

Cowboy Love

**By
OTKRomance**

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Chapter One

Alicia swallowed the last bite of birthday cake and sat back with a satisfied sigh. She smiled at her sister, Karen, sitting beside her at the crowded table.

"That was an awesome dinner, sis."

Karen grinned, and her green eyes, identical to Alicia's, were dancing. "Glad you enjoyed it. But your birthday present's not quite finished with yet."

Alicia's eyes narrowed even as her stomach did a funny flip flop. "You didn't."

Karen giggled.

"Karen!" Alicia wanted to shout at her older sister, but managed to keep her voice down; she didn't want to alert all her friends at the table to what was going on. They'd find out soon enough, though, unfortunately. "You promised me!"

"Oh, come on, Alicia. Did you really think I'd take you here for your birthday, and not order you a birthday spanking?"

"Yes, yes I did, since I specifically asked you not to!" Alicia hissed.

Karen patted her sister's hand. "Calm down. I don't know why you're so upset. I thought you liked being spanked...." Alicia's face blazed with embarrassment and she was grateful for the noise of the diners around them and the other conversations at their table. "Besides, this is a well known restaurant, and everyone knows about the spanking thing -- it's on the menu, for crying out loud! We've seen a couple people being led away from their tables by the staff just since sitting down. Where do you think they were going?"

Alicia had known full well where they were going, and although she'd not wanted to be one of them, she'd still experienced an involuntary twitch of desire as she watched them being led out of the crowded restaurant and bar. She'd been grateful

that there hadn't been any public spankings that night;

she was aroused just thinking about what those customers were about to

receive. But that didn't mean she wanted to join them.

Her sister was still talking. "... I arranged for a private session, after all. I know you said you didn't want me to do that, but it is tradition, Lise. And, hey, maybe it'll help you forget about Damon..."

"Don't mention his name!" Alicia hissed. "It's my birthday. I don't want to hear his name!"

"Okay, okay. Calm down. I just thought if someone new gave you what you like, you'd see that there is hope for a new relationship. You can't hide from the world forever, little sister..."

Just then a burst of music came over the speakers and Alicia groaned as everyone at the table turned to look at her. They grinned with good cheer and plenty of alcoholic buzz as they joined in singing "Happy Birthday." Karen giggled, and Alicia wanted to clock her. "I guess that's cue time!" She sang and hugged her glowering sister. "Oh, cheer up! You'll thank me later, I just know it!"

As the song died out, a tall, broad shouldered man wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, black cowboy boots and a Stetson strode across the restaurant. Everyone in the room watched as he walked right over to their table, right up to Alicia, and held out one sun bronzed, long fingered hand.

Alicia sat back in her chair, staring at that hand. This was *not* happening!!

Then he spoke, and his soft, slightly Southern drawl had a strange way of pulling her attention to him. She found herself looking up into a pair of warm, sky blue eyes, set in a very pleasant face framed by dark hair. He touched the brim of his hat in gentlemanly greeting and smiled as he said, "I believe it's your birthday today, Alicia Goode."

It wasn't a question, but he seemed to expect an answer, so she nodded.

There were twitters of laughter and some elbowing around her table.

The man held out his hand again, pressing it closer to her in obvious encouragement. "Well, come along then, darlin'. Your sister ordered you a special present."

She knew she couldn't get out of this without making a scene. Something about this handsome cowboy - Lord, leave it to Karen to remember her thing about cowboys! - told her he was not going to take a simple refusal without some arguing. She sent a glare of promising revenge to her grinning sibling, then thrust her hand into the cowboy's and stood up from her chair. She sighed as he led her from the room, applause and cheers following after them.

Once they were out of the room, Alicia tried to reclaim her hand, but the cowboy held fast as he led her down a quiet hallway to the last door on the right. Without a word, he unlocked the door with a key drawn from his back pocket, then ushered her inside.

Alicia's eyes quickly took in the room. It was fairly small, but not crowded, and very clean. There was a small table, two straight backed, armless chairs and a leather sofa. In the corner was a shelving unit with a state of the art stereo, two shelves full of CDs and a cabinet in the bottom. Based on the purpose of the room, Alicia figured that cabinet held an assortment of spanking implements.

"Would you like me to put on some music?" Cowboy was asking. He shot her a grin from under his hat that made her toes curl inside of her sensible flats. "A little bit of country, perhaps?"

"No, thank you," she replied stiffly. This time she did manage to tug her hand out of his, only to experience a strange sense of loss the moment the warm contact was broken. Ignoring the feeling of disappointment, she plunged in with her speech. "Look, my sister did this against my wishes. And I

really must insist you not follow through with this... this...."

"Birthday spanking," he supplied helpfully. She looked up at him for the first time since she'd started talking to find he was grinning at her, clearly amused.

"Right. I don't want you to do that.... um.... I suppose since it's your job and all, we can stay back here a while and then go back to the restaurant and pretend that you...uh... that you...."

"That I spanked you," he finished. This time she didn't need to look at him - his amusement was audible in his voice. She took a deep, steadying breath.

"Right."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Alicia."

Her head snapped up and she stared hotly at him. "Of course you can!

You will!" One dark eyebrow rose under the Stetson and his flannel covered arms crossed over his chest. "I did not order this... spanking! And I will not tolerate it!"

"It doesn't matter if you ordered it for yourself or not, birthday girl," Cowboy informed her in a maddeningly calm voice. "You will have the spanking."

"I'll charge you with assault!" she yelled.

He had the nerve to chuckle at that. "Well, you'd be filing charges against your sister, in that case. The papers she signed for the spanking specify any legal problems that could result will be her responsibility, since she is the one ordering the spanking. The only way that would change would be if you had bruises or welts, which, trust me, I would never give you." To her horror, he unfolded his arms and began to roll his sleeves up to his elbows, revealing well-muscled bronzed arms. "Regardless, birthday girl, you will have your spanking."

Alicia stared at him, her mouth hanging open. "I don't believe this..."

Again, he laughed. He had a warm, pleasant laugh that she might have liked, had the circumstances been different. Well, in all honesty, there was a lot about this handsome cowboy that she would like, if she let herself. "Believe it, darlin'. Someone thinks you ought to have your bottom warmed up, and so you will." He finished rolling his sleeves and moved one of the chairs towards the center of the room, away from all the rest of the furniture. He sat down and tipped the Stetson back on his head to see her better. "Come on over."

She shook her head and stubbornly stood her ground.

"It won't be unpleasant, darlin'," he told her softly. "I promise. You just trust me. I'll give you a real nice birthday present."

God help her if she didn't want to walk right over and drape herself over his lap! The man was gorgeous and he had the whole stern-but-gentle spanker role down to a tee. He was turning her on already and he hadn't even swatted her yet. Plus she didn't know the man from Adam - he hadn't even told her his name! Spankings had always been a very sexual thing for her, something she'd only shared with a man in a committed relationship. If she let this Cowboy spank her, she'd surely be aroused and unsatisfied for weeks afterward!

"Alicia Marie." His voice was less gentle now. He patted his thigh. "You come on over here, birthday girl. If I have to come get you, I'll give you ten extra swats."

There was a part of Alicia that wanted to call him on that threat. It had been so long since she'd had any spanking play and she knew instinctively that playing with this man would be heavenly. She reminded herself that she was not going to enjoy this, she wouldn't let herself. And Karen was going to pay for this!

Newly resolved, she shuffled over to the Cowboy's side.

"There's a good little birthday girl." He immediately claimed one of her hands and tugged her so she stood between his jeaned thighs. "Sit here on my knee, darlin'." When she hesitated, he gave her a gentle little push, then wrapped his free arm around her waist, settling his large hand on her hip. She found that she couldn't look at him. That problem was solved for her, however, when he released her hand to grasp her chin and tilt her face up. There was little else to look at but him, especially when everything else in the room - hell, in the whole town - paled in comparison to the handsome cowboy.

"Listen to me, Alicia Marie. I'm going to put you over my knee in a few minutes and I'm going to give you a nice birthday spanking." Just hearing the bluntly spoken words made her resolve not to enjoy this weaken. "I'm going to push up your skirt and pull down your panties, 'cause birthday swats should be given as they were first begun, on your first birthday, on your bare bottom." He smiled at that, and damn if she didn't feel herself smiling back. "Now there's a pretty smile, Alicia Marie. Why'd you keep that hidden away from me so long?" She tried to hide her face again, and again he wouldn't let her look away. He held her face still with his fingers under her chin. "I promise you will enjoy this. So don't be afraid of me. I know it's been a long time since a man spanked you. And I know that your memories of him have been tainted since your relationship ended. I'm going to try to erase those memories of him -- all of them."

His words were so kind and his tone was so gentle. She didn't even think to be angry with Karen for all the information she'd obviously blabbed to these people when she arranged this spanking. Instead she fought against the sudden lump that had formed in her throat, but a few tears betrayed her, anyway. The cowboy's hand left her chin to wipe the tears away. "I'll have none of these," he said teasingly. "You're not going to get

that kind of spanking!" He patted her hip. "What do you say we get started now?"

All her previous arguments were gone; she didn't even think of saying no to him again. She sniffed daintily and rose, moving to his right as he prompted her to. He guided her over his denim-clad knees, and she lay there limply, letting him adjust her body to his liking. She closed her eyes, savoring the delicious feeling of being vulnerably positioned over his strong lap. It had been so long....

She felt her short skirt being raised and gathered at the small of her back. His large hand smoothed over her panty clad bottom and she smiled as he told her how very pretty she looked just then. A moment more of his soft caresses, then Alicia felt his fingers dip below the elastic of her panties. A thrill shivered through her, swirling in her stomach, then quickly traveling down to twitch between her legs. He made a slow, deliberate business of rolling her lacy, white panties down her cheeks; then, even slower, he tugged them down to her knees.

His hand returned to stroke her bare bottom. "You're beautiful, Alicia." His voice was soft and reverent. Alicia reminded herself that his tone meant nothing - the man did this for a living. How many bare backsides must he see in a day?

He continued to caress her, and he even nudged her legs apart slightly. Alicia was grateful for the long curtain of blond hair that fell about her blushing face, well aware of what he must be seeing now, and hoping her arousal wasn't as obvious as she feared.

He didn't say anything sexual, nor did he touch her in any sexual way and the result was that she grew even more frustratingly excited. Instead, he paused to say, "Let's see your face, darlin'," and bent down to sweep aside all the hair she had been hiding beneath. "There. Now that's much better."

He patted her bottom. "Let's see now. How old are you today, little birthday girl?"

"I'm twenty-nine." Her voice sounded strange and squeaky to her ears and she grimaced.

"Twenty-nine?" he asked, sounding surprised. "Is that all? Well, that would make my job entirely too easy. I'm sure your sister would want to get her money's worth. So, I think I'll give you two swats for each year, plus two to grow on. A nice even sixty sounds good. What do you think?"

"Um..."

His hand stopped its gentle patting and she could hear the grin in his words. "Okay, let's get started then."

His hand fell onto her bottom with a firm SMACK! It wasn't especially hard, but it carried some sting and Alicia could barely hold back a moan of pleasure. A twin SMACK! landed on the opposite cheek and she automatically raised her bottom up for more.

The cowboy obliged her with eight more spanks, alternating cheeks each time. Then he paused and rubbed her pinkening bottom. "That's ten, my birthday girl."

The moan fell from her mouth unnoticed at first. It felt so good, her bottom warm and stingy, and his hand caressing her so wonderfully. He kept coming closer and closer to touching her between her legs, where she now ached and clenched in anticipation. But every time she thought for sure that she would feel his fingers there where she longed for them, he drew them back again.

Ten more spanks followed, fired off at her bottom in rapid succession. They were hard enough to make her gasp and kick a bit, but still wonderfully erotic. The warmth from her bottom was spreading in that wonderful spiral throughout the rest of her body and she felt heat everywhere. He paused to caress her again, murmuring how pretty she looked with her pink bottom and how lovely her gasps sounded to his ears. He asked her

if she was okay, and she answered in a breathless sort of whisper that she was.

He began spanking again, this time swatting her much slower and letting each stinger sink in fully, before delivering the next. They were crisp, firm swats and Alicia grabbed hold of his leg with one hand and held on. She knew that her bottom had to be quickly reddening under his broad hand and even though the heat was really intensifying, she still arched up to meet him every time. He stopped after twenty more, announcing that they had only twenty more to go, and commenced stroking her again.

Another moan fell from her lips as he once again came as close to touching her as he could, yet each time fell just short. This time, she heard his warm chuckle above her and she looked back over her shoulder at him as he again swept her hair away from her face.

"I think you are enjoying this, Alicia," he accused teasingly. She felt her face blaze in embarrassment and tried to duck her head, but he wouldn't let her. He touched the blush on her face and said, "Don't be embarrassed. It's a beautiful reaction you're having. I love it. Your body is beautiful and your bottom is all pink and warm from my hand." He patted her bare seat as he spoke. "It makes me so happy to know you are excited by this." His hand rubbed again, circling each of her nether cheeks around, and around again. A tiny whimper escaped her. "The sounds you're making makes me very excited, Alicia. But I want to hear you admit you like this."

"Oh... I.... I don't think so...."

"No?" His fingers dipped so close to her sex she nearly went mad when he pulled them back. "Well, I think you can. And I think we'll just take a little breather here, until you figure out a way to tell me."

Then, to her surprise, he nudged her legs further apart and she knew he could see the evidence of her arousal. But for some reason,

draped over this man's lap, excited beyond belief by his attentions to her backside, she found that her embarrassment was fading. She felt strangely... proud of the way he was making her react. It was like he saw her response as a gift, and he certainly accepted this about her, had said he thought it was beautiful. Why shouldn't she agree?

"I have the answer here, in and of itself," he commented. She felt him lean back away from her and his body grew tense. "You might not believe this, Alicia, but I've never crossed the line between business and pleasure before, but right now there's nothing I would rather do. It would get me fired. I want to touch you, though, more than anything." She heard the strain in his voice and started to tell him that she wanted that too. He stopped her before she could finish. "No, darlin,' I can't do that. It wouldn't be fair to either of us."

She couldn't deny the disappointment those words brought on. She didn't know what to say, and so remained quiet as his fingers drew twin hearts on her bottom, then in silence his hand fell down in the first spank of her last remaining twenty.

The last set of swats were the sharpest yet and she heard herself moaning loudly throughout them. She knew she was grinding herself against his leg, and she couldn't help it. She wanted him so badly, and she knew she couldn't have him.

When he finished her last twenty, he once again petted her bottom. She was writhing over his lap and half crying with frustration.

"Shh, baby..." He bent and gave each of her bottom cheeks a soft kiss. Then he patted her bottom low on her sit spot, right behind her sex and she bucked and writhed over his leg shamelessly while he spoke encouragingly above her, bringing her to climax as much with his words as with the light spanks he delivered. The loud cry announcing her orgasm brought a broad grin to his face.

He caressed her back and bottom as she came slowly down. He smoothed her hair back from her

face and smiled down into her dreamy expression, finally holding a calm, well-spanked, well-sated woman over his knees.

"Happy birthday, Alicia Marie," he said as he helped her stand. She wiggled into her panties and touched her still warm bottom through the silk and lace before letting her skirt fall back down over her behind. She was shy now, unable to look him in the eye, especially when she noticed the large bulge straining at the zipper of his jeans.

He stood and framed her face with his hands. "I want to tell you that I've never done that with anyone. I hope I haven't offended you, now that it's over. I wanted to give you the pleasure you seemed to ask for and it gave me great pleasure to do it."

She nodded and looked up into those blue eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

He smiled and surprised her with a soft kiss to her lips. "You're most welcome, my little birthday girl." He continued to hold her before him, which was just fine, actually, with her. His expression had grown serious and he finally said, "May I call you sometime, Alicia?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

He let go of her and found a pen and paper on one of the shelves in the room. She wrote her phone number for him, trying to ignore the insecure voices in her head that told her she was an idiot, that he probably had a new collection of similar slips of paper every day. He thanked her when she handed him the paper.

"I suppose I ought to return you to your table before your sister starts to worry," he said, sounding disappointed. He hesitated a bit longer, this time giving her a longer kiss that left her feeling light headed from the hammering of her heart. She felt so faint, in fact, that she doubted she'd heard him right when he added, "Plus I'd best give them my notice."

"What did you say?"

He grinned. "I said I'd better hand in my resignation if I intend to take you out on a date, Alicia Marie. And I fully intend to do exactly that."

"But..."

"Don't argue with me, woman," he teased. He claimed possession of her hand and led her towards the doorway before she could really protest further.

They were heading back to the noise of the restaurant and the expectant faces at her table too soon for her to question him. Though she did manage to pull back a moment to ask him his name.

"It's Luke," he said. "Luke Stephens."

Definitely not the "cool hand" kind of Luke, she mused. They reached her table of giggling, gawking friends and Luke gave her bottom a soft pat to urge her back to her chair. She returned and sat tenderly beside her sister, who immediately jumped on her with twenty questions. Alicia looked over her shoulder and smiled as Luke gave her a wink and a wave and then turned and walked away. She could have sworn she heard him whistling despite all the noise surrounding her.

Chapter Two

Alicia spent each night, and the better part of her days for the next week dreaming about Luke. She saw him in her mind, remembering how sexy he'd looked in his low slung blue jeans with the sleeves rolled up on his flannel shirt. She saw the dancing light in his eyes, the teasing smile on his sensuous lips. She heard his southern drawl as he'd assured her that she would have her spanking. She remembered the feel of his hard thighs beneath her belly when she'd been over his lap and her entire body flushed with the memory of the wonderful present he'd given her with the flat of his palm and the skill of his voice. If she closed her eyes, she could almost feel his lips against her own again.

When he finally called her, eight days after her birthday, she ignored the flutter in her stomach at the sound of his voice rumbling over the wire, and snapped, "Well, it sure took you long enough to call, Cowboy!"

He chuckled. "I'm sorry I kept you in suspense, darlin'. This week was really hectic and I just plain didn't have the time to give you a ring until now."

She felt a pang of guilt at his words, thinking about how he had quit his job so that he could take her out on a date. "Did you find another job?" she asked quietly.

What do you mean?" he actually sounded confused and for a minute some of her ire returned.

"You said you were going to quit the restaurant," she reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. I did quit. But I was only working there part time, filling in for people when they were out, or coming in if they had a special request from a customer for a cowboy."

Alicia blushed hotly at that last bit of information.

"I honestly didn't have the time to give you a call, Alicia. I'm sorry 'bout that. But I can make it up to you," he pressed.

Alicia crossed her arms over her chest. "Yeah?" she prompted grudgingly when he said nothing more. "I'm listening."

Luke laughed again. "How about dinner and spanking?"

"Don't you mean dinner and dancing?" she groused, not budging yet despite his attempts to be light.

"Well, if you'd prefer dancing, I guess that'd be okay," he conceded with a put-upon sigh. "But I said dinner and spanking, and that's exactly what I meant."

"Humph!" Alicia twisted the phone cord around one finger. "Well, just so you know, Cowboy, I don't do spankings on the first date."

"Oh, no?" There was an audible smile in his voice. "Well, you know what they say, angel: There's a first time for everything."

Why did the simple use of the word 'angel' make her toes curl and the icy tone vanish from her voice? She cleared her throat and hoped she wasn't giving it away that she was coming around. If there was one thing that Alicia Goode had learned about men it was that she should never let them think they had the best of her.

"Don't count on it."

He laughed. "We'll see. I'll pick you up on Friday at seven?"

"I never said yes," she pointed out.

"Sure you did. The first time you looked in my eyes, Alicia Marie. You said 'yes' to me the first time you looked at me."

It should have sounded corny or arrogant - it would have sounded corny or arrogant coming from any other man in the world. But coming from Luke, even over the telephone wire, it gave Alicia goosebumps. She couldn't think of a single snappy reply, and instead found herself meekly giving him her address so that he could pick her up on Friday night. His words were echoing in her mind even after he had told her to "be good" and "wear

something pretty," then said goodbye and hung up. She replaced the handset on the cradle and stared at the phone a few minutes before the 'pretty' comment sunk in. Ha! She ought to wear her old pair of camouflage army pants and a man's tee shirt and work boots, just to spite the bossy man!

Of course, when Alicia opened the door of her apartment to Luke that Friday night, she was wearing a pale pink flowered sundress. Nothing very dressy since she didn't know where they were going for dinner, but pretty and feminine all the same. As he had requested - no, told - her. She'd been silently berating herself since the moment she'd slipped the cotton dress over her head, but the moment she saw him in her doorway, looking her over appreciatively with that sexy grin of his and a bunch of pink carnations in one hand, she blushed with pride.

"Hello, beautiful," he rumbled, holding the flowers out to her. Lord, when was the last time someone had given her flowers? "Here, you should have these. They match your blushing cheeks."

She giggled nervously as she accepted the carnations, blushing all the more at the thought of the other cheeks that had been blushing the last time she'd seen this man.

"Th-thank you. Uh -- let me put these in some water...." she stammered. And get myself back under control!

"Sure."

Luke waited just inside her doorway while she rushed into the kitchen. She made herself take ten deep breaths as she arranged the flowers in a vase.

Calm down, he's just a man for goodness sake. A gorgeous, spanking man -- but still just a man.

When she came back into the living room, Luke was cradling her devil cat, Lucy, against his chest. Alicia stopped dead in her tracks.

"Careful... she doesn't like to be picked up," she cautioned.

Luke was busy rubbing the silver tiger's belly. "She's purring," he pointed out.

Sure enough, she was. Alicia could hear her clear across the room.

"So you charm all kinds of females, is that it?" she joked. At his puzzled look, she continued. "That cat doesn't go near any stranger. She barely tolerates me. If I tried to hold her like that, my arms would be shred to ribbons in seconds."

Luke shrugged as he set Lucy on the floor at his feet. The cat rubbed herself unabashedly against his jeaned calves, walking across the toes of his boots in a shameless bid for more attention. "I've always been good with animals."

As Alicia's eyes traveled up from her cat to Luke's face, she noticed for the first time that he was dressed as he had been the last time they'd met--faded jeans, flannel shirt, cowboy boots. No Stetson this time, but she was glad for that since it left her with a clearer view of his handsome face and those blue, blue eyes.

"You're not exactly dressed for dinner and dancing," Alicia pointed out - unless he was planning to take her line-dancing. "Where are we going for dinner?"

"It's a surprise," he answered, grinning wickedly.

"Oh, come on! Tell me!"

He just shook his head. "Nope. You're just going to have to wait and see."

Alicia gave out a loud, exasperated sigh and crossed her arms over her chest. She saw his amused expression out of the corner of her eye.

"Don't pout, angel. Unless you want me to put you over my knee and give your bottom a nice warming to start off our evening."

Just those words made her blood race. But she raised her chin up and plastered a false smile on her face. "No thank you," she sang cheerfully. "Remember, Luke, no spanking on the first date."

Luke chuckled. "We'll see."

Unable to give up so easily, she pressed, gesturing towards his clothes, "I thought that get-up was just your costume at the restaurant."

Luke grinned. "Nope. This is generally how I look every day. These clothes are comfortable and serviceable, especially when I've been working at my mother's farm." He shrugged. "But I thought you would like this 'get-up,' as you put it. Your sister did request a cowboy for your birthday spanking, after all."

Alicia felt herself blush again. "I... I've always had this sort of.... thing for cowboys," she admitted to the floor beneath her.

Luke tipped her chin up with one finger and smiled softly. "Well, darlin', this time you've found yourself the gen-u-wine article."

They laughed at the way he drew out "genuine" and some of her tension eased.

"Now, little lady, if you're done scrutinizing my wardrobe, we'll be off to dinner."

She nodded her agreement and grabbed her purse. They had to shoo the cat back into the apartment when they closed the door behind them. Luke took Alicia's hand as they descended the stairs to the parking lot.

"If you don't mind a friendly bit of advice, Alicia," he said as they crossed the lot. "I wouldn't be coming home too late by yourself in this part of town, if I were you."

She made a face. "Yeah, I know it's not the safest area, but while I'm still getting my bakery off the ground, it's about all I can afford."

Luke had a black pickup truck that he had to give her a boost up into. She grinned to herself as he was walking around to the driver's door. When he started the engine, the local country station came on, playing Garth Brooks. Good Lord, after all her years of fantasizing about cowboys, she really had found a real one!

It took her a few minutes to realize Luke was staring at her, with an expectant look on his face.

"Wh-what?"

"Seatbelt."

She made a face.

"You ride in my truck, Alicia Marie, you wear a seatbelt." To her surprise, he actually leaned over and grabbed the belt himself, snapping it firmly into place. "If you're not careful about things like that, you might find yourself getting a real spanking from me."

A real spanking? She didn't know what he meant by that, but decided not to ask. "Uh, sorry."

He seemed to let it go after a minute and the tension eased. As they pulled out of her complex, he asked her about her new business and she relaxed as she told him about the joys and troubles of launching her bakery.

Before she knew it, the ride was slowing as Luke pulled the truck into the parking area at the local park. She stopped talking and glanced at him, confused.

"What happened to dinner and dancing?"

He chuckled and tweaked her nose. "You're cute. I never said 'dinner and dancing,' I said 'dinner and spanking.' Remember?"

Alicia made a face at him and opened her mouth to retort, stopping when one of his long fingers pressed against her lips. "Dinner is a picnic. Spanking to follow later." That said, he grabbed his keys from the ignition and got out of the cab before she could say a thing.

A picnic? Alicia hadn't been on a picnic in.....had she ever been on a picnic? She frowned as she hopped down from her side of the truck.

Luke was closing the cap on the truck, holding a huge picnic basket in one hand and a checkered blanket under his arm. He made a 'tsk tsk' sound at her as he came around her side of the truck and saw she was already waiting for him there. "Didn't you ever date a gentleman, Alicia? You're supposed to wait for me to open your door for you before you get out of the truck. Remember that next time."

Alicia shook her head at his back as he led her down a grassy slope to an area of picnic tables. A small playground stood nearby, consisting of a swing set, slide and a small jungle gym. Luke set their basket down on one of the benches and nodded towards the area as he opened the blanket over the table. "If you're not a brat, I might just push you on the swings after dinner."

Heat filled Alicia's face, despite the fact that they were all alone. To cover her shyness, she taunted, "Oh yeah, and what if I am a brat?"

"I think you know the answer to that already, honey." Luke's eyes pinned her and she stared at him as his voice dropped an octave. "Would you like a demonstration?"

"N-n-no, thank you." So much for her false bravado. She was blushing even hotter now than before. Luke grinned and touched one cheek gently with an index finger.

"This blushing quirk you have is nice. I like it. I'll have to think of more things to say to keep you nice and pink."

She was grateful when he took a step back and set the basket up on the table. She had the alarming feeling that he could quite easily make her completely forget herself and get lost in him. She'd have to remember to be careful.

"So, what's for dinner?" she asked brightly, following his lead by digging into the basket. Paper plates and plastic silverware emerged, followed by a Tupperware container of cold fried chicken, another of potato salad, and a bag of white grapes. There were two colas and a wine cooler, which Luke offered to her and she declined. There was also a bag of homemade chocolate chip cookies, and a pile of paper napkins on the bottom.

They sat across from one another and dug into the fare in a companionable quiet. Alicia was surprised at how very easy it was to be with Luke, despite what little time she'd known him. There was no nervous urge to keep up a constant chatter

or any inclination to avoid eye contact as they shared their meal. Although her fierce attraction to Luke made her a bit edgy, she also felt very safe and comfortable with him, as if she'd known him for a long time. It didn't make any sense, but that was how she felt. She hoped, a bit belatedly, that those feelings wouldn't get her into trouble. It occurred to her that going on a date like this with someone she'd met only a week before could actually prove dangerous. But when she met Luke's eyes as they finished their meal and dug into the bag of cookies, she just couldn't imagine anything bad about him.

They'd both been hungry and the conversation had lagged as they'd satisfied their appetites. Now full, Alicia sat back with an appreciative sigh and asked, "Did you cook that chicken and all by yourself, Cowboy?"

Luke laughed. "Nope. My mother fixed us the basket, actually."

"She's a fine cook. Those cookies were as good as my own recipe. I don't suppose she's looking for a job, maybe in a new bakery?"

"No, I don't think she'd be up for that. She had a mild stroke back last fall and she has to be careful not to take on too much."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He made a dismissive gesture. "She's got a lot of years left to pester me, don't worry," he complained good-naturedly. "But since my father's not here anymore I try to help her out as much as I can. The hardest part, really, is trying to keep her from working hard the way she's used to."

"When did your dad pass?"

"Over ten years ago."

Alicia nodded. "It must be a lot of work to run a farm, mostly by yourself."

He shrugged, gathering the Tupperware containers and returning them to the basket. "Bout two years ago, I moved back home. Converted the old shed into a guest house of sorts. So I'm on site all the time and it's easier that way. Plus it's good

for Missy..." He winced and stopped talking. She heard him mutter a quiet curse as he carried their trash to a can nearby.

"Who's Missy?"

"She's my niece." Now he made a full-blown hangdog face. "God, I'm sorry. I told myself I wasn't going to blurt out my whole life story to you tonight..."

"What are you apologizing for? Isn't this what people do on a date - get to know each other? I want to know about your life and the people in it. Don't be silly!"

He shrugged. "It's just that people tend to see the situation in a bad light. Missy's parents, my brother and his wife, died together in an auto accident a little over two years ago. I've been Missy's guardian ever since then."

Whoa. "Wow. You're raising her by yourself?"

He nodded, and she noticed that he was watching her reaction very closely, as if he expected her to run for the hills or something. "My mom's a big help, though."

"That's... wow. Lucky little girl."

His eyebrows rose and a slow, pleased smile spread over his face. "Thank you. No one's ever reacted that way before when I told them. It's always 'poor little girl.' I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd give anything so she could have her parents back, but I love her and I love having her in my life."

"How old is she?"

"Six. Oh, no, wait. Sorry. Six and a half. That's what she would tell you, anyway."

Alicia giggled. "Well, I'll look forward to meeting her." As soon as the words left her mouth, she winced inwardly. They'd just come out, without thinking, but as soon as she heard them she realized how presumptuous they sounded.

Luke winked at her and grabbed her hand for a squeeze. "I'll look forward to it, too." Alicia was

grateful for the kind way he smoothed over her uneasiness.

"I've got to warn you first, though. I haven't dated almost at all since I took her in. And she liked to throw a fit tonight when I left her with her grandmother. She's a bit insecure and....well, possessive."

Alicia nodded. "That's understandable, given what's happened to her." She grinned at him, attempting to lighten the moment and assure him that this bit of news didn't frighten her. "Besides, I don't blame her for being possessive of you. She just has good taste, that's all."

He chuckled. "Well," he said after a moment of warmly studying her face. "You've been a wonderful date so far, not a bit bratty. Would you like a push on the swing?"

"Sure!" She followed him to the swings and let him boost her up onto one even though she certainly could have hopped up on her own. She smiled at him over her shoulder when he drew the swing back and pushed her forward.

Luke walked Alicia to her door at the end of the evening. She turned and looked up at him, feeling a bit awkward now, despite the pleasant evening they had passed getting to know each other.

Luke gave her a sexy grin. "I'd love to come inside and give you a nice bedtime spanking, but seeing as how it's our first date and all, I think we'd best hold off on that a while."

Her eyebrow rose. "A bedtime spanking? What's that supposed to be?"

"You've never had one?" he asked, sounded astounded. "Well, I'll have to remedy that... soon, but not tonight." He paused and put his arms loosely around her waist, grinning down at her as she looked up expectantly at him.

Finally, he continued, whispering into her ear: "A bedtime spanking is for good girls, so they go to

sleep feeling all warm and fuzzy. I'd put you over my down. Then I'd spank your pretty little bottom a bit, just till it got a little pink and warm. And I'd tell you that you were a good girl and a fun date and that I enjoyed your company tonight and wanted very much to see you again. And then I'd kiss your forehead and tuck you into bed.... How does that sound?"

A shiver ran up Alicia's spine. "G-g-good, I guess."

Luke chuckled. "You guess?" He shook his head as if disappointed. "Well, like I said, I'll have to show you sometime -- not tonight though, 'cause it's only our first date." He met her eyes and laughed again. Arrogant cuss, she thought. Meanie, using her own words against her like that and knowing full well that she wanted to experience this bedtime spanking thing of his right now.

"Relax, angel," he assured her. "I promise you, there will be lots of bedtime spankings in your future."

He pulled her into a tight bear hug that she decided was a nice conciliation prize. His hands were linked at the small of her back, right above her backside, but he made no move to touch her there, even though she arched her back and thrust her little behind out. Why, oh why, had she said no spankings on the first date? She didn't even think he was going to give her a little love pat!

Luke removed his arms from Alicia's waist and framed her face with both hands. He lowered his mouth to embrace hers, kissing her with a dizzying leisure and meticulous, plundering thoroughness. She whimpered with her desire as she hung onto him, hungrily returning his kiss with thrusts of her own small, pink tongue. He dallied with her a while, running her silken tresses through his fingers and sucking lazily on her pouty bottom lip. When he finally pulled back from her, she opened her eyes slowly as if awakening from a wonderful dream.

She licked her swollen lips and felt shyness steal over her under his stark gaze.

That was when he caught her off guard with two quick, playful swats to her skirted behind. He gave her cheek one final peck, warned her in a husky voice to lock her door when she got inside, and turned with a wink to descend the steps.

Chapter Three

Over the next three months, Alicia and Luke grew closer. They saw each other at least twice a week or more and spoke every day on the phone. Alicia found herself waking up in the morning and her first thoughts were of the handsome cowboy.

Things were really going well between them. Alicia had met, and quickly befriended Luke's mom, and they planned for her to finally meet Missy the weekend following the three month anniversary of their first date. Her only complaint was that despite some gentle love pats, and an occasional swat or two, Luke hadn't given her another spanking yet. Each time she saw him, Alicia found herself strung as tight as a coil, anxiously anticipating a spanking that she longed for and never came.

Of course, there were lots of threats from him, including two serious ones in which he promised her a "real" spanking if she wasn't more careful. One of these warnings came after the second time he discovered her habit of not wearing her safety belt. That time, he'd promised her a good whipping with his big, wide, leather belt if he caught her without the safety harness again. Just the idea of being whipped with a belt, when she'd never been spanked with anything other than a man's hand, was enough to get her to remember that safety belt.

The second threat for a real spanking had been more recent, when Luke had taken note of all the extra time she'd been putting in at the bakery. It was running her down, and she wasn't getting enough rest or the right kind of food to eat, when she even paused long enough to refuel. Her sister and a few friends had offered their help, but she kept declining. This was her dream -- the dream that her ex-fiancé, Damon, had always told her wouldn't make it. And she had to prove that it would. And, in her mind anyway, she had to prove it by herself.

She wasn't as daunted by his threat to spank her over working too hard as she was by the whipping threat over the seatbelt. She even went so far as to tell Luke that she doubted he could give her a "real" spanking, as he put it. Spankings turned her on, and she didn't see how he could use a spanking as a deterrent to her behavior. His eyes had turned steely when she'd told him that, as if he was readying already for the challenge and he'd said calmly, "There is more than one kind of spanking, Alicia Marie. I'm quite sure that I could give you a disciplinary spanking that you would not find erotic or sexy in the least. And, you can bet on it that if you don't ease up on yourself soon, you're going to find out just exactly what I mean."

Little did she know, her time to find out was fast approaching.....

It was a humid, sticky evening in late August and Alicia was still at the bakery, even though she had closed the shop down at four. Now past seven, she was still laboring over the twenty dozen cookies she had promised the Red Cross for the hospital blood drive. Though she knew that the free cookies were going to a good cause, and that it was also good for business because the bakery's name would be on display and her goodies would be getting tasted, she was beginning to regret her last minute contribution. Of course, she hadn't been able to get any of her part time help to stay and work with her, since she'd only agreed to this yesterday and only asked her workers with a day's notice. Her sister was out of town for the week on business. She'd even called two of her girlfriends, but neither had been home. So, she'd plunged in on her own.

The jingle of the bell on the shop's front door cut through her inner thoughts and she tensed with alarm, thinking she had surely locked that door when she'd closed up the shop for the day. Cautiously, she peered around the side of the wall between the kitchen and the shop display area and

saw, with relief, that it was only Luke standing inside the door.

Her relief quickly changed to concern when his blue eyes fell on her. He looked so angry, for a minute she was frozen in her spot.

Without saying a word, he turned and locked the door behind him. He had a large paper bag in his hands and she could smell that it had food in it. Her stomach growled loudly at the wonderful aromas, reminding her that she hadn't eaten lunch today.

"Hi, Cowboy." She greeted him with a smile as he approached her. She hoped she didn't sound as unsure of herself as she felt. Something was definitely wrong, she could tell by the way Luke was acting. "What're you doing here?"

"I was looking for my date for the evening," he drawled lazily. He set the bag on the counter in the kitchen, turned towards her, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Maybe you've seen her, cute little thing with long blond hair and green eyes."

"Did... we have a date tonight?" Alicia guessed, although she feared she already knew the answer.

"Yes, we did."

"Oh, no. Luke, I'm so sorry! I got all wrapped up in these darn cookies and I must have forgotten."

"Mmm-hmmm." He frowned at her. "What did we say about you working all these hours, Alicia Marie?"

"Luke, you don't understand! This is my business! I have to be here, it's my responsibility! I can't just walk away when there's work to be done and no one else to do it."

He sighed. "Why didn't you call someone to help you?"

"I tried." He looked at her doubtfully. "I really did try this time! But no one is home." She stomped one foot in frustration. "I'm afraid this time I may really have bit off more than I can chew."

"What is it you need to finish?"

She hesitated. "Um, twenty dozen chocolate chip cookies by eight a.m. tomorrow."

His eyebrows rose. "That's a lot of cookies in a little bit of time."

"They're for the Red Cross Blood Drive at the hospital. They only asked me yesterday."

He shook his head.

"It's for a good cause! And it's good publicity for the bakery and will

get people to try my products! How could I have said no?"

He was still shaking his head, but he held up his hands now to ward off her defenses. "Okay, little lady. This is what we're going to do. And I don't want to hear a word of argument from you. You and I are going to sit down and eat this dinner I brought us from the Hong Kong Garden, where you were supposed to meet me...."

"I'm really sorry, Luke...." Alicia whispered, pressing her eyes closed.

"Forget about that. It's not important. I was just worried about you when you didn't show up. We'll talk about that later, though. Like I said, we're going to eat, and then you can show me what to do to help you get these cookies baked. Later, when the work's all done, I'll drive you home and we'll talk about your work schedule."

"Okay."

He looked surprised that she wasn't offering some argument, but he didn't say anything. He opened the sack of Chinese food instead and they sat beside one another on stools to eat.

The meal was shared mostly in silence and Alicia couldn't help but wonder what lay in store for her later that night. She tried not to dwell on it, though. Instead she thought about how different Luke was from Damon. Damon had never troubled himself so much as to even show support for her dream. While here was Luke, ready to tough out a hot, sweaty night baking cookies to help her achieve it.

It took a little work to teach Luke to bake cookies, but he got the hang of it fairly quickly. It surprised Alicia how quickly the time went as they

worked side by side. Before she knew it, all twenty dozen were baked and they were boxing up the last of them. A glance at the clock made her grimace; it was already ten o'clock and they still had their talk to get through.

She glanced at Luke out of the corner of her eye as they set the last box on the counter. "Thanks for helping me, Luke. Who knows how long I would have been here if I'd had to do all this alone."

"All you ever have to do is ask me, Alicia, and I will be there for you. No matter what."

She looked down at her shoes and swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I'm not used to that, you know. Damon never would have even poked his head in here tonight if he'd been in your place. He probably would have just gone home from the restaurant in a huff when I didn't show up."

Luke's voice was quiet, but there was an unmistakable edge to it. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you, I'm not your ex-fiancé, Alicia."

She shook her head and met his eyes levelly. "No, you're not. I know that."

"Good."

"I have my car here, you know," she said after a moment had passed. "You don't have to give me a ride home. Maybe we could just talk tomorrow...."

He shook his head and his eyes were determined when he turned to look at her. "I'll just follow you over then. I want us to discuss this once and for all, tonight. And, besides, I don't like the idea of you walking into your building by yourself so late at night."

Alicia resisted the urge to roll her eyes at his last comment. She knew she should be glad that he was concerned about her, but she'd been an independent, self reliant woman for a long time now and comments like that were hard to swallow.

"Okay. Just let me get my purse."

The drive over to her apartment seemed to go by much faster than usual. When she pulled her little Escort alongside Luke's truck, he motioned for

her to stay inside the car till he came and opened the door for her. She sighed, but let him have his way. He squirmed inside the building, looking around the dark, dimly lit lot with obvious distrust.

When they got inside her apartment, the door was locked immediately behind them. Luke turned to her and pinned her with a serious look.

"Why don't you go and get changed for bed?"

Her eyebrows rose. They hadn't slept together yet, and he certainly didn't look like he had any intention of doing that tonight. But she didn't think it would be wise to question him, so she shrugged and agreed. It was late anyway, and she'd just be going to bed when he left.

When she came back into the living room wearing a long sleep shirt, Luke was sitting on the couch waiting for her. She moved to join him, but he shook his head at her.

"What?" she asked.

He pointed one slim finger to a corner of the room, which she then noticed he had moved a potted plant from. It was now a bare, empty corner. She glanced from it to him, frowning.

"I want you to stand there in the corner, Alicia, and think about all the reasons it is not wise for you to work yourself to the bone."

"You what!?" She couldn't believe him! She shook her head. "No, Luke. I won't! I'm not a child, and I won't let you treat me like one! I will not be put in a corner."

His jaw hardened and he stared her down for a few moments. Then, to her shock, he grasped one arm and marched her over to the corner. He pressed her against the walls and held her in place with one hand on her waist. She twisted and struggled and hollered at him, but he handled her easily. He didn't have to hurt her to keep her where he wanted her.

"Anytime you want to stand here like a good girl and do your thinking, you just settle down and I'll leave you be," he told her quietly. It was a wonder

she heard him over all the yelling she was doing. "Once you settle down, you'll be here for ten minutes and then we will talk. The longer you carry on like this, the longer you have to wait to start that ten minutes."

"Urrrrgh! I hate you!" she screamed.

"You'll get over it."

Somehow she managed to rein in her temper. She stopped struggling and stood still and stiff. It wouldn't do her any good to keep fighting him. He was simply bigger and stronger. He could hold her there all night long without breaking a sweat.

She felt his hand leave her waist and she could tell that he had sat back down on the sofa when she heard the old springs creak under his weight. A moment after that she heard Lucy purring and she rolled her eyes and snorted under her breath.

"You'd best be thinking in that corner," Luke warned her, obviously having heard her derision.

She folded her arms over her chest and sighed. Then the strangest thing happened. She felt like she was going to cry.

That was dumb, she decided, but it didn't make the feeling go away. She felt like a disappointing, troublesome child standing there. And she was terribly afraid that the damage she'd done tonight by forgetting to meet Luke and scaring him like that was unrepairable.

When he finally called her out of the corner ten minutes later, she turned to him and sniffled. She was still managing to hold her tears at bay but it was getting harder, especially when she looked at him.

"Are you going to give me a... a real spanking?" she whispered.

Luke looked at her sadly, but his jaw was set. "What do you think,]angel?"

She shuffled over to his side and stood there looking at him like she didn't know what came next. Luke shooed the cat away and took her hand. He gave her a gentle tug and she went over his lap. He

wasted no time in whisking up her nightgown and tugging down her panties. The first smack from his hand was hard and as loud as a gunshot.

More hot, stinging slaps rained down on her unprotected flesh and she quickly began to see what Luke had been warning her about all along. This spanking was nothing like the sweet, stingy, warm foreplay swats she loved. There was no rubbing, no touching, no kisses, no soft words, no teasing. There was only the hard punishing effect of his hand on her backside and she found herself squirming and trying in vain to avoid his hand.

As he worked, Luke delivered the speech he'd intended for her concerning her work. "You have to start taking better care of yourself Alicia. You're going to get sick and run down from overworking yourself, and then what good will you be to the store? I will not allow you to do that to yourself. I intend to see that you stay good and healthy so that I can enjoy your company for a long time!"

By this time Alicia was pleading with him to stop spanking her. Her bottom was on fire and no matter which direction she turned, he never missed the spot he aimed for. She'd never thought a spanking could hurt like this and she never wanted to experience another like this one again. She promised him that she would do anything he said, if he would only stop.

But he didn't. His hand kept falling in deafening thunderclaps and tears began to fall down her cheeks. "You will not work any later than six p.m. Is that understood, Alicia Marie?"

"Yeeessss! Please, Luke....."

"And, if you do work that late, you will have the shop door locked after you close and you will call me to come down and drive you back here so you don't have to walk into this complex by yourself at night. Agreed?"

"Okay! Okay! I promise!"

"No more accepting projects at the last minute like those cookies tonight..." SLAP! SMACK! CRACK!

"...and when you need help at work..." SMACK! CRACK! WAP! "...you will ask me or your sister or your friends or someone until you find it! Am I being absolutely clear about that?"

"God, yes! Ow! Please, Luke, anything!" She beat her fists against the floor below her, not sure if she could take even one more strike from his hand.

"And... you will start keeping a calendar of appointments so that you don't forget dates or meetings. You've got a lot going on in your life right now and I understand that you simply forgot tonight. I'm not angry about that. But I don't want to be scared and worried for your safety again when it can be prevented with a simple calendar." He stopped her spanking. Finally. "Okay, honey?"

"Yes, Luke. Luke, I'm sorry." Fresh tears took over and Luke helped her right herself. He cradled her gently on his lap and rocked her in his arms, comforting her now with soft kisses and words of forgiveness. He dried the tears from her cheeks with his fingers and stroked back the hair that had fallen into her face. "I'm so sorry I forgot. I won't again. I promise I'll take better care of myself."

"Okay, baby. I'm glad to hear that. It's okay, Alicia. I forgive you. I love you. Shh, please don't cry anymore."

His words sunk in slowly and she blinked as she realized he'd just said he loved her. She rested her head on his shoulder and smiled slowly, then worried her bottom lip as she thought of all the complications that could bring.

After Luke felt that Alicia was calmed down, he smiled down at her and kissed her forehead. "You look a bit sleepy there, cutie," he observed. "All that kicking and hissing at me after your long day seems to have tuckered you out."

She nodded. She was feeling sleepy.

"Let's get you tucked in to bed," he suggested. As he stood and picked her up in his arms to carry her off to her room, he teased, "Would you like to experience a bedtime spanking tonight?"

"No! That's okay. Not tonight!" she answered quickly, her bottom still very hot and sore. The cool sheets on her bed felt wonderful when Luke set her down. She looked up at him when he tucked her in and she said, "I didn't think you'd really do it."

His gaze was warm and loving on her face. She would have known he loved her then, she thought, even if he hadn't already said so in words. "I only did it because I care about you and what's good for you. I have to warn you right now, too: I'll do it again if I think you need it. I won't tolerate you ignoring your health or your safety."

She nodded. He bent down and brushed his mouth against hers in a warm, soft kiss that was sweet and just the stuff to weave pleasant dreams of. When he turned to go to the door and click off the light, she said, "Luke?"

"Yes, angel?"

"Thank you."

She saw the flash of his white teeth in the darkness of the room. "Anytime. Sweet dreams now. I'll talk to you in the morning."

In the quiet of her room, Alicia wondered about his warning that he would spank her again like he had tonight if necessary. She wasn't sure how she felt about that, even though she'd thanked him for what he'd done tonight. Although she understood that he'd spanked her out of concern for her well being, she just wasn't sure if she could willingly submit herself to his care in that way again.

Chapter Four

That Saturday, Luke packed a picnic lunch for three, and added fishing poles and a blanket to the back of his truck. When he came back into the house, he glanced at his pouting niece and gave her his brightest smile.

"Come on, Missy! We're going to have a lot of fun today! What's with the long face?"

"Why does she have to come?"

He sighed. Patience, he reminded himself silently. He picked Melissa up and carried her over to the big armchair by the front window. He sat her down on his lap and held her loosely in his arms.

"Pumpkin, we've talked about this before. I want you to meet Alicia because she's a very special lady and she's going to be a part of our lives."

Melissa's little orange kitten joined them in the armchair, curling up with a loud purr in her mistress's lap. Missy focused her attention on the cat, worrying her bottom lip, as her uncle continued. "I know that this is something new, but I want you to please give Alicia a chance. She's really a fun lady and I like her very much..."

"Do you like her more than me?"

The question was so softly spoken, he almost didn't hear it. Luke turned Missy's chin up with two fingers and met her eyes. "You are my favorite girl. You know that," he assured her, kissing her forehead. "I like Alicia in a different way, honey, and it doesn't mean that I love you any less. Okay?"

She was still frowning, but she nodded. Luke held her on his lap a bit longer and let her turn her attention back to the kitten. When it was time for them to go, he said, "So, can you be a good girl for me today and be nice to Alicia? I know you'll like her a lot, too, if you give her a chance."

"Okay, Uncle Luke," Missy agreed quietly. She sounded so sad and resigned. Luke patted her back and told himself she just needed some time to get

used to this new change. She'd certainly come around once she'd met Alicia.

When they arrived at her apartment, Alicia came out of the building wearing a little summer dress and a shaky smile. Luke knew her well enough by now to see that she was nervous. He got out of the truck, pulling his reluctant niece behind him by the hand. He gave Alicia a brief kiss on the cheek and a wink.

"Hello, gorgeous."

"Hello yourself." Even her voice was shaky. Luke took one of her hands and gave it a reassuring squeeze, tugging her a step closer at the same time. "Missy, this is my friend, Alicia. Alicia, this is my niece, Missy."

Missy eyed the woman before her warily. "You can call me Melissa," she said haughtily. Luke blinked at her in surprise. She never asked anyone to call her that! Alicia offered the little girl her hand and they shook. "It's nice to meet you, Melissa. Your uncle's told me lots about you."

Missy's nose crinkled in dislike as she withdrew her hand, but she didn't say anything else. Alicia glanced nervously at Luke and he offered a small shrug. "Well, girls, let's get going, then!" he suggested with forced cheer.

Luke drove to the small lake where he had taken Missy fishing several times in the past. The party of three settled on the edge of a creaky dock, shoes off and legs dangling over the side. Luke handed Missy her fishing pole and gave his own to Alicia.

"Oh, no. I'll just keep you two company while you fish," Alicia protested, trying to give him back the pole.

"No, way. No girl of mine is going to stick around for long without learning to fish," he teased. "It's easy. I'll teach you. So, just relax."

Alicia watched as Luke choose a long, slimy earthworm from a container of the critters that he had brought along. She made a face as he speared the worm on the hook. When she looked up she saw

Missy staring at her with what could only be described as disgust.

"Yucky, huh?" she said to the little girl, knowing even as she spoke that it was the wrong thing to say. Missy didn't answer, except to give Alicia a withering look, from head to toe. Alicia suddenly felt very silly for having worn the little flowered sundress instead of shorts and a tee shirt. At least she'd decided on the more sensible Keds instead of the strappy heels she'd had on at first that morning.

She watched as the little girl chose her own worm and stabbed it onto her hook without any hesitation or remorse. She glanced up at Alicia with a sinister sort of smile and Alicia got the distinct feeling that Missy was imagining that it was her uncle's new girlfriend impaled on that hook instead of the fat earthworm.

"That a girl, pumpkin," Luke praised, completely missing the exchange between his female companions. He showed Alicia how to cast her line and watched approvingly as Missy cast out beside her. Alicia was beginning to feel like a complete idiot next to the child.

They fished and talked for a while, Luke holding up much of the conversation as he tried to think of things that would interest both his girls. Missy caught a couple fish, all very small, and Luke let them go.

Alicia didn't catch anything.

She was grateful when they stopped to eat lunch. They spread the blanket out under the shade of a tree and shared sandwiches and grapes, colas and potato chips. Luke tried to get Missy to talk about her kitten, but the child remained aloof. She stared moodily at her lunch, and whenever she looked at Alicia it was as if she were trying to zap her out of existence with her gaze. It was beginning to get unnerving.

"May I be excused?" Missy suddenly asked, completely interrupting her uncle in mid-sentence.

His brow furrowed a moment, but he didn't scold her.

"Do you feel okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Can I wade a lil'? It's hot."

"Okay, just stay where I can see you. And don't go in past your knees."

"Okay!" Missy was already running off towards the water.

"She hates me," Alicia sighed once the child was out of earshot.

"No, she doesn't. She doesn't even know you well enough to have any opinion yet," Luke insisted. He turned Alicia towards him and kissed her briefly. "I'm sorry she's being difficult. She promised me this morning that she would give you a fair chance."

Alicia shrugged. "It's okay. She's been through a lot..."

"It doesn't matter what she's been through. It doesn't mean she can be rude. I'm going to have a long talk with her tonight." Alicia sighed.

Luke tilted her face up with his fingers. "Don't get so down in the mouth, little lady. I'd hate to have to warm your fanny on this lovely afternoon."

She pulled away from his grip. "You're not going to spank me again. I haven't done anything wrong today..."

"Well, you haven't been exactly gregarious in attempting to befriend Missy, Alicia."

"Oh, so now it's all my fault? By the way, that's an awfully big word for you, Cowboy. Gre-gar-i-ous? Bet you can't spell it!"

Luke's eyes glittered dangerously in her direction. "You're pushing your luck, Alicia."

Before she could respond to that, there was a loud SPLASH! from the dock.

Both adults looked up to see a sputtering, wet, muddy Melissa emerge from the water.

"Melissa Erin!" Luke shouted, jumping up and running to the dock, Alicia close on his heels. He hauled his soaking wet niece onto the dock,

drenching himself in the process. "I thought you were wading!"

"I was... I... uh..."

Luke shook his head. What next? The day was going from bad to worse.

"Well, girls, I think this ends our little fishing trip. Let's get our shoes and pack up." He gave Missy a stern look. "We'll talk about this once we get you home and dry."

Alicia couldn't have been happier to see this awful outing coming to an end. She found her shoes and stepped into one, not even noticing the empty, open container beside them that had housed the earthworms.

Luke was wrapping Missy in the blanket when he heard Alicia's shrill scream. He looked over his shoulder as she withdrew her foot from her shoe, two earthworms dangling from her toes.

There was an unmistakable giggle from the wet little girl behind him.

Luke picked Missy up and strode the length of the dock to Alicia's side.

He set his niece down with a jolt and picked up Alicia's shoes. They were each filled with earthworms, as well as a good deal of the dirt that the container had also held.

"Melissa Erin," he growled. "Did you do this?" Duh, Alicia thought.

Missy was looking up at her uncle, the picture of innocence and he fought the urge to shake her. "Do what, Uncle Luke?" she asked.

"These shoes are ruined, Melissa!" he shouted. "You apologize to Alicia right this minute, young lady."

There was a moment of tense silence while Missy fixed Alicia with a look of pure hatred. Luke looked like he might just strangle the little girl.

And Alicia wished she could just disappear.

Then, the silence was broken with a firm, defiant, loudly voiced, "No."

Luke's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. "What did you say?" he demanded.

"NO!" Missy shouted, stomping one foot. "I'm not sorry! I won't apologize! I don't want her here!"

Alicia watched as Luke took a slow breath, in and out. He closed his eyes a moment. She started to interrupt to say it was okay, they were old shoes anyway (which was a complete lie because they were brand new), but he held up one hand to silence her.

"Melissa. You are about a second away from getting punished, young lady. Now I suggest you apologize to Alicia, right here and now, unless that's how you want things to go."

Oh, Lord.

Missy stared her uncle down for a few second, then finally mumbled, "Sorry."

"Like you mean it!" Luke thundered.

Missy glared at Alicia, but her voice was contrite. "I'm sorry I put worms in your shoes, 'Licia."

Alicia nodded. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." Luke pointed to the truck. "Wait in the truck, Melissa. We'll be right there."

Missy trudged off to the truck, stumbling inside awkwardly while still wrapped in the blanket. Luke took Alicia's shoes and threw them angrily into the trashcan.

"I'm sorry," he said as he gathered the poles and picnic basket. "I'll get you another pair...."

"Don't worry about it."

"....and she will be punished when I get her home."

Alicia touched his arm to stay him. "You're not really going to punish her, are you?"

His look was incredulous. "Hell, yes, I'm going to punish her! Don't you think she deserves it? She's also going to be put in her room for the rest of the day!"

"Oh, Luke, please don't punish her!" Alicia implored. "If you do, she'll blame me! She already hates me as it is! It'll only make things worse!"

Luke glared at her. "I can't just let her get away with this," he insisted, shaking his head. Suddenly his gaze turned hard and he added, "She has to learn that's there's consequences to her actions – just like you do."

He turned on his heel and walked angrily away. It took all of Alicia's will power not to throw the empty bait can she held at his arrogant head.

When Luke got Melissa home, he gave her the world's quickest bath in absolute silence. All of his niece's defiance had disappeared on the tense ride home and he knew she was regretting her behavior.

When Missy was dry and clean again, he helped her into a pair of pajamas.

She didn't even question him or complain about how early it was to be getting ready for bed. When he spoke to her finally, his voice was gruff and he noticed how her bottom lip trembled.

While Missy had worked the tangles out of her wet hair, Luke had placed her little "time out" chair in a corner in her bedroom; now, he instructed her to sit in it, facing the wall, and think about her behavior that day. He left her there, closing his ears to the quiet sniffing he heard as he walked out of the room.

In the kitchen, he took two TV dinners from the freezer and set them in the oven. He tried to phone Alicia, but only got her machine. He doubted that she'd gone out again when he'd only dropped her off a half-hour ago, but he figured she needed a little time to herself to figure out her feelings.

He left a brief message, though, that was firm about his resolve that they talk, and soon.

He glanced out the window towards his mother's house, hoping to see her car in the driveway even though he knew it was the night she had supper with one of her church friends. He wished she was home so he could ask her for advice on how to handle Melissa, but she wouldn't be back for

another hour or two and he wouldn't wait that long to discipline his niece. He was nervous, though. He'd never punished Melissa before.

He checked his watch and sighed as he turned to go back to Missy's room. She'd been in that corner ten minutes, and he thought that was long enough for the both of them to wait.

Time to get this over with.

Luke was pleased that she was where she'd been left, at least. He sat on her bed, rubbed a hand over his face and called her over to him.

His heart fell to his feet at the overly bright eyes that warily watched him as Missy stood up from her chair and walked slowly to his side. She'd never looked at him like that before, like she was afraid of him. He felt for a minute like he couldn't breathe. When she finally stood in front of him, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth and blinking rapidly against the tears in her eyes, Luke did the only thing he could think of. He picked her up and cradled her in his lap, relief rushing through him like a drug at the way she curled against his chest and hid her face in the curve of his neck.

He held her quietly for a few minutes until they'd both calmed a bit. Then he sat back and lifted her face up. He kissed her forehead and smoothed her hair back. "We need to talk about today, pumpkin," he finally said. "Did you think about what happened like I asked you to?"

Missy nodded.

"Good girl. What did you think about?"

"I... I thought 'bout how I promised to be nice to 'Licia. And then I wasn't nice to her..."

Luke nodded. "Why do you think that happened?"

Missy lifted one shoulder. "Don't know.... I... just saw her wit you and...." Her voice trailed off and she just sat on his knee, staring at her hands.

"Melissa." Luke's voice was gentle, but firm. "Look at me, honey." He waited while she slowly lifted her eyes. "Do you remember what I said this

morning? About how no matter what happens or who else is in our lives, I will always love you?"

Missy nodded.

"That's always and forever, honey. You're stuck with me, kiddo. But you're going to have to learn to share me."

She nodded again.

Luke held her for a bit, trying to think of another way to explain this.

Finally he said, "You know how sometimes Grandma comes over and she and I do some planning on the computer? And then sometimes you go over your friend Janie's house to play? Those times, you share me with Grandma and I share you with Janie. Right?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, Alicia's another person you're going to share me with. And, I bet once you and she get to be friends, I'll have to share you with her sometimes, too."

Missy sighed and rested her head on her uncle's shoulder. Luke knew she understood what he meant, and he also knew that she still wasn't happy about it. After a little time had passed, he asked her, "So do you think you can try again for me, Missy?"

"I'll try! I promise!" she said earnest. "I'm really sorry I ruined our day, Uncle Luke! And I'm sorry I broke my promise to you."

"Well, sweetie, a promise is a very serious thing. I hope you try harder this time."

"I will."

Luke smiled at her. "Good. The first thing you do when you see Alicia again, march right up to her, and you tell her you're sorry. And from now on, no more acting out just to get my attention. Any time you want my attention, all you have to do is tell me. You don't have to fall in a lake."

They both laughed at the way he'd phrased that. "You could just say... oh, I don't know. You could just tug on my sleeve. How's that? It'd be our code."

And that way I'd know you were missing me and you could still stay dry."

Missy grinned. "Okay." She cuddled against his side and he sighed. "I'm really sorry, Uncle Luke."

Luke pressed a soft kiss on the crown of her head. "WeeIII, baby, maybe just this one time, I think that being sorry can be enough..."

She glanced up at him in surprise.

"Just keep your promise about behaving better, so there's no next time, you hear?"

"Yes sir."

"I love you, Melissa Erin. Don't you ever forget that or doubt it."

"Yes, sir," she repeated, stretching up to hug him around his neck. "I love you too, Uncle Luke."

They ate dinner together, and when her uncle imposed an early bedtime on her and had her Grandma come over to stay a few hours with her so he could run over to Alicia's, Missy didn't complain at all. Instead she gave him a hug and whispered good night.

Chapter Five

It was about eight thirty by the time Luke got over to Alicia's apartment. He'd seen the lights on in her windows as well as her car parked in its usual space, so he knew she was home, even though she didn't respond when he rang her bell. He could just imagine her standing on her tiptoes on the other side of the door, looking through the peephole at him. "Alicia Marie, we need to talk. And I'm not going to do it through this door!" He finally announced in frustration.

He was sure that half the building had heard him, but he didn't care. He banged sharply on the door again. "You're only making things worse for yourself, little lady. You might as well start behaving now and let me in." A frustrated little scream penetrated the wood that separated them and a grin slipped over Luke's face.

A second later, the door opened an inch, the chain lock still in place, and Alicia's face appeared in the crack. Her green eyes snapped and sparked angrily as she spat, "I should start behaving? You should talk to your niece about behavior, buddy! I haven't done a thing wrong!"

"I told you, Alicia. I will not have this conversation through the door. Let me in, or I'm warning you -- I'll let myself in."

Her jaw dropped momentarily. She recovered quickly, though. "Oh! Big man! Let me tell you something, Cowboy, you bust open my door and I'll call the cops on you so fast your head will spin!"

Luke nodded solemnly, as if considering her words. "Well, darlin,' you're sure welcome to try, but I'm bettin' I'd be faster." A second girlishly shrill scream pierced his ears as Alicia promptly slammed the door in his face. Before she could have a moment to throw her deadbolt, Luke crashed his full weight into the door and -- to her surprise, as well as his own -- the hard wood gave way. Luke

stumbled through the opening as Alicia staggered backwards and fell with a thump on her backside.

"You okay?" Luke asked. She grudgingly let him help her to her feet, then slapped his hands away as she stared past him at the door. "Now look what you did, you big oaf!" she exclaimed, gesturing madly at the splintered wood and broken lock, the crooked way the door now hung on its hinges. Luke looked at his destructive handiwork with a blank expression. He closed the bruised door with a calm that made Alicia want to slap him.

Then he turned back to her and said, "Well, Alicia Marie, if you'd just been reasonable and let me in, I wouldn't have had to bust up your door. Now would I?" While she stammered in angry frustration at him, Luke's gaze took a lazy trail up and down her body and her face flushed at the heat in his blue eyes and the sexy smile that slowly spread over his features. She suddenly felt like she stood before him completely naked and vulnerable instead of being snug and warm in her old flannel nightgown and fuzzy pink slippers.

"Damn, little girl," Luke exclaimed softly. "Don't you look all cute and cud'ly. I don't know if I can stay mad at you when you're standin' there dressed like that."

Alicia shook a finger at him when he looked like he meant to come closer. "Don't, Luke!" she demanded. "I... I've changed my mind about us. I... I don't think it's going to work out." The look of surprise on his face might have been comical if Alicia wasn't trying so hard to be strong and not break down and cry. She swallowed back her tears, stood a little taller and made herself meet his eyes - which, she noted alarmingly, were as hard as steel on her face. "I want you to leave.... please."

"You changed your mind, huh?" Luke asked and his voice was deceptively cool. His powerful arms crossed over his broad chest and he looked downright stern and, well, disappointed. He took a step towards her and, reflexively, Alicia took a

countering step back. "What about me? Don't I get a say in this?"

"N-n-no, not really," she squeaked, wincing at her voice as she heard it. What was wrong with her? She was a grown woman and in her own apartment letting this... this *man* -- who she honestly did not fear -- intimidate her. "If... if I want you to go, Luke, you... you should be a gentleman and respect my wishes." Luke was still advancing towards her and, despite herself, Alicia was still backing away from him. She realized with a start that although the big bully was a bit intimidating, there was a part of her that was excited at the chase and even more so by the smoldering 'boy-are-you-gonna-get-it-now' look she was receiving. Luke was chuckling at her comment about his being a gentleman when her backside bumped into the kitchen counter. She hadn't even been aware that they'd traveled from one room into the next! Luke closed the bit of space between them in an instant and just the close proximity and the smell of his cologne made Alicia feel light headed.

When he enclosed her with one arm braced on either side of her on the counter with her in between and demanded harshly, "Look at me!" she felt herself growing weak with desire. She met his sharp gaze and swallowed hard. "First of all," he rasped. "I never claimed to be a gentleman, so don't expect it. Second of all, you can bet your sweet butt that I *do* have a say in this. And you're not getting away from me until I've said it all. Third, you'd better have a good explanation for all of this, Alicia. Because I'm not buying it."

She nodded jerkily, her face burning as she wondered if he knew how aroused she was just from the talking-to he was giving her and the way he had her pinned there, immobile. He hadn't even touched her and she was already aching for him. Lord, what was her problem? She shouldn't be turned on by this, by his anger. She knew what a real spanking from him was like and she didn't want

another! He studied her a few minutes in silence, moving a strand of hair away from her eyes and cupping her cheek, then the side of her neck.

He glanced down further and noticed, about the same time as she did, how rock hard and eagerly straining her nipples were through the worn flannel nightgown. His chuckle was as warm a sound as his breath felt on her skin. With one light finger, he traced a circle around one aching bud, glancing up mischievously to see her reaction play across her face. "Does this turn you on, Alicia?" he asked silkily. "Me crashing in here and scolding you for your behavior? Telling you what's going to happen and physically overpowering you, dominating you? Even after the spanking you got the other night from me?" His finger moved to her second nipple and teased a twin ring around it. She gasped involuntarily and blushed hotter. "Ah, there's that blush I'm so partial to. I'll take that as a yes... damn, what do you know..."

Alicia whimpered and tried to pull back from him and his touch, enjoying it far too much and too disturbed by her attraction to his dominance and her desire for more of it. "You're gonna hurt your back, sweetheart, you keep pulling away from me like that..."

He was so damn proud of himself! Standing there like a damn granite statue of cowboy sex appeal and making her body scream for him. She punched him in the chest, pouting because she knew she'd hurt her fist more than him.

"You stop being angry at me, darlin', and you just might enjoy yourself." He continued touching her breasts, teasing around the nipples, and chuckled at her look of distressed desire. Every so often he grazed one nipple very gently with the pad of his thumb and she would arch against his touch.

"Don't touch me..." she pleaded, her voice totally lacking in conviction. Her head lolled back over her shoulders, then snapped up as he bent his head and nipped ever so lightly at her nipple

through the fabric of her nightgown. "I want you to stop touching me like that!" she cried more harshly this time.

Luke leaned closer to her and spoke right in her ear. "You can stop the brat act, Alicia. You've made it clear to me today that I've neglected you. And I promise, you'll have your spanking tonight, just the way you need it."

She sagged against him, hating herself and the thrill that shot through her at his words. Any other woman would have run for the hills, but, oh no, not her. She melted at just the images his words brought to mind. She sighed and murmured, "I don't know what's wrong with me!"

Luke pulled back from her and shook his head. "There's not a thing wrong with you, Alicia, honey. Not one thing." He framed her face in his hands and kissed her with a violent slowness, a leisurely plunder that left her knees weak and her eyes glazed when he eventually pulled back and gave her a gentle smile. He ran one hand over her blond hair and kissed her forehead. "Now that that's settled," he said, taking her hand. "Let's go have us that talk..."

Alicia found herself meekly following Luke to her sofa, then sitting there facing him. He held her hand and smiled at her. "Talk to me," he encouraged, as if it were so simple. She picked at the fuzzies on her old couch and mumbled, "I don't know what you want me to say..."

Luke sighed as he lifted her chin with one finger. "Well, all I *want* is to look into your eyes when you talk to me. You tell me what you need to say, honey, not what you think I want to hear."

She felt tears pricking her eyes and blinked furiously to get rid of them. How silly she felt! She cleared her throat, forced herself to keep looking at Luke and blurted, "I just think it's better to stop this... this... our relationship.... now before anyone gets hurt...." She could have bit her tongue off as she saw the gentling in Luke's eyes and realized

that she'd just exposed herself to him completely in one simple sentence.

Before he could say a thing, she rushed on. "I... I mean your niece hates me, Luke. And... I'm not so sure I like her much either. I don't have much experience with kids and I never imagined myself even having children..." She'd expected to get at least a surprised expression from that bit of revelation, but Luke just sat there listening to her ramblings with that same softness in his gaze.

"Maybe you're wasting your time with me. I don't see myself getting married for a long time, Luke, if ever, even. And I know you want a wife and a mother for Missy and kids of your own. You should know I'm not ready for that now. After the way my engagement ended with Damon I don't even know if I still believe in marriage."

Luke still made no comment, though he was looking at her more thoughtfully and he did nod his head to show he was listening. Alicia had already told him the details of her relationship with Damon, how he'd never understood her spanking kink and had made very minimal effort to try to accommodate her desires in that direction. The night before they were supposed to be married, she'd discovered him in bed with her best friend and he had announced that at least she didn't like the "weird shit" that Alicia was into.

"And then there's this whole discipline spanking thing you gave me the other night," Alicia continued. Now that he'd finally coerced her into talking it was like she couldn't stop! "I just don't know about that whole thing. I didn't like it, that was for sure. But I understand that you did it because you care about me. I just don't know if I can trust you to do that on a regular basis in our relationship...."

Luke smiled at her. "Well, if you're good, I won't have to do it on a very regular basis, now will I?"

She blushed. "No, but I still have trouble with the whole idea."

He nodded. "I understand why it would be hard to accept that. It means you have to give me your complete trust and the power to decide what's best for you instead of doing it yourself. After your last experience trusting a man like that, I can see why it's hard. But I won't back down on that. When you need a lesson like you did the other night, I won't be able to sit on my hands and let it pass. So, if you can't find a way to reconcile getting punished when you deserve it, then I think you may be right in saying our relationship wouldn't work. As much as I want it to work, it won't without your consent to that."

Alicia sniffled at his words and he smiled. "I thought you were trying to convince me that we shouldn't be together, here. And now when I agree with you that you might be right, you look like you're going to cry."

She blinked against the hot tears, swallowing them back. "I'm not going to cry," she insisted, but one tear had already escaped and was making a mad dash for freedom down her soft cheek.

Luke chuckled softly as he wiped the wetness away and gave her hand a squeeze. "Calm down, baby. I'm not giving up on us yet. I'm just telling you that you need to take some time and think about the punishment spankings. And if you find that you can't accept them, then maybe we should reconsider what we're plunging into here. That's all.

"Now, as for my niece, she does not hate you. She doesn't hate anything, except possibly Brussels sprouts. She doesn't even know you yet. I had a talk with her tonight -- a good talk -- and I think she will really give you the chance you deserve..."

"You didn't punish her, did you?"

Luke nodded. "No, I didn't really have to go to all that trouble. Relax, Alicia. I sat her in the corner a little while to make her think about her behavior and then we had a good talk, like I said. She wasn't mad at me or you. She behaved very badly today and understood that that couldn't be permitted. It

went very well, actually. And like I said the next time you two meet up, it should go much better." Alicia sighed. Luke gave her hand a tug and cuddled her against his side. She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"As for what you said about kids, I think you need to give Missy the same chance she needs to give you before you decide things about yourself that you're not sure of. Like you said, you don't have much experience with kids, so the way I see it, how do you really know for sure?"

She shrugged one shoulder. He made it all sound so simple and logical and easy. In her head it was complicated and emotional and so very hard. But she liked Luke so much, wanted him to be her own so much, that she wanted just as much to believe him.

Luke gave her forehead a warm kiss and cupped her face. She looked up at him and he leaned his forehead against hers. "I want you to know something, Alicia Marie," he said. "And I want you to remember it. I am not your ex-fiancé. And I would never hurt you like he did. Never. Got that?"

She nodded jerkily, shamed by the indirect comparison she'd made between the two men. Luke was nothing like Damon and she knew that in her heart. "I'm sorry. You're right."

One finger rose to her lips to quiet her apology. "It's okay. Just remember next time."

She nodded again and released a deep breath when Luke enfolded her back in his arms. It felt so good to be held like that after the long day they'd had and especially after this talk.

"As far as marriage is concerned, honey, I'm not in any rush myself, you know. I would like to marry someday and have a family, but I don't have to do it tomorrow. We've only been dating a couple months and things will come in their own time. If you do decide that you want to be with me, then I'm sure you'll find a way to trust me with your heart. And if you trust me enough and want to be

with me, I'm sure your belief in marriage and love will strengthen as well."

As he spoke, he petted her hair back from her face. Alicia wished that what he predicted could come true. She would like to believe in love again, and to be able to trust someone without fear or doubt. She couldn't think of anyone more worthy of her trust than Luke.

After they'd sat in quiet for some time, Luke patted her bottom and said, "Now, let's get you properly spanked and put to bed...."

"You... you're still going to spank me?"

"Of course I am." Luke answered easily. "Silly woman. But don't get all excited on me. You've been especially naughty today and you've got a hard spanking coming to you."

Something in his eyes belied his words and Alicia bit back a smile. "And I won't like this spanking, is that what you're saying?"

Luke's gaze was warm. "I told you before, there're all kinds of spankings."

"Right, of course." A tiny giggle escaped her as she saw that his eyes were a-dance with humor.

"So, off with you to your bedroom, Miss. I'll be there directly."

Alicia went to her room, resisting the urge to glance back over her shoulder at Luke. She sat on the edge of the bed, her stomach doing an intricate series of somersaults and her hands suddenly clammy.

When he came through the door a few minutes later and looked across the room at her, she smiled.

"Do you have a hairbrush, young lady?" he surprised her by asking.

"Y-yes, I do... over there on t-the dresser..." Now the somersaults in Alicia's stomach changed to handsprings as she watched the tall, strong cowboy saunter over to her dresser. He picked up the large, flat backed, wooden brush and examined it a moment.

He shot a glance her way as he commented, "It's beautiful."

She squirmed a bit, not sure what to say, and wondering if he'd notice..... "

"But, it doesn't look like you use it on your hair," he noticed. And then he tapped the back of the brush against his palm. "There's not even a single strand of your golden hair in these bristles. Why is that?"

Alicia felt her face flame with heat and heard his soft chuckle. "Because, I... I *don't* use it on my hair...." she admitted quietly.

"Hmmm," he observed, looking very thoughtful as he rejoined her, brush still in hand.

She prayed he wouldn't ask her why she had it - he knew, of course -- but she wouldn't put it past him to ask just so he could watch her squirm and blush some more.

Luke set the brush on the bed and took Alicia's hand as he sat beside her. Very gently, not wanting to change the mood, he asked, "Did you and Damon play with the brush?"

"No," she answered, staring at the carpet as her neck flushed like her face. "I... we... it's never been used... not yet..."

"Not yet," Luke agreed, and though she wasn't looking at his face to see it, she heard the smile in his voice.

"Well, I think it's about time it got some use, don't you?" He tipped her chin up with one finger and winked at her. "You know, Missy always says you should give your hair twenty strokes every night before bed so it will be thick and pretty -- something her mother used to tell her, I guess. But since you don't use this brush for your hair, I guess you'll have to get those twenty strokes on your bottom."

And just that fast, in the span of a blink of her eyes, she was face down over Luke's lap. He ran his hand over her bottom through the material of her

nightgown and panties and made an appreciative sound low in his throat.

"Luke..." She looked over her shoulder, feeling suddenly so vulnerable and nervous that her voice shook. "I...I've never been spanked with... anything. Except someone's hand.... Iuh..."

"Shh, baby." Luke stroked her cheek and brushed her hair away from her eyes. "Trust me. You don't have to worry about anything when you're in my hands. I'll always take good care of you. Okay?"

She nodded jerkily, though inside she couldn't help her nerves. She rested her head on her arms and closed her eyes, waiting for the first swat. But Luke was in no hurry. He slowly lifted her nightgown up and layered it onto her back, revealing her bottom encased in pale pink nylon panties. He made a great, slow process of peeling them down to her knees, mumbling that a naughty girl like Alicia should only be spanked on her bare backside.

When her shapely bottom peered up at him, he smiled as he caressed it, whispering, "Hello, there. I thought I might be seeing you again."

Alicia's giggle at that faded to a contented sigh when he bent over her and pressed twin kisses, one on each cheek.

He started scolding her then, and though there was a lightness in his voice, Alicia heard the truth of his admonishment and she welcomed the hand spans he began as he lectured her. They were much crisper and dealt more firmly than she liked, but he wasn't spanking as hard as he had the last time she'd been over his lap, either. "I expect you to give Missy the same chance I expect her to give you, Alicia. You can't just give up on a good relationship because the first challenge comes along. I expect you to try harder this time, young lady. Understand?"

"Yesssss....." Alicia felt the tears gathering in her eyes now, both from the application of his hand and the disappointment in his words. She blinked the

tears back, then was surprised when he stopped for a moment and caressed her bottom.

"Does your bottom hurt, sweetheart?"

"Yes...."

"Well, we're half finished. I'm just going to finish you up with the brush." Alicia held her breath, waiting for the first CRACK! of that brush. But apparently Luke planned to keep her in suspense a bit first, for he continued lecturing while his hand smoothed her red fanny, giving little pats here and there to punctuate his words.

"You know, Alicia, when I call and leave a message, I expect you to call me back. I was very worried about you after I dropped you off and I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm sorry. I... I was here when you called... I just... I didn't.... I was..."

"Tsk tsks." Luke shook his head. "What you were, Alicia Marie, was running from me. Just like tonight when I wanted you to talk to me... you wanted to hide from me, run from me. I won't allow that. You can't hide things from me, or lie to me, which you also tried to do when you said you didn't want to see me anymore."

"I know!" Alicia's voice broke as the first sob escaped her. "Luke, I'm soooooorry!"

"Shh. Shh. Honey, it's okay." Luke turned her to cradle her against his chest and wiped at the fresh tears. He kissed her forehead and pushed her hair behind her ears. "Don't cry, Lise. I just want to make some things clear to you. It's okay. I love you. Shh."

She cuddled in his arms a few minutes, aware of the abating sting in her bottom, the lingering warmth and the effects it was bringing, especially when coupled with being held and comforted. She rubbed herself against the crotch of Luke's jeans, feeling his own arousal through the worn denim.

"No." He set her away from him and shook his head at her. "Don't do that. All that's gonna happen tonight is you're going to get your tail good and

paddled and then you're going to sleep. That's the end of it."

She pouted openly at him. Then had the boldness to touch him again, this time with her hand.

"If you like, brat, you can get a good dose of my belt tonight as well," he ground out.

The idea scared her even as it made her sex clench. "Don't you want to make love to me?" she asked, hurt.

Luke sighed and shook his head in frustration. "You just felt my erection, honey, you know I do. More than anything. But you're not ready for that yet."

When she began to protest, he held up one hand and spoke over her. "Let me finish! Making love is something to be done in a committed relationship, not casually. At least not in my book, anyway. And you're not ready to commit to me yet, as you've already said tonight."

"So," she sniffed. "So, we aren't going to make love?"

"No, darlin.' Not tonight, at least. Not for a while, I guess. Until you're ready."

"Humph!" She folded her arms over her chest. "Fine, then, Mr. Paragon of Virtue. If that's the way you want it...."

"It's not the way I want it, but that's how it is." He ignored her frown and put her back over his lap, not quite as gently this time as the last. At the last minute he changed his mind and repositioned her so that her bottom was draped over only one of his knees. He clamped her legs between his thighs, picked up the hairbrush and brought it down unceremoniously with a loud CRACK!

"Ow!"

The second CRACK! and third sounded equally as loud and soon Luke had a lap full of struggling, shrieking woman.

"I won't argue this sex point with you, Alicia. And I won't tolerate you being a brat about it,

either," he told her between swats. "If I mean anything to you, you'll find a way to wait -- and you're to behave yourself in the meantime."

He stopped the paddling after he'd given her twenty strokes with the brush and he tossed it aside. He knew he hadn't stayed his strength much and she'd probably be a bit sore tomorrow. Her bottom was hot and red and she panted over his lap when he stopped and she was able to cease struggling. He helped her up a few moments later and sat her gingerly on his knee. "Now, do you have anything else to say on the subject? Because after tonight, I don't want to have to discuss it again."

"No, I guess not," she whispered mournfully. She wouldn't look at him till he forced her to by tipping up her chin.

"Then stop pouting, unless you want another spanking tonight."

"No, thank you," she answered primly, savoring his lips on her own as he pressed a warm kiss there. One arousing spanking was enough, thank you very much, especially when she wasn't going to get anything from it but a sleepless night, some erotic dreams and a sore backside in the morning. She hadn't believed him about the different kinds of spankings, but she did now -- she couldn't think of a worse sort of punishment than her current situation!

Chapter Six

The following morning Alicia woke up from a string of frustrating, erotic dreams. She got out of bed, pulled on her old flannel bathrobe and stomped off to the bathroom, muttering under her breath about domineering men, and one specific cowboy in particular.

A low, deep chuckle broke through her grumblings just before she stepped into the bathroom. She stuck her head around the corner and sure enough, there was the object of her contempt, grinning with obvious amusement at her expense. Her eyes narrowed and she folded her arms over her chest as she took in his sleep tousled hair, the tossed aside blanket on her couch, and his rumpled clothes.

"You slept here last night?"

He nodded, gesturing to the battered door. "I couldn't just leave you here alone with the door barely hanging on its hinges, and the locks not working."

She sniffed. "You... you could've told me, Luke. You could've.... cuddled me a bit after.... after you spanked me."

"I suppose," he agreed as he stood up and stretched, giving Alicia a wonderful show of muscles rippling beneath his white tee shirt and tight jeans. "But that would've only made the pair of us all the more horny..."

"So?" she asked innocently.

Luke gave her a playfully stern look and a swat on the bottom as he joined her for a hug.

"Besides, I wouldn't have been much protection to you if I was in your bed asleep and someone broke in." He kissed her pouting mouth, briefly, and then released her. "Go on and get showered and dressed. I called for a repairman to come for the door, and I have something I want to talk to you about." He gave her bottom a small pinch that

made her squirm. "By the way, how's your bottom feel this morning?"

"Not as sore as my heart," she murmured pettishly.

Luke wasn't falling for her act, though. He merely swatted her again and assured her: "You deserved everything you got last night, Alicia Marie. And if you can't remember to behave yourself, I promise you there's plenty more where that came from."

"Humph!" Feeling her face flush scarlet at his words, Alicia made a hasty retreat into the bathroom, closing the door -- and locking it, for good measure -- in his handsome face.

Half an hour later, Alicia emerged from the bathroom, smelling good enough to eat, even ensconced in that same old, baggy flannel bathrobe. The repairmen, two middle-aged men with sagging pants and greasy hands, were already going about the business of fixing her door. Luke gave her a wink and followed her into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

She looked at him expectantly, one eyebrow raised, as she ran a brush through her long, golden hair.

"I have an idea," he started, and she heard in his voice that he liked this idea of his, very much. "Ever since I've known you, I've been trying to warn you about how this area of town isn't the best of places for a woman to live alone. You've even agreed with me, but right now you don't have the money to move into some place more safe." He sighed. "Well, I think that last night's... er... door incident should tell you that you maybe shouldn't wait much longer to find someplace better to live."

"Well, I didn't have the door dead bolted," Alicia pointed out. "I mean, to be fair and all, I don't know that you could have broken through if I had, Superman."

He tweaked her nose at the Superman jibe. "Regardless, you've been concerned about the

safety issues at this apartment, as I have been. And I have a great idea." He paused as if to create suspense, though Alicia already had a sense of what was coming. "Why don't you move into the farmhouse with my mom?"

"Your mom?" That part had been unexpected. "Why not move in with you?"

He gave her *the look*. "Because I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you, for one thing. And the last thing I want is for my niece to discover us in bed before you are officially made her aunt."

Alicia made a face, but it was obvious that she was considering his idea. She already thought of Luke's mom as a friend and really did like the older woman.

"Are you sure it would be okay with Emily?"

Luke made a dismissive gesture with one hand. "Mom would love the company. And it would give you and I more time together. And you and Missy could get to know each other better. You could save some money like you always say you want to..."

"Oh, I couldn't live at the house without paying rent," Alicia protested.

Luke shrugged. "Well, you could decide that later on with mom." He watched her anxiously as she thought about the idea some more. "What do you say?"

A slow smile warmed her face though there was a caution in her eyes that Luke didn't miss. "I say okay," she agreed, then laughed as the big cowboy scooped her up in his arms for a hug and kiss.

"You won't regret it," he whispered against her mouth. "I promise."

And so it was, that Alicia found herself living with Luke's mother in the big, old farmhouse, just a few hundred yards from the house he and Missy shared.

Much to Alicia's surprise, the little girl had accepted the arrangement very well, especially considering how suddenly it had occurred. The first time she saw Missy her first day on the farm, the

child had come up to her and apologized for her behavior on the day of the picnic. Alicia had accepted immediately, and though there was sometimes still a tension between the two of them, she also knew she was building a friendship with the little girl, as well. Missy was captivated by Alicia's computer, and so after her homework was done, Alicia would play games with her on the computer or help her surf the web. The two of them would collaborate with Luke's mom in the kitchen, as well, helping with dinner and weekend lunches. Alicia would sometimes look up from the computer screen or a mixing bowl to discover Luke in the doorway watching the scene with a big, wistful grin on his face. She would blush then, and look quickly away.

Of course, the more Alicia saw of Luke, the more she could feel herself falling deeper in love with him. He was there in the morning at the breakfast table, smelling like aftershave and soap, with his dark hair curling around the nape of his neck and his eyes roaming over her body in obvious hunger. When she was at home during the day, she found herself watching him through the windows while he labored in the sun, the golden rays glinting off his bronzed arms and the wind playing with his hair. At dinner he would come in to share the meal and she could often see the fatigue in his eyes from the hard, long day he'd worked. But he always had time and patience to listen to Missy's recounting of her school day or his mother's telling of a particularly comical story. Sometimes after dinner she would follow him and Missy over to their house and sit with him on the old, squeaky porch swing after Missy had been put to bed. She would lay her head on his shoulder or in his lap and they would look up at the stars together and talk about their separate pasts and their entwined futures.

On weekends, they made a habit of keeping one night, Friday or Saturday, as their "date night." They would go to the movies, or dinner, or a friend's party. People in town began to recognize

them together and whenever they were spotted alone, they would be asked where the other one was. One night, at Luke's good friend, Sergeant Brain McDogal's baby girl's christening party, the policeman had teased Alicia about how he might just have to arrest her if she made his old buddy grin any more moronically. They'd all shared a good laugh at that, especially when Luke calmly set aside little Emma McDogal and lunged playfully after his childhood pal.

Alicia had been living on the farm for about three and a half months, and was really beginning to feel at home there -- like she belonged, and might just want to remain there -- when Luke dropped the bomb on her. Apparently, he too had had similar feeling about keeping her there with him....

Luke was in town one day in mid December, on a normal, routine run to the feed mill and the hardware store, when he stopped suddenly in his tracks on the walk back to his truck. He turned and looked into the window of the small town's one and only jewelry store and this voice in his head told him to go inside.

He knew he should ignore the voice. It hadn't been that long ago, after all, that he'd told Alicia that he was in no rush to get married. And he wasn't, not really. Though he couldn't exactly help thinking about how wonderful a life married to her could be, especially now that she was living so close and he saw her every day. Still, he didn't want to push things too hard with her and wind up scaring her away.

He must have stood on the sidewalk in front of that store for a good five minutes, debating with that voice in his head. He finally decided it couldn't hurt to go in and *look*, and besides, it wasn't like the shop sold only diamond engagement rings. Maybe he would see a nice necklace or bracelet that Alicia might like, and he could buy that for her, instead.

That was what he told himself, anyway, as an excuse to get his butt in the door. But the first display he was drawn to was not one of necklaces, or bracelets, or even broaches. Oh, no -- it was the selection of engagement rings that Luke Stephens walked up to.

And when the cowboy walked out of the jewelry shop almost an hour later, with a good deal of his savings spent, there was a small, black velvet ring box tucked into his jacket pocket. And Luke had a definite spring in his step as he hummed under his breath on the way home.

When Luke got back to the farm, he put the supplies from town away and headed up to his mother's house. It was a weekday, and Missy was at school, but he found his mom in the kitchen, stirring a big pot of fragrant chicken soup.

"Mmmm, that smells wonderful," he commented, kissing Emily Stephens on her cheek. She smiled at her son over her shoulder as she added a dash of salt to the pot.

"I thought your sweetheart could use some of my chicken soup for that flu she's got," Emily said.

Alicia had been home the past three days with a flu bug that was going around. She'd been fighting it for about a week, actually, but hadn't been willing to stay home and rest as she needed to until just these past few days. And even getting her to do that had taken some major threatening from Luke and a forced trip to the doctor before she'd grudgingly agreed to follow the doctor's advice to stay away from work and rest.

"That's really thoughtful of you, Ma," Luke said. Emily looked at him curiously as he shifted his large frame from one foot to the other.

"You okay, Luke?" she asked. "You look... I don't know. Sort of nervous or something."

Luke laughed. Leave it to his mother to see right through him and know that something was up. He raked one hand through his dark hair and shrugged. "Well, I guess I am nervous. A little, anyway."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong." He fumbled in his jacket pocket and drew out the ring box. His mother's sky blue eyes lit up when she saw the box and she exclaimed a soft "oh, my!" when he snapped it open to reveal the small diamond ring inside.

"You're going to propose to Alicia!" she exclaimed. Luke shushed her madly, even though she'd spoken softly, and he glanced over his shoulder least his girlfriend be out of bed and standing suddenly behind them at the base of the stairs. "Oh, Luke, how wonderful!"

"Do you think she'll like it?" Luke worried. "I didn't have enough money to buy her a very large diamond...."

Emily waved her hand dismissively. "That won't matter. She'll love it."

Luke smiled and squeezed his mother's hand as he closed the box. "I hope you're right. I hope she says yes." He took his coat off and put the box in his shirt pocket.

"Of course she'll say yes," Emily insisted adamantly. She clucked her tongue at him disapprovingly. "What *else* would she say?"

Luke shrugged. His mother didn't know about Alicia's history with men or her failed engagement, and he didn't feel that it was his place to tell her about it. But he could think of plenty of things other than 'yes' that Alicia might say when he proposed. Starting with a reminder that she didn't believe in marriage anymore, and that she wasn't ready yet to try to find that belief again.

Emily was taking soup bowls out of a cabinet and placing them on a tray. She gave her son a mischievous, conspirator's smile as she added spoons, crackers, two cans of ginger ale, and a lidded crock of the soup she'd just made.

"Here," she said, turning with the tray in her hands and thrusting it at him. "Go on and take this up to your future wife. I... I'll just busy myself down here a while so you can have some privacy

upstairs." She stood on her tiptoes to press a kiss on Luke's cheek. "Good luck, honey."

When Luke shouldered his way through Alicia's halfway opened bedroom door, his gaze fell on her as his blood rushed through his veins. She lay in bed, sleeping like an angel, completely oblivious to the havoc going on inside of him and the impending question he was bolstering his courage to ask her.

He set the tray down on a table by the window and settled on the edge of the bed for a few minutes, watching her sleep. He held one of her hands in both of his while he took notice that her color was improving and her skin was no longer hot with fever. She was definitely recovering despite herself. If she hadn't been so stubborn at first about staying home and resting, she'd probably be over this flu by now.

Luke raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Lice?" He called softly. "Alicia, honey, wake up. It's time for lunch."

Alicia's eyes fluttered open slowly, and she smiled sleepily at him. "Hi," she said.

"Hi," he answered. He kissed her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, thanks." She had the good grace to look a bit sheepish, at least.

Luke tweaked her nose. "I'm glad to hear that." He stood and went over to the food, starting to ladle soup into the bowls. "Mom made you some of her famous chicken soup. Known county wide for its restoring, healing powers."

"Your mother spoils me."

"She enjoys it." Luke returned to Alicia's side a few moments later with the tray containing her bowl of soup, a couple crackers and one of the ginger ales. Alicia scooted to a sitting position and Luke set the tray on her lap. "Eat up!"

They ate lunch together, chatting a bit about the upcoming holidays and the rush of orders Alicia was getting at the bakery. Luke told her that he'd

stopped in while he'd been in town and assured her that everything was well in hand.

A quiet settled over them after that, and Luke noticed that Alicia looked decidedly uncomfortable. She'd finished all of the food on her tray and he worried that maybe her queasy stomach was rebelling against it.

"Do you feel okay, sweetheart?" he asked.

She nodded. Luke took the tray from her lap and set it aside. He rejoined her and sat on the edge of the bed again, holding her hand.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes... I'm just wondering..." She looked up at him and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "Are you very mad at me, Luke?"

"Mad at you? No, Alicia, I'm not mad. Why would I be?"

"Well... you know... when I got sick and you tried to get me to go to the doctor and rest. And I wouldn't listen to you..."

Luke grinned. "You listened when I told you that you'd get your bottom good and blistered if you didn't go."

She blushed bright red from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. "Yeah... well... are you mad at me because I wouldn't listen?"

Luke shook his head. "No, honey. I'm just glad you did listen. And I'm glad you're feeling better. Maybe next time you won't be so stubborn about going to see the doctor when you don't feel well."

She nodded. She was fidgeting with the satin trim on the cotton blanket and she wouldn't look up at Luke. She asked the blanket, "Are... are you going to spank me... once I'm all better?"

Luke studied her bent head. He hadn't planned on spanking her, once she was well, but something about the way she was acting made him hesitate to answer 'no.' He hadn't had to give Alicia a discipline spanking since that day they'd all gone fishing, and the topic hadn't come up since then in conversation, either. He'd assumed, and hoped, that she'd been

thinking about the punishments as he's suggested, but they hadn't discussed them since. Now, he had a feeling that Alicia had reached a conclusion about her feelings. He just wasn't sure what that conclusion was.

"Well, Alicia, I hadn't planned to spank you, no. Why?"

"I... I think that... that maybe...." She shook her head, blushing painfully, and couldn't finish.

Luke tipped her face up and smiled gently at her. "You think that maybe I should?" he asked.

She nodded, ever so slightly, and squeezed her eyes shut. "And you're okay with that?"

This time her nod was more obvious. "I'd feel better if you did," she whispered. "I... I was pretty horrid to you and you were just concerned about me..."

Luke grinned. "Yeah, you were pretty horrid, you stubborn lady," he teased. He squeezed her hand. "Okay, sweetheart. We'll handle it later, when you're completely over this flu. Okay?"

She nodded. "Thank you, Luke."

Luke felt like his heart had swelled to twice its size since he'd sat down beside her. This new development was very promising. If Alicia could trust him to punish her, even ask him to do it, maybe she could trust him to love her without betraying her, too.

Heartened, he implored, "Close your eyes."

"What?" Her brow furrowed.

"Just close your eyes a minute. I have a surprise for you."

"Okay..."

Once Alicia sat before him with her eyes shut, Luke fished the ring box out of his shirt pocket. He opened it and settled it, turned towards her, in her open palm.

"Okay, open up."

One green eye peeked open hesitantly, then the other. Her mouth formed a little O and her gaze flew from the ring in her hand to Luke's face.

"Alicia," Luke began, his voice thick. "Will you marry me?"

Her lip trembled, and then the tears started to roll down her cheeks. Her hand shook and she just stared from the ring to Luke and back again.

Luke pressed his eyes closed. He'd blown it. She looked scared to death by his proposal. He'd known it was too soon, that she wasn't ready yet. But he'd gone charging ahead anyway and now he'd ruined it completely.

With his thumbs, he wiped at her tears, and he took the box from her shaking hand. It closed with a loud, conclusive SNAP!

"Shh, baby. Don't cry," he soothed. Alicia cuddled against his chest, sniffing and trembling as he tried to calm her. "Lord, Alicia, I'm so sorry. Please, just forget I said a word. I understand that you need more time, honey. I don't want to rush you."

Alicia relaxed in his arms, lulled by his words and his warmth. He was so loving and kind to her. So sweet and giving. And even though the thought of marriage terrified her, as she sat there cradled in Luke's embrace, it became very clear to her that she could not say no to this man. She simply could not.

"Just... just promise me you'll think about it," Luke was asking. "Okay? That's all."

She pulled back from him and wiped her eyes. He looked sick with worry and she touched his cheek in reassurance. "I don't need to think about it, Luke."

His face fell and she smiled. This time it was her finger tipping his chin up so that he would meet her eyes.

"Luke, I don't need to think about it because the answer is yes."

A brilliant smile, like rays of sunshine filtering through dark storm clouds, broke over his handsome face.

"Did you say yes?"

She nodded, grinning back at him. "Yes!"

Luke crushed her to him in a sweet grip that made her feel like the most cherished woman on Earth -- even if it was a tad tight for air. He cradled the back of her head and fervently promised her that he would never make her regret her decision.

And for the moment at least, Alicia knew no fear and believed him with her entire heart and soul.

Chapter Seven

The Christmas holiday passed by in a blur of activity and visitations from various family members. Alicia's parents flew up from Florida to meet their future son-in-law and his family. Although Alicia was glad to see them, and excited to meet the different extensions of Luke's relations, it was also a very nerve wracking time for her. Meeting everyone and having everyone meet Luke made her really face the reality of what was happening. This was *for keeps* -- or it should be, anyway. She was really going to give her heart to Luke and she had to find a way to trust him not to break it on her.

Before she knew it, the new year was upon them. Even though the big farmhouse was filled to the brim with celebrants, Alicia still felt as if she and Luke were all alone for the traditional midnight kiss. When they parted, he picked her clear up off her feet and twirled her around in a circle. "Happy New Year, Lice!"

"Happy New Year, Cowboy," she giggled.

Alicia's resolution for the new year was to find a way to overcome her fears about submitting herself to Luke. She could think of no other cause that was more important to her or their happiness.

After the holidays had passed and the various relations had gone home, life resumed its normal pace once again. Luke and Alicia set the date for their wedding for May first and Alicia gratefully accepted her sister Karen's help in planning for the ceremony and reception. With each new decision she made, whether it was big or small, she felt that much closer to achieving her resolution.

As Valentine's Day approached, Alicia felt stronger each day as far as her relationship with Luke was concerned. She'd been able to submit willingly to him for the spanking she'd asked for after her flu, and afterwards had felt even closer to him because of it. They'd made it through the hectic

holidays together and were planning each day towards the start of their new life together. And then there was Valentine's Day weekend, which promised to be a great escape for them both. Missy would be spending the weekend at a friend's house and Emily had arranged to be away as well, going to visit her sister two towns away. The entire farm would be their own personal playground and Luke had been driving Alicia half crazy for weeks now, describing in lurid detail all the things he had planned for her. She could hardly wait....

The Friday before Valentine's Day, Luke came in early from the fields to shower and change clothes. He set the table in the small dining room with candles and the good china, turned the stereo system to a soft, jazz station in the living room, and placed tea candles on the various tables in the bedroom. He glanced around the room, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

An hour later, as he was walking back into the house with containers of take out from Alicia's favorite Chinese restaurant, the phone rang.

It was Brian McDogal on the line.

"Luke, this is really awkward, but I knew you'd want to know what happened, so I called as soon as I could."

Luke was alarmed at Brian's obvious distress. "What's wrong?"

His long time friend sighed. "Well, there's no easy way to say this, Luke.... I pulled Alicia over today. She was doing eighty-five in a forty zone. And, Luke, she didn't have her seatbelt on."

Luke went absolutely still and silent. He blinked once, twice, digesting Brian's words.

"Luke? Are you there?"

"Yes." His voice sounded strained, even to his own ears. "She didn't have an accident, did she?"

"No. I gave her a ticket for the speeding and the seatbelt, though. Couldn't believe it when I got up to her window and saw who it was driving. I figured

you'd want to know what happened, especially with how you lost your brother and all."

"Yeah." Luke ran a weary hand over his face. "Thank you, Brian."

"No problem."

"I'm sure after tonight you won't have any reason to pull her over again."

Luke hung up the phone with a quiet click that was completely at odds with the rage that boiled in his blood. His fists clenched as he stalked to the window that overlooked the drive, waiting to see Alicia's car winding its way up. A muscle ticked in his jaw as he tried to rein in his temper. He couldn't explode on her the second she showed up, though it would be hard not to. He had to give her a chance to tell him about the ticket first. It was important that she feel she could tell him about things like this. But in order for her to tell him, he had to first give her the chance.

He took a deep breath, in and out, and started counting backwards from one hundred to try to calm down. He had reached sixty-two when Alicia's car appeared in the drive.

Alicia walked slowly into the house that Luke shared with Missy, hoping that her expression was normal. She had a sinking feeling that Brian may have already called to tell Luke about the ticket that now burned like a hot coal in her coat pocket. She knew she would have to tell Luke what had happened. Even if Brian hadn't called, they were sure to see each other soon and the topic would come up then. Plus she knew better than to try to keep something from Luke. He was going to be her husband and she needed to be honest with him about everything. No matter how scared she was to face his disappointment and anger.

He was waiting for her in the dining room with an odd expression on his face, like he was fighting to control his emotions. She knew it then, for sure,

that Brian had already contacted Luke about her ticket.

The elegant table setting, the candles, and the aromas from her favorite take-out restaurant weren't missed as she took in the scene before her, and fresh guilt hit her hard as she realized what a wonderful evening Luke had planned that was now completely ruined.

Alicia sucked in a huge gasp of air before she spoke. "Luke, I have to tell you something."

A look of pure relief crossed his face and her own hammering heart beat slowed a bit as she realized he'd been hoping she would come to him on her own. "What is it, angel?" he asked, taking her hand.

"Luke, I got a speeding ticket today," she admitted quietly. "I was going eighty-five in a forty zone. And..." She studied the carpet under her feet. "And I wasn't wearing my seatbelt."

He nodded. "Why?" he asked.

Alicia blinked. She hadn't anticipated that question. "I was late opening the store and I had a customer due right at open to pick up a large order," she answered. "And... oh, Luke, it's so stupid. I didn't have my belt on because this blouse is silk and I didn't want it to get creased or wrinkled!"

When she dared glance up into her fiancé's face, his eyes were dark and angry. He led her into the livingroom and all but pushed her down onto the sofa.

"Do you know why it's so important to me that you wear your seatbelt, Alicia?" he asked, pacing in front of her, hands on his hips.

"Because it's the law? And it's for my own safety and protection?" she guessed.

Luke nodded. "Those reasons are good, but there's another reason too. One I should probably have told you about sooner. It's just very hard to talk about it..." He paused and turned to pin her with his gaze. "My brother and his wife probably

would have survived the accident that killed them -- if they'd been wearing their seatbelts at the time."

Alicia gasped softly at this horrible revelation.

"And it probably also would have helped if the guy who hit them had been doing the speed limit, instead of going thirty miles per hour over it."

"Oh, God...."

Luke's pacing had stopped. He stood staring at Alicia now with hard, hurt eyes. "So, you see, Alicia, it's very important to me that my fiancée keeps her promise to wear her seatbelt. And it's also very important to me that she obeys the speed limit. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Luke. Oh, God, Luke, I'm so sorry. I didn't know...."

He held up one hand. "It doesn't matter that you didn't know. You're not stupid, Alicia. You know better than to speed like you did today. And you know you need to wear your seatbelt. Yet you don't. And this isn't the first time we've had this conversation, is it?"

"No..."

He shook his head in exasperation. "Well, I'm telling you, it's going to be the last." He pulled her up by her hand and marched her down the hallway to his bedroom. He piled three pillows, one on top of the other, in the middle of the bed, then turned to her and said, "Take off your pants and underwear, Alicia, and lay over those pillows with your bottom up good and high."

"Luke, please..." she started, a sick, sinking feeling skittering around in her belly.

"No!" he barked. He took a step back from her and she could see that he was visibly fighting to control his anger. "No. I warned you the last time what would happen if you forgot your seatbelt again. And not five minutes ago, you told me that you didn't just forget, but willingly left off using it to keep from *wrinkling your blouse*. So, I don't want to hear a word from you. You knew what I'd promised you, and you still did it. So, believe me, Alicia,

you're going to get the whipping of your life tonight. Now do as I said!"

Tears were flowing down Alicia's cheeks already, just from the hurt and truth in his words. She knew he was right, that was what was the worst of it. That, and the knowledge of how she'd let him down by breaking her promise to him.

She unbuttoned and pushed down her pants and panties, stepping out of them with a flaming face. She was eager to hide her face and her body from his searing gaze and bent herself, bottom up, over the pillows as quickly as she could. She shivered in the slightly cool air of the room, feeling more exposed and vulnerable and frightened than she ever could remember.

"Turn your head towards me," Luke told her. Apparently he wasn't going to let her hide her face from him during this punishment. She turned her head to the opposite side, tears sliding down to wet the coverlet beneath her.

Luke looked down at her with this sadness in his gaze that was worse, somehow, than the earlier anger. He placed a small pillow under her neck and let his fingers linger a moment on her damp cheek. Then he took a deep breath, seeming to gather himself together, and stepped back.

In a sort of horrifying dream-state, Alicia watched as Luke unbuckled his belt and drew the length of wicked, wide, black leather through the loops in his jeans. He wrapped one end of it around one hand, leaving a good length dangling free. It was easily long enough to strike across both of Alicia's buttocks at the same time, each and every time.

She watched as he drew his arm back, but squeezed her eyes shut as the leather flew forward again. There was a loud SNAP! as the strap met her bare flesh and a burning blossom of pain fired up along the line the leather left in its wake.

"Oww!" she cried, unable to contain her surprise and discomfort. But the second lash was already

descending by that point, followed rapidly by a third, and so many, many more.

Luke paid no attention to her wails or her pleading, just kept up the whipping with slow, deliberate measures of his belt. Each time the leather danced against her backside, Alicia bucked and cried out against it. Her flesh felt seared, burnt, and swollen. Yet still he snapped the belt down on her upturned cheeks, bent on making his point known and felt for days to come.

"You - are- a- smart - woman - Alicia Marie!" he said, using his licks to punctuate his words. "I - will - not - tolerate - foolish - dangerous - behavior - from you. Not - ever. Do - you - hear - me?" he demanded.

"Yes! Luke, please, stop!" In her desperation, one hand shot back in a futile effort to cover her burning bottom.

"Move your hand, Alicia."

"Luke, pleeease! I can't take anymore..." she sobbed.

"Yes, you can. You've earned plenty more and you will have it. Now move your hand unless you want me to start over from the beginning."

Good Lord, she didn't want that. She snatched her hand back immediately, hardly believing that he would make such a threat, let alone carry it out. But she wasn't about to test him on it, either. Her reward for obeying was a fresh, smart lick from the belt that made her gasp.

"You - could - get - killed - if you had an - accident - going so - fast - and - not - wearing - your - seatbelt. Do you realize that, Alicia?"

"Yes," she hissed.

"Then you'd better wake up - and stop acting - so - stupidly!" SNAP! CRACK! "If I have to - I'll take - this - belt - to you - every damn night. Anything - so that you - remember to - wear your - seatbelt - and obey the - speed - limit when you drive."

The coverlet beneath Alicia's face was soaked from her tears. Her hands ached from being balled

into fists and her legs were exhausted from kicking and struggling. She lay limply over the stacked pillows now, no longer fighting the punishment, only jumping from time to time as each new stroke fell. She wondered when.....if, he was going to stop. Surely she had to be purple and bruised by now. She couldn't imagine sitting down for a week, at least.

"Luke... Luke... I swear I'll never do it again.... Just please stop...."

There wasn't even a brief pause in the rise and fall of the strap. "You need to learn, Alicia, that I am the one punishing you. I decide how, where, and when to stop. I will stop when I think you've really learned your lesson. And this is a very serious lesson to learn. I want to make damn sure you get it this time around because if there's a next time, you could get hurt or killed if you're not as lucky."

After a pause, during which the only sound in the room was the swish-snaap of the belt meeting Alicia's behind, Luke stopped the whipping and asked, "Now, am I going to have to repeat this lesson again, Alicia Marie?"

"No! No, Luke, I swear! I promise you. I'll always wear my belt and I won't speed again. I promise!"

He let the belt fly against her five more times in rapid succession. Alicia hissed and writhed in pain. When he finished, she heard the sound of the belt as he flung it to the floor.

"Stay there," he growled. Alicia heard the opening and closing of the door and knew a fresh, raw pain at the knowledge that Luke was walking away without comforting her or even saying he loved her or forgave her.

She sobbed out her misery, her bottom still thrust up in the air, throbbing with heat. She couldn't even fathom moving at that moment. All that existed for her was the awful pain and the horrible fear of what her foolishness may have cost her relationship with Luke.

A while later, she heard him come back into the room. She chanced a glance up at him and saw him flinch when he surveyed what he'd done to her backside. He sat almost timidly on the bed beside her and unscrewed a small jar he held in his hand.

"This should help minimize the bruising," he told her. A second later, she felt his fingertips spreading a cool lotion on her bottom. Even though he was being gentle, she still sucked in a breath at the light pressure of his fingers on her freshly leathered backside.

"Luke, I'm so sorry..."

"Shhh... it's over now."

"But, I feel so badly still..."

"I forgive you, Alicia. If you want to make it up to me and if you want to feel better, honey, just keep your promises. Okay?"

"Okay."

When Luke had finished with the lotion, he helped her to stand and presented her with one of his long tee shirts to change into. Then he ducked back out of the room.

Even the soft cotton of the worn tee shirt was abrasive to Alicia's tender skin, but she donned the shirt anyway, and padded barefoot after Luke. She found him standing in the kitchen, staring out the window at nothing.

She came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek on his broad back.

"Luke?" she asked.

"Yeah?" He sounded weary, tired, aged.

"I love you."

It was the first time she'd said the words out loud and now she wondered why it had taken her so long. Luke turned around and hugged her tightly, resting his chin on the top of her head.

"You love me even after what just happened?"

She nodded. "I loved you before then, too. But I think I love you even more now."

His face was grim. "I'm sorry I was so hard on you."

She put one finger to his lips. "I deserved it. It's about time I realized that I have to take care of myself."

Luke pressed his eyes closed. He pulled her closer still and whispered, "God, Alicia, don't ever do anything like that again."

"I won't."

He breathed her scent in deep and caressed her back, then ever so gently smoothed a hand over her still warm bottom.

She pulled his head down and rose up on her toes to kiss him with all the passion and love she felt for him. She rubbed herself shamelessly against him and looked up at him through lowered eyelashes when their lips parted.

"I know I was just punished, but could you make love to me anyway, Luke?" she asked hopefully. "Please?"

Chapter Eight

Luke framed Alicia's face and looked into her eyes longingly. "Sweetheart, you're too sore for that right now. There's no way I would do that to you."

Alicia placed her hands over Luke's and smiled up at him. "Please? I want you to make love to me, Luke. I need you to comfort me..."

Luke shook his head. "Your bottom is red and sore. No. We have all weekend, hell, the rest of our lives. I don't want to hurt you..."

"You won't, Luke..." Alicia closed her eyes briefly. "I can see what a romantic night you had planned for us. Can't we still enjoy a little of it? Please?"

How could he say no to her? When she was looking up at him with those big green eyes and that soft mouth, asking him to comfort her with his lovemaking? Especially after the hard spanking she'd just taken from him? He couldn't say no to her, he just couldn't make the word come out of his mouth.

Ever so slightly, Luke bent and kissed Alicia's forehead. "Okay," he conceded and was rewarded with a brilliant grin. "But, you have to promise to tell me if it hurts you. Understand?"

"Yes!" She made an X over her chest above her heart and reached up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "I promise! Cross my heart!"

Luke chuckled and drew her into his arms for a long, warm hug. Their hands grew distracted and began to wander as Luke seared her mouth with his warm, firm lips. It wasn't long before they were groping and panting like too randy teenagers, and Luke drew back from Alicia for a moment to regain his head. She pouted prettily, fiddling with the buttons on his shirt. He leaned over her and whispered in her ear, "Now, let's see how hot things can really get!" And he scooped her up in his arms, mindful of her tender backside, and carried her off to his bedroom.

The room where Alicia had so recently been punished in now became a romantic little love nest for the two of them. Luke settled Alicia on the bed and lit all the tea candles in the room, giving off just enough soft light for them to see one another by. He pulled the tee shirt she'd only just donned right off again and tossed it over his shoulder to the floor, then traced the cups of her lacy underwire bra with his thumbs. She leaned back against the pillows she'd recently been draped over for chastisement, and watched in a drunken daze as he dallied with her breasts, bringing them to stand at hard attention inside their lace caps. When he bent his head to draw at first one bud, then other, through the fabric, they threatened to break free and Alicia let out a low moan of desire.

More sounds fell from Alicia's lips, lusty and shrill, but very different from the recent sobs and cries that had echoed in the room during her whipping. She tossed her head wildly back and forth as Luke took greedy sips from her, glancing from time to time up into her face with a wide, proud grin.

The bra, her only remaining piece of clothing, came off with a deft movement of Luke's fingers and he cupped her bare breast in both hands, making her near delirious with long, wet kisses traced along the outline of her jaw, neck, earlobe and collarbone. Alicia could feel the stiff member of him as it bumped against her stomach. But it wasn't enough -- she wanted to feel him.

"You... you have on... too many clothes!" she panted as his kisses trailed down her neck again, through the valley between her breasts and down further still towards her navel. Her fingers snatched at empty air as she tried to snag his clothes to pull them off. Luke chuckled at her efforts and the frustrated sounds she was making, his warm breath fanning over her bare belly in a gentle tickle.

"Be patient, young lady," he advised in that no-nonsense 'I'm-the-spanker-here-and-don't-you-

forget-it' voice. "Good things come to those who wait..."

"God, you're so conceited!"

Luke nipped her hip playfully with his teeth. His eyes were soft and serious when they rose to her face. "You're beautiful, Alicia Marie. Stunning."

As usual, the heat spread across her face and neck and Luke reached up to touch the blossoming blush. He grinned. "I just love that."

Alicia rolled her eyes. "I know!"

He laughed again and kissed her mouth, taking a long leisurely sip, obviously enjoying taking his time about everything and keeping her near hysteria with the wait. His hand traveled down the length of her side, then brushed ever so slightly over the curls between her legs.

He was still kissing her when one of his fingers touched her there, very gently, just like the flit of a butterfly wing. Yet, Alicia still tensed and their kiss broke abruptly. Luke pushed aside her curtain of hair and looked up into her face.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded immediately, though she didn't look all that sure of herself.

"Does it hurt too much?"

"No."

"Alicia, you can't hide things from me. Especially not in bed. If something's wrong, you must tell me."

She blushed again. "It's okay, Luke.... It's just that.... well, I haven't been with all that many men. That's all. And... well, it's been a while since the last man."

"Oh." Luke smiled. He moved his finger so he was once again just barely inside of her. She tensed, then seemed to relax when he stopped at that. "Well, angel, I kind of like that. Now, let's see, where were we?"

While Alicia wriggled and writhed, Luke once again worked his way down her body with kisses, rubbing small circles with his fingers inside of her. The stubble on his face that had grown since he'd

shaved that morning was just enough of an abrasive on her skin to make the journey of kisses all the more exciting. When he got down to the patch of blond curls between her legs, he looked up into her face with a wide grin, like he'd just discovered the most wonderful thing in the world.

"What... what are you doing?" Alicia stammered.

"You'll see. What did I tell you about being patient?"

Very carefully, Luke placed one of the pillows under Alicia's bottom. Before settling her on it, he pressed twin kisses on her bottom cheeks and asked her how she was doing.

"O--okay."

"Good girl."

Then, as if he found it the most natural thing in the world, Luke took hold of each of Alicia's ankles, and lifted her legs, one over each of his shoulders. He hunkered down right before her nest of golden curls and actually licked his lips.

"L--Luke...." Alicia's voice broke as she said his name. It sounded like a plea, but for what she had no idea.

"Relax, darlin.' Trust me."

Luke slipped his hand under Alicia's bottom and cupped her in his palms, raising her up to his lips. He parted her ever so gently with his thumbs and suckled her right there, where she had ached and throbbed for him for so long.

Alicia cried out in raspy, unintelligible sounds, twisting about at his slow, sweet torment. Luke drew on her like she held the sweetest of nectars and he was starving. She didn't seem to know whether she liked this or hated it and Luke finally asked her, to make sure she was okay. Her answer was that she didn't know.

Luke chuckled at that and she felt the laughter through her body as much as she heard it. He gave her one more wet kiss there, and sat up. She watched with hungry eyes as he shed his clothes into a pile on the floor, then rejoined her on the

bed. Hesitantly, she reached out and clasped her hand over his hard, erect shaft and giggled at the gasp of pleasure and surprise she wrung from him. Slowly, enjoying her play, she stroked him and watched in fascination at the exchange of emotions that crossed over his face. He stilled her hand a few minutes later, groaning her name, and moved to sit beside her in the center of the bed.

"I'm not going to push into you while you're bottom's still so sore," he told her, sitting on the bed and guiding her to straddle him. Ever so slowly, constantly aware that this was most likely a new, uncomfortable experience for her, Luke eased Alicia down the length of him. She gasped and clenched her muscles, looking with wild fright into his eyes. He stopped at those times and held them both perfectly still until her muscles relaxed and stretched to accommodate him. He spoke to her with encouraging words that made her smile fit to light up the room. "Oh, Lord, Alicia. That's it. You're doing great, honey. Just relax. Don't fight it. That's it...."

Nearly five minutes later, sweat beading on his brow, his forearms trembling, Luke was finally fully seated inside of Alicia.

As gently as he could, he guided her into the age-old rhythm, marveling in the change of expression over her face. He cushioned her still warm bottom with his hands to try to absorb the rough slap of it meeting his hard thighs as she moved down and then back up again.

"It's... so different... on top," she marveled.

Luke kissed her temple, then her nose. "Get used to it. I sort of like it this way."

"You do? I thought.... guys always wanted.... to top...."

"Nah.... besides I can't do this..." -and he gave her a light swat, low on her bottom, knowing it would further stimulate her sex- "if you're beneath me..."

Their climax was tender and simultaneous, born out of the effort and consideration for each other that had gone into the act. Their voices rang out loud and primitive in the room and afterwards they drifted back from the stars to lie huddled in one another's arms.

Alicia's head rested on Luke's softly furred chest and her fingers played along the muscled length of his arm.

"That was wonderful," she sighed.

Luke patted her bottom. "Yes, it was."

She looked up at him and rested her chin on his chest. "It was never.... that good before," she admitted shyly. "Is it always like that?"

Luke grinned that cocky grin of his and she waited for the customary arrogant response. Something like, "It is with me, baby." But his grin softened and he ran his fingers through her hair. "It *should* always be like that."

"Hmmm." Alicia smiled and put her head back on his chest.

They spent nearly the entire weekend in bed. Getting to know one another in that intimate, physical way turned out to be quite an engrossing hobby, one that Alicia figured she might be able to work at full time, if not for the real world.

All good things must come to an end, of course, and that special weekend was no different. On Sunday afternoon, around two-thirty, a phone call came through for Alicia on the house phone. When she hung up, Luke saw the disappointment on her face.

Alicia had applied for a loan to expand the bakery. It was a minimal amount, just for the basics of what she really needed to make running the business easier. A couple more full time employees who had some experience, two more ovens and a few small odds and ends. The bank had turned her down two weeks ago and she had, after carefully deliberating over it, asked her parents for the loan.

Luke knew before he even asked her that it had been them on the phone, apparently with bad news.

"They'd love to loan me the money," Alicia told him after confirming his suspicions about the call. "They just can't afford it themselves." She sighed.

"I'm sorry, honey." Luke took her hand and kissed it.

She shrugged half heartedly, though the expression on her face betrayed the careless gesture. "So, I'll just keep working a bit extra, get Karen to help as much as she can. Maybe in a year the store will be strong enough that the bank won't see me as such a risk."

Luke nodded. He had another possible solution, but something held him back from offering it to her. He had a feeling she would not respond kindly to it.

He glanced at the clock. "Well, I guess I better head out to go pick up Missy. Wanna come?"

"Sure. Anything to get my mind off of work."

The ride took about an hour and Luke put on one of Alicia's favorite CD's while they drove. He sang along with the songs and she found herself touched by his efforts to cheer her. She didn't dare unbuckle her seatbelt to slide across the bench seat to kiss him, but she wanted to. She did catch his eye and smile, then she whispered that she loved him.

When they got to Missy's grandparents' house, Alicia was introduced to Bill and Molly Jenkins, who were a kindly elderly couple who clearly loved Missy and liked Luke very much. Missy came downstairs looking forlorn and Alicia first thought the little girl must wish she could visit longer. Then Molly told Luke that Missy hadn't been feeling well that day and she thought she was coming down with something.

To her surprise, after hugging her uncle hello, Missy clung to Alicia's side. She rested her head on Alicia's shoulder the entire ride home, and actually fell asleep.

Luke smiled across the cab at Alicia's look of bewilderment. "I'm afraid I'm not much help when someone's sick," he told her, nodding to Missy. "Missy knows from experience that if she's sick to her stomach, I turn just as green and hightail it away to someplace safe."

Alicia grinned, remembering now when she'd had the flu and Luke had looked like he was sick to his stomach, too. "So, that's your flaw, huh, Cowboy?" she teased him, getting a frown in return. "A weak stomach...."

"It's not exactly a flaw..."

"It is for you," she insisted. "And here I was thinking you were the perfect man!"

Luke laughed. He nodded again towards his niece. "I may be the perfect man, but I'm a damn rotten nurse maid."

Alicia smiled as she looked down into Missy's peaceful face. She swept aside a few locks of the little girl's hair and realized that she sort of liked the warm, trusting weight cuddled up beside her. Was this what it was like with children, she wondered. Would it be this way with her own children, hers and Luke's?

She glanced at her fiancé, wondering if their kids would take after him or her. Hopefully a little of both. It was strange for her to be thinking like that -- about kids. Until just a few months ago, she had closed herself off to the idea completely.

Luke caught her watching him. "Whatcha thinking about?" he asked.

"Our future," she answered, turning her gaze back to Missy. She was glad that he didn't push her for more details. It was all so new to her and she needed to get her feelings straight in her head before sharing them with him.

Luke carried Missy from the truck to the house when they got back to the farm. She woke up when he set her in her bed and immediately looked around and asked, "Where's Alicia?"

"I'm right here!"

"Oh." Missy looked relieved, then glanced apologetically at her uncle. Luke smiled his understanding and ruffled her hair.

"How about some dry toast and tea?" he asked.

Missy hesitated, then nodded.

Luke already looked a tad green, Alicia thought. Poor guy. He beat a hasty retreat from the room, leaving his girls alone.

Alicia fussed with the pillows and blanket, making sure that Missy was comfortable. The entire time Missy was studying her quietly.

"You okay?" Alicia finally asked.

Missy nodded. "I love Uncle Luke, but he's a wimp about people gettin' sick," she said. Alicia laughed.

"Well, I'm not a wimp about stuff like that," she assured the little girl, sensing that Missy had been hoping to hear those very words. "I'll be here if you need me, Missy, okay?"

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

That night, Luke made up a bed on the couch for himself and Alicia slept in his room. She was close enough there to hear if Missy needed her, and Luke said he didn't want his niece to get the wrong idea about them before they were married. Alicia had told him the idea wasn't "wrong," he just didn't want to be too close if Missy got sick during the night. That had gotten her quite a smarting slap to her still tender rear.

Alicia was up twice with Missy during the night. Though it wasn't much fun to clean the child up and comfort her after she'd been ill, Alicia found that she enjoyed taking care of the little girl. No one had ever really relied on her before - it had always been the other way around. She found that she rather liked being needed.

In the morning, Alicia met Luke in the kitchen.

"How's the patient?" he asked as he put bread into the toaster.

"About the same. She's not going to school today, that's for sure. She's got a temp and still feels sick."

"Oh."

Alicia hid a smile. She accepted the mug of coffee he handed her. "I'll take her to the doctor for you today," she offered.

"You will?"

"Sure, I don't mind. I don't even really need to go in to the store today so I could stay home with her, too. If it helps out."

"You're sure?"

"Sure."

"Thanks, that would help out a lot." Luke turned and gave Alicia one of his breath stealing kisses. When he pulled back from her, he fixed her with a quizzical look and accused, "You like it, don't you?"

"Like what?"

"You like playing mom!"

Alicia shrugged. She didn't see why she should deny it, even though he made it sound like a sin. "It's nice to feel needed," she agreed. "Especially when Missy didn't care much for me at first."

Luke grinned. "I knew that wouldn't last," he reminded her as he turned back to breakfast preparations. "She couldn't resist you for long. And, Alicia..."

"Yeah?"

"Just for the record, honey. Missy's not the only one around here who needs you."

Alicia blushed. "Thanks, Cowboy."

Chapter Nine

The months that remained until the wedding seemed to fly by for Alicia. She was constantly busy at the bakery and last minute plans and problems for the wedding took up a lot of her time, as well. In April, they celebrated both Missy and Luke's birthdays within two weeks of one another and Alicia threw them a combined surprise party that was a huge hit. It wasn't enough to keep her from receiving both birthday spankings, though she didn't really mind. The spanking she took for Missy's birthday was hardly much of a spanking, being only seven swats, plus the traditional one to grow on. Luke's spanking for his birthday was a bit longer, with him turning thirty that year, but it was a real warm and fuzzy spanking that ending with a long bout of lovemaking that Alicia thought was well worth the wait.

Of course, those weren't the only times she was over Luke's knee in the two and a half months between Valentine's Day and their wedding. As the big day drew closer, Alicia grew more and more nervous and tense, and she found herself repeatedly over Luke's lap for one transgression or another. He even gave these spankings a name – tension breakers. To Alicia, they were more like bottom breakers, but she didn't dare complain. She knew she deserved each and every one, and all she had to do to avoid them was take a step back and calm down when she started getting riled up about the wedding. It was just that she never did that!

In her defense, there was a lot to be overcome by. The wedding guest list was huge, and the majority of guests were coming in from out of town. It seemed that everyone expected her help in finding accommodations and she still had a business to run on the side. Then, of course, there were last minute problems to be handled – her dress had been altered wrong and the dressmaker was rushing now to have it finished on time, two of her

bridesmaids' dyed heels had arrived in the wrong sizes and were on priority shipping in order to arrive on time. Missy was being difficult about wearing the pink ribbon in her hair that matched the one on her flower girl's dress. And the list went on...

And still, in the back of Alicia's mind, despite the fact that she loved Luke Stephens with all her heart and thought there could be no greater happiness than being his wife, she still had the nagging worry that something was going to happen to ruin the wedding. She wondered if she would ever get over what Damon had done to her.

The night before the wedding, Alicia and Luke attended a brief rehearsal at the small church in town where they would be married. Alicia felt the butterflies swirling in her belly as she walked down the aisle, hand tucked into her father's elbow. Everyone around her was talking and joking, in great humor over the upcoming nuptials. Luke and the minister were smiling down the length of the aisle at her, while Alicia felt sick to her stomach. When they reached the altar and her father handed her over to Luke, he noticed her hands were shaking when he took possession of them.

"Relax," he admonished gently, squeezing her hands. She blushed as red as a beet and ducked her head. The minister smiled gently and went through the rest of what they could expect for the ceremony with a quiet respect for Alicia's distress.

When they had finished running through the ceremony, Luke pulled Alicia aside and looked into her eyes.

"I love you, Alicia Marie, you know that, right?" he asked her.

She nodded. "I love you, too, Luke."

"Say it, so I know you understand," he pressed.

"Say 'Luke Stephens loves me.'"

She blushed furiously, and even more so when he caressed one flaming cheek with his thumb. "Luke Stephens loves me," she whispered, glancing around her and feeling foolish. "Okay?"

He nodded. "Don't forget it. You seem to be getting lost in bad memories here lately and I don't want you to be worried that I'm going to pull a Damon on you."

She looked down at the floor, ashamed at being caught. He always seemed to know what she was thinking. "I'm sorry, Luke."

"It's okay. I can't even imagine what that must have done to you. But you should know me better by now, that I'd never do anything like that to you. Right?"

"Right."

He kissed her there, in the shadows of the church altar, and she felt his love and warmth flowing through her like a sweet wine.

They retired back to the farm for an informal gathering for supper. Alicia huddled beside her husband-to-be and fortified herself for the night with his laughter and love.

She left with her sister after dinner. In order to keep from seeing Luke in the morning before the ceremony she had decided to stay the night at Karen's with her parents, and he would stay at home with Missy.

He walked her out to her car and pulled her into his arms, lifting her off her feet in a bear hug. "Oh, boy!" he exclaimed. "I love you, Alicia Goode."

"I love you, Luke."

"Be good tonight," he warned with a grin and a tap to her backside. "No fraternizing with any male strippers or whatever you girls do for a bachelorette party!"

She shook her head. "No way. Some of the girls might stop by, but I plan to get my beauty sleep."

"Not that you need any."

Luke held her quietly for a bit and Alicia tried to draw some of his strength into her. She sighed and he kissed her forehead.

"Trust me," he entreated her, sensing her feelings, like always. "Everything will be fine, I promise."

Alicia drove off to Karen's a few minutes later, repeating his words like a prayer in her head.

At her sister's, Alicia changed from her dress and heels into an old pair of comfy sweats and athletic socks, then joined Karen and their parents in the den. A few of Alicia's girlfriends stopped by with last minute gifts and well wishes. She took a sleeping pill around ten, knowing she'd never be able to relax and get any rest without it, then kissed her parents goodnight around eleven.

Karen stopped by her room as she was pulling the covers back on the bed.

"You okay, sis?" she asked.

Alicia nodded. "Sure, why?"

"Well, for a woman who's about to marry one of the greatest guys I know, you just don't look all that happy."

Alicia sagged down on the mattress and hugged a pillow to her chest.

"He's not Damon, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Or my head knows, at least. It's hard to convince my heart that I'm not going to get hurt."

Karen smiled sadly. "I'd love to get my hands on that Damon, just once. He'd sing soprano for the rest of his days."

Alicia giggled and hugged her sister. "I love you, too, Karen."

Karen turned a few minutes later, pausing at the doorway. "Do you love him, 'Lice?"

"Yes, I do. Very much."

"Do you trust him?"

That was a tougher question. "I want to trust him," she hedged. "He's never given me any reason not to trust him. It's just very hard to forget what happened the last time I put my complete trust in a guy."

Karen nodded. "Try to get some sleep. By this time tomorrow you'll see that all these worries are for nothing. And you'll be Mrs. Alicia Stephens."

Alicia smiled. "You're right. Good night."

After Karen left, Alicia crawled back out of bed and crept quietly over to the telephone on the dresser. She dialed Luke's number, biting her bottom lip as she did it, and feeling foolish. She knew she wouldn't wake Missy, who slept like a rock, but she hoped Luke hadn't already fallen asleep. She just wanted to hear his voice before she went to sleep, one last reassurance that everything would work out all right in the morning.

There was no answer, and she waited through fifteen agonizing rings. Even if Luke had fallen asleep, Alicia thought he surely would have heard the phone and answered. He was a fairly light sleeper and she'd woken him with a phone call or two in the past. The fact that he hadn't answered told her he must not be home.

Praying she didn't misdial, Alicia tried the line one more time, and sat through twenty rings this time. There was still no answer and she finally hung up with a sigh. Where could he be? He'd told her he wasn't going out with any of the guys, had just wanted to spend a quiet evening at home after supper with Missy. She supposed some of his buddies could have stopped by and persuaded him to go out, and he could have left Missy at his mom's, but she wouldn't have expected him to be out this late. She wished she could call Emily to check out that possibility, but she knew she would wake Luke's mom if she did that and she wouldn't do that for anything, not even her own piece of mind.

She settled herself under the covers, telling herself she was being paranoid, and that there was a perfectly good reason why Luke hadn't answered the phone. Maybe he'd been as nervous as she was, had also taken a sleeping pill to get some rest, and it had put him in a deeper sleep than usual. That would explain why the phone hadn't woken him as it normally would have.

She could feel the affects of the sleeping tablet she had taken now as she willed her eyes closed

and her negative thoughts away. She loved Luke, she trusted him, and she was going to marry him at eleven in the morning tomorrow. She wouldn't allow herself to think of anything else.

But that night, she dreamed of the last night she'd spent before she was to marry, and how that night she'd found her husband-to-be in bed with her best friend. Except in the dream, the husband-to-be was not Damon, but Luke instead, and the woman he was in bed with was a faceless, shapely beauty.

In the morning, Alicia woke and looked about her, wondering for a moment where she was. When her eyes fell on the wedding dress hanging on the closet door, she groaned and pulled the covers back up over her head.

A knock at the door made her come out of her hiding place. "Come in," she called wearily.

Her mother and father came through the door, followed by Karen who carried a tray of lightly buttered toast and a mug of sweetened tea.

"Good morning, dear," Alicia's mother sang, pecking her cheek merrily. Her father tousled her already disheveled hair and kissed her forehead. Karen gave her a brief, apologetic smile as she settled the tray over her lap.

"I figured you'd be too nervous for much more than toast, but you should eat something," her sister said. "And the tea is herbal, so it should help settle your stomach."

Alicia smiled. "Thanks, sis."

"Are you nervous, dear?" Alicia's mother asked, looking worriedly at her youngest daughter.

Alicia shook her head, forcing a smile. "Nope."

"Good," her father boomed. "You have no reason to be. I had me a good talk with that groom of yours last night and you can rest easy that he's gonna take real good care of you. I told him he'd have *me* to answer to if he didn't."

Alicia winced inwardly, sharing a glance of irritation with Karen, but smiled her thanks to their father. So that's what happened to Luke last night,

she thought wryly. He ran for the hills after the talk he had with good old dad.

After a few more minutes of encouraging words, her family left her to eat in peace. The toast tasted like sawdust to her and the tea was too sweet, but she forced herself to eat, then to get out of bed. Ignoring the guilt and listening instead to the suspicious voice in her heart, Alicia tiptoed over to the phone again and rang Luke's house. Emily's voice answered, equally as musical and merry as Alicia's mother's. Feeling incredibly childish and silly, Alicia quietly hung the handset back on the cradle, then stared at the phone for a full five minutes, expecting it to ring back.

She pushed herself into the bathroom and showered, admonishing herself in silence the entire time. If Emily was at Luke's, then she was there getting Missy ready for the wedding, which meant that Luke was there too, getting ready. Didn't it?

When she came out of the bathroom, the phone was ringing and it was Luke.

She answered hesitantly, not sure what to expect.

"Good morning, Alicia Marie," he rumbled, and she could hear the smile in his voice. It made her feel even guiltier for her suspicions about where he'd been the night before. "How did you sleep?"

"Okay," she answered, trying to sound natural. "How 'bout you?"

"All right." He paused and Alicia held her breath, waiting for him to say something about how he'd been out with the guys till almost midnight, or anything like that to explain why he hadn't answered her call. But he said nothing like that. Instead he said, "Only two hours to go and you'll officially be mine. What do you think of that?"

"I think it's too long to wait."

He chuckled. "We'll have to work on your patience once we're married." There was a sound in the background and she heard him speaking to

Missy. "Missy says hello and she can't wait to see you."

Alicia smiled. "Tell her I love her and can't wait to see her either."

She listened as Luke relayed the message. Then he said, "Did you call earlier? The phone rang while I was in the shower and Mom answered, but the caller hung up."

"N-no, I didn't call. Why would I call and hang up?"

"Oh, I didn't really think it was you. It just seemed odd. Guess it was a wrong number."

"Probably."

"Well, I just wanted to call and tell you I love you. I'll see you at the church, right?"

"You bet."

"Okay, sweetheart. Bye."

"Bye, Luke."

Alicia hung up the phone, blinking back tears of frustration and sentiment. What was wrong with her? How could she be suspicious of a man like that, who called to tell her he loved her? It shouldn't matter what had happened in her past to make it hard to trust him; she should trust him no matter what.

A few minutes later, Karen came in to help her do her hair and make up, then her mother came in to help her into the simple, white lace dress. When the collaborative work was complete, Alicia looked at herself in the full-length mirror and wondered just who it was staring back at her.

The dress was plain, but elegant, with a sweetheart neckline, full floor length skirt, and lace overlay. The sleeves were cut wide and had small bows on the outside. Small white ballerina style shoes peeked out from beneath the hem of the skirt. Karen had done Alicia's hair into a bouncing chignon at the back of her head, allowing a few curls to frame her face in soft ringlets. And her make up was done in soft peaches and cream, just enough to accent her own natural coloring. She

wore no blush though – as Luke had teased her on more than one occasion, she certainly didn't need to use the stuff!

Somewhere along the line, Alicia's father had changed into his tuxedo, her mother had donned the ivory and jade suit she'd agonized over choosing to wear, and Karen had put on her baby pink bridesmaid's dress. Everyone was ready to go, and when Alicia looked at the clock, she was horrified to realize they had to leave in less than ten minutes in order to get to the church on time.

Before she knew it, they were all piling into her parents' rented van and driving to the little church. The place was packed, at least judging by all the cars in the parking lot and on the street. Alicia saw Brian McDogal and his wife standing in an empty parking space, waving wildly at them and she directed her father towards that space. As she got out of the van, Brian's wife Beth came over to help her with her skirt and praise her on how beautiful she looked.

"Luke asked us to come out and save you a parking spot," Brian said to explain why they'd been standing outside in the middle of the empty spot. "He didn't want you to have to walk too far in your dress and all."

How very like Luke, Alicia thought. And a fresh pang of guilt hit her, even as her heart raced and her stomach knotted when she looked towards the church.

The little party started towards the church, and Karen came up to give Alicia a squeeze around her shoulders. When they got inside the doorway of the church and Alicia peeked in to see all the guests filling the pews, she felt so lightheaded she feared she might faint.

The McDogals wished her well and then went on in to reclaim their baby and find seats. Alicia saw Luke turn and grin when he saw them returning, knowing that meant his bride was now in the building.

Alicia's father turned to her and offered his arm. She linked her arm through his and took a deep steadying breath. Her bridesmaids were lining up in front of her, giggling and jostling one another, throwing her smiles and blowing kisses. Her mother gave her a brief hug and kiss before going inside to be seated in the front pew. Karen gave her a reassuring smile over her shoulder. And the music began to play.

Alicia watched the line of women walk off before her, one by one. Her father patted her hand where it rested in the crook of his elbow. He was saying something, but she wasn't getting it all. Something about how Luke was a good man and she was going to be happy. Then it was their turn to appear.

The first step was jarring and Alicia nearly stumbled to take the second. Everyone was standing and turned to watch their approach. There were so many people she couldn't even see Luke at the end of the aisle at first. And when she did see him, standing there beside Brian, Missy nearby in her flower girl dress, her breath caught in her throat. He was beaming, his face expectant and happy and carefree. He looked more handsome than she had ever imagined a man could look, dressed in a western cut black tuxedo with an old fashioned string tie. His eyes glimmered at her, and his smile broadened.

And all Alicia could think of was, where had he been last night when she'd phoned?

Her steps faltered and eventually stopped all together. Her father tugged at her arm once, then he turned quizzically towards her. The people standing on both sides of her began to fidget and look at one another, a few whispering behind their hands. Luke's face fell and Alicia saw Karen muttering something under her breath.

And then she saw nothing but rapidly passing faces as she turned on her heel and fled.

Chapter Ten

"Alicia!"

The sound of her name followed Alicia as she fled out the church, past all her guests, and onto the sidewalk outside. The bright, May sunshine made her squint as she looked over her shoulder to see her groom in hot pursuit.

"Leave me alone, Luke!" she called out to him. Now that she was outside, she was at a loss for where to go. She had driven in with her parents, and had no car to hop into for her getaway. She had a ludicrous memory of the movie, *Runaway Bride*, and thought, where's a horse when you need one?

"Alicia, come on. Don't run from me. Let's talk about this."

She had slowed her pace, but was still jogging away from him down the sidewalk. In a few feet the sidewalk was going to end. She glanced back over her shoulder at him once more, saw how close he was already, and darted between two parked cars out into the street.

"Alicia!"

She never even saw the car that nearly hit her. She couldn't have described even the blur of color that flew past her. All she was aware of was Luke's terrorized shout, then a vise like arm that grasped her around the waist and hauled her back out of the street just in time.

He'd grabbed her so hard that they both fell backwards onto the sidewalk, Alicia cushioned somewhat by the fact that she fell into Luke's lap. She scrambled to her feet, but he grabbed hold of her arm before she had another chance to escape.

"All right, young lady," he growled as he turned her back to the church and marched her in that direction. "Now that you've scared half my life away, let's get to the bottom of this nonsense."

She felt her face flame from the tips of her ears down to her neck, both from the curious looks they were receiving from some of the more nosy guests

that were standing on the church steps, as well as from the comment Luke had just made. He ushered her up the stairs, past everyone including her family and the minister, and went straight into that good man's small office. He let go of her arm once they were inside, closed the door behind them, and said, "Sit."

She didn't even think of arguing with him. She sat timidly on the edge of one of the chairs that faced the minister's desk, staring at the carpet beneath her feet.

"What is going on with you, Alicia?" Luke wanted to know, and he sounded honestly confounded. She glanced up at him and saw that despite the hard facial features and stern stance he held with his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes were weary and hurt. "Why would you run out on me like that?"

She didn't answer, found that she couldn't answer.

"This can't just be your difficulty trusting men because of your ex. You know me better than that."

"Do I?"

She'd spoken so softly, he hadn't heard her. "What?"

Alicia made herself look up and meet his eyes. "Do I really know you better than that?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Last night, Luke. I called you last night at almost midnight. And you weren't home."

He closed his eyes briefly, then a smile flashed over his face. "Is that what this is all about?" he asked.

"Yes! It is!"

Now he was laughing, actually *laughing*, and her blood really started to boil.

"What's so funny?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. It's just that when you find out where I was you're really going to feel like a little idiot, accusing me of cheating on you."

"Oh really? Well, let's call me an idiot then. Tell me where you were, Luke."

His expression sobered. He studied her quietly a moment. Finally he said, "No, I don't think so. I could tell you, but my plan was to surprise you with it tonight. And I'm not willing to change my plan just because you got your back up instead of trusting me like you should have."

"How can you expect me to trust you when you refuse to tell me where you were?" she cried.

"I expect you to trust me. Period. I've never given you any reason not to. Your ex gave you reason not to trust *him*, not all of the male race. And I'm damn sick of paying for his sins. It's going to stop here, today. You want to marry me today, you do it trusting me. And tonight, after the ceremony, *then* I will tell you where I was last night and you'll be glad you did."

She sighed. "I don't know if I can do that, Luke."

His shoulders sagged. "Well, I hope that you can, because I would hate to lose you over nothing." She looked down at her hands, but he knelt in front of her and tipped her face up. "You think about it for a bit in here," he suggested quietly. "I'll go back into the church and try to calm our families down. You make up your mind."

She nodded, blinking back tears. "Thank you."

He gave a curt jerk of his head and stood. At the door, he paused and turned back to her. "Alicia?"

"Yes?"

"Remember that I love you. Think about all the wonderful things that have happened since we've been together. And think about what it would be like if we weren't together anymore."

The sound of the door closing behind him made her start. She wiped at a few escaped tears and tried to calm her pulse.

His words rang in her ears and she couldn't help but follow his advice. If they weren't together anymore, her life would be so lonely and colorless. She couldn't even imagine trying to find another person to share her life with -- she didn't want another person. She only wanted Luke.

Why did he have to be so damn stubborn? Why couldn't he just tell her where he was last night? If what he said was true, she could be embarrassed and apologize, but then they could get married without any doubts in her heart. And tonight she would willingly submit to whatever punishment he saw fit to give her.

She shivered, a delayed reaction to nearly getting hit by that car. She'd half expected him to spank her the minute they were alone, but was so grateful he hadn't. But she was sure to really be in for it tonight.

She must have sat in the minister's office for twenty minutes, going back and forth in her head. She was amazed that Luke was able to keep her family at bay. She was also grateful to him for giving her the time alone that she needed to make up her mind.

Finally, after a few cleansing breaths, she stood and peeked her head out of the office door. It didn't take long to catch Karen's eye and her sister joined her in the office in a second.

"Oh, honey, are you all right?" Karen asked, hugging Alicia hard.

Alicia nodded. "I'm fine. And I'm going to get married today. Can you help me repair my face?"

Karen smiled. "Sure."

A few minutes later, all traces of tears gone from her face except a bit of redness in her eyes, Alicia stepped out of the office. She didn't see Luke anywhere in the throngs of people milling about. But her parents spotted her and immediately joined her to make sure she was okay.

While Alicia tried to reassure her parents, Karen went to find Luke and the minister. Pretty soon the best man and bridesmaids reappeared to direct the guests back to their seats. Alicia's face was constantly enflamed as guests passed by and shot her curious glances.

It seemed to take forever, but finally everyone was seated once again. The line of bridesmaids

formed in front of Alicia and her father and she felt the same butterflies stirring in her stomach. The first step this time wasn't so jarring, though. And when she saw Luke standing at the end of the aisle, looking down at her with such pride and love, her heart thumped hard and she knew she had made the right decision.

Her father handed her over to her groom, and he beamed down into her face. He took possession of both her hands and brought them to his lips for a kiss. "Welcome back," he whispered.

And the wedding ceremony began.

Alicia glanced at her husband from the passenger seat as he drove. She sighed contentedly, thinking over the day. She was weary from all the dancing and mingling they'd done at the reception, but it was hardly even five o'clock. They planned to check into the honeymoon suite they would share for that night, then maybe go out for a bite to eat after freshening up.

Luke was being very mellow, but she sensed that his mood would change once they were alone. She knew she'd scared him badly today when she'd run into the street. Plus there was the little fact that she'd run out in the middle of their wedding ceremony to deal with.

They checked into their room, and Luke made a big production of carrying her over the threshold. The room was beautiful, done in pale blue and gold, with accents of rose and royal blue. The bed was round and huge. There was a whirlpool bath for two, and a small refrigerator stocked with wine and cheese. Luke tipped the bellboy and closed the door behind him with a quiet click.

Alicia slipped her shoes off and sat tentatively on the bed. Now that they were alone, and at their final destination for that evening, she was a bit unsure of herself. She glanced at Luke to try to

gauge what he was thinking, but she couldn't tell a thing from his expression.

"Why don't you slip out of that dress?" he asked huskily, digging in one of the suitcases for something.

"Okay. I'll just freshen up a little in the bathroom."

He nodded distractedly.

Alicia slipped the silk dress she'd donned after the reception over her head and scrunched her hair a bit. She wore a plain white lace slip beneath the dress, no bra, no panties. She figured it was appropriate for whatever her new husband had in mind, be it her punishment or their wedding night pleasure.

When she emerged from the bathroom, Luke was sitting on the edge of the bed and she knew then which would be coming first. Tears welled in her throat and without quite realizing what she was doing, she knelt at his feet. She laid her head against his knee, hugged one of his calves in her arms, and cried.

"Shh," he soothed, stroking her hair with light fingertips. "Don't cry sweetheart. Alicia, please. Don't cry."

"I'm so sorry! I should have trusted you. I do trust you..."

"I know." Luke pulled her up to sit beside him and he cradled her against his shoulder, rocking her in his arms. "Please don't cry."

She managed to regain control of herself, sniffing a little.

"You must hate me for what I did."

"Never. I would never hate you, no matter what you did. Don't let me ever hear you say anything like that again." Luke gave her a little shake. "Hear me?"

"Yes."

He pressed a warm kiss on her forehead and wiped her damp cheeks with his thumbs.

"Are you ready to hear where I was last night?"

She nodded, and sat waiting for him to continue.

"I have an old friend who is the manager at Hatfield Bank over in Merion. I spoke with him last week about getting you the loan for the bakery. And last night, I met him at the bank to fill out the necessary paperwork."

"You were meeting with him at a bank at eleven in the evening?" Alicia questioned.

Luke sighed. "Yeah. I didn't exactly have time to meet with him during normal business hours with everything that's been going on with the wedding. So he made a special allowance for an old friend and met me there last night. If you don't believe me, I have his cell number. You can call him yourself. Plus when we get back from our honeymoon, you'll have your loan money."

Alicia blinked. "You got approved?"

"We did."

"How?"

He shrugged. "I put the farm up as collateral."

"You did *what*?" Alicia couldn't believe her ears. And he was so blasé about the entire thing. "Luke, are you crazy? That's your home! It's been in your family for generations! How could you put it up for a measly few thousand dollars?"

"You're good for it, I figure," he said, tweaking her nose. "You don't seem to understand how this marriage thing works, Alicia. That farm is your home now, too. As much as it is mine, or Mom's, or Missy's. And your bakery, your dream, it's mine too. We're partners. We're going to work together on all of it."

"Still..." she hesitated. "I don't know that I can let you do this...."

"I thought you'd feel that way about it," he admitted. "That's why I didn't tell you about it before I went and did it. There's no 'letting' me do it now – it's a done deal. You just have to learn to live with it. And I don't want to hear any lip from you about it, because you're in enough trouble with me already as it is."

Alicia sighed and rested her head on Luke's shoulder. "Okay. Thank you."

He squeezed her knee. "You know, you scared the hell out of me today."

"I know." She closed her eyes tightly, seeing the whole thing in her mind as if she'd watched herself running from the church on a film. She saw herself darting into the street, narrowly escaping getting hit because Luke pulled her back in the nick of time. "It was stupid. I'll never forgive myself for the way I embarrassed you. For the way I embarrassed myself."

"I was talking about when you almost became street pizza," he said, and they shared a dry laugh at the way he put it. He drew her into his arms and let out a long held breath, squeezing her tight. "I thought you really were going to be lost to me, forever."

"I'm sorry. I'll never run from you again, Luke. I promise."

He gave her lips a soft, feathery kiss of forgiveness and love. "I know." He smiled gently at her. "Close your eyes. I have a present for you."

"A present?" She made a face. "I didn't get you anything!"

"So what? Do what your husband says and close your eyes."

"Oh, all right."

Alicia's eyes fluttered closed and she felt the mattress shift as Luke stood up. She heard the sound of a zipper being opened and closed, then the mattress shifted again as Luke rejoined her.

"Hold out your hand," he instructed.

She held out both hands and was rewarded with an awkward, heavy weight being deposited there.

"Okay, open your eyes."

A long box sat in her hands, wrapped in cream colored paper decorated with maroon and hot pink hearts. A shimmery satin bow in scarlet red was tied on top.

"Oh my," Alicia said. "How pretty. Did you wrap this all by your lonesome, Cowboy?"

Luke grinned, his eyes twinkling with some private joke. "Just open it already, Miss. Smarty Pants."

She tugged open the ribbon, then wound the scarlet satin band loosely around her husband's neck, giggling at the face he made when she did it. She lifted the lid off the box and gasped at what she saw inside.

It was a wooden paddle, the large business end of which was shaped like a heart and painted a bright, hot red. Engraved in the wood were the words, "Luke and Alicia Stephens. May 1, 2001."

Alicia lifted the paddle out of the box, her stomach falling at the weight of it in her hand. It was beautifully made and of quality material. Sure to last a good number of years, she thought with an inward smile. Just like their marriage.

"What do you think?" Luke asked. She was surprised to see that his expression was uncertain. She caressed his cheek lovingly, emotion choking her throat. After all this time, and despite all his usual self-confidence, he was still obviously somewhat uncertain about this part of their relationship, and whether she really accepted it or not.

"I think it's a beautiful gift," she said, a catch in her voice. "I will always feel your love for me whenever I look at it, whenever you send me to fetch it for you, whenever you use it to spank me."

He smiled, and pulled her close for a kiss and hug. Alicia felt all her tension ebb away in his embrace, and she knew she was finally at peace with her past and what had happened back then. She could move on now, and be free to trust this man who loved her with such devotion. She could trust him to keep her heart safe. And she would do everything to keep his heart safe and protected for the rest of her days.

They pulled apart slowly and looked into one another's eyes for a long, long time. Then Alicia sat back on her heels, handed the new paddle to her husband, and bent herself over his lap. She reached back with one hand and pulled the back of her slip up, exposing her bare backside for him.

"I didn't think I'd be using it so soon," Luke said, running his hand slowly over her curves.

"I deserve it," Alicia said, settling her head on her arms. "I want you to, for what happened today. Because I didn't trust you and because I tried to run from you instead of talking with you. I want you to do it now so that it will be done with and then we can really start our honeymoon."

Luke nodded his agreement. He stroked her hair back from her face and bent over her to place his usual twin kisses to her bottom cheeks. Then he drew back his arm, and set their wedding night off with the first of many hot, red flames.

