



Mistletoe and Holly: Holly Peterson had been humiliated a year ago on Christmas Eve by her ex-fiance, who considered her only a "passable" choice as a wife - while intending to keep his lover on the side. El Jerko had seen her as a playbunny with no real brains. True, she was a woman who flitted from job to job and never took life seriously, until that moment when she tossed the ring back in his face. She walked away that night; certain she'd never love again, and never celebrate Christmas again.

Brandon McNamara was in desperate need of a highly-skilled personal assistant to replace the one who'd eloped and moved without giving notice. He needed someone prepared to work with a successful, demanding businessman like him. Someone to come in and immediately handle the planning details of the company's annual Christmas party. Holly was in no way qualified, but there was just something about the spirited young woman and almost without knowing how it happened, he'd given her the job. He did warn her that he expected a lot of hard work from her. As sanity hit him that he'd just hired the totally wrong person for the job, he added that there would be serious consequences should she not obey and comply with all of his orders. He hadn't exactly said he meant spanking, but he did. She took the job anyway - heaven help them both.

Bah Humbug Cowboy: Lacey McAdams had returned home unexpectedly during an early December snowstorm after being gone longer than she'd planned. To her horror, she found her handsome husband with his arms around her best friend, kissing her. Her world shattered. When he'd miserably tried to explain that they'd been worried about her and had only sought comfort in a stupid moment, she refused to listen to him. In her heart, she believed him. But she wasn't sure she could ever forgive either of them, or forgive herself for being away from home so often and so long. Maybe their marriage just wasn't meant to be.

Devlin had been horrified to discover his arms around another woman, kissing her when his precious wife walked into their kitchen. He'd missed her so damn much. He'd never meant to touch her friend. There always had been and always would be only one woman for him, his fiery Lacey Jane. Numbness spread through him when she wouldn't accept his gut-deep apology, when she drove away from him into the snowstorm. This could not be the end of them. He would do whatever necessary to make things right again. Trouble was his wife could be pretty stubborn at times, unreasonable, too. But she'd accept his apology and his forever kind of love, even if he had to burn her butt to make her think clearly. And he aimed to have her back with him permanently by Christmas.

Santa Wears Spurs: Roxie Evans had left California, her wealthy but distant family, and a former fiance who'd turned out to be Very Mr. Wrong. She'd moved halfway across the country to begin a new life as a librarian and try to find a happily-ever-after kind of man. What she found was a cowboy with a reputation as the best sweet-talker in the state. They had nothing in common, except an attraction that took them both by surprise. When he approached her to be Santa's helper this year at the ranchers association's Christmas party, she'd teased him about what he was prepared to offer her in exchange for saying yes. He mentioned several possible enticements: one was taking her over his knee and encouraging her agreement by warming her bottom; another was offering to be her love slave. Both suggestions were not really serious ones. Until Roxie decided to call his bluff and accepted the love slave offer, thinking her acceptance not serious either. But as it turned out, he was serious.

Love slave? Well, hell, who was he to turn down such an opportunity! Dexter Malone could certainly do his civic duty by acting as Santa, and as offering his body to the pretty new woman in town. 'Course he figured they'd really only have a night or two of some mutually agreed upon fun. Then he'd go his way, as usual, and she would go hers. He sure hadn't counted on losing his heart to a woman who enjoyed sex, sensual fun, and a playful spanking as much as he did. He also hadn't counted on having to spank her for real.

Ranch Christmas

Book One: Mistletoe and Holly

Book Two: Bah, Humbug! Cowboy

Book Three: Santa Wears Spurs

By Starla Kaye

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Mistletoe and Holly

By Starla Kaye

Chapter One

"That's quite a rock you've got there, Professor Shanahan," Holly overheard Eric's good friend and fellow professor at the University of Colorado say as she approached the pair from behind. She'd come to the Economic Department's Christmas party as a surprise for Eric. She'd told him she would be skiing this weekend in Vail with some friends, but had changed her mind at the last minute. Something had made her decide to come see the man she'd been dating for the last year instead of going off to play. Something had whispered in her thoughts that this would be a life changing weekend. From what she'd overheard, and from the jewelry box held open in Eric's hand... well, the change definitely would be a big one.

Out of habit, she smoothed down the side of her dress. She'd spent her entire final check from the job she'd just quit on this designer dress. It fit like a glove, molding to her every curve, even though it only fell to mid-thigh. The back was non-existent and the neckline nearly reached her waist. Hot. A red silk charmeuse dress designed to get any man's attention. For a mere instant she remembered how conservative Eric was, how he'd frowned at a few of her more daring outfits. Still, he was holding a jewelry box right now.

"So which one of them is the new head of the department's future wife?"

Which one of them? She froze, feeling the blood draining from her face, feeling her heart pound. *Which one of them?* Surely she'd misunderstood. No, Eric couldn't possibly be ...

"Alexandra doesn't want the strings of marriage. She's content with our continuing just as we have been. As am I," Eric explained casually. "While Holly

Peterson isn't exactly the ideal wife for a man in my position, she's passable. Of course I'll have to put my foot down about some of her flighty ways. I'll find her a suitable career position, too. No more flitting from one job to another every few months. And, though I truly enjoy that playbunny body of hers in private, I'll have to oversee purchasing her a proper wardrobe."

She felt sick, faint. *Playbunny? Put his foot down. Oversee changes in her wardrobe. Oh Gawd.* She'd never felt so humiliated. She'd finally thought she'd overcome her looks, finally thought people had begun seeing beyond her former blonde bimbo image—including having been a popular cheerleader in both high school and college. Okay, her family still seemed to basically pity her as the only daughter of five who didn't have a doctorate degree. She didn't have a degree at all, having quit in the middle of her senior year. They tended to roll their eyes when she either lost or quit yet another job. Did they really see her as much of a loser in need of serious overhaul as Eric did?

Sick. Almost mortally wounded. She needed to get out of here.

"Holly!" Eric's friend, whom she had begun to think of as *her* friend as well, spotted her before she could even move. "We thought you would be in Vail by now." He glanced at Eric with a sly grin. "Your lady looks even hotter tonight than ever."

Eric stared at her dress, but it wasn't approval she saw in his expression. *Lying, cheating scumbag!*

Unaware or unconcerned with Eric's disapproval, the friend prodded, "Why don't you pop the question now?"

No, no, no! Holly inwardly countered. All she wanted to do was go somewhere—the ends of the earth might be far enough, maybe Pluto—and hide. She took a tentative step back.

Eric appeared to gather his disgust and forced a tolerant smile. He walked toward her, grabbed her arm, and thrust the small box at her. He didn't say a word, just handed her the box. No dropping to his knee and looking lovingly up at her as he asked her to marry him. Not even a request to her at all. Just giving her the damn box. Mr. Romantic—*not*—at his worst.

Moving way out of character, Holly lost it. She didn't pretend understanding, or tolerance, or patience of any kind. She tossed the box at him and it fell to the floor with a surprisingly loud Thunk! Immediately they gained the attention of most of the hundred plus people in the large, festively decorated room. She didn't care. If she could help it, she'd never see any of these people again.

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on the planet," she snapped, pleased to see him grinding his teeth and turning red. "And believe me, Professor Shanahan, there are many far better men than you on this planet. Even in this room."

With that she jerked her arm free and strode as fast as she could on her stiletto heels from the party. She ignored his calling after her. What she couldn't ignore was that he didn't bother to *come* after her. Tears trickled down her cheeks, but she didn't care. This had been the absolute worst night of her life. A Christmas Eve to never forget. After this humiliation she just might never celebrate Christmas again. It would only hold bad memories for her.

Eleven months, two jobs, a different state, and a lake's worth of tears later Holly sat anxiously waiting in the ultra modern reception room of McNamara Enterprises' executive offices. She was more nervous than she'd ever been, but she prayed it didn't show. She was here to apply for a "real" job with one of the biggest up-and-coming entrepreneurial companies in Kansas. She'd heard from a friend of a friend of a friend about Brandon McNamara looking for a personal assistant. The man was legendary, both for having taken his family's failing company and completely turning it around in less than two years, and for his sexual appeal to every woman in the state—single or married. An alpha male, former cowboy, bad boy who'd made millions. What more could a woman want, or at least dream about. But she wasn't here to catch the eye of the much-sought after CEO. Nor was she here to drool at his feet, or dream about him asking her out. She wanted a job. This job. Even if she wasn't the least bit qualified for it. She didn't seem to be qualified for any job.

"You can go in now," the twenty-something receptionist said from behind the huge ebony desk. She gave Holly a supportive smile even as the much older woman standing behind her shook her head, lips pursed in obvious disapproval.

Holly tried to ignore the pointed glower of the woman who'd snippily informed Holly that she was *The* executive secretary for the firm. Standing, she took a second to suck in a steadying breath and to smooth down her skirt that only came to mid-thigh. Until she'd noted the prim and proper two-piece, gray suit, with the over-the-knee skirt, and the pristine white shirt the secretary wore, Holly had felt fairly comfortable with her clothing choice.

"It isn't good to keep a potential employer waiting," the secretary huffed, adding under her breath yet loud enough for Holly to hear, "Not that *you* have a prayer of getting the position."

Holly knew the woman probably spoke the truth, but in spite of her limited job history, she felt strangely optimistic. More optimistic than she'd felt in the last year. Like finally her life was coming together again, or actually beginning. This would be her chance at a career-type job, and a huge step away from the too-carefree and non-responsible lifestyle she'd led for far too long. She was really ready to show everyone—including herself—that she could do something of real value. It had taken her longer than she'd expected to get over that lying, sneaking, loathsome scum ex-boyfriend. Okay, maybe she was still a tad bitter about that horrible Christmas. Even now, with Christmas in the air everywhere she went, she preferred not to think of the special holiday time.

Feeling the secretary's gaze pinned in disdain on her, Holly forced a smile, picked up her purse, and the hot pink, slim briefcase that held her skimpy resume. "Mr. McNamara's office is where?" she asked the receptionist, pretending the secretary wasn't still standing there..

"All the way down the hall. Corner office." The young woman returned Holly's smile. "Good luck."

Luck. Yes, she supposed she needed a lot of luck. She battled down the fresh battle of nerves tensing in her stomach. *Don't think about El Jerko. You are more than*

a bimbo blonde, no matter what everyone else seems to think. How many times had she told herself that since she'd broken up with Eric? How many times had she tried to overlook her family's sympathetic looks? Well, she didn't need anyone's sympathy.

The end of the hall. Thirty feet from a whole new chance to make something with her life. A job like this was such an opportunity. She *wanted* this job.

Brandon looked at his schedule for the next two weeks and knew he'd never have time to deal with all of the holiday party plans. The annual Christmas party given by McNamara Enterprises was traditionally a serious event in the city. Clients, other big dogs in business like himself, and a ton of networking contacts important to his company planned to attend every year. He'd counted on his personal assistant to take care of everything, like she had for the last ten years, since he'd taken over the corporation. He certainly hadn't foreseen her falling in love at the last conference he'd sent her to. Or deciding to elope right then and move to Las Vegas immediately.

He massaged the headache pounding at his skull. His usually neat-as-a-pin desk was covered in paperwork he'd spent most of the night trying to get through. His message box on the monitor flashed persistently. There wasn't a quarter hour open for the next two weeks on his schedule. A glance at his former assistant's schedule revealed a nightmare almost as bad. He shouldn't have accepted her two days notice last week, especially since she hadn't bothered to come back and even work those last two days. He should have at least hired a temp, but he'd never have been satisfied with a temp. Now he'd spent a day and a half interviewing applicants. Time he hadn't really had for that chore. Sure his executive secretary had offered to handle the interviews, but she didn't know all of what he actually looked for in an assistant.

He rubbed his head again and pulled out the folder with the dozen resumes he'd received in interviews. Several of the women and one of the men had impressive work history. One woman in particular seemed like she could do what he would require, but there had been something about her that hadn't had him immediately offering her the

position. Maybe he was just too tired, too overwhelmed at the moment to think straight. He was in a truck load of trouble right now. He needed a qualified assistant to start ASAP and dive right into the holiday plans. Everything else he desperately relied on his assistant to do would have to wait.

Closing the folder, he wished he hadn't told his receptionist that he would see this last minute job applicant. He needed to go ahead and call Mrs. Flannery and offer her the job. The problem was she couldn't start until next week. And that was a *serious* problem with his timeline. Two weeks to the party.

He reached in his top drawer and snatched a bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol. Popping two pills, he waited to see the young woman Annie had told him about. He could have refused to see the woman, probably should have. Still, when he'd heard Catherine harassing Annie about him taking the time to see whoever this person was, he'd caved. Annie was young, but a fairly decent judge of character. Catherine Hawke... Well, Catherine had the personality of a female Hitler at times. He should let her go, and one of these days when he had time to deal with hiring a new executive secretary he would. He'd inherited her with the job.

He heard the soft footfalls on the carpet coming down the hallway, and then heard them stop. He knew his reputation in the business world and that a number of people were in awe of what he'd accomplished in such a short time. Being admired was a good thing, being feared was not. If this young woman was hesitating because she feared meeting the lion in his lair, then she wasn't the employee he needed. The person in this position would have to put up with his intense work schedule, with the constant new challenges that he brought to the firm, and with his need to be decisive and in control at all times. He knew he could be hard to work for, but there wasn't an employer who treated his employees more fairly. Yes, this was a plum opportunity for the right woman. And the qualifications he sought were all but written in stone.

She was on the move again. He felt oddly eager to see the mysterious final applicant.

The scent of vanilla drifted his way. He sniffed again. No, no that smelled like cookies. Sugar cookies. The scent was enough to draw on his childhood memories of

his grandmother baking the best sugar cookies ever made for him and his three brothers. She was the only warm spot in his youth. Certainly his mother wouldn't ever have made cookies for her sons. Even to this day, he doubted she could find the kitchen in her house.

"Mr. McNamara?" a soft voice questioned from the doorway. Soft, but not hesitant like he'd thought at first.

A living, breathing sugar cookie in human form. The woman he'd guess to be in her late twenties smiled at him. She had the silkiest looking pale blonde hair he'd ever seen, hair that hung in soft waves partially down her back and partially draped over some pretty spectacular breasts. The breasts were gently held within a pale lemon, low-necked shirt that tucked into a too-short-for-the-office lemon skirt that hit her at mid-thigh. Mid-thigh of some well-toned legs. Legs that held his rapt attention all the way down to her strappy hot pink high heels. He could easily envision those legs wrapped around him. He could almost feel his mouth suckling those breasts. *Damn*. He was in trouble here.

"Am I in the right office?" she asked, flipping her hair back over a shoulder with one slender, perfectly manicured hand. The action nearly made her lose the hot pink purse hanging by a gold chain over her shoulder. Her other hand held a slim hot pink briefcase. "I was looking for Brandon McNamara."

"You've found him." He continued with his curious observation of the woman before him. She was nothing like the other applicants, who had all marched in here in business black suits, with carefully styled hair, and attitudes. Yes, each of them had very self-confident attitudes, and resumes to back up those attitudes. But this woman... She appeared to be an interesting combination: sweetness and brightness all wrapped up in one very tempting package. It had been a while since a woman had actually captured his attention as quickly as she had. His ex-wife had made damn sure he carefully checked out any woman he even considered going out with, let alone taking to his bed.

Going out with? Bedding? Brandon forced his gaze from hers, forced his thoughts back under rigid control. This fairly tall, sensual vision standing so calmly in his doorway was T-R-O-U-B-L-E in capital letters. Bold, capital letters.

"Come in and have a seat." He concentrated on straightening the papers on his desk. If he was lucky, he could get through this interview and have her out of here in five minutes. He didn't even intend to ask for her resume.

Then there it was right in the middle of his desk, right under his nose. A pale yellow sheet of paper with a bunch of words that he wasn't interested in reading. All but the name, that is. *Holly Peterson. Holly, was that a sign or what?* He needed someone to dive into Christmas party arrangements and in walks a "Holly."

He heard the soft whoosh of the leather chair in front of his desk as she sat down. In spite of how hard he tried not to, he drew in another breath of her soft vanilla scent. It soothed him like nothing else had in weeks. And she stirred him like no other woman had in months. Damn. *Focus.*

"I realize, Mr. McNamara, that I don't have the ordinary type of job qualifications you might be looking for," she began, although she didn't sound worried about that fact.

A quick glance at the resume told him her statement was completely truthful. He wanted someone with several years of experience as a secretary, possibly even as a personal assistant. The resumes in the folder proved there were many such people out there looking for jobs. This woman didn't have several years of experience at *any* one job. And he didn't see any experience in an office. Definitely not qualified.

"I'm a diversified employee," she captured his attention again, that spell-binding smile still in place. "Kind of a Janet-of-all-trades. You might say I'm extremely versatile."

"You might." Although he saw it more as couldn't hold a job. He was also strongly interested in someone with a degree in business administration, or at least with a lot of college behind them so that he could encourage the person to complete their degree. Education was important to him. Earning a degree showed perseverance, and determination. He was that rare cowboy who had a college degree and knew how to

use it. His father hadn't thought it was necessary if he was going into ranching. His mother had thought it was absolutely necessary, since she'd manipulated him into taking over her family's business. It had been difficult to please divorced parents. So he'd pleased himself: he took over his mother's family's business *and* he had a small ranch that someone else managed for him.

Again she seemed to read his thoughts. "I don't imagine you were looking for someone majoring in visual arts and gerontology."

"An artist who likes working with senior citizens," he summarized. "No, I honestly can't say that was the background I was searching for."

She fiddled with the purse in her lap. Her small shoulders slumped for just an instant. Then she pulled herself together, raised her head and looked him squarely in the eye. Her smile had disappeared and he missed it. Without concentrating on that, he took the time to really notice her brown eyes. Specks of gold were sprinkled in them. A flick of a glance down and he noticed the way her full pink upper lip tipped up at the corners and looked like a bow. Cupid's bow. He curled his hands into fists and tried to get even a modicum of control over his thoughts. *Cupid's bow?* What the hell was he thinking? Totally inappropriate in the situation.

"The position you're offering is an amazing opportunity. I'm sure many more qualified applicants have come in that door and interviewed with you. But I *want* this job, Mr. McNamara. I need this chance to... Well, I really want to be considered. I promise, I won't let you down. I just need a little faith in me."

Faith. He made judgments based on research and valid proof of potential value. Never had he made a gut-instinct decision. Until now. "Can you start tomorrow?" he asked, before his brain fully kicked into gear and overrode the unprecedented gut decision. He could have rescinded the offer. But the relief in her expression, combined with the true smile she gifted him, had him biting his tongue. She could start immediately. That was the important thing to remember.

She jumped to her feet and to his amazement did what could only be described as a Happy Dance. Totally inappropriate in an office interview situation. But, damn, if he didn't feel as excited about his decision and her reaction as she did.

Then, moving right along that “inappropriate” path, Brandon said, “I’m a firm task master, Ms. Peterson. My staff works hard. They are well rewarded because of that.” She’d stopped dancing and took her seat again, watching him curiously. “You will be working closely with me. I will expect even more from you than anyone else. Did I mention that I’m very controlling? That I expect obedience and compliance with my every request and order.”

“Okkkkkaayyy,” she acknowledged, clearly as confused as he was by where this conversation was going. “I’m pretty sure I can handle whatever you want me to do. No, I mean I *know* I can do whatever is asked of me.”

He went even further down that “inappropriate path.” “There will be consequences for disobedience and failure to fulfill any required duties. Serious consequences.” Suddenly he’d envisioned having the delectable young woman upturned over his knee, being spanked by him for whatever reason. True, he believed in spanking when necessary. He’d certainly received *his* share of spankings in his early years. He’d even done a smattering of spanking of a more playful nature with women over the years. And he’d wanted, badly, to soundly spank his ex more than a few times during their hellish marriage. But he never had. He hadn’t really cared about her enough to attempt to do so. This woman, though, this woman brought to surface an interest of his that he normally kept hidden. He waited almost breathlessly for her response.

She sat quietly for a minute. Studied his large hands now lying on the desktop. “As I said, Mr. McNamara, I want this job.”

He still wasn’t sure she understood what he’d been awkwardly hinting at, but they could face that matter should it ever actually become necessary. If she balked when it came to that, then he would back down and just let her go. Then he’d hire the woman he’d interviewed yesterday, who really was qualified for the position. The woman he hadn’t had any thoughts about spanking at all. The woman in the boring, tailored black suit and not the refreshing lemon yellow skirt.

“Be here at eight o’clock sharp. We’ll deal with all the employment details tomorrow.” He gave her a nod confirming their agreement to work together and went

back to sorting through the papers on his desk. She made him strangely uncomfortable, and all too aware of her as a woman. He needed her out of his sight, out of his office. By tomorrow morning he'd have shaken off these strange feelings and be ready to deal with her as her boss.

Hearing her soft footfalls padding back down the hallway, he suddenly realized he hadn't mentioned the holiday party. But it was a party, and a Christmas one at that. What woman didn't like a party? Who didn't like Christmas? Even as distanced from his family as he was, he still enjoyed this special time of year. His decorator was at this moment turning his usually stiffly modern mansion into a Christmas wonderland. Tonight she would decorate his office and much of the McNamara building. He smiled at that thought.

Holly left Brandon McNamara's office all but floating on a cloud of happiness. She didn't know why he'd hired her. She certainly wasn't qualified for the job. But she'd gotten it! She'd actually been offered the job! She couldn't wait to call her best friend, Beth, and tell her the good news. Beth had been worried about Holly even applying for this position. She hadn't wanted Holly to be disappointed yet again. After applying for and being turned down for around a hundred jobs in the month she'd been living in Wichita, Holly's spirits had been pretty low. She'd even considered moving back to Colorado and staying with her parents while she tried to find work in Denver. But she hadn't wanted to even be in the same state as Professor Jerko. Now she didn't have to even think about that... or him.

"See you tomorrow," she said cheerfully as she swept through the reception room and smiled at the receptionist.

"*Tomorrow?*" the executive secretary asked, sounding shocked as she stuck her head out of a side room.

Holly stopped and turned to focus on the older woman with a look of victory firmly on her face. "Mr. McNamara wants me here at eight. We'll fill out the necessary

paperwork then, he said." She turned away once more, giving Annie a fingery wave. With effort, she managed not to go skipping down the hallway toward the elevator.

She slept restlessly, tossing and turning. Eric had taken her shopping. He'd thrown out her entire wardrobe and bought her a closet full of "proper" clothing for her role as an esteemed professor's wife. He'd even taken her to a hair salon and stood rigidly while the slyly smiling beautician—who looked oddly like a feminine version of Eric's professor friend—cut off Holly's long hair. Cut it to a short, more "dignified" length.

Holly rolled over and sobbed into her pillow. She was miserable in her new life as a professor's wife.

Squirming as if fighting the unwanted role, she managed to shove the quilt and sheet to the end of the bed. Her satin shortie nightgown rode up. It rode higher and higher, until she felt the faint sensation of warm air from the furnace brushing over her bare bottom. Something about it was soothing. She drifted back down into dreamland again.

Brandon replaced Eric in her dream, such a welcome replacement. Where Eric had been good-looking and in fair condition for a bookish man who seldom was out of the lecture hall or his office, Brandon was intensely handsome. He walked to her from some other room, striding naked in her direction. His body was firm, his abdomen definitely six-pack. Long legs were muscled, a joggers type of muscles. His chest was broad with a splattering of fine black hair across his pecs and leading a sensual path down to...

She squirmed against the bed, sighing, aching, wanting. Now that was a serious piece of man designed to please any woman. Wet, she was soooo wet. She wiggled her bottom, tempting him, begging him.

Smack! His hand slapped her bottom. She wriggled in reaction. That wasn't what she'd expected. As she turned to glower in his direction, he smiled at her and sat

beside her on the bed. She loved the shadowed beard stubble on his face, loved the dimple in his chin.

Smack! Smiling with a heated look in his mahogany brown eyes, he spanked her again. She wiggled away from the hand stinging her bottom. She wanted him to love her, not spank her. But he'd warned her that there would be consequences for disobedience. He spanked her again, and she tried to remember what she'd done wrong, how she'd disobeyed him.

Then his hand smoothed slow, gentle circles over her barely burning bottom. Now that was okay. That kind of touch more than made up for a slap or two to her bare buttocks. Oh, yeah, that definitely made up for it.

The alarm clock rudely interrupted her dream. All Holly was left with was why she'd drawn Brandon McNamara into her dream world. And why she'd dreamt of him spanking her. She'd never been spanked.

Racing to the shower, her thoughts went back to the interview yesterday. She mulled over his comment about "serious consequences" and Brandon's expecting obedience and compliance. Surely he hadn't really been referring to...

No, that was just silly.

Chapter Two

Holly tried to wiggle her foot into one of a pair of stilettos, eyeball search the disastrous bedroom for the other shoe, and glance at the morning news on the TV at the same time. The wayward shoe was nowhere to be seen. And the news had faded away to another Christmas ad, which made her almost nauseous.

Feeling defeated about the lost shoe, she kicked the first one off and marched toward the closet from hell to, hopefully, locate a complete pair of heels. The spirited holiday song being sung with the ad reminded her of how much she used to love Christmas time. Everything about it, especially getting and giving presents. *B.E.* Before Eric had ruined the holiday for her. Now there didn't seem to be much magic to this time of the year. She just wanted to get through it. She especially didn't look forward to going out to buy gift cards for her sisters who didn't need anything, or for her parents who didn't want anything. It was all hardly worth the bother. But she did need to find something for Beth, who had stuck by her and let her cry buckets and buckets of tears on her shoulders. Other than that, Christmas would not be part of her life. Maybe never again, and that was a depressing thought.

There! She gave a squeal of delight and relief at spotting a matching pair of shoes. Slipping them on, she promised herself that *tonight* would be the night she came home from work and attacked the closet. Well, maybe the whole bedroom. As she grabbed her purse from the unmade bed, she felt the weight of reality shoving down on her shoulders. Okay, the whole apartment was a disaster.

She raced out of her loft apartment in Old Town toward the elevator, determined not to be late for her first day of work. As she dashed into the elevator, she considered

the oddness of her life. When she'd lived at home, her bedroom had always been neat. Her clothes always hung up, her dresser drawers carefully arranged. Each of her four older sisters' rooms had also been in constant states of perfection. Of course it had been their neat-freak mother who had kept the entire house spotless and tidy, but nobody had complained. Why would they? None of them, especially her, would have wanted to give up a second of their happy-just-to-be-children times to actually help around the house. Her mother had expected each of her daughters to inherit her housekeeping skills and gently countered their father's desire for her to teach them such skills. She'd always smiled and said, "Dear, they'll know how to do this one day. Trust me."

Watching the floors slip by, Holly sighed. Her mother had been right about four out of five of her daughters. Unfortunately, Holly was that daughter who'd failed to either inherit the skills or gain them through some kind of osmosis. She hoped being neat and organized wasn't a skill her new boss would be counting on a lot because he'd be gravely disappointed.

For a second, she recalled the bizarre dream she'd been enveloped in when the alarm clock had gone off. Brandon had been spanking her. *Playfully? For an actual wrongdoing? She didn't know, and it didn't matter. Just the idea was weird.* Her pulse raced. Okay, weird, but intriguing, too. She'd never been spanked in her life, couldn't even imagine how it would feel...other than humiliating. So why had she also felt turned on? Weird. Really weird.

Stop it. Focus. She needed to get to work. She was already pushing it time-wise, and there sure better not be any traffic problems on the way to the office.

Sitting in one of the three lanes of cars basically parked on the city's main highway a half hour later, Holly wondered if there would be any way of sweet talking her way out of trouble for being late her first day of work. Probably not.
Unemployment line, here I come.

She weighed whether to call the office and attempt an explanation, or whether to just keep on driving out of town, out of the state once traffic got moving again. She really didn't want to face the city's hottest CEO who had decided to give her a chance at a job she had no business even applying for. He would be so mad at her. He deserved to be mad at her. Still, she really had wanted a chance at that job.

Pulling her from her troubled thoughts, her cell phone rang, buried deep in her purse. It could be Beth. But in her gut she knew it was someone from McNamara Enterprises. Probably *The* executive secretary. Attila the Hun in a two-piece suit and sensible shoes. With a sigh of resignation, she found the phone and warily said, "Holly."

"*Ms. Peterson*," Brandon said her name in a manner that clearly expressed his frustration. "I assume you're on your way to the office. Maybe pulling into the lot even as we speak."

She'd rather the call had been from Attila. "Yes, I'm on my way. No, I'm not pulling into the lot quite yet. Actually, I'll be a tad late." At the moment it looked like she had a chance of growing old here in her beloved yellow VW.

"Obviously we have different definitions for 'tad.' You're already twenty minutes late." She heard him blow out a weary breath and could almost envision the way his forehead would pinch in annoyance. "Tell me the truth, Ms. Peterson. You *have* left your apartment, or wherever you're living. You really are on your way to the office."

Now she was getting irritated. "Apartment. And, yes, I've left it. Unfortunately there's some kind of accident on the highway. Traffic is backed up, in all lanes, as far as the eye can see. This is *not* my fault." After her brief release of stress, she felt better. She also felt guilty for all but yelling at her new boss. She softened her tone. "I'm sorry, sir. Really sorry."

She shifted uneasily on the seat and waited for him to say the words she so didn't want to hear: that she was fired. Her stomach rolled with tension as he remained silent.

When she'd thought he wasn't going to answer, she finally started to speak. But he cut her off first. "As it happens, I have some unexpected meetings outside the

office for most of the day. Catherine, my secretary, will take care of your paperwork. She'll show you to your office. You can spend the day reviewing my calendar and yours. Your calendar has all of the PR appointments already scheduled by the previous assistant. I assume you'll be able to handle them?"

"PR appointments?"

"Public relations stuff for the firm. You're to be involved with several of the community's volunteer organizations. You can mix with strangers, can't you? You can serve on whatever committee is needed?"

This was the stuff of her sister's worlds, her mother's world. They were all married to socially prominent men in their various cities. Men who, even though their wives had degrees out the wazoo, didn't want their wives working. They hosted dinner parties. They served on committees. She'd never particularly wanted to do that kind of work. But she'd been head cheerleader, president of her sorority, and had volunteered in one political campaign. Didn't that qualify her?

"Yes, I can do that." Disappointment inched through her and she muttered, "I wanted a real job."

He grunted—yes, it sounded like a grunt of disgust. "You *have* a *real* job, Ms. Peterson. Part of that *real* job entails representing the company within the community. Essentially being a do-gooder. But if you can't handle it..."

"I can suck up with the best of them." She huffed, and then realized what she'd said. "I mean, I can mix and play well with strangers. I can do anything necessary to make your company look good."

"I'm counting on that, Ms. Peterson. All of that: the sucking up, the mixing and the playing well." She heard Catherine in the background reminding him of an important meeting in a half hour. "Oh, and you need to follow up on the plans for the firm's Christmas party."

Without thinking, she blurted in a panic, "I don't do Christmas."

"Against your religion?" he questioned, sounding like he was getting ready to leave.

"No," she answered quietly. "It's personal."

"I'm sorry, but handling the party and buying presents for clients on my behalf is a big part of your tasks this month."

Buttinski Attila said loud enough for Holly to hear, "I can handle the party and the gifts. It would probably be better if I did."

Although Holly was definitely not looking forward to having anything to do with the supposedly happy holiday season, she was pleased to hear Brandon counter, "Ms. Peterson will take care of it all. You can assist *her*, if she needs your help."

A warm and fuzzy feeling crept through Holly. He sounded confident that she could handle the assignment. He didn't even know her abilities, or anything else about her, but he believed in her. It had been so long since anyone had believed she could do more than learn the newest cheer, or something else totally useless in the real world. She wouldn't let him down.

"I'm on it, boss," she said, watching the traffic begin to flow again. "We're finally moving. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Good. I'll call to check in with you later."

Holly followed Catherine slowly down the hallway, frozen inside in panic mode from the instant she stepped into the outer office and saw an enormous wreath, a decorated tree, and lengths of fir draped in front of Annie's desk. Christmas music played quietly in the background. Cinnamon scented the air. *Oh gawd, oh gawd, oh gawd*, her brain repeated over and over as they walked. Her stomach rolled with nausea.

Catherine stopped outside the door of a small office right next to Brandon's. An office she noted in shock that was Christmas hell, at least to her. She bit her lip to keep it from wobbling. She blinked and tried to look out the window at downtown Wichita and not at the decorations. She would not cry. She would not cry.

"I assume you know how to work a computer," Catherine stated, implying in her tone that she did *not* think Holly actually knew how.

"Of course." Holly darted her gaze straight from the window to the sleek ebony desk and the slim-line monitor on it.

Catherine handed her a file, turning away at the same time. "The W-4 and I-9 are in the folder. When you get them completed, give them to Annie. She'll see to it they get to the Human Resources Department."

Panic at being left alone in the Christmas room tore at her. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do today. Mr. McNamara said he would—"

"He's a very busy man. We're *all* busy here. He was suddenly called away on business." Catherine glanced at her in disapproval. "The last assistant left her schedule and all of the holiday party details on the computer. At the moment there is no password to get to them. You'll, of course, create a password, and then give it to me for security reasons."

With that said, the less-than-friendly secretary marched rapidly back down the hall. Holly stood for several long minutes unable to take that first step into her new office. All she could think of was Eric and the department party last year. The decorations had been simple, conservative, but definitely enough to make it a Christmas event. She shuddered. She didn't want to rehash that awful night yet again.

Brandon did call her later, but he called from Los Angeles. The day had gone straight to hell even before his first scheduled meeting. He had to fly out of town to save a business deal his attorney was handling for the firm. He didn't normally mind the out of town trips, even the emergency ones. This time, with the intriguing Holly Peterson starting her first day with the company, he hadn't wanted to go. He'd spent the night dreaming about the blonde haired beauty he'd hired in a spur of the moment decision. And his dreams had been pretty inventive.

He waited impatiently while Catherine relayed the lengthy list of the day's accomplishments and the list of Holly's imperfections. Finally, when he could take no

more, he interrupted, "I'll consider everything you've said when I get back. Now, get me through to Ms. Peterson."

With a snort of annoyance, Catherine did as requested. A second later he heard the soft voice he'd been hearing in his head all day. "Mr. McNamara, I'll fix it. I swear."

He sat up straighter in the chair he'd slumped down in during Catherine's tirade. "Fix what?" Catherine had mentioned a lot of things, but he couldn't remember her saying something had broken.

"My computer. A file within the computer. The computer." She sounded upset, not irritated, but angry, and slightly confused..

"What file? I'm sure there is a good back-up around there somewhere. Just ask Catherine—"

Did she actually growl at him? He had to smile at that. Sometimes just the mention of Catherine's name made him want to snarl and growl, too. He tamped down his amusement. "You two aren't getting along, are you?"

"Huge, enormous, colossal understatement," she all but spit out. "She hates me. I've been here one freaking day and she hates me already. Actually, she hated me when I first walked into the office yesterday."

He'd had that feeling as well, but he didn't know why Catherine would feel that way. Still, the woman had been with the firm for almost twenty years. She'd started with his dad. And should have ended her time there when his dad retired. But, no, Brandon had basically inherited her. He did owe her some loyalty, though.

"You need to learn how to work together."

"She erased that file. I know she did." She growled again, and he really wished he was there to see her do it.

"Again, I ask what file?"

"When I couldn't find the computer file about the holiday party that she'd told me about, she was going to show me herself. I stepped out of the office for a minute—something personal—and when I came back supposedly everything was ready. I sat

down, put one finger on the keyboard, and the entire file disappeared. I swear, I didn't do anything. She set me up. I know she did."

He started to repeat that the file was backed up somewhere when she hastily added, "Actually, that keystroke blew up my whole computer. The resident techie claims the hard drive is toast. Again, I repeat, *she* set me up."

What a mess, a mini-disaster. But the file was backed up on his home computer. He'd find it when he got back tomorrow. Right now he was more concerned with a potentially volatile situation within his office. "I'm too tired to think this all through right now. The problem can be fixed. When I get back. Just go home. Each of you to your separate corners, so to speak, to your different parts of town."

"I don't know what you see in her. She runs the office with a harsh hand and snaps at everybody. She tries to intimidate poor Annie. And she hates me. The feeling is mutual. Well, maybe not *hate*, but I strongly dislike your executive secretary."

Clearly when riled the woman tended to ramble on and on. Yet she'd only been there one day. She should have more respect for Catherine, even though it sounded like Catherine hadn't exactly earned any respect today. He had to make his authority clear. "We're through talking about this for now. Go home."

"But—"

"I don't care for bad attitude in the office."

"But—"

"Go home, Ms. Peterson. Don't stop to speak with Catherine. Don't even look in her direction. Just go home." He'd deal with Catherine himself.

"Maybe I should just quit. I don't want to, but maybe I should."

Probably she should, but he didn't want that. "We need to have a talk, Ms. Peterson, about getting along in the office place. About respecting the senior employees, and not trying to argue with your boss."

He heard a sound. Did she just stomp her foot? That's what it had sounded like. *Bratting. She was bratting.*

"I wasn't exactly arguing with you. I just think... I'm in trouble, aren't I?" She didn't stop with the question. "Okay. You can yell at me. It won't be the first time someone has yelled at me. But I *still* think Catherine should be put out to secretary pasture." She blew out a frustrated, annoyed breath and he thought maybe she even mumbled something derogatory.

Definitely bratting. "I don't yell, Ms. Peterson. But, I assure you, you will clearly understand my view of proper office behavior when I'm done 'talking' to you." He was ready to "talk" to her right now. She *needed* that "talk" right now. Instead he added, "Tomorrow. My office at 5:30."

He'd evidently surprised her and she didn't know how to respond. "You *will* be there, am I right? You're *not*, I repeat, not quitting yet."

"Okay," she agreed, sounding wary. "5:30 in your office. No problem."

"Actually, Ms. Peterson, there *is* a problem, but we will deal with it. Just as we discussed we might when you interviewed with me." He wondered if she really understood what he was hinting at. This was a huge step on his part, but he sensed it was a good one in their relationship.

"Do you understand me, Ms. Peterson?" he questioned. "If you've changed your mind about working for me, then I'll see to it that your check is ready when you get to the office tomorrow." He went out—far out—on a limb here. "I'm hoping you want to continue employment at McNamara Enterprises."

To his relief, she exclaimed, "I do!"

"I'm pleased to hear that." And he was. "5:30. Now, let me talk to Catherine again."

What had he just done? Brandon swiveled his chair around to stare out the window of the office he was in for the moment. He barely noted the gray clouds heavily laden with the possibility of rain. He barely heard the sounds of office staff working down the hall. The only thing he could think about was Holly Peterson. The brown-eyed blonde with a killer body who had made him unable to think of much beyond wanting to see her again. Last night he'd dreamed of her slipping out of that sensual lemon outfit she'd worn yesterday and sliding onto his bed. He'd heard her

breathless, turn-any-man-on voice nearly every waking minute today. And the scent she wore—something like vanilla or cookies, he wasn't sure—stayed with him all of the time. She was *nothing* like the women he normally dated. She was *nothing*, thank you God, like his social climbing ex-wife.

"She's not going to work out," Catherine, his ex-military secretary stated in disapproval on the other end of the phone line. "I'll call the paper to run a new ad."

"There's no need for that."

"Whatever you say, sir. I'm only thinking about what's best for you and the company."

What she really wanted, he suspected, was Holly's job. No way was that ever going to happen. He shuddered at the very idea. "I've got a meeting to get to now, but you and I are going to have a talk when I get back. I'm not happy with what's gone on there today. Not at all."

"I don't know what she told you, but—"

"We're done for now, Ms. Hawke. I'll be talking with you, and then with Holly...I mean Ms. Peterson...tomorrow." He hung up, ignoring her snort.

As he looked out the window again, he thought about how he would be having a *discussion* of sorts tomorrow night with Holly. It wouldn't be the first time he'd dealt with an employee in such a manner, but he rarely handled company discipline this way. He hadn't been sure he'd meant it when he'd subtly promised it during her initial interview. But he meant it now. It was time he got his office ladies under control. He'd seriously talk to Catherine Hawke, even though the woman really needed a good bottom burning herself. But she'd never go along with that, and he'd never really consider it. No, the only bottom he was interested in seeing upturned over his knee belonged to a young woman he shouldn't be attracted to, but was.

That hadn't gone particularly well. Holly stared at the phone, wondering what had possessed her to talk so abruptly to Brandon McNamara. Her boss. She didn't

normally lose her temper. Getting pissed at Eric and tossing the ring box back at him last Christmas Eve had been the first time she could remember getting really mad. But Catherine had tried to belittle her all day, and she still believed the woman had sabotaged her computer. It annoyed her that Brandon had tried to defend the woman. Had he heard her tiny fit? Heard her stomp her foot? What was that about anyway? It had just made her foot hurt.

The clock across the room said 3:30 p.m. Too early to go home, even if Brandon had ordered her to do so. Maybe she didn't have a computer to work on, but surely she could at least straighten his desk. She remembered seeing scattered piles of papers on it when she had passed by his office on the way to the ladies room. Besides, she was more than ready to get out of this office with all the decorations she'd tried to ignore.

Okay, Brandon's office was the North Pole, Santa's home to the extreme. Was he nuts? Everything she'd read about him said he was the epitome of the new mold for CEOs. He was organized, determined, had a tendency to live at the office, and was almost ruthless in buying businesses that badly needed salvaging. When she'd first seen his ultra modern, richly decorated office, it had seemed to fit him.

She stood, mouth gaping, staring at the corner of the office, at the enormous tree that hadn't been there yesterday. It didn't hold the normal fancy, colored balls, tiny lights and elegant garland that she'd seen in other offices. No, Brandon's tree held an unbelievable collection of Santa decorations, tiny sleigh lights, and a garland of glittery holly and berries. Her eyes welled with tears. This would have been the tree of her dreams... if she could still tolerate Christmas and all of its happiness.

With a muffled sob, she sped back to her office and grabbed her purse. Maybe tomorrow she'd be able to deal with all the decorations and Mr. Christmas. For now, she needed distance. She needed to get out of panic mode and find a way to function during this season, especially in these offices. Because she *wanted* to keep this job. She *would* keep this job.

As she swept out of the offices, barely telling Annie that Brandon had sent her home for the day, Holly thought back to her conversation with him. Had he really

implied what she'd thought he did? Had her dream last night been some kind of omen? Was he going to spank her? That didn't really happen to adults, did it? Especially not in an office place.

She punched the elevator button, thinking back to having watched the movie *Secretary*. Okay, the woman in it had been kind of strange. He'd been kind of out there, too. She'd almost stopped watching the movie, but when he'd bent her over the desk... When he'd spanked her...

Whoa! She was getting strangely moist in places she shouldn't be. How could she get turned on by thinking about a man soundly swatting his hand against a woman's bottom? How could she be feeling so excited thinking about Brandon applying *his* hand to her bottom? She really felt hot now. Maybe she was coming down with something. Surely that was the problem. It couldn't be that she was intrigued by the idea of getting spanked.

Chapter Three

The flight had seemed endlessly long. Brandon stood under the shower, letting the hot water massage the tension from his shoulders. He'd managed to save the deal that had almost gone sour in Los Angeles. He'd even managed to arrange another potential buyout while talking on his cell phone waiting for his flight. The only problems had been at his home office, between two women apparently ready to catfight it out.

He turned and let the shower beat down on his head. He'd better stock up on Tylenol before he went in this morning. The sound of a definite foot stomping replayed in his mind. He wondered if Holly's pretty face had been pulled into a pout as well. Tantrums weren't something he normally liked, still didn't. But he had to admit that he wished he'd been there to witness it. One thing was for sure—or pretty sure, if she actually cooperated—he would be burning a sweet bottom later this afternoon.

For the second night in a row, he'd dreamt of his new assistant. She certainly had the body for any man's wet dream. He wanted to have a much closer look at that body, even more than just her bare bottom over his knee. He wanted to slip her out of her clothes, slowly remove her underwear, and then get skin-to-skin as quickly as possible. She would be soft, delicate, and she would smell like cookies.

With a glance down, he found he'd gotten rock hard thinking about her. With him thinking about spanking her later, he knew he would stay semi-hard most of the day. Growing the company had been the entire focus of his life ever since he took over the badly struggling firm from his father. His ex hadn't cared that he spent hours upon hours at the office, working toward his goal of eventually taking the firm worldwide. He hadn't met that goal quite yet, but at least he'd managed to take it nationwide. Give

him another three or four years and he'd take them international. To do so, he'd need a good team around him, most of which he had now. The question was, could Holly eventually be molded into an assistant that would help take them there. Or had his gut instinct about her been wrong? There had been something... He still couldn't put his mind around exactly what he'd seen in those few short minutes that had him taking a chance on her. He hoped like hell she didn't let him down.

The night had seemed endlessly long. Holly had bounced back and forth in dreamland from worrying about her job, from confronting Catherine—who had turned into a fire-breathing dragon—in the office, from the annoying lusty looks the mid-executive men had kept giving her yesterday, to Brandon. When the dreams turned to her boss, she definitely hadn't "seen" him as her "boss."

Holly turned her VW into the parking garage and sucked in a nerve-filled breath. The thoughts she'd had of Brandon were way down the line of sensually naughty. Sure, she enjoyed sex and playing around in bed. Not that Eric had done much of either. He'd always been too busy or too tired. He'd thought her suggestions too kinky. Given time and distance from their relationship, she now knew that breaking up with him was the best thing she'd ever done. Even if he'd badly bruised her outlook of Christmas time because of the poor timing.

Parking in her assigned spot, she took a second to calm the fluttering in her stomach. *Today will be better. Today will be better.* The mantra was only slightly helping. She didn't want to face Atilla the Dragon, but at least Brandon would be there and act as a buffer. Which was really sad. Her boss shouldn't have to be a buffer between his employees. No wonder he planned to spank her.

Her breath caught. *Spank her!* He hadn't come right out and said he intended to do such a thing, but she knew. She knew in her gut that's what he'd been hem-hawing about without flat out saying it. Geez. *Spank her.* Could she really climb out

of this car and go into the offices knowing what would happen late this afternoon? How could she even look at him during the long hours before their “meeting”?

She squeezed her eyes shut for an instant and reminded herself of her goal: making a real place, a permanent place within McNamara Enterprises. The more she’d read about Brandon McNamara and what he’d already done with the business, and what he planned to do in the future, she was filled with excitement. If she didn’t blow this, she could be part of something really important and challenging. Well, she *wouldn’t* blow this opportunity!

Holly attempted to breeze by the receptionist talking to Brandon’s executive secretary, but, of course, that wasn’t possible. Catherine stepped into her path. The usual what-did-he-possibly-see-in-you look was in her eyes. Holly decided to try a new tack with her. “Good morning, Catherine, you look very nice today.”

Catherine’s brow creased in confusion, but she quickly recovered. A few nice words weren’t going to sway her from what she clearly saw as her duty: harassing the new girl. Her gaze swept up and down Holly; her expression pinching in distaste. “There is such a thing as suitable office attire.”

Holly caught the younger receptionist’s sympathetic look and fought down the urge snap back. She’d have liked to punch the self-appointed office fashion policewoman right in her carefully lipstick outlined mouth. Instead, she inwardly counted to ten before saying, “I didn’t realize dressing like a GQ mortician was the requirement here.” This is exactly what had come to her mind when she first spotted the dark, tailored suit with its—once again—over-the-knee-length skirt, black sensible shoes with thick heels, and the pristine white blouse. Quite a comparison to her chosen outfit of the day. Even if hers was totally wrong, she still liked it better.

Annie’s lips twitched, which, of course, Catherine noted. She frowned down at Annie’s smart-looking sweater and slacks. “I believe it’s time I had a talk with Mr. McNamara about proper office wear.”

Poor Annie's face flamed. Holly, again, wanted to do bodily harm to the older woman, in spite of years of being told to respect your elders. She decided getting out of the way of temptation would be for the best. Forcing a final smile for Annie and the scowling Catherine, she gave them a final glance and headed for her small office next to Brandon's.

As she strode down the hallway, she could feel the gazes of several of the male staff members watching her progress as she went by their offices. Having developed very well as a teenager, she'd always had a lot of male attention. Being a cheerleader had only added to the attention she'd received in college. Sure, she was proud of the body she worked hard to maintain. But she didn't think she went around flaunting it. When one of the mailroom guys saw her, turned bug-eyed, and nearly crashed his cart into the wall, she glanced down at her clothing choice today. Black spandex Capri leggings with a gray v-necked tunic sweater, accessorized with a 3-inch wide black patent belt and 4-inch black heels. Okay, her wardrobe wasn't quite like what the other women wore around here. Maybe she did need to do a bit of shopping. She wasn't going as far as Catherine and the stodgy suits. She just couldn't do that.

She was about to change her mind about altering her wardrobe for the office because she liked her style when she overheard one of the men nearby say conspiratorially, "Now *those* are some nice legs."

The comment was quickly followed by, "Wish my wife had that kind of cleavage."

Mortified, Holly rushed to her desk and dropped into the chair. *Had everyone been talking about her like that? Were they laughing at her? Oh geez.* She'd really wanted to fit in here. She knew that her office skills needed some serious development, but she knew the clients would like her once she talked to them. And the groups she would volunteer with would appreciate her help. She'd always had a way with people, always been a hard worker even if she didn't have a long track record at any one job. Well, most people liked her. Obviously Catherine Hawke was the exception.

She stuffed her purse into the bottom desk drawer. She was failing at wardrobe. At least in the office place. It had never occurred to her to upgrade her clothing style after college. She evidently had a lot to learn, about a lot of things.

Feeling depressed, she glanced at her monitor and felt even more depressed. Stupid computer was broken. She knew from the brief look at her schedule yesterday that there were a ton of projects for both the company and the outside groups that she was supposed to be working on. Without the computerized schedule,, she didn't know any whens or wheres. She did know that a *huge* part of her time in the next couple of weeks would revolve around the firm's holiday party. The idea still made her nauseous. How could she do it? How could she not?

As if that thought wasn't traumatic enough, her gaze shifted to the wall clock across the room. Nine hours, fifteen minutes until her meeting with Brandon. When she looked down at her deskpad, she found the note she'd scribbled on a post-it note. McNamara, 5:30, don't be late.

Late. *Beth!* Immediately she picked up the phone, got an outside line, and called her best friend. When she answered, Holly quickly said, "I can't meet you for dinner tonight."

"But I've invited that really nice Howard Swift," Beth protested, distressed about a failed attempt at matchmaking.

"I have a meeting tonight with my boss." Holly wished her friend would stop trying to match her up with every single man she met. Beth was determined to find someone to completely destroy all of Holly's sour memories of Eric. It hadn't been that Holly hadn't dated A.E.—After Eric—because she had. True she was nearing thirty and unmarried, while her perfect sisters had all married in their early twenties. They all had given her parents grandchildren, too. Holly might want to eventually get married, but she was satisfied with her life most of the time, although she'd needed a career to really focus on. She wanted to be more than just some eventual husband's "eye candy," which is what her sisters were even though they were well-educated eye candy. She wasn't sure she even wanted children.

"What about meeting us for dessert? I'm sure he would stay around—"

"No, Beth. I can't make it tonight, and I've got to get back to work now." She hung up, thinking that after her "discussion" with Brandon later, she probably wouldn't be in the mood for meeting anyone for dessert. And dessert was her favorite food group.

She felt her heart race. Her insides tingled. Spanked. *Spanked.*

She could hardly wrap her mind around the concept. Sure, her parents had occasionally patted her bottom when she'd misbehaved growing up. But they'd never done much more than that. They'd never taken her over their knee. *Would he? Would he pull her over his muscled thighs?*

She tingled even more, as weird as that was.

Her parents had never bared her bottom and spanked her, as so many of her friends' parents had done to her friends. *Would he bare her bottom? Would he take down her leggings—and her panties—and use his large hand on her bare bottom?*

She was getting wet between the legs. That was a strange reaction to thinking about someone spanking you like a child in need of correction. But when the man was drop dead gorgeous and lusted after by half the women in the city—including her...

Enough. She could not spend all day thinking about what would happen later. She had work to do, too much work to do. If she only knew what it was she was supposed to be doing.

As it turned out, Brandon ended up in outside meetings all morning and most of the afternoon. Holly had managed to busy herself with sorting through the limited amount of paper files in her desk drawers, which hadn't been of much help in letting her know what she really should be working on. She tried to clean up Brandon's desk as well. Again, she hadn't found anything about her duties, except a short list of some clients the firm needed to buy Christmas gifts for. All in all, the day dragged by. And no matter how hard she tried to keep from looking at the clock, or tried to stop thinking about the meeting in Brandon's office, she couldn't. The anticipation was a crazy thing.

When Brandon unexpectedly walked into her office mid-afternoon, she did an even crazier thing. She looked straight at him. "Are you going to spank me?"

For a second he seemed surprised by her question. Then he carefully closed the door and walked up to her desk. His intensely blue eyes focused on her. "Yes, Ms. Peterson, I am."

She swallowed hard, looking down at the papers in front of her. He reached to lift her face with a finger under her chin. "You could still give me your notice. I could write you a final check. Your choice."

She took in the stop-her-heart handsome man in front of her. He had the most intriguing eyes and the longest lashes. Oh, and she really liked the dimple in the middle of his chin. And his dark brown hair, longer than most businessmen she knew. She wanted to run her fingers through it.

"Ms. Peterson?" he prodded, stroking her cheek gently with the pad of a thumb.

"I'm not quitting." She tried not to purr as he stroked her cheek a final time. It felt so good.

He nodded and gave a brief smile before turning toward the door again. "You're not going to be comfortable going home tonight."

Holly squirmed in her chair, but whether it was from thinking about having her bottom spanked later or about how he'd so gently touched her face, she didn't know.

Brandon glanced at the clock on his computer: 5:28. Catherine had finally left ten minutes ago, clearly annoyed that Holly was staying longer. The other staff had left at almost five o'clock on the dot. The rest of the building would be almost empty. He and Holly were virtually alone here. Would she actually come to him as they'd arranged? Was she even now gathering her courage to walk across the hall?

He decided to give her a gentle prod and punched her office phone line. "Ms. Peterson, you can come in now."

He heard the click as she picked up, heard her suck in a breath. "Yes, sir."

Brandon waited patiently behind his desk. It had been a wild day of meetings and he really should be meeting with another client even now. He'd put that meeting off until tomorrow, much to Catherine's annoyance. But he wouldn't have handled that important meeting well, not when his thoughts kept turning to Holly and this appointment. He'd been thinking about this ever since yesterday when he'd made the decision to do this. He'd wondered if she would really allow it to happen. At the same time he'd wondered if he would really go through with it.

He closed his eyes and mulled the situation over yet again. He believed in spanking as a way to help correct mistakes and guide behavior. He'd spanked other women over the years, never his ex-wife—who had most definitely deserved it more than anyone he'd ever known. Instead of reining her in when she got out of control, he'd taken off on business trips for a few days. There had been a lot of trips during their last year of marriage. Their marriage had been more or less arranged by his mother and a huge mistake. One that he continued to pay for. But even as spiteful and hurtful as she'd been, he still believed in marriage. He still wanted to find a special woman to share the rest of his life with.

His mind saw Holly. All he seemed to be able to think about was Holly Peterson. They barely knew each other. Although he'd read her resume thoroughly, what there had been of it. And he'd run into someone who knew her from Boulder, Colorado. He knew a great deal about her family, and about the man everyone thought she'd marry. He had to smile when he remembered how he'd heard that she referred to the professor as El Jerko. Now that Brandon knew about what the man had done and said on that Christmas Eve, he understood some of her resistance to the magical holiday. Somehow he wanted to make it special for her again.

He heard quiet footsteps in the hallway. His stomach tensed and he opened his eyes. She'd come to him after all. *Good. Interesting, too.* She looked paler than he remembered, with an attractive blush creeping up her slender neck. Her warm brown eyes mirrored her anxiety. She wasn't sure about this, but she'd come anyway. He respected her for that.

"Close the door." He knew the outer door was locked. He'd told Catherine to do so as she left. Still, he wanted privacy in here, for Holly.

She obeyed and faced him again, not speaking, waiting.

"I expect my employees to get along, even if they don't like each other." He held up a hand when she looked ready to defend herself. "Yes, I realize this is *not* a one-sided situation. Catherine's attitude around here lately has been very inappropriate. I'll be having a serious talk with her. Nothing like this one, I can assure you of that."

"She certainly deserves an attitude adjustment, even more than me," Holly muttered. "But I can't see her... Well, I can't see you..."

He gave an amused smile. "I can't see me taking her over my knee either."

Holly walked further into the room, stopping midway toward his desk. "We're not here to discuss Catherine. I know that."

"No."

Her uneasiness was clear, but she didn't run from the room. Actually, she looked curious. He stood and walked over to the leather sofa in front of the wall of windows. They were on the top floor and nobody could possibly see inside the office. When he looked up, she was watching him.

"I won't have you arguing with my executive secretary, Ms. Peterson. And I won't have you throwing tantrums." As she blinked at him, he nodded. "Yes, I heard that foot stomp even over the phone line. Childish. You're working in a responsible position now. You are expected to behave as an adult."

"I know." She fingered the hem of the sweater that hugged her shapely body to perfection. "I rarely lose my temper. She just made me so frustrated. I'm sorry."

He understood. Catherine Hawke made him crazy at times, but he couldn't tell her that right now. This was about Holly at the moment. Her attitude. Her understanding on what he expected. His informant friend had said she could be a really spirited woman at times. That probably had something to do with her having been a cheerleader, and maybe with her feeling a rebellious need to be slightly wild when her sisters were models of perfection. The description of her sisters sounded

much like the women he tended to date. They seemed boring as hell in comparison to this lovely lady in leggings. An outfit totally unsuitable outfit for the office, but damn if he didn't appreciate how it looked on her.

"Then there is the fact that you—and Catherine, maybe—destroyed an expensive piece of office equipment. Yes, I realize that it was done unintentionally. But it is still a costly situation to fix."

"I'll pay for it," she said in a rush.

He shook his head. "Unnecessary. But you will pay for the misbehavior and the tantrum."

Okay, she hadn't behaved that badly. He just had this need to test her, to see if she'd really allow him to spank her. If she did, then he'd look forward to other such sessions, because he had a feeling this pretty lady might seriously try his patience from time to time.

Her chin quivered, then she stiffened her shoulders. She was game.

He motioned her to come to him. "It's been a long day. Let's get this unpleasantness over with."

She hesitated for just a second, and then warily walked toward him, watching her feet in those sexy little black heels. "I'm sorry to have disappointed you. I really want to learn. I really would like to work here."

As she looked at him, he saw all the dread, worry, and uncertainty in her eyes. He was tempted to forget this whole spanking thing. But she stood there ready to accept what he would do, she trusted him. He would follow through with what he'd promised.

"You were late your first day of work, not a very good start. A responsible employee judges weather conditions, traffic. You need to leave earlier so that unexpected things don't make you late." He met her regretful gaze and said firmly, "Pull your leggings down to your knees."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

Was he going too far, too soon? "Pull your leggings down."

Still she stood there, apparently weighing his order over in her mind. Finally she gathered her courage and with shaking hands removed the belt over the sweater. She drew in a quick breath and then tugged the black tights down the most amazing legs. He wanted to touch them, to touch her everywhere.

"I'm sorry you have to... have to..." She didn't meet his eyes.

"Spank you," he finished when she couldn't seem to get the words out. He liked the way she worried her lower lip, liked the way her face grew pinker. He really liked the way she appeared ready for something as embarrassing as a spanking. And he definitely looked forward to putting his hand on her soft, bare bottom.

She gave a nod and then before he could order her to, she scooted over his lap, stretching out her arms and gripping the cushion, stretching out her seemingly endlessly long legs. He enjoyed the sight for a second before shoving her sweater up off her amazing ass. A tiny pair of lace bikini panties caught his attention and his cock immediately hardened. If she noticed his obvious swelling next to her hip, she didn't acknowledge it. His heart thudded as he inched the panties off her buttocks.

She gave a quiet sound of distress, but did nothing to stop him. His admiration for her went up yet another notch.

"I'm ready," she whispered.

In that instant he knew she was the kind of woman who needed discipline and would accept it. He was a man capable of giving her exactly what she needed. At a later time he would carefully weigh whether they could have more of a future than boss and employee, than spankee and spanker. He tucked her close to him, holding her in place with his left arm over her back. Then without another second's hesitation, he swatted the middle of her creamy cheeks. Hard.

She yelped, telling him that she was definitely not used to being spanked. He gave her two brisk swats, one to each cheek, leaving behind his handprint. "Have you ever been spanked?" If she had been, it had been a while.

"Not like this," she squeaked out as he began spanking her in earnest.

"Ohhhhhh, owwww. That hurts."

He developed a rhythm, two hard swats to each cheek, then one to each lower cheek. She had her own rhythm going: hiss, grab the cushions, wriggle away from the pain, and kick up a leg.

"This is going to be a serious lesson. You're going home with a very sore bottom tonight." He probably should have eased her into learning to take a spanking, but he didn't. He spanked her hard, steadily, watching her bottom turn red. Still, he knew when enough was enough. He wouldn't really hurt her, ever.

"I'm s-s-s-sorry," she cried, wriggling wildly after a particularly hard swat. "I-I'll do better. I-I promise."

He didn't answer, just kept on spanking until he felt the blaze of fire from her crimson bottom. His hand hurt, but she would hurt more. She'd remember this lesson.

Finally he stopped, placing his palm down on her sore bottom. He gently smoothed the soft, tender skin. He wanted to bend down and kiss those sweet cheeks, but he didn't. He wanted to pull off her clothes and sink into her, but he wouldn't. They weren't in that place in their relationship, yet, but he wanted to get to that place...and maybe beyond it.

"Are you done now?" she questioned, lying quietly sobbing over his lap.

He couldn't keep from reaching to touch that mass of silky blonde hair. "Yes. I believe that was enough for your first spanking experience."

Although he hated to cover up the sight, he gently pulled her panties back into place, hearing her sharp intake of breath. She'd hate pulling those tight leggings up. Almost as much as he'd hate seeing that sweet ass covered.

He helped her stand and watched her hands fly back to touch her burning bottom. She rubbed it, shifted from foot to foot, and then realized she was putting on a show for him and tugged the leggings up, grimacing.

"Are you going to be all right driving home?" He knew it would hurt like the dickens to sit, but that was part of being spanked.

"I'll be fine," she said, avoiding looking at him. She walked gingerly to the door, and he wondered if he'd destroyed any hope of a relationship with her. Then she stopped, looked back at him, and said, "Are we okay now, Brandon?"

Brandon. She'd referred to him by his first name instead of his last, but then they'd just done something pretty damn personal. He liked the sound of his name coming from her lips.

"Yes, Holly, we are." He smiled and was pleased to see her give him a timid smile in return.

Chapter Four

As the phone on the nightstand suddenly burst to life, Holly shot up in bed. She sat there disoriented and blinking for a second. And then her cell phone went crazy ringing across the room in her purse. Her eyes burned from lack of sleep. Her heart pounded from the rush of adrenaline, even more so when she noted how the sun shone determinedly between the slats of her blinds. For the second week in December and at the time she was supposed to wake up, the sun should still be struggling to meet the new day. Her goose was soooooo cooked!

She made a frantic grab for the phone next to her only to have whoever had been calling finally give up on her. She didn't even bother trying to go for the cell phone because it would be going to voicemail about now. No doubt both calls had come from the office. Probably Catherine was calling on her home line to harass her about being late. Oh how that woman loved to harass her. Brandon was calling on her cell phone line in disappointment, again. Darnit. She'd been the model employee for... okay, only for a week. Brandon's "attitude adjustment" had been intended to adjust her attitude, her determination to do right at the office, and with all her projects. At this point she still had a good attitude, but she was seriously struggling with all the projects. But she was determined to do better.

Yawning, she threw her legs over the side of the bed. *All her projects.* Brandon hadn't been kidding when he'd said his last assistant had been heavily involved in community groups. *What one didn't she belong to? Had the woman never slept?* She didn't feel like she'd slept in almost a week. December seemed to bring out the craziness, the need to do even more, in every single one of the four groups she now

volunteered with. She didn't even have time to think about her dislike of the holiday season. She didn't have time to sleep, barely had time to eat, and definitely not time to exercise. Her vitamins were gone. Grocery shopping and most meals consisted of grabbing some totally non-nutritious whatever from the Stop and Go on her way home from wherever. She'd lost ten pounds, which she could barely afford to lose. Her clothes weren't fitting right anymore.

The phone began ringing again the second she stepped into the shower and started letting the hot water ease the tension from her shoulder muscles. No doubt she was in trouble again. Brandon had only managed to catch her on the phone a couple of times what with her wild out-of-the-office schedule and with his having flown to Texas for a few days. He'd mentioned the company party in both calls and she'd hemmed and hawed her way around the subject. She didn't quite have the details wrapped up yet, or the gifts for certain clients bought. Actually, she didn't have *any* of the details even started. She'd been meaning to do all of that, when she had two spare seconds. Which at this rate would be the next holiday season.

She grabbed the body swash and started lathering up, thinking back to that "special" meeting with Brandon early in that first week of work. *Was it really only last week?* She still couldn't believe what had happened. Or how painful the ride home had been that night, and she suspected that hadn't been a really hard spanking. Whatever, it had hurt. It also had been embarrassing. At least nobody in the office seemed to be aware of what had gone on between her and Brandon McNamara. Fortunately, he'd never mentioned the incident during any of their conversations after that. One thing was for sure, the man clearly had experience at turning women over his knees and warming their bottoms.

A tingling went through her, pooling between her legs, at the thought of Brandon touching her—even by spanking her. They didn't know each other, but she was so incredibly drawn to him. She admired his intelligence. She was totally in awe of his body. What woman with sight wouldn't be? She liked the whole package that made up Brandon McNamara. Especially how he was in control of everything around him. Well, maybe not her. She seemed to buck his system, a lot. She didn't update her

computer schedule like he wanted her to because she rarely made it into the office these days. She didn't dress like the others because she hadn't had a second's time to shop for a new wardrobe. But she really did like working for the company, and would like it even more if she ever actually worked in the office.

In the office! Double darn. She blinked away soap that had gotten in her eyes. *Staff meeting!* Annie had told her yesterday when she'd called in that Brandon would be back today and that he'd called a staff meeting. He wanted a status report on everything, including everything that she had *not* gotten done. He didn't actually know she hadn't gotten anything done. She was in such trouble.

Brandon listened patiently to yet another boring update from one of his executives. He'd listened to the accountant's report. He'd listened to report after report and he was tired of all of it. What he wanted was to go home, crash for a few hours, and then catch up with the work that had accumulated on his desk. But he also needed to find out the status of the holiday party...if Holly would just get here. *Where the hell was she? Why hadn't she answered her phone? Was something wrong with her? Had she been in an accident?*

He drew in a steadying breath as the Human Resources manager gave her report. He needed to calm down and stop worrying so much about Holly Peterson. In truth, he couldn't remember the last time he'd had someone stay in his thoughts so much, or when he'd constantly worried about another person like he did Holly. Not good. She was an employee and he really shouldn't keep having the kind of thoughts he had about her.

Where the hell was she? Were those footsteps he heard in the hallway? Was that the scent of cookies floating in their direction? He perked up as the HR manager finished and looked with satisfaction in his way.

He gave her a curt nod and hoped she thought he'd heard what she'd said. He hadn't, but he'd get a written report later.

"Mr. McNamara," Catherine said loudly, obviously aware that he hadn't been listening to anyone and wanting his attention. "I have some very disturbing news that everyone here is concerned about. It's about the Christmas party. The plans are *still* far from complete. There are no caterers lined up. No band engaged. Need I go on?"

He sat up straighter. "The party is less than two weeks away."

Catherine looked smugly. "Exactly. As far as I know, the only arrangement made is that it will take place, as usual, at your estate."

For the first time in a long, long while, Brandon cursed in front of his staff. This was serious. He and Ms. Peterson would discuss this thoroughly today. His spanking hand itched to connect with the soft bottom he well remembered.

The woman with that delectable bottom walked hurriedly into the conference room. She looked adorably disheveled, sensually alluring in yet another inappropriate too short skirt and molding sweater. She was out of breath. He studied her more closely and frowned. She had dark circles under her eyes that her makeup hadn't covered. Those amazing eyes were streaked with the red lines of exhaustion. As she dropped the familiar pink briefcase on the table, he also realized she'd lost weight. Too much weight, in his opinion.

"I was explaining to Mr. McNamara that the holiday party is in serious trouble," Catherine stated, her tone and expression enormously pleased.

Holly sat down, opened her briefcase and pulled out a paper calendar. She flipped to December without saying a word. Brandon caught the annoyed expressions on the staff of eleven seated around the large mahogany table. Only the young receptionist appeared the least bit sympathetic.

Unable to sit and watch the frown lines deepen any further on Holly's forehead, Brandon bit back his annoyance. He stood and walked around to look over her shoulder at the calendar. Mistake. Her scent drifted up to him. His body responded. He longed to touch her, to kiss her, more.

He battled his strong reactions and focused on the calendar. Nearly every minute of every work hour—and well into the evenings—appeared filled with one activity or another for the various groups she'd become involved with. Lines were

marked through notes to call a caterer, plans to call the florist, and a note to call the band they normally hired. The items looked to have been marked out and placed on a new day, day after day. Continually marked through. Her schedule looked worse than his.

"I believe your priorities are way out of whack, Ms. Peterson. The community groups are volunteer things. Getting projects done for the company should come first." He realized his tone was harsher than it should have been, but this was important. "You should have crossed off the candy cane pass out event. Or that cookie exchange. Or that day wrapping presents."

She cocked her head to look up at him, her bow mouth pinched in irritation. "I was only following through with commitments that had been made by *your former* assistant. Miss Perfect. You told me to honor all of her commitments. You should have told me that you'd changed your mind. It isn't like I wanted to do any of them."

The room around them grew silent. Brandon was pretty sure Catherine was memorizing every word Holly said. He would hear about this later, possibly several times. "We should—and will—discuss this in private. In detail."

She pinned him with an even more irritated look, and then glared down the table at Catherine. "I was under the impression that your precious executive secretary was going to make the arrangements that I couldn't seem to get to."

Brandon looked at Catherine. "Why would you think that?"

Catherine raised her pointy chin in disdain of the younger woman's comment. "You specifically told me that *all* of the arrangements were Ms. Peterson's responsibility. You told me that she would *ask* me for assistance if needed." Her gaze narrowed on Holly. "I don't remember *ever* having been asked for help."

Holly's mouth tightened, she ground her teeth. "You and I talked about my tight schedule last week. You said you knew exactly who to call for each of those things."

"I did *not* agree to actually call anyone, though. You did *not* ask me to do so, or I certainly would have." She sent a satisfied glance at Brandon.

Cutting into the conversation, one of the men said, "We've been waiting for the invitations to come from the printer so we could get them to our clients."

Another man said huffily. "Obviously they haven't been ordered yet."

"Of course they have..." Brandon began, and then stopped. "They have, haven't they?"

Catherine thrust herself back into the conversation, "I'll take care of everything, right after this meeting. I'll order the invitations, and try to find a decent caterer at this late date. But we'll probably have to pay out the wazoo for them."

Brandon didn't particularly like Catherine taking over, but at least she did know what they needed and who to contact. Especially on such short notice. *Damn*. He should have kept an eye on this situation. He'd intended to, even intended to help with some of the plans. But two of their fledgling businesses in Texas had required him to fly down there for over a week. Now he faced a disaster and possibly even calling off the expected party. Holly had never once mentioned any problems when they'd spoken on the phone. This was definitely a situation worthy of being fired on the spot. Something he just might have to buck up and do. Right after he burned her bottom.

To everyone's surprise, Holly stood up, nearly making him trip and fall as he scrambled out of the way. Ignoring that, she narrowed her eyes at Catherine. "*You* will fix *nothing*! If I'm completely responsible—which I hadn't thought until just this moment—I will take care of everything. Even if I have to handwrite every damn invitation and personally deliver them. Even if I have to cook every damn appetizer and serve every damn drink at the party myself."

Catherine's face had turned so red Brandon thought she'd stroke out on them. Everyone, but the receptionist, looked stunned. Annie looked proud. Brandon was proud of Holly, too, for finally standing up for herself. She was still in trouble and would hear about this in no uncertain terms from him, but he was proud of her.

And then she swayed on those high stilettos and grabbed hold of the table. Her face had paled several shades.

Alarmed, Brandon scooped her up into his arms just as she fainted. Before anyone could react he carried her down the hall to his office, muttering under his breath about women who didn't take decent care of themselves. With each muttered word and each step, he was worried. And he felt guilty. He'd given her too much to do

too soon. She wasn't experienced or trained at any of this. He'd known this, but she'd wanted a chance. He'd wanted to give it to her.

Annie trailed after him. "Should I call an ambulance, sir? Will she be all right?"

Brandon carefully lay Holly on his sofa and immediately knelt down beside it. He knew that most of the others had crowded into the office as well. None of them were important at the moment. He could only focus on the too pale, too beaten-looking woman in front of him.

Without turning, he shook his head. "I don't think EMTs are necessary. She's already starting to come around." He gently pushed strands of silky hair away from Holly's face, quietly saying, "Ms. Peterson."

She gave a soft moan. Eyes closed, she grumbled, "It can't be time to get up."

He smiled. "Come on, Holly. Wake up."

She blinked at him. "Brandon."

As she quietly said his name, he felt such relief. He had a feeling everyone else in the room now realized how much he cared for her. He'd deal with that later. He'd always scoffed at the idea of someone falling in love at first sight. Apparently that was exactly what had happened to him. So much for his well-ordered life.

"You haven't been taking care of yourself." He kept his palm on the side of her face, pleased when some of the color returned. "We're going to discuss that as well."

"As well?" she questioned. Her eyes widened in understanding. Her pretty little cheeks turned pink. "Oh, right."

A half hour later Holly couldn't believe Brandon had ordered a complete rearrangement of his schedule for the rest of the day. She sat on the sofa with the calendar that Annie had retrieved for her from the conference room and watched the show in amazement. And it *was* a show.

Catherine blew up like a blow fish, her entire body puffing up in outrage. "These are important meetings. The one with Albert Turpin can't possibly be rescheduled. The one with Scott Anderson absolutely must happen today."

Brandon's expression hardened. "Reschedule them all. Turpin and Anderson both might give you attitude, but they want these meetings more than I do. They'll reschedule. As will all of the others."

Furious that she hadn't gotten what she wanted, Catherine turned to glower at Holly. One long, slim hand motioned in her direction. "If Ms. Peterson wasn't so incompetent—"

"That's quite enough, Ms. Hawke!" Brandon barked and the woman all but bit her tongue to stop the tirade. His gaze shifted and softened somewhat as he looked at Holly. "If you've recovered enough by now, you and I will be leaving the office. For the day."

Holly held up her calendar. "But—"

"Annie has called a temp agency, which will send over a fill-in receptionist." At Catherine's shocked look, he continued, "Annie will be dealing in your place today with whatever community functions you were to help with. She was thrilled at the opportunity."

"Okkkkkay," Holly said, confused. "Then I'll need to call and make the arrangements for the party."

"Ms. Peterson, it is too late for simple calls. You and I will be going personally to make our requests." He pushed back from his desk and stood.

"But, Mr. McNamara," Catherine protested, stopping when he shot her a quelling glance. She huffed and stormed down the hallway.

Holly got uneasily to her feet, feeling somewhat better. Her stomach growled just as Brandon grabbed his overcoat from a corner halltree. She put a hand over her stomach and mumbled, "Sorry."

"We're going to start our outings with brunch."

Brandon sat back in the booth of the small Beacon Diner pleased to watch the color fully returning to Holly's face. He'd been worried about her after the fainting incident. And he hadn't been happy to hear that she'd barely eaten all week, or slept. As she'd all but inhaled the stack of pancakes, he'd finessed the information out of her.

"I'm so sorry about this mess. I'm sure you're ready to fire me," Holly said, sounding sincerely distressed and annoyed. She took a quick sip of chocolate milk—he found her drinking milk oddly adorable—before meeting his gaze again. "I'd like a second chance." Her little chin went up a notch. "I still say Catherine told me she would help on this holiday project."

He had a strong feeling Catherine had, in fact, told Holly she'd help. But she'd never planned to actually do so. She'd had it in for Holly ever since he agreed to interview her. He was damn tired of Catherine's jealousy and of her games in the office. He'd have a very serious talk with her tomorrow. Job seniority didn't mean a lot to him if that person couldn't get along with his/her fellow employees. As for Holly, she needed to live up to her own responsibilities. That included letting him know when she was in over her head. If they were going to be able to continue working together, which he really did want, then she'd have to agree to follow his rules. The main one being no lying or lying by omission.

"I'll admit, Ms. Peterson," he said, trying to keep things on a professional level for the moment, "that firing you did go through my thoughts."

She stiffened. "I can do this job; I know I can."

"We'll see." He couldn't resist any longer. He leaned closer and used his thumb to wipe away a spot of milk at the corner of her tempting mouth. Immediately, just at touching her, he started to harden. Inappropriate. *Totally*. Instead of pulling his hand away, though, he allowed his thumb to gently move across her very soft lips. "We'll see." His voice had turned gruff with arousal, which was clearly a bad sign.

Holly sat frozen, watching his hand pull away from her face. Heat flashed in her eyes, and her breasts rose and fell as if she, too, struggled with desire. The reaction definitely stroked his ego. *Damn*. He hadn't expected such intense feelings to develop between them when he'd interviewed her, even though he'd been attracted to her. With that face, that body...what man wouldn't be attracted? But, damn, this complicated things.

"I'm in trouble again, aren't I?" Their gazes locked. "You've been thinking about...Well, you know."

Brandon couldn't believe she'd more or less brought the subject up. He decided not to deny it. "Yes, you are. And, yes, I have been thinking about warming a certain part of your anatomy."

She looked anxiously around, relaxing when it appeared that no one was listening. That chin thrust out again. "I don't particularly want to be disciplined, but if you must, you must. I want to keep this job."

He glanced at his watch, determined not to let her see how relieved he was to hear that she'd essentially agreed to let him spank her once more. It went through his mind that in spite of their age differences, their social differences, and so many other differences, they were suited for each other. He'd mull that over more. He also needed to find out her feelings for him. For now, there were things to do.

"We should go to my place next. I live in a loft a few blocks from here," she interrupted his musing, again catching him by surprise. Her cheeks had turned pink. "I'd prefer to get whatever you deem necessary over and done with. Then we can focus on fixing the problem I've created."

He slid out of the booth and went to pay their bill, pleased to hear her following right behind him. They were going to her apartment so he could spank her. Okay with him. He was also curious to learn more about this sensual woman who made him so crazy.

"Owwwwww," Holly moaned out, arching her head back. Her face was pinched in misery as she glanced his way. "Oh stop, please stop."

Brandon merely tightened his hold on her as they sat on an over-sized footstool in the great room of her loft apartment thirty minutes later. His hand landed in a burning response. "You should have told me about the problem with making the arrangements. Essentially you lied to me, Ms. Peterson, by omission."

She wriggled sideways, tears streaming down her face. "I kept thinking I'd get to it. Ohhhhhh, owwww." She twisted into him in an attempt to avoid his punishing hand. But a series of brisk swats landed anyway. "I-I thought Catherine..."

"We're *not* bringing Catherine into this. The job was assigned to you. Your responsibility, including letting me know if you couldn't handle all or some of it"

"I'm soooooooryyy." She kicked her legs up, one after the other. She'd kicked off her shoes early in the spanking.

"This will not, and I definitely mean *not*, ever happen again." He emphasized the demand with another round of swats to the underside of her very sore buttocks. "Do I make myself clear?"

Holly sniffed and bobbed her head. He'd been spanking her forever it seemed, but probably more like ten minutes. It was awful, much worse than in the office. She could have refused when he'd gotten over his shocked look at the apartment disaster and pulled her with him to the footstool—the only clean surface in the room. She could have refused when he'd drawn her over his knee, shoved her skirt up and tugged her panties down. She could have refused before he'd landed the first swat. But she hadn't refused any of it. As horrible as this was, it helped ease her guilt for having failed in her job.

He'd given her a second to catch her breath, but now that hard hand landed again, and again, and again. "I want you to answer me. Out loud. Do I make myself clear?"

"*Yes! Yes, yes, yes.*" She squirmed side to side as much as his tight hold allowed. Her bottom felt like he'd set it on fire.

He sent two more sizzling swats to each heated cheek and then pulled her panties back up. She hissed at the feel of the soft fabric against her tender skin.

"I'll give you a half hour to pull yourself together while I call and check in with the office. Then we're going to go make all the arrangements you should have already taken care of."

Holly scooted off of his lap, settled on her knees on the floor and frantically rubbed at the burn. She knew there were tear tracks on her face and her mascara had probably ran. But all she could deal with at the moment was the pain. "Spankings really hurt."

She glanced up at him and found him smiling tenderly at her. He held up his hand and she noted how red it was, too. "If you're expecting sympathy from me for a sore hand, forget it."

To her surprise, he leaned forward and carefully thumbed away the tears. His thumb stole lower to move slowly over her lips much as he'd done in the diner. She tingled all over and almost forgot her burning bottom. Then he set his phone down and replaced his thumb on her lips with his own lips. His kiss was commanding, demanding, and thorough. She forgot everything but the kiss. The amazing kiss.

When he sat back, his eyes were nearly black and his chest was straining. Remarkably, she'd affected him as much as he'd affected her. He looked troubled as well. She thought she understood the problem. "We've crossed a line, haven't we?"

"A lot of lines, actually." His expression remained serious. "This is wrong, you know."

She tried to change the subject back to something safer. "Spanking me?"

He shook his head. "No, sweet Holly, spanking you is right. You need it and I need to do it. That probably doesn't make sense to you, but I'm experienced in this. I know."

She looked away for a second, and then back at him. This was all new to her: the whole spanking thing, and especially the admiring the man who did it. Even more, even scarier, she thought she was in love with him. She couldn't tell him that. Maybe

she should quit after all. No. She'd quit too many jobs already. And she wasn't ready to leave Brandon behind, either.

She sucked in a breath and carefully got to her feet. "Printers or caterers first?"

Chapter Five

Holly's stomach was a bundle of nerves, much as it had been for the last two weeks. With Brandon's help, she'd gotten everything done for the party. He was incredible to work with. Organized to the extreme. Determined, and let everyone in his path know it. Confident and competent. And, in spite of those ultra-alpha characteristics, people liked him. Probably because he could be incredibly charming when necessary, like convincing an over-booked caterer to take on just one more job: his. Or convincing a harried printer that he could fit in one more rush printing job. She'd learned a lot and wanted to learn so much more.

The night was ebony black with no moonlight. As she drove down the winding lane leading to Brandon's estate, the lights from his house lit up the sky. She drove by every style and make of luxury car. Her sassy little VW bug looked as out of place as she felt. But she drove determinedly on toward the line of valets waiting for guests to arrive. With each yard closer to his home, she gaped more and more in awe. His "home" went way beyond anything she'd ever dreamed of, far beyond a show of mere "wealth." Her parents had been far from poor, their house in an exclusive neighborhood, but this... *Oh my gawd, she didn't belong here.*

She tried to figure out if she could squeeze through the parked cars ahead on the circle drive and disappear into the night. Brandon would never miss her. Then she remembered that warm look in his eyes she'd seen many times when she'd caught him looking at her. She recalled how his deep voice grew even deeper, huskier when he touched her in some way. And he seemed to have been touching her a lot lately. A hand on her hair as he looked over her shoulder for one reason or another. A quick

squeeze of her hand before they went into a meeting. A palm cupping her face as he flicked away some imagined speck from her cheek. Not to mention the kiss in the diner. The amazing kiss. Soon followed by his touching her in a not-so-pleasant way: spanking her.

Her car stopped almost on its own in front of the eager-faced valets. She would go to this party and try to not embarrass him. If she was lucky, maybe she'd get a chance to "touch" him tonight. Kiss him. She grabbed her small evening purse and smiled at the thought of the sprig of mistletoe inside it. Pretty daring idea. Could she really go through with it? He was her boss, but in her heart he was much more than that.

"Have you seen Ms. Peterson yet?" Brandon asked Annie when he found her looking at the Christmas tree in the middle of the ballroom. He'd been watching the front door as much as he could, ridiculously eager to see Holly tonight.

Annie gave him a gentle smile of understanding. "She'll be here."

He wasn't as positive about that as Annie seemed to be. Holly had told him she was nervous about coming to his house, particularly after Catherine had called it a modern day castle in Kansas. He knew the house was impressive and big; he'd had it built specifically that way. Actually his ex had insisted on the really ostentatious parts of the mansion, but now it was totally his showplace. What was missing, though, was someone to share it with, someone to help him entertain here, someone with enough spirit to give it warmth.

One of the firm's most important clients strolled over with his wife and he shook off his thoughts. "I hope you're enjoying yourself, Sam."

Sam Waller nodded and glanced at his wife, who was sipping champagne. "I'd heard rumors that there wouldn't be a party this year. Glad to see it wasn't true. We always like coming here, part of our holiday tradition now."

Brandon gave a practiced smile. He'd listened to the same comment more times tonight than he'd have liked. There shouldn't have been any rumors. His staff would certainly be hearing about that. They all should have been supportive, definitely more helpful in pulling the party together. Even though the actual planning duties were supposed to belong to his assistant, that shouldn't have kept any of them from offering to help. Especially Catherine, who was keeping her distance from him tonight.

"I'll admit we had a little trouble getting the plans made this year," Brandon started only to stop when Holly walked up behind him. He knew it was her from the scent of cookies, from the way his entire body sensed her.

Holly stepped beside him and smiled apologetically toward the Wallers. "New girl just about blew it." She glanced up at Brandon. "I'll start planning in June next year. I promise."

Brandon gaped like an idiot at her. Sam—and most of the men in the vicinity—seemed to be doing the same. How could they not? Holly Peterson on any normal day, in one of her too-short skirts and tight top or painted on leggings and low-cut sweaters was a sight to behold. In a sinfully red, strapless dress that hugged her perfect curves... well, she was hot. And she'd left her long, silky blonde hair down, instead of up like so many of the other women here tonight. He wanted to slip his hands through it, feel it sliding over his fingers.

Sam Waller's grin was enormous. He was definitely interested in what he was seeing—much to his wife's annoyance. He held out a hand. "Sam Waller. You must be Brandon's new assistant. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Holly shook his hand, looking amused by Brandon's sour expression as Sam held her hand a little too long. To keep peace, she smoothly extracted her hand. "Waller Electronics, right? You've had a particularly good year. At least according to what I read the other day in the newspaper." She glanced at his wife, smiling. "And you have your own business, right? Suzanna's Salon and Spa?"

Suzanna's frown disappeared and she seemed impressed. "That's correct. On the east side of the city."

They chitchatted for a few minutes, both of the Wallers now at ease. Brandon approved of her knowledge of the firm's clients and her ability to casually visit with virtual strangers. His confidence in her grew. If he was patient, she could do this job. If he was even more patient, he could get her to play an even more important role in his life.

"Brandon!" He recognized the woman's voice calling out as she walked up behind him. He turned to watch Julia, his former assistant, move closer with Catherine at her side.

He gave the women a nod of acknowledgment, uneasy with Holly beside him.

"You did a wonderful job with the party after all. I'm so sorry to have left you in the lurch like that."

Brandon tried to contain his irritation with her. "I thought you had eloped, decided to live in—"

Catherine butted in, "It's sad, of course, but Julia's marriage didn't work out. She's moved back here. She's ready to resume her position. Isn't that wonderful news?"

"I think we'll leave you all alone. Holly, nice meeting you." Sam Waller took his wife's hand and led her away, giving Holly a sympathetic glance.

Holly's stomach knotted and she couldn't breathe. Brandon's amazingly skilled and efficient former assistant had come back to town and clearly expected to just walk back into her old job. A job that Holly had at first sucked at, but now had limited success at. What she really lacked, though, was support from her fellow workers. They would all be happy to see her leave.

Taking her cue, the elegantly beautiful brunette stepped next to Brandon, slid one arm so she held one of his and began gently leading him away. She didn't even acknowledge Holly. "I've had this idea about your newest branch office. I'd like to discuss it with you before I forget it."

Brandon looked back at Holly, but didn't resist being led off. Holly tried not to let him see the horror she felt, the way her world had just blown up in her face. She gave a forced smile and grabbed a flute of champagne from a passing waiter. Then when Brandon moved out of sight, she set the flute on a nearby table and sped as quickly as she could from the room. Tears misted her eyes and she avoided looking at anyone. She headed straight to the front doors, not even bothering to claim the coat she'd checked with a maid upon entering the house.

As she reached into her evening bag for her keys, she felt the sprig of mistletoe. Her heart felt like an elephant was sitting on her chest crushing it. She jerked the sprig out and tossed it back into the entryway. *What a stupid idea it had been! What a stupid idea it had been to think that she was starting to fit into her job and fit into Brandon's life!* She sped outside barely aware of the freezing temperature and her barely covered body. She hurt. Really hurt.

Brandon had noted Holly hurrying through the ballroom and attempted to convince Julia that he'd talk to her later. As usual, she'd been dogged determined in talking to him. He'd zigzagged his way around and between the large crowd of guests in his home with Julia hot on his tail. He'd forgotten how relentless she could be, and how annoying that trait was at times. As he started to tell her one more time that they would talk tomorrow, he saw Holly stop in the entry, reach into her small bag, and toss something to the floor. She gave a muffled sob and tore out of his house without her coat. She'd freeze, catch pneumonia. What was she thinking!

Ignoring the fact that Julia had stopped beside him and was still chattering away about some business idea she'd had, he scooped up the item Holly had dropped. *A sprig of mistletoe.* His fingertips had touched moisture when he'd picked it up and he knew he'd touched her tear. She'd left the party that she'd worked so hard with him on crying, silently, but crying nonetheless. *Because of him. Because of Julia.*

"I'm sorry your marriage didn't work out, Julia," he said brusquely. He watched Holly run in those ridiculous high heels toward the valets he'd hired. "And I'm sorry, but your former position has been filled."

"Catherine told me, but she said that person wasn't working out." Julia kept up with him as he walked outside.

He stopped to face the woman he'd once thought he might have a future with beyond just working together. She was model beautiful, confident, goal-oriented—all things he appreciated. But she wasn't Holly. Holly with her inappropriate style of dressing at the office. And, lord help him, she'd been sensually sinful looking tonight. Her beauty went beyond her incredible shapely body and a face he could spend hours looking at. Maybe she wasn't confident in the way Julia was, but her confidence was growing. He wanted to see it grow even more. He hadn't known what her personal goals were when she'd first started at the firm, but he was pretty sure they now went beyond just the workplace. He felt the mistletoe in his hand and hope swelled within him. Hopefully, he'd become one of her goals.

"Catherine is wrong. Holly is exactly what the company needs. What I need." He turned and sped after the only woman who mattered in his life.

"Let me in, Holly," Brandon urged again into the intercom of her apartment building almost an hour later. He'd raced after her, praying as they drove that neither of them would have an accident on the icy streets. And he'd been standing here in the outer door area for fifteen minutes trying to convince her to admit him to the building.

"Go home, Brandon," she protested, sniffing. "You've got an important party at your house."

He did, but it wasn't as important as this moment in time. "Come back with me."

For a minute he didn't think she would answer. Finally, as he was wondering about his sanity in pursuing someone who clearly didn't want him around, she said angrily, "No. And I'm not coming back to work, either."

"Why the hell not?" *Heartburn. She was giving him heartburn.* He rubbed at his chest with one hand and felt the mistletoe in his pocket with the other hand.

"Your precious assistant is back. The can-do-no-wrong Julia Banks." He was happy to hear no more sound of tears in her voice, but he was irritated with her jealous attitude.

"My assistant is in this building. The stubborn, irrational woman I'm trying to talk to right now."

"I'm not stubborn. I'm realistic. I was a round ball trying to fit into a square hole. Not going to happen and we both know it." She blew out a breath. "Go away. Just have HR mail my final check."

"I'm going to burn your bottom for acting like such an idiot," he grumbled, not thinking she'd hear him.

"You're never spanking me again," she snapped. "Go away."

He started to turn around and leave, but he knew if he did that he'd never see her again. He couldn't let that happen. Yes, he intended to spank her tonight, and many times in the future. First, he had to get her to give him another chance. He pulled the mistletoe from his pocket and rubbed it gently with his thumb. "Holly, I'm sorry. For everything. For hiring you and then tossing you into a job that you needed training in, at the very least needed some support from your fellow workers...and me. I'm sorry for Catherine and her attitude issues, which will stop as of Monday when I give her notice."

She was so quiet. Was she listening to him? He surged ahead in desperation. "I need you, *you*, Holly Peterson, by my side at the office. I need you by my side in the years ahead...as my wife."

"Did you just propose to me over the intercom?" she asked in amazement.

"Well...yes, I guess I did." He was more than a little shocked himself. He waited anxiously for her next comment.

Her response came in the click sound of the outer door being unlocked. *Thank God.* He jerked open the door and strode into the heart of the building.

Holly dashed at her tears with the back of her hand. Her heart pounded. Her thoughts scattered. She'd lost her job, but no, she hadn't. Her world had fallen apart, but no, it hadn't. She'd never see Brandon again, but yes, she would.

She yanked open the apartment door to watch for him coming from the elevator. She was angry with him. He was with her as well. She loved him. Evidently he loved her, too. Her temper flared as she waited impatiently for him, and then she marched down the hall to meet him, ignoring the fact that she only had on one heel and was more hobbling than marching.

The second the elevator door opened and he stepped out, she said huffily, "You don't propose to someone over an intercom." She reached down and pulled off the heel she wore.

One of his thick eyebrows rose at her tone. He held up the now battered sprig of mistletoe. "You don't throw things on the floor in a snit, either."

At the sight of the mistletoe and what she'd had planned, tears burned her eyes once again. Her lower lip quivered at how much she'd nearly lost.

Brandon took her arm and guided her back to her apartment. Carefully shutting the door, he urged her into the great room, stopping to turn on the stereo. At her quizzical look he said, "For privacy."

Her eyes widened and her cheeks heated. "Privacy?"

He set the mistletoe on a nearly falling over stack of magazines on an end table. "So the neighbors won't hear me spanking you."

"Do you really need me?" she asked, ignoring the comment about spanking her. "More than Julia?"

He led her to the sofa, brushing an afghan to the floor so he could sit down. She went with him, resisting slightly. "You'll be every bit as good as, maybe even better than, Julia eventually." He met her wary gaze. "As I said downstairs, it's *you* I need. *You* I want."

"Maybe we could not do this. Maybe we could talk about..." With an "oof" she landed on his knees and he encouraged her to move forward.

"We'll do this, and we'll talk later." He wasn't going to be swayed.

She flattened her hands on the floor, her hair draped around her head, and he immediately got down to business. He shifted her dress up out of the way, sucking in a breath at the sight of her tiny red thong. He ran a hand over her bare skin. She lifted into his touch with a quiet moan of pleasure as he caressed her several more times. She dreaded the spanking, but his touch was amazing.

Too soon, he removed his hand and she tensed. A second later, the same hand connected soundly with her bottom. The sound echoed in the room and she was glad he'd turned on the stereo.

"You're not getting a hard spanking tonight, Holly, but you'll remember it."

She didn't respond and he took that as the sign to begin. He spanked steadily but not hard. She wriggled and squirmed, more from arousal than from pain this time. This spanking was pleasurable. She was all but purring at his touch.

By the time he finished, she felt his hard shaft pressed against her hip. Pulsing. He wanted her. She wanted him, too. As she got to her feet and faced him, she knew that this would be a night for them both to remember.

Standing, Brandon scooted the afghan out of his way, and then managed to get down on one knee in the limited space available. As she gaped at him, he took her hands and held them. "Marry me, Holly Peterson."

A smile curved her lips, but she daringly gave him a hard time. "You spanked me, and now you propose?"

"I spanked you because I love you."

"Say it again," she whispered.

"I spanked you because I love you."

"Not the 'spanked you' part."

"The 'I love you' part?"

She drew him to his feet and snuggled into him. "Yes, that part."

Brandon crushed her to him, running his hands through her hair. "I love you."

He stepped back so that he could look down at her. "So? Are you accepting my proposal or not?"

"How long do I get to answer?"

He swatted her bottom. "Okay, okay. You can be so impatient at times."

"Your answer?" He threatened her with a raised hand and a smile.

"I guess I'll accept."

He swatted her again. She giggled and escaped his hold. Before he could comment on her ungracious acceptance, she started pulling off her dress and speeding toward the bedroom. "Let's seal the deal in bed, okay?"

He began jerking off his clothes, leaving a trail of expensive clothing behind him. "Have I mentioned how much I like your sweet ass?"

She was lying stretched out in the middle of her rumpled bed, smiling. When her gaze landed on his long, aching hard cock, she licked her lips. *Yum! Definitely yum!*

"Where have you been all my life, Holly Peterson?"

She lifted her arms to motion him to her and he slid onto the bed and into her arms. "Searching for you." She kissed his head as he scooted down the bed so he could pay homage to her aching breasts. "But now I've found you."

Bah Humbug! Cowboy

By Starla Kaye

Chapter One

"You sonofa—" Lacey McAdams bit out, walking into the kitchen and finding her husband locking lips with another woman. Seriously locking lips, with his eyes closed. She was too furious, too hurt, to even finish the slight to his parentage. She padded on stockinged feet to the nearest counter, snagged the first thing handy—her favorite coffee mug—and tossed it at him. Her aim had always been good. The ceramic mug hit him on the arm before he could react, and then dropped to the tiled floor and shattered. Just like her heart had shattered.

"What the hell!" he hissed, shifting Sarah—Lacey's now former friend—protectively to the side. Then, as if suddenly realizing what he'd been caught doing, he grimaced in horror and gasped, "Lacey!"

The man didn't know what *horror* was! Lacey reached for another coffee mug, determined to throw every damn thing she could possibly lift at him.

He jerked instantly out of his shock and his dark chocolate eyes narrowed. The carved features of his face grew harsher. "Don't even think about it!" His normally low voice had grown even deeper in warning.

She refused to listen to him. "Like *you* didn't think?" With perfect aim once more, she threw the cup at him. To her annoyance, he caught it easily. She curled her hands into fists and shot her gaze to Sarah, who had slunk back toward the far end of the room. "Well, maybe you *were* thinking. With your dick. You sonofa..." She still couldn't finish the thought, but he understood exactly what she meant.

"It wasn't... I didn't..." he floundered, guilt crawling all over his face.

"You were. You did." She spun and stormed back to the entry, jammed her feet into the boots still dripping on the linoleum, and sped out of the house into the gently falling snow of early December. She felt cold clear to the bone, and not because of the weather. Cold and outraged. She slammed the screen door of the mudroom shut, opened it and slammed it again before stomping through the snow to her Jeep Wrangler parked by the side fence.

She'd been gone to a private training session in Wyoming longer than she'd expected. Driving through off and on snowstorms for a day and half to get back here to Cimarron, Kansas had left her exhausted. All that had kept her going was the thought of coming home to the DR Ranch and spending some serious time having her wicked way with the handsome cowboy who owned her heart. Tears streamed down her face and froze on her cheeks. All those hours of stress for nothing!

The bitterly cold wind whipped around her and she pulled her sheepskin coat closer, needing its warmth. All the warmth and happiness she'd felt pulling onto the road leading to her home had vanished at the horrible discovery she'd made. She'd noticed Sarah's SUV in the driveway and had wondered briefly what her friend was doing here. Now she knew. She'd snuck out to the ranch while Lacey was gone to make a play for Lacey's husband. She'd always had her eyes on him, had often told Lacey what a fool she was for leaving a man like him alone so much. Maybe the *lonely* man had invited Sarah out here. They'd always gotten along pretty well. Clearly—now that she thought about it—too well. What did it matter? They'd both hurt her, deeply.

Lost in her troubled thoughts she hadn't heard Devlin coming after her. She'd just reached for the door handle of her snow-dusted Jeep when he grabbed her arm and said, "Lacey." The agony echoed in that one word tore at her, but she was already bleeding inside.

With all the fury within her, she shot her elbow back and hit him hard in the gut. He released her with a grunt of pain. "Don't even speak to me. Just don't!" she hissed and scrambled into the Jeep.

He grabbed the door so she couldn't pull it shut. The regret that had been in his expression had disappeared. Now he looked mad, as if he had that right. "Come back

inside. You're being childish."

"*Childish!* How dare you say that to me!" With fingers that shook, she jammed the key in the ignition. "Give me my damn door."

His gaze narrowed again and he shivered, standing there coatless, hatless, gloveless. "It's a snowstorm. Could become a blizzard at any time. You're not going anywhere."

She pinned him with a look hot enough to melt the polar icecap. "I've been driving through snow since before dawn yesterday. Trying to get home to my *loving* husband." She laughed without amusement. "But my 'loving husband' wasn't expecting me...didn't need me. He'd already found someone else to heat the sheets up with."

"Lacey!" Warning peeled loudly in his voice again.

She switched on the engine and the sounds of the Jeep bursting to life made him scowl even more. "Move away from my damn door!"

"Where the hell are you going?" he gritted out, refusing to move. Snow now covered him from the top of his raven black hair to the tips of his scuffed boots. He didn't appear to notice it all, or even be aware of the slight trembling of his body.

"Anywhere *you* aren't." In truth she didn't know. She felt lost. Alone. Miserable. And as furious as she was with him, she wanted to chastise him for being out in the freezing cold without protection. *Idiot, idiot, idiot!* She shouldn't care at all. He'd been holding another woman, kissing another woman.

"Lacey Jane, we need to talk." The regret had returned to his eyes, his shoulders slumped. He'd started really shivering.

A movement on the back porch caught her eye and her glance darted to the sprawling ranch house they'd lovingly designed and had built their first year of marriage. Sarah stood on the porch, looking pale and shaken, coatless and shivering like Devlin. "Your lover looks cold. Probably missing your damn arms around her, the warmth of your damn kisses." Another tear slid down her cheek and she dashed it away, again trying to pull her door shut.

He didn't even look Sarah's direction. "She's *not* my lover! We're friends. *Just* friends. She's your friend, too." Devlin snarled. "I honestly don't know what happened

back there."

"Well, let me remind you then." She tugged at the door, but he was just so darn strong. "Your arms were around my best friend. Make that my *former* best friend." She swallowed hard at the betrayal. "Your lips were pressed against hers. And it sure looked like your tongue was in her mouth." She glanced down his snow-covered form. "Hell, your dick was probably hard as a rod and pressed against her, too."

Guilt washed over his wet face and he couldn't meet her eyes. "I never meant to—"

"I've got to go," she said desperately, giving up on the door and stepping on the gas pedal, her left foot still barely on the brake. The Jeep lurched forward enough to make him yelp in pain as she drug him a few feet before he let go of the door. He fell to hands and knees on the snow covered gravel and cursed a blue streak.

She slammed on the brakes, skidded sideways, and cranked down the window to look at him. "You okay?" In spite of how he'd broken her heart, she didn't want him hurt.

He climbed awkwardly to his feet and dusted the snow off his hands. "What do you care?"

Relieved that he was okay, she snapped, "You're right, I don't care." Then she smiled wickedly. "Stand still and I'll back over you."

As if daring her to do as she'd taunted him, Devlin didn't move.. "Going to your parents?"

They'd be upset with her for not dealing with her problems head-on, but she was just too tired from all the traveling to do it right now. Upset with her or not, they'd take her in. She said wearily, "Yes."

He gave a curt nod, although he looked less than pleased. "We'll talk when you're not quite so crazy."

She turned away, but couldn't put the look of utter devastation she'd seen on his face in the kitchen out of her mind. He stood there while she righted the Jeep, stood there as the snow continued covering him. Stood there until Sarah walked to his side and gently reached for him. To his benefit, he flinched away from her, instead starting

to walk after Lacey's Jeep. He gave up after a dozen feet, and, as she pulled out of the ranch yard, he stalked off through the snow toward the barn. Lacey was so intent on watching him that she barely missed crashing into a telephone pole next to the ranch road. She straightened the wheel, sucked in a calming breath, and headed away from the place she'd longed to be since mid November.

Devlin walked blindly through the rapidly falling snow to the barn, and then shoved open the big door only enough for him to step inside. He felt numb and it had nothing to do with the cold or the fact that he'd left his coat in the house. He stood in the doorway and watched the Jeep's taillights disappear into the mounting snowstorm. Darkness seemed to surround him, wove through him. The light that was his life had just driven away from him.

No, he'd driven her away.

His vision blurred. He ached soul deep. It barely even registered with him when Sarah dashed through the snow to her SUV and drove away as well. He kicked at the door so hard his foot hurt even through the heavy boot he wore. But it didn't matter; nothing mattered. God, he'd been so stupid! He still didn't know exactly how Sarah had come to be in his arms, or how he'd ended up kissing her. She'd stopped by to see if Lacey had gotten back yet, although that had surprised him due to the storm. They'd shared some coffee and then worried together about his wife being gone so long. He'd told Sarah his real concern was that Lacey might be traveling back during these early winter storms. The more they'd talked, the lonelier he'd felt, the more distraught he'd gotten. Somehow she'd come to him, to comfort him, and then... *Damn, damn, damn!*

He hated these business trips of Lacey's, always had. In truth, he'd suspected this last year that she'd grown tired of all the traveling, too. Still, she'd developed a good reputation as a barrel-racing trainer, both for horses and riders, and the money was too good to pass up. Even a ranch that normally ran in the black, like the DR, could still always use extra cash. But he'd planned to discuss some possible changes to that

business, give her something extra special at Christmas that he'd hoped would keep her around most of the year. He needed her around, probably more than he'd ever told her. Well, after her reaction in the house, he was certain he'd never told Lacey often enough how much he loved her. They'd gotten to the point where they took each other for granted. Huge mistake.

He felt sick inside. He'd been waiting and waiting for her return. She'd looked tired, too thin—she never ate right when she was away from home. Damn beautiful in spite of all that, but then he was biased. There was no other woman for him, never could be. He loved her from the mass of long, curly, always out of control blonde hair clear down to her sexy, slender feet that always sported light pink nail polish. There just weren't enough words to describe what an idiot he'd been! Even worse, he knew if the situation had been reversed, he'd have been pretty damn pissed off, too. No, he'd have probably tried to kill another man for daring to touch his wife.

The snow was falling heavier now and he could barely make out the house across the ranch yard. He'd made such a mess of things. Forced her to leave him. This was *not* the end of them yet. Could *not* be the end of them! She just better be damn careful and get to her parents' ranch okay. He'd call and check on her in an hour or so. If she made it there without any trouble, he'd give her a day to calm down and rest up before he went to her. If she hadn't gotten there by the time he called, he'd head out on foot if he had to in order to find her.

Lacey parked in her parents' driveway and gave a deep sigh of relief. The snow storm had gotten much worse on her drive over here from the DR. She'd been lucky to make it, especially when her eyes had misted with tears the entire way. Devlin was probably going out of his mind with worry. But right now he deserved to deal with some worry and frustration. Resigned to their separation—maybe temporary, maybe more—she dashed away any lingering tears on her cheeks and jerked her purse and the big duffle bag on the passenger seat out with her. Anything else she'd fetch later. All she

wanted now was to get into the house, hide out in her old room, and sulk. Devlin didn't like it when she sulked—pouted he called it—but right now she didn't care what he liked. Big, stupid cowboy. Making out with the friend she'd known her entire life. Right there in Lacey's own kitchen. Had they done this before? Done maybe more than just kissing? She felt sick. Horribly betrayed, by them both. And mad as hell.

She'd just stomped the snow off her boots and was about to knock on door of the two-story house that had been in the McAdams family for over a hundred years when her mother opened the front door. The still youthful looking woman, although with a few gray hairs threading through blonde hair like Lacey's, looked beyond Lacey to the Jeep. "Where's Devlin?"

Her parents loved her husband like one of their own children, and the feeling was mutual. Devlin had no one left of his family. They would be disappointed that she'd come without him. "I'm here alone."

Her mother looked at the bag Lacey carried and frowned suspiciously. "When did you get back? Devlin didn't think you would make it until sometime next week. Actually he hoped you'd wait long enough for these storms to move on."

"I got back a little while ago." She gave a dramatic shiver. "Can I come in out of the storm?"

"Well, of course you can. But I don't understand what you're doing here. Why aren't you at the DR? Does Devlin know you're back yet?"

The sickening incident in her kitchen replayed over again in Lacey's mind. She really didn't want to discuss any of it, or Devlin. Her feelings were all too raw. "Can I stay here for a few days or so?" She didn't want to think about a longer stay than that.

Her father walked into the enormous great room as Lacey dropped her duffel bag on the floor of the tiled entry area. "Stay here?" he asked, clearly having overheard her question. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"Do we have to get into this right now? Can't you see I'm worn out? Stressed?"

His eyes narrowed. "Something going on between you and Devlin?"

Her mother looked shocked, and then resigned to trouble in her youngest daughter's life. Lacey had always been more of a trial to her parents than any of the

other three children. "Johnathan, I don't think it's any of our business." She reached to help Lacey out of her heavy coat. "Of course you can stay here, dear."

Disapproval etched deep lines into her father's forehead. He was still a handsome and well-built for a man in his early sixties. "I'm going to call Devlin. Make him get his butt over here."

"No!" Lacey snapped. "I do *not* want to see him right now. Just leave it alone, Dad. Leave it alone."

She watched her parents share looks of concern, watched her father battle against his need to take charge. Her mother touched his arm and he sucked in a breath, but he continued to look less than happy. Staying here would be difficult. But at the moment she didn't have anywhere else to go. "I don't want to discuss my marriage or Devlin. Not now. I'm exhausted, and it's been a hell of a day."

"You're dripping all over the floor," he grouched, struggling not to say more. With that he turned and headed back to his den, where he always disappeared to when he felt frustrated. He stopped before turning down the hallway. "Glad you made it back okay. Still, you were gone too damn long, if you ask me. Devlin needs to put a stop to this nonsense. You're gone too much. A marriage can't work that way."

That was as close to a welcome-back hug as she would get from her father. He loved her, loved all of his kids, but he wasn't a touchy-feely kind of guy. Unless he was doing some serious touching on someone's upturned bottom. Her dad could deliver one devil of a spanking.

Lacey forced that uncomfortable thought aside and faced her mother. "Thanks, Mom." At her mother's troubled expression, Lacey leaned over to tug off her snow boots.

"I'll give you the rest of the day and tonight, but we'll be talking about this tomorrow," her mother said firmly. "This isn't right."

A phone rang in the other room and Lacey knew it would be Devlin checking on her. A few seconds later, her father came back into the room with the portable phone. "Your husband wants to talk to you." He thrust the phone at her.

She shook her head and refused to take it. "Just tell him I got here okay. I'll talk

to him in a day or so.”

“Lacey McAdams, you need to talk to your husband. He’s worried about you.” Her father clearly didn’t like her display of stubbornness. He never had.

Like her attitude or not, she couldn’t talk to Devlin right now. “No.” She grabbed her duffle bag and fled up the staircase at the side of the room. With any luck her parents would leave her alone the rest of the day.

Luck was finally with her and Lacey had her privacy until she woke to the sun slipping in through the mini blinds she’d failed to close the night before. Her head pounded with a headache after having tossed and turned for hours. As she fully opened her eyes and took in the overly girly, pink painted room, she felt fury roiling through her. She’d left here at eighteen to make her living on the rodeo circuit, honing her skills as a barrel racer. Her father had been furious that she would refuse to even consider going to college. It had taken her three years before she’d started really making money, and before they’d finally spoken again. She felt like she had disappointed him all over again by coming here. That made her even angrier. She wasn’t a child any longer; she was a married woman of twenty-six.

In her disgust, she sat up and threw her pillow across the room. It felt good. So she tossed the other pillow as well. The pillow hit the bedroom door with a small thud at the same time her mother knocked and called out, “What on earth is going on in there, Lacey Jane?”

Caught in a tantrum fit, Lacey gritted out, “Nothing, Mom. I’ll be down to get some breakfast in a little while, okay?”

Evidently it wasn’t okay, because her mother opened the door. She frowned at the pillows nearby. “That’s no way for a grown woman to behave. But then a grown woman wouldn’t be hiding away at her parents’ house instead of dealing with her marital problems.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Devlin stated, moving into the doorway behind her

mother. When her mother looked at him in surprise, he said calmly, "I'd like to have some time alone with my wife, if you don't mind."

In spite of her anger, Lacey couldn't keep from looking at him. She'd never been able to get enough of looking at her husband. He was so handsome, so sinfully sexy that she literally ached all over whenever they were anywhere near one another. Now wasn't any different. That reaction made her even madder. "I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to even see you," Lacey said, irritated that he'd come here without calling her first. Not that she would have taken his call.

Her mother stepped around Devlin and pulled the door shut. Devlin stood tall and stiff, looking like a dark devil in a Stetson. The cowboy was here on a mission. "I'm still mad at you. I don't know if I can forgive you. Or Sarah."

He flinched, pain flashed in his eyes for a second. "I'm having trouble forgiving myself, but we'll both eventually deal with what happened. I only came here now to make sure you're okay." He leaned down to pick up the pillows, shaking his head as he realized what she'd done. "A tantrum? What happens when you throw a fit of temper?"

Immediately her buttocks clenched in reaction to words she'd heard before. She looked down at the quilt, but she refused to answer him.

More stubbornness, of course, was not a good response on her part. Devlin moved to the bedside in an instant. While she glanced warily up, he tossed the pillows next to her. A vein pulsed in the side of his neck. Never a good sign. "What happens when you misbehave, Lacey Jane McAdams?"

She hated when he used her full name. Her buttocks clenched again and she felt familiar flutters in her stomach and between her legs as well. "You don't have any right to... We're not at home..." she protested, heart racing. It was clear those things meant nothing at all to her angry husband.

"You *are* my wife, and I've every right, a duty to take care of you." He reached down to tug the quilt back in one quick jerk. As he took in the short, see-through baby doll pajamas she wore, his eyes widened and heated. She watched him draw in a steadying breath and force aside his instinctive primal urge to climb into bed with her. After a second, he managed to say grimly, "A duty to spank your butt when necessary."

Lacey tried to scramble to the other side of the bed. "You can't spank me now. We're having enough problems without that."

Devlin latched onto her leg and tugged her back across the bed. He pulled her around until her legs dangled over the side and her bottom rested right along the edge. As she screeched, "No!" he jerked the tiny panties down to mid-thigh, not that they would have been any kind of protection. His calloused hand flattened against her bare bottom with a smack that echoed around the room.

She squirmed and snapped in distress, "They'll hear, Devlin! My parents will hear this."

The protest didn't sway his intention a bit. He planted a hand in the middle of her back to hold her in place and began swatting her cheeks in earnest. "They'll be down in the kitchen at the other side of the house. They're not going to hear me spanking you, unless you scream bloody murder."

He was right; they probably wouldn't hear him punishing her. It didn't mean she would accept this easily. "I'm already furious with you." She sucked in a breath at the sharp burst of swats he aimed at her lower cheeks. "This isn't going to help."

His hand rained a fire so hot, so quickly that she did cry out. "Stop! Oh stop!"

"This spanking has nothing to do with our problems of the moment." He made her dance on her toes with his sizzling, encouraging hand. "This spanking is for your acting irresponsibly and driving off in a near blizzard. For worrying the hell out of me."

"Ooooooohhh. Ooooooo. Pleeessse." She wriggled for all she was worth, sobbing. Her big cowboy never did anything half way. When he made love to her, it was amazing. When he spanked her, she felt the results for a long time.

"You're also getting soundly spanked for pitching a tantrum." He finished up with a long, steady stream of hard smacks as he carefully avoided her kicking legs. When he stopped, he held his hand on her blazing bottom. "Are we clear on the whole behavior issue?"

"Yes," Lacey said on a snuffle. "No more tantrums. I promise."

"Okay." He pulled her panties up even though she hissed at the touch of fabric on her stinging bottom. Then he helped her scoot up onto the bed where she stretched

out and hugged her pillow for comfort. "You lie there and remember exactly why you got your sweet little butt spanked. I'll tell your parents to leave you alone for a couple of hours, tell them you're resting again."

He strode toward the door and she stopped him by saying, "That's all you came here to do? Spank me?"

His crooked smile did funny things to her as it always did. She grew warm and wet between her legs, and that really, really annoyed her.

"No, I came to make sure you were okay. The spanking was an added bonus." He had the nerve to wink at her.

She started to grab for the pillow to throw at him, but a hard look settled back on his face and she froze. He would blister her good if she did such a stupid thing, probably with his belt. "Just go away," she grumbled unhappily.

Instead he walked back to her and she tensed. He gently kissed the top of her head, smoothing her hair for a second. "I'm sorry, Lacey. I swear it just happened. I'm really sorry." His tone was low, filled with regret.

When she didn't respond in any way, he again moved to the door, again stopped and glanced back at her. "I'll pick you up Saturday about six for the town's Christmas party."

"Not going." She couldn't believe that he would even think she might consider it after what he'd done at their house, after what he'd just done to her.

"Six o'clock sharp." He, of course, wouldn't accept her stubborn attitude. "Don't keep me waiting." His gaze shifted to her red bottom. "Unless you want..." He didn't have to finish the thought because they both knew exactly what he implied.

It was nearly one o'clock by the time she finally recovered, finished her pity party, and managed to get dressed. As she pulled on the too tight jeans, she took another moment to curse her rotten husband for giving her a spanking she'd remember at least the rest of the day. She went downstairs carefully, again grumbling under her

breath about Devlin and his big, hard hand.

Hunger drew her to the kitchen, she hoped her father wouldn't be hanging around there. She felt tremendous relief to find only her mother. "Dad around?" Lacey asked cautiously. With his attitude yesterday, she really didn't want to speak with him just yet. He'd want to push her into going home to Devlin; she wasn't in the mood for being pushed that direction.

"Went to town with one of the ranch hands for some supplies. If you want to sit down, I'll fix you a sandwich. You must be hungry." Her mother studied her closely. "Maybe you'd rather not sit."

Lacey felt the heat of embarrassment creep up her neck and face. "You heard?"

Her mother shook her head and smiled in understanding. "No. But you're walking as if those jeans aren't a bit comfortable at the moment."

Lacey couldn't look her mother in the eye, too many memories from growing up here raced through her mind. She crossed the room to pull a glass from the cupboard. "You recognize the movements from after you or Dad used to wallop my backside," Lacey said awkwardly.

For a moment her mother remained quiet and Lacey was glad the subject had faded away. But evidently it hadn't. "Actually, I recognize the discomfort from personal experiences."

Lacey turned to gape at her, seeing the faint blush of embarrassment on her mother's cheeks. "You know my husband spanked me because... because..." She must have misunderstood.

"Because *my* husband spans me on occasion." Her mother stood stiffly as if uncertain what her daughter would think of her due to the admission.

Lacey gave her mother a small smile, pleased to see the relief that made her mother return to making a sandwich. For a few minutes, neither of them spoke. Finally Lacey said conversationally, "I always thought spankings stopped when you grew up. That they were just for kids."

Spreading peanut butter on a slice of bread, her mother said thoughtfully, "For some people. For those of us women married to strong men, men who love as deeply

as your father and your husband do, men who believe in correcting their wife's behavior... Well, for us, we still get turned over a knee every now and then."

Lacey took a sip of milk, still struggling to take this all in. *Her mother got spanked. Turned over her father's knee and spanked.* "You don't mind getting spanked?"

"Of course I mind!" Her mother snorted. "It's embarrassing and I feel so ashamed of myself for making him feel like he needs to spank me. But I love your father and I accept his correction. Not always gracefully."

Lacey appreciated her honesty. Somehow they had shifted to yet another level in their relationship. She decided to admit what had happened earlier. "Devlin spanked the hell out of my backside this morning." She glanced at her mother and gently touched her bottom. "He was pretty upset with me driving in the storm, and then he realized I'd thrown a small tantrum. He doesn't like tantrums. Man, that cowboy can sure light a fire."

"Hurts like the devil, doesn't it?" her mother commiserated and handed her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "But you love him anyway, don't you?"

"I think so." Lacey felt her eyes tearing. "I caught him kissing Sarah in our kitchen. She was really into it, clinging to him like a damn vine. He was, too, until... It broke my heart. I don't know if I can forgive him." She sniffled in misery.

Chapter Two

Snowing again. *Hell*. Devlin looked out the kitchen window, drinking his first cup of coffee for the day. The weather this week had been flat out miserable. Just like him. He hadn't seen Lacey in three days, not since he'd gone over to her folks' place to check on her. Not since he'd spanked her sweet butt for worrying the devil out of him.

He sucked in another sip and nearly burnt his tongue and throat. In disgust, he set the mug on the counter and coffee sloshed over the side, burning his hand. *Well, hell*. The day sure was starting off bad. But it was Saturday, finally. Tonight was Cimarron's annual Christmas party at the high school gym. Tonight he would have his precious wife at his side again. He was more than ready for that, more than ready for them to get what had happened behind them. He never slept well when Lacey was traveling, but he'd barely gotten more than a few hours sleep each night since the horrible incident—as he'd come to think of it. So he'd become something of a bear and the few hands that stayed on at the ranch during the winters were steering well clear of him. He didn't blame them at all.

Annoyed with the coffee mess and his stinging hand, he grabbed a towel and wiped up the coffee, tossing the towel in the double sink. He held his hand under the faucet and ran cold water over it. At the same time he wondered if Lacey was still lazing about in bed. Wondered if she were as miserable without him as he was without her. He hated this situation. Really, really hated it! What he should have done the other day was grab her up and tote her back—probably kicking and cursing him—to the DR. He should have insisted they face this problem down right off. But his damn pride had been bruised by her running-home-to-momma thing. So he'd decided to let her lick her

wounds for a spell before they went at it. Besides, he was having trouble forgiving himself for his part in the kissing Sarah incident. Was he really that weak of a man? Couldn't handle his loneliness better than that?

Shutting off the faucet, he turned to glower at the wall phone near the back door. Why the hell hadn't she even called him? 'Course he hadn't called her either. The pride thing again. A man's damn ego sure could get in the way at times. Her father had called, though. Oh yeah, Johnathan McAdams had called every day, wanting to know how long this "nonsense," as he called their temporary separation, was going to go on. He was furious with his daughter for running away from her husband. And he was furious with Devlin, too, for not hauling his wife back home. Devlin understood Johnathan's feelings, and he didn't like putting the two people who'd become as much his parents as Lacey's in the middle of this mess. Which made him want to take her over his knee and warm that backside again for being so damn stubborn, for not giving him a chance to eat a whole flock of crow for being such an idiot.

Even though he should be getting his ass out to the barn and helping with early morning chores, Devlin padded barefoot to the phone. After a few rings he found the call being answered by Lacey, and the shock left him speechless for a second. Then he recovered and said, "Do you have something appropriate to wear tonight? Or should I bring you over a dress or whatever?"

Evidently she was as surprised to hear his voice, as he'd been to hear hers. It took her another second to say, "I don't want to go." *With you*. She hadn't said the words, but he "heard" them anyway.

"You trying to get out of going to the party tonight again, Daughter?" Johnathan growled in the background. "I'm getting real tired of these games of yours."

"Johnathan, that's a private conversation," Devlin heard Shirley protesting. "Let's go in the other room and give them some privacy. Come on. Stop being so nosy." And then Devlin heard Johnathan grumbling, and their footsteps heading away.

Devlin felt angry all over again. "Lacey Jane, your folks shouldn't be involved in this situation of ours. You need to get yourself back here so we can face this problem

down.” He knew as soon as he’d said it that she would get her back up. Damn stubborn woman.

She proved him right. “When I’m good and ready, Devlin Rafferty. Which may be *never*,” she countered, and he could almost see her bristling.

He blew out a frustrated breath and curled his coffee-burned hand into a fist. “Back to the clothing matter.”

“I’m not going.” She didn’t back down an inch.

This butting heads was getting them nowhere, but he bit out anyway, “You *are*! I’ll be there at six o’clock sharp. You’ll be dressed and ready to go. Or I’ll be tanning your bottom, and then getting you dressed and hauling you to the damn party.” With that he hung up. She could just figure out her own wardrobe problem.

Lacey fled her family’s kitchen for the privacy of her old bedroom. She steamed all the way up the stairs. How dare her father not only eavesdrop but also try to interfere in her marital problems! How dare Devlin act so bossy! Insisting she go to what should be a very merry event, when she didn’t feel the least bit merry. And threatening to tan her bottom! Oooooooooo. That really made her mad.

She stepped into the sickeningly pink room: pink walls, pink curtains, pink quilt, even a pink rug over the wooden floors. What had possessed her as a teenager to want so damn much pink? If she had to stay here much longer—midst all this Pepto Bismol décor, she would go nuts. Throwing herself across the stupid pink bed, she reminded herself that she didn’t need to stay here. She could swallow her pride, hop in her Jeep, and go back to the DR. Back to Devlin.

Devlin. She hugged her pillow and closed her eyes. The strong arms that had so many, many times held her in comfort, in love, had been around Sarah. His lips—the top one with that slight scar from a cut received when he’d been a bareback rider—had been planted on Sarah’s. She’d seen the kiss deepen, tongues definitely involved. The painful memory still hurt. In her heart, she wanted to believe Devlin and his vow that

he'd not really known how it had happened. Her husband was an extremely passionate man driven by strong physical needs. When they made love, he often got lost in the moment, in what he was feeling. She was pretty certain that he'd just missed her so much that he wasn't dealing with his emotions well. He'd either tried to comfort Sarah, or accepted comfort from her with no thought of going too far. Big, dumb cowboy! Sarah probably took advantage of the moment. But he should have been stronger than that.

"Lacey? Lacey, are you all right?" her mother asked worriedly from the other side of the door.

Lacey rolled over onto her back and sighed, staring up at the ceiling, glad that at least it wasn't pink. She needed to get over her mad. She needed to go toe-to-toe with Devlin, but she just wasn't ready to do it. She was pretty certain he'd made a stupid spur of the moment bad decision. It was the "pretty certain" part that had her hesitating, that had her wondering about their marriage.

"Lacey," her mother said, cautiously opening the door, "your father would like to speak with you in his office." She looked regretful, like she'd argued with her husband and lost the argument.

"Fine," Lacey said, forcing a calmness that she didn't really feel. "He's been wanting to talk with me for days now. I suppose it's time we had this discussion."

"I'm afraid so." Her mother walked away, clearly not interested in watching her daughter drag herself downstairs to see her father.

Resigned, Lacey walked slowly down to the den, where too many parental "discussions" had taken place over the years. Her heart pounded with the dread of confronting her father, who'd been holding back his frustration with her ever since she'd arrived in the snowstorm. Not being able to take immediate charge had been hard for him, even if it really wasn't his business. He liked to deal with everything straight on, and he hated dealing with emotional issues. She had a strong feeling that this would not be a pleasant experience, not a warm and fuzzy father-daughter talk. Of course, she could refuse to listen to him, to allow anything else to happen...and she

might decide that way. But, above all else, he was her father and she'd learned long ago to love and respect him. Especially in his house.

Ten minutes later as she lay draped over her father's lap having her jean-covered bottom sharply smacked, Lacey was rethinking her decision to love, respect, and allow him to deal out his parental correction. He'd lectured her good and soundly about marriages, about the whole "until death" part, about learning to deal with problems. She'd listened to it all, knowing he was right. Then he'd told her she needed a spanking for running away from her problems and being too damn stubborn to go home and deal with them.

She'd felt awkward being taken over his lap for the first time in a good eight years. Still, he was her father and she'd decided to accept his punishment. Partly because he seemed to so badly need to do the only thing he felt he could in his daughter's situation, and partly because she oddly needed him to do this so they could be right again.

"Uuuuuuuuhhh," she moaned as he landed another half dozen swats. "Please, Dad, I understand now."

He landed one final smack that had her arching away from it. "You stay here longer than another week, and I'll be heating your butt again." He helped her to her feet. "Go to your room. Figure out how you're going to make things right with your man."

He'd always sent her to her room after a spanking; evidently being an adult now didn't make things different. She reached back to rub her sore bottom as he frowned in disapproval. Truthfully, she wanted to go to her room, to sulk and get over the indignity of it. But first she leaned down and kissed his weathered cheek, surprising him. "Thanks, Dad. Thanks for caring enough to do this." She stepped away, rubbed her bottom again. "Not that I liked getting spanked." Then she walked gingerly out of the room and back up to her bedroom.

Her mother was there waiting for her, and turned from the window when Lacey entered the room. "I tried to talk him out of it. He's so stubborn sometimes. Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine, Mom." They shared a look, a look of understanding between two wives who were occasionally spanked. "Guess I need to figure out something to wear tonight." Truth was, she really did want to go to the party...with Devlin, her handsome devil. Even if she wasn't speaking to him.

"I've got a new skirt that I'd planned to give you for Christmas," her mother said, looking relieved to change the subject. "It'll be perfect." She smiled slyly. "Devlin will love it."

Six o'clock sharp Devlin was on the McAdams's doorstep in his best-pressed jeans, the new shirt he'd bought special for the night, and his favorite dress Stetson. Nerves wrangled with one another in his gut. He hadn't been this anxious since his first date back in high school. Actually, he was more nervous now. Tonight mattered a hell of a lot more than that date all those years ago.

Sucking up his courage, he reached out to knock on the oversized front door, but it swung open first. His hand frozen in mid-air, Devlin gaped at his wife. She'd never looked prettier. Well, except when she'd worn that fancy white gown and walked down the aisle to become his bride five years back. She was nervous, too, he could see it in her sky blue eyes.

"Just let me get my coat," she said quickly, turning to reach for the long, suede shearling coat he'd given her for Christmas two years ago. With the reach up, his eyes widened in appreciation at the way the mid-thigh length denim skirt she wore rose up to just below her mighty fine bottom.

He struggled for breath, fought the strong urge to take her down to the floor, right there in the entry of her parents' home. The blood had shifted from his brain right on down to his cock. And his cock ached badly for him to spread those long, shapely legs of hers and ram deep inside her warmth. Damn. How was he going to survive the night?

"Are you all right?" she asked, holding out her coat for him to help her into it. "You look a little heated. You're not running a fever are you?" She reached to touch his forehead and he stepped back so fast that he nearly fell over the lip of the door.

Devlin gripped the coat tightly, when he really wanted to latch onto her more. This wasn't the time yet. He wanted to be a proper gentleman for her. Hell, he'd spent more than an hour picking out his clothes, showering, and putting on the cologne she'd bought him for his birthday. "I'm fine. Probably just the cold on my face is all." Then he held out the coat so she could slip her slender arms into the sleeves.

"Mom and Dad already left. I could have ridden to town with them," she said hesitantly, picking up her keys from the hall tree stand and nudging him out to the porch so she could close and lock the door.

He disliked the awkwardness between them. It made him even more determined to get things settled as soon as possible, for sure by Christmas. "It's my job to take you to the party."

"Your *job*!" She leveled him with a sizzling look. "So is it supposed to be *my job* to go with you to the party?"

Well, damn. "I didn't mean... It's not a..." He blew out a breath and put his hands on her shoulders so that she raised her head to look him straight in the eye. "I wanted to take you to the party."

Lacey had stiffened at his touch, but finally gave a curt nod. Not much of an acceptance. He had a feeling the night would seem endlessly long. She'd gone from nervous to defensive in the blink of an eye. He would have to watch every word he said, and that wouldn't be easy. He was getting damn tired of her testiness. It made him wonder if there were more to her anger than just him getting caught kissing Sarah.

She wiggled out of his hold and walked primly down the porch steps, down the sidewalk, and stood waiting impatiently for him to open the passenger door to his pickup. As he did so, Devlin suddenly decided this whole getting back together thing wasn't all up to him. He hadn't blamed her at first for being furious and upset with him. He'd even accepted her walking out on him, though that had riled him some. But this

business of bouncing from one mood to another, of pouting instead of fighting for their marriage, was getting damn old.

They didn't say two words during the entire forty-five minute drive into town. Devlin had waited for her to take the next step, to make some kind of overture, which she hadn't. He was barely able to bite down his irritation with her and not do something he really longed to do—like bend her over the seat and warm her butt.

Instead he climbed out, trying to cool off as he went around to help her from the truck. Deciding to make nice, he held her in place a second. "You know I'm sorry as hell for what happened, Lacey." When she didn't do more than bob her head, his frustration came out defensively, "You're gone too much. Have you ever considered how much I miss you on all those trips of yours? I get damn lonely."

She looked taken aback for a second. "You agreed to my starting the business." She pushed him back so she could climb out by herself.

"Yeah, I did." It really wasn't the business he had a problem with; it was her being gone.

"But now you're against it. Now you think I should stay at the ranch, be the little homebody who cooks, washes, and waits on you hand and foot." She strode around him and headed for the door to the gym. The whole school was ablaze with light, Christmas music played by a local band drifted outside as people kept opening and closing the door as they arrived for the happy event.

Devlin was beside her in an instant, pulling her to a stop, and making her face him. Reining in the temper she had provoked was damn hard. Keeping from telling her his plan was even harder, but he refused to ruin his Christmas gift to her. Still, his voice echoed his irritation as he said, "Lacey Jane, I'm proud of what you've accomplished. Sure I get annoyed with all your traveling, but I'm not asking you to give it up."

When she seemed only slightly soothed by his comments, he shook his head, took her by the elbow, and escorted her into the building without another word. The minute he'd helped her out of her coat and gave both of their coats to the coat-check girls, he walked off. She could seek out her folks for a spell, or some of her friends. He

needed a breather from her. Needed a drink and a laugh with one of his own good buddies before he attempted to tangle with Lacey again.

Lacey stood shocked as Devlin hurried away from her, shocked and embarrassed. People were looking at her in pity. Abandoned at a party by her husband. Yet if she were honest with herself, she'd admit that she'd practically pushed him away. She'd been too sensitive about his "job" remark, but she'd been nervous. She'd missed him these last few days. No, she'd missed him for almost a month. Her business had become such a chore this last year, which left her uncertain about so much. All the driving to clients, all the hotel rooms, fast food, mindless TV watching in the evenings. She had grown to dislike all of that. Yet she wanted, needed, to help out with the finances for the DR, and she didn't know how else to do it. She'd taken her frustrations out on poor Devlin. He'd gotten testy with her, but she deserved it. Now she was miserable again. Alone in the midst of her friends, neighbors, and relatives.

"Glad to see you're finally back," their foreman's wife said with a welcoming smile as she approached.

Lacey glanced across the big, crowded gymnasium toward the tables where cookies and punch stretched from one end to the other end. Devlin had just gotten a cup of punch and was grinning and laughing with the young, single woman new to town. Jealousy curled deep within her. Devlin had such striking good looks and such easy charm that women of all ages were drawn to him. Until that moment in the kitchen with Sarah, though, she'd never felt an instant's jealousy. She'd been confident in his love for her. Now? Now she wondered just how strong their marriage really was. How many women had he flirted with when she'd been gone? God, she hated this sickening jealousy that had seemed to take over her good sense.

She forced aside those thoughts and gave a weak smile. "How're the kids, Mary Sue? Excited about Christmas?"

Mary Sue latched onto the change of subject with enthusiasm. Within five minutes Lacey knew absolutely every possible bit of news about her friend's three children. She felt a twinge of regret, emptiness. She and Devlin had put off having kids until the ranch got over the first rocky years, and they'd just started talking about the possibility of starting a family in the next year or so. But her business kept her so busy...

"Lacey," Sarah's mention of her name immediately made Lacey tense. They hadn't spoken a word since that awful afternoon. "You misunderstood. Devlin has been so lonely, was feeling even lonelier that day. We just—"

"Not now, Sarah," Lacey said bitterly, trying to ignore Mary Sue's questioning look. "I can't talk to you yet." She walked away, feeling such mixed emotions: anger, betrayal, hurt, fear. It was the fear of possibly losing her husband that brought tears to her eyes. She hurried across the room to the restroom, desperate to have a few minutes to settle her emotions.

Her mother found her there. "Maybe you shouldn't have come to the party after all. It's clear to everyone that you and Devlin are fighting. And after you snapped at Sarah, then stormed off...Well, folks are starting to speculate about things that are none of their business."

Lacey sank against one of the sinks. "Oh perfect. Now we're feed for the gossip mill."

"Honey, you either need to go out there and play nice with your husband, or you need to go home."

"What?" Lacey asked, shocked by the forcefulness in her mother's tone.

"This is a party; people are supposed to be happy here. It's not right that you're here putting a dampening influence on the party. Paste a smile on that pretty face of yours and go dance with Devlin. Or take my keys and our car and go home. We can hitch a ride with our neighbor." Her mother looked grimly determined about what she'd said.

"I'm not sure I want to dance with him," Lacey said quietly. "Or that he would want to dance with me." She hadn't intended to act so bitchy when he picked her up.

She'd actually talked herself into wanting to enjoy the night with him. Then her temper had gotten the better of her. "I said some things earlier. He's pissed at me."

Her mother rolled her eyes. "The two of you are making me crazy. Well, like I said, smile and dance or go home." With that said, she reached into her purse for the keys.

Lacey straightened, yanked out of her pity party. "If he won't dance with me, I'll come find you for the keys." She sucked in a steadying breath and tried to calm the quivering nerves in her stomach. Then she glanced quickly into the mirror to make sure there were no signs of tears. "Thanks, Mom."

Naturally with the way her life had been going at the moment, she found Devlin dancing with Sarah. They looked awfully comfortable together. Sarah looked up at Devlin as if he hung the moon and the stars and the whole damn universe. His cocky grin said he had.

Lacey's hands curled into fists and she marched over to them in the middle of the dance area, feeling as if flames were coming out of her ears. She tapped Sarah on the shoulder. "Mind if I cut in? I'd like to dance with *my* husband."

Sarah actually looked annoyed, but she stepped out of his embrace on the slow dance. "He asked me." She sashayed away, moving around the other dancing couples that were now staring curiously at Lacey and Devlin.

"You embarrassed your friend, Lacey Jane," Devlin said in a low voice, not moving to take her into his arms. "You embarrassed me, and yourself, too. I don't like your behavior tonight. Not one damn bit."

"Are you going to dance with me or not?" Lacey asked, hurt by his justified chastisement. She did feel embarrassed, but not for hurting Sarah. She couldn't forget how he'd been smiling and laughing so easily with her former friend.

Devlin stood rigidly for another second, and then pulled her into his arms. They settled uncomfortably into the gentle country waltz. His big hand on the middle of her back felt familiar and should have felt comforting, but she knew he was seething inside so it didn't. He didn't say a word on their first lap around the dance floor. Finally he led them off to a part of the room where only a handful of people stood visiting.

"It was a mistake to bring you here tonight. I'd thought maybe we could start to get beyond what happened, but it doesn't appear that you're even remotely interested in doing so." He wouldn't look her in the eye. "I'm tired, Lacey. Too tired to deal with your attitude tonight. I'm taking you home."

"You know, I'm *not* the only one with attitude tonight." Her heart pinched at how he seemed to be giving up. She followed him to the coatroom. This time she put her own coat on. She trailed after him to his pickup in silence, miserable that the night had ended so badly. She'd been right, she shouldn't have come here tonight. Maybe they'd been apart too much to ever be able to find their way back together. Maybe she was scared that he didn't really want her back, no matter what he said.

He climbed in and shoved the key in the ignition as she admitted. "You're not the only one unhappy with me today." She fiddled with a button on her coat. "Dad spanked me this morning. He's fed up with my not dealing with our problems."

"He spanked you! Hell. I'll have a talk with him," Devlin gritted out, fury rolling off him in thick waves. "I'm the only one should be burning your butt."

"I deserved it." She touched his arm, trying to calm him down. "He just cares about me."

Devlin slumped against the seat and looked at her. "You deserve to have your bottom warmed again for how you treated Sarah. She wasn't doing anything wrong. WE weren't doing anything wrong, just dancing." He started to lean over to kiss her and then sat back looking frustrated. "You're going to have to get over what you witnessed in our kitchen. It was just a kiss. A damn kiss that shouldn't have happened."

"I'm trying to."

"Not very hard. And you're not ready for us to discuss it, or any other problem we might be having. Right now I'm not either." He turned the engine on and backed out of the parking place.

Lacey wished she could say "yes I'm done with worrying about Sarah, with wondering about our marriage." The words just wouldn't come out.

"I'm not giving up on us yet. But I'm not taking you back to the DR either. Until you get your head straight you can just stay at your folks' place." There was such sadness in his voice, determination as well.

They drove the forty-five minute trip in silence once more. It hurt that he didn't want to take her home with him, even if she wasn't ready to do so. But his having ordered her to stay away wasn't a good sign. They were in trouble.

When he pulled into the driveway and she started to climb out, he stopped her. "I'll be picking you up at six thirty Monday night. There's a bunch of us going caroling. You're coming along."

"But—" She bit off her protest at the rigidity in his expression. "Six thirty, right." She felt a tiny flicker of hope that maybe they weren't in as much trouble as she'd thought.

"One more thing, if you don't start behaving better, I'll be paddling your rear. And it'll not be a light paddling, either. Understand me?"

Her buttocks tightened immediately, remembering other times when he'd paddled her with a hairbrush or a paddle they kept in the bedroom closet. Never fun experiences. Yet she felt warmth blossoming between her legs, hints of arousal. Not at the idea of the paddling, but at the depth of love for her in his impassioned threat.

"Yes, I understand." She thought about his hand touching her bare bottom, about his hand moving to her mound, about his massaging her clit. She trembled. "Good-night, Dev." With that she ran into the house.

Chapter Three

Lacey's parents insisted she go to the church she'd been raised in with them the next morning. The experience was a nightmare. It seemed that half those in attendance came up to her and asked if she were all right, asked if they could do anything to help her during this awful time of separation from Devlin. The other half admitted to her that they'd wondered how long the marriage would last, with her being gone so often. It was clearly the Hatfields and the McCoys kind of situation. The townspeople saw Devlin and Lacey as two feuding people in a relationship doomed due to differences. She'd been glad Devlin hadn't been there today, too.

After church she turned down lunch with her parents, instead deciding to go to the DR Ranch. Not to see Devlin, but to check on her horse. She might not have even gone over to check on Sasha if she hadn't overheard one of their ranch hands at church saying that Devlin had gone to Dodge City for the day. Coward that she was.

The minute she turned onto the gravel lane leading to the main area a wave of homesickness swept over her. Finally the snowstorms had moved on and the weather had warmed again. She had to dodge around some new muddy holes in the rutted road. As she did so, she noted how the handful of trees that spotted the grounds between the stable, the bunkhouse, and the main house were barren of leaves. Actually, the whole place seemed barren of life. All the action that normally took place during the spring and summer was missing. She vaguely wondered if she would be here with those next seasons to witness life at its fullest on the DR.

She parked in the driveway and decided to go into the house first. If she were going to stay with her parents' any longer, she needed more of her clothes. She also

wanted to take a couple of framed photos with her. When she stepped into the front entry hall, the familiar scents overwhelmed her: bayberry from a candle in the living room that Devlin must have lit earlier, bacon from his breakfast, and leather from his favorite work jacket hanging on a wall hook near the door. Coming to grips with the essence of her home, she walked sadly toward the master bedroom.

As she stopped in the doorway of the suite, her knees nearly buckled from the sights. An enormous, hand carved oak bed they'd bought their first year together took up a big section of the bedroom part. Devlin had obviously tossed and turned last night, as the sheets and quilt were a rumpled mess. And he hadn't bothered to hang up his shirt or jacket. Both lie thrown carelessly on the chair next to the large walk-in closet. None of this was out of the ordinary for her husband. Housekeeping at any level was not a priority for him. She had to smile as she remembered all the times she'd returned from a trip and had to practically unbury the room before she could walk into it. Out of habit she almost picked up the shirt and jacket. Almost. It wasn't her place to pick up after him at the moment. The pain of that idea stabbed at her.

Momentarily lost in the pain, she vaguely heard the front door open and close. Her heart raced as she listened to Devlin's familiar heavy footsteps heading her direction. She felt guilty for being here, felt irritated that *he* was here when he wasn't supposed to be. She moved back into the hallway and waited for him. Nerves tingled all through her.

"What are you doing here?" Devlin asked when he first stepped into the hallway and saw her as she stood warily outside their room. His tone seemed harsh, but his eyes warmed and appeared to devour her.

In spite of the problems between them, her body responded to his closeness. Her lower body pulsed. She wanted him, wanted to feel his body next to hers, in hers. With effort, she forced down her arousal to note how tired he looked. She remembered the rumpled bed, although that memory only made the warmth within her heat up more. "I thought you were supposed to be in Dodge City today, at a meeting."

His powerful shoulders looked stiff. "So you didn't come to see me." It was a statement, not a question.

"No, I came for some of my clothes, and a few other things." He looked so good, even if he hadn't bothered to shave this morning. The stubble on his jaw was dark and she knew it would feel like soft bristles. She longed to reach up and run her hand over it as she'd done so many times in the past. "It's okay, isn't it?"

"Take whatever you want." He turned to walk away.

"Wait!" she called out, torn between wanting to get her things and leave quickly, and wanting to spend a few more minutes with him. She searched her mind frantically for something to say. "Sasha. Has someone been taking care of Sasha?" Which, of course, she knew someone would be doing. So the question sounded really stupid.

Devlin faced her again, his gaze moving slowly over her, as if he couldn't get enough of looking at her. "I've been taking care of her. She's fine. Misses you, but fine."

Now what? He'd leave if she didn't come up with some other conversational topic. "I might have another job after the first of the year." The instant his forehead pinched she knew it had been a huge mistake to mention what was already a sore subject between them. Was she secretly trying to destroy their marriage? No, she was just an idiot.

"We can discuss that another time. I came back for some papers I left on my desk. And I saw your Jeep, thought maybe... I've got to hit the road for that meeting you mentioned." He didn't move, even though he'd just insinuated he was in a hurry. Then he finally turned away again.

"Devlin," she called out, walking toward him, her pulse racing. This was so hard.

"I'm in a hurry." Yet he stopped, but didn't face her.

Lacey had never felt so awkward, never felt so unsure of them. She blinked back tears that had suddenly filled her eyes. "Devlin, I'm sorry about last night."

He leaned his head back and sucked in a breath, an action he always did when frustrated. Wariness in his expression, he slowly faced her. "You should be. But I don't want to get into it now. Or anything else. Just take what you came for. Visit Sasha if you want. I'll see you tomorrow night."

Before she could stop herself, Lacey launched herself at him and he hugged her

tenderly for an instant. In that time, his cock bloomed to full life, strained at his jeans. She wriggled instinctively against him. Needing. Desperate. It had been so long. Nothing else mattered in that moment but getting him inside her. "Please, Dev," she pleaded, reaching to unbuckle his belt, to unsnap the button on his jeans.

He didn't speak but instead got lost in the urgent need to be with her as well. His lips sought hers, searing them with fiery desire. At the same time his hands shoved her shearling coat from her shoulders, efficiently undid her jeans and tugged them down. And then her bikini panties followed the jeans. He didn't take any more time than dealing with the absolute necessities of shoving clothing out of the way.

"I've got to have you. Now." He groaned and eased her down to the carpet in the hallway.

Lacey lay on her back, trembling with need, aching for him. It didn't matter that they were in the hallway, that the bedroom was only a half dozen feet away. She watched him battling with his own powerful arousal and forced all their problems from her mind. All that she cared about in this space of time was the handsome man tugging her jeans and panties lower. She waited breathlessly as he shoved his own jeans and undershorts down enough to free his long, hard cock. At the first sight of it, she quivered, wanted to feel it sliding into her body so badly.

He moved over her, holding his weight off her with his strong arms. Then his face pinched in frustration and he bit out, "Protection. Damn."

When he would have moved to get up, she pulled him to her. "I'm on the pill, remember?" Still he hesitated to go any further. She slid her legs as far apart as the shoved down clothing allowed and shifted until she could move against that hot, throbbing length she so wanted inside her. "I'm ready. You're ready. Come on, Dev. Please."

His control disappeared with the aching plea in her voice. He reached down to slide a finger inside her and grinned in male pleasure when he discovered she really was wet and ready for him. In one long thrust he filled her to the hilt and she moaned mindlessly, "Oooooohh...ooooohhhh." It felt so good. Oh, so wonderful.

Her small sounds lured him to action. He pumped his hips, short strokes, and

then long, delicious ones. Her muscles massaged his shaft with each thrust. His strokes, her responsive massages went on and on until her legs quivered, until her breaths became rapid, soft gasps. It went on and on, his thrusts harder and faster. Then she came apart and he joined her. They shuddered and groaned with final thrusts that ended with their mutual explosions.

After a long moment, Devlin drew in a deep breath and withdrew. Perspiration beaded his forehead. His chest still rose and fell with his struggles to regain control of his breathing. He crawled off of her. "That shouldn't have happened. I just needed you so damn much."

Lacey flinched at his words and arched her back to jerk her panties and jeans up. "Don't you think I needed you just as much?"

He stood, pulling his clothes back into place. He avoided looking at her. "Okay, we *both* needed it. That doesn't make what we did right, under the circumstances." His body stiffened with resolve, and then he drew her to her feet before moving well away from her. "Tomorrow, Lacey. I can't get into any of this right now."

Aching at his rejection after their desperate quickie, she decided to forget the clothes and the photos. Instead she grabbed her coat and tore past him to race out of the house. She didn't stop until she had flung herself into the Jeep. She sped off even though she looked up into her rearview mirror and saw him running after her. *Déjà vu*. It had been a bad situation before, and it wasn't any better this time.

Devlin strode back into the house, no longer in the mood for a meeting with some of the county's ranchers. But the second he stepped foot in the entry he could smell the essence of their lovemaking. He stood statue still and stared at the place in the hallway where he'd taken his beloved wife to the carpet. The place where he'd had desperate sex with her. Not made love. Had sex. It had been satisfying but not right. Quickies were okay and they'd certainly had enough of those over the years. But this had been pure lust that both needed quenched without any thought beyond that

moment. She deserved better than that. Dammit, so did he!

He stepped back out onto the porch and pulled the door closed. When he'd gotten a call on his cell phone from his foreman telling him that Lacey was at the house, he'd come back with a lame excuse of having left behind some papers, which he hadn't. And then he'd spotted her Jeep... Such hope had torn through him. Yet the instant he saw her and how uncomfortable she looked, he'd known she still wasn't ready to completely forgive him, to really talk about the issues forcing them apart. It had been damn hard to act distant and to insist he didn't want to discuss anything right then. Actually, he hadn't wanted to talk. He'd wanted to hold her in his arms forever. But he couldn't.

Still bruised from the pain of being with Lacey and not being able to stay with her, he got in his truck. He'd go to the meeting and figure things out while he drove. She was nearly ready to take that first step toward coming home, but she could be a mite stubborn. His patience had worn thin. He wanted her back with him. He'd be a charming devil tomorrow night while they went caroling with some friends. If that wasn't enough, well... He just might have to give her some incentive to get past her pout and stop being so dang stubborn. Reddening that sweet bottom wasn't a hardship for him, and he knew from experience that sometimes it was the only way to get his wife thinking straight again.

The evening was bitterly cold, but the full moon and the sky full of stars more than made up for the coldness. Added to the sense of beauty and happiness were the two other couples traveling around with Lacey and Devlin as they went from ranch to ranch to spread Christmas cheer. Their friends and neighbors laughed easily at anything and nothing. And they teased Lacey with a gentle caring about her tendency to sing her own words when she forgot some the correct ones. The problems between her and Devlin were forgotten for the most part.

Lacey sat next to him in his big dual cab pickup, four others were with them as

well. It felt so right to sit tucked close to him, and yet there was something in her that couldn't completely ignore the hurt inside her. Her father called it plain old stubbornness. Perhaps he was right. She'd certainly seen no additional signs that Devlin was interested in any other woman, in particular Sarah. And Sarah had not approached him again—at least to Lacey's knowledge. Sometimes her stubbornness got in the way of getting on with life. Yet there had been times when that plucky stubbornness had helped her accomplish things she probably wouldn't have otherwise. Like going up the ranks as a barrel racer until she'd won the biggest honor two years in a row. Like helping her step away from that and start her own business training others and training their mounts. But now, well that blessed stubbornness she'd inherited from her father was making her miserable. Making Devlin miserable as well.

As if he'd read some of her troubled thoughts, Devlin reached down to squeeze her hand. "You okay? You've gone awfully quiet."

"Probably trying to think up some new verses to Silent Night or something," one of their neighbors teased from the back seat.

His wife evidently nudged him hard in the side because he grunted as she said, "You leave her be, Jake Allen. I kinda liked that change she came up with for Holly Jolly Christmas."

"It's a stupid song anyway," their foreman offered. "Nobody sane knows the correct words."

Lacey forced a commiserating laugh and settled closer to Devlin. "Just tired, I guess," she said. "Haven't been sleeping much."

Some of the lightheartedness faded away in the close quarters. Everyone knew Devlin and Lacey had been separated for nearly a week now. If they hadn't known it for a fact, they could have seen the aching loneliness whenever they looked in Devlin's eyes. Lacey had seen it herself several times when she'd glanced at him tonight. Loneliness and frustration. She had a feeling that he'd come close to the end of his patience with her. Oddly she hoped so. Maybe what she needed was for him to force her to make some kind of decision. She just hoped she wouldn't make a bad decision.

"I'll get you back to your folks' as soon as we get these others dropped off," he

said quietly.

She tensed, uncomfortable knowing that their friends had all heard that once again she wouldn't be going home with her husband. She'd be going home to a big empty house tonight because her parents had gone to Wichita for the weekend to visit some friends. The thought of staying there all by herself made her even more miserable. Maybe she should just go home with Devlin. But he hadn't asked her to, hadn't even hinted at it. She remained quiet and withdrawn the rest of the trip, barely even saying good-bye to her friends as they dropped them off.

Devlin had been thinking about it all night long, about blistering Lacey's butt. She'd pretended to enjoy herself, pretended to be comfortable being with him. Yet she'd also distanced herself and their friends had picked up on that fact. He was damn tired of these emotional games of hers. Damn tired of her pigheaded stubbornness and her moodiness. He'd let her get away with this nonsense too long. In the past he would have dealt with this behavior problem right away. He decided that he needed to do the same thing now. Tonight she'd go to bed with a red-hot butt. It was a good thing her parents were gone, although that wouldn't have stopped him from giving her the spanking she needed.

She looked at him curiously when he turned off the truck instead of just keeping it on while she hopped out. In the dim light of the moon coming in through the windshield, he knew she could see the grim set to his face. He heard the concern in her voice as she asked, "You're coming in, aren't you?"

He nodded and climbed out before she could protest. She could stop him, and they both knew that, but she didn't. Instead she slipped out of the truck as well and followed him up the sidewalk to the front door. He used his own key and opened the door while she waited quietly for him to say something, to do something. He was pretty sure she'd sensed that *something* wouldn't be pulling her into his arms for a warm hug.

The gentleman in him made him help her out of her long coat, but he was

growing more impatient with each passing second. He hung his own heavy shearling coat up on the halltree beside hers. When he turned in her direction, he found her looking wary. It was clear what she expected him to do next. Again, she could have stopped him with a refusal. He'd spanked her many times over the years, but she'd never flat out told him she wouldn't allow it. She suffered during a spanking and yet she respected his role as her disciplinarian when he deemed it necessary. It seemed she would be reluctantly receptive tonight as well. Good.

Lights had been left on in the main part of the house, so he took her hand and led her into the great room with all its many pieces of overstuffed furniture. There were a number of places he could sit to do the unpleasant task. He chose one of the pair of basically straight-backed chairs beside the fireplace that took up an entire wall. For a more formal spanking he liked the way a harder chair worked; there was no awkward leaning too far in any direction due to thick cushions. More overall control for the spanker. They had such chairs at home in the bedroom and in the living room.

Lacey went with him and he was certain her stomach was with tingling nerves. She'd admitted the response to anticipating a spanking to him long ago. From his actions, she knew exactly what he had planned. She'd probably figured it out as they'd turned onto the ranch's road. His body language had, no doubt, forewarned her of his decision to spank her before he left tonight.

"This isn't going to help anything, you know," Lacey said quietly.

Again, he thought about how she could tell him to leave before this went any farther. But she didn't. "It'll help get you focused again," he explained as he sat down in one of the straight-backed chairs and held her by the wrist next to him. "Either you're going to be so furious with me that you'll demand a divorce—which I won't give you, just so you know—or you'll want to figure this mess out."

Lacey blinked at him. "Divorce?"

He mentally sighed in relief at the horror on her face. *Thank God.* She hadn't been thinking about divorce. Yes, she might have wanted to kick his butt for kissing Sarah, but her thoughts hadn't turned to something so drastic.

"Never mind that." He didn't want to dwell on that subject. He released her arm,

but held her gaze and said sternly, "Bare your bottom, Lacey Jane."

He rarely made her do that and knew she hated having to do so. It was bad enough to have him do it, but she'd told him that this made her feel so ashamed of herself. Which was the point he wanted to get across sometimes, like now.

She stood quietly, reluctant.

"You really don't want me to do it tonight," he warned. If he bared her bottom, she would definitely suffer the consequences.

The rebel in her chose that moment to stupidly speak up. "I *never* want you to do it."

His expression darkened. "You do *not* want to press me on this, believe me." His hands started to move to his belt, but only as a threat.

Instantly, her trembling hands moved to undo her jeans. Her cheeks flamed as she shoved them below her buttocks. He swallowed hard as he stared at the skimpy lace thong, which made his shaft swell uncomfortably. After another second, she pulled them down as well. He had to shift on the chair and he thought he caught a trace of a smile on her face.

"Push them all down to your knees," his voice was huskier than he liked at the moment. This wasn't about getting aroused. This was about discipline.

When she'd done it, he pulled her to stand between his legs. She hated when he put her in this position because he would have so much more control of her movements, and that usually meant the spanking would be a real lesson burner. Exactly what he intended now.

"I'm ready to talk about the problems," she said in an effort to stall.

He nudged her over his left thigh and she planted her hands flat on the carpet. As he locked her into place with his right leg, he countered, "No, you're not. You're just trying to keep me from blistering your butt." He made sure her bottom rested perfectly on his thigh and shoved her sweater up onto her back, completely baring her bottom. "We'll be talking this all out in a couple of days. On Christmas Eve."

"After this I might not want to talk to you," she sassed and twisted around to look back at him.

He gave her a look that made it clear he disapproved of her idiotic remark. "Tonight you'll be sulking a lot, feeling real sorry for yourself." He raised his hand high and she quickly looked down, her long braid swinging so that it hit her in the face. He lowered his hand fell with a biting Smack!

"Tomorrow you'll be less pissed for getting your bottom burnt." Another sizzling Smack!

"By Christmas Eve you'll be feeling sentimental and ready to talk reasonably." He brought his hand briskly down in the middle of both cheeks. Already he could see large splotches where his hand had landed. Already he could feel the heat rising off her bottom

"*Jeez Louise! Warm up!* Have you ever thought about a warm up first?" she protested.

"That *was* the warm up, darlin'. Now we'll get this unpleasant task really taken care of." He meant it, too, and held her in place with one hand at her waist. His other hand moved swiftly, landed with blazing authority. He was relentless in turning her bottom red and building a fire she would feel far into the night.

Lacey made a brief attempt at taking the spanking stoically. Very brief. The she was jerking from side to side even though it was impossible to move very much because of his leg lock. She couldn't even kick her legs up very much. All she could do was endure the painful swats and cry out her anguish. Normally she wasn't overly vocal when he punished her, this time all the built-up emotions she'd been avoiding burst free. She wriggled and cried out her horror at finding Devlin holding and kissing Sarah. She sobbed out her fear of their marriage falling apart. She moaned out her heartbreak. Her words and admissions cut him deeply, but he didn't stop. She needed this release. He needed to hear it all.

Finally she just collapsed and took his mighty, encouraging Smacks! Her bottom looked dark red, had to be hurting like hell. She lie sobbing but seemed oddly calmer. Exactly what he'd been aiming for.

He gentled his hand, soothed light circles on her tender buttocks. "Are we done here, sweetheart? Or have I failed to get my disappointment with your behavior

across?"

"You-you were clear." She sobbed, wincing. "I behaved badly." She sniffled. "I hate that I made things so bad, made you so upset that you felt forced to spank me."

He shifted his leg to release her, but she remained in place for several seconds trying to calm her breathing. When he thought she'd recovered enough, he helped her awkwardly to her feet and her sweater moved down, barely touching the upper part of her buttocks. It was enough to make her hiss out in pain.

"Reckon you'll be quite tender for a while." He stood and pulled her to him. "Come on, sweetheart, I'll help you upstairs. Don't figure you'll want to pull those jeans up to make the climb." He scooped her into his arms and flinched as she gasped with the pain. She leaned her head against his chest and slowly calmed her miserable whimpers.

In her too-pink room, he set her on her feet and carefully undressed her. She stood looking forlornly beside the bed. "Why don't you skip even a short nightgown tonight."

"Sounds good to me." She didn't look anxious to climb onto the bed.

Understanding the pain of movement, he picked her up and placed her on the bed.

She yelped at the touch of her throbbing bottom against the quilt and quickly rolled over to her stomach.

He didn't like causing her pain like this, but sometimes it was necessary. He sucked up his regret and leaned over to kiss her head. He inhaled her scent, still felt the power of his arousal. It cost him to say, "You have no idea how much I'd like to crawl into bed with you."

Lacey's thoughts appeared mainly centered on her poor bottom, but she responded to his gentleness. She'd taken the spanking with as much as grace as possible, but he could see that she didn't hate him for having done it. She'd needed settling, and now she needed to sulk, they both knew that.

She drew in a shuddery breath. "Not really in the mood for it right now. Or much of anything else."

He moved away from the bed. "I'll see you in a couple of days."

"Tomorrow—" she began.

"No. I'm busy tomorrow. And you need to have the day to seriously think about us, if you want an *us*." When he saw that she would interrupt, he shook his head. "I know you love me, Lacey. Even if I did something incredibly stupid like kiss Sarah. But I think we need to be real honest about our dreams. I know what I want. Make sure you figure out exactly what you want too."

Chapter Four

By the time her parents were to return the next day at noon, Lacey had done a lot of thinking, as Devlin had wanted her to do. Right after he'd left, her thoughts had been focused mainly on her very sore bottom. There'd been some serious sulking. A few thoughts about how horrible her husband was to do such an embarrassing, painful thing to her. And, as she'd slept restlessly on her stomach, she'd remembered the many spankings she'd had in this house while growing up. But none of them had been delivered cruelly or without good reason. She'd always been headstrong, independent, and something of a rebel. All character traits that often led to clashes with school rules and household rules. As an adult, she hadn't changed much. Which was why she'd often felt the flat of Devlin's hand on her bottom. He had rules to follow as well—rules that she'd agreed with early on in their marriage. Although sometimes when she was actually over his knee and having her bottom thoroughly heated, she wanted to revoke that agreement. She never had, but she did play with the idea now and again.

Lacey had just put a casserole into the oven when her parents pulled into the driveway. She watched out the kitchen window as her father went around to help her mom out of the car, a cowboy gentleman like Devlin. Her mother stepped out and slid her arms around him, going up on tiptoe to give him a kiss. He hugged her in turn. Warmth moved through Lacey. Her parents had their share of arguments like any other couple, but they genuinely enjoyed each other's company. She'd seen them tease one another, share secret laughs, and steal kisses. And after her conversation with her mother last week, she also knew they were a couple that believed in domestic discipline. Like she and Devlin. Spankings came and went, as did the problems or issues

that led to them. But a real marriage endured: budding romance, tears, laughter, deaths, financial ups and downs, arguments, and even discipline. Her parents had endured such things for almost thirty-five years. Surely she and Devlin could do the same. She *wanted* to do the same.

"I thought you'd be back at the DR by now," her father said, frowning in disappointment as he walked into the room with her mother. "Looks like I'm going to have to talk to Devlin. The boy needs to take care of marital business."

"Johnathan, we need to stay out of their problems. We talked about this," her mother reminded him while taking off her coat. She sniffed the air. "Is that apple pie I smell?"

Her father sniffed as well, and then grinned. "Apple pie and fresh bread, too. Always love coming home to the smell of fresh bread. Nothing like it." Then he frowned again. "You should be home cooking for your husband."

Lacey turned to reach for plates in the nearby cabinet. "He doesn't want me there until tomorrow," she said quietly. She still couldn't understand why he didn't want her there and it hurt that she basically had been told to stay away. She'd pouted plenty about that last night. Of course, she'd also pouted about getting spanked, and pouted about not getting to sleep nice and naked against her husband. She liked cuddling with him after she'd recovered some from a bottom warming. Putting those thoughts aside, she said, "I've got a cheeseburger casserole in the oven. Lunch will be ready in a half hour or so."

"I suppose he has his reasons, dear," her mother said coming over to give her a supportive hug, feeling Lacey flinch.

Her father grumbled something about "stupid reasons" and announced that he'd be in his den until lunch was ready. The second he left the room, her mother pressed, "Did you two have another fight?"

"No. We had another spanking. Last night, after the caroling." Lacey wouldn't have admitted it to anyone else, but her mother would understand.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She took the plates to the table while Lacey went for silverware.

"I'll be sitting gingerly for lunch, that's for sure."

Her mother blushed and admitted quietly, "So will I."

Lacey blinked. "Dad spanked you? But you were so loving outside just now."

"Spankings clear the air sometimes."

"Yes."

"Anyway, having a sore bottom for a time is much better than living with tension, and an angry husband." She set the plates on the table. "Tensions gone now."

Pulling the silverware out of the drawer, Lacey said, "Well, I got spanked, too. But the tension is still there between us."

"But you're going to the DR tomorrow for Christmas Eve? Will you be staying there?" her mother asked in concern and changed the subject. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you need to, dear, don't get me wrong."

Lacey started setting the silverware beside the plates. "I'm hoping to stay there, but I suppose it depends on how things go. On whether I can keep from acting like a brat again."

"You've forgiven him about the Sarah mishap then?" Her mother's eyes searched Lacey's, held such hope.

"I over-reacted. I know that now." Lacey heaved an aggrieved sigh. "Devlin's been more than apologetic about being an idiot, about not knowing what the hell he'd been doing. Sarah wanted him years ago; he didn't feel the same way. I'd forgotten about that, forgot that she flirts with him every chance she gets. He is oblivious to it, but he got caught in her trap this time. She and I are going to have a little heart-to-heart about keeping her paws and lips off *my* husband."

"You didn't forgive Devlin easily either," her mother pointed out, clearly relieved that the worst of her daughter's problems were nearly finished.

Lacey reached back to rub her still faintly sore bottom. "He pointed that out very well last night. I can tell you this, Mom, I'm not real anxious to test his patience again anytime soon."

With a gentle smile, her mother rubbed her own bottom. "Not real anxious to test your father's patience again, either."

Devlin's patience was long gone, with himself. Christmas eve morning and he hadn't slept in two nights. Of course, all day yesterday, and most of last night, he'd been putting the finishing touches on his plan—his surprise for Lacey. He looked yet another time out the living room window toward the ranch road. Half the day was gone. Well, okay, it was only a little after nine, but it felt so much later. What if she didn't come?

He couldn't keep looking out the damn window every few minutes. He needed to do something. His gaze went to the corner by the fireplace, the corner where they normally put up a Christmas tree. With all the craziness between him and Lacey, he hadn't given a tree much thought. But Lacey loved Christmas trees, loved having decorations all over the house. Okay, so did he. It didn't seem right not to have them this year.

It had taken Lacey much longer than she'd expected to drive back to the DR. She'd overslept, having finally gotten her first good night's sleep in over a week. She'd made up her mind to make things right with Devlin and evidently that had eased her body's pent-up frustrations. By the time she'd gotten around and packed her Jeep she'd remembered that she only had a couple of small things for her husband for Christmas. One little outfit that she'd wear for *his* pleasure. Well, she hoped she'd get some pleasure out of what happened when he saw the outfit. But she wanted to give him something extra special. Something that would show him how much she loved, trusted and needed him. She'd remembered seeing something once when she'd gone with a friend to check out an adult fun store. At the time they'd both laughed about the things they'd seen. This morning she'd wanted to make something like a particular item that had caught her attention. So, she'd done a little shopping at a couple of places—the sales clerks were probably still wondering about the items she'd purchased. And then she'd done a bit of constructing in her father's barn. All in all it was the fault of the

special, handmade gift in the box with the big red bow that she wasn't pulling up at her home until almost five o'clock.

She walked hesitantly into the house through the mudroom and into the kitchen. The last time she'd come in this way hadn't turned out well, had been a horrible surprise. This time she faced another surprise: the kitchen was a disaster. But it smelled good, like gingerbread and cookies. Flour and, well, goo, covered nearly every inch of counter space, along with sheets of waxed paper on which dozens of various kinds of cookies sat cooling. Her gaze shifted to the bar in the middle of the room and she spotted two big pans of gingerbread cake. Her Christmas recipes! He'd tried his hand at making the foods she usually made for the holiday. *How sweet.* And what a mess! Plus, he'd made way too much. But then all her recipes were designed for making double or triple amounts, and he wouldn't have known that. Oh, she'd wished she'd have been able to see him doing all of this. She hadn't even known he could cook.

Christmas music from their stereo system in the living room caught her attention just as her eyes had misted over. She grabbed a sugar cookie and followed the sound of *Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer*—one of Devlin's favorites, to which he was singing along in his rich baritone. It made her smile. It made her ache to touch him.

For the second time, she stopped to stare in surprise at the drastic change in a room. She'd forgotten all about decorating her home with all of the problems she and Devlin had been facing lately. She'd thought of that on her drive over this afternoon and had felt awful. Devlin hadn't had a happy childhood and hadn't celebrated Christmas until she'd met him. Now he loved that time of year, which was why he'd insisted on going to the town's holiday party and caroling. She'd worked hard every year to make the season special for him, going all out with decorations and baking. Evidently he'd taken over for her this year. All of her large Santa collection was displayed on the mantle, on the bookshelves with the entertainment center, and on the end tables. Most surprising, though, was the eight-foot plus tree standing beside the fireplace, fully decorated with the ornaments they had bought together over the years. Devlin had just placed the angel on the top. He looked at her from where he stood on a

stepstool and grinned like a young boy seeking approval for something special he'd done.

She burst into tears.

He scrambled down the ladder and pulled her into his embrace, gently stroking the long hair she'd left loose to hang in waves down her back. "Did I do something wrong? Should I have not put it up?" When she sobbed harder, he said firmly, "I'll take it all down. Just give me a few minutes."

When he started to move away, she quickly reached for his arm. "No! I'm crying, you silly man, because I'm so happy."

Devlin stood there and shook his head, pure male, totally not understanding women sometimes. "What took you so long to get here? I've been waiting all day." He looked uncomfortable with admitting that fact.

Lacey wiped away her tears and grinned mischievously. "I was making you something special for Christmas."

"Sweetheart, all I wanted for Christmas was you, back in this house. Hopefully permanently." He noted the crumbs on the front of her shirt. "Found the cookies, huh? You know, there's something weird about those recipes of yours. They make a hell of a lot of cookies."

She laughed and it felt wonderful. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed in pure joy. Then he joined her, the deep laugh lines beside his warm eyes growing deeper. It had been far too long since they'd laughed together. Yet another sign that her business was too stressful, both for her and for Devlin. She moved into his arms, hugging him tightly, reveling in the quiet strength that was her husband. "I've missed you. So much."

He held her as close to him as he could. All their problems seemed to melt away and she knew that they'd find a way to work it all out. Finally, she released him, grinning up at his beloved face. "Grab your coat, cowboy. I've got a Jeep full of stuff to bring inside."

"Did you bring all your clothes back?" he asked cautiously, already heading for the mudroom and his jacket.

She moved beside him, going up on tiptoe to kiss his beard-roughened cheek. "Everything, every pair of jeans, every shirt, every nightgown...every tiny lace thong." She loved the way he sucked in a breath and his eyes grew darker. "If you're really nice later, I may even show you an especially interesting something I picked up this morning. Believe me, you'll like it."

Devlin couldn't stand it a second longer. He'd unloaded the Jeep, beyond pleased that Lacey had brought everything she'd taken with her back where it belonged. He'd carried in a couple of boxes wrapped in plain paper with enormous red bows. It practically killed him to put them under the tree. Ever since he'd started celebrating Christmas after meeting Lacey, he was like a kid when it came to presents. He'd gently shaken the boxes until she'd slapped his hands. He'd questioned her about them until she'd threatened to not even give them to him. But what he really couldn't wait for was having her naked in their bed, doing all sorts of naughty and nice things to her. Which brought to mind the "interesting something" she'd mentioned that he would like.

As soon as Lacey put the lid on the final container of cookies, he snagged her arm and drew her hard up against him. "Lacey mine, if I don't get you to the bedroom pretty damn soon, I'm going to take you right here on the floor. And, truthfully, my old knees aren't up to a lot of that kind of thing. The other day was enough for a while."

She smiled the sexy smile that drove him nuts and moved her body against the thick shaft begging to be freed. Ornery woman.

"Hmmm, it appears you've got something purely delightful that needs my serious attention." She moved again and he grabbed her buttocks, forcing her to stop torturing him. "I was going to tempt you with that 'interesting something' I mentioned earlier. But I don't think you'd survive long enough for me to put it on. Maybe later."

He scooped her into his arms and hurried to their bedroom while she giggled and nibbled on his earlobe. "You're right, I'd never survive you putting more on. I want you stripped to the bare. Now." He set her down and she scooted out of his reach before he could start undressing her, before he could start tearing her clothes off, that is.

"Same goes for you. Start stripping or I'll start ripping." His eyes widened at the sassy promise and his breaths quickened. It took him a second to finally move.

She was fully undressed and standing tapping her small foot by the time he'd managed to wrestle his boots off, fight the buttons on his shirt, and finally nearly unman himself unzipping the jeans.

"We're going to have to do a lot more practicing undressing without hurting yourself, I see," she teased with a grin, freeing her hair from the ponytail and shaking it out so it draped around her body.

Devlin could hardly breathe from his near state of panic about getting undressed quickly. The instant he was free of all clothing he went to her and kissed her so hard, so intently that she went boneless and he had to hold her up. Then he picked her up and tossed her onto the bed he'd hastily made, but not well. "You think it's funny watching me suffer. Well, we'll see just how funny you think it is when I torture you."

Lacey looked at his hard cock bobbing and her mouth felt dry. Her tiny, sensitive bud tingled and warm wetness appeared between her legs. To entice him more, she lazily stretched her arms above her head; bent her legs, drawing her heels back almost to her buttocks; and then eased her thighs apart. He couldn't refuse the invitation and crawled between her legs to seek out that pulsing clit and play with it, first with his fingers, and then with his mouth. When she was arching up eagerly, he drove his tongue into her and played some more. He was merciless in his assaults, in his determination to torture her with pleasure until she broke apart crying out his name, "Devlin! Ohhhhhhhh Devlin!"

She'd barely recovered when he plunged his long, hot rod deep inside her. Her legs locked around him and she rode wave after wave of sensation, until his thrusts were rocking them both, shaking the bed. She pressed her feet against his buttocks and rose up to meet every thrust, desperate to reach that pinnacle of mindless ecstasy once more. Finally she reached it, crying out even as he drove harder, deeper. Then his entire body froze in pained tension, and his cock pulsed out his warm cream. When he groaned out her name, she'd never heard it spoken with so much need, so much love.

Devlin collapsed on top of her. His muscled body was covered in sweat, but she didn't care. She gently ran her fingernails up and down his back, holding him, never

wanting him to either move away or to pull out of her. She leaned up until she could kiss the top of his head and said breathlessly, "I've missed you. Missed this."

He grinned up at her, his expression filled with male pride. "It was good, wasn't it?"

Lacey smiled and rubbed his back again. "I guess so."

He arched back, the muscles in his arms bulging. "Guess so?" Then he chuckled. "Maybe somebody needs a spanking for lying, because it was damn good."

She thought about her special gift and fought down the stirrings of arousal. "How about we clean up, and then go open one gift each?"

"I get to open a present tonight?" The thrilled little boy in him burst free. He pulled out of her and she moaned her disappointment, which made him grin even more. "Don't worry, sweetheart, I'm not nearly done with you."

By the time Lacey had showered, dressed in her "something interesting," and covered it with her oldest terrycloth robe Devlin was sitting cross-legged in front of the Christmas tree. Darkness had fallen and he'd turned on one lamp across the room. But the twinkling lights on the tree were more than enough for her. She loved seeing him there wearing only a pair of boxer shorts with reindeers frolicking on them that she'd gotten him last year. She loved seeing the play of lights on his dark hair, on his excited face. His excitement didn't even slightly fade when he spotted her in the ratty old robe.

"I'm saving my main gift to you for tomorrow morning. But I hope you'll like this, too." He handed her a small box as she sat down beside him, careful to keep her robe wrapped tightly around her. "By the way, you're irresistible even in that worn out thing."

Her hands shook as she unwrapped the box and opened it. She stared inside it, tears filling her eyes, unable to speak for a minute. He waited anxiously and she finally pulled out the silver and turquoise necklace. The chain was so delicate and the pendant

was an exquisite turquoise teardrop. He knew she liked jewelry, but only very simple pieces. "It's beautiful," she purred, holding it to her heart. "Thank you sooooo much."

The relief that she liked his gift was written all over his face. Then he grinned boyishly and looked at the handful of presents under the tree. "My turn."

Lacey's heart pounded as she carefully put the necklace back in the box. Could she really do this? What would he think?

"Come on. I've been a good boy." He immediately froze, clearly wishing he hadn't said that. They both quickly thought back to that one awful time when he hadn't been so good.

She forced that memory aside. Even though the bruise was still there on her heart, it was fading away. She picked out the box with the gift she'd made him. As he took it, she said warily, "You might think this is a little strange."

He grinned and pulled the bow off, opening the box in a flash. For a split second he just sat there, staring in surprise, and then he chuckled and lifted the unique paddle from the box. He carefully examined the twelve-inch long, redesigned and recovered ping-pong paddle. "That's some mighty nice leather on the handle and one side." He flipped the paddle over, running his fingers over the soft fur on the other side. "Interesting, sweetheart. Damn interesting."

"I made it. Actually, I reworked a ping-pong paddle, based on something I saw in a store a while back." She felt a blush stealing up her face.

"Lacey Jane, you ought to be spanked for going into such a place," he chastised, but there was a definite sparkle of amusement in his eyes. "For going there without me."

Enormously pleased that he didn't find her gift somehow sick or bizarre, she decided to finish out the little scenario she'd come up with. She stood, while he watched curiously and continued stroking the furry side of the paddle, and undid the robe, letting it pool at her feet. His mouth gaped open at the sheer red shelf bra trimmed with a thin row of soft white fur that pushed her full breasts up; at the sheer red and white trimmed G-string. She slowly turned around so he could get the full effect. He was speechless, appeared to be almost drooling.

Okay so far. Relieved at that, she moved over to the footstool in front of his favorite chair and went slowly to her knees, making sure he was still watching her. Then she draped herself over it and cocked her head to look directly at him. "Care to try out your gift?"

Devlin was stunned, absolutely stunned that his wife would go to such extremes to please him. But he sure as hell liked it! He thought his heart was going to give out when she dropped that old robe of hers, when he caught sight of that skimpy little Christmas outfit. Fact was, his heart still pounded hard. He sure wasn't thinking a lot about paddling that fine butt. No, he was thinking more along the lines of holding her down and sliding deep inside her from behind. Riding her good.

She wiggled that butt at him and the string of the thong moved deeper into her crack. She was trying to kill him. Maybe she did need a swat or two with this odd paddle. He walked over to her, still amused that she'd made the funny thing for him. She'd done nice work, too. The leather was good quality and that side would deliver a devil of a sting. The furry side, well, he imagined that might be good for some highly erotic play. He liked to play. Especially with Lacey. Especially with Lacey's great ass.

He went down to his knees beside her, running his hand over the creamy skin of her buttocks. She quivered. He grinned. "You've been naughty, haven't you, sweetheart?"

She glanced at him, her wealth of hair sliding over her slender back. "A little bit," she said huskily. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Believe I'll heat up your bottom." He gave her a firm swat with the leather side of the paddle across both cheeks. Not hard, but enough for her to suck in a breath. "Got quite a nice bite to it," he said, thinking this little paddle would come in right handy for times when she really needed her bottom burned. She hadn't looked away from him and he liked that. He smoothed his hand over the area he'd smacked. Her buttocks quivered again.

"Have you been nice, Lacey Jane?" He flipped the paddle over to the furry side. As her gaze caught and held on the paddle, he smacked it against her bottom, and then stroked it slowly all around her cheeks.

"Ummmmm," she purred. "Naughty and nice."

Next he tried swatting her lightly with the leather side, and then swatting again with the furry side. He kept up the rhythm for several minutes until she turned her head again, gripping the stool, pushing her bottom back to meet each stroke: hard or soft. He paddled her this way until she cried out, "Take me. Oh, Dev, take me now!"

Although he thought it a shame to ruin the cute little panties, he ripped them away and then tugged down his shorts. He grasped her hips and slammed into her as she pushed back to take all of him. Her inner muscles clenched around him. The sensation drove him crazy. He couldn't be gentle, couldn't go slow. He rammed her hard, fast; his balls slapped against her. Then there was no thought, just action. They moved together, frantically until she shattered. Until he filled her again with his warm juices. Until he collapsed over her trembling body.

When he finally managed to pull out and sit back on his haunches, he said huskily, "Best damn Christmas ever."

Lacey sank to the floor beside him, smiling in contentment. "We had a tough time getting here, but I'd have to agree."

Devlin thought about the things they hadn't said yet, the issues still keeping them apart. He still intended to get it all settled. But not now. Now he just wanted to go to bed and fall asleep with his precious wife snuggled in his arms. "Time to call it a night, Lacey Jane. You've worn me plumb out."

Evidently she'd remembered their problems as well because she worried her lower lip for a second. "I'm sorry, Dev. I—"

He stood and tugged up his shorts, and then pulled her up as well. "Not tonight. We'll talk it out tomorrow."

Chapter Five

The sun barely slithered in between the partially open blinds when Lacey finally stirred as she slept snuggled against Devlin. She wasn't anxious to fully awaken. She didn't want to leave the warmth of the bed or the warmth of her husband, so she smoothed her hand over his firm abdomen and up his chest, toyed with his nipples. Maybe she could entice him to stay in bed a little longer.

He captured her hand. "It's about time you woke up. It's Christmas morning." He wasn't going to be enticed into playing. The big boy was ready for presents and could hardly wait.

Still, she wasn't ready to give up on the "present" she wanted even more than whatever remained under the tree. She tried sliding one leg over his, moving it up and down slowly, temptingly. "How about we do something to warm us both up?" She pressed closer to him, skin to skin.

"You're insatiable, aren't you?" he teased and threw off the covers. Reaching over to lightly pat her bare bottom, he added, "Maybe I could warm you up another way. I did get this nifty new paddle."

A little annoyed at being denied the treat she wanted, Lacey scooted off the bed and said sassily, "If I can't get what I want, you can't get what you want."

"Was that attitude, Lacey Jane? Pouting?" He got up, not looking really upset with her, just testing how things might go today, she decided.

She sashayed with an exaggerated sway of her hips to the bathroom. "Maybe, and maybe. But I'll put my 'attitude' aside if you'll put your thoughts of warming my bottom aside. Since you won't play nicely here in bed, then we've got gifts to open,

breakfast to make, kisses to share.”

“And a talk to have,” he added quietly, sounding worried, but hopeful.

It took Lacey longer than it should have to brush her teeth, comb her hair, and get dressed. They’d had fun last night, made love with the enthusiasm they’d once enjoyed, and yet nothing had been settled between them. Part of her wanted to share Christmas morning like they always had, and forget about the issues that had been driving them apart. Part of her knew they’d never be okay until they faced their problems. Their biggest problem was her business, because it forced them apart so often. She should give it up, settle for helping run the DR with Devlin. But in her heart, she didn’t think she could do it. She enjoyed teaching others the skills she’d honed over the years, and she liked training horses to barrel race as well.

Devlin sat in front of the Christmas tree and, as much as he loved Christmas, he had trouble generating his usual excitement this morning. So much depended on Lacey’s view of his gift to her. Would she think he’d gone too far? Maybe think he was trying to be in charge of her business, when that wasn’t at all what he intended? When he’d first thought of his plan last summer, it had seemed so right. And he’d worked damn hard to figure out all the details, arrange the financing, and make tentative arrangements for the work to be done. He hoped he hadn’t been wasting time and effort. He also hoped she would see what he offered as he meant it, and not as more interference in her life than she could live with.

He caught the sweet smell of her apple shampoo as she stepped into the room. Every nerve in his body jerked to awareness. He loved her so damn much it hurt sometimes. “Ready for your presents, sweetheart?”

Her answering smile was tender, but weak. He hated that. She settled next to him and he turned to cup her face. “There’s no one I’ll ever love more than you, my Lacey. And I thank you for all the years you’ve shared with me so far. *So far*, sweetheart, did you catch that? I’m hoping for another twenty or thirty more years.”

She turned her head to gently kiss his palm. "I was thinking more like forty or fifty."

For the next half hour they opened gifts of favorite colognes or perfume, a new shirt he'd mentioned wanting once, a sweater in a color he liked on her, books by their most enjoyed authors. Appreciated gifts, but nothing truly from the heart. Lacey felt so bad about the lines of tension on Devlin's face. The DR was a large ranch and required so much energy and effort to keep it afloat. She knew how hard he worked, how much he loved the ranch. He'd vowed the day he'd asked her to marry him that he would make a ranch that would support them and the children they would one day have. He'd done that. And all the stress and strain of accomplishing his goal had taken a toll on him. He didn't laugh quite so easily these days, and he had learned to exist on only a few hours of sleep most nights because of all there was to do in running the ranch. He deserved more help from her. He deserved a better wife.

She drew in a steadying breath and made a sudden decision, one that she would find a way to live with. "My final gift to you isn't wrapped in a box all nice and pretty. It's something far more personal and intangible." When he looked at her, a frown furrowed his brow. "I'm giving up my business." The admission made her stomach knot.

His immediate furious expression stunned her. "Absolutely not!"

Always quick to be defensive, she snapped, "I'll quit it if I want to!" Now she had no choice; she would follow through with her vow.

He grabbed a final slender box from under the tree and thrust it into her hands. "Open it!"

The rebel in her didn't want to obey. "Maybe I don't want any more gifts," she countered, thrusting the package back at him.

Devlin ripped the paper off the box and shoved it again into her hands. "Open the damn box!"

She wanted to throw it at him, but instead lifted the lid and found a folded piece of paper. His expression remained hard and determined. She yanked the paper out of the box and briskly unfolded it. A map of the ranch grounds. She glanced up at him, but it was clear he wanted her to look more closely at the map. When she did, her heart

raced and she felt light-headed. "Lacey's Arena?" she asked in a small voice. "And a new stable, a second bunkhouse. What is all this?"

"I thought maybe if you had your own training space and a place to board both clients and their horses..." He let the rest of the explanation drift away.

Everything in her was trembling from the special gift he offered her. "But how can we afford..."

"I've already got all that figured out. We'll be okay." He clearly tried to read her face for her acceptance or refusal, and then added, "I've even got someone designing ads for all the ranching and rodeo-related magazines and e-zines. This will work, Lacey, I just know it. If you'll give it a chance."

She launched herself at him, smothered him with kisses, and sobbed at the same time. "I so don't deserve you." She meant it, too. He was such a special man.

Devlin blew out a relieved breath and the tension he'd felt for months drained away. She was crying again, but he was pretty sure that like last time it was because she was happy. Women. He hugged her with all the love within him. "No, you don't," he teased.

"I've put you through so much this last year. Haven't been here often enough to be the wife you deserve. I've been snippy and bitchy when I was here. Too lost in my business. Took our marriage, and you—especially you—too much for granted." She eased off him, huddled miserably. "I really don't like the person I've become this year."

He wished he could deny what she said was true, but he couldn't. "That's behind us now. Without having to be gone so much, I'm hoping you'll settle down. Be more the sweet natured, occasionally ornery, woman I fell in love with. Still love."

"The only way that's really going to happen is if you help me," she said quietly after a moment.

"Course I'll help you. I'll be right beside you whenever you need me to help with a decision about your business." They had always discussed business matters, both for the DR and her business. So he didn't completely understand what she meant right now.

She shook her head, twisted her hands together in her lap. "I'm talking about

discipline, Dev. We both know I can be something of a handful at times, especially when I'm stressed. If I'm going to be around more, you're going to have to go back to being the disciplinarian I need on occasion. And you have no idea how hard it is for me to say this, to all but beg for your continued disciplinary efforts."

Their gazes met and he frowned, thoughtfully. "I know. You don't mind the play spankings like we messed around with last night, but you sure as hell don't like when I really blister your butt." He reached over to gently squeeze her small hands.

"Sweetheart, I'm a man who believes strongly in taking care of his woman. In providing for her, in loving her until she can't move a muscle, and in turning her over my knee when she gets out of hand. The only reason you haven't gotten more spankings this year is because you've been gone so much. I reckon that'll change this next year, with you being here most of the time."

"I'm so sorry. For all that I've put you through this year. For making you miss me so much you needed comforting by another woman."

It made Devlin uncomfortable that she'd taken over the guilt he'd felt for kissing Sarah. Somehow she'd made it her fault, but it wasn't. No, he alone had been the idiot who'd made such an awful mistake. Lacey's misery, her unhappiness ate at him. He decided to snap her out of this self-destructive state in the only way he knew how to reach her, although he sure as hell didn't want to act the disciplinarian right now. "Go bring me that new paddle, Lacey Jane," he said as sternly as he could muster.

"What?" she asked, blinking in confusion.

At her wary question, he battled to stay strong in his decision. Even if he didn't really want to punish his precious wife, she needed it. He always knew when she reached that point where she couldn't think straight, couldn't pull herself out of some funk she'd sunk into. She depended on him, just as she'd reminded him only moments ago.

"I said go get that new paddle. I think it's time we gave it a real workout." He stood and pulled her up as well.

"But it's Christmas," she protested in a weak voice, yet hope and acceptance echoed in it as well.

"Yep, it is. And a certain little wife is going to get her butt heated up real well. It'll be Christmas red real soon."

Her fighting spirit returned for just an instant. Her eyes flashed fire at him and she sassed, "Bah humbug, cowboy!"

Naturally he retaliated and gave her bottom a firm swat. She quieted down real fast and went to fetch the paddle as ordered. Sometimes, not often, she was a fast learner.

When she returned, walking slowly toward her unpleasant fate, he noted tears had welled up in her eyes. It gave him a moment's pause before he steeled himself for what was necessary. He'd moved to the straight-backed chair kept in the room just for these purposes and she came reluctantly to him, and handed him the paddle without meeting his eyes.

He knew she wouldn't like it, but he said firmly, "Bare your bottom. Now."

"Please don't do this," she pleaded, knowing well that he never changed his mind once he'd decided to punish her. When he sat impatiently waiting, she finally obediently lowered her jeans and panties.

She looked so sad standing there that it nearly broke Devlin's heart. He had to keep reminding himself that she'd told him she wanted this from him, said she needed this from him. He didn't take her hand to pull her over his lap, but instead said, "Position yourself." He was afraid if he'd taken her hand just then that he would have broken, and simply pulled her into his embrace.

Tears trickled from her eyes and she scooted awkwardly to his side and then leaned over his thighs. She sniffled and scooted forward adjusting herself until her hands were flat on the carpet, until her bare toes were braced as well. "I don't want to be paddled," she said quietly once she'd settled in place.

Devlin stared at that creamy bottom, wishing he didn't have to turn it red, didn't have to make it hot. He longed to simply reach down and smooth his hands over the soft flesh. Run his fingers between her legs, find her... He forced down the beginnings of arousal. "Yes, you do," he countered gruffly. "We both know that you expect me to do this. Maybe not paddle you, but spank you. It's me who is choosing to use the

paddle. I'm the one in charge now."

He brought the leather paddle down with a resounding Smack against one buttock and then the other. Twin red spots immediately marred the surface of those perfect cream-colored mounds. "You've been holding a whole bunch of guilt feelings inside you for too long." He paddled her again several times, all in different spots.

"You're right! I'm sooooo sorry," she hissed, her long hair swaying around her head as she moved in pain.

"I love you so damn much, sweetheart. I hurt when you hurt." He dealt out a rapid round of swats, watching the build of color, feeling the heat developing.

She wriggled in a frantic effort to avoid the worst of the swats, and bit out, "I bet you don't hurt like I hurt right now!"

Oddly, he smiled at that outburst. "Got that right, Lacey Jane. I was more referring to when you're hurting for other reasons." He busted her butt again. "Still, I don't like causing you pain, but I will." Another pair of swats. "I'll tough it up and burn your backside whenever I think you need it."

She mumbled something about how gracious of him it was to toughen up to spank the hell out of her. Then she settled down, must have bit her lip to keep from sassing anymore. He took that as a sign to get down to seriously work at building a fire on the squirming bottom perched over his lap. So he did. He paddled that bottom long and hard because he had no intention of having to do this again anytime soon.

Lacey sure wished she could take back her earlier plea for Devlin to return to being her firm disciplinarian. What the hell had she been thinking? The man took that job far too seriously. She wriggled and kicked as he steadily beat her poor bottom. She squirmed and bucked as the fire rose to a fierce blaze. She tried not to cry out, she really did. Finally, though, he broke her resistance, and she cried for all she was worth.

He pounded with the paddle, lighter now but it still hurt like hell. She cried out all of her frustration, all of her unhappiness for the way she'd damaged their marriage. She

could have insisted at anytime that he let her up, and he would have done so because that's what they'd agreed on when they were first married. She didn't do it, couldn't do it, no matter how much she was suffering. This sound spanking had been a long time in coming.

By the time Devlin sat the paddle on the floor beside him, there wasn't a tiny spot on Lacey's bottom that hadn't been soundly smacked. He sat there quietly, just holding her over his lap for a long time, smoothing his big hands gently over her back. He whispered words of love, of promise to never betray her in any way again, to treasure her always. Through it all, Lacey quieted and managed to shove the pain aside in her mind enough to really consider their life together. She couldn't imagine going another day without him in it. There would never be another time when she would run away to stay at her parents' and avoid dealing with whatever problem came up. That was what a child would do, and she was a happily married woman. A happily married woman with a very, very sore bottom.

His hands had begun exploring areas that were becoming quickly aroused, but Lacey couldn't allow that yet. Normally when he punished her, he had strict rules about not making love with her right afterward. He believed she needed time for her to experience all of the myriad of emotions: pain from the spanking, embarrassment from having had her bottom bared and spanked, understanding why it had happened, and accepting that she had done wrong and been punished for it. When she had faced all of it and came to him in true apology, he made exquisite love to her because they were both now at peace. This time could be no different. She knew he was only doing this because they'd been apart so much lately and he was a very passionate man. He wanted her.

She slid backward off his lap, wincing as her bottom made contact with her bent legs and the denim. She threw her hands flew back to rub at the sting. "I'm thinking maybe that paddle wasn't such a good idea. Especially not the leather side of it."

"Figured you might think something like that." He smiled gently at her. "As for myself, I kinda like that special gift. Gets a point across right well."

Lacey rubbed her bottom again. "I liked that furry side a whole lot better."

He chuckled. "Gotta admit I enjoyed playing with both sides last night. Landing a nice, light swat with the leather side, doing some sensual rubbing with the other. Didn't redden your bottom quite like I enjoy seeing sometimes. But it turned me on, that's for damn sure."

She let it pass about his enjoying seeing her bottom turn red now and then, because she knew that. He'd mentioned it a time or two. He also liked spooning behind her recently warmed bottom sometimes, too. She liked that okay as well.

"Excited me, too," she said, noting how his gaze focused on the part of her that was bare. The way his eyes had darkened also told her how much he wanted her. The time still wasn't right. So, although it was almost excruciatingly painful, she stood and pulled her panties and jeans up over her stinging buttocks. She held her breath and bit her lip as she zipped the too snug jeans. "Dang, that hurts."

"You didn't have to do that, sweetheart. I was kind of admiring the view." His voice was husky and she could see his irregular breathing.

She touched her covered bottom again, feeling the heat through the thick denim. She'd be feeling this sting for a good part of the day. "Dev, what you're doing for me..." Tears of happiness threatened once more.

"Spanking your sweet butt," he teased, attempting to forestall the tears that made him uncomfortable.

Lacey rolled her eyes. "Get your mind off my butt. I'm trying to be serious here."

"Hard to forget that cute little bottom of yours, especially since I just had it all nice and bare over my lap." When she frowned at him, he nodded. "Okay, just tell me how wonderful I am, how there couldn't possibly be a better husband. I can take it."

She knew he expected her to say something sassy back, but she drew from her gut and said, "You're so wonderful that I'll never be deserving enough of the love you show me." He would have protested, but she continued, "It amazes me that you love me—even when I'm an idiot, or when I act like a brat, or when I'm the worst wife ever. I frustrate the devil out of you, but you never stop loving me."

"Not for an instant," he admitted, and it was clear in his expression how much he meant what he said.

Lacey sucked in a breath to tell him the things she'd been thinking about these last months. "It's time I started showing the depths of my love for you, too. I've been thinking about this for a while now. I'm taking your last name as mine. Finally. My business reputation is established, and it really had nothing to do with relying on my name known on the rodeo circuits. I was stupid to ever think that."

He looked surprised and extremely pleased. "I'd be honored, Lacey Jane, but that choice is completely yours."

Now for the big step. She tried to calm the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. "I want to give you children. We're both ready for this, both want them."

"Sweetheart," he couldn't seem to say more, but she saw the tenderness in his eyes. The happiness. He'd wanted children with her for a long time.

"I stopped taking the pill last week. I lied the other day. Sorry." When he looked ready to demand another spanking was due, she hurriedly added, "I'm not sure how long it takes to be off them before I can get pregnant, but I think we should start trying. Really trying. Is that okay with you?"

Devlin came to her in a flash, scooped her off her feet and swung her around. She winced at the pain on her bottom, but treasured being held with such gentle strength. Carefully he set her on her feet. "I'd love to get real serious about making babies with you. Hell, I wouldn't mind working at the little chore a dozen times a day."

"A dozen?" she taunted, leaning back to grin up at him. "I know you're hot stuff when it comes to sex, but a dozen?"

His dark eyes twinkled. "Okay, two or three times. Ready to start on that project, sweetheart? I'm game."

She reached back to touch her tender bottom. "Spanked only moments ago, remember? Fire. Pain." She saw the disappointment sweep over his face, and she felt the hard ridge of his cock rubbing against her. Heat and wetness flooded her; she was as aroused as he was in spite of her suffering bottom. "To hell with recovering! I'm ready."

Santa Wears Spurs

By Starla Kaye

Chapter One

"And your job, Dex, as this year's Santa, is to convince Roxie Evans to be Santa's helper," stated the president of the Rocking Hills Ranchers Association.

A hardy round of "Oh yeahs!" followed, which managed to snare Dexter Malone's attention. He had only been half-listening to the meeting. The only thing that saved him from being bored out of his mind at these monthly meetings was the fact that they were held at Curly's Bar. It gave him an opportunity to relax away from the ranch, do a dab of drinking, flirt with the fine waitresses, and even pay a bit of notice to what happened at the meetings. He was on the board this year, although he'd never quite figured out *how* he'd gotten on it. He sure hadn't volunteered. In fact, he was trying to come up with a way to ease off the board a month early, the end of November. Right in the middle of coming up with a brilliant plan to do just that, his hearing kicked in. Okay, his selective hearing kicked in.

The chair he'd been leaning back in, balanced on the rear legs, thudded down with his alarm. "*Santa?* When the devil did I *volunteer* for that little chore?" All he could figure was he must have an invisible evil twin who kept signing him up.

"The vice-president has traditionally been Santa from day one of the organization. You know that. Or would know it, if you'd ever read the bylaws and job descriptions." Franklin, the association's president and the county's biggest headache, glared down his bulbous nose at him.

"Been meaning to get around it," Dex said, pretty sure he'd lost the papers somewhere and not really caring. Then he recalled the other comment Franklin had made. "Roxie? I get to have Roxie for my helper? Well, hot damn!"

Immediately his thoughts wandered to the redhead who had come to Sunflower, Kansas in the spring as the new librarian. Five foot seven or so, which would be the perfect height to comfortably drape his arm over her shoulders. Curly red hair that fell just past her shoulders, soft as silk no doubt. Hazel eyes surrounded by thick, dark eyelashes; eyes that smiled with gentleness and a hint of mischief, though he believed he was the only person in town who'd seemed to notice that. The list of her temptations for a man went on and on. Problem was every single man in the area wanted her, even some married men had their eye on her. As of yet, though, not a blessed one of them had made any headway with her. Dex knew, because he'd been sitting back watching and waiting, learning what they all did wrong. When he went after the sweet little filly, he aimed to get her. At least get her for romancing. He wasn't interested in none of that settling down nonsense. But he wouldn't hurt her; he never hurt women. They understood the rules going in and pert near every woman he'd ever dated for any length of time was still a friend of his. He was real proud of that fact.

"So you'll talk to her next week and get her to the seamstress at the cleaners for a fitting for her costume? It's important you get this matter settled right away," Franklin interrupted Dex's musings.

"We might want to come up with a backup woman," Troy commented as a challenge, sitting next to Dex. "I can't imagine that she'll agree to doing it. Don't seem the type to wear that skimpy costume." He grinned. "Not that she'd look bad in it."

Dex glowered at his good buddy and foreman from his ranch. "She'll agree to it. She just might need some sweet talking, and I can handle that." He winked, feeling extremely confident. There wasn't a better sweet talker in the county, hell, probably in the state. He ought to be a politician. 'Course he favored kissing pretty females over kissing babies and other people's asses.

"I got twenty bucks says she refuses," yelled out Sam, the town's veterinarian who'd been hot after Roxie since she came to town. A pair of ranchers from the next county sitting at his table chuckled and casually teased him about his latest rebuff from her. He gave a shrug, appearing embarrassed. "She's weakening. She almost said 'yes' to going out the last time I asked her."

His comment encouraged more laughs and appreciative comments about what a fine looking woman Roxie was. A discriminating one, too.

"Add my twenty to that," Troy inserted with a nod to Dex. "I think she's too 'discriminating' to let an old cowboy like Dex here sweet talk her into anything."

"I don't think we should be talking like this, making bets—" Franklin complained, clearly peeved that he'd lost control of the meeting.

Dex grinned easily at them all, even old sourpuss Franklin. "I'll take on all your bets. Sweet little Roxie's agreement will be signed, sealed, and delivered in two weeks time. Count on it. Dexter Malone *always* gets his woman."

Troy just shook his dark head in amusement. "It's not going to be pretty seeing a big stud like you brought down by that bit of a gal." He faced the others again. "I suggest Sally Ann at the Drop By and Go as a backup. Probably wouldn't take much convincing at all to get her to agree."

Now Dex was riled, and it took a lot to rile him. Belittling his expertise at womanizing was flat out going too far. He stood, picked up his Stetson and slapped it on his head. "I'd've thought you all, my *friends*, would have more confidence in my abilities at persuasion."

"Prove us wrong. Ain't another woman in town any of us would like to see more in that little outfit." Troy looked at him in challenge, a wicked gleam in his eye, like he was seeing Roxie in that very short skirt that left a lot of leg exposed.

Dexter gave a curt nod and strode out of the bar, away from the skeptics. As he headed for his Dodge Ram truck, he felt an instant's worth of doubt. Roxie Evans might be the prettiest female in these parts, but she could also be pretty dang stubborn. What would it take to convince her to do this job? Make her feel real guilty about disappointing the town and the kids if she refused? That would be kind of low. Maybe offer to take her to the Winter Dance? He could do that. Give her cute little bottom some incentive? Nothing like warming a woman's bottom to get her to change her attitude. He wouldn't mind smacking his palm down on her creamy bottom, pinkening it up a bit. What about offering to be her love slave? Now *that* was a mighty interesting idea! It certainly wouldn't be a hardship on his part.

He climbed into the quad cab truck with a smile. He'd only be doing his civic duty to offer himself to her, and he was nothing if not civic minded.

Roxie Evans really liked the teeny, tiny, miniscule house she'd rented. The only available house or apartment in Sunflower when she'd moved here in April. She really liked having to keep most of her treasured knick-knacks and photos boxed up, less dusting. In fact, she really liked having almost none of her personal belongings out of the packing boxes. *Wrong! Definitely wrong.*

She sat on the pumpkin orange loveseat that came with the partially furnished house and felt miserable. Across the living room—okay, five feet away—the TV struggled to offer her one of the two poor-reception channels the town had. Good thing she wasn't much of a TV-watching person. She only had it on for the noise. Something to make even this small amount of emptiness seem not quite so lonely. She'd heard that small towns were friendly places. Of course she'd also heard that they could be slightly cool to outsiders who weren't born and raised there. What she'd encountered in her seven months here had been a mixture of both: the women were polite enough but a little distant, and the men were very friendly—hot after her body, something she was all too familiar with. It wasn't her fault she'd been born with good genes, a shapely figure that she didn't have to work to keep, and pretty. Her mother had been a high fashion model, although not one of the anorexic ones. Her father was still a strikingly handsome man. Each of her three siblings had also inherited these traits. But like all those women who wished they could have more of everything she seemed to have in abundance, she, in contrast, wished she had far less.

The phone rang on the end table beside her, blessedly interrupting her spell of depression. She grabbed the receiver sure the call was her usual Saturday morning call from one of her relatives. Probably her oldest brother. It was his turn to check in on the baby sister who'd dared to move so far from the family's home base in Sacramento.

"Hello," she greeted the caller, still going by the big city rule of not answering with her name.

"Roxie Evans?" a man asked in a honeyed drawl. *Sexy*. Something warm curled through her. The reaction surprised her.

"Have I got the right number?" the man drawled again.

Oh yum! She could listen to him talk all day...all night. She'd heard that voice somewhere, but couldn't quite place who it belonged to. Then she realized she hadn't responded. "Yes." She was glad he couldn't see her blush of embarrassment.

"Dexter Malone. Do you have a minute to talk? Or maybe we could meet for a cup of coffee? My treat."

That was a pretty round about way of trying to finagle a date of sorts with her. Ever since she'd developed far too well at sixteen she'd been dealing with come-ons and all manner of men eager to go out with her, or eager to do far more than that. She felt rather disappointed to face yet another of such calls

"I don't date men I've barely met. And I'm not really interested in dating right now, anyway. But thanks for calling."

She was about to hang up when he said, "I don't believe I said anything about a date. Just talking to you. About a matter having to do with the Ranchers Association."

He actually sounded annoyed that she'd thought he was calling for a date. Her face flamed and, again, she was glad he couldn't see her. "Sorry. I just assumed. Again, sorry."

"Sorry enough to meet me at Moe's Diner? In an hour or so?"

Roxie hesitated. She hadn't yet dated anyone from Sunflower or the surrounding area, although she'd had plenty of offers. After the mess she'd gone through with her ex-fiancé, she was being more careful this time. El Scumbag hadn't hurt her enough to make her stop wanting a happily-ever-after with the right man someday, but she wasn't in a hurry to find him. Actually, she was still forming that inner picture of Mr. Perfect. It was silly even thinking about such a thing. This wouldn't be a real date; he'd made that clear enough. A little conversation, some coffee, maybe some flirting. Her heart would

be safe, and she might have some fun for the first time here in town. She wanted some fun.

"Ma'am?" he asked, sounding concerned. "Hope I haven't offended you in some way."

She found that endearing, and she really liked the way he said "ma'am." It made her tingle in places that were seriously out of practice in tingling. "An hour. Yes, I'll be there." Her heart did a little two-step as she hung up. *What am I getting into by agreeing to meet the hottest, most womanizing man in the area? Not a date, remember?* Still, Dexter Malone's exploits were legendary around here. They'd even made it to the tender ears of the town's supposedly meek little librarian.

Shy. Innocent. So sweet. She smiled at the comments she'd overheard in reference to herself a few times from various men she'd rebuffed for dates. She hurried off to the closet-sized bedroom to find her baggiest jeans and an old t-shirt. Her disguise, as she thought of it. What the men in the area—particularly the county's biggest stud—didn't know was that she wasn't quite so innocent. She didn't go from one man's bed to another easily, but she was far from naive when it came to making love and having a good time. She might even know a few tricks that would curl the big blond cowboy's toes.

Cowboy Hot Stuff sat at the counter flirting with two waitresses—two—when Roxie walked into the diner an hour later. If his dick was half as big as his ego, it had to be enormous. Still, the man could definitely make a woman's heart flutter. With that lean but muscled frame and that oh-so-taut butt encased so nicely in well-worn jeans, he could make a woman quiver in some very intimate places. She ought to know, since it was happening to her right that second. Her clit was so excited by him that it might as well be waving to him and saying "Come here, cowboy. Come play a while."

The waitresses barely even looked in her direction. It didn't bother her. They'd found a boy toy to enjoy and they didn't want to share. Too bad. Roxie was attracted to

the Boy Toy as well. She walked to the end of the counter and said in her best meek librarian's voice, "Mister Malone?"

He gave a final smile to the two fawning ladies in their late twenties, tipped his hat to them as he ambled toward her, smiling. *My, oh my, the man has some serious dimples. And his eyes. Now those were something to truly enjoy. Sky blue and sparkling with sinfully sensual promise.*

He stopped next to her. "Miss Evans, glad you could meet me." He nodded toward a booth at the far end of the nearly empty diner. "That okay with you?"

In answer, she headed for the booth, slid her coat off, and quickly took a seat on one of the red vinyl bench seats. The diner was retro 1950s, complete with jukebox in the far corner and an old-fashioned soda bar. Or maybe it wasn't retro, but these were original fixtures from the 1950s. Whatever. She liked it. She pulled one of the laminated menus from behind the oversized sugar container.

"They've got the best cinnamon rolls in the state here. As big as a dinner plate, thick with cinnamon, and icing so sweet you'll be thinking about it for a week." He eased his six-foot-something body into the seat opposite her. "Coffee's good, too."

"Sounds fine to me. Both." She drew in a deep breath, inhaled his very male scent that was a nice mix of leather, musky cologne, and working man. *Really nice.* She liked his thick, collar-length blond hair, too.

He motioned to the waitresses and called out, "Two coffees, one cinnamon roll and two forks please." He faced her again and winked. "Figured we could share the roll. A bit of a thing like you could never eat all of it."

Roxie smiled, turned and called out, "Make that *two* cinnamon rolls." Looking back at him, she explained, "I have a healthy appetite and, with my metabolism, I won't gain an ounce."

He grinned. "Finally a woman not ashamed to do more than nibble in front of a man."

"Now, about this ranchers association matter," she prodded, curious to what they could possibly want from her. *Maybe a special book order?*

He took off his wide-brimmed hat and placed it crown side up on the table. "Don't know if you've heard anything about it, but the association puts on a big holiday party the weekend before Christmas. Most everyone in the area shows up. Lots of fun. And we hand out presents to all the kids."

"One of the mothers who came in for story hour last Wednesday mentioned it." She pulled a napkin from the container and replaced the menu. That husky country drawl of his was playing havoc with her libido, and her imagination. Obviously she'd gone way too long without dating.

"Course we always have a Santa and a Santa's helper. Don't quite know how it happened, but it appears that I'm Santa this year."

She had to smile at that. "You'll need a lot of padding."

He chuckled and patted his firm abdomen. "Not if I eat very many of these cinnamon rolls," he countered as the waitress walked over with their orders.

The cinnamon roll was huge, bigger than she'd imagined. Maybe he'd been right to request only one and two forks. Good thing she was hungry. "I have trouble seeing you as Santa, even without considering the padding issue."

"Well, you can see it for yourself, up close and personal. Especially if you're Santa's helper."

Roxie gaped at him. "Me? You're kidding, right?"

"Dead serious, ma'am. As a representative of the association, I'm asking you to help us out this year."

Secretly, she thought the idea sounded like fun. She hadn't gotten involved with anything in the community yet. *Would this be a good place to start?* Particularly when she noted the flirtatious gleam in Dexter's eyes. He was definitely up to something. "I don't think..."

"You wouldn't want to disappoint the town's kids, would you? Santa needs a helper to pass out the gifts and candy." He reached over to gently pat her arm as she slowly cut off a piece of the cinnamon roll. "What would it take to convince you, sweet thing?"

Sweet thing? Boy, this cowboy would be in serious trouble with someone like her extremely feminist older sister. Roxie kind of thought his attitude was cute, although he needed taking down a peg or two. He was clearly used to women falling at his feet, doing whatever he wanted, his way. *Not this time, Hot Stuff.*

She looked down at where his hand touched her arm, trying to look timid and worried about such a forward act. It was hard to do because his touch had sent a whole wave of warm sensations flooding through her. He was such a choice hunk. The problem was he clearly knew that and played on that fact. *This time, you'll play by somebody else's rules. My rules.*

"Why me?" she finally asked. "Why can't you have the same woman who did the part last year do it again?"

He pulled his hand away, leaned back in his chair, and chuckled. "Annabelle is pert near as big as house at the moment, expecting twins in December. She's not real interested in waddling around in a little helper's outfit." He slammed his mouth shut, and immediately she knew he hadn't intended on telling her the costume would be precisely as she'd first envisioned: something with a short skirt and a lot of leg showing.

"I just don't think..." Roxie wondered how far he'd go to convince her to help the association. She would do it, of course, but she wanted to play with him a bit first. The cocky cowboy deserved it. Plus she'd been really bored lately.

"You'd look real nice in the costume, ma'am. And just think about how good you'll feel helping with such a worthy event. The kids'll be ever so grateful."

Putting it on a little thick, aren't you? The kids, right! They weren't the ones who wanted to see her in a skimpy outfit. They wouldn't care if a grizzled old woman gave them their candy and presents. She scooped up a bite of roll and watched him follow the progress of the fork to her mouth. She slipped the tip of her tongue out to lick at some icing running over the side of the fork. For added affect, she gave a tiny sigh of delight, something on the order of a woman's moan while in the first throes of ecstasy.

His eyes widened, darkened.

Men could be such fun to play with. But you had to be careful. "I don't normally like to show off my body." She glanced down at her frumpy attire. Then she took the

forkful into her mouth, drawing the empty fork ever so slowly back out, sighing in pleasure again.

He couldn't stop watching her, and she could tell his breathing had quickened. "It's not like everyone will be focused on your costume. It's a party. There'll be so much going on that most people won't even notice you. And the kids will just be after the gifts."

She supposed that was partly true. But she also knew that this here Santa would be watching her every movement, as would most of the single men there. She wasn't overly concerned with that; she just didn't flaunt her figure around on a daily basis. If she were going to strut around half-dressed and get the evil eye from the other women, she wanted compensation. Up front. From this cowboy.

Deciding to get down to wheeling and dealing like her father had taught her, she leaned toward him. "If I agree to do this, what are you offering as incentive? Because, Dexter Malone, I know you didn't invite me here to talk about this without having a plan of persuasion."

"Well, I..." He looked knocked off-kilter by her boldness. Then he grinned and all that cockiness of his came back. "Okay, I'll admit I'd been toying with a couple of ideas."

"Like?" She sat back and scooped up a dollop of icing with a finger, put it in her mouth and slowly sucked it off. *This really was a wonderful cinnamon roll. She didn't even want to think about the number of calories per bite. Good thing she didn't have to think about them.*

His Adam's apple bobbed as he watched her. "Like maybe escorting you to the Winter Dance," he said huskily.

That would be okay, but she felt certain he had a more intriguing offer. "Or?"

He was still watching her finger, mesmerized, not really paying a whole lot of attention to the conversation. "I could take you over my knee and warm your backside. Sort of an alternative method of persuasion."

She blinked, heart immediately racing. "*What?*" She couldn't have heard him right. He couldn't have been talking about spanking her!

He came out of his stupor at her sharp question, and evidently forgot what he'd just said. Instead he said, "Like offering to be your love slave. 'Course that was just some crazy notion that popped into my head." He went back to being fascinated by the fingertip she still held in front of her lips, tapping her mouth in thought.

Hmmm. Love slave. Now that is a much better idea. Certainly better than spanking her, if he'd actually even said such a thing. Still, that crazy idea had sounded sort of interesting. *No! Well, yes.*

"I'll take the second offer," Roxie stated boldly and forced away the thought of spanking. She slid out of the booth and grabbed her coat, regretted abandoning the rest of the cinnamon roll. "I've got to go. Sorry. I'm expecting a phone call."

She hurried away, hoping to get out to her car before he managed to get over his shock and come after her.

"Well, hell." She heard him grumble and then he scrambled in her direction.

"Hey!" one of the waitresses called out. "What about your bill?"

He must have slammed some money on the counter by the register because he snapped, "Keep the change."

Roxie decided to have mercy on him and slowed down as she approached her shiny red, vintage Mustang. He caught up with her seconds later, planted himself between her and the driver's door.

"Mind repeating your answer? Sometimes I have a bit of trouble with my hearing. Don't think I caught the answer quite right."

With a quick glance around to be sure they were alone, she stepped right up to him. He flattened against the car. Before he could say anything else, she went up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear, "The love slave thing. I'm accepting *that* offer." She nipped at his earlobe before stepping back with a serene expression. "I'll admit, though, the other offer was kind of intriguing, too."

"I-I..." he fumbled around, a blush creeping up his neck in a most charming manner. "I-I..."

She took his arm and gently tugged him out of the way. "Relax, cowboy, I knew you weren't serious." Oddly, disappointment threaded through her. It had only been a man's idiotic attempt at kidding around. What a shame.

She pulled open the car door and slid onto the seat. She'd liked the daring idea, even if she hadn't really been serious with her answer either. She'd planned to make him sweat about the problem and ask her nicely a few more times before she agreed to be Santa's helper.

"So when do we start?"

His question jolted her out of her musings and her mouth fell open.

Chapter Two

When do we start? Dexter Malone's question had played over and over all night long in Roxie's head. She hadn't gotten a wink of deep sleep, but boy, oh boy, she'd had dreams! Most of them revolving around Dexter in various states of undress—mainly completely undressed. And the things they'd done! She'd even had dreams of being taken across his hard thighs and having him spank her!

She took a final sip of coffee and grabbed her much-loved black leather coat, putting it on as she raced through her teeny-tiny house. Sunday morning. She really should have visited that church one of her customers had invited her to attend. But her thoughts couldn't seem to settle off the bizarre conversation and the resulting challenge of the evening before. With the intriguing visions that kept popping into her mind, she didn't think she belonged in church today. She didn't want to get caught sitting there, supposedly listening to the sermon, only to have someone nudge her out of her stupor and have her blurt out, "Let's try it with chocolate syrup now!"

She settled into her Mustang and struggled to put the key in the ignition. *Think library. Think re-alphabetizing every section if necessary.* She had to get these visions out of her head. The library would be closed today, of course, so she could attend to many of the small improvement ideas she'd been considering for months. Staying busy today was imperative. If she'd stayed in that small house, the loneliness would overwhelm her, as it had started doing far too often lately. For some reason, being alone in the library was different. Strange as it would seem to most people, she always felt surrounded by friends there. Authors she enjoyed, characters she liked, and she could imagine herself being with them in different times and in different places.

Turning down Main Street, she thought about her family. Successful professionals, lawyers, surgeons, and executives in companies they owned. All of them were part of the well-established movers and doers in Sacramento and San Francisco. She had been part of that type of existence for three years, too, before she burned out at twenty-seven. She smiled to herself remembering how they had practically gone into shock her when she'd announced one day that she was quitting her six-figure job as the public relations specialist for the family's various businesses. Her oldest brother's horrified expression had been priceless. Her parents had calmly laughed it off as just a phase she was going through. And El Scumbag had been livid at her "foolish decision."

She pulled into her parking spot behind the small library, finding herself grinding her jaw yet again. Every time she thought about power lawyer Adam Taylor she nearly ground her teeth into powder. He'd certainly shown his real colors, real feelings during those six months she'd floundered around trying to decide what she really wanted to do with her life. The first decision she'd made had been to end her engagement, which eventually had led to her having to get a court order to make him stay away from her.

Thinking about him still gave her nightmares. He'd actually taken to stalking her in his determination to make her come back to him. She felt so much safer here in Sunflower. It had been a divine intervention—as she preferred to think of it—when she'd run across an ad for a librarian in this small Kansas town. The town council had hired her on the spot when she'd come to interview with them. Evidently they had been trying for months to find a replacement and had reached the point where they considered closing the library. Now, odd as it was to her family, she loved it here.

As she walked to the back door, she smiled sadly. Yes, she liked living here, but she was lonely. It was definitely time to get involved more in the community. She'd had invitations. It was time to accept some of them.

Invitation. A six-foot-something, blond-headed cowboy with laughing blue eyes immediately came to mind. There had definitely been "invitation" flashing at her in his eyes. She'd never even been around cowboys until she'd moved here. This particular cowboy would be a handful. *Oh Jeez.* She instantly pictured him naked. Pictured a nice thick, long dick that she couldn't even get the fingers of one hand to curl completely

around! *Maybe you need to make friends with your trusty dildo again. Find some relief.* But it wasn't a "substitute" she wanted.

She quickly closed the door and locked it, and tried to close her mind to all thoughts of Dexter Malone. She'd start with the history books. It was a large section and re-alphabetizing it by author's last name would definitely keep her thoughts from straying to things she had no business thinking about. She still had no idea why the last librarian had alphabetized books by their titles. *Had she never been in a library before?* The people in town didn't seem to mind, though, so it hadn't been a high priority. It was now. Surely such mind-numbing work would keep her from thinking any more about that hot stud.

Two hours later, as she finished up the history section, Roxie realized the task had only given her more time to think about Dexter. Dexter, that is, as he might have been in various time periods. It mattered little to her fertile imagination that she'd never seen him in less than tight jeans and a shirt. Now she'd seen him as Roman soldier Dexter, looking so luscious in the hard, molded chest and back pieces that enhanced his well-toned chest; in a mid-thigh length leather skirt with slits that revealed muscled thighs; and in shin guards worn over his very nice calves. The Scottish Highlander Dexter, looking oh so tempting in a kilt, Jacobite shirt, knee-high hose and ghillie brogue shoes. Of course, he would be bare beneath the kilt. Although her personal favorite was the Viking warrior Dexter, looking so wild and commanding in skin-tight leather pants, his perfect bare chest criss-crossed with leather bands, in heavy leather arm and leg gauntlets, and carrying a fearsome sword. But she'd modified that part a bit, changing the weapon into an awesome sword used to give many a Viking lady pure pleasure.

Hot! It was far too hot in here. She went in search of the thermostat and tried to calm her pounding heart. Her imagination was way too vivid at times. *Vivid and wicked.*

Fortunately someone knocked on the front door of the library and saved her from lapsing into more wicked thoughts. Puzzled as to who it could possibly be, she hurried through the maze of shelves. Sally Ann from the Drop By and Go stood outside, smiling as Roxie saw her in the window.

As Roxie opened the door, Sally Ann said, "I know it's Sunday, but since I noticed your car in the alley and knew you were here. I wondered if you'd let me check out a book today."

Roxie stepped back so the slightly older woman could come inside. "I don't mind. Actually I could use the distraction."

Sally Ann smiled warmly. "Not a lot to do in a town the size of Sunflower is there? Guess I understand how you might come here on your day off sometimes."

"There were some chores here that I've been wanting to get to but haven't had the time yet." Roxie looked curiously at the pretty brunette. "So what kind of book emergency is this?"

"Book emergency!" Sally Ann laughed. "I like that. Guess it's partly true, too." She grew serious. "Nobody around here knows this, but I'm taking online college classes. I'm determined to learn something beyond how to stock shelves and work the cash register at a mini-mart. I need a better research book on Scottish history."

Immediately Roxie's thoughts jumped back to Dexter in a kilt. She must have blushed or something because Sally Ann asked in concern, "Are you all right?"

For some reason Roxie felt comfortable with this woman she'd shared dozens of quick, casual conversations with since coming to town. And now that Sally Ann had told her something that she'd evidently not told anyone else, she decided to confide in her as well. Just a little, anyway. "I've been straightening the books in the history section. You know how your mind wanders sometimes when you do tedious things?"

"Yes."

"I started seeing a certain cowboy around here as he might look in various period costumes. A Scottish Highlander for instance."

Sally Ann hooted, her brown eyes sparkled in delight. "Let me guess. Dexter Malone."

Roxie blinked in surprise. "Actually, yes. But how—"

"Oh, honey, that man has been the center of pert near every woman in the county's fantasies for years. Been in mine plenty of times, too." She grinned in mischief. "Kilt, I bet. Nothing underneath, right?"

Roxie nodded and further confided, "I've only run into him a half dozen times since coming here last spring. Never in the library. I don't think he's a library kind of man. Anyway, he called me out of the blue last night, to meet him at Moe's Diner. You'll never believe this, but he said the Ranchers Association would like me to be Santa's helper this year."

Again, Sally Ann's eyes mirrored amusement. "Course they do. You're new to town, single, and just about the prettiest thing these old boys around here have seen in a long time." She giggled. "Each and every one of them is envisioning you in that bit of a short skirt costume the helper wears."

"You're pretty! And I've met any number of women in town who are nice looking," Roxie protested. "Besides, no one in town has ever seen me in anything but loose fitting clothing. I purposely try not to—"

Sally Ann nodded toward Roxie's jeans and Roxie gasped in dismay. In her hurry to get out of the house this morning, she'd donned her faded jeans that fit like a second skin. Even worse she'd put on an old t-shirt that cupped her breasts as tight as a lover would. "Well, damn."

"I don't have any idea why you've felt it necessary to hide your figure, but, honey, your plan has never worked. There's not a man in town who hasn't been imagining what lie beneath those baggy slacks you wear sometimes, or those less-than-flattering dresses. And the women haven't been fooled, either."

Sally Ann headed for the history section. "You look more natural in what you're wearing today. More approachable."

That comment caught Roxie by surprise. Had people been so standoffish because *she* looked that way? That wasn't what she wanted at all. "I've been kind of foolish, I guess. It's just that being so well endowed hasn't always been a good thing. I wanted people to see me for more than..."

"Get over it, Roxie Evans! You're a sweet lady with a hell of a body. Some are blessed, some aren't." She spotted a book that must have looked interesting and pulled it off the shelf, and then glanced at Roxie, grinning in mischief. "You don't know about the bet, do you?"

"Bet?"

"Half that association has a bet with Dexter that he can't convince you to be Santa's helper. They figure you're too prim and proper to even consider agreeing to wearing that costume."

Roxie bristled at that. "They'd be wrong then. *Prim! Proper!*" She snorted in disgust, and then realized that was exactly the impression she'd been giving everyone. Maybe she needed a spanking for that reason alone. Her pulse raced. *What was the deal with all these thoughts about spanking?* She'd never been spanked in her life. *Wasn't it degrading, wrong to do to a woman? So why does the bizarre thought of that handsome cowboy taking a hand to my bottom turn me on?*

Sally Ann chuckled and pulled Roxie from her wandering thoughts. "I'd pretty much figured they were idiots. Anyway, Dexter told them he'd have your agreement 'signed, sealed, and delivered' within two weeks."

Roxie should have been furious with both the other ranchers and with Dexter. But she simply found it funny. Again, she decided to confide in her new friend, who she imagined wouldn't be shocked by her outlandish challenge. "I told him I'd consider it, for a price."

"You want to be *paid* for this volunteer thing?" Sally Ann looked annoyed.

"Of course not. I don't need money. Ever." She lowered her voice, even though there was no one else there. "Dexter floundered around trying to come up with something to entice me into agreeing. He even joked about offering to be my love slave."

Sally Ann hooted. "That handsome stud really thinks he's something, doesn't he. Love slave!"

Roxie grinned in mischief. "I told him that was the incentive I wanted. *Him* to be my love slave."

Sally Ann's eyebrows shot up nearly to her hairline, and then she fell back against the shelving, laughing until she cried.

Roxie joined her, relieved. It really was funny, and appealing.

Finally Sally Ann stopped laughing long enough to ask, "After he managed to

close his mouth that no doubt fell open, what did he say?"

"He actually was stunned by my answer, which I really hadn't meant, just so you know. Anyway, when he recovered, he asked me 'When do we start?'"

Sally Ann straightened and went toe-to-toe with Roxie. "You're telling me that you *wouldn't* want Mr. Hot to Trot to do some serious trotting with you? Are you nuts, girl?"

"Actually I would. But this would be wrong." She couldn't tell this new friend how much she'd been thinking about the idea.

"Honey, you've absolutely got to do this! For each and every one of us women in town who'd give our right arms, our right legs, hell, anything for that opportunity."

Roxie stiffened. "I don't want anyone else to know about this. I shouldn't have said anything to you."

Sally Ann smiled gently. "Calm down. I won't tell another soul, but I'm positively overjoyed you shared this with me. And I want to know details—maybe not every intimate one—but enough details to give me pleasant dreams of my own. I'll be surviving vicariously off your enjoyment. Don't let me down."

"I can't really do this. Can I?" She shouldn't even be considering it.

Her friend brushed Roxie's uncertainty aside, took her hand and led her to one of the tables. "Sit. Let's discuss some of the possibilities. You know, I've always wanted to..."

Roxie quietly sat and listened to some very interesting ideas, soon joining in with other ideas she'd read about and was curious to try. Within a few minutes, she decided to shock the cowboy once more and actually pursue this bizarre plan.

Dexter had a forkful of steak halfway to his mouth when his cell phone rang. He glanced across the table in his kitchen at Troy, shaking his head. "A man can't even eat without some problem popping up." He'd spent from dawn until dusk rounding up a few head of cattle that had managed to escape through a hole in the fence in one of the

fields. He felt bone-deep weary and had only wanted a few minutes of peace at dinnertime.

Flipping open the phone, he answered briskly, "Dex."

"Tomorrow night." He heard Roxie Evans say in that soft tone of hers. It was a tone that reminded him of a woman whispering sweet nothings to a man while lost in the throes of making love. Hell of a turn on. He went rock hard.

"Tomorrow night?" He must sound like an idiot, repeating her. It stunned the hell out of him to hear from her. He'd figured after their conversation yesterday she'd steer well away from him. His gaze met Troy's, who eyed him curiously. "You talking about what I think you're talking about?"

"Yes. You can come to my place tomorrow night around 7. I'll plan to feed you."

He thought that was a rather odd way of saying she'd cook for him, but smiled. "Sounds good to me." *Was she really serious about that whole love slave business? Nah, she had to be playing with him.* She'd cook him dinner and then tell him about her decision to go ahead and be Santa's helper, no strings attached. He found that disappointing.

"You might want to bring condoms. I don't have any."

Well hell! His cock swelled so damn fast it was a wonder it didn't burst through his jeans. *Condoms. Bring condoms.* He grinned in anticipation. "No problem, sweet thing."

"Okay then. I'll see you tomorrow night." She hesitated. "Be ready, cowboy. Real ready." She hung up.

Dex flipped his phone shut and glanced across at Troy. His best friend looked real curious about the conversation, and normally they shared almost everything. But this was different. For the first time ever, Dex didn't want to share all that went on between him and a woman. Still, when his truck was spotted parked in front of her house tomorrow night, he figured half the town would know about it before they'd even eaten dinner. Might as well deter some of the gossip.

"I asked Roxie to dinner one night. She just called to invite me to eat at her place tomorrow night. No big deal."

It was a *huge* deal, Dexter bemoaned as he shaved for the second time that day. He'd already showered away the day's worth of dust and grime. Troy had tried to grill him all afternoon about tonight. He seldom got mad, but he'd finally told his friend to back off, and Troy had been surprised. *Damn!* He knicked his chin. For the second time. She was going to think him some sort of incompetent idiot who couldn't even shave properly.

By the time he managed to get dressed and made sure he had a pocketful of condoms, he was a wreck. He'd gone out with and bedded countless women. He could sweet talk, flirt, and entice with the best of men. No woman he'd been with had ever complained about his loving, at least none that he knew of. But this whole "love slave" thing was something new. He felt pressured. *What if I can't perform? What if she stands there—or lies there—naked before me and I can't get my dick up?* Not that it wasn't bursting to life at the moment and eager to do whatever pleasurable tasks asked of it. *But what if it fails me when I need it most?*

As he parked in front of the tiny house right at seven o'clock sharp, Dexter prayed to the gods of arousal not to let him down. His heart pounded while he climbed out and felt one final time in his pocket for those precious condoms. He'd even gotten an assortment. He wanted to make dang sure she got what she wanted.

Roxie met him at the door in a flippy-skirted red dress that skimmed over curves he'd only guessed at and ended just below her butt. Long and shapely legs immediately captured his attention. Of course, his attention quickly moved back up to the pair of plump breasts that threatened to spill out of the low, scooped neckline. He was pretty sure she didn't have a bra on either. He couldn't speak, could only stare.

She looked nervous, too—thank God he wasn't alone in the feeling—but boldly stepped aside to invite him into her home. "I've been waiting for you. Hope you're hungry." Her gaze moved up and down him, and she smiled. "You look good enough to eat, cowboy."

He was certain she'd meant to say "Are you ready to eat, cowboy?" But another look at her eyes and the way they'd darkened to a deeper shade of green made him wonder. Plus there was the fact that her nipples—definitely no bra—were clearly evident now. Firm, tight buds. His mouth watered. He was a nipple man, loved flicking his tongue slowly around them, nibbling them to arousal, and sucking deeply on them. 'Course he was also a leg man, a butt man, and a clit man. Okay, there wasn't an inch of a woman's body he didn't enjoy.

Although they were still virtual strangers, he couldn't resist pulling her hard against him. Old Faithful hadn't let him down yet. His cock had maintained its state of urgent need and he made sure she felt all of it. "You look damn good, darlin'. Fact is I'm not at all sure I could eat right now. Other things are on my mind." He rubbed against her and she didn't resist one iota, which pleased the hell out of him.

She moved even closer, something he'd not thought possible. Those hard nipples were practically imprinting themselves on his chest even through the layers of clothing. "Oh, you're going to like the food I've got ready." She went up on tiptoe and flicked the tip of her tongue over his earlobe, made him shiver. "I'm pretty sure you're going to like feeding one another, too."

Food? Was she serious? He could barely breathe, had trouble thinking straight. Chewing anything would be far beyond him in this state. Still, he couldn't be impolite if she'd gone to trouble for him. "Reckon I'll like whatever you've got in mind."

Roxie's heart had begun racing as she brazenly tried to start this first part of her plan. She'd done outrageous things before, but this was really out there. Yet she'd never felt more excited about doing something. He was such serious eye candy to savor for hours and hours. After this little experiment at being very sexually daring, she might have to pack her bags and steal away in the dark of night. She might not be able to face him again, or anyone else in town. *Oh, what the hell!*

She closed and locked the door, and then took his large, calloused hand to lead him into her living room. All of the three steps it took to reach it, that is. He stared in amazement, possibly horror, at the orange sofa. "Came with the place," she explained, slightly embarrassed.

"Was kinda hoping it wasn't a sign of your taste in décor. It's a tad... well, okay, it's ugly." He tugged off his coat and tossed it on the back of the sofa. Then he spotted the play space she'd made a few feet away with a thick quilt and several pillows. "That looks interesting."

"It's a small area, sorry." She laughed and he grinned in response. "The whole place is pretty compact."

"All the better for cuddling, darlin'."

She liked his sense of humor. It was strange, but she felt comfortable with him already. Sure he could be a flirt extraordinaire and tended to have a cocky attitude most of the other times she'd seen him or run into him. Yet she also knew him to be a hard working rancher who had built up one of the most respected ranches in the area. His men were loyal to him and he treated them well. She'd heard snippets of conversations about him many times. There wasn't a soul in the county who didn't like him, especially the women. He'd make an incredible husband, she was certain of it. But he wasn't the settling down type, or so she'd also heard a number of times. Which was fine with her. After El Scumbag, she wasn't sure she wanted to be tied down either, certainly not treated as a possession. *Okay, time to get down to why he's here!*

"I'll just go get the tray of snacks I prepared. Make yourself comfortable. Take your shirt off if you want. Boots and jeans, too, would be all right." She turned and hurried toward the kitchen, hoping he hadn't heard the nervousness behind her bold statements. "You did bring condoms, didn't you?" She still had trouble believing how daring she was being.

Dexter struggled with her comments about getting comfortable, about removing his clothes. *Damn!* The woman clearly had serious play in mind, and soon. Which he figured was okay with him, too. He grinned, sitting down to tug off his boots. "Yep, got a few with me."

By the time she came back into the room he'd shucked off all but his briefs. So far so good, too. His cock hadn't shrunk down a millimeter even when faced with a bolder, sexier woman than he'd ever before encountered. Fact was, he felt damn proud of the long, thick bulge straining against his briefs when she walked closer. At the

immediate widening of her eyes and the tiny smile of appreciation, his cock made a desperate plea for freedom.

She forced her gaze away from him and set down a tray with a rather odd variety of foods on the sofa, right next to where he'd tossed the condoms. She laughed, a husky, sensual as hell laugh. "You must have amazing stamina."

He took her hand and tugged her down with him. "I'm no lightweight when it comes to making love." As she sat there on her knees between his spread legs, he watched her breasts rise and fall with anticipation. The nipples still thrust firmly against the bodice of her dress. He reached out to cup each breast. "Nice pair of hooters, sweet thing. Really nice."

"You've such a way with words, boy toy," she countered, moving into his hands, sighing in pleasure at the gentle massage.

"Boy toy?" He grinned and eased back. "Guess I can live with that. Now, how about you take that dress off. I'm feeling mighty overdressed here."

Roxie felt his gaze on her as she reached back to unzip the dress. Before she could change her mind, she let it slip from her shoulders, let it pool around her knees. She faced him in nothing but a pair of white lace panties embroidered with a butterfly design. The design went right along with the butterflies currently fluttering about in her stomach. She hadn't been with another man since Adam, and he'd never found her very exciting. But it was pretty clear that Dexter Malone did. That exquisite cock of his appeared to grow even thicker, even longer right in front of her eyes.

"Hot damn, darlin'," he groaned huskily. "Never been much of a butterfly man before, but now I'm awfully fond of them."

She giggled in relief. He had such a quirky way of making her feel good. Eager to tease him now, she eased her legs apart enough to slide her hands between the thighs and show him something she didn't think he knew about. "Crotch-less, too."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "You're killing me. Much more of this and I won't last long enough to get to know one another better before I have to take you."

Absolutely delighted with his response, Roxie wiggled out of the dress and threw it aside. "Not yet, cowboy. I've got something special in mind first. Something that I've

been wanting to try for a long time.”

She reached for the tray of miscellaneous food items and set it down within easy reach. “Pick something.”

Dexter really preferred to just stare at her breasts. Well, actually, no, he’d rather be holding those babies, even settling his mouth over one of them. But she appeared determined to play a bit first. Fine. He’d control the big fellow a spell longer and let her play. He handed her two items: a small bowl of strawberries and an opened can of chocolate syrup. “I don’t know what you have in mind for these, but I like them both.”

Her eyes sparked in delight, which in turn made him feel damn good about pleasing her. She studied his chest for a minute and he wondered if there was something wrong with it. He didn’t think he had any scars or any flaws to cause her so much distress. Finally he said a little defensively, “If my chest bothers you so much, I can put my shirt back on.”

“What?” She blinked at him, and then shook her head, her shoulder-length auburn curls bouncing all over. “Oh, no. I like your chest. You just have more hair than I’d counted on.”

It wasn’t like he was a hairy ape, for Pete’s sake. Only a spattering of blonde hair ran along the center of his chest. “Never been a problem before to a woman.”

She worried her lip for a second and seemed to make a decision. Suddenly she shoved a strawberry in his mouth with such force that he nearly swallowed it whole, gagged to keep from doing so.

Horror marred her pretty face. “I’m sorry! I only meant to have you nibble on it, and then I was supposed to nibble on it. This was supposed to be sensual...not almost lethal.” Tears misted her eyes.

Recovered now, he realized what she had planned: feeding and tasting games as foreplay. Gently he set the bowl of strawberries aside. “How about I take charge of this little feast?” He thumbed her tears away, smiling in reassurance.

She bobbed her head, but still appeared horrified at what she’d done. Suddenly she looked up at him in such concern and surprised the hell out of him by saying, “Maybe I do deserve a spanking. For almost killing you.”

Dexter's blood heated and raced through his veins. He'd immediately pictured her sweet bottom stretched over his lap. Then he recalled the idiotic teasing he'd mentioned the other day; at the same time he'd suggested this whole love slave business. "I didn't mean it, darlin'."

Oddly she looked disappointed. "I'm sorry. Of course you were joking. I'm sure you don't go around spanking women." Her face flamed.

He tenderly touched her cheek, making her look at him. "Yes, I was joking around. But, in truth, I have spanked a few women. Sometimes because they plain needed an attitude adjustment. Mostly, though, just for fun. It can be a really nice turn on."

He moved his thumb so that it smoothed lightly over her lips and he heard her breath catch. "I wouldn't mind at all spanking you a bit. Letting you find out for yourself how exciting it can be. If you're game, that is."

Her eyes widened and she mulled it over. It sort of tickled him that she thought everything over so much.

"Yes, I believe I would like to try it," she said quietly.

Well, hell! She continually surprised him. Before she could change her mind, he helped her move next to his stretched out legs. Then she slid across his lap, squirming forward until she had her bottom over his right thigh.

"Is this right?" She looked back at him, cheeks pink, but determined to do this correctly.

"Perfect, darlin'." He fingered the edges of the tiny lace panties. "Normally I give bare bottom spankings. But I don't think these little scraps are going to lessen either your pleasure or mine."

She buried her head in her arms and he heard a muffled, "I'm ready."

Every square inch of her looked tense. You'd have thought she was in for a serious walloping and had braced for it. He almost chuckled, but he didn't want to embarrass her. This was a brand new experience for her and he wanted it to be a good one. Gently he smoothed his hand over her creamy buttocks until she seemed to settle down. Then he lightly smacked one cheek with his open palm. He quickly followed that

one with a slightly harder smack to the other cheek.

Head still buried, she moaned, "Oh. Ummm."

He picked up the pace and spanked her lightly, then harder, then lightly for several minutes. Her smooth cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink and he was getting a serious hard-on. Unsure if he could do anymore, he asked huskily, "Had enough, sweetheart?"

She wriggled back off his lap, reached back to touch her bottom, and smiled. "Interesting. It stung just a little. But mainly it made me hot all over."

She rubbed her butt. "Warm. Tingly." Then she smiled sassily and reached around to touch between her legs. "Inside, too."

Dexter fought the powerful urge to lay her down right then and take her. But he remembered all the planning for tonight she'd done. He had to hang on a while longer. "How about we try something else now?"

"Really? You're still up for these little games?" She looked so excited he couldn't have denied her anything. But it would cost him.

In answer, he guided her to lie down beside him. As she watched him curiously, he picked up the can of chocolate and ran a tiny line of syrup around each nipple, trailed a line down her abdomen, stopping just above her curly auburn bush. She quivered and sucked in a breath as he set the can down. At this point his cock was throbbing something awful, frantic for thrusting deep within her. But he couldn't do it yet. She was waiting, watching, anticipating. He'd finish this game for her, even if it killed him.

Carefully he shifted her legs apart so that he could kneel between them. Too late he remembered the crotch-less panties that he'd been reluctant to have her remove. He kinda liked them. Now, as her legs spread apart, he stared down at the beads of moisture that already dotted her mound. He shuddered, called upon every ounce of willpower he had left and looked beyond the place he so longed to enter. His heart raced as he bent over to use the tip of his tongue to lick at the chocolate. He started just above her bush and licked up to her navel.

Roxie moaned beneath him, writhed in pleasure as he moved inch by inch up her

body. "Oh, oh, oh, Dex!" she gasped, her fingers threading through his hair. He stilled for a second, realizing that was the first time she'd called him by his nickname. He liked it. He liked her.

"Hang in there, darlin'. I've got more chocolate to lick off." He went back to the task that he'd definitely begun to enjoy. By the time he got to one of the nipples, she trembled with obvious need. Her hands held him to her as if to never let him go.

Finally he'd licked away all the chocolate and she looked up at him in such a fevered state of desire that he wanted to rip off his briefs and ram into her. That's what his cock definitely wanted. But a spark of sanity remained in his mind and he shifted back, and then stood. She watched him intently as he stripped off the briefs and threw them aside.

His hands shook as he reached for the condoms. He briefly considered just slipping on one of the kind he usually used, a regular old condom. Then he thought about how special she'd wanted to make tonight and reached for one of the kind he'd never used. He opened the package and grinned down at her. "Bought these special for you. Supposed to have some kind of ribs for stimulating a woman. They're even berry scented."

Her pretty eyes glistened again, which tugged at his heartstrings. "That was so thoughtful of you." She reached to remove her panties, stopping when he shook his head.

"Keep them on, since they're open and all. I kinda like them. Sexy. Hot." Dexter eased down between her legs once more as she spread herself even wider. "I'm not sure how gentle I can be now. I've been aching for you ever since I left home. And this little chocolate game... Well, I need you pretty bad."

"Come here, cowboy," she purred, lifting her hips in further invitation. "I've been wanting that huge cock of yours deep inside me for far too long."

A second later, he rammed in harder than he'd intended, but she didn't appear to mind at all. Her inner muscles went right to work massaging his length as he remained still for a few seconds. To his absolute delight, she moaned out, "Those ribs are wonderful."

He couldn't remain still any longer. His arms were braced on either side of her and he pumped, and then pumped harder, faster. She reached up to curl her hands around his neck, smiling in encouragement. He didn't need encouragement. What he needed was willpower, so he wouldn't end this too soon. He had none at all.

"I can't take it slow. I just can't," he gritted out, continuing to pump repeatedly.

Her legs locked around his back and she arched up to meet his thrusts in her own desperation. "I don't want slow."

Taking her at her word, he thrust over and over, breathing hard, panting, sweating. At last her body rose to meet him a final time, stiffened, and she screamed out, "Oh God! Oh God! Ohhhhhh God!" Her warm juices surrounded him and she collapsed beneath him.

Her climax drove him on. He took her hard, deep until he grunted out his own powerful release. "Damn, Roxie! So damn good!"

Roxie held Dexter closely as he trembled with the last of his orgasm. He was still half aroused inside her. *Amazing. The whole experience had been amazing.* And fun, even if she'd screwed up the strawberry thing. She stroked his hair as his head rested on her chest, and thought she could easily enjoy fun, games, and sex with this man forever. Which made her stiffen in surprised shock.

Instantly attuned to her change in emotions, he eased back to pull out of her. He shifted to sit back on his haunches and they just looked at each other for several seconds. Finally he said, "This love slave thing...I like it."

Again he'd lightened the moment and she smiled in mischief at him. "I'd have to agree."

Although he looked reluctant, he stood and started dressing. She didn't move, just took the opportunity to savor each movement he made. He was nicely toned, lean but not thin, muscled but not in a bulgy kind of way. She'd dream about this night for a while.

Shoving on his boots, he grinned down at her. "Been enjoying the show, darlin'? That's okay, because I've been enjoying watching you lying there all nice and naked but for those sexy little panties."

Suddenly she felt guilty about insisting on this love slave matter. She opened her mouth to tell him she'd be Santa's helper and not hold him to this game. But he stopped her by shaking his head and saying, "How about we take this to my ranch next time? Maybe this Friday. Plan to stay the night, at least. Maybe bring toys."

He grinned crookedly. "Or I can supply them. Don't have anything now, but I imagine I can wrestle up one or two."

Roxie considered saying *no* for just a split second. Then she returned his crooked grin and said, "Your turn to supply the fun."

Chapter Three

Dexter's thoughts kept turning to toys, specifically something Roxie might find enjoyable. He didn't much care what they were. The joy for him was in being with her, watching the way she responded, giving her whatever pleasure he could. She'd surprised the hell out of him. First with the whole challenging him on his ridiculous suggestion of offering himself as her love slave, a challenge he knew she hadn't really meant. He sure was glad she hadn't backed away from it, though, when he'd called her on it. And, second, she'd surprised him with the strawberry and syrup thing. He wasn't exactly sure who had gotten the better part of that deal. And, oh yeah, the spanking play! *Can't forget how much fun that was!*

"Are you listening to me?" Franklin pressed, sounding thoroughly annoyed from where he sat in one of the booths in Moe's Diner.

"Well, you might want to repeat the last part," Dexter said, not really concerned that he'd missed out on any part of whatever the association's president had been droning on about. He picked up a mug and took a sip of coffee, waiting. He had better places to be than meeting with this man.

"It's been over a week now since you agreed to ask Roxie Evans about the Santa's helper job. Has she agreed to it or not? We need to know." Franklin's bulbous nose had reddened along with his face in his irritation.

Dexter looked around the diner, nodded a greeting to a pair of ranchers at a nearby table. "It's not a firm agreement yet, but we're getting there. You don't need to worry."

"When it comes to getting you to follow through on this, yes, I do need to worry.

"He pinned Dexter with a questioning gaze. "You *have* actually talked to her about this, haven't you?"

Riled about being doubted, Dexter put down his coffee and stood. "I said I'd talk to her, and I have. You can pay for the damn coffee. I've got better things to do than be lectured by you." Like stopping by to see Roxie and reminding her about tomorrow night. Like running into Kansas City and looking for some adult toys in a store he knew about.

Libraries were supposed to be quiet places, but Sally Ann was laughing her pretty head off and making Roxie wish she'd never said a word to her. She hadn't meant to tell her new friend anything about her night with Dexter. Somehow the whole nearly choking him to death with a strawberry had come out. Which was what Sally Ann was currently laughing about.

Foolishly thinking she'd get her friend to quiet down, Roxie said in a near whisper, "When he recovered, he trickled chocolate syrup on me. Then he licked it off." She absolutely would *not* mention the spanking incident. That was strictly between her and Dexter. Even at the thought of it, she felt moisture building between her legs. She'd liked the feel of his hand on her bottom; at least the light spanks had been very nice. Actually, if she were honest about it, the slightly harder spanks had excited her even more.

"Chocolate syrup!" Sally Ann had gone from laughing to shouting. "Honey, you make me sooooo proud."

Roxie felt a blush creeping up her neck as she tried to smile weakly at an elderly woman searching the paperback rack at the end of the checkout counter. Fortunately the woman had just walked up and hadn't heard the strawberry part. "I'm not telling you another thing. Ever."

Sally Ann took Roxie's arm and forced her to follow her around the counter and to a private corner out of earshot of the older woman. "Yes, you will. Living vicariously

through you, remember.” She hugged Roxie. “This’ll have me dreaming sweet fantasies about that hunk for weeks. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“How about dreaming about some other cowboy? Maybe that foreman of his? Troy what’s-his-name.” Roxie didn’t at all like the idea of her friend—or any other woman—having lusty thoughts about Dexter. *Which is totally stupid. It isn’t like you have any kind of real relationship. Still...*

“You like him, don’t you? Really like him.” Sally Ann looked stunned, and then worried. “He’s not a settling down kind of guy, honey. Don’t starting getting your hopes up.”

“I’m not the settling down kind of woman, either,” Roxie snapped back, barely aware of the front door having opened and closed. She was too distressed about the very thing she’d been starting to worry about: falling for her cowboy. “I’ve already survived one womanizing man breaking my heart. I broke our engagement, and he couldn’t accept it. He was so possessive about me that I finally had to get a restraining order because he started stalking me. Which didn’t stop him. So I left town.”

She drew in a steadying breath, mortified that she’d blurted out so much of her past. “I’ve been burned, as they say, and I’m not interested in anything more serious than fun and games now. Maybe forever.” But that was a lie, because in spite of how she’d been hurt, she still wanted that elusive happily-ever-after.

Dexter exited the library as fast as he could and hoped neither of the women had spotted him. What he’d overheard made him sick. Roxie Evans was a sweet woman, caring about others. Learning that she’d been hurt bad by another womanizer like himself worried him. Except that he’d never physically or emotionally hurt another woman. He showed them a good time—a real good time—for a spell, and then they parted ways. Sure there’d been a few that wouldn’t have minded marrying him, but even they had gotten over that foolish notion and were still his friends. He’d make a rotten husband, just like his father had been.

He strode briskly back to his truck. He needed to think about what they were doing. He damn sure didn't want to hurt Roxie. She was still vulnerable from that piece of shit—who'd ended up stalking her. *Stalking her!* Making her life so bad she had to move halfway across the country. Maybe they all needed to rethink this Santa's helper job. No way was he going to let her get hurt, by him or this silly association thing.

Suddenly she was beside his truck and knocking on the window, looking worried. He lowered the window. "You okay, darlin'? You're looking a bit pale." He had a real bad feeling that she'd spotted him leaving the library.

"You overheard me talking to Sally Ann, didn't you? Now you don't want anything to do with me, do you?" She appeared to be in a strange mix of moods: embarrassed, outraged, and distraught. She stepped back toward the sidewalk, worrying her lower lip.

His gut churned. Seeing her upset like this really got to him. He hoped to hell he didn't screw this up. "Not so, darlin', about the not wanting anything more to do with you," he countered gently. "I hate like hell what that sonofa... what that other man did to you, and I don't even know all the specifics."

He closed his eyes a second in an attempt to calm his fury with that low-down scoundrel. Still, he had to be honest with her. "Roxie, I've been running mighty hard from the whole marriage idea for a long time now. Don't know if I'll ever be changing my mind about it."

Her reaction wasn't what he expected. Instead of sad about his admission, she looked pissed. "Have I even remotely asked you to think about marriage? We barely even know each other!" She blew out a breath and started to walk back to the library, mumbling about men and their ridiculous notions.

Relief settled over him. He'd much rather have her mad at him than near tears, which was what he'd suspected she'd been when she approached the truck. "As long as we're straight on this marriage thing," he called out to stop her. When she faced him, annoyance pinching her pretty brow, he added, "I'm still interested in pursuing our little agreement, if you are." He held his breath for her answer. For some reason he didn't understand, he prayed she wouldn't turn him down.

She stood quietly a few seconds as if weighing it all in her mind. The woman was a definite thinker. A planner. Like that little food thing she'd come up with a few days ago. He'd never run into a woman like her. She was a refreshing change. Fun. Worth a man's loving for a lifetime. A notion that surprised the devil out of him and made him a tad uneasy. He'd never thought that about any other woman.

Finally she reached her decision and smiled the smile that reached her eyes. The smile that made him feel like picking her up and hugging the gentleness from her and right on into him. "Friday, right." It was a statement and not a question.

Dexter released that tension filled breath he'd been holding. He swung out of the truck and went to her, cupping her face in his hands. They'd never kissed. They'd done a whole lot more, but they'd never kissed. He aimed to change that right now. She didn't resist at all as he leaned down to kiss her. Within a second he wanted more than that, much more. He sensed she wanted it, too. But she deserved better than being pressed almost intimately close to a cowboy on a public street. A cowboy such as him with a pretty wild reputation.

He stepped back and touched her cheek. "Still okay with toys?"

She looked relieved that they were back to normal. "Your treat, right?" With a sassy grin and a sexy sway of her hips, she went back to the library.

"Hot damn!" He had a sudden feeling that he'd finally met his match. *Kansas City. Toy store. Now.*

Tearing around his house to make sure everything was ready, Dexter realized he'd never gone to such bother for a woman. Sure he'd had many out to his place over the years. Some had even stayed a week or so before they'd parted ways with no hard feelings. He'd never cared two cents worth if things were picked up, the kitchen clean, or even if his bed had been made. Today he'd practically arm-twisted Troy into helping him clean up the house. Troy had thought him insane, but had helped him anyway because they were that kind of friends. His buddy had even gone into town and picked

up a meal for two from the diner so Dex could heat it up later.

Almost seven o'clock, he noticed on the mantel clock in the great room. He was freshly showered, wearing his best jeans and favorite shirt, and he'd even polished his boots. And he'd nicked his jaw shaving again. Much more of that nonsense and his pretty face would be all scarred up. Yep, he was nervous from his cut up face down to his cock. Poor thing had been tortured all day with Dex's varying moods. It had all but exploded in full blown arousal a few times as he'd thought about Roxie's bottom lying over his lap, about licking all that chocolate off her sweet body, and about their too short lovemaking. He definitely wanted that part to go a lot longer this time.

He strained his ears yet again, just as he'd done off and on for the last half hour. *Was that her Mustang heading up the gravel drive? Or just another of the hands going off to town for the night? Her Mustang! Pulling up right out front. Finally.*

For a second he considered going for nonchalance in answering the door. Then he gave up on that foolish idea. He wanted to see her. He practically tore the door from its frame at the same time she started up the porch steps. They stared at each other, both obviously uncomfortable, and then she smiled. And his nervousness faded away.

"Welcome to the Devil's Spur," he said casually, walking out to meet her. He didn't care if any of his men were staring with binoculars out the bunkhouse toward the main house, which Troy probably was. He wrapped her in a hug he'd been aching to give her and then kissed her. Kissed her so deeply that Old Faithful made his presence known between them.

Her lips curved into a smile as he released her. "Guess we don't need to play around with that line 'Are you glad to see me, or is that a gun in your pocket?'"

He felt himself actually blushing, and he never blushed. "Guess not. It's pretty damn obvious."

She gave a dramatic shiver. "Hint, hint, cowboy. It's cold out here."

Immediately he motioned her inside. "I'm planning on warming you up real well tonight, darlin'. Don't you worry."

"Same goes for you, boy toy." She sashayed into his house, stopping in the tiled entry area. "Oh, this is beautiful, Dex." She sniffed the air and grinned at him.

"Somebody's been seriously cleaning today. You didn't have to, you know. Unless it was your housekeeper, of course."

He took a small bag she carried, pleased that maybe she had actually brought something with which to stay the night—he'd been afraid she wouldn't. Then he took her coat and hung it next to his heavy jacket on a hall tree. "No housekeeper, although I really need one. Just never seem to get around to hiring one. Troy and I picked up a little. No big deal."

Roxie had both eagerly anticipated tonight and dreaded it. She'd never done anything like this before, never purposely pursued having fun with sex. Never wanted to share her fantasies with anyone until now. She still hadn't quite figured out why *this* cowboy? All she knew was that from her first encounter with him at Moe's Diner he'd been on her mind and starred in her nightly dreams. But she enjoyed more than just his body, and that body was something pretty special. Now, as she looked around the main room of his house, she felt like she'd learned even more about him.

She strolled into the middle of the enormous great room and felt completely at home. Big, thick beams stretched across the space of the open ceiling. One long wall was almost entirely made of windows with open blinds, and the view looked over a beautifully landscaped lawn complete with what must be gardens and a gazebo. Another wall held a stone fireplace with a thick, carved mantelpiece. Shelves were cut into the walls alongside the fireplace and filled with hundreds of videos and dvds, some exquisite pottery bowls of various sizes, and rodeo belt buckles. The furniture consisted of several sofas and two over-sized chairs, all thick cushioned and very comfortable looking.

She was still taking it all in when he said, "I can't take credit for the furniture. My Mom helped me pick it out one time when she was here visiting from Florida. She got tired of the hodge-podge of worn out stuff I'd accumulated."

That was the first personal thing he'd ever mentioned and Roxie latched onto it. "Did your parents retire to Florida or something? I guess I thought your family had been around here for a while." She walked over to sink into one of the chairs. "Oh, very nice."

He smiled and went to stand by the fireplace, looking into the flames of the fire he'd built earlier. "Yeah, this was originally their ranch. I took it over when I was eighteen, after my Dad up and split one day. Mom helped me the best she could for a few years, but her health turned bad. She went down to live with her sister in Orlando around ten years ago."

"You took over this ranch at eighteen? Any help from siblings?" She hoped he wouldn't clam up just yet. She really wanted to get to know him better, but she didn't want to reciprocate much with her background. Their worlds were so different.

He faced her but she knew his sharing was coming to a rapid close. "No siblings. But Troy and I've been friends since we were toddlers. He somehow ended up moving here when my Dad left, been here ever since. I made him a minority partner in the Devil's Spur a couple years back."

He walked over and bent down to sit on his haunches in front of her. "Your turn, pretty lady. Spill a bit about your family. Fair is fair."

Roxie had always been uncomfortable talking about her family. They were so powerful and almost larger-than-life in California, and she was the black sheep who had somehow failed to thrill in that whirlwind of fancy parties, political games and one-up-man-ships. She reached out to touch his five o'clock shadow gently. "Let's just say they're all big dogs and I'm the scrawny runt of the litter."

Evidently he saw something in her expression that warned him this was a subject she really didn't want to talk about because he simply nodded, then grinned. He climbed to his towering height and took her hands to pull her up. "Okay, scrawny, let's go eat."

"I'm *not* scrawny," she huffed, smiling.

"No, you're not. You're one of the most beautiful women I've ever run into." His heated gaze moved over her in appreciation. "All soft and curvy in the right places. Not one of them stick thin women a man can't lay against without getting poked by a bone."

She went all hot inside at his rather strange compliment. "You're not butt ugly either, my boy toy."

He chuckled. "Speaking of toys. I picked up a few yesterday. Been thinking about them ever since, about pleasuring you with them." He moved against her, holding her so that she could clearly see that he'd been—and was—thinking about her. "You real hungry right now?"

Roxie threaded her arms around him, snuggling closer. "Starving. For you."

Immediately he scooped her up and started striding out of the great room and down a hallway. "Then enough chitchat, darlin'. We'll save the food for later, take care of a much more demanding appetite right now."

She couldn't believe he was carrying her, but she loved it. And she didn't care at all that she had barely eaten all day in nervous anticipation of tonight. "Going to tell me what you got to play with?" she asked as he carried her into what was obviously his master suite. Again, she loved the room. "Now *that* is a serious bed!" She gaped at the enormous bed in a corner of the large room done in shades of blue and gold.

"I'm a man who rolls around a bit at night, don't like falling off a dang narrow bed." He dropped her onto it, grinning. "'Sides, it's real nice for playing on, if'n you know what I mean." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

Roxie thought she should probably be annoyed that he'd hinted at having brought other women here, but it didn't really bother her. She was the one here now. "I think a lot of play space can be a very good thing. And, cowboy, I'm ready to play." With that she pulled her sweater off over her head, and almost felt his heated gaze watching the bounce of her breasts barely contained in a white lacy bra.

"Damn but that's a real nice view," he husked out. He, in turn, quickly unsnapped his Western cut shirt and shucked it off.

"Have I mentioned that I really, really like a man's chest. Particularly yours." She watched his chest rise and fall in a deep breath of pride as she went up on her knees to undo her jeans. Then she looked down and realized she still had her heels on. She scrambled around so that she was lying down and kicked them off. "I might need some help tugging these tight jeans off."

He was there in an instant, eagerly taking over the task. As he started pulling them down, he sucked in a breath at the sight of her tiny white thong. "I swear, darlin',

you've got some of the hottest underthings! And I sure as the devil like 'em." He pulled the jeans off slowly, apparently savoring each inch of her that he bared.

"You need some help undressing, cowboy?" she purred, preparing to get up and help him.

He toed down his boots, pulled them off, and then stripped down to his navy briefs in what had to be record time. Then he stood there in all his male magnificence grinning. "Okay. Time for fun and games." His eyes sparkled with all the excitement of a child at Christmastime. "I'll let you pick the first one." He retrieved a box from the long triple dresser nearby.

Roxie's heart raced as she looked into his box of toys. She had a couple of vibrators, but anything beyond them was part of some fantasies she'd dreamed of occasionally. No specific toy, mainly just the idea of playing at sex. Eagerly she reached inside and picked up an odd looking thing that consisted of what looked like two yellow balls joined together and attached to a cord. "What is this?"

He sat on the bed beside her, leaning over to kiss her first. A kiss that had her clit pulsing and her heart pounding. Just as she was seriously getting into it, he pulled back to say, "They're called royal balls. We'll slip them into your vagina before we do some other playing. They'll make you tingle all over, darlin'. Make you damn near dying by the time I pull them out and slip my cock inside you instead."

She stared at them and smiled. "Like Ben Wa balls. I've never tried them, but I've read about them. Always wondered..."

"Wonder no more. Let's try them out," he said, looking real eager to make use of them.

She looked at the other items in the box and then decided they could get to them later. "Okay, I'm game." One item in particular she would insist on using on him. Some men might not go along with it, but she was pretty sure Dex would.

He grinned, his gaze swept over her again, eyes glimmered with approval. "As much as I enjoy the sight of you in those sexy little panties and bra, why don't you slip them off."

"Only if you get rid of your briefs, too." She didn't wait for his response as she

quickly shed the items he'd mentioned. He shed his briefs at the same time. His cock proudly danced around for attention when she looked his way again. "See, he's much happier now."

"He'll be even happier before long." He picked up the royal balls, swung them back and forth for a second, and then motioned her to lie back. "Spread your legs, just a little. Yeah, that's good. Now lift up a bit." He chuckled in delight as he saw moisture dotting her lower lips. "Thought maybe I'd have to add some lubrication first, but it appears you're pretty damn excited already."

"Got a real nice look at that big dick of yours, didn't I? Of course I'm excited," she teased, blushing a little as he moved between her legs. She held her hips up and tensed a bit while he gently began nudging the balls into her vagina. As they slipped by her tingling clit, she sucked in a breath of pleasure. "Oh my. That's very nice."

When the balls were completely buried within her, he carefully pushed her back to the bed. Even that slight movement made them move. "Ohhhhhhh," she said on a little gasp.

He had a crooked smile filled with sinful mischief. "Want to try something that I figure will really get them balls a-going? Get you good and excited real quick."

Roxie was concentrating on the strange feel of them inside her, only half listening to him. "Sure."

Suddenly he moved off the bed, making the balls bounce merrily around. She trembled. Then he flipped her over onto her stomach and somehow managed to shift a small pillow beneath her stomach, raising her bottom up. The balls were going wild and she had trouble following his intentions. Until his hand landed on her bare bottom, not hard, but enough so she felt it.

"You're going to spank me?" she asked incredulously, although she found the idea kind of intriguing, especially with the little balls adding to the mix.

"I'm going to pinken that sweet butt just a bit. Mainly aiming to take you right to the edge, darlin'." He held her lightly in place. "Going to give you what they call a good girl's spanking."

Roxie lay there with her bottom raised up for his attention, with a pair of magical

balls deep inside her, and with her whole body anticipating the spanking. He didn't let her down. His hand landed over and over with a light sting. He aimed for the bottom curve of her cheeks, a spot that made the balls bounce with enthusiasm. Her cool cheeks became pleasantly warm.

Within seconds she was squirming and moaning in ecstasy, in need. "Oh, Dex." She sighed and shoved her bottom out for more of the pain/pleasure spanking. "Ooooooooooooo. Ooooooooo. Oohhhhhhhh." She pushed back to meet his hand, gasping, "I've been such a gooooood girl."

A wave of orgasm swept through her and she collapsed against the bed. She gave a contented sigh. "That was very nice. Very, very nice."

"Not as nice as this will be, darlin'" In the next instant he shifted her legs apart enough so that he could pull the balls out of her vagina.

"Ohmygawd!" She gasped at the sensation of them sliding by her still highly sensitized clit. Their removal had only served to make her want something back inside her...want him.

She turned her head to plead for that only to find Dex already in the process of putting on another of the ribbed condoms. Their gazes met and she quickly scooted back until her bottom was thrust high and waiting for his attention.

Dexter grinned in delight, gave her sassy bottom a smack. She shot him a how-dare-you look, although it was spoiled by her giggle. Then he gripped her hips and placed his long and ready cock at her entrance. She studied him for a second before dropping her head to await the joys of what would come next.

"Feel me, sweet thing," he said as he rammed deep within her. "Feel me slamming into you. Taking you."

"Oh, yes!" Her vaginal muscles tightened eagerly around him. She pushed back against him, rotated her hips, used her muscles to massage his throbbing length. "Yes! Take me. Ohhhhhh...uhhhhhh. Yes!"

Even though they'd both talked about making their next lovemaking session longer, neither were patient. He took her hard and fast. His balls slapped against her cheeks with each forceful thrust. She, in turn, moaned in desperation. Her response

made him groan and grunt in his frantic race to the point of explosion. Within moments he panted, held her to him and rammed home in wild urgency until finally she screamed out his name. Until finally he stiffened and ground out his own release, spilling into the condom until it threatened to spill over. He pulled out with the last of his sanity so as not to fall like a dead weight upon her and crush her.

He collapsed on the bed next to her, breathing hard. She, too, dropped in contented exhaustion, but he pulled her next to him. Draping an arm around her waist, he held her to him and wearily said, "I swear, I used to have more patience. There's just something about when I sink into you... I want you so damn bad that I can't control myself." He nuzzled her neck. "Just let me rest up a bit, and then we can go another round. Okay?"

She seemed willing to simply lie here beside him. "A few minutes sounds good."

He kissed her neck one final time before drifting off to sleep with a mumbled, "I think I love you, darlin'."

Chapter Four

As Roxie came slowly awake and opened one eye, the alarm clock beside the bed flashed 12: 15. She stiffened in surprise. That few minutes of rest they'd both needed had turned into nearly four hours. Obviously their bodies had needed the rest. She'd certainly been running on little sleep, anxious about tonight, and been worried about the strength of her feelings for a man she barely knew. Suddenly she froze as a faint memory tickled her mind. *Had he actually said something about falling in love with her?*

Her pulse raced and her thoughts seemed to go in a million different ways at once. *Had he just been lost in the moment? A man trying to say what he thought a woman wanted to hear after they'd made love?* But he'd sounded almost asleep; surely he hadn't been alert enough at that point to come up with a line like that. *What if he really was becoming emotionally involved with her? Good thing? Bad thing?* How did she feel about him? Okay, sure she couldn't get enough of his body. He was some pretty terrific eye candy. Great fun in bed, too. Adam had been zippo in both areas, but then she didn't want to compare Dex to anyone else—especially not El Scumbag.

She contemplated getting up to seek a place in Dex's house where she could think. But then she felt the warmth of her living blanket: Dex spooned against her back, an arm draped over her chest, one of his hands cupping one of her breasts. No. She'd just stay right here. Then her stomach growled and ruined everything.

Dex's hand gently squeezed her breast and he settled even closer behind her. "I'm not much of a host. Starving my guest."

She rolled over to face him, smiling at how hot he looked to her with stubble

already appearing on his nicely carved face, with eyes heating once again. He really had the sexiest eyes. "You fed *one* of my appetites." She reached down to embrace his half erect cock, which immediately started growing within her hand. "I'm not saying *that* appetite is completely satisfied yet."

He grinned and glanced to where she moved her hand slowly up and down his fully erect cock. "You keep that up and we still won't make it to the kitchen. Be a waste, too. Troy fetched us some of the world's best beef stroganoff from Moe's Diner. Thought we could warm it up when we got hungry." As her hand got busier, he grimaced. "Darlin', if you don't stop that, I'm not going to be letting you out of this bed."

Roxie's thoughts turned to a particular toy that had caught her eye earlier in his special box. She gave his cock one final squeeze and released him. "Well, come on then. Feed me." She scooted off the bed, went to his walk-in closet and snagged one of his shirts to put on. "Hope you don't mind."

"It looks a hell of a lot better on you than me," he said easily, walking over to kiss her. "Kinda liked you in the bare, though."

Stepping back, she snapped the shirt closed up to breast level. When she looked up he had grabbed a pair of jeans and tugged them on, grimacing as his fully aroused cock had to be adjusted to zip them up. "You're going to need your strength, cowboy. I've got some plans for you. It's *my* turn to play. If you can handle letting me be in charge for a while."

His eyes heated yet again. "When it comes to lovemaking, I'm an equal opportunity kind of guy." He took her hand to lead her from the room. "What exactly do you have in mind?"

"You'll have to wait and see." She smiled at him when he glanced in her direction. "Let's just say I'm going to be completely in charge."

Handcuffs! Dexter chuckled an hour later as she tugged the furry handcuffs he'd bought as more a joke than anything out of his toy box. *Well, damn.*

"It's sure nice that you've got a headboard with all those round rods." She

dangled the cuffs and frowned a bit. "Guess maybe you've done this with other women."

"Nope, darlin', never done this before. They're brand new." As if suspecting what she wanted him to do, he climbed onto the bed and shifted around until he was stretched out in the middle, naked once more. He raised his hands above his head. "Actually, I don't even know why I bought them. But now I'm kinda glad I did."

Roxie had already shed his shirt as well and scrambled onto the bed beside him. She looked eager to try this out and quickly cuffed his hands to the center post. He watched her quietly, anticipating. She didn't keep him waiting.

She knelt between his legs and took gentle hold of his erection. Slowly, she licked his penis as though it were an ice cream cone. Licked repeatedly up the length on one side and then the other. Finally, she ran her tongue around the head, once, twice.

His balls tightened and he sucked in air through clenched teeth. "Damn that feels good."

She smiled up at him and blew softly on the wet tip. His hips shifted and his whole body tensed. He was way past ready. Then she sucked his cock deep into her mouth, working her lips and her tongue over its length. He couldn't breathe. He shifted again, groaning.

As he dragged in a desperate breath, she reached down to cup his balls and gently massaged them. His hips jerked upward. "You're killing me!" he gritted out.

Stopping to give him a sassy smile, she went back to sucking and pulling his dick. She massaged over and over, wicked woman that she was.

"Oh darlin'! It's coming. Oh damn, it's coming!" His hips thrust upward one more time with the force of his release.

She held on, took it all, sucking until he lay spent, panting. To his surprise, she whispered, "Thank you." Then she moved to release him from the handcuffs.

The second Dexter was free he grabbed her to him. His mouth covered hers and she didn't resist at all. His tongue slid along her mouth until she opened, and he thrust it inside. Their tongues mated with as much passion as in the sexual act.

When he finally pulled away, he carefully laid her down beside him, feathered his fingers over her breasts, and toyed with the hardening nubs. "So, darlin', have I convinced you yet to be Santa's helper?"

"Had enough of the love slave thing already, huh?" she teased, reaching to toy with his nipples.

"Never." He leaned over to lave one nipple. "But the association's pressuring me. Franklin wants you to go in for a costume fitting within the next couple of days."

"Short skirt, right? Shows a lot of leg?" She lightly pinched a nipple.

"Ouch," he said, with a wicked grin. "I didn't pick the outfit. Not saying I don't want to see you in it, though."

"Wuss. That was only a teeny, tiny pinch." She pretended to be in deep thought. "I'm just not sure you've really convinced me yet."

"How about I spank your butt for real and get you to finally make up your mind?"

. "You spanked me earlier."

"No, I played at spanking earlier. Believe me, when I give you a *real* spanking, you'll know the difference." He smoothed her hair away from her face. "But I'm not in the mood for really burning your butt. I'm more in the mood for burning up these sheets."

"Well, if you insist..."

All too soon it was Sunday afternoon and Roxie needed to get back to town. The time had passed so fast, although most of that time had been spent making love. In his bed. In the great room. In the kitchen. Even once in the barn when he'd taken her out there to show her some new kittens. But now as she gathered her things into the small bag she'd brought, she felt incredibly sad. What had started out as a game had ended up well on the way to something serious, at least for her.

"Are you sure you have to go, darlin'?" Dex walked up behind her to slip his arms

around her waist.

"It's been wonderful, my cowboy," she answered, turning to face him. "But I've got a real life to get back to and work tomorrow. Also my family is probably frantic because they couldn't get hold of me yesterday. I can't believe I left my cell phone at home."

He frowned at that. "You came all the way out here without a cell phone. What if you'd had car trouble? This is winter. What if we'd had a sudden storm?"

"Your ranch is only about ten miles out of town. I'm a grown woman. I'd have found a way to deal with car trouble or a storm."

"Stand still, just for my sake. I really need to do this for my own sanity." Then as she did as he'd asked, he reached around her and swatted her jean-covered bottom hard several times quickly.

"Hey! That hurt." She rubbed her bottom the instant he stopped.

He looked unrepentant. "You deserve a serious spanking for being so careless. But I'm going to let you off easy this time. Just don't go running off without your cell phone next time when you come out here."

"Who says I'm coming again," she snapped only partly irritated with him.

"I do. I want you here for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day." His eyes had softened now and mirrored his seriousness.

She was surprised. She hadn't known what she'd do for the holiday. It would certainly be lonely in her tiny place. But this seemed like a major step for them, and it was odd, considering how he'd made it pretty clear he wasn't a settling type of man. For that part, she'd made it clear—although it had been a lie—that she wasn't looking for another serious relationship. She didn't know what to say.

"If you'd rather, I'll come to your place." He clearly wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. He wanted them to be together.

"Here, if you'll put up a tree. Or let me put up a tree."

"How about you come home with me next Saturday night after the Christmas party? We can put up a tree together."

She should say no. Instead she caved. "Okay, I'll be Santa's helper. And, yes, I'll

come here to help with decorating a tree."

Roxie had barely opened the door to her house when she heard the phone ringing. She knew who it was even before she lifted the receiver. "Hello," she said slightly breathless.

"Roxie? Where have you been all weekend? We've been calling and calling," her mother said in an annoyed rush. She was always in a rush, always had somewhere else to be. But it was her duty occasionally to check in on the daughter who had run away. This must be *her* weekend.

"Sorry to have inconvenienced you. As you can tell now, I'm alive and well. So you can go to whatever social event is planned for the afternoon." She wasn't in the mood for the usual vague conversation. Any of her siblings, even her father, she could visit with for up to a half hour before everyone began feeling uncomfortable. Her mother, well, they topped visitation-wise at maybe five minutes.

"Your father wants you home for Christmas. You can come here next Friday. That way you can visit with your whole family. I'll make the arrangements."

"Thanks, but no." Roxie wished she had stayed at Dex's, without her phone.

"Don't be silly. Of course you'll come here. We're your family. Families get together for the holidays."

Yes, they were her family. That didn't mean they enjoyed each other's company. At least it hadn't seemed like any of her family had enjoyed *her* company in a long time. She wasn't in the mood for pretending to be happy with them this year. "No, Mother. I'm *not* coming."

"Why would you possibly want to stay in—what is it? Sunflower?—for the holiday? If it's because of your job, surely you can take off for a week this time of year."

"Maybe I could and maybe I couldn't. I'm not going to ask. Besides, I have plans for next weekend and for Christmas weekend. But, again, thanks for the warm offer."

She started to hang up, but her father joined them on the line.

"Roxie, you haven't been back since you moved away last spring," her father said, trying to lay down a guilt trip. She wasn't falling for it. "I'm sure you can change your plans."

"No, Dad. It's not that I can't change my plans, I *won't* change them." Her "warm and loving" parents were giving her a headache. They'd been on El Scumbag's side after she'd ended the engagement, right up until she'd left town. They'd thought her stalking accusation was nonsense. "I'm finally settling into the community. Next Saturday I'm helping with the ranchers association's Christmas party. Then I'm spending Christmas with a new friend."

"Bring her with you. I'm sure she would enjoy our big holiday open house, and there are several other parties you can take her to," her mother inserted impatiently.

"*He* wouldn't like it at all, none of it." Actually, she didn't know, but Dex didn't seem like the kind who would enjoy hours of mindless conversations, constant false smiles and unmeant compliments. She hated it, had never liked it.

"He? Surely you're not seeing someone there! Adam—" her mother said in horror.

"Adam is *not* a part of my life any longer." Roxie was proud of herself for having not screamed the statement. They would never see their beloved golden boy as anything less than wonderful. "I'm involved with a much better man now. Anyway, I'm not coming for Christmas. I've got to go." She hung up, having had her fill of talking to people who didn't really listen to her.

"So how'd the weekend go?" Troy asked Dexter the next morning as they rode into town in Dex's truck for supplies. "Was it worth all the housecleaning?"

Dexter had missed Roxie ever since she'd left the ranch, and it worried him. He'd even had a feeling that he'd mumbled something about falling in love with her at one point. *Had he really said it? Had she heard him? How did he really feel? Damn.* He'd

never been in this kind of mess before.

"That good, huh," Troy said, smirking.

"Yeah, we had a good time." A great time, which he'd like to repeat. A lot.

"I've never seen you so quiet after a one-nighter, or a two-nighter. You're usually running on an adrenaline high. The high of a well-satisfied man."

Dexter didn't like this conversation. "Roxie is *not* a one-night kind of woman. She's a real nice lady." Okay, she was one hot lady at times. *His* kind of hot lady.

"You've fallen for her, haven't you? Well, shit! Never thought I'd see the day when the great Dexter Malone would be thinking about settling down." Troy chuckled. "With a sweet little librarian."

"Have I said anything about love?" Dexter questioned in irritation. What really irritated him was that he thought Troy might be right. Maybe the mighty had finally fallen in love. Normally that idea would have scared him, would have made him back straight away from the woman. This time he'd rather run straight to Roxie. "Damn. What the hell am I going to do?"

Troy chuckled again. "Reckon you need to tell the woman. See how she feels. If'n she feels the same, well, I suppose you best be shopping for a diamond."

By Saturday night Roxie was a wreck. Her entire family—to her astonishment—had hounded her all week about wanting her to come to California for Christmastime. It was almost like they were terrified that she'd marry someone in little town Kansas and they'd never see her again. Which, sometimes, was a thought she toyed with—not the idea of getting married, but the idea of staying forever away from her family. The marriage idea would be nice, but she didn't really see it happening. Dex hadn't even called her again until this morning to make sure she still planned to be Santa's helper.

Santa's helper! As she stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, she couldn't believe that she'd agreed to wear this outfit. Or believe that the association actually had someone wear this in front of children. She'd managed a few modifications, but this

was the best she could do.

With a final sigh of acceptance, she headed back into the living room. It was time to go. In spite of the Playboy version of Santa's helper costume, she'd been looking forward to tonight. Several townspeople she'd barely spoken to when they visited the library had come in this week to say how happy they were that she would be there tonight. It seemed the people now saw her as a part of the community. She'd finally realized that she'd been the one staying at a distance, not them. She'd been living on the edge of a fence for too long while she decided whether to stay here or whether to move back to California. The choice had been made. She preferred Sunflower.

Wrapping herself in a long, heavy coat against the biting wind of the first snowstorm of the year, she smiled for the first time in days. Her weekend with Dexter had been great fun—actually very special. Even if they became only friends, she would find a way to accept that. It would be hard at first she suspected, seeing him around town and watching him go out with other women. Her heart twisted at the thought. *Okay, better not to think about that right now.*

Pulling Roxie from her musings, someone knocked on her front door. She hurriedly went to peek out the peephole and found Dexter standing there. Actually Santa stood there. And he looked so adorable all stuffed around the belly, a far cry from the lean and muscled man she knew him to be. The full white beard and thick white eyebrows that had been glued in place beneath the stocking cap, too, made her smile. Her spell of sadness melted away.

She opened the door. "Where's your sleigh, Santa?"

"Couldn't get Donner and Blitzen to leave the warmth of the stable. Even Rudolph wasn't all that excited about getting out tonight." He motioned to his pickup parked out front. "The big Ram will just have to carry Santa and his helper to the VFW Hall."

"I was going to drive," she countered, pleased that he'd come for her but still uncertain about where they stood at the moment.

His eyes expressed confusion. "If you're coming out to the Devil's Spur

afterward, I can't see much point in that."

Her heart raced. So the tree-trimming thing was still on. Maybe he wasn't really done with her. Maybe he'd actually been too busy this week to call her. Now she felt childish for having basically pouted because she thought... Well, she'd just plain been thinking too much. "I wasn't sure if we were still going to do that."

He didn't say anything for a second, and then something seemed to dawn on him. He reached out to gently touch her cheek. "I meant to call this week. There was one problem after another to deal with on the ranch. I won't even go in to listing them. Too damn depressing. But Troy and I cut down a tree yesterday and got it put up in the great room."

She really did feel foolish. "I didn't mean to add to your problems."

His mouth was on hers attempting to kiss her, but the beard got in the way. He grumbled in annoyance as he stepped back. "Well, hell. Can't even give you a good liplock in this outfit."

Roxie beamed with pleasure at his consternation and at his word choice. He such a way with words. "Am I staying the night? Or will you bring me back after we decorate the tree?"

"Pack a bag because I'm keeping you with me until late Sunday. I'd keep you longer, but I know you have a job to get back to."

Rosie had never seen such chaos, or enjoyed herself so much. The VFW Hall was filled to capacity with what appeared to be every person who lived in the area. Cookies, cakes, pies, candy, appetizers, and bowls of punch covered tables along one wall. A handful of women attempted to oversee the tables. One of the elderly ladies who frequented the library and always sounded rather gruff took over the role of keeping the men from trying to spike at least one bowl of punch. Roxie had even seen her use her cane to swat a pair of cowboys away. Soon enough they came back and kissed her wrinkled cheeks and she blushed fiercely, beaming in delight as well.

By nine o'clock the party was winding down and Roxie's feet in the red high heels she'd chosen to wear were killing her. And she'd done so many knee bends to get presents out of Santa's bag that her thigh muscles were screaming. But to watch Dexter charm each and every child as Santa had been a pure pleasure. She could listen to his deep rumbling Ho, Ho, Ho forever. Actually, she enjoyed listening to him, period. Looking at him, too.

As a final little girl around two years of age scrambled up the small stage to visit Santa, Roxie stood to the side and simply watched his magic. At first the girl had been hesitant, encouraged on by her nearby parents. Then Dex's charm came out as he scooped her up with a, "Well, aren't you a little sweetie!"

She tugged on his beard and let it pop back into place with a giggle. Dex merely laughed, a deep, rumbling sound and made his big, over-stuffed belly shake. She giggled again.

The mother moved next to Roxie. "He's the best Santa we've ever had. Everyone was kind of concerned about Dexter doing it this year. But he's perfect at it." She fanned her face, leaning closer to add, "And that laugh of his! Oh my, it sure is sexy. Not that the kids think that."

Roxie had to agree, with everything she'd said. "You're right. I've never seen a Santa with such charisma for the young and the old." The best part was that she would be going home tonight with that hot, sexy Santa. She looked forward to undressing Santa. Right down to the bare.

As the little girl hurried back to her parents, thrilled with the candy cane she held in one hand and a small doll in the other hand, Dex winked at Roxie. She went to his side and he pulled her down onto one knee. "So, little darlin', what do *you* want Santa to bring you this year?"

Roxie glanced quickly around to make sure there wasn't anyone standing close to them. "Something long and thick and hot. Something that has amazing power to do wonderful things." She wiggled her bottom against him, smiling in satisfaction when she felt the stirrings of the part of him she referred to.

He placed a hand next to her bottom. "Such naughty thoughts, and in a public

place. I'm thinking Santa's helper needs a spanking for such naughtiness." He gave her a light pat. "Right after that, Santa just might have exactly the present she wants."

She wiggled against his hand. "Want to hear some more of my naughty thoughts, Santa?"

"Later. Definitely want to hear them later."

Dexter hadn't even removed his Santa suit to start a fire in the fireplace beside the still undecorated tree when they got home to his ranch. And Roxie still wore her helper's costume as she tuned the radio to an all-Christmas music station. Stepping back from the fire, he thought she looked mighty cute in the short-skirted red velvet dress with white fur trim. More sexy, actually, than cute. He had been glad that she'd modified the fairly revealing dress with its low-cut bodice by adding a white top with a lacy collar underneath. Before they'd become involved he'd looked forward to seeing all of her lusciously displayed—just like every other man in town. Now he thought more along the lines of him being the only one who should see a lot of—or all of—her nice, plump breasts. And he'd been a little uneasy with the expanse of her long, shapely legs revealed by the short skirt. But she'd been careful to never just bend over and give others a view of things they shouldn't be seeing. Again, he aimed to be the only man seeing such sights.

She turned from the radio and smiled at him, something sinfully promising. The air stilled in his lungs for a second. "Sure enjoyed tonight's party. More'n ever. 'Course it helped having such a pretty little helper."

"It was the best Christmas party I've ever been to, far better than those stuffy affairs my family puts on every year." She walked over to him and nodded at the eight-foot tall Scottish fir. "You picked out a beautiful tree. I'm assuming you have decorations."

"A bunch. Mom left all of her decorations with me, but I haven't put up a tree since she moved away. Never wanted to until now."

Her eyes sparkled with excitement and he knew she was getting ready to ask about starting on the decorating. He'd been thinking about something else, though, ever since their little teasing session at the Hall. "Before we get to either the decorating, or the hubba-hubba, Santa needs to take a certain helper with naughty thoughts over his knee. Warm her bottom a bit." He wondered if she would play along with him.

She looked thoughtful for a few seconds, and then prettily pouted. "Santa's such an old stick in the mud. I was just having fun with him."

Dex felt a grin spreading beneath his beard. She was definitely the woman for him. He took her hand and moved to a straight-backed chair that had been in his family since he was a kid. It had once been a very well used piece of furniture. He sat and pulled her over his velvet-covered lap.

She scooted forward until her hands were braced on the floor. Dex watched the sensual wiggle of her bottom, enjoying the way the short skirt rose nice and high. It left him with a very pleasant view of those long legs and her small feet in the hot red heels she hadn't kicked off yet. He pushed the skirt and the multi-layers of white slips that served to fluff the skirt out over her back. His heart pounded as he stared down at her sweet bottom encased—okay barely encased—in a pair of red lace bikini panties. He had to clear his throat twice before he could speak.

"I'm thinking this bottom needs to turn a nice shade of red, like the panties. Needs to be warmed up good." He went to pull down the panties and she cooperated by lifting up enough to let him do it.

"Christmas red, huh." She tried to look back at him, but she'd let her long hair down and couldn't see through its veil. She gave an irritated huff, which he smiled at. "Warmed up? Well, it is an awfully cold night."

Such a trooper. She'd just agreed to whatever he wanted to do. Damn he loved the woman! Unable to resist any longer, he smacked her buttocks, one and then the other. A second later he did it all over again, slightly harder.

"Oh Santa," she sighed, shifting on his knee in obvious growing excitement.

After that, Santa took absolute delight in spanking the helper he now knew he

loved with all his heart. He swatted those plump little cheeks lightly for several minutes, listening to her growing arousal: the way she sighed, the small moans. He spanked harder and harder until her bottom had turned a light shade of red. She was wiggling by then, even doing some arching and bucking. But she didn't beg him to stop. This was new to her and she was testing both of them.

Dex went right on spanking her, although lighter again, and heard her return to moaning and sighing in mounting pleasure. His cock had hardened, too. He was getting pretty close to doing some moaning of his own. So he figured it was time to move on to more intimate things.

He gave one final swat to her bottom curve. "Time for Santa's special gift."

She blew out a trembling breath and then scooted off his lap before he could even help her. For just a moment she reached back to rub at the low sting. "Thank you, Santa. For attempting to correct my naughty ways." Then she all but jerked him to his feet. "You failed, though. Because I'm thinking some *very* naughty thoughts now. About that 'special gift.'"

He chased her to the bedroom, listening to her giggle in delight, wondering how he'd ever gotten so damn lucky to find her. Wondering how the hell he could keep her?

Chapter Five

Evidently he couldn't keep her. Three days later, Dexter stood staring in shock at the "Closed" sign on the Library door. Cold air blustered around him; snow fell steadily. He'd gotten tied up with problems on the ranch again and he hadn't called Roxie since she'd left his ranch Sunday night. He'd been working damn hard, fallen into bed each night and went right off to sleep. Dreaming about his lady. Because of those dreams, he'd driven like a crazy man to get into town first thing this morning. Now she was gone. He'd already been by her house, which had held no sign of life either. *Damn.*

He turned back to his truck at the same time Sally Ann drove up and yelled out her lowered window, "She's gone, Dex."

"Hell, I can see for myself that she's not here," he grouched, stepping off the sidewalk and nearly losing his footing. "She's not at her house, either."

She leaned out her car window, snow falling all over her dark hair. "Her parents showed up unexpectedly yesterday and all but dragged her with them. To Sacramento." She wiped moisture off her face. "They wanted her at the family home for Christmas real bad, I guess. She'd told them 'no' last week, but they don't seem to take 'no' for an answer real well."

His heart sank like a rock. He'd never felt so depressed or so frustrated. All his planning for a Christmas with Roxie had been wasted time. "If she hadn't really wanted to go with them, she'd be here. She's a grown woman. Makes her own decisions. Moved all this way away from them, didn't she?"

"Dex, don't—"

"Don't what? Don't hurt because she left town and didn't even bother to call me,

then or since? Don't wish I'd stuck to my usual routine: love 'em and leave 'em?" He couldn't think straight. Everything in him felt raw with pain. He just wanted to get back to the ranch, where he could hole up and bury himself in chores he'd planned to have his men do while he spent extra time with Roxie.

He yanked open his truck door and climbed inside even as Sally Ann called out, "You're being a jerk about this! Not much better than her ex-fiancé, if you ask me. He emotionally abused her—like her family does—and then stalked her when she called off the engagement."

She let Dex absorb that a second, then added, "She got drug off by her folks. Sure she could have said 'no' again, but they're her folks and she loves them...warts and all. So what does the man who supposedly loves her do—and it's plain as day you do—when he learns about this, he stalks, too. Only he stalks the other way from her. In a damn fit!" She closed her window and drove off, but he'd seen her shaking her head in disgust.

He slumped against the seat and stared blindly out at the worsening weather. Yes, he loved Roxie. But this whole "loving someone"—really loving her, not just enjoying sex with her—idea was a new experience for him. It appeared he'd already messed up by not feeling immediately sympathetic for her being taken away by her family. Problem was he'd secretly wondered how long a big city, wealthy woman like her would stay in a place like Sunflower. It didn't have any of the things she would have been used to doing: dining at fancy restaurants, attending plays or the opera, shopping at ritzy stores or even a mall. What did *he* have to offer her? Sure he had one of the biggest ranches in the state, it ran in the black, and was worth a pretty penny. But, still, it was a ranch. And he was a good old country boy.

Damn. He was having himself one of those pity parties he'd heard women talk about. This wasn't like him. He either needed to figure out how to convince her to be with him or find a way to let her go. Feeling as disgusted with himself as Sally Ann had been, he pulled out and sped off not paying a whole of attention to the driving conditions.

Roxie sat perched on one of the elegant but uncomfortable chairs in her parents' exquisitely decorated living room and stared at yet another decorator done Christmas tree. Each ornament was tasteful, expensive, and placed in a perfect spot. Her parents had never used the same decorations twice that she could remember, never even personally picked out decorations. Christmas in the Evans' house was quietly elegant. The parties were catered by the best of the caterers in Northern California. They hired a string quartet to play Christmas music in the background, rather than simply turning on a radio station like she'd done at Dex's house. No, Dex's *home*.

She heaved a miserable sigh, missing him terribly. She could have called him the second her parents arrived in Sunflower, but she hadn't wanted him to be forced into riding to her rescue. They were her problem and she needed to see one more time if she could make them understand the woman she was now, the woman she liked being. But she should have called him at some point since arriving here. Only after getting here, she hadn't known what to tell him. She planned to be back in Sunflower for Christmas, no matter what her parents said. She'd be with Dex for Christmas...if he'd still have her, that is.

"There you are, honey," Adam Taylor said casually but without warmth as he strolled into the room as if he belonged here. "Your mother said I'd probably find you in here moping around the Christmas tree."

Again, her parents had betrayed her. They'd allowed a man she wanted nowhere near her to come into their home. And her 'loving' mother had even pointed him in her direction. She allowed all her frustration with them to come out in her voice. "I'm *not* your honey. And, in spite of what my parents may think, you're *not* supposed to be within 100 feet of me, remember?"

Why her parents believed his version of them breaking up, she'd never understand. He was perfect in their eyes: a partner in a prestigious law firm, an up-and-coming politician. But she'd seen the less than perfect side of him. She saw it now, in the possessive look in his eyes. Something about him seemed even less stable than

the last time she'd seen him. He actually frightened her.

Even as she thought that, he walked over to her, completely ignoring what she'd said about staying away from her. He snorted. "That little bit of nonsense has been handled. Now, come here and give your fiancé a proper kiss."

Her heart raced in panic. His expression was one of you'd-better-not-disobey-me, grim determination to be in control. "I'm *not* your fiancé. And I'm telling you to leave my parents' house," she said with as much courage as she could muster. She didn't like the look in his eyes.

His tolerance with her snapped. He grabbed her arm so hard she'd have bruises, jerked her off the chair, and tugged her roughly against him. His mouth slammed down onto hers. Although she struggled, he held her firmly in place.

Finally she managed to bite his lower lip and he released her. His eyes were wild in fury. Then his carefully manicured hand turned into a fist and he hit her cheek. Hard enough that she fell backward to the floor as pain exploded on her face and her eyes filled with tears.

She glared up at him, her hand over her wounded cheek. "*Get out! Not!*" Just speaking caused her great pain, but she didn't think he'd broken her cheekbone.

"You can't speak to me that way, you slut. You should consider yourself lucky that I'm still willing to marry you." He reached for her again, his expression crazed.

She kicked at him and he dodged the action. She'd had all she would take from him. Her voice rang with anger as she bit out, "My parents may think you all but walk on water, but I know you for the piece of slim you really are. I would *never* marry you. *Never. Get out* before I call the police!"

"What is going on in here, Roxie Evans?" her mother questioned in annoyance as she and Dex's father walked into the room. "Why are yelling at poor Adam?" The question faded away as they both immediately stopped in shock at the sight of their precious Adam looking murderous above their trembling daughter on the floor.

When her father saw the red mark on Roxie's cheek, he became truly angry for the first time that Roxie could remember seeing. He barreled across the room and stepped between Adam and his daughter, looking down at her for a second. "Do you

want to press charges against him?"

"No." She should, but she really just wanted to never see him again. Returning to Sunflower should take care of that.

Her father appeared uncertain about her decision, and then he gave a curt nod. He glared back at Adam and jammed his finger forcefully into the younger man's chest repeatedly, "I'm seeing to it that restraining order is filed again. And if I *ever* see you anywhere within sight of my daughter again, I will see to it that you lose your license to practice. I will sue you for every cent you have now or will ever have." He shoved the man back toward the hallway. "If I were a better man, I'd beat the hell out of your sorry ass. *Leave. Now.*"

Roxie could only sit watching in amazement, and in pride. Maybe her family wasn't quite as bad as she'd begun to believe. Even her mother looked uncertainly at her, as if she wanted to apologize but just didn't know how. She didn't come to her daughter, though. She simply stood there and finally said, "It appears you were right about Adam." Then she turned and walked back the way she'd come. The sad thing was that Roxie hadn't expected anything else from her mother.

It was her father who helped her up and who pulled her into his arms and hugged her. She couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. "Roxie, I'm so sorry. I feel like such a fool for not believing you before." He hugged her a final time. "You'll be okay. You're the strongest one in this family. My pride and joy."

Tears stung her eyes. She'd always thought she was his biggest disappointment. "Yes," she said, having to swallow down emotion before she could continue. "Yes, I'll be okay. But I'm leaving, Dad. Today. I have to get home to Sunflower."

He set her away from him and searched her eyes for a second, and then he nodded. "You're going back to this cowboy you've been moping around for since we dragged you away. You love him, don't you? Really love him."

As scary as it was to admit because she may have already lost him, she said, "Yes. He's really special. You'd like him, too, if you'd ever give him a chance."

"Dexter Malone has quite a reputation as a man who likes women. But I hear that he's become a different man in the last month." When she would have raged at

him, he held up a hand. "I'm your father, and I love you. There was no way I would let you move so far away without keeping some kind of eye out for you. At least for a while. Until I knew you'd be okay, which I think you will be now."

"Call off your private eye, Dad. Today. I'll forgive you this one time, but don't do it again. Trust me." Roxie was angry that he'd sent his man to watch after her, and to investigate Dex. But she also felt loved, finally.

He gave a curt nod. "Today. And just so you know, I've also learned that your Dexter Malone is highly respected statewide as a rancher. The man is smart, too, although he doesn't like to show it off. That ranch of his, combined with investments he has made, make him worth a hell of a lot more than us." He straightened his shoulders and smoothed his tailored jacket. "We'd better go make flight arrangements."

As Roxie stood holding back the silk drapes at her bedroom window, she stared miserably out into the night. If she were back in Sunflower, she knew the sky would be pitch black and the stars would sparkle like diamonds. She noted dully how the sky here was dark but with a haziness due to all the city lights. The stars could barely be seen. She'd never known there could be such a difference. She preferred the night sky as it could be seen in the smaller town. She hadn't been able to get a flight out until tomorrow morning, Christmas Eve. Of course her father had offered to hire her a private jet, but she'd decided against it. Call her chicken, but small planes flying over the mountains scared her. She didn't want to take any chances on an accident keeping her from being with Dex again.

She desperately wanted to call him and to hear his voice. A glance at her watch told her it would be almost midnight back in Kansas. He'd told her once that he normally went to bed around ten during the workweek. Ranching was exhausting work and even with a half dozen ranch hands, Dex did a lot of the physical labor himself. He got up before the sun most of the time to begin chores. She really shouldn't bother him now. But she walked over to her bed, grabbed the phone on the nightstand, and

punched in his number.

Several rings later Dex answered sounding out of breath, like he'd hurried from somewhere to get the phone, "Devil's Spur." He turned away from the phone a second to call out, "Hang on, Bambi, I'll be there in a minute."

He hadn't been asleep, and he wasn't alone. Roxie's heart sank. He sounded energized, and she remembered him being that way when they were playing around. She could barely hold the phone. "Never mind, wrong number," she mumbled and hung up.

She'd been a fool to think he'd wait around for her to call him or to come back to Sunflower. Like her father had said, Dexter Malone had a reputation with women. *Love 'em and leave 'em.* Evidently he'd left her and moved on to another willing woman. Bambi.

A tear trickled down her cheek and she put the receiver back in the cradle. She didn't think she could stay in Sunflower and see him dating another woman. Before she'd fallen in love with him if they'd gone their separate ways by mutual agreement, she might have been able to handle that. Not now. Still, she needed to go back there and arrange to have her stuff moved. Quit her job, too. That thought made her realize how much she'd come to enjoy working in the small town library, and getting to know the townspeople. She wasn't sure where she would go, but she couldn't stay there. And she couldn't come back here.

Dexter had recognized Roxie's voice just as she'd hung up on him. He'd immediately tried to find out the number she'd called from, but it was blocked. *Damn. Why did she hang up?* He stared helplessly at the phone, certain things had just gotten worse even though he didn't know why.

"Dex? Are you all right?" Bambi asked as she stepped into the kitchen where he'd gone to answer the phone.

Bambi! Hell fire! He suddenly remembered calling out breathlessly to Troy's

girlfriend after running up the basement stairs. Roxie had jumped to the wrong conclusion. She hadn't even given him a chance to explain, not that he would have thought he needed to explain. But Roxie had clearly thought him breathless from doing the deed with another woman. The idea made him angry. She should know him better than that. But then they'd only been going out less than a month. And she knew about his former reputation with the ladies. With the way things were going between him and Roxie, he'd have to be reviving that reputation, because it appeared that she might not want anything more to do with him. *This whole love business was pure hell.*

"Dex?" Bambi asked again.

"I think that was Roxie," he said, feeling again as if he'd just been wasting his time. He'd decided to stop moping around as he waited for her to come back. He'd asked Bambi to help him wrap the near roomful of gifts he'd bought for Roxie. They were almost done, but it had taken them hours. Well, they'd taken time out to eat and do a few chores. They'd run out of wrapping paper and he'd been sure his mom had left some in the basement. Now he had a mountain of gifts and maybe nobody to give them to.

He slammed his fist against the wall in frustration, something he'd never done before. "We're finished," he said wearily. "Thanks for your help. Thank Troy, too, for letting me take so much of your time from him."

"But there's still..." Her protest faded away when she noticed his defeated expression. "Are you giving up again?"

He really didn't want to talk about the situation, didn't want to think about it. He would, though. Sleep seemed to be a thing of his past, at least peaceful sleep. Once he'd gotten over Roxie skipping out without even calling him, he'd started planning a special Christmas whenever she managed to come back. He'd never bought so many presents in his life. He'd never looked forward to Christmas as much. But if she could make such a snap judgment about him, not trust him, did he really want a future with her? Would she always be waiting for him to return to his womanizing ways?

"Just go home, Bambi," he finally said. "I'm tired. Need to go to bed."

She stood hesitantly for a minute, and then finally gave him a pitying look. She

grabbed her coat from the back of a chair, slipped it on while looking as if she wanted to say something else. Fortunately she didn't, just turned to walk out the back door. He felt certain she'd go straight to Troy and tell him what little she knew had happened. Troy would, of course, come marching back here to call him ten kinds of fool for acting this way. Tell him he needed to go to California and get the woman he loved back. He'd been telling him that for days now.

He didn't want to butt heads with his friend. He just wanted to be alone. That wasn't going to happen if he stayed here; he knew Troy too well. So he'd go for a drive for a spell, let Troy find him gone, and give up and go back to his small house and crawl into bed with Bambi. He sure did envy the man. He'd much rather be settling into bed with Roxie than heading out into the wintry cold night.

Damn deer. That was the last clear thought Dexter had before slamming on the brakes, sliding on the black ice, and holding on for dear life as his truck rolled over and over. When it finally stopped upside down in the ditch, he was pinned to the seat by the seat belt, being smashed and nearly smothered by the front and side airbags. The bags hadn't come out as quickly as they should have and he'd banged his head pretty hard on the steering wheel at one point. There were more aches and pains, but he couldn't seem to be able to focus on them. Things were getting gray, his thoughts fuzzy.

In a last act of survival, he managed to dig a pocketknife from his pocket and stabbed at the bags. He groaned as they collapsed away from his battered body. Then he managed to undo the seat belt, which forced him to crumple down onto the roof of the cab, battering him some more. He somehow found his cell phone as his world started fading. *Roxie. Call Roxie.*

Roxie's tears had finally stopped falling and she was almost asleep when her cell phone rang. She didn't want to answer it. Middle of the night calls were never good. After all, she'd called Dex in the middle of the night back in Kansas and look how bad that had turned out. But something she couldn't name told her to answer. With a sigh, she flipped on the bedside light and grabbed the phone.

Before she could even speak, she heard Dex's voice saying weakly, in a near whisper, "Roxie."

She shot up in bed, her stomach clenching. Something was very wrong. "Dex, is that you?" She'd thought it was his voice, but what if it was Adam playing with her mind again? Maybe she'd just wanted to hear Dex's voice.

"Accident...truck rolled. Damn. Head's bleeding..."

She stilled, frightened. It *was* Dex! He was hurt. How bad she couldn't tell. And here she was some 1,500 miles away. "Dex. Dex, did you call 911?" She tried to sound calm, although she felt anything but that. "Dex? Are you listening?"

"You're...you're number one." He sounded like he was drifting away.

Head trauma? What? Oh, God, what? Number one? He must mean he'd punched for a memorized number on his speed dial. She was number one. That made her feel good, except that wasn't much help in this situation. "Call 911. Dex? Are you there?"

"Can't keep...eyes open. Cold...Damn cold night." His voice echoed pain and he sounded weaker. Then he groaned, obviously trying to move somehow. "Can't..." Then he fell silent.

"Dex!" she screamed. "Dexter Malone!"

No response. She felt certain he'd passed out. She prayed he'd *only* passed out. Fortunately she had Dex's ranch on speed dial as well, and fortunately she had Troy's house on speed dial, too. Desperately she punched Troy's number.

A woman answered, sounding distressed, "Dexter, is that you? Troy's out looking—"

"Whoever you are, call Troy on his cell phone. Dexter just called me." Roxie swallowed down a sob. "He's been in some kind of accident. I don't know where."

"Who is this?" the woman asked quickly.

"Roxie Evans."

"He had an accident? And he called you in California?" She sounded incredulous.

"I was on his speed dial. Thank God." She bit her lower lip to keep from falling apart. "Can you call Troy? Let him know. I-I'll be there later today. As soon as I can get there."

"He loves you, you know." The woman hung up after that, hopefully, to contact Troy.

Dexter gritted in pain while the firemen finally pried open the smashed in door of his truck mere hours before dawn on Christmas Eve. He'd been phasing in and out of consciousness for a while now. And he felt nearly frozen. His teeth chattered as he watched snow falling heavily on them as the paramedic in the group reached in to help pull him out.

"Truck's probably totaled," the man said, attempting to distract Dex.

"What the hell were you thinking? Driving around in the middle of the night for no good reason," Troy grumbled from a couple of feet away.

Dexter didn't have a good answer, couldn't think straight. All he could manage was, "Deer. Damn deer." He knew his friend was worried. He'd found him only minutes before the sheriff and the volunteer firemen had shown up. He'd been standing around looking like a worried father ever since.

"Why the hell didn't you call *me* instead of Roxie?" Troy asked in frustration while they loaded Dexter on a gurney from the ambulance that had just arrived.

Dexter blinked, confused. The pain took most of his focus. He tried to ignore what the paramedics were doing, grimacing as they worked on his battered body. "I called Roxie?" He'd been fuzzy, like now. He'd used his speed dial to call someone, but he thought it had been Troy.

"You called Roxie's cell phone. Guess she ranks a better speed dial number than I do." Troy moved back as they belted Dexter onto the gurney. "She called my house

when you faded off. You scared the hell out of her. Scared the hell out of Bambi, too. Roxie's coming back later today."

Bambi. Roxie. Jealousy. No trust. Hurt him. The thoughts tumbled around in his mind. Pain made him angry. *Things to do. Ranch to run. Roxie ran. Hurt.* They were lifting him into the ambulance when he spotted Troy again. "Don't want to see her."

Troy frowned. "Dex..."

"She left me. Not trust me." Dexter sucked in a breath as one of the paramedics wrapped something around his left wrist. "Don't want to see her. Not deal with her now."

The other paramedic closed the back door, but not before Dex heard Troy snap, "The two of you make me crazy! You deserve each other."

"He doesn't want to see me?" Roxie asked in shock when Troy stopped her in front of Dexter's hospital room early afternoon Christmas Eve. "He *told* you that he doesn't want to see me? Why? He called *me*. Called me when he'd been hurt."

Troy looked torn, but he stuck with his long-time friend. "Give him time." Then he frowned, studied her face. "What happened to your cheek? Looks like—"

"Walked into a fist, not that it's any of your business." She spun on her heel, incredibly hurt that Dexter refused to see her. She'd been frantic to get here, would have walked the whole damn way if necessary. Okay, this was turning into the worst Christmas ever. "Not that he'll want to know, or even care, but I'll be gone by tomorrow," she said over her shoulder and walked brokenly away.

Chapter Six

Dexter had more aches than non-aches, but damn if he would stay in the hospital a second longer. He'd already been here over half a day. His concussion had been deemed only minor and he'd barely passed the basic okay-you-can-leave test, although his doctor insisted someone keep checking on him to be sure he remained okay. His left wrist was badly sprained not broken, a small blessing because it still hurt like the devil. And his left knee had gotten banged up pretty good, yet again. Other than those minor things, he was mainly just a bag of bruises. Plus he was tired, way beyond the point of exhaustion. A fact he knew which made everything worse, especially in combination with the pain.

Along with all that, he had an upset friend standing impatiently waiting to take him back to the ranch. "Okay, let it out. I know you're pissed because I made you turn Roxie away." He fumbled to snap his shirt and cursed at the awkwardness of the wrist brace. "I'll call her in a couple of days, when I get over being irritated with her."

"That'll be too late." Troy looked more disgusted with Dexter than he'd ever seen him. And over the years Dex knew he'd done a lot of things to upset his friend.

He was sweating by the time he'd finished with the shirt, but he'd been determined to do it himself. "What do you mean?" He'd only partly paid attention to what Troy had said.

"Roxie told me to tell you that she'd be gone by tomorrow." Troy grabbed the bag in which they'd put the clothes Dexter had worn when brought into the hospital. "You've seen the last of her. Actually, I was the one who saw the last of her. And I didn't like what I saw, that's for damn sure."

Dexter reeled from the comment about her leaving again. *Well, hell.*

Troy went on with his explanation, sounding annoyed that Dexter hadn't responded yet. "Her pretty eyes were red-rimmed from crying over your worthless hide. It was the big bruise on her cheek that really caught my attention. Although it looked like she must've tried to cover it with makeup. Didn't work. I still saw it." He shook his head, jaw clenched before he added with a snort of disbelief, "Claimed she ran into a fist."

Dexter had been feeling real low for making her cry when he finally caught the last part of what Troy had said. He narrowed his eyes and his gut tightened. "What'd you say about running into a fist?" He hoped he'd heard that wrong.

It took Troy a second to stop grinding his teeth in disgust. "That ex-fiancé you told me about, the one you said had stalked her. I think he went a big step past stalking while she was back in California. I think he planted a fist in her face. She's probably lucky he didn't break her cheekbone." He went back to shaking his head in rage. "If someone did that to my Bambi..."

"Take me to Roxie's house. Now!" Dexter bit out and hobbled his way around Troy as fast as he could manage, even if every step with his wounded knee hurt like the dickens.

He didn't say another word as they walked through the long hallways toward the exit. He couldn't. All the hurt he'd felt at Roxie's leaving him without calling, at her misjudging things between him and Bambi disappeared. Those things didn't matter a damn bit. He just wanted—needed—to see Roxie. See for himself that she was all right.

As he and Troy walked out into the cold, snowy day, Dexter cursed a blue streak. He refused to explain why to Troy, who didn't actually question him anyway. He cursed because she'd flown all this way to see for herself that he was all right, and he wouldn't let her. *How would he have felt in her place? Furious. Incredibly hurt. Rejected. Unloved. Damn!*

"I deserve some kind of plaque saying 'World's Biggest Idiot,'" he grumbled, hobbling toward Troy's snow-dotted truck. When they were seated inside, he turned to face his friend. "I swear this loving someone thing is damn complicated, and I'm pitiful

at it. One thing's for sure, though, I'm going to find a way to make this right again."

Roxie had gotten halfway to her house and become absolutely furious. This whole situation was ridiculous. She loved the usually light-hearted and teasing cowboy. And she knew that he loved her. At the moment she'd damaged his pride by leaving town without telling him, when he'd been expecting to spend Christmas with her. He'd no doubt thought she'd changed her mind about that and probably about a relationship at all with him. He'd spent a lot of years in mini-relationships but had no practice—that she knew of—with anything more serious. He might even be scared of what had happened between them so fast. She'd been scared, too, and she had experience with more serious relationships. What had concerned her was that they weren't anything alike. Except that they both were sexually adventurous, and that was a very nice thing to have in common. Her fear had run along the line of would Dex one day turn out to be a real jerk like Adam.

She carefully turned down the now familiar road leading to the Devil's Spur and touched her cheek. *Adam*. The man was so much more than a mere "jerk." He was borderline insane. If her father hadn't walked in when he had, she was pretty certain Adam would have become seriously violent. His eyes had been crazed. They should have had him arrested. He needed help.

Dex might be suffering from a damaged ego at the moment for her inconsiderate behavior, but he wasn't a jerk. He would never hit her with a fist. He would never even remotely consider beating her up, or any other woman. He could be such a passionate lover, could be tender, too. The community respected him and the kids had adored him as Santa. She had totally fallen in love with him that night. Dexter Malone was worth fighting for.

His sprawling ranch house lie just ahead of her now, the roof blanketed with a layer of snow. It had never even occurred to her that the house, the ranch itself, might be worth a lot of money. That didn't matter to her. She had money. What she'd been

secretly seeking was a home, with a loving man. *This* was a home. *He* was a loving man. A man who made her laugh, who enticed her to let her playful spirit out. She even suspected that he had begun winning her over that night in Moe's Diner when he'd first flashed his crooked grin her way. *Love slave*. She had to smile at the silly idea. That wasn't exactly how things had worked out, but they'd had some incredible moments. She planned on having many, many more such moments with him. Once she convinced him to speak with her again, and to let her explain why she'd gone away with her parents.

She parked in the partially shoveled off driveway and walked carefully through the six or so inches of snow, shivering. Heat. Heat right now would be a really good thing. Then she thought of Dex, in connection with heat. When they finally got around to making love again—after she was sure the act wouldn't hurt him because of his injuries—there'd be some serious heat involved.

Stomping off the snow from her boots, she thought there might be some heat involved before they made love. She had a strong feeling that he'd want to take her over his knee and spank the devil out of her for taking off with her parents and not letting him know, and for making him worry. He'd probably even spank her more for not calling him once she'd arrived in California.

Her lower lips quivered and warmth began within her. A play spanking was one thing, and she'd learned it could be a really nice experience. But a real spanking would no doubt be quite painful, as Dex had said it would be if he ever had to give her one. She didn't look forward to the pain of a serious spanking, but it could never be as painful as nearly losing him forever. She'd endure a spanking every day for the rest of her life if she had to, as long as she could stay with him. As long as he loved her.

Roxie lifted the doormat to search for a possible key to his house. Not there. She'd started to glance around the porch wondering where else he might keep a spare key when the front door opened and a very pretty young blonde looked out at her curiously. Then her face lit up with recognition. The woman shoved open the screen door and motioned her inside, smiling. "You're Roxie, right? I saw you once, going into the library."

Roxie wasn't sure how to react to this other woman clearly at home in Dex's house. "Yes, I'm Roxie Evans. And you are?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Bambi. We talked on the phone last night when you called about Dex." She helped Roxie off with her coat and hung it up. "How is the idiot cowboy? I still can't believe he went driving off in the middle of the night. Idiot, idiot, idiot. He was so upset after you'd called and hung up on him."

Roxie's heart twisted. She'd upset him, enough that he'd driven off in a snowstorm. His accident was all her fault. No wonder he'd turned her away at the hospital. "Evidently he's all right enough to be coming home today. But I haven't seen him," she answered quietly. She had soooo much making up to do. If he'd let her.

"Huh?"

"He made Troy tell me that he didn't want to see me at the hospital. Which hurt me. So I told Troy to tell Dex that I would be leaving town by tomorrow." That retaliation sounded so childish now.

The blonde looked stunned. "He's been moaning around like a lovesick fool ever since you left. He wouldn't see you?" She shook her head in amazement. "Men can be so weird sometimes."

Roxie could only nod in agreement, although it had been her fault that he'd been moaning around. And it had been her fault that he'd gotten hurt.

"Are you really leaving town? Please say it isn't so. I'm not sure I want to be within a hundred miles of Dex if you leave permanently. He'll be so angry with himself for being stubborn, probably rant and rave around here for a spell. Make his hands stay even more clear of him than they've been doing this week." She smiled after a second. "Then he'll go looking for you, because by then he'll realize how much he loves you. Men can be a tad slow at figuring these things out."

She squinted and looked more closely at Roxie. "Say, what happened to your cheek? That looks like it hurt."

Roxie didn't want to go into the story. She changed the subject. "I'm not leaving town. I'm going to wait right here for the man I love to come home. Then I'm going to burn his ears for not letting me see him at the hospital." She winked at Bambi. "After

that—once he's well enough—I'm going to do things to him that will make him forget all other women."

Bambi was beside herself in delight. "He's a goner for sure." She grabbed her ski jacket from the halltree and put it on. "I'll go on back to Troy's house. It's been real nice meeting the woman who finally brought the big stud around these parts to his knees."

"Where the hell could she have gone?" Dexter asked for the hundredth time at least as Troy drove him back to the ranch. His heart had sunk right down to his toes when they'd discovered Roxie wasn't at her house. She hadn't been at the library, either. They'd even stopped at the Drop By and Go to see if Sally Ann had seen or talked to her. She'd just vanished.

Troy hadn't said much during the half hour drive from town, but then Dexter had been doing a lot of cursing and ranting, not really up to a conversation. Finally his friend said with relief ringing in his voice as they rounded the corner of the stable and first saw the house, "Believe I know where she is." He nodded toward Dex's house. Roxie's Mustang was parked in his driveway.

The truck had barely stopped when Dex climbed out and started hobbling up the sidewalk. His battered body throbbed in more places than he could count and his knee hurt like the devil. But he just didn't damn care.

He started up the porch steps with a grimace, and then a gentle hand landed on his arm to help him. When he looked up and saw Roxie, so much emotion tore through him that he couldn't speak. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears, but she smiled. All his pain was forgotten as he basked in that warm smile he'd come to look forward to seeing.

She waved at Troy, who'd stayed beside the truck. "Thanks for bringing him home." Her tone made it clear that the other man wasn't needed.

"Guess you can handle the rascal now," he said, grinning in obvious relief and

climbing back into the truck. He drove off immediately.

Snow fell on Dexter and Roxie as they stood there a few seconds. Her gaze moved up and down him with as much intensity as an x-ray machine. She was taking in each and every one of the scratches and bruises that she could see. Dex felt completely loved in those few seconds.

Then his gaze focused on the big yellowing mark on her cheek. His stomach turned at seeing the bruise and he reached out to gently touch it. "That ex-lover of yours do this?"

She nodded.

"If I'd been there, I'd probably have killed him for that." He wished he could smooth away the pain, the discoloration, the horror of what she must have felt when the man had hit her.

"I'm all right, Dex. Really."

"I'm not. I hate seeing this, hate knowing someone hurt you in any way." He stroked her cheek gently again.

"My father threatened to kick his sorry ass," she said with a thoughtful smile. "After Adam left, Dad hugged me. It was so nice. I don't remember him doing that since I was very little. That alone was almost—almost—worth getting a fist in the face."

Dexter pulled his hand away feeling angrier than he'd ever felt in his life. At that damn Adam for what he'd done. And at a father who hadn't shown his love for his daughter in a pitiful long time. He didn't comment on that part, though, because Roxie seemed happy now with her father. From what she'd let slip a couple of other times, her parents were both real pieces of work—bad work.

"How about we go inside before you freeze?" He glanced down at his left leg. "Besides, I need to get off this leg. Banged up my knee pretty good."

Instantly she all but tugged him into the house. "Come on, I've already got your bed turned down for you. I'll get you all nice and tucked in. You probably should have stayed in the hospital longer, but you can be so stubborn. I'll take care of you, though. You don't have to worry about a thing." She was almost out of breath at the last comment.

As soon as she'd closed the door behind them, he pulled her to him, wincing a bit. "Darlin', I'm okay. Calm down."

Her bottom lip quivered and a tear trickled down her damaged cheek. "This is my fault. I'm so sorry. So very, very sorry."

He moved beside her and thumbed the tear away. "How do you figure any of this is your fault? I'm the one who was so damn crazy after you took off that I couldn't think straight. I'm the one who took off in the middle of a damn snowstorm because I was so frustrated. And it was a deer that caused the accident. Well, a deer and icy conditions."

She burst into full fledged tears. "You nearly killed yourself because you couldn't hit a deer!" She shifted against him, hugged him tight.

The hug hurt something fierce due to the hairline fracture of a couple of ribs, but hell if he would tell her that. Having her in his arms again just felt too good. He'd take one of them pain pills the doctor had sent along after a while, although he wasn't much of a pill man. "Have I mentioned how glad I am you're back?" He stroked her back, fingered her long, soft auburn curls.

As suddenly as she'd burst into tears and moved into his arms, she pushed away and swiped at the tears. She glowered at him. "You wouldn't let me see you at the hospital! You called me at the scene of the accident, but you wouldn't let me see you at the hospital."

She puffed up like hen ticked off at having an egg stolen from under her. "Do you have *any* idea how hard it was for me being so far away and knowing you were hurt? I finally even let Dad hire one of those small jets to bring me to Kansas City, and I'm scared to death of those small jets flying over the mountains. Then I drove with tears almost blinding me all the way here from Kansas City. I'm really upset with you for all of that."

He completely understood. "You'll never know how sorry I am for turning you away at the hospital, especially when I wanted to see you so bad." He reached for again, but she shied away. "I'm sorry I worried you. Are you ever going to forgive me?"

She was quiet a minute, seeming to think things over. Planning something. Then

she took his hand and started hurrying him into the great room where he had a mountain of presents in and around the Christmas tree. She ignored all of that, which surprised him. She also ignored how he had to hobble along behind her, but she finally slowed down a little. They stopped in front of the straight-backed chair although that didn't really register with him until she pushed him down onto it. He gave a quiet moan at the abruptness of the movement.

In the next second she surprised Dex even more as she undid her jeans and shoved them along with her tiny panties down to mid thigh. He stared at her curly red bush, at the hint of lips between her legs, and his cock became instantly hard. He'd wanted her for days, even when he'd been angry with her. He wanted her even more now.

Before he could think what to say or what to do, she dived across his lap. His knee throbbed but he remained still. It took her a couple of wriggles, but she finally settled into what she decided was the correct position. Then she flicked her shirttail off her bottom completely baring it. "Spank me. Now. Just get it over with," she ordered.

Dexter lightly touched her creamy bottom. "Darlin', I'd much rather be sinking this cock of mine that you've aroused deep inside you."

She shoved her curtain of hair out of the way so she could scowl at him. "I left town without letting you know why. I didn't have the decency to call you when I got to California. Then when I did call, I assumed you were having raunchy sex with the woman who answered the phone. And because of that you felt it necessary to leave your home in the middle of a storm, and nearly got killed."

She turned away again, huffing. "Spank me. I've more than earned it. If you weren't thinking with your cock right now, you'd *want* to spank me. And not a 'good girl' kind of spanking. You'd want to give me that serious spanking you told me about."

The woman surprised him all the time. She'd been doing so ever since he'd talked to her about the Santa's helper matter. Her moods swung all over the place. But damn if he didn't love her. Fact was, she was right. If his cock wasn't trying to persuade him to slam it into her, he'd have turned her over his knee. He'd be busting her backside without her having to practically beg him to do it. "I think you're right. Before

we can get on with the pleasurable loving, you need a spanking to remember. And I need to give it to you."

Then he thought about his sore hands. "I'm afraid my good hand is too sore for administering a proper spanking right now. So I'm going to have to tenderize your bottom with my doubled belt."

Her buttocks tightened and he heard her suck in a breath. "Belt?"

He pulled it off as she remained determinedly in place. "A belt spanking will hurt like blazes. But I'm going to give it to you easier than I'd do if you'd really earned a belting."

He doubled the belt and raised it up, but not as high as he would normally do. Still, when it landed and left a line across both cheeks, she felt it and gasped. He was only going to give her a taste of this kind of spanking, just enough to make her understand that she'd been soundly punished for her bad behavior. After she'd settled down again, he licked her three more times with the belt, quickly.

"Uuuuuuuuhhhh," she moaned and arched her back at the fiery lines across her bottom. "It hurts! Oh, it hurts!"

"I know, darlin'." Grimly determined to get this over with, Dexter cracked her buttocks ten more times. Red lines crisscrossed her entire bottom, including her upper thighs. He'd stayed his strength, but she'd squirmed and kicked after each one. By the last one she cried out her agony, shuddered, and sobbed.

He tossed the belt away, glad to be done with the unpleasant chore. He tenderly stroked her back to calm her, and to calm him. "It's over now. All over."

It took a few minutes before she quieted, and then she scooted off his lap. She looked at him like a well-spanked woman hoping to be forgiven for what she'd done to deserve the spanking. Her hands reached back to gingerly touch the stripes. "Are we okay now?" she asked anxiously.

"We were okay before I burned your bottom. But I did need to do it, and I think you needed me to do it, too." He nodded at her lowered jeans. "You're not going to be able to wear those tight jeans over that sore bottom. Take them off. Your shirt tail is long enough to cover you up for now."

Without any hesitation she obeyed, wincing at the pain on her poor bottom as she moved around. Then she raised her chin with pride and helped him off the chair. "Now, cowboy, let's get you to bed. You're looking kind of pale, exhausted."

"Are you going to lie down with me?" He hobbled along beside her toward the main bedroom. He desperately wanted her to be with him.

She touched her bottom and smiled at him. "On my stomach. Somebody I know and love just spanked me soundly for misbehavior."

He reached behind her, lifted her shirttail, and said cockily, "It appears the man that loves you sure knew how to lay down a fire on that sweet bottom."

They slept the rest of the day away, and the night. When Roxie opened her eyes the next morning, Dex was already watching her. She smiled sleepily at him. "Merry Christmas," she said, excitement filling her. She hadn't brought a single gift with her, but she hoped what she had planned would be good enough for now. Later, she'd go to her apartment and bring back the few presents she'd already bought him.

He leaned over to kiss her, gently moving some hair off her face. "There's a bunch of presents downstairs waiting for you to open."

She thought for a second, remembered there hardly being room around the tree last night. "Surely those aren't all for me." Still, the idea made her even more excited. Christmases with her family were simple: she and her brothers and sister got a bond each year. And those were passed out at Christmas breakfast. After that the day was spent entertaining her parents' friends, with her mother showing off the newest expensive piece of jewelry she'd received from her husband.

Impatient now to see what "real" presents were like, she all but jumped off the bed. He moaned at the jarring to his sore body and she looked contrite. "Sorry. I forgot for a second."

She danced over to the closet and returned with a one of his shirts for her to wear and a robe for him. She tossed him the robe. "Come on!"

"Don't think I've ever worn this thing," he said, looking at the silk robe. He shrugged and slipped it on. "Better than trying to pull on jeans at the moment. My ribs are aching a little."

"I'll baby you the rest of the day, but right now there's Christmas gifts to attend to."

He chuckled and followed her out of the room. She stopped in front of the tree, staring at the huge amount of carefully wrapped presents.

"They're all for you, darlin'. I got carried away a bit, haven't really shopped for Christmas much before. Except to get something small for Troy and Mom." He sat in one of the thickly cushioned chairs and eased his left leg onto the ottoman in front of it. "Bambi was helping me wrap them the night you called."

Roxie felt sick at that comment. He'd been doing all this for her, with the help of Troy's girlfriend. She'd jumped to a conclusion and nearly ruined everything. She looked at him sadly. "I deserved a much worse spanking than you gave me yesterday. I was such a jealous fool."

"You want another warming?" he teased. "Having that pretty bottom over my knee is something that I sure don't hate. Don't particularly want to spank it at the moment, though."

She scooted well away from him. "I said I deserved a worse spanking, *not* that I wanted another one." She turned toward the tree so excited she could barely stand still. "Can I open one?"

"If you don't get started soon, we'll be here all day. And I have other plans for part of the day." He grinned sexily when she glanced in his direction. "More of them love slave games maybe. Although you may have to do a lot of the leading this time. Maybe save my aching knee and sprained hand by riding your cowboy, instead of the other way around."

Roxie reached for one of the brightly wrapped gifts and pulled off the bow. "Riding my cowboy sounds just fine to me. Can I wear your spurs?" she teased and winked at him. "I'm looking forward to straddling you nice and slow. Sliding down that oh-so-nice cock. Taking it deep, so deep."

"You're killing me," he protested huskily. "Stop it now or I will tan your bottom before you get to open all those nice gifts."

She laughed and started working on the pile of presents.

Dexter waited patiently, grinning, the entire time she unwrapped them. It warmed his heart every time her eyes widened in pleasure and she bounded to her feet to give him a kiss. He'd never gotten so many kisses. He just might have to buy her a ton of presents every once in a while if this was the kind of reaction he'd get.

Finally she sat the last item aside, a sexy little nightie that he looked forward to seeing her wear and looked even more forward to taking off her.

He sat waiting for yet another kiss, was all primed for it, and planning on taking that kiss a step further. Only she knelt down in front of him this time and seemed to gather her courage.

Looking determined, she gently touched his good knee and said, "Will you marry me, Dexter Malone? Be my love slave for the next fifty or sixty years."

His heart pounded. "Well, hell," he said in disgust, earning an embarrassed look from her. "Don't be assuming the wrong thing again, darlin'. It's just that I'd planned on going down on one knee this morning and asking *you* to marry me."

She beamed. "So your answer is yes?"

Dexter shook his head. "My answer is *hell yes!*"

THE END