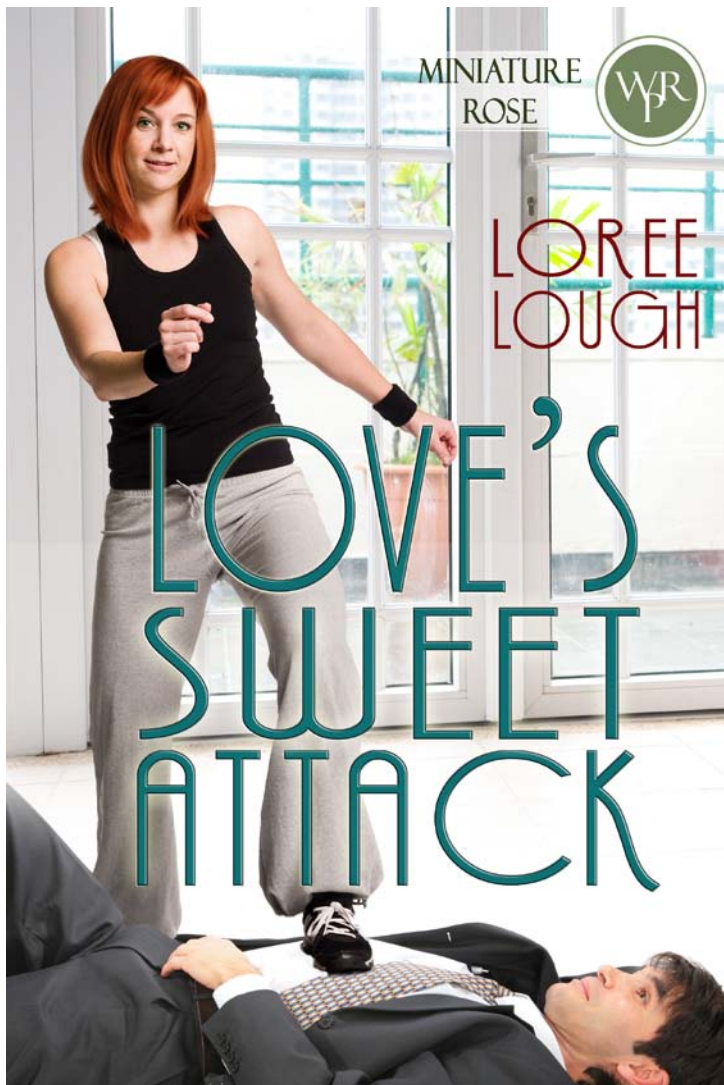


MINIATURE
ROSE



LOREE
LOUGH

LOVE'S SWEET ATTACK



For the past hour, as he'd listened to her talk about the founding of Black Belt to Go, an idea had been formulating in his mind. Now, as he pulled the car up to the entrance at the community college where she'd conduct her seminar, Dean wondered exactly how to put his plan into action.

"Well," he began, getting out of the car to open her door, "here you are, safe and sound."

He popped the hatchback's lid and handed her the duffle.

"Thanks," she said, hitching the bag's handles over one slender shoulder. "I can't remember when the trip to Philadelphia was more pleasant."

"Neither can I." And taking a step closer, Dean did what he'd been wanting to do since the moment he first saw her...

...He kissed her.

Love's Sweet Attack

by

Loree Lough

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Love's Sweet Attack

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Dedication

To Sharon Sirkis, owner of “Have Black Belt, Will Travel”, who was the inspiration for this story and the spunky gal who lived it.

Praise for Loree Lough

The “Suddenly” Series:

“Each novel is well-written and enjoyable, with easy-to-identify-with characters and gripping stories. If you like Christian fiction, this is one series you won’t want to miss. I found it hard to put the books down and each have become favorite. If I could give more than 5 stars, I would!”

(Rosella Myles, Romance Reviews)

Midnight Frolic:

I can promise you smiles, tears, and laughter...what I can also promise is that you will love this book! Kudos to Ms. Lough!

(Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio)

Love’s Sweet Attack:

This story is about two people who have had disappointments in the past, but have learned to put their fears and hope for the future in God’s hands. Ms. Lough introduces a town I would love to travel to, and characters I’d like to visit while there.

(Kathy Andrico, The Road to Romance)

Dream Seekers:

“Impressive treatment of historical themes. As a Christian parent and educator, I appreciated the presentation of both sides of the debate over separation of church and state, allowing young readers to mentally and morally wrestle with the issues. The book is strong on examples of character development, without being preachy.”

(Beth Bascom, Kids’ Book Reviews)

CHAPTER ONE

“There’s nothing worse than waiting in a long line,” Paige’s date said, “especially when you already know how the movie ends.”

Added to his list of other complaints—women drivers, traffic lights, too-few parking spaces—this latest gripe was pretty tame. Grinning inwardly, Paige sent a mental message to her mother: *You owe me for this one, Mom, big time!*

Two days ago, her mother’s best friend had called to gossip about her broken-hearted son, whose fiance had called off the wedding; the well-meaning moms decided the never-married daughter of one and the recently jilted son of the other had a lot in common, and a ‘date’ was born.

Why couldn’t Kent have been more like that guy two couples head of them in line? she wondered. There was something familiar about the tall, good-looking man whose twinkling brown eyes, warm smile, and soft-spoken jokes had kept his date giggling for the past ten minutes.

He didn’t seem to mind the heat, or the wait, and though he, too, undoubtedly knew that the boat would sink at the end of the movie, the fact hadn’t put *him* into a foul mood. Why couldn’t Mom’s pal have had a son like that?

Kent ran a stubby finger around the inside of his collar. “I’m roasting in this get-up.” He took a white handkerchief from his back pants pocket and

blotted perspiration from his forehead.

“No point in being uncomfortable,” she said, wondering why he hadn’t dressed for the weather.

“Why not take off the jacket and lose the tie?” She’d chosen light-weight beige pants and short-sleeved white blouse because the morning news had predicted a sunny, eight-five degree day for Baltimore and vicinity. It was the fifth summery day in a row, and the unexpected April heat wave seemed to be taking a very heavy toll on Kent.

He tugged at the Windsor knot of his tie. “Would you believe the air conditioning in my apartment building doesn’t get turned on ‘til May thirty-first?”

“My goodness,” Paige teased as he shrugged out of his sports coat, “could anything else possibly be wrong in your world?”

He stuffed the hanky back into his pocket. “Yeah, actually, there could. I’m bored. And I want to go inside where it’s cool, even if I do know how the movie will end.” He leaned this way and that to get a look at the box office. “What’s taking so long?”

She turned slightly to hide her exasperation, and noticed a teenaged boy hanging around near the mailbox across the street. She might not have noticed him at all if he hadn’t been pacing like a caged cougar. If Kent is ‘roasting’ in a coat and tie, think what that poor kid is going through in a sweat suit.

It wasn’t until he began crossing the street that she realized that the boy hadn’t merely been pacing. He’d been stalking, and from his unblinking stare, she gathered that his prey stood somewhere in this movie line. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled, exactly as they had on that fateful night.

Stepping aside to keep an eye on him, she watched as he took a quick look over his shoulder, another as he stepped up onto the curb. Checking for cops, no doubt, she thought as he pulled up the hood

on his zip-front sweatshirt. He tied it tight around his face, and then jammed one fist into his jacket pocket.

Following his gaze, Paige saw his intended quarry. The woman, smiling and chatting with her handsome companion, had no idea she was about to lose her pretty little white clutch—and everything in it—to this frazzled, frightened, freckle-faced boy.

Years of training rose to the fore. The moment he grabbed the purse and took off running, Paige leaped out of her spot in line...

...and tackled him.

His muffled *Oomph* was all but drowned out by the gasps and muffled cries of the gathering crowd. Straddling his narrow back, Paige pinned the boy's arms to the concrete.

"Let me up, lady," he whimpered, struggling for all he was worth. "My ole man's gonna kill me when—"

"You should have thought about that before you decided to steal that woman's purse," she said in her tough, no-nonsense voice. But Paige wouldn't have intentionally hurt anyone, least of all a teary-eyed kid. She loosened her grip a mite.

"I wasn't really gonna steal it; I woulda brung it back. Honest."

A pair of black loafers stepped into her line of sight. From what seemed to Paige several stories above the shoes, a deep, grating voice said, "Yeah, right."

In a heartbeat, Paige's gaze slid from the highly-polished shoes to the neatly-creased trousers, short-sleeved white shirt, and dark, angry eyes that glared at the boy. The handsome companion of the purse-snatching victim....

Now I know why he looks so familiar...he's Dean Porter! Oddly enough, she'd read an article about him just yesterday in *Baltimore Magazine*. He was yester-year's football darling and today's King of

Commercials...and owner of one of the east coast's most successful hotel-restaurant chains. Uh-oh Paige, you're in for it now.

Training had prepared her to defend herself against a variety of attacks; experience had taught her that men who witnessed her methods didn't appreciate being one-upped by a woman any more than the would-be mugger. Especially not famous, good-looking ones, she added. And as often as this guy's face is on the TV, he must have an ego the size of Texas.

Much to her surprise, Dean's irate stare turned into a friendly smile. "I'd shake your hand and thank you for what you just did," he said, stooping to retrieve his date's purse, "but you seem to have those hands full at the moment."

"Ooof," the would-be mugger whined, "you're hurting me, lady."

"Sorry," Paige said, meaning it, "but I can't let go 'til the cops get here."

As if on cue, the flashing lights and siren of a squad car announced the arrival of Howard County's finest. Two door slams and several hurried footsteps later, one of the officers asked Dean, "What appears to be the trouble here?"

Paige couldn't believe her ears. *I'm the one mashing a teenager flat, and he's the one they go to for an explanation?*

As if he'd read her mind, Dean said, "You should be talking to this young woman, officer; she just thwarted a robbery."

The cop turned his gaze on Paige, still sitting on the red-faced boy in the sweat suit. "You? his partner asked, wrinkling his nose. "But..."

"You should have seen her," Dean added, his grin broadening. "It was like something out of a Bruce Lee movie."

The policemen exchanged 'oh brother' glances and stepped forward. "Okay, lady," said the oldest,

“you can get up now; we’ve got him.” She stood and dusted street grit from her knees as he added, “But don’t go anywhere.” The click of the handcuffs punctuated his order. “We’ll need your statement for our report.”

Wincing as the officers roughly stuffed the kid into the squad car, she shook her head. She’d almost forgotten about Kent. “For the luvva Pete, Paige,” he grumped, “your heroics made me look like a sissy back there. I could have taken that guy if—”

“There were two dozen men in line, and not one of them did anything to stop the kid from grabbing that woman’s purse.” She cast a glance at Dean. “Not even her date, and he’s Dean Porter.”

Kent followed her gaze. “The ex-football player?” He glanced at the cops then, who were interviewing Porter and his date. “Still,” he added, glaring at Paige, “you could at least have—”

When the officer in charge waved her over, Paige was only too glad to leave her whiny date behind.

“The lady doesn’t want to press charges,” the cop said, scribbling her name and telephone number on his notepad, “so we’ve pretty much wrapped things up here. Thanks for sticking around, though.”

Paige watched Kent stomp across the parking lot toward his car. Well, there goes your ride home, she thought. Paige caught sight of the boy just then, slouching and fighting tears in the back of the squad car. “You’re going to let him go?”

The officer shrugged one shoulder. “Like I said, the lady isn’t pressing charges.”

“Mind if I ask him a question before you turn him loose?”

“Okay, but make it quick, will ya?” Grinning, he added with a wink, “I haven’t eaten since noon.”

Paige walked purposefully toward the police cruiser, rested her hands on the half-open rear window. “What’s your name?”

Without looking up, the boy answered, "Tony."

"How old are you, Tony?"

"Fourteen."

Something in his eyes, in his voice, told her this was not your run-of-the-mill juvenile offender, because he lacked that hardened 'look' so familiar on them. What was it her father always said? That the trouble with kids these days is they have too much time on their hands? An idea began forming in her head, one that put a slight smile on her face.

"You have nice eyes, Tony, and a person with nice eyes doesn't steal ladies' purses."

He met her gaze just long enough to register mild surprise, and then stared at some unknown spot on the floor of the squad car. Lower lip trembling, a tear slid down his freckled cheek, making him look four instead of fourteen. She'd seen more than enough wayward youngsters to tell the difference between genuine regret and good acting. Unless she was badly mistaken, Tony was truly sorry for what he'd done.

But what had driven him to take something that wasn't his? She handed him a business card. "If you want to make some honest money, call me."

Tony stared at the card as one corner of his mouth lifted in a grateful smile.

"Hey, tough girl," the cop teased, "you all through molly-coddling Jack the Ripper, there?"

"I guess," she said, straightening as the cops took Tony aside and gave him the routine 'don't let us catch you at this again' lecture. She knew from the wide-eyed guilty look on the boy's face that he'd never heard the speech before. And hopefully, she thought, fighting tears of her own, he'd never hear it again.

"Don't tell me you're one of those bleeding heart liberals."

His deep voice startled her, and she gasped. "I beg your pardon?" Paige asked, meeting Dean's big

brown eyes.

"Well, just look at you, all weepy over that little scuz ball. 'Nice eyes.' Gimme a break! No need to feel sorry for him; he feels plenty sorry for himself, believe you me."

"Oh, really." She lifted her chin a notch. "I wasn't aware that you knew him."

"Don't need to know *him*." He narrowed his eyes. "I know his type."

His friendly smiles and offer to shake her hand earlier had given her reason to hope that maybe Dean was different, that he hadn't felt 'bested' by—what had Kent called it?—her 'heroics'. If the look on his face right now was any indicator, she'd been wrong about that.

Dead wrong.

She swallowed her disappointment. "And exactly what would his 'type' be?"

"Spoiled, bored, lazy, amoral—"

Clenching her teeth, she said, "I hate to be rude, but I have to find a phone booth. It seems my date—"

"Hi," a woman's voice interrupted, "I'm Marta Matthews."

Paige looked up, and up, into the clear blue eyes of Dean's date. "Marta Matthews, the cover model?"

"It's such a pleasure to meet you," she said, sandwiching Paige's hands between her own.

"I was hoping for an opportunity to thank you. For getting my purse back." She took a step closer. "Now tell me," she whispered, "where did you learn to *do* that?"

Paige shrugged. "You could do it, too, with training."

"I'd love to learn," the model admitted, "if for no other reason than to keep those nosy reporters at a safe distance!" Giggling, she fired off a clumsy karate chop.

Paige grinned and fished a business card out of

her purse.

“Paige Anderson. Black Belt to Go’,” Marta read aloud. Brow furrowed, she tilted her head. “I don’t get it.”

“I have a studio here in town, but I also take my self-defense classes on the road, to colleges, corporations—”

“Isn’t our little hero something?” Dean interrupted, slipping an arm around Marta. “Pretty and petite, smart and successful...”

Paige didn’t have time to figure out what had caused of the strange edginess in his voice, because the question was quickly smothered by feelings of jealousy, aroused when he put his arm around the model.

He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a card of his own. “Give me a call in the morning,” he instructed, handing it to Paige. And as he led Marta toward the theater entrance, he added, “I have a business proposition for you. I’m in the office by nine sharp.” He jabbed a forefinger in the air, as if to say, ‘I expect your call at nine oh one.’

She clicked her heels together and snapped off a smart salute. “Yes-sir!” she said in her best Bullwinkle imitation.

The minute the words were out of her mouth, Paige regretted them. Fortunately, it appeared he hadn’t heard her.

Once Dean and Marta disappeared into the crowd of movie-goers, she took a good look at his card. “Porter Hotels and Restaurants” it said, “Where Quality is King.”

His bossy behavior made it fairly obvious to Paige that in Dean’s mind, at least, Quality ran a pale second to the real king, and she didn’t know if she could stomach doing business with another pompous, self-centered man.

Sighing, she felt her shoulders slump in resignation. You can’t afford not to. Black Belt to Go

was holding its own, but business could always be better. If she managed to secure a contract with Porter Hotels, she'd be set. You can't buy publicity like that!

The *Baltimore Magazine* article had listed dozens of cities up and down the east coast where he'd built a Porter Hotel, each with its own five-star restaurant and a fully-equipped work-out room...and at least one hundred employees. If the 'business proposition' he'd mentioned included *all* his holdings, this could mean a franchise! *Why, I might even have to hire someone to run the studio while I handle the on-the-road business.*

Paige saw a pay phone near where she'd first noticed Tony, and headed for it.

Her years as a karate student had taught her a great deal about self-defense. Taught her a thing or two about business, too. Rule one: 'Never let the competition read your fear.' Rule two: 'Don't let 'em get the upper hand.'

It was all she could do to keep from smirking as she dropped several coins into the telephone. Won't he be surprised when his nine o'clock telephone appointment turns out to be a face-to-face meeting?

Questions pinged in her mind as her mother's phone rang:

Would Dean want to discuss what her company could do for his?

No doubt about it. Why else would he want to meet with me?

Would he cut her a fair deal?

That magazine article spent a whole page on his reputation as an honest businessman.

Would she and Dean have a pleasant working relationship?

She pictured his long-lashed dark eyes. His nearly-black hair. His rakish smile. His broad shoulders. If looks count for anything, she told herself, grinning, then, I don't see why not.

Loree Lough

Only one question remained....

Should I wear my little black dress, or navy
business suit...?

CHAPTER TWO

After a long sip of ice water, Dean leaned back in his chair, linked his fingers behind his neck, and propped both feet on the window sill. Yawning, he closed his eyes, and began ticking off the things that had kept him tossing and turning all night.

The air conditioning unit in his penthouse condo had decided to take a vacation from the muggy, unseasonably hot weather. And he hadn't expected the movie's ending to affect him the way it had. But mostly, he'd been feeling more than a little guilty about the way he'd treated Marta last night.

When she'd said, straight out, that it was high time she traded her 'girlfriend' tag for a more meaningful title, he'd said it was high time to put the brakes on the relationship. He hadn't intended for his listing of the facts to hurt her feelings, so each time her hurt expression had come to mind during the night, he'd tried to rationalize his reaction to her off-beat marriage proposal by telling himself he'd never done anything to make her think they'd ever be more than friends.

He'd be a fool to deny that Marta was a vision, from her well-coiffed hair-do to the soles of her designer shoes. Tall and lithe, blonde and blue-eyed, any man would likely trade his eye teeth to have a woman like that for a wife.

Why not you? he asked himself.

Because you don't want to live a rerun of Dave's