

# A PIECE OF HEAVEN



Carolyn Faulkner

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# *A Piece of Heaven - Chapter 1*

*by Carolyn Faulkner*

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She knew him just by his indolent stance as he leaned against a column as if he were holding the airport up single-handedly, smoking a cigarette, one huge booted foot crossed over the other where his impossibly long, muscular legs ended. Sarah shook her head. That man looked like one long, cool drink of water in the middle of a desert sandstorm. Mmmm-mmmm. A woman'd have to be half dead – and even then – to miss the blatant sexuality he exuded with little or no effort on his part. And she was very, very much alive.

He straightened at her arrival, and when she stayed behind the wheel rather than getting out to greet him, he knocked on the small trunk and stowed his carryon bag. Flicking the cigarette away carelessly, he wedged his considerable bulk into the passenger's seat.

“Shoehorn?” she quipped sarcastically.

“Damn little foreign cars,” he muttered under his breath, reaching for the seatbelt.

In spite, she floored it, throwing him against the back of his seat. Jed McCade stopped in the act of latching his safety belt, which was no mean feat while she was attempting to attain warp speed in this disreputable old rust bucket of a Datsun. He was sure it would rattle itself to pieces if she went over 50.

Sarah Jenkins felt a familiar tightening in her heart, her stomach, and areas much lower as he pinned her with his gaze. She knew she was pissing him off, but, what the hell – everything she did lately seemed to annoy him, why bother to satisfy someone who was clearly determined to be an asshole, regardless? He'd've found something wrong with her if she were Mother Theresa incarnate, so she'd long since decided to ignore him and give him time to recover from his terminal PMS. If only she listened to her own advice. And after what he'd done to her recently, taking liberties that weren't his – or any man's – disciplining her like some naughty five year old girl, laying her over his lap and baring her bottom . . .

She flushed guiltily at the thought, embarrassed and more, much more, but wholly unwilling to explore her feelings past the shame of it and her subsequent anger towards him for his high-handed treatment. Whether the provocation was substantive enough or not, he should never have spanked her like he did. It was something Sarah didn't think she'd be able to forgive.

Might just as well throw caution to the wind, she decided, popping a homemade

cassette tape into the ancient player. The unmistakable opening guitar licks to “Walk This Way” by Aerosmith filled the car to overflowing with sound. Her fingers tapped on the steering wheel as she brayed every word and took every breath with Steven Tyler.

Jed knew she was behaving for his benefit, and said nothing, merely reaching forward to turn the volume down to a level that didn’t threaten his eardrums. The look he gave her when she reached right after him to turn it back up made her rethink how intelligent a move that might be, so she sat back in her seat in a full fledged feminine snit. He knew he was the cause of that snit, and that it was more than likely not going to go away very quickly. If she was here picking him up, it was only under extreme duress – both Lily and Eric must’ve been completely tied up, it was the only way she would have deigned to do anything for him right now. Because of what he’d done a couple of weeks ago, she’d taken to deliberately annoying him, confronting him at every turn. Eventually, he was going to have to sit her down and explain that that was going to earn her very much the same treatment that she was pissed about, but Jed thought he would be understanding for a little while longer, to see if she would settle down by herself. But his patience was not inexhaustible. Most people would say he lacked it entirely, and he was currently using all of what little supply he owned trying not to give her the attitude adjustment her behavior screamed for.

The two of them had known each other forever, it seemed. They had had mutual friends in the small town, and although they were several years apart in school, they always ran into each other. An easy friendship grew between them, despite their obvious differences. Jed ran the Circle M ranch, which he had inherited from his disreputable father in an atrocious state and he was just getting it back into the black after a long time of operating in the red - due in part to his wastrel parent combined with a money grubbing, two timing ex-wife - which he detested. But, if anyone could do it, Jed could. He was tough as nails and everything he’d gotten out of life – thanks to his falling down drunk father - he’d had to fight for. This was no different. He loved the ranch, it was where he had grown up and it was home. Armed with a business degree from Harvard, a lot of hard-learned know-how, and a deep-set stubbornness about failing, he set about putting the ranch back on track, slowly, patiently, and with the single minded attention of a survivor.

Sarah, on the other hand, while not quite having the proverbial silver spoon, was raised by a well to do family in the small town near the ranch, Waterville, NM. She had pretty much gotten whatever she wanted just by asking her father sweetly and turning on the charm. An only child, her parents fairly doted on her, and although she went through the usual adolescent rebellions, she managed to straighten out pretty well. Going east for college had made her grow up some, and once she graduated, she’d gotten an office job in town to be near her parents since they were older.

She had even married, though everyone in the small town had known it wouldn’t last more than a year, and it hadn’t. Curry Devereaux was no one’s idea of a faithful husband, and sensitive Sarah had been betrayed repeatedly in the worst way, and everyone in that gossipy little hamlet knew it just as well or better than she did. Her badly failed marriage had made her publicly vow to never marry again – enduring that type of pain had nearly killed her the first time around, and she was definitely smart

enough to learn from her mistakes.

After several years of slow decline, Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins died within days of each other and Sarah had lived in the old house she'd grown up in all by herself since then. Having inherited a substantial nest egg from her parents, she impulsively decided to quit her job and write. If she was careful, she could last quite a while on what Mom and Dad had left her, and writing was something that she had always had a knack for. In her stories, happily ever after was a foregone conclusion, unlike real life. She knew she could do a better job than the authors of some of the romance novels she read, so she set about trying to do just that.

In a town as small as Waterville, it was hard not to bump into pretty much anyone who had bothered to stay around after high school, so when Sarah began dating a guy who had been a couple of years ahead of her in class, Eric Thornton, she also began to bump into Jed again, and they renewed their strange and unique friendship. As she would put it, Jed was strange and she was unique. The two of them were about as odd a couple as you would ever see – the big, muscular, reclusive rancher and the delicate little debutante, as he teasingly called her. He was quiet and laconic, tending to be so aloof that most people were afraid of him due to his size and often brooding stare, but when he said something he meant it and it was an intelligent, thoughtful remark. Sarah was much more gregarious, at least in public, and she kept everyone, including Jed, who hadn't had much to smile about in his life, in stitches with her quick, sharp tongue. She had never thought to be afraid of him, instead wanting to draw him out and make him smile. Despite the fact that he was not an easy person to know – preferring to keep to himself – or like, she knew and liked him, perhaps too much for her own comfort.

Despite the fact that his blatantly masculine and sensually dominant tendencies could have gotten any woman he wanted, Jed hadn't dated much since Cheryl left him. It was not his slight limp that held him back in any way, although it was enough of a permanent reminder of the reckless, drinking days of his youth when he had had one too many and gotten behind the wheel of a pickup, only to crash it headlong into a tree that he was now a confirmed teetotaler. Having been burned himself by his first wife almost five years ago, who had decided that the isolation of ranch life was not to her tastes and began to cat around town on him, Jed was very casually dating Lily Mulroony, who had been in the same class with Eric. The four of them kept seeing each other at the movies and restaurants around town. Inevitably, they ended up sitting together. The more time he spent with her, the more Jed liked being with Sarah. He took to dropping by the house on a purely casual, friendly basis, to make sure that all of the little handyman jobs that needed doing got done without her having to climb a ladder to do them. Taking care of the menial stuff usually got him invited to a home cooked dinner, which could have been all he was angling for, but he was beginning to think it wasn't, not by a long shot. Thinking like that had gotten him in trouble years ago with Cheryl – thinking with his other head, that is - and he had lost a good-sized chunk of the ranch's money to her rapacious lawyer's idea of what constituted "fair and reasonable support". The fact that various parts of his male anatomy rose to attention whenever Sarah entered a room, that he wanted desperately to bury his big work-roughened hands in her softly scented hair and kiss her like she was his woman, and that he sought her company on the flimsiest of excuses had set off alarm bells that he was doing his damndest to heed – although one could never tell from the sheer number of times they ate dinner together in

a week.

Having come over more often than not uninvited, Jed would eat whatever she was having, and it always seemed that she cooked enough to feed the army that he resembled when eating someone's cooking other than his own. The ranch was almost back into the black where it belonged, but he hadn't gotten to the point where he felt right at spending the extra money for a cook. Subsequently, he existed on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches hastily constructed in the wee hours after he finally came in for the night and whatever other pre-fab meals he could find in the grocery store. But Sarah's cooked like his mother had – right down to casual but nice place settings, napkins, and real china rather than the paper plates he'd been buying for what seemed like forever. He was a meat and potatoes man, but not fussy enough to refuse whatever warm food she dished out. So he learned to like the occasional chicken, mozzarella and stuffing casserole, Korean bulgogee over rice, and piping hot pasta e fagiola with homemade garlic bread.

When he was stuffed to the gills, and she had teased him sufficiently about trying to pack enough in until he came over again, they would adjourn to the living room to talk or watch TV. Neither of them felt the need to impress the other with scintillating conversation, and even the occasional silences were comfortable and companionable. If there was something interesting on – like a special on archeology or ancient Egyptian history, which they both loved, he would stay later than usual. But, since he was up very early in the morning, he didn't usually stay much later than ten or so. Before he left, he usually took Ziggy out into the back yard for his evening constitutional. Although he liked all animals, generally, he referred to Ziggy frequently as “that big, mangy mutt” just to get a rise out of her, to which Sarah had taken to commenting caustically that it took one to know one. He went around and made sure the house was completely secure, that all the doors were locked, etc., then she saw him to the door, pressing Tupperware containers of whatever leftovers there were into his welcoming hands. Although he would have liked to have done more, Jed had developed the habit of placing a nicely platonic peck on her cheek when she presented it to him, and although it came nowhere near to satisfying him, at least it got him a little closer to her for a second or two. That really should have held him, if his gonads would just give it a rest.

The trouble between them had developed when he had been driving over to see her a little later than usual one night and had unintentionally ended up behind her on the road. It was a damned good thing that it had been him and not a cop. His jaw clenched tighter and tighter as he literally saw red, watching her crawl slowly up the back roads that lead to her place, occasionally weaving almost off the road, pulling consistently to the right. Either she was having steering problems, or she was drunk. For her sake, he hoped it was the former, but Jed had a nasty suspicion that she'd had just a bit too much to drink. Upon being let in and watching her make her way with exaggerated care across the foyer while listing alternately to either side, his worst suspicion was confirmed: she was snookered.

Frowning deeply, Jed hung his battered gray Stetson on the hall tree and followed her into the parlor, where Sarah had collapsed onto the pretty flower print sofa in a heap of giggles at absolutely nothing, until she saw his sobering look.

Trying for some sort of decorum, Sarah asked, enunciating very carefully, “So, what brings you over here tonight?”

He didn’t sit down in the big overstuffed easy chair he had always favored, just stood there looming over her like some big, angry giant with his hands on his hips. He looked like the was about to take her across his knee for something, Sarah thought to herself, and the idea was both intriguing and terrifying at the same time. Jed was a hard man, and if he ever spanked anyone it would not be a pleasant experience for the recipient. “Did you go out with Eric tonight?” he ground out. If it had been Eric, that man was going to get his lights punched out for allowing her to drive home in that condition. But Jed doubted it was him. Eric was just as dominant as he was, and Jed knew he’d’ve seen Sarah tucked safely in bed just as he intended to. He frowned momentarily at the idea of Eric putting Sarah to bed, even platonically, then put the matter from his mind to confront the situation at hand.

Sarah shook her mane of silky red hair out of habit, stalling her answer. “No.”

She could hear his teeth grinding. “But you were out until just a while ago.”

Coming to her feet a little too quickly than was good for her balance, she wobbled precariously until he reached out and steadied her. “Thank you. I was out with the girls. But who died and made you my guardian, anyway?” Belligerence only worked when one was sober, because as she shook her index finger in his direction it kept wandering off target like it had a mind of its own. And when she tried to correct that defect, she ended up teetering dangerously to the other side.

“All I want to know is, why weren’t you smart enough to call a cab to bring you home?” he growled, fearing the answer.

Bleary, owlsh eyes blinked slowly once, twice. “Why would I do that when I have a perfectly good car?”

Dammit! It was a wonder the little fool hadn’t been picked up for drunk driving, or worse. Much, much worse. Jed wouldn’t wish the long painful recovery he had endured on his worst enemy, much less this little terror of a woman, whose blatant disregard for her own safety made him want to blister her bottom till she couldn’t sit down for a month. To keep himself from doing what he knew he was going to end up doing eventually anyway, Jed grabbed her upper arm and dragged her into the eat-in kitchen none too gently, handing her a tall glass of ice water. “Drink this. You can thank me for it in the morning.”

Like a small child, she did as she was told. Jed watched her closely, knowing obedience didn’t come naturally to her. He was going to spank her, good and thorough, but not tonight. When he punished her, he wanted her to be wide-awake for it, to remember every embarrassing nuance and painful smack for years to come. If he spanked her now, she wasn’t likely to even remember it in the morning.

Instead, he put her to bed, fighting the whole time a strong urge to join her, even if it was only to wrap his big body around hers for the night. Sarah, who was normally a

modest person, didn't seem to have any particular concerns about being naked in front of him, as soon as she got into her bedroom she slipped out of her short slinky green dress and her bra, standing before him unselfconsciously in just lacy green bikini briefs. Jed swallowed hard at the creamy perfection before him, then dragged his gaze away and mechanically turned to rummage through her bureau, coming up with a thin white cotton nightgown, which he handed back to her, not quite trusting himself to turn around until she was at least partially clothed.

Instead, he opened the bed and beckoned her over to it, then tucked the covers in around her and sat down facing her. Jed couldn't stop his hand from stroking the side of her face as she lay there looking up at him with unfocused, half-mast eyes, as if she might invite him to join her. He grinned. "Boy, are you going to regret this in the morning – in more ways than one." And he was going to be here bright and early tomorrow to deliver one of the ways personally.

Her eyes closed and she slipped into sleep like an angel, his hand still cupping her warm cheek.

Early the next morning, some sadistic son of a bitch was banging on her door fit to make her head split, and when Sarah opened it to find Jed leaning negligently against the doorframe, neither her attitude nor her headache were much improved. Her greeting was considerably less than welcoming. "Whaddya want?" It was only about seven, which was a time, as far as she was concerned, that no reasonable human ever saw. She was standing there in only her panties and the light nightie he had chosen for her. It barely reached her dimpled knees while he conducted a head to toe blatantly passionate perusal.

Jed didn't need to bully his way in, he merely by walked forward – Sarah's delicacy was no match for his muscular strength and she had no choice but to yield ground to him. She growled under her breath in his general direction, some disparaging remark that questioned his parentage turned her back to him ungraciously and fairly stumbled to the kitchen to scrounge some aspirin and a tall glass of cool water. Jed had quickly taken in her bleary-eyed stare and grumpy disposition and knew the cause was the bender she had indulged in last night, which was also the reason he was here. There was no way he was going to let her get away with driving herself home when she was as plastered as she was last night. Sarah was no idiot – she should have known better and either called a cab or called Eric – hell, she could have called him or a dozen other friends. None of them would have given her any hassle about picking her up; in fact, they would probably have praised her for being intelligent enough to recognize that she shouldn't drive. He knew he would have.

Jed's jaw set at what he knew he was going to have to do. He didn't like the idea of spanking her – well, at least not spanking her as a punishment, anyway – but he didn't like the idea of her wrapped around a tree even more so. He also knew that it was not something she was likely to be happy about, and that would be an understatement. Sarah was very independent, and didn't feel that she needed much of anyone, especially not a man. He guessed he understood after the way her husband had treated her, particularly since his own first marriage had ended under disturbingly similar circumstances. Jed had come to refer to her former husband in his own mind as "the

idiot”. But he was confident that she would get over her anger eventually. They were too good friends for her to write him off just because he’d roasted her bottom for endangering her life, and Jed was sure that he could handle any tantrum she threw as a result of it.

His mind made up, he grasped her elbow firmly, propelling her into the living room and seating them next to each other on the couch. Sarah immediately flopped back against it, head back, eyes closed. She looked completely relaxed and comfortable, despite what must’ve been a pretty hefty hangover. Jed looked at her for a moment, enjoying the site of her still sleepy state – the auburn red curls his fingers had itched to run through were tousled becomingly, and he could smell an enticing combination of her own scent and her favorite perfume – Beautiful, by Estee Lauder. She swallowed, breathing very deeply, her pretty, full breasts swelling momentarily under their practically transparent cotton covering. Jed’s mouth went dry as other areas of him swelled uncomfortably, and he had to look away to fight the urge to cover a pink tipped breast with his lips. But he shook his head. That was not what he was here for.

When he turned back, though, she had apparently slipped into sleep, starting to lean toward him, almost in slow motion. If he had allowed her to follow completely through, she would have simply ended up with her head on his shoulder. Now, that was something he wouldn’t have had any problem with under other circumstances. But it still worked to his advantage, because all he had to do was to assist her in falling towards him, but instead of ending up on his shoulder he guided her carefully over his lap.

Something didn’t feel quite comfortable about her position, and, since she was in a light sleep anyway, Sarah awoke just as he pulled her panties down to her knees, bunching the nightie at the small of her back and quickly capturing her slender wrists there, too. That would serve a two-fold purpose – keeping her from reaching back and/or scratching him, and providing an anchor for the nightgown.

“Wh – what the hell do you think you’re doing?!” she squealed, although she thought she probably had a fairly good idea – an idea she completely rejected because it was so Neanderthal.

Instead of answering her verbally, Jed let the palm of his hand do the talking. If he thought too much about it, or her nearly naked position over his lap, or how much he wanted this to end up in bed, he might listen to her cries for mercy and stop, only to indulge himself in what was rapidly becoming an overriding interest in bedding her.

But Jed was a determined, stubborn man – if he saw something that needed to be done, no matter how distasteful he might find the task, he did it. What she’d done, as far as he was concerned, required a sound, almost severe thrashing, and he was just the man to deliver it.

SMACK!SLAP!SPANK! Sarah’s brain could barely comprehend her ridiculously embarrassing position, much less deal with the searing, relentless pain that exploded in her bottom every time his large hard hand connected with her sensitive flesh. She’d never been spanked in her life. What the hell did he think he was doing, and, more

importantly, how the hell could she get him to stop it?!

SWAT!WHACK!WHAP!

The pain was rapidly becoming unbearable, yet Sarah could do nothing but bear it. His iron hard grasp of her wrists and the steely calm with which he was delivering her punishment only added to her agitation. No amount of screaming or crying or wiggling deterred him in the least, as a matter of fact he told her in an almost soothing, deep tone that if she continued to try to evade his hand that he would double the number of strokes. Tears streamed down her cheeks on to the pretty upholstery as she wailed and sobbed at this pronouncement, but ceased trying to wiggle off his lap.

SPANK!SLAP!SWAT!

Jed methodically set about roasting her bottom and the backs of her legs all the way to her knees, then back up again, over and over. Sarah's almost translucent white skin went from a pretty pale pink to a hot pink, then to a fiery, angry red, all while his hand rose and fell with a complete lack of consideration for her tears and pain.

WHAP!WHACK!SMACK!

Finally, he stopped, effortlessly stifling her immediate attempt to rise, and keeping her in that ignominious position while his big hand rested gently on those tenderized, upturned cheeks. Jed could see the enormous dark spot on the couch where the puddle of her tears had fallen. She was still sobbing loudly when he asked in a husky voice, "Do you know why I did this?"

His words helped snap Sarah out of her descent into misery, and incensed anger at him surfaced as she writhed and jerked, desperate to get away from him - the source of her pain. "I don't give a fuck – "

Five more painful strokes descended on her already seared bottom. "You know how I feel about vulgarity, Sarah. And you should care about why I spanked you, so that you can avoid another session in the future."

She snorted, absolutely filled with rage, and if she could have bent enough to reach his thigh, she'd've thrown caution to the wind and bit him with all her strength, despite her vulnerable position.

"I can't believe you drove home yesterday when you were clearly intoxicated. What if you had lost control of the car? What if it had been a cop had following you instead of me? You were definitely drunk. Why didn't you call a cab? Or call me? I'm usually home evenings. I'd've come to get you in a heartbeat rather than have you driving in that condition." Jed swallowed hard, then continued, "I wanted to do something that would get your attention and make you think twice the next time. Remember, I speak from experience on this." His voice was very soft and deep. "I don't want to lose you, especially not because of something as preventable as a DUI death." Jed never allowed his limp to be an impediment to anything he wanted to do, and if he thought such a small deficiency could detract from his dangerously sensual attractiveness, Sarah – and

most of the female population of town – would be right there to reassure him that just the opposite was the case. Sarah doubted it was anything he ever considered; he was a very self-confident man and never put much stock in anyone else's opinion of himself or anything that he did. But if he had that day to live over again, knowing what he knew now, he'd never have gotten behind the wheel, and he intended to impress that information on whomever he came in contact with. Especially those people he cared about.

Jed hadn't given her a chance to get a word in edgewise, nor allowed her to move much until he brought her panties back up her legs and over her sore butt, then with surprising gentleness pulled the hem of her nightie back down to cover half of her scorched thighs. As soon as he let go of her wrists, Sarah jumped off his lap like a scalded cat, looking down at him angrily while rubbing her bottom. She said absolutely nothing, which concerned him a little, but instead, turned and stalked to the front door, holding it open in a deliberate, silent invitation.

Jed rose and jammed his hat onto his head, sauntering over to her to bend down and kiss her goodbye on the cheek, as was his usual habit. Sarah shied away from him, refusing now to even look at him. His eyebrow rose, but he walked outside, throwing back in a growl before she had a chance to slam the door, "Call me when you've grown up and gotten over it."

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## *A Piece of Heaven - Chapter 2*

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“Where do you want me to drop you?” besides down the nearest bottomless pit, Sarah thought to herself nastily.

Her words brought him back to the present, where she was still obviously nursing a grudge toward him. When he didn’t answer immediately, she turned and caught him watching her thoughtfully, and neither of them was willing to look away. If she hadn’t had to drive, they would probably still be staring at each other, neither willing to give an inch. “If you don’t give me an alternative, I’m going to stop and see Eric and you can hitchhike from there, for all I care.”

“The feedlot’s fine with me.” Although she had been sniping at him since picking him up, Jed’d been annoyingly pleasant and even in his responses, so much so that it set Sarah’s teeth on edge. She gunned it into her usual parking space and squealed to a stop inches from the concrete wall of the office. Jed maintained an admirable silence, unfolding his considerable length from the tiny compact car to stride into Thornton’s Feedlot like he owned it, limp not withstanding. Come to think of it, Sarah frowned, he approached everything like he owned it, including his friends.

When she saw Eric, Sarah ran up to him and kissed him eagerly, surprising the good-looking blonde a little. “This is a pleasant surprise, Sarah.” He gave Jed the once over, knowing that things were not kosher between the two. “Well, you seem to be in one piece.”

“No thanks to her so-called driving,” Jed returned laconically, despite the fact that he wanted to rip his friend’s arm from around Sarah’s shoulder and beat him with it, for some unknown reason.

Eric’s grin and tone were both completely lacking in sympathy. “I couldn’t get out of that meeting and she was the only person I knew who was sure to be available to pick you up.”

Jed grunted, seething silently as he turned and helped himself to coffee.

“Listen, sweetie, I really don’t have time for a visit – since Jed is here, he and I have to go over some figures.” Sarah frowned prettily up at him and Jed realized she’d never really flirted like that with him. Eric cupped her chin gently. “I’ll call you tonight, though.”

Not one to cling, Sarah nodded, then lifted up on tiptoe to kiss him quickly on the lips.

“Bye!”

For some unknown reason that he had no interest in exploring, the affectionate peck she bestowed on Eric twisted something in her chest. Annoyed that she was leaving without so much as a thought of him and, Jed threw out sarcastically, “You don’t have to worry about me, Sarah, I’ll get a ride out to the ranch somehow.”

She turned at the door with a broad, sly smile and pushed it open with her left hip. “It is a nice day for a walk, isn’t it, Jed?” Her voice would’ve melted butter, and she was still angry enough that she’d’ve paid money to see him walk the twelve or so miles to the ranch.

Eric and Jed heard her lay rubber as she departed.

“What the hell’d you do to her, old man?” Eric walked into his office with Jed following, and shut the door behind them.

Jed folded himself into one of the uncomfortable chairs in front of the big desk and slapped his hat against his knee in agitation. “I spanked her.”

To his credit, Eric didn’t choke on the sip of coffee he’d just taken. But his eyes did bug out abnormally. “You what?”

Jed calmly met his eyes. “I spanked her. Took her over my knee, pulled down her panties, and blistered her bottom good.”

Eric leaned back in his chair and gave Jed a considering look. “I trust you had a good reason?” As far as he knew, Jed McCade was not in the habit of beating women.

He laid it out flat for his friend in a tone that conveyed all of his distaste for what she had done. “She drove drunk.”

Poor Eric’s eyes were becoming permanently distended from this conversation as he leaned forward in his chair. “Sarah? My Sarah?” He’d barely known Sarah to ever take a drink at all, much less become intoxicated.

Jed clenched his teeth tightly, immediately wanting to correct his use of that possessive pronoun in conjunction with his Sarah, but he’d get to that eventually. “Yes, Sarah. I was heading over to her place to check out the roof since we’d had all that rain, and I ended up behind her. She was driving like a little old lady and listing towards the shoulder of the road. She couldn’t have walked a straight line if her life’d depended on it.”

Sarah driving like a little old lady was incomprehensible. She made Speedy Gonzales look like a slow poke. A tic appeared in Eric’s jaw, of the same kind that Jed had been harboring for the past several weeks. Jed almost smiled, glad to have company in worrying over Miss Sarah Jenkins, even if it was his rival/friend.

“You did exactly what I’d’ve done,” the big blonde man stated unequivocally, shaking

his head in disbelief. “Exactly what I’ve got a mind to do myself the next time I see her – is she crazy?” Four huge hands clenched into fists at the thought of something bad happening to Sarah that she could easily have prevented. “Why didn’t she call me? I’d’ve come and gotten her.”

“Me, too. Or thirty odd other people,” Jed concurred, unwilling to defend Sarah’s indefensible action.

Eric leaned back again, his intense gaze settling on Jed. “Is she ok?”

Jed shook his head. “Yeah. I imagine she didn’t sit easily for several days – “

“Good!” the other man interrupted vehemently.

Jed had to stifle a small grin, but seconded the emotion heartily. “But she’s mad as a wet hen at me for doin’ it. I don’t know if she thought I’d just ignore it, or what.” Both men were in complete agreement that his actions were warranted. If Eric had been there, he’d’ve done exactly the same thing. He very well still might. What an idiotic thing to do!

When he spoke, Eric’s voice was calm and authoritative. “Does someone need an attitude adjustment?” He was literally itching to get at her little bare bottom.

“If she does, then I’ll be the one to deliver it,” Jed growled, eyes blazing.

A bushy blonde eyebrow rose in complete surprise. “Excuse me?” Jed McCade hadn’t expressed that much interest in any woman since his wife had up and left him for that ad executive whom Jed himself had hired.

“Ric, you know you don’t particularly want her – “

“And you do?” He was not about to let his friend get through this without making him squirm a little, which he did on cue, shifting uncomfortably in his chair, unwilling to explore his unsettling feelings for Sarah any too closely.

Finally, Jed gave up trying to sit still, pacing to the window that looked out over the parking lot to stare unseeingly at the cars. “I honestly don’t know what I want from her,” Jed admitted baldly before turning to bore holes in his friend with his intense stare. “But I do know I don’t want you to lay a hand on her!”

A huge grin broke over Eric’s face. “Man, you’ve got it bad.”

Jed frowned, his hands bending his poor defenseless hat in a death grip.

Enjoying his friend’s discomfort enormously, Eric rose and raised his right hand officiously. “I solemnly swear that I will not touch Sarah Jenkins,” he singsonged. “There, does that help?”

“I take it then, that no deep emotions are involved, or you wouldn’t have given her up

so easily?”

If Eric had truly wanted Sarah, Jed knew that he'd've had a fight to the death on his hands, and as Eric was an old friend, it was a fight he wouldn't relish. Neither man would surrender easily that which he considered to be his.

“I like Sarah a lot, and it could just as easily have been my lap she ended up over because I care about her, too,” he proclaimed, watching the murderous expression sweep over his friend's face with a grin. “But she's not the only woman I date, and, no, you wouldn't be breaking my heart if you want her for yourself.”

“I do,” the growl slipped out before he even had time to consider it.

His friend's stupid grin only got worse. “Boy, I'm going to enjoy watching her reel you in, buddy!” he chuckled evilly in anticipation. If he had any sense, Eric would've been concerned when Jed bared his teeth in reply, but no one had ever accused him of having too much common sense.

Instead, he steered Jed out of the office and down toward the lot, changing the subject to a less touchy one than women – cattle.

It was Friday evening, several days after Jed had laid claim to Sarah and warned Eric off her, and the subject of that discussion was feeling out of sorts. Tonight was the night she and Eric usually went out, but his call several days ago had been a gentle but firm “let's be friends” speech. Although there was no heartrending love loss as far as she was concerned, it was still a letdown, and it unsettled her, especially on top of the uncomfortable situation with Jed.

Cooking had always soothed her, just like exercise. It was a time when she didn't have to think of anything other than taking out her emotions on a lump of bread dough, and all of the instructions, step by step, were laid out for her. Although she was experienced enough a cook to doctor any recipe to her own tastes, she didn't have to do too much thinking, and sometimes that was nice. So, it was comfort food that she craved and comfort food she made. A loaf of good old bad-for-you white bread was in the oven, and she was in the process of assembling a chicken casserole with carrots, celery, potatoes, and onions in a garlic sauce when she heard the key turn in the lock of her front door.

The only other person with a key to her house came to stand before her unrepentantly, in the dining room, watching her with those searing dark blue eyes. His all-out male intensity was always somewhat unsettling, but had become even moreso now that their relationship had risen to a more intimate level at his own hand.

Jed was not a gorgeous man – he had short black hair, a tanned, mostly unlined face, and body builder's physique in a tall, imposing package - but then his attractiveness to her and the female population of the town who was younger than ninety wasn't based on something as fleeting as a pretty face. Jed was a man, and with no noticeable effort on his part he positively oozed authority and confidence. Despite the fact that he tended to be somewhat of a hermit, his reputation around town was golden, and his manners were almost anachronistic, due to his mother's influence. He rose when woman entered

the room, seated her, helped her on or off with her coat, held doors, and curbed his language in front of her, whether she was an executive or a homeless person. All of this was accomplished with a natural attentiveness that made every woman he met feel like she was the only person he cared about, the only thing of any import on his mind. To be the object of such single-minded attention and intensity of feeling was a little unsettling, and Sarah quickly returned her attention to dinner.

Realizing that she was not going to make the first move, Jed sniffed appreciatively. "Smells good."

Time and distance had dulled the edges of her anger, although she had tried valiantly to keep them sharp. The truth was, Sarah had known it was a stupid thing to drive herself home that night, but drunk people don't have the best judgement. And she had paid for that lack, she thought, reflexively rubbing her bottom.

The direction of her thoughts was plain. "Are you all right?" he asked, a day late and a dollar short, but the inquiry was sincere, nonetheless. He knew he hadn't done her any permanent damage and he never would.

A scowl darkened her face momentarily before she answered quietly, "Yes."

"Good." Jed was somewhat at a loss when she fell silent again. He cleared his throat, never taking his eyes off her, as if he thought she would disappear if she could. "Would you like some company for dinner?"

Sarah met his eyes for a moment, as if she hadn't quite decided whether or not she was going to forgive him, and he could see that hesitancy written all over her face, especially in the way she bit her bottom lip. Then she reached into a drawer behind her and handed him a list on a yellow pad. "Bathroom faucet – drip. Back step – creak. Replace bulb in kitchen ceiling," he recited out loud as a big grin spread over his face when he realized she had been writing a "honey do" list for him. "You forgot one."

Sarah stepped toward him, reaching for the pad with a frown. "I don't think –"

Suddenly, he pulled her up against his massive frame, powerful arms locking around her waist with care not to hurt her as he nevertheless held her immobile, their bodies melded together from chest to thighs. Instantly, every nerve she owned was pulsed achingly with awareness. He was so big, and had spanked her so hard, that she was a little more wary of him physically than she had been before he had punished her. "Collect kisses," he murmured softly as his mouth tenderly claimed hers. The soft, insistent pressure of his lips coaxed her into opening her mouth to his, just as, later in their relationship, the gentle pressure of his leg between hers would convince her to open her most intimate places to his unhurried exploration. Jed's lips claimed hers with passionate authority and no small amount of confidence at her response, which she could neither control nor explain. It just was. His firm tongue tickled its way past her full lips, testing the sharpness of her front teeth before seeking the enticing inner warmth of her mouth. Masculine lips slanted across hers as his palms spread open against her back, feeling the line of her bra beneath her blouse, keeping her in place for his subtly aggressive kiss.

Sarah was completely overwhelmed by him, her senses swamped when all of that undeniable sensuality was suddenly aimed at her, full-force. Though he could have kept her against him without even trying, when she began to pull back he let her go immediately, not wanting to crowd her too much. But Jed kept possession of her left hand for the longest time, letting his fingers stroke her arm all the way down to capture just her fingers with his as he lifted her hand up to his lips in a simple, courtly gesture that was somehow reassuring in its promise of things to come.

Funny, it was that kiss on the back of her hand, given while her eyes were locked with his, that blushed her from head to foot. His gaze was so intimate, lids heavily at half-mast, like she was already his in the most deeply private sense of the word. She skittered nervously a bit away, clearing her throat and trying to locate some semblance of the intelligent, self-possessed girl he had so effortlessly kissed away to be replaced by a brainless bundle of throbbing nerves.

Jed decided to let her off the hook for a while, glad that she seemed so off balance. Sarah presented such a self-possessed front that it was nice to see that he could affect her like that. Kissing her had definitely been the right thing to do – gave her something else to worry about besides her spanking. Whistling softly under his breath, he set about accomplishing everything on her list. When he finished, she had just pulled the bread out of the oven and put the covered casserole in.

“HMMMMMMMM,” he sighed appreciatively, accepting a huge, warm slice drenched in real butter. They leaned companionably against the kitchen counter and reveled in the wonderful bounty of home baked bread.

Sarah popped the last piece of crust into her mouth and chewed, espousing blissfully, “Better than sex.”

His eyebrow rose as he caught her eye. “Then you’re not doing it right, girl.”

She snorted, but blushed again, unbidden, at his frankly sexual teasing. “Coffee?” Sarah had gotten into the habit of keeping a pot fresh for him, never really knowing when he’d descend on her, and she hadn’t been able to break herself of that tendency, despite the fact that she wasn’t talking to him. If she admitted it to herself, in the deepest reaches of her heart, he had been right to do what he did. But Sarah would never publicly admit to that fact.

“Please.”

Pouring a mug of strong black stuff for him, and grabbing a Diet Coke for herself, she met him on the couch in the living room. “What’s in the bag?”

“Mmm,” he reached for it and pulled out several videos, turning them to show her the titles – “The Wrath of Kahn,” “The Voyage Home,” “Generations,” and a couple of the uncut episodes of the “old guard” – the original cast of the series.

Sarah’s eyes lit up with glee. “Star Trek Marathon!! Oh, and the oldies – I get to watch

DeForest Kelly waving a salt shaker over a dummy - YAY!!”

Jed laughed at how easily she was amused. “Yes, this was my peace offering. If all else’d failed, I was going to dangle this in front of you by yard stick before I decided whether or not to risk my life by coming in.”

“Your apology is accepted and I forgive you,” Sarah murmured happily, still rummaging through the bag.

Not about to let her get away with that, Jed grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. “I’m not apologizing, my girl, and if there’s anyone to be forgiven in this situation, it’s you and you already are,” he informed her in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

“Bullshit!”

He looked at her from beneath hooded eyes, warning quietly, “Watch your language, Sarah Marie.”

“Stuff it, Jed Albert.”

The situation was rapidly deteriorating, and before it became totally unsalvageable, Jed simply reached for her and pulled her onto his lap, pressing her head to his shoulder and wrapping his arms around her comfortably. He didn’t say a word, merely holding her and rocking just a little. After stiffening at first, Sarah soon relaxed at his soothing movements and the completely non-threatening way he was touching her.

When he spoke, she could feel his deep voice rumbling against one ear just as well as she could hear it through the other ear. “Dammit, Sarah, I won’t lose you. And if I have to paddle your butt every night for a week to get you to realize that you were being an idiot, then I’ll do it. I’d rather have you alive to curse me than dead, regardless.”

Suddenly thoroughly ashamed of both her behavior that night and the way she had treated him recently, she tucked her face against his neck and let the storm of tears come. Sarah couldn’t think of a place she would rather be at this moment than wrapped in his strong arms, safe and secure, and so obviously cared for. The strong hand that had reeked such painful havoc on her bottom days ago was now tenderly rubbing her back and stroking her hair. When she began sobbing lightly, each breath was filled with the pure masculine scent of him - sandalwood and man in a potent combination that soothed her soul - calming the disquiet she had felt from the time he had entered her house that night with such a disappointed look on his face that she had wanted to hide, until he had kissed her in the kitchen just moments before.

Suddenly, he leaned a little away from her, then she felt a kleenex being pressed to her face. Sarah sat up as far as his arms would allow and blew her nose, then let him dry the rest of her tears. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have driven home. I - I’ll call you the next time.”

Jed pressed his forehead to hers. “I know you will. I’m sorry I had to spank you.”

She blushed again prettily at the mention of the punishment she'd experienced at his hands, then admitted shyly, "I think knowing I'd disappointed you was worse."

"Ah, baby," he crooned, hugging her again tightly. "You were forgiven as soon as the spanking was over. You made a serious mistake, and you paid the penalty. That's it. Over and done. Just don't do it again." Sarah didn't seem to want to move out of the comfy cocoon he'd created for her. Jed got up and put the first movie in, then gathered her back onto his lap and lay his chin on top of her head. Sarah cuddled against him tightly, both of her delicate hands splayed against his chest. He looked down to see their slender fingers in direct contrast to the swell of his muscles. She was so small and defenseless, yet she had never hesitated to take on anyone or anything she wanted to, including him. Jed wanted to wrap her in cotton and keep her safe – maybe tying her to his bed for a few years was a good start.

The unfamiliar surge of almost feral protectiveness towards her was something he'd never experienced before, and Eric could attest to his nearly Neanderthal possessiveness – the sheer depth of both feelings made him feel supremely uncomfortable but they were completely unshakable. Sarah was the type of woman who made a man think of forever, even a reclusive old bachelor like him.

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## *A Piece of Heaven - Chapter 3*

*by Carolyn Faulkner*

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Before he left that night, Jed pulled her back into his arms at the front door, lifting her several inches off the floor with a tight band of muscle around the bottom of her ribcage, so that they could see eye to eye. The husky timbre of his voice revealed just how aroused he'd become by their evening spent lightly kissing and touching in an unhurried but fairly innocent exploration of each other. Jed was not the type to cop a quick feel, especially not with someone like Sarah. She could feel the insistent pressure of his arousal against her lower tummy, but as he had made no overly sexual moves, she felt completely safe pressed flesh to flesh with him.

"Dinner. Tomorrow night. My place," came the husky command just before his lips claimed hers again. Man, he was a fantastic kisser – passionate, considerate, not too wet . . . full, firm lips . . .

"Is that a request or a demand?" against his mouth, knowing the answer.

"Yes."

Sarah had to stop kissing him to laugh, pressing her face into his chest momentarily to help stop the giggles.

"Be there." Definitely a demand .

Fluttering her lashes coyly as she fiddled with the collar of his denim shirt, she replied, "I'll think about it."

His hand smacked loudly against her vulnerable bottom in a playful warning that nevertheless stung. "You'll do more than think, woman." Jed growled, deliberately craning his neck back to catch her eye.

"Or what, Clampett?" she eyed him back boldly, everything in her demeanor a challenge he was more than ready to accept, right down to her use of her nickname for him – "Clampett" – as in "Jed Clampett" from "The Beverly Hillbillies" which he disliked.

Jed pressed his nose to hers. "Or I'll come over and get you. And if I have to go to all that trouble, I won't be happy when I get here. I'll throw you over my shoulder and carry you off to my house, and when we get there I'll tip you over my lap again and teach you the hard way to obey me." His tone was deceptively soft but the underlying intent was hard as nails. Sarah locked her gaze with his, trying to determine just how serious he was being, and not liking the inevitable conclusion. If she didn't show up at

his house on or about the appointed hour, she had no doubt he'd do exactly what he said he'd do. Jed didn't issue either orders or threats lightly, but Sarah balked at the idea of being ordered around or threatened by anyone. And she especially didn't like being spanked.

"Put me down."

He complied immediately, realizing that he may have made a tactical error in handling her and come on too strong. So, he regrouped quickly, executing a low bow before her with an elegant sweep of his arm, affecting a pompous British accent with surprising success. "I would like to request your presence at my humble abode tomorrow evening, around seven, for dinner -" she watched his jaw clench - "please."

His abrupt change of tone surprised her into a smile, which was his intent. And Sarah knew that Jed was not in the habit of bringing women to his home. A corner of her lip quirked up. "And if I say no?"

He drew a deep, calming breath. She just had to push the envelope, didn't she? Patience, man! "Then I'll just have to keep asking, won't I?"

Sarah knew that, when Jed wanted something, he was a force to be reckoned with. He was not in the habit of giving up and detested losing. He would be issuing the invitation with his last breath, if it came to that. "Oh, all right, I'll be there," she acquiesced ungraciously.

"Damn straight," he muttered under his breath, then mustered his features into a ridiculously bright, fake smile. "Oh, goody!" His innocence was such a blatant put-on that she started to chuckle again as he winked boldly. "I always knew you were a smart girl, Sarah Lee, despite what everyone else said . . ."

Sarah smacked his shoulder hard, knowing that in the process all she was going to hurt was her hand, and she was right. He was hard as a rock. Jed clamped the battered Stetson down onto his head and smooched her cheek loudly before departing. She heard him whistling low until he got into his truck and roared away.

The dinner at the ranch was fantastic, and it gave her an interesting insight into the world of this very private man. The house, which was U-shaped, looked much the same as it always had - kitchen in the center along the back, living and dining rooms in the front in a very open concept. Updating the décor of the house had not even made his list of priorities - all of his attention and money was focused on repairing the damage done to the ranch, not the ranch house. Instead of having a front courtyard, there was a beautiful patio in the back with sliding glass door access from both the master suite, which covered one whole side of the house, and one of the big guest suites on the other side. The patio lay horizontally between the two, with a huge pool parallel in front of it, surrounded by as much lush vegetation as could be encouraged to grow in the hot New Mexico sun.

The patio was where they ate the lovely dinner of garlic roasted filets, summer squash with dill, and parmesan pasta he claimed to have cooked, although Sarah didn't hesitate to express her doubts about that claim, needling him mercilessly.

“If you can cook like this, then what the hell have you been doing at my house every other night eating my food?!” she teased with a smile while helping him clear the table.

“Enjoying the view,” he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively at her as they passed each other en route to and from the kitchen with the dirty dishes.

Sarah snorted, but blushed prettily. When they had cleaned up, he took her on the nickel tour. She’d been to the ranch only a few times before, but it fascinated her, and Sarah always made him show her around every time she came, in part because she liked to watch him while he talked about it. It was painfully obvious that the ranch was something he loved with his whole heart, entirely without reservation, and it was also easy to understand why – the ranch would never betray him, never hurt him. He could pour all of his hurt and all of his pain and energy into it, and it would give everything back without question or reserve. And without auditioning new owners for all the town to see or drinking itself into oblivion . . .

His usual reserve gave way to loquaciousness when he spoke of the improvements he wanted to make, the ambitious breeding program he’d already implemented, and when they gazed out at the expensive huge black bull he’d recently acquired, his eyes fairly lit up. It was about as close to fanciful as anyone was every going to see this rugged, practical man.

Sarah wondered if he’d ever looked at a woman in quite such an engrossed way, and the thought made her smile.

“What?” Sometimes she could be as hard to read as everyone claimed he was, only letting people see what she wanted them to see. He enjoyed having her there, and realized that he wanted her there more often. Sarah always seemed genuinely interested in the ranch and what he had to say about it, his plans, his dreams, and aspirations for it. She never complained about the smells or the sounds, and her comments full of praise, especially when he showed her the horses, which she loved. She knew just how far gone everything had been; Sarah was one of the few people he had allowed to come out to see him while it was in that atrocious condition. Jed had known instinctively that she would never berate or condemn him for trying to make a go of his family business, even though it certainly had seemed hopeless at first. Cheryl had never been interested in the every day workings of the ranch, and the isolation had driven her crazy. In retrospect, she was too much of a party girl to be happy being a rancher’s wife, but hindsight was twenty-twenty.

Brushing the ground with her sandaled foot in embarrassment, she mumbled, “Nothing.”

He leaned against the railing of the fence and caught her chin with his finger, tipping it up so that she had no choice but to look at him. “What did you just say?” his tone letting her know that he would not allow her to dodge the question.

“I just wondered if you’d ever been as effusive about a woman as you are about the ranch, that’s all.”

Truth be told, he hadn't. Until he'd gotten close to Sarah, no woman had touched him quite as deeply, even his wife. Cheryl's actions had hurt his pride badly but his heart had never been in danger from her the way it was from Sarah. Perhaps the fact that he hadn't been as emotionally involved was part of the reason she'd strayed; maybe Cheryl had sensed that he wasn't quite as committed to the relationship as he should have been, not that he had ever let on about it one way or the other to her or anyone else.

But he didn't know how effusive he'd be about Sarah, either, for fear that some other guy – like Eric – would come along and steal her away. He preferred to keep her selfishly all to himself, like having his own little piece of Heaven here on Earth.

Jed reached out and caught her small hands in his, using them to capture her against him. Her arms went around his waist naturally, and he felt her fingers thread themselves beneath his belt loops. It was a comfortably intimate gesture that he liked, almost as if she felt she needed to hold on for dear life when he kissed her. "Let's see. Your hair is as soft as a marmalade kitten's fur. Your eyes are gray, like the mist that rises off the Rio Grande on an early spring morning."

"Jed – I didn't mean – " she couldn't have been more embarrassed if he had dropped to one knee right then and there.

"You cook like a combination of my Mother and Emeril Legasse – comfort food kicked up a notch with a little spice added here and there, kinda like your personality." He frowned in mock seriousness. "I don't know how complimentary it is to be compared to a cattle ranch – although you are occasionally full of – "

"JED!" she hit his back lightly, watching his shoulders shake with laughter.

"I really can't speculate on a breeding program for you yet . . . "

"You'd better not say one more word, Jed Albert McCade!" Sarah threatened, turning to stalk back towards the house in a half-hearted huff.

She didn't get more than a few strides away before she found herself lifted into the air, forcing her to put her arms around his neck, which was exactly what he wanted. Jed liked the feel of her in his arms. Sarah was no Callista Flockhart, for which he was ever grateful since the starving-waif-look did absolutely nothing for him. He wanted a woman who looked like a woman – not fat, but curvy and obviously female in all the right places. Still, he was easily at least two of her, his body predominantly muscle, and he carried her with ridiculous ease.

"Putmedownputmedownputmedown," she chanted, kicking her feet to no avail, thinking of his limp which seemed to be accentuated by the added weight, but he merely kissed her into silence, bringing her into his study and setting her down on her back with the utmost care on the battered old overstuffed couch he sometimes ended up sleeping on.

In a smooth, calculated movement, he followed her down, positioning himself half on, half off her, one leg insinuated boldly between hers. Trapped against the back of the

couch behind her with his imposing bulk filling the field of vision in front of her, Sarah felt more keenly aware than ever of the difference in their sizes. He was big as a damned house; the hand that lay casually on her flat tummy was practically the size of a platter, though for all of his size, the term “ham-handed” did not apply to him. Sarah had never seen Jed use his physical strength indiscriminately – if a situation got out of hand usually just a hard look from him would calm any intelligent person down. He was perfect with animals – calm, infinitely patient, firm and caring. Kind of the way he was with her, she realized. If that thought held true, she had nothing to worry about.

“What?” he asked for the second time that evening, his eyes probing hers questioningly.

“You look scared.”

Sarah cleared her throat and stared at his neck diligently. “Not scared, exactly, but definitely nervous.”

“Of me?” disbelief was rife in his tone.

“Of this type of situation with you, yes.”

“Ahhh.” Jed stayed still for a long moment, not wanting to make her feel any more uncomfortable than she already was, but whole-heartedly unwilling to beat any sort of retreat. Finally, he captured her left hand, the one that wasn’t trapped underneath them and merely held it in his. “You know, I’ve been thinking that I might want to change the décor around here lately – this couch in particular has seen better days and most of the stuff in the living room has been here since probably before I was born.”

She leaned her head back further so that she could see him better. “Really?”

Jed relaxed further against her in a completely non-threatening way, leaning his head on his bent arm and looking down at her warmly. “Yeah. The ranch is pretty much on its feet now financially, and if I end up having as big an operation as I’d like, I’ll occasionally have buyers and business people over. The place could use a new coat of paint and more – inside and out.” An eyebrow lifted. “I could use a woman’s input or I’m likely to end up with mismatched everything.”

A teasing grin spread over her face. “Pink with purple polka dots?”

He looked pained. “Pink?”

That got him an out and out guffaw. “Okay, let me amend that to something just as awful but a bit more macho – orange and brown plaid?”

Jed looked indignant. “Macho? You think I’m macho?”

Sarah snorted. “If you get any more macho you’ll be dead of testosterone poisoning, buddy.”

It was his turn to smile as his gaze wandered tenderly over her face like a physical

touch. That was what he had wanted. She was soft and yielding against him, the result of a change in topic that had distracted her from whatever concerns she might have had about the intimacy of their position and his intentions. The plain truth of it was that he wanted her, and he intended to have her – one way or another. But she was not some pickup in a bar. Sarah deserved – and would demand – more from him than he might be willing to give. Unlike Cheryl, she would never be content being second place behind the ranch in his affections or attentions. She would expect to be first, and he didn't know if he could do that. What had happened between him and his first wife was bad enough. If he indulged himself with Sarah to the extent that his mind and body were clamoring for, he could easily lose himself in her. That thought was one of the few things he'd found in this world that literally scared the bejeezus out of him. If he opened himself to her completely, and something bad happened, it would be more than just embarrassing, it would devastate him. He was a man who did not love easily, and when he did he practically had to be hit over the head with it before he'd acknowledge it. The problem, however, was that he thought he had pretty much already lost the battle. Somewhere in the deepest darkest recesses of his mind, he admitted to himself that he was already three-quarters of the way in love with Miss Sarah Marie Jenkins, and it wouldn't take much more to push him all the way there.

As he looked down at her, Jed took in the wide hazel eyes and open, honest face, and couldn't keep himself from kissing her, long and deep. "You'd run roughshod over a wimp, and you know it."

He was kissing her so insistently that she couldn't frown up at him, but she managed to get out between smooches, "Yeah, but a wimpy man wouldn't spank me, either."

Jed's free hand began to roam up her side slowly, brushing little touches that echoed his teasing kisses. "Yeah, you'd wrap the poor fool around your little finger and he'd never know which way was up." Tender lips trailed down her neck, while his possessive palm finally claimed her full breast. "And you'd do exactly as you pleased no matter what kind of danger it put you in." Powerful fingers were exquisitely gentle as they plucked at her nipple through the clingy material of her shirt while his mouth found hers again in a more aggressive kiss. "Your naughtiness would continue unchecked, and eventually you'd hurt yourself or someone else, however unintentionally." Jed loved the way she arched beneath him, her breast nestling more firmly into his hand, as if it belonged there. "You need a man who is going to keep you in line. Someone who will call you on your bad behavior and not let you get away with anything."

The hem of her shirt was being slowly raised to provide him better access to that silky soft skin.

"Someone who will punish you hard when you need it, then take you to bed and wipe away your tears, and replace the pain with the ultimate pleasure." His head lowered, but not to kiss her again. Instead, he placed his hot wet mouth directly over the swollen pink nipple he'd revealed.

Sarah could no more stifle the throaty moan that escaped her lips than she could deny him the liberties he had taken with her body – she was enjoying his attentions too much to stop him, despite the fact that it made her feel more than a little out of control. It

seemed she had no control over her body's immediate and aching response to him – whether he was actually touching her or not it didn't matter. When he entered a room, his physically imposing presence demanded attention and received it. Female eyes, in particular, followed him wherever he went although he did nothing overt to encourage it. Sarah was no exception. No, she was probably the worse of the lot. Her heart would pound as if it was trying to escape the confines of her rib cage and her nipples peaked tightly in his presence. It was impossible for her to ignore the force of his masculinity when there was the length of a room between them, and in such close quarters, practically lying beneath him, every nerve she own tingled with anticipation of his touch.

Trying only somewhat successfully to keep her wits about her and not dissolve into a seething bundle of sexual impulses, Sarah inquired softly, “And that man would be you?”

Jed's head jerked up and his eyes latched onto hers. “Hell, yes,” came the husky, definitive answer. There was not the slightest note of hesitation in his voice. As if to consolidate that position, he took her mouth in dominant possession, lips slanting across hers, tongue probing insistently. The hand at her breast remained as gentle as ever; even in the heat of passion Jed knew the extent of his own strength, and not for anything in the world would he ever hurt her knowingly.

Suddenly, Sarah felt weightless as he lifted her with incredible ease and carried her into a place she'd never been – his bedroom – to place her in the middle of the worn rust colored chenille bedspread of his king sized bed. A few more drugging kisses and gently exploring touches and she was naked beneath him, while he still wore his well-fitting black slacks. But somehow that gorgeously broad, sexy chest was bare, and her fingers naturally embedded themselves in the light sprinkling of black curls, feeling with wonder the layers of strong muscle lying just beneath the warm, tanned skin.

For a long moment, Jed just took her in as she lay expectantly beneath him. God, he wanted her! Desire ripped mercilessly through him, urging him to take her now, to bury himself in her to the hilt and keep her there, submissive and clinging, until they were both utterly exhausted. But wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am was not what he wanted. He wanted more, much much more - to savor, to linger, to tease and be teased. She was precious to him, and her pleasure and comfort came well before his rampaging gonads, no matter how hard they were riding him.

The unsettled look was back in her eyes. Not quite fear, but a certain wariness. He wanted to banish that look from her face, and coming on strong was not the way to do it. Jed settled himself a little more comfortably against the cradle of her hips, causing Sarah to draw a quick breath at the touch his zippered crotch against her sensitive folds. He stroked her hair away from her face, breathing, “Damn, you're beautiful.”

“Thank you. You're pretty good looking yourself.”

“I want you.”

“I think that's kind of obvious, isn't it?” Sarah lifted her hips for a second, emphasizing

the intimate contact of their lower bodies.

“Do you want me?”

She looked blank. “You don’t know?”

Jed grimaced. “And they say I’m reticent. How was I supposed to tell? It’s a lot more blatant when a man is aroused . . . “

“Do you think I go around letting men undress me and take me to their bedrooms, Jed McCade?” she huffed, hurt by his insinuation.

“No, never.” Sarah’s reputation was that of a nun since she and her husband parted ways. Besides, she was just not a “casual sex” sort of person. “And I’m damned glad of it.”

Damn the torpedoes. “You’re the first man to get me this far since Curry,” she admitted in a small voice.

The look he gave her was incredibly possessive and at least that proud. “Good,” he growled, not liking the idea of Curry having her, either. “I intend on taking you much further than this.”

Sarah smiled softly. “I gotta warn you, I’m loud.”

Jed expelled the breath hadn’t realized he was holding, waiting for some sign of acquiescence from her. “That’s one nice thing about the ranch: we’re pretty isolated. Scream your head off. I’ve gotta warn you,” he smiled ferally, “I’m tireless.”

He was as good as word. The first time, he touched and stroked her endlessly, seemingly obsessed with the luxurious softness and taste of her skin. Every inch of her nude body was explored and praised as nerve endings she hadn’t known she’d owned became inflamed by his touch. Thick hard fingers rasped her most intimate flesh, rubbing, probing gently until she submitted to him completely and without hesitation. Jed reveled in her uninhibited responses, the graceful arch of her back, loud insistent moans and soft soundless ones, quick breathing that pressed her nipples that much further into his eager mouth.

When she was mindless with pleasure, and so far gone she literally couldn’t see clearly, when he finally settled himself against her slowly, enjoying every nuance of her surrender. Sarah’s hips arched involuntarily up to him, wordlessly beseeching him to complete his possession . But Jed was not willing to be hurried. He remained poised at the entrance to her body, his most sensitive part feeling her warmth and wetness calling to him, beckoning. He watched her writhe, heard her moan, smelled the sweet fragrance of her perfume and her excitement. Slowly, centimeter by centimeter, he pressed himself into her delicate flesh, his size stretching her, creating such a tight fit he thought he’d come before he managed to get all the way in. Shuddering with the pleasure, sucking in deep breaths to keep control of his raging needs, he entered her inexorably. Not a force on Earth or in Heaven could stop him from seating himself inside her sweetness to the hilt – unless he died of the sheer intensity of it. But what a way to go.

Sarah drew a quick breath when he began to enter her. She had always been tight and he seemed absolutely enormous, forcing her most sensitive flesh to accommodate his unstoppable invasion. There was no real pain, just an excruciating fullness that became more acute as he completed his possession. When he finally lay his head on her breast, entirely inside her for the first time, she felt wholly overwhelmed, physically, sexually, emotionally, and completely out of control. Sex with Curry had been pleasant, but nothing could prepare her for this. This was pleasure, yes, to the nth degree. But it made her feel raw, so stripped naked that she wasn't sure it was something she could even endure.

And then he began to move, and she wouldn't be able to gather another coherent thought until well after he finished. He truly was tireless and relentless, not satisfied with the screaming explosion she experienced mere minutes after he began to plunge inside her but taking her well past that. Before he allowed himself to spin out into the heavens with his own guttural cry of painful pleasure he had thrown her into three more orgasms, each longer and more intense than the last.

That night, he reached for her repeatedly as if he couldn't get enough of her, and so he couldn't. He wanted to bind her to him; hell, he wanted to bind her to the bed so she'd be there for him whenever he wanted to take her. But that wasn't the most practical approach, he supposed, although it was the one his gonads, which were still raging, were voting for. The last time, he saw her wince when he entered her with a swift stroke, and he removed himself immediately in favor of bathing her with a warm cloth.

Sarah reached out to smooth away Jed's truly distressed look. The last thing he'd meant to do was hurt her. "Don't get all upset," she said, her voice husky from all the screaming she'd been doing. "I'm fine, just not used to all of this – "

He grinned, stretching out beside her. "Not used to all this 'use', huh?"

Her smile was somewhat wan. He'd completely exhausted her. "Something like that."

Seeing how exhausted she was, he gathered her into his arms, enjoying the feeling of complete satisfaction as she lay against him, her head on his shoulder, hand on his chest, as if they slept this way every night. If he had anything to do about it, they would.

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## *A Piece of Heaven - Chapter 4*

*by Carolyn Faulkner*

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“Come over here, Sarah.” She could tell by the tone of his voice that that was the exact opposite of what she really wanted to do, so she chose to ignore him at her own peril, continuing to stir the garlic sauce for the pork with a hand that was already just a smidge unsteady.

“Sarah?” That edge was there, the one she had come to recognize as a warning of unpleasant things to come if she didn’t respond, and respond damn quickly.

“Yes, Jed, dear?” she replied, not moving an inch from the relative safety of the stove. Innocent, that was it. Play innocent. Yup, uh-huh. For all the good it was going to do her. If he’d found what she thought he’d found because she was a stupid idiot and forgot to hide it, then she was definitely in for it.

Sarah and Jed had been seeing each other almost daily since the first night they spent together. The past few months had sped by in a haze of happiness. Jed was everything she could have ever wanted in a man or a lover – kind . . . considerate . . . thoughtful . . . But he was a real pain in the butt – literally – when he thought she’d done something “wrong”, like swearing or not attending properly to her health. That seemed to be a big one. The spanking he had given her for DWI that night was just the beginning, especially once he had become her lover. She had been spanked with alarming regularity since then, at least once or twice a week for something – and he was always threatening to give her a good blistering over the fact that she was a speed demon, which was a fact that she couldn’t even deny. The whole town knew her reputation; she probably held some sort of record for having the most speeding tickets in one year or something. These were no love pats he was handing out, either – his punishments hurt like hell, and Sarah wasn’t much looking forward to the one she knew she was going to get if he’d found out she nearly got arrested the day before yesterday for speeding, and that her fine was somewhere in the \$200 range.

“Get your little fanny in here, woman.”

Uh-oh. Biting her lip worriedly, Sarah turned off the stove and walked like a condemned woman into the living room. He was standing across the room by the desk, holding the ticket in his hand and glaring at it as he read it. Dammit!! If she’d been smart, she’d’ve just kept it in her wallet where he would never have been the wiser. But no, she had to put it out on the desk earlier this afternoon to remind herself to pay it with her bills. Of course, she got involved in other things, forgetting that he would be over for dinner and, as the desk was right next to the door, and Waterville’s tickets were

a bright red, he would be able to see it without even trying!!! Damndamndamn, she mumbled under her breath. Pasting a falsely bright smile on her face, she asked in a voice that would cause cavities, “Yes, darling?”

Jed looked up, pinning her with that hard gaze, noting that she was standing just exactly one step into the room. He couldn’t say he blamed her. If he’d’ve been her, he wouldn’t have wanted to rush up to him, either, especially when he was holding the evidence of her naughtiness in the very hand that was going to give her the spanking of her life. “You do realize that Dave would have been well within his rights to haul you into jail in handcuffs for going more than twenty-five miles per hour over the speed limit?” His words were pried from between clenched teeth.

“Y-yes,” Sarah gulped, her eyes painfully wide although she couldn’t seem to look away from him, like a deer caught in headlights. “He explained that to me.”

She watched him take a very long, deep breath, shaking his head in disbelief as he ran a tanned hand over the light black stubble that developed on his jaw during the day. She knew this from personal experience, but that thought didn’t distract her much from the agonizing situation at hand. Her heart was thudding loudly in her chest, and her fingers were so cold with nervous anticipation that they were nearly numb. Jeez, she hated it when he was mad at her. It was almost worth going over there and offering him her butt, just to get the worst over with and get to the forgiveness part.

Almost, but not quite.

Jed turned his head, narrowing his eyes to consider her closely. He didn’t much like what he saw – she looked scared, and he never wanted her to be frightened of him. Her two front teeth were worrying her poor lower lip mercilessly, and he could see her swallow convulsively, as if she couldn’t get enough breath. With another loud sigh, he faced her from where he stood, holding his arms out to her.

That was all the invitation she needed to literally catapult herself against him. When she came into his arms sometimes it was with such enthusiasm that it was like receiving a body block. Confining but gentle warm muscles engulfed her as he buried his face in the side of her neck, rubbing strong hands up and down her back. Sarah slipped her cold fingers down the back of his jeans, and he jumped at their iciness. He was right. She’d been truly scared of him, and he didn’t think he could bear it.

Suddenly, he caught a still cool hand, pulling her behind him over to his favorite chair, to arrange her across his lap – facing him, for once. Her contented sigh as she snuggled bonelessly against his chest told him that she was no longer afraid, and he was glad of that. Jed kissed her on the top of her golden red head and hugged her tightly. “I couldn’t bear to lose you, you know that, don’t you?”

The very softness of his husky voice embodied the sincerity of his thought, and guilt poured into her, filling the areas that the fear had vacated, making her heart ache that she had caused him to think along those lines. “And I couldn’t bear to lose you, either.”

“Don’t you think that driving that fast puts you in unnecessary danger?”

Christ, she hated logical thinkers. And Jed was extremely logical and practical. It drove her crazy. "I like to drive fast. Gets me places faster," she fairly pouted, knowing she sounded like a six year old who was being told "no."

Jed tipped her face up. "I'd much prefer that you get there in one piece, Honey," his eyes flashed in annoyance, but his voice remained calm and steady.

Sarah couldn't quite meet his eyes, and nearly choked on the words that popped out of her mouth. "So I guess I'm going to get a spanking?"

"You guessed right, little one." Neither of them moved, until Jed said, "Are you concerned that I'll abuse you, Sarah? That someday I'll take my fists to you?"

She sat up and looked at him as if he had two heads. "No, never. Why?"

"Well, when you came out of the kitchen you looked like you were scared of me." Jed cupped her cheek with his palm. "I hope you weren't, because I'd never, ever hurt you like that, and I wanted to be sure you knew it."

"I know it. But you never hesitate to spank me at any given opportunity . . ."

"A good sound spanking never did anyone any permanent harm, young lady," came the indignant retort. "And it has made you consider the consequences of your behavior a little more carefully, hasn't it?"

Sarah nodded, frowning. "Yes, it has."

Jed's fingers ran through her curls possessively. "Then why did you look so frightened a few minutes ago?"

"Oh, Jed, it's not you, it's the spanking!" she confessed. "I don't like being spanked. It's embarrassing and painful and it makes me cry."

He was completely unrepentant now that he knew he was not the cause of her fear. "All necessary elements to any good spanking, my dear." Before she had a chance to say another word, he had turned her over on his lap and lifted her skirt. All of Sarah's spankings were on the bare. Jed had said that it was a waste of energy warming someone's jeans when it was their butt that needed the attention to drive the point home. Sarah guessed that someone was her, because he always divested her of her panties to lay a large warm palm over her naked, tender cheeks.

It was a long time later that he stopped laying his palm against said cheeks. During that time, she had begged and screamed, promised him the moon and cursed his name, and cried a veritable river of tears. Jed had ignored all of it in favor of delivering a truly thorough, painfully strict spanking, sprinkled liberally with a good scolding and lecture about thinking of someone else before acting like an immature teenager, watching her speed, and threats about what would happen if she got another ticket within the next year.

When he finally quit, his callused palm hurt wickedly, and he couldn't even imagine what her red and mottled bottom felt like. Jed made her stay over his lap for a little while to calm down, although he did not rub her bottom for her and he would not allow her to reach back during that time to soothe herself, either. Sarah was literally beside herself with the pain, and it seemed she had cried so hard she had no tears left, but still she sobbed.

Jed helped her up carefully, pulling her shirt down, but leaving her panties and pants on the floor to guide her upstairs and put her to bed like a little girl. She was so exhausted she was asleep before her head hit the pillow. He tucked her in and joined her – still dead to the world – several hours later to wake her with his mouth on her distended nipple. Carefully, he turned her onto her back and she started from her raw bottom's contact with the sheets. Jed's eager hand found the moistness between her legs that seemed to be even more copious after a good spanking and brought her to the ultimate pleasure until she cried tears of joy as hard as she had tears of pain. When he finally brought them together, sinking slowly into her warm moistness, Sarah sighed blissfully, wrapping her legs around his hips and her arms over his shoulders. His strong, steady thrusts brought her to two more peaks before he collapsed on top of her with his own groan of supreme pleasure.

As she stroked his wet hair away from his face, she found could hold the wealth of her emotions inside no longer. "I love you, Jed," Sarah whispered softly, half hoping he wouldn't hear her. She knew Jed McCade probably better than anyone on this Earth, and had no romantic notions of happily ever after with him. Jed was no longer the marrying kind, if he had ever been in the first place. But whether he returned the sentiment or just continued to show her the kind of affectionate attention and steamy sex she had come to crave, it didn't matter to her. She just wanted him to know that someone, somewhere in this wide world, loved him.

Jed reacted to her declaration by quietly pulling away from her to roll onto his back with an arm over his eyes. Sarah rose on her elbow and watched his Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed. She felt compelled to clarify what she had said, not wanting him to feel uncomfortable about it. "I don't expect marriage and a white picket fence, Jed, so don't go worrying that I'm going to start stalking you or something. I'm on the pill so I'm not going to try to trap you into marriage, either – "

"You must think I have a marvelous opinion of you, Honey," he threw out sarcastically.

Sarah was undaunted. "No, I think you have a horrible opinion of women in general, based on that bitch you were married to."

He lifted his wrist to peep one wary eye at her. "And you're going to be the one to turn me around? To reform the rake?"

She didn't feel she deserved his derision, regardless, but let it go. It was natural that he be unsettled by her confession. "No," she answered softly, cuddling herself because he seemed a million miles away from her at this moment. "I'm just going to be the one who's there. Loving you." Then her sense of humor got the best of her. "Despite your

frequent bouts of PMS.”

Jed snorted a laugh, and Sarah knew that he wasn't angry. Deciding just to let things be for the moment, she turned away from him to go to sleep curled on her side, as usual, until she heard him murmur, “Well, a big declaration of love and not even a kiss goodnight. I'm neglected, I tell you.”

Wryly, she shot back at him, “About five minutes ago you were getting a helluva lot more than a kiss, my friend.”

He heaved a dramatic sigh. “That's all you want me for. Stud service.”

She perked up and rolled over to question pertly, “And when does that start?” Her nasty comment had him feigning great injury, indulging in terrible histrionics that had her clutching her sore stomach from laughing.

As Sarah settled down from her giggles, he gathered her up against his side, where she belonged, her cheek against his shoulder, fingers buried in his chest hair. Jed squeezed her tight with his left arm. “Woman, you're going to be the death of my ego.”

“Poor baby,” she crooned with false sympathy.

“That's more like it.”

Sarah snorted once, then within seconds Jed could hear her even breathing. For long moments prior to falling asleep himself, he mulled the thought over and over in his mind.

She loved him.

Well, damn.

Curry was back in town. Sonofabitch. Sarah had run into him twice in one day, once at the bank and again at the grocery store. He looked much the same as ever, which meant devastatingly gorgeous. Curry was one fine looking man. Too bad there was nothing beneath that GQ exterior, not even the vague semblance of a heart. The scuttlebutt was that his third wife was divorcing him, and he was on the prowl again. Or would that be “still”? Fidelity would never be one of his virtues, if he had any virtues. Few that knew him could name any.

The first time in the bank he had been casually friendly, but their second accidental meeting in the grocery store seemed to put him into charm mode, and he followed her most of the way through the store as she did her weekly shopping and prayed silently that he'd go away. His oily charm no longer did anything for her, and all she wanted was to get away from him. But he stuck to her like glue, trailing her out to the car, helping her load the groceries, then, miracle of miracles, holding the car door open for her. Sarah grimaced. He must want something.

Finally, she was able to make her escape and sped home. Well, after the blistering she'd gotten for speeding that time, she was a lot more cognizant of speed limits. But she was

far from perfect about obeying them or Jed, for that matter or she wouldn't spend nearly the time she did over his lap. On the way, she mulled over Curry's sudden reappearance, wondering just what it was he had come back here for. There was nothing for him here – everyone in Waterville had his ticket. There were very few people here who could even tolerate him.

Well, as long as he didn't bother her again, Sarah decided not to worry about him one way or the other. She lugged the groceries into the house then set about putting them away before she tackled the ending of the third chapter of her book. It was giving her trouble.

Tonight, like a lot of other nights lately, would be Jed-less. It was roundup, and he was busier than a one armed paperhanger. That meant fewer spankings for her, which she was definitely happy about, but it also translated into much less time to spend together in general, which she was not.

Sarah had been relieved when her deep, dark confession hadn't caused any major problems between them. He hadn't said "I love you," back to her, but then she hadn't expected him to, anyway. Now that she'd said it once, she repeated it occasionally and he usually smiled at her and kissed her, or worse, thanked her. Truthfully, she could have done without his gratitude, but she supposed he meant well. There was really nothing else you could say back to that, without sounding stupid or prideful. It didn't seem to make him uncomfortable, and he didn't ask her to stop it, so she tossed it at him every once in the while, just as a gentle reminder of the depth of her feelings for him.

Before settling down in front of the computer, she checked the messages on her machine.

\*Beep\*

"Hey, there, Sary." It was Eric. He was the only person in the world who called her that. "Lily and I are going to dinner and a movie Friday night. We wondered if you and the cowboy wanna go with us." Sarah smiled at how casually the four of them had switched partners into much better relationships. Lily suited Eric much better than she had, and Jed suited her much better than Eric – although they were all still close friends.

Unfortunately, dinner and a movie were probably out until roundup was over. Ah, well, there'd be other times for the four of them to meet.

\*Beep\*

"Hi, sweetheart." Jed. Her heart melted just at the throaty sound of his voice on her machine. "I'm working myself to death out here when I'd much rather be with you than any old cow –"

Sarah smiled wryly. "I think that was a compliment," she said to herself.

"– I sure could use some of your good cookin', honey," his voice dropped a level. "And

I wouldn't mind if you made me some food, too. Listen, things will probably have eased off by Sunday, why don't you come on up here in the evening around seven or so? I'd like to show you just how much I've missed you, darlin'. See ya' then."

She'd do better than that. She'd go up there early and make sure that he had a good meal to come home to. Just like June Cleaver. Then she'd let him show her his appreciation . . .

\*Beep\*

"Hey, Sarah, it's me." She knew damned good and well who it was, but how the hell had Curry gotten her unlisted number? "I just wanted to tell you how good you looked this afternoon. Mmmmm-mmmm. You always were a pretty one, honey." Sarah bristled at his use of the endearment, which she knew rolled off his tongue as easy as piss rolled downhill. "Maybe we could get together some time, talk about old times. I'd sure like to see more of you . . ." He let the innuendo hang, as was his habit. "Call me. I'm at 555-3490, the Open Arms Motel."

"In your dreams, buddy boy," Sarah snarled, viciously punching the delete button to erase his voice. She felt like she needed to sterile the whole machine after that sick, flirty little message. Ugh. Some men never learned.

It was much later in the evening as she banged away at her novel. The house was completely silent except for the clattering of the keyboard as she pounded out several more pages and the thunderous sound of rain on the roof. The story was practically at the stage where it was writing itself, and she was as eager as she hoped any reader would be to find out what happened next.

Instead, the front door banged open loudly and the living room filled with Jed's imposing presence. He closed the door behind him with a slam, his raingear dripping indiscriminately on her mother's prized Persian carpet as he stalked over to her. The welcoming smile on her face melted away when she glimpsed his dark scowl. Jed got within inches of her, dripping rain onto her slippered feet as he grabbed her elbow, pulling her out of her seat and into his face. "Do you have something you want to say to me?" he growled.

Taken aback, Sarah's eyes narrowed at his bullying tactics and tone, but she was not about to let him intimidate her, regardless. She stood her ground. "Stop dripping on my carpet, for one."

Impatiently, he relieved himself of the slicker, tossing it carelessly in the direction of the tiled kitchen floor, then resumed his aggressive position in front of her. "Is that all?" his tone was mocking, angry.

Hands on her hips, she matched his anger, standing on her tiptoes to press her nose as close to his as possible. What in the hell was his problem, anyway? "Well, if you were in a better mood I'd say I'm glad to see you. But I can see that I'll be a lot happier when the screen door hits your nasty butt on the way out!"

Although he was in a blazing fury, Jed could see that Sarah had absolutely no idea what

he was talking about. And she looked like she was going to physically toss him out of the house before she gave him a chance to explain. A stray smile caught him unawares. His woman in a huff would make every effort to do just that, too, even if she broke her back in the process. Sarah didn't back down from arguing with him, and it was just what he wanted. He didn't need a shrinking violet that shuddered when he raised his voice. She raised hers right back at him, screaming like a fishwife when necessary, though not very often.

Jed closed his eyes for a split second and took a deep breath, finally coming out with what had been bothering him so much. "Your ex-husband is back in town," he mentioned softly, gauging her reaction very carefully.

Sarah's explosive groan began to settle his concerns. "Yeah, I had the misfortune to run into the dipshit twice today." Jed frowned, having only heard about the time in Hanson's store. "In the bank then at the store while I was getting groceries. Christ, he followed me around like a damned puppy . . ." She looked up at him accusingly. "Hey, wait a minute. Is that the bee that's in your bonnet?"

He certainly never owned a bonnet in his life, but he was still a little riled. "I don't think there's a person in town that didn't see that little tableau. And there wasn't a person in town who didn't delight themselves in telling me all about it, in lurid detail."

Her chin lifted. "Ahhhhh. So you came willy-nilly over here," she dropped her tone " – probably breaking several speeding limits in the process – to fight for me to the death, or what? Do you think I'd choose him over you?"

Jed's scowl was truly an art form, and it usually served him well. It was everything he intended for it to be - intimidating, frightening, and causing general mayhem that assured him of getting whatever it was he wanted. But Sarah didn't bat an eyelash at it any more, because she knew him too well. Much too well. He had high-tailed it over here as soon as it was possible for him to get away from the ranch to defend his territory. No, he didn't think that she'd choose a man who'd hurt her like Curry had. But Sarah had a history with Devereaux – a bad one, but a history none the less. Hell, she'd married the idiot – she must've loved him at the time.

Only now she loved him, and he wasn't about to lose that love. In truth, Jed didn't know that he could recover from that loss if he ever did. His divorce had driven him into an almost reclusive state where the ranch became his world. Sarah had broadened that world and taught him that he could be loved for who and what he was – regardless of any bad habits he might have, like an obsessive love for his home. Frankly, since he'd gotten seriously involved with her, the ironclad hold the ranch once had on him was rapidly being replaced by a much more insidious, delicate but nonetheless steely bond, created by a funny, naughty, redhead who knocked him off balance every once in a while, just for fun, by telling him that she loved him. Character flaws, limp and all. She had become a habit that was going to be lethal to his anti-social, grumpy, lonely, way of life. It didn't seem to make any difference to his genitals how often he made love to her – they were up and ready whenever she entered the room. Jed wondered if that would ever change, and prayed that it wouldn't.

Possession was nine tenths of the law, and as far as Jed was concerned, Sarah belonged to him. Maybe not legally, but emotionally and physically and every other important way. And he never gave up what was his. Ever.

She still looked plenty mad at him, and he guessed he could understand her not being particularly happy at the way he'd barged into her house, and practically accused her of fooling around on him with her ex. The only thing he could blame it on was the fact that about forty-two different people had gone out of their way to let him know that they had been downright cozy strolling up and down the aisles at the store, and he had helped her load the stuff into the back of her car and, well, dammit, that's what he should have been doing! He had gotten sick and tired of everyone telling him that he ought to watch out – that Curry might worm his way back into her affections and steal her right out from under his nose. Not while he still had breath in his body, Jed promised himself silently.

She was still standing there, her arms around herself tightly, as if she was already withdrawing into herself, trying to protect herself from potential emotional harm. Well, he wouldn't let her do that. Lightening fast, his hands reached out to haul her against him none too gently while his mouth descended on hers in a kiss that held the unmistakable stamp of ownership. Sarah stood stiffly in his embrace, not kissing him back, but not actively resisting him, either. In for a penny, in for a pound. His decision made, he wasted no time in carrying her up to her bedroom, depositing her gently on the pastel quilt. His strength held her immobile when she struggled to get away as he carefully peeled every piece of clothing off her, piling them on the floor next to the bed, his entire attention fixed on the little bit of woman beneath his big hands.

When Sarah was nude, but still wiggling a little as if she hadn't yet accepted the inevitability of his possession, he pressed a knee against hers, forcing her slender legs to part and settling himself against the cradle of her loins with an almost contented sigh. She couldn't move any longer unless he let her, and for some reason that seemed to calm her down. Her struggles ceased, but her eyes were closed tightly, as if he would go away if she couldn't see him. To his profound horror, a tear rolled down either side of her face to disappear into her hair.

Instantly, his thumbs wiped away all traces of the tears, but more appeared. "Am I hurting you, Sarah?" Concern was written in every line of his face. He was truly horrified when she began to nod and cry at the same time. "What is it? Am I too heavy?" He shifted his weight largely off her, but still kept her in place. She'd always loved for him to be ontop of her, although he had always worried about the disparity in their sizes. Sometimes, just lying next to her and seeing how fragile and delicate she was compared to his great hulking size made him feel like a big clumsy oaf courting a fairy princess.

"It's not th-that," she cried, trying to get her emotions under some semblance of control. "Y-you're not hurting me physically, Jed. You've hurt me emotionally."

Jed's head dropped to lie between her breasts as he hugged her very tightly. "I'm sorry. I don't know how I could have thought that you'd be interested in taking him back . . . I'm so sorry, baby." He couldn't bear to see her in tears like this, especially not over

something as idiotic as what he'd done. Hadn't she told him over and over how much she hated Curry, and hadn't she shown him and told him over and over how much she loved him?

Sarah's voice was so choked with emotion it was barely a whisper. "I don't want Curry back, Jed. What I want is right h-here with me, right now."

She looked so tentative, so vulnerable, he thought his heart was going to break in two then and there. By way of further apology, he cradled her in his arms until she had cried it out on his strong shoulder, then set about soothing and reassuring her in an entirely different way. Jed used all of his skill, all of his body to wring orgasm after orgasm from her, making her scream with pleasure until she was hoarse from it and begging him to take her. His possession was excruciatingly slow as he savored every second of how she stretched to accommodate him, reveling in each moan and the way she writhed beneath him. Once he was seated to the hilt, Jed lifted her legs and placed them over his shoulders, giving her no control over the depth of his strokes. Her hoarse cries were music to his ears as he piled sensation upon sensation before setting the both of them free to touch the heavens.

Sarah was pretty much asleep when he gathered her to his side, but Jed lay awake for a while just holding her, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of her against him. He had missed her terribly for the past few weeks while he had been so busy. It was a strange thing for him to resent the ranch he'd worked so hard to build up, but that was exactly what was happening. He didn't want to help with roundup – he wanted to be with her, even if all they were doing was the mundane things – watching TV – Bugs Bunny and Warner Brothers cartoons were his favorite, she was amazed to discover – cooking dinner, shopping. It didn't make a difference to him, as long as he was with her.

Was this love? Jed was much too scared of it for a closer examination. Whatever it was, he didn't care, as long as she remained where she belonged – in his arms. Or over his knee, as the case may be.

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## *A Piece of Heaven - Chapter 5*

*by Carolyn Faulkner*

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Things seemed to be settled between them after that. Work at the ranch eased up after roundup and Jed was once more around the house all the time spanking her and making love to her – not necessarily in that order - although they spent time at his place, too. Sarah never mentioned the message that Curry had left on her machine, or the subsequent ones that seemed a lot less friendly and a lot more threatening. He wasn't at all happy that she had no interest in seeing him. Curry was used to having women falling all over him because of his good looks, and Sarah was not obediently getting into line behind everyone else. This seemed to bother him no end.

It got so that she dreaded going out for fear she'd bump into him. He was such a pest whenever she saw him that she brought the problem to Eric's attention, who immediately demanded to know why she hadn't said anything to Jed.

Sarah sat in front of his desk nervously twisting her purse strap. "Well, because some of the messages he's been leaving threaten Jed. Curry knows that Jed and I are together, and he doesn't like it. I couldn't bear for anything to happen to him, Eric, I just couldn't!"

Eric handed her a tissue, and patted her hand in a brotherly fashion. "Don't you think the man deserves to know that his life is in danger?"

She backtracked a little. "Well, I don't think he'd really ever do anything, Eric. And you know Jed. He'll go off half-cocked and kill the man with his bare hands," she grimaced. "Especially if he heard some of the things he's said on my machine."

Eric frowned. "That bad, huh?" Sarah nodded, and Eric picked up his phone, dialing a number quickly. "Clint, could you come down to my office for a minute? I have something that needs your attention."

Clint Foster was the town's police chief. His family had practically built the town, and he was an excellent man in a tight spot. Eric made Sarah repeat everything she'd told him to Clint, and Clint advised that she get caller id, as well as stop erasing the messages and save them for him to listen to as evidence.

"Have you mentioned any of this to Jed yet?" Clint eyed her seriously.

"No, I haven't."

"Good. Don't. If this is as bad as it sounds, Jed's likely to do something he might regret in defense of his woman."

Throughout the next several weeks, Sarah did as Clint had asked, keeping the messages that Curry left. They were getting more and more aggressive. Occasionally, she stopped by to see Eric and keep him apprised of the situation, and of course, she ended up spending a certain amount of time at the Police Station. Reports of all of this activity of hers made its way back to Jed, not through any active investigating on his part, but rather because everyone in town knew everyone else's business. And they all knew that his first wife had slept with anything that didn't move quickly enough. The town was more than happy to let him know that his newest lady seemed to be taking after Cheryl in the worst way.

But Jed trusted her. She loved him, and would never hurt him like that. Almost every night, she came to him, naked in more ways than one, loving him with the openness of her body as well as her heart and her mind. He refused to believe that she would do that to him, and sloughed off all the gossip.

Still, the information festered in the back of his mind . . .

It was almost a month after he had reappeared that Curry decided to make his move to get Sarah back. Nothing he had done since they had divorced had turned out right, and for some reason his mind had fixated on the idea that if he got her back, everything would start going right for him again, despite the fact that she seemed not to want to have anything to do with him. She was just playing hard to get, something she had done before they were married. Sarah had been a virgin, and had not allowed him to make love to her until their wedding night. He had been pleasantly surprised to find that his little virgin was a nympho by night, and for a while, Curry had been content just making love to his wife.

But, as they say, greener pastures were out there, new women to be impressed by his looks and charm, and while little wifey was settling down into domestic bliss, he was dipping his wick with any woman he found attractive. It took a while, but eventually the rumors got back to her, and she confronted him with evidence of his infidelity. Like any abuser, he promised better behavior in the future, and she forgave him until the inevitable next time.

Eventually, she had had enough, and she actually went through with the divorce and kicked him out of her parents' house, where they had been living while she was trying to save money for their own place. At least there had been no children, although he knew Sarah had wanted them, she had wisely been religious about taking the pill.

Well, he was years older and wiser now, ready to settle down and be the family man she had always wanted. Sarah was involved with someone else, that Jed McCade from the Circle M. He was a big bruiser, but a gimp as Curry recalled. And Curry knew his looks beat out Jed's any day, any way. That incredible hulk was no competition at all. So he splashed some of the last of his expensive cologne onto those gorgeous cheeks and grabbed his suit coat, planning to surprise Sarah and sweep her into his arms. She was always such a passionate little thing. Thinking about screwing her got him hard before he was out the door. Mmmmmm-mmmmm. He was going to get some tonight, one way or the other.

Sarah had put the finishing touches on her hair with the hair spray just as the doorbell rang. She and Jed were going out to see the newest Star Trek film, then they would probably spend the weekend at the ranch. Her small suitcase was already by the door, packed in self-defense because he never had anything she needed beyond the bare basics of living. The man definitely needed civilizing, she smiled to herself as she opened the door wide.

And her worst nightmare walked in before she had a chance to react and slam the door in his face.

Curry.

“Wow, babe, you look great!” He left the door open as he reached for her, like they were still married and he was just coming home from work.

“Take your hands off me, asswipe!” Sarah struggled to get away from him, but he held her fast against him, his face inches from hers as she leaned as far away from him as she could without falling over.

“Sarah, my girl, you must be feeling mighty frisky. I know how you like to fight me some times.” His arms locked so hard around her waist she knew she would have bruises later. “You know I’ll make it good for you, don’t you?”

His lips descended on hers, painfully, and there was nothing she could do. Then, a thought struck her, and she went limp in his arms to throw him off balance a little. Maybe then she could get away from him before he actually raped her.

Unfortunately, that was also the exact moment that Jed arrived, and what greeted him was the painful sight of his woman in the arms of her ex-husband, but what hurt the most was that she didn’t appear to be struggling much against it. In fact, she wasn’t struggling at all. A red haze descended over everything, and he reacted instinctively, driven to a certain extent by the memory of the last time Cheryl had cheated on him and he had found her in flagrant delecto with her latest lover, but much more out of a bone deep sense of possessiveness toward Sarah.

This wasn’t Cheryl, this was his Sarah. Curry had his filthy hands on his woman. Jed reached a long arm out to grip Curry’s shoulder, turning him into a devastatingly hard punch that knocked him across the room to land in an unconscious heap on the floor. Sarah ran to Jed, putting her arms around his neck and cuddling up against him like he was her lifeline.

“Oh, Jed – “

She didn't notice that his arms weren't locked around her comfortingly until he reached up to remove hers from around his neck. He touched her as if she had some sort of contagious disease, leaning away from her instead of into her with a look of utter disgust on his face. His eyes were like living ice, so cold that staring up into them made her shiver a little. "Sorry for interrupting your little reunion. I won't be bothering you again." His long strides ate up the distance to the door almost before she could get to him.

Sarah lurched forward, grabbing his hand. "Jed, no – "

He turned back and shook her hand off him, like she was a particularly nasty insect that had decided to crawl on him. "I hope the two of you are very happy together. You deserve each other."

It was all just too much for Sarah, and she turned away from him with a strangled cry. How could he be so hateful?

"Don't think that turning on the waterworks is going to help," he ground out tonelessly. "It makes no difference to me how many men you sleep with. But from now on, I won't be one of the crowd." She heard his fading footsteps then the roar of his truck as he left.

The reality of the situation forced Sarah to act while she still could. She could fall completely apart later, when everything had been resolved, but there was still an unconscious man sprawled on her living room floor. She grabbed the phone and called 911. Clint came when he heard the call and arrested Curry on harassment and stalking charges as well as attempted rape, taking the immense pleasure of cuffing the dirtbag himself.

On his way out, he asked, "Where's Jed?"

Sarah looked down, trying to hold the tears at bay at least until she was alone. "Gone."

Clint's eyebrow rose. "Well, that's probably a good thing, or I'd be taking Devereaux to the morgue instead of the jail, huh?"

"Yeah," she whispered sadly.

"Do you want me to go get him so he can come and stay with you?"

"No, no. That's ok. I'm fine." She was dying inside by inches, but there was nothing anyone could do about it.

His gaze narrowed as if he sensed something was wrong. "Are you sure you're going to be ok?"

Sarah could only nod, not trusting her voice.

"If you need anything, you holler, hear?"

“I will,” came the watery reply.

Clint didn’t like it leaving her here alone, but he had to get Curry to the station.

Only when everyone was gone, after she had silently cleaned up the place and unpacked her suitcase then put on her favorite long nightgown and crawled into bed, only then did she allow herself to give way to the torrent of tears in one long, heartbreaking wail. Ziggy went a little crazy at the sound of her sobs, dancing around the bed and trying to lick all of the tears with one swipe of his broad doggy tongue. When that didn’t work, he lay down next to his mistress and whined with her.

Jed never cried. Instead, he locked himself in his study with a gargantuan supply of tequila and drank himself into an almost numb stupor. Almost numb. After downing a tremendous amount of the potent liquid, he realized with horrible certainty that he could still feel it – the terrible, crushing blow she had dealt him by betraying him with Curry. Curry, of all people, whom she had professed to hate. “Women,” he spat at no one, taking another swig. In the back of his mind, though, he knew. There wasn’t enough alcohol in the world to dull this hurt. Not in a year, not in ten years, not in tens of thousands of years would he ever feel whole again. For the second time in his life, he had lived to regret letting himself become vulnerable to a pretty face, and man, had he paid the price. Never again. That was his new motto. Never again.

Across town, Sarah lay huddled under the covers, practically in shock. She couldn’t seem to get warm, and she’d cried so long and so hard that her eyes were swollen almost completely shut. It was nearly one o’clock in the morning when she heard a pounding on her door. Well, there was one person she could eliminate off her list of who it might be, she thought with black humor. Wrapped in the quilt from her bed, she flung open the door carelessly and Eric walked in.

“Good God, are you all right?” She looked like death warmed over, wandering around like a lost soul.

“Uh-huh,” she croaked hoarsely, bumping into the end table and nearly destroying the mock Tiffany lamp that was perched there.

Eric grabbed her, turning her to him. “What’s the matter? Can’t you see?” His answer came when two enormous tears leaked out of her horribly swollen eyes and ran down her face. “And your throat, too?” he asked, and Sarah nodded while sobbing pitifully.

“Clint called me; he was worried about you, and I can see now why. Why didn’t you let him call Jed?”

Sarah flopped bonelessly into an easy chair, shaking her head. She literally didn’t have the strength or the will to remain standing any longer. “He wouldn’t care anyway.”

Eric frowned. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. If there was anything that Jed cared about in this world beside that damnable ranch, it was Sarah. Why wasn’t he here, taking care of her? He crouched down in front of her, taking her cold fingers in his. “Tell Uncle Eric all about it, honey.”

Sarah drew a deep breath. "I was going out with Jed to the movies tonight. When the doorbell rang, I thought it was him and opened the door. It was Curry. He grabbed me and started to kiss me." Suddenly, she remembered how hard Curry had been squeezing her, and, forsaking modesty entirely, hiked up her gown to see dark bruises forming around her ribcage, in an obvious band from front to back.

Eric's jaw tightened at the sight of them against her creamy skin. "Clint will want to see those. You'll need to be photographed."

She nodded, then continued with her sad little recitation. "I couldn't stop him, but then I remembered something from a date rape class that I had in college, that said sometimes going completely limp will surprise the aggressor enough that you can get away." Her voice broke. "S-so I did." Then it darn near disappeared, and Eric mostly had to read her lips. "That was the moment that Jed came – he saw me in Curry's arms, not fighting him." Painfully swollen eyes met Eric's. "He decked Curry, then apologized sarcastically to me for 'interrupting our reunion', He told me he no longer wanted to be a p-part of the crowd that I s-sleep with." Eric held her while she sobbed, and it felt so good to be held and rocked, even if it wasn't by the right man, that she just cried and cried and cried.

Finally, he gave up trying to get her to stop, and bundled her off to bed, tucking her in gently and holding her hand until she drifted off into an exhausted sleep. While he dozed himself and watched carefully over her, Eric knew that this was nowhere near the end of it for anyone involved. And he also knew that he was going to deliver one nasty wakeup call to his friend the idiot, Jed McCade.

Which he did, later, once Sarah had awakened and he had gotten a very small amount of food into her. She looked like she had just lost her best friend, which she had, in a way, but Eric knew it was much, much more than that. Jed had hurt her worse than Curry ever could. He had taken her love and thrown it back in her face with his distrust and his suspicion for the second time. His jealousy of Curry was almost a tangible thing, one that had caused him to leave her when he need her the most. When Eric left, she was just sitting on the couch staring blankly into space, tears still flowing slowly down her face.

When he arrived at the Circle M, Eric didn't bother to knock. He barged into the foyer and stalked to the study door. It was locked. "Jed McCade, you freakin' idiot, if you're in there you had better damn well open this goddam door," Eric pounded his fist on the solid wood door, hoping he wouldn't have to bust it down. He wanted to save his strength for giving Jed the beating he so richly deserved.

He could hear some shuffling and curses, and then a few seconds later a key turned in the lock. Jed and Sarah looked about the same – horrible. "Get outta my sight, Thornton," he snarled, walking right past Eric and into the kitchen with the almost empty tequila bottle still clutched in his fist. Eric had gotten a potent whiff of Jed's breath as he walked by; it was bad enough to knock a buzzard off a shit wagon.

"No. I've got something to say, and you're going to listen to me, by God, whether you want to or not." Eric made a grab at him from behind at the same time Jed swung his

massive fist at his friend while turning back, missing Eric by a mile. Had Jed been sober, it would have been a more equal contest – the two of them were much the same build and height, and both knew how to win in a fight. But Jed could barely stand, and all it took was a push from Eric and the weight of his own momentum to send Jed into the far wall. Eric consolidated his advantage by pressing his muscular forearm under Jed's throat, growling, "Sarah is not sleeping with anyone but you, dumbass. She's not Cheryl! Curry, that slimeball, has been following her all around town, making a nuisance of himself, leaving her nasty messages on her answering machine . . . And tonight he practically raped her, and you walked out just when she needed you the most!"

Jed snorted derisively. "Yeah, if that's practically raping her then I've been raping her myself for the past several months!" The pain in Jed's eyes was hard for Eric to see. He knew both of his best friends were hurting, but he also knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they belonged together.

"Buddy, I'm telling you he was stalking her!" Eric yelled in frustration, moving away from Jed quickly, as if he were releasing a caged lion.

Jed's tone was dead. "Right. So weren't you, and so wasn't Clint Foster, too, huh?"

He accused. "Don't think I haven't heard about her 'frequent visits', 'buddy'," the word dripped with sarcasm. "Everyone in town was only too happy to let me know how Sarah was following in Cheryl's footsteps. This is just the icing on the cake. Now get out of here before I kill you just for the sheer satisfaction of it."

Eric had never been so angry in his life. He knew that Jed was hurting, and that he needed to make allowances. That was the only reason why the man was still standing after accusing him of sleeping with Sarah. That little muscle in his jaw was getting quite a workout. Eric's deep voice was deadly soft as he said, "When you finally wake up to what really went on here, I'll gladly accept your apology." He began to walk towards the front door, then turned to face his friend one last time. "But don't make the mistake of thinking that just because I'm going to forgive you easily that Sarah will. You'll be a very lucky man if that woman ever takes you back, Jed."

When he left Jed sank into a chair in a contemplative silence. He just sat there at the dinette for a long, long time, running the scene that had devastated his life through his head as he ran his fingers through his rumpled hair. Could he have been mistaken about what he saw? No, his mind rebelled against that thought and the terrible repercussions if he were wrong. She had been wrapped in Curry's arms – there was no writhing, no struggling, no outward signs that she wasn't enjoying it just as much he was.

Jed was sick at heart thinking about it, concentrating on the pain, reliving it over and over like worrying a sore tooth. He knew from prior experience that tormenting himself with "shoulda, woulda, coulda's would drive him crazy. She had made her choice, and he was damned if he'd get down on his knees and beg her to come back to him. It bothered him that he had even thought of that; why should he want Curry's leftovers? Or was he so far gone that he'd be happy to have her any way he could?

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he systematically set about banishing everything from his mind except all of the jobs he had neglected around the ranch in favor of spending more time with his – with Sarah. With a little “work therapy”, they would all get done, and his life would return to the way it had been before they had become close – lonely and dull, but focused where it would forever remain from this day forward – his ranch. It took and took and took, giving back its own rock steadiness.

Eventually, he knew, his life might even become pain free, if he lived long enough. Or at least he would learn how to manage the pain by forcing it into a dark corner of his mind to only be relived in dreams or infrequent drunken bouts. Or whenever he saw her on the street. Or heard a woman laugh. Or watched Bugs Bunny, or Star Trek. Or ate . . . No more calling her in the middle of the night just to talk, no more early morning commando raids on the fridge after a long night spent in a wonderful, warm tangle of arms and legs. No more taking care of her, no more her taking care of him.

No more love.

He had never felt so alone and bereft in his life. Not when his Mother died. Not when his Father died. Not when Cheryl left. Until Sarah, he hadn't known what it was like to be truly loved. And even that had turned out not to be real. Resolutely, Jed dressed in work clothes and jammed his hat down onto his head, stepping out into the brightness of the day with a wince. But he trudged on, trying unsuccessfully to bury his heartache in backbreaking work.

When he returned to Sarah's house, Eric found her exactly where he had left her. He didn't think that she had moved a muscle. No, check that. She had begun to rock herself back and forth, and he didn't think this was a good sign. Eric sent her upstairs to get dressed, and when she came down, he had a light meal ready for her. Sarah barely ate two bites, but at least it was something.

He hated to leave her alone, but he had some stuff to do at work that couldn't be put off. Eric called Lily, and asked her to come over after she finished work at five. Lily was glad to help and didn't ask too many questions when he told her the situation was complicated.

“Are you sure you'll be ok? You could always come with me, you know.”

She took a swallow of the diet coke he offered, but wouldn't look at him directly. “I'll be fine,” she assured him huskily from where she was curled up forlornly on the couch, but her sad demeanor did nothing to set his mind at ease. He left her there reluctantly, promising to call as frequently as he could, and repeating that Lily would be there some time after five.

Sarah just sat on the couch like a bump on a log, trying desperately not to feel anything with little to no success. Just when she thought she had cried as much as her body would allow, she found her eyes overflowing again. The phone rang, startling her, but she just let the machine pick it up even though she didn't need to continue that habit since Curry was probably still in jail.

“This is Linda down at the hospital, Sarah. I just thought I'd let you know that Jed was

just brought in with a couple of broken ribs. He's ok, getting bandaged right now and we'll keep him over night just for observation. I bet you're already on your way, but I figured in case you weren't you'd want to know." The voice laughed gaily. "I was surprised that you weren't with him, considering that you two are surgically attached at the hip, lately. See you down here!"

She was already up and grabbing for a coat when he remembered that he probably wouldn't want to see her. The thought made her hesitate for all of a second. She needed to see him, just to make sure for herself that he was truly all right, and that was exactly what she was going to do.

The admitting nurse knew her, too – the curse of a small town – only no one knew the whole truth, so she was ushered up like she and Jed were an old married couple, which they would never be now. The room was dark, and Jed was lying on his back, his head turned away from her. Sarah drew a breath and gulped at the sight of his bare chest. He might not have Curry's perfect features, but, even laid up, he attracted her like a magnet. She walked slowly further into the room, careful not to make a sound and disturb him. It was almost enough just to be in the same room with him, but not quite, especially knowing what he thought of her. Maybe he'd give her a chance to explain . . .

Jed must've sensed her presence, because just as she approached the side of his bed his head turned and he immediately glowered up at her.

Sarah smiled tentatively. "Hi, Jed. I just wanted – "

"I don't give a damn what the hell it is you wanted, Ms. Jenkins," he snarled nastily in a tone that made it hard for her to remember how gentle he could sound sometimes. "You'd better get out of here before I throw you out bodily. Apparently I didn't make myself clear enough before I left your house, but let me clarify things now: I don't ever want to see you again. You were a great lay, but that doesn't give you the right to come here and offer me sloppy seconds while you profess that I'm the love of your life." Horrified, Sarah began to back away from him at his biting words. "Get out of my sight, slut, and if you know what's good for you, you'll make damn sure I never lay eyes on you again. Got it?" She could hear him yelling those last few phrases at her as she ran down the hall with her hand over her mouth, trying to stem the tide of tears at least until she got back to her car. She was only moderately successful.

For a long while, she merely hyperventilated and sobbed as she sat dazed behind the wheel, then she finally gathered her wits about her enough to drive home, slowly, like the little old lady she felt like.

When she got home, Sarah immediately changed into her jammies and an old battered but favorite housecoat, curling up on the couch unrepentantly with a whole pint of Ben and Jerry's Mystic Mint ice cream in one hand and a spoon in the other, but she could only force down two or three bites between the tears. It all tasted like ashes, anyway. When Lily arrived hours later, the whole pint was ice cream soup on the coffee table, and Sarah had sought comfort in the oblivion of sleep, looking wan and delicate on the couch.

Eric didn't think that Sarah would mind if he filled Lily in on what had happened between her and Jed, so he did. She wasn't there with Sarah for very long by herself, because Eric came by as soon as he could after work. Sarah was up, picking at a sandwich Lily had made for her and looking twenty years older than she had a day ago.

"Sweetie, Clint wants you to come in tomorrow so he can get some pictures of your bruises. I'll drive you down." Every protective instinct in Eric was aroused, and he couldn't believe that he was the one doing all of this instead of Jed.

Sarah straightened and looked out at him from beneath those swollen lids, speaking with the first note of quiet confidence he had heard from her since this had all happened. "No," she coughed and cleared her throat. "No, I'll drive myself."

"But – " Lily was going to volunteer to do it, too.

She stood and collected the dishes from her untouched dinner. "No, I need to do things for myself, just like normal, guys." The dishes were put into the dishwasher and the trash in the garbage. Sarah turned out the kitchen light and locked her arms into each of theirs. "Thank you so much f – " Emotions welled up into her throat, closing it off painfully until she swallowed hard on the lump. "For helping me like you have. I appreciate it more than you'll ever know." She turned and kissed Eric warmly on the cheek, hugging him hard, then did the same with Lily. They both hugged her back with all their might. "But you two have to leave. You have your own lives to lead."

They both looked appalled, sputtering, "But – We – I – You –" but Sarah was calmly escorting them to the door as politely as possible.

"I need some time alone. I know all of your various telephone numbers, and I'll call if I need anything, I promise," she held up three fingers in a "scout's honor" sign. "I'm not the type to do anything stupid, if that has you worried." Eric was about to shake his finger at her in admonition when she handed him his coat. "I need some time to myself, and I might as well get used to it. I'm going to have a lot more of it in the future for a while, until I find s –" She forced the lump back down again, then summoned a brave but wan smile. "Someone else."

His finger still poised at her, Eric commanded, "You call me after you see Clint."

"I'll call you tomorrow during the day," Lily echoed.

Finally, they left, but not without imparting all of their wisdom about dealing with a broken heart. Sarah leaned back against the door, her hand still on the knob when a thought struck her. "I have to change the freaking locks."

She kept herself very busy cleaning up around the house, took the dog out and brushed him, changed her sheets, did a wash, vacuumed, dusted, ran then emptied the dishwasher, folded and put away the laundry and was seriously considering getting out the family silver to polish until she decided that it was two in the morning and she ought to be in bed. It surprised her no end that as soon as her head hit the pillow she was out like a light.

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## *A Piece of Heaven - Chapter 6*

*by Carolyn Faulkner*

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The first thing she did when she finally woke the next morning at the unusually late hour of eleven-thirty was call Clint and find out what time would be convenient for her to drop by. Apparently, the juicy bit of gossip about how their relationship had ended and the subsequent debacle at the hospital had already made the grapevine rounds, and Clint's tone of censure was readily apparent.

"Don't you worry none, Sarah. As soon as I take care of what I got going on here that can't wait, I'm going to drive out ta' the Circle M myself and straighten that boy out, one way or t'other."

"Don't bother, Clint." Her voice was so icy hard he barely recognized it as hers. "It would be a waste of the town's resources and your valuable time. I don't care one whit about him any longer."

"Well, Sarah, I can't rightly say as I blame you. By the way, your ex-husband is more than likely goin' ta' end up in the state hospital rather than jail. He went berserk on one of my deputies when we were moving him to the county facility, started talking in tongues, like. Gibberish. But at least you won't have to worry about him no more."

That was a load off her mind, and she said as much.

"Well, I'll see you around two-thirty then."

They said their good byes, and before she had a chance to descend back into a deep blue funk, Sarah decided to work on her book. It was a marvelous distraction from the soap opera that had become her life, and she lost herself for several hours in the fictional town of Temple, Tennessee.

When she finally looked up, it was nearly time to go and meet Clint. She decided to dress more nicely than jeans, hoping it would lift her spirits some, although it was probably a stupid thing to do since she'd just have to undress while she was there so they could take the pictures. Sarah choose a comfortable pastel print jersey dress, cream hose, comfortable heels and added a touch of gold around her neck and in her ears. No amount of makeup was going to cover the ravages of the past days, but she did the best she could with a concealer and a very light foundation, as well as some blush and a swipe of eye shadow and lipstick. The only ring she wore was her mother's diamond on her right ring finger, which was a nice sized stone in an antique yellow gold setting. It made her feel that her practical, loving mother was somehow closer – in spirit if not in

body - and lately she figured could use all the help she could get.

Her worst nightmare came true when she drove up to the police station, which was next to Dempsey's Ace Hardware Store, and Jed's beat up black pickup was parked only two spaces down. He was apparently getting a load of fencing. There were three men out there including Jed, loading the materials into the bed of the truck. Sarah parked in the only available slot, but it would force her to walk by the men. She took only a moment to paste a patently false smile on her face and straightened her back once she got out of the car. She'd be damned if she'd let him intimidate her. Screw Jed McCade and the truck he rode in on!

The best defense being a good offense, Sarah greeted the other two men warmly, but walked right past Jed as if he wasn't there, and strode into the station. For a second after closing the door behind her, she sagged against it, then put her shoulders back again and walked directly into Clint's office.

He was still there when she exited about a half-hour later, and she repeated her academy award winning performance, smiling brightly at the young gentleman who followed her to her car and opened the door for her with a tip of his hat. Sarah backed out and sped away without so much as glancing in his direction, patting herself on the back all the way home as tears streaked through her make up to land in big splotches on her dress. Jed was downright furious. He couldn't remember having been so pissed in his life. The two men that were with him took several steps back from him as he clenched and unclenched those big fists while staring directly at the door to the police station.

"Dewey, you and Hank take a break in the diner for a minute. I'll be right with you."

They didn't need any further invitation to get away from their boss whose look had turned almost murderous as he stalked into the station. Jed walked right past Patsy, Clint's wife and receptionist, and into the chief's office. He was on the phone, but got off it when he saw Jed's face.

"Listen, I gotta let you go now, Roy. Something's come up." Clint replaced the receiver on the phone without taking his eyes off Jed. The man glint in the younger man's eye looked mighty dangerous. "It's about time you come see me about what's up with your woman, boy. You keep looking after her like this and you'll end up with nothin' to look after."

"I don't have a woman," Jed ground out, leaning over Clint's desk to breathe fire on his face.

Clint was neither amused nor intimidated. He rose out of his chair and got right into Jed's face in return. "Well, if you don't, I don't know who does. She sure needs someone to look after her with bruises like this!" Clint held up one of the color pictures they had taken of Sarah's middle, showing a huge band of dark bruises just at the bottom of her rib cage.

That got Jed's attention. He snapped the picture out of Clint's hand and studied it, examining each one in minute detail as Clint fed them into his hands. "What the hell

happened?" he could no more have stopped himself from asking that question than he could stop himself from breathing.

Clint sat back in his seat and lit a cigar, relishing every moment of torture Jed was going through, because he knew that Jed had put Sarah through the ringer. "She got those fighting off her ex-husband. I arrested him that same night for harassing and stalking her, as well as attempted rape."

Jed fell like a ton of bricks into the chair behind him, the wind knocked out of him so that he could hardly breathe as he realized the enormity of what he'd done. "But – "

The older man leaned forward, watching the reactions play across Jed's face. "Sarah told me herself that he was squeezing her so hard, she didn't think she was going to be able to get away from him before he . . . well, you know."

Jed was terribly afraid that he knew. His face paled to the color of milk, and a horrible pinched look appeared around his lips. "Go on," he said soundlessly, not sure whether he wanted to hear more or not.

"Somehow, she remembered something she'd been taught years ago about going limp when someone was attacking you, that sometimes they lose their grip and you can maybe escape - "

Jed filled in hoarsely, the realization of what had almost happened, and what he'd done to her hit him like a sledgehammer in the chest. He could barely take a breath. " - that's what she did. That's why she wasn't fighting him, why she wasn't struggling." He started to convulsively crumple the pictures in his hands until Clint rescued them, prying them out of his strong fists. His expression was carved in stone. "He did that to her?"

Clint nodded, puffing quietly on his cigar.

"Is he still here?"

The chief was glad he could give the answer he did. "Nope. County's got him, then he's going to end up in the state hospital. I was just telling Sarah that when she was in here just a few minutes ago. At least she doesn't have to worry about him any more." He emphasized the "him" nastily, and Jed's upper lip curled at the idea that he would be lumped in with the likes of Curry Devereaux.

"Sonofabitch," Jed swore softly under his breath.

"Yes, you are," Clint agreed readily. "Now, I've said all I intend to say to you about poor Sarah Jenkins. Get out of my office, young man."

Jed was just at the door when he heard Clint's warning from behind. "And don't you go bothering Sarah none about this. She's had enough trouble from the likes of you, and I won't hesitate to haul you into jail for harassing her, neither."

Slamming the door was probably a childish thing to do, but it made him feel at least a mite better. Although every instinct he owned was screaming for him to go to her, to try to apologize, to make it up to her somehow, he had to think a while before he did that. Instead of following his heart straight to her, he followed his head and collected his men, then drove home to sit alone in the dark in his study, trying to come up with a workable plan to worm his way back into her life when she'd probably prefer to rip his lungs out through his nose rather than say a civil word to him. He snorted derisively. As evidenced by the fact that she had trotted right past him and into the station as if he didn't exist, after having turned her honey sweet charm on Hank and Dewey.

Baldly, he realized that, after the way he'd treated her and the things he'd said, it was no wonder she'd done that. Hell, if she'd treated him like that he'd've probably decked her on the way by, but then Sarah wasn't the violent type. No, she was the emotional, loving, giving type and he'd squashed her love like a bug beneath his boot. Part of him wanted to beat his head against the wall of the study, in hopes of beating some sense into himself, and the other part wanted to storm over there and claim her, regardless of what she thought or wanted, and kidnap her back here to the ranch, where he'd tie her to the bed if he had to and make love to her until she forgave him and agreed to marry him.

THAT WAS IT. That was what he was going to do. He was going to marry that woman, he decided, completely disregarding the fact that she wasn't even speaking to him any longer at his own request. What Jed McCade wanted, Jed McCade got. One way or the other. An almost evil grin spread over his face as he plotted about how he would overcome any and all of her objections. And, if he had to, he'd kidnap her in a heartbeat. All was fair in love – love? He only thought about it for a nanosecond, then agreed. Hell, yes, love. All's fair in love and war.

And this was love AND war. It was nearly eleven, and she was watching the exciting end of a "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine" episode when her bedside phone rang. Sarah automatically picked it up and said hello.

"Good evening, Sarah Lee – "

He heard her strangled breath, then a dial tone. Anything Jed might have wanted to say to her was lost when she gently replaced the receiver in the cradle without any hesitation what so ever. Sarah had heard more than enough from him, and she never intended to listen to another word from him in this lifetime. The phone started to ring again immediately. Sarah put pillows over her ears, then decided she didn't want him leaving her any nasty messages, either. Systematically, she went around to every phone in the house and unplugged it from the wall. Then her cell phone started ringing, so she turned that off, too. Out of curiosity, she got out her laptop and checked her email. Finding that there were several there from him, she coolly deleted all of them without ever opening them, then added him to her spam file.

The next morning, a dozen apricot roses appeared at her door, which she steadfastly refused. An hour later, an expensive gold box of chocolates arrived, then a basket of fruit, some gourmet cookies and a teddy bear were all sent back in turn. She was spending more time answering the door than writing her blasted book!

The list grew all day – a portable CD player, gourmet coffee, a singing telegram, a lava lamp, a USS Enterprise phone, and a sterling silver picture frame – with his picture in it, of course.

Now, that she didn't immediately send back. Instead, she took his picture out of the frame, tore it into tiny little pieces, put it back into the frame then handed it back to the thoroughly bewildered deliveryman.

The only item he sent her that she actually did keep was a tiny little scrap of a marmalade kitten, which had come with a sealed note. The Humane Society lady had been kind enough to drop him off to her, along with some feline accouterment, and Sarah prevailed upon her to do one more thing in exchange for a good sized donation – present the untouched note to the owner of the Circle M.

He had found the one thing she could never refuse, even from him - an animal, especially a stray. Although Jed was unhappy that she hadn't read his note and had returned everything else he'd sent, he couldn't say he was surprised. And at least she had kept something. Boy, was Visa going to love him this month! He had spread his credit card number around the Internet so much getting these things for her; he'd be surprised if most of the hacker population of the world didn't have it by now. Had he said something about the ranch being back in the black? Not for long, if he kept this up.

But he wasn't going to continue showering her with things because she had never been about "things". Sarah had never cared much whether he had money or not. She had been sincerely distraught that the ranch had become dilapidated because he had been upset by it. They had been friends through richer and poorer, and now he wanted them to be husband and wife through it, too.

He figured he'd lay off for a little while, let things calm down some, then he'd actually go to her house and try to get her to talk to him, even if he had to crawl to her on his knees. He wasn't proud. He knew he was wrong, and didn't feel it made him any less of a man to admit it to her and ask her forgiveness. Beg her forgiveness, if necessary.

And if all else failed, there was always the plot he had a particular fondness for - plan B – the kidnapping. The next morning when Sarah collected the morning paper off the front step, it had a long stick in it that had a bunch of feathers attached to the end of a string. It was a cat toy, and every morning for the next few mornings when she reached for her paper, she also got a new toy for little whatsisname. She hadn't decided on a name for him yet, unless she called him Ziggy, Jr, because he had somehow come upon the erroneous decision that Ziggy, The Wonder Mutt, was his mother in doggie disguise. Sarah had just about busted a gut the first time Junior had snuggled up to Ziggy - who was the friendly type and not at all above snuggling with the little furball – and proceeded to latch onto one of the poor startled dog's nipples. It was the first time she'd laughed in a long time, and it felt good. Kinda like she'd come out of the woods a little. After coaxing a thoroughly traumatized Zigster out from under the bed, Sarah faced the fact that little Junior – he was hereby christened with a spray of catnip – needed a quick lesson on the facts of life.

Things had nearly returned to normal, P.J. conditions for her – P.J. meaning Pre-Jed. No more unexpected deliveries, no more phone calls, no more emails, and not even any more cat toys. The cat toys, Junior missed, but then he had started to look like some spoiled preppy cat who had every conceivable cat toy ever made in his greedy possession.

It was evening, and Sarah was in the midst of doing laundry – blech - her least favorite chore. Some genius person – it had to have been a man, of course – had decided that the most convenient place to put the washer and dryer in any house was in the basement, the furthest point from where all that laundry was created as he could get. This was obviously a man who had never dragged four loads of laundry up two flights of stairs, Sarah snorted. Probably the guy still lived with his mother so he never had to do any laundry. She grumbled about the same thing every time, but short of tearing the upstairs apart to make room for a laundry room where it made the most sense – duh, near the bedrooms – she was going to be making this trip for a long time.

She was just hoisting the overloaded laundry basket onto her hip to take the first step up the second flight of stairs to her bedroom when she must've turned wrong, and down she went, laundry scattering everywhere, her back spasming so painfully that she literally burst into tears. It was so bad that it took over her mind and was literally the only thing she could think of. No position was really comfortable, but by excruciating process of elimination, she found that she could live with the pain if she were on all fours, or on her back with her legs bent.

Ziggy was trying to help in the only way he could – whining and barking at her to show his concern. Slowly, by inches, she got herself on all fours and literally crawled across the carpet towards the backdoor. There was no telling when help might arrive and her first thought was the animals. Once she got Ziggy out and back in, she'd call 911. Ziggy crawled right along side her all the way, occasionally swiping at the tears as they rolled down her face with his big slobbery tongue. If her spine hadn't been trying to crawl out of her lower back the hard way she might have found the scene hysterical. Instead she concentrated on getting herself and Zig to the door, where she let him out into the back yard.

"You'd better do everything you need to do for the next three years, Ziggy. Mommy's not going to be able let you out for the foreseeable future," she warned. Ziggy was very good. He did his business and came back in quickly, just in case someone started passing out food while he was gone, he wasn't about to risk missing his share.

Luckily, both the cat and the dog were self-feeding the most expensive dry food known to man. At least she didn't have to worry about trying to get to the can opener. When Ziggy ran back in, she closed and painfully reached up to bolt the door and turn the lock, then turned resolutely back towards the desk at the front of the living room, to the phone in the house that was closest to where she was – the floor.

She'd just made it onto the living room rug when she heard a knock at her door. Oh, crap, just what she needed. Company. The only kind of company she wanted right now had stretchers and Demerol. Lots and lots of Demerol.

“Sarah?”

Holy shit, it was Jed. If she hadn't been crying so hard, she'd've laughed out loud.

His voice took on that “you'd better answer me, young lady,” tone she had come to recognize from better times – well, if just before a blistering spanking could be counted as “better times.” “Sarah, I know you're home. I want to talk to you.”

“Bully for you, Jed McCade,” she half shouted, half sobbed. “What if I don't want to talk to you? Did you ever think of that?”

He knew her too damned well. Something was wrong. “Are you all right in there, Sarah?” Jed didn't like the sound of her voice. It sounded like she was crying. “Open the door, honey. I just want to make sure you're all right.” And propose marriage, but that's a little thing . . .

“Why would you worry one way or the other about a slut, Jed, hmmmmm?” Pain definitely contributed to sarcasm.

Okay, he'd give her that one as a freebie. He certainly deserved that and more. “Open the door.” No more mister nice guy. He had the key in his hand, but he really wanted her to open the door to him. It was a symbolic gesture.

“No,” she choked on a sob as her back spasmed mercilessly. “I – I can't.”

Every sense he owned went on alert with that pitiful admission. “Sweetheart, why can't you open the door? Are you hurt?”

There was no way she wanted him to see her like this. She was much, much to vulnerable, and vulnerability wasn't a good thing to show Jed McCade even when he liked you, and he actively hated her. “Go away, Jed.” She swallowed back a sob and tried to make her voice sound stronger. “I'm fine. Go away.” Please, please, please go away and leave me to die in peace.

Sarah was in the process of rolling onto her back, hoping to alleviate the spasms she was experiencing, and was so caught up in the process that she didn't hear him use his key to come in. All of a sudden, his concerned face appeared above her, and he was reaching down as if to lift her off the floor.

“DON'T TOUCH ME!” she screamed, but he just kept coming. Jed thought she was just trying to be difficult, wanting to keep him at a distance because of the way he'd treated her. He desperately wanted to comfort her, until she screamed, “I HURT MY BACK, BUTTHEAD! GET AWAY FROM ME!”

Immediately, Jed's arms fell to his sides, but he couldn't just sit there and watch her writhing in pain. Jed grabbed her hand, wanting to provide some sort of assistance, and whipped out his cell phone with the other hand, dialing 911.

Sarah was still sobbing, but moaned, “I knew I should have changed the fucking locks.”

Jed attached himself to her side like he'd been super-glued there through the whole painful process, wincing when she screamed as they got her as gently as possible onto the stretcher and recollecting her hand whenever they were separated. He was there when they brought her in to a cubicle in the ER, and told a flat out lie when the doctor asked him if he was a relative.

"I'm her fiancé," he said, his eyes daring her to disagree. She opened her mouth to do just that and a nurse stuck a thermometer into it, so she was shut up for a while, but as soon as it was removed she set them straight.

"He is NOT my fiancé by any stretch of the imagination – " Before she got to complete that thought, she was rolled firmly to one side and she felt the pin prick of a muscle relaxant being administered at the back of her right hip.

Jed tried to look sheepish, mumbling with a charming smile, "Lovers' quarrel."

Things were getting a little fuzzy for Sarah, but she none the less shot back, "Bullshit."

He had commandeered a rolling stool which he pushed over next to her since the doc had disappeared a while to see if the medicine worked. Jed was almost afraid to touch her for fear of hurting her, but he figured her hand was safe territory, so he recaptured that, pressing her cold fingers against his warm lips. "Ahhh, yes. We were lovers." His voice deepened with a sad, wistful note. "And we quarreled."

For the first time in a long while, Sarah turned her head to look him deliberately in the eye. Jed – a man who had faced the demons of his father, fought his way out of a nearly insurmountable debt, and had never flinched from anything in his life – was truly afraid of what he saw there. Her eyes were blank. Whether it was that she no longer felt anything for him but hatred, or it was the medicine, or a combination of the both, the complete lack of emotion – good, bad, or indifferent – in her expression shot a bolt of paralyzing fear through his heart. He felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to his chest.

She said absolutely nothing; just stared at him with eyes that became more progressively glazed over with each minute. Jed couldn't think of anything scintillating to say, so he merely squeezed her hand while her eyelids slid slowly closed. When Sarah awoke, she was staring up at a dirty white ceiling, and instantly recognized exactly where she was – Jed's house. Jed's room, for that matter. Taking a deep breath against the pain she knew would come with movement; she began to struggle out from under the bedclothes, determined not to spend one more minute under that man's roof no matter how much it hurt her to get home.

Instantly, he was at her side, pressing her gently back into the mattress while taking exquisite care not to hurt her. "Ah, sleeping beauty awakes," he teased, and was rewarded by an angry flash of her eyes. That was much better than the blank look he had gotten in the ER.

"Let me up."

“No.” He said calmly, simply stating a fact. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” She’d be damned if she’d even accept food from him. “Take me home. Now.”

“No.” Again, softly and without ire.

Her glower was truly impressive. “This is kidnapping, you know.”

A broad, completely unrepentant smile splashed across his face. “Yup, it is.”

When the docs were finished with Sarah, he had claimed ownership of her and simply brought her home with him. It was where he’d intended she end up anyway. Plan B was being implemented in an entirely different way from how he had envisioned it, but as long as the results were the same and she was helpless under his roof, who was he to look a gift back injury in the mouth? She was as mad as a wet hen, but she was here, with him, where she belonged, and he’d be damned if he’d ever give her up.

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## *A Piece of Heaven - Chapter 7*

*by Carolyn Faulkner*

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“Are you comfortable?” The anxious note in his voice surprised her, and her eyebrow lifted in sarcasm. “Okay, let me reword that: are you as comfortable as possible under the circumstances?” he amended.

“I’d be much more comfortable in my own bed,” she insisted, lips tightly pursed.

Jed drew a calming breath, reaching for patience he’d never had much of to begin with. She was in pain. She was still angry at him, and understandably so. Sarah was entitled to be cranky. “No, you’d have a much longer trip to the bathroom and, if you were there alone, you’d have to negotiate a set of stairs to get to the kitchen – not that I’d leave you alone.”

She shuddered delicately at the thought of trying to climb stairs.

“So you’re here for the duration of your recovery,” and beyond, he promised himself. “There’s nothing you can do about it, so get used to it.” Diplomacy was another in the list of virtues he lacked, he supposed, but that was just too damned bad. She was his, and he was going to do anything he could – even if it meant shamelessly taking advantage of her current incapacitation – to keep her with him. He had a lot to make up for.

Sarah met his eyes, a stricken look on her white face. “But I don’t want to be here w-with you!” she whispered on a sob.

Oh, God, she was crying. He didn’t think he could bear it. She’d already shed enough tears because of him. Carefully, Jed shifted his position so that he could stroke her hair away from her face soothingly. Each teardrop ate like acid into his heart. “Shhhhh. When you feel better, we’ll look at getting you home,” he lied glibly. “But for now, just let me take care of you.”

She swallowed hard on a sob. “I’m surprised that you want to.” Her watery snipe hit its mark only too accurately.

Jed’s eyes slid reluctantly from her face as he patted her hand to rise carefully off the bed and stand in front of the window, staring out at everything he owned but seeing nothing that meant anything to him without her by his side. “I know you are,” came the hoarse, choked reply. Abruptly, he turned and walked to the bedroom door, leaving a bewildered Sarah feeling somewhat bereft. “Sleep as much as you can, baby. I’ll be back shortly.”

Sarah surprised herself by doing just that, but each and every time she woke, he was right there, sometimes just watching TV, sometimes with paperwork spread around him, sometimes just watching her with soft eyes. To her keen embarrassment, he even insisted on following directly behind her on her painful progression to the bathroom, giving her a cane to use that was left over from his own rehabilitation, but offering his strong arm on the other side, which she staunchly refused. Sarah wasn't going to touch him any more than she absolutely had to, nor did she want him touching her.

Jed wasn't used to not being able to fix things for her and he really hated the helplessness he was feeling. All he could do was wince for her whenever she moaned in pain, which was with alarming frequency, as far as he was concerned. He did help her get comfortable when she arrived back in his big bed, then handed her a glass of water and the next dose of muscle relaxant.

He arranged the covers fussily over her as she lay on her back with her knees bent, which was as close to a comfortable position as there was at this point. "I'm going to go downstairs and get something light for you to eat."

Petulantly, she asserted, "I'm not hungry."

It was only the first day, and already he wanted to take her over his knee. Instead, he held his tongue and clenched his right hand reflexively. Jed ignored her whining and suited actions to words, appearing a few minutes later with a small bowl of soup and half of a sandwich, along with a diet coke. Against her will, Sarah drew in a deep breath at the wonderful smell of soup.

He sat next to her, putting the tray on the bedside table. "I brought you some nice chicken soup I thawed – it's the stuff you gave me to freeze a while go."

She folded her arms across her chest stubbornly. "I'm not hungry." Jed could swear that thirty-two year old Sarah Jenkins had been replaced by a naughty six-year-old.

His teeth ground reaction to her whiny tone. "I don't care whether you're hungry or not, Sarah Marie. You're going to eat every drop of this soup and every bite of this sandwich if I have to hold you down to get you to do it!" Despite his vow to keep control of his temper, he was nearly shouting at her towards the end.

The single tear that dripped down her cheek was all it took to break him, all six-foot-four and two hundred fifty pounds of muscle dissolved into a big puddle next to the bed. If she had been well and was acting like this, he'd've had her over his knee so fast she wouldn't which way was up. But he detested seeing anyone he cared about hurting – he would rather take on the pain himself. And Sarah was the person he cared about most in this world, despite how shabbily he had treated her. Jed would gladly spend the rest of his life making it up to her if she would just let him.

Hoping to disguise the calculating glint in his eye, he concentrated on refolding the napkin he had shaken out. "That's fine. Whatever you say. You don't have to eat if you don't want to. You just lay there and get weaker and weaker." Jed turned a truly evil grin on her, watching her face pinch into a full-fledged pout. "Just means you stay here

with me that much longer while you recover your strength.”

He had grabbed the tray and started to leave before she relented ungraciously. “Bring the damned food back here.”

Jed stopped in his tracks, his back still to her. “What’s the magic word?”

Now it was Sarah’s turn to clench her teeth. “The magic word is you’re not going to like where this cane ends up if you don’t get back here with my dinner!”

His broad grin as he put the bed tray over her only earned him another in a long line of baleful looks. Jed took the chair beside her bed and watched her consume every drop, then removed the tray to the kitchen and came back with a heating pad and a nightgown. “While you’re still awake, why don’t we slip you into something more comfortable, and I’ll put the heating pad under you for a while.”

Jed put the stuff down on the bed, pulling on the covers that Sarah was holding onto for dear life. “If I’m going to change into a nightgown, then you’re going to leave the room.”

A thick, masculine eyebrow lifted. “Need I remind you – “

She interrupted him brusquely. “No, you needn’t remind me of anything, Jed McCade. I know I don’t have anything you haven’t already seen, but we no longer have that type of relationship,” Sarah watched his face become more and more like a thundercloud with each word she uttered but didn’t let that stop her, “and I want you out of this room while I change.” His lazy, piercing look was a warning she knew only too well. But there was little he could do to her that would hurt any more than what he’d already done.

Jed took a couple of small steps away from the bed and turned his back to her. “This is as far as I’m going, little girl. I want to be within easy reach of you in case you need help. If I turn back around and you haven’t changed yourself then I’m gonna do it for you. Do you read me?”

Sarah had no reply, but he could plainly hear the “oohs” and “ouches” as she slowly got undressed. “Where’re my panties?”

Jed turned around to find her swaying gingerly on the side of the bed, nightgown hanging down as far as the mattress but bunched at the bottom. At her bare bottom. This time the tic in his jaw had nothing to do with anger as his memory played every detail of her naked beauty behind his eyes. He was harder than a rock as he carefully leaned her against him, lifting her ever so gently to pull the gown down and place the heating pad under her before he lay her back on the bed, knees up. Despite his carefulness, he saw the tears of pain in her eyes before she blinked them away and his gut wrenched in sympathy.

“I n-need my panties, Jed,” she murmured softly, swiping at her wet eyes with the back of her hand as she drew a ragged breath.

After tucking her in, Jed reclaimed his position in the chair at her side, hunching forward to rub her arm soothingly. “Shhhhhh, baby. I didn’t get you any panties for a reason.”

Sarah’s alarmed eyes met his.

He had to chuckle. “No, not for that reason – although we will get to that later, when you’re feeling better – but because it’s one less thing for you to try to maneuver when you’re going to the bathroom. One less thing to have to pull up and push down. The less clothing the better,” his grin turned rakish. “That’s one rule I intend to enjoy.”

She harumphed noisily, and tried not to look at him as she played with the covers, hating to admit that he was right. “Oh, no! What about Ziggy and Junior?” she thought suddenly, trying to sit up, which hurt like hell, but she had to make sure her children were ok.

Inexorably, Jed pressed her back down onto the mattress with gentled strength. “Ziggy is sacked out in my study and Junior is under the bed in the spare bedroom. I wouldn’t forget the furballs. Ziggy is dying to see you, Junior doesn’t care as long as there’s a clean litter box and lots of food.”

“Sounds like my kids, all right,” Sarah grumbled, then yawned loudly. The medicine was doing its job and making her sleepy.

Jed rose and left the room for a moment, then came back with an armload of videos. “I know you like something on while you sleep, so we’ll do an ‘I, Claudius’ marathon, followed by a ‘STNG’ marathon. I kinda enjoy making Patrick Stewart do some fancy time travelling. I hope he gets frequent flier miles.” By the time the first few minutes of ‘I, Claudius’ had played, Jed looked over to find that Sarah was sound asleep. When he returned to her room an hour later, Jed saw that the covers were down to her mid-thigh and the nightgown had bunched up in front, exposing her luxurious charms to his heated gaze. His throat grew dry as the excitement at seeing her nearly naked in his bed flooded through his body, pooling in his genitals, until he saw the line of dark purple and green bruises around her middle. Without thinking, he sank down on the bed, making her moan softly in her sleep. Still, he couldn’t get up or keep his fingertips from gently grazing the vivid evidence of just what his mistake in judgment had cost her.

When Sarah woke, it was to the feeling that butterflies were flitting their wings around her stomach. What she saw was Jed, kissing each of the bruises on her ribs with the utmost tenderness. “What are you doing?” she asked sleepily.

Jed lifted his tear-filled eyes to hers automatically, then blinked them away, clearing his throat. But he didn’t flinch from saying what he was thinking in a quiet, husky voice. “I’m so sorry for what I did, and what I thought, and what I said, Sarah.” There was absolutely no hint of the usual arrogant confidence in his tone.

The sincerity of his humility surprised her. It was completely unexpected. For some strange, unknown reason, she felt compelled to say something to assuage his guilt. “It’s

not as bad as it looks. You know how easily I bruise.”

He knew from personal experience how wonderfully her bottom reddened with the firm application of his broad, flat hand. But that intimate knowledge had no bearing on what he had allowed to happen by virtue of his own unnecessarily suspicious mind. “I still should have trusted you more – I should have known that you would never behave like that.” Jed swallowed hard, never taking his eyes from hers. “I don’t have any excuses for my behavior, Sarah. There aren’t any. But I do apologize, and I intend to spend the rest of my days trying to make it up to you in the hopes that some day you’ll forgive me.”

Sarah was at an uncharacteristic loss for words for a long moment, then said, “Don’t bother beating yourself up about it, Jed. What’s past is past. All we can do is go on from there.” Her tentative smile was heartbreaking. “I’m sure you’ll find someone eventually – “

Jed frowned. “I’ve already found the person I want – you,” he declared stubbornly.

Sarah frowned right back at him. “Well then get over it, because I don’t want you any longer.”

He was completely unwilling to accept that. Her body would betray her every time. Thick, strong fingers snuck up on her, delving between her legs before she had a chance to protest. When she began to writhe, trying to buck him off, her back spasmed and she moaned. “Shhhhh. You’d better stay as still as you can, darlin’,” he advised, his fingers continuing to probe her wetness until the pad of his middle finger settled possessively over her delicate pleasure nub, rubbing it gently but insistently. This time her moan was one of pure pleasure.

“Take your hands off m-me, J-Jed McCade,” she groaned as the sensations he was relentlessly creating rapidly became unbearable. She was annoyed to find that her nipples had already stiffened at his familiar touch, and her breathing had quickened at her body’s remembrance of past pleasures from his strong hands.

“Ahhhh, sweetheart,” he breathed, leaning forward just enough to capture a delicately peaked pink nipple with his lips.

Despite the white-hot pleasure he was conjuring in her body, Sarah moaned, “Please don’t do this to me, Jed. I can’t take it!”

He desperately wanted to bring her what pleasure he could, but he didn’t want to have to force it on her. But he had proven that she would still respond to him. Her body recognized him, and his recognized hers. It was too soon, Jed acknowledged to himself, withdrawing his hand to the more neutral territory of her arm and releasing her nipple to leave it wet and wanting, at attention like parts of himself. Jed restored the nightgown as well as was possible considering her position, then cleared his throat. “Shall we continue with the marathon?”

Sarah’s recovery came along nicely. The doctor at the ER had said she should be on her back for a week to ten days, and he made sure it was the full ten days, even though she

was extremely antsy by the end. He kept her as entertained as possible – playing games, watching videos . . . he brought her laptop over from her house so she could lay quietly and work on her book as soon as she got more comfortable sitting up.

Eric came out to see Sarah once he found out where she was. His first visit was around lunchtime, and he made a detour to follow Jed in to the kitchen before going to see her. “You realize I owe you a punch in the mouth for the way you’ve treated her,” he said without preamble, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

Jed’s mouth quirked. “I’m sorry for that and I’m trying to make it up to her.” He faced his long time friend. “But it’ll probably make us both feel better if you just go ahead and take a swing. I won’t hit you back.” His arms were loose at his side as he waited for Eric to decide whether or not he was going to deck him.

The temptation was certainly there, and Eric made Jed wait a good long time before he said, “No, I don’t believe I want to do anything that might make you feel the least bit relieved.” His gaze narrowed. “No, I think I’ll wait to see if Sarah forgives you, then I’ll decide whether I’m going to wipe the floor with you.”

Sarah was overjoyed to see Eric, who bent his tall frame down to hug her carefully. The first words out of his mouth were, “Is he treating you ok?”

Jed snorted as he put the lunch tray on the nightstand.

Sarah blushed. “Yes, he’s been a perfect gentleman and he’s been keeping me from going crazy – “

“ – Short putt – “ Eric teased, occupying Jed’s chair by the bed while still holding her hand in his.

She blew him a loud raspberry. “How is Lily?”

They chatted for a short while then Eric left, not wanting to tire her. The last words out of his mouth as he left Jed at the door were a growled warning, “You’d better not hurt her again, boy.”

“I’m going to ask her to marry me, you idiot.”

That stopped Eric in his size 13 tracks. “And you’ll be damned lucky if she accepts, you realize.” It was a statement, not a question.

Jed nodded gravely. “Very, very lucky. I’ll gladly spend the rest of my life making it up to her, if she’ll let me.”

Eric squashed his hat onto his head. “See that you do. Even if she doesn’t let you.” Before too long, Sarah was able to get out of bed and sit in the living room, in the comfortable, ratty old recliner he favored. He had taken her back to the doctor, who said that things seemed to be progressing well, and that she could do whatever activity didn’t hurt too much to do. That sounded intelligent to the both of them.

But Sarah was always trying to push the limits, and Jed was always trying – usually unsuccessfully – to get her to go slow. Boy, did he know someone who was going to get her bottom blistered when she got to feeling better! She sassed him and disobeyed him all the time, and he knew he was going to have to put his foot down shortly, but he also knew that all of this brattiness was a sign that she was feeling better. It was nice to have her up and around. The pinched, pained expression was gone from her face, and although she seemed a little quieter than usual around him, things had largely gotten back to normal.

Because she was feeling so well, Jed, who had completely vacated his bed because he didn't want to jiggle the old mattress unconsciously or roll into her in his sleep, decided that tonight was the night that he was going to reclaim both his bed and his lover.

Sarah, on the other hand, was thinking that she was definitely well enough to be by herself in her own house. If she needed help, she had neighbors and a multitude of friends who would come to her assistance. She wanted to go home, and get as far away from Jed McCade as was possible, because her angry feelings toward him were starting to fade dangerously from her mind, and she didn't want to pick up where they had left off after what he had done to her. She had been too hurt. He didn't love her, anyway; she was just someone to warm his bed and cook for him.

When Jed came in for dinner, which he had cooking in the crock pot already, the first thing he saw was Sarah's suitcase by the door. As she was coming slowly in from the living room to greet him, she watched his face set as he determinedly picked up the suitcase and walked back into his bedroom with it. Sarah hobbled after him in a grotesque imitation of his limp, yelling, "Jed McCade, you put that back by the door! You're going to take me home where I belong after dinner," she huffed. Jed already had the suitcase opened and was putting her things back into the drawers they had occupied during her stay. Sarah limped back and forth, too, putting all that stuff back into her suitcase.

Instead of getting angry, though, Jed smiled at the stubborn woman he loved.

"What are you standing there grinning like an idiot for?" she accused, throwing her clothes at him instead of into the luggage.

Jed closed the suitcase and put it on the floor, then grabbed Sarah firmly but gently and deposited her on the big bed. He lay down beside her with exquisite care, watching her face for any signs of pain, but there were none. He rose on his arms above her, wanting her to see him when he told her. "I love you. You're not going anywhere. We're going to get married and live happily ever after."

"Or else?" Sarah supplied sarcastically.

"Or else," he agreed. Her face was expressionless at his pronouncement as if she were entirely underwhelmed by it. That and her silence were driving him up the wall. He had told her that he loved her, bared his soul to her, and there was no response. She simply lay beneath him, breathing calmly. "Did you hear me, dammit? I love you!"

Her caustic voice ate at him. “And what a romantic way you have with words, too, Mr. McCade.”

Jed sighed heavily and sank down next to her on the bed. Sarah immediately tried to get up, but a heavily muscled leg was placed strategically – if gently – over hers, preventing any escape.

“I said you’re not going anywhere,” he growled.

“Going to tie me to the bed, are you?” she taunted pertly, not expecting the vehement answer she got.

“If necessary, yes.” His eyes lowered to half-mast and his voice took on a deep, amorous tone, “I can see all kinds of advantages in that.”

“It’ll certainly make the kidnapping trial interesting.”

Jed’s sigh this time was one of exasperation. He reached up and turned her head to his, so that she had to look at him. “I do love you, Sarah Marie Jenkins,” the softly romantic words sounded lovely to her ears, but her brain rejected them.

“You don’t have to go overboard with your apologies, Jed. You’ve done your penance, and I’m ready to get out of your hair.”

“Are you not listening to me, or are you just being your usual stubborn, bratty self?”

Sarah played with the button on her blouse. “No, I’m just ignoring you.”

Jed tipped her chin up so that she had no choice but to look at him. “Well, stop it before I take you over my knee and give you the attitude adjustment you’ve been bucking for the past couple of weeks.”

Her eyes flared in alarm. “As I’ve said before, we no longer have that kind of relationship. You have no right –“

“I have every right,” Jed asserted firmly, settling himself carefully against the cradle of her hips. “Am I hurting your back?”

Although she wished she could answer in the affirmative so that he would get off her, she had never lied to him, and if she started hurting again he’d only keep her here that much longer. “No.”

“Good.” For a long moment all he did was drink in her face and the way her red gold curls fanned out over his pillow. Then his face hardened with intent. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’ll let you tattoo it onto my chest with a rusty nail if it’ll help you feel better. God knows I’m kicking myself in the pants enough about what I did. I’m a complete idiot and I don’t deserve a woman as wonderful as you.”

Sarah remained quiet at his little speech.

“Marry me anyway. You can devote yourself to reforming me and needling me and driving me up a wall with your sexy body.” Jed swallowed and said while staring straight into her eyes, “And I’ll spend the rest of my days trying to show you just how much I love you until God takes the breath from my body.”

A tear slipped down the side of her face and she closed her eyes against the force of his will. “And if I say no?”

She heard him draw a long breath. “Then I’ll get out the ropes, and make love to you every free minute I have until I get you pregnant. Then you’ll marry me so our baby will have a name.”

Her eyes opened, full of tears. “Jed,” she whispered, “I couldn’t take it if you hurt me like that again. I don’t know if I can forgive you enough to – to even continue to date you, much less marry you.”

Jed rolled onto his side, gathering her tightly against him. “Would you like to deck me like Eric threatened to? Would that help?”

“He what?” This was the first she was hearing about this.

Jed’s eyes grew hard. “He defended you to me just after it happened, then when he came to visit you the first time, he said he owed me a punch in the nose.” He picked up her hand and played with her delicate fingers. “Seems he believed in you more than I did, and that’s my shame to bear. But I’ll never doubt you again, honey. Ever.”

Sarah swallowed hard, but said nothing, merely contemplating her small hand in his much bigger one.

He was getting a little concerned that she might actually refuse to continue seeing him, and it made his more dominant, less coddling, side appear. “I want you as my wife, Sarah Marie, but I’ll take you any way I can get you. You’re here with me now, where you belong, and that’s where you’re going to stay.” As he talked, he began to strip her, brushing her protesting hands away firmly. He was so much bigger than she was; if he wanted to make love to her, she knew there was nothing she could do to stop him.

When they were both naked on the bed and he had again settled himself against the cradle of her hips, his swollen member at the welcoming softness of her body, Jed caught her eye again, looking for true signs of resistance. “I want you,” his voice was guttural with desire. “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone else. And I love you, more than myself, more than this ranch, more than I’ve ever loved anyone else and ever will love anyone else. You make my world complete; if I have you I have everything. Without you, I’m only half-alive. You’re my sunrise and my kiss goodnight, and everything good in between.”

Sarah couldn’t stop herself from reaching out to cup his wet cheek.

“Be my wife, Sarah. I want to love you and hold you and spank you and get you pregnant and chase you around the living room . . . “

Her own eyes full of tears, too, Sarah injected, “Not in that order, I hope.”

The look of hope that jumped into his eyes at her response made her heart ache. “Any order you want, babe.”

In answer she lifted her hips in welcome, taking him partially inside her without any assistance from him. That was all the invitation he needed to press himself into her completely, stretching her excruciatingly sensitive flesh, demanding that she accommodate him, yield to him.

He stopped there, and leaned a little away from her. “Back ok?” Sarah nodded, and he could see nothing but pleasure flushed over her face. Still his loving was slow and gentle, totally overwhelming her with sensation after sensation – Jed drove her out of herself and into a realm of pure pleasure. Her strong spasms were the end of his control as he exploded inside her, groaning loudly and collapsing onto of her for a few seconds, only to practically hop off of her, apologizing all the way.

“Are you okay? I didn’t mean to – “

“I’m fine. I’m not made of glass, you know. If it hurts, I’ll tell you.”

Jed reached over and kissed her cheek. “I like treating you like you’re made of glass. It’s good practice for when you become pregnant.”

Smugly, Sarah returned, “Excellent. That means you’re not going to spank me any more.” She rolled onto her side and Jed curled around her just like she liked.

“In your dreams, honeybunch.” His hand reached down to squeeze a vulnerable cheek. “As a matter of fact, you have a good long session coming for several reasons.”

“Bullshit. Yeow!” He hadn’t spanked her, but he did pinch her hard.

“That’s reason number one – your language. Number two is for being a stubborn brat while you were recovering. And number three is the big one – for not telling me about the fact that Curry was harassing you and leaving nasty messages on your machine. If you’d told me, I could have protected you from him.”

Sarah snorted. “If he hadn’t killed you first.”

Jed’s arms tightened around her. “I would have made damn sure that neither of us ever got hurt. And I’ve enjoyed beating that bastard to a pulp.”

She could feel how tense he was getting just at the thought. “It’s all over now. He wasn’t right in the head at the end. That’s probably why he fixated on me.”

Jed smiled broadly while clearing his throat loudly in her ear. “I’ll let that one pass. It’s

too easy.” Sarah slapped him. “I will agree, though, that he couldn’t have been right in the head in the first place to let you slip away from him.” Jed’s voice was low and husky with emotion as he hugged her tightly. “Right here is my own piece of heaven, and I’m not lettin’ go.”

## Epilogue

Sarah could hear those familiar disreputable boots clomping across the foyer, thorough the kitchen, then out to where they sat on the patio that surrounded the pool. Jed immediately squatted next to the lounge chair where she held their greedily suckling daughter against her breast. “How are my two best girls?” he asked, dropping a gentle kiss on his wife’s mouth and another just as gentle on the baby’s bare head.

“We’re fine, Daddy.” Jed sat on the chair next to her. He loved to watch Sarah and the baby, and loved the fact that Sarah had insisted on nursing their child. Her labor had been long and hard, and Sarah had thought it was much harder on him than on her. Jed thought that he would never recover from it. He had vowed that they would never have another one – he couldn’t stand for her to be in that much pain. But he wouldn’t have missed the moment his brand new daughter was placed into his waiting hands. Jed had brought the infant up to hold her next to Sarah’s face so she could see her better.

“It’s a girl,” he’d said with a meaning that only the two of them understood.

Sarah smiled, knowing that he would insist on naming her “Angel”. Jed had informed her one night when they were lying in bed mulling over names in her fourth month or so, that if their child was a girl, she would be named “Angel” since her mother was Heaven to him and angels came from Heaven.