

Cabin on the Yankee Fork

and other Short Stories

**By
Karen Hubbell**

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DEDICATION

To Michael... the Wind Beneath my Wings.

Without you, I would never have known what it is to fly. Thank you for your love, patience, and guidance, and for giving me the courage to try my wings.

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Cabin on the Yankee Fork

Chapter One

Randle pushed his hat back and looked at the leaden sky. There was a smell of snow in the air, a heavy snow by the feel of the wind whistling through the Pines and Aspens around his cabin. He shivered slightly, and headed to the woodshed for more tinder. He'd have to keep both the stove and fireplace stoked for the next few days, if he was any judge of the weather sign. Snow came early in the Sawtooths, and September was coming to an end...more than high time for the weather to turn.

He called his dog to his side, and together the two trudged the short distance to the two-story cabin. Randle lived alone on the Yankee Fork of the Salmon River, enjoying his solitude. There were a few neighbors if one needed help, or for companionship, he could drive to Hailey, Sun Valley, Twin Falls, or Challis...but on the whole, Jackson Randle was a loner. He had worked hard to build this cabin, making it rustic yet with all the modern conveniences a person would need in order to live here full time. He worked from here, writing his stories and sending them off to the publisher with regularity every six to ten months.

Right now, however, he was totally stumped for a plot and a story. Writers' block was something he had never had to struggle with. The 34 year old had begun writing at the age of 18, while in college studying pre-medicine, and had become a published author at the age of 23. Well, maybe it was his turn to have a dry spell. It wasn't as if he needed the money, as the royalties from his published works had provided him with more than enough to retire now if he wanted to. No...what Randle needed now was...something more undefined. He was tired of the bar scene, and ski bunnies were definitely not his type of woman. He wanted someone more down to earth, more womanly, less worldly. He sighed as he sat down at the desk and looked over the ad he had been writing.

"Single 34yo male in search of the right woman, age 26-32, for companionship, housekeeping, cooking, possible matrimony. Contact J. Randle, PO Box 42 Sunshine, Idaho, or email jksnrand1@msn.com for more information." He read the ad aloud to Patches. The dog wagged his feathery tail and woofed sharply, as if in approval, then went back to sleep. Jackson grinned at the canine's obvious lack of interest; put the ad into the envelope, sealed it, and shrugged into his coat again. "C'mon Patch, let's go for a walk to the Post Office." The dog snorted and rolled over, turning his back on his master. Randle shook his head, laughing, and headed out the door. He walked the 2 miles to the general

store/post office, his thoughts on whether he would get any decent answers. He had already placed a feeler out on the Internet. God; he thought...he was desperate.

As he ambled back to the cabin, the first flakes of snow began to fall. He stood and enjoyed the soft brush against his strong, tanned face, at one with nature.

When he returned to the house, he found he had several emails waiting. He read through each one, casting some aside, mulling over others. He hadn't realized there would be so many women looking for love...relationships...or just a place to call home. This may prove to be harder than he'd thought. He read and re-read each one he had earmarked, sorting them carefully until one in particular caught his eye. He zoomed in on the photo she had attached to the message...a very pretty girl. Kind of young looking, but something in those eyes tugged at him. Deep sky blue eyes... and coppery hair. He leaned back in his chair, picturing a family of little red-headed kids, all with those eyes, then he pulled out the sliding desktop and typed out a reply, pushing send before he had time to change his mind. Less than an hour later, he'd received another email from her, and took delight in discovering she was prompt. To him, that was a very good sign that they would get along, for he was a stickler for punctuality. Well...he had set things in motion...now all he could do was give it some time and hope his instincts were correct in choosing her.

Kenna frowned as the snow began to fall a great deal faster and harder. Her Jeep Cherokee was loaded with all she owned, which wasn't much really... a laptop computer, some clothing, books, and her dog, Barney. The car had barely made it over Galena Summit, though it was 4-wheel drive. The road was slick, and she'd had to fight the harsh wind on the mountain as she'd pulled over to put on the chains for added traction. According to the latest email she had received from Jackson Randle, she had about another hour or so of traveling until she got to Sunshine. However, with the winds and snow, Kenna had the feeling it would be taking her much longer. Really, she should have just pulled off in Sun Valley and stayed in a motel until the storm was over. She had tried to call Randle from Obsidian, but the line was fuzzy with static, and she had ended up by just hanging up the phone. What little she had heard of his voice through the crackling static had sounded angry, but she'd been unable to make out anything other than the tone of his voice. Well...he'd just have to be mad. She couldn't turn back now. She was more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way there. Kenna lightly patted Barney on the nose. The spaniel had curled up on the front seat close to her, apparently seeking to offer the

girl some comfort. The storm had become so bad that she was forced to come to a near halt, creeping along at ten miles an hour, and her apprehension had communicated itself to the dog.

Then...suddenly...there it was...the turn off to the left. She could barely make out the road in the dark, and the near white out conditions did not offer much help, but Kenna kicked the Jeep into 4WD and skidded onto the little single lane road that would lead to Jackson Randle's cabin and to her destiny.

Jack was fuming as he paced the hardwood floor of the large living room. This waiting was really wearing on his nerves. The girl should have been here by now, even with conditions as they were. She was long overdue...

Suddenly, Patches growled low in the back of his throat, and Randle heard a muffled rap at the cabin door, along with what sounded like a severely bronchial cough. He tugged on his sweater and opened the door to see a snow-covered slip of a girl leaning wearily against the door-jam. There was a dog with her...a parti-colored Cocker, and the girl carried a heavy suitcase...what the hell? Where was her car? His dark eyebrow rose as he took in her appearance with one sharp glance.

"Are you Jack...Jackson Randle? I'm Kenna...Michelson..." her voice trailed off at the harsh glitter in his dark eyes. His face was carved of stone as he ushered her inside, taking the suitcase from her now nerveless fingers. She moved toward the fireplace, the dog following closely at her heels. Patch rolled over, looked at the intruders, grumbled a little, then decided to allow the strangers room, and moved over. The smaller dog gratefully curled up in front of the fire, drying off and getting warm. The girl gazed about the room nervously, feeling his anger even though she could not understand it.

"Where is your car...I presume you DID drive a car to get here?" the man asked; his voice soft, deep, yet threatening. She turned toward him, her face pale in the light.

"I slid off the road...about a mile or so back...I think I may have broken the axle...slid right down the river bank you see." She coughed harshly, her slight body racked with the convulsive choking. Finally, she caught her breath. "I'm sorry...it's asthma...happens when I'm scared..." she went to brush the dampened copper curls out of her eyes, and paled further as she brought her hand back with a fair amount of blood staining it. "Oh...I must have hit...my..." she looked at him, eyes huge in her small face, and he swiftly caught her as she crumpled.

"Damn! That's all I need!" Jack carried her into the room he had readied in anticipation of her arrival, laid her on the bed, loosened her clothing carefully, and then drew a down filled comforter over her. She was beautiful...enchantly so. He felt a

surge of protectiveness for the girl, and also an inexplicable anger at her carelessness. She quite obviously had no sense when it came to taking unnecessary risks. He'd deal with that when she felt a bit better. No woman of his was going to get away with that kind of...WAIT...woman of HIS? They'd only been exchanging email and phone calls for not quite 6 weeks before deciding to give it a try as roommates...on a non-sexual, no strings attached basis. He stopped short as he gazed down at her. Well...at least he knew how he felt about the plucky woman lying on the bed. Jackson Randle was totally, deeply, irrevocably in love.

Kenna looked around the dimly lit room, then at the man sleeping in the rocker near her bed. He was handsome in a ruggedly male way, broad shouldered, with a stern jaw. He had awoken her at intervals through the night to make certain she had not sustained a serious concussion from the bump to her head. She hadn't needed any stitching; thank heaven, though he could handle that if the case arose. He'd finally fallen asleep in the wee hours of the morning, an afghan tucked about his shoulders. She felt her heart skip a beat. During the last six weeks while emailing and talking on the phone, she had found herself beginning to feel more than a little attracted to him in ways she had not thought possible through an internet meeting. A friend had warned her that this wasn't going to be anything lasting...Internet dating was for losers, according to her. Kenna had known this was the case for some online dating couples...but she'd fallen instantaneously in love the moment her eyes had met his angry dark forest green ones last night.

She quietly rose and investigated the roomy cabin. It was equipped with two fully appointed baths; one of which was right off the room where she had slept. It was a beautiful home; with all the conveniences a woman could want...microwave, coffee machine, well-stocked Deepfreeze and pantry, and a top of the line washer and dryer...WOW! she thought to herself. He apparently didn't believe in living without some luxuries. She searched the cupboards for coffee, started the drip machine, and then set to cooking breakfast. May as well begin as she meant to go on. Kenna was a hard worker, didn't believe in shilly-shallying about. When something needed doing, she did it with a modicum of noise and movement. It wasn't long before she had sausages, eggs, hash browns and toast all ready, along with the coffee. She walked back into the bedroom to awaken Jack, calling his name softly so as not to startle him.

He stirred, the wonderful smells bringing him alive. Bless the girl, she'd found everything and had been busily cooking whilst he'd slept unawares. He stretched the kinks out of his long body, then padded on stocking feet into the big kitchen and took the

chair at the head of the table. She silently served him his plate, after which she sat down beside him with hers. He looked at the small amount on her plate questioningly, which caused her to flush a little.

"I've never been much on breakfast. Coffee and toast is what I normally eat, if I have breakfast." Kenna excused, seeing a bit of anger in his eyes. Jack's lips thinned into a hard line, and he forked half of the scrambled eggs and sausage onto her plate.

"You will eat that...and I mean all of it, Kenna. I mean it. You'll find you need more than a slice of toast and cup of coffee to sustain you here in the mountains, especially in winter." He examined her from head to toe, seeing the slenderness that her coat had hidden the evening before. "Why, a good nor'easter here would pick you right up and blow you halfway to Wyoming before I could pin you down."

"But...I'm really not hungry! I NEVER eat more than toast in the morning, and I do just fine!" Kenna protested, then jumped as his large fist slammed down upon the table.

His deep voice was stern as he spoke to her, "You will do as I say, or there will be consequences. The rules are going to be laid out here and now, Kenna. Number one, you will eat when I eat. And, that means a meal, Kenna, not toast, not crackers, or whatever it is you single gals think of as food. Number two, no more un-necessary risks are to be taken by driving in a snowstorm. Even with a 4wheel drive. You could have been seriously injured or even killed. I do NOT want that responsibility upon my head. Do you understand? If you need to go into Challis or one of the other towns around here, I will take you until you are more competent in the snow. I have more experience on these mountain roads and a heavier car. You will find plenty to entertain you and keep you out of trouble here...I have a television, along with a satellite dish and a DVD player, and there are books to spare, if you're so inclined. Also Kenna...and I absolutely MEAN this...you are not to wander off alone. These mountains can be extremely treacherous to an old-timer, let alone a greenhorn. There are wild animals, and the weather changes on a dime out here. We can go on some excursions when the weather clears, if you'd like...take a look at the old mining town down the road...think you can handle it?"

Kenna gazed at him, eyes wide. "W-what would the c-consequences be? For not following the rules, I mean?"

She gulped as he very calmly stated "Why, I'd have to spank you, of course. Would there be a problem with that?"

"SPANK me?" she asked, her voice squeaking at the end of her question. "You would really DO that?"

"Yes, Little Girl. That IS what I said. You will follow the rules...or

you will find yourself getting a bare bottomed spanking and be put in the corner. Now...Kenna Michelson, if you have a problem with that, you should have read the fine print before signing this agreement and driving all the way from Twin Falls . Look...here..." he leaned over, with the paper she'd signed in his hand.

"Oh...ummm...I didn't really see that," she said. In actuality, Kenna had seen the words, and the thought of a man caring enough to take her to task over his knee had rather excited her. But, of course, Kenna didn't want HIM to know that.

"Kenna...I asked if there is a problem with this?" he took her chin in his hand, forcing her to look into his eyes.

"No...no sir. I...guess not." Kenna answered him quietly.

"Excellent. Now, eat your breakfast like a good girl." He smiled, and her heart warmed, even though she felt a little irritated with his words. However, she tucked into the meal before her, doing her damndest to eat it all.

The days soon fell into an easy routine, as Kenna adjusted to the wintry climate and the thinner air. Mornings were spent walking the two dogs, followed by a goodly sized breakfast, most of which Kenna ended up feeding to Buster and Patches after Jackson had left the room. As far as she knew, he didn't seem to notice this, so the girl felt quite safe in giving most of her share to the dogs. Jack's ideas of portioning were more than slightly different than Kenna's. After breakfast, Kenna would rinse the dishes and place them in the dishwasher for running later in the day. Then she would potter about the house while Jackson went to work on his new novel. Around midmorning, Kenna would take him a cup of coffee, after which they'd take the dogs out for another run if the weather was fair. Lunch was generally soup and sandwiches, or a hearty stew Kenna had been cooking on the back of the stove since early in the day. She was an excellent cook and loved to bake little surprises for him, such as an apple pie or his favorite spice cake, which he would eat with a relish that made her heart nearly burst with pride.

Usually, in mid-afternoon, Jack would put on his hat, coat, and gloves, then would go to the woodpile and load up more tinder for the stove and fireplace, with the dogs frolicking at his heels or chasing strange new scents into the nearby wood. Kenna would stand watching by the window, grinning at the antics of the two dogs, who had become firm friends. But, mostly, she'd watch the way Jackson would swing the ax as he chopped the wood, tossing it into a neat pile near the woodshed. The relationship between Kenna and Randle was growing stronger with each day, the silences between them becoming more companionable than

strained. She knew without a doubt that she was deeply in love with this man, and he knew he loved her beyond measure.

Unbeknownst to Kenna, Randle had also been doing some observing of his own, watching as she continued to feed her meals to the dogs, which were both getting quite fat and sassy. She, on the other hand, remained slender and rather pale, and he was beginning to feel a deep concern for her lack of appetite. Finally, one morning, he'd had enough of her pretence at obedience and 'caught' her in the act. "Kenna...just WHAT do you think you are doing?" his voice was stern as the girl jumped guiltily and flushed with embarrassment. She hadn't heard him enter the kitchen, and the dogs had been too intent upon the ham, eggs, and hotcakes they were wolfing down to warn her.

She set the emptied plate down on the counter top and turned toward him, her head hanging just a bit. "I...I...was..." her voice was small and shaky.

"You were giving the dogs YOUR food. Yes...I see." Jack finished the sentence for her, arms crossed over his broad chest. "And what did I say your first day here? About eating? It hasn't only just been your breakfasts you've fed them, has it, Young Lady?"

Kenna sucked in a breath and looked up at him, a shocked expression in the depths of her eyes. "You KNEW? The whole time...you knew? But...why didn't you SAY anything?"

"Let's just say I was giving you enough rope to hang yourself, Kenna Marie Michelson, which you have seemed to do quite well. Now...what did I say would happen?"

She tied her hands into a nervous knot behind her back, pouting, not wanting to answer him. "KENNA!" she jumped at the harsh tone of his voice as he sharply rapped out her name. Really, the man could have been a drill sergeant! the idle thought crept into her mind. "You...ummm...you said...you would s-spank m-me, Jackson. But...p-please... don't...I'm sorry. I w-won't do it a-again, I p-promise." She stuttered, tears filling her eyes. She had never been spanked in her life, and the thought rather frightened her, even amidst the twinge of intrigue she felt at his commanding stance.

"Damned straight you won't do it again! The dogs have their own food; they don't need yours as well. I told you...you need the fat to keep you insulated here. Five pounds won't hurt you, for God's sake! Go into the living room, now..." he strode into the large room to the couch and sat there, waiting for her.

Kenna stood in the doorway, between the two rooms, one stocking foot tucked behind her knee. "PLEASE...please, Jack! I'm really sorry! Please...don't spank me?" her lower lip was trembling, and she hoped he would relent.

"Get your butt over here NOW or face worse than what I'd

already planned to give you. MOVE!" Kenna looked longingly at her bedroom door, measuring the distance with her eyes. Could she make it? She was a fast runner...had been in track all through high school and college. But, Jack was a big man, with a longer stride...one to her three...and she knew it would be a very slim chance for her to reach the door and be able to lock it behind her before he caught her. Randle could see her measuring the distances, could see her thoughtfully trying to work the problem out in her head...he grinned a little to realize that she was taking him seriously. "You had better hope you can run faster scared than I can mad, Kenna Marie, because I intend to see this through. You can either do it the hard way or the easy way. I would advise that you not make me come after you. Now...COME HERE!"

Kenna bit her lower lip and slowly walked toward him, her knees quaking like jelly, heart in her throat. Finally, she stood before the man she loved, not quite knowing what to expect. She gasped in surprise as he undid her jeans and slid them, along with her panties, to the floor. He had not seen her thus, and she blushed furiously and moved in protest, then jumped as his hand caressed her bottom. He tugged her bodily across his knees, positioning her just so, with her posterior high, giving him easy access to the round globes. Kenna hid her face against the cushions of the couch, waiting in agony and fear for the first blow to fall.

CRRACCCCK! The loudness of the blow shocked her, and she hissed as his hand came down sharply upon her right cheek, mixed emotions flooding her as he brought his hand down again and again, evenly distributing the smacks across her rounded bottom. Twenty times he swatted her, then stood her up and quick-marched her, holding her by the ear lobe, to the corner. "I'm NOT a child! You CAN'T make me stand in the CORNER like a damned two year old!" she shouted and stomped her foot, exactly like the child she had claimed not to be.

Jack stopped in the middle of the room, then walked back to her, moving more swiftly than a man of his size had a right to. "Oh, wrong move, sweetheart! I not only CAN, but I WILL!" and over she went, this time finding him with his foot propped up on a chair. Unable to reach the floor with her hands, she grabbed his pants leg and held on for dear life, kicking and squealing in protest. "OWWWW...OHHHHHH...Jackson! STOPPPP IT! DAMMIT!" she screamed in rage as he peppered her backside with stinging blows. Each strike of his palm hurt worse, and each one came faster. The more Kenna struggled, the faster and harder he spanked.

"Hold STILL, Kenna, or it will get worse! And there will be no

more of that language. You do NOT speak to me like that...it is totally inappropriate and unacceptable! I neither like nor will I tolerate swearing. Do you understand?"

She tried to answer, but choked on her reply, and Jackson 's hand swatted her harder than before. Really, she thought to herself, he must have cast iron hands... it seemed as if he'd been hitting her poor bottom for an eternity.

"I...SAID...DO...YOU...UNDERSTAND?" He asked again, unsympathetically. A blow to her butt emphasized each word.

"Yes Sir! I...understand...Oh Please! Please...stop!" she begged, tears falling to the floor.

"You'll eat? No more giving it to the dogs?" he asked her, continuing to rain sharp smacks down upon her tenderized rear end.

"Ye-es...I will...I will. I p-promise. No more feeding it to the dogs...please...stop!" she wailed. Once again, Jack stood her on her feet and put her into the corner. Then he began to lecture as she stood there, nose to the wall, sobbing.

Chapter Two

"Kenna, out here, life can hang by a thread. If you don't eat, don't put on some weight, you may come down with something and not recover. I worry about you! You're so thin it isn't healthy! I know you have already been ill...you explained that before coming. But Kenna, you can't expect to regain your health by living on little else but toast and coffee. I haven't told you this, but I'm going to now, and I want you to listen to me. Kenna, I love you. I sincerely care about your well-being. I want you to be healthy and happy here...with me." His words washed over her like a balm as he gathered her into strong arms.

She sobbed out her pain guilt onto the front breadth of his warm flannel shirt. "I'm s-sorry. I...didn't realize...I didn't know. I will try to eat more, I promise. I...I love you, Jackson...truly." Her small hands clasped the shirt convulsively, and she hiccupped as he gently rubbed her back. He leaned down and kissed her tenderly, then with rising passion, then carried her to her bedroom and laid her down on her tummy. She heard him rummaging around in the medicine cabinet, and then sighed as she felt his hands begin to rub a soothing lotion onto her still fiery bottom. It felt so damned good...so very good... she corrected her thoughts. His hands were so gentle now, not the hard steel that had paddled her relentlessly just moments ago. These were loving hands, soothing hands...hands that slowly eased her tee shirt and camisole top off, and then...put her to bed. How she wanted those hands to touch her...everywhere...his hands...she sighed again and fell asleep, her dreams sweetly erotic.

Kenna slept for a few hours, emotionally and physically drained by the morning's events; then awakened and rolled onto her back. She winced at the pain in her tender bottom. Damn the man! He had given her no chance to explain that she had never been much of a breakfast eater. She was more of a nibbler... preferring to eat several small nourishing snacks during the day, and a more substantial meal at midday. Coffee and toast, with perhaps an occasional soft-boiled egg were more than enough for her. She frowned as she got up from the bed, slipping into a comfortably loose fitting pair of sweats. Jackson was being entirely too dictatorial and domineering, and she was not going to take it!

In a fit of resentment, she entered the living room to see Jackson, intently typing at the keyboard of his computer, working on the novel. Normally, Kenna would have gone quietly about her chores, waiting to vacuum until he'd gone out to chop wood, but today she wanted nothing more than to vent her anger out on the hapless floors. She pulled the Hoover out of its customary spot in

the closet, watching him out of the corner of her eye, then sharply slamming the closet door. She vacuumed the living room, purposefully bumping the vacuum into the baseboards and roughly kicking things out the way, making certain to make a great deal of noise in the process.

Jackson looked at her, eyebrow raised. In the weeks she'd been here, he had gotten used to her quiet, efficiently considerate ways. She had never disturbed him as he worked, and he had grown to enjoy her quiet, calming presence in the room as he wrote. Today, however, she seemed to be in a snit and intent upon being as much of a nuisance as possible! He rubbed his forehead thoughtfully, then shrugged lightly and went back to his work, trying to block out the distracting noises the girl made as she went about the housework with a vengeance. She finished vacuuming, put the Hoover away, then stalked into the kitchen to unload the dishes and fix lunch. Jackson followed her progress by the sounds of clashing pots and pans and slamming cupboard doors. All this, Kenna did without speaking to him or acknowledging his presence. He finally had his fill of her tantrum, and so sat down his coffee and wandered nonchalantly into the dining room, where she was setting the table, plopping the dishes down with little regard for the delicate porcelain.

He grabbed her wrist as she sat one plate down with even more force. "Heyyy...go easy there!" he told her sharply. Kenna just looked at him silently until he let go her arm and dished up the meal. She sat gingerly down, still in stony silence, and began to eat, first having ascertained he had all he might need within reach. He watched her...she'd taken a small portion...too small in his view, but then she was a tiny woman, with small bones. He realized he'd been wrong to expect her to eat as much as he. After all, he was quite a bit larger than she, athletic and tough. Still...she'd been caught in an outright lie, which was something Jackson could never tolerate. It was the principle of the thing, more than anything else for him. Jackson felt a bit of impotent rage well up inside, then quickly stifled it. She was sulking, being childishly stubborn...and he was not going to play into her hands.

The meal continued in an extremely uncomfortable silence, with Jackson watching her, and Kenna avoiding his gaze. She was feeling not only angry, but also bewildered by the cascading emotions running rampant through her mind. Part of her wanted him to be in control...to take her in hand when she herself was out of control. But to do it ARBITRARILY...without discussing the rules further...just wasn't fair! She was a normally even-tempered woman, but fairness and equality were her passion, for which she would fight tooth and nail if need be.

After lunch, Randle took the dogs for a quick run, watching the

sky. There had been snow forecast for the afternoon, and he wanted to get some wood chopped and into the house and woodshed before it hit. He might as well take out his temper on the chopping block, rather than on Kenna. Apparently, she was feeling abused already, and he wasn't going to belabor the matter with her while they were both in the grip of temperament. He sighed. Dammit, how was he supposed to deal with the girl? She had agreed to the use of domestic discipline, but perhaps she hadn't fully understood what it entailed. He put a log on the chopping block, bringing the ax down sharply, using his anger to power his muscles. He continued to split logs, piling them up until he had more than enough to last for a few days, then stacked the wood carefully, working off the frustration and rage he felt. Granted, some of the tension between them was sexual...undressing her earlier had been...stimulating to say the least. She had an innocently untouched beauty. God...he had wanted so badly to take her then and there...but she'd needed time to rest...to emotionally assimilate what had taken place. She'd been exhausted, so he had stifled his urges, concentrating on his writing instead.

Kenna watched him for a few moments, then turned from the window and began to clean up the remains of the meal. She took note that the light above the kitchen sink was burnt out. Well, she could fix that. The light from the window was dim due to the storm front moving in, and she needed the brightness of the globe to see what she was doing. She grabbed the step stool and a fresh bulb, climbing to the top of the stool, not realizing just how much space remained between her and the light fixture until she tried to reach it. She stepped one foot cautiously onto the counter, still struggling to reach the burnt out bulb, not noticing how precarious her footing was upon the stool. Suddenly the stool tilted, and Kenna lost what little balance she'd had, teetering madly on the edge of the counter, then taking the stacked dishes and crying out as she fell, she landed amidst the debris heavily upon her left hip.

Jackson, hearing her scream, rushed into the house, panic written on his face and seared across his heart. The sight that met his eyes brought him up short. Shattered plates, glasses, and light bulb surrounded Kenna, shards of it in her hair and upon her clothing.

"NO...don't MOVE, Kenna. Let me clean the glass up first. Are you all right?" he asked her, concern for her making his voice gruff and harsh. She nodded, trying not to move, the pain in her hip causing her to pale. Her hand was bleeding, a large piece of glass stuck in it, and she hid it swiftly from him, not wanting him to see it. There was a look she didn't like behind the worry showing in his eyes.

"I was...replacing that light bulb and the stool slipped..." she explained, not looking at him, as he swept up the glass, picking up the bigger pieces carefully and putting them into the trash. He pointedly glanced at her feet, then coolly measured the distance to the light fixture above the sink.

"Barefoot? You should have called me in, Kenna. That's a pretty high reach for a little gal like you!" his words sounded condescending to the girl and she bristled, having been on a slow simmer since having been spanked.

To be told off over a stupid light bulb was just too much, and she suddenly spewed out at him. "I am not little, Jackson Randle! I'm 5'4"! I'm also not a helpless little girl who can't do things for herself! I can manage to dish up my own food, thank you very much, AND decide how much or little I eat! I'm neither a fool nor a child to be pampered and coddled. I am strong enough to do what needs doing if only you'd let me! And I COULD have reached the damned fixture except the stool slipped...I just needed to stretch a bit further...OH SHIT!" she let all her anger fly at him.

Really, the man was as chauvinistic as...as...a knight in King Arthur's court! She slowly stood, not caring about the glass around her in her need to make him see her as a woman, not a child. She coughed, her emotions triggering an asthma attack, but Kenna ignored it and continued her barrage. "I know I signed that agreement, and I KNOW what it means. But I also know there has to be negotiation and an equal amount of discussion before one makes rules for others. I should have SOME say in what constitutes a spanking offense. After all, it IS my ass on the line here..." she coughed convulsively and stopped to catch her breath.

Jackson stood there, frozen to the spot, listening to the small virago, a sense of grudging admiration at her spunk and more than a little guilt over his unreasonable expectations that she would not question his rules.

"Are you finished, Kenna?" he held up his hand as she opened her mouth, effectively putting a stop to whatever she'd been going to add to her diatribe. "I have something to say, and I would like very much for you to simply listen until I finish, as I will not repeat myself." He ran his fingers through his dark hair, took a deep breath and plunged in. "You're absolutely right. We should have discussed this agreement the moment you arrived, if not before. I was wrong to assume you would simply go along with my rules without some input as to them and any consequences, and I am sorry. However... if we are going to continue the arrangement...and I would very much like to...then we need to see eye to eye on the subject. I am a reasonable man, Kenna, and I don't demand more from anyone else than I do from myself."

He had finished cleaning the remaining glass from the floor, and moved to her. He gently lead her to the bathroom, where he removed the glass from her hair, then helped her out of her sweats to examine her for cuts. As she crossed her arms in an effort to shield her breasts from his gaze in embarrassment, he saw the gash on her hand and took it between his.

"You said you weren't hurt, Kenna. This is pretty deep." He washed it and examined it closely as she stood there in her panties and socks, shivering in reaction. Whether her chills were attributed to his touch or from shock, or a combination of both, she'd no idea.

"It needs stitching, Kenna...and we can't make the drive into Hailey. The snow is too bad now to get across the pass," he was worried and it showed in the way he held her to him.

He had all he needed in the cabin for emergencies, and had more than a rudimentary medical knowledge and skills, due to his studies in medicine before becoming a full time author. While they'd been occupied, the storm had moved in, and wind howled around the cabin fiercely, blowing snow against the windows. Kenna leaned into his warmth for comfort, tears welling in her eyes. She hated needles, was a complete baby about them...and knew there would likely have to be a tetanus injection with the stitching to stave off infection. "Please...can't you just...butterfly it? I...I can't stand needles...please, Jack?" Jackson lifted her onto the bathroom counter, wrapping her in his thick robe in order to keep her warm.

"Kenna, I'm really sorry about this, but it needs sewing. A butterfly isn't going to hold the skin together. I'll be as gentle as I can, okay?"

She began to sob in earnest as he prepared the necessary items, her panic increasing although she implicitly trusted him. "I...I c-can't!" she wailed " I r-really c-can't, Jackson...p-please!"

"Yes, Kenna Marie, you CAN and you WILL, because you MUST. Take a deep breath, sweetie, and try to relax. This will sting a bit." He rubbed alcohol on her skin, and then administered the Novocain in a matter of fact way, not letting her tears prevent him from doing what he must. Kenna leaned her bright head upon his shoulder again and cried softly until the medicine took effect. She shook with fear and reaction as he stitched, carefully drawing the jagged edges of her skin together and bandaged her hand. He kissed her on the forehead, soothing her tears, then had her lean against him once more as he gave her a tetanus booster.

"Hush, now, there's a good girl...shhhhhh. That's my girl. It's all right, now. You're going to be just fine...relax, honey. Shhh." Jackson rocked her as her sobs began to subside, then carefully lifted her and carried her into the bedroom. He sat her on the bed,

and then he picked up her flannel gown. He moved to pull it over her head, but she looked up into his eyes and he paused. Night had fallen, and he felt she was more than a little drained both physically and emotionally by all that had taken place that day. He looked searchingly into her eyes, drawn to the passion he saw so clearly in their depths. The need that shone from them was a fire that he could feel on her heated skin.

"Jack, please...stay with me tonight?" Kenna begged softly, her soft cheek resting against his chest.

"If I stay, Kenna, you know we'll make love, don't you? Are you ready for that? I want you to be certain of what you ask, Kenna." He spoke gently yet sternly, wanting the girl to know exactly what she was doing. She had ridden an emotional roller coaster today, and he was not about to take advantage if she in the least unsure.

"I...I wanted you to make love to me this morning after you spanked me. I thought you would...but when you didn't, I...felt...confused and angry." She spoke so softly that he had to bend to hear her shy admission. He took her lips with his, pushing his tongue into her willing mouth. Their tongues entwined in an erotically symbolic dance, and she timidly pulled back a little, causing him to moan. "Kenna..." he was surprised by her shaking fingers working at the buttons of his flannel shirt, then he grasped them gently and held them as he undid the shirt himself, casting it aside. Soon they were lying upon the bed, Kenna totally beautiful in her nakedness, he still partially clothed in his jeans.

She was moaning feverishly as he explored her, his hands and mouth touching and kissing in places no one had ever touched before. She nearly fainted as his mouth found her bare womanhood and his tongue slid inside its wet warmth. "Ohhh...my God...Jack!" her small hands clenched into fists as he teased and tasted. She cried out again as pleasure began to overwhelm her senses, her hips thrusting to meet his hungry mouth. She had never felt such passion...such heat. She thought she might die from the sheer intensity of it all.

"Jack...please...I...I need...I...want...ohhhh!" she whimpered, her body flushed with desire.

He quickly divested himself of his jeans, releasing his hard member. She was wet and hot with need, and he eased into her. Kenna stilled for only a moment as he pushed past the tight membrane, but the pain was short-lived, and she began to moan as he moved within her. Jackson let her set the pace, his hips meeting hers, giving her pleasure beyond anything she had ever imagined. He felt her body tightening around him, pulling him into her deeper and faster, and felt his control begin to slip. "Oh, God...Kenna...yes. Come for me...let it go, baby."

He groaned as he gave a forceful thrust into her, her moans echoing his. Suddenly, they exploded together, muscles contracting in ecstasy, Kenna crying out his name wildly, and Jack fiercely growling as his seed spilled into her. They slowly began to ride the crest, and then came down to earth, holding one another in wonder. Jack tenderly kissed away her tears as she cried at the beauty they had shared. She had given him something precious beyond gold...her innocence, her trust, and her heart. He felt truly blessed and honored by her offering. These were among the greatest gifts a woman could give to a man. Jack would cherish Kenna till he died and beyond. He knew they would find much to argue about, but also they would discover a good deal of joy and love as they built their relationship upon the trust they gave so completely to one another. He held her close to his heart, watching her sleep for a time, and then he too fell asleep, the woman of his dreams in his warm embrace.

Kenna and Jackson grew ever closer as the winter days flew by, sharing stories of their childhoods and families. They would sometimes make love in front of the big fireplace in the living room, falling asleep in one another's arms. Once, while out walking in the bright winter sun, Jack had tackled her and made love to her in the snow, Kenna giggling as she put some down the collar of his shirt. He'd growled at her and kissed her fiercely, and then had taken her to the heights. After they had walked home, hand in hand, and kissing every few feet much to the annoyance of the dogs. The canines couldn't understand the strange way Kenna and Jackson played, but then, they were only humans.

Kenna enjoyed teasing him. She would walk by him on her way to the kitchen and tickle his ear as he wrote. Jack would respond in kind to a certain extent, but when the writing muse took over, he would sharply warn her to behave or be paddled if she didn't stop trying to distract him. She took his threats seriously and would behave...for a while. Her fun-loving nature was coming to the fore, and more often than not, she would soon be teasing and tempting Jack to spend time with her. Still, she tried hard not to make it too much of a habit, because she knew he had a deadline, and she really did want him to finish the book. She had been surreptitiously reading bits of the manuscript whenever he was away for the day, her curiosity in reading it becoming too tempting to ignore. She loved his detail in describing the characters and the world in which they lived, and could imagine herself as the heroine, and Jack as the strong male protagonist.

He had very nearly caught her one day, and Kenna had been in a fright for hours after his arrival, knowing very well she was in for

a paddling. They had discussed the rules, the major rule being that she not disturb his papers. She was to leave the manuscript strictly alone. Jackson would let her read it when it was finished and not until. He hadn't laid down very many rules, but those he had were set in stone. Jack would not budge once the rules were established. Kenna found she liked knowing the consequences for any given offense...and the fact that Jackson was very much in control as the head of household. He was strong, protective, supportive, giving, and very loving. Kenna took her role as partner very seriously, and though it wasn't always equal, it was a fair arrangement, to her way of thinking. She was an independent girl who liked doing things her own way and usually rushed in doing them. He had told her if she kept hurrying about she would find herself in a peck of trouble one of these days, just as she'd done when trying to change that pesky light bulb.

Her hand had been sore for 3 weeks after the accident, due to a minor infection setting in. She had been in a hurry, as usual, and had not heeded Jack's warning about getting the hand wet or using it too much. He had quite ruthlessly blistered her bottom for taking chances with it after restitching it for the second time. Another rule was that Kenna take better care of herself, and be more aware of what she was doing. She hadn't particularly cared for THAT rule. She had in fact protested that she took very good care of herself, but in reality, she was too busy caring for him, the cabin, and the dogs. She would push until she was exhausted, which made her grouchy and quarrelsome. She then would pester Jack with little barbs until he thought he'd go round the bend.

"Kenna..." he would begin; his voice just a bit harsh. The angrier Jackson got, the softer his voice became. Kenna would heed the warning most of the time, settling down to read quietly, or taking a nap in order to get away from that soft, cautionary note in his voice.

She had been with Jack for three months now. They had spent the Christmas and New Year holidays snowbound, and Kenna was beginning to think winter would never end. Cabin fever was definitely setting in. She had been cooped up with a mild cold for the last week...honestly; Jack was such a worrywart...she sighed miserably as she looked out the window. February was half over, and still it snowed four out of seven days in a week. She had never seen this much snow, although she was a native Idahoan. Would it never end? She felt restless, wanting to go out, but had promised Jack she would not go anywhere alone. She wasn't all that good with directions, and he had warned her that even people born and raised in the mountains could get lost in the snow. Jackson was busily writing, the keys on the computer clacking away in an aggravating tattoo, wearing on Kenna's nerves. OHHH!

She was going to go stark raving mad if she didn't get some fresh air! She thought she would go for a walk...not far. Just down to the Post Office and back...perhaps four miles there and back. Surely she could do that...she knew the way quite well by now from walks with Jack, and she was in good physical shape. Jack would be glad to have the mail, without having to interrupt his working. He was so immersed in the book, and she knew how much he hated to stop.

Chapter Three

Swiftly, and silently as possible, Kenna pulled on her boots, heavy parka, and gloves. Then, making certain the dogs took no notice of her going; she snuck out into the brisk wind and light snow. She crept around the cabin, staying away from the windows, and ran lightheartedly off in the direction of the Post Office. The air felt good upon her cheeks as she walked, humming a tune and watching the winter birds flying about. There was a cheerful sense of freedom in her heart, and she danced a little jig, and then righted herself as she slipped. Better stop that, she thought, or end up with a broken ankle or leg.

She giggled as she pictured Jack finding her lying injured in the snow, then sobered. He'd be very angry with her if he discovered she had left the comfort of the house. She picked up the speed a bit and made it to the little Post Office moments before it closed, then headed back to the cabin. She hadn't paid much attention to how quickly darkness would fall, especially in winter, and even more so in a storm. The wind had picked up while she was inside the Post Office, and by the time she'd gone ten yards from the building she was feeling just a little bit of fright. She kept walking, determined not to turn back, even though the snow was being picked up by the wind and blown wildly around her. She ducked her head, a worried expression on her face as she fought to keep her balance.

She was cold and tired. The two miles to the cabin seemed to go on forever. It was then that Kenna admitted that she had lost her sense of direction in the blowing snow and had passed the turn off to the cabin. She had no idea how far she had come and no way to guess. She stopped, looking around, trying to get her bearings, to find a landmark, anything that was familiar. Nothing. She was lost...totally, hopelessly lost. Now, when it was too late, Kenna understood why Jack had been so adamant that she not go out alone. She'd never been in the mountains...not in winter. She had little knowledge to help herself, no way to let him know where she was...oh WHY hadn't she listened to him! She knew enough to try to find some type of shelter, but where? She blundered into a stand of trees that protected her from the worst of the wind and found a log to sit on, huddling deeper into her coat. She was scared and had never felt so alone in all of her life. Twenty-three years is too young to die, she thought fatalistically, and NOT in a snowstorm, for heaven's sake! She very nearly started to laugh at the irony of her predicament. Jackson certainly couldn't paddle her if he couldn't FIND her! Oh well, there was nothing for it. She'd have to hope he'd notice she was missing and find her before she froze to death, no matter what the consequences.

Jack stretched and ran his fingers through his dark hair. It was well past six o'clock and Kenna should have dinner going, but there was an uncanny silence in the house that he didn't like. It was, in fact, the absence of Kenna's usual preparatory noises that had finally drawn him out of the chapter he'd been so intent upon finishing. Patches and Buster were at the door, both dogs whining frantically, and Jackson had a dreadful feeling in the pit of his stomach as he noticed Kenna's outdoor gear missing from the coat rack by the kitchen door.

"Oh God!" he exclaimed, "the little fool!" He grabbed a flashlight, heavy coat, hat and gloves. Then he turned round and swiftly filled a thermos with coffee, lacing it heavily with brandy, and took down an old but heavy woolen blanket from the shelf in the closet. He knew she was going to be cold...very cold! IF he found her alive...well...Jack swore she would most decidedly have one hell of a sore bottom if she were. He had told her more than once of the storms that instantaneously descended in the mountains, and that she was to remain close to the cabin if she did go out alone.

Calling the dogs to his side, Jackson Randle went out into the bitter night, the wind chilling him to the bone even through his heavy parka. He looked into the tool shed, thinking perhaps she had taken the snowmobile, then frowned. He'd taught her how to drive the blasted thing...if she HAD to go on an excursion, she could have at least thought to take it, as it was faster than being on foot. Lord, but sometimes the girl was just plain stupid!

He growled as he took note that her Jeep was parked in the drive, repaired and fully operational...so she had definitely WALKED! But where had she gone...where would she take it into her foolish head to wander off to? Oh, HELL! He had talked about fetching the mail earlier in the day, but then had become immersed in his writing. Knowing Kenna, she had taken it upon herself to surprise him by going to get the mail. He would without doubt wring her lovely neck for her if...WHEN...he got her back home.

Jackson trudged to the Post Office, the dogs sniffing as they went, but found it shut for the weekend. He hurried to the storekeeper's cabin and asked about Kenna, getting more worried with each moment that passed, only to be told she had left hours ago. After refusing aid in his search as gracefully as possible, he began the trip back to the cabin.

"C'mon Patches, Buster...find Kenna! Go to Kenna!" he told the dogs, and there began what he would later call the longest hours of his life as he and the dogs began to search. They took it inch by

inch in places, digging in every area that looked like there may be a body hidden within. He was frantically calling her name at the top of his voice, when Buster suddenly whined sharply and ran towards the stand of pines that stood not far from the cabin. He rushed after the cocker, knowing Buster's great affection for his mistress would guide him.

"Kenna...Kenna? Answer me if you hear me...Kenna!" he hollered. There she was, half asleep from the cold, her face pale with fright in the glow of the flashlight's beam. And, rightly so, if the foreboding look on Jack's face was any indication. She was in trouble in more ways than one, for sure.

"I...I'm so s-sorry J-jackson..." she shuddered, her teeth chattering as he knelt in the snow and silently opened the thermos of hot coffee and brandy he carried, putting it to her lips. "Drink it slowly, Kenna...it will help. Can you move?" he was brusque as he questioned her, and she felt foolish tears begin to flow down her frozen cheeks. Then he wrapped her in a woolen blanket as he pulled her to her feet.

"I...can w-walk...I th-think." She teetered dangerously, and then fell against him. His arms automatically reached for her and lifted her close to his chest and began the walk to the cabin, the dogs running around them in joyful exuberance. Kenna kept her face buried in his coat, teeth chattering, cold and frightened at the range of emotions she felt rolling from Jackson's silent form.

They arrived at the cabin in short order, and Jack strode into the main bath. He sat Kenna on a bench as he ran hot water into the deep claw footed tub, then stripped her, remaining broodingly silent all the while. He gave her no time for modesty but quickly settled her into the tub, and she sighed as the warmth began to seep into her bones. He stayed with her, gently washing her hair, still in silence, then helped her out of the big tub and dried her briskly with a rough towel until her skin glowed pink and warm. Then Jackson brushed her hair and carried her into her bedroom, where he swiftly grabbed up her thickest flannel gown, pulled it over her head and body, and then stood watching as she settled herself under the down comforter. Finally, situated to her satisfaction under the warm covers, Kenna timidly looked up into his stony face.

"Jackson...what...what are you thinking?" she questioned him, her voice scared as that of a misbehaving child expecting punishment.

He ran shaking fingers through already mussed hair, his anger making him nearly want to strangle her, then strode to the window, turning his back for a moment to gather his thoughts.

"I'm thinking exactly how I am going to punish you, Kenna Marie Michelson, for your stupidity! I am so furious with you right

now I can't even see straight! Do you realize you could have very easily DIED out there? What were you thinking...or were you thinking at all? What if I hadn't noticed you were gone? I have never, EVER in my life been more angry than I am at this moment, young lady!" he spoke quite softly, yet with a starkness that Kenna had never before heard in his voice. His beloved face was white and tired, and she flinched at the pain reflected in the depths of his dark green eyes, then looked away, tears of shame filling her eyes.

"I'm s-sorry, Jack. I truly am...I only...w-wanted to bring you the mail. I needed s-some fresh air, and I thought...I'm sorry! I d-didn't mean to cause t-trouble or...hurt you." She looked up at him, begging for understanding. What she saw in his grim features was that Jack did understand her restlessness, but he was also firmly resolved in keeping to the rules.

"You'll stay in bed, tonight, Kenna. I'll bring you some soup, and then I want you to rest. I'll decide what to do about this in the morning...because if I touch you now, while I'm angry, God only knows what I would do." Jackson harshly told the girl.

Soon, he brought the promised soup, and saw her safely tucked in. Kenna cried into her pillows when he walked out and into the bedroom across the hall, shutting the door with a decided snap. They had not slept apart since the first time they had made love. Was he THAT angry? Oh...she was such an IDIOT! Why could she never obey him when it came to her safety? Why did she have to challenge and push him? He asked so little of her...surely being honest with him and obedient to him wasn't that hard to do. Why had she snuck out? She had known it would buy her a peck of trouble. Kenna lay awake most of that night, trying to ascertain why she had taken it into her head to deliberately disobey Jackson when she could have very easily waited for him to walk with her. And, the mail...what little there had been...could have waited until Monday. She was normally neither a cantankerous nor rebellious person, though she was high-spirited and impulsive.

The next morning found her with a bad headache, and her cold returned full force from the exposure. Kenna was quiet and thoughtful as she did her morning chores, fixing breakfast with downcast eyes. She felt horribly guilty and sad on top of being out of sorts. She wished Jackson would spank her and have done with it, but apparently he hadn't made his decision as to her punishment yet... he sat distant and silent, lost in his own thoughts.

He sat there debating with himself. How was he going to get through to Kenna that safety out here was not something to be taken lightly? She could have so easily died last night. He felt his heart grow leaden at the very thought of having to go on without

her bright presence in his life. He had to do something...drastic... something that would stay in her memory. He searched his memories for the best solution, and then smiled as he hit upon something his father had done to him once long ago. He would assign her lines for today, and then later this evening start a week's worth of spanking. How else would it get through to her just how vitally important it was that she obey the safety rules? He recalled how well it had worked for his father, mulling it over in his mind. He didn't see the chastened and meek looks Kenna sent his way.

"Jack?" she began softly, "what are you going to do?" He gazed at her thoughtfully, a determined light in his eyes.

"Kenna, after breakfast, you are to go to the desk in the study and write 500 lines, reading 'I will not disobey the safety rules again,' in your best penmanship. You will write this by hand, not on the computer. If it is not to my satisfaction, I will tear it up, and you will begin again. Is that understood?" Her face was a picture of conflicting emotions...on one hand wanting to protest against the childish assignment, on the other not knowing just how far to push him in the given circumstances. She stomped in irritation, and he reached out a large hand to sharply swat her fanny.

"Young lady, there will be no tantrums, or you will be quite severely and swiftly taken to task. Is that CLEAR?" Jack spoke with authority, and Kenna bit her lip...still unsure as to how serious he was.

"But...I'm a really terrible writer! I can't even decipher it myself sometimes! Please...can't I use my computer and print it out?" she whined, pouting. "I don't WANT to do lines..."

Jackson could not believe that she was behaving so childishly over writing lines, yet he had an inkling that she was about to get even more childish. He swatted her again, harder this time, and she jumped and let out a squeak of rage. Clearly, she was going to be recalcitrant about this, he sighed. Really...the girl was simply impossible, today!

"You will do the lines...to which you have just added another hundred, by the way, Kenna. Now...if you are quite finished...go start." And adding insult to injury he slapped her backside once more, not bothering to be gentle. She ran to the study and began to slam things around in her search for pen and paper, muttering under her breath.

Randle had had more than enough of this behavior by now. "KENNA MARIE, stop that racket this instant and get to those lines, young lady, unless you want to try for 1000. This is your last warning!" he heard her murmuring snidely, but decided to let it pass. Best to ignore her now and get on with his tasks for the day.

An uneasy silence soon fell over the cabin. Jackson went to his computer desk and began writing, ignoring the girl across the room as she fussed and scribbled away. Two hours later, she handed him a sheet of paper covered with what looked to him like hen scratches. Jack looked at it, and then watched her face fall as he ran it through the shredder. "Again. This time correctly. No misspelled words, no blotches, no erasures." His voice was cold.

Kenna went quietly back to her desk and sat down, shoulders slumped in shame and disappointment. She had worked so HARD...she felt a tear roll down her face and sniffled. She then started to re-write her lines...all 600 of them, trying desperately to make her schoolgirl scrawl neat and legible. "I will not..." what was she supposed to be writing? Oh god...she was losing it! Soon, another tear plopped onto her paper, and she hastily wiped it away. "I...will...not...disobey the safety rules again," she wrote, over and over, and over. She wrote until her hand felt like lead, and still there was more. As Kenna wrote, her tears continued to fall unchecked, while she desperately tried to regain control.

Randle felt like a heel, but he needed her to learn that there were lines she could not cross without consequence. She must realize that it was not he that dictated whether she could or could not go outdoors alone, but Nature itself in all its awesomeness and fury. Too many people had died under the same circumstances in which Kenna had been the night before. He hadn't the heart to tell her she had been only a few short yards from the cabin. That information was being saved for the stern lecture that was coming later. The afternoon passed as the two worked on in dismal silence.

Eventually, Kenna finished a second time, sniffing as she handed the paper to him, not looking at him. Her eyes were red from crying and from her cold, and her headache was worse than ever. She felt like she had been dragged behind a snowplow, and heartily wished Jack would just get it over with.

"Very well...it will do. Now...go to the back door. You know the willow tree just outside?" he handed her his pocketknife, and Kenna gasped, catching the meaning of his words. "You are to cut a switch, the width of my little finger and 18 inches in length, then return here." Kenna obeyed silently, her face pale. She followed his instructions as closely as she could, then returned, holding the willow and his knife out to him with trembling hands. Jackson then led her to the table, where he ordered her to remove her jeans and underwear, which she did, still silent, still avoiding his gaze. Then he draped her over the table, with her hands holding onto the edges in a death grip, her legs slightly spread, toes not quite reaching the floor. Kenna bit her lip, waiting for the first swish of the willow, closing her eyes tightly and trying not to whimper in

fear. She jumped as Jackson let lose a few experimental snaps against the table, not touching her. The whistle of that switch was enough to send shudders of fright to the marrow of her bones, and she felt panic begin.

"Kenna...do you know how close you were to the cabin last night?" he gently asked.

"N-no...I...don't, Sir...I...was scared. I...lost my head..." she stammered.

"You were in the little grove of pines...the ones just 30 yards away from the back door...you know what that means?" he asked, his voice still gentle.

Kenna miserably shook her head, not understanding. "N-no...Sir."

"It means that you will receive thirty lashes from the switch, tonight, and every night for the next five days, Kenna. The reason you will be punished so harshly is that I want it to be remembered. I want you to never forget that you are to follow the safety rules. They are in place for reasons. Do you hear me, Kenna? I need you to understand that you were in a very serious position last night! You were a mere thirty yards from the house, and you could have died!" he let the willow switch fly, and she cried out at its sting across her cheeks. Her hands gripped the edges of the table ever tighter as the blows fell one by one, peppering her backside and thighs. By the time he'd reached fifteen, Kenna was white-knuckling the table's edge, writhing in agony. By thirty, she was limp and totally repentant.

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry! I won't ever disobey you again, Jackson," Kenna sobbed as he picked her up and held her to him. "I'll remember... I will...I promise, Jack..."

"Yes, my love, I expect you will remember by the time this week is through." He carried her to his chair and sat holding her, rubbing her back and striped rear as she cried, sitting gingerly upon his lap. She sighed and acknowledged that she would definitely be one sorry and sore girl by the end of the week if her bottom was any judge. She knew Jack hadn't struck her with full force, yet she could feel the burn of every stripe the willow had made across her flesh. She could only hope he would not use the hated switch again, because she knew he would not hesitate to use all of the power behind his swing from this moment on. She was going to be punished properly for her misdeeds. Somehow, the knowledge gave her a sense of security...and a freedom to be wholly herself that she marveled at. She had thought the opposite when she'd begun this journey. Now, she wouldn't dream of living her life without the comforting boundaries that he placed upon her out of love.

Jackson looked down at her, and brushed her hair back from

her face. "Kenna, I would be so lost without you. You are my joy...my very breath! I have never in my life been as frightened as I was last night, not knowing if I would find you alive. Do you know how much you mean to me? Do you know how much I love you? This is why we have this agreement in our relationship, Kenna. Because I love you. Because it's my job to protect you... yes, even from yourself if I must... and even if that means I have to discipline you in order to keep you safe." He spoke with a great depth of emotion, his voice hesitant, yet she could feel the strength of character behind them, the passion, and the love filling her soul. How she loved this man. His solid ways anchored her when she was lost; his arms held her when she needed comfort or warmth, his passion reaching and matching hers.

She reached up to stroke his cheek softly. "Jackson, I am sorry. I just didn't think the storm would get so bad so quickly. I was so frightened! And so relieved when you found me, even though I knew I would be in trouble for disobeying you. I kept thinking how wrong it would be to die at 23 and how much I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life...how much I need you and love you." She whispered softly. Her temple rested against his strong shoulder, and he kissed the top of her bright head as he stood and carried her to the bedroom. He laid her down, then undressed and crawled into the bed beside her, cuddling her closely, mindful of her sore bottom. Its warmth burned into his thighs as he held her. She snuggled further into his embrace as sleep began to overcome her. Gradually, they fell asleep, she feeling safer than she had for many years, protected by the big man who's touch could send her over the edge with passion or crying in release from her guilt, he tenderly, sweetly holding on to the most cherished possession he could own. Kenna...his woman. Outside of the cabin, the Yankee Fork murmured gently in its sleep as the snow caressed it and fell softly, silently to the ground.

Sophie

Chapter One

The first words that came to mind when he saw her were frumpy, spinsterish schoolmarm. She was dressed in an unappealing skirt and vest, her long hair pulled back into an unattractive ponytail. She wore no make-up, and her eyes were hidden behind a pair of atrociously ugly glasses. He thought her a rather unremarkable woman, and yet there was something that pulled him, some indefinable sense that there was more to her than met the eye, making him want to peel her layers off like one would an onion. She had very good secretarial skills, and was quietly unassuming in manner, yet he felt a spark of spirit behind the plain-jane identity she assumed. Normally, Garth Riggins would not be vaguely attracted to a woman like Sophronia Crawford. He usually went in for the more obvious, voluptuously sensual woman. Still...there was a quietly simmering fire inside Sophie that he felt he could ignite into a full-blown conflagration if given the chance.

Sophie wiped her eyes and blew her nose, giving a soft hiccupping sigh. She had been in the restroom when two of the other girls from the secretarial pool had come in and started to comment about another girl. She hadn't realized it was she they were discussing. Then she had heard her name and raucous laughter from them as a third had joined in the conversation with a remark about the way she dressed, and questioned how Garth could stand to have "Little Miss Sophie Sunshine" working as his secretary when there were others much better looking.

Sophie had remained hidden in the stall, hearing every degrading word, her face red, and tears flowing silently down her face until the other girls had left, unaware of her presence. She was embarrassed and upset about what she had inadvertently overheard and also felt a sense of outrage at the criticisms from the girls. She had seen nothing wrong neither with the way she dressed, nor in the fact that she did not play up her looks to appear more attractive. Sophie had been a sheltered child, nurtured by a rather reclusive maiden aunt from the age of six and had been taught to dress rather conservatively, if not in truth, as old-fashioned as her Aunt Martha had. Since she was a shy girl, given to be studious and retiring, Sophie hadn't seemed to have been overly concerned with looks during school, concentrating on getting good grades and on her music. She had graduated high school and had gone on to take a secretarial course, which had

been the course approved of for young ladies by her aunt. Sophie would have rather studied medicine, but blood and gore were thought of as something decent young ladies did not have an interest in by her aunt, and so Sophie had gone on in her life, pleasing her aunt and not herself. She had felt that she could not truly follow her own course, as her aunt had controlled the purse strings with a lovingly iron fist. Sophie had always been a people pleaser, losing herself in the joy of giving, and had truly loved her aunt and so did not feel too put upon by the loss of her dreams of a career in the medical field.

Soon after Sophie had finished her training, Aunt Martha had died much the same way she had lived...quietly in her sleep, out of step with the world and its inhabitants, leaving all she'd owned to the young woman. Alone in the world, Sophie had entered the work force, determined to be the best possible secretary she could be in honor to her aunt.

She enjoyed working as Garth Riggins' private secretary. The man was very pleasant to work with, although she had caught him casting some rather questioning glances her way upon occasion...still, Sophie felt comfortable with him. He never raised his voice when angered, but he would get a look in his eyes, and a brow would rise. The unfortunate soul whom had caused the "boss" to get ticked would be called into his office, and if lucky, would emerge, appearing suitably chastised by whatever had transpired behind those large oak doors. So far, Sophie had not been called on the carpet, and hoped never to have to face the ire of her boss.

Garth watched as his pale secretary went about her work after her lunch break, a rather pinched and unhappy look upon her face. Something had upset the girl, for she usually had a smile for him, and although not a chatterbox, she would normally carry on a pleasing conversation when spoken to. Today, however, she seemed to be very much out of sorts and almost ill at ease within her own skin. After the tenth soft hiccupping sigh, Garth had had enough of the girl's mooney mood. He tossed his pencil down onto the large oak desk, and looked at her, eyebrow up. "All right, Miss Crawford...let's have it," his soft, deep voice spoke to her and she looked up, her pen poised over the shorthand pad upon her lap.

"Sir? Wh...what do you mean, Mr. Riggins? Have what?" she questioned, nervously clearing her throat as he got up and walked round the desk to look down upon her, his arms folded across a broad chest and eyebrow even higher.

"Something has obviously upset you, I want to know what it was." He held up a hand as Sophie started to deny that she was troubled. "Don't try to tell me nothing is wrong, Sophie,...you've been walking around in here all afternoon like the world has just

caved in on your head. Now, give, young lady, and don't leave anything out. Maybe I can help." Sophie cleared her throat and capped the pen in her small hand, quite obviously trying to stall a little, and he smiled sardonically. "Sophie...I don't ask more than twice for information..." he warned softly.

She gazed up into his brooding grey eyes, her lower lip trembling a little in an effort to control the tears that threatened to spill again. She had taken all of her lunch hour to sort herself out and stop crying, as she was not about to let her boss nor the others in the office see her distress. "I...Sir? Is...is there something wrong with the way I dress?" she blurted the question, her face red, then she looked down at her loafer-shod feet, waiting for his answer.

He frowned at the question. So...she had evidently overheard some of the snide comments the girls in the secretarial pool were making about her. He had known it would happen eventually, but that it would devastate her so completely, he had not foreseen. Her slender shoulders were slumped, her hands shaking, her whole body, in fact, was trembling in reaction. Garth's hands clenched in unconscious anger at the person or persons whom had hurt this girl so cruelly. He had hoped that one of the friendlier secretaries would have taken the girl under their wing, rather than it falling upon his head to guide her in her choices of attractive apparel and make up.

He sighed and took her small chin into his big fist, gently pulling her head up, so he could look into her eyes. He knelt in front of her and removed the outsized glasses she wore, revealing a pair of beautiful greenish-blue eyes, wherein tears sparkled. "Sophie...this is not going to be easy for you to hear, but...yes. Your clothes are too conservative, and to say the least...too old for you. They make you look... frumpy and old, and they detract from what I believe could be a very pretty young woman," he explained gently.

She winced at his words, and then spoke rather sharply and angrily. "I'm amazed you could stand to have me around, Mr. Riggins, if I am so...ugly and unbearable to look at!"

She stood unexpectedly, her small foot stomping in rage, her fists clenched, notebook and pen flying from her lap to land unheeded upon the carpeted floor. Her actions came unpredictably, and he stood to his full height, taken aback by the little virago in his office, his jaw tightening as she shoved him away from her and headed toward the doors.

"Stop right there, young lady...we are not finished with this discussion!" his voice rapped out, and Sophie turned to look at him, small mouth agape. He had never used that tone with her...not once in the five months she had worked for him. In fact,

Sophie had never been spoken to in such a commanding way, and her hand dropped from the doorknob. "I expect you to grant me the courtesy of listening to me, young lady," he continued. He strode to her, took her elbow, and directed her to the leather couch, where she sat, lower lip pouting mutinously, arms folded.

"Sophie, haven't you ever wanted to fit in? Or do you enjoy being out of step and out of date with the world you live in?" he questioned her. She was slightly taken aback at the probing question. A humorless smile flitted across her face.

"I...never really thought of it that way, Mr. Riggins. I haven't paid much attention to clothing styles until starting work; I was too focused upon my studies. I...actually... I have never bought clothing for myself. Aunt Martha ordered all of them from a local shop. She shopped for everything that way...tradesmen would deliver the groceries, her medicines...even the doctor came to the house. She didn't like to go out, you see. I was never asked for my opinion."

There was no rancor in her voice, which rather surprised Garth. He was indeed gaining a clearer insight into the upbringing of this naïve young woman, and he grimaced. It was, in his belief, a form of neglect to raise a child so out of sync that they would be held up to ridicule and mockery by others.

"No one has ever told you this before?" he probed. She shook her head negatively, feeling all kinds of fool. "Would you care for some guidance, then? I would be more than willing to take you to a few boutiques in the city, if you would be agreeable to let me go along as an advisor?" he looked at her flushed face and felt more than a little stab of sympathy for the girl. What kind of life must she have lived, caged in the walls provided by her aunt?

Sophie nodded shyly, because she really did not wish to go shopping alone.

"Good...then I suggest you take the rest of today off, and I shall pick you up tomorrow at 9 am sharp to begin." Garth spoke firmly as he helped her off the couch. "Do you have anything other than these dresses, Sophie? Jeans, or slacks that you could wear tomorrow?"

She paused and turned to grin at him. "I do have one pair of denims that a school friend gave me for my birthday a few years ago...never worn, because they were unbecoming a lady in Aunt Martha's eyes. I was supposed to get rid of them, but I didn't. My one moment of rebellion, you could say."

She walked out of the room, leaving a rather baffled man standing there with his chin in his hand staring at the door thoughtfully. Sophie definitely had a spark of temper and will under that calm exterior after all. He would enjoy seeing it develop.

Saturday dawned bright and clear. The morning sun shone into Sophie's room and wakened her gently, its touch caressing her eyelids with a soft kiss. She threw back her covers and rushed to open the window to hear the songs of the birds, and drank in the freshness of a new day with a deep breath. Even though she had been up late into the night, she was wide-awake, excited at the prospect of being with Garth outside of the office for the day. She had sorted through her closet and that of her late aunt, throwing away some outfits and setting aside others to be donated to Good Will. Sophie grinned as her cat, Nicodemus, rubbed his head against her ankle. It seemed to her that he sensed the changes coming and heartily approved. She picked him up and hugged his soft body to her; his loud purr tickled her chin. "Well, my friend, what say we go dig up some breakfast before I leave you to your day, hmm?" The cat mewed his appreciation as she set him on the floor again, walked to her door, and looked back at her as if to say 'Well, what are you waiting for?' Sophie laughed at the old curmudgeon and opened the door for him. "There you are, Your Majesty," she told him as he exited the room, tail switching impatiently.

Garth was amazed at the change in the girl. Her long auburn hair was left loose and flowed to her slender waist, which was accentuated by the jeans and simple white tee shirt she wore. She was stunning, with a figure a model would envy. Only the glasses she wore detracted from her beauty. Those would have to go, Garth decided to himself. One thing at a time, though. Right now, the goal was to get her into a more attractive wardrobe and makeup...bringing her into the 21st century. Still, now that he could actually see the girl's figure, he felt a rather strange wrenching in his heart that he shook off. He had visions of wrapping his hands in that glorious hair and pulling her toward him for a passionate kiss. He shifted uneasily in the seat and concentrated upon the road ahead, clearing his mind of the thought of taking her and making her his. She was his secretary, not some passing fancy for him to take and cast aside...yet, here he was, playing Swengali. Damn! He must be crazy to be taking an interest in the girl.

He drove with a proficiency that the girl admired, her eyes watching the hands on the steering wheel. Lord, but he was attractive, and his hands were large and well kept. Sophie quickly averted her eyes when Garth glanced at her. She flushed guiltily at the thoughts that ran rampant through her mind...images of him touching her intimately, his hands caressing her. Really, she must get a rein on such ideas. They were entirely too self-

indulgent! The man was her boss, for goodness sake. She turned her head and looked out the window, focusing on the passing scenery for the rest of the drive. The silence between them grew oppressive, but she could not bring herself to break it. For the first time in her life, Sophie was highly, overwhelmingly aware of a man. She wanted to make him see her as a woman. She closed her eyes and unconsciously clenched her small hand into a fist.

"Sophie? Are you going to get out of the car?" Garth's voice came from the sidewalk, where he stood, holding her door open for her. She blushed and nodded. "Thank you...I...ummm...must have fallen asleep, sorry." She spoke softly as she stepped out of the car.

The rest of the morning went by on wings as Sophie was swept into one store after another, trying on outfit after outfit, modeling for him. She was shyly pleased when he approved of her selections. Garth let his eyes drink in the sight of Sophie in clothing that was much more in keeping with her age and structure than the shapeless dresses she had previously worn. She obviously had an instinctive sense of style, for she chose dresses and slack sets that draped her body attractively, colors that complimented her auburn hair and blue-green eyes. She had carefully listened to the girl at the store makeup counter, who helped her pick out the proper cosmetics and showed her how to apply them. Her face glowed with soft color, enhanced by the lightly applied makeup. She was dressed in one of the new outfits...a soft sage green top with darker green denims and sandals, and looked enchantingly lovely. He discovered that he felt more than a little attracted to her, and found himself watching the way she moved, the graceful placement of her hand, the unconscious sensuality of her walk.

They were getting along very well; until Garth suggested Sophie purchase an evening gown. She had looked at it, allowing herself to be talked into trying it on. He'd been breathless with her ethereal appearance. She'd blushed at the curves the dress revealed, the creamy skin of her shoulders and cleavage shown to perfection, and rushed back into the dressing room to take it off. He'd noticed it was not in the collection she'd put on the counter as final selections. He frowned at her, for the dress had seemed to be made especially with Sophie in mind. However, Garth decided to wait until they were alone before addressing the girl's obstinacy. Once in the car, he turned to look at her. "Sophie, that gown was perfect for you. If you're worried about the cost, I would be happy to purchase it for you..." he began, only to be very peremptorily cut off by her sharp words.

"No! I have plenty of money, Mr. Riggins. I have no need for the gown. Besides, it was positively indecent!" Her faced flushed

with irritation when Garth threw back his dark head in laughter, calling her a little prude, and her small hand flew involuntarily to slap his face. His larger hand caught her wrist just before the blow landed, his eyes darkening to steely grey.

"You don't want to go there, young lady."

Sophie was too angry to heed the warning, and let fly with the other hand. It made a fierce sound when it connected to Garth's cheek, and left an angry red mark.

He silently started the car, his jaw set. The ride to Sophie's house was accomplished in total silence, whereupon Garth took her by her elbow and drew her along with him into the front hall. Sophie was protesting all the way, for she had trouble keeping up with his longer stride, and stumbled in the effort to stay on her feet. "Garth! Let me go! You're walking too fast..." she raged ineffectually. He pulled her into the living room, then swiftly settled onto the sofa and pulled her in one smooth motion over his lap. "What do you think you're doing...let me UP! NOW! GARTHUUUU!" she cried out as his hand came down upon her upturned posterior in a sharply stinging smack.

"You've been needing this for some time now, you little hell-cat! I will NOT tolerate your attitude any longer. I let it go in the office when you lost your temper with me, but I will not put up with it now." Garth continued to rain slaps on her hapless bottom as she squirmed and kicked, trying to get away from the blows.

"Garth...stop...stop...OWWWWW! DAMMIT. Stop it, you brute! Let me GO!"

Sophie's hand went back involuntarily to protect herself, but he simply grasped her wrist, pulling her hand out of the way, and unrelentingly spanked her. "You will NOT curse at me, young lady!" he said firmly, peppering her ass harder and faster. "Just be glad I've left you some dignity and not bared your ass for this, Sophronia Elizabeth." Sophie had never in her life been struck, and was gasping in shock and sheer amazement that he would so ruthlessly punish her for losing her temper.

"Please...oh, please... Garth...I...I'm...sorry I hit you...please stop...it HURTS!" she wailed. She began to sob with the pain and shame of being spanked by her boss. "Owww...oh please! I will never...ever slap you again, Sir!"

Garth eased her up and turned the sobbing girl into his chest, rocking her gently. "Hush now. It's all right, sweetheart. Shhhh..." Sophie clung to him, gulping and crying, soaking the front breadth of his shirt with her tears.

"I...I really...am sorry...Garth. Will... you forgive...me?" she hiccupped softly as he rubbed her back.

"I know, Baby. All is forgiven." He kissed her gently on the forehead, and she wrapped her small arms around him in a

grateful hug, snuggling into his arms with a sigh. She fell asleep in the comfort of his lap, small and secure in the love she felt within the tender circle of his strong arms.

He marveled at how natural it felt to hold her, how her small body curved to fit his larger frame, and how she seemed to melt into him. He knew in that moment that she was perhaps the most important person in his life, for his emotions were tender, and his heart filled with a sweetness he had never known. Who would have ever guessed that Garth Riggins would fall for a little plain-jane wisp of a girl with an old-fashioned name and sensibilities? He felt bewildered, for he had always gone for the blatantly sexual woman, the blowsy, voluptuous blondes or brunettes with the come-hither look and free passes to their bedrooms. To suddenly find himself in love with the girl he held tenderly in his arms as she slept was quite a surprise to Garth, a very pleasant one, but still a surprise.

She stirred quietly, and her eyes fluttered open. She looked up into his face, and he kissed her, unable to stop his lips from meeting her softer ones, plundering their sweetness. Sophie murmured, then wrapped her arms about him, as she gave Garth an answering kiss. She melted into his embrace hungrily; passion meeting passion, as they both felt the flames of desire burning, building. Garth moaned in frustration, then gently thrust the girl from him, putting the brakes on in an effort to contain his fierce desire for her. She was an innocent, and he didn't want to rush her into something she may regret. "I have to go...I'll see you in the office Monday." He nearly tripped over himself in an effort to put distance between them. Sophie walked to the door and watched as he backed out of the drive, heart heavy in her chest. How could she have kissed him? She would never be able to look him in the eye again! How could she have let her feelings for him become so...so obvious?

"Well, I blew that, Nicodemus...big time." She spoke to the cat as he wrapped around her legs. She picked him up and held him to her, putting her cheek on his soft fur. He purred loudly, butting her chin comfortingly as she sat down on the sofa. "Well, at least I can count on you to stick with me, Nic." she smiled ruefully. They shared the couch, a good movie on television, and a bologna sandwich. Then Sophie and her cat snuggled under her blankets and fell asleep, exhaustion taking over at last.

Chapter Two

Sophie had blossomed over night after Garth Riggins had taken her in hand and had become rather more popular than he'd liked with members of the junior staff in the last few months. Subsequent to spanking her, the girl had seemed to withdraw emotionally from him, treating him with a coolness that she had here-to-fore never shown him.

He stood in his office, pensively looking out the big window at the city lights. It was quite late, but he had no desire to leave as yet, feeling that it was best to thrash through his emotions here than in his apartment. Then, too, here he was assured none of his previous lovers would be trying to contact him, for he had made it a point to never give out the office number to any of the women he'd dated. Garth Riggins preferred to keep his business life separate from his social life. Certainly, many of them would have liked to be touted at his prestigious business...he was a very wealthy man, and considered a good catch...but Garth had been very adamant about his office being off limits. He tended to frown on office romances, though he did not discourage them. His employees were human after all, and as long as work was done on time, and the staff kept within office guidelines regarding the matter, then he had no problem.

His predicament now was that he, himself, was head-over-heels in love with Sophie and was finding it increasingly hard to focus upon his duties as President of the company. Perhaps he should transfer her to another area or even put her in the secretarial pool, rather than have her as his personal aid. He rubbed his forehead, feeling the beginnings of a severe headache behind his eyes. He shrugged off his abstraction and picked up his briefcase, then left the office for the weekend.

Sophie smiled at the young man she was walking with. He had asked her to meet him at the City Arcade and Zoo for the afternoon, and she had acquiesced. James Curtiss was a nice man; she liked him because he was fun and easy to be with, without all the sexual overtones she had felt while with Garth. In short, James was a safe date, content to just walk side by side in warm sun, sharing stories of their lives. Deep in her heart, Sophie knew James would only be a friend, for he had none of the dominating qualities that pulled her so relentlessly to Garth Riggins.

They were laughing merrily, as James tried to win a teddy bear for her at one of the booths. He had fired ball after ball, missing each shot by a hair's breadth, until they were both nearly helpless

with laughter. Suddenly, there was Garth, who calmly bought a handful of balls, aimed, and won the bear with the second shot. He handed it to Sophie, cocking an eyebrow at James, who flushed under that implacable gaze.

Sophie frowned at Garth, handing the bear back to him, her eyes flashing angrily. "No thank you, Mr. Riggins..." she spoke a little haughtily, irritated with herself for feeling pride in his accomplishment and the offhanded manner with which he passed the stuffed toy to her.

"Take the bear," he growled softly, pushing the toy back into her arms.

Sophie looked at James, who was watching the interchange between the two, leaning against the booth, hands in his pockets, with an amused look on his face, then tried again to give the bear back to Garth, who just stood, arms crossed upon his broad chest, looking at her with that eyebrow raised. She stomped her foot in frustration, then, whirling, Sophie carried the toy over to the nearest garbage bin and dropped it in. Leaving both men in astounded silence, she walked off towards the car park, her body stiff with anger. She might have known James would do nothing...he was an easy-going young man with a laidback temperament. She didn't know whom she felt the most upset with, James, Garth, or herself for letting her welcome shine in her eyes when he had arrived.

She gasped as her arm was seized in a firm clasp, and looked up into Garth's face. "What the bloody hell..." she swore as he walked along with her, holding her arm above the elbow in a tight grip.

He had the look of a man who could very easily commit a murder, and she gulped as he ushered her to her car. She remembered his large hands, and how harsh had been the punishment they had meted out upon her backside when she last had crossed him. She knew, with every fiber in her small body, that he would again put hand to bottom for her behavior...she just hoped it would not be here, in the parking lot where anyone could see.

"Oh shit...I'm really in for it now, aren't I?" she muttered, not realizing Garth could hear her words. If anything, his dark brow went higher at the totally unladylike words that issued from the girl's lips, and he shook her in annoyance.

"Sophie...such language is not acceptable, and I don't want to hear it from you again, do you understand me, young lady?" he growled at her, and she nodded sullenly. "I can't hear you, Sophronia. I said, do you understand?" Garth shook her again, needing her full attention.

"Yes...yes! I understand, you big oaf...now let me go!" she

raged up at him, not heeding the warning in his eyes.

"Let you go? No, my sweet Sophronia, I will not let you go. Keys...now." His voice was calm and amused, his hand waiting for her to drop her keys into it.

She dug through her purse crossly, and handed the keys to Garth, her bottom lip trembling in silent resentment. He opened the door, helped her into the passenger seat, then calmly walked round to the driver's side, got in and turned to look at the girl beside him. Her small face was flushed with emotion, eyes sparkling with suppressed fury. She no longer wore the atrocious glasses that had hidden them, having gone to contact lenses which enhanced the color beautifully. She was stunning, even in a temper, and his heart lurched with the fiercest desire to protect her, to hold her, to cherish and love her. He wanted her to belong to him in every way imaginable.

He started the car, then drove, letting her brood, heading to his apartment. She followed him wordlessly, still pouting, and waited whilst he opened the door. She gasped as she was ushered into his home, his large hand in the middle of her back. It was attractively appointed, with peaceful warmth that made her feel at home instantly.

Garth took her to the large sofa, she stumbling a little, reluctant. She knew what would take place, but still felt surprised when he gently guided her to stand in front of him as he sat. She was held in place by his hands and his legs, and she listened as he began to calmly lecture her. "Sophie, your behavior was totally inexcusable today. You embarrassed not only James, and myself, but you acted like a spoiled two year old. On top of that, you cursed at me, which I will not tolerate. I expect you to conduct yourself with dignity. You are a lady, Sophronia Elizabeth, and I will see you behave as one. Am I clear on this point, young woman?"

Her lower lip trembled, but she answered, very softly. "Yes, Sir. I ...I'm sorry."

"Perhaps, Sophie, but I aim to see you much sorrier before this is through." His voice was soft, but stern. His hand reached for the snap on her jeans, and she flinched as the sound of them being undone seemed to echo through her mind. She flushed and bit her lip as she felt the denim sliding to her knees, followed by her high cut panties.

"Wha...oh my god..." she gasped as he took her over his broad lap, positioning her bottom high in the air.

"Yes, Sophie, my girl ...you've earned a bare bottomed spanking this time. I want you to remember this when next you think to act out." He caressed the pale mounds of flesh, then raised his hand high, and brought it down sharply upon the pert,

rounded cheeks.

"Owwww! Garth...NO!" Sophie cried out, surprised at how much harder this spanking was in comparison to the last time. She hadn't realized how much protection a pair of jeans could render in such a predicament.

Time and again, Garth brought his hand down, and she struggled in an effort to avoid the blows. "Ohhh...OWWWW!" she kicked and squealed, putting her small hand back to rub and cover her tender nether regions, but Garth implacably took her wrist in his hand and continued to blister her backside, determined to bring the girl to repentance. Sophie was also determined not to cry, but as her butt became more heated, and the blows rained down upon her skin, she could not contain her gasps and sobbing breaths.

"Pleeeeeeease...oh...please, Garth! It hurts! Please stop..." but he was merciless, spanking her bottom and sweet spot until she was crying and limp over his lap, signaling her surrender. He then rubbed the fiery skin, and patted her back soothingly, until her sobs subsided, then gently lifted her and positioned her on his knees, so that she could bury her face in his shirt. She hiccupped and sighed, trying to gain some control of her emotions, and trying, also, to make sense out of the heat she felt between her thighs. She had never felt so aware of Garth, so aroused. Her whole body was reacting in a highly unexpected manner, and she gripped the material of his shirt in small hands, terrified of what she was feeling...not knowing if it was normal. His hands, as they rubbed and soothed, were so...gentle, so sweetly tender upon her sensitized skin, and she moaned softly.

Garth was aware of her arousal, and shifted a little uncomfortably, knowing she must feel his bulging member straining against her through the material of his jeans. He heard the small moan, which caused his body to react even more, and he suddenly brought her face up and kissed her lips, demanding her surrender, forcing her lips to respond to him. His hands moved over her, and she moved against him, her passion meeting his. Her cotton top flew off, landing upon the floor, baring sweet breasts small but full, followed by the panties and jeans that had been at half-mast during her punishment. He turned her to lay upon the couch, his body half covering her, kissing, touching, and exciting her. She watched, helplessly moved as he stripped, blushing at the sight of his manhood. He was beautifully proportioned, broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist and a tight butt. She shyly touched him, and he moaned at the soft caress, his tongue forcing its way into her mouth, dancing with hers in symbolic mastery. Her small hands clasped him to her, the rosy peaks of her breasts crushed against his chest.

"Ahhhh..." she sighed, and her hips moved against him in involuntary invitation, needing, wanting his total domination of her. She was a wanton beast in his arms, her passion surprising in a virgin. He fingered her sex, already wet, then gently pushed into it with his fingers, stretching, finding the barrier and opening it, as her body convulsed. She cried out as she felt the tissue give, then she moaned as he continued to push into her, her body clasping his fingers.

"Ohhh...Garth...please..." she sobbed, feeling the need rising, building within, threatening to overwhelm her. He clasped her hands above her head, kissing her as he slowly entered her, thrusting his manhood into her core of femininity. He pumped slowly at first, trying to gage her reactions, and then lost control as she cried out, her whole body trembling as her sex tightened around his in a fierce orgasm. He thrust deeply into her, then he too, cried out as a powerful paroxysm shook him, and he climaxed. She lay sobbing in his arms, and he held her tenderly.

"Hush...calm down now, baby. It's alright now." he stroked her hair out of her eyes, and kissed her, loving the feeling of her small body as she trembled beneath him in reaction. He rolled to his side, taking her with him, just holding her, whispering to her as she came down. Her eyes were wide with wonder as she gazed into his, and she smiled tremulously.

"I..is it always like that?" she whispered, and he laughed gently.

"No...not always."

"I thought it would...hurt more." she spoke candidly, her fingers trailing upon his shoulders.

"All women are different, Sophie. Some are more reactive... more passionate and sensual... than others. And I was careful with you...as careful as I could be in the circumstances." He smiled as she blushed hotly, embarrassed at her enthusiasm, and took her small face in his hand, holding her gaze. "No...don't be shy. It's a beautiful gift, Sophie, and I love you all the more for giving it so sweetly and so trustingly to me."

"What did...you LOVE me?" she whispered, tears in her eyes. "Really? Truly, Garth?"

"Yes, my darling little spitfire. I love you, and I will for the rest of your life and beyond. Don't you know that, Sophie?"

"But, Garth...if you love me, why did you..." she blushed again, and he grinned unrepentantly.

"Spank you? Because I do love you, Sophie. Because I am a man who firmly believes that a woman should obey her husband, and that a husband should guide his wife with a firm hand...applied to her backside if necessary...when she gets off course. Do you have any problems with that?"

"Ummm...would it matter if I did?" she teased, and then jumped as his hand connected with her still sore buttocks sharply. "OW! No...it doesn't bother me. I want you to be in charge...I need you to pull me back when I get out of control, Garth. I had no real boundaries while growing up, even though I did obey my aunt because I loved her. But now...I know that inside I was just waiting to let loose, to be myself...to live. I kept a lot of my emotions bottled up, Garth. Do you think you can handle my letting them go now?"

"Well...I believe I have shown you that I can, Little One. So...if you get angry...rage ahead if you must, but know that my hand will always be prepared to give you a very sound spanking if you go too far. There will be consequences, Sophie." He pulled her closer, and she snuggled against him.

"I love you, Garth. I have since the first day I met you." She whispered, softly. He kissed her, lifted her into his strong arms, and then carried her into his room, where he joined her upon the bed. He turned her, spooning her body into his arms, covering them both with the duvet. They slept, waking several times to make love through the night, Garth sometimes taking her quickly, fiercely, others, with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes and sweetness in the final release. She loved him more than she thought possible.

Sophie stretched as she awakened, and turned over. She looked around her in perplexed confusion, and then realized where she was. She sighed, lying under the blankets in the dimness of the room, reaching out and shutting off the morning alarm. She grimaced, and then slipped out of bed and into the bathroom, turning the shower on full force and swiftly preparing for the day. She tried to shake off the remains of the dream, feeling rather discombobulated that she had once again dreamt about Garth Riggins. The man didn't even know she existed, let alone love her, she snorted to herself. She was nothing but a mere secretary to him, someone to be treated with distant courtesy. She put on her make-up, dried her long hair, and then dressed in a short skirt and femininely appropriate blouse. She looked at the image in the mirror and smiled, shaking her head at her nonsensical dreams of romance with her boss. She supposed all the girls had such notions about the handsome head partner of Riggins, Owens, and Clark...after all he was a very eligible bachelor and being a well-to-do businessman only sweetened the pot. She sighed and chuckled a little mirthlessly, because in all honesty, she had very deep feelings regarding her boss, and she wished fiercely that he loved her in return.

Sophie grabbed her usual breakfast of coffee and toast, and hastily fed Nicodemus before she headed out the door to work.

She revved the engine a few times, and then peeled out of the drive, radio blaring her favorite tunes. She loved driving, and had a habit of doing so at breakneck speeds; chuckling at the glares she earned from the more sedate drivers as her sporty little car hugged the road. She sped into the parking lot at work, squealing her tires as she pulled into an empty space.

Garth Riggins frowned as he watched his personal assistant pull into the lot. She arrived like this every day, driving her car in total disregard to the safety of herself or others. He felt the palm of his hand itching to apply itself to the seat of the problem. He turned from the window, and sat down, trying to put the girl from his mind and concentrate on the papers upon his desk. He had work to do, which should take priority...he shouldn't be thinking about some sexy little number he'd dreamed about taking to bed for the last few months. He grimaced at the wildly sexual tone his thoughts had taken. He most certainly did not want to become involved with one of his employees...yet, he was inexplicably drawn towards Sophie. She was pretty, in an unassuming way...not like the blatantly gorgeous women he dated; blonde, curvy and buxom... Sophie was auburn haired, small, and almost pixyish in her appearance; she barely came to the tip of his chin, with a sweet form.

Sophie sighed as she typed the Sanderson reports for what felt like the fiftieth time. Garth was in a towering rage for some reason...had been for weeks it seemed to her. It wasn't like him to be so irritable. He'd always been courteous and casually friendly. Now, he found fault with everything she did, sending back letters for her to re-type time and again. Where she'd thought of him as a rather easy to please boss, she was now discovering that he was temperamental and demandingly critical. She pounded the keys of the computer, irked with his sudden change of attitude. She printed the documents, then took them into his office, placing them upon his desk with a slightly shaky hand. She indignantly swore to herself if he found one more mistake, she would cheerfully deck the man, no matter how much larger he was than herself!

"Typo on page four. Do it again, and this time do it right!" he barked, sliding the papers back to her. That was it...Sophie glared at her boss across the polished oak desk, small hands clenched. If he hadn't been sitting down... damn and blast the man!

"Type it yourself, damnit! I'm going to lunch!" she shouted, and stomped out of the office, fuming under her breath. She slammed the door, grabbed her purse, and stalked into the elevator. She gasped softly as Garth followed and took her arm in a grip that would stop an elephant in its tracks. He looked down at her grimly, and exited the elevator, matching his stride to her shorter

one.

"I think I will take my lunch with you, Miss Crawford. We have some things we need to talk over." His voice was soft, yet she could hear the underlying steel, and felt like running for the nearest exit...and would have, had he not kept her elbow in that firm clasp. She tugged vainly as he walked toward the parking lot, then rubbed her arm as he put her into his car and shut the door.

She opened her mouth, then quickly shut it as he glared at her, putting a warning finger to her lips. "Not one word, Sophronia Elizabeth Crawford, if you know what's good for you." Her eyes rounded as he used her name rather than the usual diminutive form she was known by. She slumped in her seat, crossing her arms across her small chest defensively and pouted. He looked at her, eyebrow raised. "That pout is going to cost you..." he advised her. She grimaced and pulled in her lower lip, then turned to gaze out the window, stubbornly mute. Really...who did he think he was? Her father, for Pete's sake? He was too aggravating! She fumed silently.

He drove to a small café, glancing at the obstinate girl beside him occasionally, then ushered her into the building. Her eyes lit up as she entered the quaintly appealing dining room, decorated in a charming if somewhat trite country theme of red and white-checked tablecloths and knotty pine walls. The lights were old fashioned, and gave the café a romantic appearance. It was the type of place in which one could find themselves relaxing and drinking in the ambiance of a peaceful country inn. Still, Sophie fought it...not wanting to give him an inch. When he ordered a glass of mineral water and a meal for the both of them...rather presumptuously she thought... Sophie changed her order to light wine and salad. For some reason, she wanted to irritate Garth, and it looked like she was succeeding quite well, for his eyebrow rose, and he sent a cold stare her way after the waiter left their table. Oddly enough, she felt a shiver run up her spine, getting the distinct impression Garth was keeping score and that she was coming up on the losing side. She nervously crumbled a breadstick, not even realizing she did so, and returned his look, controlling the urge to flee as far and as fast as she could go. After all, he did have a much longer stride and could very likely catch her before she managed to reach the door; she shrugged philosophically.

When their lunch came, Sophie ate sparingly, and summoned the waiter to refill her glass more than once, to Garth's exasperation. As she had never been much of a drinker and also had eaten very little for breakfast, the wine soon began to go to her head, so when the girl again summoned the waiter, Garth shook his head and put his hand over her glass. The waiter,

feeling that discretion was called for, left the vicinity, a slight grin on his face. The young lady was in for some trouble from her man, if he was any judge of character...

"You've had more than enough, my girl." Garth spoke preemptively, and she looked at him rather owlishly, the wine making her more daring than was reasonably safe under the circumstances.

"I will drink what I want, and how much I want, whenever I want," she slurred, and then subsided as his implacable glance settled on her. She shivered, again feeling the need to run for safety. "I ...I need to..." she muttered, then hastily pushed away from the table and threaded her way to the ladies room, feeling that angry gaze following her every step of the way. She rushed into a stall and lost what little she'd eaten, and then leaned her head against the wall, trembling with reaction. She was a fool to allow him to get under her skin like this, but she just couldn't help herself. For some reason, Garth seemed to bring out her rebellious nature with his take-charge attitude, yet it gave her an odd sense of comfort, too.

Chapter Three

Garth waited for the girl to emerge, a worried frown on his handsome face. She brought out all his protective feelings...the instinct to dominate her a fierce sentiment beating strongly in his heart. He'd never felt this way before, but then he'd never been around a woman like Sophie...small, fiery, and defiant, yet with an indefinable sweetness that pulled him and drove him crazy at the same time. She was totally, beautifully female, with all the caprices inherent to the gender. He wanted to shake her, spank her cute little ass until she begged for mercy, then make love to her until she surrendered to his will. He felt his palms itching as he caught sight of her pale face from across the room. She looked so frail...his heart ached to hold her...to give her the world, should she want it.

She sat, and took a deep breath. She'd thought her knees would give out on her at any moment on the way back to the table, and was relieved to reach her chair with no mishaps. She cleared her throat and looked up into smoky eyes, her face a little defiant, even though her lips wobbled perilously.

"May I have a cup of coffee?" she asked, softly, uncertain of his mood. Garth signaled the waiter, ordered the coffee, and also a small meal for her, and then turned to look at Sophie.

"When it is brought, I expect you to eat everything on your plate, young lady. Then I am going to take you home, where we will have a much needed and very serious conversation." She hesitated, wanting to argue, but then decided to give in. She was hungry, and the salmon fillet and saffron rice he'd ordered smelled heavenly. She surprised both Garth and herself by eating every delicious bite, and felt much better for it.

All too soon, they were on the way to Sophie's house, Garth insisting that she was in no condition to drive, even though the food had absorbed what bit of alcohol had lingered in her system. She had wanted to retrieve her car from the office, but he'd remained adamant, and she'd ungraciously subsided. After all, she had no real say, as he technically held her prisoner in his car...she would end up where he chose to go. Really, the man was just too infuriatingly dominating! She childishly stuck out her tongue when he wasn't looking, only to be told he'd seen it and that she had better not let her mouth write checks her butt could not pay! Her green eyes grew round, and she looked at him, shock on her face. "You bloody well wouldn't DARE!"

"Yes, I WOULD dare, and don't swear at me, Sophronia," came the slick reply. "You will discover I am a man of action. I believe firmly in the 'laying on of hands' and in applying them to the 'seat of learning' when needed!"

"But...but...that's so archaic!" she ranted, fighting the strange thrill his words had provoked deep within her.

He pulled up near the steps of her house, turning off the engine. Sophie quickly took stock of the situation, opened her car door, and ran like sixty towards the safety of her house, thinking to be inside and on the other side of a locked door by the time Garth had gotten out of the car. She let out a small scream when she ran into the solid form planted on the steps, effectively blocking her escape. "Let me go..."she cried out, and let one small foot connect sharply in the vicinity of his shin. Garth winced, took the keys from her nerveless fingers, and unlocked the door; all without releasing the grip he had on her slender arm. Then he bodily forced her into the entry hall and thence to the living room, where he sat upon the plush couch, flung her over his lap, tossed her skirt up over her waist and peeled the lacy scrap that passed for panties down to her knees, all with a swiftness that gave the girl no chance to think. His large hand connected to her buttocks with a loud crack that echoed through the room.

"Garth...what...no! You CAN'T...stop...let me go, you bastard!" Sophie hollered as he proceeded to land blow after blow upon her bared nether regions. "Owww!" she cried out, hand reaching back to protect herself from the furious spanking. He took hold of her wrist and held her more firmly in his grip, adjusting her body so that her bottom was higher and even more vulnerable to attack.

"You will not swear at me, nor will you kick me, Sophie." He said, steel in his voice. She twisted and fought, furiously trying to avoid the harsh swats landing with precision upon her thighs and bottom, sending waves of fiery pain through her body. "Furthermore, young lady, there will be no more of this drinking on an empty stomach...no more nibbling instead of eating a meal. You will eat regularly. And no more speeding!"

"I will do whatever I want to! Just who the bloody hell do you think you are..." she began; only to cry out as his hand connected to her ass again. "OWWWW!!!!" she screamed.

"Not a wise idea to argue with me whilst in this position, my girl." He chuckled, and she gasped angrily, still trying to avoid his hand.

"Ohhh...please...let me go, Garth...it hurts! Please..." she began to plead, and the tears she had held back began to flow down her cheeks, landing on the carpet. "I...I'm sorry...I'll...obey...I promise. Please...stop." she slumped over his lap, body limp, signaling her surrender to his will.

He added five more swats for good measure, then gently rearranged her clothing, sat her up and held her to his broad chest

as she cried. "No...no one has ever...spanked me...before," she whispered, her tear stained face against his shoulder. He rubbed her back, hiding a shrewd grin at her shy acknowledgement that she'd grown up without discipline. That had been obvious by her impulsive actions and words. "Why...why did you...?" she began.

"Why did I spank you? Because, darling Sophie, I happen to love you. I care about your health, your happiness, and if that means I administer a spanking to get you back on track when I see you faltering and heading down the wrong road, then so be it." He planted a tender kiss upon her forehead. She looked up into his eyes, bewildered by his admission.

"Did...did you just say...?"

"That I love you? Yes, Sophie, I did. Get used to the idea, because I plan on saying it a lot in future, little girl." She gave a watery smile, and snuggled deeper into his arms, the pain in her nether regions forgotten in her joy at his words.

"Oh, Garth...I love you, too. I fell for you the first time I saw you." Her voice was soft and sweet music to his ears. Sophie could not believe that she was actually living out the fantasies she had been having even though her bottom was still burning from the blistering Garth had administered. His arms were tender, his heart beating soundly in her ear as she cuddled blissfully against his chest.

"So...let's do something about this mutual admiration society, shall we?" Garth chuckled, and then tilted her chin up so he could look her in the eye. Her eyebrow arched, and she remained silent, waiting for him to finish speaking. "I think we ought to get to know one another before I marry you. And I WILL marry you, Sophie, so you may as well get used to that idea right now." Garth laid a finger against her lips as she opened her mouth to object to his bossy attitude. She subsided, a whimsical smile upon her face, not really too irritated with his taking charge. His imperious quality had always been something Sophie had secretly admired about him, though she would never let on. After all, it didn't pay to let a man think he was in total control at all times. A girl had to raise a little hell now and then...even if it did earn her a hot seat. Truth be known, strong-willed, fiery Sophie Crawford had furtively longed to be dominated from the age of 14. Her dreams had been filled with images of someone who could guide and teach her, who would help her overcome bad habits that she could not seem to control on her own, no matter how hard she tried to change them. Someone who would give her the incentive to better herself simply by loving her enough to reprimand her as her parents; and later her aunt, had never done. For a long while, she had dated the weak, sensitive types, men she could control and subjugate to her whims, perhaps afraid to find the one man who could tame her.

"I don't know...the boss is pretty strict about fraternizing. What should we do about that?" she teased, her fingers playing with the lapels of his suit coat.

"You'll just have to butter the old man up, won't you?" he whispered wickedly in her ear, and then nuzzled her neck, sending chills of pleasure down her spine. He grinned as she shivered delightfully in his embrace, and kissed her fully upon her parted lips, plundering her mouth as a pirate who was intent upon capturing his treasure.

"And...how would I do that?" she asked breathlessly, flushed with rising passion when he'd released her lips.

"Mmm...I'm sure we could think of a way." He spoke suggestively, and she blushed then looked away from the blatant ardor she saw in his eyes. She pushed away from his chest, needing to put some distance between them.

"Garth, I want up...please?" as his arms tightened momentarily about her small waist, then released her. "I...Garth, I don't want to cause problems at work. I know...you're the boss, and you can change any rule you wish to, but seriously...don't you think it would look better if you stood behind your own policies about dating amongst the employees? I know it isn't written in stone, but still..." she spoke hurriedly, watching his face for signs of anger.

"You're right, Miss Crawford. I expect your resignation upon my desk no later than noon tomorrow."

Her mouth dropped open at his words, as she stood in shocked surprise. "You...you can't be serious?"

"Oh, but I am, darling. In fact, I am decidedly so, Sophie. I don't believe in nepotism. As my wife, you will have no need to work; neither will I want you to. You will have a lot of preparations for the wedding, anyway, as I don't plan on this being a long engagement."

"Bloody hell!" she spluttered angrily. Domination was one thing, but being a tyrannical despot was another. "You...you arrogant bastard! I will NOT give up working! I will not become one of those rich, ornamental wives that do nothing but bloody well sit on their arses all day drinking tea and planning soirees or go gadding about spending their husbands' money!" It was Garth's turn to look stunned, as he realized how dictatorial he had sounded to the girl. She could have literally slapped him down with a feather at that moment as he drank in his own words. "GET OUT! Get out of my house! Leave me alone!" she cried out. He left the room, walked down the hall, and opened the door, hearing her parting words as though he was under ten feet of water.

"You shall have that resignation, Mr. Riggins, because...I'll bloody well QUIT! You aren't the only business in town!" as she

heard the engine rev and exit the drive, Sophie flung herself down on her knees in front of the sofa and began to cry out her disappointment, anger, and regret over the harsh words she had hurled at him so bitterly. How could he know that his words had been a sore point with the girl, who had grown up in the same world he had...rich parents, and later a rich aunt, after the death of her parents...all who had made it clear that the working class were somehow beneath them. Sophie didn't work because she had to; she worked because she'd hated being treated like a hothouse flower, fragile, delicate, and unable to live outside the glass walls of a green house, in the real world. Sophie worked to prove that she was more than a social leech, living off the money her forefathers had earned by the sweat of their brows. She did not want to become a facsimile of her mother...rich, spoiled, disenchanted, and dissatisfied with everything and everyone, including her daughter.

Nicodemus leapt onto the sofa and purred softly, rubbing his dear little face against her head lovingly. "Oh, Nicodemus...what shall I do? I love him so much, and now I've ruined it all." She spoke as if expecting the cat to give some wisely cheering answer, but he only continued to purr as she poured out her troubles on his furry body, soaking it in the process.

The next few weeks were hellacious for Sophie as she debated whether she ought to resign or go to him and apologize for her behavior. Would he understand if she explained it to him? If he didn't...well, she supposed there were other men in the world. If only Garth were not so firmly entrenched in her heart! To be fair, she really hadn't given him much of a chance to explain, before jumping down his throat...maybe he'd not meant to imply that she would not be allowed to have a job outside the home, simply that she would not have reason to do so.

She sat with aching head in her hand, vacillating back and forth, arguing with herself one way and another until she was nearly ill from worry. To make matters worse, Garth had been offhanded and cool towards her when she'd arrived at the office that morning. The only words he had spoken to her had been work related, short and succinct. There had been no underlying tone of warmth, nor any sign that he was even remotely attracted to her. How could he change so over what had amounted to a temper tantrum?

Sophie pondered his chilly attitude, and then finally decided she must face him and put the matter to an end one way or another. One thing was certain, neither she nor Garth were happy with things as they stood. Sophie took up the papers needing his signature, and then seemingly calm, she entered his office, though deep inside she felt like she would fly off in all directions if he so

much as said 'boo' to her.

He looked up, wordlessly watching the girl approach his desk, keeping his expression bland. He hoped she couldn't see the tale-tell redness of his eyes. He'd spent a number of sleepless nights, deep in thought, and had come to no real conclusions other than he had somehow touched a nerve with her and that they needed to talk. He would not compromise on being in charge of their household, should they marry, but...perhaps he needed to explain his position on her working a little more clearly. She obviously enjoyed working, but he would not have his children left alone like he'd been while his parents worked and traveled. Even rich children needed attention. He smiled grimly as he remembered the days of coming home to a mostly empty house, with no one to greet him but servants, to ask how his day had been, to comfort him if he needed it...no one to share in his triumphs or his failures. When his parents had been home, they'd been too busy to spend time with the boy. He'd vowed he would never do that to his children, no matter how much money he made.

He rose as she placed the papers upon his desk, and clasped her wrist loosely. "Stay. We need to talk."

"Umm...all right..." she sat down, effectively loosening his grip, and waited. "I'm listening..."

"Okay. I need to explain to you why I would prefer you not work once we marry." Garth ran nervous fingers through his dark hair, a gesture so unlike him that Sophie was a little taken aback. He'd always seemed so calm and collected. She leaned forward, listening intently, not interrupting as he continued, and felt her anger melt as he described the lonely childhood he'd had as the son of well-known lawyers who had traveled the world to defend the rich and famous. She had seen Garth with the child of a co-worker once on the annual "Bring Your Child to Work" day, and had somewhat jealously thought he must have had very loving and attentive parents to be so tender with the little mite...yet here she was, finding out quite the opposite. If anything, his childhood had been as void of love as hers... perhaps even more so.

As she listened, she longed to wrap her arms about the isolated little boy he must have been. Her guilt increased as she remembered the words she'd spoken to him so rashly weeks before, and her heart ached in remorse. While she liked her job, Sophie had worked rebelliously to prove a point...Garth had worked to build a dream. Which was more important? As he spoke, his voice became warm again, telling her of his wish to build his business to the point where he could be home some of the week to be with his family. He told her how he felt children needed both a father and mother at home, sharing as much as possible the load of raising them, loving them, nurturing them. He

was now to the point in his life where he could live out his vision...and he wanted her to share in it.

Sophie was silent as Garth finally wound down, and he looked at her, perplexed by the lack of response. "Sophie?" he waited patiently, sensing her need to talk, allowing her to formulate the words.

"Oh, Garth...I feel so ashamed. I was only thinking of myself...while you..." she swallowed hard and fought to maintain her composure as the tears welled up in her eyes. "I...I'd wanted to prove something to my family...and I guess I'd gotten so wrapped up in being 'right', even after they'd all gone...that I just had to keep working. I've never... needed the money...I'm sorry I overreacted...I should have given you a chance to explain, but I...I'm so sorry! I guess I thought if I didn't work, I would end up like my parents...a useless socialite. They didn't even get involved in charities, just went from one party to another, traveled the world, and pretty much acted like work was a dirty word in our house. I learned to hate it... the backbiting and pettiness that made up my parents' world. My aunt was not much different, though she was more eccentric than snobbish. I think deep down she admired me for wanting to make my own way in the world, even though I didn't need to. And then you just...arbitrarily told me I was to resign! It sounded so snobbish...it made my blood boil! I've lain awake for quite a few nights thinking about it...and I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry. I'm sorry I behaved like a spoiled brat." She bowed her head, hands clenched together upon her lap.

Garth took a deep breath...then approached her and knelt, taking her face between strong hands. "Sophie, look at me." he commanded, bringing her small, tear-stained face up so he could see into her eyes. She looked up and kept eye contact as he stood. "Do you love me... do you trust me... because those two things are the most important in any relationship. I am demanding, overbearing, and I'm certain I can even be a bit of a pig at times..." she grinned through her tears at his words, knowing she'd thought that about him and more, though he wasn't truly a pig...most of the time. "I also expect to be the head of our household, Sophie. That means that I will have the final say when we cannot agree upon something important, and that there will be discipline in our home. I will not put up with disrespect, temper tantrums, or swearing, nor will I stand idly by and watch the woman I love self-destruct through bad habits. You will eat properly, get a decent night's rest, and drive more cautiously...no more speeding. There will be harsh consequences, Sophie, for each action...do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Garth. Very clear," she said softly. She no longer felt that

strong need, the drive to prove something, though she knew there would always be times when she rebelled and kicked against the traces. She wasn't a temperamental redhead for nothing... a small smile played across her beautiful face. Well, Garth obviously could handle her acts of rebellion, as she'd been shown those few weeks ago, over his knee. She had the distinct feeling that his 'consequences' would consist of her landing face down again, his hard hand connecting with her tender bottom. She realized if she married him, she would have to accept this as a part of their lives together. Well...wasn't that something she had longed for...someone prepared to cherish her...to protect her and to walk beside her through life...someone stronger than she, who could send a thrill of anticipation or healthy fear down her spine with one look? Garth was that and more. Scientists would say that she'd been attracted to him because he was the Alpha male, and she was the Alpha female... a case of nature working her wonders in order to perpetuate the species. Sophie wouldn't have put it quite into those terms...she simply knew she loved him to distraction, and that she couldn't picture her life without him by her side. No matter what the terms, Sophie knew her life was meant to be with Garth.

"Now...Sophronia Elizabeth Crawford, will you do me the honor of marrying me?" he asked, his words coming firmly, proudly. He was not a man who would beg or plead, nor was he one to grovel. He asked with a straightforward honesty that touched her more deeply than had he been on his knees before her. He simply held out his hand toward her in invitation, waiting for her to come to him. Sophie knew then that it would always be so, but that it was not an empty hand that reached for her. His hand was full of love and a promise of things to come, along with his heart. It offered her security, safety, comfort, sweetly tender touches, and harsh correction when needed...things Sophie had never really known in her life until Garth had come into it.

Garth's hand stretched forth, offering the world. Sophie's small hand reached out and accepted his gift. As his hand clasped hers, she whispered the two sweetest words he'd ever heard in his life...her gift to him, along with her heart, which she sealed with a kiss. Those softly spoken words were, "Yes, Garth."

Aimee

She had been alone for 6 weeks now, and was beginning to get used to the idea that she may be alone and lonely for the rest of her adult life. Leaving him had been the hardest thing she had ever done, because she truly loved Michael...she'd needed his reassurance and his guidance...but for him to SPANK her, just because she'd gone against his wishes? Aimee had departed in a flurry of tears and rage, leaving Michael, the one man who had ever truly understood her, standing there, his face withdrawn and still.

She was still wondering exactly how she had ended up over his knee that day in the office with her short skirts up and her panties down about her knees, his large hand planting stinging swats to her backside as he'd lectured her. She had felt so humiliated and embarrassed...she'd worked for Michael for 2 years and though he had playfully told her she deserved spanking on numerous occasions, Aimee had never in her wildest imaginations thought he would carry through. Even after she'd begun dating him and they had moved in together, she had not believed his threats. This time had been different. Aimee had a bad habit of being tardy for work and would rush to get there, often getting a ticket in the process. Time and again, Michael had warned her that she needed to be more cautious, or she'd wind up having an accident...and also that he would not tolerate her being late for work. He'd told her that once more would see her losing the car, having to ride with him, and she would also receive a much-deserved spanking.

Aimee, being who she was, had brazenly pooh-poohed him and had gone about her daily affairs, being Michael's secretary at work and his lover at home, still not curbing her tendency for carelessness.

That day, she had been scurrying about while Michael was already beginning to gather his briefcase, still in her robe as he'd left. She'd had exactly one hour to be to work. Unfortunately for Aimee, things had started to go wrong the moment she'd left the drive. She had forgotten the important papers she'd taken home to read through, which was also a minor no-no in Michael's book. He never took work home, and had expected the same from Aimee. "Get it done in the office," he'd told her so many times. Never the less she still snuck the work home and stayed up late to do it. If the papers weren't on his work desk, he would know she'd done it again.

She had fretfully turned around, even though she was more than halfway to work, yet knowing he needed those papers. In her hurry, she had sped through a stop sign and had gotten into a minor accident, skidding into a retaining wall to avoid oncoming

traffic. Her car was in bad shape, and she was shaken up, but otherwise unhurt. The policeman had called Michael, and he had arrived at the scene with a dark scowl on his handsome face. Aimee had felt her heart drop to her toes as he'd taken her arm and led her to his car.

"You're not hurt? Nothing injured?" he'd asked her, worry in his eyes...worry and something else that Aimee had not liked.

"I-I'm fine Michael...the paramedics checked me out. I-I'm fine," she had whispered. He looked VERY angry, and she lapsed into a frightened silence on the way to the office.

Aimee had tried to stay calm as he had taken her by the elbow again and led her into his inner sanctum, sitting down on his couch, with her standing in front of him.

"Aimee, look at me. I want you to listen to me now, and carefully. I have just been frightened out of ten years of my life because of your careless attitude! Not only have you disregarded the rules of safety, you have broken SEVERAL laws in the process, young lady. I have asked you then TOLD you in no uncertain terms NOT to rush about...to plan your time in order to be here safely and punctually! I need you to be safe, Aimee, not just here on the job, but at home too. What did I tell you would happen if you disobeyed me again?" his voice was stern, determined.

Aimee had jumped a little at his tone, for Michael had always been a soft-spoken man, never given to raising his voice. He was not yelling now, but there was steeliness behind his words that sent a shiver of apprehension up her spine.

"Michael, I am sorry...I was going home to..."she stopped, realizing that she now was in trouble two-fold, once for her careless driving and also for the papers still lying on her desk at home.

"Aimee! Answer my question. What did I say would happen?" his eyes were angry, his voice harder yet.

"Michael! You WOULDN'T DARE!" she'd protested.

"AIMELIA ELIZABETH, ANSWER ME! NOW!" He had spoken very sternly and forcefully, and Aimee knew then that he meant every word he had said. Michael Kellar actually meant to spank her!

"You said you'd spank me, Michael..." she whispered.

"What? I didn't quite hear you, Missy."

Aimee had shuffled her feet, backing up just a little, trying to get away from that long armed reach of his. She had never been spanked in her life and didn't mean to start now.

"You said you would spank me!" she had raised her voice angrily, still backing up, until the desk had met her hip. She was now a good three feet or more away, and looked from him to the door in hopes that she could make a mad dash for safety, gauging the distance with her eyes.

"Aimee, don't even think about it. I am much faster and have a longer stride. And you'd just make it worse for yourself. Come here." Michael had stated very calmly. He was determined to give the girl what she'd deserved for so long. He was tired of her acting the spoiled child, and meant to see that she understood he would take no more.

"Aimee..."warningly.

She had slowly walked toward him, her lower lip between her teeth.

Suddenly, his arm had snaked out and she'd been turned topsy-turvy over those strong thighs, skirt flung up to her waist and panties pulled down to her knees! Aimee had kicked and squealed, only to be contained by Michael overlapping one leg over hers.

"MICHAEL! STOP! DON'T!!!!" she'd cried out as his hand had begun to blister her backside.

"Aimee, I have tried TALKING,*swat* BEGGING,*swat* PLEADING...I am THROUGH*swat* with that! You WILL*swat* obey the safety rules! Talking hasn't worked! If this is the only*swat* way to get through to you, then so be it!" he punctuated nearly every word with a stinging slap on her fanny, spreading heat from hip to thigh. "You will NOT drive above the speed limit! You WILL wear your seatbelt, and you will pay your fines! And you will NOT take work home again, either!"

She had been in tears when he'd finally allowed her up, and then had been further chagrined when he had sent her to a corner to think about her spanking.

"And don't RUB!" he'd said sternly, adding insult to injury with another hard swat when she'd tried to rub the sting from her butt.

She had stood there for what seemed like days, but in actual time was only 15 minutes, and then he'd called her to him again.

Her eyes had rounded when she had seen the paddle in his hand.

"Oh, Michael, please....no more. Please? I'm sorry..." she had pleaded, tears welling in her blue-grey eyes.

His face was set and stern. "You will not argue with me. I decide when we stop. You need to learn your lesson, Aimee. Do you understand? And, yes, you WILL be sorry."

She had nodded, and then he had taken her to the desk, placing her hands on either edge and draping her across it so her toes barely touched the floor and her legs were spread revealing her womanhood to his gaze.

He had rubbed her bottom for a moment, then his arm had raised, and he had told her to count the blows this time.

"Y-yes, Sir..." and it began.

"ONE...Owwwww!" she'd thought his hand had stung, but the

thin paddle made of clear plastic was worse, much worse!

"Two...oooo, three...ohhh, please...FOUR! Please, Michael..." she was sobbing, her hands white knuckled on the edges of the desk.

She counted every stroke, each one harder than the last, up to 50, by which time she was totally repentant and crying weakly. There were other feelings coursing throughout her body that she didn't understand. She was intensely turned on, yet in so much pain...how could that be? Her swollen pussy was soaking wet, throbbing with desire.

Michael had taken her onto his lap, soothing her, caressing her back and gently rubbing her hot backside.

"I'm sorry Michael! I won't d-disobey again," she had wailed, and he had comforted her, whispering his forgiveness and love.

For a moment after, she had felt that perhaps he was right to have spanked her, but the more she'd thought of it, the more she began to feel angry and confused.

And that had led her to leave...telling Michael that she was not a child and that he didn't have the right to treat her that way.

Aimee now truly regretted leaving him...but she had needed time to sort through those conflicting emotions...the war within herself a torment she could not stand. She had thought she was crazy...had she actually gotten sexually turned on by his domineering attitude...by his spanking her? She had lost weight in the 6 weeks after leaving, and sleep was a thing of the past. She would dream of him, looking for her, and of their passionate reunion, and then would awaken sobbing, to lie awake the rest of the long dark night, missing him, missing his arm thrown over her in sleep, and his kisses that had teased her into wakefulness each morning. Her pride alone kept her from calling him and begging for his forgiveness.

Michael Kellar rubbed the grit from his dark eyes, and then massaged the back of his neck roughly trying to rid himself of the headache he felt coming on. Six weeks...dammit! Where in hell was she? He was about to go mad from worry and fear that she'd been hurt or worse. He had searched everywhere he could think of, even calling Aimee's parents in Idaho, thinking perhaps she had returned home from California, but Mrs. Quinn had told Michael they had not seen her. So...where was she? Where would she go to lick her wounds? She was so stubborn. James Quinn had laughed when Michael had called again and told him what had happened, knowing his daughter well.

"She's a handful, that one. Never could pin her down, and her mother would never let me paddle her either, since she was the only girl and the baby to boot. The boys...well, they all are very

responsible adults, but Aimee...I'm afraid she really is spoiled, Mike. I'm sorry she's giving you such a hard time."

Aimee's family was large, five boys and herself, and her father and mother. There had been discipline with the boys, but Aimee had run wild, due more to her mother's influence than actual misbehavior. James thought perhaps Michael Kellar had the right of it. In 35 years of marriage, he had never raised his hand to Francis, and they had gotten along for the most part, quite well. Their only disagreement had been over the spanking of their daughter. Francis would not hear of it. She'd felt children should be disciplined by grounding and time out, rather than the use of corporal punishment, but even more fiercely with Aimee than her brothers. Perhaps because the girl had been such a small and delicate baby, James had allowed his wife to raise their daughter in her way. Now Aimee was spoiled and headstrong, and needed very badly to be put into place.

James looked thoughtful as he hung up the phone. He had a feeling his wife knew where the little hellcat was and was keeping the information from him. Maybe he should take a page out of young Kellar's book and get to the heart of the matter by going to the bottom? He grinned, rubbing his chin in contemplation.

"Francis, come here, please. We need to discuss something." He was definitely going to put this into practice.

Three hours later, the telephone at Michael's home rang, and he picked it up tiredly, checking the clock. He'd actually fallen asleep for 30 minutes...something he'd needed but had been unable to do much of in the last six weeks.

He grinned when he heard James' voice across the wires, explaining exactly where his daughter had gotten to.

"You don't say? So, she's been in the cabin there all this time. I'm on the first flight out in the morning. Thanks James." He chuckled as James thanked HIM for giving him the nerve to do what he'd wanted to do for years...reduce his bitchy wife to a repentant, loving, respectful woman in a matter of moments, all with a good, old-fashioned over-the-knee spanking. Something he was going to continue from the sound of it.

Michael was grinning as he hung up the phone. He'd learned a lot from his father about how to treat a woman, and also from his mother. She had been a very sweet woman, caring for his father tenderly, yet she was also a passionate woman with a temper that was seen on occasion. At those times, Adam Kellar had taken his wife into their room, where he'd apparently delivered what he'd called an attitude adjustment, and she would emerge 30 minutes later, her good humor restored; able to go on with her life, knowing she was loved and protected.

Michael had asked how his father had done this, and had been

told that it was the use of domestic discipline. "Women are much like little children in their emotions. They fly apart so easily, or like your mother, tend to let things build, then explode in inappropriate ways. When we married, she and I agreed that this would be how we dealt with her tantrums. It has worked all these years, Michael, because she knows I will always be here to guide her back onto the path if she steps off, and that I do it out of love for her. We have a strong and happy relationship because of this. Our trust is deeper, our devotion to one another stronger," Michael's father had told him. He had vowed he would have the same when he met the girl of his dreams, but had lost sight of that for a time. He loved Aimee so much that he had wanted to give her time to adjust to being together. Now, he realized he should have discussed discipline when they'd begun dating. Perhaps then she would have believed him and been better prepared to practice some restraint. He did not want her to change who she was...the warm, shyly passionate, impulsive, and adorable young woman that he loved. All he wanted was to know she was safe...that she loved him enough to put his wishes and her safety above her bad habits. Michael wanted her trust to be in him, for her to let go and let him be in command, which, to some extent, she had done. Until the day he had actually dared take her to task across his knees. Somehow, the aftercare had made her angrier rather than more accepting, and he couldn't understand that. He'd known she was excited... he had been too, quite frankly...but she'd reacted badly; raging and crying; stomping out of the office. He hadn't seen her since.

She moved restlessly in her sleep, and cried out for him, waking in tears. Oh, how she longed for him to be there with her, holding her closely and sweetly in sleep. Aimee rolled onto her side and wept for a time, then stilled and again fell into a fitful slumber wherein she was being chased by evil shadows, trying desperately to get to Michael in order to be safe and protected. Again, she awakened; screaming his name and shuddering in the half-light of pre-dawn. She lay there taking calming breaths, then got up slowly and began to gather her things together as she dressed.

She turned to put the last of her toiletries into her bag when the door opened, and he stood there, framed in the light from the rising sun.

Aimee gasped and dropped her things, her hands going to her mouth in shocked dismay and a shudder of fear coursed through her.

"M-micha-ael? W-what...how did you find me?" she questioned

as he strode further into the room. His face was stern and disappointed as he looked at her and then around the small three-room cabin she had stayed in for the last month and a half.

"Your father ...persuaded, shall we say...your mother to tell him where you were.

I took it from there. We need to talk, Aimee. We need to decide what we want out of our relationship, and I need...I need to tell you right now that if you cannot submit yourself to a few simple rules, we are through. I can't live my life constantly in fear Aimee...fear that the woman I love will die in an accident because she is stubbornly holding onto bad habits." Michael ran shaking fingers through his hair, turning to the window and watching the sun rise, his back stiff with resolve.

She stepped toward him, palm outstretched, all of the hurt, the anger, and the loneliness of the last few weeks pouring out as she spoke.

"Michael; please don't shut me out. Let me tell you, please. Let me explain? I..." she cleared her throat, trying to speak around the huge lump that had somehow gathered there. "I love you so much, and I am sorry, Michael. So sorry that I disobeyed you and that I hurt you. I will try to do better, I promise. No more taking work home...no more rushing...Michael?" she touched his shoulder tentatively; trying to gauge his emotions, to feel what he was feeling.

He turned, gazing into her blue-grey eyes. "What, Aimee? Tell me what you want...because God knows, I have no idea. What do you want from me?"

She hesitated for a moment, and then carefully led him, non-resistant, to the couch. She pushed him down, her eyes upon his.

"I...want you to...spank me, Michael. Please..." she reached into her bag and pulled out the paddle he had used on her that day so long ago. She stood there before him, head down, paddle held out toward him in supplication, humbling herself in the only way she knew.

"I'm saying I...NEED you to spank me, Michael. And I trust you...with all of my heart."

He reached out and tenderly touched her cheek, wiping the tears from its softness. "Are you certain, Aimelia? This is what you really want? There will be no turning back. Once we begin this road, Aimee, we will stay on this road for the duration of the trip together. Do you understand that? Are you willing to commit to that?" he questioned her gently.

She swallowed, and then nodded as she said two soft clearly spoken words of love and trust.

"Yes, Sir."

Michael sat in the chair watching Aimee sleep, her face peaceful and childishly adorable. He'd held her for over an hour after her spanking as she'd cried out all of her heartache and disappointment in herself. Then they had quietly discussed the last six weeks of pain from being parted, after which he had gently tucked her into bed for a nap. She was emotionally and physically exhausted and soon fell soundly asleep.

He sighed and slouched into the chair, his lack of rest finally catching up to him. This spanking had drained him more than he'd realized it could...yet there was also a sense of peace in his heart now for Aimee's acceptance of the discipline. Certainly, they'd probably have disagreements where he would wonder if it was worth the effort, as would she, but now that they had begun with the first step, it would eventually be easier and perhaps there would come a day when they would not need the spanking for discipline so much as for maintenance and connection, as in his parents' marriage.

He awakened to Aimee's soft voice. "Michael, please come to bed...you'll get a stiff neck sleeping in the chair that way."

"Are you sure you don't have an ulterior motive there, Angel?" Michael grinned as he took her small hand.

She rose letting him see her slender form through the soft silky gown she wore, the small, pert breasts, and the roundness of her hip.

He felt his arousal press against the restrictive material of his jeans, then sucked in a breath as Aimee leaned over him and slowly slid the zipper down, releasing his swollen member to her touch.

"Aimee...oh god," he moaned as she knelt again, taking him into her mouth, his hands going to her hair, then clasping her head as she began a slow erotic movement up and down his shaft. She was caressing and gently messaging his balls in her hands. With each stroke of her warm lips she could feel his shaft swelling. Before long she felt him quiver in her mouth and the muscles twitching. She knew he was going to fill her mouth with his hot cum from deep within his loins and she didn't want to spill a drop. She sucked and licked, as Michael groaned in release. She knew if she kept going with her sweet lips and soft tongue he would soon be hard again.

It wasn't long and he was hard as a rock. Michael gently lifted her and took her to their bed, where he laid her down. Aimee knew she was going to feel that magnificent cock in her as he stripped out of his clothing, and then pulled her gown off, playing with her already swollen and wet pussy. She was gasping and sobbing for release by the time he entered her, his shaft sheathed

in her hot womanhood as he thrust deeper within.

They made love as they never had before, wildly, and passionately; crying out as they reached an earth shaking climax together. He held her tightly to him, kissing her face and neck, soothing her as the passion began to ebb. Aimee hugged him gently, tenderly brushing the hair from his eyes. How she loved this man! Domineering, passionate, loving, sweetly tender...Michael owned part of her heart and more than a little of her soul.

He saw the unspoken love in her eyes, and kissed her softly swollen lips again with gentle thoroughness. No words were needed between them as he tucked her under his chin, curled into a ball together for sleep. He cuddled her closely, his arms strong and sure. She was his life; he would cherish her and love her forever.

Aimee stood nervously in the doorway of the chapel, hanging onto her father's arm with a death grip. The wedding music was soft and sweet as they began walking down the long aisle toward Michael, who stood proudly looking toward the beautiful girl who would be his wife. His eyes were warm and tender as she reached his side, his hand gently taking hers, enfolding it with warmth that shook her to her bones.

Michael smiled at her as she repeated her vows. She spoke the words softly; her eyes full of love as she looked into his strong face and uttered the time-honored vow to love, honor, and obey. He knew that had been something Aimee would have felt was terribly old-fashioned at one time, but now she meant the words with all of her heart.

Michael gave his vows with a depth of passion that had her weak in the knees. She was trembling as he kissed her lips, at first gently, then with a fierceness that stole her breath away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Michael Brandon Kellar."

The guests broke into applause and Michael led her down the aisle and out the doors of the chapel. Everyone piled into cars for the procession to the Reception Hall, where the usual toasts, roasts, and jokes were exchanged. Aimee was dancing the first waltz with her father, and suddenly asked him a question out of the blue.

"Dad... You and Mom look so...happy lately. I don't remember you being so comfortable together. What's changed, if I may ask?"

James grinned at his beautiful daughter, and then glanced at Francis, who blushed and looked down at the floor at the gleam in his eyes. "Your Michael gave me a few pointers on married bliss,"

he laughed softly at Aimee's puzzled face, then a little louder as she suddenly caught the meaning of his words.

"Daddy! You...ohhh! And is Mother behaving?" Aimee asked cheekily.

"We're getting there, Young Lady, so just you remember that I can and will paddle you, too, if Michael isn't around to do the job," James laughed as Aimee wrinkled her nose at him playfully. She truly liked seeing her father so happy and her mother so calm and relaxed. She hugged her father tightly around the neck as the final strains of their dance floated on the air; then moved gracefully into the waiting arms of her husband to dance with him.

"Michael, did you actually suggest to my father that he SPANK my mother?" Aimee questioned softly.

Michael's grin spoke volumes to the girl and she smiled at him. "Ohhoooo...so that's how he persuaded her to tell you where I was?" she giggled.

"Yes, and if you are a very good little girl, when we get to the hotel tonight, you will get a different kind of spanking," Michael whispered wickedly into her ear, his hand resting possessively above her slender hip, and Aimee shivered in delight.

"Oh, yes, Michael. I'll be VERY good," she said, as she smiled up into her husband's eye, her own eyes dancing with love and a promise of things to come.

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