

Lady's Man

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I'm shocked awake by a horrible clanging noise, the stuff of my nightmares. In fact, for a moment I'm not sure of the difference. I thrash convulsively, jerking toward the noise, coming awake, realizing it's the damned alarm clock that Beth makes me use. I lurch toward it, intending to smash it. Immediately, my Conditioning kicks in and I'm frozen. I can't move. All that I can do is lay there and listen to the racket of that damned clock. I try to control my stress, try to achieve enough calm to turn off the Conditioning. God knows I've had enough practice. Slowly I calm. After a minute or two I can move my fingers, then my hands. Trembling, I stretch my arm toward the clock, carefully avoiding thoughts of violence. Success. I press the button and the noise is gone.

So begins another day. It's always bad but this one is worse than usual. I wonder why. I manage to pull myself into a sitting position on the edge of my bed and then just sit with my forehead resting on my hands. I know that I can't stay this way for long or my Conditioning will start to do things to me. I wait as long as I dare, then try to stand. I make it to the wall and, leaning for support, I work my way along the wall to the bathroom. A warm shower would be nice but my Conditioning interprets that as being too pleasurable. I try to inch the temperature up and I get it just above cold before my muscles begin to twitch involuntarily. OK. Not quite cold shower. After that, I dress. I'm just about recovered, so I try to seem normal as I walk into the kitchen. There she is, eating breakfast. Bacon. Omelet. Biscuits, butter, and honey. Hot tea. She looks up and says, "Good morning, Dear".

Suddenly I want to strangle the bitch and immediately I regret my unguarded thought, as my Conditioning tweaks me. I stumble and catch my balance. I can see in her eyes that wicked gleam that tells me that she understands exactly what happened.

"Sit down," she says sweetly, "and have your breakfast."

My conditioning smiles at her for me and says, "Thank you, Darling. Don't mind if I do."

She smiles back at me. I hate her.

"What are we having?" I try to ask, but my feelings have trapped me again and my Conditioning temporarily has control of my throat. I pretend to be clearing my throat, try to get rid of the hate that I feel and ask again, "What are we having?"

"Your usual," she says with a charming smile, "Allfiber Bran and skim milk. You can have as much as you want. Knock yourself out!"

I haven't eaten bacon or an omelet since the Conditioning. The Panel thought that my diet should be such as to prolong my usefulness as a husband and a father. I eat my Allfiber Bran and skim milk while she dallies with her omelet.

"Oh," she sighs, pushing it away, "I just made too much this morning. Would you like to finish it for me?" she asks, pushing the plate my direction. Inside, I'm dying

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for that bacon and omelet. She knows it. That's why she does it. "No thanks," says my Conditioning, smiling cheerfully for me, "I have to watch my cholesterol, you know."

"It's so very sweet of you," she says, "to sacrifice your little pleasures like that for me and Kate." She pats her belly.

She talks about the damned brat as if it's already been born. She's been doing it since the — for a long time now. She knows it irritates me. I can't think of anything safe to say and my Conditioning doesn't seem to feel that a response is necessary. I finish eating, excuse myself, and walk to the front closet. I get my coat and umbrella from the closet and hope that I'm going to escape. Just as I put my hand on the knob, she yells at me from the table, "Don't forget today is Friday, CM you know!"

Shit. That's why it was worse this morning. I'd forgotten but my subconscious, what's left of it, remembered. CM. Conditioning Maintenance. Damn.

You see, they can't make the Conditioning permanent. It has to be frequently renewed, or it fades. If I could just manage to evade them for even a month — at the very thought, my Conditioning locks down on me so bad that I can't even see. Everything is black and all I can hear is a roaring in my ears. I lean against the door, trying not to fall, barely conscious. I keep thinking, I'll go to CM, I'll go to CM, I'll go to CM, over and over and over again. Slowly I get myself back under control. Slowly, I approach normal. When I can see again, I look around, trembling, and there she is, leaning against the wall by the kitchen door, her arms casually crossed, watching me, gloating behind her sympathetic smile.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I forgot what it always does to you when you forget it and then get reminded of it like that."

I can't speak, so I leave. I go out the door and walk the three blocks to the bus stop.

My bus is just arriving at the stop when I come around the corner and I have to run. The driver waits. I guess that he knows how important it is for me to be on time. I don't get time off. Every minute of work that I miss has to be made up. I climb onto the bus and collapse gratefully into a seat. I stare out the window and try not to think about anything. I'm not successful. My mind wanders back to that fateful day, the day that it all happened, the day that everything changed.

"You're what!"

"Pregnant." she said.

The bitch! She knew that I didn't want a baby. We'd argued about it enough times.

"What happened?" I yelled. "Your implant was good for another year!"

"I had it removed."

"You did it on purpose? It wasn't even an accident?" I was furious.

"Well," she said, "You just wouldn't be reasonable about it, and –"

That's when I hit the bitch in the face. I didn't know that I was going to do it. She'd just used that "reasonable" argument on me so many times, and I'd never agreed to be a father, and I could see my whole future being ruined, and she had that stubborn look on her face, and I just couldn't take it any more. I hit her. Then she was sitting on the floor with her back against her dresser, holding her hand against her face, looking stunned, not angry yet, blood all over the front of her. I left the house, got in the car, and drove. I don't know where I was going. I don't know why I was going. I just had to go. Naturally, I hadn't gone 10 miles yet before they pulled me over and arrested me.

With Beth's broken nose as evidence, and Beth's word against mine, the DA didn't see any reason for a trial. She just turned the whole case over directly to the Women's Justice Panel. Bad news for me. With a jury with maybe a few men on it, I might have had some kind of a chance, but that panel would just punish me. I figured I'd get at least a year in the slammer. However, I wasn't prepared for it when they took me from my cell to a medical unit instead of directly to the hearing chamber. I was already worried and they wouldn't answer any questions, just kept pushing me where they wanted me to go. When they sat me in a chair at a diagnostic unit and flipped the bonds around me I started to get really scared. It took only a few seconds for the medical technician to program a dose of something and the injector slipped it into my arm. Within seconds, I couldn't move or speak. I was lifted into a wheel chair and wheeled into the hearing room.

Beth was there, her face in bandages. She'd obviously been talking to the women on the Panel. They all had looks of great sympathy on their faces. When I was wheeled in, they looked at me with expressions that made my blood run cold. The charges were read, the forewoman asked Beth if they were substantially correct, Beth said yes. The forewoman asked me if I had anything to say for myself. I tried to talk but my mouth wouldn't open. My tongue wouldn't move. I was having trouble swallowing, and spit was beginning to drool out of my mouth. Whatever they'd given me, it worked. She waited for a few moments, while my state of panic increased. I didn't know what the hell these women were up to but it sure as hell didn't look good for me. She rapped her gavel and said, "Defendant refuses to speak. Obviously, guilty as charged, overcome by shame. Obviously failed to understand the serious responsibility of being a father, behaved irrationally. Can't be trusted. Must learn his lesson. In the meantime, must serve the best interests of the child. Must provide appropriate role model, support family. Obviously unreliable. The sentence is Conditioning."

"NOOO!" I screamed inside of myself, unable to move. "Noooo, nooo! Not Conditioning! Not Conditioning!" It's all I could think as they wheeled me out, and I kept screaming it, over and over, inside myself until....

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I come back to normal as I'm tapped on the shoulder. My memories have placed me into such a state of stress that I'm locked up again. The bus is at my stop and I haven't noticed it. I can't move. The driver taps me on the shoulder again.

"Your stop, Sir."

He looks concerned. He probably is. Everybody knows about me, and most men show a little sympathy, when they think that they can get away with it. The other people on the bus are pretending that they don't even know that I'm there, except for one woman who stares openly, intently, looking like maybe she's having an orgasm or something.

"Your stop, Sir," he says again.

I manage to nod. Slowly, I try to move my arms and my Conditioning lets up a little. Spasmodically, I reach for the back of the seat in front of me. I try to pull myself out of my seat. The first time I fail and fall back into my seat. I try again and manage to get myself into a standing position, leaning on the seat back in front of me. Then, staggering and leaning on seats, I make my way to the front of the bus and down the steps to the sidewalk.

I don't notice the bus leaving. I just lean on a lamp post for a while. Eventually, I feel a little more normal and I walk, with halting uncertain steps, the few blocks to my office. It's in a warehouse for SheerNothing Apparel, "Throw Away Your Lingerie!", that's their slogan. That's where I work because that's where the Women's Justice Panel put me. Nobody else would even consider hiring me, and anybody who did would do so at his own great peril. It isn't much of a job. I just add numbers. The computer could do it faster and better but the Women's Justice Panel decreed that I must work at this place and this is the work that they gave me. I add numbers. There are only two people in the whole place, me and Miss Perkins. I don't know why they need her here. I don't know what she does here, except wear the product. Today, it's a hot pink SheerNothing body suit that fits her like a coat of paint, doesn't hide anything at all, and provides exactly the right amount of support, in exactly the right places, where her every movement is an erotic enticement.

I try not to look at her. My Conditioning is very particular about other women. I make my way to my desk and sit down. I pick up my pencil and my ledgers and I start adding numbers. Miss Perkins wanders into my office and sits on the corner of my desk.

"Good morning," she says cheerfully, "I thought maybe you weren't coming in today."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of missing work!" says my Conditioning, smiling at her for me, "I just had a little trouble on the bus. Almost missed my stop." I smile again, looking at her face, trying to ignore those boobs jiggling around in the SheerNothing

body suit, just inches away from my face. I'm not quite successful and my Conditioning is beginning to send me little messages.

"Well," she says, sliding just a little in my direction, so that her butt just touches the back of my hand, my Conditioning jerks my hand toward my chest, "if you need anything, just ask me. I'm here to help." She smiles again, all sweetness and seduction. She reaches out and gives my cheek a friendly little sisterly stroke and my Conditioning locks me tighter than a drum. She slides off the front of my desk and stands up, her boobs exactly centered in my field of vision, every detail there for me to see through the damned SheerNothing body suit, my Conditioning already has me locked up so I can't move, can't even close my eyes, she just stands there breathing, every little rise of her boobs punching me in my gut, my Conditioning won't let me move a muscle, so I can't not look at her, my pencil snaps and the pieces fly across the room, she sighs, her boobs wobble up and down, and the movement drives my Conditioning completely crazy. I completely lose my vision and see black. I hear only the roaring in my ears. I partially lose consciousness, unable to think. I'm frozen solid. I can't even feel anything, locked in a black roaring nowhere.

After a while, it slowly fades and I gradually recover. Miss Perkins is gone, back in her office, probably plotting her next move. I'm not sitting at my desk anymore. My chair is pushed back against the wall. I try to move it, but I'm trembling so hard that I can't control my muscles. I wait a while and try again. I can't make the chair move. I try again, and it rolls a little, then a little more. I can't get up, but I can roll in my chair, so I turn it facing the wall and push myself slowly across the room, and around in circles until I find the broken pieces of my pencil. I'm getting some strength back, and I manage to pick them up and get them into the trash can. Then, back to my desk. I take another pencil from the drawer and start adding numbers. I don't know what Miss Perkins did with me, or to me, or in front of me, while I was blacked out, but it seems to have satisfied her. She doesn't bother me again for the rest of the morning. I make it safely to lunch. This afternoon is Conditioning Maintenance, so I don't have to face Miss Perkins again until Monday. Thank God for that.

The bus ride to Conditioning Maintenance is normal. I manage to keep my mind on the scenery outside of the window and arrive without further problems. I get off the bus and walk into the lobby...

I re-awake on the bus, riding home. As usual, I don't remember anything that happened after I walked into the lobby at Conditioning Maintenance. I keep my thoughts on the scenery and I don't have any problem about missing my stop. I walk the three blocks to home. I walk in the front door. I put my coat and umbrella in the front closet, walk into the den, pick up the paper, and sit in my recliner chair. As long as I don't kick out the footrest or lean back in it, my Conditioning lets me use the chair. If I get too comfortable, I, well, I just don't get too comfortable. I read the paper. Usually, the Conditioning isn't too picky about what I'm permitted to

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read. Not that the paper is likely to print anything that might contradict the approved — oops, my conditioning doesn't like that line of thought, and my hands begin to tremble. If I want to read the paper, I'd better not think, just read.

Beth arrives. She's beginning to look like a walrus and waddle like a duck.

"Hi, beautiful!" my Conditioning says with a smile.

"Hi, Daddy-to-be!" she says. Her smirk is just barely visible behind her playful banter.

We have supper and I don't say much. She brought home 'take-out' Chinese food for her. The smell drives me crazy. I eat my soy steak, boiled carrots, a bran muffin, and soy milk. I have to stay healthy, so that I can support the child.

After supper, I watch TV for a while. There isn't much risk, because nobody would dare broadcast anything that contradicts the — yeah, right, don't think, just watch. After a while, Beth calls me from her bedroom. Friday, right after Conditioning Maintenance, is the only time that they can make my Conditioning strong enough to do what she wants. I enter the bedroom. There she is, in all of her glory. Shit. Even a SheerNothing couldn't salvage — but my Conditioning tweaks me, so I try to stop that line of thought. The only thing that comes to mind to replace it is how much I want to strangle the bitch, and that isn't any good either. My Conditioning tweaks me, hard, and I stumble and lean against the wall. I look at her, laying there in her most seductive pose, and my Conditioning leers at her for me. It doesn't have any objection to consensual sex between spouses so, for the next hour or so, I do whatever she wants. Eventually, she's satisfied. I leave her laying there on her bed, drifting off to sleep. I stagger to my own room. A shower would be like heaven but I'm just too damned tired. I'm already undressed after the marathon with Beth, so I just stagger across the room, throw back the covers, and fall forward. The only good thing about this damned Conditioning is that it makes me go to sleep the instant that I'm in bed —