiggle his fingers mere millimeters from her bare armpits. She wondered if he was actually going to tickle her, or simply drive her insane with his incredibly skillful teasing.

"Gotcha!" he suddenly shouted, giving her belly a playful poke.

"HeeHeeHeeHeeHeeEEEEEEEEEEEEAAHhHaHaHaHaHaHa!" she shrieked.

He plunged his fingers into her lower ribs while pressing his thumbs into the two shallow dimples located above her hip bones. Judging from Laura's reaction, he'd obviously found two of her most agonizingly ticklish spots.

"AaaaaaaghHAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh, my GOD! HAHAHAHAHAHA! StopaaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

He then began tickling her belly, gradually working his way toward its center. Laura knew that he was slowly approaching the spot upon which she absolutely couldn't stand being tickled. She pressed her eyelids shut and continued to laugh hysterically as he got closer and closer to that dreadfully sensitive spot. Then suddenly, she felt...nothing. Laura quickly opened her eyes, only to find that the reason he'd stopped was to obtain a Q-tip from the box. And she knew *exactly* what he planned to do with it.

“OH, GOD! NOT THERE! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA! PLEASE! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA! PLEASE! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! NO MORE!!”

John thoroughly tickled her bellybutton while totally ignoring her pleas for mercy. He swirled the small swab all around her navel, lightly stroked the rim, and deftly tickled every crease and crevice within.

“AaaaaaghHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! AaaaaaghHEEHEEHEEHEEHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Laura couldn't believe how much tickling she had already endured, nor could she bear the thought of it continuing for nearly seven more hours. She was beginning to think that she wouldn't survive the ordeal.

Back at the pillory, Jodi wearily lifted her head and saw Troy Collins and his two sons approaching.

*Though she'd already been tickled by many, you see,  
she was extremely distressed now faced by these three.  
Jodi knew that the worst was still to come  
since THEY owned the store she had shoplifted from!*

“Hello, Jodi! We know you've been stealing from our drugstore for quite some time,” Troy said as he opened the small box he was holding. “So, we've decided to give you a personal demonstration of this great new product! We want you to fully experience its incredible power and quality, so you'll know exactly which one to take the next time you shoplift!”

He removed two electric toothbrushes from the box and handed one to each of his sons.

“I think you'll really get a CHARGE out of this new model!”

The boys positioned themselves at Jodi's sides, while Troy remained standing in front of the pillory.

“YIKES! EEEEEEEHAHAHAHAHA!!” she screamed as the spinning bristles made contact with her delicate armpits. “HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! HELP! HAHAAHAHAHA! NO, PLEASE! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

“That's it, boys! Make sure you scrub those 'pits really clean!” Troy chuckled.

“No! HaHaHaHaHaHAHA! No! They're clean! HAHAAHAHAHAHA! NooooooleeeeezzaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! They're CLEAN!”

Troy reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of adhesive tape. He lifted Jodi's pigtailed straight up and taped them against the sign that was tacked to the pillory. He then removed yet another electric toothbrush from the box and switched it on. Jodi had no idea why he'd taped up her hair or what he planned to do next. But his intentions became quite evident when he slowly moved the brush toward her captive head and applied it to her left earlobe.

“YaaaaahHAHAHAHAHA! YaaaaahahaHAHAHAHA!” she exploded.

Jodi shrieked and yelped even louder when he began to alternately tickle both of her earlobes with the device. It was, without a doubt, the most horrendous torment that her extraordinarily sensitive ears had ever been subjected to. Meanwhile, the Collins brothers continued to ‘clean’ her armpits, but they soon decided that her little bare feet could use a good scrubbing as well.

“Oh, God! NO! NO! STOP! HeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHA! Help! HaHaHaHaaahHELP! HAHAHAHA! HeeeHeeeHeeeHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Many other people were now clamoring to tickle Jodi, so Troy and his sons decided to pay Tonya a visit. They walked over to the stocks, electric toothbrushes in hand, and joined the enthusiastic group that was gathered around the platform. Cathy Mitchell, a bartender at the local pub, seemed to be taking particular delight in tickling Tonya’s toes with a small plastic fork.

“We really helped Jodi clean up her act with *these* things!” Troy declared as he handed two of the brushes to Cathy.

“Thanks, I’ll give ‘em a try!” she replied.

Tonya was thoroughly exhausted from all of the laughing, thrashing, and screaming. But when she saw the electric toothbrushes and heard them come buzzing to life, she seemed to gain an instant burst of new energy.

“NO! NO! NO! Not THOSE things on my FEET! Please, I can’t STAND much more of this shit! You people are fuckin’ CRAZY! Let me OUT of this God-damn thing!”

Cathy paid no attention to Tonya’s foul rant, having heard far worse language at the bar. She just turned the speed controls of the brushes to their highest setting and flashed her an evil grin.

“Are you ready, Tonnie, ‘cause heeeeeeere they come!” she taunted as she plowed both sets of bristles right into the center of Tonya’s ticklish soles.

“HeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!  
HAHAHAHAHAHA! OH, SHIT! HeeeHeeeHAHAHAHAHA! STOP IT!  
AaaaagghhHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

The crowd had now swelled to nearly a thousand people, and still more were arriving by the minute. At the rate things were going, half of the town’s entire population would soon be here. In fact, word of today’s extraordinary event had apparently spread beyond Hastingson, and even beyond Brenner County. A large white van owned by WGGB-TV had just pulled into Town Square. The television news crew onboard had been dispatched here all the way from Springfield to cover the unique story. Reporters from both the Hastingson Herald and the Butler College Courier were also here conducting interviews and snapping photos. And of course, many townspeople had brought their own cameras and video camcorders and were making ample use of them.

Joe Reynolds, an accountant who'd recently moved into town, stood on the sidelines happily watching the day's events unfold. He was delighted to see so many people participating, but he, himself, was content to merely observe. That is, until he suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to join them. He realized that some folks were clearly seeking revenge, while some others may have considered it their civic duty to help punish the prisoners. But Joe had no particular gripe with Tonya, Laura and Jodi, nor was he especially civic-minded. Of course, he also realized that most of the people were tickling the girls simply because it was fun. He'd always felt that tickling *was* fun, but for some inexplicable reason, that feeling had now been multiplied by a thousand.

Joe dashed over to the tickling post where the Miller sisters, attractive identical twins in their late thirties, were tickling Laura's armpits with a pair of white feathers. They couldn't help but notice how anxious Joe seemed, so they smiled to each other and cheerfully stepped to the sides.

Joe leaped up onto the platform and began tickling Laura's belly using both of his hands. He tickled her with such passion and intensity, even the Miller twins were duly impressed.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I CAN'T STAND IT! HAHAHAHAHA!  
Oh, NO! NOT MY BELLYBUTTON AGAIN! HAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

The Miller twins smiled to each other once more, and then they resumed tickling Laura's underarms with their long white quills.

"AaaaaaaghHAHHAHA! NO! HeeHeeHeeHAHAHA! NOT THERE  
TOO! HAHAHAHAHAHAHeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAH!! OH, MY GOD!  
AaaaghHAHAHAHA!! HEEEEEEEEHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!  
AhhhHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! HELP MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

## Chapter Eleven

The big Town Hall clock rang out twelve noon, indicating that Tonya, Laura and Jodi had now endured three grueling hours of ticklish torment. They were, however, granted several short breaks during that time as was prudently recommended by Dr. Goodwin. He also periodically checked the girls just to be sure that they weren't in any real danger. Even though they were all in excellent health, he knew they could still pass out from lack of oxygen.

Bob had also been keeping a watchful eye on the situation because he realized that there were those who might be tempted to punish the youthful offenders with something a bit harsher than tickling. While he could easily appreciate the contempt that the townspeople had for the girls, he did feel somewhat responsible for ensuring their safety. Of course, he was also more than happy to offer suggestions on tickling techniques, although most folks seemed to be doing just fine all on their own.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before *you* guys showed up!" Bob said to the Hendersons upon their arrival. "And I see that you've brought your little helpers again!"

Mrs. Henderson smiled. "That's right! Duke and Daisy had so much fun at the carnival, we just *had* to bring them along!"

"And I brought the treats!" Mr. Henderson added as he jiggled the shopping bag he was holding. "They really loved the vanilla ice cream, but their absolute favorite is peanut butter!"

"Are you sure it's okay to give them stuff like that?" Bob asked.

"Both of those dogs have a stronger stomach than I do!" Mr. Henderson laughed. "Actually, the vet told us that an occasional sweet won't hurt them. In fact, she said that Duke and Daisy are two of the healthiest dogs she'd ever examined."

The Hendersons strolled over to the stocks where Professor Palowski was apparently testing Tonya's math skills. She'd been asking Tonya to mentally solve a series of rather complex problems. And for each wrong answer, she was tickled with a feather. When the quiz was finally over, the professor announced Tonya's total score. Not surprisingly, it was a zero.

"SHIT! Get them AWAY from me!" Tonya shrieked as Duke and Daisy began sniffing her feet.

"For once, can't you at least *try* to be nice?" Mrs. Henderson sarcastically asked. "Just look how excited they are to meet you! All you have to do is give them a little treat and they'll be your friends forever!"

“WHAT?” Tonya exclaimed, noticing that Mr. Henderson had removed a big jar from the shopping bag. “What the hell are you gonna do? Oh, NO! What IS that stuff? Oh, shit! HeeHeeHeeHeeHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa!”

Tonya giggled and squirmed as the Hendersons slathered creamy peanut butter all over her feet. Using the two wooden spatulas they’d brought, they generously applied it to her heels and soles, and packed it firmly into the spaces between her toes. The entire process tickled considerably, but Tonya knew that it was nothing compared to what was to come.

It was obvious that Duke and Daisy just couldn’t wait to indulge in their favorite treat. Their mouths were open, their tongues were wagging, and their eyes were transfixed on the front of the stocks. The moment their owners moved out of the way, they leaped forward and began frantically licking Tonya’s big tasty feet.

“YEEEEEEAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!  
GET THEM OFF ME!! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Tonya screamed with laughter and uselessly yanked on the restraints as both dogs relentlessly licked her feet. The Hendersons just stood there and grinned while watching their pets thoroughly enjoying themselves. Then they nodded to each other, stepped onto the platform, and smeared a huge dollop of peanut butter onto each of her armpits.

“OH, GOD! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! NO! NOT THAT!!  
HaaHaaHaaHaaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

The dogs continued to consume the brown sticky treat that had been liberally spread onto Tonya’s bare feet. Once they’d lapped up the very last morsel, they jumped onto the platform and climbed up on both sides of the bench. Duke began feverishly licking Tonya’s right underarm, thus leaving her left one for Daisy to devour. The Hendersons then returned to the front of the stocks and started scraping her soles with the wooden spatulas.

“YaaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP! HAHAAHAHAHAHA! STOP!  
HAHAHAHAHAHA!! YOU’RE KILLING ME!! HAHAAHAHAHAHA!!”

While the Hendersons were busy torturing Tonya, Laura was receiving a visit from Reverend Thomas and six members of the church youth group. She noticed that he was holding two large plastic buckets, and she shuddered at the thought of what could possibly be in them.

“YOU were the one who was caught painting graffiti on the side of our church!” he bellowed with scorn.

Laura slowly nodded her head, knowing full well that she couldn’t deny the deed. “I...I guess it seemed like fun at the time, but...”

“Fun?” he interrupted. “These hard-working teenagers spent an entire day cleaning it all off! So, I think it’s only fair that *they* have a little fun painting something...YOU!”



Reverend Thomas placed both buckets onto the platform. He removed about a dozen small jars from one of them, and a handful of brushes from the other.

“Don’t worry, it’s water-based paint and it’ll wash right off,” he assured her. “But I ought to warn you that these jars were ‘accidentally’ left in the refrigerator all night!”

Laura’s big blue eyes widened and her mouth went dry as she suddenly realized the full extent of her next ordeal. She also happened to know one of the girls in the youth group. Her name was Erica, and they had been friends a couple of years ago. But when Laura began to associate with Tonya and Jodi, Erica stopped being her friend.

“Please, please don’t do this to me!” Laura begged. “Come on, Erica, we used to be friends!”

“Yes, you’re right...we *used* to be friends. But just look at what’s happened to you! Look at all the trouble you and those other two girls have been causing! Laura, I’m sorry to have to do this but it’s really for your own good!”

Each of the teens selected an exposed area of Laura’s body to paint. And dressed as she was, there was plenty to choose from. Two boys began their artistic endeavors directly below her bound wrists, and then slowly worked their way down to her shoulders. Laura struggled and flinched as they delicately applied the chilly paint to her soft sensitive skin. But with her arms tightly strapped to the post, it was impossible for her to avoid the insidious strokes and dabs of their brushes.

“HeeeeeeeeeHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” she howled when they began painting little flowers onto her armpits. “HAAAAAAAAAAAA! HAAAAAAAAAAAAHEEHEEHEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Meanwhile, two girls had begun to decorate Laura’s thighs and knees with some colorful designs. It tickled so much, she didn’t think it could get any worse. But it did when Erica and a boy named David began painting black and white stripes along the sides of her ribcage.

“AaaahHAAAAAAAAHA! AaaahHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

After they had adorned Laura with ‘tiger stripes’ all the way down to her hips, Erica decided to paint a big happy face on her belly.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAA! PLEASE! HeeHeeHeeHAAAAAAAA! Don’t paint my tummy! AaaaahHAAAAAAAA!! AaaaahHAAAAAAAA!!”

Laura laughed and screamed hysterically while begging Erica to stop. But she wouldn’t stop. And within a few minutes, the large smiling face was complete...except for the nose.

“AaaaaaggghhhHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Laura exploded as Erica added the finishing touch. “YaaaaaaaahhHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! HEEHEEHEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”



The images that Laura viewed in her mind were pleasant, soothing and tranquil. She saw grassy hills, gentle streams, tall trees and vibrant flowers. It was incredibly beautiful. Then, she saw herself as a little girl, happily playing amongst the lush grass and colorful flora. The imagery had now become so vivid, so real, she almost thought she was watching a movie. She was astonished that her own mind had somehow produced this veritable ‘anesthetic’ that allowed her to tolerate the horrendous torture.

Suddenly, another group of images began to flash in Laura’s mind. It was as if a completely different piece of film had been abruptly spliced into her mental movie. Again, she saw herself. But this time, she was at her present age of eighteen. She was in the dressing room of Donna’s Fine Fashions, stuffing several bathing suits into her jeans. She watched herself walk out of the store without having paid for the items. She then saw herself smashing a car window and spray-painting the hood. Laura hated what she saw. She positively loathed it. And at that very moment, everything became profoundly clear. Laura swiftly opened her eyes, catapulting herself back into the harsh reality of her predicament.

“HAHAHAHAHA! Please STOP! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I’m sorry! HeeHeeHeeHAHAHA! I’M REALLY SORRY! HAHAHA! I KNOW! HAHAHAHA! I KNOW NOW! HAHAHAHAHAHA! PLEASE, I KNOW!”

Over at the pillory, some folks were gleefully spinning Jodi around as they simultaneously tickled her feet and her face with feathers. Evidently, they’d found the rotating feature of the device to be especially amusing. But Jodi wasn’t amused at all. She was being mercilessly tickled, she was extremely dizzy, and she was starting to lose control of her bladder. However, she was also beginning to experience a revelation similar to the one that Laura had just experienced.

“PLEASE! HAHAHAHAHAHA! NO MORE! HAHAHAHAHAHA! I’m sorry! HAHAHAHA, so SORRY! HAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh God, I gotta pee! Let me out! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I’m dizzy and I gotta pee! HaHaHaHaHaHa! And I’m really sorry! Heeheeheehee I’m very sorr...”

Jodi’s head and hands suddenly went limp and her lips became silent. Everyone who’d been tickling her immediately stopped, stood back, and said nothing. Seeing what had happened, Dr. Goodwin promptly came to her aid. He slowed the pillory to a stop, and then he applied a cold compress to her forehead. Jodi quickly regained consciousness a few moments later.

Tonya was also starting to sound quite different from her usual self. The rebellious, foul-mouthed ringleader had actually begun to utter apologies between her salvos of raucous laughter.

“HAHAHAHAHA! Please stop! I understand! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I’m sorry! HeeHeeHAHAHAHA! I’m SORRY, everyone! HAHAHAHA! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I’m really sorry! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Judge Potter had never actually left Town Square. He'd been watching from a distance the entire time. When he saw and heard what was now happening, he felt compelled to intervene. His immediate concern was that Jodi had apparently passed out. So he was very relieved when Dr. Goodwin assured him that it wasn't serious, and that she was going to be fine.

As the Town Hall clock tolled a single chime, Judge Potter stepped onto the stocks platform and began to address the huge crowd.

"EVERYONE! May I please have your attention! In light of what I've just witnessed, I have decided to reduce the prisoners' sentences to FOUR HOURS! By doing so, I truly believe that justice will best be served! Tonya Sheppard, Laura Pierce, Jodi Blake...it is clear to me that you have finally begun to show REMORSE, something that you have NEVER shown before! I sincerely hope that these feelings are genuine, and that they will remain permanent!" He handed the padlock keys to Bob and continued. "The time is now one o'clock! Having fully served their sentences, the prisoners are hereby released and they are free to go! Mr. Nelson, you and your five young associates can take it from here."

Bob opened the padlocks that he'd placed onto each of the devices. Jen and Michelle quickly untied Tonya's toes and unbuckled the leg and wrist restraints. Then they opened the stocks and helped her to slowly stand up. After rubbing her wrists and stretching her limbs, Tonya did something she hadn't done in a very long time. She smiled.

Mike unfastened the three long straps that bound Laura to the tickling post. He then turned the winch handle until her arms had been lowered sufficiently for him to remove the leather cuffs from her wrists.

Jodi had now fully recovered from her brief fainting spell, but she had indeed wet herself. Noticing what had happened, Jason and Brad released her from the pillory as quickly as possible. Once she was free, Michelle gave her a towel to wrap around herself so as to avoid any further embarrassment.

"I found all of your sneakers, but I could only find three socks," Jen told the girls. "I'll bet those dogs made off with the other three!"

"Yeah, I think you're right!" Jodi giggled.

Bob reached under the pillory platform and retrieved three plastic bags that he'd previously stashed there.

"The guards left these for me to give to you," he said, handing each girl a bag with her name written on it. "It's your street clothes, plus all personal items that were confiscated at the time of your arrest. You *will* need your keys if you expect to get into your apartment!"

Laura, who was still covered with a substantial amount of paint, grinned and said, "Thanks, I was wondering how we'd get our keys back. I can't wait to take a nice hot shower!"

The three former prisoners were thoroughly exhausted from their arduous ordeal. They were very anxious to leave Town Square and return to the small apartment they shared. They were also extremely grateful that Judge Potter had reduced their sentences. Four more hours of tortuous tickling was unthinkable.

“You girls still look a little shaky to me,” Jason remarked. “And that’s certainly understandable considering what you’ve been through. You live on Fernwood, right?”

“Yes, we do,” Tonya answered.

“Well, that’s just a couple of blocks from here. If you don’t mind, we’d like to walk you home.”

“That’s right,” Mike agreed. “We want to make sure you girls get home safely.”

“Hey, that’s really nice of you,” Tonya replied, her smile widening even more. “You guys are great!”

Seeing that Jodi was indeed a bit wobbly, Michelle offered her a hand. Jodi gladly took it and gave it a gentle squeeze as a gesture of her gratitude. Then, to the amazement of everyone in the crowd, the eight youths walked out of Town Square together. As they made their way toward Fernwood Street, the five college students had a really good feeling that life was about to change dramatically for Tonya, Laura and Jodi.

## Chapter Twelve

The girls awoke very early the next morning. Having slept soundly for more than twelve hours, they felt completely rested and wonderfully rejuvenated. As they sat at the kitchen table eating their bacon and eggs, they talked about the severe punishment they'd received. But they weren't the least bit angry or resentful. In fact, they admitted to each other that they probably deserved everything they had gotten. They even began to joke about the experience, each insisting that *their* particular torment was the absolute worst. However, they also realized that something truly remarkable had happened as a result of it. They could feel the transformation that had occurred, and they knew exactly what they had to do. So they finished their breakfast, cleaned up the dishes, and headed straight into town.

Their first stop was Bob Nelson's cabinetry shop. The store wasn't open for business yet since it was only eight-thirty. But they saw Bob inside, so they knocked on the window to get his attention. He seemed rather surprised when he looked up from his desk and noticed the girls standing outside. Nevertheless, he unlocked the door and invited them in.

"Those college students were really nice to us," Tonya began. "We had a very interesting chat with them on the way back to our apartment. They told us all about the Town Hall meeting, and how you were the one who came up with the idea for our punishment!"

"Well, er...yes, that's true," Bob admitted. "I sure hope you didn't come here to admonish me!"

"*Admonish* you?" Jodi asked with surprise. "Actually, we came here to thank you!"

Laura shook her head in agreement. "That's right, and we can't thank you enough for what you've done! It's a little hard to explain, but something happened to me yesterday...something that made me see myself for the very first time."

"It happened to *all* of us," Tonya chimed in. "And it was definitely caused by all that crazy non-stop tickling!"

"That's amazing! I've always had this theory...but I never...I mean...I can't believe..." Seemingly at a loss for words, Bob finally said, "Well, let me just say that I'm thrilled! So, what do you girls plan to do now?"

"For starters, we're going to personally apologize to a lot of people," Tonya replied. "After all the trouble we've caused, it's the least we can do."

Jodi nodded and said, "Laura and I want to return to school and finish our senior year. As you probably know, we were both expelled from Hastings High at the beginning of April. So, the first thing we have to do is persuade our principal to re-instate us. Hopefully, he'll give us a second chance."

“We’re determined to graduate next month,” Laura added. “We intend to study diligently and work very hard, and we’ll do whatever it takes to catch up. Jen and Michelle even offered to tutor us. In fact, they insisted on it!”

“Wow, I’m really impressed! You girls...I mean, *young ladies*...don’t even sound the same!”

“Oh, by the way, we’re all seeking employment,” Tonya said proudly. “Instead of stealing, we’re going to work for our money! Laura and Jodi are looking for part-time jobs, preferably on the weekend since their schoolwork must come first! And I’m hoping to find a challenging full-time position. You might find this hard to believe, Mr. Nelson, but I actually graduated from high school last year...though I’ll admit I just *barely* graduated! Anyway, we’d better be going now. We’ve got so much to do!”

Tonya, Laura and Jodi thanked Bob once again before leaving his shop. They spent the rest of the day apologizing to dozens of people all over town. They were very happy to find that many folks were actually quite forgiving, and nearly everyone seemed willing to give the girls a chance to prove themselves.

The last person they’d planned on visiting today was Dr. Goodwin, whose medical office occupied the ground floor of his home. They saw his car in the driveway, so they went up to the front door and rang the bell.

“Come in, come in!” Dr. Goodwin exclaimed. “Bob Nelson called me this morning and told me what happened! At first, I didn’t believe him. But he swore to me that every word was true!”

“Well, it *is* true!” Jodi declared as they all walked upstairs to the living room. “Dr. Goodwin, I came here to apologize for puncturing your tires last year. I never got caught, but I wanted you to know that I was the one who did it. I hope you saved the receipt from the repair shop because I intend to pay back every penny as soon as I find a job.”

“Jodi, that’s very commendable. And you might have a job sooner than you think! About an hour ago, I received a phone call from Tom Browne. He told me that you’d paid him a visit to apologize for being so disruptive in his chemistry class. He was stunned by the sudden change in your attitude, and by the sincerity of your apology. He also mentioned that you had considered a career in medicine a while back. Is that true?”

“Yes, it sure is! A couple of years ago, I thought about becoming a pediatrician, or maybe even a pediatric ophthalmologist. I seem to have gotten a little side-tracked lately, but I think I’m right back on course now!”

“That’s great, Jodi! Of course, you’ll need to pull up your grades once your principal lets you back into school. I’m confident that he will, and I’m also confident that you’ll make a fine doctor one day if you really put your mind to it. In fact, I have so much confidence in you, I’m prepared to offer you a job. If you can stay for a while, I’d be happy to discuss it with you.”

“Really? A job working in your office? Wow, I’m definitely interested!”

Tonya winked at Jodi. “Well, I think Laura and I should be going now so that you and Dr. Goodwin can work out all the details.”

Tonya and Laura gave Jodi a quick hug before going down the stairs.

“Good luck, Jodi!” they yelled up to her on their way out the door.

“Jodi, your timing is perfect,” Dr. Goodwin said as they both took a seat on the couch. “My assistant just informed me that she can no longer work on Saturdays. I’m looking for a receptionist who can also help prep patients. You know...pulling their charts, handing them gowns and taking their vitals, which I’ll teach you to do. I’ll need you to work Saturdays from eight AM to four PM, and I’m willing to pay you a starting salary of eleven dollars an hour. So, how does that sound?”

“Fantastic! I can’t begin to tell you how grateful I am! You *won’t* be disappointed, I promise. I’m going to prove to you just how serious I am about becoming a doctor!”

“Excellent! That’s what I like to hear! Jodi, the job is yours and you’ll begin one week from today. Now, let’s go downstairs so I can show you around the office. Oh, and please feel free to ask questions.”

Dr. Goodwin gave Jodi a complete tour of his office. He answered all of her questions, and he explained everything that she’d need to know to get started next week. He even found a white coat for her that seemed to fit reasonably well. Jodi realized what a wonderful opportunity she’d just been given. Besides earning good money, she’d be learning from a doctor who’d been practicing medicine longer than any other physician in town.

“Jodi, the change that I see in you is astonishing,” Dr. Goodwin remarked as he leaned up against the exam table. “You seem like a totally different person.”

“Yeah, even Mr. Nelson couldn’t believe it. And the whole tickling thing was his idea!”

Dr. Goodwin grinned. “Which reminds me...how’ve you been feeling? Any light-headedness? You gave Judge Potter quite a scare yesterday when you passed out in that pillory contraption! Since you’re already here, I ought to give you a quick check-up.”

“Okay, as long as you agree not to give me another ‘skin sensitivity’ test! Jeeez! I *still* can’t believe I actually fell for that!”

Dr. Goodwin chuckled, recalling how convincing he’d been. “Jodi, I promise I won’t tickle you. I’m just going to check your blood pressure and listen to your chest. But once you start working here, I can’t guarantee that I won’t sneak in a tickle or two when you least expect it. I can’t think of a better way to keep my employees on their toes!”

“Well, after what I went through yesterday, *that* shouldn’t be a problem! In fact, it might even be fun. Dr. Goodwin, I think I’m really going to love working here!”



The sun had already set by the time Jodi had left Dr. Goodwin's office. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, and she was starving. She couldn't wait to get home, have dinner, and tell Tonya and Laura all about her new job.

The girls woke up very early again on the following morning. There were still many people they'd hoped to visit and things they'd planned on doing. Being that it was Sunday, Laura decided to go to church, something she hadn't done in years. And Tonya went over to the Children's Hospital to see if they needed any volunteers.

By the end of the day, they had accomplished all of their goals with the exception of meeting with Mr. Rehnquist, the principal of Hastings High School. Laura and Jodi planned to speak with him first thing in the morning. Since they did not own a car, the girls had literally walked all over town during the past two days. They were very glad to finally be relaxing in their apartment and enjoying a snack. They'd just begun watching TV when the telephone rang. Laura got up to answer it.

"Hello, Judge Potter. How are you, sir?" Laura listened intently for a moment. "Okay, hold on...let me check with them."

Covering the phone with her hand, she turned to Jodi and Tonya. "Judge Potter wants to meet with us tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. He said he's got some really good news!"

Tonya and Jodi smiled and nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, Judge Potter, we'll all be there. Where should we...oh, your chambers? Great, we'll see you at nine."

Laura hung up the phone and then said to Jodi, "I guess we'll go see Mr. Rehnquist right after we meet with Judge Potter."

"Good idea. The courthouse is only three blocks from the school. I sure hope we get re-instated. Not only do I want to finish high school, I want to go to college. And then I want to go to medical school!"

Tonya put her arm around Jodi. "And you will! I just *know* that you will! Jodi, you're one of the smartest people I've ever met. You got straight A's right up until you started cutting classes. I still don't understand how we let ourselves get into so much trouble. But that's all behind us now! So once you're back in school, don't even THINK of cutting a class! Because if you do, I'll kick your little butt!"

All three girls exploded with laughter. They hadn't laughed that hard since being tickled out of their minds in Town Square. But this hearty laughter was evoked by the humorous image that Tonya had conjured up in their minds. The laughter felt great. In fact, *everything* felt great. Tonya, Laura and Jodi felt great about themselves and their future.

Walking into the courthouse the next morning felt a little strange to the girls. Four days ago, they were brought there in handcuffs to be sentenced as petty criminals. But today, they had come voluntarily, ostensibly looking forward to meeting with the man who'd doled out their harsh sentences.

As they entered Judge Potter's chambers, they noticed that Bob Nelson, Donna Houston, and Mr. Freundlich were also present. Judge Potter took a moment to study the three open folders on his desk, and then he slipped off his reading glasses and began to speak.

"In all my years on the bench, I have never seen a more rapid and complete rehabilitation as that which you three young women have shown! I am extremely pleased, to say the very least! I received more than fifty calls this past weekend...on my home phone, no less! And everyone called for exactly the same reason. They called to tell me about the remarkable change that they'd witnessed in each of you! Some even went as far as to call me a genius. But *I'm* not the true genius here, Bob Nelson is! If not for him, none of this would've occurred."

"Thank you, Judge Potter," Bob said politely, "but if you hadn't agreed to go along with my suggestion, then none of this would've occurred either."

"Well, the important thing is that it *did* occur!" Judge Potter replied. He then looked directly at Tonya, Laura and Jodi. "The whole town appears to be very supportive of your recent efforts. Jodi, I understand that you're going to be working for Dr. Goodwin, and that you and Laura want to return to school."

"That's right! And in addition to giving me a job, Dr. Goodwin said he wants to be my mentor. He even offered to help pay my tuition if I'm accepted into college! Of course, I first have to graduate from high school. So after we're done here, Laura and I are going to meet with our principal to see if he'll let us back into school."

"That won't be necessary. Jack Rehnquist and I play golf together every Sunday. During yesterday's game, I recommended that you and Laura be allowed to return to school...and he agreed wholeheartedly! You're to report to his office in one hour. He will officially rescind your expulsions, and then you'll both return to classes as usual."

"That's great!" Laura exclaimed. "Thank you so much!"

"It's my pleasure. By the way, I think you'll also be happy to hear what Donna Houston has to say to you."

"I heard you're looking for work on the weekend," Donna said, turning to Laura. "And I also heard that you're quite knowledgeable about clothing. Well, I'm willing to overlook your past misconduct and offer you a job in my store. Saturday is my busiest day, and I could really use the extra help. I can pay you ten dollars an hour, and you'll get a thirty-percent employee discount on anything in the store. So, Laura, do we have a deal?"

"We sure do! Thanks, Mrs. Houston! I promise I won't let you down!"

Judge Potter smiled to Laura and said, "Reverend Thomas told me that you'd spoken to him about joining the church youth group. Even though he'd kept a straight face, I thought for sure he was kidding!"

“Well, I did...despite my memorable ‘art lesson’! My old friend, Erica, insisted I join. I’m looking forward to doing lots of community service!”

“That’s very admirable. And Tonya, I understand that you’ve decided to do some volunteer work at the Children’s Hospital.”

Tonya nodded. “I signed up yesterday. I’ll be reading books and telling stories to all the young patients there. I think I’ll find it very rewarding!”

“That’s wonderful. I just hope that you’ve left enough time in your busy schedule for your new job.”

“New job?” Tonya asked, somewhat confused. “Oh, sure, I’ve been looking. But I haven’t found anything yet.”

“Yes, you have!” Mr. Freundlich suddenly interjected. “Mrs. Freundlich and I aren’t as young as we used to be. We’re not ready to sell the hardware store and retire just yet, but we’re too old to continue running it ourselves. Like Donna Houston, we’re also willing to overlook previous mistakes. Tonya, we want you to come work for us, and we think you’d be perfect for the job. Besides, you’re much taller than both of us. Reaching for those top shelf items won’t be a problem for you! We can discuss your salary after this meeting. I’m sure you’ll find our offer quite generous.”

“I’d love to work in your store, Mr. Freundlich...but only under one condition.”

“And what condition is that?” he asked.

“You must keep the first two hundred dollars I earn as payment for the window I so foolishly broke!”

“I think I can live with *that* condition!” Mr. Freundlich replied with a laugh.

Smiling, Judge Potter closed the three folders and slid them into the top drawer of his desk.

“During your sentencing last week, I said I’d like nothing more than to never see any of you in my court again. Well, that isn’t exactly true. I *would* like to see you in my court again...as a responsible juror, an expert witness, or maybe even a defense attorney! And that’s not entirely impossible, based upon what I’ve seen here today. I wish you the best of luck in your new jobs and in school. Thank you all for coming! Bob, would you mind staying for a few more minutes? There are some things that I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Sure, no problem,” Bob answered. He waited for the others to leave the room and then he closed the door.

“Bob, those are *not* the same girls,” Judge Potter said as he loosened his tie. “The difference is nothing short of amazing! I have to admit that when you first suggested having them locked up and tickled, I was quite skeptical. I said to myself, ‘what the hell kind of punishment is *that*?’ Well, it appears to be an extremely effective one!”

“Yes, the results certainly speak for themselves. And that is precisely why I haven’t taken the stocks, pillory and tickling post back to my shop. Jim, I’ve decided to donate them to the town. I’ve already spoken with Mayor Jenkins and the Board of Trustees, and they agreed that all three devices should remain as permanent fixtures in Town Square.”

“That’s fabulous news! I was hoping they’d be left in place to be used again when deemed appropriate. From now on, those who stand before me for sentencing won’t necessarily be spending time in a warm cozy jail cell. Instead, they might find themselves confined in the pillory or strapped to the tickling post. Or perhaps they’ll find themselves locked in the stocks, stripped of their shoes and socks. They’ll then helplessly watch as dozens of people eagerly approach, ready and willing to mete out their punishment. They’ll surely think twice before breaking the law again!”

“They certainly will,” Bob agreed. “But then again, there might be a few who’d actually *welcome* such a fate, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, Bob, I know exactly what you mean. And that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I happened to be in Town Square on Saturday morning. I watched with curiosity as a group of college kids toyed with the stocks. One young man allowed himself to be locked in it, apparently for fun. And that’s perfectly understandable, considering the novelty of the device and all. But I was completely taken aback when he suddenly asked to be tickled! His friends gladly complied, and he began laughing like a lunatic. His howling attracted more people, and it wasn’t long before a young lady had taken his place in the stocks. She *also* wanted to be tickled, as did the person who followed her. Bob, it was the strangest thing I’d ever seen. I couldn’t tell who was having more fun...those who were doing the tickling, or the one who was being tickled!”

“Jim, what you witnessed was not an isolated incident. I was in Town Square yesterday afternoon, and I saw a lot of people amusing themselves in exactly the same manner. And they weren’t just using the stocks. In fact, all three devices were occupied by willing victims who appeared to be having one hell of a good time! One of them was Sarah Henderson.”

“Sarah Henderson? Wasn’t she the one who...”

“That’s right. She and her husband, Pete, were the ones who’d brought their two dogs on Friday. Anyway, she kicked off her shoes and told Pete to put her in the stocks. She even insisted on having her toes tied back and her legs strapped down. She went completely berserk the instant that Pete started tickling her feet. Fearing that she couldn’t breathe, he stopped right away. But she begged him to continue and told him not to stop until *she* said so! Well, at least fifteen minutes had passed before she finally told him to stop. After she’d caught her breath, she asked...no, she *demand*ed that he bind her wrists to the restraining post and tickle her armpits! He did...and *that* lasted for *another* fifteen minutes!”

Judge Potter scratched his head in disbelief. "You can't be talking about the same lovely woman who makes those wonderful pies that my wife always buys at the church bake sale!"

"Oh, it gets even better!" Bob snickered. "After he released her from the stocks, she told him that it was now *his* turn! She said she wanted to return the favor, and that if he really loved her he'd gladly accept her offering. Not having much of a choice, he followed her over to the tickling post. She practically ripped off his shirt, and then two of her friends helped get Pete all winched up and bound to the post. Then all three women went at him with a vengeance, digging their fingers into his body as if they were digging for gold! Well, I never would've guessed that Pete Henderson was such a ticklish guy...but he is. And his wife and her two lady friends had a spectacular time reminding him of that fact!"

"Bob, there's something very strange going on in this town. About a dozen people were involved in the tickling on Saturday, and you said that a lot of people took part in yesterday's incident. How many is 'a lot'?"

"Oh, I'd say about fifty people had participated by the time it was finally over. Most of them had dispensed the tickling, but a surprising number were the recipients. And a few, like Pete and Sarah Henderson, experienced both giving and receiving."

Judge Potter looked rather concerned. "Twelve people on Saturday, fifty on Sunday, and Lord knows how many today! It's still early and most folks are at work, but I'm a little worried about what might be happening at noon. We both know that a lot of people take their lunch break in Town Square!"

"Jim, it's not just happening in Town Square. On the way over here, I stopped into Christy's for a cup of coffee. I heard some giggling while on the checkout line, and then I saw why. The guy in front of me was tickling the woman in front of him, and she was tickling the girl in front of her! After I'd left the store, I saw all three of them in the parking lot. They were tickling each other...and anyone else who just happened to come their way!"

"Hmm, this tickling craze appears to be growing," Judge Potter said, looking down at his watch. "Bob, it's almost nine-thirty. I'm due in court in a few minutes, and I'm sure you've got things to attend to back at your shop. But could you possibly get away at noon and meet me in Town Square?"

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea. My assistant, Frank, can take care of the store in my absence. I'll see you there at twelve noon."

The tickling craze, as Judge Potter had called it, was indeed spreading all over town. In the days that followed, more and more people were evidently being bitten by the 'tickle-bug', a phrase coined by the reporter who'd been writing a series of articles about it in the *Hastington Herald*. The public gatherings at the stocks, pillory and tickling post had become a daily ritual for many, and continued to grow in size. But as Bob had observed, incidents of tickling were by no means limited to Town Square.

When Miss Weaver first noticed that Kari, her new pedicurist, was deliberately tickling the clients' feet, she reprimanded the young woman. She told her that it was unprofessional, and that it would drive her customers away. But once word had got out that The Hastings House of Beauty was now offering 'special custom' pedicures, business began to boom. Kari, who'd obviously been bitten by the tickle-bug, was suddenly swamped with work. Appointments for her services were now being booked a week in advance. It seemed that a large number of women, and even a few men, wanted their pedicure to tickle as much as possible. They, too, had succumbed to the tickle-bug, but in the exact opposite way. Being the savvy businesswoman that she was, Miss Weaver purchased a special motorized device that was designed to scrub the soles and heels smooth and free of rough spots. It came with a set of attachments that included pumice-stone wheels and brushes of various sizes and stiffness. The scrubbing machine, along with Kari's nimble fingers, provided a tickling experience that was so intense, some clients inadvertently kicked her in the face. Miss Weaver effectively solved this problem by installing a pair of ankle straps onto the pedicure chair. Very few customers complained about the restraints. In fact, most preferred not having to worry about injuring the pretty young redhead as they sat there laughing and screaming their heads off.

By the end of the week, it appeared that nearly half the people of Hastings had been bitten by the tickle-bug. Clearly, things would never be quite the same in this town again. The sound of laughter poured from open windows, and everywhere you looked, there was tickling.

Bob drove to North Amherst on Friday morning to pick up a truckload of lumber that he'd ordered from Cows Building Supply. On his way back, something unusual caught his eye. It was the sign that greeted folks as they traveled the main road into town. Bob chuckled while reading the clever addition some prankster had apparently made to the sign.

*Welcome To*  
**HASTINGTON**  
**MASSACHUSETTS**  
Population: 4138  
*"THE TICKLING CAPITAL  
OF THE WORLD"*

## Chapter Thirteen

Tonya was really enjoying her new job at Freundlich's Hardware Store. She'd been working there only four days, and already she'd proven to Mr. and Mrs. Freundlich that they'd made a wise decision by hiring her. Laura and Jodi were excitedly looking forward to their new jobs, which were to begin tomorrow morning. They were also happy to be back in school, and even happier to have Jen and Michelle as their tutors. Both girls were doing exceptionally well, and graduating in June appeared to be an attainable goal.

Jen and Michelle, along with Brad, Mike and Jason, had also been spending time socially with Tonya, Laura and Jodi. It didn't seem to matter that the five college students were a few years older than the girls. In fact, they found that they had a lot in common and shared many of the same interests. All eight youths were often seen together walking along Main Street, shopping in stores, or seated around a table at the Starbucks over in Northampton. They realized that they were quickly becoming very good friends. But what they didn't know was that two of them would soon become a lot more than just friends.

It was after six-thirty on Friday evening, and Jen and Michelle were still at Laura and Jodi's apartment where they'd been helping the girls with their homework for the past two hours. They'd just finished when Tonya arrived.

"Hi, Tonya! How'd things go at the store today?" Jen inquired.

"*Very* well! Jen, I really love this job and I'm learning so much. Go ahead, ask me about hardware! Hey, I know the difference between a fuse and a circuit breaker...I know what a ball-peen hammer looks like...and I know that joint compound *isn't* something you smoke!"

"No, it certainly isn't!" Michelle laughed.

Jen also laughed, and then turned to Jodi and said, "So, I guess you're all psyched up about working for Dr. Goodwin. Jodi, I'm not sure if you know this...but, his wife was killed in a tragic car accident many years ago. He never re-married, and they didn't have any kids. I overheard some folks in town saying that he really likes you. They said he was able to see beyond your troubled past and stare deep down into your soul. And when he did, he saw something very special in you. Jodi, they said that he actually thinks of you as the daughter he never had."

A tear trickled down Jodi's cheek, having been extremely moved by what Jen had just told her. She obviously meant a whole lot more to Dr. Goodwin than she'd realized, and she vowed to herself that she would do everything humanly possible to make him proud of her.

"Jodi, are you really crying?" Laura asked with concern.

"Sorry, I just couldn't help it."

Laura put her arm around Jodi's waist. "Yeah, I understand. But I think we'd all agree that you're a lot prettier when you're smiling...or laughing!" She slipped her hand under Jodi's tee shirt and playfully tickled her belly.

"HeeHeeHeeHeeHeeHeeHee!" Jodi giggled as she pulled Laura's hand out from under her shirt. "Okay, okay! I'm smiling and laughing now!"

Michelle flashed Laura a suspicious grin. "Don't tell me that *you* 've been bitten by the tickle-bug!"

"Well, I'm not really sure. But after being tickled so much, it sure feels good to *do* some tickling for a change!"

"Yeah, you've certainly earned that right," Jen remarked. "Anyway, I still can't believe what's been going on in this town. Things just haven't been the same ever since you guys were tickled out of your skulls last Friday. For whatever reason, it seems to have 'inspired' a lot of people."

"It sure looks that way," Tonya agreed. "Tickling is now the main topic of conversation down at the store. Some folks who come in don't even buy anything. They just want to talk to *me*, since I'm considered the 'expert' on what it's like to be tickled!"

"Hey, what about Laura and me?" Jodi protested. "We're experts, too! And so are Jen and Michelle, now that we know what *they* went through for charity!"

"Yes, of course you're right," Tonya admitted. "And that's why it's very important that we all attend tonight's special meeting. An article in today's paper said there's going to be a guest speaker who will try to explain this tickle-bug thing. It also said that Town Hall is expected to be filled to capacity, so we should plan on getting there early. By the way, do either of you know if Jason is coming to the meeting?"

"Yes, he'll definitely be there," Michelle answered.

"Great! Uh, I mean..." Tonya blushed, which was somewhat unusual for her. "Oh well, I'll just come right out and say it! I never heard Jason mention anything about a girlfriend. Do you guys happen to know if he's involved with anyone?"

Michelle smiled and said, "He broke up with someone about six months ago. Since then, he hasn't seemed very interested in meeting anyone. That is, until this week."

"He met someone this week?" Tonya asked, sounding quite disappointed.

"Well, he hasn't approached her yet. Jason's a little shy, so he wanted me to first find out if she was seeing anyone."

"So, is she?"

"I don't know. I haven't asked her yet. But maybe now's a perfect time! Tonya, *are* you seeing anyone?"

Tonya could hardly contain herself. "Oh, my God! Are you kidding me? I can't believe he's interested in me after all the trouble I was in!"



“Tonya, he sees that you’re a totally different person now, and he *loves* what he sees!”

“Guys, this is too good to be true! I can’t wait for him to ask me out! Or maybe I should ask *him* out! Oh God, he’s so cute! I sure hope he likes to go dancing!”

“Actually, he does. And he’s a pretty good dancer, too!”

“Fantastic! Oh look, it’s almost seven o’clock and the meeting starts at eight. It’s too late for you and Jen to go back to your place for dinner, so why don’t you stay and we’ll order in a pizza?”

“Great idea! Now we’ll definitely get there on time.”

“Sounds good to me, too,” Jen added. “But *we’re* paying!”

Brad, Jason and Mike were already seated inside the crowded meeting room when the girls arrived at Town Hall. Tonya made sure to sit next to Jason as she and the other girls took the five seats that the guys had saved for them. Dozens of people continued to pour in, and the meeting hall was soon filled to the point where only standing room was available. At exactly eight o’clock, Chairman Henry Taylor pounded his gavel and called the meeting to order.

“Good evening, ladies and gentleman! The Hastings Board of Trustees has called this special meeting tonight to address the concerns that many of you have regarding the unusual phenomenon that has recently manifested itself in our community. I am, of course, referring to this strange and sudden fascination with tickling! Many questions have been raised as to the safety and well-being of our citizens, especially of those who’ve fallen victim to this so-called tickle-bug! With us tonight is Dr. Barbara Ferris, head of the Department of Psychology at Butler College. We believe that she can, and will, provide answers to all of your questions. Please join me now in welcoming Dr. Ferris!”

As a polite round of applause filled the hall, an attractive, neatly dressed, middle-aged woman rose from her seat and stepped to the podium.

“Mr. Chairman...members of the Board of Trustees...I’d like to thank you for inviting me here this evening. Most of you are fully aware of the events that have led up to our present situation. Nevertheless, I’d like to review them for the benefit of everyone’s enlightenment. Judge James Potter was recently faced with a dilemma. Three young women who’d been found guilty of perpetrating a rather loathsome crime, attempting to steal money intended for charity, would soon appear before him for sentencing. Their faces were quite familiar to him. Indeed, they’d been convicted of crimes on numerous other occasions...and in every case, they were sentenced to serve time in the Brenner County Jail. And yet, they were back in his courtroom again, seemingly undaunted by the conventional punishment they’d received in the past.”

Dr. Ferris turned to catch a glimpse of the smile that was beginning to form on Judge Potter's face. She returned the smile and resumed speaking.

"Judge Potter was understandably frustrated, but a viable solution seemed close at hand. At a meeting that took place in this very room, Mr. Bob Nelson proposed a plan that was inspired by an inventive game he'd helped a group of students create for the Butler College fundraising carnival. His plan called for the youthful offenders to be locked into instruments of punishment similar to those used centuries ago. These large wooden devices were originally designed to hold the prisoner helplessly exposed to public ridicule and scorn...and in some instances, projectiles hurled by an angry mob! Judge Potter certainly had no intention of allowing objects to be thrown at the young women. But as Mr. Nelson had so convincingly stated, perhaps they could be *tickled* into becoming law-abiding citizens."

"And that is EXACTLY what happened!" Judge Potter exclaimed as he quickly joined Dr. Ferris at the podium. "Those three young ladies changed dramatically, far exceeding my wildest expectations! I encourage everyone in this room to join me in giving them the recognition they deserve for the outstanding effort they've recently put forth in our community!"

Tonya, Laura and Jodi hesitantly got to their feet in response to the enthusiastic ovation that ensued.

"Thank you very much," Tonya said shyly. "I apologize if we seemed a bit slow to stand up, but we're just not accustomed to receiving applause from the people of *this* town!"

A wave of laughter followed Tonya's remark. Although it was the truth and wasn't meant to be funny, it came off sounding like a well-timed joke.

"Dr. Ferris, I would like to make one more introduction," Judge Potter said while motioning to Jen, Michelle, Brad, Jason and Mike to also stand up. "I doubt there's anyone here who doesn't know that these are the students who ran that fabulous carnival game! Although it was only a mock depiction of what ultimately took place in Town Square, these students know all too well that the tickling was entirely real! Maybe that's why Tonya, Laura and Jodi have become such good friends with them, and have followed in their footsteps by also becoming tremendous assets to our community! In my opinion, the young people now standing...all EIGHT of them...are heroes in this town! They truly are the heroes of Hastings!"

The meeting hall erupted with thunderous applause that lasted for several minutes and literally shook the floor. The eight youths couldn't believe the overwhelming sense of pride they were feeling. And Tonya couldn't believe something *else* she was feeling...Jason's hand gently caressing her own. Once the applause had finally waned, they all sat down, Judge Potter returned to his seat, and Dr. Ferris continued.

“Judging by the remarkable change in the behavior of those three young women, there’s clearly no doubt that their punishment was effective. But it was also unique, in that ordinary citizens became part of the punitive process since *they* were the ones who actually did the tickling. It’s reminiscent of the bygone justice I’d mentioned earlier in which the prisoner was pelted with objects thrown by...ordinary citizens. I should also point out that the hapless offender was often seriously injured as a result of that practice. Allowing folks to tickle our present-day prisoners was a relatively safe and humane way for people to attain retribution. And indeed, they did! I was in Town Square last Friday, and I saw for myself how those girls were tickled to the point of near collapse! And I also noticed that many people were enjoying themselves immensely...ticklers and spectators, alike!”

“Oh, so you actually saw the beginnings of the tickle-bug?” Henry Taylor asked. “Even in those who were just watching? How is that possible?”

“I have a theory, which I’d now like to present. Up until recently, when you heard the word ‘tickle’ you would probably think of a simple physical activity that is often considered silly, and is usually associated with children. You’d likely say that most adults are simply too busy to spend time even thinking about something as trivial as tickling. Well, you’d be absolutely right! Tickling certainly *is* child’s play...and with good reason. Children generally see themselves as having very little control over events in their lives. When a youngster discovers that merely touching someone lightly or unexpectedly can produce an explosive physical reaction, it gives that child a sense of power not normally felt. And the fact that the reaction often includes screams of laughter makes it all the more fun. So, it’s not surprising that virtually every child has an avid interest in tickling at some point in his or her development. It can last for a day, a month, or for several years, but it usually fades away well before adulthood. I say ‘usually’ because I’ve recently learned that it doesn’t always disappear. In fact, it can even intensify during adolescence and then last throughout one’s lifetime. I made this astonishing discovery when I began to research tickling on the Internet. I was quite disappointed to find that there’s been very little done in the way of clinical studies, but I was amazed by the wealth of other information I’d found on the subject. Dozens of websites and several online discussion forums have been established by and for adults who have a profound proclivity for tickling. Many of them fondly refer to themselves as ‘ticklephiles’, which in the singular form means ‘lover of tickle’. It’s not known as to how many of these people there are worldwide, but it appears that their ranks have just been increased by nearly two thousand! What seems to have happened here in Hastings is that about half of you have suddenly *become* ticklephiles!”

Henry Taylor firmly tapped his gavel to quell the outburst of laughter that emanated from the rear of the hall. The lively group standing back there apparently couldn't keep their fingers to themselves.

"Dr. Ferris, let me see if I understand this correctly. These so-called ticklephiles have always loved tickling, right? But what you're saying is that for half the folks in this town, that same predilection just suddenly appeared, like a light bulb being turned on by a switch!"

"Exactly! In fact, that's a pretty good analogy. Let me explain, and I promise it'll all make sense. I said earlier that a child's interest in tickling usually fades away, but what I really believe happens is that it becomes dormant. Like so many other childhood experiences, it, too, gets safely tucked away deep within the recesses of our subconscious mind. Now, getting back to your analogy with the light bulb. For that bulb to light up, electrical energy must first be applied to it. And for someone to suddenly become a ticklephile, the psychological 'energy' of an extraordinarily powerful stimulus would have to be present in order to awaken that person's latent affinity for tickling. Without question, that stimulus was right there in Town Square last Friday! Everyone who saw those young women being subjected to hours of merciless tickling was exposed to it! Everyone who heard their horrific shrieks of laughter was exposed to it! And those who were actually doing the tickling received an even greater dose of the stimulus that had the potential to arouse their dormant ticklephelia...and thus release the tickle-bug!"

Henry Taylor nodded with understanding. "That's a terrific theory, Dr. Ferris, and I seriously doubt that anyone will come up with a better one. But I am curious about one thing. You've clearly explained why many children, and therefore, ticklephiles, enjoy tickling as it relates to being the tickler. But what about those who enjoy being the *ticklee*, if I may take the liberty of inventing a word?"

"Actually, that word has already been invented!" Dr. Ferris replied. "In addition to using the Internet to learn *about* ticklephiles, I've also used it to communicate *with* ticklephiles. 'Tickler' and 'ticklee' are part of the basic lingo, and they're often abbreviated as 'ler' and 'lee'. Now, to answer your question. Although most children love to tickle, some love to *be* tickled. Perhaps it's the fun of relinquishing self-control, or the exhilaration one feels as a result of endorphins being released by the brain. Since all ticklephelia stems from childhood experiences, a ticklephile who enjoyed being tickled as a child probably still does. The same holds true for all you 'new' ticklephiles who prefer to be the ticklee. What you witnessed in Town Square was harsh and extreme, and yet it served as the stimulus that awakened a very positive recollection of being tickled as a youngster."

“Dr. Ferris, you’ve certainly kept your promise,” Henry Taylor remarked. “It *does* all make sense, or at least it’s starting to! Anyway, I’m sure that lots of other people have questions, so I’m now going to open the floor.”

Chairman Taylor recognized Ed Dawson, who’d recently retired after having served as Town Clerk for more than forty years. He stood and asked a question that many others had planned to ask.

“I was in Town Square last Friday, and I saw and heard everything. But I haven’t been bitten by the tickle-bug, nor have many of my friends who were also there. How do you explain that?”

“Well, if it’ll make you feel any better, I haven’t been bitten either!” Dr. Ferris admitted. “The vast majority of those who’ve been affected are under the age of fifty. Oh, and in case you’re wondering, I am over fifty...but I won’t say by how much! I suspect that the longer it’s been since one’s childhood, the harder it is to awaken one’s latent ticklephelia. However, age isn’t the only factor in that there’ve been numerous exceptions. Some twenty-year-olds have not been affected, and I know of at least one couple in their eighties who can’t stop tickling each other!”

Sarah Henderson began waving her hand so vigorously, Henry Taylor had no choice but to acknowledge her next.

“Dr. Ferris, I think the tickle-bug bit me EXTRA hard! I love to tickle my husband, Pete, but I also love it when he tickles me! We haven’t had this much fun since we were sweethearts back in high school, if you know what I mean! I won’t go into too much detail, but let’s just say that I’m NOT getting a lot of housework done! So, do you think it’s permanent?”

“Yes, I believe it is. Think of it this way...once you discover that you love a certain food, you’ll always enjoy eating it from that point on. In other words, you and your husband should consider hiring a maid!”

When Henry Taylor had finally stopped laughing, he acknowledged John Brewster.

“I was bitten by the tickle-bug even before last Friday!” John proclaimed as he rose from his seat. “It happened to me when I saw Jen Adams being tickled at the fundraising carnival. Seeing her feet stuck through those holes reminded me of something that happened when I was about ten. While playing in the backyard one day, I noticed that the girl next door had somehow wedged her ankles between the slats of the picket fence that separated our yards. She was barefoot, as usual, since she hated wearing shoes in the summer. When she realized that she was hopelessly stuck, she began yelling for help. But instead of trying to free her, I started tickling her feet! She went completely ballistic and began laughing like crazy! When I finally stopped and helped her get free, she actually thanked me. But it wasn’t just for getting her loose...she also thanked me for tickling her! She said she really liked being tickled and that she’d had a lot of fun. I’m sure that she did...but not nearly as much fun as I had!”

“Thank you for sharing that anecdote,” Dr. Ferris said with a grin. “By the way, you’re not the only one who was bitten by the tickle-bug at the carnival. Several others have told me that it happened to them after they’d watched or played the tickling game. But for everyone else who’s been affected, the far more potent stimulus of that event in Town Square was required. Without a doubt, those who were there saw more extreme tickling in one minute, than most people see in a lifetime! As far as I can tell, nothing even remotely close to it has ever occurred, anywhere. And that would certainly explain why there’s never been a single reported case of SMT before.”

“SMT?” Henry Taylor asked with puzzlement.

“Oh, sorry! It stands for Spontaneous Mass Ticklephelia. I should also mention that we’ll soon be seeing a lot of new faces in town. Although I’ve tried to be discreet while using the Internet, it was impossible to keep what has happened here a secret. Hundreds of ticklephiles from all over the country are planning to visit us. In fact, some of them may be arriving as early as tomorrow. They’re all very anxious to see for themselves what the ‘tickling capital of the world’ is really like!”

Henry Taylor scratched his chin and remarked, “Well, as long as they’re decent and respectful, I see no reason why they shouldn’t be welcome. Besides, it’ll be very good for business. With the exception of parents visiting their children at Butler, we get very few tourists in this town.”

“That may be true,” Judge Potter interjected, “but I’m very concerned about one thing. Each day, people gather in Town Square to use the stocks, pillory and tickling post for fun and games. According to what Dr. Ferris just told us, the size of that crowd will undoubtedly increase. Now as I understood it, Mayor Jenkins and the Board of Trustees had decided that those devices were to remain in Town Square so they could be used for punishment...not entertainment!”

“They *were* left there to be used for punishment,” Henry Taylor assured him. “But we also felt that there’d be no harm in letting folks amuse themselves with those things when they weren’t being used for punitive purposes. And having watched them play, I honestly can’t remember a time when I’ve seen the people of this town having more fun!”

“That is an excellent point,” Judge Potter admitted. “So, I guess I’ll have to be sure of *two* things before sentencing someone to public incarceration. Not only must I determine that the offender is ticklish, I must also ensure that he or she isn’t one of those, er...ticklees!”

“That’s right, Jim! Putting a ticklee in the stocks would be like strapping a diehard Red Sox fan into a seat at Fenway right behind home plate!”

“Hell, even I wouldn’t mind that!” Judge Potter shouted over the laughter and applause that followed the clever comparison.

After everyone had quieted down, Henry Taylor called upon Reverend Thomas, who'd been patiently waiting to speak.

"I'm certainly not opposed to folks having a good time, but I'm afraid that someone is going to get hurt if we continue to allow those things to be used like toys! A finger or toe could easily get caught, given the way that those frames are hinged. And binding someone to the post too tightly or incorrectly could be very dangerous. I'm also concerned that those devices may be damaged by the weather, especially during the harsh winter months."

Beaming broadly, Bob Nelson instantly sprung to his feet.

Henry Taylor smiled and said, "Reverend Thomas, I believe that your fears are about to be put to rest. Isn't that right, Bob?"

"That's right! You'll be happy to know that many of my friends have agreed to join my squad of 'safety officers'. Beginning tomorrow morning, there will always be at least one of us on hand to ensure the safe and proper use of the devices. Think of us as you would a lifeguard at the swimming pool. And since the pool is normally closed when there's no lifeguard on duty, so will be the case with the stocks, pillory and tickling post. Weather permitting, the devices will be open every day during daylight hours, and they'll be closed at night. And of course, they'll be closed entirely during the winter. I've also purchased a set of custom-made vinyl covers, which will be removed in the morning and replaced in the evening by the safety officer on duty. They are extremely rugged, and they're designed to provide excellent protection against rain, snow, and the extreme cold."

"Bob, I should've known better than to think that you'd overlooked a single detail!" Reverend Thomas declared. "Maybe YOU should run for mayor in the next election!"

The Town Hall meeting lasted well into the evening as Dr. Ferris continued to answer questions about her theory, about the out-of-town visitors who'd be arriving shortly, and about tickling in general.

Meanwhile, one hundred miles away in Boston at the law firm of Page, Fitch and Associates, a different kind of meeting was about to take place. Attorney Kelly McNeal had been working very late when, suddenly, she began hearing screams of laughter coming from the conference room across the hall from her office. A few moments later, the voice of Don Page crackled from the speaker of her intercom.

"Kelly, I'm in the conference room with Roger! Get in here right away! You *won't* believe this!"

## Chapter Fourteen

Kelly stood frozen with her azure blue eyes transfixed on the large video monitor that was built into the wall of the conference room. She stared at the screen in total disbelief, and she didn't utter a single word until the videotape that was playing had finally come to an end.

"Please tell me it's just an elaborate hoax!"

Roger Fitch, who co-owned the law firm with Don, replied, "Kelly, it's not a hoax. Everything that you saw and heard was real. It happened last Friday over in Brenner County, in a small college town called Hastings. The tape is a copy of some raw footage that was shot by a WGGB-TV news crew. My brother, who works at the station in Springfield, sent it to me along with a letter in which he explained what had happened. Apparently, those three girls had been causing a lot of trouble, and they were constantly being arrested for petty crimes. Judge James Potter, the town justice, was completely fed up, and he was willing to do just about anything to put an end to their mayhem. Well, he got this crazy idea to have them publicly confined in devices that were commonly used during the Colonial era! As you saw, he had one of the girls imprisoned in foot stocks, another one locked into some sort of pillory, and the third one was bound to what looked like a whipping post! He also instructed the county jail to provide them with only the skimpiest of clothing to wear on that particular day. And as if *that* wasn't enough, he encouraged the townspeople to tickle the girls while they were helplessly restrained by those horrible contraptions!"

"Oh, my God!" Kelly gasped. "Those poor girls! I can't even imagine what it must've been like! I'm so ticklish, I would've died!"

"Kelly, I never knew you were that ticklish," Don teased. "Anyway, we believe that those young ladies would have a very strong case if they were to file a civil lawsuit against the town. Their punishment was blatantly cruel and unusual, and therefore, unconstitutional. And exposing their half-naked bodies in public clearly violated their right to privacy. With the testimony of several expert witnesses, I think we could also prove that they suffered permanent psychological damage as a result of their horrendous ordeal. All we have to do is convince them to allow our firm to file suit on their behalf. Kelly, this is exactly the kind of case we're always looking to take on...the kind we usually win!"

"Yes, it certainly is. Of course, the town may agree to settle out of court rather than go to trial. Either way, those young women stand to collect a lot of money. Don, how much would you recommend that they sue for?"



“Ten million dollars per plaintiff. With our standard contingent fee being one third of the settlement, winning this case would obviously be a major boost to the revenues of Page, Fitch and Associates!”

Roger smiled and said, “Their names are Tonya Sheppard, Jodi Blake and Laura Pierce. I checked the online directory and found a T. Sheppard listed at thirty-five Fernwood Street. But rather than making a phone call or writing a letter, we thought it would be much better if one of us went to Hastingson and personally met with the girls. Kelly, we think that you’re the one who should go.”

“Why me? Is it because you feel they’ll be more receptive to a woman?”

“Well, that’s partly the reason,” Roger admitted, “but we also believe that you’re the best one for the job. Kelly, we know that you can be extremely persuasive. Remember how well you handled the jury in the Bachman case last month? You had all twelve of them eating right out of your hand!”

“We’ve decided to give you a little incentive,” Don added. “You’ll receive a fifty thousand dollar bonus if you convince them to sue. And it’ll be yours to keep, even in the unlikely event that we lose the case.”

Kelly couldn’t pass up the chance to earn such a huge bonus. And having seen for herself what the girls had gone through, she thought it would be rather easy to persuade them to sue the town.

“Okay, guys, when do I go?”

“Monday, right after our one o’clock meeting,” Don answered. “We’ll print out a map and directions, and there’ll be a BMW rental waiting for you in the parking garage. Have a great weekend, Kelly! We’ll see you on Monday.”

Kelly returned to her office smiling. She was thrilled that she’d soon be fifty thousand dollars richer, provided that all went well. She was also quite pleased that Roger and Don had so much confidence in her ability to procure this case for the firm. She shut down her computer, switched off the lights, and then briskly walked toward the elevator. Kelly knew that she really *was* going to have a great weekend.

“I TOLD you not to get off the interstate!” Karen Burrows yelled to her husband as he negotiated the narrow winding road. “Now we’re LOST! My sister gave us perfectly good directions to her new house! Scott, why couldn’t you just follow them?”

“And WHY did I have to give up my SATURDAY?” grumbled their daughter, Nicole. “I’m eighteen! Getting up at six in the morning to go to Vermont with my parents and kid brother is such bullshit!”

“Watch your mouth!” Scott snapped. “You haven’t seen your cousins in over a year. And Karen, we’re *not* lost. I’m just taking the scenic route. Northwestern Massachusetts is one of the most beautiful parts of New England this time of year.”

After driving for over twenty minutes without seeing a single familiar sign, Scott Burrows realized that his wife was right. He really *was* lost. He continued to drive, hoping that he'd eventually find his way onto I-91. But instead, he found himself entering Hastings.

"At last, we're coming into a town," Karen sighed. "Scott, you really should stop and ask someone for directions."

"Okay, okay. But it's still pretty early, so let's all be on the lookout for some people up and about."

"DAD, there's some guys over there!" cried nine-year-old Adam as they slowly approached Town Square. "Over there! On the grass! See 'em?"

"He's right, honey," Karen confirmed. "We'll have to walk across the lawn to speak with them, so pull over and park behind that white SUV."

Bob Nelson and his assistant, Frank, had just finished trying out the new vinyl covers that had been made for the stocks, pillory and tickling post. They found that they all fit perfectly, but they also discovered that the toe restraints of the stocks were showing signs of constant use. All four ribbons were quite tattered and worn, and two of the rubber toe cushions had begun to split. Fearing that someone might rip them completely, they removed the restraints with the intention of installing new ones later that day. After discarding the last ribbon, they noticed the four members of the Burrows family walking toward them.

"Good morning!" Bob greeted them cheerfully. "I don't recall having seen you folks around here before."

"Well, we're from Connecticut," Scott explained. "We were on our way to Vermont, but we seem to have gotten lost. Perhaps you could tell us the best way to get to..."

"Oh, LOOK!" Karen gushed with excitement. "What an amazing Colonial re-creation! Hey, I've got a terrific idea! Let's take some pictures of Adam and Nikki in one of those things!"

Folding her arms and rolling her eyes, Nicole blurted, "MOM! Can't we just get the directions and GO?"

"Aw, come on, it'll be fun!" Scott insisted, suddenly realizing what the unusual apparatus actually was. He then turned to Bob and said, "Sir, would it be okay if we took a few photos of our kids in the stockade?"

"Sure! But just so you know, the device in the center is called the stocks, and the one on the left is a pillory. That structure on the right is fashioned after a whipping post, but I can assure you that we've never actually whipped anyone! Anyway, you folks are more than welcome to take pictures, and we'd be happy to help your children pose for them."

"Great!" Scott exclaimed, handing his son the keys to the car. "Adam, go get the camera!"

Bob and Frank grinned as Adam eagerly dashed across the lawn. Then they stepped onto the middle platform and began to open the stocks.

“Come have a seat, young lady,” Bob said, beckoning to Nicole. “Let’s get you up in the stocks so you’ll be ready by the time your brother returns.”

“Mom! Dad! I *really* don’t want to do this!”

Karen draped her arm over Nicole’s shoulder and took her aside.

“Nikki, I’ll make you a deal. Remember that outfit you really loved? The one that I said was way too expensive? Well, I’ll buy it for you if you just go up there and let us take a few pictures.”

“You will? Um...all right. I’ll do it.”

Nicole cautiously climbed onto the platform and seated herself on the bench. It was only then that she realized that she wasn’t about to be photographed in some flimsy theatrical stage-prop. This set of stocks was real...a little *too* real, so she thought. It was nothing at all like the device she’d seen at The Excalibur during a recent family trip to Las Vegas. The ‘medieval pillory’, as she recalled, offered no actual means of confinement. It did not even open and close. One simply inserted one’s head and hands into the enormously over-sized holes.

Following Bob’s instructions, Nicole swung her legs up onto the shelf that adjoined the bench and the stocks. She then pushed her sneaker-clad feet over and just slightly beyond the two semi-circular cutouts. Bob closed the stocks and engaged the clasp, thus snugly securing her ankles in place.

“Would you like ‘the works’?” Frank then asked. He pointed to the pair of straps that were attached to the shelf, and to the wrist cuffs that dangled overhead like mistletoe.

“Uh, no thanks. I can hardly move as it is.”

“Aw, Nikki, you’re such a CHICKEN!” cried Adam, who’d just returned with the camera. “Go for the works! I DARE YA!”

Nicole absolutely hated being teased and goaded by Adam, especially in front of strangers. She also knew that if she refused his dare, he would undoubtedly tell all of her friends.

“I’m not scared of ANYTHING!” she boldly asserted, thrusting her arms in the air. “I’ll go for the works! And you better, too, when it’s YOUR turn, you little bastard!”

Bob and Frank fastened the straps around Nicole’s legs and wrists, and then they stepped off the platform and moved out of the way. Scott turned on the digital camera, which Karen had given him for his birthday last week. It took him a moment or two to adjust the settings since he’d only used it once before.

“Okay, now smile!” he said with enthusiasm.

But Nicole did not feign even a tiny smirk, let alone, a huge grin.

“Come on, Nikki, you can do *much* better than that!” Karen urged.

“MOM! I’m not very happy about doing this, and I really don’t feel like smiling! Just take the damn picture and let me out of this stupid thing!”

“Not ‘til I see a big smile!”

“WHAT? You gotta be fuckin’ kidding! Let me out, damn it! Let me out!”

“May I make a suggestion?” Bob asked politely.

“Sure, anything,” Karen sighed, clearly dismayed by Nicole’s dismal attitude and total lack of cooperation. She was also quite embarrassed by her daughter’s liberal use of profanity.

With his back to Nicole, Bob began whispering to Scott, Karen and Adam. Nicole couldn’t hear a word he was saying, and she thought it was rather rude that she wasn’t included in the conversation. Her parents and brother suddenly started to giggle, and then Bob slowly turned around and faced her.

“What’s so funny?” she asked. “Are you guys laughing at me? Yeah, I’m sure I look totally ridiculous in this thing, especially with those two big bull’s-eyes around my feet! Who’s the moron who painted *those* on?”

“I am!” Bob answered. “I painted those targets around the holes because the stocks were originally used for a carnival game. The premise of that game involved the portrayal of two Colonial American girls, each of whom had a rather foul mouth...just like you. They were depicted as having lived during a time when such vulgarity was actually considered a crime. Consequently, they found themselves locked in the stocks...just like you.”

Nicole suddenly noticed that Adam had vanished from view. But a moment later, he sneezed, hence she realized that he was crouched in front of the stocks. Bob paused briefly, lest a second sneeze was forthcoming, and then he continued his verbal dissertation.

“The village magistrate had decreed that once the young women had been set in the stocks, they were to be relieved of their footwear and thus rendered barefoot...just like you!”

Nicole instantly felt her sneakers being snatched from her feet. She then felt a pair of familiar small hands pulling off both of her socks.

“MOM! What the hell’s going on? You said you wanted me to smile for the camera, not show off my pedicure!”

“Oh, you’ll be doing a lot more than just smiling,” Bob chuckled. “You see, the village magistrate had further decreed that those young women were to have their feet thoroughly tickled...just...like...”

“HeeeeeeeHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaHaaHaaHaaHaaHeeHeeHeeHeeHee!  
AaaaaaaaahHaHaHaHaHaHeeHeeHeeHeeHeeHeeHaaHaaHaaHaaHaa!  
HaHaHaHaHaHaHaHa! HeeHeeHeeHeeHaaHaaHaaHaaHaaHaHaHaHa!”

Nicole continued to laugh and giggle as Adam playfully tickled her feet with his lithe little fingers. Scott, meanwhile, was busily using his camera to capture images of Nicole from every conceivable angle. He went to great lengths so as not to miss a single one of his daughter’s priceless facial expressions.

Karen was both surprised and delighted that Nicole's reaction to being tickled wasn't one of obscenity-laden protest. Instead, it was one of happy laughter, wiggling toes, and joyful smiles that were as wide as her lips would allow. She'd originally felt a bit guilty for bribing Nicole into the stocks and for being a party to Bob's cunning scheme. But those feelings of guilt quickly vanished when she realized that, for the very first time today, Nicole was actually having fun. After several minutes had gone by, Karen noticed that Nicole's face had begun to turn red and that she was having difficulty catching her breath. Scott had already taken a plethora of pictures, so she prudently told Adam to stop.

"Oh, my God! That was awesome!" Nicole raved as Bob and Frank began undoing the straps. "Adam, when I realized you were going to tickle my feet, I was ready to kill you! But you didn't do it hard or dig in with your nails like you always do when you tickle to annoy me. I hate that because it hurts a lot more than it tickles. But you were doing these amazing light little strokes that tickled so much, I couldn't stop laughing! It gave me butterflies in my stomach and I felt totally out of control! It was almost like the feeling I get from roller coasters! It felt weird, scary and fun, all at the same time...and I loved it!"

Adam glanced at Bob and then said to Nicole, "*He* told me to do it that way! And he's a real smart guy 'cause he built all these things in his woodshop!"

Bob smiled at Adam and took the compliment for all that it was worth. But his smile slowly faded because he saw that it was starting to drizzle.

"I'm sorry, folks, but we've got to cover these things up now," Bob said as he helped Nicole down from the platform. "Adam, I know you wanted your Dad to take some pictures of you in the stocks, too. So perhaps you can pay us a visit on your way back from Vermont. Of course, you first have to *get* to Vermont!"

"That's right, I almost forgot why we stopped here!" Scott laughed. "If you could get me back onto I-91, I'd be most appreciative."

After getting the directions, Scott and his family thanked Bob and Frank for the fun time they'd had and then they all headed back to the car. Adam and Nicole entertained themselves during the remainder of the trip by scanning through the nearly sixty images that were stored in the camera. Nicole couldn't believe some of the close-up shots of her exuberant laughing face. And Adam especially enjoyed the ones that showed him mischievously tickling her feet.

Nicole leaned forward from the back seat and said, "Mom, I know I told you that I didn't want to go to Vermont today. Well, now I can't wait to get there and show Cousin Julie and Keith all these great pictures! And you *are* going to buy me that outfit like you promised, right?"

“Nikki, all things considered, you really *were* a good sport back there. So I’m also going to buy you that pair of shoes you wanted...the ones that cost two hundred dollars!”

Bob and Frank had finished covering the devices just before it actually began to rain. Then they left Town Square and walked to the cabinetry shop since it was almost time to open for business. Neither of them had brought an umbrella, but they were fortunate in that the store was only a few blocks away. Frank was originally going to manage the shop for the first four hours so that Bob could serve as the day’s first safety officer. As he’d mentioned at last night’s meeting, his plan to always have a volunteer supervisor on hand at the stocks, pillory and tickling post was supposed to begin this morning. But as long as the rain continued, those devices would remain covered and closed.

“It sure feels good to finally be inside,” Bob said as he dried his hair with a towel. “I’m really glad those folks were able to get some pictures of their daughter before the rain started.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Frank agreed. “She was laughing and grinning the whole time, and her parents were thrilled! By the way, I noticed how surprised they were when you made your sneaky little suggestion. I guess they didn’t see the big welcome sign when they drove into town!”

“You’re right. I think they would’ve said something if they’d seen our famous ‘tickling capital of the world’ slogan! Anyway, they seemed like a really nice family and I’m glad they had a wonderful time. And I’ll bet that nobody else who visits our town misses that sign!”

“You’re talking about the ticklephiles, right? Those people Dr. Ferris told us about? Well, I’m sure they’re going to love it here...just like I do. It’s no secret that *I’ve* been bitten by the tickle-bug!”

“Frank, I think you were bitten the night that Jen and Michelle came over to test those devices!”

“Okay, I’ll admit that I had a lot of fun helping Jen tickle Michelle. But it *really* hit me at the big ‘tickle-fest’ in Town Square! I think Dr. Ferris got it right because the way she explained it is exactly the way it happened to me.”

“Yeah, you and two thousand other folks in this town! Add to that the hundreds of visitors who’ll soon be arriving. Hell, we might have to build more stocks!”

Just as Frank was about to comment, Mrs. Ryan, a long-time customer, walked into the store. They greeted her cordially and Bob promptly attended to her needs. Frank then left the showroom and went into the carpentry shop to finish sanding a set of kitchen cabinets he’d been working on.

About an hour later, Bob noticed that the rain had begun to subside and that the sky was starting to brighten. By eleven o’clock, it stopped raining completely and the sun began to slowly break through the clouds.

“Frank, I’m going to head over to Town Square,” Bob said as he stepped into the workshop. “I’m sure some folks are already there waiting for those devices to be opened. I’ll probably be gone for the rest of the day, especially if some of those out-of-town visitors show up. Business has been pretty slow today so you can close a little early if you want.”

“Okay, Bob, have fun! I’ll probably join you there around five o’clock.”

Just as Bob had predicted, there were a lot of people already gathered in Town Square when he arrived. And judging by the number of unfamiliar faces, he knew that some of them had traveled to Hastingson to experience the remarkable phenomenon they’d heard about via the Internet. Bob introduced himself and offered a warm welcome to all those who were new in town. He uncovered the stocks, pillory and tickling post, stepped back, and then watched as folks eagerly mounted the platforms and began to play.

People continued to arrive by the carload throughout the entire day. Hotel rooms, and even parking spaces, were at a premium by late afternoon. Town Square was soon filled with visitors and residents alike, and many new friendships were undoubtedly being made as they all mingled, laughed and played.

In accordance with his plan for safe tickling, Bob reluctantly closed the devices at sundown. But the tickling continued all night long and well into Sunday morning. There was tickling in the streets, as well as in bars and restaurants. There was tickling in private homes, and on porches and front lawns. The local movie theater, the bowling alley, and even Reverend Thomas’ church weren’t immune from the infectious sound of laughter that seemed to be just about everywhere.

Back in Boston, Kelly McNeal had spent the weekend shopping, playing tennis, and going out with friends on Saturday night. But she decided to stay home on Sunday evening in order to prepare for her trip to Hastingson. Although she expected her meeting with Tonya, Laura and Jodi to only last a few hours, she was determined not to leave until she’d achieved her goal of convincing the girls to sue the town. So she packed a small suitcase with several days worth of clothes, and then she began making phone calls to reserve a hotel room.

“You’re all booked up, too?” she groaned with despair. “For the entire week? All the rooms were booked by *what* kind of files? Okay, I’ll hold on while you...oh, someone just cancelled? Great! I’ll take the room for two nights.”

After making the reservation, Kelly hung up the phone and muttered to herself, “What the hell are *tickle* files?”

# Chapter Fifteen

“The final item on today’s agenda is the prospective case of Sheppard, Pierce and Blake versus the Town of Hastings,” Don announced to the other attorneys seated at the conference room table. “This unique case involves a judge who went far beyond the boundaries of the law when he recently pronounced sentence upon three young women. As you’re about to see, not only was the prescribed punishment cruel and unusual, it was humiliating and degrading as well.”

Don pressed the play button on the VCR. As Kelly watched the tape along with the others, she was just as shocked and stunned as she was when she’d seen it the first time. And she could tell by the reaction of her colleagues that they, too, found it very disturbing. Once the tape had ended, Don explained what they’d all just seen and then he answered a number of questions.

“As some of you know, Kelly will be going to Hastings this afternoon to meet with those girls. She will offer them our firm’s legal representation, and she’ll advise that they each seek ten million dollars in compensatory damages. Although I doubt she needs it, let’s wish Kelly good luck in this endeavor!”

Kelly smiled as they all stood and applauded. After thanking everyone, she wheeled her suitcase to the front desk and picked up the map and directions that Roger had left. She then took the elevator to the parking garage and tossed her luggage into the trunk of the red BMW that had been rented for her.

Kelly left downtown Boston and made her way onto the Massachusetts Turnpike. She disliked driving in the city due to the traffic and endless construction, but she really loved the open road. And she was now zipping along the ‘Mass Pike’ just slightly above the speed limit as she’d expected she would be at three in the afternoon. Kelly turned on the radio and began to sing along with an oldies tune. But she couldn’t stop thinking about Tonya, Laura and Jodi, and the terrible injustice she believed that they’d suffered. Of course, she also couldn’t stop thinking about how she planned to spend her fifty thousand dollar bonus.

At around four-thirty, Kelly passed a sign that said she’d entered Brenner County. It caused her to grin because she knew she’d soon be arriving at her destination. About ten minutes later, she noticed another sign. But this one made her gasp. It informed her that she was entering Hastings...the tickling capital of the world!



Although Kelly wasn't quite sure what it meant, it prompted her to think of the videotape once again. She then recalled that the hotel clerk had said something about 'tickle files'. Suddenly, she had an uneasy feeling that there was something very strange about this town.

Kelly followed the road to Main Street and made a left turn. But instead of proceeding, she pulled over and flipped open her cell phone. She pressed the number three button on the keypad, which was the number she'd programmed to speed-dial Don's office.

"Hello, Don? Yes, the directions were fine and I got here okay. But something just isn't right. What do I mean? Well, there was a big sign that said I was entering the tickling capital of the world! And when I called to make a reservation, they said the hotel was full of tickle files! Don, I've got a creepy feeling about this place and...of course I realize how important this case is to the firm...what?...yes, I know that you and Roger are counting on me, but...okay, I'll try to stay focused and not worry about anything except getting the job done. You're right, Don, it's probably nothing more than someone's idea of a joke. I'll call you after I've met with the girls and let you know how everything went. Bye."

Kelly studied the map briefly and then she continued driving down Main Street. As she passed Town Square, she noticed that there was a large group of people gathered there. Unable to see what was happening, she assumed it was just a flea market or a political rally of some sort. When she reached Fernwood Street, she turned right, and then parked in a space that someone had just pulled out of. Number thirty-five, the address she was looking for, was the second building from the corner.

Kelly entered the dimly lit lobby of the old, three-story walk-up. The directory listed Tonya Sheppard as the occupant of apartment 3B, so she pressed the button on the intercom panel. Kelly waited for more than a minute, but there was no reply. Just as she was about to leave, a woman who was carrying a bag full of groceries walked into the lobby.

"Excuse me. Do you know where I can find Tonya Sheppard? I'm also looking for Laura Pierce and Jodi Blake. Do you happen to know any of those girls?"

"Do I *know* them? Honey, EVERYBODY in Hastings knows them! They're practically celebrities! So, I take it you're not from around here."

"No, I'm not...I'm from Boston. I'm an attorney, and it's very important that I speak with them."

"Well, Laura and Jodi sometimes go to the library after school. It's quite a ways from here, and they might not even be there. But I know where you'll definitely find Tonya. She started working at Freundlich's Hardware about a week ago. Just walk out to Main, turn right, and go down two blocks. The store is right on the corner."

Kelly thanked the woman and began following the directions she'd been given. As she walked along Main Street, she noticed how casually attired most of the townspeople were. She felt somewhat over-dressed in her starched white blouse, gray wool skirt, black high-heels and stockings. She considered going back to her car and driving to the hotel so that she could change into something a bit more comfortable. But she decided that she'd rather meet with the girls first and check into the hotel later.

Kelly entered Freundlich's Hardware Store and noticed a tall, dark-haired young woman standing behind the counter. Having seen the videotape twice, Kelly recognized her immediately.

"Hello, are you Tonya Sheppard?" she asked, just to be certain.

"Yes, I am. How may I help you?"

"My name is Kelly McNeal, and I'm with Page, Fitch and Associates of Boston. There's something extremely important that I'd like to discuss with you, Laura Pierce, and Jodi Blake. I assume you know both of those girls."

"Of course, I do! We're all best friends, and we share an apartment not far from here. Why do you want to speak with us? What is this all about?"

"Well, I'd rather explain it to all three of you at the same time. When do you think we could get together?"

"How about in a little while? It's already past five, and I get off work at five-thirty. Laura and Jodi should be back at the apartment by then, so let's meet there in about a half-hour. We live at thirty-five Fernwood Street, apartment 3B. Just go down two blocks and turn..."

"Yes, I know exactly where it is. Tonya, it was very nice meeting you and I'm really looking forward to meeting your friends. I'll see you all later."

After leaving the store, Kelly decided to look for a place to eat since she was beginning to get rather hungry. Quite conveniently, the Hastings Diner was right across the street.

Kelly walked into the diner and seated herself at a small table by the window. The waitress immediately came over, smiled, and handed her a very large menu. She returned a few minutes later, her pen and pad poised to jot down Kelly's order.

"What can I get for you, dear?"

"Just a salad, no dressing, and a glass of water. I'm trying to watch my weight."

"Yeah, right," the waitress remarked as she surveyed Kelly's waif-like frame.

Kelly leaned back in her seat and gazed out the window while waiting for her salad to arrive. The row of small shops and the smiles on the faces of those walking by reminded her of the little town she grew up in. The quaint, picturesque street scene brought back many fond memories of her youth.

Kelly's childhood reminiscing was suddenly interrupted by a series of shrill screams coming from the rear of the diner. Turning around quickly, she was astonished by what she observed. Each time the waitress emerged from the kitchen carrying a tray full of food, some of the patrons would reach out and tickle her ribs as she walked by. She laughed and squirmed, nearly dropping the tray several times. But not once did she demand that they stop, nor did she even attempt to avoid their wiggling fingers. In fact, she seemed to enjoy the challenge of not allowing the tray to slip from her hands and thus go crashing to the floor.

When the waitress returned with her order, Kelly looked up and said, "Why do you let them do that? I'd go ballistic if they did that to me!"

"Oh, it's just a little game that I play with some of the regulars. If I drop the tray, their meal is on the house. But if I don't, they leave me twice the tip that they normally would. I made an extra ninety bucks last week and I only dropped the tray once."

"Even so, doesn't your boss mind that you gave away free food and created a mess to clean up?"

"Not at all. In fact, the game was actually *his* idea!"

Kelly pretended to be amused and nodded politely, but in truth, she was appalled. The thought of a grown woman engaging in a frivolous game that involved tickling seemed very odd. It also reinforced her belief that there was, indeed, something very peculiar about this town.

Tonya left work promptly at five-thirty and went straight home. She was extremely anxious to learn why Kelly had come all the way from Boston to speak with her and her friends. After fumbling with her keys, she let herself into the apartment and found Laura and Jodi deeply engrossed in their studies.

"Hey, guys, I think our luck is continuing to improve!" she declared.

"What exactly do you mean?" Jodi responded as she and Laura looked up from their books.

"Well, this woman dressed in fancy business clothes came into the store today. Her name was Kelly McNeal, and she said she had something very important to discuss with us. She works for a company in Boston called Page Associates, or something like that. I can't remember the exact name but it sounded like a film company or a talent agency! Maybe they want to make a documentary about us, and how we changed our lives completely around!"

"Oh, my God! That would be totally awesome!" Laura exclaimed.

"Yeah, it sure would!" cried Jodi. "We'd be famous!"

Just then, the intercom buzzed.

"Oh, that must be her now," Tonya said as she pushed the button on the panel next to the door. "I told her to come at around five forty-five, and she's right on time."

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Tonya opened it and invited Kelly to come in.

“Ms. McNeal, I’d like you to meet Laura Pierce and Jodi Blake.”

“It’s a pleasure. Oh, and please call me Kelly.”

The girls smiled and nodded, and then they all took a seat on the couch in the living room.

“So when do you start shooting the movie?” Laura suddenly asked.

“*Movie?*” Kelly replied, seeming a bit confused.

“Please forgive her for being so blunt,” Tonya interjected. “We just assumed that your company was interested in making a documentary about us.”

“Oh, it’s even better than that,” Kelly said with a grin. “There’s an excellent chance that each of you will soon be awarded a huge sum of money! You see, I’m an attorney, and my firm would like to represent you in a civil lawsuit against the town. I watched a videotape of your recent ordeal, and I can’t even imagine the pain and suffering that you endured. The Eighth Amendment prohibits that kind of punishment, and we intend to prove beyond any doubt that your Constitutional rights were grossly violated. My firm is willing to represent you on a contingent fee basis. In other words, it’ll cost you nothing upfront. We collect our fee only if the case is actually won.”

“Just how much would we be suing for?” Jodi inquired with a hint of skepticism.

“Ten million dollars each!”

“And how much is your *contingent fee*?” Laura then asked.

“One third of the total settlement, which is customary for this type of arrangement.”

Tonya glanced at Laura and Jodi, stood and then said, “So, you want us to sue the people of Hastington for thirty million dollars...because they SAVED OUR LIVES? That would certainly BANKRUPT this wonderful little town! What you don’t seem to understand is that we were headed for a life of crime, and we would’ve eventually ended up in the state penitentiary! Need I tell you what happens to women like US in a place like THAT? We’d be raped, beaten, or maybe even KILLED! What Judge Potter and the people of this town did was probably the best thing that ever happened to us! Oh, sure...being tickled for hours nearly drove us insane! But somehow, it made us realize that we were ruining our lives!”

“B...but what about the m...money?” Kelly stuttered.

“The MONEY?” Jodi retorted. “That’s all you CARE about, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes...I mean NO! I mean...”

“I think Kelly could use a little ‘attitude adjustment’!” Laura snickered.

“Yes, that’s an excellent idea!” Jodi agreed.

Kelly jumped up quickly and headed straight for the door, but the three girls grabbed her and wrestled her to the floor. She began kicking and screaming as they dragged her over to a big wooden chair in the corner.

“Let’s tie her up...then we’ll figure out what to do with her!” cried Tonya.

“HELP! HELP! HELP!” Kelly shrieked.

“We better tape her mouth shut, too!” Laura exclaimed as she reached for the roll of duct tape they kept stashed in the closet.

Tonya held Kelly down firmly while Laura and Jodi taped her wrists and forearms to the arms of the chair. They then bound her ankles to the legs of the chair and placed a large piece of tape over her mouth.

“Okay, guys, here’s what we’re going to do,” Tonya said with authority. “Laura, go find Jen and Michelle and bring them here right away. I saw them shopping in Donna’s on my way home and they’re probably still there. Jodi, I want you to go to the cabinet store and get Mr. Nelson. He should be closing up shop right about now. Jason and the boys are at the high school watching a soccer game, so I’ll run down to the field and get them.”

“Okay, but what about *her*?” Jodi asked.

Tonya quickly examined Kelly’s bound limbs and replied, “Oh, don’t worry...she’s not going anywhere! And besides, we won’t be gone very long.”

Once the girls had left the apartment, Kelly immediately began trying to free herself. She’d never been so frightened in her entire life, and she shuddered at the thought of what they might do to her. After struggling frantically for several minutes, she succeeded in loosening the tape around her right ankle. Using every bit of her strength and just the right leverage, she was able to rip the tape and pull her foot free. She then noticed that her purse was lying on the floor a short distance away. She’d dropped it during her brief wrestling match with the girls. They hadn’t bothered to pick it up, nor did they realize that her cell phone was inside of it. Kelly kicked off her shoe, stretched out her leg, and snagged the purse handle with her foot. She slid the purse directly in front of the chair and used her stocking-clad toes to maneuver the phone out of it. It took numerous attempts, but she finally managed to pry it open. And when she did, she was very happy to find that she’d left it turned on. Kelly leaned forward until her fingers could grasp and remove the tape that covered her mouth. Then, using great care, she pressed the number three button with the tip of her big toe. A few moments later, she heard the distant sound of Don’s voice answering the phone.

“Don, it’s me, Kelly! Can you hear me okay? Good! Now, don’t talk, just listen! I’ve been KIDNAPPED! They’ve got me taped up in a chair and I think they’re going to TORTURE me! Don, this whole town is completely insane! You bastards NEVER should’ve sent me here alone! What? No, no, don’t call the police! They might be in on it, too! Oh, God! I think I hear them coming up the stairs! HELP!”

Kelly became even more riddled with panic when she heard the key turn in the lock. She was, however, able to switch off the phone just before the front door swung open. Laura, Jen and Michelle entered the apartment and immediately noticed the cell phone on the floor, as well as the absence of tape on Kelly's mouth and right ankle.

"You're pretty sneaky...even for a lawyer," Michelle said as she picked up the phone and tossed it onto the couch. "Just who were you trying to call?"

"Please, please, don't hurt me! If you let me go, I promise I'll leave and never come back!"

"Don't worry, we're not going to hurt you," Jen assured her.

"You're not? Then what *do* you want? What's going to happen to me?"

Jen grinned and replied, "You'll find out when Bob Nelson gets here!"

Just as Kelly was about to respond, Brad, Mike, Jason and Tonya arrived. And following closely behind them were Jodi and Bob.

"Oh, my God! What's going on? Who *are* all you people?"

"You're right, Kelly," Tonya said tongue-in-cheek, "I really *should* introduce everyone! This is my boyfriend, Jason, and that's Mike and Brad over there. And in case they didn't introduce themselves, this is Jen and this is Michelle. Oh, and that tall handsome guy standing right there is Bob Nelson."

"Handsome guy?" Bob chuckled. "Well, Tonya, I guess that's a matter of opinion but I really do thank you for the compliment. Anyway, we're all gathered here for one reason...to decide what to do with our guest!"

Bob turned to Brad, Mike and Jason and whispered something to them. They then slowly lifted the chair to which Kelly was bound and moved it to the center of the living room.

"Kelly, I know why you've come to Hastings," Bob said as he stepped behind the chair. "Jodi explained it quite thoroughly on the way over here. As I'm sure you've been told, we don't intend to hurt you. That just wouldn't be right. But neither is your reason for coming here! Therefore, you are about to discover the unique way in which we in this town deal with someone like you. And to ensure that our methods will be most effective, we shall now conduct a little experiment."

Bob inserted his fingers into the sleeves of her blouse and briefly tickled her armpits.

"YeeeeeeaaaaaaahahaHaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!  
STOP THAT! HaaHaaHaaHaaHaa! Oh, God! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

Before Kelly had even stopped laughing, the boys tilted her over backward so that the back of the chair was resting flat on the floor. Then they securely re-taped her right ankle to the chair leg and quickly removed her left shoe.

“Those stockings look pretty expensive,” Bob teased. “So I’ll try not to rip them...for the moment!”

“PLEASE! Don’t touch my feet! I can’t standaaahhHAHAHAHAHA!! AaaaaahHA!!”

Bob’s little experiment merely confirmed what Kelly had suspected all along. She realized that they were going to tickle her and that there was nothing she could do to stop them. She also knew that she was extremely ticklish nearly everywhere on her body. Kelly prayed that Don had taken her cry for help seriously and that he’d somehow come to her rescue.

“Bob, let’s take her to Town Square!” Tonya suggested.

“Yes, that’s exactly what we’re going to do. And we’ll take her there right in that chair! Brad, Mike...you guys grab the front legs. Jason and I will take the back.”

They carefully carried Kelly out of the apartment, down the stairs, and out onto the street. With the five girls leading the way, they marched Kelly down Main Street as if she were a float in a parade. Some people who saw the unusual procession joined them along the way. They began shouting, laughing and singing, which attracted still others to join the noisy entourage.

When they arrived in Town Square, they weren’t surprised to find that the stocks, pillory and tickling post were all in use. They set the chair down on the grass, and then Bob spoke to Troy Collins who was the safety officer on duty. Bob and Troy explained the situation to the folks on each of the platforms. Eager to cooperate, the three ‘victims’ were promptly released, and then they all stepped down and joined the large group of spectators.

“Today, we have a very special guest in our town!” Bob announced to the crowd. “Her name is Kelly, and she’s come all the way from Boston! So let’s welcome her to Hastings in a way that she’ll always remember!”

The boys quickly removed the duct tape from Kelly’s wrists, ankles and forearms. Then they lifted her out of the chair and carried her over to the tickling post. She didn’t fight or even struggle as they shackled her hands to the cable. She knew it’d be pointless to resist, although she did squirm and kick somewhat when they started to crank the winch. With her body stretched taught, they then fastened the three additional straps around her arms, thighs and ankles.

“Please, I’m begging you, don’t do this to me!” Kelly implored. “I’m much too ticklish!”

“I’ll be the judge of that!” Tonya asserted as she mounted the platform.

“And so will WE!” echoed Laura and Jodi.

Tonya slowly unbuttoned Kelly’s blouse and remarked, “Oh, don’t get the wrong idea. We just don’t want anything to get in the way of finding out how ticklish you really are!”

The girls pulled her blouse completely open and tugged her skirt down to her hips. The sudden embarrassment of dozens of strangers seeing exactly what type of bra she was wearing only added to Kelly's woes.

Tonya and Jodi began tickling Kelly's bare armpits, while Laura took pleasure in tickling her milky-white belly. Jen and Michelle decided to lend the girls a hand, so they stepped up onto the platform and started tickling Kelly's ribs.

"HeeeeeaaahhHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!  
HeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! Oh, God!  
Don't tickle my bellybaaaaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

Laura was delighted to find that Kelly's navel was unbearably ticklish, just like her own. Her pinky fit into it perfectly, and she used a combined motion of both wiggling and twisting that drove Kelly completely berserk.

"NO! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! PLEASE! HaaHaaHaaHAHAHAHA!  
STOP! AaaaaahHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! Oh, my GOD! HAHAHAHA!!  
HeeHeeHeeHeeHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

They tickled Kelly for quite some time despite her begging and pleading. But when it appeared that she was about to pass out, they stopped and allowed her to catch her breath. They also wanted to give their fingers a rest so they asked the boys if they'd mind taking over. Not surprisingly, Brad, Mike and Jason were more than happy to pick up right where the girls had left off.

"Can't you go any FASTER?" Don shouted, glancing at the speedometer.

"Come on, I'm doing almost ninety!" Roger replied. "It'll be a friggin' miracle if we don't get pulled over!"

"I know, but we've got to get there before it's too late! Kelly said the whole town is crazy and she thinks they're going to torture her!"

"Yes, you told me six times! But there's one thing I don't understand. How did Kelly dial the phone if they've got her all tied up?"

"I have no idea. You can ask her yourself when we find her...assuming we get there in time!"

Back in Town Square, Kelly was becoming delirious as she continued to scream with hysterical laughter. She'd been bound to the tickling post for nearly an hour, and she'd only been granted three brief rest periods during that time. She was drenched with perspiration, totally exhausted, and her eyes had welled up with tears.

Kelly sighed with relief when the boys finally removed the straps and began to loosen the winch. She assumed they were satisfied that she'd been tickled sufficiently, and she thought she was going to be released. But as she soon discovered, her ticklish encounter was far from over.

"Okay, boys, now let's put her in the stocks!" Bob exclaimed. "I can't wait to get my hands on those incredibly ticklish feet!"



Bob removed a small folding knife from his pocket and proceeded to cut off the tips of Kelly's stockings. To avoid injuring her, he stretched the tip of each stocking several inches above her foot and then carefully sliced it off. He spent a moment admiring her pampered pink toes, and noticed the stark contrast between them and the tattered, black nylon fabric from which they protruded. Grinning, he then ripped her stockings completely open, thus exposing the rest of her feet.

Kelly exploded with uncontrollable laughter the instant Bob's fingers made contact with her soft naked soles. It was, without question, the most agonizingly intense tickling she'd ever experienced. And yet, to everyone's total amazement, she steadfastly refused to admit any wrongdoing. Instead, she just sat there laughing and screaming at the top of her lungs.

"LOOK! There's the sign Kelly told me about!" Don exclaimed. "And that's Main Street up ahead! Slow down and make a left turn!"

"Okay, but exactly where do we begin looking for her?" Roger asked.

"We'll start at the girls' apartment. According to this map, Fernwood crosses Main Street near the center of town."

As they quickly approached Town Square, Roger remarked, "If she's not at the apartment, maybe one of the neighbors could tell us where she's being held captive."

"Perhaps, but I wouldn't bet on it. Kelly seemed pretty convinced that the whole town is involved. You saw that sign back there! And the mob scene on the videotape was...JUST LIKE THE ONE OVER THERE! Oh, my God! LISTEN! Do you hear that woman screaming? Pull over and get out of the car!"

Back at the stocks, something truly remarkable was happening to Kelly. From deep within the forgotten recesses of her mind, a strange and irrepressible desire began to emerge like bubbles in a large boiling caldron. Much to her surprise, she suddenly realized that she didn't want the tickling to stop! The relentless agony and discomfort brought on by her predicament had mysteriously morphed into boundless exhilaration and pleasure. Instead of seeming like ticklish torture, it now seemed like ticklish ecstasy. And even more to her surprise, Kelly discovered that she was becoming incredibly attracted to Bob.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! PLEASE! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! DON'T! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! STOP! HAHAHAHAHA! PLEASE! HAHAHAHA! DON'T! HAHAHAHA! STOP! HAHAHA! PLEASE DON'T STOP! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

When Bob saw Kelly's astonishingly altered reaction, he knew exactly what had happened. There was no doubt in his mind that she'd been bitten by the tickle-bug. Ironically, Kelly had just become Hastings's newest ticklephile. He also began to sense the newly found fondness she felt for him. And that's when he realized that the strange emotions he'd been experiencing were feelings of mutual attraction.

Bob's desire to continue tickling Kelly was soon overpowered by his longing to hold and embrace her. So he unfastened the restraints, opened the stocks, and then slowly helped her to her feet. After gazing into each other's eyes for a moment, they hugged like they'd known one another for years.

"I hope you don't plan on returning to Boston right away," he whispered.

"Oh, I think I'll stick around for a while," she replied with a smile.

Jokingly, he then said, "By the way, Kelly, you never did admit why you've come here."

With a look of disdain, she thrust an accusing finger into the crowd and cried, "I came here because...THOSE TWO BASTARDS sent me here to RUIN this town!"

"THEY made you do it? Those two guys over there? Let's get them up here right now!"

More than a dozen angry citizens surrounded Roger and Don and dragged them to the front of the platform. Having been caught totally off-guard, they were stunned and completely bewildered.

Glaring at Kelly, Don shouted, "Just what the hell do you think you're doing? We thought you were in trouble!"

"Oh, *I'm* not the one who's in trouble," she giggled. "Right, girls?"

Tonya, Laura, Jodi, Jen and Michelle suddenly tackled them to the ground, yanked off their shoes, and began gleefully tearing their clothes off. The crowd roared with laughter when Roger and Don finally stood up wearing nothing except their boxer shorts.

"Kelly, if you don't put a stop to this RIGHT NOW, your job will be in serious jeopardy!" Roger warned.

"Job? Hah! I'm tired of being one of your ambulance-chasing lackeys! I QUIT!"

Bob placed his arm around Kelly's waist and declared, "It's time to give these two guys a taste of what our town's famous for!"

"Yeah, let's put *him* on the stretching post," she said, pointing at Roger. "But instead of pulling him up by the wrists, let's hang him upside-down by his ankles!"

"What a great idea!" Bob exclaimed. "And we'll put your other ex-boss in our special pillory! I guarantee that his head will be spinning in no time!"

Jason, Tonya, Laura and Jodi grabbed Roger by his arms and legs and carried him over to the tickling post. He grappled with them in a desperate attempt to get free, but he was simply no match for the four strong youths. They lifted him onto the platform and laid him down flat on his back. The girls literally sat on him as Jason lowered the two leather cuffs down to the bottom of the post. After buckling them tightly around Roger's ankles, he cranked the winch until Roger's head dangled two feet over the platform.

"Damn it, Kelly! Make them stop! This is totally illegal! It goes against everything you believe in! It...it..."

Don, meanwhile, was having his own problems. Brad and Mike teamed up with Jen and Michelle and dragged him over to the pillory. He also put up a valiant fight and he almost managed to escape. But he soon found himself with his head and hands locked in the big wooden frame and his bare feet trapped in the rear ankle stocks.

Although he could still hear Roger wailing in protest, Don's rigid confinement prevented him from seeing his partner's beet-red face and wildly flailing arms. Everyone else, of course, had a perfectly good view of Roger, especially the girls. But even they couldn't tell whether his rosy complexion had been caused by his inverted position, or the humiliation of having been publicly stripped to his underwear. Bob, however, was a bit more concerned about his freely swinging arms. He was afraid that once things got started, Roger might punch someone where it could do some serious damage.

"I think we should tie up his hands," Bob said as he picked up one of the straps normally used to secure the victim to the post. "But I wish we had something a little shorter and thinner than this. Does anyone have something else we could use, like a piece of rope or a strip of cloth?"

Kelly sat down on the edge of the platform and quickly removed her torn stockings.

"How's this?" she asked, offering one of them to Bob.

"Perfect! In fact, why don't *you* do the honors?"

"It would be my pleasure! But I might need a little help."

Jason and Tonya promptly came forward and took hold of Roger's arms. They extended them down toward the platform and then pulled them behind the post. They held his hands firmly together, thus enabling Kelly to bind his wrists with her stocking.

"Hey, guys, thanks for your help," she said while tying the final knot.

Bob checked the safety lock on the winch, just to be certain that the cable wouldn't slip. He then stepped over to the pillory to ensure that both latches were fastened securely. Satisfied that Roger and Don could not possibly escape from their respective devices, he smiled and made an announcement.

"Okay, folks...LET THE FUN BEGIN!"

People instantly swarmed onto both platforms and positioned themselves around Roger and Don. Although they'd heard Kelly blurt out that the duo intended to ruin their town, most were still unaware of the details of the allegation. Nonetheless, they began to mercilessly tickle both of them. Using their fingers, as well as anything else they could find, they thoroughly tickled every inch of Roger and Don's exposed skin. Helplessly restrained as they were, they could do nothing but endure the anguish and scream obscenities at their tormentors.

Many of those in the crowd quickly responded by jeering and taunting the two hysterically laughing lawyers. But some folks decided to express their anger a bit differently. A teenage couple reached into their picnic basket and withdrew some tomatoes left over from lunch. Having been in there for more than six hours, they had already begun to spoil. Giggling, the young couple stepped in front of the pillory and began hurling them right at Don's face.

Their actions inspired others to toss remnants of their own lunches at Roger. They pelted his face and naked torso with a variety of items including banana peels, mustard, chocolate pudding, and a half-eaten tuna fish sandwich. Being suspended by the ankles and having his hands tied behind the post made it impossible for him to protect himself from the seemingly endless onslaught of putrid projectiles.

Roger and Don were subjected to a number of other abuses, all of which were inflicted right along with the tickling. Some folks scooped handfuls of ice cubes from their cooler and dumped them onto Don's back, arms and legs. They applied them to Roger's armpits, and they even dropped a few into his boxer shorts. One resourceful young woman looped rubber-bands around Don's feet and snapped them repeatedly against his bare soles, while several youngsters armed with water pistols squirted him in the face.

Tonya, Laura and Jodi couldn't resist joining those who were doing the tickling, and neither could Jen and Michelle. Moreover, Brad, Mike and Jason had been part of the wild food-flinging frenzy. Bob and Kelly, on the other hand, were perfectly content to just stand there and watch as others tormented the ticklish twosome. But that all changed when Pete and Sarah Henderson arrived.

"I'm really glad you're both here," Bob said as he took Kelly's hand. "Pete, Sarah...I'd like you to meet Kelly McNeal. She came into town just a few hours ago and she's *already* been bitten by the tickle-bug!"

"Really? That's wonderful!" Sarah remarked.

"Yes, it certainly is," Pete agreed. "Anyway, we were headed over to the church to drop off some pies when we noticed that there were a lot more people here than usual. Bob, what's going on? Those two fellows sure don't look like they're having much fun!"

"Trust me, they're not! Kelly works...er, *worked* for their law firm in Boston. They were planning to sue our town and walk away with a lot of money. Well, I think it's safe to say that all they're going to leave with is a bellyful of laughs, about half of their clothing, and even less of their dignity!"

Once they'd all stopped giggling, Sarah exclaimed, "Honey, let's get the pies!"

"Are you sure? You worked all morning making them and..."

"Oh, I'll just whip up another batch for tomorrow night's bake sale!"

Pete smiled with approval, and then they both dashed off to their car.

"Kelly, I think you're really going to love *this*!" Bob chuckled while motioning to the folks on the pillory platform.

They nodded to Bob, released the brake, and began rapidly rotating the device.

"Oh, my God!" cried Kelly. "You weren't kidding when you said that his head would be spinning! And LOOK...here come the PIES!"

“We’ve got coconut custard and lemon meringue!” Sarah announced as she and Pete triumphantly returned.

They placed the two large white boxes they’d brought onto the ground, removed the lids, and began quickly handing out pies.

Tonya, Laura and Jodi each grabbed a pie, as did Jen, Michelle and the boys. Several people in the crowd also procured pastries, but Sarah insisted that the last two were for Kelly and Bob.

“Aaaaaaaaagh!” Don grunted. “Stop spinning this damn thing around!”

“Okay, whatever you say!” Bob replied with a laugh.

The folks on the platform slowed the pillory down almost to a dead stop. Of course, doing so all but ensured that Michelle’s pie would be a direct hit. And it was. They resumed spinning Don quickly, but they slowed him down again just as Brad was ready to launch his pie.

Jodi and Laura literally pushed their pies into Roger’s face, while Tonya and a number of others enjoyed the challenge of throwing their pies from a considerable distance. Most of them hit Roger squarely in the face. But there were a few misses, including one coconut custard that landed right on Jodi’s buttocks.

Bob removed the last lemon meringue from the box and handed it to Kelly. “Here, you can have mine, too! Now you can let *both* of those guys know exactly how you feel about them!”

“Thanks, Bob! Oooh, this is going to be so much fun!” she giggled on her way to the tickling post.

Hanging upside-down, bound, and covered with glop, Roger remained quiet and nearly motionless. He’d been stripped of his pride, as well as his clothing, and he’d completely lost his will to struggle and fight. He felt a stinging sense of defeat, and he believed that begging for mercy would just be a waste of his breath. But when he realized that Kelly was the one who would deal the final blow, he could no longer maintain his silence.

“What have these people done to you? Have you totally lost your mind? Kelly, just think of what you’re doing! Please, please...NO MORE!”

Kelly thought for a moment, and then she set her pie down on the edge of the platform. Her apparent change of heart prompted Bob to join her.

“Roger, I haven’t lost my mind, or anything else for that matter. In fact, I’ve actually *found* something. And it’s something that I’ve been searching for all of my life.”

She wrapped her arms around Bob and kissed him gently on the lips. He was quite surprised by her aggressiveness, but he gladly returned the kiss.

“Bob, it’s time that we let them go. I don’t think you have to worry about any more lawsuits. In fact, I doubt they’ll ever set foot in this town again!”

Bob stepped onto the platform and cut Roger’s hands free with his pocket knife. “Okay, boys, you heard the lady!”

Brad, Mike and Jason released Don from the pillory, while Bob and Kelly finished the task of freeing Roger from the tickling post. Both men were extremely tired and weary, and they were filthy from having been splattered with slop and pelted with pies. They said nothing to Kelly or anyone else as they stumbled about in search of their clothing. They managed to locate both pairs of pants, three shoes and one shirt, but the rest of their garments were nowhere to be found. They used some discarded napkins to clean themselves off as best as they could, and then they slowly walked back to their car in total silence.

Bob embraced Kelly and said, "It took a lot of courage to stand up to those guys and sacrifice your career for what you truly believe in. And yet, you showed compassion for them when you realized that they'd suffered enough. You're an amazing person, Kelly McNeal!"

"You're a pretty amazing person, yourself. And you're also one hell of a tickler! Bob, I still don't understand why I suddenly love being tickled, especially if you're the one doing it! You mentioned to Sarah and Pete that I was bitten by the 'tickle-bug'. Well, you'll definitely have to explain *that* one to me!"

"I plan to. And we've got lots of other things to talk about, too. By the way, do you have a place to stay tonight?"

"I *do* have a reservation at the Crescent Hotel, but..."

"Kelly, you're more than welcome to stay at my place. It's a very large house, and I think you'd find it much more comfortable. I've got a fabulous guestroom, and there's a big stone fireplace in the living room. Oh, and I also happen to be an excellent cook!"

Smiling warmly, Kelly replied, "Bob, I think I'm going to take you up on your offer!"

## Chapter Sixteen

The leaves had already begun to turn brown, and the gentle breeze whispering through them was noticeably cooler than it had been just a few weeks ago. Knowing that autumn would soon be upon us conjured up colorful images of apple orchards, crackling fires, and costumed children scurrying about in search of Halloween treats. It was a time of change in many ways. But everyone knew that whatever changes were to come, none would possibly compare with those that had already occurred.

Back in May, something truly astounding had happened in our little town. It'd brought endless laughter to our hearts, as well as our lips. It touched the lives of many of us, and in a very good way. And for some, it had actually changed their very destiny.

Laura and Jodi did indeed graduate from Hastingson High School in June. In fact, they both graduated with honors, and they were even asked to speak at the graduation ceremony. Absolutely determined to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor, Jodi submitted a belated application to Butler College. Although the school had officially stopped accepting applications in April, the Dean of Admissions decided to make a rare exception. Her remarkably high grades, along with the glowing letters of recommendation written by Judge Potter and Dr. Goodwin, convinced the College Board to accept her as a pre-med student. Jodi was so overwhelmed with joy, she literally burst into tears when she received the good news.

Following graduation, Laura began working full-time at Donna's Fine Fashions. She was quickly promoted to assistant store manager and given a substantial increase in pay. She really loved her job, but Jodi's success had inspired her to pursue a career in the garment industry. Thus, she decided to work for a year, and then go to college to earn a degree in fashion design. Laura did some research and found that the University of Rhode Island offered an excellent program in that field. So she applied to the school, and if accepted, she would begin attending classes next fall.

Jason and Tonya's relationship had truly blossomed, and the love that they shared continued to grow. So it came as no great surprise when Jason announced his plans to make Hastingson his permanent home. His parents were a little disappointed that he would not be returning to Ohio to work in the family business as originally planned. But when they finally met their potential daughter-in-law, they wholeheartedly supported his decision. They took an instant liking to Tonya, and they were thrilled that their son had found someone as intelligent and lovely as her.



Understandably, Jason was somewhat hesitant to tell his parents about Tonya's sordid past. But when he explained how she'd gone from being a troubled teen to a respectable young woman, they were actually quite impressed.

Tonya, Laura and Jodi had remained roommates. However, they'd moved from their small dingy quarters on Fernwood Street to a much nicer apartment in the building that Jen's grandmother owned. It was a lot more spacious, it had a great view, and Jen and Michelle lived right down the hall.

Michelle had originally intended to move back to New York to attend Columbia University as a graduate student. She'd also been accepted by four other schools, including the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. After some careful consideration, and lots of persuasive tickling by Jen, Michelle decided that she would earn her Master's degree in computer science at U-Mass Amherst. Besides it being an excellent school, her decision allowed her to remain in Hastings since Amherst was just fifteen miles away.

Having completed their education at Butler, Mike and Brad reluctantly said a sad farewell to their friends. Mike returned to his home in New Jersey where he had several job offers waiting, and Brad went back to Texas to work in his brother's accounting firm. But as they had promised, they kept in touch all summer long via countless e-mails and telephone calls. They also intended to visit as often as possible, and they planned on attending the reunion party that they'd all decided to have next year.

As expected, throngs of people still gathered in Town Square for their daily dose of tickling fun. And folks continued to come here from all over the world so that they themselves could partake in our favorite pastime. The sound of laughter still poured from open windows, and everywhere you looked, there was still lots and lots of tickling.

Without question, Kelly was the one whose life had changed the most dramatically. Soon after that fateful day back in May, she'd made her decision to move to Hastings and establish her own law firm. She was a bit apprehensive about going back to Page, Fitch and Associates to submit her official resignation. But she knew that it had to be done, and she also needed to pack up her law books and all of her personal items.

Kelly was glad to find that Roger and Don had apparently licked their emotional wounds and taken it all in stride. In fact, they actually joked about their outrageously wild experience in Town Square. And even though they didn't fully appreciate Kelly's reasons for leaving, they respected her decision and wished her well in her new venture.

Kelly had absolutely no regrets about moving to Hastingson and starting a new life for herself. She was really a small town girl at heart, and she'd already made many new friends. And she'd also fallen deeply in love with a man who, up until recently, had only appeared in her dreams. But now, she knew that he really existed. She knew he was tall, handsome, witty, and thirty-eight years old...and that his name was Bob Nelson.

Indeed, Kelly had no regrets, especially today. Her brand new law office, which had been under construction for weeks, was now open. She was determined to make it a very successful practice, and she looked forward to representing many interesting clients.

Kelly stood outside and watched as a workman installed her new brass shingle onto the exterior wall. After he'd polished it off and stepped aside, she proudly read it out loud.

"Kelly Elizabeth Nelson, Attorney at Law."