



He's stern, bossy and nearly unbearable.
Until she finally realizes.....

A HARD MAN

Is Good to Find

CAROLYN FAULKNER

A Hard Man... ...Is Good To Find

By Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter 1

Her nipples were hard, dammit!

Kelsey tried to shrug her shoulders surreptitiously, casting a furtive eye around to see if anyone else had noticed her body's inappropriate response to a certain man's presence just a few feet away. Luckily, her silk shirt and short jacket had a loose enough fit that the gyrations did the trick without her having to spend the next half hour hunched over like Quasimodo.

Never mind that it was a funeral, for God's sake - *and* for one of her best friends, Calliope Jenks, psychic extraordinaire. As Callie'd said herself many times before, she may be old but she wasn't dead. Kelsey's already reddened eyes flooded instantly with tears through her small, watery smile. Callie wouldn't have taken any offense at Kelsey's middle-aged body having a mind of its own, if there was one thing Calliope had thoroughly enjoyed, it was being *right*. She would have been tickled pink, partly because she had had a ribald sense of humor and would have heartily appreciated the irony of sexual arousal during a celebration of her death, and partly because she'd've known exactly who it was that caused such a startling reaction in Kelsey.

The culprit was standing across the grave from her - not that there was a crush of mourners; it was just the two of them, Callie's younger sister, and a few of her neighbors. Well, Kelsey thought with a wry twist of her lips, they always were on the opposite side of pretty much everything, why not a funereal service? She let her eyes flicker over him quickly. At least he wasn't wearing those annoying mirrored sunglasses that she hated and he favored. Kelsey bit her lip as her eyes took in his tanned face. It wasn't a handsome face by any means but rather a hard, interesting field of planes and angles, almost no curves or rounded edges to speak of. His eyes were dark, nose sharp, and his lips . . .

She gave a short sigh, almost a whimper, feeling an annoyingly familiar but unwelcome warmth flow through her body to settle aching between her legs. Her eyes swept rapidly down over the impressive breadth of his shoulders, heavy with muscle, the taut, flat stomach she knew lay beneath that oxford cloth shirt, down to where his hands - *ohhhh Lord, the thought of those hands wielding any sort of an implement was enough to make her shiver* - were clasped beneath the waist of his charcoal dress pants. Kelsey frowned, noting his unusual stance - somewhat hunched as her own had been a few seconds ago, with his fingers splayed as if he was trying to cover up something that lay behind them.

Her brow furrowed in thought. What could he be hiding? she mused just long enough for the information to filter through her dirty, active little mind. Her lips formed a startled "o" of surprise when she realized that he was trying to conceal an even more blatant reaction than hers! If his hands and feet were no lie, it was probably a *considerable* reaction, and she couldn't help a catty grin as she saw him shift almost nervously. Nah. Clint Duncan nervous? Never! Even embarrassed was pushing it some.

Another quick glance at his face caught him staring back at her with the usual assessing boldness. She had an almost uncontrollable urge to stick her tongue out at him, but decided that would be completely tacky, and Callie did not deserve tacky behavior at a service in her honor. Ruthlessly, Kelsey dragged her gaze away from his to the rich, mahogany urn surrounded by beautiful arrangements of yellow roses - Callie's favorite.

Father O'Ryan's monotone voice droned, "Let us bow our heads in prayer: Our Father -"

Kelsey heard Clint's deep voice as he chanted the familiar words to the Lord's Prayer, and another sharp fever-chill washed over her already aching breasts, making them swell against the confining lace of her pink bra. Oh, man, no matter how many prayers she uttered now, she knew she was definitely going straight to hell when she died for feeling like this - *do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars!* Kelsey muttered to herself, scrunching her shoulders uncomfortably again. She glared quickly at Clint and their eyes collided again - the bastard had a shit-eating grin on his face; he knew what was happening to her; there was no doubt.

Scowling, she bent her head again and studied her shoes, trying unsuccessfully to appear pious and innocent although the religious ceremony was for the benefit of the mourners. Callie had been a child of the world and subscribed to no particular religious philosophy, as a matter of fact her most firm belief was in the inherent intelligence of Chaos Theory. The thought of Callie's total irreverence brought a smile to Kelsey's face as the service ended quietly, and, after hugging everyone there - with one large, brooding exception - Kelsey turned to the priest, a small stipend already in her hand.

But just as she was going to touch the Father's arm to get his attention away from Bridie, Callie's vivacious younger sister, she found her path blocked by a behemoth in a dark gray suit, who pumped Father Ryan's hand up and down several times, saying, "Wonderful service, Father," as he held out a modest pile of folded bills.

Unable to resist, Kelsey smacked Clint on the arm, hurting her hand in the process. "I was going to pay him, Duncan!"

Clint didn't acknowledge either the hit or her presence, moving deliberately so that all she could see was the vast pinstriped expanse of his back. "Here you go, Father," she heard him say.

"Dammit, Clint," Kelsey grabbed his arm and tried to move him, without managing to budge him even a millimeter. So she shouldered past him as best she could, almost standing on top of the poor, shocked priest in her haste to offer her own money for his services. "*I'm* paying him!"

Father Ryan, God love him, was of the old school, and he'd known Kelsey since she was in diapers. "Kelsey Elizabeth Donohue! Language! I know your parents taught you better than that!"

She could hear Clint sniggering under his breath, but Kelsey was only somewhat subdued by the scolding. "Sorry, Father," she muttered, pressing her own packet of bills into his hand.

"I already paid him, Princess," came the smug statement from behind and well above her head.

That condescending nickname grated on her like nothing else, and he knew it, which was why he'd used it. "Well, then, he's been paid twice due to your own stubborn stupidity, hasn't he?" Kelsey turned to face her annoying adversary, hands on her hips, ready for a fight as always around him. They had gone nose to nose innumerable times before - since the first time they'd met, frankly - and undoubtedly would again. Kelsey had never backed down, despite the drastic differences in their sizes, and she wasn't about to start now.

But before she could begin, Bridie put a firm hand on either of them. "Surely the two of you're not going to be disrespectful enough to start another one of your donnybrooks over my sainted sister's grave, *aire ya'?*"

Kelsey had always noticed how Bridie's Irish accent was always exaggerated when she was a mite upset. "No," Kelsey answered, realizing that she had no choice but to lay off. "I won't fight here and now. I'm sorry." She dropped a warm kiss on Bridie's soft cheek, getting a sharp whiff of Youth Dew in the process, but she couldn't resist brushing past Clint and growling low

under her breath. She didn't know what it was about that man that set her on edge, but he drove her absolutely crazy - in more ways than one.

Callie had not wanted a wake - in truth she hadn't wanted the formal funeral, either, but she had recognized the living's need to grieve and had consented to the small grave-side service. "Have a party," she'd said repeatedly as the end drew near. "Have fun." At one point, she'd even whispered saucily to Kelsey, "Grab a hold of that Duncan man and give him the ride of his life!"

Kelsey had snorted and, she thought in retrospect, protested way too much at the time. Callie had known. She always knew what was in "her girl's" heart. When Kelsey finally got to her car in the small family cemetery, she stood for a moment, looking out over the rich green hills surrounding the small hamlet of Gordon's Cross, Vermont, remembering Callie in her own way and in her own sore heart as the tears once again dripped down her cheeks.

Kelsey lifted her face to the sun, almost defiantly whispering out loud, "Good bye, old girl. I loved you, and I'm gonna miss you a lot."

"So am I," came the low, masculine rumble from behind her.

Startled, she whirled, quickly swiping the backs of her hands over her cheeks. She hated to cry in front of anyone in the first place, and Duncan was the last person in the world she would want to show any weakness to. Clint took in the devastated look on her face and her puffy red eyes, making the split second, probably life-threatening decision to pull her into his arms. He hated to see a woman cry, and somehow, Kelsey's tears - even though she annoyed the pee out of him unfailingly at every given chance - made him feel worse than most. She was not the vulnerable type, especially not around him, and seeing her looking so hurt made his chest squeeze painfully even more than it already had from the moment he'd heard about Callie's death. Clint knew that Kelsey had been there with the old girl to the devastating end, as he had wanted to be but couldn't since duty called. He knew it couldn't have been easy for the little pain in the arse to see one of her best friends pass on, no matter how expected it had been after that long illness.

Kelsey "oofed" softly as she was brought none-too-gently up against the rock hardness of his chest. She didn't want to find being wrapped in those strong arms comforting, but she did, relaxing into him against her will until she felt something hard poking against her lower tummy. Clint's ham-sized hand spread itself possessively just above where her ample bottom rounded out the suit's A-line skirt, not letting her step back from him when she tried to. Kelsey began to struggle in earnest, but wasn't going anywhere until he decided to let her go. "Stay still." His breath was warm on her scalp, and she could hear as well as feel it when he took a deep breath, his nose buried in her hair.

"Not on a bet - let me go!"

It was mere seconds before she found herself entirely immobile, and practically lifted off her feet which made her lie even closer against that impressive ridge of flesh in his pants. Clint wore a smug grin on his face the whole time. "I said be still."

"Pretty soon I'm going to be unconscious, you big lummo!" she panted, still wiggling to her last breath. The tremendous pressure around her ribs eased somewhat, but not enough that she could escape. "I always knew you were weird - you've been hard as a spike through the whole funeral, you pervert!"

Those arms contracted again in warning, then loosened slightly. "Listen to your friendly neighborhood police officer. Relax. And I wouldn't be throwing those particular stones myself, if I were you, considering that your little nipples were pebbled through most of it, too."

Incensed and embarrassed that he had noticed a response in her that he had caused and she'd been wholly unable to control, Kelsey started to swing her feet, hoping to kick him, but good.

She found herself on solid ground instantly, but was no less trapped than before. "You're just askin' for it, aren't you? You'll have to be careful, you might just get it."

Startled, and wary of the direction this conversation was heading, Kelsey snorted. "Not from you, I'm not."

"Kels!" Randy's high, nasally-challenged voice squeaked its way into her ears.

"Here comes Junior," Clint commented snidely.

Kelsey didn't know and didn't care about whatever it was that Clint Duncan had against her boyfriend. As far as she was concerned, Officer Duncan could piss up a rope. This time, though, when she tried to wiggle free, he let her, and she practically sprinted to Randy who, as usual, was too preoccupied to kiss her hello. He never kissed her goodbye, either, and disdained pretty much every other form of physical affection, including, much to her disgust and frustration, sex. But here and now, in front of that noseybody Clint, who was positively leering at them, was not the time for that discussion.

Kelsey took a hold of an arm that it would never have occurred to Randy to have offered, automatically making unwanted and unfavorable comparisons between the size of Randy's arm and the size of Clint's arms . . . *Don't go there!* She tried to squelch the thought, but didn't quite succeed. Not every man was built like a combination of Schwarzenegger and Hulk Hogan, and not every woman appreciated such flashy and unnecessary bulk in a man.

Unfortunately, Kelsey was one of those shallow women who *liked* men with obvious muscles, and who were taller than she was - Randy was exactly her height, slim but trim. Almost delicate. There was absolutely nothing delicate about Duncan, including his language and his Neanderthal attitude towards women.

Clint had a bit of a reputation around town. He was a ladies man, and made no apologies about it. Everything he did and his whole attitude towards women screamed self-confidence and an arrogance that drove Kelsey up a wall. He could - and did - go out with a different woman practically each week, with absolutely no pretense of trying to establish a "relationship" with any of them, no matter how much they might cry afterwards, and despite the fact that he was hardly in the bloom of his youth at forty-three. He was scrupulously honest with his women about what he wanted and what he expected, and yet most of the fairer sex would gladly stand in line twice, and they practically fought over him whenever he entered a room. Kelsey shuddered involuntarily. She had no intention of standing in line for a scrap of his attention, no matter how her body tried to convince her that she should.

He must be *damned* good in bed, she thought, following Randy with a frown. At least his women were getting some. Randy barely touched her, and treated her more like a friend than a girlfriend. It was true that they had a lot of the same interests - computers and science fiction being the top two - but Kelsey was beginning to worry that he was just as happy to have her as a pal. She wanted fairly frequent, hot and heavy sex, and the more she looked at Randy's slight shoulders and wiry build, the more she thought back to how wonderful it had felt to be held tight against Clint's blatant, raging erection. At least he felt something and displayed it, however involuntarily.

"Kelsey?"

Randy had found the person he'd been looking for. Thom Cannizarro - of the Law Offices of Cannizarro, Esposito, and Finch- stepped forward and hugged Kelsey warmly. Kels

took a deep breath of Lauder for Men and let herself relax for the first time in a long while. Thom always smelled so damned good!

"Ahem. If you two are through groping each other . . .?" Clint asked as Kelsey lay her head on Thom's broad, expensively clad shoulder. She hadn't realized that Clint had been behind them, and wondered at the note of possessiveness in his voice. Why on Earth would he be possessive of her? And why hadn't Randy asked that question?!

Instead, Randy had cornered poor Father Ryan about when St. Theresa's was going to step into the twenty-first century and get its computers wired together in a network. Kelsey could tell that that was what he was talking about even though he was several feet away and facing away from her, because he was moving his body about and waving his arms passionately. She snorted. If only she could get him to throw some of that passion her way, but then her butt was not stamped with a Windows logo and she was beginning to doubt that he thought she had any interesting ports into which he might want to stick his Ethernet connection . . .

Thom was speaking and Kelsey had missed most of it watching Randy buttonhole the poor beleaguered priest. " - so I want to see the two of you in my office. What time would be convenient?" He looked at Kelsey expectantly.

Kels wished fervently that she had heard the first part of the conversation. "Refresh my memory - "

Thom - and Clint the Neanderthal - frowned down at her. "Translation: you were daydreaming while I was talking and didn't hear a word of what I said." He had no right at all to the long suffering sigh he emitted, so Kelsey hit him sharply.

"I was *not* daydreaming. I was thinking over the day's events so I could write about them later."

"Sure you were." Neither of them looked liked they'd bought her excuse at all. Thom deigned to repeat himself, albeit impatiently. "I was saying that you two need to be present at the reading of Callie's will."

That was a stark reminder of why they were all there. "Oh. I hope she didn't leave me anything. I told her specifically *not* to."

Clint couldn't resist needling her. Maybe it would take her mind off things to get mad at him. "Well, Callie was a woman, which means she was going to be contrary and do the exact *opposite* of what you wanted her to do, like all women. She probably left you the whole freakin' estate."

Kelsey was suddenly too tired to try to come up with a snappy reply, so she didn't say a thing. She just locked eyes with Duncan and rawly let hers fill to overflowing with tears before she trudged away.

"Aw, son of a bitch," she heard Clint curse, but she couldn't even work up a smile as Father Ryan chided him, too, for "language, language". Kelsey felt better at not having been the only one the priest ended up shaking his head over.

At least he didn't follow her this time, for which she was eternally grateful. Kelsey knew that if just one more person hugged her or patted her on the back, she would lose it entirely. She was halfway home, blissfully alone, before she remembered that she hadn't set any time to meet with Thom, so she called his secretary, Anna, and told her what days and times worked for her, then told her to call back with a finalized time. When Kelsey finally walked into her small apartment, cluttered as it was with books and cats and computer stuff, she didn't even pause on her way to her bedroom for a good, long cry.

It was more than a week before Thom's secretary could manage to get everyone rounded up in the same room on the same day at the same time. There were only five of them - Thom, his secretary, Bridie, Duncan, and Kelsey, but Anna would have said it was like trying to convene a meeting of the G-7 with everyone's weird schedules. Bridie did a lot of volunteer and part-time work to make ends meet, and Clint was a Lieutenant in the town police force. Kelsey was the only one - being a bookstore manager - who had a regular schedule. But she'd done it.

Thom sat behind his big mahogany desk after making sure that everyone was as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. "Callie wasn't much for formality, as you all know, so she specifically asked that I not read her Last Will and Testament with all that 'legal folderol', as she so quaintly put it." Everyone laughed softly. That sure sounded like the Callie they all knew! "But I do have it written up inclusive of folderol, in case anyone here wishes to contest it. It is a valid will, and this is going to be fairly short."

Kelsey frowned, wondering why Thom thought someone might contest the will. Whatever Callie left her - probably some small monetary gift - was fine with her. She'd loved Callie the person, not whatever she owned, which Kelsey knew wasn't much, anyway.

"To her sister, Bridget Marie Harrington: her investments and all monies therein, as well as any furnishings you would like from her house, minus several bequests to charities - the American Lung Association, Shambala, and the American Cancer Society are the biggest of those." Thom passed Bridie a paper. "I believe that this is an accounting of the remaining monies, and I have also begun the paperwork to transfer that sum into your name."

Bridie stood up and kissed him on the cheek, making the lawyer blush brightly under his tan. "Thank you, Thom my boy."

Kelsey smiled, wondering how Thom, who was in his mid-forties and the father of three, felt about being called a boy, but she valiantly resisted mentioning it.

But if Bridie didn't get the house, who did?

Thom cleared his throat and shuffled his papers restlessly, almost as if he didn't want to go any further with the reading. "Don't thank me, thank Callie. That takes care of all of her property with the exception of the house."

Clint frowned, sensing impending disaster. What had that cantankerous old woman done with her beloved house?

"Although it's highly unusual, and I did try to talk her out of it, it was Callie's dying wish that her two favorite people in the world - besides her sister, of course - should have her house." Thom looked over the rim of his half-glasses pointedly at Clint and Kelsey. "That would be you two."

"Huh?" came the shocked reply in stereo.

"The terms are as follows, and I believe I'm quoting here, 'let the two of them live in my house for eighteen months together. At the end of that time, they can sell it and split the profits if they like - granted they haven't murdered each other outright. However, it is my fervent wish that they would use this time to come to their senses and' . . . well, uh, she does get a little graphic here about you two getting together in the, ah, biblical sense of the word." He cleared his throat awkwardly, as if his tie was creeping up on him. " 'If either of you should leave before the time is up for longer than twenty-four hours, you will forfeit your half of the house and its proceeds to the other.' She does say that her money is on the two of you, and that she hopes you

will live in the house together forever and, I'm quoting a more mild passage, 'have wild monkey sex in every room of the house at least once a day'."

There was a loud silence when Thom finished reading, and then Kelsey began to giggle. She knew it was wholly inappropriate, but she couldn't help it. Callie always liked to have the last word, the old coot. And this time she'd done it quite ingeniously. Callie also knew how much Kelsey loved the big old ranch house she'd lived in on the edge of town, but Kelsey had no designs in that area. Bridie should have inherited the house along with her sister's investments.

"She really did have her money on you two, you know," Bridie was saying in her high-pitched lilt. "There it 'tis, listed down here on the bottom," she showed everyone the entry Thom had made at Callie's behest. "Five hundred dollars: bet with Bridie and Thom about Clint and my girl," the ledger said, plain as day.

Kelsey got up to squat next to Bridie's chair. "But that should be your house, Bridie!"

The older woman patted Kelsey's hand. "No, dearie. That wasn't our family home; the ranch was the house that Callie and her husband bought after they married. It was always so full of love. She wanted that for you and Clint - for the house to be filled with your own love and lust . . . for life, of course."

"But Callie *knew* that we can barely stand to be in the same room together without killing each other - " Clint stood up, angrily shoving his fists into his pockets.

Despite the setting, Kelsey couldn't resist needling him. "Yeah, she knew you were a raving lunatic but she kept you as a friend, anyway. No accounting for some people's taste . . ."

Clint rounded on her, ready for a fight, but Thom interrupted as the voice of reason. "Enough, enough. The whole town knows you two can't stand each other, but for whatever reason Callie thought you'all protested too much and that there was some spark there. Whether she was right or wrong is a moot point - the question comes down to: can you two spend that much time together and live to tell about it? Do you even want to? Maybe one of you'd rather just forfeit without even trying and just give your half up to the other. Maybe neither one of you wants to deal with this mess, and, in which case, the proceeds of the house once it's sold will go to charity."

That idea grated on Kelsey. She loved that house at least as much as Callie had. It was a big ranch house, with a huge master bedroom, bow windows with window seats in the dining and living rooms, a large country kitchen with every appliance known to man, and it was done in country blue with flowered upholstery accents that Kelsey had helped Callie pick out several years ago when she'd gone on a redecorating binge.

Kelsey was already arranging furniture in her mind when Clint asked a disgustingly practical question. "When do you have to have our answers?"

"By the fifteenth of the month."

That was less than a week away.

The somber group filed out of his office minutes later, with Clint and Kelsey pulling up the rear as they walked to their respective cars. As she put the key in the lock of her beat up old Volkswagen, Kelsey happened to look up and caught Clint staring at her while opening up his big brawny truck. Clint smiled wolfishly, winked at her, then got in. Kelsey gave him the good old-fashioned one-finger salute, and clamored into her own vehicle, revving the engine angrily as he laid rubber leaving the parking lot.

Isn't that just like a police officer? she thought. *Do as I say, not as I do.*

God she hated that man! How the hell was she going to put up with him on a day to day basis for eighteen months without hitting him upside the head with a two by four and being

hauled in for murder? She didn't know the answer to that question, but she did know that she wanted that damned house, and if she had to live, eat, and sleep with the Devil himself, then so be it.

Sleep with? Perish the thought!

Kelsey shuddered, but she recognized the truth of the matter: as much as she detested Clint Duncan, her body absolutely adored him, responding sexually to his presence every time, much to her embarrassment.

Even as she refused to even think of the possibility of Callie's prophecy coming true, she had to acknowledge the fact that her nipples had been painfully spiked through the whole meeting, and her panties were soaked right through her hose, dammit! Around him, her body definitely had a mind of its own. With what she wanted from a man, she knew she could never consider Clint as a potential anything, not that she ever would.

The fact that her late night fantasies were filled with daring, forbidden thoughts of him taking her in hand was something her conscious mind flatly refused to explore. That was an impossibility. There was no way that she'd ever let the big oaf close enough to her to do that, anyway - or that she'd ever trust him enough to make herself that vulnerable to him.

She hated him. Kelsey just had to keep repeating that fact to herself, like a mantra, even as her mind conjured images of herself stretched over those powerful thighs, getting the spanking of her life.

Nope. Not gonna happen. Not in this lifetime, anyway, she gunned the car out of the lot, her bottom tingling at the thought of submitting to him in that way.

Chapter 2

Requisite tie askew and shirt and pants thoroughly wrinkled, as if he'd retrieved them from the floor of his bedroom before donning them, Clint Duncan sank into his desk chair as bonelessly as possible for someone of his size, sighing exasperatedly and automatically reaching down quickly to try to adjust himself before he ended up singing soprano in the Policemen's Choir. He grimaced, thinking that having to do that was becoming an annoyingly frequent habit. Hoping to distract himself from the source of both his consternation and his rampant excitement, he signed into the precinct's email - not that there was usually anything in the least interesting to him in his inbox - birthday wishes and notifications of births and retirements and assorted administrative and housekeeping types of things. Generally, he avoided it like the plague for just those reasons.

Heck, he avoided computers in general. He didn't want to email someone back and forth - or, worse than that, instant message complete strangers. If he wanted to talk to someone, he'd pick up the damned phone and do it. Computers were a menace to society, as far as he was concerned. He hated them with a passion.

A social butterfly he was not. Heck, he smiled wryly, he was barely paper trained, as Kelsey was infinitely fond of reminding him. Just the thought of her sent a jolt of electricity into his groin, distracting him from his distraction. Damn, that woman drove him up a wall! She could get to him faster than anyone else on the planet.

He was supposed to be cool, calm, and collected at all times, and - when she was nowhere near and not eating away at his composure from inside his mind - he was - always self-assured, always competent and serious. Nothing could get to him. Clint was a cop with nearly twenty years of experience in criminal justice. He'd been a Security Police officer in the Air Force - a Captain when he'd retired. Law enforcement had really been his only career, his only real interest since he could remember. Even when he was a kid and played cops and robbers in the street, dodging pretend bullets by ducking behind parked cars, his mom said that he'd always refused to be a robber just on general principles, although Clint himself had no recollection of being quite that righteous.

He just knew he liked being the one in control - and that was, most usually in his limited childhood experience, a police officer. They got to carry guns and handcuffs - which, later on in life came to have an entirely different use from what they taught in any academy - and drive fast without fear of getting a ticket. People were supposed to do as they said.

What could possibly be greater than that? his precocious young mind had decided, and from that point on, he could never really see himself as anything else.

The Air Force had beckoned only as a way to get his degree without owing an arm and three legs to the government in loans, and, as they were at that point hurting for warm bodies in the military, he was pretty much able to pick where he wanted to go. Security Police had fit him

just perfectly. Naturally conscientious and damned good at what he did, the young airman was cited several times for bravery and received several medals while enlisted, and had a solid gold reputation, so much so that when he'd graduated from college the Wing, Base, and Security Police Squadron Commanders all wrote letters of recommendation for him to get into Officers' Training School.

Clint hadn't intended to make a career out of soldiering, necessarily, but it to appealed to him, and he was excelling at it, so he became a "retread" officer, having spent a hitch and a half as enlisted but then becoming an officer and doing pretty well at that, too.

When he retired out of the military, though, he knew that he wanted to get back into the trenches and be a police officer. He could do all of the bureaucratic crap that was necessary to get the big money, but he didn't like it. He much preferred to be on the front lines. Since he'd grown up in Gordon's Cross, and, almost on a whim when he was up visiting from where he'd settled near Boston, he'd put in his application for police officer in the small burg.

The phone call had come three days later, offering him the chance to start the battery of tests that might get him into the next academy. He'd jumped at the offer, and graduated six months later. A year and a half after that, he'd made detective, and he would be perfectly happy to retired out in another eighteen years without ever having been anything but. It was his calling, his avocation.

Clint was a single-minded kind of a guy - almost tunnel-visioned when he was working on a case. But lately someone - whose initials were Kelsey Donahue - was getting into his mind and making him . . . he shifted uncomfortably in his chair again . . . hard. He'd been like granite around her since they'd met entirely by chance one evening when he was home on leave. With nothing much else on his plate, Clint decided on the spur of the moment to stop by Callie's place, and she introduced him to the little spitfire, with words - for his ears only, of course - to the effect that if he was a smart boy, he'd have his way with Kelsey as soon as possible and never let her go from there.

Clint had to shake his head and chuckle as he waded through the more than two hundred messages, not really reading them but skimming subject lines and "from" lines to see if there was anything that caught his eye - and almost nothing did.

That offhand, off-color remark was so reminiscent of Callie. Clint had gotten to know her through his mother's sister . . . and in spite of his mother's tacit disapproval of her bohemian ways, Clint and Callie had become fast friends. As an only child of older parents, Clint had no one close by to play games with and Callie filled that void. She was an inveterate card player and had quickly taught that spongey mind of his everything from canasta to poker and blackjack, regularly beating him out of his allowance without so much as a by-your-leave until he caught on to the subtler nuances and then the odds evened out a little.

Callie never treated him as a child - she'd been straight-talking from the first, not pulling any punches, and the older Clint got the more he appreciated that. She'd supported his decision to join the Air Force - another of the many times she was at loggerheads with his mother. Callie thought it would be a wonderful way for him to escape the confines of Gordon's Cross and spread his wings some, when he was young and didn't have any responsibilities. She'd cautioned him repeatedly, though, to make damned sure that he didn't end up with any little Clints running around before he wanted to, making him blush when almost no one or nothing could have. She'd given him his first package of condoms when he was twelve, and, over the course of their relationship had always been entirely truthful with him about sex. Callie had been the one to give him what resembled the only "sex talk" he was likely to get in his life, gently but

forthrightly emphasizing the incredible pleasure - physical, emotional, and spiritual as well as the tremendous responsibility of taking that plunge. His father certainly wasn't likely to talk to him about it.

They'd remained very good friends even when he'd been sent away, writing back and forth quite religiously, and Clint had made it a point to stop by to see his old friend every time he got home on leave, and once he'd settled there they had had a regular poker night every other week or so with several of Callie's cronies.

She'd congratulated him when he'd entered into an impromptu, thankfully very brief, unhappy marriage to a woman who looked at an Air Force officer and saw dollar signs, and hadn't said "I told you so" once, no matter the considerable temptation. Cute little cupie-doll Eileen Sawyer - a teacher in the American school on Base - had dazzled him in the bedroom like no other woman, while she spent every cent they made combined, and then some.

Clint frowned as his eyes lit on something in his box marked urgent, just as someone dumped a load of mail on his desk, which he promptly ignored.

The message made his blood run cold for a moment, until he brought it under control. After reading it closely, he was almost able to dismiss it, but not quite. It was too close to him. Not enough time had passed. The letter informed him that Jerry Travis, an extremely violent and vengeful killer that Clint had been instrumental in capturing several years ago - near the beginning of his career here - was going up before a parole board at the end of the month.

Parole. Clint couldn't believe it. A vicious man like that being considered for release. Hell, he was still getting the occasional threatening letter - anonymous, of course - that was obviously from Travis. Clint had taken three bullets and nearly died in the firefight that had finally brought him down . . . Travis had set his sights on the brash detective - taunting him and the entire department with anonymous letters and a message left near his last victim, promising that Duncan was next on his list. The small squad of detectives on the force pulled together and got the job done.

It certainly wasn't unheard of that such a small town would have a homicidal maniac in its midst, but it was unusual. Thus there had been a lot of press attention from all over the world, especially as the body count rose. They had evidence that linked him to the murders of four pretty young women, and they liked him for at least another four.

Luckily, they'd been ready for him, and since the obviously disturbed individual had been incarcerated, no more bodies had turned up.

But Travis came from money, and he had an extremely good attorney who picked apart the police procedures used to nab him and got him an extremely reduced sentence that was, frankly, a slap in the face to everyone who had worked so hard to bring him in.

Well, it looked like he was going to be making a trip to *that* parole hearing - not that he truly expected that the man was going to be released, Clint thought, his lips tight, jaw clenched as he reached for the phone to call and sign up to speak to the board against ever letting that man out into society again.

While he was on hold, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, an unbidden picture creeping into his mind that had nothing to do with the situation at hand: Kelsey's wonderfully rounded curves filling his hands as he settled into her, spreading her open, stretching that hot, tight glove around him unbearably as he -

Sitting up abruptly, he shook his head like a dog with a recalcitrant stuffed toy. Damn! Would he never be able to get that woman out of his head? Even a real-life life or death threat

like Travis couldn't keep her from invading his consciousness. And he knew better than to look down, knowing his body was already caught up in the flash-fantasy, hook, line, and sinker.

Maybe if he got this blasted situation with Callie's house settled, he'd be able to think again without unbidden pictures of that too-well-blessed shrew popping into his head.

After he'd let the powers that be know that he would be attending and speaking rather vehemently on the behalf of the state, he jabbed the disconnect button and punched in the second most aggravating person he'd ever met in his life, a small smile creeping over his face as he thought that she was, however, probably just a little less of a threat to him.

But not by much, came the wry thought, as he had to rearrange things again for his own comfort while waiting for her to answer.

"You know better than that, Kelsey Donahue." The voice came from above her; most things were above her, though, since she was lying unceremoniously draped over Clint's lap for the umpteenth time that day, red-roasted bottom again bouncing beneath the painfully loving application of his hand.

"C-Clint - Cliiiiiinnnnnnnttttt! Stop!" she babbled incoherently, not at all sure she could tolerate yet another stinging bout of swollen, swelling handprints on her tender derriere.

But the horrid cracking of flesh on flesh did not diminish or falter, despite her pleas. "Now, you know that I'm not going to stop spanking you until I'm sure that you've learned your lesson, young lady. You know that I'm never going to let you get off easy when you disobey me - today should prove that to you. This is what, your fourth session here in the past eight hours - most of which were the direct result of your sassy mouth? I'm beginning to think you like being put over my knee like a naughty little girl - you're spending so much time here. But I'll always do whatever it takes to bring you back into line, Kelsey. That's what I'm here for - to remind you - and your bottom - that I'm the one in charge of your behavior, and that I'll always be here to correct you when you need it."

The heat and hurt in her bottom were unbearable, and he showed absolutely no signs of stopping. None. She danced around as much as she could - as much as she dared - which was never enough so that he missed a swat, of course; his strong arm around her would never allow for that. That was part of the awfulness of being disciplined by him - the true and complete physical helplessness, along with the feeling of being reduced to feeling like she was about four years old, with her pink cotton elastic-waist shorts bunched around her ankle socks, along with the white cotton panties which were the only ones he allowed her to wear, twisted and tight, binding her as effectively as any leather cuffs could.

It was the last part of every spanking, where he smacked her as hard as he could over her already broiled skin, driving her well beyond coherence to where she couldn't even beg for it to end, but could only make pathetic attempts to deal with the consequences he brought to her actions.

When he was finally done, when he felt that he had impressed his point on her to the fullest extent possible, Clint's hold on her waist loosened, but he didn't release her; his big palm rested at the small of her back, and she knew exactly what that meant from prior painful experience: "Stay still, stay right where I've put you, or else." The fingers of the very hand that had just wreaked havoc on her tender skin began to probe gently between her legs, the bulk of

his fingers twisting gently to coax them apart, forcing her to straddle his knee and display herself quite obscenely.

Her voice gravelly and hoarse from the moans and groans he'd inspired with pain not three minutes ago, Kelsey couldn't keep herself from debasing herself further by begging him not to touch her that way, not like this.

It was, of course, as if she hadn't spoken a word. Clint did with her body whatever he preferred . . . and that usually meant either incredibly hard to bear discipline, or blinding, all-consuming orgasms that left her feeling at least as drained.

Her body was opened, carefully, gently, in direct contrast to the way he'd punished her. To her complete mortification, she knew that he could both see and feel just how her body had responded - unconsciously- to the way he had always chosen to reaffirm his rules.

"Even this time, you loved it, Kelsey," his breath ghosted across her seared flesh. "Even though you were already so well-roasted. Or maybe because you were."

She felt him collect her dew on his fingertips, then bring the liquid gold deposit a few inches further up between her legs to the button of flesh that yearned for it, yearned for any touch he might grant her, especially that long, slick stroking he favored as he cradled the tasty bit between index and middle fingers, always surrounding her with himself, never letting up on the exquisite sensations he knew he was eliciting from her eager, juicy body -

"Muh-rrrr-OOW!" Hunter - Kelsey's tabby mutt pound-kitty chose that exact, atrocious time to alert her that - as far as he was concerned - it was time to get up by butting his cold, wet nose up against hers and announcing his presence loudly while tap-dancing on her breasts with his big, pointy feet.

Kelsey awoke abruptly, just about ready to do bodily harm to the poor cat when she realized that she was never going to find out how that wondrous fantasy dream ended . . . not that she couldn't guess. Her body was primed for release, blood still thrumming through her most delicate areas, creating that unspeakable ache she would just have to live with - at least until tonight. She didn't have time to take care of things this morning, unfortunately.

It was only seven-thirty, and there was no need for her to get up, really, although she always did for fear of becoming a lazybones who got nothing accomplished during the day, Kelsey decided that since she'd been so rudely awakened, she might as well do something productive. All the time she was getting herself dressed, she refused to allow herself to dwell on the fact that her subconscious seemed quite willing to make Clint the star of her sex dreams. It wasn't like it hadn't happened before; she grimaced at the face in the mirror while brushing her teeth with added vigor. They were always dreams about her submitting to him - *as if*, she kidded herself hollowly - being spanked or caned or duly chastised with any number of implements her mind had put at his disposal, then brought to pleasure in varied ways. And she almost always found the most stunning satisfaction in them - unless the cat got to her first, that is.

She liked to delude herself into thinking that the hero - such as he was - in her dreams could have been any man - even just a cute guy off the street or a particularly good looking waiting at a restaurant.

But somehow, for some unknown reason that she staunchly refused to investigate further, it was always Clint Duncan. Never anyone else. He had been the star of her fantasies since before she knew what sexual satisfaction was, and Kelsey would give her life before she ever let him find out about that fact.

She didn't like Clint Duncan. She didn't, she chanted. He was domineering and ill-mannered and ill-tempered and rough. He was everything she detested like in a man . . . well,

except maybe the domineering part. Deep, deep down in her heart, where she rarely let anyone else look, and where she rarely ventured herself except by accident, Kelsey wanted a man who would not be afraid to take control of her. Not in a nasty, control-freak way, and not in a way that would be unhealthy for her or for them. But in a natural, fifties-ish way . . . Despite her egalitarian tendencies, she wanted a man who would take charge and take care of her.

But she still really hadn't come to grips with that idea herself, and if she was asked she'd deny it to the Heavens. Loudly. How ridiculous for a woman of the twenty-first century to *want* to have to live in an "I Love Lucy" type of relationship, where she would be expected to submit to and obey her husband in all things, lest he physically chastise her like a little girl for any little mishap, where he was the undisputed head of the household, and she was expected to do as she was told.

As she slipped a sweatshirt over her head, completely naughty thoughts slipped surreptitiously back into her head . . . thoughts of lying beneath Clint as he eased into her, rubbing her striped red bottom against the mattress as he swelled inside her, suckling at her nipples and driving into her hard -

The phone trilled loudly in the silence as she stood there breathing heavily at her thoughts, face flushed and nipples tight. In an unusually grumpy tone at the constant interruptions at the crack of dawn, Kelsey snatched up the phone. "Yeah, what?"

A purely masculine snort greeted her ears. "That's a helluva way to answer the phone, Princess."

God, she hated him - and she hated that blasted nickname even worse! It made her sound as if she laid back and had people waiting on her hand and foot, and nothing could have been further from the truth. Just because she had generous parents who gave her lots of things - as well as lots of love - didn't make her a useless person. Just because she didn't get up and go out into the world every day didn't mean that she didn't work - she did. It just happened to be on a computer at home rather than at an office building or manufacturing plant.

"Bite me," she snapped off, inches away from slamming the receiver down like a petulant child. Until then, she'd been able to avoid thinking about what the hell was she going to do with him and the terms of Callie's will. She had a bad feeling that that was why he was calling.

"That can be arranged, but you probably won't like it," he returned laconically. Clint was thinking that he didn't want to bite her at all. Instead, he wanted to put her over his lap and redden those teasing globes - to keep her princessishness tightly in line, and keep her only to himself.

A mental picture of that wimpy, nerdy Randy popped into his head, and his jaw tightened. She needed a man with a firm hand - someone who wasn't afraid to lay down the law and back it up by applying the flat of his hand to her rump when the situation warranted it.

It was her turn to snort indelicately in his ear. "In your dreams." *No, in yours*, her subconscious corrected her automatically, but she ignored that annoyingly persistent little voice.

That came uncomfortably close to his reality lately, so his response was a little gruff. "Enough chit-chat. What're we going to do about the house?"

Kelsey sighed with exaggerated patience while cradling the phone between her cheek and shoulder as she pulled on her socks and shoes. "I've already told you. I'll buy you out. I've got an appointment with a mortgage loan officer, and I'm hoping that I'll be able to buy out your interest in it and keep it for myself." She very quietly kept her own counsel about the fact that she didn't have a lot of hope that she'd get the loan, considering how much her income had dropped since she'd started writing, to say nothing of the debt load she already had. A mortgage

company was probably going to run screaming from her application, but he didn't need to know that.

"I never heard anything about that, Princess - "

"Stop calling me that!" she practically yelled, despite the fact that she'd never yelled at anyone in her life. This man drove her straight up a wall, every time they came within fifty feet of each other . . . Continuing in a considerably quieter tone, "I didn't tell you directly - I told Thom to tell you."

"Whatsa' matter? You can't pick up the phone and call me yourself, *Princess*?" he baited.

"Please! Not if I can help it!" she snorted derisively in his ear.

Clint's jaw clenched tightly. "What if I want the house for myself?"

Kelsey's jaw dropped open. It would be just like the stinker to go after something simply because he knew she wanted it. "Then I suggest you start filling out mortgage applications, too, although I don't know why you'd want a house when you barely spend any time at home as it is."

"How would you know how much time I spend at home?"

"I was just assuming - "

"Well, don't," he commanded crisply, and for a moment she could see him in his Air Force Officer uniform giving her a direct order as if she was an Airman Basic. "I always liked Callie's house."

"She told me that you did nothing but complain to her about how big it was and how much upkeep there was - "

"It was big and a lot of upkeep for a seventy-whatever year old woman!"

"It'll be a lot of work for whoever gets it."

"I'm not afraid of hard work - unlike some people, I get up and go to work every day."

She'd been waiting for him to make some sort of crack about her profession, and it didn't matter how many times he did, she always rose to the bait - at least at first. "I work just as hard as you do, buddy-boy - "

He was laughing so uproariously she knew he'd drown out anything more that she said, so she lay in wait for him to calm down. "Ahhhhh, little girl," he lamented in a falsely sympathetic tone, still chuckling occasionally, "you sure do tell some whoppers - someone oughta warm your seat good for saying such things."

Despite the fact that - to her disgust - both her bottom and the area between her legs clenched tightly at his casual words, Kelsey was not amused. She also hated to be called "little girl" as if she was a five year old. But she resolved to remain silent. She'd decided that she wasn't going to let him needle her any more about her writing. She was moderately successful, and darned proud of herself because of it.

Since she didn't seem to want to play anymore, he came right to the point of his call - well, one of them, anyway. "I figured we should get together and try to talk this whole situation out, see if we can't come to some sort of amicable agreement."

Kelsey's eyebrow hurt, it was so far into her hairline. "I can't see how that would really do us any good. I can argue you with you quite proficiently from the comfort of my apartment."

Clint wasn't any too happy that she was turning him down outright, without even really considering the possibility that a face to face meeting might help things . . . not that he was desperate to see her or anything of the sort, of course. "Well, that's fine, but I never thought you were a chicken, but if you're *that* afraid of me - "

She rose to the bait like a trooper. "I certainly am not chicken, and I am most definitely not afraid of *you*, believe me," she fairly sneered. "How about seven-thirty tomorrow night at Chico's?" she challenged boldly, suggesting a popular Mexican restaurant.

He couldn't suppress a soft snicker. "You afraid to come to my place?" he challenged. Clint didn't know where that came from, exactly - he didn't allow very many people - beyond his buddies and even those were few and far between - into the inner sanctum of his apartment, much less a woman he professed to hate outright. Even his occasional girlfriends - much more occasional than *some people* might think, frankly - were rarely invited to share his private, personal space.

His place? Her conscience squeaked. *But I don't wanna go to his place - it's much too intimate! I don't wanna see the Neanderthal in his natural habitat! What if he conks me over the head with a club and drags me into his cave? There were probably dirty socks and underwear all over the floor, and green, furry dishes under the couch, mating . . .* Not that her housekeeping tendencies were particularly anal. She'd been known to be a tad lax in that area on occasion.

Kelsey ignored that tiny, desperate - and disgustingly wishful - sounding voice. She would be fine. They'd talk - she'd bet they wouldn't get much resolved, but they'd talk, and he'd learn she wasn't just going to lie down and let him walk all over her about this.

Lie down for him, yes, but not for that particular reason, her mind supplied slyly until she squelched the thought with more violence than was truly necessary.

"I'm not gonna take it easy on you," he'd continued while she was waging a quiet war with herself. "I want that house, and I aim to get it."

"OOoooooooooh, I'm sooooooooo scaaaared!" Kelsey knew she sounded like the child he often accused her of being, but she couldn't help it. "Fine. When?"

Remembering in the back of his mind that every woman he'd ever dated was compulsively late, Clint made an automatic adjustment, saying, "Since tomorrow at seven-thirty works for you, then it works for me," he countered, although he automatically adjusted the time to eight in his mind. Most of the women he knew were genetically predisposed to be at least a half hour late for everything. That was okay. Tomorrow was Tuesday night. No football games on of note, and poker night wasn't until Thursday.

"I'll be there."

"Good. See you then, Princess."

Kelsey snorted and hung up the phone, not caring how impolite it was. That man made her furious!

He also made her wet, she had to concede, knowing there was a large wet spot on her panties just from their very platonic, combative conversation.

She sighed, hugging a pillow tightly, trying to forcibly evict him from her thoughts without much success.

Her mind had a mind of its own.

In fact, she thought of nothing *but* him for the next day and a half - Kelsey couldn't get away from him - even when she tried to immerse herself in her writing, she discovered that her nice, mild-mannered, well-groomed hero ended up with a lot of unpleasantly familiar, Clint-like

characteristics, leaving her banging her head against the keyboard in frustration by early the next afternoon.

Luckily, she was saved from having to have her heroine kill the hero with her bare hands - much as she often wanted to do to Clint - by the trill of the phone next to her.

"Water company," she answered cheerfully. "Which drip do you want?"

Her best friend's giggles tickled her ear. "Since you're the only one living there, you really should reconsider using that line, shouldn't you?"

"Yeah, it just fell outta my mouth. You know how my mouth tends to run away with whatever brains I have left . . . "

"Kelsey!" Anna chided.

"So . . . how's it hangin'?"

"Great! What's goin' on with you? Any word from the mortgage company?"

"Nope - haven't gone yet. My appointment is for next week, Monday."

"Wow - that far away?"

"Yeah, everyone and their brother is either buying or refinancing right now because of the low rates."

"Mmmmmmm. That could work in your favor, though - your payment'll be lower."

Kelsey snorted. "Honestly, I don't hold out a lot of hope about getting this mortgage, unfortunately. Not with what I owe and my so-called career as a writer making me peanuts this year."

"Stop that!" Anna was ever the optimist, and often had to curb Kelsey's natural pessimism. "You don't know what they'll say."

"I have a pretty good idea."

"Kelsey! Don't go in there with a defeatist attitude, or I'll hafta smack you around myself."

"Yes, Ma'am, may I have another?" came the snappy return.

"Cut that out. You know I'm much too vanilla to be a dominatrix."

"Yes, but sometimes you sound like a reasonable facsimile therein . . . "

There was a short comfortable silence. "You know, you do still have a viable alternative if, for some reason, the powers that be can't see clear to lending you the money you need."

"I do?" Kelsey questioned foggily. For the life of her she couldn't see one.

"Yes. You and Clint could share the house for a year and a half - "

"WE COULD NOT!!!"

Anna was not going to put up with her stubborn friend's automatic protestations. "Listen to me - if you spent that time living like a church mouse, then maybe you could get some stuff paid off, and then you could reapply at the end of that time with a much smaller amount of debt!"

"You left out the physical impossibility of my being able to live with him and not kill him at some point during those eighteen looooooooooooooooooooooooooooo months."

"Kelsey Valentina Donahue! You know you could do that if you really wanted to."

"Could not," Kelsey pouted back at her, her lower lip lolling onto the receiver.

"How old did you say you were?"

The answer was prompt and delivered in a decidedly un-ladylike growl. "Not nearly old enough to control myself longer than about five seconds around that man. He makes me positively *itch* to smack him."

Anna snickered into the phone. "I didn't think *you* wanted to smack *him* - I thought it was quite the other way around . . . "

Kelsey blushed from head to toe, even though there was no one else around to see it.
"Anna!!! Cut that out!"

"Well, am I wrong?" Her friend sounded completely unrepentant.

"No," she admitted reluctantly, "but you don't need to broadcast something I told you in confidence . . . "

"A personal telephone conversation between us is hardly broadcasting it, my friend.
Now, taking an ad out in the paper . . . "

"ACK!"

" . . . or calling him and telling him what-all I know about how much you love to '*hate*' him . . . "

Kelsey went almost apoplectic at that idea, her heart pumping wildly and skin going cold.
"You *wouldn't*!!!"

The heartfelt snort from the other end of the phone mollified her somewhat. "Of course not! First of all, you know entirely too much about me that you could pass on to Ron and get me into deep shit!"

Kelsey's laugh was slightly weak as she tried to recover from the shock of even the hint of the possibility of Clint -finding out about A - what she liked sexually, and much much worse than that B - that she liked the idea of getting it from him. It didn't bear thinking of - ever.

"And secondly, you're my best friend and I would never do that to you." She held up her right hand, as if being sworn in at a court of law. "I do hereby promise that - even under the threat of the interminable torture of having to listen to Slim Whitman and Zamphir albums for days on end - shudder - or having to watch several Pauley Shore films simultaneously - I will never reveal any of your secrets, so help me George Bush." Anna heard some tentative chuckles as well as a huge sigh of relief. "Even if I do agree with Callie and think it would be a wonderful thing if the two of you got together."

"Ugh! Crosses and holy water, no!!!"

"Well, I know how you protest too much about not liking him, and I also see how he looks at you when he thinks that no one is looking watching him."

"He does?" She couldn't keep the pathetic note of interest from creeping into her voice.

"Yes. He looks like you do when you're eying a piece of Belgian milk chocolate - like he wants to devour you in one swallow."

"I thought I was the one who swallowed . . . "

"Ewwwwwww!!!"

Kelsey snorted. "Oh, please. Don't even try to make me think that I'm offending your delicate sensibilities, girlie-girl. Ron has much too much of a satisfied look on his face whenever I see him." There was a slight silence. "Are you blushing, Anna Drysdale?"

"Am not!"

"Suuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrre you are. By now, your complexion just about matches your beet-red hair."

Anna huffed indignantly. "My hair is not beet red!"

"Yeah, but it has been - remember that dye job gone bad when it came out maroon?"
Kelsey smiled broadly, quite satisfied with herself that she'd been able to steer her headstrong friend away from the topic of the house - and Clint Duncan.

Chapter 3

Seven-thirty the next day came all too soon - for both of the combatants. Kelsey had stood in front of her closet for quite some time, wondering what the heck would be appropriate to wear to face one's life-long opponent in his own lair - besides chain mail armor, that is. She had a feeling that even the best armor would be no protection against *that* annoying, overgrown oaf.

She considered and discarded outfits in her sizeable - but still moderate for most females - wardrobe until she'd been through all of her favorite summer clothes. Finally, a thought struck her: *why the hell was she dressing up for this guy she detested?* Instantly, her dilemma was solved. Each outfit was replaced neatly in the closet, then she dug around in her drawers and pulled out her oldest, most faded - and strategically but prettily patched - pair of jeans, and a t-shirt that read "When God made man, she was only kidding."

Feeling an incredible sense of satisfaction, Kelsey disdained make-up entirely - well, except for a slight bit of foundation to even out her skin tones - and decided to forego her contacts for the evening, choosing instead to wear her ugliest pair of frames. A pair of three-strap Birks completed her outfit. *After all*, she thought, *who was she trying to impress? Certainly not that man.*

The animosity she felt towards Clint was nothing new. It had been there - hot and sharp - from the very first moment she'd set eyes on him. He'd blown into Callie's - not even bothering with the courtesy of knocking - during one of her frequent visits, acting like he'd owned the place, and Callie - much to Kelsey's surprise and dismay - had practically tripped over herself fawning over the big galoot.

Kelsey was unable to hide the anger she felt at his intrusion into her time with Callie, which she considered to be incredibly precious. Although she didn't say anything outright, she let it be known by her demeanor and her facial expressions that his presence was not particularly welcome as far as she was concerned.

Introductions were made and Kelsey responded in the polite manner that had been drilled into her as a girl - although she was in her early twenties at that point - as the cretin had looked her up and down quite blatantly, like she was a tasty little morsel just ripe for the pickin'.

"Kelsey Donahue, this is Air Force Second Lieutenant Clint Duncan, home from Germany after more than a year away from kith and kin." Callie's eyes as she looked at him shone with tremendous pride. "Clint, my boy, this is Kelsey Donahue. She's going to be a best-selling author one day, but for now she's working at First Federal Bank while she writes the first of many novels."

His handshake was just what she expected, firm and strong . . . and it made her nipples come to embarrassing attention. Shocked to the bone - that had certainly never happened to her with any other man - Kelsey made sure her grip was as limp as a dead fish, and that she reclaimed her hand as soon as was courteously feasible while blushing deeply under his boldly assessing gaze.

"Ms. Donahue. It's nice to meet you," Clint stated flatly, in an emotionless tone that was just this side of insulting, responding to the distinct chill he felt from her and making it seem as if, in his thorough inspection, he had found her considerably lacking.

Knowing she was mouthing a complete falsehood, Kelsey replied as she stared at her shoes, "Nice to meet you, too, Lt. Duncan."

Callie was eying the two thoughtfully, her sharp, miss-nothing gaze traveling back and forth between two of her favorite people as if they were in a tennis match, although they were both standing quite motionless. Something was going on here. She could sense it. Their behavior was entirely abnormal - Kelsey was the bubbly, happy sort who laughed and joked a lot, even when meeting someone new. Clint was the more reserved of the two, but still generally had a ready smile.

"Well, you two must have a lot to catch up on," Kelsey murmured hurriedly, deliberately moving away from the two of them, her eyes firmly fastened on the floor. "I'll leave you to it."

"You don't have to go, Kelsey-girl - stay and chat a while," Callie encouraged, touching the obviously disconcerted young woman's elbow as she shrugged into a rain coat. Clint stood behind her like a lump, saying nothing, so Callie delivered a well-placed sharp elbow to his ribs to prompt him into helping her cajole Kelsey into staying.

"Ooof!" The exclamation exploded from his lips before he could control it; Callie had caught him by surprise, as usual. "Yes, please stay," Clint said in a tone that entirely lacked conviction. He'd heard enough from Callie about this spoiled little chit that he was not impressed in the least, and was in no hurry to have her sure to be self-centered contributions to their conversation.

To say nothing of the fact that he was quite annoyed at himself, since every part of his body but his brain seemed to welcome her presence . . . and was quite interested in getting to know if the rest of her skin was as soft as that of her hand.

The only explanation he could come up with was that he needed a woman. It had been a while - he'd been so busy what with the almost continual inspections going on on Base that he hadn't had any time at all to appease his . . . baser needs.

Well, that was one of the things he'd take care of while he was home - but certainly not with the little Princess here. He snorted in his mind. She was probably so prissy in bed she made her boyfriend wear a blindfold - and not for fun, either, but to preserve her precious modesty.

Kelsey had pretended not to hear what he'd said, not acknowledging it in any way, but continuing to get ready to leave, pulling her long hair out from the coat so that it floated and bounced around her like a loose halo. "No, I really do have to go." Callie knew that was an out and out lie - they had been going to bake some cinnamon raisin bread; Callie was slowly and patiently teaching Kelsey to cook - the girl's mother was a wonderful cook, but had no patience in teaching someone else how to do it. She'd practically banned Kelsey from the kitchen, and Callie had come to the rescue when the girl expressed an interest in learning how to bake, at least.

Callie had refused, of course, to let her leave with out a long, strong hug. Kelsey's family wasn't very touchy-feely, which Callie considered to be blasphemy when one had children. She had no chicks of her own, and lavished her attention on everyone else's progeny - of which both Kelsey and Clint were her absolute favorites.

They were so much alike, and so wonderfully different; she had often thought in her matchmaker's soul that they would make a fantastic couple if she could just get them together. It had surprised and saddened her how they had seemed to take an instantaneous dislike to each other. Hmmmmm. Hate is just the other side of love, she remembered, smiling secretly to

herself as she handed the girl on of her own umbrellas and waved at her until her small, decrepit little car had meandered down the long drive.

Callie closed the kitchen door and rounded on Clint, giving him a piece of her mind about how he had acted towards her favorite girl. Callie didn't often get riled, but when she did, watch out. At least Clint had had the grace to blush, realizing she was right.

"I'm sorry. I'll do better next time. It's just I found her to be exactly the way you've described her to me - a spoiled princess."

Depressed to realize that that was the impression she'd given him of Kelsey, Callie sighed. "How could you possibly know that in such a short time? Give the girl a chance, Clint, before you condemn her. A five second exchange in my kitchen is not enough time for you to make that kind of judgment."

But the negative first impressions - on both sides - had stuck. They only ran into each other occasionally - and always at Callie's as one was coming and the other going - or when Clint dropped by when he was home - unexpected, uninvited and unwanted, as far as Kelsey was concerned. When they were together, the sparks flew - both conversationally and physically. They sniped at each other incessantly, the niceties forsaken almost immediately as they snapped back and forth.

Callie shook her head at them. She would have been sad if she hadn't recognized that behind all of those terse exchanges was a load of attraction they were both fighting heartily against. If they'd just relax around each other and have a civil conversation, she knew they would hit it off.

But she was never able to get them to that point, and it was one of the things that, when she died, she couldn't let go of, so she hoped - in her little bequest - that they might just come together despite her. She knew she was going to do everything she could to arrange the possibility of it, anyway, and the two of them would take it wherever it would go.

That ever-present animosity bloomed within Kelsey the minute she ascended the steps to his house, although she did have to admit that she was surprised that he lived in as nice an area as he did. She would have thought that he'd have a third floor walk-up in a tenement on the bad side of town, but instead the address he'd given her was of a nice middle-class duplex in a pretty, residential neighborhood that was, frankly, much better than where she was currently living.

She rang the doorbell once, and waited.

And waited.

Kelsey began to worry that she'd gotten the address wrong as she punched the doorbell again. Well, he certainly wasn't waiting anxiously for her to appear, now, was he, not that she was surprised.

Just as she was digging in her pocket for the sticky note she'd written the address down on, the door was pulled open and there he was, in nicely pressed slacks and an oxford shirt. Kelsey felt distinctly under-dressed.

Clint stood aside for her to enter, sweeping an exaggeratedly courtly - and inherently sarcastic - bow. "Sorry," he mumbled almost sheepishly. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to seriously reconsider coming here."

Clint frowned. "I'm sorry. I was trying to type a letter for work and I was so involved in trying to work the correction tape that I lost track of time."

They were in his kitchen, which Kelsey noticed with amazement was absolutely spotless. But something else he'd said had amazed her even more and her face showed it. "Correction tape?"

"Yeah."

Was that a blush she detected under his George-Hamilton-perpetually-tanned skin? "Don't tell me you were typing on a typewriter!" she scoffed outright.

Yep, it was a blush, because it deepened considerably at her derisive comment. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"What do you have for soda?"

"Diet Pepsi." He held open the door to the avocado green fridge, and she knew instantaneously that he had never cooked a thing in this house. It was absolutely pristine. No leftovers . . . not even a crusty bottle of ketchup. There was a two liter of Diet Pepsi, a squeeze bottle of French's mustard, a five pack of beer - the orphan beer was dribbling condensation onto the nearby counter - and one, lonely egg in the door, in its hallowed out cradle.

"I'll take water, then, please."

His eyebrow rose, as if he was going to make a sarcastic comment about how fussy she was, but he restrained himself admirably. Seconds later, a large glass of tap water, cooling over ice, was pressed into her hand.

"You're using a *typewriter*?"

"Yes," he ground out, letting her know that he wished she wouldn't pursue that line of questioning.

Not that she would ever take a hint of his. Nope. Not likely. "Don't you have a word processing program on your computer?"

Sighing in defeat, Clint mumbled into his beer as he walked into the living room, "I don't own a computer."

Kelsey was flabbergasted. She'd heard of hold outs from the twenty-first century; those stubborn coots that eschewed the convenience and sheer joy of punching all those buttons and clicking on all those infinite links, but she'd never really stood this close to someone who didn't have a computer in his or her home. "Really? You don't?"

Frowning, Clint indicated that she should take the place of honor and sit in the only real piece of furniture in the room - his huge, overstuffed, does-everything-but-the-windows leather recliner. Gazing curiously about the sparsely furnished room, Kelsey sank into the chair, unable to suppress a groan of almost sexual satisfaction at the sheer comfort that all of that cushiony black leather afforded.

Pulling a folding chair away from the green velvet poker table that was the only other piece of furniture in the room besides the lamp table next to his chair, Clint sat down in a considerably more gingerly fashion, smiling in an evilly self-satisfied manner. "That was just my reaction when I sat down in it in the showroom. I knew I had to have it at just that moment."

Unaware of her sensual movements, Kelsey stroked the arms of the chair lovingly, rubbing the back of her head against the pillow-like headrest. "Oh, my God, this thing is positively sinful!"

As she was unselfconsciously writhing, Clint came to full, painful attention, physically unable to look away from the way her body arched and bucked. He had to clamp his mouth shut with a click in order to catch the bit of drool that threatened to spill onto the carpet. *Man, she*

looked like she was going to orgasm right then and there! He wondered what she would do if he darted over and flipped on the vibration and massage switch. She'd probably implode right there in his La-Z-Boy!

And what he wouldn't give to see just that happen to his uptight, starchy little Princess!

His Princess? The thought had popped into his head unbidden - and staunchly unwanted.

In mid-arch, Kelsey seemed to come to her senses about where she was and just what kind of display she was making, blushing an almost ruby red with the knowledge that he had - indeed - been watching every second of her lascivious motions. Sitting up straighter and crossing her legs in a ladylike fashion that she could now never pull off in front of him again, she pounced, hoping to distract him from her display.

"Why don't you own a computer, just out of curiosity?"

It took Clint a moment to get his mouth into gear for anything other than suckling at her - at any and all parts of her. His mind had definitely run away with his thoughts, and his body was in deep cahoots with it at that moment. "Huh?"

"Computers? You *do* know what they are, don't you?" she asked sarcastically, finding the bite of it helped ease her total embarrassment at her own embarrassing faux pas.

Clint frowned fiercely. "Of course I do. They're thousand dollar paperweights. They're the bane of my existence. I use one at work, only because I have to, but I refuse to cohabitate with one of those minions of Satan."

Kelsey couldn't suppress a giggle. "You're afraid of computers?"

His frown deepened, if that was possible. He looked like a grumpy old Scrooge. "I am *not* afraid of computers. I just don't like them, and I don't think they serve much of a useful purpose."

"Well, they'd save you from having to use correction tapes, for one thing."

Clint emitted a non-verbal grunt at that idea, taking a swig of beer. "I've been doing it since high school. I imagine I'll get along."

"Are you ever planning on joining the rest of us in the twenty-first century, or are you going to be a backwards curmudgeon all the rest of your life?"

His glare was impressive, but Kelsey remained unfazed. "I thought we were going to talk about the house."

"Chicken."

Clint rose half way, threateningly, as if he was going to come after her for that remark. Instead, he sat back down, deciding instead to change the subject to one that would be equally as annoying to her. "I want that house."

Kelsey's eyes narrowed, he could see it even from across the room. "I want the house, too. That's why I'm over here, to see if we could settle this thing amicably."

Leaning back in his chair, Clint needled, "Well, then if we're going to be amicable, then that means that you're going to let me buy you out of the house."

"Not on your old lady's corset cover, Clint Duncan. I have just as much right to Callie's house as you do."

He was silent for a moment, just to throw her off, as if she was a suspect he was interrogating. "I took your advice and got myself an appointment with a mortgage company. We'll just see who gets this house, Princess. And I'd be willing to bet that it's me. Of course, if you'd like to try to coerce me in a more . . . enticing fashion, you might get further."

Incensed at how this conversation was going, Kelsey shot out of the recliner as if it had stung her. "I can see that we're not going to get anywhere with this discussion. I don't know

why I thought that you and I could come to some sort of civilized agreement - when it's always been quite obvious to me that you're not nearly civilized." She turned her back on him and stalked to the front door, depositing her glass on the counter on the way by.

When, with her hand on the doorknob, Kelsey rounded to say something else, he was following her so closely that she bumped right into the big galoot, staggering back several steps and nearly falling, feeling as if she'd slammed up against a the side of a building.

Clint automatically reached out and grabbed her upper arm, steadying her and keeping her from falling backwards onto her pretty little butt, but as soon as she'd regained her balance, she shrugged out of his hold with a jerk. "I'm quite all right, thank you."

Her tone could have frozen over the equator, and the smile that settled over his face was about as friendly as her tone. "You're welcome."

Kelsey couldn't trust herself to say anything, so she merely glared up at him and exited as gracefully as she could.

Clint tried to talk himself into not following her every move back to her car - it was quite a lovely view from this side, especially with the door blocking out all the invectives she was undoubtedly heaping on his head. Those round curves made his mouth water, and although his brain rebelled completely, it was overruled by the prurient interests of a body that had been aching hard since the moment she'd come into his place.

God, to have the right to tame that little minx! He thought, then squelched the thought ruthlessly. She didn't like him; he didn't like her. That was the way things worked best, despite the undeniably tantalizing idea of bending her to his will - and over his lap - then laying her down on his big bed and feasting himself on that milky-white - and occasionally sore and red - skin.

What he ended up doing - without even realizing it - was banging his head against the door in frustration.

Chapter 4

Thoroughly defeated, Kelsey put the phone down in the cradle. In truth, she wanted to cry, but if she gave into that impulse every time she felt it she'd flood the whole town.

The mortgage company had said no. Not maybe, or possibly, or if she stood on her head and spit nickels, but a flat out "no" - and for just the reasons she's suspected, too: too much debt, too little income.

Dammit! Kelsey stood up so fast the office chair rolled halfway across the room. As she paced agitatedly back and forth across the living room, her hand naturally found its way into her hair, where she twirled the same poor lock she'd been twirling since she was a little girl. Some people smoked, some drank - Kelsey twirled. In fact, when she was little, she'd twirled so industriously she'd almost ended up a bald little girl.

She'd rarely suffered such a setback in her life. Generally, she got what she set her heart on - first because of doting, loving parents who found it hard to say no to either of their darling girls, and then because she'd had a great paying job managing a retail clothing store, and, being single, had money to burn and spoil herself with. And what she didn't have in hand, she charged on one of those lovely cards that kept appearing in her mailbox as if by magic. Those credit card companies were *so* generous and thoughtful!

But having a store was like having a capricious child. If the security alarm went off at three a.m., the cops didn't call the assistant manager. They called her. If an employee wasn't performing up to snuff, she either had to put up and shut up - depending on the economy - or fire them, neither of which was at all preferable. If someone called in sick, guess who ended up having to cover the shift if no one else could be found?

When her mother's health began to fail, there was no question that it was Kelsey that was going to move back to Gordon's Cross to take care of her through her agonizingly slow decline. Her older sister was married and lived in Alaska with her husband and her two-point-five kids. Janelle was useless for anything resembling practical help, although she was quite willing to offer both advice and criticism long distance. Kelsey did the best she could, but, in the end, almost everything her parents had worked so hard to build was gone. If it hadn't been for the small life insurance policy her mother had, Kelsey wasn't sure she'd have been able to cover the funereal costs.

She'd always had a hankering to write. It was what she did to entertain herself, at first, but then, in the middle of one long, lonely night, she wondered just what it was she was waiting for. There was no time better than when she was single - which she frankly always expected to be - to consciously do something that was going to negatively affect her earning power. So, before she'd moved back to live with her Mother, she'd started to try to plan ahead a bit be as smart as she could be about money - she saved up a bit of a nest egg. But when the house was sold to pay medical bills, and her mother was in a decent but not great nursing home, she found herself having to downsize even further from her really gorgeous place with three bedrooms she didn't really need and a gorgeous view of the mountains to the small bedroom she'd occupied as a child, then to a small one bedroom walkup in a somewhat questionable part of town, but whose rent she couldn't turn down.

Kelsey already had a reasonably state-of-the-art computer - a Christmas present to herself last year, which meant it was only partially obsolete several months later - a beautiful desk and office chair . . . what else did a writer need, anyway?

She'd even gone so far as to sell a lot of her furnishings, keeping only what she absolutely needed - her bed, computer stuff, a couch, and lamp table. Spartan, but livable for the short term. Kelsey had never been meant to live cheaply, and she knew it. Economizing went entirely against her grain. She was a Gray Poupon girl living in a French's Mustard world. Whatever it was she saw in a catalogue that she liked, it was always the most expensive thing they had to offer. It never failed.

She'd compromised as much as she could, and had paid down some of her debt, but apparently it wasn't enough.

The phone cut into her melancholy abruptly. It was Thom.

"Hey, Kelsey. I need to know what's going on with you and the house."

Her lips pursed as if she'd just sucked on a lemon, she answered, "I just got soundly turned down."

"Awww, hon, I'm sorry."

Kelsey knew that Thom was truly sympathetic to her plight, and let herself melt a little as she plopped down on the couch. "Thanks. If this had only been next year, I'd probably be okay."

"Yeah, I know. You're doing quite well, I hear."

Despite her doldrums, Kelsey smiled. "Thank you."

Thom cleared his throat, his voice more businesslike. "So does that mean that you're going to agree to the conditions of the will?"

She'd been so busy in the agony of disappointment that she hadn't really considered that that was the only next step that would let her keep her foot in the door, so to speak, however distasteful the idea of so closely sharing a space with that annoying man.

She had to suck it up and close her eyes, gritting her teeth as if she was constipated. Indeed, her voice sounded like she was straining at something . . . "Yeessss, I suppose so. What choice to I have, really? I want that house! I had to sell Mom and Dad's house, and I'm not going to give up Callie's."

Thom tried to soothe her. "You don't have a choice, and you know that Callie knew that. She knew you well enough to know that you didn't have the finances yet to buy the house outright, and that if you had the chance to move into a place that you didn't have to pay rent on, you might have enough for a down payment when the assigned time period is over."

Kelsey's eyes narrowed. "You sound as if you think that she planned to go when she went."

In his office across the street, behind his big oak desk, Thom smiled broadly at her fanciful suggestion. "Callie was a smart woman, but she wasn't *quite* that well informed."

"Mmmmm," Kelsey grumbled. "The problem is that that overgrown schoolboy will have the same advantage, if he hasn't already gotten a loan to buy the place out from under me with."

"He hasn't," Thom stated bluntly.

This stopped Kelsey in her tracks. Holding her breath and biting her lip viciously, she was almost afraid to ask. "Do you know that for sure?"

"Yes, I do."

Her breath exploded out of her.

Thom leaned back in his plush leather chair. He'd know Kelsey and Janelle since they were little girls - they were all only a few grades apart in school. Despite the fact that she'd grown up in a family that was on the verge of well-to-do and had had success in her chosen career, the past few years had brought a lot of sorrow as well as turmoil into Kelsey's life. She'd been alone when she'd seen both of her parents die - her father quite unexpectedly and her mother after a long illness that had eaten up any sort of inheritance she might have had. Janelle had not maintained the closeness with her parents that she'd grown up with, and Thom couldn't think of any instance where she'd bothered to come home to help Kelsey with her mother's care taking.

Clint might call Kelsey "Princess", but the princess had fallen on some very hard times recently, and had risen to meet the challenges with admirable poise and dignity. Thom knew just how spoiled and fussy she could sometimes be - honestly through no fault of her own. But she'd grown up a lot in the past few years - she'd had to. If it hadn't been for Callie, it would have been just that much harder on Kelsey. Callie was often Kelsey's respite care, watching over Evelyn Donahue so that her daughter could go out occasionally and have some time to herself.

Sometimes Thom would run into Kelsey at Callie's when she took a rare afternoon off from looking after her mother. Thom had seen the wonderful, warm relationship between the two women, despite the age difference, and, months later, had stood at Kelsey's elbow - with Callie on the other side - as her family home was put up for auction to pay Evelyn's bills.

That house had been a symbol of Kelsey's security, Thom mused. And that was probably why she was so interested in having Callie's house.

"So," he began somewhat tentatively. "You two are back where you started. And somehow I doubt that either of you is going to give up. So when are you going to move into Callie's house?"

Although she was happy that Clint hadn't had any luck either, Kelsey was in no hurry to become roommates with that aggravating man - and she used the term loosely in her mind . . . although she didn't suppose she really could, if she was truthful. There certainly wasn't any doubt as to his masculinity - the man oozed testosterone. He fairly screamed "capable male animal" - that bulge in his pants at the funeral was no sock, she'd bet the farm on that.

Not that any of that impressed her at all . . .

"Don't hold your breath," she told Thom sharply, only to hear him chuckle softly.

"I won't. But I *am* going to be watching you two for the next eighteen months - I have a feeling it's going to be better than any sit com or reality show on television."

"Grrrrrrrr."

"Well, when you come to the realization that you have no other choice if you truly want this house, get a hold of me. I'll facilitate the negotiations. I have a feeling I'm going to have a harder time than Carter trying to wrangle the Camp David Peace Accord from Sadat and Begin."

He hung up the phone to the sound of Kelsey's hearty raspberry.

Although Thom did his best to be a go-between, it was like trying to negotiate between members of the G-7. The out and out hostility in the air was incredible - he'd arbitrated nasty divorce settlements that were friendlier. Thom frowned. It was unlike either of them to have this fervent distaste for anyone - Clint was usually quite disaffected. He had to be, considering

his occupation. And he couldn't recall ever hearing or seeing Kelsey react quite like this about any other person - she pretty much liked everyone.

Suddenly it struck him - they were circling each other metaphorically and verbally like two alley cats. Thom snorted to himself. He didn't know if he'd go quite as far as naming whatever was between the two as love or even any sort of reasonable facsimile thereof at this point. But, as he looked from adversary to adversary, he realized that the majority of the tension in the room was sexual in nature - now that he thought about it, the air fairly sizzled with it.

Inordinately happy at having discovered the nature of their problem - not that either of them would ever admit to it, Thom spent the rest of the negotiation period trying - sometimes unsuccessfully - to suppress a smile.

For his part, Clint was just about ready to throttle Kelsey. It seemed like she was being even more deliberately annoying than usual - arguing about absolutely everything, from who was going to get use of the master bedroom to whose furniture they were going to use . . . not that he had a lot to choose from beyond bedroom furniture, but his big beloved recliner was going to parked right in the living room, in front of his wide screen TV where it belonged, and she could just take her prissy, holier than thou attitude and . . . bend over his lap for a good, hard spanking until she fairly begged him to put it in her bedroom, if that's what got him to stop spanking that beautifully rounded, red and white marbled bottom . . .

He shifted in his chair, suddenly cramped in a very strategic area, cursing his blasted imagination for getting him into this fix. Couldn't he be normal for once and fantasize about roseying some super model's bottom, instead of his arch nemesis? The perpetual thorn in his side? The pampered princess that sat smugly across from him, entirely untouched and unaffected by the proceedings, and obviously not suffering the torment of the damned that he was, wanting her desperately and hating himself for it.

Not that he wouldn't take her up on it if the unthinkable happened and she threw herself at him - he'd be hard pressed - uh, *very* hard pressed, if his current condition was any indicator - not to take her up on it. After teaching her a lesson that would be as unpleasant for her as it was pleasant for him . . .

What could the Cro-magnon be thinking of now? Kelsey wondered uncharitably. It wasn't enough for him to be ungentlemanly and insist that he have the master bedroom - *although what else had she expected from him?* she thought nastily. And what flimsy excuse did he give for his need of it? The fact that he was most definitely going to have overnight visitors of the female persuasion, and that that would dictate the necessity of having the larger room.

Of course, from there the discussion had descended into a shouting match about who was going to be staying over in the house that they shared and when. Clint had taken every possible opportunity to impugn her relationship with Randy, calling into question his abilities in the bedroom, and, because she couldn't defend that which she didn't know, his attack had left her uncharacteristically speechless.

"What's the matter, Princess? No comeback?" he'd taunted after wondering aloud something to the affect that Randy probably hadn't the slightest idea how to satisfy a woman, because he certainly didn't know how to control his.

"I am *not* something to be owned and controlled, Mr. Duncan," Kelsey said stiffly, and Clint realized that he had really hit a nerve. She looked about ready to cry, and despite his needling, like most men on Earth, he wanted to avoid a woman's tears at almost any cost. Of course, if the cause of them was a good, sound spanking, then he would know how to deal with

them. But their appearance at almost any other time threw him entirely. Diffidently, Kelsey spat out as she rose and shrugged into her jacket, "You can have the master bedroom."

Clint sighed heavily. Now he felt like the bad guy, and he hadn't done anything but fight for his right to use the bigger room, since he was the more likely of the two to have overnight visitors. "Why don't we split the difference? You take it for the first nine months, and I'll take it for the last."

Her answer was crisp and succinct, and she didn't meet his eyes. "Because I don't want to have to move all my things out of my bedroom again."

He shifted uncomfortably, not liking how she was acting. He and Kelsey had always sparred back and forth. It was how they communicated, if one could call it that. And she'd always met him toe to toe, never backing down even when he was doing his best to intimidate her with his considerable size and an wholly unwelcoming demeanor. But now she was acting defeated - cowed, even - and he didn't like it. Not one bit.

"I'll move you. I'll do everything when the time comes for us to switch. You won't have to lift a finger." Not wanting to, but unable to stop himself, he sat forward in his chair for the first time, trying to catch her eye. He swore if he saw but one teardrop fall onto her beige coat, he'd . . .

But there were no tears. Only a tired, perfunctory response, delivered in a soft voice he barely recognized as hers. "No, that's okay."

She did turn to Thom. "I think we've ironed out the major stuff. If there's anything else, send me a letter or an email. I'm going home."

Both Thom and Clint rose as she headed for the door. "Barring any other problems, you can both move in this weekend," Thom called after her.

"Thank you," so quietly both men had to strain to hear it, and then there was just the tap-tap-tapping of her heels on the hardwood floor.

Thom threw his pen onto the yellow legal pad he'd been writing notes on. "Well, I wonder what happened to change her mind."

Clint snorted. "Who can tell with a woman? They all get their pantyhose in a twist in the blink of an eye and leave us poor slobs wondering what the hell we did to cause the sudden sea change."

When he looked up, Thom was eyeing him a little too closely for comfort. "Tell me something, Clint."

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you just give it up and ask her out?"

Clint's big fists clenched on the wooden conference table in front of him as he rounded on his friend. "Excuse me? Are you out of your mind? Why would I want to date the biggest spoiled brat in the state?"

Thom remained entirely unintimidated, leaning as far back in his chair as he could and locking his fingers behind his head. "Because you want her - and you're just itching to take her in hand. You protest waaaaay too much, buddy. You've got a bad case for that woman. I just wish you'd do something about it."

The big man's frown was truly fierce. "Who's side are you on, anyway? You sound just like Callie, butting her nose in where it doesn't belong, trying to play matchmaker between me and that Shrewish American Princess. Did Callie put you up to this, somehow?"

Thom shook his head. "Nope. Anyone with eyes can see how . . . interested you are in her. Go get her, man! I happen to agree with you about Randy -although I might not have gone

so far as to wonder out loud which one of the Wizard of Oz munchkins he was, and whether or not he was anatomically correct."

"He's a nerd! A wimpy nerd at that."

"No argument here. He is. He makes quite a bit of money being nerdy, though."

Clint hissed through tightly clenched teeth. "Kelsey needs a strong man, not someone who bows to her every whim and lets her run wild."

Thom's eyebrow rose. Clint had obviously put a certain amount of thought into just exactly what kind of man he felt Kelsey needed. He wasn't surprised that the description bore a striking resemblance to Clint himself. "I agree, however chauvinistic it sounds. Some women need a firm, caring, guiding hand, and Kelsey is definitely one of them."

"Damn straight!"

Almost calculatingly, Thom let a few things slip about Kelsey's behavior that he thought Clint might not know. "Yeah, she needs someone who'll stop her from taking that shortcut through the park like she usually does on her way home from poker night at her friend Anna's."

Clint's eyes narrowed dangerously. "There have been a couple of car-jackings in that park. What is that woman thinking?"

"And someone who'll make sure she takes care of that old rattletrap of a car of hers - I know for a fact that she almost rear ended someone recently because of the condition of her brakes, and despite the fact that it's ready for the junkyard, she's always speeding through town like she's driving a Ferrari." In truth, Thom didn't know the condition of Kelsey's brakes, but Callie had mentioned several things about Kelsey that had worried her and this was one of them. Thom figured that there was no harm in nudging Clint just a little in the right direction.

A whimsical image flashed through his mind - an atrocious picture of himself as Cupid, complete with crown of laurel, wings fluttering on his back and a bow and arrows, although - as a former college football defensive lineman, he wasn't at all small enough to pull it off, even naked.

Shaking his head hard, he dispelled the disturbing picture quickly with a shudder, lest it stick in his head.

"She is, is she?"

Thom wasn't entirely sure that he hadn't said too much, so he clamped his mouth closed, muttering quietly, "Uh huh. Anyway, it was nice of you to offer to move things halfway through, though."

"Mmmmmmm." Clint was obviously paying absolutely no attention to what he was saying. Nothing like stirring up a man's protective instincts - rusty though they may be in his case - to get him thinking about a woman.

As Clint stood up quickly and headed for the door, Thom threw out, "If there's anything else I can think of that needs to be discussed, I'll be in touch."

"You do that," came the growl from the hallway.

Thom decided not to hurt himself patting his own back. He'd wait until the wedding.

Clint barely hauled himself into his apartment Friday night before the move. He'd driven all the way to Montpelier, where he and more than a handful of other cops and victims' family had converged on the parole board. Everyone else was extremely emotional, but relatively polite

about their impassioned pleas against the man's release. He tried to stick to the facts as much as possible.

Clint didn't sugar-coat anything. He boldly called into question the intelligence of every member of the board, chiding them like naughty children for allowing Travis' attempt to wiggle out of his just sentence to get this far. Coldly, calculatingly, he had run through each of Travis's crimes - playing show and tell with disgustingly graphic crime scene photos that had relatives bawling in the gallery.

But he felt he'd - and they'd - made their point. After that, there was no way any sane person would decide to let that animal loose.

No way.

Chapter 5

Kelsey *hated* moving. Hated it with a capital HATED. She'd asked - okay, drafted - a lot of her friends to help, but only some of them could come, and then, of course, very few of them actually showed up, even with the promised beer and pizza afterwards. It had dwindled down to just herself and Anna and Bitsy, and she still had her living room furniture to heft into the house.

Randy was there, but then, as she lugged the umpteenth heavy box into the house from the van she'd rented, she realized that he might as well just have stayed at home - he was that much help. Come to think of it, he seemed to have a rather convenient back condition that was generally only displayed when it became necessary to lift anything heavier than a cat - unless it was computer equipment, of course. More often than not during this process she found him leaning against the side of the van, wearing his a ridiculously inappropriate oxford shirt and khakis, looking like he was attending an office party as opposed to a helping his girlfriend move. Correction, she thought sarcastically to himself, he wasn't helping. He was watching everyone else work.

As it happened, Clint pulled up in his big truck at that point. Behind him was a whole crew of burly cop friends to help him - which was overkill, considering his lack of furniture - and they got his stuff taken care of in no time at all, not that he had much to move beyond the bare bones that was in his apartment - the recliner, the poker table, and his king-sized bedroom set.

Kelsey had resolved to ignore him as much as possible for the next year and a half, and today was no exception. She uncovered the heavy sleeper sofa, stationing herself at the far end opposite her two friends at the near end. Through much pushing and shoving and cursing and grunting, they managed to move it about a half a foot. Bitsy whined and complained through the whole thing, and Kelsey was rolling her eyes so much that it was starting to give her a headache.

"C'mon, guys. This is one of the last few things we have to get in. Then we'll send out to Gully's for all the pizza and beer you can stand," Kelsey encouraged, starting to push the big couch herself.

"Why don't we just enlist the aid of the police auxiliary, there," Anna mused, motioning with her head towards Clint's mob while pulling with all her might. Bitsy was busy perseverating over a chipped nail in her manicure. She was proving to be about as much help as Randy.

Kelsey grimaced, and not from the exertion. "Never. I'd sooner get help from a bunch of rattlesnakes - "

Clint deposited the last box of junk in his room - barely able to sidle around the tight fit of the oversized bed - then turned around to head back out the door. Neither bedroom was occupied, so he'd taken the high road and deliberately put his stuff into the smaller room that had no connecting bath. Let her have the master for the first nine months. He could be big about it, even if it cramped his style a little in the mean time.

When he stepped out the front door, he could see right into the back of the good-sized van Kelsey had rented and crammed all of her stuff into, and he was appalled at what he saw: three women, who ought to be hanging curtains in the kitchen or something equally as lightweight were instead trying unsuccessfully to wrestle a huge, overstuffed couch out of the back of the truck. Hands on his hips, he gave Randy a disdainful once-over, then pressed two fingers to his mouth and whistled, immediately grabbing the attention of everyone within a five mile radius. All four of the men he'd corralled into helping him followed him into the back of the truck.

"Step aside, ladies, and let us take care of this," he announced with a crooked smile as he lumbered towards them.

Bitsy and Anna were only too willing to do exactly as he commanded, but, besides being largely trapped where she was, Kelsey wasn't about to surrender that easily. The closer he got to where she stood, the more claustrophobic she felt. "No, thank you, we'll manage fine by ourselves," she stated definitively, hating the wholly doubtful look Duncan was giving her as her hands spasmodically clenched and unclenched on the back of the couch.

Her eyes grew big as saucers when he didn't stop coming once he'd reached the end of the couch, but instead crawled up onto it and walked across it, forcibly joining her in the tight little spot she'd carved out amongst the rest of her stuff.

Clint held his hand out to her as if to help her step over the sofa and away from what he obviously considered "man's work". Kelsey was caught. If she stayed, then she would have to tolerate the way his taut, tight body rubbed up against hers as he succeeded where she'd failed. And she had no doubt that he would succeed - his body under the worn red shirt fairly rippled with muscles. He was already pressed obscenely up to her front as he waited with an amused, patient look, as if he knew how reluctant she was to take his hand and act the helpless female, and was thoroughly enjoying her discomfort.

Anna was throwing her daggers for hesitating; she could feel them stabbing into her front. Bitsy was busy lasciviously eying the rest of his friends, who all also bulged in all of the most wonderfully masculine of places.

Kelsey couldn't decide what to do, and it must've showed, because Clint took the choice entirely away from her in one move: he picked her up, his strong hands on her small waist, and handed her over the couch to another man who seemed to magically appear and held her only long enough to set her carefully onto her feet.

Biting her lip, and with stupid tears stinging her eyes for no apparent reason, Kelsey knew she had to do the right thing. "Thank you. You don't have to do this."

It might have been a nice, friendly movement. A turning point, of sorts in their relationship. At least a potential truce. A small peace offering.

But then Clint had to go and let his mouth run away with him, as usual as he passed her on the way out. "Well, I don't see your boyfriend in here helping you any."

Kelsey stalked after him - furious at Clint's comment in general, then even angrier that it put her in the unenviable position of having to defend Randy. "He's got a bad back and he can't lift things."

"Oooooooh," Clint mouthed in obvious disbelief as the men around him chuckled.

Arms crossed over her chest, Kelsey fumed as she followed him.

"Okay, Princess, you gotta tell us Neanderthals where this goes - and make sure that that's where you want it, because we ain't movers and we're ain't gonna pick it up again once we've set it down, understand?"

Luckily, Kelsey had already arranged the furniture in her mind, and she knew right where she wanted it. "Oh, I can tell you where to stick it, all right, Clint . . ." she left that statement off while making her way into the living room.

Her quip earned her some "oohs" from his friends. "She's feisty, Clint. I like that."

For some reason, Kelsey watched Clint's brow darken as he frowned fiercely at the other man. He continued to browbeat the poor guy as he spoke. "None of that, Kelsey. We're not going to stand here all day, either. If you don't tell us soon, we'll just drop it where we stand."

There went her plan for making them hold it and wait while she dawdled around. "Over there, against that wall, please," she motioned to exactly where she wanted it.

The couch placed perfectly, the men trounced out of the house again, and after a minute of luxuriating at how lovely the flowered upholstery looked against the dusky rose carpeting and pale pink walls, Kelsey snapped herself out of her reverie and turned to go climb into the back of the truck again. But on her way out she was met by her matching occasional chairs, each hefted by one man, and, because of the onslaught of furniture that needed placing, she never ended up getting back there.

Soon the living room was quite well appointed, but the men kept coming with the remaining boxes. She tried to protest that they didn't need to do that, but they just gave her indulgent smiles, like she was some wayward six year old, and asked her where she wanted them. Clint carried the last box in, and ended up setting it in her bedroom, then putting together the frame and setting up the bed for her, although she was so busy directing traffic that she didn't see what he'd done until later.

Since she couldn't stop them, Kelsey decided she'd better feed them, sending Anna and Bitsy out for lots and lots of cold beer - and Diet Coke for herself - then placing an order with the best delivery place in town for six large pizzas with varying toppings. If she was any judge of men and their eating habits, she'd be lucky if she didn't end up ordering more trying to fill these guys up.

It amazed her how well her friends seemed to mesh with his - especially when the beer flowed freely as well as the pizza. They set it up as a kind of buffet, with all the pizzas lined up on the countertop, along with napkins and plates, ending at the fridge where the drinks were. Of course, the women were the only ones who bothered with the amenities of plates and napkins, but everyone ended up bunched together in the kitchen, talking and laughing and happily stuffing their faces after introductions were made.

Randy excused himself before the pizza came - patting his stomach and complaining about acid reflux before slipping out like a wimp in the night. To tell the truth, Kelsey barely noticed his absence. She was going to have to break up with that man at some point in the future, she knew. He wasn't right for her, not at all. But right now, she had too much other stuff going on, and she hated breaking up even more than she hated moving. Ridding herself of Randy would probably be the least emotionally devastating end of a relationship she'd ever experienced, since she wasn't in love with him. Oh, she liked him a lot as a person, and they were very well matched intellectually, but as boyfriend material he too closely resembled a doormat.

Soon, too soon as far as Kelsey was concerned, she and her new "roommate" were alone in her - their - house. Kelsey bustled around the kitchen cleaning up while Clint fiddled in the

living room, hooking up one of his two contributions to the living room furniture - his huge television. That disreputable, gargantuan leather recliner had already weaseled its way into her carefully coordinated living room grouping, where it stuck out like a sore thumb planted directly in front of the boob tube.

Hoping her nervousness didn't show, Kelsey turned out the light and leaned into the living room. "The leftover pizza is all in one box in the fridge. Help yourself. There's beer left, too, that you're more than welcome to, since I don't drink it."

As she wandered down the hall towards the smaller bedroom she was sure he'd put her stuff in, she was annoyed to realize that the man who came to mind when she thought of what her fantasy boyfriend might be like was none other than the lump in her living room whose first priority after moving in was not to empty all of the boxes full of crap they'd just unloaded but rather to make sure that his gigantic screen TV - which she was quite sure was somehow symbolically phallic although she hadn't quite worked out how yet - was working so that he could veg in front of it, no doubt with a beer in one hand and a bag of pork rinds in the other.

She could tell when he'd succeeded by the sounds of football wafting to her ears. Kelsey couldn't suppress an eye roll that was so exaggerated she hurt her eyes doing it. But when she turned to the right, into the smaller room, she was amazed to see not her own things crammed into it, but rather his huge bed, which barely left any room to walk around it. His only other piece of furniture seemed to be a chest of drawers, with another - smaller - TV perched on top of it.

Tentatively, she peeked into the master bedroom, finding her own boxes piled around the bed, which had already been put together. *Well, well, well.* How awkward that he was being so unexpectedly nice to her. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She wondered what the rat wanted.

But, regardless, such unexpected kindness deserved thanks, so, before she forgot, Kelsey trotted back down the hall. Dear God in Heaven, he was shirtless!

Trying desperately not to stare, Kelsey had to force the words out of her drooling mouth. "Thank you for giving me the master first."

"Mmm."

An entirely unwelcoming response. Just what she expected. "And for putting the bed together."

He was - she noted with a perverse satisfaction once she'd reigned in her libido - perched almost exactly as she'd pictured him in her mind: hunkered down on his throne, beer in one hand, cold pizza slice in the other. Oh, well, close enough. As she watched, helplessly, he tilted back his head and took several long tugs from the beer, melting Kelsey's insides shamelessly with that display. She could feel herself moistening as she watched his Adam's apple bob up and down with each hard swallow. He was wonderfully tanned, with nicely defined muscles but not overly so. "Mmm," was all she got out of him - not that she wanted or expected anything more articulate.

Red faced for some reason, and creamy in places she didn't want to consider, Kelsey wisely retreated to her bedroom, where she tackled a few easy to dispose of boxes after setting up her own telly and turning it to her favorite show on Animal Planet, the *Crocodile Annoyer*. Finally, when she could barely keep her eyes open, she showered quickly - luxuriating in the fact that she could get to the bathroom without having to leave her room - then crawled into her freshly made bed . . . after carefully checking it out just in case he was only being nice to her to set her up. She wouldn't have put it past him to have set it up only enough that when she lay on it the first time, it would collapse beneath her.

But it was fine. It was more than fine. It was wonderful to be in this house, which she'd already come to think of as *her* house - in her cozy queen-sized bed with its peach and sea foam green comforter and matching sheets, all of her things around her - if not unboxed quite yet.

Despite her happiness, she suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of loneliness, and her eyes filled to overflowing with tears.

Callie. She missed Callie something fierce.

"I love you, Callie," she whispered into the dark, fancying that she was heard and that the loving but crotchety old woman returned the sentiment in kind.

Instead of drifting off, though, despite how completely exhausted she was, and how every muscle she owned cried out for sleep, the sounds of crunching bones and rabid hooting and hollering from the living room kept her awake.

She didn't want to start World War Three so early on in the year and a half they were stuck with each other, though. Was this one night of sleep worth it? Or should she make a stand early and draw the line in the sand before he got the mistaken idea that he could do this *every* night?

In the end, she decided to be civil. Excruciatingly civil. It was the only way to go, if she was going to keep herself from ending up behind bars for cop killing, however much he deserved it.

In a thin summer nightie that barely reached her knees, she looked around the room. She didn't own a housecoat, having lived by herself she never needed one. If she was in bed, she was in her pajamas. If she was up, she was dressed. Kelsey wasn't one for hanging around in her jammies till all hours of the day - too much temptation to get back into bed.

So she grabbed the only thing that was readily available to her - a light cream throw that lay across the foot of the bed, wrapping it securely around her sarong-fashion, and padded her cotton clad feet back to the entrance to the living room.

"Um, Duncan?"

He didn't even look up at her. "What?"

Suddenly nervous - partly because of her lack of attire, which was stupid since he hadn't paid her enough attention to even know what she was wearing, and partially just because he'd always made her uncomfortably sexually aware - she curled her toes within the thin white socks she wore to bed. "Would you mind turning the TV down a little? I'm having a hard time getting to sleep."

No answer, but he pushed a button on the remote that seemed surgically attached to his hand, and she could hear the din of the game receding slowly. "Thank you."

Against his considerable will, Clint hungrily watched her turn and trot back down the hall. His face was dark and foreboding, but the rest of him was burning up from the inside out. That woman was dangerous - damned dangerous to his mental health, and Callie damned well knew it, the interfering old biddy!! He cursed her in his mind, then rescinded it immediately, sending his cosmic thanks for the house, even if she'd screwed things up royally as far as she was concerned by tying the bequest to the Princess.

Every time he looked at her, every time he was within twenty feet of her, he lost control of his body, and it annoyed him to no end. He'd never been like that around any other women - of course he would pick the woman in the world that drove him the craziest to be attracted to.

If he managed to make it through the next eighteen months without applying a healthy dose of the flat of his hand to that cute, shapely bottom, it would be some sort of a miracle.

But he had to admit that she wasn't being bratty right now. She was making the effort to be nice, and he knew he would have to do the same. She'd thanked him prettily for what he'd done, and had even been extremely polite in her request that he turn down the game - which was a perfectly reasonable request, as far as he was concerned.

Clint frowned. She'd looked . . . different from usual. Granted, he'd never seen her in a nightgown before, and wondered if it could be that simple. But he doubted it. She seemed smaller. The incredible difference in their sizes had never made any difference to Kelsey. She came at him with everything she had, despite the fact that it was the equivalent of a teacup poodle nipping at the ankles of a bull mastiff.

Tonight her voice had been softer, less strident than he'd ever heard it - except perhaps at Callie's funeral. Vulnerable. That was it. She looked vulnerable, as if she was too tired to maintain the usual angry, sarcastic façade. Beneath that flimsy wrap she'd donned, her body was well-rounded but still no match for his; she was wonderfully small and delicate, her face freshly washed and makeup free . . . but her eyes were swollen, he'd noticed. Being a cop made him aware of the finer details, and he was particularly good at faces. Kelsey's eyes were usually a clear gray, stark in her creamy face. But she was close enough to him that when he replayed the scene in his mind, he could see that she had been crying.

He wondered why and what he could do about it, then chided himself for the impulse. He didn't want to go down that road. She was probably just tired, or cranky, or having one of those "woman's moments" where she cried for no particular reason.

Yeah, that was it. The women he'd known had often cried at the drop of a hat - he wouldn't be surprised to find that Kelsey was just like that.

Shaking his head at females in general, he went back to his game.

But not without his mind wandering back to her several times - often enough to annoy him into forsaking the game and deciding to retire himself. Her door was closed, with no light beneath it. Clint stood stock still in the middle of the hall - like an idiot, he labeled himself - listening acutely for any sounds of sobbing, but none greeted his ears, and he gave it a good long time.

Finally he shrugged and ducked into his own room.

He must've been right - it was some sort of female thing. Shuddering at the thought, he crawled onto his unmade bed and was asleep in seconds.

Chapter 6

Kelsey took a big red marker to the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* calendar she'd hung up near her computer and crossed off yesterday, the fifteenth. One month down, seventeen more to go, she thought grimly as she sat back down.

Well, they'd managed to get this far without killing each other. Oh, it had been close on occasion. Very close, but much less often than she would have expected if she was brutally honest with herself. He was gone a lot, so besides the change of venue, her schedule hadn't been disrupted at all. She was getting used to seeing that old junker of a beat up Chevy Nova - his unmarked car that was in such disrepair that it made her Bug look like a Rolls - in the driveway, along with his big, phallic truck. She still got up and wrote and edited all day, stopping only for meals, and sometimes not even that. Sometimes he was home - asleep while she worked, sometimes he made an appearance later. Kelsey never realized just how varied a schedule a cop might have. She was heartily glad that she wasn't his girlfriend.

The thought made her throat clamp shut. She wasn't, and she never would be as long as she retained her senses.

They started out trying to keep things as separate as possible - he bought and used his own groceries and she did the same. But Kelsey liked to cook, and always ended up making much more than she needed, so she naturally offered the leftovers to him, which he always attacked with such eagerness that she couldn't help but feeling complimented, even when she considered what he ate on his own: pork rinds, Diet Pepsi, and microwave dinners.

She slipped easily into the habit of cooking for the two of them, despite the fact that they rarely ate together. She would cook whatever she wanted for dinner - spaghetti, lasagna, roast beef, chicken over biscuits, whatever she had a taste for - and then put the leftovers in the fridge. Clint would dive into it when he got home, moaning and groaning appreciatively. He'd certainly done wonders for her ego in that area.

He was incredibly, anally neat for a man, and often quoted the old saw "a place for everything and everything in its place" as he trailed around after her, picking things up off the floor - where they'd landed for her to deal with later, when the glow of inspiration had worn off - and often dumping them directly into her lap while she was in the middle of typing a thought.

Plus, there wasn't enough room anywhere else for the only other furniture - such as it was - that he owned - his weightlifting equipment. So it ended up being stored - and used - where she'd set up her computer, which was the dining room - since neither one of them had any interest in sitting down to eat any sort of a formal meal. On the weekends, when they were both home, it became an element of true torture that she'd be sitting there trying to write, and a few inches away, usually right directly behind her, he would be standing there in just a small, loose pair of nylon shorts, sweating and lifting and flexing, his breath puffing out of him on every exertion, sounding for all he was worth as if he was mid-coitus.

Or what her mind imagined he sounded like in that delicate, tantalizing situation. More often than not she found herself entirely unable to concentrate . . . staring at the screen, her fingers uselessly lying on the keyboard, desperately wanting them, instead, to be lightly resting on his bulging pecs as he pumped into her, driving her over the edge - It took every ounce of will she possessed not to turn around and touch him - somewhere, anywhere, damn him!!!

For the umpteenth time, she lamented loudly, "Isn't there anywhere else you could do that?"

"Am I disturbing you, Princess?" he asked sarcastically on a loud puff of breath, not hesitating a moment in his rhythm.

Kelsey's lips pursed. His question strayed uncomfortably close to the truth. "You're sweating."

Her lips and nose wrinkled in distaste.

Clint put the weights down on the floor with a *clunk*, snorting, "You've got to be kidding! Sweat is entirely normal." He paused for a moment. "But then, I'm forgetting who I'm talking to. You've probably never sweated in your life - your parents probably found someone else to do that for you, too."

She swung the comfy office chair around and glared at him, crossing her hands over her breasts in a huff. "They certainly did not!"

"And then there's your geek of a boyfriend, who's probably allergic to sweat or something. He certainly seems afraid to break one."

"Randy is - "

"Too heavy for light work, too light for heavy work?" Clint supplied helpfully.

"*He is not!!!*" Kelsey fumed, despite the fact that that very disloyal thought had been running through her head while the rest of them lugged stuff into the house during the move.

"Certainly seemed that way to me when we were moving in," Clint commented, turning to reach behind him and grab a larger set of weights. Hefting the weights again, he continued. "That man has to be a first-class wuss, otherwise why would he allow you to move in with another man?"

Kelsey was incensed - both by his words and by her own concerns that her thought patterns and Clint Duncan's weren't that far apart. She rounded on him. "*Allow?*"

Clint concentrated on his form, not glancing at the irate woman next to him with an almost stern look on his face. "I would never let my girlfriend move in with some other guy under any circumstances," he said flatly.

She whirled back to her computer screen; the sight of him with his bulging muscles and to-die-for physique making her wonder if someone had left the heat on. It certainly was getting uncomfortably warm in there. Discomfited in the extreme by her reactions to this man, Kelsey dredged up every ounce of sarcasm she could manage when she replied, "Well, that's the difference between a Neanderthal and an enlightened, twenty-first century man - Randy would never try to tell me what to do."

Clint's voice was deep, his words deliberate and slow. "Even though it's exactly what you need."

Kelsey's face went beet red and she knew it. "I most certainly do not! I am a successful, independent woman, thank you very much. I don't need a *man* - " she made the word an insult " - to tell me what to do."

"Of course you do," he continued behind her, almost conversationally. "Randy isn't right for a woman like you, Princess. You need a strong man; someone who's not afraid to take you in

hand and make sure that you behave the way you should - that you don't compromise your health or safety by acting impetuously or irresponsibly."

Oh, dear God, he was saying exactly the words she had put in his mouth in her deepest, darkest fantasies, and she wished with all her might that he'd cut it out!! There was no way she could concentrate on her writing now . . . all she could do was feel the flush on her face creeping down over every inch of the rest of her body, making her legs shift nervously as the area between them swelled and moistened generously of its own accord.

Her breasts were rising and falling all too quickly, so Kelsey took a deep breath and assumed careful control over her breathing, and her tone of voice, which was disparaging in the extreme. "Do you realize just how incredibly chauvinistic you sound?"

Kelsey swore she could *hear* him raise his eyebrow. "So you would classify a man who cared about how his woman was behaving - especially when it was detrimental to her health and welfare - as chauvinistic?"

Kelsey's eyebrow rose as she whirled to confront him. "A man who wants to 'take me in hand', quote unquote? And 'make sure I behave'? Hell, yes, any man who truly believes that shouldn't be allowed to exist in this day and age." She shook her head back and forth with histrionic vehemence. "No, thank you. Not me." To Kelsey's ears, the words rang very hollow and untrue. She couldn't only hope that they didn't sound the same way to Clint, or she could find herself in deep trouble . . . with herself even more than with him. She was sure that she was just being a worrywart. She sounded just fine. Still, she worried about protesting too much *or* too little, not wanting to alert him in the least to how she might truly feel about being taken in hand - in his firm hands, frankly, and being made to behave.

She was just barely able to suppress the shudder that went through her at her thoughts as she turned back to her computer.

Clint was too busy counting reps to pay too much attention to the subtler nuances going on around him, although if this discussion continued, or got any more personal, he was going to need to sling a towel over his hips or stand behind something to disguise his burgeoning arousal. Besides, she was reacting just as he'd expected her to - like a true women's libber who couldn't - wouldn't - acknowledge the natural order of things. Men were stronger and bigger - nature had predetermined that they would be in charge of things, and one of those things was their smaller, weaker, prettier mates. And when a man's mate disobeyed him, there was a price to pay. That was the way it was supposed to be. Current societal norms had skewed everyone's thinking.

He tsked loudly, shaking his head as if devastated by her pronouncement. "You'd prefer to cuddle up to a nerdy, wimpy man who's afraid of his own shadow? Pity."

Kelsey ignored him entirely. Apparently he'd never noticed that Junior - uh, Randy - never stayed the night, and that she never slept overnight at his place, either. She wasn't about to bring that up and give him more ammunition. No doubt he slept with every woman on the first date or there wasn't a second, being the enlightened type that he was. *Not*, she thought nastily.

Suddenly incensed with the direction the conversation was going - it was getting all too personal, as far as she was concerned, especially when it was with a man she couldn't stand - and with the inherently sensual, sexual smell and sounds of his workout, Kelsey stood up abruptly, shoving her chair back forcefully enough that it rolled back and smacked Clint's legs. She grabbed her bag from where it had landed on the printer stand last night when she came in.

"Going somewhere?" he asked, pushing the chair away with one foot, not missing a beat of his routine.

For a moment, Kelsey just stood there with her pocketbook slung over her shoulder, unable to take her eyes off of the gleaming male animal flexing his considerable biceps in front of her. He wasn't grossly muscular - that would have been a turn off. Instead, Clint was just nicely defined, and so blatantly, obviously capable that her mouth - which hung open just a tad in her hazy stupor - began to water.

Clint had to suppress a satisfied smile. It was about damned time she noticed him as a man, and not just an adversary. Sometimes it seemed as if she looked right through him. He had been going to try to cram his weights into his own room, trying not to crowd her too much, but Clint decided he liked seeing her react like this to him; he thoroughly enjoyed disconcerting her so much she just stared at him as if bewitched by the sight of him.

"See something you like?" he asked in a lazy growl.

That snapped her out of it right quick. "Of course not. I was just trying to come up with another place that you could do all that grunting and sweating that wouldn't disturb me while I'm writing," she sniffed, as if insulted to the core at his suggestion.

"So I disturb you?"

"You most certainly do not," she huffed, turning on her heel to flounce towards the door, but not before he caught a good look at how red her face had gotten.

Clint dropped the barbells into their case as the jingle of her car keys as she fished them out of her purse made a thought strike him. "Oh. That reminds me. You need to watch your speed, Missy."

Almost to the door, Kelsey rounded on him, eyes wide and lips in an angry "o". "Ex-cuse me?"

"You heard me. The driveway is full of your skid marks where you slam on your brakes. If you barrel up our driveway that fast, I can't imagine that you drive any more carefully on the road. If I hear that you've been speeding - and I will hear - you're going to get a spanking."

That trigger word made her whole body clench, but she didn't want to hear it from him. She swore she didn't. Kelsey closed her eyes and practiced deep breathing, counting slowly - very slowly - to ten, hoping it would keep her from throttling the annoying hulk. Without another word - or even another glance - she left, stalking to her car and quite deliberately revving the engine and peeling out of the driveway, spraying dirt that drummed against the kitchen wall behind her. She sped down the bumpy path so fast and so angrily that she nearly lost control of the car.

She didn't usually drive like that - well, not often, anyway - and as soon as she'd gotten a little away from the house, she slowed down and even pulled over to the side of the road. Kelsey was so frustrated with him that she was shaking, and it took several minutes for her to calm down and continue on her way. She wasn't exactly sure where she was going - all she had meant to do was to get away from him - but she ended up arriving at her girlfriend's house much earlier than was expected for poker night, camping out there for the rest of the afternoon and into the next morning.

When Clint had heard her start the car - unnecessarily loudly - then spew gravel up against the house as she left, a smile barely flitted over his mouth.

And it wasn't a pretty sight. Not at all.

"Come on you stupid light - *change!!!*" Kelsey chanted loudly, but not loudly enough to be heard over Steven Tyler's wailing about the hole in his soul. She was tired and cranky and just wanted to go home after a long day of writing and a bad night of poker. It was a damned good thing it was only penny ante, and she always played with money she didn't need, anyways, or she'd be filing for Chapter Eleven the next morning! Gambling was a definite weakness, and Kelsey felt incredibly glad that there were no casinos anywhere near her, or it would have been much more of a problem. As it was, she usually either broke even or got ahead a little on the occasional poker nights with her friends, but not tonight.

Her atrocious luck tonight just fit perfectly into the kind of day it had been: This morning, her computer had crashed before she'd had a chance to save almost a whole chapter she'd written, which made her want to weep at the lost work. The hot dogs she'd cooked for lunch this afternoon had been rancid, but she hadn't known it until she bit into one and gagged her way to the garbage can.

Plus, the number one cause of aggravation in her life: Clint Duncan, who had been the reason for her precipitous flight to Melly's so early in the afternoon. That man could push her buttons faster than anyone on the Earth . . . and what was worse was that he seemed to be pushing even more personal buttons than he had been - spanking buttons, and that was *not* a good thing.

But it was a darned good thing that she and Melly were extremely good friends, and she knew where the spare key was kept. She'd taken her anger out by cooking, which always calmed her. By the time Melly got home that afternoon, there were several hors d'oeuvres already cooked for the hungry players - all women on diets, the most dangerous and hungry sort - that would be descending on them that night.

And now it was almost two in the morning and she was exhausted, and here she was just sitting at this idiotic light. It was holding so long one would think it was the middle of rush hour - such as it was - traffic instead of the middle of the freaking night.

She was just about to invoke that little known law of the road - "left-on-red-if-it's-past-midnight-in-a-tiny-Vermont-town", but then, finally, she got the green light. Not about to get caught at the next set, she raced down Merchant's Row, which was the main street of the small burg, and was almost in sight of her turn off when she saw a flashing blue light in her rearview mirror.

"Son of a *bitch!*" Automatically slowing down, Kelsey pulled over to the side of the road and leaned over to the glove box, snatching out the envelope that contained her registration and proof of insurance, grabbed her license out of her wallet, then leaned back and waited for the blasted cop to come to her. While she waited, she glanced up at her rearview mirror, and noticed that the cop car was not the usual type. It must've been unmarked, because the only thing that tagged it as a cop car was one lowly blue bubble gum machine throwing its garish glare onto everything.

Maybe she could talk him out of a ticket if she buttered him up a little . . .

Come to think of it, Kelsey thought, squinting a little and leaning forward to get a better look, that car looked somewhat familiar . . .

"Didn't I tell you to watch your speed, little lady?"

She knew that voice before his face appeared in her drivers' side window, and her heart sank. It was *him*. "Go away."

"I don't think so. Did you know you were doing almost sixty in a thirty-five?" Part of him was frankly amazed that her little German rattletrap could attain such a speed without shaking itself apart. But the majority of him was filled with a righteous concern for her safety that made him feel exceedingly uncomfortable, and also made him just a little crankier than usual.

How easily he adopted that pedantic, "talking to a kindergartener" tone that policeman who had a motorist dead to rights always assumed - as if he was talking to a complete idiot. "Clint Duncan, are you stalking me?"

The sardonic look on his face made her want to punch him. "No, ma'am. I was just driving downtown when you blew by me, and I couldn't shirk my duty as an officer of the law, now, could I?"

She gave him a withering glance, but it didn't faze him in the least.

Kelsey sighed, surrendering to the inevitability of it. He had warned her. She just hadn't realized how obnoxious he could be. She handed him all of her pertinent information, then had to sit and listen as he called it in. At least she felt vindicated that the voice on the other end of the radio sounded clearly surprised to find he was doing a traffic stop.

Clint leaned on her window, ticket pad in hand. "Now, we can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way. It's up to you. If you'll give me your word that you're not going to speed around town again, then I'll let you go with a warning." He felt he was being extremely generous, especially considering how fast she was going in a populated area. "Of course, if you give me your word and you break it in the future, there will be extra consequences - besides a ticket - that would be purely between you and me."

Before she had a chance to consider his offer, Kelsey seethed from between ground teeth, "Gimme the ticket and hurry up about it, *Officer*." Her inflexion made the title an insult.

Clint sighed. "Are you sure? It's going to be a hefty fine, and enough points so that if you get another ticket within the next two years, you're going to end up without a license."

Stubborn to the end, Kelsey merely tapped the ticket pad that was, as yet, blank.

Grimacing, Clint wrote out the citation and handed it to her. He'd quickly decided he wasn't going to be that generous to the stubborn chit. "You and I are going to have a discussion when I come home - wait up for me."

Reigning in her temper only somewhat successfully, aware that if she pissed him off he wouldn't hesitate to add on infractions - real or imagined - Kelsey asked stiffly as she stared straight ahead, "Am I free to go?"

With another agitated sigh, Clint grumbled, "Yes, you are. But I meant what I said about talking to you when I come home. And you'd better be awake."

Kelsey snorted but said nothing, but she did pull very carefully - and very *slowly* - away from the curb and drove the rest of the way home like a little old lady - a decrepit little old lady who had just gotten a speeding ticket from her mortal enemy who had threatened her with a "talking to" when he got home, and didn't sound like he was kidding about it. She really didn't want to think about what form the conversation was going to take . . .

All the way home, Kelsey raged against him - that he'd had the unmitigated gall to stop her in the first place. He was a detective, not a uniform cop. What was he doing running a traffic stop, for crying out loud? Then he *gave* her the blasted ticket!! And he practically commanded her, as if he was her father or her boyfriend or something - the mere thought gave her a set of shivers that were uncomfortably close to the good kind - to stay awake so that he

could give her some sort of pedantic safety lecture when he got home. Or worse, she thought, biting her lip.

Well, Kelsey sniffed to herself as she guided her car down the driveway, *he could talk all he liked, but he could not touch*. She wouldn't *let* him touch. Not for all the tea in China. Not for every cent of Bill Gates' money. Not for -

She was protesting too much, even to herself.

Kelsey wasn't even sure she was going to let him talk to her yet. She was tired, and it was the middle of the night, and, come to think of it, she intended to go to sleep, not wait up to be further annoyed that that overgrown Boy Scout.

Less than a half hour after she'd pulled into the yard, she was sound asleep, safe and warm under her purple flowered sheets, lilac vellux blanket, warm hypoallergenic down duvet, and thick winter comforter.

Clint had wrapped up the rest of his night as quickly as possible. He'd forgotten how damned much paperwork a ticket generated, plus he had to endure the razzing that came from the guys about the idea that he'd issued any sort of ticket at all.

When he pulled up to the house, his truck dominating the space next to her little V-Dub, he could see with a grimace that there were no lights on in the house. That did not bode well for her having obeyed him, not that he was really surprised that she hadn't. All Clint hoped was that he could keep himself from doing anything more than delivering a good lecture about safety and recklessness. *Yeah, right*, he thought to himself scornfully. She needed a spanking, and the chances were very good that she was going to get one tonight. He had had just about enough of her bratty behavior - and, despite his warnings, it had now become a matter of her own safety.

And he wasn't at all sure he was going to be able to keep himself from doing exactly that. That woman made him itch to pull her over his lap more so than any other he'd ever met. She needed a long, hard spanking to make her pay attention to what was going on around her - to make her realize that there was someone in her life - *in her life*? He asked himself, then let it go quickly as if the thought had burned him - who was going to enforce some badly needed rules of behavior that she was definitely going to be expected to obey.

He found his way to his room in the dark, having been blessed with excellent night vision, and divested himself of his shoulder holster and gun, as well as his watch and wallet. For a moment, he just stood in front of his dresser, hands on his hips. Clint had almost never questioned himself. He knew what he wanted in life, and went out and got it, one way or the other.

But interpersonal relationships in general - that weren't of the more temporary variety or the type where he was in control and people were required by law or employment to do as he said - weren't his forte, and he knew it. And Kelsey was the ultimate example of his hopelessness in that area. He wasn't the "smile and bite his tongue" type. Never would be. He called 'em like he saw 'em, no matter who he offended. It had - on occasion - gotten him into a tad of trouble in the military, but he'd been lucky that he'd had other traits that had helped him excel there.

He pursed his lips together in a crooked line. But if anyone needed to be kept in line, it was the woman who lay - probably asleep - in the room across the hall. She had a boyfriend - of

sorts - who didn't seem to be much interested in riding herd over her. Clint's eyes narrowed with the thought. Randy didn't seem to be much interested in her at all. Come to think of it, he'd never stayed over night, and had rarely even been to the house since he and Kelsey had started living together.

Gee, he thought sarcastically with a snigger, I hope I don't intimidate him.

Clint stopped in front of Kelsey's door, listening carefully. There was no light, no sounds from the television. She had totally ignored what his order and gone to bed, knowing that he wanted to talk to her. He didn't know why he was surprised, or why her behavior - which was entirely within character for her - should annoy him so much, but it did. She needed a lesson in obedience, and he was just the man to give it to her.

Luckily, there were no locks on any of the doors. Callie had hated them, and he had had a damned hard time just to get her to put a lock on her front door, much less on doors inside the house. He stepped into the big room and drew an unconsciously deep breath of her flowery scent. She always smelled distractingly good, and her bedroom seemed to concentrate all of that wonderful powdery, slightly musky scent.

She was lying on her left side, facing away from the door, and it was only when his knees pressed against the side of the bed that he realized that she'd kicked off the covers; there seemed to be a veritable mountain of them nestling cozily just about mid-thigh. The stray thought that that was were he'd bring her panties and pants down to when he spanked her made him instantly hard, and he had to wrench his mind out of the gutter with an only mildly successful yank.

The sight of her - lying there stretched out, half on her tummy, right leg extended and left leg bent, one hand tucked under her cheek and the other extended under the pillow - didn't help him much. Her sleeveless nightie - however "granny-style" he'd always thought of them as on the rare occasions that he'd seen them - had ridden up to just under her ribcage, the flouncy ruffle around the hem framing her lower back and bottom beautifully, delicately as it was cradled by her hip-hugging panties. Clint's hands ached to mold themselves to those lusciously revealed curves, but he knew he couldn't.

Instead, he sank down onto the mattress, figuring that it would wake her. No such luck. "Kelsey?" he asked quietly, not wanting to startle her.

Nothing. Not a peep, not a movement. Nada.

"Kelsey?" he asked a little louder.

Still dead to the world.

Finally, Clint wrapped his big fingers around her bare bicep and shook her, just a little. "Kelsey? It's Clint."

Her reaction could not have been further from what he expected - she literally leapt away from him with a blood-curdling scream, almost ending up in a heap on the floor, save for his quick reflexes. Clint dove across the bed and tackled her around the waist, pulling her back just as she began a flailing descent over the edge.

But instead of the profuse thanks he'd expected, he got pummeled - inexpertly, but pummeled none the less - and screamed at. "Get the hell away from me! Get off of me! Right now!!!" She was scrambling away from him, scrabbling for the blankets and hauling them up under her chin, her back to the headboard, facing him with her eyes wide in her face like he was some sort of rapist.

"Kelsey, it's me. Clint." He leaned over and touched the lamp on her nightstand so that a dull light flooded the room.

Neither the sound of his voice nor his name seemed to give her any comfort at all - she was still looking at him as if she expected him to produce an axe and kill her horribly; her eyes were fuzzy and unfocused. "Get out of here! Are you out of your mind?" she screamed.

Clint held out his hand, hoping to calm her. He hadn't realized she'd wig out at the mere site of him. "It's just me. Clint the Neanderthal. I came in for our talk. Remember the ticket?"

Kelsey completely ignored his hand. A huge breath exploded out of her, and she nearly collapsed, bowing her head, then jerking it upright. "Are you out of your fucking mind to come into my room like this?"

There was no mistaking the absolute fury in her tone. That was pure Kelsey. How could he know that she slept so deep? She had become so abruptly alert - he knew that her original reaction was almost autonomic, happening when she was still mostly asleep. "Well, if you'd stayed up like I told you to - "

He was unprepared for the violence of her response. She launched herself at him, full bore, pushing all of her body weight at him in an effort to topple him off her bed.

"Get out of here! Get away from me!"

Even still somewhat befuddled as she was - not quite awake - Kelsey recognized the ridiculous ease with which he met her attack and subdued her completely. Before she knew it, she was curled up on his lap - exactly where she never, ever wanted to be - at least not consciously, anyway. His strong arms held her tight against his chest, effectively stifling any further attempt to inflict her will on him - or even defend herself - but that was not her concern at the moment.

She wanted him gone. He had no right to be here. None at all. Being her roommate did not give him leave to make any sort of rules for her. Okay, he was a cop. He'd written her a ticket. That was where it ended. Just because they lived together - completely platonically - did not give him the right to decide what she could or couldn't do - no matter what kind of grandiose delusions he suffered. They were none of her concern, just as she was none of his.

The thought that he was too much of a temptation - that the hard warmth of his lap seeping insidiously into her brain and coaxing her body to respond against her will - that he might somehow corrupt her into throwing herself at her with an entirely different intention than she'd had just a few minutes ago - was forced to the back of her mind.

I don't want him. I don't want him. I don't want him, she chanted softly to herself.

But herself had the audacity to chant back, *I don't want him. Much. I don't want him. Much.*

"Let me go," she whispered hoarsely, struggling against his insoluble hold.

"Nope. I told you we were going to have a chat when I got home, and we are. I'm sorry I scared you, though. I had no idea you were such a deep sleeper."

Kelsey didn't act as if she'd heard a word he'd said, but continued to try to wrestle away from him until he got her in a position that was so restrictive that she had no wiggle room at all.

Despite the aggravation - the constant, harping agitation, he thought grimly for a second - she felt exceedingly good in his arms . . . better than he wanted her to, frankly - warm and feminine and soft.

He had a helluva time dragging himself back to the reality of the situation, but he managed it. "Now. I believe there's a little matter of you barreling helter-skelter through town like a bat out of hell in the dead of night."

"There is no such 'matter' between us, Clint Duncan. I sped. You ticketed me. End of subject," she seethed between clenched jaws.

"Not hardly. I've heard from some reliable sources that you have a tendency to do that. That you drive recklessly around town in your little wannabe car and that you have, on more than one occasion, shown a complete disregard for posted speed limits."

Kelsey was thrown. She hadn't been caught speeding in years - not that she didn't do it, she did - just like everyone else. Where had he gotten that kind of information about her?

"And that you don't take very good care of your vehicle - such as it is - either, making you even more of a road hazard than you might be."

She didn't like where this might be leading. If he thought he was going to - He'd better not think she was going to let him -

"You had better let me go, and I mean *now*." Kelsey was deadly serious.

Still keeping her completely immobile, Clint answered in a firm, soft tone, "The only place I'm going to let you go is over my lap. You, my dear, are way over due for a spanking, and tonight you're going to get one."

Chapter 7

Speechless with more than a little fear - that her fantasies were going to be realized, if this big galoot had anything to say about it - and a disturbing twinge of anticipation, Kelsey renewed her struggles, but to absolutely no avail. As a matter of fact, she ended up contributing to her own demise. She really had no defenses against his incredible, unstoppable strength, and ended up miscalculating badly enough that all he had to do was tip her face down over the lap she'd just been sitting on. Keeping her there didn't prove to be much of a problem, either, despite her further frantic gyrations.

Kelsey didn't waste her time on trying to talk him out of it, unfortunately. She did waste her strength trying to get herself out of this situation. She was entirely exhausted well before he ever started the - God she didn't even want to think of that idea in the same sentence with Clint Duncan - spanking.

Her gown hadn't been in the best position to help her, anyway - it had probably ridden up as she slept, and it had merely been pooled around her hips as she sat on his lap, feeling the rock hard muscles of his legs beneath her largely defenseless bottom cheeks, covered as they were by thin pink panties.

Eventually, it ended up wrapped well up around her waist, practically beneath her breasts. The only thing between his hand and her butt was her undies, and Clint disposed of them in a matter of seconds without ever giving her the opportunity to challenge her position, but not in a violent or hurtful way. She almost wished he would be nasty to her so that she could hate him just a little bit more for it. But he seemed to be taking every care with her comfort - for now.

Still, she was mortified to be - in essence - naked and lying over his lap. Kelsey knew that he now had an unobstructed view of her, from mid-back to her toes - a view he didn't deserve, and that she had not granted him voluntarily.

A stark thought made her body convulse with a shiver. She couldn't talk him out of it. She couldn't threaten her way off his lap. She was in for it, and was rapidly coming to the realization that there was nothing she could do about it. Absolutely nothing. She was going to get spanked - like it or not, and Kelsey was pretty darned sure that she wasn't gonna like it.

All of her life, it seemed, she had been intrigued with spanking, reading and re-re-re-reading the ever rarer punishment passages that could be found mostly in the older, thick historical romances - until the books automatically opened to the pages she found most intriguing - and staring raptly at the screen whenever there was a repeat of a fifties movie or TV show in which the wife or girlfriend found herself getting a throbbing comeuppance over a dominant male's lap. VCRs were such a boon . . . she had a fairly decent collection of shorts that had caught her eye over the years . . .

Kelsey'd only told one person in the universe of her interests - Anna. She didn't dare tell anyone else, including her one and only lover, for fear of being ridiculed. Until she found the

Internet, she'd pretty much figured she was the only person in the world who *wanted* to be disciplined . . . or at least, she thought, squirming restlessly over his broad lap, the idea had *sounded* extremely titillating - until she'd ended up staring the reality of it in the face - or rather the carpet.

When she was lying in bed, or sitting comfortably in front of her computer, reading about a strong, no-nonsense man pulling his woman over his lap for an impromptu or more planned and thorough chastisement, it always made her whole body flush hot - hotter in some areas than others. If she kept reading - which she inevitably did - she'd end up incredibly frustrated; throbbing, achy, and dying for someone to do the same thing to her.

But now, lying uncomfortably over his hard, unforgiving legs, her hair long enough to pool on the carpet, and her feet automatically scissoring in the air even before he ever delivered the first swat, with her tummy twisting inside her as her heart thumped wildly in her chest, Kelsey was beginning to seriously rethink her desires. Oh, parts of her were beginning to shamefully beg for his attention, but she was finding it harder to ignore her intellect than she'd figured, and her mind knew this was gonna *hurt* - and not in a good way, either.

Clint, on the other hand, was marveling at the perfection sprawled over him. Her skin was like burgeoning satin - soft and wonderfully pliant under his palm. He certainly had never expected to actually end up in this situation - although the fantasy had drifted through his fertile mind on more than one occasion. Usually it was a much more vengeful fantasy than this was turning out to be.

Of its own volition, his hand molded itself slowly to her hip, then over those luscious, enticing curves, and down the back of her nearest leg, ignoring the way she flinched. "God, Donahue. You've got a beautiful butt."

Kelsey arched, still trying to get away from him, growling low under her breath. She didn't want him complimenting her as he held her still for whatever it was that he was going to do to her - as if she didn't know. To hell with all of her fantasies - the reality was no fun already. She wanted him to let her go. What he was doing wasn't right. Not at all.

No matter how her body might argue with her.

She could only hope he wasn't bold enough to slip a finger between her legs, or she'd be totally caught - achingly, dripping wet. Her body would be screaming that she was enjoying this enormously, but her head - her head was more than a little apprehensive.

With an equally aching shudder, Clint had to reel himself in - although he had no way to deflate himself, unfortunately. His other head had a life of its own and Kelsey's other most enticing spot - warm, but definitely not welcoming, he was quite sure - was lying directly over his stiffness, which didn't help matters in the least. He was of half a mind to chuck the whole idea, turn her over and plant a hot wet one on her, but that was not why he was here. He snorted softly to himself. After this, she probably wouldn't let him within a ninety mile radius of her, but at least she'd be alive to hate him, not crumpled dead behind the wheel of her car.

Without preamble, he lifted his hand and brought his palm down on Kelsey's fleshy roundness with a resounding crack, making the lovely young woman he - in essence - held captive blurt out a wonderfully satisfying and entirely unguarded "YEOW!!!" From that point on, any reservations Clint had had about spanking her - and spanking her very, very well - disappeared.

With that first slap, Kelsey released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, and to her intense mortification, an utterly undignified yowl came with it. What was worse, was that, as he continued to apply his redwood hand to her cringing butt, she realized that there wasn't

going to be any warm up - which, of course, she'd read about in some of the spanking fiction she'd found online. Nope. Apparently Clint didn't believe in them - or he had no idea what they were, which was much more likely. It wasn't as if she thought he was some sort of spanking connoisseur, as she was.

At first, she couldn't wrap her mind around the simple fact of how much it hurt. Her parents had never touched her, and she had no basis of comparison even to a distant spanking in her childhood. But this freaking *hurt!!* And he didn't seem to be losing any steam, or showing any signs of stopping, whereas she had already - after only about ten slaps - reached the limits of her tolerance. Although Kelsey had continually, of course, been struggling to get away, she redoubled her physical as well as vocal efforts to end her torment, her threats and begging interrupted by a squeal or a scream each time his flesh made sharp, swift contact with hers.

"Clint - OW - Goddammit - Clint Duncan - you - OH! NO! Stop - you let me GOOO - OOH OWWWWWW!"

No answer except more - and, unbelievably, harder swats. Kelsey rapidly found herself at the point where she literally *couldn't* continue her tirade - which had descended into vague threats that were probably not the smartest thing to throw at the man who was already thoroughly blistering her bottom - because of the tears and moans that clogged her throat.

And still he continued to spank her.

Clint didn't ease off until he felt her surrender - until she stopped fighting him and surrendered to the inevitable, hanging over his legs quietly - but with the occasional flinch when he hit a particularly sensitive spot - and accepting the discipline he was dishing out. It was a wonderful moment that made him want to pause to savor it, but he didn't. He kept right on reddening his princess's luscious fanny for a while longer, just so she knew that, even when (not ever "if") she acquiesced to a punishment, did not mean that he would fluff it off in any way.

"Kelsey?" He used a somewhat gentler form of his command tone, his voice strong and firm, but not loud.

She turned her head towards him, breathing in some of her own hair as he aimed and struck the same place, just at the base of her ample curves, on either side of her rear, alternating, but not slowly enough that the sting from the previous lick had dissipated, consciously building the sting to an unbearable level. "Wha-what?" she choked out, tears dripping from her chin.

Clint frowned. "The correct response is 'yes, Sir.'" Their conversation - such as it was - did not detract in any way from the rhythm of sizzling swats he was delivering.

To his complete amazement, she turned her head away from him, so that she was looking down over the edge of the bed to the carpeting, and said quietly, "Yes, Sir."

It was almost enough to make him stop in mid-spank, but not quite. It was enough to make his penis contract hard. "Good girl. Now, I'm never going to have to do this again, am I? You're going to watch your speed around town, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, I am - I will!!!" Kelsey felt herself blushing both at the ignominy of her situation and the way her body forced her mind to answer him as quickly as possible, in what she was beginning to think was a vain hope of preventing any more painful whacks to her tush.

Interested to find just how far he could push her at this stage, Clint issued a tremendously hard volley of slaps to each tender cheek. Then he stopped and said, "What did I just tell you was the correct response, young lady?" keeping his tone soft, but stern.

"YES SIR!" she fairly screamed, then dissolved into sobs.

Clint patted her nicely rouged bottom gingerly. "Good girl. Then I'm only going to give you twenty more, ten on each side, and then I'll let you go."

The yelps and squeals that drifted to his ears at that pronouncement nearly made him embarrass himself right there, with her on his lap. But he controlled himself - just barely - and started in immediately. Clint was even so bold as to arrange her in a manner that was much more pleasant for him - and much more humiliating for her: he pulled her front more tightly to his waist, making her lie more on the bed rather than over his legs, while he arranged her lower half over his closer knee, separating those lovely legs and even her rear globes just enough so that she had no choice but to splay herself over him, putting her more intimate parts on display, not that he could see them very well at that angle.

The last twenty strokes were delivered as hard as he felt he safely could. Kelsey screamed bloody murder and wiggled violently from the first to the last, but never managed to escape even one tremendous slap.

When it was done - when *he* was done, since he was the one in charge of the spanking - Clint let her go, and a still whimpering, keening Kelsey scrambled away from him as if he'd been branding her with a hot poker instead of just spanking her. She brought her nightie down over her glowing rear angrily enough to almost tear the shoulder seams, as she slipped off the other side of the bed and stood defiantly with her arms crossed over her chest, visibly seething and, if her expression was anything to go by, actively wishing he was dead.

"Ahhhh. Good idea."

Confused, and not really wanting to show it, Kelsey watched him rise and come to her. His guiding hands on her shoulders turned her around and gently pushed her into the corner. "I want you to stand there for a while and think about your health and safety, and why you just got spanked." Clint reached down to the hem of her nightie and hiked it right back up to her neckline, saying, "Hold this. If you let it down, I'll know, and you'll regret it."

Clint exited the room, but left the door to her bedroom wide open, taking a long moment to stare back at his proud princess-in-the-corner, her entire backside naked and vulnerable, those ruby red cheeks glowing back at him fit to warm the room all on their own.

He didn't really know what to do with himself - he hadn't expected that she would be so meek about being put in the corner - especially not completely exposed! Clint ended up in the living room. He was so pumped he felt like he could run around the block a thousand times and still have enough energy to bench press the house.

And he'd still be hard, even after all that, he knew, looking down at the rampant body part in question ruefully.

That she might have softened towards him enough to help him with that touchy dilemma was too much to hope for. He didn't make her wait long, but when Clint tried to pull her out of the corner and into his arms, she danced away from him and over to the door, holding it open in an unmistakable invitation to leave the room.

She was still crying, even ten minutes later. Of course, having gotten another up close view of those two undoubtedly tender halves, he could understand why she might still be sobbing, he supposed. They looked like they hurt with every move.

But he hated to leave her this way. She needed to be held and comforted. She needed resolution and forgiveness. It went against his grain to just desert her and let her cry alone in her room. One look at her stone cold face, however, made him realize that she wouldn't accept comfort from him, anyway.

Clint couldn't keep himself from saying something to her, though. She looked so forlorn and unhappy - a princess defrocked and dethroned and shown that there was someone in this world who wouldn't let her be self-destructive was a sobering sight. "If you want to talk, I'm right across the hall. Don't forget to pay your ticket within fifteen days, or I'll have to arrest you."

The door slammed shut behind him, just clipping the back of his heels. *Good going, Duncan*, he congratulated himself sarcastically. *You just blistered her rear, and now you're threatening to arrest her. How many more ways can you think of ingratiating yourself to her? Maybe you should criticize her makeup and ask her what's growing in the back of the fridge - that'd make you a lot of points.*

Feeling somewhat dejected when he'd been feeling on top of the world not fifteen minutes ago, Clint crawled into bed. It had been an unexpectedly long, highly eventful night.

Kelsey, on the other hand, lay on her bed, feeling confused and achy - in several strategic spots. She'd been spanked for the first time - and not at her own behest. It wasn't what she'd envisioned for her first spanking at all - she hadn't met the right man, established a wonderful warm relationship and come to trust him enough to share her innermost desires with him - enough to let him discipline her when he saw fit, all the while knowing that he had her best interests at heart because he loved her.

Instead, the man she detested most in the world had caught her doing something that was - she hated to admit it to herself - basically wrong - not that everyone in the world didn't speed at one time or the other. And he'd had the audacity to spank her for it - to take her over his lap, pull off her panties - which she had had to rescue from the floor near the bed once he'd left - and apply the broad palm of his hand to her wiggling rear end. For an atrociously long time. Kelsey's hands automatically reached back to rub the still throbbing, still very hot objects of her musings.

How could he? She wondered, already knowing the answer to that question and not wanting to admit it. She'd let him. She should have fought harder - should have put her foot down - shouldn't have let him do it, come hell or high water.

But she had barely put up any protest at all - whether it was her own basic curiosity about spanking or - God forbid - about *him* . . . or a combination of the two, she knew she should have done a better, more effective job of stopping him, somehow.

So now she knew what it felt like.

It hurt. Kelsey shifted uncomfortably on her tummy. She never slept on her tummy. Carefully, and attentive to any flare up her roasted backside, she turned slowly onto her side and then onto her back - for about a minute. Bending her knees and pressing her feet into the mattress to alleviate some of the weight on her tender parts only helped a little, and made the muscles in her legs start to shake. She could hardly get to sleep like that, so she ended up settling for the night on her side.

It hurt *and* it was humiliating - especially that part at the end, when she'd really thought that the spanking was over, and he blithely announced that she had twenty more coming, and then had practically spread her wide open to deliver them, so that her privates rubbed along the denim on his leg as he spanked her. Good Lord, her swollen, incredibly sensitive clit - despite his best efforts - was right on top of his knee, and each time his hand connected with her, she moved a little forwards, which caused the soft-rough denim to graze that already swollen, aching area.

Kelsey would have sworn that she hadn't had even an iota of a sexual thought through this whole process - it had been much too uncomfortable, in a lot of different ways - but she could hardly deny how turned on she was when she was probably leaving a wet trail all over his jeans . . .

She fell asleep a long while later, after letting her most important concern niggle at her until the wee hours of the morning, and never coming up with a reasonable answer: why wasn't she absolutely furious with him?

Chapter 8

Even the next morning, when she awoke early as usual - awakened by rolling forgetfully onto her back and being rudely reminded of what he had done to her - threw on a disreputable but well-broken-in bathrobe and wandered out to the kitchen.

He was out there, of course, having his usual breakfast - leftovers. From the nauseating smells emanating from the microwave at this hour of the morning, it appeared that he was noshing on sour cream green chili chicken enchiladas. Kelsey scrunched her lips to one side as she said a grateful prayer that she wasn't one of his co-workers.

Clint popped the microwave open and proceeded to doctor the mess in the big bowl liberally with hot sauce. Giving her the once over with a jaundiced eye, he asked, "You okay?" around a mouthful of food. Kelsey stepped around him to grab a box of Golden Grahams and some milk from the fridge. He'd learned by experience to give her a wide berth in the morning. She was definitely one of those people who woke up slowly - exactly the opposite of him. He could get a call in to work at any time of the night or day - to say nothing of his military experience - so he'd learned to wake up pretty much instantaneously.

A crooked smile drifted around his mouth. But this little pampered Princess had no such life-or-death responsibilities, and his first few conversational gambits early in the morning had been met with stony stares and complete indifference. So now he generally let her wander around in her quiet stupor until he went to work - or, if he wanted to royally needle her, he'd be just as obnoxiously pleasant and effusively awake as possible.

That usually earned him several nasty looks and maybe a smack or two - sometimes she even deigned to take the energy to answer him verbally, and Clint always looked suitably shocked at the sound of her voice in the early morning hours, which was usually good for several minutes of watching Kelsey in complete aggravation.

In answer to his query this morning, all she did was grunt in a most unladylike manner, but she couldn't suppress the bright red blush that suffused her face.

The grin that settled on Clint's face did not bode well for her, she knew. "Your face right now just about matches the shade of your bottom when I got through with it last night."

Kelsey's lip curled cruelly, but she steadfastly refused to meet his eyes as she went about constructing her own, much more edible, breakfast. "Grrrrrrrrrr." Why couldn't he just leave her alone in the morning? Especially *this* morning, in particular, when her panties were rubbing her still tender flesh, and she was almost afraid to pull on a pair of jeans . . .

And all because of the brute that was standing directly behind her, practically breathing down her neck. But still she couldn't work up a decent font of anger about what he'd done . . . when she should have been absolutely furious to the point of threatening to file charges against him and demanding that he leave the premises immediately.

What was the matter with her? She should have been outraged and calling for his head on a platter.

Instead, she was trying - rather unsuccessfully - to squelch a disturbing feeling of warmth towards him that she certainly didn't want. Her confusion over her feelings made her even more curmudgeonly than she usually was in the morning.

Clint, on the other hand, wasn't feeling particularly warm this morning - except when he allowed himself to remember how it felt to finally teach her a lesson. Instead, he found himself wanting some sort of reassurance that she was all right. Not that he'd ever really hurt a woman he'd spanked - granted they'd been few and far between. But still . . . she hadn't let him cuddle her afterwards, and he was surprised to find himself feeling the lack of that close, intimate resolution.

Even with her.

So, without a thought, he stalked her, trapping her easily in the corner by putting a hand on either side of the counter. She didn't seem to notice, although it was hard to tell since she was facing away from him, hovering over her cereal bowl as if he held the meaning of life.

"Answer me, little girl," he growled softly, his breath blowing at the straggly tendrils of her sleep-strewn hair. "Are you all right?"

"Mmmmmmm."

A non-committal, almost non-verbal answer. "Are you sure?" Clint couldn't keep his right hand from gliding over the back of her schlubby robe, passing over but not touching the area he'd attended to last night.

The milk slammed abruptly down onto the counter. "YES. I'm fine. Go the hell away." Kelsey turned around, but Clint hadn't moved an inch. They were nearly pressed against each other, and she was automatically in his arms. The closeness made Kelsey obviously nervous - Clint had never seen her so fluttery. Her hand went to the neck of her nightclothes, as if she thought he was going to ravish her or something.

Clint laid a long finger along the side of her jaw and tilted her head up so that she had to look at him. "Good. Is your bottom still sore?"

Try as she might, she couldn't move her head down, but she did lower her eyes while her face flared brightly like a forth of July rocket in the night sky. She remained quiet.

"Kelsey." His tone held a wealth of warning that she now knew she needed to pay heed to.

Mutinously, she pursed her lips together.

Clint leaned a little closer to her, his hands coming off the counter to rest at the small of her back. "Maybe I need to find out for myself"

As his fingers started to wander further down her back - with surprising gentleness - Kelsey bullied her way past him. She had no illusions, though - if he hadn't wanted to let her go, she wouldn't have been able to fight her way away from him.

Reflexively tightening the belt of her robe while staring at the worn simulated brick tile on the floor, she bit off nastily, "Yes. I'm still sore. I hope you're happy."

Happy? No, he wasn't. Satisfied that he hadn't gone too easy on her, though, yes. Clint was of a mind that spankings should have a lasting effect. They should never be physically detrimental, but they shouldn't be forgotten as soon as they were given, either. Being a little sore for a day or two afterwards would remind her that someone - even if it was someone she detested - was looking out for her, and would hold her to account for her actions.

And he intended to do just that, from this point on.

Ignoring the spitting kitten who dared to glare daggers at him, Clint cupped her cheek as he realized he needed to get a move on. "Don't forget to pay that ticket. You have fifteen days, and I'll be keeping track of it. If you don't pay it on time, I can legally arrest you."

That threat did what his spanking had not - it got Kelsey mad. She advanced on him as he walked away from her, wishing she had a cast iron skillet or a rolling pin in her hand to whack him upside the head with. "Don't you dare threaten me like that!"

The smile on his face would have melted the faces on Mount Rushmore. "It's not a threat, Princess. It's a promise. If you don't pay that ticket on time, I'll arrest you. Handcuffs, squad car and all. But only after I've spanked you again. So go pay it today and you won't have to worry about it." He had the audacity to reach out and chuck her under the chin like she was a five year old, then turned on his heel and left, all smarmy self-confidence, as if the world was his oyster.

And Kelsey could do nothing but stand there and curse him and his ancestry back to the primordial soup. What the hell was she going to do with herself - with him?

That question kept popping into her mind at the most inopportune times during the morning when she was trying to write. It didn't help that every time she shifted in her chair - which had somehow become the most uncomfortable piece of furniture she owned - her rear reminded her of just what had transpired last night, and with whom.

And the horror of it all was that every time she thought about it - thought about the intimacy of it, of being exposed to him, being over his lap, being disciplined . . . being spanked . . . she could feel herself nipples get hard . . . feel her arousal leak shamefully onto her panties.

There was no hope for it. The man excited her beyond baring, the snot, and now that he'd spanked her it was a thousand times worse, when it should have been that she couldn't stand the sight of him.

But she wasn't lucky enough for that. The average American woman, after having been manhandled like that, would have been outraged in the extreme - *if* she wasn't already a spanko. The thought gave Kelsey pause. She'd never had cause to regret her unusual preferences until now. And if it had been any other man - *preferably one she could stand to be in the same room with without wanting to commit homicide would be nice*, she thought sarcastically - she would have been positively elated that she'd felt comfortable enough - that she trusted him enough to discipline her.

But not Nathaniel Duncan. Nope. He was entirely unacceptable, as was the idea that he had appointed himself the guardian of her behavior. She was never going to let him do that to her again. Never. Ever.

Her fiasco of a day was capped off by fact that it was whatzizname's poker night, and she found herself descended upon by five loud, obnoxious and unapologetically chauvinistic cops who seemed to think that a) there was something going on between the two of them, and b) that since she cooked, she was going to provide them with munchies and act as a waitress/barmaid.

Unfortunately for Clint, he allowed himself to buy into that fantasy - probably after consuming a few to many beers. When she'd seen the lay of the land - and they way the

testosterone loaded pack of them took over her living room, Kelsey rolled her eyes at the cat calls and got as much stuff together as she could, planning to spend the night in her room.

She would have made it, too, except that she ran out of Diet Coke and had to slip into the kitchen. Clint was facing the hall, though, and there was no way he would miss her - she wasn't that lucky lately. Not at all.

But someone else spotted her first. "Kelsey! Hey pretty lady, why don't you come on in here and bring me some good luck?"

It was Scott Pollack. She cringed visibly at the beer-soaked voice, but the next braying one wasn't much better.

"Bring me a beer, willya?" It was Clint. He didn't *sound* plastered - impossibly demanding, yes, plastered, no.

Stopping in the archway to the kitchen, Kelsey fairly nailed him to the wall with a searing glare.

But then she reconsidered, answering blithely, "Sure thing."

She could hear them patting him on the back, as if he'd successfully housebroken a particularly recalcitrant cocker spaniel. But the laughter and the congratulations were on the other foot when she tripped on a throw rug "accidentally" and poured the ice cold Dos Equis into his lap. You would have thought she'd put ants down his pants. It was wonderful! Still holding the incriminating - but dead empty - bottle, she stood a little away from him and watched the dark stain spread over his most delicate area, laughing until her sides hurt - along with the rest of his buddies, who were also doubling over and sniggering loudly.

But the look on his face when he caught her eye was no laughing matter. It promised retribution, in the most basic of manners. Suddenly, Kelsey fell silent, praying he wouldn't decide to go caveman on her and do something stupid like try to spank her in front of his friends. Instead, he said one word, purposefully and low but loud enough to be heard by his cronies, full of evil and lascivious intent.

"Later."

The guys all hooted and howled at that, and Kelsey knew she'd be subtly had - everyone at the table would now assume that there was something intimate between them when there wasn't . . . really. Not that the spanking hadn't been intimate . . . Defeated, she stalked back into the kitchen, grabbed a diet soda, and retreated to the relative safety of her room, which was what she had intended on doing in the first place before he'd issued his highly insulting command. Feeling braver as she settled back against her headboard to watch *The Sopranos*, she mumbled under her breath to no one in particular, "*He damned well got what he deserved.*"

Later, when the men had left and Clint had knocked on her door then barged into her room without waiting for her to give him permission to enter, she used that line again - but he didn't seem to be buying it. Kelsey had stood up as soon as he came in, not wanting to be on a bed with him in the room. Somehow it was just too vulnerable a position to be in in front of a man who oozed testosterone as he did.

He easily managed to back her into the same corner he'd made her stand in the day before, although Kelsey cursed herself for being cowardly enough to back away from him and let herself get trapped by his huge palms on the walls on either side of her head. Clint leaned into her, their bodies touching from shoulder to knee, practically nose to nose. He was so friggin' big! She thought as he towered over her, and all she could see was acres and acres of understated but nicely rippling muscles.

Clint would have been so much easier to resist if he'd been some muscle-bound Schwarzenegger-wannabe. But he wasn't. He was very much himself - tall and very broad of shoulder, but not over-blown with muscles. Capable-looking. He looked - and acted - as if he could do anything that was necessary to ensure his own survival and that of his loved ones. He would, indeed, have made a great mate during the Neanderthal era . . . *and probably now, too*, her traitorous mind interjected.

"You deserve a spanking for what you did," he tossed out almost casually, but then, he was holding all the cards considering he was keeping her captive.

Kelsey's chin went up a notch - especially when she realized that she was staring at the small patch of light brown hair that was visible through the buttons at the collar of his golf shirt. "You and whose army? You're never, ever going to touch me like that again, Duncan. I won't allow it."

Clint snickered in the face of her bravado. There was liquor on his breath, but he wasn't acting particularly drunk any more. He was acting dangerous instead. "You've already allowed it once. And I'm claiming the right to do it again anytime I see the need to."

"You do and you'll withdraw a bloody stump," Kelsey stated flatly, meeting his eyes with a completely straight face.

He had to admit to a certain grudging admiration. She wasn't backing down, despite the fact that they each knew that he had the strength to do pretty much as he pleased with her. The cold, hard reality of the situation was that she was no match for him physically. "Well, Princess, I think we're at a draw right now. But consider this fair warning - I'll spank you any time I think you need it. And you know there's nothing you can do to stop me."

Her eyes flared with anger, and he knew -somehow - just how frustrating that idea was to her. She didn't like having someone around her that she truly couldn't control, or someone who flat out said that he was going to try to curb her behavior. It must irk the hell out of her that it was him, too, considering the animosity they'd shared in the past - and currently.

But she hadn't filed charges against him for assault. She hadn't really even made much of a big deal about her spanking at all, as if she really did realize that she deserved it. Hmmmmmm.

For some reason, coming to those understandings made him relax. He could relate to the idea of not wanting to feel out of control - he hated it, too. And maybe - just maybe - she was a closet spanko. Stranger things had happened. Still, she needed to realize that he was assuming the role of arbiter of her behavior. "Oh, and don't pull another stunt like this evening, or you'll find yourself over my lap getting your bare butt tanned - no matter what kind of audience we might have," he warned sternly, then turned away and exited her bedroom.

Kelsey slumped in the aftermath, having envisioned having to fight him off - unsuccessfully. As she crawled into bed she reflexively rubbed her bottom, choosing to lie on her side rather than her back although she wasn't terribly tender any more.

Her last thought as she drifted off to sleep was of the fact that she knew he'd been rock hard throughout that entire exchange . . . and her panties had been soaking wet.

Clint had to actively get a hold of his temper, leaning back in his chair and counting . . . and counting . . . and counting. Travis had escaped! Apparently, he'd seen the writing on the wall, since so many people turned out to speak out vehemently and plaintively against his release. He wasn't going to see the outside any time soon, so he decided to take matters into his own hands.

It was a major cause for concern. Travis wasn't the type to let bygones be bygones - he'd consider that he had scores to settle - with Clint in particular. This not only put him in danger, but anyone close to him. Clint's jaw clenched. Princess. Kelsey had become a prime target, merely because of the fact that they lived together. Travis would never take the time to investigate whether or not there was a romantic link between them - he would assume that because they were living together that they were lovers and that Clint cared about her. Luckily, the department would do whatever it could to keep him informed of any sightings, and hopefully, of Travis' imminent capture.

Clint had to admit to himself that those assumptions weren't too far off the mark. Not the lovers part, of course, but the fact that he was coming to grudgingly care for the little pain in the neck. She was a damn fine cook, and when she learned what he liked to eat, seemed to cook to his tastes to a certain extent. She kept the house clean and the fridge stocked with what she knew he preferred. She was smart and funny - not that those were sides of herself that she voluntarily revealed to him, but he'd ended up overhearing a ton of laughter and quips one night when she'd had a gaggle of her friends over.

He'd been working out in the dining room, and had no hope of *not* eavesdropping. Although he wasn't exactly sure whether any of them knew he was there, he wasn't trying to be quiet or stealthy. They were just laughing and giggling so much they probably didn't hear him huffing and puffing. The conversation that had flown amongst women he would have sworn were staid and prudish made him blush. They discussed the most intimate things about themselves and their mates - who was good in bed, who was piggish and self-centered, who was doing what to whom and how many times a night . . . It was one of the few times he'd heard Kelsey laugh, and it seemed she hadn't been able to stop.

"The average American male is six inches long - and hasn't the slightest idea of what to do with any of it," one female voice pronounced firmly.

"It ain't the six inches I want," chimed in another as Clint felt his face burning with a blush like he hadn't felt in years. "I want his mouth where it's going to do me the most good - but David won't even consider it."

Oh, God, he recognized that voice! It was Anita Brown. He worked with her husband . . . and, frankly, wasn't surprised that she wasn't getting what she needed.

A chorus of satisfied - and sometimes wistful "mmmmmmms" drifted to his ears as he automatically tried to discern whether Kelsey was one of the satisfied ones or the wistful ones. He couldn't quite tell.

"How are you and Randy doing?"

Clint's ears pricked up and he surreptitiously moved closer to the archway into the living room. "Fine."

"Still not out of the starting gate?"

He heard Kelsey's indignant humph. "Just because we're not sleeping together yet doesn't mean that - "

"Oh, come on, Kels," Clint would know Anna Drysdale's nasal inflections anywhere. "You've been dating for how long and he hasn't even touched you? Has he even *tried* to get into your pants?"

"I think he's gay," came a chorus of pronouncements.

Clint could almost feel sorry for the guy that he was being discussed like this at a hen party. "He is not gay!" Kelsey defended immediately. "He's just not some grabbing, groping jerk who leads with his dick."

"No, he's a geek who prefers to fondle his mouse than a real live woman."

"He does not!" Her reply carried no conviction at all.

"Now, Clint Duncan - I bet that man knows how to satisfy a woman - I bet he makes 'em scream and cry with it - "

In a harsh whisper, Kelsey warned, "Do you mind?"

"I wouldn't mind at all - he can eat crackers in my bed any time at all! That man is fine!"

The rhythm of his reps was entirely thrown off by the conversation he was listening to, but it was worth it - hearing what these women were saying about him - that they wanted him - was a wonderful ego stroke, not that he needed it, necessarily.

But the one person he was most interested in intriguing merely scoffed at everyone's enthusiastic agreement that he was desirable. He heard the Princess's highly unladylike snort, and could just imagine how her nose was high in the air. "He's probably a rough, selfish minute-man - all hat and no cattle."

"I don't knoo-ooowww. I've seen him in a swim suit - unless there was a sock in there he's got a pretty impressive package - "

He could see Kelsey wrinkling her nose in distaste. "EWWWWwwwwww - I don't want to think about his package, thank you very much."

"I think someone's protesting a bit too much over there, don't you, ladies?" came a wry voice.

Before he could do anything - not that he felt he needed to duck and run, necessarily - Clint heard someone stomping towards him. Someone's recognizable stomping. "Can we talk about something *else*, please? Pretty much anything else would be great." When Kelsey saw him, she stopped short and stared, blushed a dull and unbecoming shade of red, then carried on, sticking her tongue out at him boldly when he winked at her.

"You've got it bad for him, don't you!"

Kelsey's voice was just about as indignant as he'd ever heard it as she shouted back at them and poured Orange Crush into her glass at the same time. "I most certainly do not. I have better taste than that." She delivered her next line while staring right into his eyes. "I prefer a man who knows words of more than one syllable." She walked past him and back into the living room without so much as a glance.

"C'mon, Kels. The man was an officer in the Air Force. He's far from stupid."

"Not as far as I can tell. Who says you have to be smart to say 'hoo-ahh'?"

"That's the Marines."

"Whatever."

Clint was interested to hear that their discussions were at least as dirty as those he had with his poker buddies. He learned all sorts of interesting information that would help him enormously if he ever needed to blackmail any one of a number of guys in town.

When it finally broke up, he caught Kelsey in the kitchen. "I need to talk to you."

She barely looked at him. "I'm sure you do after you eavesdropped on our conversation all night."

"I was exercising. I can't help it if my weights are in the dining room. You guys could have stuck to less delicate topics, you know."

Remembering just what she'd said about him - and what the others had said - made her cheeks flush - again - so hot she thought she was going to faint. "And you could have put off flexing your muscles until after the girls had left."

Clint frowned. He hated it when she was right. "Anyways, I just wanted to let you know that you need to keep a really careful eye out. Jerry Travis escaped from jail today."

Kelsey deigned to let her eyes flicker to his face. She was surprised - and fascinated - to see the muscle that jumped in his jaw. "Who's that?"

He sighed impatiently. "You gotta be kidding me. You never heard of Jerry Travis?"

Kelsey shrugged, but seemed to be at least a little more interested in what he was saying. At least she was facing him now, leaning back against the counter with her arms folded over her chest. "The name sounds vaguely familiar. Enlighten me."

"He's a serial killer - "

"And he escaped. Someone wasn't watching the door very well."

Clint was inclined to agree with her sarcastic view of the establishment. "Yeah, well, the man has a particular dislike for me since I caught him, and living here puts you in danger."

"Oh, it does, does it?" She didn't sound very impressed or worried.

He put his hands on his hips and stared down at her intimidatingly. "Yes, it does. Listen to me for once in your life. Now, I've got as many feelers out as I can at this department and others, and every cop in the state is on the lookout for him. But there's every possibility that he'll show up here - and he ain't going to have a house warming gift in his hands. He's a very dangerous man."

Clint was only somewhat relieved to see that she was nodding, apparently in agreement with what he said. "If I get any information that he's in the area, you're going to want to go stay with friends somewhere else for a while. He won't know that our relationship isn't what it might seem to some - living together and all," he added quickly, trying to forestall any protestations she might voice about how their situation looked to others. "He's going to assume that since we're living together that we're in love - that we're romantically involved - and that puts you in imminent danger."

Her vehement head shaking made him worry. "You just want to get me out of this house, because you know that if I spend more than a day away, then I forfeit the house to you. I am not leaving this place under any circumstances. If I'm in so much danger, then the cops - that's you, big man," Kelsey had the audacity to poke her pointy index finger into his chest hard, " - had just better do their jobs and protect me. But I am *not* leaving *my* house."

With that blind, ignorant pronouncement, she left him alone in the kitchen, scratching his head and fuming about what he could do to keep her safe. He could take care of himself - Travis would never get the best of him again. He'd spent too much time lying flat on his back in the blasted county hospital to ever let that happen twice.

But Kelsey was the wildcard in this situation. Clint knew with a certainty that both calmed and frightened him that Travis was making a beeline to Gordon's Cross to settle what he would consider as old debts - namely offing the cop who'd had the unmitigated gall to catch him. He knew he was ready for that confrontation, but Kelsey had no idea what she was stubborning

herself into, and the idea that she might get seriously hurt - or a lot worse - chilled him to the bone.

BANG! In pure frustration, Clint slammed his fist down onto the countertop. Damned Callie and all her meddling! If that old woman hadn't decided to keep a hand in things well beyond the grave and manipulate the two of them into being together, Clint would have almost welcomed the rematch between Travis and himself. But Kelsey threw a wrench into the works - she was a civilian and an innocent - a annoying in the extreme, yes, but an innocent nonetheless. And she needed to be kept safe - forcibly if necessary.

Grim faced, he resolved to visit Thom Cannizarro in the morning to see what could be done about that hitch in the will - if anything. He didn't hold out much hope, either that Thom would be able to help him or that his damned stubborn Princess would come to her senses.

In her room, Kelsey heard the loud *whack* that issued from the direction of the kitchen, but she decided that she didn't really want to explore its origins too closely. Instead, she got ready for bed and turned on *Emeril* just to see what he was bamming his way through.

What Clint had said to her really hadn't sunk in, but she was sure he was making a mountain out of a mole hill. Maybe in the hopes of impressing her, she didn't know. But she certainly wasn't going to let him - either Clint or whoever this Jerry Travis was - drive her from her home, under any circumstances.

Under the covers, alone in the dark, though, her mind began to dwell on the most unpleasant of possibilities, until she shut it down and forced herself to go to sleep - and dreamt all night of being hunted and stalked.

Chapter 9

The side door in from the driveway slammed against the kitchen wall as he barged into the house a fast week later, his face as grim as an undertaker's. Someone who closely resembled Travis had been spotted in a bar not far from the boarder, and was heard bragging to anyone who would hear that he had business with a certain cop not far away. Clint aimed to get his prickly Princess out of the house well before that happened, even if it killed the both of them - which was quite likely to happen when he announced again that he expected her to leave. Death by spoiled rotten brat, or by deranged killer - he wondered which would be worse?

He stomped through the kitchen and into the dining room, where she should have been sitting in front of her blasted computer, typing away at whatever it was that she purported to be writing. Her chair was empty, of course. Just when he wanted her, she disappeared. Typical woman, he thought grumpily.

He scanned the room quickly and caught site of her slumped on the fluffy, flowered couch in the living room, looking away from him and out the big front bow window. Her forehead was supported by one hand, and she seemed to be holding herself with the other - not paying the least attention to him, as usual.

"You need to get out," Clint stated firmly, and completely without tact. Niceties - not that he generally subscribed to them anyway - definitely fell by the wayside when someone's life was in danger.

She didn't move a muscle, or acknowledge his presence or the order he'd given in any way, just continued to stare vacantly out the window.

Come to think of it, though, her shoulders were shaking a little but that fact didn't sink in with him at all. He ratcheted his voice up a notch. "Did you hear me, Kelsey? You need to collect that nasty cat of yours and some things for yourself and go stay at a friend's house for a while. Travis has been spotted not far from here."

Still nothing. He might as well have been talking to the sofa.

Clint could not believe she was willing to stubborn herself to death - partly to spite him and partly because of this damned house. Unable to stop himself, he stalked over to her and lifted her bodily into his arms, and it was only then that he saw the tears that had been coursing down her cheeks. They stopped him in his tracks, and instead of carting her forcibly into her room as he'd planned, he simply sat back down with her on his lap. Like most men, he couldn't tolerate a woman's tears, and hers seem to affect him more so than any others - perhaps as much as Callie's did when she cried, which, thankfully, had been rare.

Although he was loathe to admit it, the Princess didn't act quite as spoiled rotten as he'd expected - actually, she was a pretty nice person. He'd seen her cook a whole meal for a friend who was down on her luck, or just down in general. She was much easier to get along with - despite the occasional temper tantrum - than he would have bet, and, if he was honest with himself, he was - generally - coming to enjoy the time he spent with her. Kelsey was smart and

sharp-tongued, and as defensive with him as a cornered, spitting kitten, but they'd worked out a pretty nice system for two people who supposedly hated each other.

Her tears made his chest clench uncomfortably. She'd never resorted to that usual feminine ploy, preferring to yell and fight and claw back when they argued, which actually wasn't too often. Kelsey made several half-hearted attempts to get up, but he stifled every one of them efficiently, but with care not to hurt her. It quickly ended up that he simply held her captive against him, her cheek pressed against his chest, his chin resting lightly on top of her sweet-smelling hair.

"What is it?" his voice rumbled into her ear as one big hand rubbed slowly up and down her thinly t-shirted back. Kelsey couldn't believe she was finding herself in this position, but then she was feeling that a lot lately - she couldn't believe she was living with him in the first place, or that there was someone out there who wanted to kill him and would have no compunction at all about harming her in the process.

Now here she was, settled in disgusting comfort on her sworn enemy's lap, feeling safer and more intimate with him like this than she ever had with - Her mind stopped her right there. She didn't want to cry in front of him, but it seemed she couldn't avoid it.

"Nothing," she whispered from behind her hand, tears pouring down her face.

Clint rocked her just a little, operating entirely on instinct. Instances in his personal life where he'd needed to console a female had been few and far between, thank God. He was entirely out of his element - which was the usual with the Princess, it seemed. "'Nothing' ain't going to cut it with me, honey-child. Tell Uncle Clint allllllllll about it," he encouraged, his voice low and soothing.

Oh, God, he was rocking her! She hadn't been rocked since she was a very little girl - it felt sinfully good, even though she knew she should have been valiantly continuing her struggle to get away from him. His warmth, the animal heat of him was seeping insidiously into her bones, calming and relaxing her against her will. "No, I'm okay," she protested weakly.

Clint's hand drifted all the way down her back to cup one curved cheek. "I'm not going to say this again, Princess. Either you tell me what's going on that's made you so sad, or I'm going to hold you over my lap instead of on it."

Kelsey bit her lip. This was really not a subject that she relished talking to him about. Not at all. She was sure he was going to razz her to death about it, and she just wasn't up to his weight right now. But that hand had started patting the area it claimed in silent warning, and, finally, after several long moments trying to delay the inevitable, Kelsey finally gave in to the big bully, spilling the beans in one quick breath. "Randy and I split up today."

Clint's eyebrow rose as he hugged her gently. "I'm sorry. I'm surprised, too. That was pretty abrupt, wasn't it?"

She seemed to shrink within his arms. "Yeah." Her fingers fiddled with the buttons on her blouse. "It was."

A frown clouded his face and suddenly, with a flurry of disturbing thoughts, he came to full alert. "He didn't do something to you? Hurt you, did he?" His hands on her body were now more exploratory - as if he was checking for any bruises or deformities.

On a hard swallow, Kelsey answered in a tiny voice as she turned her face into his shirt, "Not physically, no."

"Oh." One of Clint's fingers stroked slowly down the satiny side of her cheek. "What happened, sweetie? You can tell me. It'll go to the grave with me, I promise."

Kelsey's chuckle had nothing to do with humor. "Right. I should tell you my most hurtful secrets because you and I are so close? I don't *think* so."

Clint had a sudden flash of insight - partially based on her body language and partially on her words. "Did you find him with someone else?"

The way she convulsed in his arms was all the answer he needed. He wasn't about to rake her over the coals for the gory details. He was amazed that she'd trusted him this much. Instead, he simply held and rocked her, not saying a word, just trying to comfort her with his presence.

Her words were muffled against him, but he got the gist. "I went by his place with some breakfast - " Clint could well imagine what she'd brought. He'd had a slice of her homemade coffeecake this morning before he'd left. " - I didn't even get a chance to stop the car." Her keening sob made him contract his arms around her. It took her a few minutes to collect herself enough to continue. "He was on his f-front porch, in his bathrobe, flossing Sandy Avery's tonsils with his tongue."

"Ahhh, sweetie, I'm sorry." Clint continued to rub up and down her back slowly, cursing the nerdy little weasel silently for the pain he was causing his Princess, while trying to suppress a feeling of righteousness since he hadn't liked the man in the first place.

"I can't believe he did this to me! I never even saw him in his robe until this morning, for crying out loud, and we've been dating forever! He never - we never - " Despite the fact that she was allowing herself to be more vulnerable in front of Clint Duncan than she'd ever been in her life, there were definitely still some things that her mind balked at revealing to a man she purported to hate, although those feelings were slowly changing and the wonderful way he was acting right now was certainly helping with that.

Clint frowned. He was no angel, but he'd never cheated - ever - and he had no use or understanding for men - or women - who did. Clint leaned down and pressed his lips into that golden blonde halo at the top of her head. "His behavior is not your fault, honey. You deserve better than him. Much better."

Although she wanted to just surrender to him - to the truth of his words - Kelsey instead pulled back to meet his eyes, her cheeks wet with tears, full lower lip trembling. "Thank you," she whispered.

Clint just couldn't resist that sad face. Cupping a palm at the back of her head, he pressed his lips to hers, almost smiling at the pure surprised that registered on her face. In fact, she was apparently so surprised by his kiss that, for a long while, he was the only one kissing - his mouth slanted gently over hers, not pressing, not being sloppy, not pushing his tongue down her throat, but rather being respectful and taking it slow, waiting for her to become more aware of what was happening between the two of them, and frankly expecting nothing more than that she would reject him outright.

But she didn't. At least not overtly, anyway. He gave it a good long time, but she remained still as a rabbit who'd knows she's been spotted by a hawk. So he said what the hell. She could scream bloody murder later - and likely would - but he was going to do what he wanted to do.

What he'd wanted to do for some time, if he admitted the truth to himself, which he wasn't in any hurry to do.

Her lips were wet and salty, so soft and inviting that he almost lost control and took the kiss from her. Instead he put the brakes on his suddenly surging libido and coaxed and encouraged instead, sometimes nibbling, sometimes not until she tilted her head and joined him

rather merely letting him kiss her as if she was suffering it to pay him back for the comfort he'd extended to her.

Kelsey felt as if the unusual, unexpected events of this morning were merely extending to this period of mild insanity. But, damn, he kissed good! That was not a fact that she'd ever expected to discover, but it was the truth nonetheless. The moment she'd felt him press his lips to hers, her nipples rose and chafed against the inside of her bra. The back of her scalp tingled where his palm cupped it, holding her very gently as if she was highly breakable. Kelsey took a deep breath - she hadn't been aware that she wasn't breathing, she was too caught up in the moment. He smelled wonderfully of some sort of sandalwood-y, spicy cologne and that only added to her sensory overload.

He was so close - if he had been more demanding, more aggressive, she would have immediately backed away. But he was slow and careful - almost as if he really cared about her, about her reactions. She was just being delusional from the shock of what she'd see and learned this morning, she knew, but . . . God, his lips felt good on hers! Better than she wanted them to, by a long shot. Better than she could resist in her depressed state.

Slowly, tentatively, one small, feminine hand crept up to rest on his hard, sinewy shoulder as she allowed his tongue to creep into her mouth, exploring so lightly he was almost tickling her. She grew bold with his care; eager fingers delving into the short, soft hair at the back of his neck, ruffling over it compulsively, opening her mouth more fully and greeting his tongue with her own.

But Kelsey's body didn't truly begin to ache and throb until he abruptly shrugged off the velvet gloves and slanted his mouth over hers, compelling her to meet his passion with her own - a challenge that she more than accepted. Kelsey met him move for move, flattening herself against him as much as she could, craving the pressure, the presence of his hard, muscled masculinity against her rounded softness. Her hand came up to cup his cheek, to keep him kissing her so that he would have no doubt that she wanted his wonderful attentions to continue, in case her eager participation wasn't enough.

Clint couldn't believe that he was taming the Princess to his hand - to his mouth - but he wasn't going to question his good fortune too closely. Nope. He was going to take it where he found it - and what he found in his arms right now was a lovely, warm, willing woman. He stood suddenly, gathering her close to him and striding confidently down the hall into her room, figuring that she would be less likely to balk if she were set down on her own bed rather than his. Clint followed her down, never relinquishing her lips, lying half on and half off her side.

If she was going to protest, it was going to be now, Clint knew. He deliberately pulled back a little, nibbling teasingly down the side of her neck, then back up to hummingbird kiss her porcelain cheeks. "He didn't deserve you, Princess," he whispered hoarsely. "He wasn't near good enough for you. No woman deserves to be treated like that, especially you. You didn't do anything to warrant that from him." Clint watched her eyes shutter closed and saw the two huge tears that were squeezed out, regretting that he'd brought it up again, sorry for her pain and wanting desperately to make it better.

"Shh-shhh-shhhh," he murmured against that fine, soft skin at her temple as his hands drifted down the front of her light, loose blouse, tucking themselves up under the hem confidently but in a completely unhurried manner, allowing just the tips of his fingers to graze her rounded tummy.

Kelsey automatically squealed as he inadvertently tickled her, and she realized exactly where his hands had gotten to while she'd been bone-deep in the pleasure of his kisses. She

reached down to try to extract his hand, her small fingers wrapping around his thick wrist, but she found she'd need a crowbar to move him.

But for some reason, the thought didn't alarm her as much as it should. He'd mellowed her - dangerously - with his tenderness, and with those soul-stirring lips. She was more embarrassed that he'd see her chubby roundness than outraged as she should have been that he was taking those liberties in the first place. "C-Clint - "

Clint completely ignored the presence of her hand around his wrist, but he did slow his explorations a bit. "Yes, my Princess?" he asked, covering her mouth with his and not giving her the opportunity to answer him before he'd again set about distracting her.

Kelsey's whole body flared hot as he easily reduced her to a blithering mass of throbbing nerves - just from kisses alone. She could suddenly feel every square inch of her flesh and everything that touched it, especially his sure hand on the all-too-soft skin of her tummy. "Clint - Clint, don't touch my tummy, please?" She hated the pleading note in her voice.

Although sex - at least with herself - had always been extremely pleasurable for her, she was very self-conscious about being rounder than society might prefer. And sex with the one and only man she'd been involved with had been . . . somewhat less than satisfying. It would take her a long time to become comfortable with a man's touch. Given a preference, despite the hot and steamy sex scenes she wrote on a daily basis, it seemed, she would have preferred that this happen in the middle of the night. With no lights on.

Instead, it was broad daylight, and she was sprawled beneath him, his hand claiming her stomach as if he owned it. There was nowhere to hide from him. If she'd been in her right mind, not on the rebound from that simpering twit of a lying cheat, she'd never have let it get this far. But it felt so damned good - hell, he'd made more moves on her in the past twenty minutes than Randy had made in the entire time they'd been dating. Sure, confident moves with absolutely no hesitation. The man knew his way around a woman, she had to grant him that. Somehow, that wasn't necessarily a comforting thought.

His answer to her plea came when he silently unbuttoned her blouse, starting at the bottom. Kelsey's drowsy eyes flew open and now both of her hands joined the fray trying to dissuade him from his chosen course of action -from exposing her faults to the light - to his eyes. What if he turned back into the cretin she knew him as and ridiculed her?

She only had time to make one grab at him before she found her wrists clamped to the bed beside her hips - and he wouldn't let her go no matter how she struggled.

Clint was amazed to find that a woman who presented herself as completely confident, with an in-your-face, balls-to-the-wall attitude like she had, was so insecure about her appearance. Her incessant wiggling caused him to lie on top of her, his hips naturally parting her legs as he moved down until his face was level with the bare area she seemed so concerned about. Without a word, Clint buried his face in that welcoming softness. He'd never been interested in even just dating a stick figure, much less touching one. He preferred his women with some meat on their bones, and she had just about the right amount. Honestly, he didn't think much could dampen his libido, but her small, curvy tummy just called out for some attention.

Maybe there were other issues, besides Randy-the-cheating-rat, that he could help her with . . . while helping himself a little, too.

"Clint - no - don't!!!" None of the wiggling or rocking back and forth she was doing was getting her anywhere - it was only serving to cradle his face against the very area she was trying

to get him to avoid. Her stomach had always been a sore point with her - she would never have let Randy touch it - ever - not that he'd shown much interest in touching her, anyway.

But with Clint, it wasn't a matter of "letting" him do anything - he just did it, with or without her consent. How typical of him. He wasn't hurting her, she supposed, but he wasn't helping either. And what he was doing certainly wasn't pleasant . . . at least until he started to kiss his way up from her tummy, leaving a warm, wet trail up the center of her body until his lips encountered the front closure of her bra.

Clint had to let one of her hands go in order to release it, and he was all prepared to do his best to convince her to let him continue. But the protests that he'd expected didn't materialize. Instead, she laid her recently freed hand on his shoulder and met his eyes. The cups of her flesh colored bra lay over her breasts as they rose and fell with each quick breath. Clint's gonads were screaming at him to take every advantage of the situation, but as soon as he looked into her eyes he knew he couldn't give in to them - not that he ever had.

His Princess was wary of him - more wary than she'd ever been. She'd never let herself be this vulnerable with him except when he'd spanked her; usually she'd been too busy fighting with him and hating him . . . reacting naturally to his own behavior or demeanor. Clint lost himself in those gray, frightened-doe eyes - hook, line, and sinker. He couldn't tolerate the idea that she could truly be afraid of him. Annoyed, frustrated, and aggravated, heck yes. But afraid - no. He wanted nothing more in this life than to wipe that look off her face.

One rough-skinned, big-fingered hand came up and cupped her cheek with every ounce of gentleness he possessed. "Kelsey, I want to pleasure you," he confessed hoarsely. "I want to make you writhe and moan and cry out because of what my fingers and my lips are doing to you - because you're full of me, stretched wide open beneath me - "

The thought flashed into her mind that he must've been reading her stories, but then his back pocket began to trill repeatedly, and he treated her to an earful of badly suppressed expletives.

Flipping open the phone as he rolled off her, he growled, "Duncan." Whatever he was hearing wasn't making him any happier than having been interrupted. His face would have frightened the Devil himself. "Yeah, Goddammit, I'll be there."

Clint shoved his phone back into his pocket and shrugged off the bed, glancing back at Kelsey wistfully. Suddenly, she remembered that she was lying there with her legs akimbo, her blouse spread open and her bra undone, as if eagerly awaiting the return of his intimate attentions. Kelsey's hands flew up to gather the ends of her blouse together.

The warning was delivered in a low, husky voice. "We're not done here, not by a long shot. I want you." He paused, just as her hands stilled. "And you want me." Kelsey's nose rose automatically into the air, a vociferous protest on the tip of her tongue, but he forestalled it by holding up his hand. "Don't even try to deny it. If you didn't feel something for me, I'd be singing soprano by now."

Oh, crap, he's right, she thought.

"You'd never have let me hold you on my lap in the first place. *Or* spank you." He grimaced when his phone rang again. "Get up - you're coming with me."

Kelsey snorted, busily fastening everything he'd unfastened and swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Not on a bet. I'm staying right here and barring my door."

"Remember that guy I told you about - Travis, the one who's out roaming around these parts somewhere with a hard on for me?"

Her guffaw exploded out of her mouth at the picture his words painted. The mere idea of any man coming onto the ultra-hetero Clint Duncan was preposterous.

He didn't look at all amused by her amusement. "You're coming with me to a safe house until Travis tips his hand again." Clint began to rummage around in her closet, looking for anything that would pass for a small suitcase or duffle bag that she could cram a few things into.

"I most certainly am not. I'm staying right here. I will not forfeit my rights to this house just because of your huge ego in thinking that this guy is going to have nothing better to do once he's escaped than to track you down."

Clint threw a small valise onto the bed and flipped it open with a jerk, his jaw working furiously the whole time. "He did exactly as I thought he would - he's made a beeline for Gordon's Cross. He's been spotted at a hotel just outside of town." He crossed to where she was standing with her hands on her hips, head tilted, a defiant expression on her face. "You have a choice: you can come with me to a safe house and be relatively comfortable, or I'll take you into protective custody and you can spend whatever time it takes in a jail cell."

Kelsey's eyes went wide. "You wouldn't dare!"

He imposed another step closer towards her, so that their bodies brushed with every movement and she could feel his breath on the top of her head. "Is that what you really think? That I wouldn't do something I've told you I would do?" Unbelievably, his voice lowered to a threateningly intimate range. "Just like I spanked you when I said I would, didn't I? And I won't hesitate to do exactly that now if that's what it takes to get you to comply. If you need a warm bottom to realize how serious I am about this, I'd be more than happy to oblige - only I'll do it at the safe house, well within earshot of the officer who's guarding you. Then you'll have a red bottom and a red face. Jail or safe house, make your choice."

There was no give in his voice or his stance, absolutely none. "But the house - "

"I got Thom's okay to add a codicil agreement stipulating the details of this situation and the fact that I wouldn't try to lay claim to the house because of it." Clint reached up and pushed a strand of hair away from her face. "That would hardly be sporting of me, anyway, since it's my situation that's making you leave."

"I want to see Thom before I decide anything," Kelsey folded her arms over her chest protectively.

Clint frowned fiercely down at her. Suspicious little chit! Had he just been thinking that she wasn't as annoying as he'd thought originally? She was *more* annoying than he'd thought! "Do you think I'm lying to you?"

Kelsey couldn't stop herself from stomping her foot like a child. "I want to see Thom. Then I'll go to the safe house, since it seems like I absolutely have to."

"You do." He wasn't happy that she had refused to take his word about the house, so when she walked around him - giving him as wide a berth as she could - he reached over and swatted her inviting bottom once, hard.

Kelsey skittered away, gyrating in the way that only naughty little girls who are trying to avoid full blown spankings have, her hands automatically reaching back to rub the offended area. "Cut that out! You can't spank me."

Having made her pronouncement, she proceeded to grab a handful of undies and bras from the top drawer of her dresser and transfer them into the suitcase. When she was just about to turn and go back to collect some t-shirts, she found her wrist caught, and then her whole body tugged just enough to put her off balance.

It all happened exactly the way he'd pictured it in his mind. She was over his raised knee in seconds, getting ten or twelve crisp swats, each of which had her bellowing like an indignant, hissing cat while she struggled and wrestled, all to no avail. "Let me go, you big oaf! Stop that! STOOOOOOP ITT! OW! OW! OW!"

Clint acted as if she was lying placidly in place instead of him having to hold her with a vice-like grip around the waist to keep her in target range, not responding in the least to her inflammatory remarks. He let her go as suddenly as he'd captured her, saying, "Hurry up about it, honey. Take enough for a week, although I doubt it'll take that long. And," he concluded, forcing her to look up at him while she danced from foot to foot, "I will spank you any time I think you need it. I told you that before, and I wasn't talking just to hear my own voice."

"Bite me." She couldn't think of anything better to say. Denying the fact that he could grab her and spank her seemed useless, since it had been proven true on more than one occasion.

Clint bullied her out of the house in record time, and he did as she asked and drove right to Thom's office after calling him from the car to let him know to expect them. When they barged into his office, Kelsey took one of the seats in front of his desk, but Clint began to pace almost immediately. Thom leaned back in his chair and considered the two of them - so different, so adversarial.

They each needed a good fuck. With each other. But neither was willing - or ever likely - to admit it.

Thom sighed loudly. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit? The two of you in the same room and not *quite* at each other's throats? What happened? You guys sick?"

His sarcasm was not lost on either of them. "She doesn't believe that I signed off on her leaving the house for more than a day because of the Travis situation."

Thom's chair hit the hardwood floor with a loud *thunk*. "Has there been a development in that area that I should know about?"

"Yes," Clint bit off. "He's outside of town. But I want her out of there, for her own safety."

After rifling through one of his drawers, Thom produced a legal looking document that he pushed across the desk towards Kelsey. "He did agree to it, Kelsey. And it's only right that he did."

Kelsey remained motionless, not moving to pick up the papers. She looked up at Clint. "Please leave us alone."

Thom had never seen a man frown as deeply as Clint did at that moment. "What the hell for?" he scowled.

"Because I want to talk to him without you listening. I would have thought that the answer to that question was more than readily apparent." Sarcasm dripped from each word.

After a pause of several long seconds, Clint stalked to the door. "Not too long. I want you where a cop can keep an eye on you."

Once the door had closed behind him, Kelsey leaned forwards and grabbed the paper Thom had offered, reading it over carefully, although the legalese boggled her mind. Anything past "the party of the first part" was pretty much lost on her. She tossed it back onto the desk. "So, what exactly did he agree to?"

Thom spelled it out for her. He hadn't given up any rights, and neither had she, but Clint had given her an exemption for this particular situation. As soon as it was resolved, then all of the regular stipulations of Callie's will went back into effect.

Before Kels had a chance to say "yea" or "nay", Clint barged in, saying something to the effect that they needed to get a move on - that he'd just gotten a report that someone fitting Travis's description was headed into town. He grabbed Kelsey by the arm and practically dragged her from the office.

"Hey!! I'm still talking to Thom!" she screeched, trying unsuccessfully to wrestle herself away from him. Damn, the man was strong!

"Not any more you're not," Clint answered grimly, pulling her down the steps of the converted Victorian and stashing her rudely in the passenger's seat of his oversized truck.

Kelsey's hand was on the door latch as he shouldered his way behind the wheel. "If you want to sit comfortably for the ride to the safe house, you'll let go of that handle." His tone was deadly calm, and when she looked up at him his face was a blank and placid as a mountain pool - but that serenity only managed to convey an air of pure menace . . .

Even though she did obey him, almost instantaneously at the look in his eyes, Kelsey felt the need to argue and save some face, at least. "I wasn't done talking to Thom, you know. How do I know you're not going to screw me out of my house?"

The look he gave her almost made her heart stop, but all he said - deathly quiet - was, "You'll just have to trust me, won't you?" If he'd taken the time right now, Clint would have felt vaguely insulted, but there was too much on the line right now for him to worry about feelings. This was a life or death matter, and he was damned if he was going to let her spoiled-child attitude get her killed. If she thought that little of him, then maybe he was wrong about the idea that they were getting closer, despite their misgivings about each other. Regardless, he couldn't worry about it right now. He had to get her to safety as soon as possible.

The "safe house" turned out to be the apartment of the local county sheriff, several towns over from Gordon's Cross. Clint couldn't tell her how long she'd be there, and one day slipped easily into two, then three, then four, then a week. Travis seemed more slippery than an eel. He kept reassuring her that they would catch him soon. Kelsey had reached the end of her patience long about the first day, but she knew - because Clint reiterated it every time he saw her or called her - that he wouldn't hesitate to throw her in jail. And that wouldn't be the end of it, either, until he'd reddened her end. He'd do whatever was necessary to protect her, even from herself.

Despite the unattractiveness of a jail cell, and the fact that she actually had it pretty cushy there - especially since she'd convinced Clint to get her her laptop, Kelsey was getting antsy. And fed up with being cooped up. She was bored, bored, bored, bored, bored. She had only been able to tell people that she'd gone out of town. Most of her time was spent with whatever officer had drawn the short straw and had to guard her. Clint was trying to stay as far away from her as he could, but at the same time he was trying to be as big a target for Travis to make his move against as possible.

Kelsey hated to admit it, but she detested the idea that he was in so much danger - and it made her uncomfortable that she was so concerned about her. But she had to admit that - in general, if one forgave certain things like pumping iron right behind her as she was trying to write - and that blasted poker table taking up space in her otherwise lovely living room - he hadn't been that hard to live with. In fact, Kelsey was concerned that the pain in the neck was actually growing on her . . . she knew he was definitely having an effect on her libido. Whether that was good or not, she wasn't quite sure.

Why couldn't she just go easy on herself for once and continue to hate him outright? Why did things have to be so blasted complicated? Why couldn't Callie have just left either one of them the blasted house, and then they could have gotten on with their lives!

The cordless phone next to the bed rang loudly, making her jump and blasting her out of her musings. Her guard dog - a blank, unfriendly man who seemed merely to be putting in time with her - answered it, mumbled a few words into the receiver, then handed the phone over to her.

"Well, we lost him again," were the first words he ground out into her ear.

"You what?!"

Clint hated - more than almost anything ever - to have to admit it, especially to this woman. "We lost track of him. We don't know where he is any more. The last person to lay eyes on him says he was headed out of town -"

Kelsey nearly jumped for joy. "Excellent!! That means I can get out of this hellhole and go back home."

Silence from the other end.

Her hopes of escape withered on the vine. "Doesn't it? He was going out of town."

"No, it doesn't mean you can go home. Since we have no idea where the hell he is, he could be anywhere. You need to sit tight."

"No." Kelsey was incensed. She was sick of being cooped up, and all of her frustration came out in her tone. "I want to go home. Now. Immediately. This very minute. You tell your sallow-faced minion over here to take me home, or so help me -"

His next sentence sent a chill through her body that settled at its intended target - her butt. "If you so much as set one tiny, flat foot outside that door, Wilson will tell me about it. And the next time I see you, you'll spend the first fifteen minutes over my lap, getting your bottom roasted. Comprene?"

Her answer was a sudden, final *click* in his ear. Well, Clint thought, his mouth twisting wryly, at least she knew enough about him now that she wouldn't doubt the veracity of his promise. And he didn't think that she was in much of a hurry to get another spanking from him. He knew he'd made it an unpleasant enough experience that she wouldn't want it repeated any time soon - not that her wants really fit into the equation anywhere.

Clint leaned back in his big leather chair. Being a target was pretty easy, so far. He was acting as normally as possible, while the poor Princess was holed up in Rudy's considerably less-than-well-appointed tiny little apartment. Well, he thought, crossing an ankle over his knee casually, as if the whole force *didn't* think that Travis was probably somewhere in the surrounding woods, he'd have to make it up to her somehow.

A slightly evil, remembered-pleasure smile spread over his face. And he knew exactly how he was going to do it, too. They'd been rudely interrupted before, but once this situation was resolved . . . Clint groaned softly aloud. He wanted her. He'd wanted her from the start, he had to admit to himself, even when she was at her most aggravating - which was ninety-nine percent of the time, he thought with a wry smile. It seemed that most of the time he was torn between wanting to lay claim to her in the most basic of manners and wanting to tip her over his lap for a blistering.

If he played his cards right, he could end up with the rights to do either, as he saw fit. His Princess had surprised him - not only with how easy to get along with she had turned out to be - but with her almost meek acceptance of the dominant way he'd treated her. She'd let him spank her, and come awfully damned close to making love to her.

Yet she still purported to all and sundry that she hated him.

Well, he knew that the other side of hate is love. And she certainly did seem to love what he'd been doing to her before that blasted phone had rung and he'd had to drag her off to safety.

Clint leaned back and ran that sexy scene through his mind for the thousandth time that day - dear God, she was potent! Even just holding her as she wept for that loser Randy, who was the person in this world who was the least deserving of her tears. He made a mental note to visit the scumbag - without letting Kelsey know, of course - just to adjust his attitude a little and make sure that he understood - in no uncertain terms - that he'd done something entirely unacceptable. She felt so good in his arms . . . he'd've done just about anything to keep her there.

Providing comfort wasn't his usual *modus operandi*, but, if he was honest with himself, although his genitals were always pretty perked around her, it was the first and only thing he was thinking of once he'd discovered that she'd been crying as she gazed out the front bow window. Hell, he chided himself, those tears had been enough to completely distract him from his rightful purpose - getting her out of this house and away from danger. Instead of sweeping her out and away, as he should have, he'd ended up nearly making love to her - when there was a killer on the loose with the single-minded intention of offing him, and to whom killing anyone he loved would merely be a lovely bonus gift.

But he'd loved spreading her out on that bed . . . all that hair fanning out behind her, framing her delicate features. Her shyness about her bit of a belly was cute, not that he would ever let her tell him where he could touch and where he couldn't. She'd learn that soon enough.

Clint sighed, closing his eyes for just a second. The lady had obviously been protesting too much. She wanted him. All of the signs were there. She hadn't put up much of a fight - not about the spanking or the lovemaking. If she truly thought he was detestable and couldn't stand to be near him, she wouldn't have let him get anywhere near that close to her. As he lay over her, her eyes were wide but soft, her body writhing slightly beneath his, her nipples tautly peaked beneath her bra.

If she truly hated him, she'd've struggled to the death before she'd be that vulnerable with him. He knew his Princess. She'd never give up the fight. But she'd let him hold her while she cried, then part her legs and settled onto her, as if he had every right.

And apparently, he did. She'd given him the right to both spank her and make love to her.

The idea brought him to immediate, full erectness, and he spent several miserable hours wanting her, craving her . . . until he finally fell asleep.

Chapter 10

Scrraaaaaaaaape. Scrrrraaaaaaaaape. Clunk.

Clint had been awake and ready since the first scraping sound reached his ears. Cops always slept with one eye open - and he really shouldn't have been sleeping anyway, even though the house was being watched pretty carefully.

He moved silently through the house, gun drawn, towards the back door which faced the woods. That's where the sounds were coming from. He hunkered down to one side of the door, breathing deep and clear, adrenaline pumping through every capillary in his body. God, he loved his job! He thought as the door opened slowly and he rose stealthily, lowering the muzzle of the gun to get a bead on the sleazebag. He was gonna put this guy away for all time -

The nose of the gun became curtained in a fall of long blonde hair, just as Clint ground out, "Freeze, scumbag!"

Kelsey did exactly as she was told - terribly afraid she knew what it was she was feeling, pressing against the back of her skull. She immediately dropped the duffle bag she'd put her clothes in, and just stood there, shaking. She was so frightened out of her mind that she couldn't say a word.

Clint grabbed the man's upper arm, already feeling that there was something wrong here. And there was. Travis had short, black hair. And that wasn't a masculine upper arm his fingers were digging into. It felt soft and familiar . . . and feminine.

Kelsey. When he realized who it was, Clint immediately holstered his gun, but didn't let her go - not that she was struggling. She was obviously scared stiff. Good. He was glad she realized how badly she'd miscalculated and disobeyed. She would get a much more lasting reminder later, he promised himself grimly. He pulled her unceremoniously into the house and closed the door, flattening her back against the wall and leaning against her as if they were in a bed instead of standing in the kitchen.

Her legs opened to him as if they recognized him as her true mate, and the splayed posture put her at a distinct disadvantage, not that she wasn't already completely overpowered by him, and entirely out of her league. "Are you out of what little mind you possess, coming here in the middle of the night? Do you realize how close you just came to getting shot?" he whispered savagely.

She opened her mouth to reply, but he wasn't done - not nearly.

" - And do you realize that you could have been shot at any time once you got within a five mile radius of this place? What were you thinking, woman?" he roared down at her.

Kelsey bit her upper lip with her lower teeth. "I'm - "

A loud gunshot rang from just outside - sounding like it had whizzed just past their ears. Clint threw her onto the floor and landed on top of her, "woofing" the air out of her lungs. Now she couldn't talk even if he let her, she thought as she tried to drag in a lungful of air.

"You stay here. If you move a millimeter, I'll know, and you'll regret it. And you're already going to have enough to regret when we're done here," he ground out then crawled away from her, reaching up to lock the door, then finding a vantage point at the nearest window - which ended up being in the dining room - to try to see what was going on.

For once in her life, Kelsey did exactly as she was told. She was still trying to breathe, so staying put wasn't that much of a concern. The real problem came when the door opened, eerily quiet, and two big, grubby boots appeared right in front of her. The owner of the boots moved in complete silence, as if he was a mere phantom. But when he squatted in front of her and reached out to yank a handful of her hair around his hand, twisting it painfully to try to make her cry out, she knew this was no ghost. Without warning, he backhanded her, hard, splitting her lip and setting her cheek on fire with pain, but she remained silent. Their faces were close enough that she was getting an eyeful of him - blackened front tooth, grimy face, and short dark hair.

It had to be Travis.

For the second time this evening, she had a gun put to her head; this time, her temple.

"Scream. Scream so your loverboy cop boyfriend'll come running and I can shoot him dead, like I should have the last time. I tried, but he scraped by. This time I'll be sure to finish the job."

His voice was deathlike. Not merely a monotone, but one with a disturbing, crazy edge to it. It's very emotionlessness sent a chill up her spine. His breath was fetid as it floated into her nostrils. No way was she going to comply and call Clint running in to his death. Travis pulled her hair so tightly it threatened to come out of her head in one big hunk as he used it to turn her around to face away from him, all the while grinding the gun into the side of her head.

"Scream, bitch. Or I'll give you something to scream ab -"

Another loud gunshot resounded in her ears, milliseconds before the limp body draped itself over her, and the hold on her hair loosened. The back of her shirt was getting wet, but there was no water on anywhere. Kelsey didn't want to think about what liquid was dampening the material.

She lay face down on the floor, her nose crushed into the tile, but her lip and cheek were so sore from the all-out blow that she barely noticed it. Someone lifted the dead man off her back, but still Kelsey was in no hurry to move. She couldn't even begin to process what had happened in the last few minutes. She was just - dumbstruck.

"Kelsey? Kelsey! Are you okay? Answer me, dammit!" Clint sounded absolutely frantic. He desperately wanted to pick her up, but there was a huge bloodstain on her shirt and he didn't know exactly what kinds of injuries she might have suffered. He'd been on the job long enough to know that, unless the person's life was in danger, one didn't move an injured person until one was able to assess what was wrong with them. One wrong move of someone with a back injury could result in permanent paralysis. He knew she'd been smacked around some by Travis, and desperately hoped that that was all she'd had to endure from him.

Kelsey's ready voice was failing her. She was feeling lightheaded, and there was a buzzing in her ears. But Clint sounded absolutely frantic. "Oh-kay," she sighed, as loudly as she could. She felt like she was shouting, using up all her energy to let him know that she was all right.

Clint saw her lips move, and her breathy exclamation barely reached his ears, but he was still overjoyed to hear it. He couldn't have stopped himself from reaching out to stroke the back of her head, even into the blood soaked hair. "You stay very, very still till the medics check you

out, honey. Just lie there for a minute. The bus is on its way." He grabbed the hand that wasn't beneath her, and held onto it tight.

Kelsey laid her good cheek on the cool tile, grateful for its serene smoothness, and fainted dead away.

She came around slowly, becoming aware of more peripheral things before what was going on with her own body.

An unfamiliar male voice came from above her. "You gotta back off, Duncan, so I can treat her."

A growl issued from somewhere behind her, one that warned the first voice to back the hell off in no uncertain terms.

Kelsey faded out again then - for how long she didn't know.

Someone was feeling her up, and Kelsey came awake with a start, a scathing protest on her lips that was never voiced because she quickly realized that it was a paramedic who was doing the touching.

"Did you fall?" he asked kindly, his hands never still.

"No," she replied hoarsely, still on her tummy.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Just my face where he hit me."

Apparently having determined that she didn't have any sort of c-spine injury, he helped her turn onto her back. The hisses and indrawn breaths from the audience that was standing over her should have registered with her as to how bad her face looked, but Kelsey was way beyond caring about something so trivial. She was just glad to be alive.

"I'm going to do a little probing and it's going to be a little uncomfortable . . ." He was already poking and prodding at her face, holding it tipped up to him so that she could do nothing but try to wince away from him. Mercifully, he stopped before it became unbearable, and gave her an ice pack. "You're gonna have a beautiful shiner - I'm not sure whether he broke your cheekbone or not. The doc's in the ER will do x-rays to determine that."

Before she knew it, she was strapped and taped in to within an inch of her life, headed for the back of the ambulance. Clint hadn't let go of her hand through the whole thing, and even climbed in to sit on the bench next to her as she was transported.

"You know, Duncan," the EMT said wryly, as he danced over and around the big man in the cramped space, "you're friggin' well in the way."

Clint didn't deign to respond. His whole being was focused on his little scrap of a Princess, lying there, broken and hurting because of him. Her face was very swollen and already bruised from below her jaw to above her eye line. He squeezed her hand and tried to smile down at her, but it probably didn't look very pleasant.

The only time he left her side throughout the whole ordeal was when they took her into x-ray. There, he waited outside impatiently and grabbed her hand again as soon as she came out. Clint bullied the doc horrendously, telling him that he'd better damned well make sure that there were no lasting effects from her injuries. The doctor remained unfazed.

She had a fractured cheekbone that would hurt like hell for quite a while, and a very mild concussion, but overall she was okay. They sent her home - bundled in the warm blankets he'd harangued the nurses into providing for the ride home. One of his fellow officers had driven his truck to the hospital for him, checking in quickly on the two of them although he was largely ignored by Kelsey who was asleep and Duncan who merely provided grunts for answers as he stood over the small woman, gently brushing the hair away from her face. The grizzled old

sergeant recognized that look on a man's face - love, pure and simple. He was sure he looked the exact same way when his Evie had been rushed to the hospital with a tubal pregnancy.

The big man shuddered at the memory and dropped the curtain, turning back to catch a ride from the squad car that had followed him to the hospital.

Kelsey felt every bump and bulge in the road, all the way home. Clint responded to even the smallest, quietest indrawn breath, and did his best to avoid anything that would jar her at all. They had one stop before they could go home - the pharmacy, where they filled the script the doctor had given her for pain.

It didn't help that the driveway to Callie's place was only packed dirt and had potholes the size of Outer Mongolia. By the time the behemoth truck stopped, Kelsey was more awake than she'd been in a while, and hurting considerably more. Her whole face throbbed in time with her heartbeat, so much so that she just wished her heart would stop beating so the pain would end. Closing her eyes didn't help - nothing seemed to.

She reached for the handle to open the door, but before she got her fingers around it, the door swung open, and she found herself in his arms. Clint walked as slowly and carefully into the house as he could, trying to make her ride as smooth as possible. He didn't set her down until he could do so on her own bed, fussing around her with pillows and covers and generally being more solicitous than she would have thought he knew how.

Once he'd gotten her settled, he brought her an ice pack wrapped in a washcloth, which she laid up against her cheek. Sitting down slowly next to her, he held out his next offering: two large white pills and a Dixie cup of tap water. "Here. Take these."

Kelsey eyed them suspiciously, although she knew what they were. Pain pills. She hated stuff like that, knowing it would make her all woozy and vulnerable and out of control. One of the reasons she'd never dabbled - well, dabbled very little anyway, especially if one compared her to the rest of her generation - in drugs or alcohol was because she detested the way it made her feel - as if she didn't have control of her faculties. She didn't like that, and refused to deliberately indulge in something that would make her feel like an easy target of any kind.

"No."

Clint was in no mood to put up with anything from her that even remotely resembled rebellion. She was going to take these pills. He could not tolerate the idea of her being in pain. He just couldn't. Spankings did not come into the picture, not at all. The two were apples and oranges and couldn't be compared. This was something entirely different, and if he could, he would have endured the pain himself. Hell, he had had a broken jaw on one occasion, and had been in enough scuffles to know that her face had to be absolutely killing her.

If he had to powder up those pills and slip them into her Diet Coke, so be it. One way or the other, she was going to get some pain relief.

The look in his eye displayed his thoughts to her as if they were flashing in neon on his forehead. With a painful grimace, she sighed and reached for them.

Clint was amazed at her transformation. He expected much more of a struggle. She must've been really hurting. He held the straw to her mouth, hating the way she winced with any movement of her head or face.

When she relaxed back against the pillows, the first few tears leaked out of Kelsey's eyes, along with the exact words she was thinking. "Thank you."

Clint, who had been putting the drink on the nightstand, snuck a quick look back at her. The strained inflection at the end of her sentence told him she was crying, and he could see the tears dripping down her face. "You're welcome."

Kelsey put her hand on his strong, tanned forearm where it lay on his knee. "No, I mean thank you for everything. Saving my life. Staying with me in the ambulance and the ER. Bringing me home. You can commence the lecture any time now." She didn't know if she'd be able to stay awake for it, but he could rail at her all he wanted - especially when she was unconscious.

"No thanks or lecture needed, sweetheart. None at all. Besides, you're not going to want to thank me when you've recovered and I finally spank you for being stupid enough to come back here when you knew you weren't supposed to." He didn't reach up to wipe away her tears for fear of hurting her more, but leaned towards her, desperately wanting to hold her, but absolutely terrified to do so. For a short while, they merely remained in that immobile tableau.

His softly spoken words only made her cry harder, and she couldn't even lean forwards into his arms as she normally would have, or it would have made her face throb even worse than it already was. God, the man got to her the way no one else ever had before. She was putty in his hands. He said - and did - all the right things to her, damn him, and even through her haze of pain, she wanted him.

"You know," his voice took on a soothing, almost chanting tone, "I'm never going to leave you."

She must've been under the influence of the drugs or that statement would have gotten a considerable rise out of her. Instead, her eyelids began to flutter closed, squeezing out the last few remnants of tears.

"Callie knew exactly what she was doing with us, you know. Getting us together like this. She knew that the two of us felt very strongly about each other - granted, we hated each other, but very strong feelings can often be a harbinger of other things. She knew that if we spent time together, got to know each other a little, then we'd probably like each other.

"Now, I'm not saying that some of the things you do don't drive me crazy. They do - writing at all hours, elbowing me whenever I step into the kitchen, drinking that awful Diet Coke stuff . . ."

He thought he saw what might have been a smile, but it was hard to tell with all the swelling and the fact that she was pretty much asleep. Clint looked down at the small, ringless hand that lay against the skin of his arm. He traced up and down those fingers with the tips of his. "Callie was right. I want you. From the tips of these fingers to the bottoms of your perpetually sock-covered feet." Clint swallowed his normal reticence about such matters, knowing she was probably asleep, and said what was on his mind, although it was the first time he'd said it out loud.

"You're in me - like I hope I'm in you. You're everywhere I turn - everything I think of. You drive me crazy - even first thing in the morning." His eyes half closed as desire coursed through his body. "Maybe more so first thing in the morning, when you're all warm and sleepy and soft - and grumpy."

He shook himself physically, like a big dog throwing off pool water.

Clint couldn't take his eyes off her face - however bruised and swollen it was. She was beautiful to him. She was all he could see.

"I love you, Kelsey Valentina Donahue." The words were all the more powerful for their sincere softness, and the sheer size of the man delivering them.

He just sat there, like an idiot, for the longest time . . . just looking at her . . . wondering how he could possibly have fallen for her. And how Callie had known - without a doubt - that he would?

Eventually, he carefully removed himself from the bed - moving slowly so as not to disturb her. He'd set up a chair in the bedroom - there was no way he was going to let her awaken alone in the room. He'd camp here until he could work his way into her bed.

That thought brought a broad, evil grin to his face as he turned the TV on with the captions on, and indulged himself in a Simpsons marathon while she slept most of the day away.

Her recovery was slow and painful - but made much easier - and Kelsey hated to admit this - by one Clint Duncan. He seemed to know exactly what she wanted, when she wanted it.

At first, she was merely amazed by the sheer fact that he was willing to be there with her.

"Don't you have to go to work?" she tried, unsuccessfully and painfully, to scowl at him not long after he'd brought her home from the ER.

Clint was folding laundry on the bed. The way his muscles stretched and rippled beneath his black t-shirt reminded her of some jungle cat - not quite tamed, but willing to conform to the confines of civilization as long as it benefited him. Despite how crappy she was feeling - the persistent achiness and tiredness she couldn't seem to shake - Kelsey wanted nothing more in life at this moment than to reach out and rub his broad back, letting her fingers massage here, scratch there, tickle other places . . .

But he probably wouldn't welcome such familiarity from her . . . or would he? He'd been giving her such mixed signals - she wasn't sure of herself or him at this point, but didn't want to take the real risk of rejection.

So her hand stayed where it was, lying at her side, her fingers itching to touch him.

"Got some time off," was his response. He didn't look at her - he couldn't. If he did, he was sure she'd read in his eyes just how rare that was. He'd never taken any time off that he didn't absolutely have to - a week's vacation was mandatory for all officers, and that was what he did, pacing the house like a caged animal until he could get back to work.

When he called his commander and said that he wanted to stay home for a while, the man was speechless. But Clint had an automatic five workdays off - and the hand-holding counseling that went with it that was more what he dreaded - because he'd killed a perp. But Kelsey would have doctors' visits well beyond that, and he wanted to stay home and take care of her for as long as she needed it.

Well, as long as *he deemed* she needed it, anyway.

"Lovely."

She heard him snort. "I knew you'd need someone to take care of you."

"I do not!" she protested, not as vehemently as she might because she'd found it hurt her to do so.

The hand that patted her leg was deliberately condescending, she was sure. "Yes, you do. Ir-regardless," he said pointedly, using the word only because he knew how much it irked the writer in her, "I'm not going anywhere." He picked up piles of clothes - even her most delicate undies - and got off the bed, holding folded stuff in each big hand. "You'd better tell me where these go, or I'm going to improvise."

If she could have without hurting herself grievously, she would have raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I can tell you where they go . . ." Her voice still had the right inflection, but not the facial expressions to go along with it, since moving those muscles caused her considerable discomfort.

"Princess . . . I don't want to hear anything like that coming from your mouth. Understand?" He didn't have any problems looking at her with one eyebrow up, his chin tucked against his chest, in that time-honored manner of a man laying down the law to his woman.

Kelsey snorted, not meeting his eyes after the first few seconds. "The undies go in the top drawer," she deftly answered his first question to avoid the second.

"Bras and panties in the same drawer?" he asked, having pulled out the top drawer of her dresser.

She nodded.

When he was done and she'd directed him as to where nearly every piece of her clothing resided, he came back to the bed, holding out another set of pain medication.

Kelsey crossed her arms over her chest. He was always trying to ply her with drugs. She couldn't shake her head back and forth, but merely said definitely, "No."

Clint sighed and took what seemed to be his permanent perch on the side of her bed. "Now, you know that you can get away with that right now, don't you? Because I'm not about to spank you when you're hurt like this. I just couldn't do it. So you think you can get away with murder, and you can, to a certain extent."

He refused to touch her face for fear of adding to her pain, so he craned himself around and presented his face right in front of hers. She had no choice but to look at him - they were practically bumping noses. "Butt. Your butt - is already on the line here for one really bad spanking. And I have an excellent memory for misbehavior, so anything you do during this time - or any other time when you're sick - that's naughty will *not* be forgotten. Most particularly not refusing to take your medicine." Clint could see her foot moving back and forth under the blanket agitatedly.

"So, unless you want a second very long, bad spanking once you're recovered, then I suggest you take these like a good girl." He tilted his head down and looked out at her from under his brown. "And you know - I'm sure - that I won't hesitate to deliver either one of them."

Growling - she had already discovered - involved a lot of facial muscles when done well, and with true feeling. The vibrations of the growl didn't feel so great, either, so she'd ceased and desisted doing that, for a while, anyway. So, instead, she sighed heavily to show him that she was not going quietly, then took the blasted things, knowing full well that he wasn't bluffing in the least when he said that he would remember anything she did that he didn't like, and would take it out of her hide when she'd recovered.

As she lay back into the multitude of fluffy pillows he was always grouping around and behind her, Kelsey started to wonder where she'd gone wrong. Just where had she lost it - control of her own life and the ability to act without negative consequence to her person? When had she ceded that control to him? But most of all, why? Was she out of her mind? That man's spankings hurt, and yet the both of them just seemed to accept that he had the ability to chastise her at will.

And he did, dammit.

How had she ended up like this - with a man like him in charge of her discipline? That wasn't the way it was supposed to be at all. Not at all. This man would expect that she would actually do as she was told or as he expected of her. She wasn't going to be able to slide along with him; she already knew he wouldn't have it. She knew he was a stickler for things when she still hated him.

She'd lost control of her life. She was in a downward spiral, in the hand of a man she could cheerfully have killed over the past years, but now she'd granted him the right to wield implements of punishment against her own bottom.

Indeed, she craved it.

And more.

Kelsey's legs moved restlessly as Clint watched her surrender to the magic of the pills, wondering what she was thinking, what niggling thoughts caused her to protest almost in her sleep. Shrugging, he reached for a copy of Sports Illustrated, and listened for the beep of the dryer, never leaving her side until she awoke.

He made a pretty decent nurse, Kelsey thought as she considered his entrance - carrying a dinner tray in to her. Two weeks later, her cheek was feeling much better -the pain had dulled to a low roar.

And her jailer - also known as Clint Duncan - was actually allowing her to get out of bed, finally. She had pointed out to him, with all the sarcasm she could muster - which was considerable - that it wasn't her feet that were the problem. He had merely given her that look that reminded her that he was keeping some sort of tabulation in her head regarding her behavior, and that if she pushed it she was going to end up with a mark that represented a session over his lap.

He had been wonderful - taking care of her as if she was his beloved wife instead of a woman he supposedly hated. Surprisingly, he'd proven an apt cook - with a lot of direction - and besides that had barely spent five minutes away from her. Granted, she'd been taking those damned pills and had been asleep a lot, which might well have accounted for how well they got along, but in general they were able to reach compromises about things like what they were going to watch, and they actually did find a lot of common ground - they both loved "The Sopranos", sitcoms, roller coasters, and things about travel or animals. Generally, they could find something to watch that they both agreed on - although, because Kelsey forced him to watch three soaps every afternoon - the ones she'd been watching since grade school - she was automatically required to surrender the TV for whatever sport he wanted to watch, whenever he wanted.

Of course, they couldn't stop needling each other cold turkey, so, no matter what sport he was watching, she always liked to inquire sweetly at some time during the game what inning they were in, but he'd started it by making retching noises during her soaps, and asking anytime Erica Kane appeared whether or not she'd gotten married again.

But their Clint-enforced intimacy was coming to an end. He was going back to work tomorrow; Kelsey's doctor visit had gone very well. The doc had said she was healing very well, although her face was still decorated in pretty rainbow colors, and that she probably wouldn't need any plastic surgery.

Kelsey - who didn't have any health insurance, being self-employed - had bemoaned the cost of all of the medical care she was getting, and Clint had given her the eye, but he hadn't wanted to discuss the situation yet. Any medical bills that had come in during the past two weeks, however, had been surreptitiously paid. He never opened any of the envelopes - that would have been a federal offense. He just went to the hospital billing department and paid her

bill, and went to the doctor's office and paid her bill . . . shuddering at the thought of himself as the bill fairy.

Clint decided to make it a special night. He wanted - quite desperately - to make love to Kelsey, and she seemed pain free enough that she might even be receptive to it. Maybe. Their relationship had changed a lot in the past fourteen days - it had begun changing well before that, thanks to the crafty Callie's machinations in cramming them together. He had learned that a lot of his assumptions about Kelsey were wrong - she wasn't particularly bratty, and was actually a lot of fun to be around. They had spent a lot of time lately talking and laughing. Small intimacies abounded; he helped her to the bathroom at first and assisted her in and out of the shower - but not the usual sexual ones that could have gotten in the way, although he was certainly still aware of her as a beautiful woman.

She'd been in pain for a lot of the time, yet hadn't whine or complained about it. In fact, he had had to learn to read her face - her expression and her complexion, which went conveniently ashen gray when she was hurting - because she wouldn't ask him for the damned pain meds she needed, preferring to tough it out and not be asleep so much.

He liked her . . . and was more than halfway in love with her, if he was so bold as to admit it to himself, which he wasn't very often.

And he wanted her.

Tonight.

Blissfully oblivious, Kelsey's eyes popped as he brought in a second tray. Both were decorated with white roses and tall white candles. On his way in with the last one, Clint turned off the lights and the room was bathed in the glow of candlelight. He set one bed tray over Kelsey's legs and then put one over his own lap.

"Wow! Did you cook this all by yourself?" she exclaimed, eying the beautifully done steak, grilled onions, garlic mashed potatoes drowning in butter, and green beans with a bit of parmesan cheese and toasted almonds.

Clint frowned just a bit. "Well . . . Outback did the steaks, the onions, and the mashed potatoes. I remembered you saying they were your favorite. But I did the fresh green beans in the steamer, just the way you taught me."

Kelsey ate a piece of the meat and sighed in ecstasy as it melted in her mouth.

"Mmmmmmm. Gee, this is good. Thank you! You didn't have to go to all this trouble, Clint."

Somewhere along the line, she'd dropped the habit of calling him by his last name. Clint took it as a good sign. After letting a forkful of the buttery, pungent potatoes slide down his throat, he said, "I know I didn't. I wanted to. Things are getting more back to normal tomorrow, and I want to commemorate the occasion." He took a swallow of wine, feeling a lot of satisfaction as she tucked into the meal with almost as much gusto as he did.

They ate and talked, dragging the meal out laughing, and he fell harder than ever right there. She was still looking bruised and beaten up - a fact that made his stomach clench each and every time he looked at her - and small and delicate in the nightgown and robe he'd had her climb into, and he wanted to claim every inch of her as his to love and protect. The feelings welled up inside him so fiercely that they hurt him physically. She was still smiling broadly after her last bout of the giggles, unselfconsciously licking the back of the spoon she was using to catch all the butter that ran from the fort she'd made out of her mashed potatoes.

Impulsively, Clint leaned over and moved the spoon away from her mouth and kissed her, tasting butter and garlic and potato and a little wine on her lips, which merely reflected his own. Kelsey had stilled, like a doe in the forest seeing something potentially threatening, but she didn't protest, and eventually she decided apparently that he wasn't a threat to her, and relaxed into the kiss, opening her mouth for him, tilting her head so that he could take her with his mouth.

When the trays disappeared, she didn't know. She didn't know anything except the touch of his mouth and the firm but gentle hands that rested on her upper arms, turning her into his body, against him, so that she could lean into him just as she wanted - but how had he known she craved him so?

He was exquisitely gentle with her in every way - conscious to avoid to active or aggressive a kiss, lest it hurt her cheek. Instead, he butterfly kissed her onto her back, still in his arms and clutching at him, holding him, running her fine, soft hands up and down his t-shirted back until he shrugged out of it in record time, dropping it to the floor so that he could feel her touch. He needed her touch with the same urgency that he needed his next breath of air - with an ache he'd never felt before, but one that had always been there when he was around her. It had slowly come to life as they had come together, and now it was a brushfire running wild through his body, tempered only by the new love he felt for her.

Clint pulled out all of the stops for her. He wanted to dazzle her - he wanted tonight to set the tone for the rest of their relationship . . . hopefully for the rest of their lives.

If he had been in his right mind, that thought would have scared the bejeezus out of him, but he was too intent on Kelsey and how she was making him feel to worry about it right then.

She let him slip her out of her robe very docilely, then lay back in her sleeveless white nightie, eying him a little apprehensively.

Clint kissed her - but not as passionately as he wanted to - instead moving slowly, softly down the side of her neck, his hand reaching up to tangle in the waterfall of hair at the back of her head. God he loved her hair! Always had. He'd always wanted - even when she was driving him craziest - to reach out and wrap that long curtain around his wrist, and now he could. He could use it to pull her closer, or hold her still for a bottom roasting.

His lips traveled along the neckline of her modest gown, the fingers of his free hand just barely tracing up and down the insides of her arms, making her shiver with it. He'd learned she was incredibly sensitive and ticklish - he was going to enjoy that. The shivers had made her nipples pop out; they were clearly outlined by the thin material covering them. Clint wanted to be bold enough to lean down and take one in his mouth, but he didn't want to frighten her.

She wasn't very experienced, he knew. He wasn't sure exactly how he knew it, he just did. Maybe it was the way she was so shy - some of the women he'd been with were bolder than most men. But not his Princess. She was almost tentative with him - maybe because of their past, but he sensed it was more than that. Kelsey didn't have that "practiced" air, nor had she come at him with a ruler in one hand and a condom in the other.

Kelsey had an . . . almost untouched air of innocence that he found incredibly enticing. It made him want to teach her - made him want to please her, to see her eyes go round and make her body arch in his arms from the pleasurable agony of it.

He leaned back from her a bit, reaching down to the hem of the gown. "How about if we get you out of this, Princess?"

It was the first time he'd used that nickname for her that she didn't consider it an insult. His voice was deep and warm and husky, without a trace of sarcasm or bite. Kelsey sat up and

tried to gather the material, but he wouldn't let her, pulling the gown over her head carefully and dropping it over the side of her bed without taking his eyes off of her. His intent gaze made her self-conscious, and she automatically reached for the sheet and blankets to pull them up under her chin and shield herself from him.

But Clint wouldn't allow it - not forcefully or nastily, but gently pulling them away from her, down to the bottom of the bed where she couldn't reach them anyway. Blushing brightly, Kelsey lay back, closing her eyes in fevered embarrassment. She heard him sigh deeply, and bit her lip.

He only said one word, breathily, reverently "gorgeous," before leaning forward to bury his face in her tummy, remembering how self-conscious she was about that portion of her anatomy. She tried to wiggle him off her, tried to push at his shoulders, but it was like trying to move a boulder. He wasn't going anywhere.

Eventually, he stopped butterfly kissing her, and looked up to see her lying there with her eyes squinched tightly closed, like she was facing an execution instead of what was going to be a wondrous bout of lovemaking. "Hey," he cajoled huskily. "Look at me."

Her eyelids fluttered open hesitantly, and she peered down at him.

"I'm going to make love to you. I won't hurt you, I promise."

Kelsey felt a little silly. "I'm not worried that you'll hurt me - I'm just . . . well, I know I'm no Anna Kornikova."

Clint snorted. "You don't have to be. I want you, and I don't want you to think that any part of you is ugly to me. 'Cause it's not."

Incredibly, she blushed hotter. He was being entirely honest with her - she just knew it - and somehow that was almost worse.

He'd left her panties on, and started to kiss his way up from them, ending up above her, on all fours, looking down into her eyes. "I can't kiss you as much as I want to, so I'll just have to concentrate on the rest of you instead."

Her eyes went wide at that pronouncement, but he was as good as his word, his hands traveling over her as if she was made of spun sugar, palms gliding delicately over raised nipples, making her jerk and catch her breath. But they didn't linger there, gliding down to catch her panties and pull them off in a very non-threatening, slow manner, so that she barely realized she was naked beneath him, until his jeans pressed up against her bare legs, one of them lying atop hers - not pressing or pushing against her, but lying over where her legs would separate . . . eventually. A portent of things to come.

One rough-skinned palm cupped her good cheek, fingers delving into her hair while his other hand felt free to explore her satiny skin - running the pad of his index finger over her peaked pink nipple, over and over and over until he wandered over to its twin and did the same thing.

Kelsey's breathing was already hard just from nervousness, but he wasn't helping it any. Her nipples were pulsing and aching and practically begging for his attention, and he didn't disappoint. Clint leaned down and took the nearest straining nub into his mouth, suckling lightly at first, then more fiercely as she arched and pressed his face into her breast.

Oh, God, she smelled wonderful - and he didn't even think it was a perfume. It was just her scent - warm woman. Clint was drowning - quite happily - in everything about her. Her stiff little nipple filled his mouth as he flicked his tongue around and around it, his brain drinking in all of her sexy cries and moans as he took her other nipple between his thumb and forefinger and twirled it, pinching just a bit.

Her response surprised him - she almost bucked him off her at that, but he held her down and refused to stop, knowing he wasn't hurting her but instead was making her crazy with pleasure - he hoped - because he was certainly most of the way there already himself.

He let his mouth trail down her tummy, and was heading lazily further south, but Kelsey's protestations became very fervent, as if she was reading his mind. "No - no. Please. Not - that. Not right now."

Clint had half a mind to ignore her - taking care of a woman that way was one of his favorite things to do, and - if he said so himself, he did it pretty well. But Kelsey seemed very unsettled at the idea, and he didn't want her to experience anything that was the least unpleasant, so he backed off and moved a little to the side, choosing instead to let his fingers drift down to that lush delta between her still-closed thighs. He didn't demand that she open them. He didn't push them open, either. Clint just tucked his middle finger into that moist notch and slid it down to that pulsating scrap of flesh - sighing and closing his eyes in silent prayer when he realized that his finger was drenched in her delicate fluids - more than enough to aid him in bringing her to what he intended would be a wild, screaming completion.

He kept her as stimulated as he could, considering that he didn't want to kiss her too much. His mouth captured and kept a nipple, worrying it avidly, suckling and flicking and nibbling while she arched and writhed beneath him.

Kelsey was - incredibly, unbelievably - close already. And his finger was driving her to distraction. She had already determined that if he pushed her, if he forced her in any way, that she would balk - just on general principles. But he hadn't. He'd just gone in and taken what he wanted, claiming it as his own as if he felt he had some sort of right to it.

And he certainly knew what to do with it, she had to grant him that much. He was making her want to move her hips to help him do this thing to her . . . and her legs were falling open with no conscious thought from her. All she wanted was for him not to stop.

She wanted more. She wanted him to keep doing this. If he stopped now, she knew she'd die from it. She'd implode.

"You are so beautiful. I love you like this," Clint murmured encouragingly against the firm flesh of her breast. He'd known that she'd come to relax enough to let him in, and she had. Her legs weren't splayed open, quite, but they were pretty far apart - welcoming him, telling him silently - in case he couldn't hear her sighs and squeaks and moans of pure sensation - that he was hitting the exact right spot, in the right way, with the right pressure.

Bringing a woman to orgasm was not a task for the inattentive or faint hearted.

"Tell me when you're close, Kelsey," he whispered before wrapping his lips around her nipple again.

Kelsey could barely think with what he was doing to her body - and how much she was enjoying it. "Wh- why?"

He gave the taut bud just the hint of a bite before lifting his head and explaining, "Because I said to."

The command made her entire body clench once - hard. Clint felt it, and chuckled softly. "Someone likes to be told what to do . . . despite how much she'd disagree with that statement."

Kelsey was in a bind - she wanted to argue with him for all she was worth, but she certainly didn't want him to stop. After wrestling with herself for a while, as he expertly manipulated the point on her body that contained more nerves per square inch than any other, she gave up. He wasn't asking a question or expecting a response - so he wasn't going to get one.

Everything in her existence was concentrated on him. On the places he was touching . . . tweaking . . . suckling . . . rubbing . . . Her muscles were starting to tighten, and she was getting very, very close.

"Almost," she said through tightly clenched teeth. For something that was incredibly pleasurable for her, it required a tremendous amount of tension.

"Good girl," he praised, moving his hand away from her eager little clit, and down to the dripping entrance to her body.

Kelsey's cry of frustration was probably heard in the next house over - which was about a mile away. She wasn't just frustrated, she was furious that he'd stopped. Her lower body was almost painfully swollen and sensitized and she needed him to finish what he'd started.

She was only slightly mollified when he pressed a finger up inside her, startled at how tight she was. She wasn't a virgin, but she was practically as tight as one. It was Clint's turn to clench hard. He almost lost control of himself, especially when he felt that soft wet glove enveloping a second finger eagerly.

He pumped those long, thick fingers in and out of her slowly at first, then more quickly as her hips rose to meet each plunge. "Mmmmmmm. Someone likes that . . ." he whispered huskily, plunging harder.

"Ahhhh - God - Clint - uhhhhnnnnnnnnnoooooo - "

He leaned close to her ear, still taking her hard with his hand. "Don't lie to me, little girl. You already have at least one harsh spanking coming. You don't want to make it more, believe me." As he spoke, he dipped his thumb into the font of her fluid, then carried that slickness up to her hard bud, rubbing over and over that exposed bundle of nerves while never even slowing down his invasion of her body. Two strokes later, he added a third finger, which stretched her almost uncomfortably wide, forcing her clit even further out of its protective hood, so that the ball of his thumb rested directly on top of it, dragging slowly across it with each stroke.

Kelsey couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. She was one big, exposed, throbbing, pulsing mass; her very existence depending on the fact that he would continue to do this until she reached her release. If he stopped - or even slowed down a little - she would wither up and die, she knew it.

Barely able to get the words out, she gasped, "Don't - stop pleeeaaaaseeeee!" sounding as desperate as she felt.

Clint remained where he was - torturing her sensually, loving the fact that she was so absorbed and involved in what he was doing. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. I'm not going to stop until you've come, sweetie. I want you to come hard on my hand for me. That's it. I'm going to make my Princess come and come and come . . . "

Oh, God Almighty she was right there, right on the verge, just a few strokes away . . . just a few slow drags of that roughish thumb over the top of her and she would explode all over him uncontrollably . . .

His lips were inches from her ear, his voice tugging at a part of her, invading her as surely and insidiously and insistently as his fingers did, all husky and rough and deep as he stimulated her brain while tormenting her body. "Come for me, Kelsey. Come right now or you're going to get another spanking. The next time I make you come, you're going to be lying on your sore bottom while I love you with my mouth - "

That was it. That was enough. It was almost too much. His words were going directly into her brain and from there to her open, weeping, vulnerable mound. The tingle that had been there - in the background of it all, lying in wait for her till exactly the right moment - had come

to the forefront, enveloping all of her most sensitive area in that throbbing thrum of ecstatic anticipation, of imminent, pleasurable implosion.

Her first contraction made her scream out loud and clamp down on his fingers as if she was going to swallow them into her body. He kept up his rhythm, giving no quarter through it all, leaving his thumb right where it was, lying atop that throbbing point, pulling it over her constantly as she jerked and arched and clenched in the throes of the paradise he had brought her. She continued to scream, but each was - as her contractions were - softer than the last but still quite considerable.

"That's it. You are so beautiful like this, Kelsey." If she were in her right mind, she would have protested that sentence, but she was too caught up in the feelings of her tight tipped nipples and the pulsing of herself around his hand. "Wonderful, sweetie. That's it." His thumb circled her slowly, gently, teasing out every last ounce of pure pleasure, until she collapsed back onto the bed, all tension drained from her body at his hands and lips.

She was wasted. Used up. Unable to think or process anything. She was floating above herself, half oxygen deprived from breathing as if she'd run a marathon, her teeth and fingers tingling from it, inches away from fainting, but she didn't care.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she realized that he wasn't behaving as she expected him to - considering she generally thought of him as a selfish, self-centered man. Kelsey knew that most men would already be inside her, having "done their duty" and fulfilled their obligation to bring her off, they would be busily getting their own rocks off, regardless of how she was feeling or doing in the aftermath.

Clint, however, was merely lying beside her, holding her close to him, stroking the damp hair away from her temples and squeezing his arms around her. He seemed in absolutely no hurry to claim her, although she could feel, even though the fabric of his jeans, that he was certainly more than capable.

Trying to control her breathing a little more, Kelsey took a deep breath while Clint stroked her arm. Her eyes were closed when she said, "Dear God, you almost killed me with that."

She could hear the self-satisfied grin in his voice, thought. "Good. I'm glad. You are the most responsive woman I've ever seen. It's marvelous that you can give yourself over to it that way."

Kelsey blushed. "Thank you, I think." She opened her eyes and caught his gaze. "It was because of you, and what you said, and how you . . . handled me. You're very good."

She watched in amazement as he turned a dusky shade of red. "Uh, thank you. But you sound somewhat surprised at that."

Kelsey shrugged, not wanting to defend her remark.

"But then you tend to think the worst of me automatically, and the reverse is also true. How did we end up getting of on such a wrong foot?" he mused out loud, kissing the side of her jaw delicately, making her shudder again.

"Aren't you going to . . . ?" she asked the question even though just thinking it made her blush worse.

Clint chuckled at her innocence, especially after such a truly explosive orgasm. "Yes, I am. But I wanted to make sure you were all right before I did."

Kelsey's eyes drifted closed at that pronouncement. She could hear him shucking out of his jeans as he moved beside her.

"Open your eyes, Kelsey."

He was sitting at her feet. She did as she was told, more out of curiosity than because she had an interest in obeying him.

"Open your legs for me."

It was a powerful command. In essence, he was telling her to invite him inside her - to make herself vulnerable to him at his behest - to submit to him voluntarily. It took her a long moment, during which he merely held her eyes, saying and doing nothing. This was her decision, and hers alone. He would never force himself on her, and if she decided that she didn't want him to make love to her, then that would be it. Their fragile beginning - such as it was - would die right there in her bed.

When her feet began to inch apart - slowly - he released a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Clint was hardly unaffected by what he'd brought her to. He was rock hard - the zipper of his jeans permanently imprinted on his rampant parts. He wanted her - wanted to make her his, wanted to stamp his ownership on her as surely as if he'd had her tattooed as "property of". He wanted more over her - wanted everything she had to give, and more.

He waited - throbbing painfully every second - until her legs were well apart. Not shyly parted but truly splayed, an obvious, still wet, bent-kneed sensual offering that he didn't hesitate in accepting. Clint moved forwards and insinuated himself between those alabaster legs, parting her even further by mere virtue of his broadness and size, feeling her legs against his sides, not holding him, yet, but yielding to him.

Clint draped himself on top of her experimentally, concerned that he was too big for her. He never thought of her actual size - she was such a little pistol that she presented herself as six feet tall and able to leap buildings in a single bound. But in reality, she was much smaller than him, and despite her concerns about her weight, she was about half his size. He watched her face as he settled onto her, his penis nestling between her outer lips, seeking but not entering, almost happy just to be closer to where it should be housed at all times, if it had its own way.

"Too heavy?" he asked on a groan. She felt so good against him, all warm and moist and welcoming.

To his surprise, Kelsey wrapped her arms around him, holding him gently. "Nooooooo," she breathed. Dear God, he felt so good on top of her!

He had to kiss her - but kept it light, with little to no pressure, dueling tongues and nibbling at her lips, then down her neck to a still tight nipple, feeling a tremendous rush when she immediately arched up to offer her breast to him. Busy fingers found her lonely other tip, reducing her to a writhing, panting mass in just a few minutes.

Every movement careful and slow, he rocked just a little back and forth, positioning himself at her entrance, the head of his cock already generously bathed in her slickness.

She surprised him by arching up to him, as if asking for him to take her. He teased a little, sliding just a scant bit in, then pulling back several times.

Kelsey was fairly beating at his shoulders by now, silently asking for what he desperately wanted to give her. "Shh-shh-shh," he soothed, all the while barely able to keep himself in check, barely able to keep from plunging into her in one hard, uncompromising stroke that would undoubtedly lift her from the mattress from the force.

Instead, he eased himself into her, his eyes nearly rolling back into his head at how tight she fit around him - he was barely able to do it without letting himself loose prematurely. Christ, he almost couldn't move; she was clamped around him like a fist.

He groaned, deep and low in his chest, with every small advancement, until he'd finally made it almost all of the way into her, until he reached down and gathered her knees over his

elbows, forcing her to rock back and open even further to him, so that he occupied every inch of her with his huge, stretching presence.

Kelsey - held down by his weight and wide by his breadth - felt like he was going to come out her throat any minute. Cripes he was big! He'd claimed her completely. There was nothing left of her to yield to him physically; he filled every nook and cranny of her to overflowing.

And then he began to move.

Sex for Kelsey had been a bit disappointing. Her only lover had been in college - the rest of the time she was too concentrated on her work to pay much attention to men, and, frankly, not many had come her way. Alan had done what she supposed was his best - but it had been much less than fulfilling for her. She could - and did - do better for herself on a regular basis.

But Clint - he had nearly caused her to pass out on his first try. She shuddered to think what her next orgasm with him might be like.

She had a sneaking suspicion that she might be finding out shortly, though, since the way he was thrusting into her was causing that already highly sensitized area to come to life again, especially considering how he was holding her - spread for him . . . penetrated . . . possessed and almost overwhelmed with it. He was so right for her - how could she have thought that his being a cave man was a *bad* thing, when it was just what she needed, as he'd been saying all along?

Kelsey rocked up to meet him, loving the guttural groan she tore from his throat when she did that, and the wonderful pressure on her insides as he filled her up. Unbelievably, before she had a chance to think about it, her body convulsed uncontrollably for the second time that night, and Clint followed not long afterwards, arching into her, grabbing her tight to him and moaning long and low as his body pulsed and he flooded himself into her.

His big body collapsed on top of her, totally boneless. Kelsey loved the feel of him, the weight of him on her, the way he draped over her, covering her completely like a hairy warm blanket . . . with lips. Lips that were nibbling at her collar bone very lazily.

Kelsey indulged herself, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders - he was so broad they didn't meet in the back. Clint chuckled as she started to massage him lightly. "Mmmmmmm, that feels great, but I should get off you. I'm too heavy."

"No, you're not," Kelsey pouted, but he was already half off her.

"Don't worry - I'm not going far." His lips took hers. "Ever again."

Kelsey awoke earlier in the morning than usual, with Clint snoring loudly right next to her. He'd barely let go of her all night, preferring instead to bring her to ecstatic end over and over until she fell asleep in his arms, sated and exhausted, as secret, womanly smile on her face.

She turned to look at him, and he was just as devastating now as he'd been last night - maybe more so, since she knew intimately what he could do to her. But thoughts niggled at her - and not good thoughts, either. This morning she wasn't thinking of the incredibly pleasurable excesses of last night, even though her body reminded her when some new and previously unacknowledged place twinged with each movement

She was thinking about the fact that she'd slept with a man who, until very recently, she would have purported to hate outright - that the whole town knew she detested. And yet, she'd

let him do things to her that she hadn't even let Randy consider after several months of dating - not that he'd shown any inclination to do so, but still.

Despite the fact that they lived together, they'd never even been out on a date. But there he was, stretched out beside her like a Playgirl model. Better than a Playgirl model, she mused, reaching out to tickle her fingertips over his firm, smooth skin for just a second, careful not to wake him. He knew her - played her - better than she played herself.

But what did all this mean? Had anything really changed? Where did they go from here?

Those were the thing she was actively pondering, all serious-faced, when he awoke a while later from her restless roving under the covers. His first act of the morning was to press himself into her, hoping to still her movements, or at least put them to good use.

If she had had any inkling of what he was going to do, she would have tried to get away from him, but she was his before she could do anything about it, filled to the brim with him, taken, possessed, truly, and in the best sense of the word, nailed. There was nowhere to move but closer to him, and, as he dragged himself in and out of her, her body gave her no choice but to follow its dictates. He pulled moan after toe-deep moan from her on the way to a mutual implosion that must have shuddered the rafters, and afterwards, he did not roll away, or even fall asleep, but rather he gathered her to him, spoon fashioned, and kissed her temple, stroking her in a calming, soothing manner meant to help her get her errant, ragged breathing under control.

"Why were you looking so serious when I woke up?" he whispered into her ear.

Kelsey did not want to talk about it right now. "Nothing," she said, sliding away from him, out of his arms.

Clint knew her well enough by now that he didn't believe that, but he decided not to push it.

For now.

He had to go back to work, and for the first time in his life he really didn't want to. He didn't want to leave her. She'd start to think too much and would over-think things, and no good could come from that. Clint kissed her a lingering goodbye and went to face the stacks of paperwork he knew would be piled up on his desk.

He called her mid-day, to tell her he missed her, trying to be romantic and affectionate, but she sounded distant, even now. Clint knew he'd have his work cut out for him by the time he got home.

That was hours and hours later, much later than it should have been - later than he'd told her to expect him. He entered the house all prepared for a fight - even though she'd never hassled him about being late before. They hadn't slept together before. Women had strange notions about relationships and sleeping together, and he kinda figured that she would figure that they had graduated - by virtue of having had sex - to a deeper level of intimacy and were a "couple" now, or were at least well on their way to being one.

And he was fine with that. He wanted to be a couple with her. As long as he could take his rightful place in her bed - or with her over his lap getting a paddling, as the case may be - at night, he was all for whatever made her happy about their relationship. She could tell people

they were Charles and Camilla for all he cared. Although, he thought with a rueful smile, that would be selling the both of them short in the looks department . . .

She was sitting right where he expected her to be - at her computer, typing away.

"Hi, honey, I'm home!" he yelled enthusiastically, and with much less sarcasm than he usually did.

Her "hi" was disappointingly soft and distracted. "Dinner's on the stove. I haven't had a chance to put it in Tupperware yet."

Regardless of whatever else was going on in his life, his stomach took precedence over every other part of his body except his penis, which was nicely sated from last night - although ever watchful. He followed his nose to the stove, where a marvelous concoction of steak slices, mustard, garlic, butter, and Worcestershire sauce greeted him, with crunchy garlic toast to eat it on.

Before he even asked the question, she said, "Just turn the heat on medium and heat it through, then put some toast on a plate and dribble some sauce and steak on it. The toast doesn't have to be hot - although if you want it to be, then just nuke it for a half a minute or so. Not too long, or it'll get rubbery. If you want cheese, then let me know and I'll come broil you some."

Clint didn't want to put her to any extra added trouble. He adored her cooking, and whatever she did was great with him. The only two things he refused to eat were Brussel sprouts and green fried tomatoes. Other than that, he was easy in the food department. If it sat still long enough and vaguely resembled food, he was going to eat it - and this meal was one of his favorites. Steak with garlic - what could possibly be bad about that?

He ate in the living room, in front of the evening news as usual, while she tap tap tapped away fervently, then joined him after shutting down her computer. An empty dinner plate sat next to his big recliner, waiting for him to get up again. Kelsey noticed it, but knew that he would clean up his own mess, as well as whatever was left of hers from cooking their dinner. He was no slob, thank the Heavens.

Kelsey took a hassock and dragged it close to him. "I need to talk to you."

Clint's stomach thunked down to his toes, then up to his throat, finally rebounding violently back to its normal position in his abdominal cavity. How he dreaded hearing those words from a woman - usually for a different reason entirely - but he knew nothing good could come of whatever conversation followed that phrase.

More tense than he would like to admit, he leaned back in the chair, hoping to appear exactly the opposite.

After clearing her throat several times, she began, "Last night - " he could hear her swallow from several feet away, and watched with great interest as her fair complexion became tinged with a pretty pink. "Last night was . . . wonderful. It was . . . mesmerizing. Incredible. Fantastic."

A broad grin stretched over his face. She had said all of this to him last night and again this morning, even when he said he didn't want her gratitude. "You're welcome. It was mind-blowing on my end, too, you know."

"Thank you."

He desperately wished she'd get to whatever point so that they could get it - whatever "it" was - hashed out, and he could take her in his arms and snuggle with her until they went to bed.

Maybe he could get her to snuggle with him in bed, which would be so much the better, he thought.

"But - ?" he asked encouragingly.

Kelsey squirmed, knowing he wasn't going to like what she was going to say. "But - I think we jumped the gun."

His jaw snapped shut, and he was concerned that he knew where this was going, but he tried not to show his aggravation. "How so?"

"Well, going to bed together so quickly."

A bushy eyebrow rose. "Quickly? We've been living together for how long now?"

Kelsey frowned. "Not in the usual sense of the word at all. Heck, we don't even like each other - do we?"

It was a loaded question, one that he had luckily already resolved in his mind. "I didn't like you because I didn't know you. I had wrongly assumed a lot of things that, since we've moved in together, I've changed my mind about." His smile was broad but tense. "You're nowhere near the brat I thought you were, my Princess."

"Thank you, I think."

Clint chuckled, then waited for her to return the compliment, his eyes boring into hers, making her wiggle under his gaze.

"You're just as much of a pain as I thought you'd be, frankly," she admitted baldly. "You're very macho and dominant . . ." She was going to fall off the chair if she kept writhing like that. "And . . . I find that attractive when I don't find it annoying."

He laughed again. "Well, it's a backhanded compliment, but I'll take it."

"No, no, no. You know what I mean. You're a throwback. You're protective and commanding and you like to be obeyed." She couldn't hide the shiver that ran through her body at her own words, and he watched her nipples pop out behind her thin t-shirt. "But you're also not a slob, like most men, and you're appreciative of my cooking, and surprisingly intelligent for a Neanderthal . . ." she smiled ruefully. "And - and I like you. And I'm seriously attracted to you - despite the fact that your spanking hand is made of redwood."

Clint held the offending hand up, turning it this way and that. "It is not - see?"

Kelsey reached back reflexively to rub her bottom. "Is too. I should know - I've been on the receiving end."

"And you will be again - not too long from now, when the doc says you're healed," he warned in a soft, almost friendly tone.

She was wiggling again, not wanting to think about the next time she was going to be over his lap . . . "But - but don't you think that we've kinda skipped a lot of necessary steps in . . . in becoming lovers. And in you spanking me?" she added, always interested in getting herself out of one of his spankings - despite the fact that that was what she had been craving all her life. The reality of it was - like his lovemaking - almost too much to bear.

"No," he replied firmly. "I don't think we skipped anything other than a lot of other people's social conventions. And you're not going to get out of a session bare-bottomed over my lap that easily, girl, so don't even go there. We are not debating whether or not I spank you - that is a foregone conclusion."

Almost nastily, she allowed, "All right, all right. But I want us to date. And get to know each other better. Before we sleep together again."

Clint was appalled that she'd even voiced that idea. "Are you out of your mind, woman? I want you, and I know you want me. Now don't go playing games like this with what we have - it's rare enough as it is. I'm going to be in your bed tonight - " He stopped talking when she crossed her arms over her chest and began to shake her head back and forth. "I - " More resolute head-shaking. "You - " still shaking. He grabbed his plate and came darned close to busting it

on the floor in a fit of temper. "Well, fine then. Cut off your nose to spite your face. It's no never mind to me."

He rose and went into the kitchen, with Kelsey hot on his heels. "Don't be mad. I just want us to spend some time together that's not in the heat of passion. I want to go out to dinner and to the movies and go out with friends and all of the usual stuff. Without the - " she stumbled for the right word. "Without all the confusion that sex would bring."

He stopped in the act of loading the dishwasher. "Confusion? You mean the fact that I make your teeth tingle, and that you fit me tighter than a surgeon's glove - clamping yourself around me as you - "

Kels held her hand up. "Cut that out! I know what you do to me, and probably nowhere near enough of what I do to you. We're explosive in bed. That's damned lucky for us. But that can't be all that we are, or we'll be over in a week or two."

Clint snorted, but had gone back to the dishes. Did that crazy woman think that he'd get tired of her - of their incredible union - in such a short time? The way she responded to him? He'd probably die fifty years from now, still with a mental list of things he wanted them to try out under the covers - or under the dining room table . . . but he didn't say as much to her. "Whatever," he shrugged, running a damp rag over the counters as if last night had never happened, as if she wasn't discussing their - apparently very tentative - future.

Defeated, and hurting in ways she hadn't ever before, Kelsey backed off. It was obvious to her that he didn't care much about anything other than having sex with her. That was all he saw her as - a convenient sexual outlet. All of his careful nursemaiding, his concern over her health when he caught her speeding . . . none of it meant anything to him except as a way to get into her pants.

She fled to her bedroom, flung herself - gently - on the bed and cried herself to sleep.

Clint remained in the kitchen, wiping his hands with a towel and wondering how the hell things had gone to pot so damned fast. Not much later, he walked down the hall to his room and heard her weeping. A muscle ticked in his jaw, as he turned away from his own door and towards hers, his hand on her doorknob, wishing it was her shoulder as he pulled her to him.

And why shouldn't it be? He asked himself, opening the door and walking into the room as if he owned it. And he did - or half of it anyway due to the crazy old woman.

Kelsey apparently didn't hear him until he closed the door - from the inside loudly. She sat bolt upright, tears streaming down her face, eyes red and puffy, looking truly miserable. "What are you doing here? Go to your own room!"

Clint had already divested himself of his tie - it was usually his first act upon leaving the department. There was quite a collection of ties behind the seat of his truck. His shirt was hanging in the front closet - he couldn't quite get himself to the stage where he merely balled it into a wad and threw it in the corner, but the closet worked well for him, and he didn't have to iron it when he wore it again later. His t-shirt was easily dealt with - peeled off in record time and thrown into the hamper she kept by the door.

"Stop disrobing in my room and go do it in your own room!" she was practically screeching behind him as he sat down on the end of the bed - oblivious, it would seem - and pried off his shoes, arranging them neatly with a sock in each, then standing again and loosening his belt.

"E-nough!" Kelsey made a grab for his waistband, just as the belt was snaking out of the loops.

"Ah-ah-ahh-ahhh," he warned, shaking his finger at her. "I have a belt in my hand. It's probably not a good idea to be misbehaving."

Kelsey retracted her hand immediately, folding it against her chest and sitting back on her heels, feeling immediately vulnerable in just her nightie and panties. "You can't sleep here, Clint," she said, shaking her head bravely as she hugged herself and watched him proceed to strip nude then slide under the covers next to her.

He held his arms out. "Come here, baby."

Damn, he looked inviting - that tanned, broad, lightly hairy chest with its understated muscles, his arms beckoning to her. It was so much of what she needed after a long cry - a strong male shoulder to cry on.

She couldn't resist it. She was too weak. Five seconds later, Kelsey was letting him hold her tight against him as she resumed her cry, rocking them both slowly back and forth as he brushing his hand down the curtain of her hair. "Shhhhhh, sweetie. It's okay. I couldn't stand hearing you crying. I had to come in and hold you, honey."

"Don't say that!"

"Why not?" he asked, completely perplexed by her command.

"Because you don't really mean it. You just want to have sex with me. That's all I am to you. A vagina that's less than ten feet away from you most of the time. You don't want to date me or have a relationship with me. You just want to fuck me."

It was an automatic response. She didn't usually swear, and he didn't like such crude language coming from her sweet lips. Clint swatted his whole hand down across her lightly covered bottom. "I don't want to hear you say that word again, young lady. Do you understand me?"

She nodded her face against his pectoral muscle.

"I can't hear you, woman," he warned.

"Yes, Sir."

Clint kissed the top of her head. "Good girl. And you're wrong. I'd love to date you. We can go out tomorrow night, if you want. I'll take you to your favorite restaurant - maybe we'll even catch a movie."

She had stopped sobbing - sort of - lifting her head and looking at him with still-weeping eyes. "Tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, honey," he cooed, brushing her hair back. "Does that work for you?"

Kelsey nodded.

"Good." Clint held her close again.

"But - "she sniffed. "I don't want us to have sex for a while."

He couldn't stop it. His whole body cramped uncomfortably all at once. No sex. Wasn't that just like a woman? And after last night, even! Clint sighed, rubbing her back rhythmically. He wasn't about to force himself on her. But she felt so good - so warm and alive and sensual - in his arms. He didn't want to let go.

"All right," he barely bit out. "No sex. We'll date. We'll go out. We'll get to know each other." Dear God, what was he saying!!!!???? "But we're not going to have a moratorium on sex for very long, understand?" He tipped her chin up so that he could catch her eye. "I am not a very patient man."

"No? You're not?" she asked, in a watery, if sarcastic, voice.

He growled down at her, stealing several kisses and pulling himself away at the same time, while his body and his mind screamed that they belonged together, that he needed to feel

her close around him, to feel her contract with the pleasure he brought her, to hear her scream with it again and again until he succumbed to his own.

All in good time, he thought in the back of his mind. He wasn't going to put up with much of this - she could have her dating time - he'd take her out every day for the next two weeks. And then that would be it. He wasn't even sure he could manage to last that long.

Two weeks, with her under the same roof, twitching the lovely bottom of hers under his nose, plying him innocently with food, and subject to his discipline.

Every bone and muscle in his body shuddered dangerously at the thought.

He would be lucky if he lived through it, he thought as he ducked into his own lonely, cold room.

Come to think of it, so would she.

Actually, he was pleasantly surprised at how well - and how quickly - it went. They went out to dinner almost every night, caught some movies, and hung out with friends, who were entirely amazed at the turnaround. Most of them confessed to having formed a pool, and betting against the idea of the two of them ever getting together.

They each had poker nights at different times and in different places. His ended up being at the house again, and his friends even invited her to join, which he hadn't been too keen on, but he got overruled. It worked out well, though - she played like a man and didn't complain when she lost - although she ended up ahead for the night. Well ahead, much to the chagrin of the burly men. When they were discussing - after she'd toddled to bed with her purse bulging with their money - whether or not she should be allowed to join regularly, it wasn't that she annoyed them or aggravated them, it was whether or not they thought they could afford the losses!

Clint had never discussed his self-imposed two week deadline with Kelsey. It was just his breaking point - maybe a little *after* his breaking point, he mused as he swallowed hard and watched her disrobe.

He was sitting on the end of her bed, and she was going to get the first of the spankings she was due - this one would be the worst, for being knuckleheaded enough to come home when she was supposed to be in protective custody. This one was going to hurt her, bad, and Duncan had to admit that he was a little worried about that.

He loved her. He'd admitted it to himself but not yet to her, that would be too weird at this point. And he didn't want to hurt her. But he definitely wanted to teach her a lesson. Somehow, those two things seem to be at odds with each other, despite the fact that he knew that the spanking was exactly what she needed.

Kelsey came towards him - completely nude - and Clint had to reel in his libido. He kept his eyes on her face, trying to let his affection for her show in them, along with his firm resolve. She looked almost afraid of him, and he didn't want that. Respect, yes. Fear, no.

Clint drew her to stand in front of him, holding her hands in his and looking up into her eyes. "You know I would never abuse you, don't you?"

She nodded solemnly. Kelsey's heart was beating even faster and harder than it had the first time he spanked her. Somehow, this time was worse - harder. And she was going to get it harder, too, she knew. He was not impressed by the idea that she had gotten bored at the safe

house, and was angrier than she'd ever seen him that she'd decided to take matters into her own hands and come home.

Kelsey shrugged mentally. She supposed it was a stupid thing to do - but it had seemed perfectly logical to her at the time. She'd known this time was coming - looming in the future - although she'd been able to put it out of her mind most of the time. But now she was going to have to pay the piper.

And the piper was both mad as hell at her behavior and - she imagined correctly - sexually frustrated, as she was. Kelsey didn't think that those two things boded very well for the condition of her bottom once he was through with her. It had been almost ten days since they had made love. Her cheek was pretty much healed, and they had been driving each other up the walls each night, standing in the hall way, groping each other like a couple of teenagers who didn't have two perfectly good beds not ten feet away.

Except for when they said good night - and he literally growled it at her, his hands never leaving her equally reluctant body until the last possible minute - he had been the perfect gentleman. Clint was attentive and obviously interested but not overly so - not publicly embarrassing about it - and he was surprisingly easy to talk to. His manners were impeccable, although he always glared at her when she held a door open for him. He always tucked her into his truck before he got in, and even went to get it when the weather was bad and brought it around to her so that she wouldn't have to walk in the rain. He started taking a little more interest in what she was doing in the kitchen, and she converted him to watching cooking programs on Food TV, although she couldn't quite wean him off of a steady diet of sports programs, either. Kelsey tried to be as open as he was, though, so she sat next to him at watched football as well as the baseball playoffs, trying not to ask too many stupid questions although she'd never been able to figure football out.

But now, here she was, standing naked in front of him, about to submit to a punishment that was more apropos for a four year old than a thirty-four year old. Goosebumps came out on her arms, and her nipples were standing at attention, more from nerves than from anything else. She wasn't feeling particularly sexy right now - she was feeling apprehensive.

"I want you to go stand in your corner for a while, hands on your head, and think about why you're getting this spanking and why it's going to be more severe than most. When I call you back to me, I'm going to ask you what you thought about, and I want complete answers. Do you understand?"

Tears were already building in her eyes. She hated to stand in the corner! "Yes, Sir," she whispered softly.

"Okay. Go to the corner and I don't want to see you move a muscle until I call you, or you'll regret it."

"Yes, Sir."

He was moving around behind her, she worried, not thinking of what she was supposed to be thinking about. She wanted to dance a little, to shift and wiggle and move, but knew better than to do that. Just because he was doing something other than staring at her now-white bottom didn't mean he'd miss anything about how she behaved in the corner. She didn't dare fidget. She was going to get it bad enough already.

A year later - it seemed to Kelsey - she heard his low voice. "C'mere, my Princess."

Now that she could leave the corner, she wasn't at all sure she wanted to. The trip to stand in front of him again was accomplished as slowly as she dared, and her obvious reluctance brought an endearing smile to his face.

Finally, he held his hand out to her imperiously, and she walked more rapidly forwards. Clint positioned her directly in front of him, between his knees, close to him, with his big palms covering her bottom. She couldn't keep herself from scanning the bed, her eyes growing big at the sight of a wooden bath brush lying to his side, easily within reach.

"Now. Why are you getting this spanking, and why is it going to be extra bad, young lady?" he asked sternly, tipping her chin up and turning her face away from what he knew she was intrigued by so that she stared into his eyes.

She would have brushed the floor with her feet if she could have, but she was being held too closely. When she spoke, her voice was soft and tentative. This was not a subject she liked. "Well, um, I - um - I came home when I wasn't supposed to."

"Where were you supposed to be?"

"At the safe house."

"And why weren't you supposed to come home?"

"B-because of Travis."

"We had a telephone conversation about this, too, didn't we? When we lost track of him and you said you wanted to come back? What did I tell you would happen to you if you came home?"

Kelsey had to think about that for a moment, recalling the conversation and blushing brightly when she remembered. "You said I'd spend the first fifteen minutes over your lap getting my bottom roasted."

Clint nodded. "Well, it's not the first fifteen minutes, but you're definitely going to get your bottom roasted." His jaw clenched as he relived those terrifying moments when he watched Travis holding her and beating her. He wished the man was still alive so he could have the immense pleasure of killing him again. "I have never been more scared in my entire life. Ever. I'm telling you right now that you are going to be one unhappy lady when I'm done with you."

He took her left hand in his and pulled her over his lap as she whined and was just short of uncooperative. Clint smacked her curvy bottom and she settled down some. "I'm sorry that this has to be harsh, Kelsey. But you put yourself more at risk by coming home than you ever would by speeding. You actively put yourself into the line of fire, and I - " he had to stop. The idea that she might have been hurt - or killed - made it impossible for him to go on . . . in every way but one.

His hand fell onto her bottom without preamble - hard stroke after extremely hard stroke. He laid into her with a set of about twenty swats that he was quite sure were nearly unbearable before he stopped and rubbed her bottom just a little.

Kelsey heard him sigh above her as she tried not to wiggle too much. He nearly had her crying just from the first volley - she didn't want to think what the rest of the next half hour or so was going to be like.

When the bath brush first connected with her already pinkened bottom, Kelsey's mouth formed an unpleasantly surprised "o" - but then came the second smack and the third and on and on and on. Her mind could do nothing to process how much it hurt her. All she could do was react to each swat, arching and bucking and wiggling and forgetting all about good behavior. Clint grabbed her far arm just above the elbow, easily keeping her from escaping off his lap, holding her relatively still for her punishment. All of it. He aimed to see that she didn't miss a full, hard stroke.

Kelsey was wailing by the seventh or eighth stroke with that wicked thing, and not long after he began the second set of twenty there were real tears dripping down her cheeks. His short

bouts of rubbing didn't help much, except at the time. Her nose was running and she was babbling apologies and heartfelt - and bottom-felt - promises of better behavior.

But he kept on, this time not stopping until he'd delivered twenty-five incredible cracks against those wobbling, rapidly darkening cheeks. As his hand massaged her tormented flesh rhythmically, Clint whispered, "You will never put yourself in danger like that again. Never ever. I aim to make damned sure of that. Any time you even think of doing something like that, you'll remember this spanking. I promise."

When he took up the brush again, it was to use it in an even more calculated and evil method - three rapid-fire, wrist-snapped whacks in a row - each one in the exact same spot: the very bottom of her butt where it almost became her thigh. Every time she sat for the next week, she'd be reminded of the fact that she was his. Then he alternated to the other side and did the same thing. Back and forth and back and forth.

Kelsey lost her voice. Her screams and cries were mere croaking as the brush fell. She was beyond trying to wrestle herself away, beyond begging him to stop, beyond making extravagant promises that she couldn't keep anyway. That horrible wooden thing imprinted itself on her bottom and she had surrendered to it - and to him.

Clint gave her another varied round - some on her thighs but mostly on her mottled rear, then stopped and put the brush down on the bed. Kelsey didn't move. She was crying inconsolably, her arms hanging down by her head, her hair pooled directly beneath. He could see the dark stain of her tears on the carpet, and heard her sniffing as he rubbed her back.

Clint was glad that she wasn't trying to get up immediately - he wouldn't have allowed that anyway. He wanted his penitent Princess to spend a little time over his lap, after the spanking, hopefully contemplating what had gotten her to this undoubtedly uncomfortable point.

"May I get up now?" she asked with extreme politeness.

In answer, he immediately helped her to sit on his lap, bare red bottom hanging over his thigh instead of lying on top of it as he held and rocked her, rubbing her back as carefully as he'd rubbed her poor backside. "There, there, there, sweetie. It's all over, and all is forgiven."

She was crying even harder now - when she was safe and warm in his arms. Clint pulled her tight and just held her as he tried to firmly ignore the rampant hard on he got with her pressed against him, all soft and warm and repentant, clinging to him as if he was her lifeline.

He did something next that he'd never done in his lifetime, except with her, oddly enough. With Kelsey it seemed to be something of a depressing habit. He put her to be without him. After getting her into a gown and undies, he tucked her under the covers - on her tummy - and staying with her until she fell asleep.

As he undressed to crawl into his own wholly uninviting bed, he could think of nothing but her and how absurd the situation had become. He was damned well crazy to have put himself off as long as he had. They needed to be together - she needed someone to look after her and keep a very tight rein on her various self-destructive impulses. And he needed someone who could match him in the bedroom and wasn't afraid to go toe-to-toe with him outside of the bedroom, either.

He needed - and wanted - and loved - her.

His self-imposed exile ended - as of now. Clint's gazed - somewhat evil and all sensual - swung to the door.

The gloves, as they say, were off.

The next morning, Kelsey rolled off of her side and onto her back - screeching loudly and then rolling back onto her side quickly. Her second shriek of the morning came when someone wrapped their arms around her from behind and pulled her to them.

Clint. Who else?

His familiar male scent wafted to her nostrils as he surrounded her with himself. Kelsey sighed. Why had she been insisting that they date again and not have sex? Her reasoning was definitely clouded at this point. All she could think of was his hardness pressing up against her, just beneath the cleft of her sore bottom cheeks, tucking itself into the warmth it found there where bottom met thigh.

"What are you doing here?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Holding you," he responded promptly, kissing the back of her head loudly.

"I thought we weren't supposed to be doing things like this for a while . . ."

"Things like what?" He would never, ever be able to pull off innocence. Nope. Not him. "Kissing? Holding?" His hands came up to cup her breasts. "Fondling?"

He was so gleefully little boyish in his misbehavior that she had to giggle as she tried unsuccessfully to pry his hands away from her. "Fondling, especially."

With an impudent tweak of each nipple, he did finally move his hands, but only to lift and turn her so that she ended up lying on top of him.

And he was most definitely naked. Bare naked, even.

Kelsey tried to get up, but one strong arm across her back held her in place as all of her struggles merely brushed her hardened tips against the light fur on his chest. Her legs had naturally separated so that she straddled him, her open, glistening privates lying directly on top of his, dragging over him as she moved until the head of his penis found her entrance.

All Clint had to do to join them together was rock her back onto him, which was exactly what he did with a hand on each hip, gently pushing her backwards until she impaled herself on him.

Her groan as he entered her sent shivers down his spine and made him contract inside her. "Dear God, Kelsey," he ground out, arching his hips up to drive himself home, "I have to have you. I have to be inside you."

Clint waited for a long moment, waiting for her to bring up their agreement, to say they shouldn't, to protest in some way. But when he pried his eyes open to look up at her, she was in the act of sinking down onto him, her eyes closed, mouth open, head thrown back in the throes of such pleasure - pleasure that he was giving her.

If he could have, he would have smiled. Instead, he settled for rocking his hips up and down, making her ride him and listening to her moans and sighs as he took her. His hands found her breasts, rolling and tugging at those inviting nipples, doubling the volume and amount of her pleasured cries.

It ended quicker than he wanted it to - bare seconds after she'd convulsed onto his chest. The violent contractions of her tightness around him sent him hurling over his own edge.

They clung together, breathing heavily, for the longest time, neither willing to move and break the magic spell that had settled around them.

Swallowing hard, and swallowing down the huge lump of his pride, Clint confessed breathily, "I love you, Princess."

Kelsey's head snapped up and she stared at him in disbelief. Tears filled her eyes and dripped down her cheeks as she bit her lip and just stared at him.

Clint was stumped. He'd just shared his deepest feelings with her, and she burst into tears? "Honey, I didn't mean to make you cry - " He reached up to cup her cheek.

"No," she sighed, pressing her cheek into his palm and holding his hand with her own. "No. You didn't. Not in a bad way. It's just that I never ever expected to hear you say that."

He frowned deeply. "Why not?"

"I figured this was just a casual fling for you. Maybe a way to get me to give you the house - " He was looking hurt so she stopped there before she said something that really drove him away. Kelsey shrugged. "It was too much to hope for that you loved me, too, especially considering how much we've hated each other for so long."

Clint's heart soared. Hadn't she just said that she loved him? "What did you just say? Did I hear you wrong?"

Kelsey blushed and giggled a little. "I love you, too. I think I always have -even when you were annoying the crap out of me being Mr. Macho Man."

He was frowning again.

"I know I definitely loved you from the time you took care of me after Travis - "

A big hand came up. "I can't think about what happened without getting mad. No more mentioning his name in our house."

A huge grin spread over Kelsey's face. "I like the sound of that. 'Our house'."

Clint hugged her to him. "I do, too. No more fighting over Callie's place. Now it's ours. I'm going to love you and spank you and chase after you and eat your cooking for ever and ever."

Kelsey pressed her lips to his, fervently repeating part of his vow. "For ever and ever."

She settled her cheek against his muscled chest, melding herself to her hard man.

Far above them, Calliope Jenks peered down and heaved a huge sigh of relief. It was about time those two realized they belonged together!