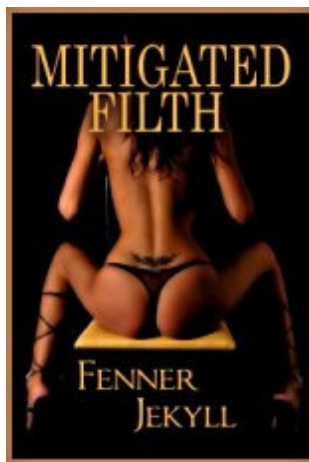


LETTING MY HAIR DOWN

Rapunzel doesn't hang with the chipmunks – period.

I mean, I don't know if it's an actual rule or whatever, but that's the way it has always been on Mother Goose Island. When I was a fuzzhead, no way were any of the faces prepared to lunch with me. And now I've made it onto the princess roster I'm not gonna go mixing it up with any plush'n'plastic woodland creatures. Excuse me but that's theme-park pecking order, and I'm fine with it.



So I'm sitting at a table with the Ice Queen – Carmen, actually - and we're shooting the breeze between tiny bites of cannelloni with the sauce scraped off, because if you get any stains on the costumes you have to pay for the dry-cleaning – and Charlie Troll meanders over and, without so much as a howdjadoo, he says, “Hey, ladies – mind if I park my tail?”

He has his head on, so he's a little muffled – but after a while in this place it gets so you can understand even through three layers of synthetic fur and rigid polypropylene.

Myself, I'm not sure how to nix the jerk, but right away Carmen puts him in his place.

“We were just leaving,” she says in her freeze-dried British accent.

“Aww, come on,” the troll says, pulling his head off. The guy inside is kinda cute, actually. I'd dig him if I met him in a bar. But I remind myself that here on the Island he's vermin.

He points a paw at the table. “You haven't even started your desserts.”

Carmen gets to her feet. “We're taking them with us,” she says, sweeping her sparkling white cape around her. “Come along, Ashley. We have a show in twenty minutes.”

As I follow her out of the canteen, holding my cup of chocolate mousse well away from my aquamarine bodice, I'm thinking how damn cool Carmen is. She's been top villain on the Island for fifteen years, which is some going.

“I started as a bunnykin, just like you,” she tells me. “Within three summer seasons I'd worked my way up to Gretel, and not long after that I inherited my

Crystal Crown from the legendary Ursula May herself. I was the youngest Ice Queen in the history of MGI.”

“Nearly twenty years here?” I say.

She purses her lips and narrows her eyes. “I never suspected you of numeracy,” she murmurs. “But yes. Not that it matters. The Ice Queen is well-suited to the more mature spellbinder.”

Spellbinders – that’s what they call the performers here. At rehearsal the other day I referred to myself as an actress, and the Grand Magician nearly busted me back to support squirrel. “We are not playing parts! We are scattering magic dust! What are we doing?”

“Scattering magic dust,” I said sheepishly.

There are a thousand rules. Never let a guest see you putting on or taking off your costume. Never let a guest see you eating or drinking. Never smoke, not even on your way to work in the morning. Never move around the island except in the underground tunnels. And never speak. Smile, gesture, pose, smile, bat your eyelashes, smile, pat small children on the head (and no place else) and smile, smile, smile – but never speak. Only the Ice Queen is permitted to speak. Also she can rant and hiss, yell and threaten. It’s part of her schtick, and Carmen does it in a British accent so refined that it sends shivers of naughtiness down the spine of anyone she aims it at. She so totally owns that role.

Anyhow, I don’t recall anyone mentioning there was a rule about getting fucked on the premises, although I guess we’re supposed to take that as read. Which is a very real problem for me.

“Carmen,” I say as we take the elevator from the staff canteen down to the subterranean railroad that’ll carry us to Grandma’s House in the Forest, “when you were first a face, did all this smiling and posing have – how can I say? – any weird side-effects?”

“Like what?” she says, taking a seat on the little red train.

“Well, it’s kind of embarrassing. I spend all day beaming at kids and smiling sweetly at their moms and dads. I lip-synch to *Oh my! Oh Magic!* at ten, twelve, two and four; and three times a day I let down my hair so that Prince Justin can rescue me from the Enchanted Tower beside the KFC concession. And it just...gets to me.”

“Ah,” Carmen nods. “Yes. I know where you’re going with this.”

“I mean, I trained at the Studio in New York – I’m all about Method, you know? Since I made the roster, I’ve studied Rapunzel’s psychology and I’ve really thought through this helpless, alienated virgin persona. I am totally into her wholesomeness, believe me. But by the end of the day...”

“By the end of the day you’re ready to run headlong through the turnstile, screaming for vodka and a joint, and frothing at the gash for cock.”

See, this is what I mean about a British accent. An Englishwoman in her mid-forties can deliver a line like that and it sounds no more vulgar than the morning weather on Fox.

“You had that too?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “When I was Gretel, yes. It often happens to those taking the more, umm, cotton-pantied roles, as it were. But since I’ve been the Ice Queen – which is a persona brimming with erotic power and domme sexuality – I’ve found I entertain no such ungovernable urges.” She indicates that the little red train has reached our destination. “These feelings pass – don’t worry.” We step onto the platform, and she turns to me. “And, of course, you must never act upon them. Hm?”

“Of course not,” I say. “And – anyway – who with?”

“Prince Justin?”

I laugh. “Three times daily he scales the walls of my tower and I kiss him on his carefully-glossed lips. Let me tell you, there’s nothing happening there.”

“I understand,” Carmen says, heading for the elevator. “It’s so often the case with the men in this business. The marquee’s all lit up out front but there’s scant likelihood of the curtain rising.”

* * * *

*“Goodbye one, goodbye all – from Mother Goose and all her friends.
Come back soon for laughs and fun where joyful magic never ends!”*

The follow-spots fade and before the first skyrocket explodes over Candy Mountain, I’m off the stage, down the chute and onto the little red train with eight feet of blonde braid looping behind me.

I hit the freeway at seventy miles per hour, ripping the cellophane off a pack of Marlboro with my teeth. I still have on my outfit – which is supposed never to leave the Island – and I spill ash on my petticoats as I take a deep, deep drag on a blessed Red, recklessly changing lanes to get past SUVs crammed with children shocked to see Rapunzel blowing smoke out of every orifice.

Half an hour later I’m in my apartment, flat on the bed, gin bottle in one hand, petticoats around my neck, other hand busy with a two-pronged princess-pacifier.

Eventually I fall back breathless.

“Mother of God,” I gasp as I light another cigarette. “I have to get either a boyfriend or out of this job.”

It’s got to be the former – I can’t afford to quit Mother Goose. This apartment costs big bucks and I’m spending a freaking fortune on London Dry.

And batteries.

* * * *

Carmen sucks humus from a celery stick.

“You’ve heard, of course, that Little Red Riding Hood has left us? Attila himself marched her off the premises.” She means Mr. Atelier, the Managing Director. He’s a tubby, bald little guy - like an egg with a Brooks Brothers Platinum Card.

“Really? Why?”

“It seems they caught the stupid little bitch giving her number to a guest. So unprofessional.”

I avoid Carmen’s gaze and I bite my lip. I’ve been pretty unprofessional myself lately.

Picture this. I’m posing with a family on Troll Bridge. The mom’s fiddling with the camera. I have a kid on each side of me and the dad grinning over my shoulder. And – I know it’s not my imagination – he’s pressing this serious boner against my ass. I mean, really rubbing it in there. Grinning and grinding, grinding and grinning as his wife clicks away with the SLR.

“Okay,” says the mom, taking a few steps towards us. “Let’s get one with me.”

“Wait, wait,” he grins, grins, grins. “I had my eyes closed. Take a couple more to be sure.”

“You think? Okay.”

As she lines up the shot again, I take my right hand from Junior’s shoulder, and I reach back to grab Dad’s stiff cock behind his chinos.

“Nyik!” he squeaks through happy clenched teeth. I start to jerk him with sharp, abbreviated strokes.

“All right, everyone - say ‘cheese’!”

“Chee-ee-ee-sus....”

I wink at him and turn to make my way towards the Long Lush Grass Café beyond the bridge. I’m halfway across when Charlie Troll pops up.

“Nice,” he says – and I don’t need to see his face to know he’s smiling.

“Nice what?”

“Nice Kodak moment.”

“It’s what we’re paid to do.”

“True. But we’re not all so hands-on about it.”

I tilt my head haughtily. I look him right in his big, yellow, bloodshot eyes, and I say, “I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I hold his gaze for a second of standoff silence, and then I stalk away.

It’s not until I’m on the far side of the bridge that I realize there was no point going eyeball-to-eyeball like that. The guy’s actual real eyes are peeking out from somewhere inside the troll’s slack mouth. While I was giving him the juju stare, the bastard was probably scoping my tits.

“So in all the time you’ve been here, you’ve never dated a guest?” I ask Carmen.

“Good God, no. No guests, no spellbinders - no one who has anything to do with the Island. It’s strictly against the rules and Mr. Atelier is very particular about that.” She looks at me keenly. “Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering.” I occupy myself removing the lettuce from my BLT. “So have they found a new Little Red Riding Hood?”

“I suppose they must be asking around. But that wouldn’t interest you, would it? Rapunzel’s much higher profile.”

“I know, I know.” I take a teeny bite of the BT. “But right now I’d give a lot for the outside chance of being eaten by a wolf.”

“Oh, bless.” Carmen says, laughing. “But actually, he eats Grandma.”

I glance sidelong at her. “I’ll take your word for it,” I snicker.

* * * *

At ten o'clock every morning when they open the gates to the Mother Goose Island Theme Park and Petting Zoo, I'm supposed to be perched atop my Enchanted Tower beside the KFC concession, waving at the guests as they swarm along Hometown Avenue and into Anywhere Square. So it's bad news if at ten to ten I'm half a mile away, punching in the pass code that'll raise the barrier to the parking lot. This is what you get if you stay up half the night with a bottle of Jack, a plastic pal and a brand-new subscription to *Bare Butt Beefcake* on cable.

"You'll never make it," chuckles the security guy as I sprint past him into the subterranean railroad station.

An empty train is about to leave, and I leap aboard. It's six minutes to ten when the little red engine glides from the platform into the tunnel. Just as I'm thinking that I might be okay, the car lurches to the left and takes a long curve away from my regular route. We're not headed for the Enchanted Tower by the KFC. God knows where we're going.

I get off at the next stop, which is signed as 4A. I have no idea where that is, but it sounds a damn long way from 7C, which is my usual destination. I follow the exit-arrows along a dim corridor. A few paces ahead to my right there's a door with a small window lit by suffused sunshine. Beyond it I can see running water and the Long Lush Grass Café. If I go through that door, I realize, I will emerge under Troll Bridge, which is not a hell of a lot of good to me. To my left is another gloomy corridor that seems to go more in the direction I want. So that's the one I take.

Fifteen feet along there's a sharp corner, and beyond the corner there's a door ajar. I peek in through the crack and I see a small changing room – I have a similar one in the tunnel beneath my Enchanted Tower, although mine doesn't have a horizontal slot-window overlooking the tables around the Long Lush Grass Café. As this is a subterranean room, of course, the view from the window is pretty low in relation to the café terrace – in fact, it's at about seat elevation. Or crotch height. Panty level, if you will. And this is a circumstance not lost on Charlie Troll, who is standing there mouth agape, nonchalantly stroking an angry monster dick which, if you were the type to think about such things, is exactly the kind of brutish member you'd expect to find on a nightmarish mythical ogre. It has a certain graceless charm, actually.

"Kodak moment!" I say brightly.

Charlie Troll leaps so high he smacks his head on the low ceiling.

"Looks like I'm not the only hands-on spellbinder around here," I say, sauntering towards him.

I take control of the situation. It's quite a handful, but the muffled groans from inside Charlie Troll's head suggest that I'm handling it right. He's facing me and I'm looking past him out of the window – and it's a view that holds the

attention, I have to say. You can see right up the short skirts and the gaping legs of summer shorts, and you're face-to-face with an entire range of women's lingerie

"You like panties?" I whisper.

Charlie Troll nods his big, plushie head and his plastic eyelashes bob up and down.

I step back and sit on the table, shoving showtime schedules and deodorant sprays onto the floor. I pull up my long aquamarine dress and spread my legs wide apart.

"Jerk off all over my princess twat," I tell the troll.

He takes a pace forward and starts to flog it, his troll head lolling back and forth, his fist a blur.

I reach down to run a finger over my mound. "Can you see the wet spot?" I breathe.

That does it. He loses any sense of propriety and spatters jizz all over my thighs and underwear. I peel the panties off, mop up with them as best I can and then drop them on the table.

"They're all yours until lunch. Come find me and give them back," I say.

I head for the door without a backward glance.

* * * *

I don't know what effect it would have on the Dads if they knew that Rapunzel's going commando, but it certainly brightens up my morning. By the time Charlie Troll intercepts me in the Deep Dark Forest just before one o'clock, I'm so delirious with lust I'm considering inventive uses for the Ice Queen's crystal wand.

"Get over here, now, now, now," I jabber, pulling him by his pointy troll ear into the Wicked Witch's Gingerbread House. In back we find a staff-room where an entrance to the railway is hidden. It's madness to risk a quickie in there – I know that. But we get right down to the action and it's fast, it's dirty, it's less than satisfying – and it's more fun than I've had since, well, since my mom brought me to this park when I was eight years old.

"That can never, ever happen again," I tell the troll afterwards, as he tucks his cock back into his furry purple pants.

“Damn right,” he says, nodding his big ol’ troll head. “We were lucky not to get caught.”

“Exactly. Once we got lucky – twice would be pressing it.”

“God, you’re hot in that gown.”

“I so am.”

“I want to fuck your tits. Look.”

“Jesus – is that thing ready to go again?”

“Uh-huh. Undo your top.”

“Okay, but come in my mouth. I don’t want to have to dry clean.”

Over the next couple of weeks, me and Charlie go crazy – we’re doing it all over Mother Goose Island. We fuck in all the beds and across the breakfast table at the Three Bears’ House. Charlie has me from behind against Humpty Dumpty’s wall. I blow him upstairs while Wee Willie Winkie’s downstairs, and he eats me downstairs while Willie Winkie’s up. On his birthday I give him a treat in Grandma’s closet, where the Woodcutter later happens upon a tube of lube that leads to the old lady being escorted from the premises. We get our rocks off on the subterranean train, at the top of the Ferris wheel and in every room of the House of Fun, including the balcony that overlooks the doggie gym in the petting zoo, which, given what we’re up to behind the plastic wisteria, is quite appropriate.

We know we’re going to get caught sometime, but we can’t help ourselves. We’re both dizzily spunk-drunk.

* * * *

At lunch, a crowd of muskrats, fairy cobblers and second-string royalty are gathered around the noticeboard, squawking like premenstrual parakeets.

“What’s going on?” I ask Carmen as I put my tray down on the table.

“Apparently, a guest has reported seeing two spellbinders engaged in inappropriate behavior,” she says dismissively.

“Which two?”

“They don’t seem to know.”

See, this is why I'm never comfortable with guys getting jail time on the say-so of a passer-by. I mean, the witnesses must've seen – what? - a hairy purple troll with yellow saucer-eyes giving the good news to a white chick in a blue medieval gown and eight-foot blonde braids. And they couldn't pick us out of a line-up?

Carmen nods towards the notice. "When they catch the culprits, they're not just going to fire them. They're going to bring criminal charges. Mr. Atelier is most upset."

"Damn. That's heavy."

"Image management. Protection of investment. All that."

It's obvious even to me that this is a huge freaking sign from God that it's time to call it a day on the trans-costume coitus. But – Jeez – someone saw us! We were nearly caught! What a fucking turn-on!

After lunch, I pass Charlie outside Muffett's Frozen Yogurt Shack.

"The Ghost Train," I whisper. "Fifteen minutes."

"What? Are you out of your mind, already?"

"No. I'm out of my panties already."

Seventeen minutes later, I'm bent over a plywood coffin in the dark taking it canine from a purple troll with a cock like a baseball bat. Every thirty seconds a Ghost Train car trundles past about four feet from us. It's close to pitch-black in there so the riders can't make out more than shadowy figures in the plastic crypt – but the way I'm wailing, they can sure hear me, and I'm banking on them taking me for part of the general soundtrack - a banshee, perhaps, or a particularly vocal specter.

An aside here. The special effects on theme park rides are so much more sophisticated now than they were when I was a kid. What with advances in lighting technology and the development of computer programs that control the intermittent and arbitrary application of artificial phenomena to enhance the feeling of a unique user-experience, you can never quite be sure what'll happen next. Charlie and I, for instance, are not aware that every seven or eight minutes the shadowy tableau of which we're a temporary part gets brilliantly illuminated by a thirty-second lightning storm of flashing strobes and random backlighting. Also, the coffin I'm lying across with my ass in the air has three halogen spots inside, all of which are pointed upwards to give the impression that something supernaturally evil is about to erupt from within.

So when all this business kicks in, the troll and I are a little taken aback - as is every member of the Order of the Little Sisters of Mercy, whose car is rolling past the plastic crypt at the time. The nuns would be less impressed, I think,

had Charlie not just pulled his cock out in order to repeatedly slap my spread-open ass with the shaft – which is a great effect under strobes, he tells me.

Well, the Sisters have a collective conniption at a hundred and ten decibels, the power to the cars goes off, the house lights all come on and footsteps can be heard running towards us from the booth outside. The troll and I drag on what clothes we can and disappear into the depths of the Ghost Train heading for the entrance to the subterranean station concealed behind the AC unit out back.

“We are so screwed,” I say as we jump onto the first train we see.

“Do you think they’d recognize us?” Charlie asks,

“Even if they didn’t clock the costumes or our faces, I don’t think a single one of those nuns would have any trouble identifying you by your distinguishing features.”

We get off the train a couple of stops up the line without any real idea of what we plan to do next. Just merge back in to the daily life of the park, I guess. But, deep down, I know the game’s up. Those nuns are going to finger us for sure. Yeah, yeah. Go ahead – laugh.

“Where the fuck are we?” Charlie says as we walk along the corridor.

“8A, apparently,” I say, pointing at the sign.

“Do you really think they’ll bring criminal charges?”

I nod. “Yeah. You can’t go winking your asshole at the Brides of Christ without expecting a pretty severe rap.”

“But what about the bad publicity?”

“The Island’s going to get that anyway now. They need to show they’re coming down on the perps with all the force of the law. Image protection.” We reach a fork in the corridor. “Which way do you want to go?”

“Does it make any difference?”

I look to the left, and I can see a door leading out onto Winter Wonderland, the Ice Queen’s frosty realm. To the right there’s more corridor and a blind corner.

“Well, last time I was faced with a decision like this, I took the road less traveled and I bumped into you. So who knows?”

We go right.

“I can’t do jail time,” Charlie frets. “I’m too pretty.”

We reach a closed door and I tell Charlie to shut up while I listen.

“Can’t hear anything,” I tell him.

I open the door quietly and peek in. We’re inside Carmen’s Palace of Ice. There she is, standing at the window overlooking the all-weather rink. She’s doing her twice-daily Wicked Queen bit, casting evil spells on the guests and waving her crystal wand.

“You’re worthless! I shall crush you beneath my heel. You! Yes, you, you sniveling peasant! You will bow before me! I’ll show you who’s in charge here!”

The guests love this sort of thing. They lap it up.

Much the same can be said of the tubby, egg-like man in the Brook Brothers suit who’s crouching beneath the level of the window, holding up Carmen’s shimmering sparkled gown and licking her surprisingly hairy muff.

It figures. As soon as I see Mr. Atelier dining at the Y, it totally makes sense. That right there’s some image that’s going to need serious protecting.

Smiling, I look over my shoulder at Charlie.

“Don’t worry about jail time, pretty-boy. From now on we’re going to lead enchanted lives.”