



Two True Loves

By Carolyn Faulkner

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Prologue

He woke her up in the most pleasant of possible manners – that hot, wet mouth of his gluing itself over her most precious part, his soft, broad tongue settling right over her already stiff bud, just lying there for the longest time, surrounding and engulfing her pleasure center in an act of outright ownership. When he began to move, it was in the smallest of ways, barely working his tongue back and forth on her, rubbing her, pressing only slightly – just enough to let her know he meant business.

Lana couldn't keep the guttural moan to herself; it escape through her mouth and filled the room as he arranged her ankles on his shoulders, splaying her gently but inexorably for his own pleasure and hers, never detaching his mouth from its snug home. She reached down to run her fingers through his short hair, loving the feeling of it on her fingers, knowing it was his, making her realize just exactly what he was doing. She didn't know whether she should encourage him or try to pry him away – neither direction would preserve her sanity, she was sure. She couldn't imagine how lost she would be if he stopped but should she be letting him do this to her? The intimacy – dear God the pleasure – was almost more than she could stand.

When he began flicking her, firmly but demandingly, Lana had to arch her hips against him. The low groans and growls she heard were unrecognizable even to her own ears. Burke reached up and caught one of her wrists, circling it with his fingers and pinning it to the bed beside her hip. The fingers of his other hand roamed her natural cleft from the bottom to that sweet, weeping well where they stopped and pressed, slowly, twisting slightly, making every nerve in that very sensitive spot riot along the way, stretching her open almost to capacity, creating that wonderful, stretchy hurt that was such a perfect contrast to the loving ministrations of her tongue.

The storm snuck up on her, hitting her all at once, before she had a chance to come to grips with it, before she could prepare herself and build her mental defenses . . . before she could cope. It washed over every inch of her body from the tips of her toes to the split ends of her hair, convulsing her body beneath those suckling lips and on those stiff, uncompromising fingers. Lana bucked and arched and screamed in ecstasy, expelling every ounce of breath in her body.

Burke loved to see her so completely engulfed in pleasure. She was absolutely mindless with it, and he made sure she experienced every bit of it he could conjure for her, not letting her dissuade him from bringing her up to the very same mountain top for a second . . . third . . . fourth time, until she was completely wrung out from it and begging him to stop.

He loved hearing her beg, knowing he had pushed her to the limits of her body's tolerance. Burke moved away slowly, not wanting to startle her in any way, slowly rising up between those slender legs, keeping them over his shoulders, dragging himself up her and kissing every inch between until he reached a tempting nipple, replacing one erect bud with another. His bursting cock found the opening to her furrow naturally; its weeping tip slipping inside her easily, but she was so small, even after his fingers, that the rest of him took agonizing seconds to open her.

She was surprised by his bold claim and he absorbed every shocked whimper, every vulnerable whisper of his name as she surrendered her body to him by slow millimeters. He sank into her by weight alone, suckling avidly on a nipple, knowing that as soon as he'd made it all the way, as soon as he felt his balls resting against her open, dripping cleft, he would lose control completely and it would be over for him.

And it was. Almost instantaneously. He had to plunge – there was no avoiding the urge – but he'd already begun to spew himself inside her with a loud, bare toothed growl.

Lana tried to absorb the shock of his entry, to come to terms with his intimate possessions of her, first with his mouth, then with that enormous cock of his. At the last she was trapped – there was nothing she could

have done to prevent him from entering her with her legs splayed and hooked over those broad shoulders. She was at his mercy, and she was beginning to realize that, in bed, he didn't have any.

She held him against her, closing her eyes against that unfamiliar feeling welled up in her heart, spreading through her body with more force than any orgasm she'd ever had in her life, occupying her mind though she tried not to let it.

Love. Dear God, her mind whispered at the behest of her heart, she loved him. Her love for Craig had just . . . been there; they'd been together forever and she couldn't remember a time when she didn't love him. Stronger than almost anything she'd ever experienced, it filled every crevasse of her body, alerted every pore and nerve. She felt throbbingly, excruciatingly alive, for the first time in her life.

And scared out of her ever loving mind.

Luckily for her, he'd pressed a somewhat absent kiss to her forehead and collapsed as he rolled over her, apologizing profusely but groggily for following the usual male routine of practically falling asleep before the last stroke. Lana's mouth twisted wryly. Normally, she might have complained and tried to keep him awake for some snuggling, but this time the typical male routine worked nicely.

She was able to slip out of the bed and into that sexy black slip dress she'd bought especially for the occasion . . . well, she'd been coerced into buying, anyway, slithering into her barely there panties but not bothering with the black hose. Small, pink tipped toes were tucked into pretty ballerina style flats, a concession to the atrocious, hereditary state of said feet. She was consigned by freak of birth to a lifetime of Nikes and orthopedic inserts when what she really craved, especially with this flirty little confection, was to wear something like a Manolo Blahnik stiletto heeled sling back . . .

Dressed to the nines – footwear excluded – fervently wishing she had a brush of some sort to dispel the bed head their lovemaking had inflicted on what eight hours ago had been a carefully careless riot of curls. Lana stood next to the bed and looked down at him.

Oh, how the mighty had fallen. She snorted. Right onto that huge sword of his. A little intelligent talk, some witty banter, a gorgeous man in a tux, and she fell off the wagon with a resounding thud heard round the world. Well, if the world consisted of little Summerville, Tennessee, and for the most part, hers did. Thinking of the amazed expressions on her friends' faces – and, oh my God, her sister's – was enough to bring an evil smile to her face. It was almost worth it.

But not quite, considering that the person that mattered the most in the world was her daughter, and there was no telling how little Lily might take the news . . . Thank God she was safe with her Aunt Marilyn.

And then Craig's face floated in her mind's eye for the smallest of seconds, wiping that smile off her face almost violently. What was she doing here? Was she out of her mind?

He rolled over in his sleep, throwing his left arm over his hip, and it winked at her accusatorily even in the dim light of the hotel room.

It hadn't been a dream, although it was an accident, a terrible, terrible accident.

She'd known him for all of three hours, even if she was generous and included their short phone conversations. And she couldn't even claim inebriation, because they'd been stone cold sober when they'd done it. A high blush rose to her cheeks as more intimate details played behind her eyes. Both "its".

Summerville's most confirmed, reverent widow, Lana Avril Thorpe Hutchinson, stared down at her new husband in all his considerable glory, her mouth watering at the muscular line of his back and those broad shoulders. He wasn't muscle bound, but he certainly knew what he was doing with what he had, she thought irreverently.

She swallowed, amazed and ashamed at how her libido seemed to have infected her consciousness. She was Craig's wife – she'd been his wife since she'd been an adult. He was all she knew and all she cared to know.

Until now.

That cheap ten karat ring on his finger glared at her; she wanted to reach down and snatch it off his finger and throw it out the window, but she squashed the urge as tears darkened splotches on the sheets. Her own

matching ring was already in the palm of her right hand, as she would have sworn that the skin it had claimed burned with the insincerity of it all.

The ring issued a tinny clink when she placed it on the nightstand next to his watch, and stalked out of the room without casting even the slightest glance back towards the stranger lying on the bed.

Her husband.

Chapter 1

Ten days earlier:

“TAKE IT OFF! TAKE IT OFF!!” The audience chanted wildly. He was sure some of them were reaching around behind them to take off their bras!

How the hell did I let myself get roped into this?

He was the next one up on stage, and his dresser was still fiddling with his shirt. Every time she unbuttoned a button, he closed it again. If she had her way, he was going to go up there looking like some two bit stripper, and that was the last kind of image he wanted to present! He was a respectable, respected businessman not some hard bodied boy trying to strut his way through college. At least he'd been able to fend the ones off that had come bearing make up. That was definitely one place he drew the line.

Hell – he was too damned old for this! He was still in damned fine shape, though, if he did say so himself, thanks to his home gym where he could workout whenever he got a free moment – which wasn't often. But still. He could hear those man hungry women chanting as Rick smiled and winked and strutted out there, trying to eke as much money out of them as he could . . . all in the name of charity, of course.

That was what he had to keep in mind. This was all for charity. All for charity. He started to say it in his mind like a mantra, but it wasn't working.

Rick slapped his shoulder as he stepped down off the runway and into the staging area where Burke stood waiting to be introduced.

Simone Quinlan from Channel Five was the pseudo auctioneer. She was a pretty bottled blonde, but she had that hard look that Burke detested, as if she'd seen it all and done and it all and wasn't much impressed by any of it.

“Next, ladies, comes the piece de resistance.”

Oh, thanks, Simone. No pressure there, he thought, rolling his eyes.

His young dresser had succeeded, just before he climbed those steps onto the runway, in getting almost all of his buttons undone, and Burke wasn't about to be seen trying to button them all back up like some prude. He was wearing a simple, James Bond-esque tux, but, according to everyone on the stylists' staff it looked gorgeous on him, setting off his naturally tanned skin and complimenting his conservatively cut obsidian hair.

And as soon as he unbuttoned the jacket, as he was supposed to do as he walked down to the end of the platform, the dress shirt would hang open, as he'd just come from some office tryst, showing off his flat, rippled belly to its best advantage, framed by the starched white shirt.

“Not only is he the president and CEO of Daniels Industries – one of the largest companies in Summerville – but he's also one of the handsomest eligible bachelors in the state – Burke Daniels!”

Burke pasted on the patent smile he used when he was meeting with the press and stalked onto the runway. The lights were blinding and broiling hot, and the women! He'd heard sailors with better language!

“Burke is six feet, six inches tall and weighs two hundred and thirty pounds.” She'd timed his physical description to correspond with his loss of the jacket, which only served to rouse the natives to a fever pitch. “And

it looks from here like all of those pounds are solid, rippling muscles.” She actually had the audacity to come over to him and pull apart the shirt, giving everyone a bird’s eye view of his abs. “What’s my first bid, ladies? Do I hear five hundred for this gorgeous specimen of a man? He could eat crackers in my bed any day! I’m sure he’d fix your motherboard but good.”

Burke had a hard time not rolling his eyes again. Great. Innuendo about computers because that was what his company manufactured. He looked out over the crowd, his face muscles cramping from all the smiling. There were women out there who were old enough to be his grandmother, for God’s sake, and they were the ones who were screaming the loudest. Someone who looked a little too much like his granny was fervently waving a D cup flag at him as if he was some sort of rock star or something.

Simone had twelve opening bids in an instant, and it only escalated to truly enormous proportions from there. Charity. All for charity, Burke kept repeating as he smiled and posed and tried not to feel like a slab of meat at a butcher shop, or a slave at an auction, even though that was essentially the idea.

It really was for a very worthy charity – the Heart Association. Both of Burke’s parents had died of heart disease, and they were the charity that his company supported the most heavily, although there were others, who didn’t ask CEOs to parade themselves around like thoroughbred horses. When he met them, he’d already had his checkbook out in anticipation of writing them a big check, but instead they’d come calling about their annual bachelor auction, and he didn’t really feel as if he could turn them down, although he’d pressed a some of his upper management team into it, too. Misery loved company.

The bidding got to seventy five hundred before settling down a bit. It had stood at eighty one hundred when Simone started her “going once” routine. She’d already picked up the gavel to say “gone” when someone, from the darker, far back of the room, called out loud and clear, “Ten thousand dollars.”

He’d already garnered higher bids than anyone else in the show. Ten thousand dollars was an enormous amount for just one supposedly romantic dinner with him. Until he’d appeared, the highest anyone had gone for was fifteen hundred. Burke grimaced. Nothing like the hint of a little high priced prostitution to raise the stakes a bit.

He didn’t care if her bid matched the national debt and she was Michelle Pfeiffer herself. It was going to be a very staid evening. Burke didn’t appreciate being the quarry at all; he was much more comfortable in the position of hunter.

The best description of Burke’s approach to woman was old fashioned, at best, although some women considered it outright Neanderthal. His mother had raised him as a Southern Gentleman. His father had shown him how a man treats a woman purely by example. In Gregory Daniels’ eyes, his wife could do no wrong . . . usually. He adored her, and that’s what he showed, unashamedly, to his sons and the world. Penny Daniels was treated like fine porcelain, and, once they were financially stable, what she wanted, she got.

Luckily, Gregory had chosen well. The only thing Penny wanted was him. She wasn’t a woman who demanded much of anything except love and undivided attention from her man, and Gregory was only too happy to provide for her every need. Along the way, though, he did see to it that she had the things she wanted but would never demand – a beautiful house, enough clothes and shoes to choke a horse, and the occasional, always tasteful, trinket.

He wanted what his father had had, and, not having found it yet, Burke had reached the ripe age of forty two with no divorces. No marriages, either, but no divorces. No children. And only one badly ended engagement when he was a hormone filled teen fresh out of high school.

No one had really piqued his interest. He dated, sometimes regularly, but even the most promising of relationships withered and died. And it wasn’t because of his old fashioned attitudes towards women, either. Burke had found that most women enjoyed being treated with more than the common modicum of courtesy. He opened doors, stood when they entered a room, and he never drove away until he’d made sure his date had gotten inside her house or apartment safely.

Burke was a one woman man. When he’d committed to a woman – even if they were only dating and just decided to see each other exclusively – he never looked at anyone else under any circumstances. He had very

strong instincts about caring for the woman he was involved with, and, to some women, that felt like smothering rather than caring. Those dates never developed into relationships. But there had been the occasional woman – and he knew it only took one – where they actually graduated to being a couple, both physically and emotionally.

But, despite his more modest tendencies, he also had an ample sex drive, and loved to spend lazy Sunday mornings in bed, making love. Or lazy Tuesday afternoons. Burke didn't much care when, or where – he was all for christening any room in the house. He'd found that most women couldn't keep up with him, and his frequent needs sometimes became a bone of contention. He wasn't about to push himself on any woman, ever, so eventually the disparity in their sex drives, and his taste for spankings that went beyond the occasional sensual foreplay, would pull them apart.

He shook his head. Ten thousand dollars for a date with him – a man who had never been married and was reasonably well off. It was mind boggling.

The woman who'd stood up and made the bid was not, thankfully, one of the grandmothers – he didn't think. She was standing so far in the shadows that he couldn't make out much in the way of detail about her. She seemed to be hanging back in the shadows as much as possible.

Simone was over the moon. That bid – as well as the others – made this the most successful auction they'd ever had, and she had presided over it. It would be an excellent addition to her resume. Before the woman changed her mind or withdrew her bid, Simone yelled, "Going, going, gone!" and smashed her gavel down so hard it nearly broke. "I'm sure you're going to be very happy with your purchase."

Burke grimaced at the use of that term, but seized the opportunity to walk off stage as quickly as he could, back to the dressing room where he could get back into his own clothes. Once he'd done that, he was supposed to report to a kind of a cocktail party for the winning bidders, where they could meet the people they'd "bought" and make arrangements for their date.

Suddenly thirsty, he grabbed a glass of punch and drank it all down practically in one gulp. When he put the glass down, she was standing there, blushing an entirely unbecoming fire engine red. "Mr. Daniels?"

Burke shook the extended delicate hand, making sure not to crush her fingers or embed any rings into her flesh. But he wanted to withdraw his hand immediately as she tried to with a small frown – touching her was like touching a live wire that when right to his cock, which was about to embarrass him mightily if she noticed the instant, enormous bulge at the front of his pants.

He grimaced, letting her hand go just short of impolitely. In a matter of five seconds, she'd managed to disconcert him, and Burke didn't like to feel any way but completely in charge, especially of himself and his reactions. Despite his high sex drive, he wasn't sixteen anymore, and that wasn't supposed to still be happening.

She wasn't even startlingly gorgeous, where he might be able to give his libido a bit of a pass. She wasn't ugly, either; she was average. Pleasant looking, but unremarkable. Her skin had been soft and warm against his, and her voice flowed over him like liquid silk, wrapping even more firmly around his engorged self.

"I'm Lana Hutchinson. I didn't actually buy you for myself. My sister, Marilyn, wanted to meet you, and couldn't make it here tonight to bid. So I'm kind of the proxy, if you will. This is her contact information. She's looking forward to hearing from you." She pressed a card into his hand, careful not to touch him again.

She smiled at him, a very soft, wistful smile with the slightest touch of sadness, and he was totally lost. Goosebumps formed on his forearms, and his heart began to bang against his sternum. He wanted her, and he intended to have her. And if what he was feeling right now was any indication, nothing short of marrying her – preferably a barefoot but not necessarily pregnant style marriage where she was never more than arm's reach away from him.

Burke was not used to startling himself, but it seemed that with this woman it was becoming a common occurrence. Neanderthal intentions towards a woman were something very new to him – how could he possibly be this possessive of a woman he'd known for all of five seconds? His genitals contracted as the soft scent of her perfume teased his nostrils, reminding him that he'd become fully engaged at just the touch of her hand.

Proxy, hell, he thought. He didn't care who her sister was – he'd honor his obligation to the letter, but he fully intended to woo and wed the woman who was standing in front of him right now . . .

Only she wasn't anywhere in sight. While he'd been busily plotting in his big head – and fantasizing in his little one, she'd slipped away into the crowd. His eyes shot to the exits, and he barely caught a glimpse of the soft pink dress she was wearing as it disappeared out into the night.

Apparently, he was the only one who'd felt the incredible, undeniable attraction that had flooded him the moment he'd taken her hand and looked into those big blue eyes. Either that or she was more adept at hiding her reaction than he was – he knew there was no way anyone who looked at his hips was going to have any illusions about what he was feeling. He started walking determinedly without thinking about it, his hunter's instincts kicking into high gear, but halfway through the annoying crowd of people, he relaxed a little, realizing that he still had a connection to her through her sister. All was not lost.

Chapter 2

For her part, Lana barely made it to her car. When she slid behind the wheel of the small, sporty Celica, she literally collapsed, resting her forehead on the wheel with a long, ragged sigh, squirming as she felt the undeniable evidence of her desire for that gorgeous hunk of masculinity back there dampen her panties. She was still shaking with the same fervor as she had been when she'd first seen him on the runway. Those laser black eyes cut right through her years of mourning as if they'd never existed, nearly knocking her on her butt right in the middle of the throng of screaming, middle aged adolescents.

Right to her – right through the sorrow and the pain to her, awakening a part of her she'd thought long dead, one that only Craig had touched . . . until now. Her first instinct had been to run right then and there. She didn't want this, didn't want him or any part of him, even the more interesting pieces her body had somehow come to crave when she'd never even so much as spoken to him.

Lana had never believed in anything like love at first sight. She and Craig had been raised by next door neighbors, had napped in the same crib, played in the same backyards since the day they were born. They'd been stitched together at the hip through thick and thin, and had married right out of high school. Why, she'd never known any man but Craig – in the biblical sense of the word – and she could honestly say that she'd never had any interest in anyone else.

Until now.

Until one Burke Daniels sauntered down that runway like he owned it. And he might as well have, considering he owned most of everything else of any worth in the town. She'd seen pictures of him in the local – and some national – papers and magazines. He was a self-made man who'd started a computer company in his basement, and now owned a multi-national conglomerate who was one of the largest employers in the state. He'd been hailed as a hero for not moving jobs overseas and, indeed, pledged to expand in Tennessee and elsewhere. He lived in the same town he'd grown up in, not too far from the house where he was raised.

He was a hometown success story, and although he'd never married and was in his early forties, there had never been even so much as a hint that he might possibly be hitting for the other team. Pictures of his dates with beautiful women – some longtime friends and even the occasional Hollywood starlet – were splashed across the front page of the Summerville Gazette, which granted never had a whole lot to talk about besides deadly dull city council meetings and the occasional high speed chase down I-40, as if he was the one making the movies.

But nothing of what she'd seen previously had prepared her for the man in person. She went hot and cold all at once, and her heart began to throb behind her breast bone. It was a fight or flight response, and she knew which one she wanted to do. It was no wonder all those normally level headed women were practically prostrating themselves in front of him. His stance, his look, his subdued smiles fairly screamed confidence and authority. This was a man who knew what was right and did it, refusing to compromise along the way. And it didn't hurt that he had a full head – if rather shortly cropped head – of deeply black hair and shoulders that looked like they made it hard for him to fit through a door.

If she let herself admit it – and she wasn't in any particular hurry to do so – she was even more spellbound than the screaming soccer mom's who were already reaching for the back hooks of their bras. But that feeling – that overwhelming lust and attraction, the powerful and uncontrollable clenching between her legs – only forced her further into the shadows.

Unlike the rest of the rabble, she expressly did not want to be noticed by him. Her first impulse was to run. Somehow, deep in her practically exploding heart, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this man was going to radically change her life, and that was the last thing she wanted. But she had been bidding for her sister, and Marilyn had said not to come home without him, after giving her a bidding limit of fifteen thousand dollars.

The only thing that kept her sane was the knowledge that she wasn't going to be the one who was going to have to sit across from him at dinner. That would be Marilyn's place, thankfully. She could be the one who had to squirm under those piercing black eyes.

A sudden image of him looking out at her from under those eyes and a fiercely furrowed brow – looking very much as Craig had when she'd overdrawn the checkbook or gotten caught speeding. It was enough to revive the goose bumps that had slowly been fading from their handshake. That had been like a million volt electrical shock, and she knew that not one intelligent word had passed her lips from that point on, not that she'd been in great shape even just walking up to him. She'd had to practically force herself to do it.

But that image, of him looking down at her from that great height as if he was going to reach out and tug her over his knee any second, seemed to be burned into her brain. Lana shook her head deliberately, trying to disabuse herself of that notion. That was one man who was never going to be put into that situation.

Never.

Her cell phone rang as she pulled out of the parking lot, and she waited until she was safely on the highway to answer it, hands free. "Yeah, what?"

Her sister's snort filled the interior of the small car. "That's a friendly greeting! Sheesh!"

"I'm not in the mood."

"Ooooooh. Cranky! That time of the month, is it?"

Lana checked over her shoulder with a grimace while switching lanes. "How can you be a woman and be so sexist?"

She could hear something crunching in the background. "It's easy. I know myself."

"I know you, too, unfortunately. Put the Doritos down and talk to me. I just bought you a man, which, in case you don't remember, you don't need since you're already married."

Lana was glad she wasn't wearing the ear piece when Marilyn let out a crystal shattering squeal. "You did? Is he as cute as they say? Is he even more gorgeous up close?"

"He's all right."

Her sister's complete disinterest in men annoyed her to no end. Marilyn tsked loudly. "You have got to be kidding me. The man is a multi-millionaire, single, straight, and oh, by the way, drop dead gorgeous. What more do you need, woman?"

Lana shrugged. "I'm not looking, Marilyn, and you know that."

"But you should be. And . . . since you're not, I'm looking for you." Marilyn hadn't intended to drop the bomb over the phone, but it seemed like a good enough time as any.

"I know, I know. I remember all the blind dates you've set me up with. Our taste in men is about as different as it can get."

"Yes, but this man is perfect for you."

Feeling a little dense and wondering if she'd missed a conversational switch, Lana asked, "What man?"

"Burke Daniels."

"Huh?" Luckily, she suppressed the urge to slam on her brakes, thus avoiding a messy twelve car pile up.

"He's yours! Like you said, I don't need him. I'm very very happy and well taken care of by Carl." Lana knew this practically first hand – Marilyn was the queen of TMI. "Happy Birthday! Merry Christmas! Happy Haunaka! Whatever. He's yours."

After a truly exasperated sigh, Lana said as forcefully as she could, knowing her sister wouldn't hear a word of it, "But I don't want him, and I have no intentions of going out with the man."

"Look. I spent ten thousand dollars acquiring him for you. He's damned near perfect, and any woman within a thousand mile radius would give her right arm to have ten minutes with him, much less a complete romantic evening. So shut up and accept your gift graciously."

Lana refused to dignify that little speech with a response, especially since she'd never asked Marilyn to spend any money at all on her behalf. Not that Marilyn couldn't afford it. Carl was a contractor and made money hand over fist. Ten thousand only meant that Marilyn might have to give up getting the soles of her feet sanded or her ear hair waxed, Lana thought grumpily. The chilly silence stretched until it was positively uncomfortable.

Marilyn huffed. "You can be as pissed as you want, but you're the one who's going out with him, not me. I'm not going to pay that kind of money and then not have you do it. I'll kidnap you and drive you there myself if I have to."

And Lana wouldn't put that past her sister in the least. "I didn't ask you to spend the money, Marilyn."

"That's neither here nor there. It's spent, and you're going. You need to start living again. Craig would be very unhappy with how much of a hermit you've become."

"Bite me. And don't tell me how Craig would react."

There was a painful edge to her sister's voice that was all too familiar, so Marilyn deliberately softened her response. "Look. I'm not trying to force you into anything –"

"Yes, you are."

She paused and took a deep breath. "Yes, I guess I am. But I just hate to see you hurting so much, and I want to help you get comfortable with getting out there again. You don't have to spend the rest of your life alone. You don't. Consider this a tiny step back into the dating world again."

Lana sighed exasperatedly. "It's not a tiny step, not when there were hundreds of screaming women trying to catch this man's eye. And I really can choose my own men, you know."

"I know you can, and I know you got a real gem on the first try. But Craig wouldn't want you to just give up huge parts of your life and live like a recluse because he's gone."

The lump that formed in her throat was almost too big to swallow, and her words came out stilted and dulled. "I know."

Marilyn knew that her sister was on the verge of tears, so she backed off. She certainly didn't want her to be driving and bawling at the same time. "Anyway. You've got a date with a luscious, gorgeous man. You need some time out for yourself. I know it's not easy to trust someone with Lily's care while you go out, so I'll come over baby sit. No problem. You go out and have a great time – the dinner and dancing and limo and everything are paid for – not that he couldn't afford the whole thing himself. Just go out for the fun of it, and then you'll have something to brag about. You'll be one of the few women who have dated Burke Daniels – you know you'll be in some pretty exalted company."

Her snort was so hard it hurt her throat. "And you think that after having dated some of Hollywood's prettiest women that he's going to fall for me? Maybe it's not Doritos that I should be worrying about – what exactly have you been smoking, dropping, or rubbing into your belly lately? Anything interesting?"

Marilyn giggled. "Honey, the worst drug I've been using lately is Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk. I should be smart and just cut out the middle man and apply the pints directly to my hips."

"I'm right there with you. Everything I eat lately ends up there."

"Puh-leeze. You weigh ninety-eight pounds soaking wet with rocks in your pockets. I'm the one who got Mom's genes. You're the one who can eat anything she wants and not gain an ounce."

Lana groaned, wondering if her sister had really taken a good look at her lately. Middle age had not been kind, and the fabled spread was much more than an urban myth as far as Lana was concerned. Yes, she'd lost some weight since Craig died, but there was more than enough left over to make her self conscious about her body. She murmured, "I'm the one who doesn't have anyone watching what I eat for me any more."

Marilyn's husband, Carl, was one of Craig's best friends. The four of them had hung out together in high school, and Craig and Carl had similar ideas about how a husband should take care of his wife – and they both

extended to the idea that the husband, as head of the household, had a duty and a responsibility to keep their wife in line, one way or the other.

And the method they'd both chosen – and stuck to with incredible fortitude – was good old fashioned spankings. Both wives had spent innumerable hours over their respective husband's laps, crying and screaming and moaning as that big broad hand of correction imprinted itself on her bottom because she'd overspent or sped, or Craig's bugaboo, used a vulgarity.

In fact, Lana remembered with a full bodied blush that she had spent some time in the corner of Marilyn's huge dining room because of her choice of off color language. The sisters had grown up in a game playing family, and as they'd grown older their father, who was the biggest shark of them all in more ways than one, had taught them how to play penny ante poker, and that had quickly become a family tradition on Friday nights.

Even though their parents were gone, the girls kept the tradition going once they got married. It gave them all a chance to unwind and eat stuff that was bad for them and have some adult time. But both Marilyn and Lana played to win. When they were playing with their father, they could often come away with double or more their usual allowance.

When the last cards were revealed and Marilyn beat Lana for a pretty large pot, Lana let loose with a stream of invectives that were supposed to be under her breath, but Craig just caught as he was coming back in from the kitchen with a frosty St Pauly's Girl and a bowl of chips and salsa.

"What did you just say, missy?" Those words, in that tone, had sent a chill down Lana's back that made her nipples peak automatically, even though they weren't the part of her that was going to be attended to, she knew. But he wouldn't do anything here, in front of Carl and Marilyn, would he? She'd thought.

Wrong.

Craig hadn't even given her a chance to defend herself. "Get your nose into that corner, young lady." Without even looking at her, he pointed at the empty corner next to the window. It was across from him, where he'd be able to keep an eye on her.

Lana had cursed her sister's decorating sense – what was she, crazy to leave an open corner around her own husband, much less Lana's? Every corner in Lana's house was full of something – plants, book cases, anything so that she didn't have to spend interminable time there, fidgeting nervously and trying to forget that when she got called out, she was going to be punished.

But he wouldn't do that to her here, would he? She kept clinging to that feeble idea every step of the way. She hadn't thought he'd put her in the corner while her sister and brother in law were watching. And he had.

So there she'd stood. While everyone else continued playing, laughing and munching and drinking, she had to stand there and contemplate her navel, her bottom already stinging in anticipation and her stomach in knots from both the incredible embarrassment of being chastised in front of a crowd, and that horrid feeling of dread about the spanking itself.

Craig's spankings were not fun – never had been and never will be. They were not precursors to sex, although, only occasionally, they became just that. And they were not love pats, at least not in the casual sense of the word. They were love pats because he loved her and cared enough to correct her when she was wrong. But he spanked like he did everything else – to the fullest, and with his best effort – which meant that she knew from experience that she never wanted him ever spank her, although she always seemed to end up over his lap anyway for some reason or another, crying and kicking and begging and promising never to ever ever do it again.

To Lana's complete mortification, Marilyn had decided to make a valiant effort to try to get him to take pity on her younger sister. "Craig, why don't you let Lana come back and play poker? It's really not a good game to play three handed."

If she hadn't thought it would get her into more trouble than she was already in, Lana would have groaned aloud and hissed at her sister to shut the heck up.

But Carl stepped in long before Lana lost all control and said something in his quiet, understated way that Lana had to strain to hear. "Marilyn, what have I told you about interfering between Craig and Lana?"

She could have sworn she could hear Marilyn's gulp all the way over here. "But - "

"Marilyn." He only said one word. He didn't yell it, or raise the volume of his voice in any way.

Lana had to give her sister points for trying – but she recognized that tone. It was the tone all men who spanked their wives for discipline possessed and used to their advantage – judiciously, if they were smart, so that it had more impact. It meant something to the effect that "you'd better stop there or your sister's not going to be the only one in the pre-spanking corner." So she didn't feel bad when Marilyn didn't put up any more of a fight than she had.

She had to stand there for what seemed like several hours, worrying about whether he was going to spank her in front of an audience, too, but in reality was probably only about fifteen minutes.

"Carl, would you and Marilyn be good enough to excuse Lana and I for a moment?" she heard him ask, followed by chairs scraping the parquet wood floor accompanied by embarrassing and embarrassed mumbles by Carl and Marilyn, who exited quickly through the swinging door into the kitchen.

All Lana could do was pray for an earthquake, and/or that the two of them would not stand right by the door to hear what was going to happen next.

Unfortunately, she'd known which had the highest likelihood of being true. Lana almost stomped her foot. She didn't want to be spanked essentially *in front of* her sister and brother in law. The idea was just too embarrassing.

"Come here, Lana."

Oh, if only they were in bed and he was using that smooth, buttery tone. She literally dragged her bare feet every step of the way, until she stood directly in front of him. "You're not really going to do this here, are you?" she smiled, trying to cajole him out of even thinking about it. That swinging door certainly wasn't going to provide any sort of sound insulation. Craig and Marilyn might as well have just continued to play cards around them!

Lana made a silent, solemn vow that she was definitely going to have to take this spanking a quietly as she could – and that was a vow she made each and every time she got spanked, but had never once been able to keep past the first few swats.

But it went right over his head. She knew it was going to as soon as she saw that determined look on his face.

"If you hadn't chosen to break one of your rules, then I wouldn't have to do it here, now would I?" he'd said leaning back lazily in his chair. "Bend over the table."

Lana's eyes had bugged. "Lean over the table?" she'd repeated back to him, standing there in total amazement.

His eyebrow headed for his scalp. "Did I say something you didn't understand?"

She gulped, mumbling a soft, "No, Sir," before complying.

Craig had stood, positioning himself right next to her, his hand claiming her barely clad bottom. Lana bit her lip and damned her fashion sense for not wearing better protection. She supposed she should at least be thankful that he wasn't making her take her pants and panties down, which was absolutely unheard of. She always got punished on the bare. Even before he began swatting, she was mentally ripping apart her wardrobe and throwing every pair of pants she owned that were like the light cotton capris she had worn tonight. She might as well have been bare for all the help against his hard as a paddle right hand.

"Now, you know that I don't tolerate language like that from you under any circumstances. This is hardly the first spanking I've had to give you about this. I don't know why you thought you'd get away with it here, but I'm not about to let you. I'm going to give you a good, hard spanking and then you're going to apologize to your sister and Carl and we're going to go home, where you can try to convince me not to give a dose of my belt."

The word "belt" corresponded with the first spank, and it cracked out of his mouth with the same force that his hand connected with her tensed bottom.

Lana gritted her teeth and sucked back in the moan that was halfway up her throat. She did not want to give Marilyn, especially, any more of a show than she had to. She knew that Carl spanked her sister, but he had never done it in front of her.

“Uh!” He was spanking so fast and hard – probably because he thought she wasn’t feeling it much because of the pants – that she could barely catch her breath, but that didn’t stop the frequent incoherent moan from escaping from her wide open mouth.

She desperately wanted to, although was never allowed to, reach back and defend herself from a spanking – the one time she’d done that when they’d first gotten married had been quite enough to disabuse her of that idea for the rest of her life – but she did find an almost better use for them this time. She clamped them over her mouth for as long as she could, but as soon as she started crying, which was only a few smacks later, she couldn’t breathe through her nose any longer, so she had to give that up.

From that point on, trying to hold onto her dignity was a lost cause. She was already blubbering all over Marilyn’s pretty shabby chic tablecloth. And it seemed that the longer the spanking continued, the harder he smacked. That was the way he always spanked, and it was horrid to try to live through.

It didn’t seem to matter how many spankings she’d gotten from him – and it was a lot – she was never really able to find a way to even begin to tolerate them. That was the idea, she supposed, but still. He smacked her so hard that the pattern of his handprint would remain on her bottom for several days. Lana began to arch with each loud crack, bucking her hips against the edge of the table and shoving it a few inches away every time the flat of his hand connected with her more than ample bottom cheeks.

That was one of the other awful aspects of getting spanked, as far as she was concerned – after the atrocious pain and tears – that each time he delivered one of those horrid, biting swats, it made her rear end wobble like it was made out of jello. Even when she was younger and generally firmer everywhere, her bottom had still wiggled and jiggled under his painful ministrations, and it had darn near drove her crazy.

The backs of her thighs didn’t fare well either, although they didn’t wobble as bad as her bottom because she was standing. He delivered the last ten or so swats there, knowing that just below her sweet spot – where bottom met thigh – and down the backs of her legs were very sensitive and would leave a long lasting impression.

Lana had long since abandoned all thoughts of dignity or restraint. Carl and Marilyn were surely getting one interesting earful of how Craig kept a short reign on Lana, who as the impulsive, spoiled youngest sister, generally needed someone strict and no nonsense to oversee her behavior. When he’d finally finished, she was in the middle of one of those expelled breaths from which it took eons to recover.

And to her utter horror, he called them in from the kitchen while she was still lying there over the table, barely able to draw in a breath, her face – as well as the tablecloth beneath it – damp from the copious amounts of tears he’d inspired. And they came in within milliseconds of his invitation, which meant they had definitely been listening at the door.

Her face a shade of cherry red that probably matched her nether cheeks, Lana straightened up in a hurry, sinking down onto the unforgiving oak chair next to her husband with a loud, ragged moan.

There were sympathetic tears in Marilyn’s eyes when she whispered, “Poor baby.”

Craig had shot Marilyn a doubtful look. “She knows the rules and the consequences for breaking them. Just like you do.” But his main concern had been Lana, as always. He watched her carefully for signs of breathing problems, reaching for her left hand and locking his fingers into hers. “This is going to be our last hand, guys. I think someone needs to get to bed early tonight.”

To her deep mortification, Lana could not control her tears. Her bottom was just killing her as she sat on that God awful hard wooden chair, and she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and go to sleep.

Craig, bless his heart, was as attentive to her as he’d always been, and called the hand just after the cards had been dealt when he saw that she was not recovering well from her punishment.

They had ended up going home and snuggling while she cried out her pain and humiliation on his broad chest. He’d always taken care of her, always known exactly what she needed and wanted, even if she couldn’t put a voice to certain particularly intimate almost desires.

And now, here Marilyn was trying to set her up with a total stranger. How was anyone going to follow Craig’s act? He’d been her first and only lover. All she’d ever needed or wanted. That was it. She’d gotten lucky –

hell, had been incredibly blessed – early on in life and had never so much as looked at anyone else. Okay . . . Jean Luc Picard and Kevin Sorbo's Hercules notwithstanding.

"Well, there are tons of men out there that would love to look after you – even in that special way." Marilyn ignored Lana's doubtful snort. "There are. You just have to get yourself out there."

"But -"

"No 'buts'!! Now when he calls me, I'm just going to refer him to you, and I expect you to go out with this guy, at least this once, and stop being such a nun."

"Jeez, since when have you been the spanker?"

"Don't I wish – I got it good from him about this, even though in the end he came around to my way of thinking. I'm going to be sitting on a very sore bottom for the next several days just for you . . ."

"Just a minute, I need to get out my violin," Lana returned wryly.

"Yeah, well, just make sure you don't waste my pain. Look, I don't expect you're going to marry this guy . . . although wouldn't that be great? I guess it would be a little far fetched."

"Ya' think?"

"But you could go out and have a good time and not worry about Lily or anything for just one night. Then maybe that'll help you realize that you can go out and you'll put yourself out there a little more. The right guy'll come along and you'll be happy again."

Her sister made it all sound so easy.

Lana sighed loudly, and Marilyn moved right in, not giving her sister a chance to argue any more. "Okay. So pretty much any night is great with you since you don't have a life . . . I'll set it up for a week from this Saturday."

Lana didn't say a word, not wanting to encourage her and knowing that protesting wouldn't get her anywhere. It would just be a waste of her breath.

"And you're going to go, right?" Marilyn wanted verbal confirmation. If she didn't think it would be too messy, she'd make her sister sign in blood. She didn't trust her as far as she could throw her not to back and find some way of not fulfilling this commitment.

"Yeah, I guess so. But I'm also telling you right now that this is it. The very last time that I'm going to knuckle under to any kind of set up from you in regards to men. No more blind dates, no more inviting me over when some single friend of Carl's happens to be there, no nothing like any of that. Nada. Zippo. Zilch. Understood?"

It was Marilyn's turn to sigh. "Yeah, yeah. This is it. I won't try to get you to have a life any more after this. I promise."

"Pinky swear?"

"Pinky swear."

Chapter 3

It was several days later when the phone rang while she and Lily were cuddled up in the big master bedroom that Craig had designed himself and built with Carl's able assistance. It was a big room in and of itself, with tons of built in bookshelves and ornate moldings around the ceiling that were mirrored around the floor to ceiling windows. Lana was a great fan of well lit – naturally lit – rooms, and he'd kept that thought in mind as the house was built. Even the bathroom had huge windows, but of course they were on the second floor and slightly blurred and obscured by a special glazing process so that no one who tried could see in.

The room was decorated in periwinkle blue with soft yellow accents, and it was Lana's favorite room in the whole house. Besides his study, which had remained largely untouched from the day he'd died, it was the room in which Lana felt Craig's presence most strongly, and some nights she would swear that if she'd just be able to turn over fast enough, she'd catch him lying behind her, spooning her as they had always slept.

But she'd never been able to do that.

Lana kissed the silky top of Lily's head, making the little girl – the not so little girl anymore – look up at her mother and throw her arms around her in a big pooh bear hug. Lily was eight now, although she had Down's and was emotionally and intellectually several years behind that. She was a wonderful and loving child, the apple of her parents' eyes, and a living reminder of Burke.

Lily was a large part of the reason – the excuse – why Lana didn't get out much socially. She didn't like to trust Lily strangers, preferring, on those rare occasions when she needed to go out without her, to let her stay with Marilyn and her kids.

But it was just that – and excuse. Craig's careful planning had left them very secure financially, and she didn't need to worry about having to work. Lana had stayed home with Lily from a few months before she was born, and she would have been devastated if she had had to get a job after Craig's death. So she was home with her little girl all the time. When she was in school, the house kept her busy, as well as the few close friends she kept in contact with.

But no men. If it hadn't been for Marilyn's judicious meddling, she wouldn't have had a date in five years – since he died. As far as Lana was concerned, her life had peaked with Craig, and she couldn't see it getting any better. She fully intended to devote her life to her child, and that would be quite enough for her. She didn't have any interest in men in the least, and her sex drive – which had always been incredibly high and prevalent – had been buried along with her husband.

"Are you gonna anzer the phone, Momma?" Lily prompted, looking up from the coloring book she was engrossed in.

Lana smiled down at her darling daughter. "I think I'd better, huh?"

Lily nodded exaggeratedly, choosing a crayon with incredible concentration.

Without looking at the caller ID information, Lana pushed the talk button on the cordless phone, figuring it was her sister. No one else called her this late. "Joe's Pool Shack. Liquor in the front, poker in the back."

Dead silence. Marilyn would have ignored her entirely. Their father had answered the phone that way often, to their incredible embarrassment, but for some reason the strangest of family habits took root and had lives of their own. She looked at the caller info, and it came up as "private number, private name." Oh, crap.

But whoever the caller was didn't give her any time to recover herself, and she recognized his voice immediately, despite their short acquaintance. "Lana Hutchinson?" came the deep rumble.

Crap and crap again, it was him! The man she least wanted to talk to in this world. But she decided to play it dumb. "Yes?"

It had been a long time since he'd had to identify himself over the phone. Most people – even those that didn't know him – recognized his voice. He'd been conned into doing some of the television and radio ads for the company, especially in the beginning, when he didn't have the money to pay fancy advertising agencies. "This is Burke."

"Burke who?" Now that might have been pushing it a little, but she didn't want him to think she'd been sitting at home awaiting his call, because she certainly hadn't.

His sigh revealed his tendency towards impatience. "Burke Daniels. The man you bought for your sister?"

"Ohh, that Burke." She turned and winked at Lily, who giggled back at her.

"Yes. I called your sister to set up a time for our date and found out that she had given me to you."

Lana had to laugh. "Must've been a new experience for you – you've probably never worn hand me downs, but now you've become one."

"Well, you're wrong on that count. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth – in fact, my father was pretty poor when I was born, and I've definitely worn hand me downs."

"Ahh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply anything –"

"Nope. You didn't." He could hear her put her hand over the receiver and speak to someone else.

"Excuse me, but I need to go tuck my daughter in." Lily was perfectly capable of tucking herself in, but any excuse to get off the phone with this man. He was doing it to her again – even just his voice was making her melt, especially the area between her legs. Lana had already had to cross her legs and squeeze them tight, which ended up only making matters worse.

"Oh. I'm sorry I called at an inconvenient time." He hadn't had anyone give him the bum's rush in a very long time. This woman was going to be hell on his ego! He cleared his throat sharply. "When can I call you?"

"Um, well," how about never? She was thinking, but didn't say. "I'm not sure . . ."

Her sister had hinted that this might happen – that she would try to stall or completely back out of the date. He had had a very informative conversation with Marilyn Rojas. Very informative indeed. "Lana, I'm not going to let you out of this."

That tone! Where did he get that tone – it was pure Craig; low and slow, but with a strength of purpose running through it that let her know he meant what he said.

She didn't know what to say. He'd managed to render her speechless, which was no mean feat.

"As it happens, I'm not free on the night your sister was suggesting, which is why I got your number from her and called. And I'd like to see you sooner, anyway. The small taste of you I got when you gave me your sister's card was nowhere near enough."

She shouldn't be letting him say things like that to her, should she?

"Your sister thought that this Saturday would work just as well for you." He didn't let on that Marilyn had spoken disparagingly about the fact that Lana didn't have a life so she was likely to be available any night he wanted.

"She did, did she?"

"Are you available?" he pressed, hearing her sigh somewhat impatiently in the background, but he was determined to spend more time with her. Burke wanted her beneath him on his big bed in the worst way. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any woman in his life, and he wasn't going to let her reticence about her widowhood stand in his way.

Hopefully, he'd even get to like her. She'd affected him so that he was already thinking marriage to this woman. Visions of her as she'd stood in front of him at the after party danced in his head at the most inappropriate times – board meetings, marketing meetings, business lunches. He had to get a handle on her and his attraction to her some how.

Her sister had been a veritable font of information. Probably more than he really needed to know at this point, but she seemed like a really nice lady who wanted her sister to get out more and perhaps find someone to love. Burke hadn't let on any of his thoughts or feelings, but he knew that Marilyn was going to be a strong ally in getting Lana to actually agree to this date.

Damn – she was a horrid liar in the first place, and she couldn't come up with a reason not to quickly enough to not sound like she was reaching. “Oh, yes, I guess I am.”

“Such enthusiasm!” he sniffed loudly into the phone. “I know I showered the morning of the auction . . . do I smell bad, is that it?”

Lana was blushing so hard she was glad he wasn't there to see it. “No, no, of course not.”

Burke took a deep breath and said exactly what he was thinking, damn the consequences. “He wouldn't want you to cloister yourself, and you know it.”

Her pause was deafening, but he knew he'd be hitting a touchy topic. “Mr. Daniels, you have overstepped your bounds and I will thank you not to try to interpret what my dead husband – whom you did not know – would want nor what I – who has barely made your acquaintance – do or do not know.”

Well, she could be quiet, but she certainly had spunk, and he was glad of it. He'd unintentionally overshadow a truly shy or weak woman.

“Your sister mentioned that you have a daughter?”

Lana noticed that he hadn't made any move towards an apology. “Yes, I do,” her response was deliberately stiff and unwelcoming.

“That's great – then you have a living part of him to cherish always.”

Her deep frown was lost on him. He had said what she'd been thinking only moments later when Lily was coloring beside her. His inadvertent clairvoyance softened her against her will. “Yes, yes, I do. Lily is a very special young lady.”

“I'm sure she is, especially if she takes after you at all.”

“Mr. Daniels, you barely know me.”

She heard his breath hiss in through his teeth. “I know you better than you think. And I think you felt the same thing as I felt when we shook hands. The Earth trembled. It felt like a bolt of lightning, and I intend to explore that with you further.”

Dear God, with his voice he could have made his money doing phone sex just as easily as building computers. It was cavernously deep and resounded throughout her body, seeping like a velvet wildfire into her ears and finding its way unerringly to that part of her that was most – and now least – Craig's.

“I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Mr. Daniels - ”

“Call me Burke. And I'll pick you up day after tomorrow at eight, Lana. Don't make me wait, and don't even think about trying to duck out on me. You wouldn't like the consequences.”

Lana frowned. Just what had her sister decided to tell this man about her? If Marilyn had been telling tales out of school Lana might just have to tell Carl some things that would ensure that Marilyn ended up spending some quality – if highly uncomfortable time – over her husband's lap.

And Lana knew for a fact that if he knew what Lana knew about a certain mink coat that he'd told his wife they couldn't buy quite yet but was currently residing in the back of Marilyn's walk in closet, that she would become intimately reacquainted with Carl's favorite implement – the old oak school paddle he'd found – and to Marilyn's deep embarrassment – bid on at a country auction they'd attended.

Burke was a bit concerned that she hadn't said a word since he made his pronouncement. “Lana?”

“Yes,” she responded absently.

“Did I make myself clear?”

“I'll be there, Mr. Daniels. But don't be expecting that I'm just going to fall into bed with you. I'm not that kind of a woman. I wasn't that kind before I got married, and I'm even less likely to be that kind as a widow.”

“Stop hiding behind your dead husband to keep life at bay. I'm not going to let you do that any more, Lana.”

“Well!” The man certainly cut to the chase, and alarmingly close to the truth, too. Closer than Lana was interested in getting.

He almost chuckled at the indignation in her voice. “You’re only mad because I’m getting a little too close to the truth for comfort, and you know it. I’ll see you in a couple days.”

He hung up, and Lana felt as if she could breathe again. Annoying man. She mentally scratched him off her list of potential suitors, on which he was the only one. She’d go on this date, but she wouldn’t enjoy it. If there was one thing Lana hated, it was to be pushed into things. Especially something like this, which she didn’t feel in the least ready for.

She snorted softly. She seriously doubted that any woman was really ever ready for a man like Burke Daniels. He was a damn the torpedoes, take no prisoners type of man. A John Wayne type. A rock steady, upstanding citizen with what was apparently some sort of naturally dom-ish tendencies towards women. She was surprised she hadn’t heard about whole class action law suits about that in this day and age. But perhaps he was smart enough to be careful at whom he directed that particular tone of voice he’d used with her.

It certainly was potent enough! Lana deliberately got up and moved around the bedroom, trying to dispel the distinctly sexual aura he had managed to conjure within a very short conversation. Her nipples were tight, painful points that were maddeningly brushed by the simple cotton nightgown she drew over her head, and the panties she changed out of were embarrassingly wet.

Trying to put the fact that a man she barely knew had created such a response in her, Lana climbed into bed, but ended up tossing and turning for most of the night, visions of Burke Daniels dancing – and doing a lot more than that – running through her head.

Chapter 4

Of course, Marilyn couldn't just leave well enough alone. She did deny having said anything untoward to Burke, though, not that Lana believed her for a millisecond. She had to take Lana out for a new dress, and wouldn't let her settle for something staid and classic. No way. The dress she fell in love with – and if Lana admitted it to herself, she thought it looked pretty good on her, too, but not to face Burke Daniels in – was a black sheath dress with very understated beading and a scalloped lace hem that ended well above Lana's knees. It was so well fitted that she wasn't going to be able to wear much in the way of underwear beneath it, but she supposed that, for one evening, that was going to be okay, although she swore she was going to feel positively naked without her bra. And those panties – she'd never seen anything so small and clingy in her life!

Lily had very happily gone to stay with her Aunt Marilyn, who spoiled her rotten since she had two boys. She and Lily were going to play dress up – much like Lily's mommy – and bake cookies. Marilyn had volunteered to keep Lily all night as an added incentive for Lana to spend as much time with that man as she wanted without feeling that Lily might not be well looked after.

She was completely dressed at seven forty five, and trying to peep discreetly out the front curtains. A black limo pulled up in front of the house. Funny, she'd thought it was supposed to be a white limo – kind of like the white horses for Cinderella's pumpkin carriage. But black or white made no difference to her. She'd only been in a limo once in her life – for the trip to her wedding reception, and then to the airport for their honeymoon in the Bahamas.

It surprised her that he got out of the limo and walked up to her front door – somehow she had envisioned walking down to the car by herself. But he came right to the door and rang the bell. She opened it immediately, probably giving away the fact that she had been nervously anticipating his arrival.

He smiled, and it was as if the sun burst within her, its rays heating every inch of her skin, and overheating some areas quite considerably. She knew those panties were a mistake!

Burke offered his hand, but when she put hers out he turned it and bent low over the back, kissing it very, very gently. "I'm glad I didn't have to come into the house and drag you out of a dark corner of the cellar. It would have earned you a considerable spanking, I can tell you."

Lana had taken a few steps ahead of him down the path, but those words made her head snap around violently. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He wasn't giving her any chance to think about it, though. His hand took up residence possessively at the small of her back as he guided her into the limo.

Lana deliberately sidled all the way across the plush leather seat, cramming herself into the opposite corner. Burke settled in and closed the door, then pushed a button and said, "To the Cascades, please, Roger."

That was definitely not the restaurant the charity had intended to send them to. If she could remember correctly, it was a very nice restaurant, but nothing on the level of the Cascades, which sat smack in the middle of downtown Knoxville and was one of the most exclusive restaurants in the country. It was so small and intimate – with a small dining room as well as tiny booths around the perimeter with silk draperies that could be drawn to further seclude the lucky couple.

Then he turned back to her. It was a little intimidating to have all of that intensity focused on her. Lana swallowed, her mouth instantly dry. The man was almost too potent!

"Relax. Your eyes are as round as Red's when she confronts the big bad wolf."

She was happy that her eyebrow obeyed her command and rose sharply. "If the pelt fits . . ."

His smile was decidedly wolfish, and unapologetically so. "It does, to a certain extent," he admitted. "But not right now. Unless you happen to find wolves particularly intriguing . . .?"

In fact, she loved wolves, but she wasn't about to let him know that. She was so nervous and concentrating so hard on trying to breathe regularly that she didn't say a thing.

He tried for a comforting tone of voice. "If you don't talk to me, this is going to be an insufferably boring evening."

Suddenly, her nervousness dissipated, especially when she remembered what he'd said to her before they got into the car.

"You are not ever going to spank me. You have no right. None at all. I want that understood right now," she blurted out, ruining the bravado effect by biting her lip. She figured that it wasn't worth denying it. Marilyn had obviously spilled the most intimate beans about her she could, for which she was going to pay in the most excruciating of ways, Lana vowed, already mentally lining up the things she'd been saving to blackmail her with.

"So. Marilyn and Lana. I take it your mother was an old movie buff?"

Grabbing all the gumption she owned – which was not an inconsiderable amount – Lana leaned forward, enunciating very carefully. "If you so much as lay a hand one hand on me this evening, I'll call the cops."

To her amazement, Burke just smiled broadly, and leaned so close that their noses were almost touching. "If I think you need a spanking, then you'll get one. And I intend to touch you a lot, so you're now forewarned." Her completely outraged look was priceless. Made her look even sexier than she already was to him. That dress hugged her every generous curve and stopped mid thigh. Her full, blushed rose lips called to him, and in one swift movement he cradled her jaw in his palm, gently but firmly, so that she couldn't have gotten away easily, and covered her mouth with his own.

He did it so quickly that she didn't have a chance to react and pull away. And now she was trapped, held in a way that was inexorable but didn't hurt her in the least. And if she admitted it to herself, trying to get away hadn't even entered her mind, even after having given him that ultimatum about not touching her only seconds ago. When their lips met, any thoughts of struggling against the kiss flew out the window – that overwhelming sensory flood was back as soon as their lips touched, and every intelligent thought she own was crowded out by its sheer volume and force, even though he wasn't deepening the kiss as he very easily could have, but merely pressing his mouth to hers almost tenderly, as if he knew the resulting confusion it would inspire in her.

He pulled back but pressed his forehead to hers. "I feel the same thing, Lana. When our skin touches, my body riots. Before now, I've only shook your hand, but I've been jonesing for you since we met."

He was describing a little too closely for comfort exactly what was happening to her – what had happened the first time they'd met. Nearly every part of her just wanted to surrender herself to him, in the back of the limo, in a hotel room, in an ally. She didn't care.

But a tiny – very tiny – part of her brain survived the sensory deluge enough to realize that he was ignoring every behavioral rule she'd given him. She'd told him he didn't have the right to spank her, and he'd asked a question about her name. She'd expressly forbidden him from touching her, and yet here they were in a lip lock that threatened to wipe away every intelligent thought she'd ever had.

Lana was able – barely – to pull together the tatters of her indignation and rear back from him, breaking free of his hold only because the movement was unexpected, she knew. There was no way she'd have been able to get away from him otherwise, unless he let her. He was easily big enough to subdue someone her size without much effort on his part.

However, if he'd struck her as being an ogre or a bully, she would never have been in the car with him. And nothing she'd ever heard about him had been anything but complimentary. In fact, he had an excellent reputation in regards to how he treated women – even the ones he'd broken up with had nothing but praise for him and his behavior towards them.

She scooted back into the corner of the car, doing her best to glare at him while her whole body throbbed and surged and ached, as if she was a heroin addict in withdrawal. There was nothing she wanted more at this

moment than to inch herself closer to him and let him touch her in anyway she chose, but there was a principal at stake.

Summoning every ounce of outrage she could – which, unfortunately wasn't much after that kiss – Lana accused, "Apparently the press about you being a gentleman is just so much spin doctoring. I believe I expressly told you that you weren't to touch me."

One of his thick eyebrows rose, and somehow that set Lana's tummy to tumbling nervously. There was no doubt about it. He had "the look" down pat, dammit.

His voice was rich, velvety chocolate and he held her eyes tightly with his as he responded, making her feel as if his arms were already around her. "I am a gentleman. I am also a gentle man. I would never touch you inappropriately, or in a way that would hurt you – except when I have to spank you." When she opened her mouth to reply – vehemently – he pressed one finger over her lips to quiet her. "We have something between us that shouldn't be treated lightly, so I'm not going to allow you to just brush me off like that. I know that you feel the same way I do – I don't know how I know, but I do. I know your whole body flushes when we touch – I can feel your breath against me as it quickens when our lips meet. I'm not going to paw you like some school boy, but I'm definitely going to touch you, Lana. Whenever and wherever I choose. I'm going to put my hand on your back when we walk into the restaurant, I'm going to cup your cheek when we kiss, I'm going to hold you very closely while we dance, and I'm going to hold you close while we're in this limousine."

He put actions to words as he spoke, reaching his thick, muscular arms out to wrap around her and slide her close against his side. Lana didn't protest – she was too overwhelmed by the feelings he inspired that she had thought she'd long since buried. She'd forgotten how wonderful it felt to be held tight in a big strong man's arms, forgotten how warm and safe it felt . . .

He was doing it again, she realized. Turning this around so that they worked out the way he wanted them to. No wonder he was such a successful businessman!

Muttering expletives under her breath, but apparently not far enough under it, she leaned back as far as she could, which wasn't far at all, saying, "Damn you, let me go!" And when he didn't instantaneously release her, she drew her hand back and slapped him.

It was like hitting her palm against a brick wall, and didn't seem to affect him in any way. Real regret set in the moment after her hand connected with his cheek, and she heartily wished she hadn't done it.

Especially when a little muscle began to tic in his jaw, and his eyelids dropped just a bit, giving him a darker, much more dangerous look. "I had hoped to avoid your first spanking for a lot longer than this, but it appears that you need a lesson in decorum right now, so you're bloody well going to get one."

It was depressingly easy for him to maneuver her over his lap since she was already in his arms. He just pressed with incredible gentleness from behind and she essentially fell over his legs. He had the element of surprise working for him in a big way – this was the last thing she expected him to do, despite his earlier warning.

And decorum? Lana fumed all the time she was struggling to get away from him. But he had her pinned in record time, and didn't hesitate for one second before bringing the full force of his palm down onto her thinly covered bottom.

If she had forgotten how wonderful a man's arms felt around her, she'd also forgotten the reality of how awful a man's palm felt when applied forcefully applied to her derriere. None of her wiggling and struggling did her any good – all he had to do was contract his arm just a tad and she was held fast and vulnerable, right where he wanted her, damn him! She knew she should never have agreed to go on this date!

Although he kept spanking her, hard, his hand rising and falling almost automatically, one part of him meting out the punishment he had set forth and the other taking the time to luxuriate at the realization that she was over his lap. His body had been prepared for this moment since they'd met – full blown and erect, straining and seeking the very part of her that was most female to his male. He knew she knew exactly what was pressing insistently up into her stomach as he landed swat after swat on that sweet rear of hers, pressing her even more firmly against himself.

Spanking her was a sweet torture on several levels – he would much rather have been kissing the breath out of her . . . he thought. But the feel of her, almost all of her so close to him, with just their clothes separating them – barely. Every time his hand landed on her rapidly roasting rump, he wanted to squeeze and fondle and gently run just the tips of his fingers over those luscious hills and valleys.

But that was not to be – not this time anyway, but he was sure there would be more time for such indulgences later. He didn't intend to let this one slip away under any circumstances.

"Not only will I not tolerate language like that from those sweet lips of yours – ever," he accented the "ever" with a flurry of smacks carefully calculated to cover every bit of her already well warmed backside. She was still trying to squirm away, but wasn't getting anywhere because of the hard arm he kept across her back. "But I will take you over my lap and give you a good hard spanking every time I hear you say anything in the least off color. It's a sacrilege for such a lovely woman as you to be using words like that. And I'll thank you not to slap me across the face. You can bet I'd never do that to you." Burke slid his hand under her dress and slipped it up and over her bottom, pleasantly surprised at how much of her rear was revealed by the opaque hose and nearly nonexistent panties. Before she had a chance to protest what he'd done, he began to spank her almost completely unprotected cheeks, as hard as he could, fast and furious and completely without mercy, until he heard her begin to snifle and cry, and then he stopped immediately and gathered her up against him, rocking just slightly.

It had amazed him when Marilyn had mentioned, with extreme casualness, that Lana's husband used to spank her on occasion. Spanking had been something he was always interested in, but none of the women he dated seemed to have the same affinity for it that he did. Oh, they'd put up with it as foreplay, and some of them even liked it as foreplay, pretend spankings turned them on. But it was never anything any of them would consider as something more – something that could enhance their lives – to have someone who truly cared about them watching over them, and loving them enough to correct their behavior when it was necessary. Only when it was necessary, and only in the most loving of ways.

And for some reason, this woman inspired just such emotions within him. He couldn't believe the depth of his feelings for someone he barely knew, but she did. He wasn't sure he wanted to question it much – he was just happy to have found it at his ripe old age. He had been beginning to wonder. Now the only thing was to get this stubborn woman to see what they could have, too.

Holding her against him like this was the best thing he had ever known – even better than seeing his business succeed solely through the sweat of his brow and the strength of his brain. Marilyn had spoken in glowing terms about her sister, but she needn't have said the words. He knew how she felt merely by the tone of her voice when she talked about Lana. Pure, unadulterated love shone through loud and clear.

Marilyn had talked about how much in love Lana and Craig had been – practically from the day they were born, and how there had never been anyone else for either of them. She mentioned Lana's daughter, Lily, and how, although the couple was traumatized to realize that Lily would have problems in growing up, they had decided that they wouldn't treat her any differently from any other child. As a result, she was way ahead of any predictions the medical establishment had made for her abilities.

She also related how devastating Craig's death had been to Lana, and emphasized how, even after more than five years, she still very much considered herself Mrs. Hutchinson, and really hadn't given any man any sort of a break, despite the occasional dates Marilyn arranged.

He'd been amused that, to top it off, she'd read him the riot act, threatening grievous bodily harm if he hurt so much as a hair on her head, and or the emotional equivalent therein. She was a spunky one, and he admired her devotion to her sister.

But there was no way he would ever hurt Lana. Firstly, he wasn't that kind of a man, and secondly, there were too many other more interesting things that he would like to do to her.

"I should slap your face again," she mumbled against his lapel, sniffling pathetically.

Burke hugged her even closer, partially for to comfort her and partially in self defense. He leaned forward and whispered directly into her cute, diamond studded ear. "I don't think that would be a very good idea. I wouldn't want to have to take off my belt so early in our acquaintance."

He felt her badly suppressed shiver at the word “belt”, and had to clamp down on his own desires in order to keep from pressing her back onto the seat and maneuvering himself between those long, slim legs.

The limo stopped rather abruptly, and Burke found himself very reluctant to let her go. Stanton, his chauffeur, was well trained, though. He didn’t so much as get out from behind the wheel until Burke hit a button that signaled him he was to do so.

“We’re here,” he murmured against her forehead.

“I don’t want to have to go sit on my butt for two hours, thanks to someone,” she whined, with a searing glare in his direction as she slowly moved off his lap and gingerly onto her bottom.

“I’m thinking you’re probably going to survive, and that the Cascade has very plush cushions in their booths,” he returned without a lot of sympathy. Douglas opened the door and Burke got out, then turned back to offer his hand to help Lana. Just before they started up the walkway to the entrance to the restaurant, he turned to look down at her, his hand – the one that had spanked her – coming up to caress her cheek, his thumb tracing the trail of tears down her still blushing cheeks.

“You’re gorgeous. You have that wonderful just spanked look that makes me want to bundle you back into that limo and ravish you until we get home, then ravish you endlessly there.” He bent and kissed her with a gentleness that belied his words.

And then a flash went off, and pulled Lana from the trance like state he’d created for her. She looked around, just to either side of the path were hordes of paparazzi, cameras drawn and shooting for all they were worth.

For a long moment, a long, precious moment, she’d forgotten just who she was with.

Burke didn’t like the frightened look on her face at all, so he gathered her close, almost giving in to the urge to sweep her up in his arms, but they would have even more of a field day if he did that, and they ran the gauntlet together, with him shielding her from their prying eyes as much as he could.

Once inside, he grabbed her shoulders and caught her eye, saying quietly, “I’m sorry about that. There isn’t really much that can be done about them. Hopefully, they won’t be there when we come out.”

Lana tried to smile, but wasn’t having much success at it. She’d never liked having her picture taken, and now it was likely to be splashed all over every possible gossip rag. “It’s okay.”

“Mr. Daniels?” A tall man with another camera in his hand had walked up to Burke with his hand out.

“Please, we’d just like to eat dinner in peace,” Burke said firmly.

“The Heart Association asked me to come and take a couple of publicity photos for their website and newsletter.” Burke’s foreboding look didn’t change one bit, so he stammered on. “I – I’ll be as quick as I c-can - ”

“Get on with it,” he growled, causing Lana to glance up at him with that wary expression he didn’t like seeing at all.

Burke wrapped his arms around her from behind, then held her tight to his side, letting the man snap away for about three minutes. Then he put his hand up and that was it. The photographer stopped immediately, backing his way out of the restaurant while blubbing his thanks.

The maitre d’ greeted Burke warmly by name, and brought them to what was apparently “his” booth, towards the back of the cozy dining room where he wasn’t likely to be spotted. Unlike most celebrities, he preferred as much anonymity as possible, and didn’t consider that he was a celebrity, although every one else seemed to.

The restaurant was decorated old style, like something out of the fifties, with heavy red velvet curtains and lots of black and white diamond patterns. The curtaining off of their high sided booth made it feel as if they were in a world all their own, and he intended to perpetuate that aura. She slid in one side, and Burke the other. Lana stopped well away from Burke, but he just kept coming, until their thighs lay beside each other on the overstuffed red leather.

The exceptionally discreet waiter appeared, took their drink orders, and disappeared. The unobtrusive service was one of the reasons he liked this restaurant so much. Lana didn’t order an alcoholic drink, preferring a virgin strawberry daiquiri instead, but Burke ordered a scotch, straight, as well as a bottle of Cristal champagne.

Lana was no bumpkin – she had a general idea of what Cristal cost, because Craig had bought a bottle for their wedding night, and back then they really couldn't afford it, and that was years ago. "You don't have to do that!" she admonished with a blush.

"I want to. This is a very special night."

Her face only flared brighter at his words.

"Do you like champagne?"

Lana smirked. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but it's one of my favorite drinks. Craig and I – " She stopped abruptly, mid thought.

Burke quirked an eyebrow at her. "What were you going to say?"

She shook her head. "Oh, something about Craig and I, of course. I'm sorry. I don't mean to drag him into every conversation."

"You don't," he snorted. "I've barely ever heard you mention his name. This is too new for the both of us. And I wouldn't be offended, anyway. He sounds – from what I've heard from Marilyn and the way I can see you're still completely devoted to him – like he must've been a great guy."

Her eyes filled with tears, Lana nodded sadly. "He was."

Burke put his hand over hers where it lay on the fine white tablecloth. "Then I'm glad you've had that kind of love in your life. You're very lucky. I've never been able to find it."

The waiter reappeared with the drinks and opened the champagne, pouring each of them a glass then leaving again.

Burke raised his glass towards her, causing her to lift her own towards him. As their glasses clinked, he stared into her eyes and said, "To secret desires."

Lana took a sip, but only a sip, letting the lovely sparkly confection slowly drizzle down her throat. Lucious! She thought, taking another small sip.

He watched her drinking it like it was liquid gold, parceling it out to herself stringently, then handed her a menu. "What strikes your fancy for dinner?"

The first thing that struck Lana was the fact that there were no prices on the menu. That was never a good thing. She and Craig had done all right, but they had never quite gotten to the point where they didn't have to read price tags.

She was biting her lip, and he was beginning to realize that that was a sign of worry in her, so he said soothingly, "Remember, this is on them." Somehow he knew that if it had been on him it would have been somehow harder for her to accept and let go, to let herself get what she wanted. She'd probably be worried that he'd demand some sort of payback at the end of the evening, which of course he had no intention of doing.

Well, when he put it that way . . .

Chapter 5

Dinner was unbelievable. Lana was no slouch of a cook herself, and she and Craig had been to some nice places, but nothing she'd ever experienced had compared to this. The waiter brought or replaced things before she knew she wanted them. She had pork loin medallions served in a blueberry maple reduction and caramelized onions over a mound of some of the lightest, fluffiest garlic mashed potatoes she'd ever eaten. Burke had a flat iron steak that melted in her mouth when he insisted they exchange bites by boldly stealing forkfuls of her potatoes at regular, completely blatant intervals. He'd gotten the baked potato but hers had looked too good not to try.

Lana was surprised at how comfortable she felt. Despite the fact that he was, in essence, a corporate mogul, he had no airs about him at all, and treated her – and acted himself – like a very regular person, despite his bank balance.

They found a huge array of things to talk about – everything from chaos theory to reality television to Degas and what they thought about the war in Iraq, as well as, of course, his business and her daughter. He ordered dessert for them and it was the perfect lightish cap to the heavy meal – an apple crisp made with Granny Smith apples and lots of cinnamon, so that the tartness of the apples seeped into your taste buds just before the sweetness of the crisp topping and melted vanilla ice cream came along to soothe them.

They had both ordered coffee and were still picking at the crisp lazily. “Lily sounds like a fantastic little girl.”

“She is,” Lana stated with no small amount of maternal pride.

“What grade is she in? What’s her favorite subject?”

Lana had never shied away from telling people how special Lily was. “Well, she’s eight, and she’s in the third grade for some things, but Lily has Down’s Syndrome, so she goes to a different school for some special classes, and I work with her a lot. She’s doing wonderfully, though – she’s done a lot more than they thought she could or would, and luckily, she loves school, although I think she’d still say that her favorite class is recess!”

“I’m sure that the reason she’s doing so well is because of you – Marilyn told me a little about Lily. When you talk about her, you glow.”

Lana looked away from him and took another sip of that incredible champagne – it slid down her throat like golden velvet. She was going to have to be careful or she was going to overindulge and lose all her inhibitions, and for some reason she didn’t think that that would be a good idea around this man at all. He would take advantage of any weakness she showed. He was a predator, a panther in sheep’s clothing, long and lean and powerful. He’d dressed up to be accepted in polite society, but beneath the civilized veneer, he didn’t miss a thing, watching her every move avidly. This man wouldn’t miss a trick, or an opportunity to consolidate his position – in business or personal dealings.

Why, he’d had the audacity to correct and spank her and they hadn’t even known each other for twenty minutes at that point! The nerve! She knew she should have been a lot more outraged at him, but, against her will and better judgment, she liked the man.

When Marilyn had told her that she was going to gift her with the Burke Daniels, Lana had fired up her computer and investigated the man, and darned if she didn’t like everything she’d read about him. It was hard to find anything critical about him. He’d pulled himself up by his bootstraps, and, even in this day and age, continued to run his company much like a small family business. Even workers on the line – the assembly line – earned higher than average wages and had more paid time off than others in comparable positions in other

companies. Burke encouraged such forward thinking policies as maternity leave – for both parents – for births and adoptions, job sharing, mothers’ hours, and he had an exceptionally well run and well equipped day care facility on site where everyone – from janitor to CEO could bring his or her kids at an extremely competitive rate.

If there had been one complaint – although Lana wouldn’t have put it as fine a point on it – it was that he could, on occasion, be a bit too aggressive. In business, anyway. He got what he went after. One way or the other. Always legally, but he wasn’t a man who would be deterred once he’d set his sights on something.

Or someone, Lana had thought with a shiver that brought her nipples to taut points.

“Thank you, but I don’t think we’ve done anything different from what any parent would do – you want the best for your child. Craig and I were devastated when we were told about Lily’s situation.”

Burke noticed that she did not refer to it as a problem.

“But we decided then and there that we weren’t going to treat her any differently from how we would treat any other child. I had been reading to her even before she made her appearance, and I’ve read to her every night of her life. As a result, she’s now reading to me, which is just . . .” She couldn’t help it. She teared up, remembering the night when Lily had taken the book in her own hands while they were having their ritual bedtime snuggles in her bed, and proudly began to read “The Cat in the Hat” to her mother.

He put his hand over hers. “It’s fantastic. Lily is a very lucky little girl.”

“No, I’m a very lucky mother, to have such a wonderful daughter.”

“It must’ve been very hard after you lost Craig.” He was watching her as if to gauge even the minutest of reactions.

Lana reached for the champagne again, taking a bigger swallow this time, carefully not looking at him. If his goal was to get her to cry, he was doing a great job. “Yes, it was.”

She had been worried the whole evening about what she always worried about on those rare occasions when she went out with a man. Every other word out of her mouth seemed to be “Craig this” and “Craig that”. It must’ve been wearisome for the men, to know they were being compared to an idolized ghost. But she couldn’t help it. He had been the most pervasive force in her life – almost more so than her parents. He’d always been there for her; he’d been her rock, and even now she could barely complete a thought without his name coming up.

At least she was aware of it. She supposed that was something.

“Marilyn said -”

“Good Lord,” she interrupted, trying to tamp her temper down to mock anger, “how long were you on the phone with her? I’m surprised she didn’t tell you when I lost my virginity, for crying out loud!” As soon as the words were out of her mouth she regretted them. There was no need to start talking about sex around this man – he oozed it all by himself without any help from her . . . at least, he oozed it towards her, anyway. The entire time they’d been together, he’d never looked at anyone but her, and that was a big plus. There was nothing worse than being with a man who was constantly on the lookout to trade up.

A horrid thought struck Lana and she looked up at him with panic written all over her face. “She didn’t tell you that, did she?”

His smile was downright pantherish. “No, she didn’t. But I would assume that it would have been to Craig on your wedding night.”

If she blushed any harder she was going to burst. To soothe her embarrassment, she reached for her champagne again, then stopped. It was too darned good for someone who pretty much never drank. So she diverted her hand to her largely melted virgin daiquiri, thinking that he’d gotten the man right but the night wrong, but that wasn’t something she was about to get into with him.

“You’re still in love with him.” It wasn’t a question; it was a statement.

“Oh yes. Very much so.”

“I understand that you haven’t dated much since his death.”

“Nope. Not interested.” She said it in a very strong, flat way that made him think that she thought it was non-negotiable, avoiding his eyes as she leaned forward and corralled another spoonful of the apples.

“Oh really?”

"Yup." She put her spoon down and sighed contentedly, but still wouldn't meet his eyes.

He'd been sitting back in his chair, but suddenly leaned forward, capturing her left hand in both of his.

"Well, you may not realize it yet, but you've had to suffer through the last of your sister's set ups."

"I have?" Still not looking at him.

Burke reached over and turned her face towards his with his finger crooked beneath her chin, forcing her to either close her eyes or look at him.

He looked straight into her eyes when he said, "Yes, you have. I'm the last man you're going to date, Lana Hutchinson, because you're going to marry me."

She couldn't believe he had the audacity to say that - they were barely getting to know each other! She didn't intend to see him again, much less marry him! He hid it well, apparently, but he had a more than healthy ego. Lana couldn't help but smile at such bravado. She didn't feel particularly threatened, instead she felt more nervous, as if she was worried that he was going to get his way despite her very carefully erected defenses against a man like him, who she knew, deep down, could, more easily than she wanted to consider, scale those high walls she'd so carefully erected in a single bound and storm her heart, taking possession of her heart the way he'd already halfway done to her body, without even trying.

"Well, thank you for the advanced warning . . . forewarned is forearmed, as they say."

"You don't need to arm yourself against me, you know." He kept her hand prisoner, moving it to his leg as he leaned back. "I would never hurt you - or Lily, for that matter. I'm going to put my cards on the table because I know who you are. You're the woman I've been waiting for - looking for - all my life. I love you."

Lana could not possibly have been any more bowled over than she was. How could he possibly know that about her in such a short time?

She hadn't realized that she'd asked that question aloud, but apparently she had because he was answering it. "I know it because I know what a committed, very much in love couple looks like. Not from personal experience like you do, unfortunately, but from the example my parents set. They loved each other until they died. They held hands and never left the house without kissing each other good bye. Dad called Mom from work just to say 'hi' and talk to her. She was his best friend and his wife and his partner, in every sense of the word, and that's what I want, and it's very much what I believe we can have."

Lana was stunned. She certainly hadn't been thinking in those terms about him, but apparently he had about her. "I don't know what to say."

His voice flowed over her, surrounding her as surely as his arms had in the limo after he'd spanked her. "You don't have to say a thing. Just don't shut me out without giving me a chance. That's all I ask. Don't arbitrarily throw away a second chance at happiness."

Her mind caught on his verbiage. "I don't know if there's anything arbitrary about it . . ."

"No, it's self preservation, as far as you're concerned. You lost the love of your life, someone you'd known from the moment you became sentient, the man that was absolutely perfect for you, who never put a foot wrong."

"I don't know if I'd quite say that. He wasn't a saint."

"The longer you idolize him from afar as you do, the more saintly he'll become, and he's already almost an impossible act to follow. You'll forget that he used to leave his dirty clothes next to the hamper rather than in it. Or that he always left the car on empty. Or that he widowed you during the football season, or whatever. Give a flesh and blood man a chance." He wanted to say that he couldn't imagine that Craig - if he loved her as much as he did - would want her to turn herself into a nun on his account, either, but Burke thought that that would definitely be presumptuous. He didn't want to speak for Craig, anyway, he wanted to speak for himself.

"No, he wasn't a saint," Lana agreed, remember the times Craig was impossibly stubborn and autocratic, and the fact that he deliberately put the ice cube trays back with just one remaining cube in them, rather than refilling them, just to annoy her. But even those negative feelings had softened during the years without him needling her about something - usually something to do with taking care of her health. That man could be an inveterate nag sometimes! "But he was the closest thing to Heaven I'm likely to see on this Earth." Looking down, Lana ruthlessly tamped down the tears. She did not want to turn this into a "poor Lana" conversation.

"Only if you spend the rest of your life cloistered."

"It's only been five years!" she answered defensively.

"Yes, but before you know it, it's going to be ten, then fifteen . . . and you're already too comfortable spending all your time involved with Lily."

Lana moved away from him about as far as she could and put her napkin on the table. "Now you're just channeling – or rather parroting – my sister."

Burke took her posture and tone of voice when he decided to lighten things up a bit. "Well, I gave it my best shot," he shrugged with a quirky grin. "I can't help it if you can't see what a fine catch I am -"

Her disbelieving snorts were music to his ears. He thought he might have pushed a bit too much, but now she was smiling at his outrageous comment. "Well, I, for one, need to work off some of this dinner." He patted his flat stomach then rose to collect her from her chair.

"Don't we need to pay?"

"No, they picked up the tab, remember?"

His arm slipped around her waist as if they had always walked so closely together, but Lana frowned. "Yes, but didn't they pay for a different place?"

The limo arrived just as they walked out to the curb, as if the chauffeur had been watching and waiting for them. Burke turned to Lana and held her still. "You worry too much. Everything's been taken care of. All you have to do tonight is relax and have a good time."

"I would say 'yes, Sir', but you don't need the ego boost. Jeez, you should have been in the military – you give orders well." She ducked into the back of the limo and scooched over, but not quite as far as she had the first time.

He was completely unrepentant, settling himself not too far from her, so as not to crowd her. Lazily, he reached out to play with one of the curls that fell down her back. "Comes with running your own business. If you don't give the orders, no one will."

Lana didn't quite know what to do or say. He was looking at her intently, like he was going to devour her. Just his gaze made her whole body flush, her nipples poking against the fabric of the dress in a way she knew would not go unnoticed by him. He wasn't even touching her and she could feel her body begin to ready itself for his possession. She had to get a handle on her rampant response to him or there was going to be a big wet spot on the back of her dress.

"So where are we going dancing?" She hadn't danced since her wedding – and even then, she'd had to practically bribe Craig to get out on the floor. It was one of the truest signs she'd ever had that he loved her – that he'd danced every dance she'd wanted him to at their wedding, although she'd had to promise never to make him dance again.

She didn't even know the names of any dance clubs, and didn't keep up with popular music – beyond the very occasional ballad that caught her ear – so she had no idea where they might end up. In the end, she was amazed at where he'd taken her.

It was a takeoff on the Starlight Ballroom. No screaming patrons, no throbbing, thumping music, just the gentle strains of romantic love songs from the thirties, forties and fifties, and a completely packed dance floor. The Ballroom was decorated in shades of blue, with comfortable but smallish café style tables around the perimeter and long, azure blue floor to ceiling silk drapes at the windows. The ceiling was a deep blue velvet, onto which the constellations were projected, and the rest of the lighting of the room was soft and subtle. The live dance orchestra was set off to one side, so as not to disturb the dancers for whom they played.

They claimed a table, but barely, before Burke held his hand out to her. "I hope you don't mind coming here instead of one of the hipper joints in town. My Mom made me take ballroom dancing lessons as a kid, and, although it pains my masculinity to admit it, I loved it, and I never get a chance to do it."

His tiny confession made her smile up at him and put her hand in his. "Well, please remember that my Mom trod all over my Dad's feet every time they danced, and I have very little experience dancing like this."

The gaze he turned on her when he answered her smoldered as much as the one he'd given her in the car. "Then let me teach you," he nearly growled.

And he turned out to be as wonderful a teacher as he was at everything else he touched. His arms around her were at just the right tightness to guide her, his instructions were soft but firm. "Don't look down at your feet, sweetheart, look up at me," he whispered to her at least a thousand times, though it really didn't take her that long to catch on, and she far outstripped him with embarrassed "I'm sorries" for all the times she crunched his feet beneath hers.

He pulled her tight against him and spoke softly right into her ear. "Don't worry about it. My feet are twice the size of yours, and besides, I'm happy just to have you in my arms. You can stomp on me all you like if you'll just settle here for a while and let me guide you around the floor."

And she did. It had been such a long time since she'd been held by a man that she was reveling in it, too. How wonderful his strong, hard body felt against hers, bulging unrelentingly in all the right areas against her softer, more yielding spots. His hand splayed against her back, keeping her tight against him but not obscenely so, her other hand in his as they swirled around the dance floor. It made her wish she had worn a dress with a full, swishy skirt that would swing around her as they moved.

As she got a little better at it – nominally so, unfortunately for his poor feet – she was able to keep her eyes more on his, and also look around a little. Lana was surprised to see that the population was not just older folks who remembered the music that was playing when it had first come out, but there was a fair amount of couples of their own age, as well as some even younger. It seemed everyone wanted a chance to dance romantically like this.

He hadn't been kidding about loving to dance like this, either. Although they sat some of them out, they swayed to nearly every song, until Lana begged him to let her sit it out. Her feet were killing her.

Burke refreshed their drinks – another bottle of champagne – then came back, set the drinks down and pulled her feet onto his lap beneath the tablecloth. "What are you doing?" Lana had been leaning back trying to catch her breath. Even though they hadn't been moving particularly fast, it was tiring, but exhilarating. She hadn't felt this good in a very, very long time.

And now he was rubbing her feet – the surest way to her heart, and he wasn't letting her snatch them away, either. Burke caught her eye and gave her that familiar look, saying firmly but in the softest voice imaginable, "Leave your feet where I put them, Lana, unless you want another spanking."

Frowning back at him, she bit her lip, but immediately stopped trying to retrieve her feet. She was learning by experience that this man was all cattle and no hat. And besides, what he was doing felt sinfully good.

"My God, I'll pay you to keep doing that," she sighed.

Burke snorted softly and couldn't resist slipping in, "Marry me and I'll do it for your any time you ask."

"Mmmmm. This is definitely sweetening the pot."

He paused for a second, chuckling. "So you'd marry me not for my considerable fortune, or my incredibly sexy good looks –" He was glad when she guffawed right where he'd intended. "– that's attracting you – it's my hands on your feet."

"Well, it certainly isn't your hands on my butt, I can tell you that!" she replied vehemently.

He was entirely unrepentant. "Yeah, well, that's one thing you can be sure of – around me, if you need it, you're gonna get a spanking. No doubt about it."

She glared at him. "That's not a selling point, you know."

"It should be."

"Yeah, right."

Suddenly, Burke cocked his head at as the band started to play a lovely, slow melody. He stood and put his hand out to her again. "Are your feet up to one last dance?"

They were, thanks largely to his incredible massage, and partly to the champagne, which was just barely taking the edge off things. That last dance was the most romantic of the evening. When it ended, everyone else was clapping, but Burke had dipped his head to hers and captured her lips for a long, slow kiss. His kisses were perfect – perfectly timed, the perfect pressure, and perfectly wonderful. Standing so close to him, wrapped up

against him in his arms, she felt protected and cared for – it was a feeling she remembered, but hadn't experienced for a while.

And she knew she could very easily get used to it, and that worried her.

When he drew his head away from her, his smile was mischievous, and she knew she would have to learn to take that as a warning. But she had no idea what he was going to do until he did it – swung her up in his arms and carried her off the dance floor, her flaming face tucked against his neck, and their avid audience clapping them off into the night.

In the back of the limo again, she figured that he would be dropping her off at home. It was well past midnight, and she was starting to get a little sleepy. She had enjoyed herself enormously, and hoped that he had, too, but it was time for the evening to end.

Instead, he told the driver to take them on a drive, and gathered her back against him. "Thank you for indulging me with the dancing."

"Oh, you're welcome. It was fun once I caught on. I hate doing things for the first time, especially in front of someone."

Burke nodded. "I think most people feel that way. If you're going to make a mistake, you don't want an audience."

Lana nodded, too.

Burke didn't think he'd ever been as content and happy, and he was loathe to let the evening end. Suddenly, though, he knew exactly how he did want it to end.

"Marry me, Lana." His tone confirmed that he was completely serious.

"Burke, I can't just -"

"Yes, you can. I'll sign over half of my company to you right here and now if you'll marry me. I'll set up a trust fund for Lily so she'll never want for anything -"

Lana tried to sit up and turn to look at him, but he wouldn't let her. "I don't want your money -"

His whisper was strong and sure. "I know you don't. I can spot a gold digger a mile away. But you want me." Her traitorous nipples had peaked painfully as the hands that had been at her waist crept up to settle with exquisite tenderness over her breasts. He didn't grab, he didn't grope. He just put his hands on a very intimate part of her, laying a claim without feeling the need to enforce it in any way on her body.

"I want all of you. And I don't want to go the 'sneak around Lily's back route' to get you, either. I don't want to wait, and I don't think you do, either, if you're brave enough to admit it to yourself."

She wasn't. Not by a long shot. But big, big parts of herself wanted more from him than she'd wanted from any man since Craig. It scared her. She wasn't one to do anything impulsively, and marriage was one of those things she'd always put into the "must consider very carefully and know the man for more than one day" category.

But she was no spring chicken, and perhaps, just perhaps, she'd gotten too complacent. Craig had been the one who had always reminded her that this was, in all probability, the only life she'd ever have, and that she needed to grab all the gusto she could. Granted, she thought with a small smile, he usually used that argument when he was trying to get her to have sex in an unusual place, or go vacationing in the Congo, or something equally as unusual.

Suddenly, she could hear him saying "carpe diem" as clearly as if it was his arms around her rather than Burke's, and she knew that despite her misgivings, despite how scared she was of the idea, and how she knew she was going to regret it in the morning, she was going to do it.

Lana turned in his arms and kissed him for the first time. His lips were pale and full, and he tasted of champagne. When she drew back just a bit, she looked him straight in the eye and said, "Yes."

Chapter 6

Burke could have been knocked over with a feather. He'd never expected that she'd ever agree so quickly. In fact, he had several elaborate schemes all planned out in his mind to win her over. It looked like he wasn't going to need them, though. Before she had a chance to change her mind, he buzzed Stanton and said, "Take us to Judge Casey's house."

And he proceeded to kiss her until they got there so that she wouldn't have a chance to change her mind, not that Lana was suffering much from the attentions. His kisses made her knees weak and her will even weaker. She felt as if every cell in her body was alive again, from her hair to her toes. It felt so good to be held against a hard, strong man again, and she seemed to fit perfectly into his arms. She let herself drown in those safe, protected feelings and shoved everything else aside. It was one of the few times in her life that she'd just done what she felt like doing, damning the consequences.

He even kissed her while Stanton stopped at a Walmart for some strange reason. But Lana wasn't about to object – her body was on fire, and all she wanted was it to continue.

They ended up at the home of a Judge that Burke knew personally, who was only too happy to marry them, muttering things like it was about damned time he settled down. Hurried introductions were made, and when they stood in front of the Judge and his tiny white haired wife, and said their vows, Burke's voice was low and clear. He held onto both of her hands the entire time, looking down at her, his face as loving as she could ever ask that it be. He even produced rings at exactly the right time, making her look at him in amazement again.

As he slid hers onto her finger, he apologized, though. "They're only ten karat – it was all Stanton could get. Walmart was the only place open this time of night. It was here or Kroger, and I didn't think they would carry rings. But I'll replace it tomorrow – wedding and engagement rings. We'll go shopping for whatever you want."

But she was already shaking her head, even before he ended his pathetic little speech. "I don't want anything replaced at all. I don't care what kind of ring it is. It could be a cigar band for all I care."

He couldn't believe this woman. He wanted to give her everything – all he was and all he had. She was so small and delicate, and had been through so much. Just looking at her made his entire body swell with unfulfilled needs – the first and sharpest of which was that he wanted to lay her down on his big bed and have his way with her . . . as many times over as he could manage at his advanced age. Until he passed out from the sheer, raw pleasure of it, or she did. But Burke also wanted to take care of her – to make sure nothing bad ever happened to her – or her daughter – again, and that was exactly what he intended to do.

Finally, Judge Albert Casey was saying those magical words – "You may kiss the bride."

Burke caught Lana's eye and thought he saw a tear in it, then tugged on her hands just the slightest bit to bring her up against him. His hands came up to cup either side of her face, lacing themselves into her hair.

Lana looked up at him – and it was quite a ways. The difference in their heights became glaringly apparent when they were dancing, but she became so lost in the movements of his body and trying to keep from crushing his feet that she forgot about it. He would always make her feel so tiny . . .

His lips claimed hers – there was no other way to put it. He wasn't in the least hesitant about it, and kissed her with a rampant possessive intent that made her forget they weren't the only ones in the room. The

judge had to clear his throat politely before Burke pulled back a little, eyes closed reverently as he moved his lips to her forehead and kissing her as if she was his biggest treasure.

"May I be the first to offer my congratulations?" Albert asked, offering his hand.

Keeping one arm tightly around his new wife's waist, Burke turned to his good friend with a huge smile and shook his hand. Congratulations were exchanged all around, and, to Burke and Lana's delight, Albert popped the cork on a very old, very valuable bottle of champagne, and drank to the couples' health and long marriage.

"It's about damned time," the older man growled, winking at Lana, who blushed beautifully.

Burke hadn't let Lana stray from his side since they'd been pronounced man and wife. It was as if he worried she was going to run away from him now that he'd bestowed her with all of his worldly goods. "You're repeating yourself in your old age, Al. And, well, I had to wait until I found the right one." Burke leaned down and kissed the top of Lana's head.

"And it looks to me as if you've definitely found her!" Nancy gushed.

Lana knew her face could not possibly get any redder. She took the smallest of sips of champagne, not wanting to lose her faculties, although the temptation was there, especially when she let herself consider what she'd just done, which she steadfastly refused to do.

The judge eyed Lana closely, saying, "Your last name was Hutchinson?"

"It was, yes," Lana answered softly. She felt Burke's arm tighten around her.

"Ever know a Greg and Penny Hutchinson?"

Lana bit her lip. When she answered, her voice was whisper thin. "They were my in-laws."

Albert looked stunned. "Then you were Craig's wife?"

As Lana was nodding sadly, Burke moved to thank Nancy for her hospitality, hugging her warmly, then eying Al sharply as he fumbled through an awkward offer of condolences.

"She's fine now, Al. She's with me."

Burke got Lana out of the house as quickly as he could, bundling her back into the limo and giving Stanton orders to take them home.

Still somewhat shocked both by their precipitous marriage as well as the unwelcome reminder of her widowhood in the middle of it, Lana looked around for her small clutch purse in a daze.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" Burke asked at her, his eyebrow rising at her fervent hunting around.

"My keys. I need to find my house keys."

Burke stilled her hands and brought her into his arms, stilling her frantic movements. "It's okay. You don't need them right now, and I'm sure they'll turn up. I know you had your purse when we came out of the ballroom. We're going to our home now, and I have the keys. I'll get you copies as soon as I can."

Lana swallowed hard. "Your house?"

His place was the biggest home in town. He'd bought up several lots not too far from the street he'd grown up on – the town hadn't experienced much growth until his company started to do well. It was rumored to have a bowling alley, a movie theatre, and over fifteen bedrooms.

Lana wasn't at all sure she was going to like living in a place like that. Her own house wasn't small but it wasn't huge on that scale, and it was very homey and comfortable. Something as big as his place probably felt like a museum, and as they drove up the winding driveway and around the cul de sac to the front door, it sure looked like one.

There was a large, well lit main house with Grecian columns along the front, and a huge wing on either side. Once the limo had rolled to a stop, Stanton got out and opened the car door, then doffed his chauffeur's cap and opened the front door, which was a good thing because Burke had gathered her up into his arms again, and he might have had a problem with the doorknob. He didn't stop at the threshold, though, he walked all the way across the marble foyer and up the staircase with her, and it didn't even have him breathing hard. He walked to the end of a pale gold hallway, and threw open a set of double doors into his bedroom, not pausing until he lay her down on his humongous bed, crawling up onto it beside her, never letting her leave his arms.

"I know you find this hard to believe," he breathed, his hand resting heavily on her tummy, "but I do love you. Thank you for marrying me, Mrs. Daniels. Tomorrow we'll go get rings, and somewhere along the line I'll get you a wedding present, I promise."

"I don't care," she whispered back, reaching out to touch his face.

It was one of the first times she'd touched him, and even though it was just his cheek, he felt it to his toes. He'd been ragingly hard all evening; there was no way she could have missed it while they were dancing. Luckily, he'd been able to wrestle himself under control during the ceremony or it could have been quite embarrassing, but as soon as they'd reclaimed the limo he was hard as a spike again, especially when he pulled her onto his lap and he was forcibly nestled against her bottom.

Speaking of which . . . "Does your rear end still hurt?" he asked, positioning her on her side so that he could reach around and pat the body part in question.

"No, it does not," she answered pertly, but with a frown.

Burke nuzzled his nose against hers, saying between teasing kisses, "Well, then I guess I'll just have to make sure that I spank much harder the next time." Lana gasped indignantly – as if he'd asked for a "do over" for the spanking he'd given her – and tried to pull away, but he wasn't about to let her move one inch away from him.

"I don't think so." It was hard to be adamant when he was kissing her that way, even about a subject like a future spanking. He was making everything inside her melt together into a big pile of goo with those soft, gentle, undemanding kisses. And his hand on her bottom – when it wasn't swatting her – made every cell in that area of her body sit up and take notice. He began to trail his finger slowly down that natural cleft from lower back to where her thighs met, then back again, over and over. He might as well have had his fingers directly on her clit – she felt as if he did! The ache that had been in the background since he'd picked her up – heck, since she'd seen him come down that runway – had moved very much to the fore.

Burke hadn't been able to hide his interest from her at all – she'd clearly felt his hardness when he'd had her over his lap. She'd had to restrain herself from rubbing against him while they were dancing, although a certain amount of that occurred naturally. Now she desperately wanted to arch against him, to rub herself against that prominent ridge in his pants, but she didn't dare. Her body was swollen and wet with a desire that had been dormant for too long, and she knew when she finally let go of her slender control, she was going to explode all over him like a warm can of beer in a paint mixer. If his fingers so much as drifted a little south of where they currently were, she swore it was going to be all over for her.

Lana had spent the past five years focusing attention everywhere but at herself – and ninety nine point nine percent of that attention had gone to Lily. If she ate, drank, and slept her daughter, then she got into bed too tired to notice the cold, lonely other side where Craig should be. Her sexual desires had been sublimated to the point that – before the onset of one Burke Daniels – she would have sworn that she was the female equivalent of a eunuch – completely asexual, and, despite the fact that she and Craig had had a wonderful sex life, Lana would have sworn that she didn't miss it.

But just a look from Burke blew away that hypothesis completely. She wasn't attracted to very many men, but this one – the one that was lying on his side in front of her, unbuttoning his shirt and revealing an unbelievably sexy, broad chest – set off fireworks within every tingling nerve she'd forgotten existed, setting them to throbbing and aching, begging for even just the lightest touch of his fingertips and ready to riot at the thought of his mouth.

He threw the shirt away while holding her eyes with his, his mouth claiming her in kisses that deepened rapidly until Lana thought she was going to die if he stopped. Her mind was blissfully full of nothing but the x-rated thoughts he inspired, and her body was his to do with as he pleased.

And Burke pleased to take his time with her – as much as his body allowed, anyway. Now that he'd gotten her where he wanted her, which was a marvelous surprise itself; he had had hopes, but he really hadn't expected to get her to say "yes" to him this quickly.

Since she had, he was going to move to consolidate his lead as quickly as possible. He'd known, from the moment their hands had touched the night of the auction, that they were going to burn down the house when they

made love, and he could already feel the edges of the bed starting to singe just from the little they'd already done. She was incredibly hot, and he was hot for her.

He leaned over her just a bit, pressing her back onto the thick comforter, and pulling away at each side of her dress as she lay back. She made an aborted attempt to grab for them out of delayed modesty, but he chided gently, "No, sweetie, I want to see you."

Lana wasn't at all sure that she wanted him to see her not so young, mother of one breasts, but she had no choice – he had the dress to her ankles and then in a heap on the floor as her arms came up to catch it to her.

He was staring down at her, and she brought her arms up again reflexively, afraid of what he might be thinking. Then he lowered his head to first one prickly tip and then the other, pronouncing reverently between them throatily, "Beautiful."

Lana lifted her head, watching him suckle her strongly, doing nothing towards soothing the ache in her nipples and everything to create an even deeper need that streamed directly from those wet, hard nubs to the wet, hard nub between her legs.

Both the nylons and the panties were ripped off her in one swift motion that made her eyes go big. Burke saw that frightened look and kissed his way up to and across her collarbone, then up the side off her neck to her lips. "Shh-shh-shh. Please don't be afraid of me, Lana. I would never hurt you. I'm just a bit of an impatient bridegroom," he apologized, leaning back to look down into her eyes, hoping to see that apprehension completely gone, but there was still some lingering on the fringes of her eyes.

There was nothing like making oneself vulnerable to drive away fear. Burke reached down between them and undid his belt and zipper, then caught her and brought it to his swollen self, unable to suppress a deep, guttural moan when her soft fingers cupped as much of him as she could. "Dear Lord, woman -" he growled, hips grinding against her tender palm. "You can't possibly be afraid of me. I'm totally at your mercy." He took her other hand and put it in the center of his chest, where she could feel his rapid heartbeat. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, saying, "You have my heart and my part, and you can hurt either one of them very easily. But I know you won't. I trust you with both. Won't you trust me a little, too?"

Lana bit her lip, and lay back, leaving herself completely open to him, trust shining in her eyes. Burke smiled, and didn't immediately move into position. He knew his body was going to make him shortly, but he wanted to revel in her, in what they had together. He didn't want it to end quickly, although he was pretty sure it was going to as soon as his body got a taste of her. He just hoped he didn't embarrass himself.

He scooted up beside her, keeping them touching from shoulder to groin, and ran his hand down her tummy, noting the small faded silvery lines left from her pregnancy, then delving into surprisingly soft, straightish pubic hair, and on down the tender inside of each of her thighs, sending a shiver through her and raising gooseflesh everywhere in his path.

"Are you cold, honey?" he frowned.

"N-no."

"What is it?"

She shrugged, but he wouldn't let her get away with that. "Answer me, Lana. You're just a quick flip away from a spanking. I don't want you hiding anything from me, ever."

She couldn't meet his eyes, but mumbled, "Nervous."

Burke nodded, whispering, "So am I."

That made her smile. "Why would you be nervous?"

He touched her gently, all over except her most private place, while he spoke. "Because I'm not a teenager any more. I hope I can keep up with you, and satisfy you. And not have this be over before it's begun." His fingers began to venture towards that almost no man's land, cupping her at first, making her start just a little, but talking all the time, soothing her with his voice. "And what if you didn't like what I look like, or think I'm in the point and laugh category -"

She almost laughed at that, and he knew she had relaxed a lot. He didn't want her to ever be afraid of him.

"You're not at all small, Burrrrrrkeee!" One of his fingers had slipped between those pouty lips, dragging itself through her warm butter and up to that nest of nerves that had her moaning his name.

He could definitely get used to that.

Burke leaned over her a little, and took one of those mauve tips into his mouth as he deliberately moved his fingers back down to that swollen, weeping font. "Mmmmmmm, oh, Lana, you're very wet!" As he expected, her face flushed a deep red but he also noticed that the blush extended down towards her breasts. Slowly, experimentally, he pressed one finger into her, and found he could barely make it.

Lana reached down towards his hand as he entered her, but it wasn't as if there was anything she could do about it. He was all the way inside her practically before she could react.

It was only his finger, but Burke had to clench his jaw. She was so tight he wasn't sure he was going to be able to get inside her, and the idea nearly drove him out of his mind.

"Sweetie," he whispered urgently. "I don't think I can wait too much longer."

Lana nodded. It wasn't as if she was a virgin. She'd had a child. But she'd also been sexually dormant for the past five years. She guessed if she was going to err on one side or the other, she'd rather err on the side of being tight rather than loose.

When he began to present himself to her, though, she wasn't sure she'd still agree with that idea. He was big, and she had become small. Lana had forgotten that sometimes Craig's entry had hurt, just for a moment, until her body adjusted itself to him.

Burke was taking as much time as his body would allow, arching his hips to inch his way inside her while she clung to him, inside and out, grabbing his arms and moaning just a little at each advance. He gave her time to relax then forged forward, until he was completely imbedded in her, her body cradling him, her legs wrapped loosely around his, her body tilted up to him, deepening their contact.

He leaned down, onto his elbows, framing her head with his forearms, flexing his muscles to pump gently in and out of her. At the first stroke, Lana sucked her breath all the way into her lungs, involuntarily, moaning low and loud as she expelled it and he pulled out.

She groaned with each plunge and retreat and he adored it – she wanted him! Within several strokes his staid little Lana was writhing beneath him as he took her slowly and surely, not giving in to that inexorable urge to speed up until the last possible minute. He kept himself tightly in check, concentrating almost completely on her pleasure as he dipped and thrust and drew himself all the way out before plunging all the way back in, to the hilt.

It was on one of those strokes that her cries reached a fever pitch and he felt her start to contract around him. Burke sped up immediately, carrying her along on the wave that eventually crashed on his own beach as he arched into her powerfully, taking her, owning her, claiming her in the most basic sense of the act.

He had never come so hard in his life. As he spasmed into her, jerking and twitching in the throes of it, he thought the lights were dimming and he was going to faint, although he fought the feeling off. He felt more drained than he could ever imagine being, and collapsed down on top of her because he couldn't support himself on his arms any longer.

Lana was feeling much the same. She didn't even notice when he practically fell on her – she was bathed in bliss, flying higher than any cloud in the sky. She was still contracting, long after he had left her. Her body didn't want to let him go.

His breath blew the baby hair around her ear as it puffed out of his mouth. When he had calmed down, he levered himself off her with a start. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to crush you."

"You didn't," her answer was lazy and almost sleepy.

They did nap for a very short time, but he awakened immediately when she moved away from him and sat up on the side of the bed. "What is it, sweetheart?"

She was almost in tears. She never did this kind of thing – and even though he was her husband it was beginning to feel uncomfortably like a one night stand. “I need to go to the bathroom, but I don’t know where it is!” It was dark and she could barely make out a couple of shapes that might have been the bathroom door, but she didn’t want to look like an idiot and end up in a closet instead.

“Oh, honey, it’s the door in the corner on the far right. I’m sorry. I should have shown you when we got here.” After turning on a small tableside lamp, he opened the bathroom door for her, and turned on the lights in there. It was the biggest bathroom she’d ever seen in her life. It was bigger than some public bathrooms. There was a huge sunken tub, and a separate big shower stall, and what looked like his and hers toilets along another wall.

Embarrassed that he had to get up and show her the bathroom, Lana mumbled, “Thank you,” and slipped inside, where she had to play eenie meenie with the two toilets, until the one she decided that the one she picked was definitely not a the usual toilet. Luckily, the other one was exactly what she expected.

When she came back to bed, he was raring to go, and they stayed awake until almost dawn. They couldn’t get enough of each other, and she surprised him by being almost as aggressive as he was.

Chapter 7

Presently:

It was those memories that flooded her mind as Lana drove home – the uninhibited things they had done to – and with each other. He'd put her into positions she would have bet she wouldn't have been able to get into moments earlier, but somehow, for some reason, she was more relaxed than she thought she would be – more open to the new and different things he suggested.

She pulled into her sister's driveway and spent a long moment in the car, trying to compose herself. Marilyn was very attuned to her sister, and she could pick up on things that no one else would. Even though she thought it was pretty much a lost cause, she still had to attempt to keep her private business private, although that pipe dream was probably only going to last until Marilyn got a good look at her.

Their household was up notoriously early, so Lana didn't worry about waking anyone up. She knew that at seven thirty, Marilyn would probably already have the kids fed, and would probably be working on her third cup of coffee.

She breezed in the door and announced herself, trying to avoid her sister's eyes, which was probably a dead giveaway. "Hi, honey, I'm home!"

Lily came running from the TV room, wrapping her chubby arms around Lana's waist. "I misseded you, Mommy!"

Lana sank down and hugged her daughter tight, then let go and looked back at her doubtfully. "You were probably so busy with Aunt Marilyn that you never gave me a thought, girlie-girl!"

But Lily would not be deterred, and answered solemnly, "No, Mommy, I misseded you all the time we were making and eating s'mores, and tellin' ghost stories, and eatin' popcorn -"

"Good Lord, babygirl, I'm not going to need to feed you for a week since you've eaten all that!" She poked the little girl in her ticklish tummy, drawing squeals of both delight and protest.

"Are too!"

"Am not!" Lana replied with mock sternness. "Why don't you hop upstairs and get your clothes on, and then get your things together and come back down with them so we can go home."

"K!" Lily adored helping her mother, and although her clothes were likely to end up crumpled in her bag, Lana didn't care about that right now. She just wanted to get out of her sister's house as quickly as possible.

But Marilyn, who had stood watching Lana's exchange with Lily, eyed her sister closely. When Lily had disappeared into the room she used when she was visiting her Aunt and Uncle, Marilyn stated slyly, "You're still in the clothes you wore last night."

Lana wanted to smack her forehead. She should have driven home and changed clothes before coming over here, but her first thought was to just pick up Lily and go home to hibernate for a while, rather than trying to plan out the best way to circumvent her sister's eagle eye.

"Yep." That's it, girl, she coached herself. Say as little as possible and you're less likely to incriminate yourself. The fewer people who knew what she'd done last night – especially the marriage part – the better.

"So, how was it?" It was a casual question that hid a wealth of curiosity.

Lana nodded, concentrating on Marilyn's favorite rose and cream wallpaper. "It was very nice."

Marilyn took a step closer to her sister. "Just 'very nice'? You have a date with the most eligible bachelor in the state – one of the most eligible in the world – and it's 'very nice'?"

"Yep."

At this point, she was standing practically up against Lana, who, out of sheer stubbornness, refused to budge. Marilyn started to sniff at her, doing a reasonable impression of a bloodhound. "You reek of expensive mens' cologne."

"I - I do?"

"Yes, you do." She leaned even closer, and touched the side of Lana's neck, where neck met shoulder. "And you've got a hickey, dear. It's faint, but it's there." Marilyn grabbed Lana's hand and dragged her over to the table in the breakfast nook, practically forcing her down into a chair.

"But Lily -" Lana tried weakly, not quite willing to admit defeat.

"You're not setting a foot out of this house until you tell me everything," she gave Lana a reasonable facsimile of "the look", complete with raised eyebrow. "And I do mean everything."

So Lana spilled - a judiciously edited version, yes, but she spilled, and Marilyn lapped every word up like a starving cat at an all you can drink milk buffet.

But Marilyn's momma hadn't raised any fools. She didn't buy Lana's sanitized version for one minute. "C'mon, sister. You're holding out on me, I know. You slept with him, didn't you?"

Lana's blazing red face was more than she needed as an answer.

"Good for you! I bet he was great, too, wasn't he? He just strikes me as one of those men who really cares about what his woman is feeling in bed - or not feeling, as is sometimes the case. But not his, I would bet my bottom dollar!" She leaned over and hugged her sister tight. "I'm so glad you finally found someone you trust that much, and I'm so glad it was him. He may be rich, but he seemed really . . . real to me over the phone."

It was a mistake to mention that she and Burke had discussed her prior to their date, Marilyn realized a little too late.

That was when Lana rounded on her. "Yes, I understand that you told him quite a bit about me during your conversation, Marilyn Jessup Thorpe Rojas. And you should feel very lucky that I'm even deigning to speak to you, considering what I know you told him."

It was Marilyn's turn to blush, although she didn't do it quite as brightly - or as often - as her sister did. "Okay, I know, I went a bit too far -"

"Oh, ya' think?" Lana returned with every ounce of sarcasm she owned.

"Well . . ." Marilyn wheedled. "I wanted him to like you. And I knew he would if I kinda helped him to get to know you as I do."

"And that included, as far as you were concerned, telling him that Craig spanked me?"

Marilyn looked like she had swallowed a golf ball. She put her hands to her mouth. "I forgot I'd told him that! I only mentioned it in passing, kind of -"

Lana rolled her eyes. "Oh, that makes me feel ever so much better - that you just let it drip from your lips during the course of an everyday casual conversation that I was spanked. How many others of our friends know this inconsequential tidbit of information about me, hmmmmmm?"

"No one else - no one - I swear!" She held her right hand up as if she was on the witness stand. "Really, Lan, God as my witness I've never told anyone else."

"Uh huh. Forgive me if I don't thank you for deciding to impart the information to him - a total stranger."

Marilyn leaned forward and whispered, "Did he spank you?"

But Lana wasn't going to have any more of it. To cover the inevitable tell-tale blush, she pushed her chair back and walked around the table, saying in as hard a voice as she could conjure, "Oh-ho-ho, no. I'm taking the fifth about last night from this point on. You're not going to get any more information from this pigeon, sister dear. I think you've heard - and done - about enough."

Lily was just coming down the stairs, thumping her suitcase down them noisily, step by step. Lana gave her the eye, and she picked it up for the last set, as she should have from the beginning, then tousled the girl's hair when she finally reached her mother to let her know that she wasn't really mad.

"Here are the keys, sweetie. Why don't you go put your suitcase in the backseat and get into the car. I'll be there in two shakes of a lamb's tail, darlin'."

She watched her daughter go, then rounded on her sister for a parting shot as she leaned against the open door. "I'll leave you with something to consider, Marilyn. What would happen if I should let it slip to Carl that you've been pulling strings to set me up, hmmm?"

Marilyn blanched an unbecoming shade of white. Carl had made his thoughts about Marilyn's machinations known several times since Craig had died. At first he'd given Marilyn stern, verbal warnings about it, but since that hadn't done any good that he could see, since she still continued to set her sister up whenever the urge struck her, he'd moved on to more serious methods of behavior modification, the latest and most severe of which had been a session with a cane he had found on a site on the Internet.

It was not an experience that Marilyn was at all interested in repeating.

"You wouldn't!"

"Oh wouldn't I?" Lana let her voice trail up on the "I", and closed the door with a resounding slam behind her, feeling she might finally have found a way to keep her sister in check.

But she had thought much too soon.

When she got home, she made sure that Lily had something to work on – she often gave her daughter small study assignments on the weekends. Nothing big, just a chapter in a book they were reading together anyway, that she would then read aloud to her mother. Reading aloud was a real challenge for Lily although once she started doing it and forgot to worry about making a mistake, she was fine. Reading the chapter over first and asking her mother questions about any words that bothered her let her get her feet under her before she read the chapter aloud. She tried to copy what Lana did when she read to Lily – changing her voice for each character to make things more interesting, and she was a pretty good mimic.

With Lily reading contentedly on the sun porch, and despite the fact that it was a Saturday, Lana contacted Jon DeSimone, who was the lawyer that Craig had always used, and with whom she had maintained a relationship. She didn't want to delay the dissolution of her marriage any longer than she had to, even if he charged her overtime, or whatever the lawyerly equivalent was.

Jon was frankly amazed to hear what she'd done, but said that as long as it wasn't contested, she should be able to slip out of the marriage relatively easily.

He would draw up the necessary paperwork for her to sign and even offered to bring them by when he finished them. Jon was a friend of the family and was glad to do whatever he could to assist Lana in any way. Marilyn had tried to push them together occasionally, but there was no spark there at all.

Certainly nothing like what she'd felt for Burke, Lana thought, then squelched it immediately. What she felt for him was an aberration, and she was doing the right thing by terminating something that probably had already been exhausted on his end . . . although she knew that she got even wetter now when she thought of him – and what he could do and had done to her body – than she had before they'd been intimate.

The phone rang right then, just as she'd been thinking about him. Lana absently looked at the caller id, and it was him. Well, she wasn't going to answer it, and that was that. She put the phone back down, but there were calls all day that were probably him, that she completely ignored. She was somewhat surprised – and felt a little defeated – that he hadn't come over to talk to her about finding her ring on his nightstand – but then she was probably right that he'd worked her out of his system and would be just as happy to get out of their spur of the moment commitment.

She didn't check her messages that day until after she'd put Lily to bed. She was in her big, empty bed again – which somehow felt all the emptier for having shared his with him last night – when she let the messages play.

"Lana? It's Burke. I have your ring, and I fully intend to put it back on your finger as soon as I see you again." Well, so much for him being happy with their divorce, she thought, hoping against hope that he wouldn't

try to be an obstructionist about it. But deep down, where she wouldn't admit it to herself, she was feeling very satisfied that he wasn't going to give her up that easily.

He didn't sound like a happy camper at all, and his next words sounded even angrier. "I have some business that I have to attend to in Washington State – it's an emergency situation, or you could bet that I'd be over at your place by now with you over my knee instead of on my way to the airport. But I can tell you this: you are going to get the spanking of your life for leaving me high and dry this morning. That's not the type of behavior I expect or will tolerate from my wife. So you can be thinking of that until I get home. I'll call you later and hopefully get to talk to you."

Lana's heart had started to bang uncomfortably against her breast bone, just at his tone of voice, and then he had to bring spanking into it. Well, she tried to slough the feelings off, he wouldn't be her husband for long, so she didn't have to worry about it.

Did she?

"Lana, pick up the phone." Several long seconds of silence, then a click.

An hour later, the same call, only in a distinctly angrier tone.

Four hours later, another call. "I'm at the Crown Plaza in Seattle. My number here is 206-464-5555. I would heartily suggest that if you value the health and well being of your derriere, that you call me as soon as you get this."

A half an hour later, "Now I'm more worried than angry. I hope you're okay. I'm going to keep trying to check in when I can between meetings and crises, hoping to catch you. Please call me on my cell if you're all right so I don't have to be pulling my hair out worrying about you. I won't lie, I'm not happy that you bolted, but I'd like to talk to you about why, and I need to know that you're not lying in a ditch somewhere. I'm always available on my cell, and I don't know when I'll get back to the hotel." He left his number, then said, "I do love you, you know," and hung up.

He was getting to her, making her feel guilty. She should probably call him, Lana thought, half reaching for the phone. But part of her froze her hand in place. If she wanted to divorce him, then what was she going to call him for? He would be out of her life. He wouldn't have any right or any need to talk to her.

That seemed a little cold to her, but then, she'd never been divorced before. She didn't know how these things were done.

Could it really hurt to just call him and say that she was okay? He really sounded like he was frantic to know that she was okay.

Lana decided that she'd just call and leave a message – he was busy and probably wouldn't answer anyway. She'd just let him know that she was all right.

Of course, he answered it on the first ring, short and businesslike. "Daniels."

"I – uh – I don't want to disturb you –" There was her heart again, thumping against her chest wall like a fetus trying to kick its way out of the womb.

"You're not. Are you okay?" Sharp, and impatient.

"Yes."

She heard him cover the phone and speak to someone else in the exact same tone. "Sorry. I had to get rid of some people so I could talk to you. You're all right then? No accident as you fled the scene? You've just been sitting at home with Lily and ignoring my phone calls?"

Lana sighed, and answered boldly, "In a nutshell, yes."

Burke dragged his hand over his face slowly, clutching at shards of patience that just weren't there after an eighteen hour day of putting out fires. "May I ask what I did to deserve such shabby treatment?"

His formality stung for a reason she couldn't lay her hands on. "I wasn't trying to – I just –"

"I'm glad you're okay," he cut in. "But I'm not going to let you go, you know."

Why was it that the words she shouldn't want to hear made her heart lift?

"Is Lily okay, also?"

"Yes."

"Good. Did she have a good time a Marilyn's?"

"Yes, she always does. Marilyn spoils her terribly and stuffs her full of foods I won't let her eat, then sends her home with me all hopped up on sugar. It's okay – I do the same thing with her kids when they come over to stay with Lily." It was as if they'd been together for years, and he went away on business often, and she was just calling to tell him about their day.

"What did you do all day?"

"Read with Lily and paid some bills, did some housecleaning and laundry, just normal weekend junk."

"And now?"

Lana fidgeted with the bedcovers, pleating the sheet nervously with her fingers. "Lily's in bed. And so am I."

"What's your bedroom look like?"

She described her room to him, surprised that he'd asked.

"King sized bed?"

"Yes, although not as big as yours."

"What color are your sheets?"

Her eyebrow rose, but she told him about the blue and white checked sheets with yellow daisies scattered all over them.

"And you're in a nightgown?"

"Burke, this is not going to turn into phone sex."

"I don't want it to," he said, and somehow she believed him. "What color is the night gown and what kind of fabric?"

"Are you gay?"

He guffawed. "Yes, definitely. I was completely disinterested in you sexually last night, couldn't you tell? I'm just trying to get a picture of you in my mind."

"Oh. Well, it's cotton and about mid thigh length, and a sort of sage green with pink roses."

"Mmmmmmmmm," he sighed lazily into the phone.

She could see him leaning back with his eyes closed, trying to picture what she'd described to him. "This is the strangest phone conversation I've ever had."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Unfortunately, I have to go back to work. Thank you for calling me, though. You eased my mind, and when I get home, you can ease something else, too – after your spanking, of course."

"I don't think so."

"Oh, but I do. While you're home, start packing boxes – I want to move you into my place as soon as possible. In fact, strike that. I'll get a hold of a moving company and have them box everything up. I don't want you to have to lift a finger unnecessarily."

"You don't -"

"Lana," he began patiently. "You're in enough trouble already. Don't compound it. Just say 'yes, dear', and do as you're told."

She snorted loudly in his ear. "Boy, did you marry the wrong woman for that!"

He laughed, and she found she loved the sound. "Well, that's okay. I know how to get you to do what you need to do, don't I?"

"Good bye, Burke!" she interjected hastily.

"Bye, my love. I'll call you as soon as I can."

"Don't work too hard."

He sighed tiredly, and she knew he was doing just that. "Easier said than done, but I'll be home as soon as I can. Bye."

"Bye."

Lana hung up the phone, kicking herself all the way. She should have told him about the divorce. She should have. She shouldn't have let herself get so wrapped up in that conversation – it should have been short and sweet – businesslike – just letting him know that she was fine.

But his voice reduced every part of her to jelly. She was thinking that it would take him very little effort to get her to respond quite fully to him just over the phone, without ever touching her.

Even alone in her home room, in her own house, she blushed at that thought.

Damn him!

Chapter 8

He was as good as his word, calling her regularly, although she didn't generally answer the phone. Sometimes he left long, wordy messages about what he was going to do to her when he got home, and sometimes it was just a short hello between meetings. He said he liked having someone at home to call, and she thought that was the sweetest thing she'd ever heard.

She kept trying to remind herself that she didn't want to love him, but then he would say – or do – something that just drove home why she had fallen for him in the first place. The next morning, while Lily was at school, five dozen red roses arrived, along with Jon DiSimone, who presented her with the divorce paperwork to sign, eying the flowers that filled every nook and cranny she could spare. She'd had to rearrange her collection of Lladro to make room for the vases, and the place smelled like a florist's shop – not that she really minded.

"You're sure you want to divorce him?" Jon asked pointedly.

Lana bit her lip, but took the folded blue papers he handed her without looking at them.

Jon could see that she was a lot more undecided about it than she had been on the phone. "Look. Why don't you just keep those for a while. They're not going anywhere until they're signed. If and when you decide to sign them, bring them by the office and I'll file them. Okay?"

She nodded hesitantly. "Thank you for bringing them to me so quickly, Jon."

"Of course, of course."

He stopped at the kitchen door, pausing to look back at her with a thoughtful look on his face. "You look happier than I've seen you since Craig, you know."

"I do?"

"And, if you don't mind me saying, if he's the one that's done this for you, I hope you don't bring me those papers. You deserve to be happy, Lana, you really do. Craig would want that for you. I know that as sure as I know that Burke Daniels wouldn't marry just any old woman. He can have the pick of the lot, and that's just what he got in you."

"Jon! Thank you."

"You're welcome. You think on it before you act. Think hard. None of us poor mortals should blithely throw away any chance we get at happiness, however unlikely." He grinned crookedly at her. "I'll get off my soapbox now, and get back to work. Take care!"

Lana played back Jon's words occasionally all day, and she was so lost in thought that even Lily noticed, chiding her because she'd had to repeat nearly every story she'd recounted from her day because Lana couldn't pay attention.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. Momma's just a little preoccupied."

Lily scrunched up her nose at the unfamiliar word. "What's that mean?"

Bringing her dish to the sink to rinse it off on its way to the dishwasher, Lana answered, "It means Momma hasn't been paying close enough attention to you, so, even though it's a school night, you can watch a DVD if you like – once you've gotten all your homework done."

That was a real treat for Lily, who generally wasn't allowed to watch TV or DVDs during the school week.

The phone rang as Lily was dashing upstairs towards homework and probably her millionth screening of “Stuart Little”, and Lana answered it on the first ring. He hadn’t called all day. She thought he might be on his way home.

“I’m sorry I haven’t had a chance to call until now. Been tied up in more damned meetings. Excuse my French. I could happily go the rest of my life without attending another meeting.”

Lana chuckled. “But isn’t that the life of a successful businessman?”

“Grrrr. Tell me about your day so I can stop thinking about the possibility of striking workers and defunct pacts with software manufacturers?”

When she hung up the phone an hour and a half later, Lana found herself standing in Craig’s study, staring at the pictures of herself and Lily he kept on the left side of his big desk. The room still smelled of him somehow, as if he’d just left it for a second to go grab a Diet Coke. She sat down in his chair, and the faint spice of his favorite cologne assailed her memory. Tears dripped unheeded down her cheeks as she began to talk to him.

“I never thought it would happen. I really didn’t, Craig, honey,” her voice cracked and wobbled. “I’ve been so closed off since – since you’ve been gone. I haven’t let anyone or anything touch me, beyond Marilyn and Lily, really. And I’ve been telling myself that it was all for her, but that’s not true.

“It was because I was afraid. I’m still afraid. When I lost you, I thought I’d lost everything. I wanted to crawl into that casket with you and just let them pour that dirt down on me, too. I’d be happier, I knew, if I could have just died with you.

“But I couldn’t do that to our babygirl. She needed me, and I had to be strong. To raise her the way you would have wanted – the way we wanted.

Lana wrapped her arms around herself, as if they could replace Craig’s arms around her. “I haven’t let anyone in. No one. I was dead inside.

“Until now. Until Burke. I knew he was different the moment I met him, but I didn’t want him to be. I didn’t want things to change – it scared me – it still does. The idea of being with someone other than you . . . in more than even a sexual way. In an intimate way, a ‘hi, honey, what’s for dinner’, roll over in bed and see the same face next to me for fifty years way.

“That was supposed to be you. I never thought it could be anyone else but you.

Barely a whisper, “And I hope you’re not mad at me, and don’t feel betrayed, because I think it might be Burke, too.

“He’s a good man, Craig. A very good man, and he says he loves me, and I think he really does. And I’m – I love him, too, I think. I don’t know him very well yet, but from what I do know I think you’d like him.

“I – I thought I’d said goodbye to you for the last time when I buried you, but I feel like I’m saying it again now, and I don’t mean to. You’ll always be my love. Always, till the day I die.

“I just . . . I love him too. God help me, I love him too.” She buried her head in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

Lily found her like that a half hour later. “Momma, Momma, are you all right?” she asked, running in to give Lana a big hug.

Lana practically hugged the breath out of her daughter, then drew back and wiped her eyes, not wanting to upset the child. “I’m fine, sweetie, I was just thinking about your Daddy.”

“You miss him a lot, doncha?”

She nodded, tearing up again, and stroking Lily’s hair. “Sometimes I really, really do.”

“Aunt Marilyn says that you need a man.”

Hearing such words out of the mouth of a babe made Lana smile broadly through her tears. “And what do you think about that, Miss Lily?”

Lily shrugged. “I think you should get one if you need one,” she declared, as if they were discussing bicycles. “One like Daddy.”

“And what would you say if your Momma thinks she might have found one who’s a little like your Daddy?”

“Then you should get him. And I wanna meet him.”

Lana cupped her precious daughter's cheek. "You will, honey, you will."

Those words turned out to be terribly prophetic. The next night, there was a loud knock on the front door – the one that no one but company came to.

Lily got to the door first, but remembered what had been drilled into her about safety, for once, standing in front of the closed door and asking loudly, "Who is it?"

"Burke Daniels."

"I don't know any Burke Daniels. You'll have to go away and come back later," she stated with great finality and aplomb before Lana could get to the door and open it.

"Mommy, you're not opposed to do it that way!" Lily corrected eagerly.

Glancing at Burke, who came bearing roses, she bent down to speak her daughter. "You did very well, Lily, and I'm proud of you. But I know Mr. Daniels. He's the man I was telling you about yesterday."

She waited patiently for Lily to recall the conversation. Lily's face lit up suddenly. "The one that's like my Daddy?"

"Yes. The one that's like your Daddy."

Burke knew that he would probably never receive any higher praise from Lana, and he swallowed hard. Both of them turned to look at him, then Lana stepped aside and said, "Come in. You must be dog tired."

Suddenly feeling a little awkward, he thrust the flowers into her hand, but kept his other hand behind his back as she reached up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, then stepped a bit away. "Burke, I want you to meet my daughter, Lily. Lily, this is Mr. Daniels."

Lily did her proud and put her hand out to be swallowed by his. Lana knew a something about how tiny he could make a person feel, and she was an adult woman. But Lily didn't seem to be intimidated by him at all.

Nevertheless, Lana was impressed when he hunkered down to Lily's height. "I'm very glad to meet, you, Miss Lily." His voice was soft as butter. "Since I brought your Mommy flowers, I figured I'd bring you something you might like." He produced a wrapped package from behind his back.

Lana knew that this might develop into a problem – he was going to spoil the child horribly, she could just tell. At least this wasn't a pony . . . she didn't think. Unless they'd miniaturized them pretty darned small.

It was, instead, an evil hand held video game, just the one Lily had been nagging for but was supposed to either save her allowance to buy on her own or wait to get on her birthday several months from now.

Burke had just preempted all of that, in one fell swoop.

"What do you say, Lily?" Lana asked sharply.

Lily was still in awe. "Thank you, Mr. Daniels! It's just what I wanted!"

It even contained exactly the game she wanted for it, as well as the batteries to play it. Without another word, Lily ran for the stairs to take it up to her bedroom. "Uh uh uh!" Her mother's warning sound had Lily pausing on the first landing and looking back at her dolefully. "Is all of your homework done, young lady?"

"Yes!"

"Even the math?"

Lily's shoulders drooped. "But Momma! I have to play this game!" Her tone conveyed the fact that she would surely die if she was delayed even a second.

Lana opened her mouth to repeat her usual lecture on homework before play time when Burke spoke up with, "You're mother's right, Lily. Your homework has to get done first, always. Why don't you bring that back down here to me for safekeeping – so's you won't get tempted and you'll get your homework done faster. Your Mommy and I'll be down here talking, and when you're done, just come back down and I'll turn it over to you." He softened the orders by smiling disarmingly, and whispering loudly, "I promise I won't run down the batteries too badly – I've wanted to play this game myself!"

Only somewhat placated, Lily answered unenthusiastically, "All right," and trudged up the stairs.

Once she'd disappeared, Lana found herself in Burke's arms, being tipped backwards by the strength of his kiss. "I have missed you, woman," he growled. "Next time I travel, you're going with me."

"I have to stay with Lily," Lana trumped his autocratic commandment easily in one phrase, only to earn a glare and a swat to her bottom as she turned to head to the kitchen. "Are you hungry?"

He was, and devoured their leftovers from supper, even though they were only lowly meatloaf and garlic smashed potatoes with steamed green beans. He ate like it was his last meal and rhapsodized over her cooking, then, when she was starting to clean up, he tugged her back into his arms, cupping her bottom with his palms firmly. "You have a spanking to get out of the way."

"Burke! Not with Lily around!" She meant that as an answer to two things – his recollection of her spanking and the fact that his hands were where they oughtn't be.

"Nope. We'll do it tomorrow once she's gone to school."

"But – you can't stay here!" Lana nearly squealed, until Lily arrived, homework in hand for Lana to check.

Burke handed the video game over to Lily as soon as Lana pronounced the homework completed, and Lily was gone with the wind, her mother's reminders about bedtime floating behind her uselessly.

Lana sighed as she watched her daughter disappear upstairs, and was horrified to spot the folded blue papers that Jon had dropped off sitting on the marble topped table in the foyer. Luckily, she was discreetly able to drop them into a drawer of the table without Burke noticing a thing.

She came into his arms willingly as he sank down onto the comfy couch in the living room, and they snuggled and talked until Lana looked at her watch suddenly and realized that it was well past Lily's bedtime for a school night. She crept upstairs, and was surprised to find Burke following her to Lily's room where she was curled to one side, the repetitive music of the game a lullaby as she slept.

Burke hung back and let Lana put Lily to bed. He didn't want to butt in and try to take over or change whatever rituals they'd established. He only hoped he would be included in them as they all got to know each other.

Sleeping arrangements were on his mind, however. He knew that Lana would not want to sleep with him on Craig's bed. It was just something he knew about her as sure as he knew that he didn't want to spend tonight without her. So he discreetly checked into the other bedrooms down the hall as she and Lily were saying their sleepy goodnights, and found what was probably a guest bedroom with two twin beds, which he craftily pushed together to form a king sized bed of sorts.

Lana was amazed at his ingenuity, and grateful for his understanding. They were separated from Lily by two rooms, but both Lily's door and the guest room door were kept cracked open just a bit so that Lana could hear her daughter if she called out in the night.

It was nearly – without the sound effects – a repeat of their first night together. They were both insatiably greedy for each other. Burke brought Lana to several muffled but screaming completions, and managed to cry out his own ecstasy into the pillow next to her head each time he drove himself into her. He'd always been downright insatiable, but with her it had multiplied ten fold. He stopped himself when he reached for her the fifth time, knowing that she needed to get some sleep to function when Lily got up in the morning, which was a few scant hours away.

Planting soft kisses on each of her closed eyelids, Burke tucked her against him spoon fashion and pronounced, "Sleep."

Despite her dislike of being given orders, Lana proceeded to do just that.

She wasn't in any hurry the next morning, however, to have Lily go off to school, knowing what it meant was going to happen to her.

Although she could have taken Lily to school any morning, Lily road the bus, more for the social interaction of it and to reinforce as much normalcy in Lily's life as possible. So at seven ten, she kissed Lily good bye at the door and watched her get into the bus.

And when she closed the door and turned around, and there he was, a wicked looking paddle in hand. "Why don't we just get this over with, hmmm? Then you won't have to spend the rest of the day dreading it."

He tugged her towards the living room, where he'd closed all of the shades in preparation. He wasn't wearing anything but a skin tight pair of jeans, and Lana found herself wondering how People Magazine had missed him as one of the fifty most beautiful people every year. Men with no shirt and worn jeans had always turned her on, but he was really raising the bar.

Nevertheless, she was in no hurry to get this spanking. None at all, and she did her best to resist, planting her feet on the hard wood floors wherever there wasn't a rug, and managing to slow him a little, but missing the mark of stopping him completely by far. He never hurt her, just exerted a little more of that apparently boundless strength, and gently coercing her into obeying his not so subtle command to move forward.

But once they got there, he didn't just drag her over his knee. He settled them both down and brought her up tight to his side. "This is not going to be an easy spanking, Lana. It couldn't be. I was frantic having to be in Washington and wonder and worry about if you were alive or not. That was an awful thing to do to me."

Lana knew it was, but she had done what she thought she needed to do, and that was exactly what she told him.

"The next time you feel overwhelmed, and feel the urge to run from me, try waking me up and talking to me. I promise you, right now, as solemnly as I promised to love and honor you, that I will never be too busy to talk to you about things that are important to you. I'm not one of those men who doesn't believe in discussing things that are important in a marriage. I will always make time for you. Always. And Lily. I want to go to her recitals and her plays and her sports events and everything, and I will. There are no two people in this world who are as important to me as you two are, and I want to be kept in the loop about how you're feeling. I don't want to ever wake up and find this - " he held up her wedding ring, then slipped it onto her finger " - on my nightstand and find you gone."

Burke caught her eye. "Am I making myself perfectly clear?"

Lana could only nod. She was nervous and embarrassed and sorry about hurting him, not that she thought she could have really changed anything she'd done.

"Good. Now stand up and take your panties down, then lie over my lap, please."

Even during a spanking, he was excruciatingly polite. The thought brought a small smile to her lips, which disappeared very quickly once she settled into that depressingly familiar position. She'd been over a man's lap enough to know that she shouldn't have been finding herself there as often as she had -especially in such a new relationship. They'd only seen each other twice, and he'd spanked her both times. That was not a good thing.

And after this spanking, Lana could only think that it was a very bad thing. She might have been remembering things to be rosier than they were, but she didn't think that Craig had ever spanked her as hard. And then he'd used that God awful paddle after making sure that every inch of her butt and thighs were already well roasted, he applied several layers of swats from that horrid thing, often hitting the same area several times only because of the size of it, and the lack of size of her bottom.

Lana had never blubbered during a spanking, but she started to at the end of this one. It was how Burke knew that he'd done what needed to be done - that this was something she was going to remember the next time she thought of leaving him with no word about where she was going to be. "P-please - I - oh - no - more - sorry - so sorry - Burke - ooww!!" When they first appeared, her tears had tugged at his heart, but of course they hadn't stayed his hand in the least. He hated to have to hurt her, but he needed to make an impression, and he had - all over her formerly fair white bottom, with handprints and paddle prints that created a somewhat mottled effect that looked like it was going to help her keep this lesson in mind for several days to come.

When he was done, he let the paddle slide to the floor and turned her gently in his arms, supporting her so that her bottom wasn't touching anything and brought her up to the room they'd used last night to comfort her, merely holding and rocking her while she cried it out on his shoulder.

She fell asleep that way, in his arms, exhausted from his lovemaking and his discipline.

While Burke held her, tears filled his eyes, and he sent a prayer of thanks up to his parents. He was certain that they had steered her his way, somehow, knowing how much he wanted to find his true love as they both had.

He'd almost given up hope, but here she was, snoring lightly in his arms, and he'd kill anyone who disturbed her. No company, no chunk of change was worth as much to him as this slight bit of a woman.

He matched his forehead to hers, and fell into a deep, contented sleep, his world in his arms.