

Lucky in Love

**By
OTKRomance**

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Published by Newsite Web Services, LLC
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Chapter One

Lucky St. James started her 1972 Pinto and sat, staring into space, as it warmed up. She shivered. It was a cold January morning, and her mission was an intimidating one.

As she pulled the noisy car from the sidewalk outside her apartment building and onto the street, Clay's words came back into her head, as they had time and again since she had last seen him. *If you change your mind you know where to find me; but there will be consequences, Lucky...* He had said it with ease, no menace in the threat. And, despite the consequences he spoke of, Lucky had held onto those words. There was a solace and safety there, a round about promise that when she grew up a little and got herself sorted out, Clay would be waiting for her.

Outside her car window, the city flew by. The streets of Philadelphia were fairly deserted, many of the shops closed at this early morning hour. A few scattered Christmas decorations still hung on lampposts and buildings, oblivious to the fact that they had already had their hay day.

Unnerved by the solitude of the day, Lucy switched on the radio and fidgeted with the dial. Talk shows were the predominant feature across the Sunday morning airwaves, with only a few scattered stations actually playing music. She tried humming along with an old Harry Chapin song, but it was halfway over when she found it, and after it ended, a spiritual program began. Eventually she switched the radio off, realizing that the noise of channel surfing was far more irritating than the quiet had been.

Gradually, the cold gray concrete of city streets gave way to green lawns and clear blue skies. The huge buildings that knocked boldly against the foundations of Heaven dissolved into more modest houses that were built closer to the bounds of Earth.

Lucky's heartbeat quickened. She remembered how she had driven out here once before with Clay, how he had told her about his childhood growing up on the large farm where he still resided. He'd pointed it out to her as they'd driven by, but had respected her wishes when she'd declined several offers of a tour of the place. Instead, he'd always come to meet her somewhere, and when they had chosen to stay in for the night, those nights had always been spent at Lucky's small apartment in the city.

Now, she saw that circle of white buildings that was Clay's home off the road to her left, immensely impressive even from the road, which was a good hundred feet from the farm. Taking a deep breath for courage, she turned down the long, paved driveway.

The winter branches of the trees along the driveway stretched out in a web of tedious, bony fingers above her as she drove. The Pinto rattled past several large barns and other outbuildings, where Lucky caught glimpses of ranch hands coming in and out with equipment and bags of feed. The pastures were dotted with horses, here a chestnut, there a black, in the far corner three paints and an appaloosa rolling in a patch of sunny grass. There was one pure white foal frolicking playfully with a denim-clad man as he led it out of the barn.

As Lucky pulled around and stopped outside the main house, she was surprised that Clay's SUV was the only vehicle in the driveway. With it being his birthday today, she had half expected to find his girls here to visit with him. Selfishly, she was relieved to discover that he was, at least so far, alone; she had yet to meet Clay's daughters and was nervous enough about that first encounter without having to manage it on today of all days. There was enough on today's plate as it was.

Probably alerted by the telltale rumble of her vehicle's about-to-fall-off-any-day-now muffler, a flutter of movement occurred at the curtain of a first

floor window, drawing Lucky's attention as she parked. Clay's handsome, fine features appeared beside the large hand that had drawn back the drape. Despite the distance between where he sat inside his study and where Lucky fidgeted inside her Pinto, she would have still sworn that his eyes meet hers directly.

Within seconds, Clay had left the window and was standing just outside the front door of that massive, yet somehow old-fashioned stone front house. He stared anxiously, almost disbelievingly, at her car. Had the situation been different, Lucky would have burst out laughing to see Clay looking so befuddled and uncertain; the man was never anything but controlled, always certain of his actions.

But there was no amusement in this journey for Lucky. Her stomach was pitching with fear even as she sat there, her car still running, the heat trickling through the dash vents making her sweat. She paused further, telling herself that she was looking for something in Clay's gaze that meant he was happy she had come; but really she was looking for what she thought was more likely to be there – anger, indifference, or any other small sign that he no longer wanted her.

After several long minutes of sizing one another up from a distance, Clay slowly ambled over to her vehicle. His stride was bow legged from so much time spent in the saddle, but he still walked tall and strong, despite being hunched over against the cold as he was dressed only in a wool sweater, jeans and heavy socks.

With shaky hands, Lucky rolled down her window as he reached the car. Why she didn't just get out of the Pinto she refused to even think about.

"Hi there," he grinned down at her, just as if it had only been yesterday when they'd last seen one another, instead of three months earlier. There was a shadow of stubble across his jaw and he looked like he'd maybe lost a few pounds. His thick dark

hair was in charming disarray around his face, the result of only a few minutes in the January wind. Her eyes took in his familiar face, his warm voice, the body she knew so well how to please. She had to swallow hard on a rush of tears burning the back of her throat.

"Hi," she squeaked.

His smile broadened at her obvious nervousness. But his warm blue eyes were kind, as always.

"I confess I hadn't dared to hope for such a wonderful birthday gift as this." He opened her door then, and reached over the top of the steering wheel to turn the car's engine off himself. Just like him, to take control of the situation, especially since she was still sitting there like a stone, just staring up at him. Pocketing her keys, he held out his hand. "Come on in, Lucky."

She considered a few minutes longer, knowing the pleasures that awaited her if she went with him. And weighing the other things that were sure to accompany them as well.

Then, slowly, she nodded and climbed out of the car. The hand that clasped hers as they walked towards the house was surprisingly warm, despite the January cold.

The inside of Clay Jackson's home was warm and decorated in masculine tones. Lucky glanced nervously around as he helped her off with her tattered coat, imagining she could smell the money that had gone into creating such a beautiful and well-kept home. The wooden handrail that led from the foyer to the second floor was intricately carved and shone richly, while a crystal vase housing a handful of sunflowers gleamed in the sunlight pouring down from the double skylights in the cathedral ceilings. Everywhere she looked she saw money – expensive furnishings, fine fabrics, original artwork, high tech electronics. And beneath her

soiled sneakers, the tile floor stretched out down the hall towards the other first floor rooms, each one, she was sure, more extravagant and expensive than the one before it.

Feeling shy, and silly because of it, Lucky had to force herself to meet Clay's eyes. His expression was slightly amused. "Do you like it?" he asked quietly. Despite the amusement in his eyes, there was a seriousness in his tone that made her think her answer was important to him somehow.

"What's not to like?" she asked, spreading her arms out wide to include all that was around them. When she noticed how shaky her hands were, she let her arms drop and folded them stiffly across her chest. "It's beautiful. You have nice tastes, Clay."

His gaze dropped to her folded arms, and the amusement left his features. He grasped her hand again, leaving her no other choice but to drop her other arm to her side, and tugged her gently along beside him as he started down the hallway. "I can't take the credit for the décor," he told her casually. "I had help from the girls. Though I am glad they didn't suffocate me with flowers and pastels."

Lucky smiled at the image. "I was afraid I'd be crashing a family birthday party. I thought they might be here already."

Clay flashed her a grin over his shoulder as they entered a large den. "It's too early in the day for my girls to be out of bed, much less out of the house. I'm sure they'll come around later this afternoon or maybe this evening."

He gestured for her to have a seat on the huge chocolate brown leather sofa that ran the length of the center wall of the room, then wrapped around the corner before finally finishing around the middle of the far wall. "Have a seat. I'll go and get us some drinks. What would you like?"

Timidly, she perched on the edge of the sofa. With a shrug, she said, "Something warm?"

"Coming right up."

She watched him stride away, her eyes hungrily taking in his long legged walk, the strong, athletic movements of his muscular, work honed body. When he had slipped out of view, closing the French doors to the room behind him with a quiet click, Lucky swallowed thickly and jumped back to her feet.

Move in with me, he'd asked her three months before. *I want to wake up in the morning beside you, come home to be with you at night. I'll make you happy, Lucky, you know I will.*

She'd wanted to do as he asked, more than anything else. That was the problem; she wanted it too badly, and anytime she wanted something that badly, it only ended up hurting her in the end. Lucky was afraid to trust, afraid to be happy. Afraid, and certain that it would – could – never last.

I can't see you anymore, she'd told him simply, that last night at the club, a week after he'd asked her to move in with him. *I'm sorry.*

He'd just looked at her sadly, disappointed. He knew why she was pushing him away, had probably even seen it coming. *Don't do this*, he'd said, even though the expression on his face said that he knew it was a waste of time to try to change her mind.

I have to. She'd straightened her shoulders then, and stood up from the barstool. *Goodbye, Clay.*

She'd almost made it to the door before he called her name. Her first instinct had been to just keep walking, pretend she hadn't heard him. But something else made her turn around, the part of her that didn't want to give him up.

If you change your mind, honey, you know where to find me. He'd sat tall and straight in the bar stool, his long fingered hands spread on his muscular thighs. His blue eyes had glinted across the distance of the club at her, dangerous and steely. *But there will be consequences*, Lucky...

She knew what he meant by consequences, though up till now she'd not experienced them. He'd

told her shortly into their relationship that he had what he called some "unusual sexual interests." More specifically, spanking.

As it had been early in their relationship, he'd been quick to stress that for the most part, he had only used spanking in his relationships in a sexual context – for foreplay and pleasure. But, later on, he had been more honest, and told her that he did believe in domestic discipline, in a home where the man was the head of his household and when a woman did something to warrant it, it was the man's responsibility to correct and better direct her behavior.

Apparently, the spanking interest had been a major problem in his first marriage. And, he had told her one late night, he really did not see himself having another happy long-term relationship without that component being involved.

She hadn't been that put off by the idea of being spanked for sexual pleasure; it wasn't as weird a concept as some other things that people got excited over. But the idea of being punished, even in what Clay had described as a loving domestic discipline setting, made her nervous. It sparked too many memories of the stepfather she'd grown up with, who had let off steam and stress with a bottle of his favorite bourbon and a heavy hand to her mother's face.

Even so, she'd willingly read the stories Clay printed for her from his computer, glimpses into his soul and what he felt he needed to be happy in a relationship. And she began to see what he meant by the loving balance that could be achieved by the equalness and fairness and by the addressing of problems and forgiveness, instead of the holding of grudges and bad feelings. The night he'd asked her to move in with him, she'd been planning on telling him that she was willing to try their relationship his way, the old fashioned way.

But when he'd asked her to live with him, she'd gotten scared. And she'd run instead.

Now, she stopped her pacing and dried her sweaty palms on her skirt. She moved purposely to the windows and twisted the baton until the blinds were all closed. Next, she moved to the French doors, grateful that he'd led her to a room that had doors, and even more grateful for the curtain that she now untied and let fall over the decorative glass.

On quivery legs, she next went to the far corner of the room, where she turned her back on the room and stood facing where the two walls met. One trembling hand reached behind her and, remembering a story she'd read that Clay had given her, folded up the back of her skirt, baring her bottom, encased only in worn white cotton. Gooseflesh broke out along her legs and arms and a shiver coursed through her.

The same hand hovered at the top of her panties, remembering how the girl in the story had also lowered those till they pooled at her ankles. Somehow, Lucky couldn't do that, though. Eventually, she brought her hand back in front of her body.

It was only a moment or two later, when she heard the doors open and Clay's steps as he entered the room.

"Sorry for the wait. I thought you'd like some cocoa, but I had some trouble finding..."

His voice trailed off as he took in her current position. Silence followed, the only evidence of his presence in the room the muffled clunk as he set their drinks down on coasters. Lucky fidgeted in the corner, her stomach a riot of butterflies, her face hot and red with embarrassment.

Though she kept her gaze focused on the crease of plaster before her, she was aware of Clay's approach. His hand caught her gently at the back of her head, smoothing back the waves of auburn hair in a calming gesture. Slowly, his touch continued down the length of her back, making the cotton shirt she wore stick to her slightly sweaty skin

beneath, then over one hip, until it paused and rested just at the center of her pantied backside.

Once, then twice, ever so softly, he patted her there.

"I see you haven't forgotten our last conversation," he said softly, his voice right beside her ear, so close she felt the warmth of his breath and smelled the spice of his cologne.

"I remember," she whispered, still intently facing front.

Again, he patted her bottom, this time the slightest bit harder. "Look at me," he said.

Her eyes burning, she turned her head and met his gaze, finding relief in the warmth in his eyes.

"You can trust me." He told her.

Lucky nodded. "I know."

"Good." He took her hand and pulled her along with him as he stepped towards the couch. When he reached it, he sat down before her and took both her hands in his own. "I'm not going to go easy on you, though," he told her sternly. "When you walked away from me, you may as well have cut my heart out and taken it with you. You stole three months from me, from yourself, from us, and I don't take that lightly. I intend to make sure that you won't ever even think of running out on this relationship again. Do you understand me?"

Slowly, she nodded.

"All right, then." He patted the couch cushion to his right. "Kneel here, please."

Feeling clumsy, Lucky did as he requested. A shiver shook through her when Clay bent her upper body over, granting him access to her panties, which he quickly shucked down to her knees. Lucky couldn't help the distressed whimper that crawled out of her throat from somewhere deep inside her belly.

Clay met her wide eyes with his own calm, warm ones. "In my house, a spanking is always given on the bare bottom. There is no other way. So you

may as well abandon your modesty here and now, honey."

A moment later, she found herself belly down over his hard thighs.

"Because this is your first time, I'm only going to use my hand. In the future, for something as serious as this, you can expect a good dose of something more strict." He sat forward on the cushion and tucked both of Lucky's bare legs between his own, causing the panties to slide even further down her legs. He angled her position then, so that her upper body was supported by his left thigh and the expanse of couch beneath them.

Lucky sucked in a breath, anticipating the first stinging blow. Five seconds ticked by, then ten, and still it didn't come.

"Relax your bottom, Lucky," Clay said above her. "I don't want to bruise you." Then his large hand grasped her cheeks and shook them around a bit, eliciting a gasp of surprise from her. Clay chuckled. "Not what you were expecting, huh?" he teased gently. A moment later, he released her and nodded his approval. "Better. Don't clench, now, baby, it'll be better that way."

And then the first fiery swat fell.

Lucky arched up with that meaty smack, then was quickly distracted by a twin smack to the opposite bottom cheek. Clay quickly set a lightning pace, alternating spanks from left to right, top to bottom, then right in the middle, and soon the sting of each individual swat turned into a pervading heat, then a burning pain that had Lucky hollering and begging with each additional spank he gave her.

If this was what a hand spanking from Clay Jackson was like, she thought desperately, she never wanted to experience one from 'something more strict,' as he'd put it.

"Please, Clay!" she pleaded. "I can't take any more of this!"

"Spankings in my house," he told her calmly as he continued to wallop her, not even winded, "begin and end at my discretion, not yours, young lady. I will decide when you've had enough."

Lucky now knew why he'd restricted her legs by pinching them between his own. She could hardly even struggle against his barrage of smacks from her hobbled position. The best defense she could manage was to throw back her hand as a pathetic shield, but that effort was only in vein because Clay easily grabbed a hold of it and pinned it to her back with his non-spanking hand, all the while tsking her for the attempt.

"We need to get a few things straight in that head of yours, I think," he told her between hard, open palmed spanks with nary a pause between them. "I'm not your father, Lucky," he continued, pausing briefly to move her further forward over his lap. His broad open palm caught the back of her left thigh next and the fresh sting on that expanse of untouched skin pricked her eyes. She gasped out loud with the next swat, directed to the back of her right thigh. "And I'm not your stepfather, either." SMACK! This time right in the center of her bottom cheeks and the first tears spilled over Lucky's face. "I'm not going to walk out on you," SMACK! "or hurt you" SMACK! " - except maybe for the occasional trip over my knee, like this." SMACK! "I'm not any of those guys you dated before me, either" SMACK! "I'm interested in a lot more than just getting you into my bed" SMACK! "and I would never cheat on you or lie to you, either."

The tears ran freely down Lucky's face now, and she keened with them, with the vulnerable way they made her feel. It wasn't just the spanking anymore that was making her walls crumble, but the truth in what he was saying. Clay wasn't the father who had walked out of her life when she was a baby, the man she had never known. He wasn't the stepfather who'd abused her mother and terrified her throughout her childhood until the day he finally

drank himself to death. He wasn't the guys she'd slept with in high school, searching for closeness with a man, but never quite finding the intimacy and connection that she needed. He wasn't Jack, the first guy she'd thought she loved, only to find out he'd cheated on her nearly the entire time they'd been together. And he wasn't Charlie, the last man she'd been serious about, who had turned out to be a married man with three small children.

He wasn't any of those guys, but she was punishing him for the grief that all of them had given her before he ever came into the picture.

Lucky was so lost in her own pain and thoughts that she had hardly even noticed that Clay had eased up on the force and number of his smacks. His large hand, a bit rough from working in the stables, smoothed over the soft skin of her bottom, further abrading the raw, hot flesh, and she hissed at the simultaneous comfort and irritation his touch evoked.

"I'm sorry, Clay," she sobbed, limp and exhausted over his knee. "I'm sorry..."

"Shh..." She felt his hand on her hair, smoothing the tangled tresses back from her sweat and tear stained face. "I know, I know." He continued to stroke her hair, as she wept quietly into the couch cushions, her reddened backside still propped up over his knee.

After a few minutes had passed, and she had calmed some, Clay cleared his throat and said, "I just have one question for you and then we'll be done with this, honey. Are you ever going to run from me again, Lucky?"

"No, Clay," she answered hoarsely, honestly. "I'll never run from you again. I swear it."

"Damn right," he agreed, swatting her hard one final time for emphasis. Lucky moaned as he helped her sit up, chuckling arrogantly when she hissed as her bottom rubbed against the denim of his jeans. She settled gingerly on her side and cuddled into his

chest, purring a little when his hand cupped her burning bottom flesh and gently caressed it.

"I'm sorry, Clay," she whispered again, looking up at him through tear spiked lashes.

Clay smiled and wiped away the tears from her cheeks with the pad of one thumb. "All's forgiven and forgotten," he said and then cupped her face. His lips pressed against her forehead gently, and Lucky could feel the tremble in them, full of the longing and loneliness that waiting for her had brought on. "I love you, Lucky."

Lucky's stomach flip-flopped at the words. Words so many women longed to hear, but not her. To her, love only ever brought hardship.

Willfully, she pushed those stubborn memories away, and wrapped her arms around Clay instead. "I love you too. Don't ever leave me, Clay."

His arms tightened around her back, then one snaked up to entangle a hand in her unruly hair. The other hand returned to her bottom and patted the reddened skin, a love pat, like a parent would give a fussy infant. "Never, my love. I'll never leave you."

Chapter Two

It was a long while before all of Lucky's tears and sniffles finally abated. Clay held her tight in his arms until the storm had passed, soothing her with gentle words of love and forgiveness.

"I must look a mess," she eventually speculated after a period of companionable silence. Her hands, now calmer and no longer as shaky, smoothed over her rumpled hair.

Clay shook his head. "Not to me. You're the best damn thing I've laid eyes on in a long while."

Lucky smiled shakily, looking around the eyes like she might likely start crying again. And, while Clay loved holding her, no matter what the reason, he had seen enough tears for one day. So, to distract her from his words of affection, he patted her hip twice and stood her up, helping her to right her clothing. He noticed the flush of her facial cheeks as he did this and resisted the urge to smile. Why it would bother her to share the intimacy of a spanking and its aftermath with him, when they'd already shared each other's bodies in every other way imaginable was beyond him. But there it was anyway.

"There's a bathroom down the hall to the right," he told her, "if you want to clean up. Help yourself to whatever you need in the vanity drawers."

"Thanks." Clay watched her flit away. She seemed a little relieved to have a moment to collect herself.

Shaking his head, Clay went to the windows and reopened the blinds she had closed, then drew the curtains back on the French doors. She'd impressed him with this, today. Of course, he hadn't forgotten what he'd told her when she'd left him, that he would be there if she changed her mind, but that there would be a price for running out on him instead of trying to work things through together. He'd figured that she would remember it too. But, he'd never expected her to initiate it, to walk back

into this room and find her in the corner with her skirt tucked up, just waiting for him to come in and take her over his knee. He admired her bravery in doing it, especially considering her past and the fact that she'd told him before that she'd never been spanked.

He supposed it was a good sign, that she'd submitted her will to him, that she'd trusted him that much. And, she'd come back on her own, without any persuasion from him to do so, though he'd thought a million times of things to say, do, or give her to try to win her back. He'd managed somehow to keep away, however, knowing that if she were to come back to him and they were to have a chance together, that it would need to be a decision she came to completely on her own, without any aid in the process from him.

And, now, here she was, Clay thought as he sank back down on the sofa to await her return. He cupped his chin in his hand and frowned. Now he just had to figure out a way to get her to stay....

They spent the day together, catching up on the events of the last three months apart. They talked and ate lunch, then Clay took her on a tour of his house and the outbuildings. Lucky thrilled over meeting the horses, laughing out loud when they snuffed her open hand with their large noses, and squealing in delight when Clay showed her how to feed one a carrot. If she'd been dressed differently, he might have taken her for a ride, despite the chill in the air; instead, he promised he would the next time, as long as she had on jeans and a warm sweater and coat.

They were relaxing that afternoon in front of a fire, when Clay heard the front door open and remembered for the first time since that morning that his girls were due to come with dinner. He sighed; though he loved Andrea and Christine, he just wasn't sure how they were going to react to Lucky. The twins could be difficult sometimes, to say the least.

"Is someone here?" Lucky asked, noticing that his gaze had shifted away from her face.

"It's the girls," Clay answered, getting slowly to his feet and reaching a hand down to help Lucky up from where they'd been laying on large pillows on the floor before the blaze. "I nearly forgot they were coming."

He saw the way Lucky's shoulders tensed, and how her eyes grew wide as her gaze went to the door. Down the hall, he heard Andi call out, "Daddy! We're here!"

"In the den, kiddo," Clay returned. He shot Lucky a wink and squeezed her hand. "It's okay, honey. I promise."

Lucky nodded, shrugging as if to say that she already knew that, of course. But the rest of her body language betrayed her as anything but at ease.

A moment later, the girls rushed in, their current boyfriends bringing up the rear. Both girls stopped abruptly when they saw that their father was not alone, and even more specifically when they saw that he was in fact holding hands with the guest he was already entertaining. The young men following them nearly collided with their other halves, so sudden was their stop.

Clay made sure the smile on his face never wavered as he left Lucky's side for the briefest of moments to kiss the cheek of each of his daughters and shake the hands of their beaux. When he returned to Lucky, he put a possessive arm around her shoulders, noting to himself that she was slightly trembling again.

He cleared his throat and gestured with his free hand to the woman beside him, drawing the girls' attention to him for the first time since they'd first spotted her. "Andi, Chrissy, this is Lucky. I'm sure you remember me telling you about her..."

Andi, her long dark hair swept up in a ponytail, folded her slim arms across her chest and raised one finely shaped eyebrow over a blue eye the

exact shade as Clay's own. "I thought you weren't seeing each other anymore," she said bluntly.

Clay squeezed Lucky's tense shoulder and shrugged. "We'd had a falling out, but things seem to be getting back on track now. So it looks like we'll have one more for dinner tonight."

"Oh, no," Lucky spoke up, "I don't want to intrude..."

"I don't even know if we'd have enough food, Daddy," Chrissy pointed out, her green eyes watching the newcomer warily. She held up a huge bag of Chinese food that Clay could smell from across the room. The bag fairly bulged with cartons of food, but he knew how his girls could make pigs of themselves when it came to Chinese. Still, he grated his teeth, because he knew they were just being deliberately difficult.

"Don't be silly, Chrissy," he scolded mildly, gesturing to the bag. "It looks like you brought enough to feed a small army."

Tom, Chrissy's boyfriend, a clean cut young man with dark blond hair and hazel eyes, interjected helpfully, "I'm not a big fan of Chinese, so Lucky's welcome to my share."

"I'm not fussy either," Peter, Andrea's beau added. "Tom and I can always help ourselves to a sandwich or something if there's not enough Chinese for everyone."

Both girls scowled at their men while Clay stacked up brownie points in his book for each of them. He grinned at Lucky, who still looked like she might bolt from the room at any moment. "See, now that's definitely settled." He clapped his hands together as if in relish of the upcoming meal, instead of just plain nerves. "Let's eat!"

The group assembled around the large dining room table and passed around the various cartons of Chinese food amongst themselves. It was quiet at first, and tense, and Clay kept trying to look at or

touch Lucky in a reassuring way. It didn't escape his attention that everything he did regarding Lucky was watched by his daughters with dark, mistrusting eyes.

"So, Lucky," Peter spoke up finally, breaking the tense silence. "You have an unusual name. Is it a nickname?"

Lucky shook her head. She kept her eyes mostly on her food as she answered him, looking up only once or twice and on those occasions only glancing briefly right at Peter; it made Clay's blood boil to see her so intimidated by his girls. "No, actually, my birth certificate says Lucky St. James." She colored a bit then, reminding Clay of how colorful her nether cheeks had been the last he'd seen them. "I was born in Vegas, the same day my mother had won a thousand dollars at one of the casinos." She shrugged. "So, she named me Lucky."

Clay thought he heard a feminine scoff from farther down the table, but it was so soft he couldn't be sure.

"That's pretty neat," Tom commented. "I like that story a lot better than mine. I'm named after my dad." He wrinkled his nose. "Not very original."

Lucky smiled at him and then returned her attention to the food before her.

"What do you do, Lucky?" Andrea asked icily, pronouncing the name with unnecessary emphasis.

Clay met the uncertain gaze Lucky sent his way with a smile and the slightest of nods. She looked briefly down at her plate once more, then nervously looked up into the cold eyes of Clay's daughter. "I'm a dancer."

One of Andrea's eyebrows rose.

"I used to take ballet when I was younger," Chrissy volunteered. "What kind of dance do you study?"

Clay's heart swelled as he watched Lucky's shoulders square. He might not approve of what she did for a living himself, but the last thing he wanted her to do was show any sign of weakness in front of

his girls. At least not now when they both looked ready to jump across the table and have her for supper instead of their beloved Chinese food.

"I'm not studying it. I dance... at a club downtown.... Delilah's..."

"Delilah's Den?" Tom gasped, incredulous.

Now both of Andi's eyebrows were up. "Do you mean you're... you're a... stripper?!"

Lucky's chin rose and her deep hazel eyes rose to clash head on with Andi's blue ones. "We prefer the term 'exotic dancer.'"

Chrissy's jaw dropped then, and Peter began to cough slightly. Clay hid a grin behind his napkin.

Andrea glared up the table at her father. "Daddy," she informed him in a tight voice. "You're dating a stripper."

Clay met his daughter's gaze directly, setting the napkin aside. "I suppose I am."

And from there, the remainder of the visit just went from bad to worse.

"Where did you two meet?" Andrea demanded. "And please don't tell me that you're frequenting strip clubs, Daddy."

Clay reminded himself that his girls were adults now, no longer children. Even though they usually didn't act that way.

"Actually, I did meet her at the club. I was there at a bachelor party for one of the hands on the ranch here. I saw her across the room and she intrigued me. I could hardly even believe that I approached her later, and then I could hardly believe it when she accepted my offer to dinner. It seemed so out of character for both of us."

Lucky was nodding in agreement with him. "I'd been approached by customers before, but never one who was actually sober. And none who I was interested in. But I'd seen Clay from across the room too. And something about him drew my attention. I couldn't have said no to him that night if I'd wanted to."

Andi's eyes narrowed at Lucky and Clay wondered what his daughter was thinking.

A tense silence fell over the table again. It was Lucky this time who broke it, with a suddenly exclaimed, "Oh! I almost forgot!"

"What's that?" Clay asked.

"I baked you a cake – red velvet, your favorite. But I left it out in the car. I better go get it before it freezes solid out there."

"You baked him a cake?" Chrissy questioned, her eyes wide. "But we brought him one from the bakery."

"Well, I've got plenty of room for a slice of both," Clay quickly jumped in. No way was he missing out on Lucky's red velvet cake, especially not for one of the store bought cardboard flavored ones his daughters tended to bring.

"Or we can save mine for tomorrow," Lucky added. "Just let me go outside and bring it in. And I'll put on some coffee too."

Clay watched her disappear, knowing she was glad for the respite.

He sighed and tore his gaze from her retreating form to the accusing eyes of his children. He drew in a deep breath, sorted briefly through the tangle of thoughts in his head, trying to pick out the most important ones to impart to the girls in the brief time that Lucky would be gone, only to be beat to the punch by Andrea.

"Daddy, what do you think you're doing with that bimbo?" she whisper-shouted. "She's a stripper for crying out loud! Not to mention the fact that she's like half your freaking age! She only wants you for your money, you know. You're crazy if you think she's here for any other reason!"

While Clay sat there in a brief stunned silence following that outburst, Chrissy leaned forward in her seat, never to be left out and added her two cents worth: "Yeah, Dad."

To their credit, his daughters' dates looked like they wanted to slink right down between the floorboards, never to return again.

Clay's eyes narrowed first at one daughter and then at the other. "You two are about a moment away from being thrown out of my house for the first time in your life. One more rude comment about or to Lucky and you will be. For the record, Lucky is going to be quitting her job at the club. And also for the record, she is not half my age. She is twenty nine, which makes her thirteen years younger than me."

"And only eight years older than us!" Chrissy exclaimed.

Clay closed his eyes briefly. "It doesn't matter how old she is. Or what she does for a living. Or how much money she makes or doesn't make. All that matters is that I care about her. And that she's come back to me. You two have no idea how hard it was for her to do that. And the last thing she needs today is the hassle the two of you have given her from the moment you met her. You haven't even given her a fair chance."

"She's a bimbo, Daddy." Andi insisted. "See what she really is now before it's too late."

Clay ground his teeth. "Andrea Lynn Jackson, you are a millisecond away from going over my knee right here and now. I would advise you not to make the mistake of saying another disparaging word to me about Lucky."

Andi and Chrissy both gasped out loud at his threat.

Clay glanced at first Peter and then Tom. "You know boys, that's what these two both need more than any other thing. A damn good spanking every now and again. I recognized it while they were growing up, how spoiled they were, how manipulative and mean they could be when they wanted to be. But their mother wouldn't hear of a little old fashioned discipline. So, unfortunately, the burden will fall now to their mates, whoever they

wind up being, you two or some other poor fellows. And the situation will either be resolved by their husbands drawing the line in the sand and showing them their place, or he'll wind up a miserable bastard, subject to their every whim and demand." He stood now and shook each young man's hand, met each of their startled sets of eyes. "Best of luck to you both." He glanced at his girls one more time, seeing how they seethed. "Lord knows you're going to need it."

With that, he took himself out of the room, and strode into the kitchen to await Lucky. A few moments later, just as she walked in with a large basket in her hand, they heard the loud bang of the front door slamming shut.

"Was it something I said?" Lucky asked quietly as she set down the basket.

Clay shook his head. "No, it was something I said, that's needed to be said now for a long, long time." He drew Lucky into his arms when she frowned. "Don't worry, sweetheart. It will blow over. And maybe it'll help my girls grow up a little."

She sighed, looking positively miserable. "I don't want to be the cause of problems between you and your kids. Maybe this was a mistake, coming over here like this today."

Now it was Clay that frowned. There was the sound of a thunderclap, then a yelp from Lucky as his hand ricocheted off of her bottom. "Don't say that," he growled. "You've made me very happy by 'coming over here like this' today. Don't let them ruin it."

She still looked unhappy.

"I can see I've got my work cut out for me, here," Clay announced cheerfully. Without any warning, he bent at the waist and grabbed Lucky at the hips, lifting her up so that she dangled over his one shoulder.

"Clay!" she protested. "Put me down!"

"Oh, no," he argued, starting for the hallway stairs and only pausing at the front door long

enough to throw its lock. "I've got big plans for you tonight, missy. And I'm not about to let you try and slip away..."

Clay's bedroom was very masculine, done in dark woods and neutral tones. He deposited her gently on the huge bed, then grinned down at her mischievously.

"It's my birthday, right?" he asked suggestively.

"Yeessss....?" Lucky answered cautiously, wondering where he was headed with this, but having a fairly good idea of the general direction.

"So, I get to have a birthday wish, right?" he pressed further, still grinning widely at her.

"I suppose," she agreed haughtily, playing along now.

"Mm-hmm." His eyes narrowed at her. "I want a strip tease, Ms. St James. Solely for me. And then, I want you to place yourself over my knee so that I may give you my forty-two birthday swats."

"What?" Lucky exploded. "You've got to be kidding! You just spanked me a couple hours ago!"

Clay chuckled and shrugged. "You should know that if you move in here with me, there will be plenty of spanking, both disciplinary and playful. Often you might be over my lap more than once, or even twice, in a day. Not that there's anything to worry about, because I promise you that this spanking will be very, very different from the one you received earlier."

"I never said I was moving in here with you, Clay," Lucky corrected him quietly, not wanting to ruin the mood, because God knew she wanted him, even if she had to take another spanking beforehand.

"Ah, but just your coming back tells me that you are," he insisted. "That was the agreement, remember? You ran from the idea before, and I told you I would be there when you changed your mind."

And here you are; you just don't want to admit that you've changed your mind yet."

He leaned in close over her, his arms on either side of her body. His breath was warm against her mouth, though he didn't kiss her. Not yet. Lucky had been waiting for him to kiss her on the lips all damn day, and it was fairly driving her crazy, especially now when it seemed he was just teasing her.

"Now, I suggest you start my strip tease, unless you want me to give you a real spanking for making me wait, instead of just a fun one."

His eyes had laughter in their depths, but the sexy threat held weight in Lucky's heart after such a recent dose of his wicked hand during a "real spanking."

"Yes, sir," she breathed. She pushed him back with one hand and stood up, then turned him around and pushed him down onto the bed. "One strip tease, coming up..."

There was no music, so she improvised by humming as she ran her hand down the length of her torso to the front of her skirt. She turned her back to him and swayed her hips as her hands slowly reached around to the hook closure and zipper at the waist of her skirt. With a flick of her finger, the hook came undone, and then millimeter by millimeter she worked the zipper down until it gaped. She pushed the fabric over the swell of her hips then, undulating before him and grinning despite herself at the sounds of appreciation that he was making from behind her.

When the skirt was off, she chucked it aside and turned back to face him, now not breaking eye contact as she slowly worked her way down the row of buttons that marched down the front of her blouse. She saw his eyes widen with the release of each one, and smiled knowingly. She pulled the blouse away from her skin with agonizing slowness, then let it join the pile on the floor with her skirt.

She now stood before him in just her bra, panties, and small heels. She allowed her hands to make a wandering pass over her body and thrilled at the low moan that escaped her audience's lips.

"Come on over here," he ordered gruffly a moment later.

"But I'm not finished yet..." she argued.

"I don't care," he sat forward and reached out to snag her waist with one steely arm. "I can't wait for you any longer."

His mouth came down on hers hard and fast, slanting over her soft lips in a bid of complete ownership. He lapped at her lips as if sating a long thirst, then gradually eased off and gentled his kiss, his tongue sneaking between her teeth to mate and play with her own. A low growl of pleasure sounded deep in Clay's throat and was echoed back at him from Lucky's own.

When they finally broke apart, Lucky stared dazedly up at him for endless moments, her breath ragged and short. "I've been wanting you to do that all day long," she panted.

Clay grinned. "I've wanted to do it since the second I looked out the window and saw your car in my driveway."

They laughed then, getting giddy in the reawakening of their desire and in the joy of being together again. Lucky lay her head on his shoulder when the giggles had passed and looked up at him with a small pout.

"Please don't spank me again, Clay. I'm new at this, remember? I don't know if I can take another one today."

Clay smiled and kissed her forehead lightly. "Trust me, baby, okay? I'm not out to hurt you. In fact I bet you will enjoy it, if you just relax and allow yourself to."

Lucky was very doubtful of that, but she allowed him to draw her slowly back over his lap. It was much more comfortable to lie over his legs on the bed than it had been on the sofa, at least.

Clay unhooked her bra strap in the back and helped her to take it and her panties completely off. Then he pushed each of her heeled shoes off of her feet.

She expected to receive the first hard swat after that, but instead his hand appeared on her naked backside to rub and sooth the skin.

"You're still a little pink from earlier," he commented softly. "I promise I won't make you regret trusting me in this, Lucky."

After a second pass of his hand, he drew it back and set about giving her his birthday spanks. He counted them out loud, as he delivered each new soft smack. But the swats were widely spaced out between sessions of rubbing and touching, and they were so lightly dealt that Lucky had to admit they didn't hurt at all. By the time he reached number forty-two, plus one to grow on, she felt only the mildest of stings and the warmest of glows.

And, to her surprise, she realized as he turned her over onto her back and leaned down to suckle the tip of one breast that she was fairly dripping with desire between her legs. As if he knew the direction of her thoughts, Clay's fingers appeared suddenly at that apex and dipped determinedly into her warm, pulsing core. He lifted his eyes to her own at his discovery and grinned in victory around her tender, distended nipple.

"Told you so," he murmured before he returned to the task of making love to her.

Chapter Three

Tom started the engine of his Land Rover and cast Peter an annoyed look as he pulled out into traffic, moving away from Andi and Chrissy's apartment building. "Man, that sure was one helluva long evening," he complained.

In the passenger seat, Peter shook his head. "I've never been so glad to leave those two to their own counsel in my life," he agreed.

"I wanted to crawl under the table at their old man's house."

"Hell, yes." Peter shook his head again. "If I ever spoke to my dad the way those two do, he'd lay me out in a second."

Tom chuckled. "Yeah, well that's fathers and sons. We're talking about daddies and daughters here. Besides, you heard him today. Those girls don't know the meaning of discipline, least of all the physical type."

"Well, where I come from, it was a normal occurrence to see one of your friends getting their tail beat." Peter shrugged. "I even caught my dad warning my mom once to watch her step or wind up over his knee..."

Tom laughed again. "You're kidding!"

"God's honest truth." Peter swore, holding up his right hand for emphasis. "I never saw him spank her, never heard anything like that either, but there were enough clues over the years to make me believe it wasn't unheard of in their marriage. My dad was pretty old fashioned, and we lived in the south... I don't know." He shrugged again and turned his gaze out the passenger window. "Maybe it would do our girls some good, if we did follow Mr. Jackson's advice."

"Now, I know your joking." Tom announced, braking for a traffic light and shaking his head. "If we did that, they'd drop the two of us as fast as a polyester tube top."

Peter grinned at his friend's comparison, but was quiet for a while afterwards. He frowned, his smooth features pinched in thought. "You never know," he finally said. "Maybe they're really just waiting for someone to come along and make them toe the line. Maybe they would be happier if someone made them accountable for their behavior. Maybe the reason they're so difficult is just that they don't know how to be anything else."

"Maybe, maybe, maybe." Tom shot him an incredulous glance. "You want to spank Andi, you be my guest. Tell me how it works for you." He chuckled again and shook his head at the mental picture the idea drew in his mind. "You'll be lucky if she doesn't deck you for it."

"The thought has crossed my mind before today, you know." Peter admitted. "I mean, I do love her. But she can be a royal brat. Sometimes, I think there's no way I can be with her for the long term, if she doesn't change some of her ways. I can't help but think this is worth at least a try. And, if she dumps me for it, then maybe it's better if the relationship ends sooner instead of later. If she's really not even going to try to improve her behavior, then I don't know if I can be with her, anyway."

"I'll admit, you do have the worse of the two sisters," Tom said. "Chrissy's not so bad most of the time, at least as long as she's on her own. It's when Andi's there that she's hard to handle. She always goes along with everything Andi says, like she's afraid to stand up for herself. That's what really drives me nuts."

Peter sighed. They had reached their own apartment building and together they got out of the suv and headed inside. They reached the top of the four flights of stairs up to their apartment before either of them spoke again.

"Well, I think it's worth at least one try," Peter said again as Tom unlocked their door and they stepped inside. "The next time Andi acts up, I'm

going to give her one good fair warning. And if she keeps it up, she's going over my knee."

Tom clapped his friend on the back of his white button down dress shirt. "Good luck, my man." He laughed as he went into the kitchen and came back with two beers. Handing one of Peter, he shook his head. "Lord knows you are going to need it."

Peter took a deep breath and clinked the neck of his bottle against Tom's. "Cheers." He toasted his resolution grimly.

Clay all but insisted that Lucky spend the night at the farmhouse with him. Though she was determined not to let him take complete control of her, she eventually conceded to him because, well, she just wanted to. It had been three long months since she'd slept in his arms after generously long bouts of lovemaking, and the idea was simply too tempting for her to resist.

When she awoke in the morning, still naked and snuggled up to Clay's warm body, she had a sense of the surreal as she glanced around her at the room. Everything she laid her eyes on was of top quality and had to have cost a pretty penny, from the soft down comforter on the king sized cherry bed to the paintings on the walls and the huge Jacuzzi she could see through the open bathroom door. Subconsciously, Lucky snuggled closer against Clay, her arm tightening around his trim waist like an iron band. She didn't belong here in this house of wealth, with this man of another class. She wasn't good enough for him. His daughters were right about that.

As if he sensed her thoughts, Clay's eyes opened, and he cast her a dark look. "Good morning, my Lucky Star." He greeted her, calling her by the nickname he'd given her before they had parted ways. He glanced pointedly down at his middle where her arm still squeezed him. "Is there

a reason you're squeezing the stuffing out of me, baby?"

"Oh!" Lucky immediately eased her grip on his side and moved to sit up. "I'm sorry! I didn't realize I was doing that!"

Clay smiled gently up at her when she shifted the sheet to cover her naked breasts and belly. He reached up to finger one lock of her curly red hair. "What were you thinking about just now?" he asked. "You had a mighty frown on that pretty face."

Lucky shrugged. "Nothing really. Just thinking about the weather."

Clay's smile pulled down into a frown. He sat up then and tipped her chin up so that she had to meet his gaze. "I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear that little fib, since I did just spank you twice yesterday. But I would advise you not to test me again. When I ask you a question, Lucky, I expect you to answer me truthfully. Okay?"

Lucky swallowed hard and blinked back on unexpected, sudden tears. "Yes." She squeaked. "Okay."

Clay nodded. He kissed her forehead then and climbed out of bed. Lucky watched his naked body with appreciation as he crossed the room and pulled a robe from his closet.

"You stay right there in that bed, young lady," he ordered gruffly as he tied the belt of the robe around his waist. "I will be back shortly with some breakfast, and then we'll talk about what's troubling you."

And, before she had a moment to argue with him, he was out of the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Grumbling to herself about bossy men, Lucky determinedly stomped from the bed over to Clay's closet, where she helped herself to one of his many button-down shirts. It was long on her smaller frame, coming nearly to her knees, and she had to roll the cuffs up on the sleeves, but it would do for

now, especially since she wasn't sure what Clay had done with her clothes from the evening before.

In bare feet, she padded down the stairs and cautiously made her way back down the long hallway to the kitchen. She wasn't sure if Clay had a housekeeper or someone else that might be around the house, even at this time of the morning. She was relieved to discover him alone in the kitchen, busily mixing up what smelled liked French toast dip.

He frowned at her when she came in the room, though his eyes danced over her figure in his dress shirt. "I really do have my work cut out where you're concerned," he mumbled as he turned to the breadbox and removed a loaf of thickly sliced French bread.

Ignoring him, Lucky went to the huge stainless steel refrigerator and took out a bowl of fresh strawberries and a pitcher of orange juice. She hunted in a few cabinets and drawers before she found the glasses and a cutting board and knife.

"Don't be shy," Clay teased her as he set the frying pan on the flat surface of the stove and turned on one of the burners.

Lucky popped a strawberry in her mouth and glowered at him playfully. "Don't you want me to be comfortable here?"

Clay flicked the kitchen towel he'd had slung over his shoulder at her. "Of course I do, don't be silly."

"Then let me help you make breakfast."

Clay shrugged. "Okay. But next time, I get to bring you breakfast in bed."

She grinned, nodding. "Deal."

They shared a lingering meal of cinnamony French toast, strawberries, juice and fresh coffee as the sunlight began to filter in from the skylights in the ceiling. Lucky was surprised to learn that Clay was a good cook, even if it was only French toast. She'd half expected him to have a cook or a

housekeeper to prepare meals for him ahead of time.

"Well, you know, I didn't always have the money that I do now," he reminded her when she expressed her surprise over his culinary talent. "When Barbara and I were first married we hardly had two cents to rub together. And she's a miserable cook. Either I learned myself, or the girls and I would have starved."

Lucky didn't share in his laughter, and he reached across the table to take her hand. "What's wrong, honey? Does it upset you when I talk about my ex?"

She shook her head immediately. "No, Clay. I'm just worried about what happened last night with the girls. I don't want to cause problems for you with your kids."

Clay squeezed her hand reassuringly and nodded. "So that's what that frown was about this morning." When she nodded her affirmation, he shrugged. "Don't worry about them. Believe me, when they need something, like tuition or rent money, they'll come around. And they'll either find a way to deal with the situation and treat you with respect, or they won't get what they need from me. It's that simple."

"Clay!" Lucky set her juice glass down with a thump. "I don't want you to play those games! It'll only make things worse!"

Clay shook his head. "Just relax, Lucky Star. I don't think it'll come to that anyway. Just leave the girls to me. I know them, they'll come around eventually."

Lucky sighed. "Fine, whatever you say." She played with a piece of toast on her plate, dragging it around in the syrup with her fork. "There is something else I need to talk to you about, though."

Clay took in the way she was carefully avoiding his eyes and knew it was something he wasn't going to like. He drained the rest of the coffee from his

cup and sat back as he fixed her with his best non-nonsense stare. "And what is that, miss?"

"I have to work tonight," she told her plate.

Clay stared at her incredulously for a moment, then sat forward again and tugged her chin up with his hand. Lucky met his gaze unwillingly, looking on the verge of tears.

"You do not have to work tonight, young lady," he told her. "As I recall, that was part of the deal of moving in together." He held up his free hand when she opened her mouth. "And don't say a word to me about how that's not decided yet, because we both know that it is, well and truly decided. I told you there were three things that we had to agree on if this relationship was to continue. I needed you to participate willingly in my discipline lifestyle. I needed you to at least move in with me, since you refuse to marry me. And I needed you to leave that job."

"I know, Clay." Lucky sighed. "And, I swear, I already gave my notice. But I need that job for a good reference if I want to be able to get another job! And they wouldn't give me a very good reference if I hadn't given them two weeks notice, especially since they're already short two dancers!"

"You don't need any job that would require a good reference from a strip club." Clay ground out through clenched teeth.

Lucky rolled her eyes at him. "I've worked there for the last five years, Clay. If I want to have any hope of getting other job at all, I will need a good reference saying that I'm a good worker, that I come in on time and that I don't call out sick all the time, all that stuff. Be realistic!"

"I am being realistic," Clay insisted, getting to his feet now and taking their plates to the sink. "You don't need any job at all, Lucky. Not while you're going to be living with me."

"Don't start in on that old line again, Clay. I want a job. I want something independent of you. I mean, what would I do if something happened to

you, or to... to us, and all I'd done before that was laze around this house all day?"

Clay shot her a grin. "Planning on my untimely demise so soon, are you?" he teased.

"No, don't be silly," she scolded. She sat back in her chair and folded her arms over her chest, a sure sign that she was beginning to shut him out. "Let's just say I've learned never to take anything for granted in my life. And just the idea of depending solely on someone else for my home, the food on my plate, the clothes on my back..." She actually shivered. "It just really freaks me out."

Clay studied her silently from the sink where he was rinsing the dishes. She was such a complicated little mess, his Lucky Star. If he could have one wish, even if it cost him everything he had in this world, it would be to wipe clean the unhappy past that clouded her bright hazel eyes, making the present and future always suspicious and untrustworthy.

"Can you try to understand, Clay?" she asked him quietly when a few minutes had passed and no further argument had been offered from his side of the room.

He nodded, finishing with the dishes. He came back to the table and drew her to her feet, then enfolded her into his arms.

"I do understand, baby." He sighed. "And I'm not going to kick up a fuss about you finishing out your two weeks at the club."

Lucky rested her head on his right shoulder. "Oh, good..."

"I am, however, going to be there with you every night so that I can make sure myself that you are safe."

She pulled away from him at that pronouncement, her pretty mouth shaped into an 'o' of surprise. "You... you most certainly will not!" she countered angrily, pulling ineffectually at one arm that he had snared in an attempt to stop her from moving away from him.

"I sure the hell will," he insisted, pulling her easily back up against him despite her wriggling attempts at freedom. "I am not about to just let my future bride go jigglng around a men's dance club on her own, without any protection..."

"There are bouncers, Clay," she ground out, twisting this way and that as she tried to get loose of his steel band arms. "They do a perfectly good job of keeping us safe! Ugh! Would you let me go, you big bully!!"

"Careful with the name calling, darlin'," Clay warned huskily. "It would be only too easy to flip up the back panel of that shirt you're wearing, so I could warm your little naked bottom up proper."

The words sent an unwelcome and completely unexpected pool of warmth spreading from Lucky's stomach down between her legs, where it collected into a pulsing little puddle of heat. What the hell was wrong with her all of a sudden? She was mad at him, damn it!

She stomped her foot in frustration. She was not going to be intimidated by this man – or by any man, for that matter! Those days were over with, and good riddance to them, too!

Leaning closer to him, so close that her braless breasts beneath her shirt flattened against his naked chest, she got as close to his face as her much smaller stature would allow her to and very carefully enunciated the following words again: "Let go of me, you big bully!"

The skin around Clay's dark blue eyes crinkled when he smiled. "Don't say I didn't warn you, sweetheart."

And, a second later, he'd dragged her to one of the stools pushed up against the counter island. His bare foot hooked on the bottom rung of the stool, presenting the expense of one taunt knee covered in worn sweatpants cotton. A millisecond later, Lucky found herself virtually folded in half over that knee, her feet dangling off the floor and her bare behind sticking up into the air.

"Why look at that," Clay exclaimed from behind and above her. "I hardly have to even lift up the tail of this shirt with you at this angle. Though I think I will anyway, just so I don't miss anything important." She felt his hand brush the cotton fabric up away from her bottom, and just that simple, brief touch make her shiver with pleasure. Clay chuckled when he saw her reaction, and took a moment to caress each of her bare bottom cheeks with his hand.

Lucky's eyes drifted closed at his touch, and she hardly kept in a moan of pleasure. Then, a split second later, his hand left her skin, only to return with a loud retort a moment later, sending a searing sting across the middle of her bottom.

"OOH!" she gasped. A second hard swat fell in the same exact spot and Lucky was sure that the image of his hand had to be imprinted in bright red onto her skin with just those two spanks. "Unh - oh no..." SSSMMMACCCCKKKK!!!!

"No" SSSMMMACCCCKKKK!!!! "name"
SSSMMMACCCCKKKK!!!! "calling."
SSSMMMACCCCKKKK!!!!

And then just that fast Clay was helping her to stand upright again. The back of the shirt fell of its own accord over the center of her bottom that she was sure he had just welted with his bare hand. His eyes fairly danced with amusement as he looked at her. "No name calling in my house, Lucky Star. Understand?"

Barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Lucky nodded her head instead. "I understand," she mumbled. She began to reach back one hand to rub her tenderized backside, but was stopped by Clay's hand on her wrist.

"And no rubbing, either, young lady. Unless you want a double dose of what you just got?"

"No! No, no." Lucky quickly brought her hand back around to the front of her body, where she laced her fingers together for safe keeping. The

urge to rub the terrible sting out of her bottom was nearly overwhelming.

She leaned against the wall by the doorway then, so that just in case he found another reason to spank her, she could at least attempt an escape first. Still standing by the island in the middle of the room, Clay folded his arms over his chest in a self-satisfied manner and regarded her with a cocky smile.

Lucky sighed. She just wasn't going to win with him. She might as well admit it. "You're just not going to listen to reason about this club issue, are you?" she finally asked around a second sigh.

Slowly, Clay shook his head. "You know I've wanted you out of there from the very beginning. I don't want you there for even a minute more, let alone two weeks more. But, I will meet you halfway and let you finish out the two weeks, provided I'm there with you. That way if anyone overstepped the boundaries inside, I can prevent you from getting hurt. And if anyone has any ideas about making a grab for you when you leave at night, they'll have to get through me first."

Lucky shook her head. "I didn't know I was dating Superman," she mumbled sarcastically.

"When it comes to you, honey, they'd have to do a hell of a lot to stop me from keeping you safe. And, frankly, you don't have a prayer of talking me out of this, so you might as well give in. This is how it's going to happen if you insist on finishing out those two weeks. End of discussion."

Lucky frowned at him. "Is this how living with you is going to be?"

Clay considered the question briefly before shrugging. "Yeah, I suppose it is."

"I don't know if I'm going to want to live with you then." She told him pointedly.

Clay's eyebrows rose, but he didn't look overly concerned with her pronouncement. Instead, he crossed the small space between them and framed her face with his hands. Then he bent and pressed

his warm lips against her forehead. "I'm only doing this because I love you, and I want you to be safe." Then he tipped her chin up and move his lips down to her own, coaxing a kiss from her mouth that she was at first very reluctant to give. But his tongue slid along the seal of her lips until she finally submitted to his insistence with a sigh and allowed him to nibble on her bottom lip, and then the top. His tongue entered the warm haven of her mouth and lapped gently against her own until he felt her weight shift slightly towards him and the tiniest of moans escaped her.

When they came up for air several minutes later, Lucky could do little at first but stare up at him dazedly. Clay tweaked her nose playfully. "And just for the record, Lucky? You do want to live with me. You just don't want to admit it yet."

He gave her a playful swat then, and left her panting and swearing mentally at his retreating back as he walked out of the room.

That same morning, in their apartment across town, Andi and Chrissy sat across from one another over their morning coffee and fruit, devising a plan. A plan that they hoped would show their father that his new love interest was nothing more than a pretty little gold digger.

"It'll be hard," Andi warned her sister. "We're going to have to be nice to her if we want to win her trust."

Chrissy's youthful face pulled into a sour expression. "I can do it if you can," she vowed.

"Good. We'll do it then. For Daddy."

"Right. For him."

Andi's face puckered thoughtfully. "I bet if we could set her up so that Daddy found her with another guy – even if it just looked that way – he'd drop her."

"Yeah, but how would we do that?" Chrissy frowned. "I don't think we're going to get any help from Tom or Peter on this."

"Yeah, I know. The traitors. I still can't believe the way they stuck up for her on the ride home last night!"

Chrissy shook her head of blond curls. "Men. They're all the same. They see a nice body and a pretty face, and they're blind to everything else but that."

Andi nodded her agreement. The sisters sat in mutual silent contemplation for several long minutes, which for them was definitely a first. Finally, Andi snapped her fingers. "I know! If we can get her to hang out with us then we can introduce her to Rick. You know what a dog he can be, he'll definitely make a pass at her. And all it'll take is the right timing for Daddy to walk in on them, and it'll seem like she's cheating on him!"

"You know, that might just work. Rick is really dense when it comes to taking no for an answer. I'm sure once he gets a look at Lucky he'll be hooked on getting her to sleep with him."

"All right, then, we've got a plan. Now we just need to figure out how to get her to believe we want to make friends." Andi returned her sister's grim expression with a matching one of her own. "Come on, help me think...."

Chapter Four

Lucky conceded to Clay's wishes and grudgingly allowed him to escort her to work that evening. Though that was only after a failed attempt to escape his company when he wasn't looking, which only resulted in his inevitable presence anyway, after a lengthy struggle and reminder to her nether regions of who was 'boss' in his house. Apparently, as she was rapidly learning, it was not her.

Lucky wasn't quite sure how she felt about her rapid induction into the realm of domestic discipline. When she'd come back to Clay, knowing full well what was sure to come, she'd been semi-prepared to endure one spanking, and so far she'd been dealt four. Of course, they hadn't all been severe; she'd even rather enjoyed the birthday one. She'd just never imagined that she'd be immersed so fully and so rapidly into this lifestyle that came so naturally to Clay, but held so many conflicting issues and emotions for her. She supposed she had little choice now but to deal with the feelings as they came, and to trust in her instincts, and in him. She knew that if she wanted Clay she had to accept this part of him and willingly participate in it alongside him. Otherwise, something would always be missing for the both of them. And, now that she had him back again, she knew more surely than ever that she couldn't walk away from him again. Especially not over this, something she felt sure she'd better understand in time. She knew in her heart that Clay would never hurt her, no matter how his spankings might hurt physically when he dealt them out so sternly to her naked skin.

Though the manager at the club raised an eyebrow when she showed up with her boyfriend in tow, the man was too desperate for a dancer to complain too much about the arrangement. Not that he failed to collect Clay's entrance fee. He wasn't stupid, after all, Lucky supposed. There were a handful of other girls that Clay would witness

shedding their clothes that evening, despite the book he carried in, tucked under one arm. And, even if he did only look up from the pages when Lucky was on stage, her boss apparently wasn't about to let her show go on for free, either – boyfriend or not.

Thankfully, the evening was uneventful, and the club that night was rather slow. Lucky was grateful, more so even than usual, for the cloaking low lighting inside the club, for it helped hide the telltale redness of her recent trip over Clay's knee. Though, every time the spotlight found her she still tried to face forward anyway, least she give anyone reason to question the coloring on her backside that was so different from the creamy pale skin on the rest of her. She could think of nothing more embarrassing than having to explain to her boss about the 'funny thing' that had happened to her 'on the way to the show.'

Despite her nervousness, no one seemed to notice anything amiss. Not even when she took a step back just a tad too far and bumped her thonged backside against the rim of the tall stool behind her, wincing and cursing under her breath upon impact. Clay's eyes seemed to draw hers to him then, and she saw him grinning broadly at her discomfort. He sent her a flirty wink and blew her a kiss, which she pointedly ignored.

Between her performances, Lucky sipped a cherry coke with her friend, Bonnie, who was frowning at the expanse of her exposed belly between her bra and string bikini panties.

"Are you sure you can't tell?" she whispered to Lucky, sucking in her stomach muscles.

Lucky smacked her arm lightly. "Don't do that," she admonished. "Trust me, no one – least of all those drunks out there – can tell."

Bonnie frowned, but relaxed slightly. She'd found out about a week ago that she was pregnant and was completely torn about what she should do. There were no marriage plans between her and the

baby's father, and she was terrified to tell him she was expecting. She'd told only Lucky about her condition, not that Lucky had known what advice to give her. She herself had been abandoned by her father while she was still in her mother's womb. And her childhood had been hard, not knowing her father and having to scrap every cent in order for her mother and her to survive. Before she'd met Clay, she might have told Bonnie that she and the baby might be better off if she gave it up for adoption. But now things looked brighter in her own life, and she had ventured to share that with Bonnie when she'd shared her news. Secretly, she didn't know how anyone could abort a defenseless baby, but she had kept that to herself. The decision Bonnie came to had to be her own. She did tell her that she thought the baby's father had a right to know about it before Bonnie made up her mind what she was going to do.

And, despite all of the unluckiness she had had in her own life with love, Lucky still wished in her heart that the father of Bonnie's baby would want the child, and its mother. She hoped he wanted all of that right now, and that he just hadn't shared his desire with Bonnie yet. She hoped they had a chance, and that their baby would have two parents who loved it.

And, somewhere in the middle of all of those hopes for her friend, an old hope of Lucky's had resurfaced. She wished to know her father. To find him and see him face to face. To ask him why he'd left her. Was she really so unlovable as that? Clay loved her now; maybe her father could too, if she could find him and give him a chance. Even if she found him and discovered that he really was the unfeeling loser her mother had always described him as, at least she would know that was her own assessment of him. And then maybe the nagging hole of curiosity and wanting would go away from her soul.

The opening beat of Robert Palmer's 'Simply Irresistible' began to thump in the club as one of the other dancers came back stage following her performance. Bonnie sighed and gave her bra top a restless tug. "There's my cue," she grumbled.

Lucky watched her sashay onto the stage, and giggled to herself as she watched the men in the front row rush to be the first to slide a bill under her string bikini bottom strap. If only they knew she was preggers, they might not find her so 'irresistible,' she thought with a shake of her head.

Lucky was grateful that none of the drunken patrons had made any floundering attempts at drawing her attention, either innocently or otherwise that night. She was worried that Clay, who was usually so calm and reserved, might lose his cool and wind up smashing some guy's face in if she looked like she was in trouble. She wished he would just let the bouncers do their jobs. If her fear did come true, and Clay started a fight with someone for getting fresh with her, she wouldn't have to worry anymore about finishing out her final two weeks of work – her boss would fire her. And then she'd really be screwed for a good reference.

Clay humored her after work by agreeing to stay that night in her apartment in the city instead of making the long drive back to his house in the suburbs. It was already late when her shift ended, well past two in the morning, and they were both tired. He did insist, however, as they fell into Lucky's double bed and cuddled together in the center, that this be their last night in that apartment and that damned little bed. Starting tomorrow, her things would be moved into his house, and she would begin sleeping there. The remainder of her shifts at work were earlier ones, he reasoned as he pulled her tight up against him and closed his eyes. They would have plenty of time

to drive back to his house for the rest of her days working there.

Sometimes, Clay had the most annoying habit of making complete and inarguable sense. Like now. And, frankly, Lucky was simply too tired, too warm, and too content in his arms to even think of an argument to offer him. So, instead, she smiled as she felt his warm lips press at her temple, looked briefly around at her soon to be abandoned apartment, realizing that she really wouldn't miss it at all when she left it behind, and closed her eyes to sleep.

The next morning, Lucky awoke to the sound of muffled voices coming from the other side of her closed bedroom door. Frowning at the empty space beside her in bed, she swung her feet quickly to the floor and found a pair of jeans and a tee shirt to shrug into. A moment later, as she reached for the doorknob to go and investigate what was going on, it opened suddenly, revealing an already dressed Clay in the opening.

"Oh, good!" he exclaimed, clapping his broad hands together and instantly making her think of another similar sound made when those large hands of his impacted other patches of her own skin. To her surprise the sound, and the thought that it triggered, made the muscles hidden in the secret core between her thighs throb with anticipation. "You're up!" he proclaimed, seeming not to notice the frown that marred her face. "She's up, fellas!" he shouted over his shoulder at what was apparently a group of men in her apartment that she couldn't see. "You don't have to try to keep it down anymore."

Instantly, the voices outside her door rose and then she heard a thump. Followed by a thud. And a scrape. Lucky's eyes narrowed at the handsome man before her, forgetting for now about that funny reaction her body had just had to the sound of his

clapping. "Just what are you up to?" she questioned him suspiciously.

"Me?" he asked, feigning innocence. "What do you mean?"

She folded her arms over her chest and drummed the fingers of one hand on the inside elbow of the other arm. With a nod of her head, she indicated the door he had half closed behind him. "What's going on out there? Who's here?"

"Oh, that." He waved a hand dismissively at the happenings past the door and let it slip closed behind him. "That's just the movers."

"Movers, huh?" Lucky frowned at him harshly. She stared at him hard for several long seconds before she erupted. "Clay, I can't afford to hire movers!" Her arms snapped apart and flew out angrily to her sides, then slapped down to frame her hips. "What is wrong with you, you controlling, pigheaded, stubborn son of a..."

"Aut-aut-aut," he scolded and Lucky nearly went cross-eyed as he literally shook his finger admonishingly in her face. "Remember what I said about name calling, sweetheart."

Barely resisting the urge to bite off the tip of that finger, Lucky drew in a deep breath. "Come on, Clay! You know I don't want to sponge off of you! I'll move in with you, really I will. Just please let me do it on my own terms – with boxes from the Safeway down the street and a rented Uhaul!"

It wasn't like she expected anything else from him, but it was still infuriating to watch him stand there so calmly and shake his head at her. "Your way will take far too much time and effort. My way, everything will be there tonight, and you and I are free to spend the day together as we want. Which reminds me, hurry up and shower and get dressed. We have brunch plans."

"With who?" Lucky grimaced, plunking back dejectedly onto the rumpled bed.

"With my daughters."

Groaning, she fell back fully onto the mattress and pulled the covers up over her head. His muffled chuckle reached her ears through the layers of cotton, though, and a moment later he had tugged the covers down again to reveal her face.

"I don't wanna!" she pouted. "You can't make me."

"My advice to you is not to test that theory, young lady," he said matter of factly as he pulled the sheets the rest of the way off her prone form.

"Don't you ever get tired of being so arrogant?" she groused as he tugged her into a sitting position, and then pulled her to stand upright again.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," he told her with a warning glare. "Especially, considering that I'm not arrogant, but merely confident and self assured."

Lucky rolled her eyes. "You're not 'merely' anything."

Clay's brows furrowed over his blue eyes. "Thank you." He paused. "I think. Now go on and get ready for the day already. The girls called my cell and invited us both to brunch, so I have a feeling they're ready to apologize. If that's the case, then it shouldn't be as bad as you're thinking."

"Mmm-hmmm." Lucky frowned at him, wondering what would happen if that wasn't the case. "We're not done discussing those movers, Clay," she reminded him pointedly.

"They're halfway done already, Lucky. By the time we're done with brunch, you'll be nearly moved out of this place. Consider it a gift, honey; pretend it's a meal out or something. Whatever you need to do to allow yourself to accept it, just do it. Because I'm not sending them back until the job is done."

"Arrgghh!" she growled in frustration. "You are so stubborn!"

"And so are you," he insisted, stepping up to her so they were toe to toe, nose to nose. "But you're going to have to get used to accepting things from me, monetary things included, at some point, so it

may as well start now." With that, he turned her abruptly towards the bathroom that was adjoined to her bedroom and gave her a swat to the seat of her jeans to get her moving in that direction.

Muttering to herself, Lucky glared at him over one shoulder as she shuffled to the bathroom. She vowed silently to pay him back every red cent for those movers, even if it took her a hundred years to do so.

As they followed the hostess back to the table where Clay's daughters already awaited them, Lucky felt the butterflies reawaken with renewed energy in her belly. Despite all of Clay's assurances on the way over here that things were going to be all right, she still couldn't help but feel like she was walking in to an ambush.

When they turned the corner, they could see Andi and Peter and Chrissy and Tom against the far wall and as they drew closer, the foursome stood up and greeted them with smiles. Andi and Chrissy took turns kissing their dad's cheek while Peter held a chair back for Lucky and scooted her in. Across the table, Tom sent her a reassuring smile and a wink as everyone sat down.

Clay glanced at Lucky beside him and stretched an arm out behind her back along the top rung of her chair. He took a deep breath and speared his children with a look that would have made Lucky's behind cringe in worry. "You two should know that the only reason we're here is to give you the opportunity..."

"Daddy, wait," Andi interrupted gently. "Before you get going too strong here, we'd like to say something." She met her sister's eyes briefly, then looked straight at Lucky and swallowed. "We owe you an apology, Lucky. We never really meant to come across like such bitches to you, it just kind of happened that way. You certainly didn't deserve it."

"It's just that we worry about our dad," Chrissy added. "We worry that he might wind up with someone who's only out for his money." She shrugged and glanced at her father. "It's an understandable concern, really, considering your net worth."

"But after thinking more and remembering the two of you together on Daddy's birthday, we've come to the conclusion that we misjudged you," Andi said. "We're sorry for that. It's obvious how much Daddy cares for you and how important you are to him, and for that we're happy. We don't want to make any trouble between you."

"And, if it's possible, we'd like to be your friends," Chrissy piped in hopefully. She smiled at the equally surprised expressions on both Lucky and Clay's faces. "I'm sure we'd find that we have a lot of things in common."

Not very likely, Lucky thought darkly, trying to assess if these girls were for real. Something about the suddenness of all of this change of heart, and the way they were so fast to gush it all out without being forced to, made her think twice about the sincerity of it. It just rang false to her ears, sounded forced. She glanced at Clay to her right and saw that he seemed to believe every word; across from her Tom and Peter seemed equally taken in by the girls' story. But then again, all three of these men were biased towards the girls, and would want to believe the best of them, not the worst.

Life had taught Lucky to expect the worst and believe in people only when they showed you how they truly felt, not when they talked about it. She would give the girls the benefit of the doubt for now, because they were Clay's kids, but she would be cautious with them in the future until she decided if she really could trust them.

For now, she forced a smile of her own. "You're probably right," she agreed with Chrissy. "And I'd like to be your friend, too."

"Oh, good," Andi sighed, opening the menu in front of her. "I'm so glad that's settled. I was really nervous about seeing you again. I thought you'd be really mad at us."

"Just for the record," Clay intoned as he opened his own menu. "I was."

"Yeah, but you have to forgive us, Daddy," Chrissy said. "It's in your job description."

But Clay didn't laugh. He studied the offerings before him in silence for a few seconds and then quietly said, "Don't be so sure of that, honey. There are things that I would not forgive, despite being your father. Just remember that, and maybe it'll help you make some better choices down the road."

It was almost comical the way the sisters frowned with perfect twin timing at his words. Lucky had to lift her menu up higher to cover the grin that split across her face.

That night was the first night of their new living arrangement. Lucky was fairly wide awake after work that night, having worked an earlier shift and had just a tad too much caffeine during her breaks. She and Clay shared a sinful, late night dinner of greasy take out and then she took a long bubble bath in the Jacuzzi tub in the master bathroom.

She could hear Clay in the bedroom, starting a fire and turning on some low mood music. She smiled to herself, knowing where he was headed with that line of thinking. She'd have a little fun with him, she decided as she got out of the bath and toweled the bubbles off of her slick body.

She'd drug a box of her toiletries and sleepwear into the bathroom when she'd come in for the bath and now she pawed through it until she found what she was looking for. The off white cotton flannel nightgown had to be the ugliest article of clothing she owed, and was at least ten years old. It was her comfort nightgown, the one she donned when she didn't feel well or had cramps.

And now, with an evil little grin on her face, she pushed her arms through the long, lace capped sleeves and tugged the shapeless tent of fabric over her head. She twirled in a semicircle in front of the mirror and giggled under her breath.

As she reached for the handle to the door, her stomach whirled with nervous fireflies of mischief, and she felt a foreshadowing tingle in her bottom cheeks.

Clay eyed the shapeless cotton nightgown draping her body with a deep frown, wondering if she'd put it on just to vex him.

"I believe you know my rule about clothing in the bedroom, young lady," he intoned darkly, folding his arms across his wide, naked chest and tucking his chin against his collarbone in disapproval.

The little vixen actually rolled her eyes at him as she sat beside him on the bed. "I know it, Clay, but it's highly impractical, and I'm refusing to obey it."

His eyebrows rose at that, and his hand itched, but he fought the urge to yank her over his lap – for now. "And why, pray tell, is it such an impractical rule?"

She shrugged. "Well, for one thing, what about when I have my period?"

Clay could only stare blankly at her after that blunt question, and she giggled in pleasure at making him speechless, even if only temporarily.

"I mean, unless you want the sheets to look like a crime scene..."

"All right!" Clay interrupted, holding up one hand as he turned his head to the side, trying to rid that image from his mind. "That's enough. You win on that one, brat." He fixed her with his sternest glare. "But what about the rest of the time?"

"Well, it's cold to sleep naked!" she pouted.

Clay simply shook his head. "You have me here to keep you warm. In more ways than one, if you catch my meaning, missy."

Now it was her turn to cross her arms across her chest and frown. "But I'm not used to sleeping naked!" she whined. "It'll take me forever to relax and get to sleep that way!"

"You will get used to it." Clay scooted the few inches between them and drew the covers down that she had hidden her night gowned body beneath. "Kneel up, honey," he instructed softly.

With a heavy sigh and a lot of unnecessary flouncing around on the bed, Lucky obeyed him. They wound up facing one another on their knees, her nightgown bunched up where her knees met the mattress.

"You will get used to sleeping naked beside me," Clay repeated huskily as he grasped the bottom hem of the nightgown in his hands. "And do you know why?"

Lucky faked a stumped expression and posed thoughtfully with one finger against her cheek. "Hmm... let me think...."

Clay growled softly as he drew the hated cotton rag up and over her head, then tossed it triumphantly to the floor by the fire. Later, he thought, he'd add it to the flames. For now, he delighted in reaching behind Lucky and giving her now naked backside a good hot lick of fire from his broad palm instead.

Her eyes widened at the sharp smack, though he figured she had to have known he was going to do it. "Wait, now it's coming to me..." she teased, as though still thinking.

He chuckled and swatted her other cheek this time, a bit harder. "You can bet on that always coming to you around here, you brat," he affirmed.

She pretended enlightenment then, opening her bright eyes up till they were the size of saucers and looking thrilled with the knowledge of her realization. "I know! I'll get used to sleeping naked, because if I insist on sleeping in a nightgown, you'll just keep spanking me till I give in!"

"Bingo!" Clay toppled her over then and wrestled her around till she lay on top of him and his hands could have free range over her now naked skin. He moaned in appreciation of the sight and feel of her satiny body. "Now this is much, much better. Don't you agree?"

"Hmph." She shrugged and lay her cheek on his shoulder grumpily. "I still don't see how I'm going to get to sleep tonight."

In a flash Clay had her over his lap and his hand was already descending down on her wriggling bottom.

"Guess I'll just have to tire you out to make sure you can sleep, then, huh?" he asked menacingly over her shrill shrieks.

The spanking he dealt her was mild, though it did tingle and smart. Just when she thought she could take no more, he spun her over onto her back and straddled her from above. They took turns riding one another till well after midnight, when Lucky fell into an exhausted sleep, her naked form draped lovingly alongside of Clay's.

Chapter Five

The next morning, Clay fairly gloated when Lucky's tired eyes first peeked up at him from where her head still lay cradled on his massive shoulder.

"Mornin', sleepyhead," he drawled around a proud grin. "Nice to see your eyes open and the snores abated..."

He chuckled when she socked his arm, then watched with appreciation as she flounced naked from his bed and slammed the bathroom door behind her. He heard the toilet flush, then the sound of the water running in the sink. A few minutes later she returned, cinching the belt of a very proper terry cloth robe around her waist.

Clay frowned. "Don't even think about getting back into this bed in that thing," he warned.

Lucky rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to be getting back in bed, Mr. One-track-mind." She sent him a scathing look. "I'm hungry, after all you put me through last night." His grin broadened at the mention of last night, and she poked her nose into the air haughtily as she swept towards the bedroom door. "I'm going to go have some breakfast."

Clay sprinted along behind her, and when she realized he was following, she began to run just to enjoy the feeling of being chased. They finally crashed to a halt in the kitchen, where Clay hoisted her up on the top of the island and kissed her breathless, his hands tangled in her red curls. When their lips parted, and Lucky could only stare dazedly down at him, he swatted her bottom just where it met the counter and growled, "Don't try to run from me again, girl, I'll always catch up to you."

"Sounds like a challenge to me!" she quipped and just that fast, she was off running again.

Clay groaned, following behind with stomping steps, and griping the whole way that he was really getting too old for all this.

But once he caught up with her again, Lucky showed him in more ways than one that he wasn't nearly as old as he might think.

The next few weeks passed by quickly. Lucky spent a lot of time unpacking her things from the apartment and making a place for herself in Clay's home. She still couldn't think of his grand house as her own, so for now, she simply put most of her things in cabinets and drawers and tried to find a way to fit into this new life she was trying to lead. The entire time, she felt like a big fat fake.

By the third night of Clay's chaperoning her club performances, it had gotten around the bar who he was, and therefore no one made any attempt to get fresh with Lucky in her remaining nights at work. She realized on the last evening she was there that there was a part of her that was almost sorry that nothing had happened. Not that she wanted to see anyone get hurt, but there had been a piece of her that had wanted to see how far Clay would go to fight for her, to keep her safe.

When her job was over, and she began to search the want ads daily, Clay made a quiet suggestion to her that she take some time to herself for a few weeks, to finish getting settled into the house and consider what she wanted to do for a career, since she was so bent on having one. His suggestion threw Lucky off guard. She'd never really thought about having a career, only another job. Being a topless dancer, or a waitress, or a cashier wasn't exactly a career. And that was just about the complete list of things that Lucky was qualified to do.

Clay, of course, had an answer to that point when she brought it up to him: She could go back to school, if she wanted to. She was young and smart, and he knew she could get a degree in anything she wanted to.

But that required money. Money that Lucky didn't have, and refused to accept from Clay.

"This is just ridiculous!" Clay exploded. They'd been talking about her taking a few classes at Villanova, where his girls went. Just to see if she'd be interested in going to college to get a degree, and to find out what she was interested in. And she'd told him to stop talking about it because she couldn't afford college. "I can afford it, damn it! Why won't you let me take care of you?"

"I don't want anyone to take care of me, Clay! Not to mention that if I took your money, I'd be doing exactly what your kids said I would – I'd be..."

"If you value the ability to sit, Lucky Star, then stop right there. Don't you dare say that you'd be using me for my money, because we both know it's not true. You and I have more than that."

Lucky took a deep breath. "Right. But that's exactly what it would look like to everyone else if I used your money to go back to school..."

"I don't give a damn about anyone else! The only thing that matters is that we know that's not what's going on!"

Lucky shook her head sadly. "But that's what it would feel like to me, too, Clay. I'm sorry."

Clay rolled his eyes. "Why don't you get over yourself, Lucky?" he scowled. "You can't do everything on your own. You want to be happy in life, do something you like that completes you, you will probably need some kind of education or training. Let me help you get it. That's all I want."

She sighed and folded her arms over her chest, considering. She didn't know what to say to him when he put it like that. He did just want to help her. And he was right about needing education. She had a fairly good idea already what career she would want to follow if she could, and she definitely would need training. Why couldn't she just let him help her?

She sighed a second time, harder now. "I want to pay you back." She insisted, punctuating her

words with a jab of her forefinger in his direction. He opened his mouth with a fast argument, but she cut him off before he could speak. "That's the only way, Clay. Take it or leave it."

Mentally, she shook her head at her words. Like she was offering him something. God, she really did need to get over herself and find a grip on her stubborn pride.

His eyes narrowed at her final wording, too, but he nodded his head slowly. He even extended his hand and pumped hers when she hesitantly offered it to him. Just like he would with one of his business deals.

Except for when he tugged her closer, using her hand still imprisoned in his hard grip, and crushed his lips possessively against hers, molding her body against his tall, muscular frame and drinking each moan from her lips with a satisfied smile against her teeth.

Maybe there really was no question in this game as to who was in charge, after all.

And so it was that Lucky found herself looking at colleges in the area, reading about what courses of study they had to offer and trying to decide which was the best for her, all things considered – things, namely being price first and foremost, followed by reputation, average class size, etc.

She even found herself going to Andi and Chrissy's college campus with them for their official tour. And, surprisingly, she didn't loathe every minute of their company nearly as much as she had thought she would. In fact, there were even a few moments here and there where she actually enjoyed it.

For the most part, things still seemed forced from the direction of Clay's daughters' sudden interest in his new flame. Lucky refused to trust either of them just yet. But occasionally, she thought she caught a glimpse of the young women

inside of each of them, the ones that really could shine if the outer molds weren't usually there hiding them away, and it was the presence of them that kept Lucky's mind open. They couldn't be all bad if those good parts were in there.

Lucky figured it was that young woman inside that kept Andi and Chrissy in boyfriends. They each had their steady beaus, Peter and Tom respectively, but when they gave her the tour of their campus, Lucky realized that these girls could have their pick of any one of a score of young men. They all fairly fell over themselves trying to greet the girls as they walked along the college's streets, pointing out places of interest to Lucky, who was really only half paying attention. The girls seemed unfazed by all the male attention directed their way. They hardly paid their admirers any mind at all, beyond a cool, polite nod or hello in response.

There was one young man who was actually bold enough to walk right up to them and interrupt their conversation to say hello. He was a year or two older than the girls, perhaps twenty-four at the oldest, with thick blond hair and the clearest sea blue eyes Lucky had ever seen. He had the face of a model, and the body of a construction worker, broad across the shoulders tapering down to a small waist and lean, muscular hips and thighs. The smile he bestowed on all three of the women in front of him made even Lucky's heart pound harder, and she was never one easily taken in by any man, no matter how good he looked, or how charming he seemed.

"Afternoon, ladies," he greeted them all, and Lucky couldn't help but notice that he was paying special attention to her when he spoke, whereas the other male coeds they had passed by that day had had eyes only for Chrissy and Andi. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Oh, hi, Rick," Andi said, and Lucky's head snapped quickly in her direction at the unusual sugary sound of her voice.

"Sure is a pretty day," her sister chimed in beside her in an equally nauseatingly sweet tone. Chrissy batted her mascara tipped lashes at the young man and moved a fraction closer to him as well.

Well, Lucky thought, apparently there was something different about this guy. The girls were fairly swooning at his feet, for crying out loud. Lucky took advantage of his momentarily distracted state to look him over a bit more critically, then decided that if she wasn't already in love with Clay, she might have done a bit of swooning herself.

"Who's this lovely guest you have with you?" Rick asked, and his unusually colored gaze returned to spear Lucky. "I don't believe I've seen you around campus before," he offered her directly.

"N-n-no." Lucky felt her face color at the sound of her stammer. What in the world was wrong with her? He was just a man, for crying out loud! A drop dead gorgeous one, who seemed to be checking her out, but just a man all the same. And it didn't matter anyway, because she was not in the market for a man – she already had one at home who was sometimes more than she could handle all on his own! She cleared her throat, and mentally scrubbed clear her mind as well. "But I'm thinking of attending classes next semester."

"Really," he smiled again and Lucky felt her traitorous heart flutter. "Welcome, then. Maybe I can show you around sometime, myself. Show you some of the fun places, that these two good young ladies have surely never been privy to." And he winked at her, right there in front of Chrissy and Andi.

"Uh, I don't..."

"Of course, she'd love for you to!" Chrissy cut her off quickly, flashing her a strange look filled with heavy meaning that Lucky didn't understand. "She'll be here with us on Thursday afternoon, so why don't you meet us at the café and you can have her from there?"

An involuntary shiver ran down Lucky's spine at the way Chrissy had phrased 'you can have her from there.' She wasn't sure which of the meanings that sprang into her mind bothered her more – the sexual double meaning in the words, or the other meaning that made her sound like a course at this man's favorite restaurant. Either way, she watched, apparently momentarily unable to speak up for herself, as his cool eyes looked her over, head to toe, and the tip of his reddish pink tongue flicked out to lick his full lips. A second shiver coursed over Lucky's spine.

"Sounds like a plan to me, Miss....?"

"I'm Lucky," she told him, blushing as she realized how that sounded. "I... I mean, my name's Lucky."

He was grinning. "Mmm-hmmm." He nodded, and his bold, bright eyes moved over her form again. "Lucky, it sure is." He met her gaze head on then, and held it. "See you Thursday, then."

"Bye, Rick!" Chrissy called after him as he turned to leave. Next to her, Andi waved at his disappearing back.

Lucky frowned. "What was that all about?" she demanded once the handsome man was gone.

"Oh, Lucky, isn't he dreamy?" Chrissy gushed, turning to clutch at Lucky's sleeve. "Oh, I'd just die for one night with him!"

"Get in line, sis," Andi commanded, elbowing Chrissy playfully. "You can have him when I'm done."

"Good," Lucky interrupted. "Then one of you can meet him on Thursday. Because in case you've forgotten, I'm living with your father. I love him. I can't go off with some other guy on a... well, on a date!"

Andi made a dismissive noise. "It's not a date, Lucky. He'll just be showing you around school, too, like we have been today. Maybe take you to a party if there is one that night. That's all."

"Yeah, and if you could get in with his crowd, then maybe we could to!" Chrissy added excitedly. "Oh, please, Lucky! Please!? Just meet with him this one time! How bad could it be, anyway? He's certainly not hard on the eyes, and he seems to like you. Just go with him for one afternoon! If you can get us into the parties he goes to, we'll owe you for life!"

Lucky frowned harder. She wanted Chrissy and Andi to like her, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to get things headed in that direction. But she wasn't sure Clay would want his darling girls going to one of these parties they were so interested in. And she was sure he wouldn't want her to meet and go off alone with some guy she hardly knew.

She sighed, and forced her gaze away from the imploring pairs of eyes pinned on her face. She folded her arms across her chest and tried to think. When she glanced back in their direction, both girls were still watching her pleadingly.

"Please??!!" they begged in unison.

Lucky growled inwardly. She supposed there was really no other way out of this but to give in. They were petty enough, she was sure, to hold it against her if she refused.

Reluctantly, she nodded. And, silently, as the girls jumped up and down, cheering and holding hands, she told herself she could handle one young man's misguided advances. She'd simply set him straight from the start about her taken status, and that would be it. It was only one afternoon, and they'd be in a public place the entire time. It would work out fine.

But something still niggled in the back of her mind about the whole occurrence. Something just seemed off somehow....

"So how did your tour go with the girls?" Clay asked Lucky that night as they sat down before the TV with a bowl of popcorn between them.

Every nerve in her body seemed to jump to high alert at the question, though she managed somehow to keep her features schooled. She was sure that Clay had no idea that she planned to let another man show her the campus on Thursday – just the two of them, alone – and she wasn't about to go and get herself in trouble by telling him about it, either. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him, she had already decided.

"Fine," she answered, digging into the popcorn and crunching on a few kernels. "The campus is really nice, and I got information on the curriculums for in the spring."

"And how were the girls?" Clay pressed, watching her closely. "Were they nice to you?"

Lucky shot him a you're-being-overprotective look. "Yes, honey, they were fine. What did you think they were going to do when they got me alone, anyway? You're the one who kept reassuring me this morning that everything would be fine, remember?"

Clay sighed and gave her a sideways hug. "Yeah, I remember. But I was still worried about you all day anyway. I haven't been this serious about another woman since my marriage ended to their mom, and I'm not really sure what to expect from them. I mean, they're basically good girls at heart, but..."

Lucky patted his arm. "I know what you're saying, Clay, okay? But relax. I'm a big girl, and I can take care of myself. Your girls really aren't that scary, okay?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I guess not."

They watched the opening sequence to one of their favorite shows, chuckling occasionally together and snacking on the popcorn. When the show went into commercial, Clay speared her with one of his piercing gazes, and Lucky squirmed in her seat,

wondering with panic if he somehow did know after all about her Thursday afternoon plans.

"So, how are you feeling, honey?" he threw her off guard by asking. "About all of this change so fast, so soon?"

Lucky shrugged. "Okay, I guess. So far." She made a face. "It can be a little overwhelming, though. This house, the idea of going back to school..."

Clay's finger appeared beneath her chin and turned her face towards him. "What about me?" he pressed. "What about the spankings?"

There was a clench between her legs that she'd never understand whenever he voiced that one husky 's' word.

"I... I...um..." Lucky sighed. "I'm trying to get used to them, too...."

Clay's attention to her was nearly unnerving. "Am I too hard on you? When I spank you? Do you feel that I go too far, or that I abuse you?"

She shook her head immediately. "No, I don't ever feel abused, Clay. Sometimes I feel like I can't take anymore, but then I think that you try to get me to that breaking point. Do you?"

He nodded. "I try very hard not to go too lightly on you, Lucky, because then you won't remember the next time."

Lucky nodded, noticing out of the corner of her eye that the commercials had ended, and their show was back on. But apparently Clay still had questions.

"You're not afraid of me, though, are you, sweetheart?"

Lucky turned to look him in the eyes then, those warm, loving deep blue eyes. She cupped his cheek with her hand and smiled up at him, then slowly shook her head no. "I could never be afraid of you, cowboy. Don't ever worry about that, Clay."

He nodded, and she thought she saw a little moisture around his eyes. She pressed a kiss on his cheek, knowing that his ex wife had been afraid of

him after he'd told her about his spanking desires. She'd stopped sleeping with him, had become skittish and jumpy whenever they were in the same room together, and had even started to leave the room if they were alone together. Finally, she'd told him – over the telephone, after leaving him one day without a word – that she wanted a divorce, because she couldn't live with a man who fantasized about beating women.

And all that, without him ever once touching her in any manner other than a lover's embrace or a husbandly kiss. She had never once experienced the fiery sting of his hand on her backside, never once had he even tried to talk her into playing with spanking, even as foreplay. And, Lucky had come to decide, that was her loss.

Lucky cuddled in close to him then, snuggling against his chest, and enjoyed the feeling of his strong arms around her. They watched their show in companionable quiet, laughing at the same jokes, and each eating too much of the buttery popcorn.

When the show ended, Lucky switched the TV off using the remote, and she closed her eyes, moaning a little when Clay ran his fingers through her long hair, smoothing it back and away from her face. He pressed a soft kiss on the tip of her nose and continued to stroke her hair, like a father might soothe a sick child. Lucky kept her eyes closed and simply enjoyed the sensation.

"Have you decided yet what major you're going to claim when you start school?" he asked her softly, his hand never stilling.

"Mmm, not definitely, yet." Lucky answered. "But probably something with kids. Maybe counseling." She opened her eyes slightly then, and her heart swelled when he smiled down at her and nodded approvingly.

"I can see that," he agreed. "Yes, I can definitely see that."

She drew in a deep breath. "There's something else I've been thinking about, Clay, that you should know."

His hand faltered at the seriousness of her tone. "What's that, baby?"

Lucky opened her eyes fully and looked up at him. "I want to try to find my dad."

Clay's eyebrows rose, but for the moment he didn't say anything.

Lucky sat up. "I feel like I need to do this, Clay. I need to see him with my own eyes, hear his voice tell me why he left. I need to know it from him. I need to be able to draw my own conclusions, not just accept the ones that have been fed to me my whole life."

"You realize, sweetheart, that he may not want to be found," Clay pointed out gently.

Lucky nibbled on her bottom lip and nodded. "I've thought of that already. And I'm prepared for that. I have to confront him either way."

Clay nodded once, studying her intently. "And what if he is just as cruel and selfish as your mother told you he was? What if you just get hurt doing this?"

She couldn't help the tears that welled in her eyes, though she blinked them quickly away. And she waved him off when he tried to put his arms around her again. She took a deep breath then and spoke once she knew her voice wouldn't crack. "Then, that's why I have you go with me." She met his eyes straight on then, and knew that he saw the vulnerability in her own. "So you can catch me if he knocks me down."

Clay stared at her with new respect. He'd always known she was strong, but now he saw a new strength and a new maturity in her that he'd not witnessed before. So, what else could he do, except nod in agreement and support?

"I'll be right there, then, baby." He promised. "And you know I'll do anything to help you that I

can. We'll find him. You can confront him. And we'll deal with what happens next together."

Lucky nodded and sniffed. Then she launched herself so hard into Clay's arms, she sent him flying back hard against the back of the sofa.

"I love you, Clay Jackson," she whispered into the crook of his neck and Clay heard the tears in her voice, the ones that made her hide her face so that he wouldn't see them on her cheeks.

Clay tightened his arms around her waist and let her keep her face buried in his shoulder. He could probably count on one hand the number of times that Lucky had offered him those words, and though he longed to hear them more often he resisted the urge to ask her to repeat them. Instead, he simply rocked her quietly in his lap while she sobbed silently into his shirt and he whispered back to her: "And I love you, Lucky Star."

Chapter Six

"This is going to be so perfect," Andi whispered excitedly to her sister over coffee on Thursday morning. "I can't wait to see the look on Lucky's face when Daddy walks in on her and Rick!"

Chrissy made a little face. "I wish there was a way to do this without hurting Daddy. I think he really likes her for some reason."

Andi rolled her eyes, so like her father's, and snorted indelicately. "God only knows what he sees in her. But don't worry. I'm sure he'll be glad to get rid of her once he realizes what she's really like."

"What if she doesn't go for Rick?" Chrissy worried, playing with the piece of multigrain toast on the plate before her. "I mean, he is pretty cute and all, but you heard what she said the other day. She didn't even want to go out alone with him. Maybe he won't have any affect on her."

"Will you stop worrying? I've got it covered, all right? I told Rick that she likes to play hard to get, so if she gets too prickly with him, he'll take it as the complete opposite. All we need to do is make sure that Daddy walks in at the right moment, and it won't matter if she was a willing participant or not. All that will matter is what it looks like to him."

Chrissy still looked doubtful. "Even if we can find a way to burst in, with Dad, at just that right magical time, don't you think she's going to try to explain her way out of it? She'll probably even blab that the whole thing was our idea!"

Andi shrugged. "So what if she does? Daddy's not dumb; he's not going to believe her over what he sees with his own eyes. Especially not if you and I are there, helping him to make the right decision and walk away from her." Andi smiled brightly. "Now, will you relax? Trust me, Chrissy, everything is going to be fine."

The phone rang then, startling both girls in the early morning quiet. When Chrissy started towards the phone to answer it, Andi quickly said, "If it's

Peter's name on the i.d., I don't want to talk to him."

Her sister paused to glance at the caller id display, then turned back and sat again at the table. "It's him, alright." She bit into a piece of her toast and examined her twin as she crunched. "So what's going on?"

Andi made a noise of disgust as she got up and went to the counter to refill her coffee mug. On her way back to the table, she stuck her tongue out at the phone as it rang one last shrill time, earning a grin from her sister.

"I don't know," she answered, sighing. "He's been acting kind of weird lately. Don't think I'm crazy here, Chris, but I'm beginning to think that he actually took what Daddy said to him and Tom on the night of his birthday party seriously."

"What are you talking about?"

Andi squirmed in her chair. "You know... what Daddy said ... about you and me..."

Chrissy's expression was completely blank. "I don't remember. What did he say?"

Andi squirmed a little more in her chair. "He told them... that you and I..." When she paused and made a face, Chrissy groaned and made a hurrying motion with her hand. "He said that you and I... needamantotakeusinhand and... and.... andspankus..."

Chrissy laughed at her sister's expression of horror and the way she'd spoken the words as if just saying them out loud was going to make them come true. "Oh, yeah, that."

Andi's brows drew down over her eyes. "You won't be laughing so hard when Tom gets it into his head that it might not be such a bad idea, either."

"What are you saying?" Chrissy asked, dropping her breakfast onto the plate. "Did he... did Peter... spank you?!"

"No!" Andi shook her head vehemently. "No, he didn't." She met her sister's eyes and held them,

and her teeth nibbled worriedly on her bottom lip. "Not yet anyway."

"Well, what did happen?" Chrissy demanded. "Come on, tell me everything! I might be next, you know! Tom and Peter are like brothers, Andi, and whenever one tries something, the other usually follows!"

Andi sighed. "Well, nothing specific happened at first. He was just giving me a lot of disapproving looks and frowns, but that's not really anything new for Peter..."

"You know, Tom's been doing that a lot to me, lately," Chrissy interrupted. "And he doesn't usually do that..."

The sisters shared a look of mutual concern. "Then, last week when we went to Chez Amie for dinner, I got upset with our waiter and told him off for his lousy service. Well, you should have heard Peter after that waiter walked off! First he stood up for the shoddy service, saying the guy had a lot of tables and was obviously doing the best he could. Then he told me to watch my language and how loud I get in public places, because I was embarrassing him in front of the entire restaurant. And then he told me that if I wasn't careful with my 'tantrums,' then one of these days, he was going to just go right ahead and embarrass me right back!"

"You're kidding!" Chrissy gasped. "He said all that?"

Andi nodded vigorously. "And then, he told me that he'd been thinking about what Daddy had said that night. And he said he'd actually had that idea even before that night, on his own! Said that where he grew up, it wasn't uncommon at all! Can you imagine that? And then he told me that one of these days, I was just going to push him too far, and I was going to find myself... find myself.... in that position!"

Chrissy gasped again. "He threatened you, then? He told you he was going to spank you?"

Andi nodded. "One of these days, if I push him too far... yeah."

"Oh my God!" Chrissy stared at her sister. "Oh my God! What are you going to do?"

Andi shook her head slowly back and forth. "I don't know. I just don't know what to do." She looked up at her sister, and Chrissy could see in her eyes how torn she was. "I mean, I really like Peter, you know? I don't want to break up with him. Not even over this. I'd miss him too much. But I also do not want him to ... well, you know. So, right now, I guess I'm kind of avoiding him."

Chrissy let out a long breath. And then both sisters jumped high in their seats as the bell on the phone jangled loudly again.

Their eyes met briefly before Chrissy jumped up to check the id. She glanced back at Andi when she saw who it was.

"This time it's Tom," he told her sister.

"Don't answer it," Andi advised. Chrissy glanced back down at the phone, blinked, and then nodded slowly. "And unplug the phone, okay?"

"Okay," Chrissy agreed, already reaching for the phone jack at the wall. "That's a good idea."

"Whatcha'doin?"

Lucky nearly jumped out of her skin at the huskily voiced question so close to her ear. She swore softly, which rewarded her with a dark look from Clay, and jumped around to glare at him. She'd been so involved in what she'd been working on that she hadn't even heard him come in, much less come up right behind her.

"You scared me!" she exclaimed, hoping to avoid his question.

But his eyes narrowed and moved past her face to the search results on the computer screen in front of them. She watched his eyes as they scanned the screen from top to bottom and the furrow between them only deepened.

"You're searching for your father online?" he asked.

Lucky swallowed, squared her shoulders, and nodded. Then she waited for him to explode.

He pinned her with that penetrating gaze of his. "This isn't very safe, you know. There's a lot of perverts out there on the web who would claim to be him, just to have a chance to meet a young woman like yourself. And then do who knows what with you."

Lucky resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I'm being very careful, Clay. I'm using an alias name and a different email account. There shouldn't be any way for someone to trace it back to me, or to this address."

Clay looked completely unconvinced.

Lucky sighed. "Look, I need to do this. And this is a good way to start, as long as I'm careful."

Clay stood up and braced one of his large hands on a lean hip. He glanced disdainfully one last time at the monitor. "I've hired a private investigator for you," he told her. "He'll be by tomorrow morning to meet with you and collect any information you have about your dad."

Lucky's jaw dropped. "Clay! I can't afford that! Are you crazy?!...."

He took a step back as she lit into him with her latest tirade of complaints about his spending money on her. She was so involved she didn't even notice the slow changes in his countenance until she finally looked directly into his eyes – dark, storm rampaged eyes – approximately three minutes later. And then she shut up, quickly snapping her mouth shut as her gaze traveled over his tall, rigid frame, arms folded over his chest, mouth set in a grim line and chin tucked to his chest.

Uh oh...

"Stand up, Lucky Star," he said quietly, and the tone of his voice was entirely too sexy for such simple words. A chill of both longing and dread tripped up her spine at those words.

Swallowing, she slowly did as he'd asked. Clay took hold of the top of the wheeled office chair she'd been sitting in and pushed it further away from the desk, across the room. Then he indicated the bare expanse of wood on the desk in front of the computer monitor. "Put your elbows on the desk."

Even slower, Lucky leaned down and braced her forearms on the desk. Another shiver ran over her as the position she was in confirmed her suspicions of where Clay was headed with his instructions.

And, if she needed any more confirmation, she received it a moment later when one of his hands appeared at the top of her sweatpants, then roughly tugged them and her cotton underwear down off her hips and legs to collect in an undignified pool around her ankles.

"Bend over further," he told her in that silky voice. He helped her get more in the position he wanted with a gentle hand on her back. "Stick your bottom up and out for me."

Lucky's face heated at the idea of the obscene picture she must be making. But she did as he instructed none the less.

She heard him rummaging in one of the computer desk drawers then and a little alarm of worry went off in her head. She'd seen a wooden ruler in one of those drawers earlier, and she prayed he wasn't grabbing for it now.

"You know, Lucky Star," he said when he'd finished hunting in the drawer, obviously having found what he was looking for. "I've had just about all I can take of arguing with you over money." His hand soothed a path over her bare bottom cheeks, dipping occasionally between them and then back out again. Lucky was torn between trepidation of the spanking she knew was coming and longing for the session of loving he seemed to be preparing her for. Lately, the lines between the two were becoming so blurry, she was beginning to have a hard time telling them apart. "It seems that I need

to make a better impression on you, about whose decision it is to spend my money."

And then he whacked her with what she knew, upon impact, had to be that wooden ruler. And it stung like a son of a bitch. Lucky let out a yelp so loud and heartfelt she wouldn't have recognized it as her own voice had she heard it from the next room.

The next crack of the ruler hit her just above the first, and she let loose another shout of protest. Her hips wriggled beneath the third smack, and she moaned when the fourth fell.

"Now, listen up good, honey," Clay was saying as he walloped that ruler down across both of her naked bottom cheeks with each spank. "What I spend my money on," CRACK! "is my business," CRACK! "it's my decision," CRACK! "and no one else's." CRACK! CRACK! "And I am not" CRACK! "going to argue" CRACK! "with you" CRACK! "about it" CRACK! "one" CRACK! "more" CRACK! "minute!" CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

"Oh, God, Clay, stop!"

He didn't stop then, but he did pause to run a hand over her reddened, lined bottom.

"I want to get a few things completely clear while I have you here," he told her, and Lucky felt the ruler tap against her bottom. "First, you will cooperate fully with the P.I. that I hired, so that we can find your father quickly and safely." The ruler snapped against her skin then, and Lucky's right leg stomped in protest. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," she answered quickly. "Yes, sir, I will."

"Very good. Also, I want you to promise me that you will not agree to meet anyone online who says they're your dad. And no exchange of personal information with anyone. If you find a lead online, we'll have it checked out by the P.I. first. Is that clear?"

Again the ruler cracked against her skin and Lucky cried out with the impact. "Yes, okay. I promise."

"Good. The last thing I wanted to address is your car, Lucky. We're going out tomorrow to find you a new one..."

"But I don't need a new car!" she protested, glancing back over her shoulder at him.

Clay shook his head at her interruption, and she squeezed her eyes shut as she saw him draw back the ruler. The next five blistering smacks left her bottom throbbing and brought tears to her eyes.

She heard Clay draw a long breath when he'd finished with that set of spanks. Then he said, "You do need a new car, honey. Yours is damn near falling apart and since you don't have a cell phone or triple A, I don't feel like you're safe driving it. So, tomorrow, you and I are going car shopping, and on the way home we are also going to sign you up for a cell. Whether you like it or not, Lucky, we are going to do it, if for no other reason than my own piece of mind."

Lucky sighed. "All right, Clay. Thank you for being concerned for me."

Over her shoulder, she saw him raise an eyebrow at that. Still, he tapped the tip of the ruler against her battered, bare skin warningly. "So, are you through with arguing with me about money? Because if you haven't gotten it out of your system, you ought to right now. Let me deal with it all, right now. Because I promise you that if I have to address this again with you, this little spanking is going to be like a love pat in comparison to the next one."

Just the little taps of the ruler he was giving her now were making Lucky wince. So she quickly nodded her head. She didn't want any more of that ruler, now or ever.

"I won't argue with you about money anymore, Clay," she promised.

"Good." He set the ruler down on the desk and patted her raw bottom. "You can stand up now."

When she did, he enfolded her into his arms and let her cry it out while he gently rubbed her bottom.

When her tears finally subsided into sniffles, he pulled back from her and dried away her tears with his thumbs, then kissed her mouth with slow, loving sips of his own.

"Go on and get ready," he told her. "I don't want you driving your car into the city, so I'll give you a ride up to the university. Even Andi mentioned to me the other day that she was worried about you driving home from the college."

Lucky kept her features carefully schooled. "Okay, just give me a few minutes." She left the room and went to the bathroom to shower, her stomach sick with a new flock of butterflies. She just hoped the girls would meet her alone when Clay dropped her off. She couldn't imagine his reaction if he found out she was going to the college that day to hang out with a young, single man, just the two of them.

But she was pretty sure that she – and her extremely tender bottom – didn't want to find out.

Thank God, Lucky thought, as Clay approached the library in the center of the campus and she saw just Andi and Chrissy standing out in front waiting for her. She briefly closed her eyes in gratitude, then gathered up her purse and climbed out of the car with Clay.

"Hi, Daddy!" Andi exclaimed as her father hugged her and Chrissy. "I'm so glad you thought about bringing Lucky out to us yourself. I was really concerned for her when she went home the other day." The younger woman glanced at Lucky then and smiled. "Nothing against your cute little car, but it's such a long ride from here to Daddy's. You really should have something more reliable or at least a cell phone. That's why I called Dad and suggested next time he bring you out." She cocked her head and studied Lucky imploringly. "I hope you don't mind that I said something."

Inside Lucky was seething; as if she didn't have enough to deal with when it came to Clay's overprotectiveness – she certainly didn't need his daughters giving him more fuel for his fire! But outside, she managed a tight smile. "I think everyone is over reacting just a bit, but I appreciate the concern." Now I just have to make it through this day without Clay finding out about Rick!

"Well, darlin, I'm afraid you're just going to have to get used to my overprotective nature, cause it's part of who I am," Clay announced unabashedly. He came over to her and kissed her cheek. "And, as for the girls' concern, I'd say that just means that they like you, so be thankful for that as well."

Lucky didn't agree with his assessment of his daughters for one moment, but she wasn't about to argue with him, especially with the girls being right there. So, she just silently nodded and kissed him briefly on the lips.

"I'll be back to pick you up, say around five? Maybe we'll grab some dinner while we're down here before we go on home. Okay?"

"Sounds good," Lucky agreed. She smiled and waved with Andi and Chrissy as Clay got back in his car and drove away.

"Come on, Lucky!" Chrissy whispered excitedly, as if her father was still there. "It's almost one, and you're supposed to meet Rick at the café!"

With a sigh, Lucky followed the younger women across the quad until they reached their destination. The little café had a few full tables, but was mostly quiet for a winter afternoon. At a table towards the back, she spotted Rick sitting by himself, an empty plate pushed away from him. His aqua marine eyes, intense even from this distance away, seemed to spear her the instant that she walked in the door, like a predator would eye its prey.

"Oh, there he is!" Chrissy hissed dreamily from beside her sister. "God, the man is gorgeous!"

"Mmm-hmmm," Andi concurred, licking her full lips.

"Go on, Lucky," Chrissy encouraged, giving her a little push in the direction of Rick's table. "Have a good time. Try to remember to mention how much fun we are, so maybe next time he'll invite us too."

"Yeah," Andi agreed. "See if you can get us into Saturday night's party."

Why did I ever agree to do this? Lucky wondered wearily. The last thing on Earth that she felt like doing was playing nice with this man for these two girls. No matter how good looking he happened to be. She just wasn't good at flirting, especially when she wasn't interested in the person she was flirting with.

She took one last glance at the hopeful faces of the sisters standing beside her, though, and knew she couldn't back out now. They'd hold it against her, for sure, and even though she might not fully trust them yet, there had been progress made. They'd spent time alone together, they'd laughed and swapped stories and even a few little secrets. She couldn't disappoint them now and expect the fragile friendship that was just beginning to survive.

So, she squared her shoulders, drew a steadying breath, and started off for that table. And for what was sure to be the longest afternoon of her life.

Lucky was surprised several hours later that she hadn't been as uncomfortable with Rick as she had expected to be. He really was very charming, and he had a way with woman that seemed to put her at ease. Just about the first thing she had said to him when she'd sat down across from him at the café had been that she was involved with someone, living with him in fact. He'd just smiled at her, then told her that was fine, that he would still enjoy her company, and maybe she might find herself rethinking her living arrangements by the end of the afternoon. She thought he was rather arrogant to suggest such a thing, but it was also hard for her not to be flattered by his interest and constant attention to her. There had been far too little of that in her life, at least until Clay came along. And while

she had no complaints about the amount of attention she received from Clay, it was still flattering to see it from another, very attractive man. She was, after all, still human, and it felt good to see herself as desirable in another man's eyes.

So, she did find herself actually enjoying the afternoon. He gave her the same general tour of the campus that the girls had, but he had a funnier spin on things. And then he showed her a few places the girls hadn't, like the athletic fields and gymnasium, and the horticultural buildings. By the time they had completed the tour of the entire college, Lucky was exhausted, her feet very tired, and it was nearly four thirty.

"Come on," he said, motioning with his hand towards one of the dorms. "This is my dorm. It's coed. You can come in and sit down for a while."

Lucky hesitated. "I don't know if that's such a good idea...."

Rick rolled his eyes. "I haven't so much as tried to hold your hand all day, Lucky," he admonished her. "I've respected what you told me about your boyfriend. So, relax, okay? I'm not going to try anything."

Lucky sighed. She supposed he was right, maybe she was over reacting. And besides, there ought to be enough people in the dorm to make it safe for her to be in his room with him. If anything happened, she'd just scream for help and someone would be sure to come. Not that she really thought it would come to that.

"Okay, but just for a few minutes. I have to be at the library at five to meet my ride."

"No problem." Rick held the door open for her and watched her go through with appreciative eyes. "Though I will be disappointed to see you go."

Lucky looked away from his intense gaze and blushed. And when she did she completely missed the calculating, hungry look in his predatory gaze. She missed the fact that nearly all the other rooms they passed on the way to Rick's were either empty

or closed up. And she missed the victorious grin that briefly crossed Rick's face when he unlocked his dorm room, then turned to gesture her grandly inside.

Chapter Seven

"Where the hell can those two be?" Peter grumbled as he snapped his cell phone closed. He glanced up to where Tom stood with his hands on his hips, staring out their living room window. "I haven't been able to get in touch with Andi for three days. I swear she's avoiding me."

"Well, can you really blame her? I might be likely to avoid you myself, if you threatened to spank me."

The two friends shared a grin over the ridiculous mental picture that brought to mind. Both quickly sobered, however. "Chrissy hasn't called me back, either," Tom said. "And that's not like her."

"I bet you a round of beers at Mike's that Andi's got something to do with that. You know what kind of influence she has on Chrissy. If Andi's decided to avoid me, she's probably convinced her sister to do the same with you for some reason."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, you're probably right. I can't stand that. I wish she'd trust her own opinions once in a while instead of always following her sister's lead."

Peter sighed. "You may be right about why Andi's avoiding me, but I have a sick feeling that there's more going on, too. They have both been acting weird lately, don't you think? All kinds of secretive glances between them. And I don't know that I fully trust their sudden willingness to not only accept Lucky, but hang out with her too. If I know Andi, she's up to something, and while she might also be hiding out from me because of what I said about spanking her, I think they're both laying low now so we won't find out what's going on." He pushed himself to his feet then and beckoned Tom towards the door. "And so I think it's high time we tracked them down and found out what they're up to. Don't you?"

Tom nodded grimly. He grabbed their coats from the hall closet and followed on Peter's heels out the door.

"I have a feeling that my Andi's going to find out just how serious I was the other day when I warned her not to keep pushing me," Peter announced determinedly as they hopped inside the Land Rover.

Tom turned the key and studied his friend. "You're not even worried, just a little, that she might dump you if you do that?"

Peter frowned. "I hope that she doesn't. But if that's what happens, then it might be for the best. Because I can't just sit idly by anymore and watch her atrocious behavior without doing something to stop it. I know she has a good person inside of her, but she hides that part away so much that sometimes I wonder why I date her at all. If she won't accept my correction of her behavior, and she won't try to correct her behavior on her own, then I don't see how I can stay involved with her, anyway. Though I would miss her, even if she does drive me crazy sometimes." He slanted a knowing look at Tom as they pulled out onto the road and headed for the girls' apartment. "Do you think you can stay with Chrissy if she continues to blindly follow along with every little thing her sister decides to do?"

Tom frowned. He stared at the passing pavement for a few moments. Finally, he shook his head. "That doesn't mean that I'm going to follow your plan and spank her, though," he told Peter pointedly, and Peter nodded, though there was a lopsided smile tugging at his mouth that said he thought differently nonetheless. "I'm not!" Tom insisted, seeing his expression of doubt. Again, Peter just nodded. Tom let out an exasperated sigh. "At least, I haven't decided if I will or not, yet," he finally conceded. He gave Peter a hard stare. "I get mad at Chrissy for following along with everything her sister says to do, so I'm not about to agree to

just blindly follow your little plan, either. Understand?"

Peter nodded. "I got ya. But just don't close your mind off to the idea completely. We might just be surprised by the results if we give it a try."

Tom shook his head. "Enough about what's going to happen when we figure out what they're up to. We have to find them first. So start looking out your damn window."

Peter bit back a grin and turned his head determinedly towards his window so he could start scanning faces as Tom drove.

Clay frowned at the face of his wristwatch. It was ten after five and still no sign of Lucky or his girls. Where the hell was everybody?

He got out of his truck and slammed the door, then started walking towards the library, hoping that maybe the threesome was inside, and just too engrossed in a conversation to have noticed the time. Just as he turned the corner, he saw Andi and Chrissy coming towards him, though, and he called out to them with relief.

A split second later two more male voices called out their names and Clay turned his head to see Peter and Tom racing towards the girls. His daughters shared a brief look of concern, then hurried closer to him. Despite the fact that they obviously didn't want their beaus to catch up to them, they were nonetheless joined by Peter and Tom only a few moments after they caught up to Clay.

"Hi, Daddy, sorry we're late," Andi said, pointedly ignoring the fact that Peter was staring hard enough at her that if she were a twig and Peter capable of telekinesis, she might have snapped in two by now.

"Yeah, we've been looking for Lucky," Chrissy added, equally ignoring the looks Tom was giving her.

For the moment, Clay forgot about the tension between the couples in front of him. "Looking for Lucky? You mean she's not coming along behind you? I thought you were going to show her around some more today?"

Peter and Tom seemed to have also momentarily forgotten whatever had them so upset with the girls. They shared a brief look over the twins' heads, and Clay got a sinking feeling in his stomach.

He pinned his children with a hard glare, one that Lucky would have known not to lie to, but one that his girls had never really had much exposure to. "What is going on, girls? Where is she?"

"We think she's in Coopersmith Dorm," Andi said quickly. "We lost her after lunch, and we've been looking for her all afternoon. And just now as we saw you come around the corner, we thought we saw her go into the dorm." She pointed across the grass at the dormitory in question.

"But..." Chrissy bit her lip. "Well, Daddy... um..."

"What, Chrissy?" Clay snapped. "Just spit it out!"

"If it was her... she was with a guy," Andi jumped in.

"What?!" Clay roared. He shouldered his way between the girls and their boyfriends and strode hurriedly across the distance to the dorm.

Chrissy and Andi shared a brief victorious glance that neither Tom nor Peter missed.

"Sir, wait up a second!" Tom called out to Clay, jogging after him.

"You two are so busted," Peter hissed to the sisters in front of him. He pinned Andi with a stern, determined glare. "I don't know what exactly you've been up to, but when we find out, your butt is mine, do you hear me?"

Andi looked horrified for a brief second before she composed herself. She stiffened her spine, folded her arms over her chest and pointed her smug nose into the air. "We haven't done a single thing wrong, so I don't know what you're talking

about." And then she strode off after her father, her sister following rapidly in her wake.

When Peter caught up to everyone, it was to hear Tom saying, "Sir, we just want you to know that we have a feeling that the girls have been up to something concerning Lucky. It's just a feeling, but Peter and I both share it. And I just wanted to tell you that whatever you find in that dorm room may not be everything that it seems. Okay?"

Clay never once broke his stride, but he did glance for a long moment from Tom to Peter, who nodded once to show his agreement with what Tom had said. Next, Clay's gaze touched briefly, but meaningfully, on each of his daughters' faces, then he blinked and turned away, bounding up the four steps and inside the dorm.

From there it was simply a matter of finding the right door. Too worked up and worried to bother knocking, Clay twisted the knob of every door in his path until he found one that was open. A second later, he burst inside and came to a sudden jerking stop as he saw Lucky sprawled on a rumbled single bed, pinned beneath a young, good looking man who was literally all over her with hands and lips and tongue.

For a moment, Clay couldn't help but feel the rage and betrayal such a scene would cause anyone to feel. He was so blinded to it that he didn't even see the brief grin of triumph that Andi and Chrissy momentarily shared. But he did hear the soft sobbing plea of his Lucky Star, barely audible above the rushing pain in his heart and the pounding fury in his head: "Stop! God, stop! Please, get off of me!"

And when he looked again at the scene in front of him, he saw the way she writhed beneath the young man, not in ecstasy but in an attempt to get away. He saw the grimace on her face, the red tracks of tears on her cheeks, the way she had her hands braced against the man's chest, trying to push him away. And a bellow of pure wrath and

hatred tore itself from his chest, announcing his arrival to the pair in a way that his barging inside the room had been unable to. A second later, he had literally thrown himself onto the bare back of the man on top of Lucky, and it took Tom and Peter stepping in and holding the man between them to stop Clay from killing him with his bare hands.

"Clay!" Lucky sobbed, launching herself into his arms. "Oh, thank God...."

Clay held her tight, his heart clenching with each of her wrenching sobs. "Are you all right, baby? Did he hurt you?"

"No," Lucky quickly told him. "You... came in ... just in time..."

"You want to explain to me what you're doing in here with my lady?" he demanded roughly a few moments later. He glanced tenderly down at the woman in his arms, then across the small dorm room at the man who had the nerve to actually grin boldly at him while his handsome face sported a bloody split lip from Clay's hands.

"She came in here with me, old man." The arrogant young man told Clay with pride. "I showed her around the campus, and then she said she was tired, so I suggested we come back here." He shrugged. "She's not dense. I'm sure she knew what would happen if she came back here alone with me."

"Sounded to me like she didn't want what you were offering a minute ago," Tom told him, pinching one of his arms behind his back painfully. "Don't you know what it means when a woman tells you to stop?"

Rick shrugged again. "No woman's ever told me before." He nodded his head in the direction of Clay's daughters. "And besides, Andi told me that Lucky liked to play hard to get. And she did, right from the beginning. Told me she had a boyfriend she was shacking up with and everything. But she still came back here with me, so what does that tell you?"

Lucky shook her head miserably, clutching her ruined blouse closed in front of her. "That I'm the stupidest creature on the face of the planet." She glanced once at Andi and Chrissy and a fresh round of tears started. "I knew there was something going on between you two, but I never thought it would be something like this. You know, I only went with him in the first place because you asked me to. I wanted us to be friends, or at least on good terms with each other. And I was afraid if I didn't go with him, you'd have held it against me. Now I know why it was so important to you that I went." She glanced at Clay. "I'm sorry, Clay. I knew you wouldn't have wanted me to go with him, but the girls said if I could get into his circle of friends, then I could bring them in. I only did it for that reason. And as for coming in here, I only meant to sit down for a minute, and I thought there would be other people around, if he did get fresh. But it's like there's no one else in this entire building."

"A lot of students live here that are on the football team, and there's a game this afternoon," Tom offered. "That explains why he brought you in here today. You probably were the only two here until we showed up."

Clay's eyes were the saddest that Lucky had ever seen them as he looked at his daughters, standing huddled together near the doorway. "I've never been so disappointed in you in my entire life," he told them and his tone was hard and flat. "I knew it would be hard for you to accept Lucky, but I thought that you would at least try, for my sake. I had no idea what manipulative, mean children I had raised. I guess the idea was for me to storm in here and see Lucky with this boy and assume the worst of her. Maybe you thought I wouldn't even believe her if she tried to tell me otherwise. But I do. All I have to do is look at her to know she's telling me the truth. She could have gotten really hurt by this guy, I think, if we hadn't come in here when we did. And for that I am truly ashamed of you both." He

shook his head and closed his eyes briefly. Then he turned to Rick and walked up to him slowly. He waited till he was nose to nose with him and then he said through clenched teeth, "The next time a woman tells you to stop, you son of a bitch, you stop. Do you hear me?"

Rick nodded jerkily, his cocky manner now gone in the face of Clay's rage. Clay nodded too, and fixed the younger man with one last hard stare of challenge. Then, he slowly turned back to Lucky and helped her to pull on his coat, zipping up the front to hide her tattered shirt.

"Come on, baby. I'll take you home."

"Daddy, wait, please, we were just trying..."

Clay stopped in front of Andi and held up one shaking hand. "Not another word. I don't want to hear another word from either one of you. When you decide to grow up, and to care about someone other than yourselves for a change, then you let me know. But, right now, it's taking everything I have in me not to lose my temper and strike the both of you, though I have never once smacked you or even spanked you while you were growing up. So, just step aside, and let us by before I lose my control."

Andi's eyes grew wide with surprise, and she slowly took a step to the side, then stood beside her sister and watched as their father joined hands with Lucky and led her silently out of the room, walking right past them without looking at them or saying another word. After he had closed the door behind them, their sobs grew louder.

Tom and Peter made eye contact around the bulk of Rick's chest. Without words, a decision was made, and silently, they nodded their mutual agreement.

They let Rick go slack between them and watched as he fell to a crumpled heap between them. Tom, the more muscular of the two boyfriends, leaned over him and spoke to him in a dark, hard voice that was too quiet for anyone else

to hear. When he stood back up, any traces of his earlier look of triumph were completely gone from Rick's face, and in its place was one of simple and true fear. Tom and Peter then turned to the girls who still stood near the doorway, sniffing and feeling sorry for themselves.

"You two are coming with us," Peter told them.

"Screw you, Peter," Andi shot back. "I'm not in the mood for your crap today." And she turned on her heel and started for the door. As usual, her sister was right behind her.

Peter and Tom shared a brief look of determination. Twin growls of frustration sounded a brief warning as they started off after them. The girls never saw them coming, they came on so fast. One moment Andi and Chrissy were walking along towards the bus stop and the next their path was blocked by the angriest pair of boyfriends either of them had ever had to face. And, a few moments later, they were dangling each over one man's shoulder as he stalked away from the dormitory, easily managing the hissing, shrieking brat he held. All eyes of those they passed were caught as they moved on by, but no one stepped in to try to help them. The sisters had a reputation around the campus and there were not just a few smiles on their fellow students' and teachers' faces as they saw what looked like the beginning of a very well deserved comeuppance.

When they finally reached home, it was all Lucky could do not to run into what had become a safe haven for her, even in just the short time she'd lived there. Somehow she managed to walk sanely inside, then up the stairs to the bedroom she and Clay shared.

He followed her, his blue eyes on her all the way, watching her closely. He'd asked her about a million times over the course of the drive home if

she was sure she was all right, and she knew he was worried.

"I just want to get changed," she said and pretended she didn't hear the way that her voice quavered in the quiet room.

"Okay," he said softly and as she turned her back to look in the closet she heard the sound of him sitting on the edge of the mattress.

Her hands shook as she unbuttoned her blouse, noticing the rips where Rick had tugged at the material a little too hard in his haste to strip her of it despite her protests. She squeezed her eyes closed as a lump formed again in her throat while the afternoon replayed in her mind. One shaky hand flew to cover her mouth, and the next thing she knew she was running for the bathroom toilet.

As she retched, she felt Clay's presence as he came in and stood beside her, then swept her hair up and away from her face. He stroked her back until she had emptied her stomach, and then as she stood there with her stomach still heaving and tears scalding down her face. She couldn't understand why he didn't leave her. She was an absolute mess.

When she finally straightened up, she couldn't look at him. But, he didn't seem to care, because he led her over to the sink anyway, put paste on her toothbrush, held it under the water and placed it in her hand. "Brush," he said gently, and only when she had started did he step away.

Lucky brushed away the bad taste in her mouth and then scrubbed with fresh paste to try to rid herself of the memory of having Rick's tongue there. Eventually, she rinsed her mouth and slowly stood up. Clay was leaning against the edge of the countertop by then, watching her again. He held out his hand, and she shyly placed her own inside.

"I thought you might like a bath," he told her gently. Only then did she notice that the tub behind them was full and that he had added some lavender scented bubbles. The tears threatened to surface

again over his simple kindness, but Lucky managed to swallow them back this time.

Clay didn't wait for her to affirm his idea, he simply stood her before him and gently began to undress her, never once touching her bare skin or looking at her in a hungry way. He treated her almost like a nurse or a father, simply helped her off with her clothes and then took her hand to hold her steady as she stepped over the high side of the whirlpool tub. Still, Lucky couldn't control her body as it shivered and quaked at his attentions.

"Just try to relax, baby," Clay advised once she was covered with warm water and bubbles. "I'll come back in a little while and check on you, but if you need me for anything, just call."

When he bent down to press a kiss on the crown of her head, she looked up afterwards, puzzled. "Why are you being so nice to me?" she asked. "I lied to you today."

He blinked at the question, but she saw that his jaw did clench once at her acknowledgement of the lie. He considered his answer briefly, then nodded. "Yes, you did. But we'll deal with that later. Right now, I just want you to feel better. To feel safe. To realize that you're okay. That's all for now, okay? We'll talk about the rest once you're all right."

She just stared up at him. "Aren't you mad at me?"

"For lying to me?" He shrugged. "A little, yes, if you want to know truthfully. More disappointed than mad. But like I said, that can wait till later. What's important now is you and feeling safe again. So don't worry about anything else right now, okay?" He studied her closely one last time. "Are you sure that you don't want to go to the police, or to see campus security about what happened?"

Lucky nodded her head immediately. "Yes, I'm sure. I don't want anyone else to know how gullible I was. And besides, I don't want to get Andi and Chrissy in any trouble with the school, even if everything that happened today was by their

design. They need to finish their education, and hopefully as they do they'll grow up and find a way to accept me."

Clay just shook his head. "I hope so. But, frankly, I'd support you one hundred percent if you wanted to report what happened. Those two deserve everything they get, if you ask me. And, as for that boy, he shouldn't be allowed to do what he did to you with someone else."

"I don't think he's ever had to before, Clay." Lucky said. "I mean, did you get a good look at him? He's gorgeous. I'm sure he's never had a girl even try to tell him no. So, I honestly don't think that he's going to be forcing himself on anyone else very soon. And, as for the girls, I think that Peter and Tom can handle them."

Clay shrugged one shoulder. "Better them than me, I suppose. It's too late for me to try disciplining them anyway. I think it hurts them more when I don't communicate with them or when I take away their financial security. If anyone is going to make them change for the long run, it just might be those two young men."

Lucky sighed. "I hope that it is. Because I don't want to live my life with you with their disapproving shadow in the background."

"I know, honey." He leaned over and kissed her lips once, just briefly, noting with a brief smile that just talking a little had helped ease some of her trembling. "Now, I want you to just relax for a bit. Okay? We'll talk about everything else later."

"Okay, Clay," she agreed. She leaned back against the bath pillow and closed her eyes.

Clay stood over her a few extra minutes, replaying the sickening scene from that afternoon in his mind. He thanked God again for helping him find her in time and then he made himself turn away and walk out of the room so that she could have some time alone to get a handle on her emotions.

Chapter Eight

"You filthy, rotten son of a bitch, let me go!" Andi shrieked, swinging her arms like a windmill and kicking her legs like a child learning to swim against the sidewall of the pool. Peter simply readjusted his grip around her slim waist and continued to drag her up the remaining few steps to his and Tom's apartment door.

"I suggest you monitor your language and your name calling," he recommended in a perfectly calm tone. "It'll only add to the spanking you're already signed up for."

"You'd better not lay a hand on me!" she screamed at the top of her lungs and behind him Tom winced. "I'll sue your ass! I'll have you arrested! I'll..."

"We'll be lucky if the neighbors don't beat her to it and call the cops," Tom pointed out glumly. Peter followed his line of vision as he tried to wrestle their door open while still maintaining his hold on his squirming captive and grimaced when he saw their nosy old lady neighbor across the hall peaking out at them from behind her chain-locked door.

"Afternoon, Missus O'Leary," the boys chimed together. Finally, Peter managed to get their own door open and they burst inside just as they heard the old lady huff in an unfriendly manner, then close her door on their antics.

Tom pulled a very reluctant, but for the moment not struggling, Chrissy in behind him and pointed at the couch. "Sit down, Chrissy."

Her arms folded over her chest, a deep pouting frown on her heart shaped face, she nonetheless did as he directed, then pointedly ignored him.

"I'd like to put you down now, Andi," Peter was saying, still struggling with the raging woman in his arms. "But you have to promise me that you'll behave yourself and sit down next to your sister."

Andi paused for a few moments in her fight to look up at her grumpily obeying sibling. The twins

locked eyes for a moment, and seeing this, Peter looked over at Tom. Careful, careful, his gaze seemed to warn. This was uncharted territory, and who knew what was going to happen next with these two?

Slowly, Andi nodded her head. Even slower, Peter loosened his grip around her waist, and then lowered her till her feet touched the floor. Hesitantly, he released her completely, watching as she moved around the side of the couch to take a seat beside her sister. Briefly, he glanced at Tom, who shrugged slightly, as if to say, what next?

Peter came around to the front of the couch to face the girls, who had joined hands. Chrissy was still looking at the floor in front of her feet, while Andi meet his gaze square on, unabashedly.

"You are not laying one hand on me or my sister, Peter McKenzie," she told him matter of factly. "So you just go on and say what you think is so damn important that you practically dragged me here by my hair, and then you watch me walk out of your life."

Peter's eyebrows rose at the strength in her voice. He had to hand it to her, even now when she had done something hugely wrong, she was still standing up to him. She was a tough girl, and she knew how to defend herself. Just this time, it wasn't going to work like she thought it would.

"You want to walk out of my life, Andi, then there's probably not a whole lot I can do to stop you. It's near impossible to argue you out of any decision, even a mistake, which I'm sure Chrissy understands, given how she usually just chooses to go along with you instead of even trying to convince you otherwise. But, before you do that, there are a few things I have to say to you, and a few things Tom has to say to Chrissy. And you are both going to sit here and listen to them."

Chrissy folded her arms over her chest and glared at him, until Tom came around her side of

the couch and joined Peter. Then her gaze softened, and shifted back towards the floor.

"Chrissy," Tom scolded her softly. "Look up at us and pay attention please."

Andi watched as her sister slowly did what Tom asked her to, and she made a noise of irritation. "Just get on with the lecture, okay? The sooner we put you two out of our lives, the better."

Tom saw how Chrissy frowned at the last sentence her sister said, and his heart softened. But he also made a mental note that while she didn't seem enthusiastic about getting rid of him and Peter, she also never once uttered a word to contradict her sister's decree. And it was that lack of standing up for herself that he needed to address with her.

Peter frowned at Andi's words, and crossed his arms over his chest. His chin tucked to his chest, he narrowed his dark brown eyes on Andi's face. "What you two did today to Lucky was unforgivable. And dangerous. The fact that you deliberately set her up with Rick to make things look the way they did to your father shows that you both have some serious issues to address where her relationship with him is concerned..."

"Yeah, like how to get it to end," Andi muttered.

"No, young lady." Peter growled. "Like how to fix yourselves so that you can accept the fact that your father and mother are not going to live happily ever after, and that he is an adult who is capable of making his own decisions regarding who he spends his time with. He has a right to be happy, and you two should be pleased for him instead of trying to ruin things." He leaned in closer to both girls. "Do you want him to be alone for the rest of his life, unhappy and lonely?"

"No," Chrissy said in a voice barely above a whisper. Andi sent her a dark look.

"Don't look at her that way, Andi," Tom admonished. "She has a right to her opinions. And, in this case, I think you agree with her, you just

don't want to admit it because doing so means having to consider the fact that your dad is already happy now. With Lucky."

Andi sighed and folded her arms over her breasts. "Fine. You're right, I don't want him to be unhappy, or alone. I'd just rather he wasn't with her."

"Why? What's so bad about her?"

"She used to be a stripper, for one thing!" Andi erupted.

"Well, she isn't anymore. And who are you to judge someone by what they had to do to pay the rent? She's going to go back to school, and before you say one word about your dad paying for that, you know it was his insistence and that she plans to pay him back. So, tell us, what's so bad about her, otherwise?"

"I kind of like her," Chrissy whispered guilty, glancing nervously out of the corner of her eye at her sister. "She's funny and nice. And.... I think she really cares about Daddy."

"Then why did you go along with this plan to make it look like she was cheating on him?" Tom asked, the color in his neck red at her shy admission. When she shrugged, the color rose to include his face. "God, Chrissy, you have to learn to stand up for yourself and your opinions and stop blindly following along with everything your sister says!"

Chrissy glanced nervously again at Andi, who now seethed beside her at being painted the bad sister. "Well, it's not always like that! I don't just go along with her ideas..."

"The hell you don't." Tom glanced between the two siblings, then met Peter's eyes. "I think this little discussion would prove more effective if we were to separate these two. For now, at least. Do you mind?"

"No, I think you're right. We can always meet up later on."

"Come on, Chrissy," Tom reached for her arm and led her back down the hallway to his bedroom. "Let's go finish this talk in private."

Andi rolled her eyes as she watched them go. "So, I'm the ringleader now, am I?"

Peter shrugged. "Be honest with yourself. You know that you usually are." He sat down beside her. "You never did answer my question, you know. What's so bad about Lucky? Really?"

Andi frowned hard at him. She stared him down angrily for several long minutes, then she shrugged. "Nothing really, I guess. I just don't like her."

Peter nodded. "Mmm-hmm. Well, you know what, babe? That's tough. Because your dad does. And it's time you started acting like an adult and accepted that. Because if you don't, you're going to lose your dad."

"He wouldn't pick her over me!" Andi exclaimed. "I'm his own flesh and blood."

"You," Peter told her clearly, and very slowly, staring into her eyes the entire time, "are a self-centered, spoiled little brat child, who needs nothing nearly as much as a damn good spanking each and every day of her life!"

Andi gasped at his declaration, and she drew her hand up and back to smack his face. But, he caught her arm in mid swing, and used it against her instead, pulling her by it until she was laying prone over his lap, bottom side facing up. He wasted no time, despite her shrieks and struggles, pinning her legs between his own and bringing the flat of his hand down hard on her squirming backside.

"OH!" Andi bellowed in shock at the force behind that one, first, mighty swat. But, if she thought that that had hurt, she was in for a lesson in pain as Peter rained down smack after stinging smack on her blue jeaned backside.

"Stop it! Oww! Peter, cut it out! You can't do this to me - Oh! That's enough! AHH! You're hurting - ow! You're hurting me!"

"Really?" Peter cracked his hand off of the center of her bottom again, delighting in the way she jumped with each hard swing of his hand. "Then maybe you're beginning to feel one tenth of what your father and Lucky are feeling from the hurt you've caused them with your little stunt today."

From the other room, Peter began to hear similar sounds of another hand cracking down on another bottom, and he paused to grin. So Tom had finally come to a decision about how to handle Chrissy's problem... it was about time.

"He's... he's beating my sister!" Andi exclaimed as the sounds registered in her brain, too. Her struggles to escape Peter's hold began anew. "I have to help her! Let me go, you big ox!"

Peter shook his head and tightened his grip around her waist and the vise-like clamp of his legs on her own. "No, young lady, I'm afraid not. You're nowhere near done over my lap, yourself, and you aren't going anywhere until I'm satisfied that I've convinced you to rethink your manipulative little adventures."

SMACK!

"Ouwwoh!! Peter, you are being such a bully – OH! Now let me go!!"

Peter grimly set a steady pace of heavily wielded swats, raining them down on her upturned backside until his hand hurt, and he could feel the heat radiating through the heavy denim of her jeans. He was sure he hadn't caused her too much discomfort because of the denim covering she had protecting her skin, but she carried on like he was killing her all the same.

"If you want to continue going out with me, young lady," he told her, punctuating his words with hearty spansks, "you're going to have to stop all your little games. You're going to have to learn to be nicer to people. To be giving and friendly. I know you have those traits in you. You just don't always let them show. But, from here on out, I won't put up with anything less than the best behavior from

you, or you will find yourself over my knee again – each and every time you misbehave.”

Andi was quiet on his lap except for the occasional startled cry or whimper of pain as a particularly hard wallop caught her off guard. Peter had expected her to shout that she didn't want to continue going out with him if he was going to spank her, but she wasn't saying any such thing. And that made him pause, and have a surge of hope that he might have been right all along about this spanking thing....

In the next room, Chrissy was already sniffing and fighting tears over her boyfriend's knee as his heavy, broad hand connected again and again with her little bottom, still encased in thin cotton pants. She felt like she'd spent an eternity over his lap, already, and he still showed no signs of letting up on her.

“You're a smart girl, Chrissy,” Tom was saying now, never once breaking the steady thumping rhythm of his flat palm against her upturned bottom. “And you're an adult. You can make your own decisions about what to do, who to like, and where to go without waiting to see what Andi decides first. You know right from wrong, and you should stand up to her when she chooses the wrong thing. I'm very disappointed in your behavior, especially since you said you do like Lucky and think she really loves your dad. You should have stood up for her to your sister, and what happened today never would have occurred. What if she had gotten hurt, Chrissy? Think how badly you would have felt then!”

Chrissy was crying now, both from Tom's words and the affect of his hand on her tender bottom.

“Andi said that Rick wouldn't hurt her, that he wouldn't go that far....”

Tom gave her a two very hard cracks, drawing his hand well above his head and putting all of his

weight into the delivery of them. "I don't care what Andi said! That is the whole point here, Chrissy! You have to start thinking past whatever your sister says, and come to your own conclusions. Because you're not Andi, you're Chrissy. And, I'm dating you, not her. Do you understand that?"

Slowly, Chrissy nodded her head, sniffing. Tom sighed. "All right, stand up, then." He helped her come upright and then to her feet. Then he pointed to a corner of the room by the window. "I want you to think about this discussion over in that corner for a little while. Think about how today could have gone differently if you'd made your own decisions instead of just following along with Andi's ideas. And think of some things you and she can do to make things right with your dad and Lucky again."

Chrissy looked at him like he was crazy. "You... want me to stand in the corner... like a little kid?"

Tom looked almost as surprised as she did at the notion, like maybe he hadn't seen it coming, either. But, regardless, he nodded his agreement anyway, then pointed again to the corner. "You acted like a little girl today, not caring what happened to Lucky as long as things went your way. So why shouldn't I treat you like one now?"

Chrissy looked at the floor beneath her feet and eventually nodded. Then she slowly shuffled over to the corner Tom had indicated, and she only stopped when she was well inside the crease in between the two walls. Sniffing, she stood there under his watchful eyes, shifting her weight from foot to foot, and trying not to rub her burning behind, something he'd already once warned her not to do.

When Andi had been standing in the corner for nearly fifteen minutes, Peter left her momentarily to knock on Tom's bedroom door. All had been quiet in there for a little while now, and he figured it was safe to interrupt.

When Tom answered the door, Peter noticed with a little smile that he had placed Chrissy in the corner after her spanking, too. He motioned for his friend to join him in the hall, which he did, quietly closing the door to his room behind him.

"I don't know about you, buddy," Peter told him. "But I think the girls need one final lesson together. For what they did today. The spanking Andi just got was really just for her attitude and for the way she bullies Chrissy into her schemes. She hasn't really been punished yet for what they did to Lucky."

Tom was nodding his agreement. "And I really just spanked Chrissy for always going along with her sister's ideas instead of standing up for herself. I think you're right; we both still need to address what they did to Lucky."

"I think they should be together when we do that," Peter suggested. "They got into the mess together, so they should face the consequences of it together." He met Tom's eyes for a long moment. "And I think the lesson needs to be a little more serious than what they just had."

Tom let out a weary sigh. But he didn't disagree. "What do you have in mind?"

"For one thing, it should be on their bare behinds," Peter said with conviction. "And it's up to you how you want to handle Chrissy, of course, but I've already decided that I'm using a yardstick on Andi."

Tom raised an eyebrow.

"She's only getting twenty licks with it," Peter further clarified. "But I think they'll make a greater impression than my hand alone. And frankly, I'm already a bit sore from pounding the first spanking into her through her damn thick blue jeans."

Tom grinned. He folded his arms and thought for a moment. "I still have my fraternity paddle," he told Peter. "If you want, we could share, give them ten with each, on the bare."

Peter grinned. "I think that's an excellent idea." He turned to go into his own bedroom. "I'll meet you in the living room in a minute."

When Peter came out into the living room, he laid the wooden yardstick on the couch and noticed that the long fraternity paddle was already there. He looked up at Tom, and they shared a brief nod. He spared a brief glance at Chrissy who stood beside her beau, tear tracks lining her pretty face, her eyes wide on the two items on the couch.

Peter went to where he had left Andi in the corner, secretly pleased that she had remained there even when there had obviously been noise behind her with everyone else's arrival. He took a gentle but firm hold on her ear lobe and used that inescapable manner to escort her over to the far side of the couch. When he stopped, he turned her to face the opposite end, where her sister stood with Tom.

"This will be the final part of your lesson for today, girls," He told them both, still holding Andi by his side by her earlobe, for now that she'd seen what awaited her on the couch, she looked ready to run. "You will be paddled ten times with Tom's fraternity paddle and then you will receive ten smacks with the yardstick. You will be here together for this, since you were involved together in what you did to Lucky. And, you will have this lesson on your bare bottoms, so that we can be sure it sinks in and so that it hopefully won't need to be repeated again."

He thought he heard an audible gulp from Andi, and Chrissy's eyes began to well with fresh tears. But, to his surprise, and Tom's too, judging by his expression, neither one of them offered one word of protest. Not even when first Peter, then Tom, turned to them and undid the button, and then the zipper on their pants.

It was hard for the young men not to give in to their libidos as they undressed their girlfriends from the waist down, even though they knew it was in

preparation for a very hard, and well deserved spanking. Each of the sisters was beautiful and sexy in her own way, and even as they stood there on wobbly legs with tears shimmering in their eyes and trembling lips, both Tom and Peter had to take a mental step back and remind themselves what the business at hand was.

When the girls were both bare from the waist down, blushing furiously at their nudity in front of their sister and her boyfriend, Tom and Peter both leaned against their respective couch end, sitting on the arm of the couch with one foot on the floor beside them and the other bent to provide a place to bend their naughty girls over. Which they did quickly, after reaching down to grab hold of an implement.

"Now hold still and be good, girls," Peter advised as he tapped the heavy paddle once against Andi's bare bottom cheeks, now jutting out for his punishment. He heard her whimper, and he had to take a deep breath to steady his resolve. "And this will be over all the sooner."

Peter and Tom started spanking at the same time, and the room was suddenly filled with the sounds of wood striking bare flesh, female cries of remorse and pain, and pleas for reprieve and forgiveness. Promises of better behavior followed, and squeals and shrieks of regret. The young men looked up briefly during their hard work and meet each other's eyes, gaining support from each other as they continued their task.

The first set of ten done, they switched implements while the girls pleaded with them to stop.

"With you still fighting us like this, I'm beginning to think we're not getting through to you at all," Tom told Chrissy. "We're not stopping until we feel that you've learned your lesson today. Not until we're sure nothing like this is going to happen again. Because I don't relish the idea of having to punish you like this again, Chrissy."

The first swat of the paddle that he dealt her was very hard, powered by his frustration and meant to emphasize his words. And, her voice broke as she cried out from it, then she dissolved into tears. Tom glanced at Peter briefly, who nodded his support. Only then did he manage to go on.

"You bastard!" Andi screamed, scrambling to get off of Peter's lap. "Stop hurting my sister! You're making her cry, damn it!"

Peter wrestled her back over his knee and drew the yardstick back far, then let it snap hard against her reddened backside. She let out a yowl and bucked in protest of the awful sting. "You'll be joining her soon enough," he promised her grimly as he snapped the yardstick again.

The heavy splat of the paddle fell another nine times, and the crack of the yardstick landed eight more strips before the men finally stopped. They tossed the implements onto the couch between them and gently rubbed the backs of the sobbing girls that remained bent over their respective knees, their bare behinds red and swollen, and still sticking out into the air as if just waiting for more of their heavy handed attention.

Tom was the first to move, helping Chrissy to stand. He tsked her softly when her hand strayed behind her back to try to rub the awful sting and heat from her bottom. He took her arms in his hands instead and pulled them around his neck, pulling her hard into his arms at the same time. She started crying anew at this, and he carried her then to the big armchair by the window, where he quickly sat and pulled her into his lap, rocking and soothing her softly as she sobbed into the crook of his neck.

Andi and Peter watched them after he had helped her to her feet. Then they slowly turned away and met each other eyes. Peter's hands itched to wipe away the tears that lingered on Andi's cheeks, and he ached to pull her into his arms the way that Tom had just enveloped Chrissy in his. But

things weren't usually that simple with him and Andi.

She studied him in silence for a long time, what seemed like eternity. He half expected her to slap him and tell him she never wanted to see him again, then walk out of his life forever.

But she didn't. When she finally finished her scrutiny, she looked up into his eyes, and she spoke in the smallest voice he'd ever heard her use, the most insecure and most frightened voice she had inside of her. "Do you hate me?" she asked.

Peter shook his head, noticing the way fresh tears coursed out of her beautiful eyes at the simple side to side motion of his head. "No, sweetie, I don't hate you. I love you, Andi," he told her, realizing his own voice was hoarse.

"I don't know why," she said, looking down at her hands. Her voice shook when she continued in a whisper. "I'm a bad person."

Peter shook his head again, this time more vehemently. He tipped her chin up with one finger so she had to meet his gaze. "Sometimes, you make some bad choices, baby," he corrected her gently. "And I'd like you to let me help you change that. But you are not a bad person."

If he'd thought she was crying hard before, he'd been wrong. Because now the tears began coursing down her face like rain in a hard storm. He couldn't wipe them away fast enough. And the only other thing he could think to do was draw her into his arms, which he did with a great sigh of relief when she didn't push him away.

And, he held her for a long time, longer than he could remember ever holding her before. And, he knew, in his heart, that everything was going to be all right. Somehow, it would...

Chapter Nine

The next morning, emotionally drained, Lucky slept later than usual. She woke up in the big bed she shared with Clay, alone and cold and worried.

She felt better than she had last night. She no longer felt unclean or unsafe. She realized now that other than groping her and laying on top of her with his erection pressing into her belly, Rick hadn't really hurt her. He'd just scared her and tried to make it look like she was a willing party to the situation when Clay busted in on them.

But she knew today that she'd have to face the music. She'd lied to Clay about who she was going to be with yesterday. And he was going to beat her butt for it. Of that, she had no doubts.

Maybe it was that knowledge in the back of her mind that had caused her to sleep so late, more so than the emotional drain from yesterday's events.

In any event, she lingered in the bed still, even once awake, and only pushed herself up when Clay came in around ten o'clock with a worried frown on his face.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she assured him before he had a chance to ask her what was wrong. He still came over and looked her over from head to toe very carefully, anyway.

"It's not like you to stay in bed so late," he said, still frowning.

"I know. I'm just not anxious to get up and get my butt blistered today, is all," she said, smiling to let him know that despite the truth in her statement, she didn't fear him.

"Well, there's no escaping that, I'm afraid," he told her frankly, helping her make up the bed. "But that won't be till tonight, at least. Right now, the P.I. that I hired to look for your father is downstairs. So get dressed and come down so you can talk to him."

Then he kissed her forehead and vanished from the room before she could even open her mouth to protest the necessity of the P.I. again.

The damn, smart, interfering, controlling... loving man, she grumbled as she dressed. There was just no other way of doing things than his own! And she was beginning to think she wouldn't know what to do without him.

Lucky answered the P.I.'s questions with as much patience as she could, trying not to be moody, though she did keep getting dark looks from Clay as the meeting progressed, so she supposed she wasn't doing a very good job. But she couldn't help it if her mind was elsewhere. The dread of an upcoming, very thorough bottom roasting tended to be a bit distracting to even the most attentive girls.

When the investigator left the house, Clay quietly took her arm and led her back into the den. He closed the door behind him and then pulled her along beside him to the leather sofa where she had received her first spanking. A heaviness appeared between Lucky's legs and the muscle there clenched as he sat down, yet kept her standing before him. Her stomach did a somersault, and she had to fight to keep her voice level when she spoke. "Are you going to spank me now for lying yesterday?"

Clay shook his head, even as his hands deftly unsnapped her jeans, then jerked the zipper beneath the snap down. Looking up at her as he pushed the denim over her hips and down her thighs, he said, "No, I'm going to spank you for being moody just now with the P.I."

"I couldn't help it!" Lucky said, watching in dismay as her flowered cotton panties went the way of her jeans. "It's a little hard to concentrate knowing you've got a very big spanking coming your way in the next few hours."

"Well," Clay said, bending her unwilling form over his left thigh and holding her legs down with his right. "Now you'll have two."

SMACK!!

"Ouch! Come on, Clay. I was trying to be good, really! Oh!"

"You have to learn that in this house, Lucky Star, spankings happen when I say they do." As if to emphasize his point, Clay began a steady rhythm of hard open palmed swats from side of side on her bottom while Lucky twisted and writhed beneath him in a completely futile attempt at escape. "I wanted to be sure that you were okay today before tipping you over my knee for what happened yesterday. But I'm also not about to let your attitude just now go undisciplined either."

"I just wanted to get it over with!" Lucky confessed, grunting as Clay dealt her stinging behind another volley of spanks. "It's worse when I have to wait for you to spank me."

"I know that," Clay surprised her by saying. "And, sometimes, that is why I will make you wait for it till the end of the day, or till a point in the day when you are least expecting it. Because the anticipation is part of the punishment. But today I had just wanted to know you were really okay before addressing your dishonesty yesterday."

"But I am okay! Awh! Oh that hurts!"

"Like I said, Lucky Star. I'm the one dealing out the spanking, and therefore, I decide when to give it." He pummeled her reddened cheeks with ten more rapid, hard cracks of his hand, then stopped suddenly, rubbing the skin roughly and kneading it with his fingers, pinching slightly and grinning a bit at her sharp inhalation of air at his ministrations. "Do you understand me, now?"

"Yes, sir," Lucky sniffed. She let out a startled yelp when he swatted the center of her backside one last time, then helped her to stand up. She didn't even need to know what to do next. The brief time she'd lived with Clay Jackson had taught her that he expected her to do a little corner time before she'd be allowed the solace and comfort of his arms. So, she quickly shuffled off to her corner, head hung low and bottom beet red.

"Good girl," she heard him praise her softly from behind, and the two simple words made her smile return as she stuck her nose into the crease and exaggerated her stance so that her rosy behind stood out boldly into the room for his view. Never before, had she thought she'd find such pleasure in simply being one man's 'good girl.' Now she couldn't imagine her life without it.

Chrissy whined like a hurt puppy as she gingerly took a seat at the breakfast table that morning, her coffee cup in one hand. Across the table, Andi gave her a sympathetic look.

"I still can't believe they actually spanked us!" Chrissy said, whispering the word 'spanked', for what had to have been the twentieth time since the guys had left the night before.

"Yeah, well, start believing it," Andi told her with a dark look. "Or isn't the pain in your butt enough of a reminder that yes, it really did happen?"

Chrissy giggled. "Yeah, you're right about that." She reached one hand behind her and rubbed her backside where it met the hard wood seat of the chair. "I'd go and get a pillow to sit on, but Tom specifically told me not to."

Her sister raised an eyebrow. "And how would he know any different, anyhow?"

Chrissy shrugged. "I don't know. But he would. I just know he'd find out somehow." She slanted a sly look at her sister's seating arrangement, the same as her own, perched gently on the hard wood chair. "If you're so sure the guys wouldn't find out that we used pillows this morning, then why aren't you sitting on one?"

Andi opened her mouth for a fast retort, then paused, frowned, and finally snapped it shut. Chrissy giggled again and went back to the piece of paper before her on the table.

"I can't believe you're already working on that stupid list," Andi said. Tom and Peter had both

insisted that the girls write up a list of behaviors they wanted to improve on, as well as a few goals they wanted help accomplishing. Andi was sure that they intended to use their newly found method of spanking a girl till she was a blubbering idiot as their motivation towards realizing these new improvements. And she didn't like it one bit.

"Well, I don't want to let it go too long. Tom said he wanted it done by the time he comes by tonight. Or else." Her eyebrows rose and wiggled knowingly at her sister. "And you know what that means." She started another goal beneath the ones she'd already written out. "I don't know about you, sis, but I'm not exactly jumping up and down in anticipation of being spanked again. So I'm not taking any chances with finishing this list."

Andi folded her arms over her chest as she watched her sister write between sips of coffee. "I don't like this," she said grumpily, kicking the chair between them like a petulant child. "I don't know if I want a bossy, spanking boyfriend." She scowled as her sister continued to write as if she wasn't even speaking. "And I don't know if I like the fact that my sister is going along so happily with this whole thing, either!"

Very calmly, Chrissy looked up from her paper. "I'm sorry, Andi. But I love Tom, and I'm not about to risk losing him, not even for you. Maybe you're not cut out to be submissive, even a little bit, to Peter. And if that's the case, then that's fine for you. But if you do love him, and you want to be with him, then you ought to think about a way to at least meet him halfway. Because how are you going to feel when he's gone?" She glanced away from the amazed anger in her sister's glare then, but managed to meet it one more time. "Maybe it's time that you listened to me, for a change," she suggested quietly, then she gathered her mug and her paper and pen, and she left the room, shutting the door to her bedroom quietly behind her.

Andi sat there in stunned silence for a very long time, her sister's words ringing in her ears. Her mind replayed the events of the last twenty four hours, and she found herself fighting tears often as she thought of the look on her father's face, of how Lucky had cried out for Rick to leave her alone, of how disappointed Peter had been in her involvement in what had happened, yet he'd still held her after he'd spanked her. He'd still said he loved her after everything she'd done. He should hate her. She didn't understand how he couldn't.

And still here she sat, wanting to fight him on the decree that she write out a list of things to improve on. If she was really honest with herself, she'd see that there was a long list of things to work on. So why was she being such a bitch?

Chrissy was right... the only thing that mattered was that she loved him.

Andi reached across the table and grabbed the tablet of paper that Chrissy had left behind. There was a magnetized pencil on the refrigerator beside her, and she gripped it tightly in her hand as she bent over the page and began to write.

The day proved to be a very long one for Lucky. Never had she thought she would wish for a spanking to hurry up and arrive, especially not on the same day as another one. Yet here she was, doing exactly that.

But Clay had made it very clear to her that the spankings in their relationship happened by his rules. And it almost seemed he was enjoying watching her squirm all day long.

After her corner time that morning, he'd made her call the private investigator he'd hired to apologize for her bad behavior and to make sure that he had everything he needed to start the investigation. Lucky actually didn't mind calling the man, as she was eager to find her father and didn't want to offend anyone who could help her in the

search. But it was embarrassing to call and apologize while her bottom was still blazing, and Clay was standing in front of her with his disapproving face on and his arms folded meaningfully over his chest.

They spent a good portion of the rest of the day visiting another local college, together this time. It was fun, despite the lingering sting in her backside, and Lucky began to think that she might actually enjoy going back to school, and that she might even be good at it. Clay's confidence in her abilities and potential was certainly a large part of her new positive outlook. The fact that he believed in her, when he knew so well her faults and shortcomings, helped her believe in herself where she was once unable to do so.

They shared a late, leisurely lunch on the way home from the school, eating fried foods they loved but usually avoided, and talking about the future – both Lucky's own at school and their own together. By the time they were finished and on the remaining leg of the drive home, it was nearly five o'clock, and as Lucky realized this, she also knew the time was drawing near for her spanking.

As her stomach twisted and turned, Clay looked across at her in the car and reached over to squeeze her hand. When she glanced at him, she noticed he was smirking, ever so slightly, and she snorted. He was enjoying watching her squirm, damnit!

"I have a quick stop to make," he told her, a smile lingering in his words, if not on his face. "You don't mind, do you?"

She wanted to pitch a fit and holler at the top of her lungs that damn right she minded – she wanted – no, needed to get this spanking over and done with so she could relax and stop worrying about it every second.... but she didn't do any of those things. Forcing her face into a mask of neutrality, she faced him and shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me," she said casually, then turned to look out the

window again, least she lose her cool and go for his jugular.

She thought she heard him chuckle quietly under his breath, but she couldn't be sure since she was facing away from him. The sound made her seethe all the same.

It wasn't long before they came upon a strip mall and Clay pulled into the parking area, then stopped the car in front of an antique store. Lucky fully planned to stay in the car while he went inside, but when he got out and closed his door behind him, and she stayed inside, he looked through the windshield at her and quirked one eyebrow up. She shifted her gaze quickly away from his, hoping he'd let her get away with this little bit of defiance, but no dice. The next thing she knew, he was standing in the gap of her open car door, his hand extended in an inescapable invitation for her own.

With a sigh, Lucky gave in, put her hand inside of his, and allowed him to help her from the vehicle and towards the store. The look he gave her as they entered the shop sent shivers down her spine and a twinge of apprehension into her belly.

There was a wizened old man behind the counter who greeted them happily, as if they were the first customers he had had all day, and perhaps they were. Lucky watched Clay scan the displays quickly, wondering what it was that he was looking for. And why it had been so important for her to come inside with him.

Apparently, he didn't see what he was interested in, because eventually his gaze returned to the shopkeeper, and he said, "I was wondering if you might have any hairbrushes. Wooden ones, good and solid. The old fashioned kind."

Gulp.

Even if she hadn't been reading up on some of Clay's favorite spanking fiction, she would have realized on her own how those few sentences figured into the next few, sure to be painful, hours of her life. When her wide eyes flew to Clay's face,

his was impassive, as if he'd asked for old copies of the New York Times, and he was careful not to look at her.

The shopkeeper was more than eager to help. He hustled over to a corner display counter towards the back of the store that apparently Clay had missed. When they caught up with him, it was to discover a collection of half a dozen wicked looking wooden hairbrushes displayed under glass, all at least six inches long and some nearly as wide, and every last one of them looking for all the world as if they had been designed specifically for spanking a naughty bare backside, instead of brushing someone's hair. Or, at least that was how it seemed to Lucky, as she stared down at them, the skin on her own backside literally crawling in dread.

"May we see them, please?" Clay asked the shopkeeper, who quickly obliged. Lucky watched as Clay picked up one, then another, of the dreadful things. "What do you think, honey? I want you to choose which one."

Lucky felt like she couldn't breathe. He wanted her to choose which one of those awful things he was going to use on her own bottom?! It was too much to ask!

Apparently, Clay saw the difficulty she was having. He took out his wallet, and at first she thought he was simply going to buy up all six. She certainly wouldn't put it past him. But, instead, he fished out two hundred dollar bills, and handed them to the shopkeeper, saying, "I'd like a moment alone with the lady. Would you mind stepping out of the store for a few moments? You could lock us in, set an alarm, if you feel you need to. Five minutes is all I need."

While Lucky's knees felt like they would buckle at his words, the old man grinned from ear to ear, almost as if he suspected what was going on between the couple before him. Or maybe he was just happy to have that money for just five minutes of his time, which really would be a break for him.

In any case, he scooped up the two crisp bills that Clay had laid out on the counter, nodded his head once, and made for the door as quickly as if he'd been ten instead of eighty. The door chime tingled as he closed it behind him, and a few moments later, they could hear the sounds of his key in the lock.

Without a word, Clay took her hand and led her around to the other side of the counter, the side where the shopkeeper had been, the side that faced away from the storefront and its windows that looked out onto the parking lot and the street. She watched as he picked up the hairbrush that was first in the line. He clapped it once, very briefly, against the heel of his other hand. Then he said, "Put your hands on the counter, Lucky Star."

"Oh, God, Clay, not here," she pleaded with him, but the words sounded forced even to her own ears. "Please, don't spank me right here...."

"Where, when and how I say, remember?" he reminded her, his tone low and near her ear, his breath tickling her nape. "I'm the one who decides when this naughty bottom gets warmed, not you." He patted her bottom then, a little forewarning swat that made her legs quiver. "Now, be my good girl and put your hands on the counter."

The gravelly tone of his voice shouldn't have been sexy. The submission of her act, the way it left her feeling exposed and obscene, with her bottom sticking out and up towards him shouldn't have made her wet. When he lifted her skirt up, tucking the hem into the waistband, it shouldn't have made her heart race. And when he tugged her cotton panties down to her knees in the middle of a public store, whether they were there alone or not, it should not have made the area between her legs clench and heat.

But it did.

He dealt her five rapid cracks with each of those hairbrushes, the first five all on her left cheek with the oval shaped ebony hardwood brush, the next

five all on her right with a red stained maple brush. The third set of five he alternated cheeks with a pale, clear-coated wooden brush, ending with a hard splat in the middle of her backside. The fourth set he choose a dark stained brush of indeterminate origin, delivering the swats in a downward swinging slap, making the swat cover a larger area and causing her battered skin to bounce and jiggle with each hard smack. The fifth he gave her in the same manner, only those he dealt in an upward motion with the next brush in line, one that looked ancient and featured elaborate scrollwork on the back.

By that time, her backside was as red as a bing cherry and throbbing. Lucky was fighting tears, and more frustrated than she could say because despite everything, she was still incredibly aroused.

And, apparently, Clay was too, for she felt him pause after trading the fifth brush for the sixth, and he pressed his erection against the cleft in her bottom, sighing into her ear from behind.

"God, I can't wait to get you home," he murmured, nibbling on her earlobe for a brief moment. Lucky sighed and pushed her bottom back against him, rubbing and purring at the feeling of his rough pants on her freshly paddled skin.

"So take me home now," Lucky responded dreamily. She pressed her breasts into the counter and pushed back against him a little harder.

Clay chuckled in her ear and nipped at her neck. "Naughty, naughty," he scolded, and she felt the cold business end of the sixth brush, this one oak with a simple red rose painted on the handle, as he slipped it between their bodies and circled it around first one, then the other of her bottom cheeks. "You know we're not finished here yet."

Somehow, she would have been disappointed if he'd done anything other than move back from her then, and pull back his arm to snap off the first of the last set of five against her fiery skin. She gasped at the intensity of the smack, then cried out with the next flare of pain that blasted over her

other bottom cheek. The third lifted her up onto her toes and the fourth made her swear low in the back of her throat. But it was the fifth that brought out the scream.

When he was done, Clay set the last of the six hairbrushes back on the counter. He raked her panties back up over her bruised skin, then pulled her skirt back down over her backside. He helped her regain her feet, then he pulled her into a tight embrace and brushed his mouth over hers in a rough, open-mouthed kiss.

That was the way the shopkeeper found them when he returned to the store, peeking cautiously inside the doorway, obviously unsure what he would be walking into and not wanting to intrude.

"It's okay, you can come back in now," Clay assured him when he noticed him there.

"Have you made a decision?" the old man asked, and his eyes were busy watching both Lucky and Clay as he rejoined them.

Clay glanced down at where Lucky stood, still in the crook of his arm. "Well, honey? What do you think? Which one?"

There was no question at all in Lucky's mind. Not anymore. She looked at the precious hairbrushes laid out before her and shrugged. "All of them," she said simply.

"All?" the shopkeeper asked, obviously surprised.

Clay was laughing. He pulled out his wallet again and indicated the brushes with a wave of his hand. "You heard the lady, friend. We'll take them all."

Chapter Ten

Lucky took a deep breath as she forced herself through the sliding glass doors that led into the main lobby of the hospital. God, how she hated the stifling hospital air, the smell of antiseptic, the cool gleaming floors and muted colors... it all reminded her of the long days she'd spent in them during her mother's prolonged battle with cancer. Just stepping through those doors brought back a flood of memories that she preferred not to revisit.

But she clutched the bouquet of yellow roses to her chest and determinedly strode through the lobby anyway till she reached the elevators, jabbing the up button with one shaky finger. Bonnie needed her now, and she would not leave her best friend stranded. No one should have to deal with a miscarriage on their own, and Bonnie had no one else except Lucky to turn to. She certainly couldn't call on the father of the baby she'd lost to comfort her as she mourned, since she'd never gotten the nerve up to tell him about the child they had created. To call and tell him now would only be cruel.

The telephone call had come late last night, as Lucky and Clay had been getting ready for bed. Bonnie's voice had been weak and choked with tears as she told Lucky that she'd lost the baby. Lucky had wanted to go to her friend right away then, but Bonnie had quickly told her to wait till the morning. Visiting hours were over for the day, and she said that she was very tired and really needed to rest. So Lucky had stumbled awkwardly through what comforting words she could think to offer, listened to what Bonnie needed to say to someone about how it had happened, then finally, reluctantly hung up with a promise to be there first thing in the morning.

Clay had held Lucky protectively in his arms for long into the night after the call had ended, trying to soothe her fears and worries for her friend. Lucky

knew that he thought she was mostly worried about Bonnie's physical condition and health, because he kept reassuring her that the hospital probably only wanted to keep her overnight for observation and that they'd surely send her home in the morning. What Lucky didn't tell him was the thoughts that were swirling in her head weren't all just worries for Bonnie, but also concerns for her future with Clay.

How could she give herself over so completely to Clay the way he wanted her to – and, truthfully, the way she longed to – when everything in her own experiences and those of everyone around her warned her of the dangers of surrendering herself like that to love for another person? Her mother had trusted in love, only to have the man she adored leave her with an infant child to care for and no income to speak of. Countless relationships in Lucky's own life had only led to heartache and an even more cynical outlook on love. And then she'd seen Bonnie get pregnant. And if anything should unite two people with ties of unbreakable love, it should be a child. But instead she'd been terrified to tell her boyfriend about the baby, afraid he wouldn't want it or would think she was trying to sucker him into a marriage neither of them was ready for yet.

And now, Bonnie had lost the baby, and with it the chance of at least the unconditional love of a parent for their child and vice versa.

Lucky just wasn't sure if she'd ever truly believe in the power of love. Never once had she seen it overcome even the smallest of obstacles. Maybe it just wasn't possible... and what did that mean for her and Clay, then? Because they certainly had their own list of obstacles to tackle and overcome. Despite the fact that she loved Clay more than anything, she was beginning to doubt more and more that their love could outlast everything else. She was beginning to think that no one's could.

When she reached Bonnie's room, she knocked twice on the open door, peeking in cautiously. It

was nearly ten o'clock, but she supposed her friend still might be sleeping, considering her condition.

"Bonnie?" Lucky called softly, tiptoeing into the room.

"Hi, Lucky," Bonnie responded, and as Lucky came more fully into the room and saw her friend easing up to sit higher in bed, she attempted a wane smile. Lucky winced slightly as she saw the ghostly woman before her, pale and drawn, with dark circles beneath her eyes and ruffled bed hair.

"Hi, hon." Lucky set the flowers on the bedside table and perched gently on the edge of Bonnie's bed, enveloping her in a hug. The wavering smile broke as Bonnie's arms found their way around Lucky's waist and a sob tore its way from her lungs. Lucky rocked her friend as she cried, soothing her quietly, grateful for the drawn curtain between the two beds in the room.

"It's okay, Bonnie," Lucky murmured. "I know it hurts, and I'm so sorry, honey, but I promise you it'll get better. It'll be okay..."

Gradually, Bonnie's tears tapered off to sniffles and an occasional hiccup, and she slowly sat back from Lucky's embrace, swiping at her cheeks with impatient fingers. She drew in a ragged breath and huffed it out all at once. "Thanks for coming, Lucky. I didn't know who else to call..."

Lucky had at least one other suggestion, but Bonnie was in no condition to be receiving advice in that regard right now. So, instead she reached for her friend's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "You can always call me for anything. I'll always come to you and help any way I can. You know that, Bonnie."

"Yeah," Bonnie whispered and there were fresh tears in her eyes that she blinked rapidly away. "Thank God for that."

Lucky took a deep breath. "So, are they letting you out of here today?"

Bonnie nodded. "Yeah, if you don't mind driving me home. I didn't bring my car last night..."

Lucky nodded. "You mentioned that when you called. Of course, I'll take you home. And, if you need me to, I can also run to the drug store or the grocery store if you need anything else."

There was a sudden sound at the doorway and a moment later a voice, wavering with a jumble of emotions, broke into their conversation. "Bonnie..."

Lucky turned, sensing Bonnie tensing beside her and saw Will, Bonnie's on again-off again boyfriend, standing there behind them, looking like he'd clawed his way up a mountain to get here. His dark hair was ruffled and in disarray, his clothes rumpled like he'd slept in them, and his face... his face was twisted with grief and longing so strong that it hurt Lucky's eyes to look upon him.

He stumbled the rest of the way into the room, almost as if he were drunk, though his vision seemed clear. When he reached the foot of Bonnie's bed, he sagged against it and groped closer still.

"Bonnie....?" Lucky started uncertainly. "Should I get some help...?"

"No," her reply was weary, but without hesitation. "Will won't hurt me."

Lucky moved out of his way then, because when she looked up at him again, she saw tears coursing silently down his cheeks. He all but fell into the spot on the bed that she vacated, and as she stood there watching in shock, he threw his arms around Bonnie's shoulders and spoke in raspy breaths around his sobs: "Your boss... told me what happened. I stopped by to see you, and he told me... God, Bonnie, why didn't you tell me? I love you, Bonnie! Why didn't you call me and tell me about the baby? Or that we'd lost her? I would have been here with you. I wouldn't have left your side."

From where her head rested on Will's shoulder, Bonnie sniffled back a sob. "I was afraid to tell you...I didn't know how you'd react..."

Will shook his head sorrowfully and swept away the wet tendrils of hair that stuck to her face. "I

would have wanted the baby. I do want it, and I want you, Bon."

Lucky swallowed hard on the lump that had suddenly wedged itself in her throat. She watched as he pressed his lips to Bonnie's in a kiss that was a sweet new beginning for them, baptized in their tears. And Lucky wasn't about to interrupt it, or to continue to stand there and intrude on their reunion any longer. As quietly as she could, she tiptoed out of the room, waving briefly to her distracted friend when she glanced up at the motion out of the corner of her eye. She paused only long enough to leave a brief message at the nurse's desk, saying to let Bonnie know to call her if she still needed a ride home, otherwise she'd catch up with her another day.

As she walked back to the elevator, Lucky caught herself humming. And she smiled as she passed the nursery, pausing to watch the tiny little beings beyond the glass. She hadn't even paused to look in on them when she'd come in, but somehow things seemed brighter now on the way out.

Yes, she thought, as she watched one teeny infant stretch its small hand up to grasp onto a nurse's finger, maybe there was hope for love out there after all.

It was as Lucky was walking through the main lobby of the hospital, on her way out, that she caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye and the humming died abruptly in her throat. Her heart hammering, she veered off the direct path she'd been on towards the exit and strode straight over to where Clay sat, flipping idly through a magazine, in the waiting area outside the blood lab department.

"Clay!" she exclaimed, her eyes running over his body for any sign of injury. "What are you doing here?"

It was obvious that she'd startled him, then even more obvious that he had hoped not to encounter her here, though he had to have known there was a chance of it because she'd told him where she was going that morning. He sighed as he put his magazine aside.

"I was hoping I could get in and out and not run into you," he admitted to her, frowning.

"I can tell," Lucky agreed, crossing her arms over her chest and fixing him with what she hoped was a good imitation of the look he always gave her when she was hiding something. "So, why is that, mister?"

He had the nerve to chuckle at her, which only made her madder.

"Clay!" she whisper-screamed. "This isn't funny! You're scaring the hell out of me here! What are you doing here? It's obvious you're waiting for a test of some kind. What happened? Are you sick?"

"No baby, I'm not sick. At least we don't think so, yet."

"Then what the hell is going on?" she demanded.

Clay sighed again, harder this time, and he ran a hand through his dark hair. "I went to the doctor this morning because I've been having some mild chest pains..."

"Chest pains!"

"I didn't want to tell you about them yet because I didn't want you to worry. The doctor thinks they may just be from stress, but he wanted me to come straight over and have some blood work done, anyway. He also wants me to have a stress test, just to be on the safe side."

Lucky's vision swam. "And you weren't going to tell me this...?"

Clay framed her face gently in his hands and looked into her hurt eyes. "Honey, I didn't want you to worry over something that may turn out to be nothing."

Lucky smacked his arms away angrily. She pointed a finger in his direction and shook it as she spoke, and Clay had to bite back a laugh, knowing better than to give voice to it now in the heat of her wraith. "You listen to me, buster. It was only a friggin' week ago that you dealt me a long, painful lesson in being honest with one another at all times. Remember that night, Clay, the evening we returned from the antique store?" She waited for him to nod, seeming to enjoy watching him squirm and glance nervously around at the empty waiting area as she brought up this private topic in a public place. "Well, if you expect that kind of honesty from me, Clay, you can damn well bet that I'm going to expect it right back from you." She glared at him, and lowered her voice for his ears alone as she finished. "Do you think you can manage that standard from now on, or do you need a reminder like the one you gave me to help you out?"

Clay licked his lips and felt his hands itch to take a smack at the seat of the worn Levis she wore. There was a familiar tightness in the region of his crotch as well. He couldn't decide which emotion was most dominant in him right then, the urge to laugh at the idea of her spanking him, the desire to flip her over his knee and bare her bottom to his hand right there in the middle of the waiting area for daring to even suggest such a ludicrous thing, or the need to kiss the breath out of her because she was so damn hot and beautiful, especially when she got worked up like this.

In the end, he did none of those things. He simply shook his head and looked down at his hands for a moment. "You're right," he admitted somewhat sheepishly. "I should have told you from the beginning. We shouldn't keep things from each other, no matter what the reason. I'm sorry, Lucky."

One of her eyebrows rose. She was obviously surprised that he'd conceded so quickly, even

apologized. She looked downright victorious for a moment, smug even.

That was, until Clay leaned in close to her and whispered huskily, "But just for the record, missy, the only one in our household that gets their bottom smacked is you. And you can count on a lengthy lesson over my knee when we get home for the language you just used."

Before Lucky could do anything more than just stare at him openmouthed, the woman sitting behind the desk called Clay's name. He stood up with a raised eyebrow of challenge directed at Lucky, and then strode off behind the lab door to have his blood drawn.

"Humph," Lucky complained, folding her arms over her chest again. The man was unbelievable. Only in this relationship would she wind up getting spanked when he did something wrong. Maybe she'd luck out and they'd take a lot of blood, leaving him too weak to spank her today... as if the man ever had a weak moment in his life.

She giggled to herself as she sat there waiting for him to come back out. The image of her trying to spank him was simply too ludicrous to imagine, and it kept her from staying grumpy for too long. Even if her butt was soon to be on fire... again.

Three hours later, Lucky sat gingerly on a pillow, nursing her sore bottom and going through the day's mail. She paused when she picked up a letter with the return mailing address label of 'Andrea and Christina Jackson.'

"This oughta be good," she murmured unkindly, slipping the silver letter opener under the seal and flicking it open. She drew out the folded sheet of paper that lay inside and opened it to read.

*Dear Daddy and Lucky,
We hope that this letter finds you
well. We both wanted to write you to say*

how sorry we are for what happened the last time we saw you. What we did was immature and selfish. It could have been dangerous for Lucky and we are truly glad that she did not get hurt. We hope that you will one day be able to forgive us for the way we behaved. We would like the opportunity to be true friends to Lucky and to show you that we are trying to grow up.

Peter and Tom are helping us in this. We've each sat down and made a list of things we want to improve about ourselves and the guys have agreed to help us accomplish the list. So far it is hard but we are determined to achieve every goal we have set for ourselves. We feel very lucky that Peter and Tom haven't lost faith in us. That they are willing to help us grow and become better people shows us how much they love us.

You should know, Daddy, that the guys have taken the advice that you gave them back on the evening of your birthday party. Though it embarrasses us to say so, we think it is really helping us in this to have them there as disciplinarians. We wanted to thank you for suggesting it to them. And if Lucky is subjected to the same treatment that you advised to Peter and Tom for us, let her know she is not alone. And that now we really do have something in common with her.

We hope to talk to you both soon and start towards a new relationship.

*With much love and best wishes,
Andi and Chrissy.*

Lucky sat there in stunned silence for a long time, her own bottom still tingling from a recent bout of Clay's hand, amazed at this new knowledge that Peter and Tom were now spanking Andi and Chrissy.

Well, she'd never known two more deserving candidates for a long trip over a gentleman's lap than those two, that much was for sure.

She couldn't help but giggle at the idea, especially at the mental picture of Andi getting walloped by Peter. The first time must have been quite a struggle for him.

She heard the front door open and close and quickly tossed her pillow back onto the couch. Then she went running out to meet Clay, the letter still in her hand, calling out, "Honey, you'll never guess what came in the mail today!"

The next few weeks passed by quickly for Lucky. She decided to wait until the following fall semester to start school, not to put the event off any longer than necessary, but to allow herself more time to spend alone with Clay. Finding him at the hospital that day, and knowing now that he wasn't as invincible as he always seemed, made her realize more fully the significance of the difference in their ages. And it made her all the more eager to spend every available moment that she had with him.

So, she learned as much as she could about the ranch, by going out with him and being by his side when he did the books and met with business associates. He taught her how to ride and the basics of breeding horses. She went with him when he fed the animals and let them out into the fields in the morning. And she learned more about this man she was falling in love with every moment she spent in his company.

She saw the fairness in which he dealt with his employees, and the gentle firmness he used with all of the animals. She admired his comfortable motion

in the saddle and was grateful for the never-ending patience he showed her when he taught her to ride. She even relished his bossy concern once she mastered riding and moved on – on her own – to jumping fallen logs and puddles of water, and racing ahead of him at a full gallop into the stables. Sometimes, she showed off her newly found horsemanship just to get his protective instincts up, so she could find her way over his lap later.

It was a strange desire, she often thought, this spanking yearning of hers. But it was there all the same. And Clay really had no one to blame for his often sore spanking hand but himself. It wasn't like she'd been the one to suggest bringing the pastime into their relationship, after all.

Thankfully, the results from Clay's cardiac testing came back quickly and showed no warning signs of impending problems. His doctor attributed his mild bouts of chest pains and shortness of breath, which seemed to have ebbed away now, as instances of stress. He had suggested Clay try to get a little more daily exercise as a way of relieving stress and had also suggested a healthy diet to help him maintain the good levels of cholesterol that he currently enjoyed. So, Lucky had taken to the kitchen, armed with a new healthy eating cookbook and what time she didn't spent alongside of Clay on the ranch, she spent in the kitchen cooking up new heart-healthy meals for them to try. Every day after dinner they made it their new ritual to go out for a horseback ride around the property. And most nights when they came back they made love in one or two of a myriad list of places around the house till they were both too tired to keep their eyes open one moment longer.

It was one such night, after they had both gone to bed that Clay heard the sound of the telephone ringing down the hall just as he was about to fall over the edge into sleep. Not wanting the jangling bell to wake up Lucky, and worried that it might be one of the girls calling with what could only be

trouble at such a late hour, he quickly slipped out of bed and hurried quietly to the phone he kept in the next room, which was his office.

The voice on the other end of the line was not one of his girls, he realized with both a sigh of relief and a twinge of annoyance. It was the private investigator that he had hired to find Lucky's father.

"I'm sorry for the late hour," Barry said in his gravelly voice. "But you said you wanted to know the minute that I found out about her dad."

Clay nodded, rubbing his eyes with one hand. "Right, I did. Don't worry about it, she didn't wake up. So you've found him, then?"

There was a pause on the other side of the phone that made Clay's stomach drop. "Yeah," Barry finally said. "But she's not going to be able to meet him, Mr. Jackson."

Clay sighed. He'd been prepared for something like this. He hadn't expected the man who'd abandoned Lucky as a baby to be jumping for joy at the chance to meet her as an adult. If that were the case, he would have been looking for her himself.

"Did you offer him the money like I told you to?" he asked. He didn't like the idea of bribing the jerk to meet his own child, but he also knew that Lucky needed some closure where the issue of her father was concerned. And if she wasn't going to get it in finding a man who could return her love, then he wanted to be sure she at least got it by seeing for herself that what her mother had always said about him was right.

"I couldn't do that, I'm afraid." Barry paused again and just when Clay was about to explode for the man to spit out the entirety of the story, he continued in an apologetic tone. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Mr. Jackson, but Lucky's father is dead. He died in an automobile accident in 1999."

Clay cursed softly under his breath and thumped his fist on the table.

"I'm sorry, sir. I did get a list of his surviving relatives for you, including his mother. I haven't contacted any of them yet, but I can if you need me to..."

Clay passed a weary hand through his hair. "No, Barry, that's okay. Thanks anyway. If you could, just fax me the information on where he's buried and the list of the relatives. We'll take it from there. I'm not sure if she'll want to contact any of them or not."

"Okay. I'll send it over right now." In the background, Clay could hear the sound of the fax machine being turned on. A few moments later, his own fax started receiving Barry's information.

"I appreciate your fast work on this, Barry," he told him as he caught the pages off the machine. "And I'll let you know if I need anything else in the future."

"Sure thing, Mr. Jackson. And please tell Lucky I'm sorry about her father."

"Thank you. I will."

Clay hung up the phone and stared at the top page of the fax, the one that listed where Lucky's father was buried. There was a part of him that couldn't help but think that maybe it was for the best that the search for him had ended the way it had. At least this way he wouldn't have the chance to reject her twice.

But he knew in his heart that she'd gotten her hopes up about meeting him. She'd wanted it to turn out happily, with a second chance, and a changed man. And she was going to be bitterly disappointed to not even have the opportunity to see him face to face for what really would have been the first time in her memory.

Clay rubbed his temple wearily as he stared down at the faxes in front of him. The pages made such a tidy little order out of something so complex and mixed up. But how the hell was he going to tell her?

He finally sighed after sitting there for nearly ten minutes trying to think of what to do. One thing was for sure – it could certainly wait till tomorrow. He wasn't about to wake her up at nearly one in the morning to give her the bad news. But he wouldn't put it off any further than when she did wake up, either. They'd promised one another no more secrets or lies, and he would keep to that promise. Even though this time he knew would be harder than any other so far.

For now, he went back to bed and pulled the soft, warm, naked body of his love into his arms, where he held her protectively and lovingly throughout the night, cherishing her even as she slept as no other man in her life ever truly had.

Chapter Eleven

Clay was up early the next morning, which was his custom, though that morning he was up and about even sooner than he would have been on a normal day. He simply could not sleep, knowing what he would have to tell Lucky when she woke up.

Usually, he would tease her awake, and they would share a big breakfast together and sometimes a sleepy session of lovemaking before they ventured out to see to the horses. But, this morning, Clay let her sleep, and roused one of the hands in the bunkhouse to see to the tasks that he and Lucky usually enjoyed every morning.

Clay sat downstairs in the kitchen, the radio playing softly, as he nursed a cup of coffee and alternately glanced between the dawning of the day out the window and at the foot of the stairs where Lucky would emerge when she came down. The entire time a war was being fought in his head over how to best tell her the bad news.

When she finally did appear, she was still in her chenille bathrobe and her hair was just barely tamed back into a scrunchie. She frowned at him for a moment in puzzlement, then went over to him and bluntly asked, "What's wrong? Why didn't you wake me up?"

Clay took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He pushed his coffee cup away from him and took her hand, tugging her gently till she stepped between his thighs, then perched on his left knee. He looped his arms around her waist and hugged her for a few silent moments, resting his head against the nape of her neck.

"Clay?" Lucky asked when he was quiet for too long like that. "What's going on? Are you sick? Did the doctor call?"

"No baby," Clay assured her, sitting back finally, but still keeping her body within the circle of his

arms. "I'm fine." He gave her a sad smile. "But there is some bad news. It's about your father."

"Oh," Lucky sniffed delicately and Clay watched as she squared her shoulders as if preparing for a blow. "So, he's been found, then?"

Clay nodded. "Lucky, honey, I don't know how to say this, but..."

"He doesn't want to see me, right?" she guessed. She tossed her head defiantly and folded her arms over her chest. "Well, that's just too damn bad, Clay, because I need to see him! I need to confront him..."

"Honey," Clay managed to speak over her protests without sounding harsh. He shook his head when she closed her mouth to look at him. Then he sighed. "Lucky, I'm sorry, but you're Daddy's dead. He died in a car accident in 1999."

For what seemed like a small eternity, Lucky simply sat there staring at Clay after he'd broken the news. Somehow he met her gaze, though it was difficult; he couldn't help but feel responsible for the blow, because he was the one who'd had to deliver it. Finally, he broke the stillness by cupping the side of her face with one hand and gently stroking her cheek.

"Baby, I'm so sorry..." he began softly.

She blinked then, and shook her head, removing it from his touch. "No. No, it's okay, Clay. Really." She stood up then and moved to the coffee pot, where she poured herself a large mugful, then added generous amounts of milk and sugar. Clay noticed that her hands were shaking, though she tried to hide it. She shrugged as she returned to the table, sitting across from him this time. "I mean, it's not like I've lost anything here. I never had a father, and now I just never will. No big deal. It's not like I knew him and now I have to deal with losing him. I dealt with that a long time ago."

Clay studied her in silence for a while as she sipped her coffee and focused her gaze on the fields outside instead of on him. "You're losing the chance

to confront him over leaving you and your mom," Clay pointed out gently. "And though you won't admit it, I know you were hoping to find him a different man, one who you could have a second chance to get to know, as a father."

Lucky's eyes were cold when she finally looked away from the window and across the table at Clay. "Well, then I guess this little experience will teach me to get my hopes up where love and second chances are concerned. Because for me, neither ever seems to be on my side."

Clay stared at her for a few awkward, heart wrenching moments. "Except where I'm concerned, Lucky Star," he finally amended her little speech when it became obvious that she wasn't going to do so herself. "You know that I love you, honey. And that I would never leave you. You do know that, don't you? This is our second chance, and it's the only one we'll ever need, baby. I am on your side, Lucky. You and I are on the same team here. Right?"

Lucky's gaze had returned to the fields again, and it was unfocused. Clay wasn't even sure if she heard him, though she did nod very faintly when he finished speaking.

He sighed and closed his eyes briefly. He had to remind himself to be patient, because it wasn't his strongest trait. She would need time to accept the news, and come to terms with it. And, he would need to be the perfect mate for her during that time, so that she knew their relationship was stronger than she seemed to think it was at that moment.

"Your father does have one surviving relative," Clay told her, pushing the documents across the table that Barry had faxed over the previous evening. "His mother, Frances. And she lives just a few towns over. Maybe you'd want to contact her?"

Her eyes dropped briefly down to the pages Clay had pushed in her direction. He watched as she squeezed them shut for a second, then pulled them

away again to gaze out the window. Her voice sounded hollow when she spoke. "I don't think so."

Clay nodded. "Well, maybe you will later. So, keep the pages, honey, okay?"

She nodded distractedly.

Clay sat there looking at her, wanting to draw her into his arms and rock all her troubles away. But somehow he knew that she wouldn't let him even try to do that right now. She'd already set herself apart from him by removing herself from his lap and making eye contact as little as possible since then. He knew she wouldn't tolerate his fumbling attempts to help her right now. And he suspected that if he were to try, he would only be making things worse for her.

But he couldn't leave her alone, either. So, instead, he simply sat there across the table from her, watching out the same window as if together they could find all the answers to the mysteries of the world through that simple pane of glass.

He wasn't really surprised at her words when she finally spoke again. Though he couldn't help but be a little hurt by them, all the same.

"Would you mind going to work without me today? I'd like to be by myself for a while."

Clay wasn't sure that being by herself would be a good thing for Lucky when she was in this present mood. But he also didn't feel like he could refuse her anything right now, either. So, he reluctantly nodded and then slowly got to his feet. He approached her cautiously, half expecting her to break down and start crying on him at any moment. But she didn't; she simply sat there, still staring blankly out the window, as he pressed a single kiss on the crown of her head.

With the gentle pressure of one finger beneath her chin, Clay tipped her face up so that she had no choice but to look at him. To his disappointment, he watched her gaze focus briefly on his face, then her eyes fell wearily closed. Patience, he reminded

himself. She's just hurting right now. She needs time.

"You know where to find me if you need me," he told her in a voice husky with emotion. "I love you, Lucky. Please remember that."

Clay felt like his legs were made of lead as he turned away from her and forced them to move towards the front door. He knew in his head that he was only going out to the barn, but in his heart he couldn't help but feel like he was leaving the planet, and Lucky, behind to deal with the disappointment of this news by herself.

And there was a worry settling in behind his eyes, and no matter how hard he tried, Clay couldn't shake the shadow of it all morning long. There was something wrong with Lucky pushing him away like this. Something wrong, and altogether too familiar. It was the exact same way that things had started right before she'd left him the first time. They had been closer than ever one day, and the next she'd gotten scared by something and had started pushing him away. Then the next thing he knew, she'd been gone.

He worked the rest of the morning through, worrying more and more as the hours passed. He dared not even look toward the house, knowing that doing so would lead to his going inside to her, even though she had asked him not to. He didn't want to have to hear her ask again.

Finally, at lunchtime, he headed inside to eat, or at least that was what he told himself was his reasoning. But the thought of lunch left his mind almost immediately when he entered the strangely silent house, and saw no sign of Lucky. Hesitantly, Clay climbed the stairs and strode down the hall to their room, pausing outside with his hand spread out towards the slightly ajar door. He could see movement through the small open crack, though he couldn't quite make out what she was doing inside. His stomach knotted as he tried to determine what she was up to. Finally, he drew in a deep breath,

preparing himself for what would hopefully turn into nothing to be concerned over, and opened the door all the way with a gentle shove.

And then he simply stood there in the void, staring at her as he watched her throw a pile of clothes from one of her dresser drawers to the open suitcase waiting on the bed. Her head flew up then, and her eyes locked and stuck there for several long, heart thumping seconds. Clay could not seem to find his voice no matter how hard he tried. It was all his brain could do to register the fact that she was leaving him. Again.

It was Lucky who finally broke the awkward eye contact. She looked down at the suitcase in front of her, then turned her back to Clay and grabbed another pile of clothes from the drawer, adding it to the growing mess in the case. When she realized he was still standing there staring at her, she looked back up at him, guilt in her eyes this time, and said, "I have to go, Clay."

Clay's throat felt like it was filled with sand. The two words he finally managed to speak came out in a rasp that seemed to grate across his vocal chords. "Go where?"

She seemed stuck for an answer to that for a few moments. Finally, she met his eyes and said, "Just... go. I don't know where yet."

Clay stepped further into the room on legs that felt like thick, heavy logs sunk into wet cement. He stopped at the other side of the bed across from where she stood at the mouth of the open suitcase. "Why?"

Lucky's eyes squeezed shut, and he saw the way her mouth twitched as she fought back tears. When she opened her eyes to look at him they were wet but she did not give way to the tears that shone there.

"I can't stay," she told him shakily. "I can't do... this. I don't want to get hurt..."

"I'd never hurt you, Lucky Star," Clay told her softly, his eyes honest and warm on her pained face.

"Not intentionally, no," she agreed. She looked away from him for a moment, then made herself look back. "But, it would kill me to lose you, Clay. I mean..." She covered her mouth with one hand and drew in a deep breath to regain control of her emotions, but her voice still wavered when she finally continued. "I didn't even know my father, all right? But just finding out now that....that he's dead..." She thumbed away two tears that had made it past her resolves and closed her mouth, shook her head. She looked up at him imploringly, her eyes begging him to understand what was obviously so painful for her to say.

Clay looked at her with sad eyes, wanting to pull her into his arms and try to ease her pain. But he knew from the way she looked at him and the stiffening of her spine just now that she wouldn't let him. She would push him away. It was what she was good at after all. She'd been doing it her entire life.

"You can't live the rest of your life alone, Lucky," he told her. "No one can. Somewhere, sometime, you are going to love someone. You are going to let them in and, they will love you back. And you have to let yourself be vulnerable to them and to the world we will in. Nothing is permanent, and nothing you do will change that fact. But you can't honestly think that you can hide from love for the rest of your life. You may as well not even be alive if you're not going to have someone to share your life with. What about your friends? Are you never going to see Bonnie again, just so you won't have to possibly go through the pain of losing her someday? You don't even know for sure who will ever be the first one to go in any given relationship. It won't always be you, you know."

Lucky nodded. She swallowed. "I know that. But I'm not willing to take that chance."

Clay folded his arms over his chest and frowned at her. "I never knew you were such a chicken shit." He told her bluntly. Her eyes flew up to meet his, but she didn't argue with him as he'd expected. Instead, she shrugged and dropped her arms to her sides as if in defeat.

"If I have to be a coward to protect myself, then I guess that's what I'll be," she said.

Clay glared at her, the anger in his belly growing. He'd never wanted to spank some sense into a woman more in his life. But he wouldn't. Not now. Not when she was about to walk out of his life again. And not when she was obviously hurting so much already.

So, he used the only ammunition he had left. He came around the end of the bed so that he stood beside her, and he tipped her trembling chin up in his hand. He speared her eyes with his own and held on, making her squirm under his unrelenting gaze, though not once did she manage to look away.

"You're so worried about getting hurt, but what about me? Do you think it won't hurt me to lose you now?" Lucky looked down at the floor like a chastened child at his tone. "You promised me when you came back that you'd never run from me again, Lucky. Don't you remember?"

"I'm not running from you this time, Clay," she told him boldly, her eyes raising to meet his, and her chin lifting slightly from his grasp in defiance. He noticed that she conveniently neglected to address the subject of hurting him with her departure. "I'm leaving."

"Be honest with yourself, at least, Lucky," he ground out. "You are running from me. Again. And this time you're breaking a promise, too."

She squared her shoulders despite the fading spark in her eyes. True to form, even when she was wrong, she was still standing up to him. Just like always. "Well, then, cowboy, I'm afraid that's one promise I'm not going to be able to keep. And this

time you're just going to have to find a way to deal with that."

Clay's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I'll deal with it, little girl. And when I do, you'll be over my lap for so damn long I promise you by the time I'm through you'll forget which way is up."

Before his eyes, he watched her as her knees trembled and her pupils dilated, her breath hitched and her body swayed ever so slightly towards him, and a shot of pure male arrogance shot through him, knowing that just his words could bring on a reaction in her like that.

Not that it seemed to matter right now. Because in a moment, she seemed to snap out of the daze his words had created. She stepped back from him, and Clay released her chin roughly, watching as she went back to packing with jerky, hurried movements.

"I'm sorry, Clay," she finally said when her bag was full, and she had zipped it up. She turned to face him just as a horn sounded outside. Her eyes darted to the window, and she drew in a deep breath. "That's my ride, I guess. I called for a cab."

Clay resisted the urge to shake her. He'd just bought her a brand new car last week, and here she was leaving in a freaking cab. Not that he was surprised, of course. It was just like her in fact. But it still made him want to pull his hair out all the same.

Somehow, he managed not to touch her as she hefted the suitcase in one hand and started towards the door. But, when she reached it, he spoke in a voice barely above a whisper and watched as she drew slowly to a stop at his words.

"I've never begged anyone for a thing in my life, Lucky. But I'm begging you now. Don't leave me again. Don't go." She turned around to face him, her eyes closed and tears on her cheeks. When she was able to look at him again he came around to stand before her, and then he knelt there on the

floor, and he took hold of both of her hands. "Please. Don't go. I love you, Lucky."

She stood there for only a few moments, fighting with herself, her hands trembling in his own, her tears falling down on his upturned face. And then finally, sobbing, she bent over him and pressed wet lips to his face, in a hundred different places, starting and ending with his mouth. When she finally straightened, it was to see tears on Clay's cheeks as well and the most heart wrenching plea in his eyes.

Somewhere, she found the inner strength to pull her hands free from him. And she picked her suitcase back up with one, while the other swiped away at the mess of tears on her face. "I'm sorry, Clay," she whispered as she turned her back to him and took the first step into the hall, "but I have to. I never wanted to hurt you. I'm sorry."

And then she walked away from the one love in her life, leaving him on his knees on the floor, watching her walk out of his house and his life one more time.

Lucky had the cab driver drop her off at a motel down the road from the club where she used to dance. As she went inside and paid to rent one of the inexpensive rooms for the night, she couldn't help but think of the look on Clay's face as she walked away from him at the house. She'd never seen the man look so vulnerable or lost before. And she was afraid she was going to be haunted by the memory of that expression on his face for a long time to come.

Determinedly, she set the image aside in her mind, deposited her suitcase in the shabby room she had paid for, and started walking down the street towards Delilah's Den, relieved to see that as she drew nearer there was still a "Dancer Wanted" sign in the front window. It wasn't the step up in the world that she'd been hoping for so recently,

and it certainly wasn't going back to school like she'd been planning, but she supposed she never should have let herself entertain those delusions before, either. This was who she was, not the girlfriend of a rich cowboy, and certainly not a nontraditional student returning to school to pursue a new career. She wasn't career material, and she certainly wasn't rich man wife material. It was better, she told herself, that she learned that sooner rather than later.

And although she'd had to hurt Clay in the process, it was better to hurt him a little now instead of a lot more further down the road.

Because not only was she not cut out for the life of the better halves, she also wasn't cut out for love. She never had been meant for an everlasting love, and she wasn't ever going to be. She just simply could not place herself in such a position of absolute vulnerability and not expect to be the loser in the end. It was just a shame that she hadn't come to that conclusion the first time she'd left him instead of now. At least, she wouldn't have gotten both his and her own hopes up again in the meantime.

Her old boss, while obviously surprised to see her, was also genuinely pleased that she was asking for her old job back again. Good dancers were hard to come by, she knew, and she had experience where some new hire off the street might not. He agreed right away to let her come back, and she promised that she would return that evening to start.

God knew, she needed to start earning some money right away if she wanted to be able to eat and find somewhere more permanent to live, not to mention a new set of wheels. While she had a little money left in her old banking account, it was pathetically little to start over again on. But at least she hadn't walked away from Clay with any of his money – that was one point that she was proud of. Especially when she thought of his daughters and

their absolute insistence in the beginning that she was only after his fortune.

With nothing left to do between now and work that evening, Lucky walked back down the street and let herself into the room she'd rented. She took a long hot shower and then laid down on the lumpy bed in a tight ball, hoping to catch a small nap before returning to the club for her late shift. She lay there for a while, trying not to think of how only hours earlier she had been asleep in a house fit for a modern day princess with the only man she'd ever loved wrapped comfortably around her. She missed the feeling of his arms and legs cupping her body from all sides. She missed the gentle tickle of his breath on the nape of her neck as he slept. And the smell of him, the taste of him. Even the way his work roughened hand cracked against her bare bottom flesh when she displeased him.

A sob rose in her chest, and Lucky choked it down as she squeezed her eyes tightly on the memories. She hugged a pillow in her arms and turned her face into it, wishing it was as easy to shut out the world as it was to shut out the light in the room just by turning her head. A million and one visions swam before her eyes, and her heart pounded harder as she tried to push them away without success.

It was a long time before she was able to rest.

Chapter Twelve

Andi and Chrissy sat at the table in their dad's kitchen, watching out the window as Peter and Tom walked down to the barns with Clay. Both girls wore identical frowns on their faces, and had their arms folded across their chests.

"We have to do something," Andi announced with determination.

"I know, but what?" her sister questioned. "And how are we going to pull it off without getting our butts beat for it?"

They'd been talking before they'd come over to visit their dad about how miserable he'd been since Lucky had left him. They'd only last week made their first visit to him since that ill fated day of their prank on Lucky, and with one look at his haggard, drawn face the girls had known that something was very wrong. And, while he'd made an effort to put on a brave face and be cheerful for their benefit, it was all together too clear that he had very little hope that Lucky would return to him this time. It was like he had completely given up, which was something neither of his daughters had even seen him do. Growing up, they weren't even allowed to give voice to such a thought. It was scary for them to see him so despondent.

But they were determined not to give up on him or Lucky. Now that Andi and Chrissy believed that what Lucky and their dad had was true love, now that they had finally recognized it and accepted it, they weren't about to let them break up. Especially not when the breakup was making the father they adored so sad. They were both sure that Lucky was just as unhappy; they truly believed as Clay did that she hadn't wanted to leave him, but had only done it as some sort of twisted survival technique.

"As for what, I don't know yet," Andi answered glumly as the backs of the three men disappeared from view into the doorway of the breeding barn. "And, as far as the spanking twins go, I could care

less about them. Let them spank the pants off us – it'll be worth it if Daddy and Lucky get back together."

"They'll probably start with the pants off, anyways," Chrissy grumbled, received a pained expression from Andi at the semi-joke.

The sisters had been on the receiving end of many a spanking throughout the past several weeks since the prank they'd played on Lucky that had earned them their first turn over their beaux' knees. Although they were both steadily working away on the list of behaviors to improve on that they had made, many of the items on the lists were ongoing things that required consistent help to keep the girls in line. While, overall, Andi's foul language had improved recently, for example, she still occasionally messed up – and when she messed up several times despite warnings from Peter, she wound up over his lap for another spanking for that same list item.

Frankly, both girls were convinced that even if they lived to be a hundred, the list would never officially be completed because of those ongoing behaviors. And surely there would be things over the years added to the list, as Peter and Tom had already mentioned that they thought it would be a great idea for the girls to revise their lists every year at New Years.

"If we try to reunite them, and it turns out badly, Daddy might just watch as they roast us," Chrissy added with a nervous glance out the window. "I bet they'd let him even take a turn if they even just found out we were talking about this," she added in a whisper.

It was true that their father was fairly bursting with pride that Tom and Peter had taken his advice regarding disciplining them. It had been practically the first thing that he'd told them when they'd come by to visit. He'd clapped a hand on each young man's shoulder, standing in the middle between them, and he'd beamed at his daughters before

him. "I can see that you two are doing a fine job with my girls," he'd said. "I swear I've never seen them more mannerly or womanly in my life. Keep up the good work, boys!"

And Tom and Peter had grinned right back at him and thanked him for his advice, saying they hoped to be able to live up to his expectations in the girls' future. And Chrissy and Andi had wanted nothing so much as to turn to liquid right there on the spot so they could quietly disappear right through the floorboards.

"Don't be such a ninny," Andi scolded. "We can take a little spanking. It won't kill us – hasn't yet, anyway. And, besides, if we plan it right, it won't turn out badly. And, hopefully, with the right plan, they won't even know we had anything to do with it either."

"You're right. I can't sit by and just watch Daddy mope around anymore, anyway. So let's figure out what to do, and quick."

"Okay, good." Andi glanced away from her sister's face and saw that the three men were headed back towards the house again, whatever Clay had wanted to show the boys apparently shown. "But for now we'll have to wait till we're alone. Here they come."

When Clay led Tom and Peter back inside the kitchen, they found two smiling and innocent looking young ladies waiting for them just as they'd left them. But there was something off about those innocent and vacuous expressions – like they were being just slightly forced. Tom and Peter exchanged a brief glance, eyebrows raised. If there was one thing they were getting better at, it was learning when those two girls of theirs were up to something. And both of their naughty radar had just been turned on high alert....

Lucky sighed as she flipped through the channels on the remote for the fiftieth time that

afternoon. Life in this hotel room was getting boring.

It was hard for her to believe sometimes that it had been seven weeks already since she'd walked out of Clay's house, the image of him on his knees behind her following her with every step she'd taken. Hard to believe she was still living in the same hotel room down the street from Delilah's. She kept telling herself she was just giving herself time to save up for a security deposit on a decent place. But in her heart she had begun to suspect there was a part of her that was just waiting for Clay to come for her and bring her home.

On the days when she was honest with herself, she admitted she wouldn't fight him if he tried it. She wouldn't fight him at all. And she would willingly submit herself to whatever retribution he thought fitting for her most recent abandonment.

But, with each passing day, the likelihood of him coming became less and less. He'd never come for her the first time around, preferring to give her the time and distance to come back to him on her own accord. She knew better than to expect any different this time.

She glanced at her cell phone, which he had made her get when he'd bought her the new car. So far, he hadn't canceled the service on it yet. She found that a bit odd, though she supposed she shouldn't. That was Clay, always wanting her to be safe. She wouldn't put it past him to keep paying for the line for months to come. It was a drop in the bucket for him financially. She knew she should really contact the service provider herself and get the contract canceled, but for now the cell was her only telephone line. It was also her only means of telling time as she neither owned a watch, nor did she have a clock in her motel room. She told herself that when she moved into an apartment and got a house line, then she would definitely call and disconnect the cell phone.

Keeping it for now had nothing at all to do with the fact that it was the one last sure way that Clay had to get a hold of her if he wanted to.

The small digits on the face of the phone told her that it was nearly time for her get her lazy bones up off the bed and into work. With a groan, Lucky sat up and pulled on her shoes, then donned a coat and grabbed her keys. Outside, the air was brisk, and just the idea of going across the street to dance in next to nothing made her shiver. But, it was money, and she couldn't afford to be picky anymore about how she got it.

She walked down the street and arrived at the club just as her boss was unlocking the front doors. She was grateful to him for giving her an earlier shift since she'd come back. Since she didn't have wheels yet, and had to walk back and forth, it was a relief not to be walking back to the hotel when it was very late. It still made her nervous when she walked back, because it was dark out; but so far everything had been fine. She supposed that some of Clay's overprotective paranoia had rubbed off on her, because in the past it wouldn't have crossed her mind twice that it might not be safe to walk those two blocks in the dark after working a shift. Now she felt every night like someone was following her until she was safely back inside her run down little room, with all the locks bolted behind her.

She could just imagine Clay's reaction if he knew she'd been walking to and from work at the club. He'd throw a conniption fit. She smiled, the first one she had felt cross her face in two days. Maybe that was the way to get him back in her life: Just send him an anonymous note that she was walking back and forth between Delilah's Den and Mary's Motel every night at 6:30pm and 2am. She could just seeing him pulling up to the club at a quarter to 2 in the morning, like some crazy knight in a silver SUV, come to whisk her away... she would have laughed if she wasn't so afraid she'd end up in tears.

"Look, it's our one and only option right now," Andi told her sister as she drove, scanning the sidewalks on both sides of the street. "We have to try it, even if it will be embarrassing."

"What if she'd not there?" Chrissy asked, her eyes widening as the strip club they had known Lucky to work at in the past came into view.

Andi shrugged. "We'll worry about that if she'd not in there. But I have a feeling we're going to find her here. She needs a job, right? And there's always signs up on their bulletin board for dancers. It would be easy for her to come back and get a job here. I'll bet you she's in there right now."

"Even if she is, how are we going to get in there? It's a men's club, in case you've forgotten."

"I know." Andi shot Chrissy a dark look. "Would you quit being so negative? We'll find a way in. I've got plenty of cash. There ought to be someone who will accept some of it to let us in. And, if not, we'll just wait around until she comes out after her shift."

Chrissy took in a deep breath. "Okay."

The girls parked close to the entrance of the club and sat for a few minutes, watching as men went inside, some in groups, others in pairs, a few by themselves. There was a doorman at the entrance, checking I.D's and keeping a watchful eye on things going on both inside and outside the club. The sisters watched the parking lot and examined the outside of the building, trying to determine their next move. They were just getting out of their car, determined to make an attempt to bribe the doorman now that the flow of men going inside had stopped, when Chrissy saw a slight woman with long blond hair get out of a vehicle towards the back of the building.

"Hey, maybe she's one of the dancers," she whispered to Andi, pointing at the woman. "She might let us in."

It seemed worth a shot, and it might prove a better one if the doorman was also security, which

it seemed he was. The sisters crossed the parking lot very quickly, falling into step with the young woman and then stepping slightly in front of her to stop her progress.

"Hi, I'm Andi Jackson," Andi told her pointedly, holding out her right hand for a handshake that she never received. "Are you a dancer here?"

The pretty woman slowly nodded her head, taking careful inventory of the two women before her. She looked them up and down closely, eyeing the expensive clothes that they wore.

"This is my sister, Chrissy. And we were hoping that you could tell us if Lucky St James is working here again."

The woman's eyes narrowed at the girls. "Are... are you two Clay's daughters?" she asked.

Andi grinned. "Yes, yes we are. Then Lucky's mentioned us..."

Her eyes flicked over the sisters once more, this time with obvious disgust and dismissal. "Yes, she did. Enough that I know she wouldn't want to see either one of you, even if she does miss that man something awful."

"She does?" Chrissy asked, and her face lit up as she shared a glance with her sister. "That's great – I mean, not great, but it's good because our dad is miserable without her, too. That's why we're here. We want her to know how bad he is now that she's gone. We want her to give him another chance."

The dancer shook her head. "I don't think she's going to go for that, though I wish she would. She's just being stubborn and naïve, if you ask me, anyway. But why would either one of you two care anyway? She thought you'd be dancing a jig to have her gone."

Andi colored and looked briefly down at the asphalt beneath her feet. "There was a time when we probably would have, ma'am. But we've done some growing up recently, and we just want our dad to be happy. And I don't think he will be, unless he gets her back."

She stood studying them in silence for a long time.

"We'll pay you if you can just get us inside and point us in her direction. We promise once we talk to her, we'll leave."

Her lips pursed as she considered whether or not to trust them. Finally, she nodded just once, and motioned with her hand. "I'm a little early this evening, so I'll take you to her, then stand outside the door. I hear anything other than what you say you've come to talk to her about, and I'll be in to kick you out so fast your heads will spin. Got that?"

The girls nodded. "Thank you. Here, let me..." Andi fished in her purse for her wallet.

The woman waved her hand dismissively. "Keep it. I'm not interested in money. I just had a bit of a love miracle myself, and the only payment I'd like to see is your old man marrying my best friend. So come on with me, but make sure you keep quiet. My boss wouldn't like this one bit, and he might just fire me if he found out."

"We'll say we snuck in if we get caught," Chrissy whispered. "We don't want you to get in any trouble. We really appreciate you helping us."

"Yes, thank you," Andi added quickly.

She turned then and smiled at them. "You're welcome. My name's Bonnie by the way. You remember that, so when your dad and Lucky are back together you can tell her that I helped you out. She'd been giving me a bit of a cold shoulder lately, too. Thinking the same way about me as about your dad, that she won't get hurt as long as we don't get too close again. Stubborn..."

Bonnie led them up the back steps and inside the building, then down a dimly lit hallway, finally pointing them towards a room at the end. "That's the room she always uses to get ready in anymore." She whispered. "It's too small for the rest of us to join her, and she seems to like that. She ought to be back there about now, or she'll be back soon if

she's onstage now. So you can wait for her there. Just remember I'll be out here listening."

The girls nodded, and silently walked back to the room. Andi craned her neck around the doorjamb until she saw Lucky sitting at a vanity table, applying her makeup. She met her sister's eyes briefly and they both stood up taller and took a deep breath, then plunged back through the semi open doorway, startling Lucky so badly that she dropped the tube of mascara that had been in her hand.

"Wha... what are you two doing here?" Lucky stammered, flying around in her chair to stare in obvious bewilderment at Andi and Chrissy. "How did you get in here?"

Chrissy seemed at a loss for words, staring at the low neckline and the high hemline on the sequined dress that Lucky currently wore. Andi glanced with irritation at her sister, then drew in a long breath and straightened her spine. "We snuck in. We're here to try to talk you into coming back home to our dad."

Lucky frowned at them, then slowly folded her arms over her chest. Her head tilted to one side as she studied them. "And why would you two want me to do that? I would've thought you'd have thrown a party when you found out that I'd left."

"We really do like you, Lucky," Chrissy volunteered shyly, wincing a little at the hard glare of doubt that Lucky directed her way. "We just didn't want to allow ourselves to give you a chance in the beginning. But we've been doing a lot of growing up since then..."

"And even if we hadn't, even if we hated you, we still want Daddy to be happy," Andi added. "And he's been miserable since you left. All he does is work and sleep. He never smiles anymore. He hardly even eats. He's a mess."

Lucky looked down at the floor beneath her open toed stiletto heels. She sniffed, just once, before looking up at the girls again. "He'll get over it

in time. He'll find someone else. Your dad's a great catch, and I don't just say that because he has money. There's a lot of women out there who would want him even if he was penniless."

"He doesn't want anyone else," Chrissy told her, her eyes imploring and big. "He only wants you, Lucky."

Lucky sighed and turned her back to the girls. She picked up a hairbrush and pulled it through her long auburn hair. She was careful, Andi noticed, to avoid meeting their eyes in the mirror as she brushed. "I'm sorry, girls. But I can't go back to him."

"You still love him," Chrissy stated matter of factly. "Why would you want to be alone, when you could be together?"

"It's safer for me this way."

"You're so scared of getting hurt," Andi said, "but you don't even realize how you're hurting your life right now by taking him out of it. And you don't seem to care how much it's hurting him."

Lucky looked down at the cosmetics littering the vanity in front of her. "I care," she said softly. "I do care."

"Then why are you doing this?!" Chrissy demanded angrily, stomping over to Lucky's side. "No matter how hard you try, someday, somewhere, you are going to come to care for someone else again. And you might get hurt then. There's just no way around that, no way to run from it forever. So why don't you just give in and let yourself be happy now? You're only going to live once, you know. Why deprive yourself of anything, especially something as special as the love you and Daddy share?"

"So many people never even get to experience a fraction of the love you two have," Andi commented quietly, seeing that they seemed to be having an affect on her. "You shouldn't throw it away."

When Lucky looked up at them again, there were tears in her eyes. She blinked them stubbornly

away. "You have matured since I last saw you," she admitted. "Those boys of yours must really be making you toe the line."

The sisters exchanged a look that was full of meaning, then nodded.

Lucky smiled shakily, and there was a faraway look of longing on her face that made Andi wonder what she was thinking about. She watched as the older woman closed her eyes briefly, then opened them as she stood, smoothing down the front of her costume. She met each of their gazes briefly, then said around a sigh, "I'll think about what you said, all right? But I'm not making any promises."

Andi and Chrissy shared a smile of victory and then quickly sobered. They nodded sagely and watched as Lucky started towards the door.

"I'm due out on stage, girls," she paused to tell them at the door. She glanced at them over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised. "You two ought to have Bonnie 'sneak' you back out of here before our boss finds you and tries to get himself two new dancers..."

The sisters shared a brief look of panic, which made Lucky laugh. She sent Bonnie a look that both thanked her and damned her for her interference. Then she went off down the hall towards the backstage area.

A few minutes later, the sisters were being led back the way they'd come, with Bonnie in the lead.

"Well, that went better than I thought it would," Andi whispered to Chrissy as they went out through the back door that Bonnie held open for them. "Thanks again for your help, Bonnie."

"Don't mention it, girls. Good luck to you, I'll keep my fingers crossed." The dancer gave them a brief wave and a smile of encouragement then closed the door quietly behind them.

"I sure hope Lucky comes back soon!" Chrissy said. "I can't stand seeing Daddy so unhappy."

"I know, me neither."

They were at Andi's car and unlocking the door before they noticed the Land Rover parked right next to them.

"Hey, look at that. It looks just like Tom's, doesn't it?" Chrissy asked.

"Yeah, it does," her sister agreed, shivering. "Thank God we're getting out of here now. If either one of the guys caught us here or knew what we've been up to, we'd be in a lot of hot water."

"You already are, little girl," a deep voice told her from the shadows, and both girls jumped as Tom and Peter stepped into the dim light that filtered out to them from the open barroom door. The guys smiled at the sisters without an ounce of humor and gestured to their car. "We'll follow you over to your apartment. Drive safe now."

Andi and Chrissy shared a long look, then climbed reluctantly into their car.

"Oh, boy," Chrissy breathed as her sister pulled out onto the road, the boys following right on their bumper. "It's gonna be a long night...."

Clay cinched the saddle on the new mare and paused to stroke her neck, murmuring to her softly. She was a skittish thing, and very high strung, though her bloodlines were good. He was sure he could gentle her if he just gave her time.

Which, he certainly had plenty of anymore, since Lucky had left. And training a new horse was a good task to use to take his mind off of her; he would really need to focus his attention on the mare to both improve her and to keep himself safe.

He led her out of the barn and mounted her in the back field, then kept her at a walk as he rode past his foreman, Jim, and a few of the other hands that were out that morning. She was jumpy around a group of people, and it took a little skill to keep her from running off. Once they were past the group, she seemed to calm some, though she still shook her head and huffed impatiently at the bit in

her mouth and the man on her back. She even kicked her back legs a couple times in her agitation at him.

Clay was a good horseman, however, and he managed to keep her in his control as he edged her along the fence line of his land. They had nearly made it the entire perimeter of the ranch when it happened. When he looked back on it later, he would realize that she must have been spooked by the water, but at the time he hadn't understood what it was that got her so upset.

They had reached the stream that ran the back property line of the ranch, and at the sight of it, the mare suddenly let out a shrill shrieking neigh, tossing her head and sidestepping. She reared back once, twice, then a third time. And on the third, Clay lost a stirrup hold. When she reared up a fourth time, he found himself falling backwards through space, until he hit the bare earth below him hard, cracking the side of his head on a large rock by the side of the stream.

Watching the crazed mare, he knew that he should get himself out of her way, though he didn't seem able to move no matter how hard he tried. As he looked up, he heard her frightened voice and saw her agitated movements, her frantic bucking, her powerful hooves hovering above his body, then descending....

And that was the last vision he had before he blacked out.

Chapter Thirteen

That same morning Andi and Chrissy stood sniffling in separate corners of their living room, their pajama bottoms and panties in a tangled heap at their ankles, and their backsides both painted bright red.

The previous evening, after they'd explained everything to Peter and Tom after arriving home, they'd been treated to a long and thorough hand spanking for interfering again in their father's personal business. Neither one of the guys had been swayed by the argument that this time their intentions had been good, that they'd been trying to reunite Lucky and Clay. That apparently didn't matter, or they just plain didn't believe it was true, which was a depressing thought. Regardless, they'd been spanked the night before, then shown to bed and promised a second spanking in the morning.

The second spanking, which had just been completed, was given because the guys felt they had risked their safety the night before. If the girls were honest with themselves, they had to admit that Delilah's Den wasn't exactly in the best area of Philadelphia. You often heard about crime in that area, and it wasn't very well lit. Tom was additionally upset that they had gone to that part of town without telling anyone about it, so that if something had happened they wouldn't even have known where to look for them. It didn't help matters for the sisters when Chrissy smartly told her boyfriend that they couldn't very well have told them where they were going because then they never would have let them go.

For as long as she lived, Andi hoped she never had to use a wooden spoon again. Not that she was much of a superstar in the kitchen, anyway, and looking back now she couldn't even remember when or why she'd bought that damn wide bowled spoon to begin with... but after the tattoo that Peter had beat into her butt with it that morning, she knew

she would never be able to look at another wooden spoon the same again.

"No rubbing, young lady," she heard Tom growl from behind her at her sister. "Unless you want to start this morning's lesson all over again...?"

"No, sir!"

Andi hid a smile at her sister's immediate response. She didn't blame her one bit. And she knew how hard it was not to reach behind and try to rub away some of the flame biting into her own reddened bottom skin.

The shrill ring of the phone in the kitchen broke the quiet in the room, and both girls tensed. Andi strained her ears to hear the machine pick up. But, instead, she heard footsteps crossing the linoleum in the kitchen and then Peter's voice as he answered on the third ring.

From her position in the corner with her bottom poking out into the room and her nose smushed into the crevice of the adjoining walls, it was hard to make out all of what was being said on the line. She was able to determine when Peter hung up and then the next thing that she knew he was at her side, one hand on her belly to move her back a step from the corner, and the other pulling her panties and pajama bottoms up.

She glanced at him questioningly over one shoulder, noticing behind her that Tom was also helping her sister to right her clothing.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"That was Jim Daniels," Peter started.

"Daddy's foreman?" Chrissy interrupted.

"Yeah." Peter drew in a deep breath, then let it out in a rush. "Apparently, about an hour ago, he found your dad out in one of the back fields. He'd been working with that new mare, and she got spooked or something and threw him."

"Is he okay?" Andi pressed, her brow furrowed.

"Right now, he's at the hospital. When Jim found him he was unconscious. Looked like he hit his head on a rock that was near where Jim found him."

Peter rubbed Andi's back once, roughly, up and down, meeting her jittery eyes. "You girls go get changed, and we'll take you to the hospital."

Andi nodded dazedly and turned to her sister, whose eyes were wide and frightened. The guys watched as they joined hands and walked off to their rooms to get changed.

"Aw, hell, man," Tom said once they were out of ear shot. "Ain't this a rotten way for those two to start off their day?"

Peter smiled sadly. "Makes you wish we'd given them both spankings last night, doesn't it?"

Tom sighed and shook his head. "Yeah. Or something...."

Less than an hour later, the girls were sitting one on either side of Clay's hospital bed, each holding onto one of his limp hands with both of their own. In the shadows of the room, Tom and Peter stood awkwardly nearby in case they should be needed. Outside the lone window in the room, the weather was as dreary as the expressions on the girls' faces.

"Why doesn't he wake up?" Chrissy asked, looking first at her sister and then over her shoulder at her boyfriend for an answer that neither knew. "I mean... what does that mean?" She lowered her voice to a whisper and looked down at her father. "What if he doesn't wake up at all?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Andi snapped at her, and the tone she used and the look she sent her sister was like a physical slap across the face. If the circumstances hadn't been so glum, Peter would definitely have taken her to task for it. "He is going to wake up, and soon! He just needs us all to be positive and keep talking to him." She leaned over her father then and touched trembling fingers to his cheek. "Daddy, we're right here, okay? Me and Chrissy. And the boys, too. The ones that you

brainwashed against us. And we're all waiting on you to come back. So hurry up now, Daddy, so we can take you home. Okay?"

Her words, heartfelt though they were, had no affect on Clay; he lay on the crisp white sheets as still as stone. Andi released a quivering sigh and laid her cheek against his hand.

"We have to keep talking," she insisted from where she rested. "Somebody else tell him something."

"Okay," Chrissy volunteered. She thought for a brief moment, her lips pursed and brow furrowed, and then her eyes lit up with a topic to talk about. "This ought to make him sit up and listen," she predicted. And then she leaned in close to Clay's ear and began to tell him the tale of her and Andi's recent adventure to Delilah's and the reaction that Tom and Peter had had to it.

And, an hour later, that was how the nurse found Clay, his children gathered tight around his inanimate form, taking turns talking to him and trying to rouse him back to consciousness.

The nurse, a stout, graying woman with a nametag that read 'Judy,' smiled broadly at their efforts and praised them, saying that they were doing just exactly the right thing to help him. She then apologized because she had come to take Clay away for some more tests to be run.

"Do they know why he's still unconscious?" Peter asked.

"I'm sorry, but no, they don't just yet. They ran some tests when he first arrived, but weren't able to find anything conclusive from them, as I'm sure Dr. Samuels told you earlier." When Peter nodded, she continued. "I know he's hoping to find something more with this MRI that he's ordering now."

The girls got slowly to their feet and walked around the foot of the bed to stand beside Tom and Peter. They watched as an orderly came in to help

Judy move Clay from his bed to a gurney. As she started towards the door, she called out over her shoulder, "Why don't you all grab something to eat while your dad's busy? He's going to be at least an hour or so."

"Thank you, we will," Tom called after her.

The girls looked lost as they watched their father being wheeled away. They stood hugging themselves, their eyes large and red rimmed. Tom pulled Chrissy into his arms and murmured to her that Clay would be all right while Peter studied Andi's stiff form, trying to decide how best to comfort the prickly enigmatic woman that he loved. He finally reached over and simply took her hand. When she looked up at him, her eyes awash with tears that she battled, he tugged her gently to his side and enveloped her into his arms as well.

But he didn't promise her that everything would be okay. Because he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't allow him to make her empty promises, no matter how heartfelt they might be.

When the sisters had calmed down some, they reluctantly allowed themselves to be convinced that getting something to eat was a good idea, but only on the basis that they would need to eat something to be strong and available for their father when he awoke.

But, as they started out of the now empty room, arm in arm, Andi paused in the doorway and said, "You guys go on without me, and I'll catch up to you in the cafeteria."

Peter and Chrissy gave her a searching look that she waved off. "I need to use the little girls' room first," she explained with exaggerated patience.

"Oh." Peter looked guilty for thinking she might be up to something. "Okay. I need to find out if there's a Mac machine around here somewhere. I think I saw one up in the lobby. So if you get there

ahead of us, just wait a few minutes till we catch up."

Andi nodded and headed off in the opposite direction of the other three. She went into the first ladies room that she came to, and the moment she got inside she pulled out her cell phone and snapped it open, only to see that she had no signal.

"Damn," she muttered, snapping the cell closed again.

At that moment, the bathroom door opened, and Chrissy walked in.

"What're you doing here?" Andi asked. There was a window in the bathroom, and she moved over to it to try the cell again, with similar disappointing results.

"I could tell you were up to something," her sister stated. She frowned at the phone. "There's no reception on those things in here you know."

"So I'm learning. Come on. I have to find a phone to use and fast, before the guys come looking for us both."

"Who're you calling anyway?" Chrissy pressed, following Andi back out into the hallway.

"Lucky." Her sister strode right up to the first employee that she saw and demanded, "Where is the nearest phone – as private as possible? I have an important call that I really must make right away."

"If it's a local call, then you can use the one in my office," the man, a doctor from the looks of him, answered. He smiled at both girls, obviously taken with the twins' beauty despite Andi's brisk approach. "It's right this way," he added after Chrissy's nod.

"If anyone can wake Daddy up, it's Lucky." Andi told her sister with conviction as they followed the doctor down the corridor and into an office. Chrissy nodded her agreement as the girls sat down at the man's desk to dial. He nodded at their thanks and closed the door on his way out, a slight frown of disappointment on his young face.

Lucky had just opened the hotel room door and grudgingly let in a determined-to-talk Bonnie when her cell phone rang. The sound made her stop dead in her tracks.

Other than the woman standing beside her in that hotel room, there was only one other person in the world who knew Lucky's cell phone number. Clay.

Don't be such a ninny, she told herself sternly, as she crossed the room on watery legs to pick up the phone where she had left it on the nightstand. Anyone could look her name up in directory assistance if they wanted – she'd purposefully let her number be listed in case Clay, who she knew wasn't good with remembering phone numbers, should happen to forget hers. It was probably just her boss calling to see if she could work tonight because someone else had called in sick. Or it could always be a wrong number.

But, somehow, she knew that it wasn't either of those things. It was Clay.

Her hand shook when she held the phone up to her ear after pressing the answer button. Her voice sounded odd when she said hello.

"Lucky?" a female voice asked on the other end of the line, and though the voice was familiar it was a shock to Lucky to hear it, so sure had she been that it would be Clay's soft baritone in her ear instead.

"Yes? Who is this, please?" she managed to say despite the bitter taste of disappointment threatening to suffocate her from within.

"Lucky, it's Andi. Look, we really need you. Our dad's been in an accident. He got thrown from a horse at the ranch, and he's been unconscious since. We're down at Warminster General Hospital right now..."

Lucky's knees gave out at the words 'been in an accident.' She half fell, half sank onto the bed that

was thankfully right behind her, her heart beating wildly with fear and tears pricking her eyes. Almost instantly, Bonnie was sitting beside her, and her arm was around Lucky's shoulders, even though she had no way of knowing what was being said to her on the other end of the line.

"Is Clay all right?" Lucky heard herself ask in a frightened whisper.

"The doctors are still running all kinds of tests on him. So far, they know that he didn't break anything in the fall, and there doesn't seem to be anything physically wrong. They just can't seem to figure out why he won't come to. When our foreman found him, it looked like he'd hit his head on a pretty large rock." Andi's voice broke on the last word, and there was a pause on the phone; Lucky could hear the younger girl sniffing and crying quietly, and the sounds made Lucky's own thin line of control break. A path of tears started down her own cheeks, and she put a hand over her eyes to hide the tears from Bonnie.

"Lucky, it's Chrissy," a new voice broke in a moment later. "Can you come down here, please? Our dad needs everyone who loves him here to try to help him."

Lucky was nodding. Into the mouthpiece, she said, "I'll be there as fast as I can." And then she switched off the phone.

When she turned to Bonnie, she had already wiped away the tears. "I need you to drive me to Warminster General Hospital," she said, praying that the friend she had been avoiding and pushing away for nearly eight weeks now wouldn't turn her down.

"Of course." Bonnie took her hand and squeezed it, pulling her up beside her as she stood. "My car's outside. We'll be there in no time."

The tears threatened to start anew at Bonnie's easy agreement, but Lucky managed to keep them at bay. She watched her best friend with her heart in her eyes as she led her outside to her car and

helped her into the passenger seat like she would have a young child. That was exactly what Lucky felt like at the moment. A young, stupid, helpless child who had thought she'd known it all and had just had a very rude, very real awakening to what was really important in this world.

It was about forty minutes later when Lucky came down the hallway that led to Clay's room, Bonnie trying to keep up with her. She rushed into the hospital room where Andi and Chrissy already were, waiting for her. From the expressions on Tom and Peter's faces, Lucky figured they hadn't known that she was on her way.

"Where is he?" she asked breathlessly, her worried eyes darting from each of the girls' faces to the boys'. "I thought you said he was here."

"He is," Peter assured her, darting a dark glare at Andi, obviously having figured out how Lucky knew about Clay's hospitalization. He crossed the small room, and took one of Lucky's hands, then led her to a chair right beside the empty bed. "They're running more tests on him. They ought to be right back here with him in a few minutes."

Lucky sat reluctantly beside the bed and sighed.

"I want to know what's going on," she said. "Somebody tell me what happened. Start to finish."

Tom took a deep breath and was just opening his mouth when they heard the sound of wheels on linoleum floors and a moment later, Judy breezed back in the room with the same orderly from before, Clay's still, unconscious form between them on the gurney.

"Well, lookee here, Mr. Jackson," she sang out cheerfully, as if he was completely awake and alert. "You've got yourself two more visitors!"

Lucky felt like her heart had stopped beating inside her chest. She sat staring in horrified silence as the nurse and the orderly transferred Clay from the gurney to the bed, then pulled the starchy white

sheet over his unmoving body. She swallowed convulsively on a huge lump that had appeared in her throat at the sight of him, and she reached out with one hesitant hand to touch his face, his arm, his hand. A sob rose in her throat, and something like panic squeezed her chest.

She was vaguely aware of the nurse and the orderly bustling away, and then of everyone else's attention on her. She drew a long deep breath and looked up, her vision swimming.

"Could you all leave me alone with him a few minutes?" she managed to ask without losing her grip on her self control.

"Of course," Peter answered for them all. And then he took control and marshaled everyone through the door, closing it softly behind him on his way out.

Lucky looked back to Clay and touched his closed eyelids. "Wake up, Clay Jackson," she ordered him softly, her voice tremulous. "You've got me back here, and this time I swear to God I'm not leaving. So wake the hell up and read me the riot act. Tell me how long you're going to spank me this time around, how long you'll make me stand in the corner. And how many hours afterwards that you'll spend making love to me. How many years we're going to have together and how many grandchildren we'll spoil when we're old and gray."

When he didn't move so much as a muscle in response to her goading, Lucky felt the first of her tears slip over her cheeks. "Oh, shit," she muttered, leaning over him and staring intently into his face. "Come on, Clay, you can't do this to me. I'm going to fall apart if I lose you - I'll be an even worse mess than I am already. Jesus, I haven't even let myself grieve for my father yet, I can't even begin to think about having to grieve for you, too. Come on, Clay, open your eyes, honey. Please, Clay...."

She let her head fall onto his arm, and she lay there like that for a while, tears falling freely down her cheeks to mat the dark hairs on his arm, her

throat burning and her breath hitching. God, what was she going to do if he died? She couldn't survive it, she knew she couldn't. How had she ever thought she could just walk away from this man, and think that if anything happened to him afterwards she'd be all right, just because she wasn't with him anymore? If anything, the idea of losing him now was only worse, because she had wasted so much time that they could have had together.

What if he never woke up and she didn't have a chance to tell him how much he meant to her? How much she loved him? How she dreamed of him every night and how she'd missed the feeling of his arms around her while she slept? How he had been the only person in her life, except for her mother, who had loved her for who she was, flaws and all, and never gave up on that love, no matter how she acted or what she did?

Why had she walked away from him and all of that? She had to be the most foolish person on Earth.

Her eyes were tired and her throat raw by the time she felt her body begin to calm; crying sometimes did that for her, helped her to release the tension of whatever had her so upset. And then the most wonderful thing happened, so wonderful in fact that at first she thought she had to be imagining it.

She felt the lightest, barest hint of a touch on the crown of her head, right where Clay always used to smooth back her hair whenever he wanted to sooth her. She closed her eyes at the gentle phantom touch, letting herself enjoy it though she knew in her heart that she had to be imagining it.

But then she heard the words. Spoken so softly they hardly reached her ears.

"Quit your sniveling now, missy. Save some of those tears for the next time I have you over my knee, cause you sure are going to need 'em."

Lucky's head flew up, and her eyes lit up at the sight of Clay, his eyes just barely open and a wavering smile on his lips.

"Oh, my God, you're awake," she whispered, still staring at him, new tears streaming down her face now. "Oh, thank God! I was... I was so...." She stood up and moved to sit on the edge of his bed, leaning over him to hug him and then pressing her lips to his. She met his eyes for a very long time. "I was so afraid I'd lost you."

"Never," Clay shook his head adamantly. He fingered one of her red curls and studied her quietly. "Lord, you are a site for sore eyes."

"So are you, cowboy."

Clay cupped the side of her face and pulled her down to him so he could kiss her more thoroughly. When he finally released her, Lucky smiled teasingly down at him. "Boy, when you wake up, you really do wake up."

He wiggled his eyebrows at her suggestively and she giggled.

"I really ought to go and let everyone know that you're awake," she said reluctantly. "As much as I enjoy having you all to myself, I'm sure your kids would want to know so they can stop worrying about you, and the doctors might want to examine you again."

Clay caught her arm when she moved to go to the door. "Wait. Before you tell them, I want you to promise me something."

Lucky took a deep breath and sat back down, squeezing his hand. She reminded herself how she had felt only minutes before when she'd thought she might be losing him. She told herself it was long past time that she stopped being afraid of love, and time to give herself over to it, for good. And it would be for good, she insisted. No matter what happened, it would all be for good.

"I'll promise you anything you want," she told him sincerely, watching his eyes grow round at her brave declaration. "So ask away."

Without missing a beat, he nodded and said, "Marry me."

And, to her credit, Lucky did not pause or even hesitate. She opened her mouth and said the only word in her mind, in her heart: "Yes."

Chapter Fourteen

One week later....

Lucky awoke to the sound of the alarm clock going off on Sunday morning. Frowning, she rubbed her tired eyes and squinted at the soft blue numerals, her displeasure increasing when she saw that it was only seven a.m. She certainly hadn't set that alarm, and a brief glance to Clay's side of the bed told her that he was already up. With a sigh, she grudgingly got out of bed, figuring he'd forgotten to turn off the alarm that he must have set for himself, and slapped the annoying noise off. That was when she saw the envelope with her name on it laying beside the appliance.

Uh-oh, her brain echoed her heart.

Nervous now, Lucky took the envelope and sat down on the edge of the bed. She opened it and drew out a single sheet of plain stationery with more of Clay's strong handwriting:

Dear Lucky Star,

It is time now to address your running away from me this last time. I feel strong and calm enough now, and I do not wish to put it off any longer. The sooner we deal with it, the sooner we can put it behind us, and make a fresh start.

When you are finished reading this, I would like you to make up the bed and then gather together the items that I asked you to collect earlier this week. Place them on the bed and when I come inside I will come up to you and go over them. I'll tell you the significance of them and then we will begin.

I know that you have a date with the girls this afternoon to start planning the wedding, and I will make every effort to be finished well in advance of that. Lord knows, I'm anxious to have that wedding

*planned myself, so that I can make you
my bride.*

I love you, honey.

Clay

Lucky blew out a shaky breath as she set the letter down on the bedside table. Oh, boy.

Trying not to think of what the morning held for her, she pushed herself into action, first donning a long tee shirt and panties over the bare skin that Clay still insisted she sleep in. Then she made quick work of making up the bed. Finally, she faced the inevitable: time to collect the implements.

The first day that Clay had returned home after being in the hospital, one week ago, he had told her that she was to collect six spanking implements within the next five days. She could choose something that they had already used, but each implement had to be different from the others, and she should be careful that each would be deemed 'acceptable' by Clay's standards, because if he felt any one of her choices was too wimpy, he would choose something else to replace it.

It had proven to be one of the hardest things that Lucky had ever had to do. While she felt in her heart that she truly did deserve a thorough punishment for leaving Clay again and staying away for so long, it was very difficult to choose which implements would be used on her bare skin to deliver that punishment.

She had first chosen one of the hairbrushes that Clay had bought her, choosing the very old one with the scrollwork on the back of it. It was the one that she thought was the prettiest, and that was why she choose it; her memories of how painful each individual brush had been was pretty muddled from that day, or else she would have picked whichever one was the most lenient.

Next she had chosen a well used, thick, braided leather belt from her own closet, figuring that while it was leather it might not be too bad since it was so

old and a bit floppy. In any case, whether her assessment proved true or not, at least it was a second item to add to the pile.

Her next three items were found when she paid a visit to Target one afternoon. As spring was fast approaching, the superstore had begun to put out some of its summer inventory. She had found a plastic flyswatter at the head of one aisle and while she was hesitant that Clay might think it too wimpy, she added it to her cart anyway and hoped that he wouldn't. At the end of that same aisle she had come across a display of children's summer toys – sidewalk chalk and jacks, bubbles and... a paddleball game set. With a sigh, she'd reached for the paddleball game and plopped it into her cart.

Two aisles down, she'd been looking for a new wooden cutting board and that was when she saw the biggest wooden spoon she had ever come across in her life. The diameter of its bowl had to be at least five inches across. The tag read 'for those really big batches of cookies.' But Lucky's mind saw another purpose for the utensil. And she quickly threw it into her cart before she lost her nerve.

She had been stumped after that for a sixth item, and had finally resorted to searching online for something. With only two days to spare before her deadline, she had found a site that sold paddles at very reasonable prices. And the woman who owned it operated out of nearby New Jersey. For ten dollars plus shipping and handling, she had bought herself a leather paddle which was dubbed a "finger" paddle, because the business end of it had three 'fingers,' or flaps, that branched out from the leather at the handle area, making it resemble a fork. When she sent her online order off, she'd included a plea for the proprietress to rush her shipment, no matter what the cost, and had been pleased when the paddle arrived just yesterday, in time to complete her six items by her deadline.

Now, per his instructions in the note, Lucky collected the items that she had set aside in her

closet and then lined them up side by side on the bed. She stood looking down at them for a long moment, her stomach turning flips and her eyes watering. She wondered what he had in mind for her.

She didn't have long to wait to find out. About five minutes later, Clay came in the room. He gave her a small smile as his eyes fell on the items she had laid out for him, then he crossed the space between them and took her hand, squeezing it as he dropped a kiss on her lips.

"Good morning, beautiful," he greeted her huskily.

"Good morning," she responded, though she couldn't help but think that it was anything but.

Clay sat down on the bed and pulled her to sit on his right knee. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin briefly on the top of her head. Lucky waited for him to talk; she could tell he was composing himself, trying to decide how best to proceed.

Finally, he said, "You were gone from me this time for seven weeks. That's seven weeks of time we could have had together that we can never get back." Lucky nodded her agreement. "And this time you left is even more disappointing because you had promised me the first time that you would never run from me again." Again, Lucky nodded guiltily. "So, the way I see it, we have two things to address here. The seven weeks that you stayed away, the weeks that we lost together, and the fact that you broke your promise to me."

Lucky looked up at him, waiting for the ball to drop.

And then it did: "So, I have decided that for the next seven days, you will receive a spanking in the morning with one of the implements that you have chosen. Those spankings will be one for each of the weeks that we were apart by your decision. And every evening for the next seven days, you will have a hand spanking for breaking your promise."

Lucky simply stared at him for several minutes, the weight of his words sinking slowly into her brain. When she finally spoke again, it wasn't to argue with his decree, to question it or to try to convince him of another course of action. Because she knew Clay, and she knew him better than that; his mind was made up, and he would not be swayed now. So, instead, she heard herself ask him, "But you told me to pick out only six implements. What about the seventh day?"

Clay smiled gently and patted her hip where it met his thigh. "Don't worry about that, sweetheart. I have something in mind for the seventh day." He studied her quietly, as if waiting for something more. "Do you have any questions? Anything you want to say or tell me before we get started?"

Lucky considered the question briefly before shaking her head. "I'm not going to try to change your mind, if that's what you think," she told him. "I know I deserve this. I regret leaving you and breaking my promise. And I'm hoping that this punishment will help me to forgive myself for it. Because so far I am having a lot of trouble doing that."

Clay nodded and gave her a brief squeeze. Then he patted her hip again and nudged her to stand up. "Well, then let's get started. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish." He indicated the implements that she had laid out with an approving nod. "You've made some good choices here. I won't be dismissing any of them. Please put them on the dresser. I want them to stay there all week so that you will see them every morning."

While Lucky did as he requested, Clay told her, "There will be no lovemaking this week, Lucky. I want you to know that up front. I know that sometimes the spanking can be erotic for you even when it hurts, so the lack of fulfillment in that event will also be a part of your punishment this week. Also, as of this moment, you are to go without panties for the rest of the week. No underwear, no

matter what. I want you bare to me at all times. I have also worked out additional assignments for you for each day to help enforce your lessons. I will explain each one as we come to them, and I expect you to complete them as I ask you to. Any refusal or resistance will result in additional punishment. And any additional spanking that you may earn throughout the week will be given out with no consideration of the other punishments that you have already been dealt or those you still have coming. Do you understand?"

Sure, she understood. He'd apparently just signed her up for Hell On Earth Week.

But anything was worth it to Lucky if she could exchange it for the guilt in her heart and the gap that still stood between her and Clay. Whatever it took she would handle it. It was that important to her.

And so she nodded her head, took his hand in her own, and kissed it. "I understand, Clay. And I am ready."

His eyebrows rose at her answer. "All right. Pick out one of your implements then, and hand it to me."

And so began her week of hell on earth. That morning, Clay spanked her over his lap with the large wooden spoon. The spoon was heavy, and it stung like the dickens. When Lucky looked at her bottom in the mirror a full hour after Clay had finished with her, it was still a dark blotchy red marred with round circles where the spoon had most left its impression. She had a hard time controlling herself while she was over his lap for the spanking, though she had been determined at the offset to take it well. In the end, Clay had to hobble her legs between his own because she just couldn't help the way they jumped and kicked.

After her spanking, right afterwards in fact, Clay set her up at his desk in his study with a pen and a

pile of loose leaf paper. He had her sit bare bottomed on a chair he had brought in from the dining room to replace his own padded desk chair, and he told her she was to write out one hundred times, "I will not run from Clay ever again." Groaning inwardly, Lucky sat down nonetheless, wincing as her sore bottom hit the hard wood chair, and she picked up the pen.

When she finished the lines, about an hour later, she left them on his desk for his approval, and went on with her day. He had told her that she could go on about her day as usual once the lines were completed; he would look them over and there would be no more mention of her punishment until that night before bed – unless she got herself into trouble between now and then, which she *was not* going to do.

Always true to his word, Clay allowed Lucky the reprieve of the rest of the day, not so much as even looking in on her while she and his daughters made plans for the wedding. When he did appear that afternoon as she was putting dinner together, it was to give her a warm hug and kiss, then to return after a quick shower to keep her company and help finish putting dinner on the table. The conversation over the meal was kept carefully away from any mention of her upcoming bedtime spanking, but still the thought weighed heavily in Lucky's mind.

Sure enough, after the dishes were cleaned up from their meal, Clay took her hand and led her upstairs to their room. He ran a warm bubble bath for her and stripped her with his own hands, smiling approvingly when he confirmed that she had gone without panties the whole day as he had instructed her that morning. Then he helped her into the bath and told her to relax and soak for a while, that he would come back for her.

It was difficult to sit there and relax, but Lucky did the best that she could.

When Clay came back in for her, he helped her step out of the tub and then towel dried her himself,

awakening a thousand sensations in her body that she had already been told would not be satisfied. Then he led her back to their bedroom, took her over his lap and used his hand to set fire again to her still damp backside.

He did not stop until she was well roasted, red, and crying limply over his knee.

Then he pulled her into his arms and held her while she cried out her apologies and remorse. He rocked her on his lap until her sniffles subsided, then placed her under the covers at only eight p.m.

"Sweet dreams," he told her as he pressed a kiss on her forehead. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Clay," she told him sleepily.

That day set the pattern for the next six days to come. Each morning, Lucky woke up and received a spanking with one of the remaining implements that she had picked out. Each spanking was a little different, not just in what she was spanked with, but in how long it lasted, what position she was in and what additional assignment he chose to give her with it. And, of course, every night he drew her a warm bubble bath to soak in, then took her over his lap for a bedtime spanking with his hand before he tucked her in nice and early.

On Monday morning, Clay detached the string, ball, and staple from the paddleball game and used the resulting paddle on her bare behind, giving her fifty swift, even smacks on each cheek while he held her over his knee. After she had served ten minutes of corner time, he introduced her to a square, prickly mat that looked like a piece of outdoor carpeting, and she found out that that was to be her seat 'cushion' for the day.

Tuesday morning, Lucky found out just how affective a flimsy looking plastic flyswatter could be, especially when applied to an already sore, naked backside as she knelt over the side of the bed. That afternoon Clay had insisted that she call her

grandmother, and though she had thought that assignment was out of line at first, she was grateful to him for requiring her to complete it when she was finished. The elderly lady was very sweet over the telephone and told Lucky that she tried numerous times over the years to contact her and her mother. She looked forward to meeting her sometime soon, and Lucky found herself feeling the same way.

On Wednesday, Clay used Lucky's braided leather belt for a brief but heartfelt whipping over the sofa arm in the den. It only lasted about five minutes, including the times he paused to lecture her, but it left a lasting impression on her bottom. Lucky could tell that Clay was trying to compensate for the cumulative affect of each day's additional spankings by putting less force and number of swats into each new one. But while she realized this and appreciated it, it didn't help matters much when each day sitting down became more and more a thing of the past. That afternoon, he made her write a two page essay on how she would try in the future to handle her intimacy and trust issues differently from the way she'd dealt with them in the past. The assignment took her over an hour to complete and by the time she stood up again from the hard wooden chair she heartily hoped she would never have to sit down again.

The next day, Clay put her back over his knee and applied her pretty hairbrush to her bottom, leaving it mottled red from the intricately carved back. Lucky came to the conclusion as he was paddling her that she had definitely not chosen one of the more lenient brushes. This one fell heavily on her skin despite Clay's light use of it. She was so sore and raw by the time that he let her up to cry it out on his shoulder that she didn't even really mind when he told her that she was to go the entire day in the house without any clothing. At least she wouldn't have to put on pants or a dress that would rub against her irritated skin. Though later she did

come to resent the fact that she was nude, and he could look his fill at her, making her hot and bothered, when she couldn't see him, nor could she find a release for the pent up sexual arousal that all the spankings were bringing to the forefront.

Clay had saved the finger paddle that she had ordered on line for Friday morning, the next to last day of her punishment week. Lucky quickly found out that she had gotten her ten dollars worth, and more, when she'd purchased the leather paddle. Its long business end fell across both of her bare bottom cheeks every time that Clay brought it down while she lay there on their bed, her hips propped up by three pillows dressed in silk. That morning, he made her bring the paddle to him, kiss it, and then she had to ask him to spank her with it. Before he would agree to her request, he had made her tell him why she needed him to spank her, and he had required her to pull down her own pants till they pooled at her ankles. Instead of helping her into the position he wanted her in, he had told her instead to lay over the stacked pillows and then waiting for her to submit to the spanking by presenting herself that way. Only then did he begin the hard strapping, and as he did he insisted that she count each of the forty cracks out loud. When he was finally done, he waited for her to thank him before he helped her up, then he handed her a nail and a hammer and instructed her to hang her paddle up in her closet, somewhere where she would see it each and every day as a reminder of what happened to naughty little girls in their house. Once he had checked that she had done as he asked, he led her to the corner to cry out the rest of her tears.

On the final day of her punishment, Lucky woke up to find Clay already awake and watching her. He smiled down at her and kissed her lips briefly, then told her to get dressed. Reluctantly, knowing what was coming, she obeyed him, then took his offered hand and allowed him to escort her outside.

He led her right over to the willow tree in the front yard, the one that he knew she favored, and then he fished a pocket knife out of the front of his jeans. He handed the knife to her, blade out, and said simply, "Cut yourself a switch."

It took everything that Lucky had in her not to throw a protest tantrum right there. She was already so sore, and even bruised in a few places, and now he was going to switch her? She didn't think she could take it!

But a tiny voice inside her reminded her that this was the last day. That Clay was testing her, seeing how strong she was, seeing how much she loved him. And she did love him, and she did want to please him. So, she took the knife that he held towards her and she considered the tree in front of her for a moment before selected a single green branch and sawing through it.

Clay had to show her how to peel the bark from the switch then and though it took her a small piece of eternity to do it, she did manage to strip the entire thing on her own. Then she handed it back to him with a sigh and followed him inside the house. Once there, he instructed her to bend over the kitchen counter, and he shucked her jeans down her hips and legs. The first fiery lick of the switch struck her like a line of fire and she gasped, rising up on her toes.

Clay made fast work of the switching, snapping it smartly down her body from just above the crest of her bottom to just above her knees. Then he made the trip back up again, crisscrossing the lines a few times, determined to make the lesson one that she would never forget.

When he finally was done, he dropped the switch on the floor and turned his sobbing Lucky Star into his arms. He held her while she cried, rocking her slowly, and praising her softly in her ear.

"You have been so brave and so good this week, honey. I am so proud of you. It's over now. No

more spankings, not even tonight. It's all over. As of right now we're starting over fresh, honey. Shh, baby, it's all right, you did so well..."

Lucky never would have thought that they could have gotten a wedding together in just two months, but here they were just the same. Of course, they had purposefully kept it simple, having both the ceremony and the reception at the house with just close friends and family in attendance. Lucky was pleased that her grandmother, who she was quickly becoming close to, had been able to come. And the girls were there of course, with Tom and Peter in tow. Andi and Chrissy even stood up beside Lucky as bridesmaids, while Bonnie was the maid of honor.

She had never felt prettier or happier in her life than she did that night as she danced in her new husband's arms under a starry spring sky, the yard lit up only by the light of the heavens and a thousand or so taper candles and lanterns. As they started to move to the first dance of the evening, their guests gathered around them, blowing bubbles and taking pictures as they laughed and called out to them. Lucky looked up at Clay and smiled a secretive smile.

"I have a surprise for you," she told him in a stage whisper, making him lean in close to hear her and loving it.

"And what, pray tell, is that, little vixen?" he questioned, playing along.

She seemed to consider the question a moment before answering. Then she said, "Well, let's just say that I'll bet I'll be spanking free for at least the next nine months or so..."

Clay's brows furrowed over his blue eyes for a moment as he looked at her, digesting what she had just said. Then his eyes grew large, and he stopped dancing mid step, staring down at her in disbelief.

"Are you.... are you saying that... you're.... oh, my God... I'm going to be a Daddy? Again? You're pregnant?"

The last two words came out louder than anything before them had, and the music came to an abrupt halt as did all the conversation around them. With bubbles drifting around them and a few popping in their hair, Lucky slowly nodded, still grinning from ear to ear.

Clay let out a jubilant yell and scooped her up in his arms, twirling her around and around in the full skirted wedding gown while she laughed and held onto her veil least it go flying away. The music started back up again and the crowd gathered around them, cheering and applauding and shouting encouragement and congratulations.

When Clay finally set her back on her feet again, a loud whistle caught Lucky's attention and drew her gaze to where Andi and Chrissy stood beside Peter and Tom. She was half afraid to look at the girls' expressions despite how well things had been between them lately. But, when she did look up at them, she found their eyes warm on their father and her, genuine smiles on their faces, their hands adding heartily to the pounding applause that was all around them.

At that moment, as Clay drew her back into his arms to continue dancing, the dj announced that at this time the bride and groom wished to be joined by their friends on the lawn in a celebration of love. Wrapped in Clay's warm embrace, Lucky watched over his shoulder as other couples moved out to join them on the makeshift dance floor. Andi and Peter came first, followed closely by Chrissy and Tom, then Bonnie and Will, Jim Daniels and his wife Patricia, and still others. Turning and swirling around amongst the other couples, laughing and joking as they passed them, Lucky was struck by how love, which had always seemed so elusive, so hard to obtain even harder to hold onto, was now suddenly all around her. It was inside of her, and

Clay, and the girls and all of those people out there on that lawn with them that night. And as she looked up into Clay's eyes, seeing the love in his gaze, and feeling it in her heart just above where their baby now grew inside of her, she realized just how Lucky she really was.

