

Gabby's Secret

By

OTKRomance

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Chapter One

Gabriela Madison Hoyt squeezed the small girl's hand that lay inside her own as they walked the stone driveway on the last few feet of their long journey together. Just ahead in the near distance, she could see her best friend, Leigh Sommerville's, farmhouse and its outbuildings, and though she had never expected to visit the ranch again, the simple sight was a most welcome one to her tired soul, not to mention her worn out feet.

Little Carrie glanced up questioningly at the tall, slender young woman who held her hand as they walked. She squinted against the brightness of the June sunshine and smiled shyly back when Gabby glanced down and winked at her.

"Just a few more steps, sweetheart," Gabby answered the unasked question, "and we'll finally be there."

Despite the fact that it was a mild early June day, neither too hot nor too cold, Gabby was glad to know that a respite lay shortly ahead in their future. It had been a long trip, first by train, then by car, and finally this last leg on foot. Even though the pair only carried one suitcase and a small duffel bag between them, their arms had begun to strain from that by now. They both needed the rest, but Gabby also needed the time to fortify herself, as well; she had to figure out what she was going to do after today. Though there had certainly been plenty of quiet time during their trip to consider her options, she had yet to come up with a workable plan.

Despite her own personal troubles, though, Gabby had to smile as they drew nearer to Leigh's home. She loved her best friend like the sister she had never had and she was very happy to see what a lovely day had turned up for Leigh's wedding. She only hoped that Leigh's brother, Jake, didn't decide

to ruin the happy event when he saw who his sister had chosen for her maid of honor.

Gabby couldn't help noticing the changes in the ranch as she and Carrie came within shouting distance of the house. An addition had been built onto both the large barn, and the long ranch home, and all of the buildings sported new coats of paint. The once dilapidated corral fence was repaired and sturdy looking, penning in three muscular horses at the moment, one of which was joyously rolling in the warm spring grass. Gabby pointed out the animal's antics to Carrie and was rewarded with one of the child's rare, musical giggles.

It had been seven years since Gabby had left the small town of Stillwater, Montana with her mother after her father had passed on and they had sold their overly prosperous ranch and business; add to that the three years previous to the move since her friendship with Leigh was *supposed* to end, per Jake's order, and it had been ten years since she'd set foot on this land. She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised at how much things had changed, especially considering what a hard working man Jake was, and had always been. She only wondered if anything else had changed for the better, or was he going to slam the door in her face, or throw her off his property, just as she feared?

Gabby's belly fluttered nervously as she and Carrie passed the barn on their way towards the house, and she couldn't help glancing nervously over her shoulder, expecting Jake to come charging out at her from the building, breathing fire and demanding to know what she was doing here on his land. She knew the confrontation was inevitable, but she still longed to put it off for as long as possible.

As far as Jake Sommerville knew, his sister and Gabby had ended their erstwhile friendship back when they were both in high school, when Leigh

was only seventeen years old, and Gabby just a year older. That long ago spring day seemed to Gabby like it was both a century ago, and like it was only yesterday...

Gabby and Leigh both were lonely girls with few friends at school until they discovered one another. Jake had been working for Gabby's father, training his stallions and breaking horses to saddle with his special gentle manner, when he had brought along his kid sister one Saturday afternoon because he had no one to stay with her at home and didn't think she was old enough to stay by herself. Gabby, who had been trusted on her own in her mansion of a house since she was eight, had thought this was silly, and had figured the other girl must be a real sissy. But once she had started to talk to her, (only out of sheer boredom, of course), she'd found that they actually had quite a bit in common, despite their different social statuses, and the year's difference in age.

From that first Saturday on, Gabby and Leigh became close friends; whenever her brother went to work at the Hoyt's on an evening or Saturday, Leigh begged him to allow her to come along. And though he worried about the influence the Hoyt "hoyden," as he often called Gabby, would have on his sister, he indulged Leigh in this one repeated request because she asked for so very little, and because he knew she had so few friends.

But he worried. Gabby was reckless and undisciplined; her parents were always too busy with business or social obligations to pay her much mind, and she often acted out to try to gain their attention. Sadly, it never worked for more than a day or so, and during that brief time she was confined to her room as her "punishment." Her parents never discussed her inappropriate behavior

with her – or her appropriate behavior, for that matter – and as she got older, Gabby's antics only grew wilder. In truth, Jake felt rather sorry for the girl, though her bratty demeanor and troublesome behavior overshadowed his concern for her; he had a little sister of his own to lose sleep over, and keeping tabs on one teenager was more than enough of a job for him.

Jake tried to be patient with the growing friendship between the two girls, hoping despite the increasing amount of trouble that Gabby got his sister involved in, that Leigh would prove to be a good influence on the older girl, so that he could breath a little easier when he knew the two of them were together.

But he grew increasingly nervous that his otherwise mild mannered sibling was going to follow her friend's destructive path and wind up in serious trouble. Jake was used to being the head of their household, having assumed the male role in the family at the age of seventeen when their father died. Five years later, he found himself Leigh's sole guardian and only remaining family member when their mother passed on after losing a battle with cancer that had been several years long. And though he often wondered if he was doing the right things as he raised his little sister, he worried even more so that she would get into trouble with Gabby one day and the state would decide he wasn't fulfilling his role as her guardian. The biggest fear he harbored was that the state would one day take her away from him.

The girls did get into their share of small scrapes, though nothing was big enough to alert the social worker who watched over Leigh and Jake's home. Gabby's parents already knew their daughter's shortcomings in issues of behavior, and never thought badly of their employee when his sister was involved in some mischief with Gabby. He

was too gifted in what he did, and they knew the loss would truly be their own, if they were to let him go.

For his part, Jake tried to discourage his sister from getting into trouble with her best friend through groundings and spankings. He also appealed to her with words, always reminding her that if she were to get into serious trouble the state could determine that he wasn't doing a good job as her guardian, and they could decide to take her away. Though these talks often took place with Leigh over his knee, she truly did love her brother and just the idea of being separated from him made her begin to cry anew. He hated having to guilt her into behaving like that, but he considered it preferable to the possible alternative of having her taken away, and the talks always seemed to work – for a time, anyway, at least until Gabby's next need for attention arose and Leigh lost herself temporarily in the mischievous ride.

One warm spring day, Gabby had the idea for her and Leigh to go swimming at the pond by her house instead of going to school. The weather was extremely warm and both young women were anxious for the summer break to start. Though Leigh put up something of an argument at first, worried over what would happen should they get caught, Gabby was quickly able to ease her worries and cajole her into coming along.

Little did they expect that the school would phone their homes to ask if they were home sick; of course, there was no answer at the Hoyt residence, but Jake answered at the barn extension at the Sommerville ranch, and learned then of his sister's truancy. He was so surprised to learn she wasn't at school where she belonged, that he didn't even have the forethought to lie and say she was indeed home sick, thereby stalling any inquiries from their social services worker. Instead, he answered the

question honestly and was then asked to come down to the school to speak with the principal.

In the meantime, the two young women had been found at the pond, it being the only place Jake could think of where they could have hidden for the day without being caught. They were then transported to the school and told they were suspended for the remainder of the day, with detentions after classes for the next week. They stood in the hallway outside their principal's office, dripping pond water and looking glumly at their shoes.

"I'm sorry," Gabby told her friend as they listened to the muted male voices behind the closed door. "You're gonna be in big trouble with your brother, huh?"

Leigh nodded, swallowing hard. A short moment later, as if mentioning him made Jake appear, the door opened and he stepped out, looking stern, angry and very frightening.

His dark blue eyes swept disappointingly over his younger sister and then locked briefly with Gabby's own pale green ones. She fidgeted there under that steely hard look, regretting what she had pulled her friend into, and wishing with her whole heart that Jake would stop looking at her like that, like he truly hated her.

Gabby had harbored a secret crush on the older man, that she hadn't even shared with Leigh. She wished in her heart that she were older, and that he liked her better, so he would consider her for a girlfriend. But since that was unlikely due to the six years between them, she allowed herself to worship him from afar. He was a real hero to her, based on how he was with Leigh, how much he obviously loved and cared for her. In Gabby's life there was little of that type of deep caring, and she craved it. Maybe she even craved some of the limits and

consequences that governed Leigh's existence under Jake's care, as well.

Finally, he looked away from her, and took Leigh's thin shoulder in one hand, turning her abruptly around to leave. Gabby met her friend's gaze briefly before watching her be led away.

Later that afternoon, after Gabby was returned to her own home once someone finally reached her mother, she walked right out the front door and went to get her bike from the shed. Her mother had scolded her only briefly about skipping school, but she hadn't told her to stay at the house. And she also wasn't home any longer, so what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

Gabby pedaled over to Leigh's house, covering the two miles between their ranches in record time. She was worried about her friend, knowing how upset Jake had been with her. And, in truth, she was worried about where she stood with the older man, as well. It was no secret, even to Gabby, that he didn't like her very much; but now she worried that the dislike had turned to true hatred, and with that she was afraid of what else would follow.

When she reached the Sommerville's, Leigh was nowhere to be seen, but Jake was sitting on a chair on the front porch, quietly concentrating on mending a piece of torn saddle harness. Gabby slid to a soft stop and crouched low nearby, watching him in silence for a few minutes as he worked. She admired his strong, straight features, his wide shoulders and tall frame as he bent over his task. His slim fingers moved deftly at their job, and the locks of dark hair around his face fell forward in a boyish manner. She thought romantically that she'd never known another boy or man as beautiful as he was.

Finally, she screwed up her courage and gulped a deep breath of air before rising to her full height once again. Then she came around the side of the

house into Jake's view and he caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye.

"Go home, Gabriela," he said quietly, but firmly, after glancing at her briefly and then returning his attention to the piece of leather in his hands. "You've done enough mischief for one day."

"I... I just wanted to talk to Leigh for a minute... to check on her...."

His dark blue eyes were nearly black when he next looked up at her after those words. "Leigh is fine," he growled. "No thanks to you. Now get out of my sight before I lose my temper."

The fact that Jake was nearing the end of his temper should have been a meaningful warning to Gabby all by itself; she'd seen him work endless hours with the horses on her father's ranch, and knew the kind of patience he possessed to do so. But instead of listening to her head, Gabby listened to the pounding heart inside of her chest and pressed on with, "Can't I just talk to her for a minute? Please?"

"Jesus!" Jake bellowed, slapping the piece of harness angrily against one jeans-clad leg. "I said no, dammit! What the hell are you doing here anyway, Gabriela? Didn't your parents punish you at all for what happened today?"

Gabby's eyes were like saucers in her head at his angry outburst, yet she still stood there as if she was rooted to the soil beneath her feet. She'd never seen Jake this angry before; the Jake she knew never cursed and rarely raised his voice. Slowly she shook her head in answer to his question.

A string of curses fell from Jake's mouth and the next thing she knew he was tugging her by the hand up the steps onto the porch beside him. In another moment he had literally tossed her right over his hard thighs and had brought that nasty piece of leather he'd been mending down on her backside.

"Ow!" Gabby protested, twisting and wriggling as she fought to free herself from his tight grasp. The harness fell again on her bottom and she squawked again. That thing HURT, even through the denim of her jeans shorts and underwear.

"Poor little spoiled Gabriela Hoyt!" Jake jibed sarcastically, punctuating his words with loud whaps from the leather. "What a shame it is that no one in your miserable life ever thought to give you a good lesson like this before!"

"Ow! Let me go! Oh, please!" Gabby was rapidly losing the fight in her, having never experienced a spanking before. She hung onto Jake's pants leg and pleaded for him to stop the onslaught on her tender bottom, but to no avail. The weathered strip of leather just continued to fall across her vulnerable, upturned bottom, wielded by a furious young man who had reached his own limits of tolerance and understanding. And though Gabby tried to hold her reaction at bay, the sting and heat that Jake was building on her backside, when combined with the hurt she felt in her heart over his angry, cold response to her visit, brought the tears spilling over her lashes and rolling down her cheeks to spill onto the wooden planks of the porch floor beneath them.

"Jake!" Leigh's voice suddenly broke through the din of tears and pleading and penetrated Gabby's consciousness. She managed somehow to crane her neck up to look at her best friend where she stood in the doorway to the house, her eyes red rimmed and huge with surprise at the scene before her. Gabby moaned in embarrassment and hung her head down once again, choking on a sob as another hard whap was delivered to her behind.

"Jake, stop! You can't do this!" Leigh pleaded.

"Leigh, go inside," her brother ordered calmly, as if he wasn't exerting a single iota of energy punishing the young woman over his lap.

"But... you can't do this... her parents..."

"Her parents should have done this a few times themselves over the years. I'm not worried about her parents or anyone else, for that matter, because I'm sure she'll be too embarrassed to tell anyone what happened here today." He paused in his chore and looked up to meet his sister's gaze squarely. "Now, unless you'd like a second spanking of your own today, young lady, I suggest you go back to your room where I told you to stay."

Leigh hesitated only a moment longer before turning reluctantly and mumbling, "Yes sir," on her way back to her room.

Jake waited 'till she was gone before resuming the spanking, but then he only gave Gabby a few more well aimed swats with the leather before tossing it aside and helping her to stand. Her hands immediately flew back to rub at her tender skin through her shorts as she stood there before him, crying hoarsely.

Jake regarded her silently for a few long moments. He had a funny kind of look on his face, almost like pity. At least he wasn't looking at her in that cold, hate filled way anymore, Gabby thought. For a few moments she even allowed herself to imagine that he was about to fold her up inside his strong arms for a hug. But then the moment passed, and Jake seemed to mentally snap himself together. He sat back then, straightening his spine, and he took a deep breath.

"Go home," he repeated curtly. "And stay the hell away from my sister. I've already told her she's forbidden to see you anymore."

Fresh, scalding tears poured down Gabby's face at this news, but she didn't have the strength to say anything to the cold hard edge of anger in his voice. She turned from him then and fled to where she'd left her bike by the hedge, her bottom throbbing from his punishment while her heart ached in

sympathy from the harshness of his final rejection of her.

As she started to walk away, too sore to even try to ride, she glanced back just once to look into Leigh's window; sure enough, she saw her friend standing at the glass, watching her. But before she could lift her hand to wave, a larger hand closed the curtain with a sharp flick and Leigh was cut off from her view...

Gabby couldn't help but smile ruefully as she anticipated Jake's reaction when he saw her today; he must have been so smug all these years, thinking he'd successfully squashed their friendship, when all along she and Leigh had only grown closer. They'd gotten good at keeping their alliance secret and he had never suspected a thing. It was going to feel good, today, letting him know that he hadn't won.

She tried to concentrate on that, and not on the nervous butterflies in her stomach. Beside her, Carrie seemed to be catching some of the nervous energy surrounding her, and was looking up at her with apprehensive, questioning eyes. Gabby smiled and squeezed the girl's hand reassuringly. Then she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and silently resolved that she wouldn't let Jake Sommerville bully her this time. After all it had taken to get her and Carrie here for Leigh's wedding, he was just going to have to find a way to live with her presence for one day.

Despite her resolve, Gabby's stomach was still roiling by the time she and Carrie progressed the remaining steps to stand before the front door of the house. She reached out one thin hand to rap quickly on the lower half of the screen door, casting furtive glances to her left and right for Jake's approach.

From inside, his voice wafted out to them on the spring wind: "I'll get it, sis."

In that flash of a moment, Gabby's heartbeat froze and she had to fight the physical urging in her muscles to flee. She made a sound like a gulp and shifted her weight from foot to foot, looking down at her dusty keds and worn Levis, suddenly wishing she could look better for her first encounter with Jake Sommerville in ten years. But there was no helping that now.

Because suddenly, there he was, right before her eyes on the other side of the screen door, squinting at her quizzically in the sunshine. He didn't recognize her at first, judging by his silence and his open perusal of her person. Gabby returned the observation, looking over his face and body in open curiosity as well. He had filled out over the years, the leanness of his youth being replaced with the muscles that came from hard labor. There was a hollowness about his eyes, though, and Gabby recalled how Leigh had told her he rarely dated and was really a loner in the small town. But there were laugh lines about the corners of his mouth and the sides of his dark solemn eyes, proof that his life wasn't all seriousness and gloom.

And just looking at him for those brief moments brought the same charge of attraction surging through Gabby's blood that she'd always experienced as a young adult. If anything, it was only stronger now.

Then suddenly the look of curious interest abruptly faded from his eyes, as did the half smile that had played at the corners of his full lips, and Gabby knew that he'd recognized her then. His jaw line hardened and he spoke in a harsh whisper: "Gabriela Hoyt." The name may as well have been ground to bits under the heel of his cowboy boot. "What in God's name are you doing here?"

Before Gabby could attempt to stammer out an answer, she was saved by the breathless appearance of Leigh behind her brother. Her somewhat chubby best friend shot her a reassuring wink, then did a visible double take when she noticed that Gabby was not alone. Her soft brown eyes settled gently on Carrie for a moment, then turned back to Leigh with a thousand questions in their depths. But by that time, Jake was turning to Leigh to answer his question, and she had no chance to pose any inquiries of her own.

"I invited her, Jake," Leigh told him boldly, smiling sweetly in the face of his wraith. "Gabby is going to be my maid of honor."

Were it not for the fact that Carrie looked positively scared to death of Jake, Gabby might have laughed at the look of obvious shock on his usually self controlled face. He was floored by this sudden piece of news, that much was for sure.

Leigh reached past him and opened the screen door to admit her friend. But Jake was standing right in their path, and he wasn't budging, it seemed.

"Jake," Leigh scolded softly. "You're standing in the way."

He shook his head slowly, staring at his sister as if she'd grown another head. "I told you ten years ago that Gabriela was no longer welcome in this house."

Leigh sighed. "That was ten years ago, Jake. It's my wedding day. She's come a long way to be here for me. Please let it go. After today you'll never have to see her again."

He remained in his spot for a few more stubborn minutes before finally taking an angry step aside. His gaze flickered between the two new arrivals as they stepped into his home, his eyes alternately filled with scorn when he glared at Gabby, and with curiosity when he glanced at Carrie.

"Come on," Leigh encouraged, motioning her friend and the little girl further inside. "I'll show you where you can freshen up."

As they moved further back through the house, Jake's voice carried after them, "I want to see you outside, Leigh Marie. Don't keep me waiting."

The sound of the door slamming behind him as he left the house reached them even in the back of the rancher where Leigh's bedroom was located. Leigh sighed, then smiled sadly. She glanced at Carrie, then embraced her friend in a brief, warm hug.

"Make yourself at home," she said, sniffing a little. "Shower if you like." She glanced pointedly at Carrie again, and then added, "When I get back, we'll talk."

Gabby watched Leigh walk slowly from the room, and thought glumly, "Yeah, *if* you come back..."

Chapter Two

"Okay, Carrie," Gabby smiled encouragingly at the little girl as she stepped into Leigh's adjoining bathroom. "Why don't we wash all this road dust off and start getting ready for the wedding?"

"Okay," came Carrie's quiet answer, as she shyly joined Gabby in the room.

While she let the water run to heat up, Gabby quickly undressed and then helped Carrie to do the same. She removed the child's clothing in a clinical manner, aware of how shy Carrie was. The little girl said not a word, though her top front teeth worried a little at her bottom lip as Gabby worked.

When the water was warm, Gabby took Carrie's hand and tugged her inside the bathtub to stand under the gentle spray that fell from the showerhead. Efficiently, she gently scrubbed the girl's tiny body, mindful of her delicately thin condition, of the nearly transparent skin over her ribs, and the small bruises and scars that are only now starting to fade. Carrie stood stock still through the washing, her eyes unfocused, while Gabby tried to finish as quickly as possible.

Gabby spoke of the coming wedding that day, and of the party that would follow, needing the mindless chatter as much for her own distraction as she thought Carrie might. She told the child how the church would be decorated to overflowing with flowers and ribbons, how the groom would look so handsome in his "penguin suit," standing at the alter waiting for Leigh. She boasted about her friend's wedding gown, the very same gown that her mother had been married in, and of the gown that she, Gabby, would be wearing as maid of honor. Then she explained to Carrie about the reception afterwards, how there would be a great big dinner and cake for dessert. There would be music too, and games, and everyone would dance.

Carrie seemed little impressed by the entire monologue description that Gabby presented her with, though she did seem to perk up a bit at the mention of cake. Gabby smiled and promised that she'd ask Leigh to make sure Carrie got a nice thick slice, thinking to herself that the child certainly could use a few extra pounds on her tiny frame.

Once Carrie was clean, Gabby helped her out of the shower and wrapped her into a bath sheet that she purloined from Leigh's linen closet. She plunked her down on the closed lid of the toilet with another smaller towel and instructions to work on drying her hair, then stepped back inside the warm stall to make haste of her own clean up.

Leigh stood hugging herself in her terry cloth bathrobe, a warm shaft of sunlight washing over her from where the barn door had creaked slightly open after she'd entered and closed it. Bravely, she raised her gaze to meet the angry eyes of her brother, even though she felt like she was ten years old again, and just summoned out here by him for a good tanning.

"You've been lying to me," Jake ground out accusingly. "For over ten years now, you've been lying to me, every day."

"You're right," Leigh conceded, watching as his eyebrows rose at her quick admission, as though he'd expected her to try to deny it somehow. She sighed. "Jake, you gave me no other choice. She was my best friend – my *only* friend, really. I needed her. I couldn't help but disobey you. It was the only time, you know, while I was growing up that I did that deliberately. But if I hadn't, I wouldn't be standing here as happy a person as I am now.

"And no harm ever came of it, Jake," she added, noticing that some of the hard edge around his lean

jaw had slackened a bit. "We were ever so good after that day we played hooky, because we knew we couldn't get into any more trouble again if we wanted to keep being friends in secret. She's been a really good friend to me, Jake. There were times I don't know what I would have done without her. And I know there were times when she needed me like that too."

Jake studied his sister's earnest face for long, quiet minutes, then sighed and ran a hand wearily through his head of thick dark brown hair. "I guess it must have been tough for you at times after mom died, without another woman around to talk to about things. I'm sure I wasn't exactly the person you wanted to run to when you had boy problems or whatever."

Leigh smiled and reached out to take her brother's hand. She squeezed it and met his eyes with a grin when he glanced up at her. "Sometimes, you were the one I wanted to talk to; if I wanted you to get the boy to leave me alone!"

He chuckled and tugged her to him for a hug. "Well," he huffed after a moment, "I suppose you're right. No real harm came of your friendship with the little hoyden, and it was a long time ago that you two last got in trouble. If she's been a good friend to you over the years, then I guess that's what's the most important."

Leigh gave her brother a loud kiss on his clean-shaven cheek. "Does this mean you forgive me?" she asked with puppy dog eyes.

"I guess so," Jake capitulated grumpily, then added, eyes twinkling, "though I still ought to spank your butt good for lying to me."

Leigh laughed and socked her brother playfully in the arm. While he frowned in feigned pain and rubbed at the spot, she protested, "It's my wedding day! Even *you* wouldn't spank me on my wedding day!!"

"Humph," Jake continued to frown, though the twinkle in his eye was unmistakable. "I guess you have a point there. I suppose if there's any spanking to be done from today on, it'll be your husband doing it. At least if it's *you* getting spanked. Gabby on the other hand..."

"You just don't even think about it!" His sister scolded him. "She's changed a lot since she was a kid, Jake. Her mother lost all their money after her father died and she's a much more realistic person now. She's no longer the spoiled little rich girl you remember her as. Plus, after today you'll never even have to see her again. So don't go getting all high and mighty with her, okay?"

Jake shrugged his shoulders, looking sheepish, but not quite sheepish enough to satisfy Leigh. "Okay," he agreed when she kept looking hard at him, waiting for his agreement. Then he grinned and tugged her close for another big hug. Unable to resist, he gave her one loud swat over her covered seat, and said, "No more secrets, okay?"

Leigh nodded eagerly and reached up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "No more secrets, I promise."

"Good." Jake glanced at his watch and grimaced. "Now, I believe we have a wedding to get ready for, and you have some catching up to do with Gabby, so let's get inside, huh?"

"Right!" Leigh took her brother's offered arm, smiling shyly up at the man who had been her first hero in life as he escorted her back inside the house.

After putting Carrie into her one worn dress and good shoes, Gabby was just finishing dressing the child's hair when Leigh came back into the bedroom. She glanced up at the open questions in her friend's eyes as her gaze traveled from Carrie to

herself, and then gave the little girl's hair a final pat.

"All set, sweetie," she said.

"Since she's all ready, maybe she'd like to watch a video in the family room while you and I get ready and catch up a bit?" Leigh suggested.

"Uh... okay. Carrie, would you like that?" Gabby asked.

"Okay," Carrie responded in her usual quiet voice. Leigh smiled and reached out her hand.

"Come on, then, Carrie. I have lots of Disney movies; I'm sure we can find one you'd like."

Gabby sighed as she watched the pair leave the room. As close as she was to Leigh, she was not looking forward to this conversation, not one bit.

All too soon, however, her friend had returned. She stood just inside the door after closing it behind her, hands on her hips, her pretty round face staring with expectation at Gabby, as if to say, "Welllllll...?"

"It's starting to get late, Leigh," Gabby began, carefully avoiding direct eye contact as she did her make up in the vanity mirror before her. "Don't you think you should start getting ready?"

"I know exactly what time it is, Gabriela Hoyt. And besides, I'm all ready except for stepping into my dress and putting on my veil. So why don't you tell me what's going on?"

Gabby shrugged. "I don't know what you mean..."

"The hell you don't! Gabby, who is that little girl?"

"Carrie?" Gabby asked innocently.

"Yes, Carrie. Who else? Where'd she come from?"

Gabby gave her friend an incredulous look. "Don't tell me good old Jake never had the birds and bees talk with you..."

"Gabby, please! You know what I mean! Carrie is not your daughter. You wouldn't have just kept something like that from me! She can't be yours!" Leigh searched her friend's face for some answer since so far no verbal one had been offered. "She isn't.... *Is she?*"

Gabby finished applying lip-gloss to her lips and sat back with a sigh. She ran a brush through her long silvery blond tresses and then pulled the sides back with twin pearl combs that had been given to her a lifetime ago by her father.

"*Gabby!* Answer me!" Leigh pleaded.

"You'd better get your dress out unless you want to be late to your own wedding."

"I'm the bride," Leigh growled. "I imagine they'll wait for me if I am. I'm not moving from this spot until you answer my question! *Is she or is she not your kid?*"

Gabby sighed and threw the brush down on the vanity. "No! Okay? Are you happy now?"

Leigh closed her eyes briefly at the admission. "No," she answered softly. "Gabby, please tell me what's going on. Maybe I can help you...."

"You're getting married today, Leigh. You have enough to worry about."

"Tell me anyway. I won't be able to think about anything else until you do."

Gabby pressed her eyes shut tightly, willing herself not to give in to the frustrating urge to cry. Her nerves were so frazzled and after today she had no idea where she and Carrie would be sleeping, let alone eating their meals or getting washed for the day. She had next to no money left, no job, and no means of transportation. And after the reception today, her one friend in Stillwater, Montana would be out of town on her honeymoon for two weeks.

"Please, Gabby. Just talk to me."

It wasn't possible for Gabby to hold it in any longer. She needed to confide in someone, and

there was no one closer to her than Leigh. Maybe talking it over with someone would turn up a solution....

"You have to promise not to tell a soul," Gabby intoned fiercely.

"All right..."

"I mean it, Leigh. No one."

"Okay, I swear! I won't tell anybody."

Gabby sniffed, blinking hard to stay the tears pressing against her eyes. "Okay. Here's what happened...."

By the time Jake had showered and dressed in the western cut tuxedo for the wedding, he felt he finally had all his emotions back under firm control. Once he'd gotten past the initial shock of seeing Gabby again, all grown up now, he'd been able to get a better perspective on the situation and seeing it through his sister's eyes had helped him a lot.

She's changed a lot, Leigh had said. Humph, that was an understatement, at least as far as her physical appearance went! Heat crawled up his neck as he recalled the way he'd hungrily raked his gaze over her womanly curves until he'd realized just who was standing before him on his front step. Good Lord, she'd grown into a mighty fine looking woman! He'd been on the verge of a lowly murmured, sexy one-liner, which he probably would have flubbed terribly considering his lack of experience with such things, when her somewhat familiar features had tumbled together in his brain, like pieces of an old puzzle. When he'd finally recognized her, he'd felt like someone had just thrown a bucket of ice-cold water over his head.

She may have changed physically, he thought grimly, but he seriously doubted that her personality had changed any. She was probably still the bossy, spoiled, bratty little troublemaker he'd

disliked from the very beginning. But he supposed he could tolerate her for one day, since it was Leigh's wedding day; at least Gabby's womanly curves and angelic face would make it a little easier to look on her, even if her personality did turn out to be as acerbic as he was sure it would.

Jake grimaced as he straightened his cuff links and glanced at the clock on his bedside table. It was still pretty early, at least another half hour before the girls – *women*, he corrected himself – would be likely to be ready. With a sigh, he left his room and went into the living room, thinking to channel surf until they were ready to go.

He soon discovered that the little girl who had arrived with Gabby had beaten him to the TV, and was already absorbed in one of his sister's Disney movies. He smiled kindly at her when she looked up at him with wide, fearful eyes, as if she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't have.

"Mind if I join you, kiddo?" he asked lightly, wondering at the haunted look in her young eyes. What had this child been through in her brief life to cause that look?

She studied him in silence for a few moments before finally lifting one bony shoulder and scooting down the sofa a few inches so he could sit down beside her.

"Much obliged," he said as he took the offered seat, stretching his long legs out before him.

She was studying him now with some curiosity in her gaze, her eyes mostly focused on his tuxedo.

Finally, after a long time of looking at him, and screwing up her courage, she softly inquired, "Is that a penguin suit?"

The laugh escaped Jake before he could stop it and her eyes widened at the sudden burst of sound. He chuckled again at her look of surprise and gently patted her knee.

"Yes, it is, sweetheart," he answered around another laugh. "At least that's what I've always called the darn things."

She smiled shyly at him then.

Jake couldn't resist touching her unruly reddish brown curls. He tussled them a bit, completely unaware in the way of most men that he was undoing the arrangement Gabby had only just recently completed.

"I'm Jake," he said with genuine friendliness, thrusting out his hand to her. "What's your name?"

"C-Carrie," she stammered.

"Well, Carrie, it's sure nice to meet you. Will you save me a dance at the reception?"

Her small hand lingered in his big one, engulfed by it. "Okay," she agreed shyly.

"Thanks!" He winked at her, then turned his attention to the television, noticing how shy she seemed to be getting as he continued to show her more attention. She sure was a cute little thing, he thought, wondering what circumstances had led Gabby to wind up a single mother when she was supposed to have grown up to marry a wealthy husband so she could lazily hobnob in society for the rest of her days.

Maybe there was some merit after all to his sister's claim that Gabby had changed....

"Well, I have the money in my savings account," Leigh insisted in a whisper as she and Gabby came out of her bedroom, all dressed and ready for the wedding. "I want you to use it. It's just sitting there waiting for a rainy day, and, honey, it's pouring on you now."

Gabby smiled sadly at her best friend, hugging her gently so as to not crinkle her dress, but also so she'd know her offer was appreciated. "I can't do that."

"Gabby, don't be stubborn; now's not the time to be prideful. If you won't go to the police for help, then you have to figure out a way to ensure that you and Carrie are safe. And you'll need money to find a place to get started. You *can* take what I have to give, and you will..."

"Shhh!" Gabby shushed her friend nervously, afraid that Jake would overhear their conversation. "Don't worry about me, Leigh. I'll figure out what to do, okay?"

As the pair rounded the corner from the hallway to the living room, Jake's voice greeted them. "Do about what?"

Gabby stopped dead in her tracks, astonished to see him sitting right next to Carrie on the sofa. Leigh's tabby cat, Purry, had joined them and was curled up in Jake's lap while Carrie petted him to distraction. Gabby couldn't believe what she was seeing, knowing how Carrie usually shied away from men in an almost painfully fearful way. Yet there she sat with Jake, seemingly at ease!

"Uh..." Gabby stalled, still staring. "N-nothing. It's nothing..."

Jake studied her for a thoughtful moment, a disapproving frown of suspicion on his handsome face. He seemed about to question her dismissive response further, but he was stopped suddenly when Leigh stepped into his line of vision and scolded him gently for not yet remarking on how the bride looked.

Gabby silently thanked her friend as the conversation turned away from her; before long Leigh was urging them out the door, chattering nervously about making it to the church on time. For the moment at least, Gabby was spared any more nosy questions from Jake Sommerville.

Chapter Three

"Finish those vegetables, Carrie, and you can go play with the others," Gabby encouraged the child as she watched the newlyweds dancing to the first song at the informal, outdoor wedding reception. Carrie made a face at the vegetables on her plate, looked longingly towards the nearby group of young children chasing one another around and playing games, and then murderously stabbed a forkful of green beans with a sigh of resignation.

Meanwhile, Leigh and Tyler twirled in one another's arms under the shade of a huge maple tree to Randy Travis' "Forever and Ever, Amen." As Gabby watched the pair, her best friend laughed, tossing her head back with the joyous sound, and right there in front of God and everyone, her new husband pressed his lips reverently to her neck.

It would have been obvious to a blind person, though, that the newlyweds were in love. It was apparent in the breathy way they spoke to one another, as well as in the dazed way they sometimes sat, simply staring at each other. And though Gabby was happy for her friend, she couldn't help being a little jealous, as well.

Leigh's life, though not easy, had been filled with love. She'd started out with a pair of doting parents, unlike Gabby's own self-centered set. Though Leigh had lost her mother and father at a young age, she'd then had her brother, Jake, to replace that role of caregiver, and she'd had his own fountain of unconditional love to revel in. Now, she was marrying a wonderful man, who obviously loved her to distraction, and the feeling was plainly mutual.

Though she loved Leigh like a sister, Gabby couldn't help the envy in her heart, as she yearned

to experience the kind of love that had surrounded her friend and nurtured her for her entire life.

The first dance was winding down as Carrie finally shoved the last of her vegetables into her mouth. The child looked hopefully at Gabby then, knowing better than to ask to go and play while she was still chewing the last of her food, but the question was in her eyes just the same. Gabby smiled and nodded her head.

"Good girl, Carrie," she said, sweeping aside a few stray locks of the little girl's hair only to have the gentle spring breeze toss the fine strands around her face again. "You can go and play, now, just remember what we talked about before about talking to strangers."

Carrie nodded her agreement solemnly, and Gabby wished that her veiled reminder was only meant in reference to talking to strange adults; really, what she meant was for Carrie to keep their secret quiet. But she knew the little girl understood the importance of doing that, and as she watched her run off to join the other children, she had little worry in her mind of anyone finding out the truth.

Willy Nelson's version of "What a Wonderful World" had begun to play and when Gabby turned back to the improvised dance area, she saw that Jake was leading Leigh in the parents dance while Ty was dancing with his mother. Brother and sister were involved in a conversation as they moved and Gabby found herself free to look her fill of Jake from her safe distance across the churchyard from them. She couldn't help thinking how handsome he looked, especially all decked out in that Western tuxedo, his boots spit shined, his straight dark hair tossing about boyishly in the breeze. The years of hard work on the ranch had done him good.

She remembered how he'd gotten a audible hitch in his voice during the ceremony when the minister had asked who gave the bride to Ty, and

he'd had to answer that he did; then, later, after sitting in the front pew beside Carrie, his arm thrown casually along the back of the long seat, he'd looked both sad and happy as he watched his little sister being joined in marriage with the man she loved. He'd been good to her best friend, Gabby knew, even if sometimes he'd had to be strict with her.

As she continued to watch them, her attention was drawn from admiring Jake to Leigh's face, for she couldn't help but notice the animated, mile-a-minute dialog her friend appeared to be having with her brother. In fact, now that she noticed it, Leigh was really the only one doing any talking, while Jake continued to lead her through the dance, a frowning scowl stamped on his striking features. A sinking feeling hit Gabby's belly as she watched them, and she immediately recalled the few moments right before they had entered the church for the wedding, when Leigh had grabbed her hand and whispered fiercely, "I have another idea for you, Gabby!" But once they'd gotten inside the small chapel, happy chaos had surrounded them and Leigh hadn't told her as of yet what this new idea was.

Now, Gabby had a very bad feeling that it involved Jake in some way.

A high-pitched girlish squeal carried across the warm breeze, startling Gabby out of her thoughts; worriedly, she scanned the nearby grouping of children until she saw Carrie and determined that she was alright. Her heart was pounding as hard as if she'd just sprinted a mile to reach the child instead of simply looking across the way for her, and she had to tell herself to calm down; they hadn't been found, and the kids were just being noisy in their fun.

When Gabby looked away again to find Leigh and Jake, the song was ending and they were

pulling apart. Jake leaned down to kiss his sister's cheek, then mumbled something to her before squeezing her hands and turning away. He scanned the jumbled lot of friends and family, looked right at Gabby suddenly, and then started walking straight towards her.

Gabby couldn't help the loud gulping sound she made as she watched his long strides approach her. Now she was sure Leigh had told him her troubles. She only prayed her friend had remembered her promise to keep the truth about Carrie a secret. The last thing she needed was Mr. Do-Everything-By-The-Book Sommerville to know about that!

When Jake reached her otherwise empty table, he took a vacated chair and swiveled it around to straddle it backwards. Despite Gabby's pounding heart and sizzling nerves over why he had deliberately sought her out, her gaze was momentarily drawn to the stretch of material over his taut, muscular thighs where they hugged the insides of the back of the chair. She had a sudden flash of memory, recalling that long ago day when she was eighteen and pushed him too far; vividly she remembered the feel of those rock hard thighs beneath her tummy when he'd tugged her over his lap for the first – and only – spanking of her life. A flood of heat spread from her neck up, and she quickly attributed the sudden memory to her own guilty conscious. But the sexual twinge she felt between her legs, familiar to her now as she had come to expect it over the years whenever thinking of that event, belied that idea.

If Jake noticed any of her strange reactions to his appearance, he didn't show it. Instead, he cut right to the chase by looking her directly in the eye and saying, "I understand that you're looking for a job."

Gabby forced herself to shrug though her heart was hammering fast enough to beat its way out of

her chest. "Yeah. I'm also looking for a place for Carrie and me to stay." She watched him, waiting for him to say something else. After all, he'd come over to her and started this line of conversation. But when he continued to just sit there in front of her, looking pensive, she finally asked, a bit sharply, "What's it to you?"

One dark eyebrow rose at her tone. "Leigh just told me, is all," he answered casually. "And it just so happens that I've a position that I'm looking to fill."

Now it was one of Gabby's eyebrows that rose. "You? I'd be working for you?"

"If I hired you, then yes," he answered, making it sound like there was a better chance of horses spouting wings and taking to the air like doves. His tone of voice made Gabby's hackles rise.

"What position would I be filling – *if* I decided to take the job?" she taunted.

Jake glared at her a moment before answering. "Housekeeper. Cook. With Leigh getting hitched, I'm in the market for someone to cook and clean and do the laundry. I just don't have the energy or the time to do it all proper myself after putting in a full day with the horses."

Gabby nodded her understanding. She doubted Jake even knew how to do any of those things; she certainly couldn't imagine him cooking a meal or doing a load of wash.

"Can you cook? Do laundry? Keep a house clean?" he pressed.

"Sure," she answered quickly, blushing only a little when he studied her closely for the rapidly fired response. Maybe she had been too quick to answer, a niggling voice in her head suggested, especially considering that though she could make some easy things, she was a pretty poor cook. In any case, it was too late to take the answer back now.

"Well," Jake finally drawled, still looking at her suspiciously. "I'd give you and Carrie free room and board, but I can only afford to pay you one-fifty a week."

"It's better than nothing," Gabby shrugged, "which is what I had before you walked over here."

He stared at her solemnly for a few moments, obviously considering something. She couldn't help fidgeting in the chair, feeling like she'd been caught doing something particularly naughty. Why did she have the unsettling feeling that Jake Sommerville could look inside her mind and see all of her secrets and inner thoughts scrawled there in all their embarrassing, telling glory?

When he finally spoke, he had to clear his throat first, and his eyes bored into her, as if daring her to lie to him. "I have to ask you first, Gabriela: Are you in some kind of trouble?"

She made an indignant sound, then sputtered, "Of course not! What a rude question to ask!"

He shrugged, looking not the least bit apologetic. "I don't want any problems. So if you *are* in some kind of trouble – with the law, or a husband, or with drugs or alcohol, then you'd best be honest with me now. Because if I find out later on down the line, after you've already dragged me into the middle of it..."

"My God, you are unbelievable!" Gabby hissed angrily, despite the raw guilt she felt in her heart, knowing she was deliberately lying to him right now. But what choice did she have? She certainly couldn't be honest with him about what was going on... And she desperately needed a job, any job, even one where Jake Sommerville was her boss. "I'm not in any trouble, Jake, with the law or drugs or alcohol. And I don't have a husband, not even an ex-husband. So you can just stop thinking the worst of me, like you always do."

He had the grace to look shamed by her last statement, at least. "I'm sorry," he conceded, though in Gabby's opinion he didn't look or sound at all contrite. "I couldn't help but wonder, though, when Leigh told me that you were nearly broke, and had no place to go, no job lined up. It seemed kind of funny. That's all."

"Well, if you're so suspicious of me, then why'd you come over here at all? I really don't need your high and mighty act, Jake. If that's how you're going to be, you can just take your job offer and..."

Gabby's mouth clamped shut at the hard glare he shot her way. It was the warning in the depths of his eyes that got to her, as more recollections of being over his knee nearly ten years before flooded her brain.

"Sorry," she mumbled, feeling childlike under the heat of that look. "Look, Jake, I do need a job. I'm desperate for one, in fact. And for a place for Carrie and me to stay. If you'll have me, Jake, I promise you I'll do a good job."

He sighed, sitting back on the chair and resting his large hands on his thighs. He studied her face for a long moment, as if doing so would somehow tell him if she was indeed being truthful about not being in trouble. His gaze flickered for a minute to where the children were playing nearby and she saw a twinge of a smile play with the corners of his mouth when he spotted Carrie.

Finally, he looked back to her and spoke. "Well, I do need a housekeeper. So I guess the job is yours."

A smile broke across Gabby's face, even though a new riot of nerves had sprung to life all over her body. Working for Jake was going to have its own set of problems, but somehow that knowledge did very little to tamper her sudden burst of happiness at his words. And though she would have liked to believe her delight was only because he'd just given

her and Carrie food, shelter and some money to save, she knew it was more than just that. It was, in a very small way, a measure of acceptance from him, which was what she'd always wanted. Or, at least, it was one of the things she'd always wanted from him.

"Thank you, Jake."

He nodded gruffly. "Just remember, Gabby," he warned her, "there are rules in my house. You know what they are. And I expect you and Carrie to follow them, just like I would expect anyone else in my home to."

"Oh, don't worry," Gabby assured him. "I'll sit down and have a talk with Carrie about the rules tonight."

Jake gave her a sideways look that did funny things to her stomach. There was a twinkle in his eyes, too, like he was laughing at her on the inside. "Truthfully, Gabriela, it's not Carrie that I'm worried about where the rules are concerned."

That quickly the gratitude and happiness she had felt over being hired was tamped down by seething anger; the man was insufferable! "Don't worry about me, Jake," she fairly growled. "I'm sure I can follow your darn rules."

He grinned at her then. Shot her this shit-eating, upper-handed grin that made her want to smack his face. "Good," he praised in a silky voice. "'Cause I'm sort of attached to the kid already, and I don't think I'd have the heart to put her out of a home if I had to fire you for stepping over a line." His eyes settled on her face and though the grin was still on his face, there was a serious promise in his dark blue eyes that she didn't doubt for one minute. "I think instead, I'd most likely just put you over my knee."

Gabby's jaw fell open at his casual threat. Before she could recover herself and think of an answer, however, he had already stood up from his

chair, replaced it under the table, and strode off into the crowd of guests.

Chapter Four

And so it was that Gabby found herself returning that evening to Jake Sommerville's ranch. She couldn't help but cling to Leigh when they said their final goodbye before the newlyweds sped away for their romantic wedding night and two week honeymoon.

Her friend ran one small, chubby hand over Gabby's worried face, as if trying to soothe the lines of fear that were etched there away with her touch. "Don't worry, hon," Leigh reassured her. "Everything's going to be all right, you'll see. I know Jake can be gruff sometimes, but he's a good man, Gab. And he's fair. And if anything... well, if anything does go wrong where Carrie's concerned... you can be sure he'll protect you both."

Gabby sniffled and swiped at the tears on her face, making herself nod in agreement with her friend's opinion, not so much because she believed it but because she didn't want to send Leigh off on her honeymoon with any more worry for her than she already had.

"You're right," she whispered, hugging her quickly one last time. "Thank you for everything. And have a great time!"

Leigh's smile could have lit up a room. "I will! And when I get back, you and I will have a wonderful lunch in town and I'll tell you all about it." "Deal."

Leigh kissed Gabby on the cheek and then sprinted off to say the rest of her goodbyes. Gabby took a deep, cleansing breath and tried to get a grip on her emotions. It wasn't like she was never going to see her friend again, for heaven's sake; it would only be two weeks before she and Ty would return.

But in her heart, Gabby couldn't stop the unreasonable feeling of being abandoned to the mercy of Leigh's wolf of an older brother.

It was blessedly late when they arrived back at the ranch that evening. Carrie had fallen asleep on the ride home, and once Jake stopped the truck in front of the house, Gabby hopped down and reached back in to pick the child up – only to find that he had already gathered her into his arms.

"I'll take her," Gabby quickly offered, holding her arms outstretched as he came around the side of the truck after kicking his door shut.

"Nah, I got her. Just get the door for me, okay?"

With a sigh, Gabby accepted the keys he held out to her, moved ahead of him and unlocked and held the door open to the house.

Jake didn't even hesitate once inside to light a lamp; he simply walked straight through the kitchen, living room and back hallway until he reached Leigh's bedroom. Gabby followed him slowly, bumping clumsily along the way as she passed furniture she couldn't quite see until it was too late.

Once he had laid the little girl on the bed, he clicked on a lamp. Warm light flooded the room, and his features softened then into a smile as he glanced down at the sleeping child.

"She's tucked out," he commented in a whisper. "She didn't even stir on the way in here."

Gabby sat down beside Carrie and began to gently pull the sheets free of the bed beneath the sleeping girl. She was grateful for an activity to occupy her, not knowing quite what to say to Jake now that they were alone again.

He sighed wearily after a moment, rubbing at his eyes. "Well, it was a fine wedding," he commented thoughtfully. "And my sister's happy as a clam with her new husband."

Gabby smiled shyly. "He seems mighty happy with his new wife, as well."

Jake grinned. "Yeah. It's nice to see that true love does exist out there, if you're lucky enough to find it."

Gabby heard the wistful note in his voice, but managed not to look up at him in surprise because of it. Instead she simply nodded her silent agreement and continued slowly readying the bed for Carrie.

"You can take the next bedroom up the hall," Jake suggested a few moments later. "There's an adjoining bath and fresh towels in the closet."

"But... I had thought I'd be sharing a room with Carrie..."

Jake shrugged. "I imagine Carrie'd like having a room all her very own. Besides, there's plenty of room, so we may as well use it."

"O-Okay." Gabby sighed inwardly. It would only make Jake suspicious if she was to argue the point further, but she wasn't happy about being down the hallway from Carrie. The little girl often had nightmares, and she didn't want to chance not hearing her when she had one – or even worse, having Jake overhear the child during one of her distressing dreams.

"All right, then," Jake said, standing up with a stretch of his long legs and hard arms. "I think I'm going off to bed. Breakfast at seven tomorrow, okay, Gabby?"

"Uh—sure." Gabby swallowed hard at the mention of her cooking in the morning. "Anything special you'd care to have?"

Jake shrugged as he choose a thickly stuffed teddy bear from a shelf overhead and tucked it into bed beside Carrie. "Eggs, bacon, pancakes... whatever you feel like is fine, really. As long as it's hearty. I need something more than just oatmeal or cold cereal."

Damn! "Okay." Gabby tried for an easy smile, though she feared it looked as strained as she felt. "See you at breakfast then."

"Right." He gave her a brief look then, and a friendly smile that made her feel warm all over. "Sleep tight, Gabriela."

Morning came all too quickly for Gabby's liking; it seemed she'd only just closed her eyes for a few moments when the alarm clock she'd set was suddenly going off softly in her ear.

With a groan, she got out of bed and slapped the machine off. Cheery sunshine flooded into the room through the parted drapes, bathing her in warmth.

With a sigh, Gabby shrugged into the lightweight cotton wrapper she'd purloined from Leigh's room the night before, along with the short set of pajamas that she had worn to bed. She stifled a yawn, trudging back the hallway to poke her head into Carrie's room, where the child still lay sound asleep, before making her way out into the kitchen.

From the kitchen window over the sink, Gabby could see that Jake was already up and about outside. The horses had already been turned out of their stalls into the corral, and from time to time she saw him walking from one building to another before disappearing inside the barn once again.

The clock on the microwave oven read 6:25, so Gabby knew she had to stop dawdling and get started on breakfast. It was bad enough that she would likely disappoint Jake with her lacking culinary skills; there was no sense in making matters worse by being late with the meal, as well.

In the fridge she found a pound of bacon and a dozen large eggs, as well as orange juice and bread for toast. She pulled out all four items and set them

on the counter, then rummaged in the cabinets until she found two large frying pans.

Her groggy brain, never the best in the morning, was crying pitifully for coffee, so she set about turning on the coffeemaker and finding the ground beans before she did anything else. Once the machine was brewing the aromatic, dark liquid that would revitalize her, Gabby turned back to the range and the food she'd set out.

"Well, here goes nothing," she whispered as she set one of the heavy cast iron skillets on the stovetop. She turned on the heat beneath it and added some butter, then set a few slices of the thickly sliced bacon inside. It sizzled immediately and began to jump a little in the pan.

Gabby set the second frying pan beside the first and added some butter to it as she turned up the heat. Then she cracked four eggs into the skillet, adding a dash of pepper to the tops as they began to cook. Next, she took a couple slices of bread from the bag and set them into the toaster.

While everything was cooking, she stepped away from the stove for a minute to set the table and pour juice for the three of them. She was actually rather pleased with herself, and smiled a bit as she worked, thinking she'd been worried over nothing.

But when she turned back to the stove, and saw the flame shoot up from the grease in the bacon pan, her heart lodged into her throat and her short-lived moment of pride vanished. She hurried over to the range, noting distractedly with a loud curse that her eggs were burning, and grabbed up the skillet with the bacon. With a cry from the burn she got immediately from grabbing the hot handle without a mitt, she threw the heavy pan into the sink and doused the contents with water, only to have the smoke and flame sear up again. It was at that moment that the toaster began to emit its own noxious odor as well as a high-pitched alarm sound.

She wasn't even sure where to turn first to try to salvage the meal and was standing in the middle of the kitchen looking absolutely dumbfounded when the coughing spell suddenly hit her. Gabby had always suffered from asthma, and was especially susceptible to strong odors, smoke, etc. Usually a deep breath or two from her inhaler would do the trick and return her to her normal breathing, but since she'd been so low on money lately, she hadn't had the cash to spare to refill her prescription. She'd figured she wouldn't need it, with it being spring just now and her getting out of the city and back to the country. But she quickly realized, as she doubled over with her racking coughs, that she'd been wrong.

"What the hell...?" Jake's voice thundered suddenly from the doorway where Gabby could just make out his outline through all the smoke. He didn't wait for an answer to his question, thankfully, but charged into the kitchen instead and immediately grabbed a lid from one of the cabinets, which he tossed on top of the still smoldering bacon skillet to put out the rest of the fire; next he turned to the other appliances and either turned them off or unplugged them before any more damage could be done. Finally, he waved one large hand in front of his face and flipped on the exhaust fan above the stove.

"Gabby, are you okay?" he asked, to which her answer was only more of the same harsh hacking. "All right, darlin', let's get you out in some fresh air." He put an arm around her shoulders and helped her walk towards the front door, then out onto the porch into the clear spring air. "Breathe, Gab. Nice and slow, honey. Take it easy. Do you need me to grab your inhaler for you?"

"N-no, I don't have one with m-me," Gabby heaved beside him, her face as red as a beet, easily as embarrassed by her cooking disaster as she'd

been that long ago day when he'd spanked her butt. She wished the ground would open up and swallow her mercifully away. Especially because he was being so darn nice to her, though now that she'd been foolish enough to admit she didn't have her medication, his gaze had taken on a steely edge.

Gradually her breathing began to sound better and she was able to stop leaning so heavily against Jake, though there was a part of her that didn't want to break that simple contact.

"Are you okay now?" he asked her, and there seemed to be real concern in his blue gaze.

She nodded shakily. "I think so."

He examined her closely for a few minutes, his thumbs gently brushing aside a few strands of her hair. "What's this about not having an inhaler with you? You've always had asthma, even back when you were a kid."

Gabby closed her eyes briefly, knowing he was going to have a fit when she answered him. "I haven't had the money to renew the prescription," she said quietly, her voice hoarse from the hard coughing she'd been doing. "I was hoping my luck would hold and I wouldn't need it till I had the cash to get it filled."

Just as she'd suspected, Jake's eyes narrowed at her excuse. "Well that stops today, young lady. I'll pay for your inhaler this morning; we'll go into town right after breakfast and get it." He held up one hand to stop her when she opened her mouth to try to protest. "And I don't want to hear another word about it, Gabriela. Clear?"

A new spasm of coughs hit her then, and she knew there was no way she could even try to argue with him on the issue. He glared at her through the bout, even as his large paw patted her back gently. When she calmed once again he was still staring at her, waiting for her to answer him. So she meekly offered a "Yes sir," and he nodded.

"What the hell happened in there?" he asked her now. "I thought you told me yesterday that you knew how to cook?"

"Well, I do... I mean, I can make *some* things." Gabby found it especially hard to meet his eyes during this admission, especially with him towering over her with his arms crossed over his burly chest.

"Like what things, *exactly*, can you make?" he pressed. "I told you just about anything you wanted was fine with me."

"Well, I can make easy stuff," she admitted, squirming despite herself under his unwavering gaze. "Like sandwiches, soup from a can, frozen meals..."

Jake rolled his eyes. "If I was satisfied with those sorts of meals, Gabriela, I wouldn't need a cook because I can make those myself!"

Gabby cringed. "I'm sorry..."

Jake shook his head at her, but though he still looked cross with her, she saw the beginnings of a smile around his mouth. "You're unbelievable," he proclaimed.

Gabby looked down at the floor beneath her feet and sighed.

"I ought to spank you," he announced, which made her head snap up instantly. Now he did laugh and Gabby's face flooded with embarrassing heat. "You damn near set my kitchen up in flames, woman!"

"I didn't mean to!" she exclaimed in her own defense. "I only turned away from the stove for a moment, I swear!"

He shook his head again. "Rule number one when cooking, missy, is that you never leave a stove untended, even for a second." He studied her quietly for a moment, the light of laughter still in his eyes. Finally he said, "Was there anything else that you lied to me about yesterday, young lady?"

Gabby swallowed past the words that wanted to spill from her mouth. Instead she shook her head slowly. "I didn't lie about anything else, Jake, I swear," she managed to say. "And the only reason I fibbed about being able to cook was because I needed this job so much."

Jake sighed. "I hope you're telling me the truth," he said quietly. "I suppose I'll overlook it this time. But I don't want to catch you in any more lies, Gabriela. If I do you're likely to find yourself turned up over my lap, finding out the truth behind my promises. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," she agreed with a sigh.

"Good. In the meantime, since your cooking skills are... lacking... you can help me with some of the easier chores in the barn and that ought to free up some of my time so that I can help you prepare the meals. Once Leigh gets back from her honeymoon she can help you learn what skills you need. Deal?"

Gabby was surprised by his generous offer and smiled for the first time since yesterday. "Deal."

"All right then, let's go in and get that mess cleaned up so we can start on something edible. 'Cause I don't know about you, but I'm starved!"

"You have got to be kidding!" Gabby exclaimed about two hours later as she stood beside Jake in the shadow of a dirty horse stall, a pitchfork clutched reluctantly in her left hand and a shovel in her right.

Jake shook his head at her. Even in the dusty dim light of the barn, Gabby could clearly see that he was fighting a grin. "I'm very serious, Gabriela. The stalls need to get mucked out and hosed down today." He shrugged. "It's the easiest work out here that I could ask you to do. And I'm only asking you

to do this one stall. I'll do the other two. So what's the big deal?"

"It's manual labor, that's the big deal!" she cried. Watching his mouth twitch again, she wanted to bring the business end of her pitchfork down on his toes. "You just want to punish me for my little white lie about cooking! That's why you're making me do this!"

"In my opinion, little girl, there is no such thing as a 'little white lie.' But regardless, you're wrong about that. *If* I had been going to punish you for that, your little backside would still be stinging right now, and you'd have the taste of soap in your mouth, as well." Gabby's eyes bulged at his promise, but he continued as if he hadn't said anything out of the ordinary. "This is simply good, old fashioned work, that needs to get done. It's nothing that I wouldn't do myself, or ask Leigh to do, for that matter. It's not going to be your assigned job every day of the week. So, quit your complaining, and get started. I want the stalls cleaned by lunchtime."

And with that said, he turned on his heel and walked away from her.

Gabby fumed for the remainder of the morning, working herself into a sweaty, smelly, irritable mess. For a time she had to put up with having Jake in the stall beside her own, where he whistled and talked cheerfully to Carrie, who apparently was still charmed by him for some odd reason. Gabby was grateful when he progressed down to the last stall and she didn't have to listen to his annoying voice any more. It aggravated her that Carrie choose to sit and talk to Jake, who she'd only known for part of a day, instead of staying beside her.

Several times during the morning, Jake returned to Gabby's stall to take her filled wheelbarrow away and empty it for her. Or at least that was the pretense he used for coming back to her; Gabby

thought it was more likely just an excuse so he could check on her progress. He also asked her each time how she felt, and if she was having trouble breathing because of the physical work. Though she wished she could tell him she was having an attack, he would have plainly seen the truth; Gabby had never really been prone to asthma attacks for any reason other than smoke or very strong odors, like those from that morning in the kitchen. He reminded her to use the inhaler he'd had filled for her after breakfast should she need it, as if she'd only just developed asthma that day instead of having lived with it for as long as she could remember.

The last time Jake came to check on her it was nearing noon. He surveyed her work so far, standing back a bit with his hands in his jeans pockets.

"I set Carrie up in the living room with a peanut butter sandwich and another of Leigh's Disney movies," he told her as he observed her angry motions as she pitched the dirty hay from the floor of the stall into the wheelbarrow. "I thought you'd be done by now and we could get cleaned up and rustle up some lunch."

Gabby shot him a murderous glare. "Well, I'm *not* done yet," she snapped. "So why don't you just go 'rustle' yourself something to eat!"

His gaze narrowed for a moment, but he apparently decided to let her comment slide. "You're almost done, at least," he said after a moment. "Hurry up and finish, then come on in and get a shower. I'll make you a sandwich and put it in the fridge for when you're ready."

Hurry up and finish...! Oh, the man was incredible! As if she'd been sitting out here on her duff all day, eating bon bons! She watched as he turned and walked back towards the house, as casual as could be, and for a moment she literally

saw red. Before she quite knew what she was doing, she had reached her gloved hand into the pile of dirty, manure laden hay in her wheelbarrow, scooped up a nice sized fistful of the smelly stuff and hurled it right at his wide, imperious back.

The missile met its mark, hitting Jake right between his strong shoulder blades before sliding off slowly to the ground with something of a plop. Gabby grinned at the dark stain the mess left on his work shirt. But her grin quickly faded as Jake stopped dead in his tracks and turned slowly back around to her.

There certainly was no mistaking *that* look in his eyes. And Gabby wasn't about to stick around to try to reason with him when he was glaring at her like that, no way! There was only one sensible reaction to that murderous glare, and though it wasn't particularly courageous, Gabby was no fool – she turned on her heel and fled for her life.

Chapter Five

Jake cursed under his breath as he gave chase to Gabby, running after her as she fled the barn and circled out past the storage shed and through the vegetable garden, heading toward the tall rows of neatly planted corn that Leigh usually tended.

"Gabriela Madison Hoyt!" he shouted after her, noting her sudden glance of surprise over one shoulder as he announced her middle name, which she probably hadn't realized he knew. "Do yourself a favor and stop running from me right now, young lady!"

"Go to hell, Jake!" she threw back, flying over a row of carrots in the garden and tearing straight on without missing a beat.

Jake growled low in his throat and quickened his pace. In a manner of moments he was right on her heels, his hand outstretched. A second later he managed to snag the back waistband of her pants, and her flight came to an abrupt, jerking stop.

"Let me go!" she cried, flailing at his wide chest with her small fists and writhing wildly in his arms as she tried to shake herself free. Though he was strong, Jake found himself having a difficult time restraining her without resorting to hurting her. Finally, he sank down onto the warm grass beneath them, bringing her along for the trip with one good tug. Before she had a moment to react to the change of position, he pulled her right over his outstretched knee.

"Oh, no, you don't!" she screeched, clawing at the ground and bucking her lower body in a futile attempt to dislodge herself from his grip.

Jake chuckled at her indignation. He was still grinning when he pulled his arm back high above his head and then brought it cracking down on her backside.

"Owww!" Gabby protested.

"Well, what did you expect was going to happen after you threw manure at my back, little girl?" he scolded, adding another searing smack to her other cheek. Gabby winced and hissed at the burn, only to be rewarded with another hard slap, and another.

"Okay, okay!" she exclaimed, still trying desperately to wriggle free. "You've made your point, now let me up!"

"Oh, no, I don't think so!" Jake continued to rain spanks down on her upturned fanny, alternating sides and doing a thorough job, covering every inch from the crown of each cheek down to the cushy area where her buttocks met her slender thighs. "You need a good lesson in manners, Gabriela, and I'm going to be sure you get it right."

"Oh, come on Jake! I'm not a kid anymore! Lemme up! I'm sorry I threw horse manure at you!"

He shook his head, chuckling to himself, all the while maintaining his rhythmic cadence on her shapely derriere. "No, I don't think you're sorry at all, Gabby. Not yet, anyway."

Gabby let out a loud, shuddering sigh. Her tiny body bounced in time with his hard, open palmed spanks.

"I'm feeling a bit put out here, Gab," he told her conversationally, as if they were having a perfectly ordinary little chat in a casual restaurant over cups of coffee. "I mean, here I am giving you a job, a place to stay, and food in your belly. Then I find out you lied to me yesterday about being able to cook – and what do I do? I decide to be understanding about it; I even agree to help you with the meals in return for you helping me with some of the ranch chores. And how do you repay me? By throwing manure at me!"

"You deserved it!" Gabby growled fiercely, glaring over her shoulder at him. "You want me to work like a slave for you!"

"That's not true, Gabby," he ground out through clenched teeth. Hadn't they been through all this once already today? "I told you you won't have to muck out stalls every day of the week. But today it was a top priority, which is why I helped you by doing the other two. Why are you being so difficult about this?"

"That's just your excuse!"

Jake was rapidly losing control of what small measure of patience he still had. His hand, which was already starting to ache from spanking Gabby, began to rise and fall with rapid speed as his scolding stopped and his temper took control.

A moment later, the din Gabby had been raising as she cried out from the spanking was overpowered by a mighty shout of pain from Jake's mouth. For a moment he lost his grip on her as his hand reached down to grasp his thigh where the little hoyden had just bitten him.

That was all the time Gabby needed, though, to gain her feet and start off at a sprint again. Jake cursed as he shot to his feet and took off after her, knowing if she got too far ahead of him he'd likely not be able to catch her with the chunk she'd just taken out of his right leg.

Luck was in his favor, however, as Gabby's long blond hair, swept back from her smudged face with a ponytail holder, flew behind her as she ran. Jake made an impulsive grab for her ponytail, wincing himself when her head jerked as she was pulled back towards him.

Tears were in the corners of her eyes as she turned to look at him and Jake loosened his grip on her hair, not wanting to hurt her like that, but also not willing to take a chance on her running from him again. He returned to his seat on the grass and tugged her down beside him.

"That was a dumb move, Gabriela," he murmured in an ominous tone. His free hand found

the button fly of her worn jeans and began to efficiently undo each button in the neat, frayed little row. "I was going to be a gentleman and just give your fanny a good warming through your jeans, but now I'm afraid you've upped the ante. I think a skin-to-skin lesson would benefit you much more..."

"W-what?" Gabby stammered. Her hands pushed ineffectively at his as he finished unbuttoning her fly and moved to push the denims down past her hips. "You can't do this! Someone could see..."

"I doubt it," he shrugged, frowning disapprovingly now as he saw the tattered pair of panties that she wore beneath her jeans. He gave the elastic waistband a good tug and quickly had the underwear at mid thigh along with her jeans. Gabby's face flooded with embarrassment, though her hands now cupped her feminine charms, hiding them from his sight. Not that he seemed to be looking, she noticed with something of a strange twinge of disappointment. Instead he gave the elastic of her undies a good snap and then said quietly, "I'll have to get you and Carrie into town soon for some new clothes. These are practically falling apart."

"I don't want anything from you," Gabby hissed, her eyes shooting darts at him when he looked up to meet her gaze.

Incredibly, he smiled. "That's too bad, darlin'. Cause what you're gonna get from me, for right now at least, is a damn good bare bottomed spanking. We'll discuss the rest another time."

And with those words, he flipped her once more over his knee and brought his broad, work roughened hand crashing down on her naked backside.

Gabby could hardly believe the difference between the spanks she'd taken over her jeans and the intensity of these swats she was now having to

endure on her bare skin. She gritted her teeth against the heat and sting, refusing to show any signs of her distress to Jake. She wouldn't give the SOB the satisfaction!

"I hate you, Jake Somerville!" she spat, squeezing her eyes closed against the awful sting of his merciless hand. "I hope you rot in hell!"

Though she didn't know it, and Jake didn't understand it, Gabby's impulsive words got to him. He didn't know why he cared if she did hate him, though he'd never really hated her, even if he had worried about her influence on his little sister when they'd been kids. Actually, he rather liked Gabby's spirit and spunk; he always had. And now that he'd seen some of what she'd grown up to be, the way she was with her child, for example, and what a good friend she'd proven to be to Leigh, he found himself with a certain hesitant affection for her. Hearing her proclaim her disdain for him so vehemently made his heart sink a little in his chest and his punishing hand slow a bit against her reddened bottom.

It was then that Gabby glanced over her shoulder at him and noticed his wavering resolve. A tiny smile of victory crossed her face before she could hide it, but unfortunately for her, Jake caught it. And then he knew that she'd only shouted her hatred for him because she thought it would save her sweet little butt. Well, she was dead wrong about that!

With renewed vigor, Jake resumed the paddling, and this time Gabby was unable to hold in the gasps and yelps his unyielding hand wrought. He ignored her sounds of distress, and instead began to scold her further as he chastised her physically.

"Your attitude is going to change, young lady. No more pouting, no more whining, no more temper tantrums. You were hired to do a job, and since you weren't completely honest about your ability to do

that job, you will have to make up what you can't do by filling in where I need you. I doubt you'll like every chore I assign you, but unless you want to spend more time in your current position, you'll find a way to mind your manners and manage your temper when you're doing them. Is that clear, Gabriela?"

"Yes! Whatever you say, Jake! Just please stop spanking me!" Gabby cried in genuine distress now.

"Are you going to be respectful, and act like a mature woman instead of a spoiled child?"

"Yes!" Gabby agreed hurriedly, gritting her teeth against the unrelenting pounding of his hand on her tender rear. "Jake, stop already! You're killing me!"

"And, no more lying, right, young lady?"

"I already told you -- no more lies! Pleeese, Jake..."

"I haven't heard an apology yet..."

Gabby groaned, hanging her head as her bottom was swatted a few more unforgiving times. "I - I'm sorry... I shouldn't have thrown the manure at you... It was childish and bratty..."

Immediately, his hand stopped the terrible torment on her behind and Gabby blinked in surprise at the sudden change. He helped her to sit back on her heels, watching her with a sort of detached amusement as she winced at the smarting in her backside. Her hands flew back right away, though, to pull up her panties and jeans, despite the obvious discomfort she felt as she did so. Her face was as scarlet as her well-spanked bottom had been before she covered it up again.

She clamored precariously to her feet, more heat suffusing her face when Jake stood quickly up beside her and grabbed hold of her arm to steady her.

"I'm fine," she whispered.

"Good," he answered gruffly. When she wouldn't look at him again, he cupped her chin with the hand

that had just spanked her so thoroughly and smiled gently down into her tear stained face. "I'm sorry I had to do that," he stunned her by saying. "I hope you know I didn't enjoy it. But in order for this arrangement between us to work we have to respect and trust one another. And throwing tantrums and telling lies is not the way to foster those feelings."

Gabby sniffled and looked up at him with puppy dog eyes while one hand absently rubbed at her sore seat. "So that's how you show respect for a woman?" she asked accusingly. "By spanking her? And humiliating her by ripping her clothes off?"

Jake shook his head no, looking forlorn. "Gabby, whether you believe it or not, I've always respected you. I've always cared about you, even when you were a troublesome thorn in my side as a little girl. I just want some of the same from you, but nothing I've done ever seems to work."

"What makes you think this is going to work?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "I guess it won't," he admitted sadly. He offered her a small smile and reached up to thumb away the tears that lingered on her face. "But maybe it'll help knowing that someone cares about you. Maybe that will make something of a difference, eventually."

Gabby glared at him for a long time, working past the tears in her throat. "Don't bet on it," she told him. "I think it's time for Carrie and I to move on."

His eyes, gentle on her face only a moment before, now hardened with familiar resolve. "The hell you will," he growled.

"Try and stop me," Gabby returned with bravado she didn't quite feel in her soul. After all, he'd just subdued her pretty easily with that spanking.

"If you take that child off this property, I'll report you to children services," he threatened

coldly and Gabby had little doubt that he would do exactly as he said. "You have no job lined up, and no place to stay. I told you yesterday I wouldn't let that little girl be put out of a home, and I meant it. I'd advise you not to test me on my word."

Gabby glared at him so hard her eyes literally ached. He had her right where he wanted her and there wasn't a single thing she could do to change it. All the pressures she'd been faced with in the past few weeks loomed menacingly over her and she wished with all her heart that she could crawl into a ball somewhere and quietly cry herself into oblivion.

But there was no such solace for her, especially not now with her taskmaster standing angrily over her, arms crossed over his wide chest, dark blue eyes boring into her face.

"You have fifteen minutes to get your act together and finish cleaning out that stall. If you're not inside the house by then, I'll be back out to give you another spanking."

That said, he turned his back to her, presenting her with the dark stain she'd impulsively put on his shirt, and strode angrily away, leaving her standing in her misery by the whispering towers of corn.

That evening, Gabby picked moodily at her supper, reluctantly answering Jake's questions in monosyllables. He gritted his teeth throughout the meal, resisting the urge to drape her body back over his lap for a reminder in conversation manners.

Poor little Carrie sat between them, fretfully looking from one adult to another, while she worried her bottom lip between bites of food. Jake tried smiling reassuringly at the child, but she didn't seem at all relieved by that. She went obediently

along with Gabby to get ready for bed after the dishes had been done and the kitchen set to rights.

Jake came in the house about an hour later after checking on the stock for the night to find Gabby seated at the kitchen table, playing a game of solitaire. He was a bit surprised that she wasn't hiding out in her bedroom, away from him. But then he reconsidered, realizing that Gabriela Hoyt had probably never hidden from anyone before in her life; why should she start now, with him? It was much more her style to sit right smack in his path, and pointedly ignore him; she surely knew it would drive him crazy.

She'd turned on the small radio that Leigh had always kept in the kitchen, and a quiet slow song was playing as he poured himself a cup of coffee from what remained from supper. She had on one of those smooth jazz stations, and though he preferred country, he had to admit it wasn't all that bad to listen to. And it gave him an idea.

He hadn't felt right about leaving her after the spanking; with Leigh, he always comforted her a bit afterwards, hugging her and drying her tears, letting her know in no uncertain terms that he loved her and forgave her for whatever transgression had occurred to earn her a trip over his knee. Walking away from Gabby that afternoon, knowing she was still hurting, still crying, had been hard to do, even though he'd known she wouldn't have wanted his comfort had he tried to offer it to her. She wouldn't want it now, either, but he thought he knew a way to hold her for a few moments, anyway.

"So," he ventured softly, turned to look at her as he leaned idly against the refrigerator door. "How long you planning on pouting?"

She didn't even glance his way, just kept moving cards around in front of her. "I'm not pouting," she answered evenly.

"Could've fooled me," he disagreed, biting back a grin at the way her jaw clenched despite her obvious resolve to appear unaffected by his company. "You haven't said hardly a word to me all night, your lower lip is jutting out a mile into space, and now you won't even look at me."

She rolled her eyes and suddenly that full, sensuous lower lip was sucked back into its proper place. Next she slapped her cards onto the table and turned to look right at him. "There. Happy now?" she snapped.

"Almost," he conceded. He set his mug down on the counter behind him and extended one hand out to her, which she stared at.

"What?" she asked finally when he continued to just stand there.

He nodded briefly to the radio, which had just started playing another slow tune. "I want to dance with you."

"Tough."

Now he did grin; he just couldn't stop it from slipping across his face in time. "Come on," he cajoled gruffly. "Just one dance. It won't kill you."

"No." She turned back to the cards in front of her, and sat there dumbly, pretending to consider them. Jake would have bet his best horse that she couldn't even make sense of them right now. "I wouldn't dance with you if you were the last person on Earth."

He supposed he couldn't blame her for feeling that way; he had given her a darn hard spanking today, and then he'd followed it up by threatening to sic child services on her if she tried to leave his house and this job. He didn't regret doing either, of course, because they'd both been the right things to do; but he could also see it all from her side, and he could therefore understand why he wasn't her favorite person right now.

"You would if you had to as part of your job," he surprised her by saying. She glared over at him with such ferocity he was surprised her eyes didn't cross. He extended his hand a little closer to her, thinking he was taking a mighty big risk of getting it bitten off. "Come on."

"You're saying that now I *have* to dance with you – that it's part of my *job*?" she barked incredulously.

"Yup." He wisely bit back a chuckle. "Your dance card's gonna be full from now on, little girl. So come on already."

Gabby growled a little in her throat and snapped her cards back onto the table again. She got up from her chair with a huff and took his hand ungraciously. Jake wasted no time pulling her into his embrace.

She was stiff as a poker in his arms, but at least he'd managed to get her there. He pulled her closer, using his strength to keep her locked tight against him, but being careful not to hurt her. She gave a little unhappy sigh of resignation and allowed him to rock her gently in his arms as they swayed to the music around the kitchen floor.

"There, now," Jake murmured, his chin resting gently on her soft downy head. "This really isn't so bad, is it?"

Gabby didn't answer him, and he supposed that was as much of a concession as he was likely to get on the topic.

Jake held Gabby on their improvised linoleum dance floor through a total of three songs, and by the end of the third she had relaxed in his arms enough to rest her head lightly on his chest. If he didn't know better he might have thought she was even enjoying herself. He was loath to release her now, though he knew that he couldn't sensibly hold her like this for the rest of their lives, as enchanting an idea as that was. At least he'd gotten to offer her

some comfort, he thought, however unwanted it had originally been.

Slowly he brought their last dance to a halt, and reached down to tip her chin up with one finger. She seemed a tad dazed as she looked up at him. He smiled at her and then really shocked her – and himself – by leaning down to lightly buss her lips with a chaste kiss.

He petted her hair back from her face then, touching her cheek reverently as she stared at him in open confusion. Then he whispered, "Sweet dreams, Gabby," and released her.

Throbbing with desire that would know no release tonight, he turned away from her, feeling her wide eyed gaze follow him as he left the room.

Chapter Six

Over the course of the next week, Gabby found herself daydreaming all too often about the spanking she'd gotten from Jake, and about the dance he'd forced her into later that night. Though she wouldn't have admitted it, not even for the world on a platter, she was just as drawn to him because of those two contradictory events, as she was repelled.

Whenever thoughts of the spanking came back to her, and they visited her often without warning or reason, she found herself experiencing the strangest feelings of sexual excitement, her body responding as if to a lover's touch; her legs turning to rubber, her breasts peaked almost painfully as they strained her blouse, and the blond curls between her thighs grew damp with arousal. Though she knew it was a punishment he had given her (there certainly was no mistaking that with the soreness she felt later that day, and even the following one), there was also something compellingly erotic about the incident. As unbelievable as it was, it was almost as if she'd enjoyed the time she'd endured over Jake's hard lap, her bottom bared to correction from his unyielding hand. Surely she hadn't enjoyed having her bottom roasted – no one enjoyed that... did they?

It was embarrassing, that's what it was! But still Gabby couldn't quite stop herself from thinking about that afternoon, over and over again. Sometimes Jake walked into the same room as she when she was right in the middle of her favorite daydream, and she would have sworn he was able to see into her mind, the way he looked at her from under those hooded bedroom eyes, and gave her a sexy little half smile, as if he knew all her secrets – and got a thorough kick out of each and every one.

When she wasn't distracted by the feelings she had regarding the spanking, Gabby was disturbed by other feelings concerning the dance she had shared that evening in the kitchen with Jake. It had felt wonderful to be held like that, even though she'd given all outward signs that she hadn't enjoyed the time in his arms. Gabby couldn't even remember the last time she had been held so tenderly, so gently, as if she was really cared for. It had been all she could do not to sigh with her pleasure and curl trustingly closer to Jake as he led her gracefully around their improvised dance floor. The tears that sometimes were so close to the surface had threatened to overtake her that night, the urge to give in and sob her heart out on his wide, granite like shoulder almost more than she could resist. She wanted so badly to share her burden with someone, needed so much to have someone to support her and offer advice. She was scared and worried from the moment she woke in the morning till the time she laid her head down on the pillow at night. And even in sleep, the fears plagued her in her dreams.

But somehow she'd managed not to break down as he'd held her. She'd taken a deep breath and pressed her face to his chest, smelling his pleasant male scent and listening to the reassuring sound of his heartbeat through his soft flannel shirt. The comfort she'd felt at that moment had been nearly overpowering, but it had buoyed her, and as the days passed after that night, she found herself craving to have another dance with the man, wishing that he'd claim the rights he'd declared to all her dance card entries. She even found herself putting on the dumb kitchen radio in the daytime, just in the hopes that the right mood would strike him again. But so far, it hadn't.

A truce had been silently declared, it seemed, in the household. Jake and Gabby worked together to get all of the necessary chores done on the ranch, and a routine began to develop over the following week that worked well for both of them. To her credit, Gabby didn't give Jake any more trouble when he assigned her chores; she simply did them as asked, even going so far as to check with him once finished to be sure she had completed them to his satisfaction and hadn't missed anything. Her attitude also improved, and her sarcastic backtalk ceased. She was the model employee, and also a fast learner when it came to the basic cooking lessons she was taking from Jake. He couldn't have been more pleased with her, though he was careful not to tell her so, for fear that would be the wrong thing to say, and would bring the tenuous truce to an abrupt end.

There were, of course, a few problems in paradise. The first occurred when Jake insisted on taking Gabby and Carrie into town to purchase new clothes. He simply would not take no for an answer, and despite Gabby's protests, she found herself in the department store picking out enough clothes to outfit two women and three little girls. She gritted her teeth as she flung garments into a pile on the register counter and watched the infuriating man beside her calmly pass over his credit card as if money grew on trees. She vaguely remembered a time in her own life, before her father's death, when she'd had a similar attitude towards money, and she bit back an ironic chuckle.

As they walked out to the car, Gabby and Carrie carrying two bags and Jake sporting four, she told him in an insistent, uncompromising tone of voice that he was to take the purchases out of her wages until the bill was completely paid off. His response was an icy look, followed by the words, "Don't be ridiculous. You need your wages. I can afford to buy

you some clothes; I've been buying for my sister all this time, and now she has a husband to do that for her. So don't worry about it."

Gabby gritted her teeth. "I want you to take the bill out of my wages," she ground out, glaring at him murderously. "End of discussion."

He returned her stubborn stare, and countered dangerously, "If you're not careful, young lady, I'll take the bill out of your hide. And that will *definitely* end the discussion."

The softly growled threat set every one of Gabby's hairs on end at the nape of her neck and brought a telling ache to her loins. She flushed bright red at his words, her eyes darting nervously around them to see if anyone had heard; it seemed no one had, but the blush didn't fade regardless. She stomped her foot once, in pure frustration at the man, but argued no further. It wouldn't do her any good anyway; she'd simply save her wages herself, and then when she had enough to pay him back, she would.

The other problem, at least for Gabby, was that Jake and Carrie were growing increasingly attached to one another. Gabby didn't understand the child's affection for Jake, knowing her past experience with men, and her fear of them in all cases except this one. But for some reason, Carrie had latched onto Jake like he was her best friend, and except for when he was working at gentling his newest horse, she was constantly at his side. Gabby found herself resenting the easy warmth between the two. Though it sickened her, she couldn't help her feelings of jealousy as she witnessed the attention Carrie received from Jake, and vice versa. And though she wanted to stop those negative feelings, she found she just couldn't. She wanted to be on the receiving end of Jake's hugs and smiles, and she felt she deserved Carrie's adoration for all she was going through for the child. She hated herself

for the pettiness of such thoughts, but she couldn't stop thinking them no matter what she tried.

Gabby found herself watching the pair from afar, especially at night when Carrie would run to Jake as he sat relaxing before the fire in the living room, a book clutched in her tiny hands. He would lift her up onto his lap with a gentleness that belied his size, and she would snuggle cozily into his arms, asking him softly to read her a story. No matter how tired he was from working that day, he never said no. He read to her till she fell asleep in his lap, her small head lolling trustingly against his wide chest. Gabby found herself drawn even more to Jake as she watched him with Carrie at night for these rituals, having never experienced anything even remotely close to them with her own father. And though her heart ached with longing for what she had missed, she also felt a flutter of growing love for this man, who was so at ease with caring for the child she considered as her own.

On the second Tuesday of her employ, Jake asked Gabby to work in the large vegetable garden out behind the barn; he gave her a big, wide brimmed hat, sunglasses, and a large bottle of sun block before he went out to work himself, warning her that with her pale complexion she'd better take some precautions to protect herself from the sun.

Gabby watched his retreating back, sniffing the lotion with disdain. She didn't relish the idea of smelling like a coconut for the entire day. Besides, even though she'd been working so far in the cool, shadowy interior of the barn, she doubted she'd fry to a crisp, as Jake seemed to think, in just one afternoon in the sun.

Half an hour later, Gabby was working outside in the rich soil of the garden, humming quietly to herself. She'd donned the silly hat and sunglasses in

order to keep Jake from pestering her about them when she'd come outside, but she'd left the sun block untouched on the table inside. She'd only be out here a few hours and she knew she wouldn't burn that fast.

Carrie was playing just inside the barn door with a new litter of kittens that Jake had penned up for her inside a clean, empty stall. Every now and again, Gabby could hear the child's melodic giggles as they carried on the warm air, and the sound was soothing to her troubled mind.

She reveled in the physical work as her hands sunk into the warm earth beneath her, pulling up those vegetables that were ready, and clearing the way for those still growing. She breathed deeply of the spring air, occasionally letting her head drop back so she could feel the heat of the sun on her face. It was a wonderful way to take her mind from her troubles.

An even more wonderful way to do that, and one that she quickly found herself partaking in often as she worked, was watching Jake from the corner of her eye as he worked with his newest unbroken horse in the corral. It was amazing to watch him with the frightened animal, how gentle and strong he was at the same time. Gabby couldn't hear him from where she was working, but she could tell at times that he was speaking to the horse, and she wondered what he was saying. As his mouth moved, his hands gentled the animal, touching him along his sleek coat and causing it to ripple; gradually, by degrees, the horse grew less agitated and more calm. It was almost as if Jake knew the animal's language, and Gabby found herself time and again amazed by the scene.

So often was she distracted in fact, that when she next glanced at her watch she was shocked to see it was five of six. She gasped out loud and made quick work of finishing with the last few rows

in the garden. By the time she was done, and had started to hurry inside, Jake was heading for the barn to put the horse away.

"I'll tear Carrie away from the kittens and we'll be right in to clean up and give you a hand with supper," he told her.

Gabby nodded and clamored inside, heading straight back to her bedroom to wash her hands and sweaty face and change from her dirty clothes.

That was when she looked up into the mirror and saw it: Her beet red, sunburned face, starring wide-eyed back at her.

"Oh, no," she groaned out loud. Gently she wet a washcloth with cool water and pressed it to a smudge of dirt on her cheek, wincing at the shoot of pain that small amount of pressure brought to her scorched flesh. She'd been so lost in her thoughts out there, she hadn't even felt the burn while she'd been working, but now that she had no other distractions, her face throbbed with the pain and she felt a sob rise in her throat.

"Gabby?" Jake's voice called to her from just outside her bedroom door. She heard him knock once.

"Yes?" she answered, her voice catching around the tears.

"You okay in there?" His voice was concerned now that he'd heard her response. Gabby sighed and went to the door; he was going to see it eventually, anyway, so she might as well get it over with now. She opened the door to him, cringing under his gaze as it changed from one of concern to one of anger as he surveyed the damage she'd brought to her skin.

"Good Lord, woman, don't you have any sense at all?" he growled darkly.

That was all it took for the tears burning in Gabby's eyes to start pouring down her red face.

"Tsk," Jake whispered, taking one of her hands and tugging her into the room with him, then down onto the bed beside him. "Don't cry, Gabby. Come on..."

"I'm so stupid!" she wailed miserably. "Why didn't I just listen to you?"

To her surprise Jake smiled. "You're not stupid, young lady, and I don't want to ever hear you calling yourself that again. What you are, is stubborn. I imagine you rejected that sun block just to spite me."

Gabby sniffled and swiped at her eyes with her hands. "Well, I wish I had listened this time!" she declared emphatically.

Jake chuckled lightly and put an arm around her to give her half a hug, being careful not to brush her burn. "Me, too. Remember this the next time I suggest something for your own good, okay?"

Gabby leaned her cheek against Jake's shoulder, and let him hold her in silence for a few moments. She was half expecting him to declare she'd just earned herself another trip over his lap, but even so she couldn't quite bring herself to move away from him yet, even if doing so might have saved her butt.

Finally, he murmured, "Why don't you finish getting washed up and lie down? I'll take care of supper and bring you a tray."

"Oh, I can't do that," Gabby protested. "Why should you have to do all the work because I was so stup—uh, stubborn?"

Jake's mouth tilted as he held a grin in check at her near slip. He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "It's not much work at all, and Carrie can help me with the easy stuff. I think you'll feel better if you take a rest. Can I get you anything?"

Gabby shook her head, wondering why he was being so nice to her; if she wasn't careful she was

likely going to end up crying again. "Thank you," she said.

"Sure." He patted her back and pressed the lightest of kisses onto her sore forehead. "I'll be back with supper in a bit."

Gabby nodded and eased herself back onto the bed, closing her eyes wearily.

About forty -five minutes later, Jake shook Gabby gently awake and helped her to sit propped up with pillows. He set a tray down on her lap, which held a grilled cheese sandwich, a bowl of vegetable beef soup, and a glass of apple juice.

"One Sommerville specialty," he announced proudly, executing a mock bow.

Gabby smiled shyly at him. "Looks edible," she teased.

"You can bet on that, missy. And you'd better clear your plate, too."

"Yes, sir!" Gabby gave him a smart salute. Jake shook one long finger at her warningly, then left her to her meal with a promise to return for the tray.

Gabby enjoyed the simple fare, wondering all the while about Jake's abrupt change; except for the brief moment when he'd first noticed her sunburn, he hadn't shown any anger towards her. It wasn't like him not to at least threaten to punish her, especially when she had deliberately ignored his advice; she felt like she was holding her breath, just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When she'd finished her dinner, Gabby carried the tray into the kitchen herself. It was bad enough, in her opinion, that Jake had cooked the meal on his own because of her; she wasn't about to sit around and continue to let him wait on her, too.

When she entered the kitchen, finding Carrie and Jake finishing the last of their own sandwiches and soup, his eyes met hers squarely and for a moment she thought the moment for her reckoning had arrived.

"Are you okay?" Carrie asked, before Jake had a chance to get a scolding word out.

"Yeah, sweetie, I'm fine," Gabby assured her, coming over to the table to hug the little girl from behind. "I'll just have to be much more careful from now on in the sun."

Jake snorted indelicately, but other than that said nothing.

Gabby moved to the sink and began rinsing the dishes and loading the dishwasher. She could feel Jake's eyes on her back the entire time, but still he held back any lectures.

The dishes were finished quickly, and Gabby shooed Carrie off to the bathroom to get changed for her bath.

"I'll give her the bath tonight," Jake offered. "You go on back to bed."

"No, thank you. Carrie's my responsibility."

"I don't mind," Jake pressed.

"I know." Gabby smiled at him. "And I might need to take you up on the offer sometime, but not tonight. You read her the bedtime stories, I do the bath. Why mess with a good thing?"

He returned her smile and shrugged. "All right. I have to run into town anyway. When I get back I'll read her her story."

Gabby nodded and followed in Carrie's path to give the child her bath.

When Jake returned from town he found Gabby sitting in his mother's old rocking chair in the living room with a very sleepy Carrie in her lap. He chuckled when the child looked up at him from under heavy lids and asked around a wide yawn, "Is it time for my story now, Jake?"

"Sure is, pumpkin," he agreed. He picked Carrie up gently and deposited her for a moment on the sofa. "Stay here a second, baby. I'll be right back."

Jake took Gabby's hand then and pulled her along behind him to the bathroom located off of her

bedroom. Once there, he set down the paper bag he'd brought inside the house with him and turned to the bathtub, which he began to fill.

From the paper sack, he produced a bottle of bubble bath. As Gabby watched in bewildered amusement, he added a large dose of the sweet smelling concoction to the bathwater.

"The pharmacist said this bubble bath has aloe in it and that it should help soothe your burn if you use it in a cool bath. I also picked up some balm for after the bath and for the next few days."

Gabby blinked at sudden tears that pricked her eyes; why was she such a damn ninny all the time anymore!? She felt like she was always on the verge of crying!

"Thank you," she managed to say in a husky voice that gave away her emotion.

Jake smiled softly at her; Gabby could tell by the way he looked at her that he had heard the tears in her voice, but he refrained from commenting on them, and for that she was grateful.

"I'll go get the kid to bed," he promised. "You enjoy that bath, and just try to relax some. Okay?"

Gabby could only nod her head. Jake gave her a playful wink, then left her alone in the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

The cool water and soothing aloe in the bubble bath felt wonderful on Gabby's scorched skin. She could have happily stayed in that tub for the rest of her life, she figured, but after soaking long enough that the skin on the soles of her feet was wrinkled, she reluctantly got out of the tub and dried off as gingerly as possible.

The concept of putting on pajamas to sleep in that would rub against her burn was unappealing, at the least. Gabby considered her options, then figured it really didn't matter. No one would see her in her bedroom, under the cover of the sheet. So, she slipped under the cool sheets in only her

partially reddened birthday suit, sighing with pleasure as her relaxed muscles yielded to the firm mattress beneath her.

She was on the verge of sleep again when a quiet knock sounded at her door. A moment later, Jake stepped cautiously inside the room, the bottle of cream he'd told her about in one hand. Gabby opened her eyes sleepily, gazing up at him and not really making the connection of why he was here and what he held in his hand.

"Let me rub some of the cream on for you, sleepyhead," Jake offered as he came to sit on the side of her bed. "You'll appreciate it in the morning when you wake up, I promise."

Before Gabby could get her wits about her and stop him, he had grasped the top of the sheet she was tucked under, and had pulled it down to her feet, revealing her completely naked body to his gaze. He went stock still, staring at her for a long, awful moment. Then he quickly grabbed the sheet again and covered her once more.

"I-I'm sorry, Gab. I didn't know..."

"It's okay. I just... I didn't want to put on clothes that would scratch at my burn..."

Jake's hand was shaking visibly as he uncapped the bottle of lotion. He squeezed a small dab onto his palm and rubbed it with his fingers to warm it. "Um, why don't you put your arms out on top of the sheet and I'll start there?"

"Right." Gabby did as he suggested and let his smooth, soft fingers caress the balm into her hot arms.

Jake covered all of her sunburned areas in that manner, always careful to keep her intimate areas covered by the sheet. Despite his gentlemanly efforts, Gabby still found herself grateful for the sunburn on her face; at least it covered her hot blush as his sensuous fingers touched her body.

"I think that does it," Jake finally said as he recapped the lotion and set it aside on her nightstand. Gabby was lying on her stomach by then, and she peeked up at him from where her cheek lay against the pillow.

"Thanks, Jake. You were so nice to me tonight and I really appreciate it. I know I didn't really deserve it after the way I ignored your advice."

Jake's eyes burned intensely for a moment as he looked at her. Then he said the words she'd been waiting to hear all night long, the words she'd known he would tell her before the night was over. "The only reason you're not getting your bottom paddled till it's as warm and red as your sunburn, Gabriela Madison, is because it's obvious to me that you're already in enough discomfort as it is. But remember this, little one. The next time you decide to be so foolish and careless with your health, you *will* get a hairbrushing to remember. Do you understand me?"

Gabby swallowed hard, staring up at the hot promise in his dark blue eyes. Even though she understood the punishing threat he intended in his words, a smile escaped her anyway as she said, "Yes, Jake."

"Good." He bent over to kiss her forehead as softly as a butterfly, and his hand fell onto her sheet-protected backside in a light love pat. "Sleep tight."

Chapter Seven

Before she knew it, Gabby's first two weeks as Jake's housekeeper had passed; it hardly seemed possible, but Leigh and Ty had returned just yesterday from their honeymoon and were expected today at the ranch for a nice, relaxing lunch. Gabby couldn't wait to see her best friend.

That morning, she bundled Carrie into one of Jake's battered old work trucks and set off to the grocery store in town; the kitchen was badly in need of the basic supplies after two weeks of eating and no shopping. She and Jake had worked together on meal ideas for the next week and had also written a list of what else they needed; the task had given Gabby this wonderful premonition of what life as Jake's wife might be like... not that she ever envisioned herself in that role, of course.

Gabby turned on the radio and sang along with the country station Jake always had tuned in. Carrie watched avidly out the window at the gently sloping countryside of Montana as they rolled by, her eyes darting every which way beneath the small baseball cap Jake had given her the day after Gabby's incident with the sunburn. Gabby's own hair was swept up beneath the wide brimmed hat she'd worn that day, and both she and Carrie carried the scent of coconuts on their skin from the liberal application of sun block. Though she still wasn't wild about the smell, Gabby figured it was a lot better having the scent of coconuts on their skin than having to sport the imprint of Jake's hard hand – or the back of the hairbrush he'd threatened her with – on her backside.

At the small mom and pop store in town, Gabby commandeered a shopping cart and began going up and down the aisles, collecting the items on the list, and a few that weren't written down. It had been so long since she'd been able to go grocery shopping

and not have to stick to a strict budget that she found herself hard pressed to deny additional items that just looked good, or that were a good buy. When she'd asked Jake what his budget was for groceries, he'd shrugged and admitted to her that he didn't have one. Then he'd told her to just buy what was on the list, and anything else she saw that struck her or Carrie's fancy, and that would be fine with him; anything, as long as he didn't have to do the blasted chore himself.

By the time they reached one of the three old fashioned registers at the front of the store, Gabby's cart was full to the brim. She smiled at the elderly woman behind the counter, who she assumed was Mrs. Wiple, the wife of the proprietor that Jake had mentioned, and began to set out the items for her to ring up.

"Pick out a candy for yourself," Gabby suggested to Carrie, who had already been looking at the display next to the register with big, eager eyes. "And pick out one for Jake, too. I think he likes M&M's."

Mrs. Wiple giggled, and the sound was sweet, like that of a girl much younger than she. "That boy loves his M&M's," she confided in a stage whisper. "Him and my Artie, two peas in a pod when it comes to sweets."

"You telling stories about me over there, woman?" her husband bantered from where he was ringing up a different order at the counter to the right of hers. Gabby smiled at them, liking the two immediately.

When the groceries were tallied (Gabby refused to even allow herself to look at the total of the bill, knowing she would feel guilty over it), and bagged, she signed for the order on the Wiples' charge account ledger book and then she and Carrie started out of the store. As they came back around to the front door, a young deliveryman was setting

out newspapers beside the entryway, and something made Gabby glance down at the front-page story.

And right there, in the middle of the page, beneath a huge, condemning headline, was a picture of Carrie, right beside a picture of herself.

Gabby's breath hitched in her throat and for a horrible moment the world seemed to have frozen in place. She blinked hard several times as she stood there, as if doing so would somehow erase the horrible evidence of their impending doom, but each time she opened her eyes again, the same pictures and story stared right back up at her.

NEW YORK POLICE WIDEN SEARCH FOR MISSING GIRL

With an audible gulp, Gabby set the cart back into motion, furtively pulling Carrie's cap and her own hat down low over their eyes. She plunged through the doors out into the parking lot of the store, her eyes sweeping feverishly from side to side as she moved, sure that at any moment someone was going to recognize them and stop them. By the time she reached Jake's truck, she was practically running across the asphalt.

Carrie's eyes were questioning as Gabby ushered her, almost rough in her haste, inside the vehicle, but she did not ask any questions. The little girl knew the importance of their flight well enough and she surely understood that something had happened. Gabby all but flung the paper sacks of groceries into the bed of the truck, then climbed into the driver's seat and started the ignition with a roar.

She managed to pull out of the parking lot onto the country road with a calm that belied her inner fears; peeling away from the little mom and pop shop would only serve to bring them unwanted attention. But once she was a safe distance from the store, she pressed her foot on the gas, sending

the pedal nearly to the floor and propelling the truck into space with a lurch.

"Put your seatbelt on, Carrie," she ordered softly, as she reached to buckle herself in. Carrie obeyed her without question.

"Gabby," the little girl began hesitantly, using Gabriela's real name instead of calling her 'mommy' as she always did whenever anyone else was around. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really," Gabby answered, hoping to calm Carrie's fears. "But there was an article in the newspaper back there about us, with our pictures. I didn't want to hang around long enough for anyone to recognize us."

"Oh." Gabby's heart constricted at the forlorn note in the child's voice. She reached across the seat and squeezed her hand.

"Don't worry, honey. I promised you that you'll be safe and I meant it. I won't let anything happen to you."

Carrie didn't acknowledge Gabby's words. She simply looked blankly out the window at the rapidly passing scenery while Gabby's eyes glanced from time to time in the rear view mirror, scanning the road behind them for trouble.

They were both so absorbed in their own worries that neither one of them noticed when they flew past Jake in his second work truck where he sat at a stop sign. Gabby was so distraught that she hadn't even noticed the four way stop and had blown right through it. But Jake noticed them and, cursing in disbelief at Gabby's rash driving, did a U-turn as quickly as he safely could, then pulled into line a few cars behind her to follow them back home.

Gabby was driving so fast that she pulled even further ahead of Jake and beat him home, never even noticing the entire time that he'd been behind

her at all. When she pulled into the driveway at the ranch, Leigh was already there, just getting out of her car, and her friend ran over to hug Gabby exuberantly as she got out of Jake's truck.

It took all of Gabby's reserved energy not to fall apart in Leigh's arms. Even so, her friend immediately sensed something had happened by the way Gabby sagged against her.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she asked, stopping her excited chattering about the honeymoon and all she had to share with Gabby once she noticed her friend's shaking hands and Carrie's solemn little face.

Gabby didn't answer Leigh's question, though, asking one of her own instead as she took in the absence of the men with nervous eyes. "Where's Jake? And Ty?"

Leigh shrugged. "Ty had to go into work to check on things, and said he'd meet us here at lunchtime. I came over early because I was anxious to see you. But Jake's truck was gone when I got here."

Gabby tried to tamp down on the rising panic in her stomach. What if he'd gone to town for some reason and while he was there, he saw the newspaper?

Leigh gave Gabby a reassuring squeeze around one shoulder and half pulled her along to the bed of the truck. She handed her a grocery bag and then set one onto each of her own hips. "Come on, Gab. Let's get these groceries inside and then you can tell me what's going on."

Gabby let herself be led inside the house, and between she and Leigh they brought in all of the sacks. Then she set Carrie up at the kitchen table with the coloring book and crayons she'd bought for her, trying to reassure the child's fearsome, questioning look with a kiss and a faltering smile.

Leigh was putting two bottles of sparkling apple cider into the fridge. "Oh, here's a note from Jake," she said as she opened the door. "Says he forgot to put cider on the list and wanted to have it for me; so he ran into town to pick it up." She made a face. "Too bad, since you obviously thought of it while you were at the store."

When she turned back to the remaining groceries, she saw the pale, frightened look on Gabby's face. She came over to her friend then, and guided her into a chair at the table beside Carrie. "Here, sit down before you fall over. I'll put everything away, you talk." When Leigh had put away several more items and Gabby was still sitting there in silence, staring blankly at Carrie's picture, she encouraged further, "Gabby? What's happened, hon?"

"Oh, Leigh," Gabby sighed. She sniffed valiantly at tears that were very near the surface. "When I was at the store just now, I looked at the paper on my way out. And there was an article on the front page about Carrie and me. With pictures and everything."

Leigh paused in emptying the last of the bags and stared at her friend in sympathy. "Oh, no..."

Gabby nodded. "It said they were widening the search..." Her eyes became frantic as they studied her friend's face. "Do you think Jake'll see the paper when he goes into the store?"

Leigh shook her head. "I doubt it. He doesn't read the paper and I'm sure you've noticed by now that the only news he watches is the Weather Channel to get the forecast. I think you'll be safe, for now anyway."

Gabby allowed herself to breathe a fraction easier. "As soon as I have the chance, I'm going to die my hair," she announced. "And I'll cut Carrie's. But even then we'll have to lie low out here for a while."

Leigh nodded her agreement. "I'll get you a die kit tomorrow and bring it out," she promised. "And as long as you stick around here for the most part, you should be fairly safe. I can't imagine anyone would remember you two from my wedding or that they would have recognized you today with those hats on. I'll make sure I get to our paper at home and dispose of any articles about you so that Ty doesn't see them. And I'll be sure to distract him at night with 'newlywed things' when he would usually watch the evening news."

Gabby let out a held-in breath. "Thanks, Leigh."

"Don't mention it." A noise outside alerted both women and Leigh craned her neck to look out the window over the sink. "It's Jake," she announced, her eyebrows furrowed. "Though you wouldn't know it by the way Mr. Safety's driving in here like a speed demon. Well, compared to his usual standards, anyway."

That quickly, all of Gabby's worries and fears returned. She heard the truck come to a crunching halt outside and then what sounded like a sonic boom as Jake slammed the driver's door shut behind him.

"Uh-oh," Leigh murmured. "He's pissed about something..."

Before Gabby could properly react to that foreboding statement by running for cover, Jake had stormed inside the house and stood imposingly just inside the front door.

"Hello, brother dear," Leigh greeted him lightly, crossing over to bravely give him a peck on his clenched jaw and a one sided hug.

"Hi, sis," he returned tightly. "I have a matter to discuss with Gabby right now. Would you mind taking Carrie out to the barn for a bit?"

"But..."

His stormy blue gaze shifted briefly from Gabby to lock once on his sister's face. "Please," he said, though the word was more an order than a plea.

"O-Okay." Leigh relented, glancing apologetically at Gabby. She held out her hand to a visually shaken Carrie and then hesitantly led the little girl out of the house.

Before Gabby had a moment to get her wits about her, she found herself hauled abruptly up out of her chair by the painless, but no less inescapable, grasp of Jake's hand around her arm. He released her momentarily once she was on her feet, only to take a new grip on her, this time by her delicate earlobe.

"Jake!" she protested as he led her in that manner, like a naughty schoolgirl about to go over her father's knee, into the living room. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"That's my question for you, Gabriela," he hissed, still maintaining his grip on her ear as he stood her before him. Gabby had to stand very still to keep the pinch from hurting. "Just what the hell did you think *you* were doing?"

A sinking, sick feeling filled her belly at his words; he knew, she was sure of it. Not that she was going to admit to anything, at least not until he came right out and accused her. But she knew it anyway.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, hoping she sounded as innocent and insulted as she was trying to come across.

"*I saw you*," he ground out angrily.

Gabby's eyes closed briefly. This is it, she thought miserably, wondering what her chances were of breaking away from him and getting away with Carrie before he had a chance to call the police, if he hadn't called them already.

"Saw me, where?" she asked.

"I saw you driving on the way back here from the store," he snapped and Gabby stared up at him in confusion for a moment. She couldn't have been more surprised if he'd told her he was secretly a flamboyant transsexual Vegas act who did impersonations of Marilyn Monroe and Madonna.

"You saw me... driving home?" she questioned, and her lips twitched as she fought the inadvisable urge to giggle with relief that he was upset over this and not over what she'd feared.

Jake's eyes narrowed as his nostrils flared. "You think it's funny?" he barked. "You're damn lucky you didn't get into an accident, young lady! You had to have been doing at least eighty in a thirty-five zone, and you blew right through a four-way stop sign!"

"I did?" Gabby asked quietly. She hadn't realized she'd been driving so badly, but she'd also been scared out of her mind on the drive home, sure that someone was following her and about to turn her into the authorities. Not that she could share that information with Jake, of course.

"Yes, you did." He ground out.

"I-I don't know what to say. I don't usually drive like that, I swear. I-I guess I just was preoccupied, thinking about Leigh coming over, and I wasn't paying attention..."

Jake's jaw clenched and he finally released her ear. A little voice inside Gabby's head screamed for her to make her getaway now, but for some reason she stood her ground, watching with a sort of detached horror as he unbuckled his wide, black leather belt and pulled it from the belt loops of his jeans.

"Well, I intend to make sure you remember to pay attention the next time, Gabriela," he promised. He took her hand in an unyielding grip and tugged her along with him to the sofa. "Bend over the back," he instructed.

Gabby stared at him for a moment, unable to simply drape herself there for him to thrash at will. "Don't make me force you over," Jake encouraged softly. "It will only be that much worse for you if you do."

Slowly, the sick feeling returning to her belly, Gabby knelt on the couch as Jake had asked, then bent her upper body over the back. Her bottom, encased in tight jeans, jutted out for his punishment. She drew in a deep, shuddering breath and held it, waiting for the first lash to fall.

Jake swallowed convulsively past the lump of emotion that had formed in his throat. He'd been nearly crazy with worry and anger since he'd seen her driving so crazily in town, but now as he watched her willingly submit herself to him, he felt choked with other more confusing feelings than just anger.

He let one shaky hand rest on the small of Gabby's back for a moment as he swallowed once more. His voice was husky when he finally spoke. "You must be more careful with your safety, Gabby. Yours and little Carrie's. I care about the two of you too much to just sit back and let you be so reckless. I wouldn't do this if I didn't care."

He wondered at himself as he heard the words leave his mouth. He hadn't even realized the truth of what he'd just said before now himself. It was hard to believe that in only two weeks she and the kid had burrowed so easily and deeply into his heart, but they had.

He drew his doubled belt back and then let it sail forward again to meet with Gabby's bottom in a loud CRACK! She moaned in discomfort, and rocked forward slightly, but she did not attempt to escape him, nor did she even plead for him to stop.

Jake continued to whip her backside with the belt, unable to help comparing the pictures in his mind of the last time he'd taken a piece of leather to this particular female's backside. She'd been little more than a teenager at the time, with a much smaller behind and skinny hips and legs, nothing like the womanly curves that now filled his vision and brought a distinctive hard ache between his legs. But she'd been covered in denim that day too, and she'd been the same careless little girl that she'd shown at least a part of her to still be today.

He allowed himself to envision the possible accidents she could have caused with her dangerous driving. The images of Carrie and Gabby hurt and bleeding lent strength to his arm as he wielded the belt and Gabby was soon crying from the force of his licks. His resolve suffered then, hearing her tears and knowing he was causing them, even if he did still believe she deserved the punishment. Gradually his pace slowed and finally he tossed the belt to the floor.

He gathered her limp body off the back of the sofa then, and stood her on rubbery legs before him as he took a seat where she had just knelt. As she watched in muted numbness, tears coursing down her pretty face, he deftly unsnapped her jeans and pushed them, along with her panties, to her knees. He placed her almost gently over his lap then, caressing her already pinkened skin for a brief moment, before resuming her spanking with his hand.

Though he was sure that even on her bare skin his hand had to be less painful than the belt had been over her jeans, it seemed to Jake that Gabby's sobs only intensified as he continued to spank her. She was really carrying on, so much so that he began to get a niggling feeling that there was something else going on beneath the surface that she wasn't sharing with him.

He was tempted to try to get it out of her now, but quickly dismissed the idea. She was distraught enough as it was already; trying to spank a secret out of her now simply wouldn't work. And besides, there was a part of him that deeply wanted her to trust him enough to come to him on her own with her problems.

He finished up her spanking with a volley of fast, crisp swats to her sit spot as he scolded her one last time for the dangerous, reckless way she'd been driving. When he'd gotten a tearful, choking promise from her never to repeat her hazardous behavior, he stopped spanking her and helped her gently to her feet.

Gabby wiped self-consciously at her face, sniffing and hobbling awkwardly before Jake as she tried to pull up her pants. He pushed her hands away and did the job for her, being careful to be as clinical as a nurse while she blushed hotly under the lingering affects of last week's sunburn. She winced as the tight denims scrapped her reddened backside, but was quick to button the fly as if she feared Jake would reconsider ending her punishment and shuck them suddenly down again.

She tried to turn away from him then, but Jake wouldn't let her. If she had been Leigh, she would have done some time in the corner for what she'd done, but Gabby seemed so fragile today for some reason and he just couldn't find it in his heart to make her stand by her lonesome in between two cracks in the walls. Instead he pulled her somewhat reluctant body into his warm embrace and he rocked her gently in his arms until most of her tears had passed.

When she had calmed, he leaned back from her to thumb away the tears that had clung to her cheeks instead of falling onto his shirt. Then he petted her damp hair back from her forehead and framed her face tenderly in his hands.

"You scared ten years off my life today," he told her frankly. "Please don't ever do that again, honey."

Gabby's throat worked for a moment and she looked down shamefully. When she met his eyes again there was a quiet desperation in her gaze and Jake knew right then and there that he'd been right about her keeping something from him. It was there in her eyes, the dark foreshadowing that no matter how much she would like to promise him that it wouldn't happen again, it was beyond her control now. It would happen again, it was only a question of when and how.

She sighed raggedly and slumped against his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she whispered despairingly and Jake felt more tears soak into his shirt as they leaked from her eyes.

He pressed his eyes closed briefly as he hugged her. It took every ounce of patience he owned not to demand answers then and there. But he didn't want her to tell him that way, out of fear. They had something going here, something good to build on. If he gave her time, assuming it was there to give, she'd come to trust him. And she would tell him on her own. He had to give her the opportunity, at least.

So instead of demanding to know what had so upset her, he simply held her tight for a while longer. And then when they finally pulled apart, he took her hand and kissed her lips.

"It's going to be okay," he promised her softly, even though he had no idea if it was the truth. Then he left her so she could go wash her face and get a handle on her emotions, while he went out to the barn to let Leigh and Carrie know it was alright to come back inside.

Chapter Eight

Gabby sniffed as she tossed the large bowl of salad greens, trying to ignore the feeling of being watched. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Leigh was still studying her quietly from the other side of the counter where she was fixing a platter of assorted sandwiches for their lunch.

"Are you sure you're okay, Gab?" her friend asked, for what had to be the fourth time in the half hour since she'd come back inside.

Gabby glanced out the window above where she was working, out towards the corral fence where Jake was talking to Ty, who had recently arrived. They were admiring the latest stallion Jake was gentling and she wondered briefly where Carrie was, then realized she must be inside the barn still visiting with the kittens.

"I'm fine, Leigh," she finally answered, turning to offer her worried friend a forced, brief smile. "Really. Stop asking, okay?"

Leigh looked hurt for a moment and Gabby regretted the snappish reply. Leigh was just trying to be helpful, like the good friend that she was, and she didn't deserve that.

"Jake saw me driving home," Gabby offered further, in a more approachable tone, "and I was being pretty reckless. I was so afraid that someone had recognized us in town, and that any moment I'd look up in the rear view mirror and see the police behind us. Your brother was eager to let me know his opinions on the importance of driving safety."

Leigh smiled. "I've been on the receiving end of a few of those discussions myself," she sympathized. "The last time was when I was eighteen and he found out that I drove myself home after a party, with a couple drinks too many in my system. I've never seen my brother as mad as he was that night. It was the first and last time he

made me cut a switch for him to use on my own butt..." She shuttered at the memory. "It was awful, but he swore if I ever did anything so stupid and dangerous again, he'd switch me every day for two weeks straight. I didn't test him on it."

Gabby stared at Leigh, nearly agape at the tale. Then, amazingly, her friend smiled.

"What on earth is there to smile about from that story?" Gabby demanded.

"Nothing," Leigh answered, still grinning like an idiot. "But if Jake has spanked *you*, that's a happy thing in my opinion!"

Gabby glared at her. "Oh, yeah, it was a real joyous event!"

Leigh rolled her eyes. "I mean, that he wouldn't do that if he didn't care about you. It means he likes you, dummy, maybe even..."

Gabby snorted an interruption. "He's spanked me before and it wasn't because he cared about me. It was out of anger and irritation. Pure and simple."

"That doesn't count because you were still a kid then," Leigh replied dismissively, obviously thinking Gabby was referring to the time when they'd gotten spanked for skipping school as kids, when really she was thinking of a much more recent occurrence. "Now, you're a woman, and though Jake may be many things, he's certainly not blind or dumb. He likes you. Get used to it."

Gabby wasn't exactly chomping at the bit to tell Leigh that she'd already been over Jake's lap before today, as a grown woman, but apparently her face gave away what she wouldn't lend voice to. Leigh studied her a moment, then her eyes got very round and she exclaimed, "Oh, my God, it's happened before today?!"

Gabby screwed her face up in distaste and nodded slowly. "Once before. But he threatens me on practically a daily basis."

Her insane friend actually squealed in excitement, clapping her hands, like she'd just found out she'd won a million dollars, all of it completely tax-free.

"Oh, Gabby, maybe we'll be sisters-in-law one day!"

Now it was Gabby's turn to roll her eyes. "You, my friend," she said, "have a strange idea of what's romantic."

The other woman wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "And you, my dear, would be surprised by how right I could be. I speak from experience, after all. But that's a topic for another day," she teased, ducking a carrot that Gabby plucked out of the salad bowl and threw at her.

"Well, I'm just glad it was my driving he was upset about and not the paper." Gabby sighed a few moments later as she set the bowl of salad on the table beside Leigh's platter of sandwiches and paused. "I wonder, though, if maybe it's time that Carrie and I moved on from here. Maybe we shouldn't be staying in one place for too long, and the more distance we can put between us and New York the better..."

Leigh didn't seem to like this turn of conversation, judging by the expression on her face. But to her credit she didn't completely reject it. "Well, Gab, if you decide that's what you want to do, the money I offered you the first day you were here is still there for you to use." She studied her friend a moment, before continuing. "But if you want my opinion, I think you're just as safe here as you'd be if you started moving again, maybe even more so. Especially if you lay low for a bit, hide out for a while here on the ranch, and change your appearance and Carrie's some."

Gabby considered this in silence. One thing was for sure; if she did run again, this time she was likely to have Jake Sommerville on her trail, as well

as the New York police. And knowing Jake, he wouldn't stop until he found her. She sighed, thinking of how he'd asked her only an hour or so ago not to scare him again. She'd wanted to make that promise to him, but in her case she just wasn't sure she could keep it. At any moment the police could come for her and Carrie, and that would mean she would have to run. There wouldn't be time for explanations to prevent him from worrying. That was why she'd thought it might be wiser to leave now, before things got any stickier. But she had a feeling it was already too late where Jake was concerned. He cared now, if Leigh was to be believed, and that meant he was involved too much for them to simply turn and walk away from him without a fight.

"It might be a good idea to tell Jake what's going on, though," Leigh was suggesting. She held up her hands plaintively when Gabby turned incredible eyes on her. "Now don't go crazy on me, it's just a suggestion! Jake has a level head on his shoulders and he might be good for some sound advice..."

"He'd want me to go to the cops," Gabby interrupted. "You know that as well as I do. He does everything by the book and this would be no exception."

"Well," Leigh shrugged, looking guilty. "Maybe he'd be right about that..."

Gabby shook her head vigorously. "No. I already tried that in New York. I told you that. It didn't work. And I'm not going to be foolish enough to try it again."

Leigh sighed. "But this isn't New York. This would be a totally different police department..."

"It wouldn't make any difference. The result would be the same. Except this time I'd be thrown into jail in the bargain."

"Okay, okay... You win." Leigh gave Gabby a brief, one-armed hug around the shoulders. "And I promise I'll help you however I can. Starting tomorrow, with that hair dye. Okay?"

Gabby nodded, letting out a pent up breath. "Yeah. Thanks, Leigh."

Her friend nodded and the two women returned to fixing the remainder of lunch.

It wasn't long before the men began to amble towards the house. A brief glance out the window showed Gabby that Carrie had come out of the barn; obviously she had already recovered from her fear from when Jake had come into the house so frightfully earlier, if the fact that he now carried the child around his middle meant anything.

When the threesome came inside, Jake set Carrie down on the linoleum floor as Ty greeted Gabby, then crossed the room to hug his wife as if it had been a week since he'd last seen her instead of only a few hours.

"Hi, kitten," he murmured as he drew her close and greeted her with an Eskimo kiss and an affectionate swat to her skirted backside, which raised Gabby's eyebrows in light of her recent conversation with Leigh.

"Hi, yourself, handsome," Leigh responded warmly back, and for all the world she fairly purred the words, just like the endearment Tyler had just subscribed to her. Gabby fought a surge of jealousy over the easy affection between the newlyweds.

"Get a room, would you?" Jake gripped good-naturedly.

Ty grinned at his brother-in-law. "Just you wait, buddy. One day, you'll stumble over your own Miss. Right and then you'll be every bit as sappy and sickening as we are!"

Gabby expected to hear a derisive snort in response to Tyler's romantic predictions, but instead she heard Jake chuckle warmly. And when she

glanced up at him, he was looking at her with this softness in his gaze that made her knees feel like mush. Her eyes skirted quickly away from his as she reached out one hand to steady herself against one of the chairs at the table.

To her relief, Carrie jumped in front of her at that moment with a much-needed distraction. "Guess what?" she exclaimed. "I said hello to the new horsy! He sniffed my hand and butted his head against it!"

Gabby didn't think she'd ever heard so many words tumble from the little girl's mouth at one time. She gave Jake a hard look, knowing how dangerous that stallion was, and wished she hadn't taken her eyes off of Carrie for a second while she'd been outside. Didn't the man have any common sense?

Jake returned her look with a silently chiding one. "Don't go scorching me with your eyes, woman," he teased good-naturedly. "Carrie and I already had us a long talk about how she's not to go anywhere near any of the horses unless I am with her. Isn't that right, pumpkin?"

Carrie nodded her head, though to Gabby's eyes she didn't look all that happy with the arrangement.

"And just to be perfectly clear," Jake added, glancing meaningfully at his sister and Gabby. "That little rule goes for everyone. That stallion, especially, is a mean one, and he's not to be trusted, no matter how docile he looks or how friendly he seems. His last owners abused him and I really have a lot of work ahead of me with him before he'll be safe to approach. Understood?"

Everyone affirmed their agreement, except Carrie, who was looking down at the floor, as if contemplating her shoes. Jake knelt down beside her and tipped her little chin up with one long, tan finger. "Understand me, little girl?" he repeated.

Carrie looked earnestly into his face, and Gabby could tell she was bursting to argue the point with him. She could practically hear her in her mind: *But the horsy likes me, Jake! He nudged my hand!*

But in the end, Carrie's desire to please Jake won over her uncharacteristic urge to fight him. She nodded her head and whispered, "Yes sir. I understand."

"Good." Jake straightened and gave Carrie's curls a tousle. He turned to the rest of the room, his eyes sliding over Gabby's body slowly as if he'd like to have her instead of a sandwich, and he said, "Lunch ready yet? I'm starved."

Spanking a girl must really work up your appetite, Gabby thought wryly, as she tried to ignore the way her skin tingled from the heat in his eyes. She gathered a pile of plates from the counter and took them to the table as Leigh answered that it would be only a few moments more.

Jake intercepted Gabby halfway to the table, taking the plates from her hands with a deft movement. Their fingers grazed one another and Gabby's hands fell away, shaking. She quickly folded her arms to try to hide her obvious nervousness, but the tilted corners of Jake's mouth told her she was too late.

She tried to turn away from him then, wishing that Leigh and Ty would quit their nuzzling and cuddling in the corner. But Jake set the plates down on the table and caught her elbow gently before she could make her escape. He turned her back to him easily and smiled gently at her when she wouldn't meet his eyes.

He tipped her chin up then, just as he had with Carrie's a moment ago. And then he winked at her, like they shared some special secret. "We're still friends here, right?" he asked softly.

She blinked stupidly up at him for a few moments, hearing the question echo in her mind.

The kindness in his gaze made her heart ache, knowing that she was lying to him and was so very undeserving of it. Finally she said, with a lightness she didn't feel, "I don't recall us ever being friends, Jake. But I guess it's never too late to start."

There was a sadness in his eyes that was at odds with the grin on his face. He brushed a strand of hair from her face, and his hand lingered over her cheek, the pad of his thumb caressing the skin by her earlobe. "Friends, then," he offered.

Gabby returned the smile with a tense one of her own. "Friends."

That night Gabby was exhausted from the emotional and physical stresses of the day. After she got Carrie settled into bed for the night, she made quick work of her own bedtime rituals and then slipped under the covers with a tired little sigh.

Jake had marked her behavior throughout the rest of the day and was relieved to see her go to bed early. She'd been nervous and skittish, and he figured she needed the extra rest.

He smiled to himself as sat down at the kitchen table with a pack of cards, thinking of how sweetly sleepy and endearingly confused Gabby had looked when she'd bid him goodnight. He'd wanted so badly to kiss her, he'd fairly ached with the desire. He'd never seen her look more befuddled though, and he knew she was having a hard time reconciling her emotions from all the events of the day – from the spanking, to his comforting her afterwards, through the light hearted lunch with Leigh and Ty, and into their quiet, uncomfortable dinner. Because he hadn't wanted to make things worse for her, he'd declined himself the pleasure of the kiss, sending her off to bed with a reassuring smile and a wish for sweet dreams, instead.

And then he'd sat down to play cards against himself with an erection like an oak tree between his muscular thighs.

He smiled ruefully now. He was really in a fine pickle, that was for sure. He was falling for Gabby, even though he knew with a certainty he could feel in his bones that she was keeping something from him, if not out and out lying to him. He didn't even know if he could count on her being there in the morning, yet it didn't seem to make any difference, for even as he sat there he was wondering what was going on inside her pretty little head, and trying to think of a way to earn her trust so she would share her troubles with him.

And even though she was just down the hallway, he found himself missing her company as he played a few games of solitaire while the radio played softly behind him. He'd gotten used to her company in the evenings after Carrie was asleep; their activities were mundane ones, like watching TV or a video, or playing cards or dominoes, but he enjoyed them anyway. It was comforting in a way, knowing he had that time at the end of the day to unwind with Gabby.

It was around eleven o'clock, when he was considering turning in for the night himself, when he heard Carrie first cry out in her sleep. His eyes glanced up from the cards, expecting to see Gabby come rushing out of her room down the hallway to the little girl's, as she always did. In the time they'd been here, Carrie had had more than one nightmare – actually, for a child her age, Jake thought she had too many of them – and Gabby always went to her, even when she was already in bed herself.

But tonight, she didn't appear, not even when Carrie's cries grew louder.

Jake set his cards aside and strode quickly into the little girl's room himself. There was no sense in waking Gabby if she was so tired that her normally

light sleeping habits had deepened, and certainly no sense in letting poor Carrie continue to suffer through her dream.

In the bed, the little girl was thrashing wildly about, the bedclothes twisted around her small, sweat dampened frame. She was crying out, "No, please... no..." over and over again, in a desperate tone that made a chill run down Jake's spine.

He rushed to her side, and gently shook her, said her name. He noticed then that she'd wet the bed in her fright, and knew that now he'd not only have to calm her down, but completely wake her up so he could clean her.

"Come on, baby," he crooned softly. "It's okay. It's just a bad dream, Carrie."

Carrie's eyes had opened and she stared blearily at Jake, as if she somehow didn't really see him. Then, to his surprise, she raised up both doubled fists and began to pound with surprising vigor on his chest.

"Leave me alone!" she cried hoarsely. "Don't hurt me anymore! Just go away and leave me alone!"

Shocked, Jake resisted the urge to restrain her efforts. He accepted the abuse she was misdirecting, all the while calmly telling her, "Carrie, honey, it's me, Jake. I would never hurt you. Not ever..."

Gradually her swinging fists slowed, and a whimpering sound replaced her raw throated cries. Jake gently framed her small face between his large hands then and he tilted her head up towards his face. "Look at me, sweetheart. It's Jake. I'm here to help you, Carrie, not hurt you. Okay?"

She nodded numbly and when he released her, she launched herself into his arms, holding on around his neck as if she was drowning and he was her only way to survive.

"It's okay, pumpkin," Jake whispered as he gently rubbed her hot, damp back through the thin cotton nightshirt. "It was just a bad dream. It's over now. You're safe..."

It seemed to take a while, but Carrie's breathing eventually returned to normal and her grip around Jake's neck slackened to a point where he no longer felt like he had to struggle for his next breath. When he felt her body relaxing, he moved her gently off his lap and said, "We have to get you cleaned up, munchkin. This bed's wet."

Carrie's eyes grew huge and her cheeks flushed with embarrassed color.

"Don't worry about it," he said, his tone deliberately light. He held out his hand to her as he stood up. "Come on, let's get you washed up."

"No..." Carrie began and there was a mulish set to her jaw that Jake had never seen before.

He swept her up onto his hip though and walked with her into the bathroom. Once there he set her down, shut the door, and started running a warm bath.

"No!" Carrie exclaimed again, this time more adamantly, when Jake turned to her and reached for the hem of the nightshirt she wore.

"Carrie," he said, and the word held a slight warning. "Don't give me a hard time here. It'll only be a quick bath and then I'll get those sheets changed and you'll be back in bed."

Before she had a chance to move away from him, as he feared she was preparing to do, Jake grabbed the bottom of her nightgown and tugged it up and over her head. She tried ineffectively to stop the undressing with her arms, but Jake was stronger and managed to tear the cotton shirt from her tiny frame with minimal effort and no pain on Carrie's end.

It was then that he saw why she hadn't wanted him to take the shirt from her body.

The scars, some small others large, appeared at intervals on her small back and buttocks, on her upper arms and thighs. Here there was a small round blotch, like a cigarette burn; there there was a long, ragged scar about two inches long. There was a oblong shaped bruise on her right hip, as if she'd tumbled down a flight of stairs, and several small bruises just beginning to fade on the top of her arm, that almost looked like finger marks.

Bile rose in Jake's throat as his eyes took in the evidence of the abuse this little girl had suffered, despite her efforts to hide the marks with her hands. He heard her sobs now and looked into her face to see the tears coursing down her cheeks.

He squatted down beside her shaking, thin form and gently thumbed away her tears, only to have them replaced by fresh ones.

"It's okay, honey," he whispered brokenly. "You're safe now. Whoever did this to you can't hurt you anymore."

She nodded distractedly. "That's what Mommy says," she whispered back.

Jake smiled. "Your mama's right." He pulled her close then, and held her as tenderly as if she was made of spun glass. He rocked her in his arms for a while, till her tears had ebbed away, leaving the shoulder of his shirt wet in their wake.

When he pulled back from her, he petted the damp hair back from her blotchy face and pressed a kiss on her cheek. Then he helped her sink into the warm bath he had begun earlier, finishing it off now with a generous dose of bubble bath.

Jake sat beside the tub as Carrie washed herself; she was trancelike now, all cried out. In his mind he kept seeing the scars on her tiny body, which were now hidden by the sudsy water. He wondered who was responsible for hurting this child that way; had it been her father? Gabby had said she didn't have a husband, but Carrie had to have a

father out there, somewhere. Was he the secret Gabby was keeping?

One thing was for sure, Jake had scratched the surface of the secret with tonight's sad, sickening discovery. And first thing in the morning, he was going to have some questions for Gabby to answer.

Chapter Nine

Gabby stretched, letting out a loud yawn, as she sleepily walked into the sunny kitchen the following morning. She sniffed appreciatively at the air, catching the wonderful aroma of fresh coffee, and silently thanked Jake for brewing the stuff.

Even though she'd slept like a log the night before, she was still pretty groggy. Groggy enough, in fact, that she didn't even notice Jake sitting at the table until she had poured herself a good sized mug of joe and had taken a hearty swig.

The sober, serious look on Jake Sommerville's face was enough to bring Gabby fully awake within one moment's glance. She forced herself to set the mug down on the table, knowing that her hands had started shaking. Cautiously, she took the chair across from Jake and, hoping her tone was light and that he hadn't learned her secrets while she'd so foolishly been sleeping, said, "Good morning, Jake."

"Morning," he responded quietly, still regarding her with that curious expression that was partway concern, partway puzzlement, and partway suspicion.

Her brow furrowed, she sighed. May as well cut right to the chase... "Is something wrong? You're looking at me kind of funny."

He sighed now too. "I don't know," he said, exasperation in the words. "Last night Carrie had a nightmare..."

"She did?" Gabby interrupted. "I didn't even hear her."

He shrugged. "You were out like a light last night, Gab. I went in to her and managed to calm her down."

"You could have just woken me up," Gabby informed him.

Jake's brows drew together in displeasure at the censure in her tone. "That seemed silly, since you

were obviously tired enough to not wake up on your own as you usually do when she cries out in her sleep. Besides, the kid and I seem to get along all right, and I didn't mind helping out, so I went to her myself." He paused and studied Gabby with hard eyes. "She had wet her bed, though, and I had to clean her up before I could put her back down."

Gabby's eyes closed briefly. If he'd cleaned Carrie up, given her a bath or even just washed her with a wet cloth, he would have seen....

"I saw her scars, Gabby," he continued, finishing her thought. "The bruises and cuts and scars."

Gabby pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose, feeling a sudden headache starting there even though it was only six thirty in the morning and she'd just gotten up.

A pregnant silence stretched between them, nearly tangible in its heaviness. Gabby felt like she couldn't breathe and for a moment she considered just sucking in one last breath and then slipping away when it drained down to nothing. No more lies or secrets to protect, no more worries of being caught and sent to prison, no more nothing, period.

Unfortunately there was a little girl depending on her not to give in to that temptation.

Jake's voice penetrated her swirling thoughts, soft and concerned, but firm with a resolve to know the truth. "Who did that to her, Gabby?" he asked. "Was it her father?"

Gabby winced inwardly. "No, he's dead," she answered, hoping her voice held as little emotion as possible.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Gabby quickly spoke. "He was a bastard."

Jake's eyes studied her a moment, absorbing that information as Gabby sat in the chair, trying not to squirm and wishing she'd kept her mouth

shut. Finally he said, "Well, I know it wasn't you. But who would do such a thing to that child?"

Gabby drew a shuddering breath and willed her fingers away from the bridge her nose, forced her eyes open, and her gaze up to meet Jake's. She said the first thing that popped into her mind, and thank goodness it made some sort of sense.

"Her babysitter."

Actually, Gabby thought belatedly, it was rather ironic of her to blame it on the babysitter, considering the whole story behind the scars. But at least Jake seemed to believe her.

"A babysitter did that?"

Gabby nodded. "I can't really afford the best in child care, not that that's any excuse. I usually get reliable women, though, who are trustworthy. This was a night I got called in to work unexpectedly, and I needed the money. My usual sitter wasn't available but I knew this woman down the street from us who had offered before to watch Carrie. She wasn't a complete stranger to us and had always seemed to like Carrie, but that night... she hurt her. Her and her boyfriend were smoking pot and they... they hurt her."

Gabby was surprised at the ease with which the lies had slid off her tongue. With a feeling of self-revulsion, she wondered just what, exactly, this experience was making her into.

"Did you report her to the police?" Jake demanded angrily.

Gabby nodded her head eagerly. "Yes, as soon as I got back home and discovered what had happened. They're both in jail now."

Jake was shaking his head in disgust. "Not for long enough, I bet."

Gabby shrugged. "You know how the law is..." she said vaguely.

Jake nodded. "Yeah, they never put away the people who really deserve it, do they?" he muttered

as he shoved to his feet and moved to the stove to pour himself another cup of coffee. Gabby felt a moment of promise, that he might one day understand her plight, if she ever did open up to him about it all.

He shook his head. "Poor kid."

Gabby averted her eyes, wishing she could tell him the real story behind Carrie's bruises. He didn't deserve her lies, well intentioned though they might be.

"I'll go check on her," she said quietly.

She could feel his eyes following her as she made her way back towards Carrie's room, and though she wished it was only her imagination, she had a sinking feeling that the earlier suspicion wasn't completely erased from his gaze. He might have believed her story, but he still knew she was keeping something from him.

Later that day found Gabby pulling at her newly cut and highlighted hair between thumb and forefinger as she looked at the short, boyish do in the back of a newly shined copper pot. Her mouth twisted into an unhappy frown as she pushed the unruly locks from one position on her head to another, trying to find one that she was content with.

She was letting out an unhappy sigh when a whisper soft tickle at her now exposed neck made her jump a mile in the air. She was about to turn and wield the pot in her hand on her 'attacker' when she realized it was Jake nuzzling her skin.

Gooseflesh broke out over the column of her neck as his soft lips pressed small kisses along the length of exposed skin. The temptation to give in and turn to molten, mushy woman in his arms was nearly too much for Gabby to resist, especially

when he spanned her jean'd hips with his wide, working man's hands.

Wanting to moan in pleasure, she instead straightened her spine and squared her shoulders, and eventually the sexy cowboy took the hint and stepped back from her person – oh an inch or so. But he didn't look the least bit sheepish when he did, nor did he sound sincere as he said, grinning wolfishly at her the entire time, "Sorry, it was just too tempting..."

Gabby fixed her best glare on Jake, though her knees still felt squishy and she was fairly sure he could still see the gooseflesh on her neck.

He was still grinning at her. "I like this new hairdo, Gab," he said. "Though you might have to take up wearing turtlenecks, even in the summer time, to hide what I might do to that pretty little neck..."

"What are we, in high school?" she grouched, though secretly she enjoyed the picture his words conjured up. She'd never thought she would be the kind of woman who would be turned on by being 'marked' by a man like that, but there was a certain appeal in it for her. Maybe it was just the idea of being marked by this particular man...

Jake ignored her grumpy comment, choosing instead to bug her about the emotion behind it. "What's the matter, Gab? You were frowning pretty fierce while you contemplated your reflection in that pot. Don't you like your hair?"

Gabby wrinkled her nose and made a face, then admitted, "No, not really."

The teasing was gone from his voice, and his eyes were now soft on her face. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's just not me. And, I don't know – don't you think it makes me look like a boy?"

Jake snorted inelegantly, and his eyes bulged out for a minute. "Are you for real?" he demanded.

"Yeah... Don't you think it does?"

Jake took a long, languid look at Gabby, from the new hairdo, down the length of her body all the way to her socked feet, and she suddenly wished she hadn't asked the question. The wolf was back in his look, though this time he wasn't smiling... instead he looked about ready to have her for lunch.

Finally, once every nerve ending on Gabby's body was on fire and buzzing with sensitivity, he drawled, "Darlin', anybody'd have to be blind to mistake *you* for a boy."

Gabby had to look away from the intensity in his eyes and he seemed to realize he'd made her a little uncomfortable with his frank reassurance. He cleared his throat then and diplomatically changed the subject.

"I saw Carrie a few minutes ago, right before I came inside to get cleaned up. She looks almost as cute as you do."

Gabby rolled her eyes at this.

"Now what?" Jake asked, exasperated.

She sighed. "Nothing. It's just that I'm a little too old for 'cute.'"

Now it was Jake who rolled his eyes.

"In my opinion," he started in that no-nonsense don't-argue-with-me-if-you-know-what's-good-for-you tone, "you're never too old for some things. Like being cute. Or necking so hard you get a hickey. Or getting your bottom good and spanked when you need it."

The last was obviously a veiled threat for Gabby to stop knocking herself or else wind up over Jake's knee. She didn't miss the ominous tone there. But it didn't stop her from challenging him with, "Who ever needs that?"

He grinned and stepped back in front of her. He took first one of her arms, then the other, and put them around his neck, then he wrapped his own

around her waist. And very gently tapped the seat of her jeans. "You."

She gave him this 'who, me?' innocent look and he couldn't help but laugh. Then he squeezed her so tightly she felt she couldn't breathe.

"Cute doesn't rule out other things you know," he continued. "Like sexy, which you certainly are. Or beautiful, or attractive, or irresistible...."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture!" Gabby interrupted. "Stop before you give me a big head!"

"I doubt that's possible with you," Jake said with a shake of his head. "But just so we're one hundred percent clear here, Gabriela, in my book, you would be all of those things, and a hell of a lot more, even if you shaved your head bald." He leveled a stern look on her and added, "Got it?"

Gabby swallowed past the lump of emotion in her throat. So what if he was biased? No one had ever said anything as oddly sweet to her in her life. She nodded and this time when he pulled her to him for a squeeze, she hugged him tightly back.

The next few days passed quickly for Gabby, who was more aware of the fact that her time on the ranch was most likely growing more limited. As she dutifully took her cooking lessons from Leigh every day, the time she spent in the house increased while the time she spent helping Jake in the barn or outside diminished. She began to miss the big brute, despite his overbearing, bossy ways.

In the evenings she found herself ever more envious of the time he spent with Carrie, though she despised herself for the petty, childish feelings. Though her own relationship with Jake was growing closer every day, she found that she wanted the dratted man all to herself, no matter how unrealistic or unfair that idea was in reality.

Whenever she wasn't distracted by thoughts of Jake, most of Gabby's attention was fixed on continuing to keep Carrie safe. She became systematically obsessed with the television and radio and made sure that Jake didn't catch so much as a glimpse or a sound bite of news. Conversely, whenever she could, she tried to catch some of the news on her own, when Jake was at town or on an errand, so she could find out how close the New York police were to finding her. So far, they hadn't gotten as far as Montana, though their search was still traveling further west. She prayed every night before bed and every morning upon waking that they would somehow skip over her and eventually give up on ever finding her and Carrie again.

That Sunday morning, Gabby woke earlier than usual, and was surprised as she came out of her bedroom, tying her robe around her waist, that she heard no sounds from the front of the house, announcing Jake's morning routine. There was also no scent of coffee, which by now she had learned was a necessity for the man before he could even start his morning chores. Curious, she backtracked to his bedroom and knocked softly on the closed door. When no answer came, she slowly eased it open and peeked cautiously inside.

The sight of him in bed, totally naked from the waist up and revealed by the sheet that he had shrugged partway off his body made Gabby's heart hammer erratically in her chest and her breath hitch. She stared at him for a few long moments as her body pulsed and hummed with electric awareness and sensitivity. Thank goodness he was still sound asleep, for Lord only knows what kind of outrageous things he would have said had he caught her staring at him like that.

Finally, heat suffused her face at the wanton way she was devouring him with her eyes and she stepped back and shut the door as softly as she had

opened it. She'd let him sleep a while. Lord knew, he needed it with the way he'd been working so hard lately with Bo. Just yesterday alone, she knew, the horse had thrown him off his back five times before he'd given in for the day.

Knowing Jake, he'd want to spank her butt for letting him sleep past his usual wake up time, but this once she figured it was worth a spanking. Sometimes that man didn't know when to say enough was enough and if she had to do it for him this one time, than so be it.

But why, she wondered, as she moved towards Carrie's room to check in on the child, did the idea of getting spanked suddenly make her already warm insides flutter and turn more molten and soft? Strange....

A second surprise was waiting for Gabby as she got to Carrie's room. The door, which was never closed when the little girl slept, was closed now, and opening it revealed a completely empty room.

"Hmmm." Gabby turned towards the front of the house, still moving quietly so as to not wake Jake, but also moving quicker now. Carrie was not in the living room or kitchen, either, where she had hoped she might find her, eating an early morning piece of fruit as she often did.

Gabby glanced out the window at the front lawn and the glider swing on the porch, and discovered both also empty. Behind the wide front yard, the barn loomed tall against the morning sky.

Gabby sighed in maternal disapproval, a hunch about where Carrie was making the muscles in her neck clench.

She exited the house quietly and ran across the still dewy grass, entering the barn quickly by silently, not wanting to spook any of the horses that Carrie might be sneakily visiting, especially not if that horse was Bo. Maybe she just came out to play with the kittens, she thought hopefully...

But no. There she was, the little stinker, standing right in front of the monstrous horse's stall, her little hand held open flat before her, extending a carrot sacrifice to Bo's head.

Gabby held her breath, afraid to let out the loud scream of warning she held in check in fear of startling the horse. In horror, she waited for the large teeth to gobble up the little girl's hand. But instead, the animal gently picked the orange object off Carrie's palm, crunching it as daintily as the fussiest of felines dining at their meal. When he finished the morsel, he shook his head approvingly and nudged her shoulder playfully, making a huff-huff noise. Carrie giggled.

"Carrie Allison!" Gabby hissed then, and Carrie jumped, turning towards her. "What are you doing?" But before the child could get a word in edgewise, she continued, "You promised Jake you wouldn't go near that horse, young lady! He's dangerous and you were told - we were all told - not to mess with him! What if you got hurt!?"

"He won't hurt me," Carrie answered, petting the long nose that bumped against her again, seemingly looking for just that response. "Just look at him. He likes me."

The horse did seem to genuinely like the little girl, Gabby had to admit that. It was the strangest thing. Even as gentle as he was with animals, Jake had been having a devil of a time with him and here he was practically acting like a puppy with Carrie. It didn't make any sense.

"Carrie, you can't be here. If Jake found out, he would be very upset with you for disobeying him and for breaking your promise."

Carrie's lower lip trembled at the thought of disapproval from her hero in any form. She looked longingly at the horse and slowly petted his nose again.

"Jake won't even let me come and see him any more, not even if he comes too," she said sadly.

"That's because the horse is dangerous, honey," Gabby told her gently, though even she was having trouble believing her own words as she watched Bo with the little girl. Maybe he was a dangerous animal, but not with Carrie, for some reason.

Carrie just shook her head.

"Come on. Come inside with me and I'll make you your favorite breakfast."

Carrie sighed, dashing at the tears on her cheeks. "You won't tell Jake, will you?" she asked hopefully.

Gabby closed her eyes briefly. "No. Not as long as you swear not to do this again. Okay?"

Carrie nodded, and then actually rested her cheek against Bo's muzzle for a moment. Gabby felt tears choking her own throat even as her pulse climbed in fear that the unpredictable animal would turn on the child.

Finally, Carrie turned away from Bo and walked over to Gabby. She put her hand inside of Gabby's and let her lead her back towards the house. She only looked back once, to lift her free hand in farewell.

Chapter Ten

As she straightened from putting the chicken casserole in the oven, Gabby paused to look out the window towards the barn where Jake was working cleaning out the stalls. A little smile played across her lips as she thought of the time, a little over two weeks ago now, when he'd made her clean out one of those same stalls. It was easy to smile about it now, but at the time she'd been madder than a wet hen at him for the chore. It was funny how much had already changed between them in such a short amount of time.

Jake's behavior today had been almost comical. They had the entire ranch to themselves as Leigh had taken Carrie swimming for the day at her and Ty's house; ever since the pair had left, Jake had been in and out of the house like a yo-yo. He kept coming up with one excuse after another to come inside and see her. First it had been on the pretense of changing from his hot flannel shirt to a short-sleeved cotton tee shirt. About twenty minutes after that, he claimed he needed a drink of water. A half hour later, he was in to steal a half dozen of the oatmeal cookies Gabby had just baked. The next time it was to grab a pair of work gloves, even though Gabby knew he had at least three or four perfectly good pairs to use out in the barn.

It was actually kind of cute the way he kept coming in to see her. No matter what reason he had, each time he reappeared he also took the time to give her a hug, a kiss on the cheek and a pat on her skirted backside. And each time he did this, he lingered longer with his arms around her. Gabby had a feeling that if he didn't have so much work to do, he would have stayed inside with her all day long. And she knew she would have let him.

It had been nearly an hour, though, since his last trip in and she figured he must have finally

gotten to a point in his work where he really couldn't stop to take a break; either that or the workaholic in him had finally kicked in for the day and guilt tripped him out of taking the unnecessary breathers. Gabby kept looking towards the barn, and she knew she was waiting to see him striding inside to see her; but so far no sign of him.

Well, her own chores were done for now...

A few minutes later, her apron discarded on the countertop by the stove, Gabby was outside in the warm sunshine of the day, humming softly to herself as she walked out to the back of the barn.

Jake was working in the last stall, hosing it out after having cleaned it. He looked up at her with a wide, mischievous grin, and she instantly knew he hadn't been too busy working to come inside to see her. He'd been biding his time, waiting to see if *she* would come to see him. And she'd walked right into his little trap.

"Miss me?" he asked.

Gabby rolled her eyes and leaned against the side wall of the barn. "You're too much," she groaned.

"You know what they say," Jake said, still grinning obnoxiously, "you can never have too much of a good thing..."

Gabby watched him set the hose down. She resisted the urge to kick the seat of his Levi's when he bent slightly at the waist to take up the handles of the full wheelbarrow that stood nearby waiting to be emptied.

"I'll be right back," Jake assured her with a wink before striding off to empty the wheelbarrow.

When Jake came back around the side of the barn, lugging a bale of hay in gloved hands by the wire bindings, Gabby was ready for him with the hose in hand, aimed for his chest. But with the block of hay in front of him at waist level, there wasn't really much of a place to aim for, excepting

maybe his neck and head, and even Gabby wasn't that mean. So her element of surprise went right out the window as he slowed to a stop, taking in her threatening stance, a grin tugging at the corners of his sexy mouth.

Nonchalantly, he placed the hay bale on the ground beside him and then straightened to regard her through playfully stern eyes that twinkled in sharing this game with her.

"Someone's eager to get her little bottom dusted today, I see," he commented casually, as if talking about the forecasted weather for tomorrow. But there was a low, sexy timber to the words that made the sentence into an erotic promise. Gabby felt her blood heat and her face flush when he continued to simply stand there and look at her with that smoldering blue gaze.

"If you know what's good for you, little lady," he drawled lazily, the smile still playing at his generous lips, "you'll just put the hose down and play nice."

It was a dare if Gabby ever heard one. And it certainly wasn't one she was about to pass over. With a wide, mischievous grin, she took one step back and pulled the trigger on the hose back with both hands. A stream of beautiful, clear water sailed through the warm, late June air, arching prettily, until it met squarely with Jake Somerville's wide, muscular chest. Within moments he was soaked, the water splashing back from his body like the little droplets Leigh had taught her to use to test a hot griddle. Sizzle, sizzle...

To his credit, Jake stood there and took it like a trooper. He had his hands on his lean hips, his eyes flashing a laughing fire in Gabby's direction, the entire time she was having her fun. But she was no fool. The second she dropped the hose, she took off and ran for her life.

"You'd better run, girl," she heard him growl from somewhere behind her.

She led him in a fun little chase around the back of the barn, through the vegetable garden, and then circled back around and up through the hallway inside the building, as the horses paused in munching their snacks of grass and hay, tails twitching lazily, to watch the silly humans.

Of course, all things must eventually come to an end. And when you hate running like Gabby did, plus you sort of have this twisted desire of actually wanting to be caught, you give up the fight fairly soon.

"Gotcha!" Jake exclaimed victoriously as he caught her about the middle when she slowed again towards the back of the barn, where this whole thing had started in the first place. He wouldn't believe her when she scoffed and told him she'd let him catch her.

"No! Really!" she insisted, to which he chuckled humorlessly as he carried her, kicking and struggling for show to the bale of hay he'd recently carried over for the clean stall.

"Don't make me add fibbing to your spanking," he threatened silkily as he sat on the sturdy bale and effortlessly tossed her over his lap.

"No! Don't spank me!" Gabby protested, though even to her own ears the words sounded weak.

In answer, his hand bounced off her skirted bottom cheek with a loud POP!

"Oww!" Gabby protested, kicking one foot in a show of temper and pouting over her shoulder at Jake. He grinned back at her and gave her other bottom cheek a matching POP!

"Ouch!"

"Oh, I'm hardly tapping you," Jake scolded, spanking her backside again, alternating cheeks and then landing several stingers in the middle of her bottom. It was true, too. He wasn't spanking her very hard, especially not in comparison to other times he'd taken her over his knee. But a few

moments later, Gabby felt the warmth of the sun as it spilled across her skin when Jake pulled her skirt up onto her back and then rucked her panties down to her knees.

"Hey!" Gabby cried out.

Jake was chuckling openly at her distress. "I like you in skirts, you know, Gab. Certainly makes getting your bottom bare for a spanking a lot easier."

But he'd stopped swatting her, despite his last words. Now his hand was gliding over her bare seat, petting and caressing, massaging, and playfully pinching on occasion. Gabby felt the starch go out of her knees and she found herself lying limply over Jake's lap while he played and manipulated her bottom like a lover.

"You like this, Gab?" he asked huskily.

"Hmmm..."

He chuckled again and resumed spanking her, even gentler now than before. Light, firm swats rained softly down on her skin, more caresses than slaps, barely enough to sting but just enough to blush her bottom pink and make her achy and warm all over.

"And this, honey?" he pressed. "You like this, too?"

"Mmm-hmmm..."

Gabby's face flushed hot as she realized she'd just admitted to liking this spanking! What was wrong with her!? Here she was lying over this man's lap, bare butt to the sky in the middle of the day where anyone could happen to walk in on them, and all she could think about was staying there for as long as he'd let her, for as long as he'd keep doing what he was doing to her...

Unconsciously, she pressed her womanhood against his jeaned leg and moaned as he switched from spanking her to squeezing her cheeks again.

There was a pause then, followed by Jake making a somewhat strangled sound of his own as he repositioned her. He swatted her a few more times, and once again Gabby responded involuntarily by grinding herself intimately against him. She even murmured his name this time.

"Jaake..."

Above her she heard him clear his throat. He sounded a little wheezy. And he'd stopped touching her again. When she looked back at him expectantly, he coughed and said, "Uh, I think you better get up, Gabby."

She was surprised by his words and not a little upset by them.

"Why?" she demanded to know.

He grinned at her, this lopsided boyish grin that made her heart kick at her chest. "Because I can't take having you over my lap any more like this. If you don't move I'm likely to lay you out under me and take you right here."

Gabby felt her eyes round big at his threat and though she heard him laughing at her, she didn't care as she scrambled off his lap. If he'd just done what he'd threatened to, she probably wouldn't have even tried to stop him. But hearing him forewarn her like that engaged her brain and her survival skills kicked in.

Once she was off his lap, she pulled up her panties and straightened her skirt and started to move away but he wouldn't let her. Instead he captured her hand and pulled her towards him again, this time to sit on his lap.

"You know," he said, his lips too close to her own for any measure of comfort. She felt like she'd go cross-eyed from looking at those lips so close to her face. "I don't believe that I've even properly kissed you yet today..."

Gabby met his eyes briefly and felt herself shake her head.

He grinned and framed her face gently with his wide, long-fingered hands. Then his lips met hers and Gabby heard herself sigh with the pleasure of the contact. When his tongue probed teasingly past her teeth to toy and challenge her own in a little erotic dance, gooseflesh prickled out across her neck and arms.

It was a long, lingering kiss that seemed to last forever. Or maybe it was a series of long, lingering kisses. In any event, the pair of them sat together on that bale of hay, kissing in the warm sunshine like two teenagers, long past the time it took for the water on Jake's shirt front to dry.

"Still have that headache?" Jake asked Gabby two days later, after helping her clean up from that evening's supper.

Gabby stopped squeezing the bridge of her nose in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure from her pounding head and looked briefly up at Jake as he paused in his roughhouse play with Carrie. Slowly, she nodded her head, trying to ignore the wooziness she felt from just making that simple move. She was *not* getting sick. Who ever heard of getting a cold in the middle of the summer? It just didn't happen, and so it *wasn't* happening to her. She wasn't getting sick because she couldn't afford to be sick now...

Jake frowned and stepped closer to her in order to lay the back of his large hand to her forehead. The frown deepened as he detected the warmth there. Carrie pressed closer to Gabby as well, her own face a mirror of Jake's.

"You feel pretty warm," he remarked, stating the obvious. "Wait here, I'll get the thermometer."

"No..." Gabby started to argue, but Jake was already walking away from her. She sighed heavily

and slumped back against the cushions of the couch, her arms folded petulantly over her chest.

"Are you getting sick?" Carrie asked worriedly.

"No." Gabby answered adamantly, though the nasal stuffiness of her voice was a dead giveaway to the contrary.

Jake returned quickly and succeeded in stuffing the old-fashioned glass thermometer into her mouth when she opened it to protest that she never ran a fever, not even when she *was* sick – which, she *wasn't*. While she fumed silently with the tube between her lips, he stood over her, looking at his watch for all the world like he thought he was Florence Nightingale, telling her, "Watch your attitude, miss, or next time we'll take your temperature the truly old fashioned way."

Gabby made a face at him while his back was turned. Of all the nasty things to threaten someone with, especially when they weren't feeling well...

Lo and behold, Gabby *was* running a low-grade fever, which had to be a first for her, because she truly never did run a temperature even when she was very sick. Jake made a big fuss over her and insisted she go to bed early and get some extra rest. And of course, when she tried to argue with him on that point all it got her was:

"Don't test me, little girl. Sick or not, fever or no, I won't hesitate to put you over my knee if I have to in order to get you to listen to reason. You need to get your rest. You can either do it like a good girl or you can go to bed with a bottom as warm as your forehead. It's your choice."

Pouting, she had of course given in and allowed him to lead her reluctantly back to her bedroom. After she'd said goodnight to Carrie and changed into her nightgown in the bathroom, she entered her room to see Jake there, turning down her bed.

"I think I can manage to get into bed myself," she told him acidly.

"I'm sure you can, but sometimes when you're sick it's nice to let someone take care of you for a little while. Don't you think?"

Gabby frowned at him. "You just like to play caretaker. That's all."

He shrugged. "Maybe. What's wrong with that?"

"I'm not a baby, that's what," Gabby grouched as she flopped inelegantly onto the mattress. She had to hold back a sigh of pleasure at the sensation of lying down. It did feel good. "I don't need a keeper."

She thought she heard him snort softly, but she couldn't be sure.

"You will make sure Carrie takes her bath, though, right?" she asked sleepily a few moments later.

"Yes, ma'am." Jake pulled the sheet and thin summer blanket up over her and tucked the covers around her body. Then he leaned over her and filled her breathing area with his wonderful, unique scent as he pressed a warm kiss on her forehead. "Sweet dreams, Gabriela."

Gabby's dreams these days were anything but sweet. They were always filled with visions of the New York police finally catching up to her and taking Carrie away. What followed then for the little girl was the stuff of nightmares.

When she woke a few hours after Jake had tucked her in for the night, sweating from more than just the fever she was running, she was out of breath and on the verge of a scream. She lay for a few heart stopping moments in the damp bed, gathering her nerves together before trusting herself to get out of the bed and not have her knees give out on her.

It was dark in the house now save the shaft of light that fell down the hallway from the kitchen.

She paused at Carrie's door to peek in and saw that the little girl was sleeping soundly. She had to smile then as she continued on to the front of the house. Jake was good with the kid.

When she entered the kitchen she found him sitting at the table with the radio turned down low and a game of solitaire set out in front of him. He smiled up at her.

"There's some ice cream from Tanner Brothers' in the freezer for you, if you're feeling better," he said softly. "I took Carrie out for a cone while you were sleeping earlier."

Gabby's steps froze and suddenly she wasn't so sure she wasn't still caught in one of her nightmares.

"You... took Carrie *out* for ice cream?" she asked cautiously.

Jake's brow furrowed at the mild censure in her voice. "Yeah. You remember, Tanners' has the best around."

"But... there was a half gallon of ice cream here, in the freezer," she pressed.

He shrugged. "It's not the same. Besides, they have the cows right there at the farm and I took her over to pet them."

Gabby pressed her eyes closed briefly at his words. God, there had to have been dozens of people at the Tanners Dairy Farm and Ice Cream Stand, there always was in the summertime! What if the wrong person – or people – had noticed and recognized Carrie?!

"I really wish you would ask me before you just take Carrie places," Gabby snapped, her temper getting the best of her because she was so scared and frustrated with her situation. She knew in her heart that Jake's intentions had been good, but he may have inadvertently just put Carrie in a lot of danger by his good deed. Of course, it was her own fault for not being honest with him about

everything, but she still hadn't figured out how to tell him the truth and not have him calling the police on her a second later.

Jake's hands abandoned the game before him as he crossed his arms over his chest. His chin tucked down low to his chest as he regarded her with stormy eyes.

"I only wanted to buy the kid an ice cream cone, Gabriela," he said stonily. "Are you really that childish that you're jealous of your own daughter going out for an ice cream with me?"

Gabby wished he hadn't zeroed in on that. It would have been so much easier to stay mad at him if he hadn't brought up her own petty envy of his relationship with Carrie. It was something she always felt guilty about, though she didn't know how to end the childish feelings.

He didn't give her an opportunity to answer his question. "You're lucky you're sick, lady, because if you weren't..."

Gabby held out her hand to stop him, nodding her head. "I know, cowboy, I know. My ass would be grass..."

"Like you cannot even believe," he affirmed. He stared at her in silence for a few long, agonizing moments while Gabby tried not to squirm. When he spoke again, his tone was much softer than before. "You know, Gab, no matter how much I like Carrie or enjoy spending time with her, I still like you and enjoy being with you just as much. There's no favorites here or anything. I love the two of you. And I'd be a hell of a miserable guy if you weren't here in my life anymore."

Gabby sniffed as his unexpected words brought tears to her eyes. She blinked rapidly to try to clear them away, but a few escaped her and trailed down her cheek.

"Come here, you little brat," he encouraged with a smile and wide, open arms. Gabby didn't hesitate

to let him envelope her in a warm hug. She wished it were possible to stay within that embrace forever, safe and sound and loved. Loved... He'd said he loved her, her and Carrie...

"What are all these tears for, huh?" Jake brushed at the new tears that fell unchecked down her cheeks, smiling gently into her face.

"I don't know," Gabby said hoarsely. "I must be emotional with this cold or whatever it is..."

Jake chuckled and hugged her tighter. "That reminds me. While I was in town, I stopped at my doctor's and made you an appointment to see him tomorrow morning. And don't even start to argue with me about it, because if I have to drag you there by the hair, you *will* go and see the man, Gabby."

Gabby swallowed her objections. She didn't have the strength to argue anyway. She'd worry about the doctor's appointment tomorrow. She'd worry about everything else tomorrow. For right now all she wanted to think about was being held and loved by this man. Because if her intuition was correct, tomorrow could turn out to be her last day with him...

Chapter Eleven

After much argument and a lot promises on Gabby's part, Jake finally relented and agreed to let her go into town to see the doctor the next morning on her own. But it was clear that he didn't like the idea.

"What if you start feeling worse while you're there?" he asked worriedly.

Gabby resisted the urge to roll her eyes at his mothering. "I'll be fine, Jake," she insisted, wincing inwardly at the way her voice had worsened just overnight, becoming even more hoarse. "It's only a cold I have, not pneumonia."

He studied her thoughtfully for a few moments. "I'm not so sure it's just a cold..."

Now Gabby did roll her eyes. "Believe me, Jake, I'd know if it was something worse! I wouldn't even be going to the doctor if you weren't making such a big deal over it!"

His blue gaze narrowed at her words. "You'll get your little butt into that doctor's office, if you know what's good for you, Gabriela," he growled.

Gabby pressed her eyes closed briefly, praying for patience. In one ill-advised sentence, she'd just jeopardized being able to go alone, something she'd worked on getting him to agree to all morning. "I'm going to, Jake," she said. She made herself meet his eyes. "I promise."

His eyes were still narrowed at her skeptically. "You'd better not be fibbing to me, Gab. Did my sister ever relay to you what happens to fibbers in this family?"

Gabby couldn't decide which feeling to go with as she heard that question – frustrated anger, for what was obviously about to be yet another spanking threat from this man; or giddy happiness that he now considered her part of his family.

"Knowing you," she answered him slowly, "it's probably a spanking."

"A *switching*, to be exact," Jake confirmed and his eyes held a solemn, serious promise in their blue depths. Gabby found herself looking away from his gaze, only to have him tip her chin up with one lean finger, forcing her to make eye contact. "Followed by a good mouth soaping. Believe me, darlin', you do not want to test me on this. You eat your breakfast, and then get your little tail to the doctor like you said. Understand?"

When he released her chin, Gabby swallowed a bite of toast that suddenly tasted like ash in her mouth. The prospect of having her mouth washed out with soap, along with her bottom roasted by a switch, was a bit more daunting than just a regular spanking threat would be. "Yes, sir," she grumbled.

Jake fixed her with one more steely glare of warning, then wandered out of the room.

While he was outside feeding the horses, Gabby found the number to the doctor in his telephone book by the phone and called to cancel the appointment. Although she realized she really was pretty sick and ought to see a doctor, there simply was no way she was going to keep that appointment and chance being recognized in town by someone, especially after last night when Carrie may have been spotted.

After that, she hurried Carrie along with her bowl of cereal and then got the child dressed. She also wasn't about to leave the little girl behind while she pretended to go to her appointment. With her luck, she'd come back to the ranch to find the place swarming with cops and it would be too late to get Carrie safely away.

When the two of them left the house a half hour later, Jake looked up from where he was working by the corral. Gabby resisted the urge to smile, seeing the frustration in his eyes. Bo's owners, who lived in

California, had asked him to send them videotapes of his training sessions with their horse, so that they could see the progress that was being made. He'd had a heck of a time hooking up the video camera at the top of one barn wall yesterday afternoon, and from the looks of things he was now having difficulty figuring out how to get it focused on the corral.

"Need some help?" Gabby couldn't resist asking. He frowned fiercely at her as she came over to him and studied the contraption that had him so befuddled. She reached up on tiptoes, stretching to tilt the camera first one way, and then another, before finding the right angle, and gave him a triumphant little smile. "There you go."

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"You do know how to turn this on, right?" she pressed further, still grinning at him.

"Yeah, I can manage from here." His eyes could have burned holes through her.

"Okay, then, I guess we're off."

"Here." He held out his cell phone. "Take this with you. In case you're feeling poorly later. Give me or Leigh a call and we can come get you."

Gabby accepted the phone and met his eyes. She smiled gently at him, seeing the genuine concern in his gaze. She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek, wanting more but not wishing to give him her cold. "Thanks, cowboy. Don't worry too much, okay?"

He nodded curtly. As he tossed her a set of keys to one of the trucks, he glanced at Carrie. "You know how to call 911 if mommy needs help, right, kiddo?"

"Oh, Lord..." Gabby groaned.

It was a nice morning to be out for a drive, though Gabby was so preoccupied with everything

going on that the sunny blue sky was lost on her as she maneuvered Jake's pickup around back road after back road in an effort to kill some time. Carrie watched the passing farmland and houses, and the birds that soared high above them in the cloudless sky in a quiet that was abnormal even for her. The little girl knew something wasn't right, just from the way Gabby was acting. And though Gabby wanted to comfort her and assure her that everything was fine, the truth was that she didn't know for sure that it was. The reassuring words just wouldn't make their way past the lump of fear that had formed in her throat the previous night when Jake had first told her about his trip to Tanner Brothers with Carrie.

Gabby forced her thoughts away from that, and the first thing that popped into her mind to replace it was how Jake had promised her a switching if he found out she was lying to him about going to the doctor's. She thought of all the lies she'd told him since she'd come back for Leigh's wedding, of all the secrets she'd been keeping as well, which was surely the same thing as lying in his eyes. Just the thought of all those lies and secrets made the skin on her bottom crawl.

But then again, once the truth finally did come out – she no longer thought of it as "if", but "when" it came out – she would either be in jail or on the run again with Carrie, and either way she would be escaping any retribution Jake had planned for her. Somehow, though, this knowledge wasn't a comfort to her at all. Answering to Jake was one thing, answering to the police and a court of law was something else entirely. There was a very big part of her that wished that all she'd have to deal with at the end of this mess was a spanking from Jake...

When Gabby pulled back into the driveway at the ranch an hour and a half later, Leigh's car was already there. She was relieved that her friend was there early for their daily visit and cooking lesson. She needed her advice about what to do now that there was a good chance someone had seen Carrie last night, and having her there would be a good distraction from the questions Jake was sure to ask about the doctor's visit she was supposed to have gone to.

But as soon as Carrie and Gabby entered the house and saw Jake and Leigh standing nearly toe to toe in the living room, Gabby knew that the least of her worries was going to be any questions Jake could have pressed her with about the nonexistent doctor's visit. Behind the brother and sister the television was on, showing a CNN feature and as her eyes took this in, Gabby saw her own picture come up on the screen.

He knew, then, she thought with a sinking feeling in the pit of her belly. Her gaze swept past the images on the screen and came back to take in Leigh's flushed face, Jake's stony features, his hands on his hips. They'd obviously been having a heated discussion before she and Carrie had come into the room, and Gabby knew exactly what the topic had been.

Her best friend looked away from Jake then and her gaze came to rest on Gabby. The sympathy in her red-rimmed eyes was almost a tangible thing. She sniffled delicately, and said, "You're going to Tyler's cabin."

Those five words confirmed what Gabby had already guessed: The police knew where she and Carrie were, and were on their way now. A few days after Leigh had come back from her honeymoon, she had convinced Gabby to let her make her husband's secluded wooded hunting cabin ready should she and Carrie need a place to hide out if the

police picked up on their whereabouts. Apparently that time had come.

Twin tears had welled up in the corners of Leigh's eyes and were now trailing down her cheeks. She swiped at them distractedly and glanced meaningfully at her brother, who still stood like a silent, dark thundercloud in the middle of the room. "I'll get the bag we packed," she said, referring to the suitcase of bare essentials they had put together that same afternoon a few days ago. With the excessive amount of clothing Jake had bought Carrie and Gabby when they'd first come to stay with him in early June, there'd been more than enough that they could take some with them and still not alert the police that an escape had been planned. Gabby had wanted to be sure that in the event that they had to flee, Leigh and Jake could pretend that they hadn't known the truth about her situation. The last thing she wanted was for her friends to be in trouble with the law for her own poor decisions.

"Come on, Carrie, come help me, okay?" Leigh asked, holding out her hand to the child. Carrie looked questioningly at Gabby, then at Jake, and then up at Leigh. She finally put her tiny hand into Leigh's and let her lead her from the room.

Gabby took a deep breath, released it slowly, and made herself look at her Jake. He looked like he was barely controlling his temper. She swallowed past the lump of cowardice in her throat and made herself speak. "Did Leigh tell you the story?"

He nodded curtly. "She told me what you had told her," he answered in clipped tones. "I got a phone call from the sheriff right after I came across the story about you on the news; apparently someone must have recognized Carrie last night and reported having seen her with me. I told him that you had gone into town, which I guess is why they haven't shown up here yet, though I don't imagine

that you have a lot of time left before they do." He stared at her with hard eyes. "When Leigh came in, I told her about the phone call, and she saw the news program still on. She told me that you'd been Carrie's nanny in New York, and that her father was abusive to her. And that that's why you took her."

Gabby nodded. "That's the truth."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he surprised her by asking.

Gabby blinked. "I wasn't sure I could trust you not to go to the police. Carrie's father is a very wealthy man with a lot of connections. And wherever he doesn't have a connection, he buys one. I tried going to the police three separate times in New York, and it got me nowhere. All that came of it was that he fired me because he knew I knew what he was doing to her. And then I wasn't even there in the house to try to help her."

There was only one word to describe Jake's expression: hurt. He studied Gabby in silence for a few minutes, then said softly, "I'm sorry you felt like you couldn't trust me..."

"I wanted to, Jake," she assured him, hesitantly bridging the distance between them and looking up into his face eagerly. "But I know how you are about doing the right thing. And I was scared to death of Carrie falling back into her father's hands, even by an act that was done based on your good intentions. Can you understand that?"

"What I understand is that all this time you've been lying to me. Every day. Am I right or wrong?"

Gabby sighed. She heard Leigh and Carrie's footsteps returning down the hall and she was grateful that they would soon be on their way. "You're right."

He nodded curtly. "Good. Remember that, sweetheart. We have a long talk ahead of us in the future about it."

Gabby squeezed her eyes shut at the sudden swell of tears that pressed against them. She wanted to scream at him that there was no future for them now, didn't he see that? Stubborn man! What future did she have for anything, with anyone...?

But Leigh had reappeared at the doorway, suitcase in one hand and the map and directions to the cabin that she'd previously written up in the other. Carrie stood silently beside her, gnawing on her bottom lip and looking anxiously from one adult to the next.

Jake took a hold of Gabby's elbow then and firmly tugged her along beside him, out the front door and down to the old work truck she'd used that morning. He took the suitcase from his sister and threw it in the bed of the truck as Leigh embraced her friend and told her, amid her own freely running tears, not to worry about a thing, because she and Jake would make sure that her tracks were well covered.

Jake picked Carrie up and hugged her hard against him, and Gabby watched over Leigh's shoulder as the little girl's shoulders shook with her sobs. Jake was whispering something to her that Gabby couldn't hear, but whatever it was seemed to quiet the child. He reached into the cab of the truck, stretching across the seat to buckle Carrie onto the bench, tweaking her nose once last time as he gave her a final wink.

Then he turned to Gabby, and she was relieved to see that some of the hard edge had gone from his gaze. He swept aside a few stray wisps of her hair with his hand and cupped her cheek tenderly as he gazed at her, as if drinking in her image to savor for later. Finally, he pulled her tight against him, nearly crushing the air from her lungs in the strength of his embrace, then brought his lips down onto hers in a crashing kiss of possession and

implacable custody. Gabby whimpered beneath his tender punishment, feeling his tenure as surely as each breath that she drew into her lungs. When he finally drew back from her, it was to stare down at her with a look fit to brand her as surely as that kiss had. She'd been foolish, she realized as she stood there about to flee once again from the law, to think that she could have anything but a lasting relationship with this serious, driven man. She felt her soul had been marked by him, and she just knew that the next time she looked at herself in the mirror, that every time she did so from now on, she would see his insignia just as if he'd tattooed it right across her chest, over her heart.

He had to give her a little nudge to break the spell of that branding kiss. "Remember what I said," he told her then, his voice a low, rumbling threat of a promise. "When I see you again, we have a long talk ahead of us about lies."

A shiver danced down Gabby's spine at his silky words, but at the same time she recognized the part of her that seized on his promise, that cherished just the thought of seeing him again, even if it meant a painful switching as part of the bargain. She nodded her head, tucking the words he'd spoken into a place in her heart where she could pull them out in the days to come when she was sure to need them.

He gave her a healthy swat then on her blue-jeaned bottom, and prodded her along with a bossy, "Now, Git!"

Gabby climbed into the truck and made herself look straight ahead through the windshield as Jake closed the door behind her. Leigh handed her the directions and a sealed envelope, then leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"This had better not be money, Leigh," Gabby began.

Leigh rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't think of insulting your pride in such a way, Gab. Just take it please. Don't argue with me about it now. You don't have the time."

Gabby nodded reluctantly. She lifted her hand in farewell as Leigh called out her goodbyes and Jake gave her a few last minute words of advice about hiding the car around back when they got to the cabin, and about staying indoors as much as possible. When there was nothing left to be said, a stillness fell over everyone, and she put the truck into gear and dared one last look at her best friend and the man she was falling in love with.

"See you," he said. She nodded, and then forced her eyes away. She backed out of the driveway and pulled out onto the highway in the opposite direction of town, glancing at the handwritten directions to the cabin that Leigh had given her.

Carrie had turned around in her seat to watch their fading friends and the house they had come to think of as home in the rear windshield. She sniffled quietly and rubbed her eyes on the sleeve of her tee shirt.

Gabby tugged gently on the back of the little girl's shirt and managed to get her turned back around in her seat. "It's okay, sweetie," she reassured her. "You heard Jake. We'll see them again."

Carrie looked at her with wide eyes, the desire to believe her words painfully clear. Gabby patted her knee and turned on the radio, praying she hadn't just made things worse by getting Carrie's hopes up for something that might not really come to pass; praying for herself and for Carrie that today wasn't the last day they would ever see Jake Somerville or Leigh Doyle.

Chapter Twelve

"Are you mad at her?" Leigh asked as she and Jake watched Gabby and Carrie drive away. "At me?"

Jake looked at his sister, and resisted the urge to tousle her hair the way he always had when she was little. She reminded him so much at that moment of the little girl she'd been when he'd first taken guardianship of her; how many times over the years had she asked him that question when she'd gotten herself in trouble?

He looped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to press a kiss onto the crown of her head. He sighed. "I'm not mad," he said, which was always the answer he gave; he thought she might remember it by now. A version of the second part of the answer followed: "But I am disappointed that you two weren't honest with me."

Leigh kept her head tucked close under Jake's chin, where she was safe from having to meet his eyes. And she looked at the passing ground beneath her feet as he steered her towards the house. "She was so afraid to tell you. Especially in the beginning..."

Jake nodded. "I understand that. But I still wish you guys had told me." He glanced down at his sister then. "Have you shared any of this with Ty?"

He felt her body stiffen and he knew her answer by that reaction alone. But he waited for her to speak anyway.

It took her a moment. Then she finally admitted, in a quiet voice, like she hoped she might not be heard, "No, I haven't told him about it."

"Mm-hm." Jake halted their progress towards the house and turned to his sister. There was disapproval in his gaze that was nearly tangible. Leigh felt she could see it even though she wasn't looking at him. But Jake's days of disciplining his

sister were over. She had a husband now to correct her behavior in situations like this one, and Jake knew that. But, he did tip her chin up with one hand and made a point of making eye contact with her. "You will do so today, though, isn't that correct, Miss?"

Leigh swallowed hard and fidgeted under his gaze. He tapped her chin with his index finger and she slowly nodded, her eyes pressed closed in dread. "Yeah, I will. I promise."

Jake held her gaze a few moments longer just so she knew he meant business on the issue. Then he nodded and once again turned with her to the house. "Okay, come on. We ought to get our stories straight before the police show up..."

At that moment, the sound of approaching vehicles could be heard coming up from the road. When they turned, their suspicions were confirmed that the police had arrived; all three of the little town's squad cars were pulling into the driveway. Jake let out a weary breath.

"Too late," Leigh whispered. "The posse's already here."

Jake squeezed her hand. "Just let me do the talking and stick close by. Follow my lead. Act upset, like you just found out about the story. It probably wouldn't hurt if you could turn the water works on, too."

Leigh nodded. Acting upset was easy. And when she thought of all that little Carrie would go through if she was to wind up back in her father's clutches, the tears came. It wasn't hard to keep them going; all she had to do was think of her impending conversation with her husband that night, and they continued to fall unchecked down her face.

It was strange watching the deputies of Stillwater County's sheriff's office – all three of them

– as they searched the house and outbuildings at the ranch. Sort of like watching a movie, except this was real. Horribly real.

What was even stranger was that both Jake and Leigh knew all three men, had grown up with them in the small town. Jake had played football in high school with the sheriff, Adam Sinclair. Leigh had dated Denny Loux, one of the deputies. And Jake had helped out with Thom Dryfuss's pony when he first bought her for his little girl.

It was hard lying to these men, men who were neighbors, friends. Not to mention police officers. Leigh and Jake knew that not only were they breaking rules of friendship by withholding what they knew about Gabby's whereabouts, they were also getting themselves in deeper trouble with the law, as well. But they did it, because it was for Gabby and Carrie.

It still made Jake sick to his stomach, though. He hated the taste of a lie on his tongue.

"So she never actually told you she was the little girl's mother?" Adam asked, making notes in a small spiral bound notebook after the search had proved what Leigh and Jake had claimed from the start – that Gabby wasn't there.

"No, we just assumed that was the case." Jake rubbed his hand absently down Leigh's back, helping her with her role as the distraught, weepy friend. "She never told us any differently."

"And you say you saw bruises on Carrie?" Denny's eyes squinted at Jake.

"That's right. Scars and bruises and cuts. I asked Gabby about them, and she told me it was Carrie's father that had done that to her."

Denny nodded silently, his face a mask of emotion. He gave no reaction whatsoever to show if any of these allegations about abuse had ever been mentioned before.

"And you last saw them this morning?" Thom queried.

Again Jake nodded. "Yeah, Gabby has had a cold or something the past two days and I insisted she go to see my doctor and get checked out. She took Carrie with her."

"Your doctor's office said she called and canceled the appointment this morning around 9 o'clock."

The surprise on Jake's face was genuine, as he hadn't known that little fact. Though he supposed he shouldn't have been surprised, knowing what he did now and understanding how Gabby'd been trying to hide out the past few weeks to avoid being recognized. Still, when he got a hold of that little lady again....

"I didn't know that. She left here at around 9:15 and the appointment was for 10. I assumed she was going there."

"And neither of you has seen her since then? Or heard from her over the telephone?" Adam pressed, his solemn gaze jumping from Jake's face to Leigh's.

"No." Jake answered, being careful to keep his eyes level with Adam's. His stomach flip-flopped queasily. Gabby shook her head 'no' and sniffled, wiping at the tears that stained her face. She was doing a good job of playing the hurt, betrayed friend; Jake had to hand it to her. Though he suspected that the majority of those tears came from the certain knowledge of what fate awaited her at home tonight once she shared with Tyler all she'd been keeping from him.

Adam sighed and made a few more final notes in his book. They'd already been over these and what seemed like a hundred other questions and Jake hoped this was going to be the end of the interrogation. He normally had a good set of nerves, but he didn't honestly think he could take much more of this. Plus, the sooner this was over, the

sooner he could start working on an idea of help Gabby and Carrie.

"I'm sorry to have to put you both through this," Adam said as he snapped the notebook closed and tucked it into his front shirt pocket. "I know you were duped by Miss. Hoyt. You should know that Alexander Zobel, Carrie's father, is on his way here as we speak with his private investigator to look into this himself. I have a feeling he will be by on his own, wanting to talk to you both himself."

Jake nodded agreeably. "That's fine," he said, barely managing to squeeze the words out without gritting his teeth. How was he going to face Carrie's father, knowing all that he'd done to that child, having seen it all with his own eyes, and not kill the bastard with his bare hands? "We don't have anything to hide. He's welcome to come and talk to us when he gets into town."

"Sure, we'll help anyway we can," Leigh agreed.

Adam and his men nodded. "I'll relay that message to him when I see him. He's supposed to be checking in with me when his flight gets in, at around 4pm. I'm sure he'll appreciate your cooperation."

I wonder if he'd appreciate my fist in his face, Jake thought as he stood there with a plastered smile on his face, waving the men off in their patrol cars.

Leigh sagged up against her brother once they were out of sight. "That was awful," she whispered wearily.

Jake kissed the crown of her head and hugged her briefly. He sensed she needed the support and the moment of closeness, knowing what she still had to go home and face yet today.

"Hang in there, kiddo," he said with a soft smile when she stood tall again and took in a deep breath. Leigh nodded and reached up on tiptoe to kiss his stubbly cheek.

"I love you," she said.

"Me too."

"Tomorrow, I'll come by and we can talk about a plan to help Gabby and Carrie."

Jake nodded. "Deal." He squeezed her hand. "Good luck with your husband."

Leigh made a fussy face. "Thanks. I'm gonna need it."

After watching his sister drive away, Jake went inside the empty farmhouse and sat with a tired sigh at the kitchen table. Everywhere he looked he saw reminders of Carrie and Gabby. But they were missing. And there was an oppressive loneliness in his heart.

It was nearly dusk by the time Gabby made it to Ty's cabin. She drove right past the hidden driveway three times before she finally spotted the small marked stone Leigh had told her to look for. The house was completely hidden from view from the road by a dense cropping of trees, but she still followed Jake's advice by driving around and parking the truck behind the cabin.

She roused Carrie then from the nap she was taking, not wanting the child to wake up in a strange place and be frightened.

"Come on, honey, we're here."

Gabby grabbed their suitcase from the back of the truck and tucked the envelope Leigh had given her in her pocket. She opened the back door to the cabin with the key her friend had given her and she and Carrie went inside.

The inside was surprisingly big, larger than she had expected from looking at the building outside. It was warmly decorated and immediately Gabby felt at home in the cozy rooms. It wouldn't be so bad staying here, she knew almost immediately.

She took their suitcase to one of the two bedrooms and then got Carrie a requested drink of water from the tap. While she quenched her thirst, Gabby opened the letter Leigh had given her. It read:

Dear Gabby,

If you are reading this, then the worst has happened. I want you to know that Jake and Ty and I will do everything we can to protect you and Carrie.

The shelves and freezer are pretty well stocked, but I promise to find a way to get more supplies to you should your stay go longer than I was able to plan for. I also hid some coloring books, videos and games for Carrie in the guest bedroom closet. There's some books there, too, for you to read and pass the time.

Here's hoping for the best outcome. I hope to be seeing you soon, and that it will be on happy terms.

*All my love,
Leigh*

Gabby refolded the missive with a sigh, blinking at tears.

"Aunt Leigh thought of everything," she said a few moments later as she finished looking through the cupboards, fridge and freezer at the jam-packed supplies. She turned to where Carrie sat solemnly at the kitchen table, staring silently at her water glass. She found a smile somewhere in the recesses of her heart and pasted it on her face. "How would you like to help me with supper?"

Normally Carrie loved to help out in the kitchen, but today her reaction was anything but enthusiastic. "Okay," she whispered quietly.

"Great!" Gabby exclaimed, tugging the little girl up from her chair. She put an arm about her and squeezed her around the shoulders, fighting back a sudden urge to sit down and cry her eyes out. "What would you like, kiddo, hot dogs and macaroni or spaghetti and meatballs?"

When Leigh got home there was a message on the machine from Ty saying he would be home late from work, probably not until six or so.

It figures, she thought. Now she'd have even longer to wait before she could come clean to him about what she'd been up to. It was only four o'clock now, which meant she'd have two hours to brood and worry over her confession and Ty's inevitable disappointment.

She tried to avoid thinking about the upcoming unpleasantness by keeping herself busy. She started a load of laundry, put away the dishes from the dishwasher and straightened the house. She pulled a casserole from the freezer at about five and preheated the oven, then made a salad to go along with it.

But despite her efforts to distract herself with these activities, her stomach was alive with butterflies by 5:30 anyway.

With a sigh, Leigh put the casserole into the oven and set the timer for one hour. Then she tried to figure out what to do with herself till her husband came home.

Her mind was blank, except for one thing. And even though she hated that one idea that whispered through her mind more than any other activity she could think of, she also knew it would be the best thing she could do, especially considering the circumstances. It was exactly what Ty would want her to do, exactly what he would likely have her do

once he got home and she told him about everything she'd been keeping from him.

And so it was that Leigh took herself up to their bedroom, folded down the blinds, closed the heavy drapes, and stripped down to her tee shirt, socks, and panties. Then she stood herself in the corner between the two walls farthest from the window. As she pressed her nose into the tiny space where the two walls met, she thought of all the secrets she'd kept from her husband lately. And though she was sorry that she was going to disappoint him when she told him about it, she also wasn't sorry for protecting her friend. That made it hard to reconcile a way to make amends with Ty for her secrecy.

It was this confusion that brought back the tears from earlier in the day.

And that was how, and where, Ty found his new bride when he came in the house about twenty minutes later.

When Ty saw his wife standing there all alone in the corner of the room, her back stiffened from when she'd heard him enter the room behind her, he had to smile a little. So, he thought, she's finally decided to come clean...

He was pleased to see that she'd taken the first step in the redemption process; she'd never placed herself in the corner before. In fact, he usually had to spank her the entire way there and then threaten her with a much more severe punishment if she didn't stay put the amount of time he required.

Then he noticed the almost imperceptible shaking of her shoulders and the way her head hung down low, nearly to her chin. And he knew then that she was crying.

That, too, was a first. She'd never cried before a spanking in the past – only afterwards.

His heart thudded painfully in his chest as he approached her. Instinctively, his arms came around her waist from behind and he drew her back tight against his chest. He heard her sharp intake of breath, surprised by the sudden embrace; she obviously hadn't been expecting that from him right then.

"Look what I've got here," he whispered in her ear, kissing her cheek, and tasting the salty evidence of her tears there. "You waiting here to tell me something special, angel?"

A sob choked its way from Leigh's chest as she nodded her head. Ty briefly tightened his arms around her middle, before turning her gently around to face him. With his thumbs he wiped at her tears and then he framed her face with his hands, pressing a warm kiss onto her lips.

When he pulled back from her he smiled reassuringly, sweeping back the stray hairs she had stuck to her damp cheeks. Then he took her hand, squeezed it, and tugged her along beside him over to the bed. He sat her down on his knee, letting her curl in close to his body, her face tucked in under his chin, and then encouraged her with: "All right, baby. Tell me all about it."

It took a while for Leigh to get all the words out. And then there were more tears.

Through it all her husband held her and stroked her back, rocked her and soothed her with soft words and endearments. She cried on his shoulder until her tears were dried up.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before," she finally said in a voice hoarse from crying. "Gabby was so afraid to tell anyone and I was so scared for her I agreed to keep her secret."

Ty rested his chin lightly on his wife's head and considered her words briefly. "You *could* have told me," he corrected her gently, "you *chose* not to. There is a big difference between the two, Leigh."

Leigh swallowed past the lump in her throat. She'd known that was how he would see things. "You're right," she acknowledged quietly.

Ty sat back and shifted in his seat in order to tip Leigh's chin up so she had to meet his gaze. "How can we have trust in our marriage if you kept secrets like this from me? How can I help and support you if you don't let me in when you need me?"

Leigh sighed. "I don't know...I guess we can't, you can't..."

He nodded. He studied his sad wife a moment. "I know she's your best friend and you felt you had to protect her. I admire you for doing that. But no matter what the circumstances, there is never *any* excuse for lying to me or keeping secrets. Understand?"

Leigh nodded. "I'm sorry."

"I know." Ty sighed. "And I am glad you finally decided to tell me. I've known the truth for about a week now, you know." He resisted the urge to smile as Leigh's eyes grew wide at that news. "I saw a story in the paper at work about Gabby and with the skittish way you were acting and the mysterious way the paper kept disappearing at home, I put two and two together..."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Leigh asked, incredulous.

"Because I wanted you to tell me what was going on yourself. And, thankfully, now you have. I'm proud of you for that. I'm sure it wasn't easy."

"Why... why didn't you go to the police when you recognized Gabby from the paper?"

He shrugged. "I knew she wasn't the harmful person they were pegging her as. And I knew you wouldn't protect her unless she was innocent."

"They found her anyway. Jake and I were barely able to get her and Carrie out of town before the police showed up at the ranch today."

"Did you send them up to the cabin?" Ty guessed.

Leigh nodded. She looked hopefully at her husband. "Is that all right?"

He smiled and passed a hand lovingly over her long blond hair. "Yes, sugar. It's fine."

"Good." She looked away, her cheeks tinged pink. "Should I... should I get the paddle now?"

He sighed deeply, and then nodded. He watched her stand and slowly move away from him to retrieve the oval shaped oak paddle from its peg just inside their walk in closet. When she returned, she handed him the paddle with her eyes trained on the carpet, then turned her back to him and bent at the waist to push her shorts and panties down to her ankles.

Ty forced himself to focus at the task at hand, and to ignore the throb of desire in his pants at the swell of womanly flesh now before him. He stood up behind his wife and gently laid a hand to the small of her back.

"Bend over and hold onto your ankles, honey," he encouraged. He heard Leigh's soft sigh of resignation, and recalled how she hated this position, with no lap to support her, no human anchor to hold onto except herself. It was ironic, really, he thought, for her to be in this position for punishment. If she'd only turned to him for support with this problem she wouldn't have found herself here at all.

He helped her stay in position by keeping his hand centered on the small of her back. And he made the paddling as quick as possible, though it was tough because she danced around and fidgeted so much from the terrible sting of the hard, unforgiving wood.

Twenty fiery swats fell in rapid succession across her bottom, alternating from one cheek to another and quickly turning her skin from cream to bright

pink. Another twenty brought a full magenta blush across both her buttocks. And the final twenty, all given to the center of her backside, made the picture complete, leaving Leigh's skin a shiny apple red and her face streaked with tears.

Though he wanted to pull his wife into his arms, Ty forced himself to complete the ritual by helping her to the corner, where she was left to contemplate her behavior once again, this time with her exposed, flaming backside as a reminder of the consequences of lying to her husband. When he returned to her side ten minutes later after going into the kitchen to collect himself and check on supper, her tears had subsided and she was visibly more calmer.

He allowed himself then to pull her into a warm embrace. But he kept his voice stern when he asked her, "Are you going to lie to me again, woman? Or keep secrets?"

"No, Ty," Leigh answered automatically, looking up at him with bright wet eyes. "I promise I won't hurt our marriage that way again."

He pressed a kiss on her forehead and smiled. "I'm glad to hear that." He hugged her tighter and then helped her step back into her panties and shorts. "What do you say we get some supper and then brainstorm some ideas to help Gabby?" he suggested.

Leigh nodded and slipped her hand into her husband's. As they started for the stairs together, she thought about how much she loved him and how lucky she was to have him. She only hoped that Gabby and Jake would have the chance to discover the same type of happiness with each other.

Chapter Thirteen

It was only about seven that evening, when he was just about to pull himself out of his chair to turn on a light in the deepening darkness of the kitchen, that Jake heard a car driving up to the house. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and his pulse quickened primitively, and he simply knew that the vehicle outside contained Alexander Zobol, Carrie's father.

As he stood slowly up from his chair, he noticed the way his muscles had hardened and tensed and he sent up a silent prayer that he would be able to manage his temper and his words when he met this man. It wouldn't help Gabby's situation to pound the bastard to pieces, even though it was only the beginning of what he deserved. And the last thing Jake wanted to do was lose his tongue and inadvertently cast a shadow on his and Leigh's supposed ignorance of Gabby and Carrie's whereabouts. He didn't want to jeopardize them being found because of a slip of his angry tongue.

He turned on the light over the kitchen table, wincing at the sudden harshness, and then stood on the inside of the screen door, watching as two men got out of the late model rental car in his driveway, then walked up his steps.

He knew Zobol before he was even introduced. The man had a hawkish, predatory look to his eyes that sent chills down Jake's spine; not that he was afraid of him, considering he had a good fifty pounds of muscle over the slim business mogul, but when he considered how he must seem to little Carrie, the image literally made his blood run cold.

The second man, who Jake assumed was the private investigator that he'd been warned about, was a burly guy with graying hair and a mild expression, the kind that never gave away an emotion. He wondered briefly as he made eye

contact with this stranger how good he was at his job, and just how safe Carrie and Gabby were way up in the middle of no where at Ty's cabin.

"Gentlemen," Jake greeted his visitors, tasting the bitter irony of the word on his tongue as he said it. "I'm Jake Sommerville. Adam Sinclair told me I should expect you tonight."

Zobol nodded his well-groomed head. "Good evening, Mr. Sommerville. I apologize for barging in on you like this, but I'm sure you can understand that I am most anxious to locate my little girl. I am Alexander Zobol, and this is Stephen Forrester, the private investigator I've had looking for Carrie. I know that you've already spoken with the police, and they have shared with me what you told them, but if it's not too much trouble, I was hoping we might speak directly with you tonight, as well."

Jake nodded tightly and held the door open to admit his unwanted guests, all the while clenching his jaw to the point where his head ached to keep what he really wanted to say to Zobol inside.

"Have a seat," he offered with a wave of his hand.

"If it's not too much trouble, could Mr. Forrester have a look around, especially at the rooms where Gabriela and Carrie stayed, while you and I talk? He may find something that could lead us to them there."

Again, Jake nodded curtly, and gave brief directions to Zobol's goon to those rooms. He took the chair across the table from Zobol then, and met the man's frank gaze without hesitation.

"I don't know where your child is, Mr. Zobol," he said flatly. "As I'm sure the police told you already, Gabby left this morning with your daughter for a doctor's appointment I had set up for her myself. She has not come back and according to the doctor's office, she canceled the appointment at nine o'clock this morning, even though she left here

at 9:15; the appointment was for 10 and she told me that was where she was going. I can only assume that she knew you were getting close to her and Carrie and so she decided it was time to move on."

Zobol's eyes narrowed and Jake wondered if maybe he'd been too quick to sit down and tell the man flat out that Gabby was long gone. Maybe he should have just answered his questions like a good boy and let that conclusion come to him on his own. Either way, it was too late now.

"Yes, they did tell me that, Mr. Sommerville. But I have a few other questions I'd like to ask you, if you don't mind. For example, I had understood that Gabby was your sister's childhood friend, is that correct?"

Jake nodded. "Yes, they've been friends since they were little girls."

"But I also understood that they hadn't seen one another for some time. Years, in fact."

Jake shrugged. "They were a good distance apart."

"Didn't you and your sister think it was strange when Gabby turned up with a daughter in tow, one that she'd never mentioned before?"

Jake thought back to that day when he'd opened the front door and there had been Gabby standing on the other side, all grown up. He nearly smiled, thinking of how angry he'd been. He wasn't about to tell Zobol that he'd been shocked to see Gabby at all, let alone with a little girl at her side, since he'd thought she and Leigh had ended their friendship all those years ago as he had ordered them to.

"Well, yes, we were surprised. But their relationship was very natural, like mother and child. And Carrie called her 'Mommy.' Gabby explained to my sister that she had been embarrassed because she got pregnant so young, and that was why she

had never told her before about Carrie. We believed her."

Zobol's eyes were dark little disks. "What about Carrie's father? Or lack of one, as the case was. Did you ever ask Gabby about that?"

"It didn't come up for a while, actually," Jake answered, and impulsively he decided to be completely honest in this answer, just to see what kind of reaction he would get from Zobol. "It's not unusual for a woman to be single with a child, these days. I'm sure you can understand that, as you're a single father, right?"

Zobol nodded. "My wife passed on several years ago, when Carrie was only an infant."

Lucky woman, Jake thought briefly. "When it did come up was after I saw the scars," he paused and noted the look of shock on Zobol's otherwise impeccable face. Obviously he hadn't expected that anyone would have seen his daughters wounds, which made sense because they brought up questions that Gabby would have tried to avoid, which was exactly why she *had* tried so hard to keep the child covered around everyone else. "One night Carrie had a nightmare and wet her bed. Gabby was not feeling well and didn't wake up as she usually did when Carrie called out in her sleep, so I went in and set her in the tub to get cleaned up. She got very upset and I soon found out why – when I saw the scars and bruises. The next morning when I asked Gabby about it all, she told me that Carrie's father had been abusive to them – before he passed away prior to their coming here, that is."

A heavy silence fell between the two men seated at the table. Jake's eyes burrowed into Zobol's face, waiting for his verbal reaction to what he'd just said. The man looked like he'd just swallowed a foul tasting bug. Finally he found his voice, and choked out a strangled sounding excuse: "Well, I'm sure you realize that was just another one of Gabby's

lies. She's the one who was abusive to my Carrie, never me. I wouldn't lay a hand on my child."

Jake nodded. "Oh, of course. I'm not a fool."

But something in his eyes made Zobol squirm in his seat and Jake smiled to himself in the knowledge that maybe this high-powered man wasn't as immune to downfall as Gabby had thought. He certainly didn't look so sure of himself right now...

After putting Carrie to bed on their first night at the cabin, Gabby wandered around the rooms, feeling lonely, scared and sad. She missed the simple, comforting companionship that Jake always gave her, night after night, once the ritual of bathing Carrie and reading her to sleep were through.

She found herself standing before a cluster of family photographs on a corner table in the living room, staring at one in particular of Jake. When her eyes began to water, she reached out and took the frame in one hand, then carried it back with her to the bedroom.

She placed the photo on the nightstand right beside the bed and stripped down to just her t-shirt and panties, then crawled into bed. She lay for a long time on her side, studying the picture of Jake, learning every line of his face, admiring the strength and stubborn set of his jaw, noting the charming laugh lines at the corners of his bright eyes, and the twinkle of humor in those blue depths. Eventually, she found that she felt calmer, more relaxed. And when her eyes were simply too tired to stay open a moment longer, she gave in finally and fell asleep.

Her dreams were pleasant, of a life where she and Carrie were somehow free and together, and no longer running from the law and Alexander Zobol. Gabby and Jake were married, and trying for a baby

sister or brother for Carrie. And though life wasn't perfect, even in her dream world, she was happy. She was loved, and cared for, and she loved and provided care right back. She had a family, and her best friend was her sister-in-law. And she was married to the man she'd loved, in her heart, since her childhood.

Even in her dreams, of course, he spanked her. But not even that could dampen the wonderful, wistful haze of happiness. Even if Jake Sommerville warmed her backside every day for the rest of her life, it would be a small price to pay in order to have him as her very own.

The dream was so real, so vivid, and contained so much of what Gabby wanted for her future, that when she woke from it to the harsh morning air, to the empty bed beside her, and the cold reality of her situation, she could do nothing else but lay still under the covers as a wave of wracking sobs broke free from her chest and poured down her face. She was unable to stop herself from crying, though she knew it was silly to mourn a life that had yet to exist, and in every likelihood, never would. The tears kept coming despite this knowledge, and Gabby burrowed her face into the pillow to muffle her sobs from Carrie's ears.

Eventually, after what seemed like forever, she was able to collect her emotions and, with a ragged, shaky breath, she made herself get out of bed. In the bathroom, she showered and scrubbed the evidence of her self-pity away, then dressed for the first of God only knew how many days of seclusion in the cabin.

That day became a sort of template for the rest that followed. Gabby tried to keep herself and Carrie occupied with the board games, cards, books and videos that she found in the house. She involved the little girl in the kitchen, helping with meals, whenever possible. She even found an old

exercise video of Leigh's, and they followed along with that every day, since they were pretty much confined to the house. Her cold gradually began to get better, with the help of some medicine and vitamins she found in Leigh's medicine cabinet.

Whenever Carrie was asleep, Gabby would try to catch snippets of the news on the television or radio. She didn't want to upset Carrie by watching for updates about her father when she was awake to see them, as well. So far, all she'd been able to glean from these occasions was that Alexander was still in Stillwater, with his PI, looking further into the whereabouts of his missing daughter, while New York police expanded their search further west.

Gabby wasn't surprised that Alex was still hounding Leigh and Jake. He might be a snake of a man, but he wasn't stupid. He would sense that there was more there than met the eye and he would stick around until he felt they had exhausted all avenues or until they found some information he thought was valuable.

At least a dozen times a day, Gabby considered taking off with Carrie again. One of her worst fears was that after she and Carrie were found, Jake and Leigh and Ty would be found guilty of harboring a fugitive, obstructing justice, etc. The last thing she wanted to see happen, second only to having Carrie placed back in her father's clutches, was for her friends to suffer for her decisions.

The only reason she stayed at the cabin was because she had no money to go anywhere else. She had Jake's truck, but she didn't even have money in her pocket for gasoline when the tank would eventually run dry. And though she might be a kidnapper, at least in this case when the child she kidnapped had needed her protection, she wasn't a criminal. She didn't even think she could rob a gas station to fill up the tank or for food to keep them alive. At least not yet. In the future, she might get

desperate enough, but right now, she still hadn't reached that point.

So, instead, she waited. She hoped. And she prayed with every ounce of strength and faith in her soul.

Jake sighed as he closed the stall door and latched it behind Bo. He wasn't having much more luck with that damn horse than he was in getting rid of Alexander Zobol.

It had been almost a full week since the first time he'd met the man, when he'd had a flash of hope that he might be able to gain the upper hand over him. And in that time, Zobol had done a complete turnaround, and was now even more arrogant than before. He had Leigh half scared out of her mind, so intimidating was he when he first met her, an occurrence that both Jake and Ty were diligently ensuring against a repeat performance, as Zobol had caught her alone at home. He continued to assert his composure and confidence around Jake and Ty, once he met him as well.

Despite the fact that he and his PI had searched both the ranch and Leigh's home twice, and questioned all three of them several times, they continued to stick around town. Jake knew they were asking questions of the townsfolk, as well, but how much time did it take to ask around about one woman and a little girl, especially in a town as small as Stillwater, where they had both surely been noticed by many the few times they'd been into town together?

The longer Zobol stuck around, the more nervous Jake and Leigh became, because sooner or later they were going to have to chance taking more supplies up to Gabby and Carrie. There was only about another week's worth of food and other necessities at the cabin, according to Leigh. And

God only knew how Gabby was faring with that cold she had neglected to have looked at before she'd had to leave. Leigh had assured Jake that there were vitamins and cold medication at the cabin that she was sure to find and make use of, but Jake worried all the same. That woman had better be taking care of herself, he told himself, or that'll be one more thing she'll have to answer to me for when I see her again!

He refused to let himself even contemplate the possibility that he might *not* see her again.

Wearily, he climbed the loft stairs and took a sagging seat at the upstairs service door, which hung open, allowing his legs to drop down over the outside of the barn. He'd gotten used to coming here after finishing his work everyday to sit and think and pray. He did more praying than anything else, lately. Though he hadn't given up entirely on finding a way to prove Zobol's abuse of his daughter so that Gabby and Carrie could come safely out of hiding, he was growing less confident by the day that such a miracle would happen. He had already sat down countless times with Leigh and Ty to brainstorm ideas, not to mention all the time he'd spent thinking of a plan on his own since Gabby had gone, and nothing had come that seemed feasible. It just seemed more realistic to spend his time talking to God, asking for His help in this seemingly impossible situation, than wasting any more of it on half-baked schemes that likely would only jeopardize Gabby and Carrie, not to mention the rest of them, even more.

His heart felt empty as he sat there, bone weary from the back breaking work he'd been pushing himself with lately in the effort to temporarily relieve some of his grief. Lord, he missed her. He missed them both. He wanted to read Carrie a bedtime story and feel her tiny arms around his neck, hugging him tight. He wanted to smell the

fresh, child smell of her hair, and feel the warm weight of her little body when she crawled up in his lap to whisper to him a secret.

Hell, he wanted to feel Gabby's womanly curves on his lap, too. Or even over his lap – that would do, too, if necessary. It was certainly one of the first places he planned to put her if he was blessed enough to see her again. And she'd stay there for a while, too, damn it. She'd learn not to lie to him again, he'd see to that personally!

But only after he'd held her in his arms for an eternity. And after he'd kissed the breath from her lungs and stole the steady beat from her heart, making it race with power and love. Only after he'd told her a thousand times that he loved her, and that she'd better never leave him again. Only then...

The sun was setting in the sky that spread above him, but the beauty was lost on Jake as he sat there, unseeing, save for the images in his mind of a lively little red haired girl laughing beside a willowy, silver haired beauty. The faces beckoned to him with their laughter and the love in their eyes and he knew in his soul that he had to find a way to save them, in order to save himself.

Chapter Fourteen

Two days later, Jake was shocked to walk out of his house after going in for a break from working with Bo to find Alexander Zobol in his corral with the horse.

"Holy shit," he whispered under his breath, watching in horror as the man boldly walked up to the magnificent horse, his hand outstretched. In the far corner of the corral, the video camera whirled silently from its post on the back of the barn wall, recording every move.

"Zobol," Jake called in a neutral voice, trying to keep his tone calm so as not to spook the unpredictable stallion. "Get out of that corral and away from that horse. He's not safe to be around."

Zobol turned his head slightly in Jake's direction and scoffed. "He seems just fine to me."

Jake had reached the fence that surrounded the corral and he let himself inside, moving cautiously. Was the man blind? Jake could certainly see the way Bo's nostrils were flaring wide, the way his eyes were rolling crazily back and forth between them, the way he was backing up two steps for every advancing step that Zobol took towards him.

"Really, Zobol. I've worked with this horse for weeks now and I'm telling you he's dangerous. You shouldn't even be in here with him."

"I came out to talk to you, but when I saw him, I just had to have a closer look. He's a real beauty..."

There was something about the way Zobol looked at Bo, something about the way he spoke about him that sent shivers down Jake's spine. Then he realized it was exactly the same manner in which he spoke of his daughter. And perhaps that was where the fixation was for the man, in things of beauty – beautiful, nearly perfect things... that he could destroy and wreck with his own bare hands.

It was disgusting. But it also explained Bo's reaction to him, especially considering that Jake's luck with the horse had finally begun to turn around in the last two days. He had really made quite a bit of progress with him, until now. God only knew how much more work lay ahead of him now, trying to repair the damage this little introduction to Alexander Zobol was doing. Bo probably recognized the kind of character Zobol was, one exactly like his own original owner, the one who'd beaten him regularly and neglected his care.

Jake managed to sidle up to the stallion, and he laid a calming hand on his neck. The warm horseflesh under his hand rippled and Bo nickered almost nervously at the touch.

"Whatever it is you wanted to talk to me about, Zobol, spit it out and get the hell off my property."

Those words seemed to snap Zobol out of his fascination with Bo. His eyes came unglued from the horse in front of him and slowly focused on Jake, darkening with anger and narrowing into fine slits.

"Is that any way to talk to the man who's going to make you very rich?"

Jake sighed and resisted the urge to punch the man before him in the nose. "What are you talking about?"

Zobol crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Jake. "Come on, Jake. Stop insulting me. I'm hardly a stupid man. I know you know where that woman is with my daughter. I know you're protecting her. I imagine it's out of some loyalty to your sister because they're friends. Or perhaps you've gone and done something really stupid, like fall in love with the bitch. Either way, I *know* that you're hiding them."

"You're wrong..."

Zobol shook his head. "No, I don't think I am. In fact, I've never felt more right about anything before in my life. But I can understand your

quandary. I'm sure you're usually a man of principals. But I'm also sure you're not any more stupid than I am. I'm a very wealthy man, Jake, and I'm prepared to make you one as well. All I ask for is the location of my daughter."

Jake stepped closer to Zobol and stared him directly in the eye. "Listen to me. *I don't know where Gabby and Carrie are...* But if I did, you can believe me that I wouldn't share the information with you, no matter what amount of money you offered me. I wouldn't be able to live with myself knowing I'd put that little girl back into your malicious hands."

Zobol's eyes grew even darker now with rage and his hands balled into fists. His mouth opened and closed a few times in the beginnings of angry retorts that never made it out. Jake stood there and watched him, knowing it was too late now, but wishing he hadn't given away his true feelings about the man. Though there was no evidence that he knew where Gabby was, the words he'd just so rashly spoken would shed doubt on his credibility all the same.

He was so absorbed in regretting what he'd said that he never even saw it coming till it was too late; Alexander Zobol took two steps back and then came charging at him, knocking his fist into Jake's stomach and then clobbering his other fist over the back of his head. Jake fell to his knees, surprised by the force of the blows. When he looked up, he got another mouthful of Zobol's fist, followed by three more in succession, and another harsh blow to the back of his head. It was that final blow that sent him sprawling down onto the dusty floor of the corral.

He stared up into the void of space above his head, and could see Alexander above him, screaming things down at him like a mad man, his face all red, his eyes bulged. On the outskirts of his

line of vision, just beyond Zobol's head, he made out a blurry shape, and it took him a minute before he realized what it was... *Bo*.

Jake wasn't in any shape to stand up and get himself between Zobol and the stallion, but he made a floundering attempt to do so nonetheless, only to be rewarded for his efforts by Zobol with another fist to his stomach and a kick in his kidneys. Once he was again on the ground. With a low moan of pain, Jake pointed with a shaky hand to the horse behind the raging man, garbling a warning.

Zobol was in the process of turning around when *Bo* reared up behind him. A second later, the stallion's mighty hooves flashed down like divine lightning, crunching down on Zobol's shoulders and immediately reducing him to his knees. Again the horse reared up, and came back down, as Zobol knelt there unable to move, staring up in disbelief.

Jake lay immobile a few feet away, unable to stop the animal, unable to even cover his own ears to stuff out the horrible sound of crunching bones and Zobol's shrieking screams. The noise seemed to go on forever, and then suddenly it was eerily quiet.

Bo tossed his head then and whinnied in a shrill voice, then set off running about the perimeter of the corral as if he wanted to escape what he'd just done. On the ground nearby, Alexander Zobol lay in a lifeless heap, his blood splattered around him, his eyes wide and open, but unseeing.

It took him a while, but Jake finally managed to crawl painfully across the corral and to scoot under the fence. He gritted his teeth as he forced himself to continue on, finally reached his goal, the phone extension in the barn, where he pulled himself up to a standing position. He dialed 9-1-1 as quickly as he could and then fell to the ground beneath the extension, passed out cold.

When he came to, he was lying on a stretcher and it was being wheeled towards a waiting ambulance. As they passed the corral, he could see that the fenced in area was crawling with police and he vaguely wondered where they had all come from; Stillwater certainly didn't have that many cops. Several of them, he noticed, were standing beneath his mounted video camera, and one of them held the tape they had likely found inside in his hand. That man was talking to Leigh, and Jake breathed a sigh of relief at seeing his sister here. He knew she would explain the reason for the video equipment and that she would insure that Bo remained on the ranch and was safely inside for the night. He allowed himself to close his eyes, knowing he could trust her to handle those issues, and also realizing he would need his own rest for the questions he was sure to be hit with as soon as he'd been examined at the hospital.

"How do you feel?" Leigh asked her brother, sweeping back a lock of his hair. She looked worried about him and he wanted to ease that concern from her face.

He took her hand and gave it a hard squeeze to show her he had a lot of strength left even if the hospital staff had insisted on him staying the night.

"I'm fine, sweetheart, really. This is really just a precaution, to observe me in case I did get a concussion. I feel fine, just a bit sore."

Leigh sighed wearily and managed a weak smile. Jake patted the edge of the bed beside him and she took a seat there, then even leaned back to lay her head on his shoulder.

"It's unbelievable, what happened today," she whispered.

"I know." Jake sighed. He fingered his sister's hair idly, twirling it around one finger. "What do we do now?"

From his chair by the bed, Ty added his two cents in a low voice. "I think we need to wait it out a day or two, at least. See what comes out about Zobol now that the man's dead and not around to go after his enemies."

Jake nodded reluctantly. "I think you're right. I wouldn't want to bring them back too soon and have Gabby still end up in jail."

"Let's check the news and see what's being said about him so far," Leigh suggested.

It didn't take long to find a station that was featuring a story about Zobol. In fact, the second channel they turned to was showing pieces of the videotape that had been found in Jake's camera, while the newscaster's voice explained why the camera had been running and how the tape had cleared Jake of any suspicions of foul play concerning Zobol's death due to the many warnings he'd given the man to get away from the stallion. They also played a segment of the video, after Zobol had knocked Jake to the ground, when he'd stood over him, screaming about how he had no right to tell him how to raise or discipline his child; this chilling piece, the newscaster went on to explain, called into question Zobol's previous denials of abuse, and lent some credence to the possibility that Gabriela Hoyt had been protecting Carrie Zobol when she kidnapped her.

And then, to their collective amazement, the picture changed to show the face of a Mexican woman in her forties, who was telling the reporter that she knew why Zobol's daughter had been kidnapped – the man, she said, had abused the little girl her entire young life, and her nanny had found out. When she'd tried going to the police for help and it hadn't worked, the woman continued in

her heavily accented English, Ms. Gabby had taken matters into her own hands to protect the child.

"And God bless her for it," she added.

"Oh, my God...." Ty breathed as Jake sat up straighter in bed and Leigh's breath hitched in her throat.

The woman on the screen turned directly to the camera then and added, "Mr. Zobol was a snake, and even if I'm out of a job now, I can't say I'm sorry he's dead. At least he can't hurt that little girl no more."

The newscaster came back on the screen after that statement and announced that the woman was Zobol's long-time housekeeper at his New York home. Apparently, she had come out with that statement upon hearing the news of her employer's death. And when asked why she'd never said anything about it before, especially when Gabby Hoyt had gone to the police, the woman had answered that she'd feared for her life and those of her children because Mr. Zobol had 'connections'.

As the news story changed Jake, Leigh, and Ty exchanged meaningful glances.

"It's already starting," Jake said softly.

"Thank God," Leigh added.

It was three more days before they felt it was safe enough to risk going to Gabby and Carrie. In just that short amount of time, a lot more information had come out about Zobol, and all of it was negative. There were testimonies from Carrie's past babysitters, from their church minister, from friends of Zobol's deceased wife, and from more of Zobol's employees, all backing the claims Gabby had made of his abuse of his daughter. In addition, there was also other evidence from more sources that many of the business dealings that had amassed the man his fortune were shady, if not

downright illegal. It seemed that Zobol had a lot of secret enemies that he had left unsettled scores with upon his sudden death, and all of them were crawling out of the woodwork.

Jake made the drive up to Tyler's cabin by himself, his heart in his throat the entire time. He could hardly wait to see Carrie and Gabby and tell them that they could come home with him -- if they wanted to, of course. Leigh and Ty had thought they should still leave the decision up to Gabby, since it was her butt most on the line when she returned. Despite all the negative information coming out about Zobol now, there was still a possibility that she would be jailed for her kidnapping of his child. Jake had to keep reminding himself on the drive up that he would respect her decision if she said she didn't want to risk coming back. No matter how much he wanted her, he wouldn't let himself throw her over one shoulder and cart her on home against her will.

When he pulled up outside the cabin, he smiled as he saw that she'd been true to her word about hiding the truck from view. There was no sign, even from right outside the front door, that there was anyone inside the little house.

That was, at least, until a little face peeked out at him from behind one of the kitchen curtains, then broke into a wide grin that he immediately returned. Five seconds later, after the sounds of the locks being turned was heard, Carrie came bounding out of the house and ran right into his arms.

"Jake! You came! Can we go home now?" she squealed, snuggling close to him. Jake inhaled her clean, baby powder scent and smiled as he hugged her tight, his throat constricting a bit.

"Hi, kitten. My God, I think you've grown an inch since I last saw you."

Carrie giggled and bounced in his arms. "Oh, I'm so glad you came for us!" she exclaimed. "Gabby

saw on the TV about my...about Daddy... and she hoped you'd come...and I just knew you would!"

Jake drew back to look seriously into Carrie's eyes. "You know? About your dad? Did Gabby explain it to you, honey?"

Carrie sobered a bit at the question, but when she looked at Jake her expression was one of definite emotion. "I'm glad he's dead," she pronounced flatly.

Jake sighed. What was there to say to that? He doubted it was really that simple for the kid, but he also knew it would take time, and probably some real counseling, to help her deal with her conflicting emotions about her father. For now, he simply hugged her again, really tight, and carried her inside.

"Where is Gabby?" he asked as he set Carrie down in the kitchen.

"She's lying down in the bedroom. She hasn't been sleeping so good since she heard what happened. She got a headache today and said she had to lay down to get rid of it."

Jake nodded. He saw a plate of his favorite toffee oatmeal cookies on the counter and smiled. Obviously, Carrie wasn't the only one who'd been hoping he would come. That was promising, at least. He set Carrie up with a glass of milk and a couple cookies, snagging two for himself, and then set off for the bedroom to find Gabby.

The sight of her asleep on the bed, her silvery hair all fanned out on the pillow around her, her pink lips just slightly open, her long lashes splayed along her soft cheeks, made his breath catch and his heart pound hard in his chest. He took a moment in the doorway to admire her, for she was really a site to behold to his sore eyes.

Then he lay on the bed beside her as gently as he could, and wrapped his arms around her, breathing in her unique scent and feeling that same

tightness in his chest that he'd felt when he'd first hugged Carrie in the driveway. When he felt he had control again over his erratic emotions, he leaned on one forearm and kissed his love slowly awake.

Somehow he didn't take her by surprise, or frighten her. He felt the flutter of her lashes as she woke, then the response of her mouth beneath his own as she recognized his kiss and warmed to it. Their tongues met in a warm reunion of hello as Jake's arms encircled Gabby's waist and she brought her hands up to rest on the back of his neck.

It was a long kiss, one they were both reluctant to end. But there was so much to talk about, so much to decide. Eventually, they slowly pulled apart, and sat still embraced, looking into each other's eyes, each of them smiling and crying a little at the same time.

"Please tell me you're here to take us home," Gabby pled and there was never any other sentence in his life that Jake was so happy to hear as that one.

He pulled her tight into his arms and laughed huskily. "You read my mind, darlin'. Let's get everything together and hit the road."

Chapter Fifteen

It didn't take long to gather together the essential items and pack them into Jake's truck. Because the three of them were eager to visit and stay close together for as long as they could, Jake decided to just leave the truck Gabby had driven up, and return in the one he'd brought today.

Gabby had gotten a serious expression on her face since she'd climbed into the cab, and Jake had an idea what was on her mind. As he sat down beside her and started the truck, he looped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief squeeze.

"You know what going back means, right?" he asked gently.

Gabby nodded. She met Jake's eyes briefly, and he noted that while her chin trembled slightly, she was also squaring her shoulders and holding her head up high at the same time.

"Take me right straight there," she told him in a voice tight with resolve. "If you take me back to the ranch first I'm afraid I'll lose my nerve and want to go back into hiding."

Jake nodded. He put the truck in gear and headed towards town in Stillwater.

The drive passed by much faster than the trip had seemed before to both Gabby and Jake. It was mostly a quiet ride, punctuated by the importance of their destination and the uncertainty of what the outcome of the day would turn out to be. Hardly an inch separated the threesome, though the cab certainly boasted enough room for them all; they found comfort in their closeness and took advantage of the time they had on the ride back to town to touch, smile and sooth each others' worries and nerves whenever possible.

When they did reach the police station in town, they couldn't have been more surprised to discover the outside parking lot, lawn, and steps leading up

to the front door jam packed with newspaper and television reporters.

"Oh man," Jake let out a low whistle at the swarms of people that stood between them and the police station. He sighed and ran a hand through his wind tossed hair. "Well, there's no hope for it. You two come on out my side here and stick close by me; maybe you better carry Carrie, Gab. We'll just have to push our way on through."

It didn't take long for the reporters closest to the truck to recognize Gabby and Carrie, and once the others saw that there was a commotion in that area of the parking lot, they swarmed over as well. It seemed like the three of them were surrounded on all sides before they had even all gotten out of the truck onto the ground.

Questions were being called out to them while microphones were struck in their faces and cameras snapped away. Gabby clutched Carrie to her chest and hunched her shoulders protectively over the child's body as Carrie tucked her head into Gabby's neck. Jake surrounded them both with his body and one arm and pushed ahead with his free arm to clear some of the people from their path. Gabby was grateful for his strength and determination; she didn't know how she could have gotten through the mob if he hadn't been there with her, leading the way.

At least a dozen people in the front of the station looked up as Jake crashed their way through the front door. The young officer who sat behind the front desk stood up abruptly, and began to try to stop them, but Jake just kept right on moving, not stopping until he'd barged right through Sheriff Sinclair's office door.

Unfortunately, it seemed Jake had interrupted a meeting, because there was a young woman seated across from the Sheriff, and both of them looked more than a little startled at Jake's sudden

appearance with Gabby and Carrie in tow. But before Jake could stammer out the beginnings of an apology, Carrie let out a childish squeal of delight and exclaimed, "Aunt Heather!" A moment later, she was sitting on the young woman's lap, squeezing her about the neck hard enough to snap it in half.

"Hello sweetheart," Heather Zobol greeted her niece affectionately, returning the embrace and adding a kiss. "How are you, honey?"

Therein ensued a lively run down from Carrie concerning all of her recent adventures while Gabby shifted her weight self-consciously from foot to foot. Jake squeezed her hand and gave her a half smile of reassurance.

When Carrie paused to suck in a lung-full of air, Heather looked up at Gabby and Jake and smiled. She held out her hand towards the empty chair beside her and said, "Please, Gabby, sit down. I was just telling Sheriff Sinclair before you came in, that I wanted to be sure that all the charges against you were dropped."

"Y-Y-You were?" Gabby gasped.

"That's right." Heather bounced Carrie a bit on her lap. "It's the least I can do considering what you did for Carrie, getting her away from Alex." Heather sighed heavily. "I always knew something was very wrong in that house, especially after Mary died. But I never was very good at standing up to my brother. I was afraid of him, just like everyone else. Everyone except you. I thank you for getting Carrie away from him when you did."

Gabby didn't have a clue what to say. She sat dumbfounded in her chair, just staring at Heather. Jake stood firm behind her, his hands warm and reassuring on her shoulders.

"I guess you'll be wanting to take Carrie back with you when you leave with Alex's remains," Jake asked, his voice wooden.

"Actually," Heather began slowly, hugging Carrie tightly, "that's up to Gabby. I've seen you with my niece enough, Gabby, to know that you're like the mother she never knew. Of course, I want to be a part of her life, too, and if I'm mistaken about your feelings on adopting her as your own, then of course I would assume custody..."

"Wait," Gabby interrupted shakily. "Are... are you offering me custody of Carrie?"

Heather's smile was radiant, and very contagious. "That's exactly what I'm suggesting. Are you interested?"

Gabby was crying now, despite the grin on her face. She nodded her head, unable to speak for the moment. A flutter of laughter rippled over the room, warm with love and a much-deserved happy ending.

"I think that's a yes," Jake guessed with good humor. He leaned down to kiss the top of Gabby's head, happier for her than he'd ever before been for anyone else in his life, including himself.

And so it was that late that evening, after signing endless piles of paperwork and forms, Gabby returned to Jake's ranch a free woman, the child she loved like her own asleep in her arms.

Jake carried Carrie from the truck up the steps inside and into her bedroom, where he and Gabby performed the quiet, tender ritual of getting her undressed and into bed, smiling with weary joy at one another as they worked.

"I still can't believe it," Gabby whispered as they tiptoed out of Carrie's room. "Am I really here? Is she still with me?"

Jake gave her bottom a playful pinch, grinning widely. "Did you feel that?" he teased with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah," Gabby pouted, rubbing the offended spot.

"Then you're not dreaming, darlin'. But just in case you need more convincing, come on over here a minute..."

Gabby gladly obeyed this request, melting into Jake's arms with a happy, if a bit sleepy, sigh.

"I love you, Gabriela Madison Hoyt," he murmured against her lips. "Welcome home."

The possessive, searing kiss he branded her lips with was the best welcoming gift Gabby had ever received.

The next few days passed quickly for everyone. Jake spoke to the people who had employed him to work with Bo and discovered that they had seen pieces of the videotape where the horse trampled Zobol; not surprisingly, they were calling to tell him that they were planning to have the animal put down. They inquired if he could have the unpleasant task handled in Montana, and were surprised when he asked them instead if he could purchase the animal from them. They couldn't believe his testimonies about Bo's abrupt changes since the incident with Zobol; he truly was as docile as a lamb anymore. Plus, Jake didn't know how he would live with little Carrie should that horse be put down; she had really bonded with him. In the end, the couple granted him custody of the horse, without any charges, and they promised to send him his registration papers as soon as possible.

There was much to do to get the paperwork begun to transfer Carrie's custody before Heather left town, and of course there was much visitation between Carrie and her aunt while her stay lasted. There was also a lot of catching up to do with Leigh and Ty, and Gabby also devoted much of her time to restoring the ranch house to the order it had been in before she had abruptly left things in Jake's incapable man's hands.

Gabby knew she was on borrowed time when it came to the limits of Jake's patience, though. One of these days it was going to be her time to account to him for the secrets she'd kept from him, and the lies she had told. The more time that passed, the more nervous she grew about the impending, inevitable confrontation, until finally one morning she woke up and decided that enough was enough. The waiting was driving her insane. She would force the issue with him on her own, today, face the music, and get the whole unpleasantness over and done with.

Resolved, she called Leigh and asked her to take Carrie for the day, explaining that she needed some time alone with Jake. Leigh was sympathetic and seemed to understand; she promised to be over right after breakfast to pick Carrie up.

That settled, Gabby set about her usual morning routine, preparing breakfast and planning for lunch and dinner. After everyone was fed, the kitchen set to rights, and her other morning chores were completed, she waved to Carrie as Leigh drove out of the driveway. About ten minutes later, Jake left for the feed store in town. And then, alone at last, Gabby set about her next difficult task with a heart heavy sigh.

She'd never had to cut her own switch before and she wasn't sure where to even begin...

She took herself outside and stood back to examine the trees providing shade in the back yard; they all looked so innocuous – which one was the evil one she was supposed to find her switch on? She knew about as much about trees as she did about brain surgery, and therefore wasn't even sure which one was the correct one to choose a switch from. Finally, she hesitantly stepped over to one with some thin, whippy looking branches, and examined them more closely.

She giggled nervously as she stood there, contemplating her choice in implements of correction. In her head she could hear a comedy skit she'd seen a few years back on television, where a red neck comedian was talking about how "cruel and unusual" it is to make your kid go out and cut his own switch for a spanking. *And you're out there under that tree, going, awww, WHICH one? If I pick that one, they're just going to send me right back out here... that one will break my back.... And meanwhile your parents are inside just laughing it up!* Of course, Jake wasn't her parent, nor had he sent her out to cut her own switch; he didn't even know what she was up to this morning while he was in town. But all the same, Gabby was determined to finish this lingering betrayal between them this morning so that they could get on with their lives with a fresh start.

She finally gave in with a frustrated sigh after staring up at the blasted tree for nearly ten minutes. She took the sharp knife she'd brought with her from the kitchen and sawed down one of the thinner whippy branches. She swung it about in the air before her then, wincing slightly at the eerie "zing" sound it carried with it as it traveled. Then, ever so lightly, she tapped it, just once, on the bare skin of her calf.

"Owie!" she exclaimed softly, surprised by the sting that such a wimpy looking piece of green tree branch could produce. She reached down and rubbed at the faint red line where the switch had snapped against her skin. Well, apparently she'd chosen a pretty good switch.

She contemplated the tree again, and then glanced at the flimsy looking twig in her hand. Better get a couple, she decided impulsively. Once Jake got home and her punishment got underway she didn't want to have to stop it till it was finished, especially not for something so silly as to get

another switch should be the one she chose break. It certainly seemed like a likely scenario, especially the way she knew Jake spanked.

A few minutes later, her arms filled with at least a dozen thin switches, Gabby turned with grim determination and went back inside the house and into the living room to nervously await Jake's return.

"Gabby? Honey, I'm back!"

The sound of Jake's voice made Gabby's heart race. She nearly jumped right out of her skin when his head suddenly popped around the door jam that separated the kitchen and the living room.

"Hello sunshine," he said cheerfully. "Want to come out and help me in the barn for a bit?"

"Um..." Gabby hedged, glancing nervously at the pile of switches lying beside her on the sofa. "I... I had something else in mind... if you... if you have the time..."

Jake's eyes narrowed as he followed her gaze and realized what was sitting beside her on the couch. His eyebrows rose as he came further into the room and went straight for the pile, then lifted one switch up in his wide, strong hand. Just the sight of that switch in Jake's capable hand made Gabby's stomach flip flop nauseatingly.

But when he looked up at her again, his face split into a wide grin. And then he laughed.

"What's so funny?" Gabby demanded, stomping one foot in agitation. There she'd been all morning agonizing over these damn switches and his reaction was laughter.

"Oh, sweetie..." Jake chuckled again as he laid the switch back down with the others. "Do you think you cut enough?"

Gabby folded her arms over her chest defensively. "Well, they seemed kind of wimpy. I

thought just one might break, and then we'd have to stop and go get another..."

Jake nodded gravely. "I've had one or two break on me in my lifetime... but do you really think we'll need all these, darlin'? Or maybe, your conscious is just trying to tell me something here."

Gabby pouted. She dug her toe into the carpet beneath her feet and shrugged. "I don't know..." she hedged.

Jake nodded. Out of the corner of her eye, Gabby could see he was still repressing a grin. "Well, don't worry, love. I promise after today, your conscious will be all clear again. Okay?"

Gabby raised her eyes to his briefly and forgave him for making fun of her when she saw the love in his gaze. "Okay," she agreed quietly, feeling small and vulnerable.

Jake nodded. "Good. Now, before we begin, we have to strip the bark from the switch so we don't break your pretty skin. Here, come sit with me, and we'll each do one... just in case we break one."

Gabby returned his smile and tentatively sat down on his knee on the sofa. The switch he handed her felt like a live wire in her hand but she hung onto it resolutely and listened to the instructions he gave her to strip it of its bark.

It took her twice as long, even after watching Jake demonstrate how to strip off the bark, but finally Gabby's switch was bare, greenish-white wood as well. Her eyes met Jake's tentatively, and a breath of relief washed over her at the love she saw in his gaze.

"Well, looks like we're all set, sweetheart," he said, taking both prepared switches and setting them aside on the couch beside him. "I take it you're anxious to get this business behind us, so what do you say we get started?"

Gabby glanced one last time at the switches, swallowing hard. She nodded her head resolutely,

stood up, and surprised Jake by unbuttoning her own jean shorts and then shucking them and her panties down to her ankles. While he continued to sit, watching her in surprise, she draped her body over his lap.

A few moments later she felt his large, work roughened hand on her vulnerable bottom skin, cupping one cheek. "You know, Gabby, I'm very proud of the way you took the initiative towards getting this spanking over with; I'm sure it wasn't easy for you, baby. Because you were so mature about getting prepared for this, I want you to know that I'm going to forego the usual mouth soaping you'd get for telling me lies. But I do want you to remember that next time, if there is a next time, you *will* have your mouth thoroughly washed out for telling me dirty lies. Understand?"

From her awkward position, hanging over his knees, Gabby nodded her head 'yes.'

Jake patted her bottom affectionately. "You're a good girl, sweetheart, and I do love you."

Something about those words made a swell of tears lodge itself in Gabby's throat. When was the last time she'd been told she was good? She couldn't remember, it had been so long; actually, she couldn't remember a single time...

She heard Jake take a deep breath above her, and when next he spoke his voice was stern. "But even though you are my good girl, honey, you've still made some mistakes that we need to address before we can move on and forget about them. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir," Gabby whispered shyly.

Jake patted her backside again, this time a bit harder than the love pats of only moments ago. "So, Gabriela, why don't you tell me why you're over my knee again, waiting for a spanking?"

Gabby swallowed back on her tears and took a deep breath. "Because I lied to you, and kept the

truth from you about myself and Carrie. I put you and Leigh in a compromising situation by hiding out here, because you were protecting me from the law and you didn't even realize it until it was really too late."

"That's right. And what happens in this house, Gabriela, when you lie and keep secrets?"

Gabby pressed her eyes closed tightly, images of her impending switching running through her mind like a movie. "You get switched for it..." she whispered.

"That's right." Jake cleared his throat and shifted Gabby over his lap, tugging her body in closer to him and wrapping an arm around her waist for anchoring. "All right, Gabby, here we go. I want to warm you up some with my hand first, since this is your first switching."

Gabby wasn't sure whether to resent that idea or be grateful for it. A moment after his warning, she felt the hard, wide flat of his hand as it fell like a hot iron on her bottom. She winced, but managed not to cry out. This was only the first phase, and she was determined to take her spanking like a big girl; she'd certainly earned what she was getting, after all.

Jake kept up a steady pace of smacks on Gabby's bare skin, bringing the creamy flesh to a rosy pink, and then a faint red. The only sounds in the room were the rhythmic slap of his hand on her buttocks, and the quiet muffled cries that Gabby sometimes could not contain. She clung to his pants leg and hung on, trying to ride out the increasing heat and sting, and kept her eyes firmly closed against the site of the switches, which waited for their turn on her bottom, only inches from her nose.

When Jake finally stopped spanking her with his hand, Gabby wasn't sure if she was more relieved that phase one was over, or more scared that phase two was about to begin. Not that it mattered,

anyway, because Jake was already helping her to stand.

"No rubbing, young lady," he ordered gruffly when her hands began to creep back to touch her scorched butt. "Or we will start all over again."

Gabby certainly did not want to do that! She snatched her hands back around the front of her body so quickly that Jake had to bite back on a chuckle at the comical look on her wide-eyed face.

Although he would have thought it impossible, those eyes seemed to grow even wider now as he turned and picked up one of the prepared switches from the sofa; he took special care to be sure he selected the one that Gabby had peeled herself, checking it as he picked it up to be sure she had gotten all of the rough wood off of the top. He turned to the trembling woman before him, being mindful to stay in the moment and not allow his eyes to stray even for a second to the alluring nest of dark blond curls between her slim legs, and pointed with the switch to the couch where he had just had her over his knee.

"Bend over, Gabriela," he told her solemnly. "Put your hands flat on the cushions and push your bottom out for me."

Gabby's eyes were swimming with unshed tears, but she turned to the couch and slowly did as he instructed, jutting her pretty, reddened backside out into the air for him. The picture she presented was erotic to say the least, nearly obscenely so, and Jake was painfully aware of his own inappropriate arousal.

"Is this all right?" she asked him in a shaky, insecure little girl voice a moment later, looking back over one shoulder at him. Just looking into her worried face brought the situation back into focus for him. He smiled gently and nodded.

"Yes, sweetheart. Just like that is fine. You're doing very well, baby."

She smiled shakily back at him and turned back around to face the couch.

He laid a steadying hand on her lower back. "This is going to hurt you, Gabby, I won't pretend otherwise. But if you can hang in there and try to stay in position, I'll only given you twenty, and then it will all be over. All right?"

Jake heard Gabby's breath catch at the number he sentenced her to, but he held firm to it; really, he was going pretty easy on her.

"Okay," she finally agreed.

Jake patted her back once and then drew his other arm back to deliver the first blow with the switch. The limber rod sang a high-pitched song in the air before connecting with Gabby's bottom flesh in a little SNAP! Gabby hissed at the harsh sting, clenching her buttocks together. Jake waited for the sting to subside and for her to relax her muscles before flicking his wrist back to give her a second swat.

She managed to hold onto her composure through the first set of five, but on the sixth stroke, she couldn't help letting out a little squeal as the switch bit into her skin again, this time crisscrossing over the first five cuts for the first time. Jake sped his way through the next four licks, wanting the ordeal to end as quickly as possible. Gabby danced and cried out louder with each additional application of the switch as Jake's heart ached for her. Her bottom was rimmed with harsh, red lines and he was sure she was very sore indeed.

On the eleventh stroke, the first sob broke from Gabby's chest and Jake nearly threw the switch down as he heard it. He paused and rubbed her lower back a moment instead, instructing her quietly to breathe.

"It hurts!" Gabby wailed as tears coursed freely down her face.

"I know," Jake agreed wearily. "Remember that, young lady. Because the lies you told hurt too. Lies hurt the trust and the love between people. Remember that. Do you have any more secrets or lies to confess to me, young lady?"

Gabby sniffled at his gentle scolding, shaking her head. She'd calmed down a bit, though she was still crying quietly. Jake took her unawares in that moment by applying the last nine strokes in lightning fast fire, until she was panting and screaming, her entire body clenched as tight as a rope.

He threw the switch across the room then, and gathered his woman into his arms. In moments his shirtfront was soaked through with her tears.

He carried her to the nearby rocking chair and sat in it, holding her gingerly in his lap on her hip until her sobs lessened and her shaking seemed to cease.

"I'm so sorry," she hiccupped finally.

"Shh, baby. It's over and you're forgiven. I love you," Jake assured her, rocking her gently.

Gabby smiled, curling even closer into him. "I do have one last secret that I've been keeping from you, for a long time, actually," she whispered, her smile broadening to a grin as she peeked up at him. He frowned down at her, waiting. "I love you, too, Jake."

Jake grinned back at her and squeezed her tight. "That wasn't much of a secret, sweetheart," he teased her gently. "But I think I'll let it pass all the same, seeing as how you confessed it just now."

Gabby settled more comfortably onto Jake's lap then, and he held her like that for a long time, both of them enjoying the comfort, closeness and quiet.

Finally, Gabby looked up at Jake through dampened eyelashes and earnestly promised, "I won't ever lie to you again, Jake, I swear!"

Jake chuckled and hugged her tightly, kissing her cheek noisily. "We'll see, miss," he teased her. "We've got a lot of years together ahead of us, as I figure it. I dare say I might catch you in a fib or two along the way..."

Gabby smiled, and had the good grace to blush, knowing he would likely be proven right. She supposed she could stand a warm bottom in those years to come, as long as she got it from this man... Hmm, 'stand' being the appropriate word.

