

Blood From A Stone

by Carolyn Faulkner

Chapter 1

Brandon Carver set the phone down in its cradle with exquisite care. After almost twenty years, he was finally going to get his revenge against that damned Holden family. That very same family had ripped his loving home apart that same length of time ago, when decades old secrets and lies surfaced, all centering around old J B Cates' no good wife, Celia, and how she'd been his mother's best friend for years while spreading each evening for Daniel, Brandon's father. Finally, it was all coming together. J B may not still be around to see it, but his lovely daughter, whom Brandon had come to secretly covet, would experience his wrath to the nth degree, unless, of course, she took the low road, which he would hope against hope for but never expect. No, he'd settle for foreclosing on her house and kicking her worthless tail out of town. Carverton would be well rid of trash like that.

Miles away, in the small Victorian she'd just barely managed to occupy, the object of his years of pent up scorn blissfully tapped away at her keyboard, knocking out what would undoubtedly be a best selling historical romance novel . . . if she could ever get it published. Oh, well, since she had the summer off from her job teaching at the West Carverton Middle School, Beth might as well do something to occupy her time, and writing was one occupation that always niggled at the back of her mind. Should she submit something and risk rejection, or just keep her nasty little novels to herself, thus depriving the world of her enormous talent for adult erotica? It was such a quandary; she smiled to herself as she panted her way through yet another sex scene between the dominant, muscular hero and the spunky, beautiful lady-in-waiting he longed to tame.

The phone rudely interrupted her reverie. "Yello?" she cradled the phone between her shoulder and ear, continuing to type.

"Elizabeth Holden?" a formal male voice inquired.

If this was a telemarketer, he was going to get an earful. "Yeeesss?"

"Ms. Holden, I'm Donald Wicker – "

"The Donald Wicker?" she asked, half sarcastically, knowing it couldn't possibly be the famous trial lawyer calling her.

"Uh, yes, I guess so."

Elizabeth straightened in the uncomfortable little office chair. "Why are you calling me?"

"I'm contacting you on behalf of my client, Brandon Carver."

"Who?"

She heard an impatient sigh. "Brandon Carver. Of the Carvers? You know, Carver Feed Lot, Carver Bank, Carver Free Library . . ."

"Oh, them. I always thought that was pretty ostentatious of them, didn't you?" Elizabeth stated in a wispy voice, being deliberately obtuse. For a moment there, she almost thought she heard the sound of the bigshot lawyer banging his head against the desk.

"Uh, yeah. Anyway, my client wishes to meet with you, Ms. Holden. Tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, at the Gables." He named the Carver family mansion.

"Why?"

Here's where Donald Wicker, trail lawyer extraordinaire, became a mite uncomfortable. Brandon might not be doing something illegal with all of his maneuvering, but Donald certainly didn't like the way things smelled. To him, Bran had spent entirely too much time in this decade-old endeavor. It was over, let bygones be bygones. But no. Nothing and no one was going to keep Brandon Carver from getting what he wanted, and he wanted anything the last remaining Holden – Elizabeth – had, though he was rich as Croesus and had no particular need for anything. Blood money, he'd called it. He wanted his pound of flesh, and poor Elizabeth was going to have to cough it up.

"It seems that there's some unsettled business he would like to talk to you about, regarding your house." Yeah, he wants to take it out from under you, girl. Run for your life, if you know what's good for you.

Elizabeth was immediately on full alert. Her house meant everything to her. Something mysterious and tragic happened between the Carvers and the Holdens years and years ago, when she was very young, before her family life fell apart. No one had ever really told her what it was that caused her mother to trundle her across country from pillar to post, wandering aimlessly from relative to relative.

Well, once she'd graduated college and gotten her masters, Elizabeth had had quite enough of that. She wanted a home, a permanent home, with a porch and a garden and a

creaky old staircase. She returned to the only place she remembered any sort of stability: Carverton, Texas, because a kindly old aunt had remembered her in her will with a mildly dilapidated old house. When the real estate agent had shown her this place – a little reluctantly, because it wasn't in the best state of repair, Beth had fallen in love instantly. Despite its state of disrepair, this house felt like home. It was just right for the menagerie – two dogs and two cats - and herself. The roof needed help, it needed paint badly outside and almost as badly inside, but after an extensive – and expensive - home inspection proved that it was basically structurally sound, she knew she would keep it.

Prior to moving in, she painted and/or wallpapered the entire inside to her own tastes, light airy pastel colors. She ripped up the old worn avocado green shag carpeting to find beautiful hardwood floors, which she lovingly restored, everywhere but her bedroom, where she knew she'd want something warm and deep under her bare feet when she trotted to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Everything about the house when she finished screamed that it was hers, from the big overstuffed comfortable-but-not-quite-stylish furniture to the canopied queen sized bed she'd blown a fortune on. This was home, and whoever wanted it would have to pry the deed from her cold, dead fingers.

She was nothing if not prompt, arriving at the door to the huge, imposing mansion precisely at the appointed hour. Donald Wicker greeted her himself; Elizabeth recognized him from the articles in various entertainment magazines as well as several highly publicized trials where he'd defended well known Hollywood celebrities. The room he guided her to was a large office/library, with floor to ceiling bookcases and a big partners' desk at one end of the Aubusson carpet. The man she assumed to be Brandon Carver did not so much as extend his hand in greeting. Instead, Elizabeth felt she was pinned and squirming insect at the end of his heated, insulting perusal. Beth was sure she knew what a slave on the block felt like hundreds of years ago. Though she'd been back in town for almost a year now, she'd never seen the famed Brandon Carver, but she'd heard enough about him from every single woman shy of 60 in the county, and some of the married ones, too. Unmarried at 39, he was considered quite a catch. Though not conventionally handsome, he was one big man, and there was not a little speculation that the size of his hands and feet were no lie. He was known as a fair man, a good to work for, great with animals and supposedly a fantastic lover – if the gossip could be trusted - although he was currently unattached.

Donald cleared his throat loudly at Brandon, and the sitting man nodded. "No doubt you don't remember, Ms. Holden – "

"Elizabeth." A cold shiver ran through her body at the silent man's unrelenting, hateful gaze. What the hell had she ever done to him?

The lawyer looked very uneasy at her casual attitude, then replied, "Elizabeth, do you have any recollection of the strife that arose between the Carver family and your family?"

As no one in the room was gentleman enough to offer her a seat, Beth remained standing, crossing her arms over her chest defensively, trying to look anywhere but at Mr. Brandon Carver. "No. I was less than ten when – when we left Carverton."

"And no one has told you the full story, I take it?"

She shook her head, not liking at all where this conversation was going.

"Sit." It was the only word he'd spoken, but Brandon said it in such a tone as not to be disobeyed. Flustered, disliking the command in his voice, Beth complied, at least for the moment, she told herself, sinking into a small wingback leather chair. "It's about time you heard the story then, and paid the piper." Brandon stood, all massive 6'4" of him, unfolding from the chair like a lion about to strike. He paced directly in front of his quarry, relying on that size as well as his deep, angry tone of voice to intimidate, which was generally unlike him. Years of pent up anger and rage, pain and hurt worked its way out through his voice, slapping the young woman across the face with his disgusted attitude and stance. "Our parents were best friends from high school, Ms. Holden," he sneered. "My parents ended up with a lot more money than yours, but that didn't matter to such old friends. My father lent your father over a quarter of a million dollars, all told, in one failed business venture after another. What your father and my mother didn't know, was that your slut of a mother was balling my father behind my mother's back. In her own house." He shook a huge finger at her that fairly trembled with emotion.

Elizabeth was having all she could stand just to stay seated and not run out of the room screaming. This was way more than she ever had an interest in knowing about her mother's sex life, although she always had wondered why, after Daddy died suddenly of a heart attack, they wandered around the country like gypsies; her mother looking like she'd lost the love of her life – there, but not quite there totally. Her poor mother! Her poor father! His poor mother! What a mess.

She did the best she could. She blustered. "How the hell do you know that? Do you have any proof?"

Brandon bent down so that her entire field of vision was filled with nothing but him and practically pressed his nose to hers while he whispered in a raw voice, "Because I caught them in bed together, that's how the hell I know." Beth sucked in her breath at the truth in his voice.

Her teeth caught her upper lip as she tried not to show fear, like someone who's been cornered by an attacking dog. "What does this have to do with me?" Elizabeth was proud of how calm her voice sounded. Barely a quaver.

The angry giant of a man backed off, letting the lawyer fill in the details. Brandon half-listened while Donald went through the legalities of his claim – he wanted repayment of the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars that his father had lent her father. He had signed promissory notes. And he wanted it now. Somehow, though, he was thinking – having met the chit now – that his backup plan would have more merit to him in the long run, even if it would be harder for him to get in the first place. Brandon was nothing if not practical, and he definitely liked the looks of the slut's daughter. His mind followed the radical line of thought, wondering if sluttiness ran in families. Nothing he knew of her – which was not inconsiderable – had mentioned anything about boyfriends or sexual preferences. Hmmmmmm. He liked the idea.

Elizabeth, meanwhile, was horrified to find out that she was going to be held legally responsible for the debts her father accumulated almost twenty years ago. Where the hell was she going to come up with that amount of money? He was just going to have to accept something else in payment, and the only thing she owned of any value was her house. Her heart sank. The house wasn't worth any quarter of a million dollars, but it and the small plot of land would make a hefty down payment. Oh, God, and she'd just paid off her student loans . . .

Her mind and her gaze wandered as Wicker continued to spout his legalese, until suddenly she encountered a pair of golden brown eyes that fairly glowed as they bored into her. Elizabeth, ever-irreverent even in her darkest hour, thought he should be twisting the end of a handlebar mustache about now and it made her smile.

Both men stopped and stared at her as if she were out of her head. Donald thought she probably didn't have any grasp of the seriousness of her bleak financial situation. "Ms. Holden, I don't mean to frighten you, but you do understand that Mr. Carver is going to expect payment in full on this amount?"

Drawn back to the vulgar reality of the moment, the smile vanished from her face as if it had never been, but it had worked its magic, most especially on Donald. "I understand exactly what you're saying Mr. Wicker. Mr. Carver is holding me financially responsible for the sins of my mother."

She'd summed it up quite neatly. "I – uh, yes, I guess that would be true."

Brandon snarled, "I want my father's money, Ms. Holden," the way he said her name was

an insult in itself. "And I'll have it one way or another."

It seemed to Elizabeth that the sky had fallen down on her, and she'd survived so far. So she took a deep breath and rose from the chair. "There's an old expression, Mr. Carver, I believe it has something to do with trying to extract plasma from sedimentary rock." And she sauntered out of the room with much more bravado than she was feeling.

Again, both men were left staring after her. Brandon looked over at Donald with a quizzical expression.

"Blood from a stone, she said. Blood from a stone."

Chapter 2

Elizabeth spent the rest of the day worrying herself literally sick over the situation, realizing how much a court battle would cost, and devastated at the thought of losing her refuge. Her friend, Sarah, found her that night huddled in the middle of her living room floor, surrounded by animals that couldn't figure out what the problem was with mommy.

"Whatzamattau?" Sarah greeted blithely until she saw her friend's upturned face. Beth had been crying so hard her eyes were swollen nearly shut. "What's happened?" Sarah's mind raced. Beth had no living family that she knew of, so it couldn't be that someone died. The only thing she cared a whit about, besides her job, was her house.

"D'jou get fired? What?" She cradled her friend in her arms, setting off another round of wailing.

"H—h-house."

"What? You've got termites?"

Despite herself, Elizabeth produced a watery grin and hit her friend on the shoulder for her irreverence. "No, you idiot. Someone's trying to – to take it away from me."

Finally, the whole sordid story came out, and Sarah sat back on her heels. "Wow. I didn't think Brandon had it in him. He's usually a nice guy – domineering and stubborn, yes, but not cruel or vindictive. This must've been eating at him forever."

"I- I – " Beth took a calming breath and started again. "I don't have the money to pay him or fight him on this. Even if I sell the house and the land, I'll still end up owing him about a hundred grand. I'll be paying for my mother's nights of passion with his father until I'm

too old to enjoy my own nights of passion!"

Ever a believer that Ben and Jerry's cures all ills, Sarah rummaged around in Beth's freezer for the pint she knew she'd find. Settling back down and handing her friend a spoon, Sarah said, "Did they ask you to sign anything?"

"No," Beth hiccupped, mouthful of cool white Russian.

"Good. Don't."

Beth snorted. "Is that your considered legal opinion?"

"Yes, until we can get you a more considered one."

"That's just it!! I can't afford a more considered opinion."

Sarah sighed impatiently. "Sure you can. You know Alex will find a way out of this for you in a heartbeat."

"No, what Alex wants is to find his way into my pants."

Sarah had the grace to look sheepish. "I never said he was perfect, but he is a damned good lawyer."

Licking her lips free of the frozen confection, Beth took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "All deference to your big brother and his bitchin' lawyering, I'm going to see if I can talk some sense into one Mr. Brandon Carver myself, tomorrow."

"Ooooh. You're very brave."

"No, I just have nothing else to lose."

Beth dressed carefully for a meeting that would determine her future. She really hoped she could work things out without having to lose her house to that nasty man or her shirt to a lawyer to defend her from that nasty man. Dressed as professionally as possible in a classically cut powder blue suit with a white silk shirt underneath, she entered the San Antonio high rise that was home to Carver Enterprises, Inc, and made her way to the receptionist's desk.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes," she lied glibly, not about to be stopped before making her goal of meeting him head on.

"With whom?"

"Brandon Carver."

The receptionist's eyebrow rose tellingly, but she buzzed someone, then motioned Beth toward the elevator. "Executive suite is on the fourteenth floor, his secretary is the last on the right, Carol Ogilvie. She'll show you into Mr. Carver's office."

Not much of a city girl, Beth spent the elevator ride up congratulating herself on having made it this far. She'd probably spent a collective amount of about twenty-four hours in a city in all of her life. This was going to be an experience, but it would be worth it if she could come out of this with her house and some semblance of a financial future.

Offices like his were supposed to be intimidating, she reminded herself as she sat in a comfortable chair in front of his huge desk. Huge man, huge desk. She stood immediately when she heard the door behind her open again, and in walked the subject of her musings, suit coat off, sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms to reveal a large expanse of tanned, muscular forearm. He barely looked up from the document he was perusing as he walked behind the desk.

Beth sat down, clearing her throat nervously. "I appreciate you taking the time to see me, Mr. Carver."

Brandon sank into his black leather executive chair, leaning forward on the desk to enunciate carefully, as if to a child or someone quite deaf, "You have five minutes, Ms. Holden."

"Well," Beth shuffled the strap of her purse nervously between her fingers. "I had hoped that we might talk about – about –"

"I really don't see that there's anything more to be said between us, Ms. Holden. You owe me. That really says it all. The ball is in your court now. Are you here to pay me, is that it?"

Oooh, this man irked her. So smug. So self-confident. It was enough to make her want to throw up. "Oh, yes, Mr. Carver, I had the money-printing elves in my basement working all night so I could bring you a cool quarter million this morning. Get real, buddy, I don't have two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to give you."

Brandon leaned back in his chair, enjoying the sight of her. He liked the way she looked, even with her hair all bunched up at the back of her neck, she was pretty, and his body was reacting in an altogether too familiar way to the teasing scent of her perfume. The photos in the dossier he'd had compiled hadn't nearly done her justice. Elizabeth Holden was a lot of woman in a compact package – she barely came to his shoulder, but didn't seem the least bit intimidated either by his size or her situation. She wasn't fashionably thin – but then he preferred a woman who looked like a woman rather than a plank of wood – but rather nicely rounded in the appropriate areas. Elizabeth's businesslike attire made him wonder what she'd look like with all those glorious golden-red curls fanned out on a pillow beneath her while he – Plan B was looking better and better in his eyes. Even sarcastic as hell, she was cute. In another life, they might have been friends, even.

In another life.

Instead she had become something of an obsession of his. He wanted his pound of flesh, and he wanted to take it from her in the most humiliating way possible, preferably.

She was rambling on, and he wasn't listening to a word. "I was hoping there was some sort of agreement we could reach that wouldn't force me to sell my home." Beth leaned earnestly forward, as Brandon did, much less earnestly.

He took a good hard look at the ravages last night had exacted on her face – there was no makeup good enough in the world to cover up for lost sleep, dark circles, and swollen eyes. He'd done that to her. Him. A man who was known in most circles to have impeccable, even old worldy manners, who stood when a lady entered the room, detested vulgarities especially in front of women, and – unless the situation was "special" – had never laid his hand on a woman in anger in his life, even his mother, who could have driven Gandhi to drink.

Brandon steeled himself. He was in the right. She owed him. Her whole damned family owed him, and she just happened to end up being the last survivor. Just to see what she'd come up with, he egged her on. "What type of agreement?"

Beth had no idea. "I don't know. I could work for you."

"I don't have any fifth graders around for you to teach," he ground out impatiently. "Do you have a computer degree?"

She shook her head.

"Engineering of any kind?"

"Law? Business? Management?" They were going no where.

Beth was not proud. "I'm good with plants, and animals. I could work on your ranch, or cook for you."

He almost smiled at the idea of her as a cowpoke. "I have a gardener, a pool man, a housekeeper and a cook."

Her face fell. "Well, then I could get a summer job elsewhere and have the paychecks directly deposited to your account. I can have an allotment sent out of my school pay, too, until it's all paid off."

"And that, my girl, would be sometime before Y3K."

Tears were just beginning to creep into her eyes at the hopelessness of her situation, when her sense of humor took over. "Need a kidney?"

His eyebrow rose at her comment, but Brandon silently commended her on not resorting to tears. Most women would have been bawling on his shoulder by now, expecting that their feminine wiles could be exchanged upon for some discount off the amount owed. Speaking of which, "There is one position you forgot to mention that I do have an opening for."

She eagerly perked up, and he almost regretted mentioning it. It was almost like teasing a butterfly. "Yes, what is it?"

"Mistress."

Her chin dropped to her chest, and she shook her head. "I must have misheard you. Would you repeat that?"

Brandon came around to the front of the desk, to stand much too close to Elizabeth for her comfort. "Mistress. I'm not sleeping with anyone right now, and I must admit, there's a perverted part of me that likes the idea of bedding the daughter of the woman who so readily spread for my father." Beth bolted up and out of the chair, her hand cracking loudly across his face before she turned and walked out of the room.

Brandon merely sat back in his chair and rubbed the spot where her hand had smacked him. She had guts and heart. He was almost sorry he was doing this now. Almost, but not

quite.

Chapters 3

For the next few days, Beth fussed and fumed over Mr. Brandon Big-shot Carver until she just about drove herself mad. Physical activity, that was what she needed. She mowed the lawn, she clipped the hedges, with tears streaming down her face at the thought that she'd have to give all this up. She was kneeling in the garden, viciously pulling up weeds when someone called her name. It was a man, who, when she identified herself, handed her a legal looking document. It was a summons. The bastard was taking her to court to sue her for the money, to include all lands and real estate. Son of a bitch.

Thoughts that had been roiling around in the back of her mind now came to the fore: would it be so bad to be his mistress? For days she'd completely rejected the thought, preferring to take the high road of letting him drag her and her family name through the court system, while she lost the house any way trying to pay the legal bills. There was no one left who would be scandalized at her behavior; she had no children to worry about, and no boyfriend at the moment to defend her honor. All that she had and all that she was had been tied up in her job, her friends and her house. Well, she could probably lose the job if they enforced the morals clause in her contract, but then they'd have to fire ninety percent of the staff who was unmarried and living with their significant other. Not likely. If friends deserted her because of this, because of how close it came to prostitution, then they were truly no friends. At the end of whatever terms they worked out, her house would be her own again, with nothing and no one hanging over it, waiting to take it away.

Not one to dawdle once she'd made a decision, Beth brushed her hands off, and reached for the cordless phone.

The phone on Brandon's desk buzzed. "Yeah, Carol, what is it?"

"A Ms. Holden on line one for you, Sir."

Brandon smiled slightly, glad he was alone. He knew she'd been served with the papers today, and wasn't at all surprised at the call. She was probably going to let loose with every name in the book. He pressed line one and spoke with none of the usual civilities, "Carver."

"Name your terms." She replied in kind.

"Come again?" He couldn't be hearing right.

"You said the position of mistress was open. Is it still open?"

"Yes," he replied warily, sensing some sort of trap.

"Then let's get together and work out some terms."

He leaned back in his chair, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "You mean you want to know what my terms would be?" He asked, knowing how this would grate on her. Brandon almost thought he could hear her teeth grinding in the background.

"Whatever."

They agreed to meet on neutral ground, the offices of a lawyer that was not involved in the case. Before arriving, Beth spent her time digging, trying to find out what was reasonable expectation for compensation of a mistress. The Internet could be such a resource at times.

Before she'd even sat down, Brandon threw out. "Three years."

Beth deliberately slowed down and took her time, drew a deep breath and sat down, crossing her legs primly. "Three years?"

"I want you at my beck and call for three years to repay your father's debt."

Beth reached into her briefcase and threw a manila folder at him that contained, as closely as she could get, some idea of what a "kept woman" raked in per year. It seemed the arrangements differed widely, so, although it galled her to have to do so, she also relied on information about what prostitutes made hourly and calculated on that. He thumbed through the information, impressed with what she'd put together in such a short time. "Six months," Beth countered.

He frankly laughed in her face. "What do you think you have that other women don't, Elizabeth? Two years."

"Nine months, and medical proof of my virginity," she threw another folder across the wide oak table at him. "I'm quite sure that's more than you're going to provide me."

He nearly swallowed his tongue at that little bit of information, but bit out, "A year and a half."

"A year."

"A year and a half, and you live with me."

"As long as I have my own room in whatever house, and you don't mind two dogs and two cats coming with me, done."

How had he ended up feeling maneuvered? And how could she possibly have made it almost twenty-eight years of age and still be a virgin? "You can have your choice of several rooms, but you sleep with me at night." It was his turn to give her a document, one which spelled out the terms of her indentured servitude:

She would live with him, and be "on call" at all times.

She would abide by whatever rules he set down, or be subject to a punishment of his choice, up to and including, but not limited to spankings, but nothing that would cause any permanent damage.

She would be required to travel with him and thus take a leave of absence from her job.

She would not enter into any other sexual relationships during the agreed upon term.

He would provide for her materially and give her a small allowance.

"Define spanking," she said, not looking him in the eye.

Brandon could hardly believe she'd gotten this far. "Over my lap, bare bottomed, always. With my hand or the implement of my choice."

She seemed to consider this very carefully. "I won't be beaten."

He looked indignant. "I've never beaten a woman in my life, nor would I.

Spanked, yes, well past the point of tears. I'm not talking about a light pat, honey. When I spank you, you'll know it."

"No permanent marks or disfigurement. No scat. No bodily fluids."

The woman seemed to know of what she spoke. He wondered . . . "I'm not going to lay in a supply of a year and a half worth of condoms for you. I'll get medically certified, and I'll want you to, also, despite your virginity." His tone was full of doubt.

Beth nodded. "I'm already on the pill because of gynecological reasons."

It was his turn to nod, but he was thinking "Yeah, right. Gynecological reasons," sarcastically. Then he realized she hadn't met his eyes once through the entire exchange. "Look at me."

She did so with no hesitation, realizing that it was a test of sorts – cool as a cucumber. It

made him suspicious.

"You're not going to run out of here and hop a Greyhound to get out of this, are you? Because you know I'd hunt you down."

Brandon watched while she took a deep breath. "I recognize just exactly what kind of person you are, Mr. Carver. I'm not going to leave. But I do want you to sign something legally binding that I will get afterwards that states that you have no further claim on my progeny or me. That the debt was paid in full. I will accept nothing from you in the way of compensation – monetary or otherwise. I have enough to live on for a while in my savings. What I do want is a month of vacation to do with as I please."

He rocked back in his chair, considering her for a moment. She was almost too calm, which is why he questioned whether she was going to break and run. "You got it." Brandon dug into his pants pocket and produced a set of keys, which he pushed across the table at her. "The big gold one is the house key. Make yourself a copy, and be there tonight when I get home."

Her eyes were huge in her white face. "You want to start this tonight?" She'd hoped for at least one more night of freedom.

Brandon wanted to consolidate his stance as soon as possible. She was lucky he didn't take her right there on the conference table. Virgin, my eye. Not the way she looked. He had half a mind to grab her and kiss the stuffing out of her, but his body was already fully capable, and he frankly didn't trust himself.

"I get home at around six." He didn't say anything else as he walked out of the room, leaving her there, practically gasping. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

Brandon's eyebrows quirked up at the disreputable baby blue VW Bug parked next to his Lincoln in the driveway, until he remembered he had a houseguest. Well, more than a houseguest. Much more. He'd half expected her to defy him, but she was full of surprises, that one. Just like a Holden. She wasn't in the kitchen when he walked in, but he was accosted by two of the friendliest damned dogs he'd ever met – one a big lumbering Mastiff-type, and the other a bossy little fast food dog. Despite the disparity in their sizes, it was obvious that the tiny one ruled the roost. The dining room was empty, and the living room, the study, and the downstairs bathroom. Upstairs, his room was as pristine as he'd left it, and there were no additional clothes hung up next to his nor any suitcases on the bed. He finally found her curled up reading a book on the window seat of the bedroom that was located as far away from his as she could get without moving into someone else's house.

Elizabeth looked up at him when he pushed the door all the way open, putting a bookmark in her book. She'd seen him arrive and dreaded it, more than she'd dreaded anything in her life, and it showed in her face. Well, that was too damned bad, because she was his now.

"Where's dinner?"

Her eyebrow rose questioningly. "I thought you had a cook and a housekeeper, etc, etc, etc?"

Brandon disliked having his words thrown back at him. He glared at her while punching in his cook's number. "Cally? Where the hell are you? Oh, man, I'm sorry," Beth was surprised to hear genuine sympathy in his voice. Apparently he could be human with everyone in the world but her. "Listen, if there's anything you need or want, you know I'll help any way I can. Take care." His phone beeped on disconnection as his eyes bored into hers. "You mentioned you can cook?"

Elizabeth said absolutely nothing, merely looked back at him with an ultra-innocent look on her face.

"I'll pay you – "

As she rose from her seat, she interrupted him, which he also disliked intensely. "Save your money. Take six months off my sentence."

"Sentence" she'd said. Like she was in jail. He supposed to her it seemed that way. "I'll have that amended in the contract – 1 year, firm."

Brandon and the dogs followed her back to the kitchen. Dinner was thrown together, but he didn't complain about the steak, peppers, and onions she mixed together in a light brown sauce with garlic then served over rice. In fact, he practically licked the plate. Elizabeth could have been eating C-rations and only downed a couple of mouthfuls before rising to put her plate in the sink.

She vanished again, and when it was time for bed, he had to go roust her out of the room she'd claimed as her own. This time, instead of reading, she was typing into a laptop furiously, faster than any secretary he knew. When Brandon began to loom closely enough over her shoulder to read what she was writing, she closed the program and shut down the machine.

He grabbed her wrist in a strong but gentle hold and pulled her along after him. "Bedtime," he growled huskily.

It took everything in Elizabeth not to balk and run from that bald pronouncement. She didn't know how she'd gotten herself into this predicament – losing her virginity to a man whose only purpose in this life was revenge, who wouldn't give a damn one way or another whether he hurt her or not. For the first time in her life, she regretted not giving in to Shaun Weatherby at the drive-in senior year of high school. At least he would have pretended to care.

Finally, she did pull back, making him stop and look back at her questioningly. "I need to grab my nightgown."

"Believe me, you're not going to need it," Brandon threw back while continuing to drag her down the hall. His bedroom was enormous, with a huge king sized bed dominating it that Elizabeth couldn't seem to take her eyes off. The room was done in shades of cream and brown, with burgundy accents. It looked like a man's room. And Brandon was definitely all male.

He didn't know what was ailing him, but suddenly, despite the fact that he'd gotten exactly what he wanted and had her right where he'd plotted to have her for the past ten years, his body didn't seem to recognize the fact that he'd won. Maybe it was the way she was standing there in the middle of the room, staring at his bed with enormous, frightened blue eyes, her slender arms wrapped around her middle as if she were hugging herself. Sighing, Bran pulled his shirt out of his pants. "Do you need me to help you undress?"

The sensual undertone of his words caused her eyes to snap up to his for a second, and he could see her collect herself physically and mentally. Her back straightened and she began to unbutton her blouse.

"No clothes in bed," he stated when she tried to slip under the covers in her bra and panties.

Elizabeth didn't say anything, but stayed under the covers until she could drop the underwear onto the floor beside the bed, keeping her nakedness hidden from his watchful gaze.

Brandon was equally naked when he joined her, leaving the lamp on his side of the bed glowing.

"Turn out the light, please." It was the first request she'd made, and one of the few times this evening she'd chosen to speak. At least she wouldn't talk his ear off, he grinned to himself.

"I want the light on." That settled that. She was lying on her back, stiff as a board, just waiting for him to ravish her.

Chapter 4

Just because he knew that it was what she expected, Brandon lay facing her on his side, watching but making no move toward her. He could smell the light fragrance of her perfume, mingling with her own scent in that mass of hair. At just that moment, she leaned forward slightly, lifting the veil of curls from under her head and back to fan it out over her pillow. It looked as enticing as he had thought it would.

Elizabeth was wound so tightly she thought she might burst into tears at any moment. What the hell was he waiting for? She wished that he'd just get on with it, get it over with so that she could get to sleep. At this rate, she was going to die of a heart attack while still a virgin!

When he finally did touch her, it was not at all what she expected, nor she realized with a start, what she wanted. His big hand combed its way gently through her mane of hair. His touch was unhurried and almost reverent. Christ, if he didn't do something hurtful in the next few minutes, she was going to completely disgrace herself and dissolve into tears, which was exactly what she didn't want to do.

Bran was not used to having a woman be afraid of him, nor of one being in his bed and so obviously, desperately not wanting to be there. He'd had his share of lovers - although not recently as he'd been spending all his extra time and attention on the stiff as a board woman who lay beside him - and he was a good lover. He liked women - well, most of them anyway. Several of the women he'd been lovers with had also been into spanking, which he considered a major bonus. He was finding the idea of simply forcing himself on her was quite distasteful.

Instead, he decided to see if he could make her want him, make her respond to him. Brandon imagined that that would be even worse - to be forced to sexual pleasure by a man she undoubtedly hated. He began to talk to her, remembering one of his lovers could practically orgasm just from the sound of his voice encouraging her to do just that.

"You have a very beautiful body, Elizabeth," his voice rasped itself along the nerve endings of her skin as surely as his touch would seconds later. He consciously avoided

her most sensitive, private areas, concentrating instead on places that were usually forgotten by over-eager, less experienced men . . . the slender column of her neck, the hollow of her elbow, the gentle curve of her waist. His fingertips were rough from hours spent with an acoustic guitar in his lap rather than a woman, but his touch was light and teasing. Brandon knew from the moment of initial physical contact with her – at her indrawn breath and barely stifled moan – that she would respond to him, however her mind might argue against surrender.

"It's rounded nicely in all the right areas." The very tips of his fingers trailed over the side of her left breast and he smiled almost evilly while watching her nipple crest tightly. "And you have the most gorgeous head of hair I've ever seen." It seemed he couldn't keep his hands away from it, using the very end of an errant curl to tickle her distended nipple. "Open your eyes," he commanded, and she obeyed, her eyes more wild and frightened than when she first arrived in the room.

Brandon touched her everywhere, noting the small signs of her desire as they cropped up, not touching her more sensitive areas or even kissing her until he'd claimed possession of every other inch of her body. But he had to keep reminding her to keep her eyes open – she had the most charmingly annoying habit of closing her eyes when she arched and moaned in pleasure. His lips hovered, open and wet, over her nipple. "If I have to tell you again, you'll get your first spanking much earlier than I'd intended," he threatened, then claimed the tip of her breast aggressively.

"No, oh God!" Her reaction was extreme writhing, almost as if she were trying to buck him off her.

"Stop!" he did not relinquish possession of her nipple in issuing the command, but raised its tip with the edges of his teeth in quick punishment.

Elizabeth's voice sounded strangled, and he waited for her to relax back against the bed before resuming his intimate assault. Christ, she was sensitive! He was impressed, although sorry to realize that she had been lying when she said she was a virgin. There was no way she hadn't done this before. But the lie was a good reason for a punishment to be meted out later. Much later.

Beth's body was flooded with the rioting sensations he was creating. She'd never even indulged in heavy petting and this pleasure was so intense it was torturous. When strong fingers began to pluck gently at the nipple he wasn't suckling, she could no more control her arching back and animalistic moan than she could roll back the tide.

"That's it, Elizabeth. I want your pleasure. I want you to come for me. I will have your

orgasms as a part of my due." Brandon locked his eyes with hers as he let his broad hand wander down to the juncture of her thighs. For a second, he looked down at the auburn curls. "These will have to go, beautiful as they are." When he caught her gaze again, he said firmly, "Open your legs for me."

There was a moment when he thought she would flat out refuse him, and he remained still, letting her decide her own fate but expecting no less than her obedience. Slowly, painfully slowly, he watched her thighs part. "Very good, Elizabeth. A little bit more, just a little more." When she was spread to his liking, he pressed the palm of his hand over her entire pussy. "This is what I want of you. For the next year, the very center of you is mine – to pleasure or punish." Brandon felt a shudder ripple through her at his words. "Tonight, though, I promise you, it'll be pure pleasure."

The first time a man touched her most intimate area, and his entire goal was her humiliation. She'd been bought and paid for, and there was nothing she could do to stop him. Elizabeth knew she had to lay there and take whatever he dished out, and somehow, the idea of pleasure at his hands was infinitely worse than pain.

She was entirely unprepared for the ache of pure pleasure when the roughened pad of his middle finger rubbed delicately over her clit. Beth sat up, grabbing his wrist automatically, mouth wide open on a moan she couldn't quite get out.

"Lie back down, Elizabeth," his voice was a soothing whisper as his finger continued to work its magic, then dipped a little bit lower to gather some of her honey. "My, my but you're so wet!" Her face turned a becoming shade of red, and she pulled a little on his wrist, trying to dislodge that torturous hand. "Put your hands above your head, Beth."

No, no, no!! She couldn't do that! How could she just – she had no choice but to obey him, her mind screamed at her throbbing body, and somehow she complied, writhing and moaning against his hand the whole time.

"Good girl." Experimentally, he moved his finger down to her entrance again, and pressed a little into her, finding his way firmly barred. So she hadn't been lying! He could've been knocked over with a feather! What was she doing at the ripe old age of twenty-eight still intact?

Her moan that time was less of pleasure, more of apprehension, and Brandon found himself soothing her again compulsively, "Sh-sh-shhhhh." He went back to worrying her little love button relentlessly, eyes taking in all of her unfettered response. Christ, she was beautiful in the throes of passion! He dipped his lips to her nipple again and suckled hard, laving the turgid end with his warm, wet tongue.

"Please, no!"

A thought struck him, and he wondered if this might not be her very first orgasm, too.

"Yes, Elizabeth. I want you to come and you must do what I say. Surrender to me, Elizabeth."

"No," she moaned, but she knew he was going to push her beyond her limits to resist. He wasn't going to stop until she flew apart at the seams.

"Yes," Brandon's voice took on a warning tone. "You mustn't resist me, Beth, or you'll get a good, hard spanking." That threat made her moan and arch just a little more, and he knew that that idea was exciting to her, even if she didn't quite recognize it herself yet.

"You must come for me. I want you to orgasm on my finger like a good girl."

She was beyond speech, her body had a mind of its own, and he was in the driving seat heaping sensation after sensation on her inexperienced flesh until she couldn't take it any more and exploded with a scream, grinding her hips and writhing, bucking and moaning as he continued to wring every ounce of pleasure from her. God, she was fantastic!

Before she had recovered completely, Bran positioned himself between her legs, fully and completely capable at the virgin entrance to her body. Her hands had landed naturally on his biceps, but she wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were still wide and frightened, pupils dilated. He knew this was going to hurt her, and got it over with swiftly, burying his considerable length inside her tight glove in one swift stroke. Elizabeth's scream was genuine as she convulsed around him in pain. "It's okay, just stay still and I promise the pain will recede."

It was more than physical pain; it was true, unadulterated hatred, of him and herself. What the hell had she let him do to her - to reduce her to this, lying naked and vulnerable, pinned like a bug beneath his muscular bulk in the most compromising position a woman could assume. Worse than that, she had liked it. Responded to him wantonly, even. Climaxed like a tigress in heat on his hand, screaming like a banshee in unadulterated pleasure. God, she was a slut just like her mother!

He was right though, because when he began to move on her after a few moments, the pain had lessened, and, to her renewed horror, it began to feel fantastic, again! But she didn't want to feel like this! It made her want to wail her unhappiness, but what came out was a low, throaty moan.

Brandon had been worried about continuing to hurt her – he was no small man by any

stretch of the imagination. Her cry of obvious need, though, convinced him that she was no longer hurting, and he consciously moved within her tight little sheath in a manner meant to give the both of them the utmost in pleasure, stretching her, rasping her delicate nerves, opening her for his repeated invasion.

Elizabeth didn't want to come again, but neither Brandon nor her own body gave her any choice in the matter. Before he spent himself inside her with a hoarse cry, she'd orgasmed twice more against her will. He was lying heavily on her, hot breath fanning the baby hair at her ear. Gathering what little dignity remained like a cloak about her, she said softly in a consciously neutral tone, "Would you please get off? You're heavy."

He raised up on his elbows quickly, and rolled to the side. "Oh. Sorry."

As soon as he was off, she got up like a shot and went into the bathroom, cleaning herself meticulously, wiping away the evidence of her innocence and his recent possession. Clamping down ruthlessly on the overwhelming urge to dissolve into tears, she completed a hasty toilette.

"Are you all right?" came an intrusive question from the bedroom.

"Fine," her voice was quiet, reserved, as she slipped back into the covers, carefully not looking at him.

When she curled onto her side, facing away from him, he sighed in displeasure, reaching out to pull her forcibly into his arms. His big body cradled hers, wrapping her in a false sense of warmth and comfort. Elizabeth feigned sleep, but was wide-awake, waiting for him to fall asleep while silent tears dampened her pillow.

Finally, after an eternity, he rolled away from her and began to snore. She eased herself out of the bed, desperate to get away from him without waking him. Only when she'd reached the relative safety of the back bedroom did she allow the sobs to escape. Only it was not nearly enough. She wanted to wail and rend her clothing, she wanted to beat her head against the wall and drive the memory of achieving unbearable pleasure at his hands out of her mind. Instead, she settled for crumpling on the chair in front of her computer, crying until she could cry no more. Then her writing became her solace and she typed well into the night.

Bran awoke alone in bed, and sat up immediately, wondering if she was even in the same state. He saw the damp spot on her pillow, and the red stain on the sheets. Where was she? Not bothering to dress, he stalked down the hall angrily, half-expecting he would not find her in her room.

The door banged wide open loudly and his massive presence filled the room. "I thought I told you you'd sleep with me."

After glancing at him quickly at first, she had returned to her incessant typing. "I rarely type in my sleep."

"Bed. Now." Brandon watched her sigh exasperatedly, but she complied, saving her work on Word then closing the laptop down.

He turned and let her pass in front of him to walk down the hall behind her. She'd donned a small pink pair of thin panties and a big t-shirt, and he couldn't resist smacking her bottom smartly as they walked into his bedroom. "I must not have done a very good job making you come if you're so wide awake in the middle of the night." Her eyes flew to his apprehensively as she got under the covers, then removed her clothes.

Brandon loomed over her with purposeful sensual threat. "I'll have to rectify that situation, now won't I?"

Chapters 5

To Elizabeth's horror, he was as good as his word, using his body, his voice, and his lips to pleasure her all night long, until she literally fell asleep in his arms. When she awoke, she was alone, and the clock said almost eleven thirty, much later than she usually slept. Red faced with embarrassment about how she had responded to him so blatantly last night, she scurried down the hall to her room and dressed in the least sexiest manner she could manage – old jeans, a t-shirt that declared that "a woman needed a man like a fish needed a bicycle", and a navy blue cardigan sweater. She ruthlessly scraped her hair in a ponytail, unwilling and unable to stare herself in the mirror long enough this morning to style it. Besides, who'd she have to impress, anyway?

She figured he'd left for work by now, but she was wrong. He was sitting in his study with the door open, and she was sure she couldn't get by it without him noticing, so she didn't even try. When Brandon came into the kitchen, she was busy making some toast for breakfast.

"Did you sleep finally?" he asked, knowing she had.

Elizabeth nodded.

"Is that all you're eating?"

Another nod.

He turned her against him. "Honey, if you're going to keep up with me, you'd better pack in some calories." Her gaze remained squarely on the second button of his denim shirt until her toast popped up. "Are you genuinely this shy or are you just cruising for a spanking?"

Beth's eyes flew up to his and she bit her lip. "I- I -" she cleared her throat and started again. "I'm genuinely shy. I don't know you."

His smile was charmingly lopsided. Beth did not want to be charmed by him. "After last night, you know me pretty well, I think."

Despite her fervent prayers against it, he followed her to a seat at the small kitchen table. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you."

Not one to beat around the bush, he asked the question he'd been dying to since last night. "How did you end up a virgin at your age?"

She shrugged. "Just never met the right one."

He pinned her with his gaze. "And that ended up being me?"

Her back came up. "Not by my choice." The dishes clattered when she put them in the sink.

"You could have declined the offer."

Beth took a deep, deep breath and walked up to him, getting close voluntarily for the first time since they'd met. Her sharp blue eyes met his, and when she spoke, she enunciated very clearly and carefully. "So you want more than the pound of flesh you extracted from me last night, hmmm? Well, here's my bottom line: there are very few things I value in this life. My friends, my pets, and my house, not necessarily in that order. I have no family or boyfriend to offend, I couldn't afford a lawyer much less a legal hassle about the money, and despite how degrading and humiliating it is to be here against my will, I will survive to walk out that door exactly 364 days from now. And you will not have touched any part of me but my body. I am not my body."

But despite her best efforts to remain neutral toward him and merely exist in his house, it was not in her character to remain aloof forever. She was too much of a people person. Nightly, he breached the fortress of her indifference, wringing mind-shattering orgasms from an all too willing body. Brandon refrained from joining their bodies for long enough to allow her to heal, then it was no holds barred. He especially loved to make her beg him to take her, and enjoyed arousing her to the point where she practically attacked him. He enjoyed how her eyes widened when he first entered her with his body, pressing himself slowly, deliberately into her, stretching her, making her moan with the delicious effort of accommodating his invasion. For Elizabeth, it was a lesson in humility, and served to remind her that there were hidden aspects of her personality that he could command at will. Why him, in heaven's name? Would she respond to just anyone? Obviously, no. It had to be Brandon, dammit.

If she had been entirely honest with herself, she would have had to admit that there was one thing she did enjoy: cooking for him, at least, even though it was cooking that had earned her her first spanking. She had a hankering for roast beef, and crock potted a very nice roast with potatoes and vegetables, which she proceeded to drop onto the floor while trying to get it to the dining room table. The dogs had an extremely good dinner, but Elizabeth didn't realize that Brandon was listening to the rather colorful ranting she was doing as she watched one of her favorite meals literally going to the dogs.

The silence was deafening when she finally glanced up at the doorway, and saw him glaring down at her. "Upstairs. Now." He did not look happy. Dreading the consequences of her blue language, she followed him into his bedroom. Brandon positioned her between his legs as he sat on the edge of the bed, efficiently removing her jeans and panties, then bending her over his broad, hard thighs. And she had thought that being naked beneath him in his bed was a vulnerable position – he was showing her new meanings of the word! God, she was so exposed, with just her bottom half hanging out, bare as the day she was born. She felt like a six-year-old over her father's lap for being naughty, and knew that was exactly what he was aiming for.

"I won't have that kind of language used in my house." The first smack landed full on the crest of her butt – WHACK! - making her draw in a deep breath at the pain. She'd forgotten how much a spanking hurt, and he was only too happy to help her remember! "Do you understand me?" SMACKSLAPWHAP

Elizabeth nodded vehemently, unable to draw enough breath to cry out, much less answer him verbally. What was his hand made out of? Redwood?

SPANK!WHACK!WHAP!SWAT!

He made short work of reducing a fairly self-confident, strong willed woman to the level of a recalcitrant first grader in a matter of minutes and fifteen well placed swats to her beautiful, round bottom cheeks. But he wasn't about to end it there. Out of curiosity, he delved a finger between her cheeks to see if he could prove his own theory that she was enjoying this, and got it drenched. She was definitely enjoying it through the tears. The spanking he gave her was long and thorough. By the time he stopped, she was blubbering loud promises that she'd never swear again, ever. It was music to his ears.

Elizabeth hadn't cried so hard in years and years. Somehow, it almost felt good – gave her an excuse to get all of the stuff out that she tended to bottle up, being as sensitive as she was. She barely put up a protest when he guided her off his lap and into a corner of the room. "You stand there and think about how naughty you've been. I'll be back in a few minutes." With that juvenile admonishment, he patted her bottom condescendingly and departed, leaving Elizabeth snuffing back sobs unsuccessfully, standing with her nose in the corner and her swollen red bottom sticking out into the room. When Brandon returned, it was with the most comfortable piece of nightwear he could find in her drawers. It was a warm flannel top and pants that he dressed her in as carefully as if she were his child, then tucked her under the covers, breaking his own rule about no clothes in the bed. When he left the room, he turned the heat up deliberately, knowing the combination of exhaustion and heat would help her sleep.

When Brandon came back upstairs to awaken her, he found the bed empty, and naturally turned down the hall to her room, finding her huddled under the covers there. He picked her up in his arms gently, and brought her back to his bed. "When I put you to bed, I expect you to stay there, Missy," he growled, undressing her before joining her beneath the covers.

"Yes, Sir." She was definitely still asleep, he grinned, knowing she'd never have addressed him with such deference unless she was not quite with it.

"Do you need another spanking to reinforce that, little girl?" he asked, knowing the answer.

Elizabeth's eyes flew open and met his. "No, please." Her hands went unconsciously to her bottom, rubbing the still sore flesh. Brandon loved the way her bottom lip pouted prettily.

Instead of spanking her, he let his hand claim the juncture of her thighs as he rolled her onto her back. He couldn't believe how wet she was as he began to tease her little clitty. "Oh, baby, you're soaking wet." She squirmed in embarrassment, shifting her bottom on the sheets only once before realizing that she'd better stay still, no matter how hard it

was. He'd gotten to know her so well in the past few days that her body responded to just the idea that he was going to touch it. The pleasure was always there, a remembered flame flickering just below the surface, ready and waiting for him to fire it up again. And he always did.

Brandon had her moaning helplessly just before her body exploded as easily as he had reduced her to tears by paddling her bottom hours before. "That's my good girl. Come for me, Elizabeth, or I'll spank you again. Do as I tell you and come on my fingers." His voice, like his tongue, flicked sensuously over her nerve endings. He broke her control completely by capturing her nipple in his mouth, suckling strongly while his fingers worked their magic on her pussy.

She fought it to the end, chanting "nonononono" under her breath, even as he made her body say "yesyesyes" uncontrollably. She was so responsive, he reveled in being able to overcome her resistance, although it was a niggling thought in the back of his mind that it would be nice if she would stop fighting both himself and her and give herself to him freely. But he doubted it would ever come to that, so he would take it where he could.

When he entered her, she met his eyes, as he required, unable to stop how her breath naturally sucked in at the size of him. It was a very tight fit, and he loved to feel her expanding around him; her body forced to accommodate him inch by slow inch.

"Oh, God, you're so tight!" he breathed, beginning a deep, plunging rhythm that overwhelmed the both of them. At the very end, he reached beneath her and grabbed her bottom, squeezing it deliberately, making her arch up to him and driving him that much further inside her. The deeper contact sent them both over the edge.

Over the next few months, they settled into somewhat of a routine – he went to work and she usually went over to her own house, getting some of the small repairs done that she hadn't had the time to do before. They had dinner, spent some time in the living room or the study then went to bed. Occasionally, he found himself with a hankering for her during the day, and, much to her embarrassment, he called her to his office for a nooner. They christened his couch and his desk that afternoon, then the rug in front of the fireplace that night at home. Sometimes, though, he wouldn't quite make it through the door, and had taken her in the kitchen and on the entryway rug, slamming into her almost violently, but always certain to bring her to her own pleasure before taking his.

Despite the fact that she knew he hated her, he was not deliberately abusive or violent in any way, which would have negated the agreement between them, as far as she was concerned. Nothing and no one was worth putting up with that. In fact, he seemed almost protective of her, in his own way. Like the time he came home and she wasn't there. He

knew she often spent time at her own place when he wasn't around so he drove over there, and nearly had a coronary when he saw her up on the roof.

Not wanting to startle her, he called to her with a dangerously controlled, quiet voice. "Elizabeth."

His stance was enough to clue her into the fact that she was in major trouble. He might just as well have worn a sign – feet planted apart, arms crossed on the muscles of his chest, facial expression hard and unforgiving. When she turned to put her foot onto the top rung of the tall steel ladder, she found it encircled by his strong fingers. Brandon backed her down the ladder with him, using his big body to protect hers. When they reached the ground, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to his big Lincoln, speaking not one word – even of recrimination – until they entered his house.

"Get your little butt into that bedroom and you'd better be ready to get the spanking of your life, Missy." The disturbing calm of his tone was warning enough. Beth didn't have to be told twice.

Brandon went into his study and poured himself a big swallow of scotch. He didn't know why it had affected him so much, seeing her walking around up there like she belonged there. Must be the chauvinist in him, but his heart had been in his throat until her feet were planted firmly on the ground. He was terrified he'd startle her and cause her to fall to her death. Why should it matter so much to him? He didn't want to examine that too closely. What he wanted to do was a combination of spanking and sex that he wasn't certain how he'd achieve; he wanted to spank her for being up there in the first place and claim her with his body because she was safe with him now.

With a set, determined expression, he made his way up to the bedroom.

Chapter 6

Elizabeth was looking out the window when he came in and closed the door quietly behind him. "Strip," he commanded without really looking at her. She did as she was told, afraid to get herself into more trouble than she was already in.

He remained fully dressed in the jeans and shirt he'd put on when he came home. Brandon sat on the edge of the bed, almost dreading the thorough punishment he was going to have to administer. "C'mere." When Beth stood directly in front of him, he reached out and took her hands, squeezing them gently. "You are never to put yourself in such danger again." A shudder ran through him again at the thought of seeing her on that roof.

"But I – "

He was in no mood to listen to explanations, instead pulling her over his lap for a fast and furious hand spanking. "I don't care what you wanted or what you think you can do. I'm telling you how it's going to be." Each word was emphasized by a swift crack on her bare bottom. "I don't ever want to see you on the roof of a building again. You must've scared five years off my life. Do I make myself understood?"

Already crying and blubbering from the force of his hand on her upturned cheeks, Elizabeth got out a shaky, "Y-yesssss!"

To her surprise, he pulled her up and off his lap, only to arrange her on her stomach on the edge of the bed, over several pillows. "Just to be absolutely sure, I'm going to reinforce the idea." Beth heard a drawer open and close, and the next thing she heard was the THWACK of a heavy leather strap stinging her bottom.

"YEOW! OmyGOD – stop, please!" She knew she couldn't bear much from that wicked implement and started to get up.

His fingers touched the small of her back gently. "If you move, I'll double your punishment from thirty to sixty strokes." She lay back down, not knowing how she was going to live through thirty.

She lived by screaming and crying and begging and kicking her feet. But she did not move from that terribly vulnerable position as her body danced to the terrible rhythm of the rise and fall of that strap. Brandon wielded it with deadly accuracy and attention to detail. He left no strip of flesh untouched up and down the backs of her legs and her cheeks. In the end, her butt was a field of raised red welts and swollen imprints across quivering flesh.

After the thirtieth, he threw the strap away from them, and turned her over almost lovingly, lowering his mouth directly onto her love nest for the first time. Elizabeth was amazed at how quickly her cries of absolute pain became moans of absolute ecstasy. Her ravaged bottom throbbed almost in time with the fevered blood that coursed through her veins, pooling in the same area as his mouth was suckling lovingly. After a few minutes, he put one hand under her bottom to hold her up so that he could insert several thick fingers into her pussy, making her cry out at the raw sensations of having her sore bottom clenched gently, rhythmically, her clitty suckled aggressively, and her pussy filled and stretched almost painfully wide by the careful insistence of his fingers.

Whether it was the savagery of the spanking or the thoroughness of his pleasurable attentions, Elizabeth could not control the rolling storm that built within her. When she came, she literally screamed with it, tears leaking out of her eyes at the painful pleasure. Suddenly, fingers replaced by his throbbing cock, he rode her mercilessly, with no attention to her pleasure at all for the first time since she'd come to him. He took her, that was the only way to describe it. Brandon was claiming ownership in the most basic male way, establishing his dominance and imprinting her with his touch, his possession.

Despite the fact that he was almost mindlessly rough, she was with him all the way, lifting her hips to help him, wrapping her legs around his lean waist. When he spent inside her, it was during her third orgasm; her muscles clenching around him milking him to his own release.

His hot breath blew into her ear as he tried to come down from a frightening high, breathing so heavily his teeth were tingling. Finally conscious of the fact that he was probably crushing her with his bulk, Bran moved to the side, but kept her next to him. It annoyed him a little that after sex she curled away from him, and he knew that sometimes she cried herself to sleep, however silently she thought she was doing it.

For once, she was going to cuddle with him, like most women preferred. Brandon arranged her against his side, with her head pillowed on his right shoulder, his arm loosely draped across her back to keep her in place. This way, he could indulge himself in one of his favorite pastimes, playing with her hair. He stroked it gently away from her face, noticing that it was damp to the touch. Tears or sweat? He didn't know, until he felt the telltale wetness against his shoulder. But when she would have pulled away to cry alone, curled in a small ball of misery on the other edge of the bed, he held her more tightly and whispered soothing nothings.

It was her complete undoing. Why did he have to go and be nice to her? Brandon was startled at the depths of her sobs, but merely tightened his arms around her to let her cry it out, rubbing her back gently. It had been a very nasty punishment, and it was no wonder she was still sobbing. One of the things he missed most was the comforting a spanking cried out for, but she hadn't seemed to need or want it. Perhaps he'd been wrong in not encouraging her to lean on him after a punishment. Hmmmmmm.

After that night, however grudgingly, Brandon had to acknowledge to himself that his feelings for her were changing. He liked her, and that annoyed him, making him harder on her. He spanked her terribly often, sometimes twice an evening, the second time laying another layer of welts on a recently welted bottom, then he would force her past her natural resistance and wring several orgasms from her before pressing her into the mattress and himself into her.

Elizabeth Holden was getting to him, there was no doubt about it. She was smart and funny, very quick with a quip or insult to make him laugh. They were both history buffs – Roman, English, World War II, they discussed it all, and watched everything they could find on the educational channels together. She even found something and taped it for him on the discovery of a woolly mammoth frozen intact in Siberia. They went out occasionally, but she seemed to be so uneasy that he didn't ask it of her very often. It seemed they always met someone she knew, and she disliked having to pretend that they were romantically involved when romance had nothing to do with their arrangement. Elizabeth had spotted her best friend Sarah at the grocery store one day when he was with her, and did her best to convince him to leave. He refused, putting his arm around her affectionately.

"You don't need to do that," she whispered fervently. "She knows the situation."

Sarah greeted Elizabeth warmly, but didn't spare a glance for Brandon. He got the picture. She was incensed at his treatment of her friend, and she was freezing him out. "Don't forget – Thursday night," Sarah mentioned as she left.

"What happens Thursday night?"

Elizabeth looked guilty as sin. "I forgot to ask you if I could go to see Sarah that night."

"Fine with me," he surprised her by agreeing readily.

He let her go, but did set a curfew of eleven. She arrived promptly at ten fifty-nine, not wanting to find out how he'd punish her if she broke his ridiculous curfew. Brandon was in his study with the door open, as usual, and called her in when she tried to slip past and upstairs. "Did you have a good time?"

"Yes."

"What's that around your neck?" He'd watched her dress, and knew that she'd not had a necklace when she left the house.

Beth fingered the gold chain nervously. "Sarah gave it to me."

"Why?"

"B-because last Monday was my birthday."

How stupid could he have been! He knew her birthday – what an idiot he was. "Well, belated happy birthday." Brandon kissed her cheek chastely.

"Thank you," she blushed.

"I'll have to get you something."

Her expression froze, much like Sarah's had been in the supermarket. "No, no. I don't want anything from you, thank you." She didn't want anything except her freedom. "I'm tired. May I go upstairs?"

He nodded, his mind not on her request.

Too quickly for Brandon, she claimed her month of vacation, and he was alone in the house again, rambling and lonely. She hadn't told him where she was going, and he had no real right to ask. She'd left an emergency contact number, and he didn't have the heart to have her followed. So he worked himself to death instead, early mornings, late evenings until she returned. He took the day of her return off, so that he would be there when she got home. Well, to his home, anyway.

He didn't know how he'd let himself envision the idea of her coming through the door and hugging him tightly in greeting, as if she really wanted to be with him, but that certainly wasn't the way it played out. Elizabeth returned to him more nervous than she'd left, hurrying past him with her suitcases in her arms and the dogs yapping at her heels. She scurried around putting things back into place until he finally caught her arm in the hallway and dragged her into his room. Without taking his eyes from her, he began to undress, raising his eyebrow when she didn't do the same.

"Uh, now?"

Completely nude, he stalked toward her unselfconsciously. "Hell, yes," he growled. Beth swallowed painfully and took a step back. Somehow, she'd forgotten how physically overwhelming he was. Particularly when he wanted something, and he wanted her. Maybe her mind forgot in self-defense. Brandon backed her into a corner in short order, then lifted her onto the bed, divesting her of her clothing in record time. Oh, God, why did she have to respond to him! She was literally shaking in his arms.

Resolving not to allow her to be away from him for so long again, Bran noticed that she was shivering, but not from passion. He rolled them under the covers and turned on the electric blanket, cuddling her tightly to him. "Better?" She nodded. "Are you sick?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Nerves."

"You're that nervous of me?" His tone betrayed his disbelief.

"I – " she nodded.

He rested his chin on the top of her head and merely held her until she had relaxed, then he made sweet, careful love to her, paying particular attention to her pleasure. It was more than Elizabeth could stand and she bawled like a baby when he was through. Why did her body betray her every time?

Confused and more than a little worried, Brandon held her close to him. "Did I hurt you, baby?" He would have sworn she enjoyed it just as much as he had – he'd tried to ensure just that. Beth's head moved back and forth against his shoulder, confirming that he'd not inadvertently caused her pain. Sometimes the differences in their size worried him, but usually when it was too late to do anything about it. Bran didn't like seeing her like this – disconsolate, crying like a baby. Made him feel like the heel he was beginning to think of himself as. "Maybe you're just overtired from having too much vacation."

Grasping at any plausible explanation other than the correct one, Beth agreed in a low, throaty voice. "Yes, that must be it," while he stroked the wet hair back from her temples.

"Well, let me just make sure you're not coming down with anything, and then we'll tuck you into bed for a nice long nap." He got up, and she merely moved enough to occupy the same space he had, on her tummy, on long leg drawn up and the pillow crumpled under her head. She was almost asleep when he pulled her over his lap, which awakened her instantly.

"Why are you spanking me?" What could she possibly have done in the space of the two hours she'd been here to deserve a punishment?

His big hand rubbed her lower back. "Relax. I'm not going to spank you, Elizabeth. I'm just going to take your temperature."

She sat bolt upright on her heels, mouth open, index finger pointing into the open space. "This is where the thermometer goes for adults, buddy." Beth could see that he had a big jar of Vaseline next to his leg with what she assumed was a rectal thermometer already

sticking out of it.

"But not for you, Elizabeth," he said firmly, guiding her into place over his lap.

Beth didn't know when she'd been more embarrassed. She wasn't sure if she'd've preferred a blasted spanking to this. Brandon was taking his sweet old time, slowly pulling down her panties to just above her knee, then reaching for the thermometer with one hand while very gently separating her bottom cheeks with the fingers of the other. Although it was nothing but a slender glass tube, she gasped at its intrusion, especially when he seated it well within her and twirled it into place.

"Good girl," he patted her bottom condescendingly while Beth fumed at the indignity of her position until she remembered she could contract her butt muscles . . .

SMACKSMACKSMACK! "Stop that right now, Elizabeth Holden!" he warned, issuing several more sharp whacks to her vulnerable bottom. "If that thermometer gets out of your bottom without my help, you're going to be one very sorry little girl." Beth opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it again and settled for wiggling helplessly on his lap until he finally removed the offending object. She jumped off his lap like a scalded cat, pulling up her panties quickly before he decided to do anything else to her.

"Naptime, Beth." After pronouncing her healthy but exhausted, he tucked her under the covers and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Sleep as long as you can. Don't get out of bed until I come for you." Beth nodded, almost asleep already.

It was several months later, not too long before she would be released from her obligation, that she got a call from the area hospital, letting her know that Brandon had been in a car accident. He wasn't seriously hurt, but did have a broken ankle and some cuts and bruises. The nurse asked if she could come down to collect him.

Her attitude toward him while he was recovering gave him hope that she might feel something besides loathing for him – Elizabeth fairly danced attendance on him, although he was grumpy and in pain for the first couple of days, and barely fit to live with. When he was feeling better, he thanked her seriously, then tried to show her how he felt by bringing her to an extremely intense orgasm. But somehow, that seemed to make it worse.

Brandon was at a loss. He'd captured this woman with the intent of inflicting some sort of revenge for his lost family honor on her, when what she really needed from him, and what he was really interested in providing for her was protection. Elizabeth was the most uniquely sensitive person he'd ever met, desperately in need of a guiding hand against all

of the potential hurts in life. The only things she'd asked of him over the past almost eight months were whether she could rescue some animals and have them stay in the house with them until she could find decent homes.

And although he'd spanked her, and if she ever let him near her again after her year was up, he would continue to spank her if she misbehaved, he knew that it had benefited her – helped her be a stronger person in general.

How could he tell her that he no longer hated the sight of her as he had for the past several years, but instead looked forward to seeing her every evening when he came home? Enjoyed spending time with her, whether it was watching a special on TV, getting badly beaten at a trivia game, or luxuriating in the soft folds of her body. He wanted her to want him, and knew that, with the way he'd treated her, it was a completely lost cause. They were on the downside of their bargain, and as fervently as she was counting the days until her freedom, he was dreading it.

Chapters 7

Brandon took her away with him several times to a cabin he had deep in the Tennessee woods, near a beautiful, serene lake. There he indulged himself in what was becoming a favorite pastime of his – watching her. The cabin was secluded enough, particularly in early spring, that he refused to allow her to wear clothing, particularly inside. As the only shower was outdoors and surrounded only by a flimsy curtain, she was forced to walk for a short distance outside in the way God had intended, and the way Brandon appreciated the most. He'd caught her just outside the door and held her in his arms in the warmth of the sunshine. For a moment there, she couldn't help but return his smile, and he could almost pretend that they were simply lovers enjoying a weekend escape. His hands found the moisture hidden at the juncture of her thighs, and right there, in front of God and all the woodland animals, he pleased her body mercilessly until she creamed on the tips of his fingers and moaned loud enough to be heard in town. Then he picked her up, not wanting to rub her delicate skin against the rough logs of the cabin wall, and placed her delicately in the middle of the homemade quilt on the sleigh bed, and claimed her for his own minutes later.

Sometimes she was so quiet; he wondered what she was thinking. But he didn't think his right to her extended to her private thoughts, so he never asked. If he had, he would have gotten an interesting earful. Elizabeth was almost inconsolable about the fact that she couldn't control her response to him, despite daily and nightly attempts. It seemed he knew her body better than she did, and dammit, every blasted thing he did to her excited her almost beyond bearing. It was extremely embarrassing to her that the fact that he spanked her turned her on, that his dominant tendencies struck a complimentary chord in

her psyche. It wasn't right. This man was the scum of the earth, someone who had essentially forced her into indentured servitude – prostitution, even, but when he kissed her she melted like spring snow in the April sun. Even the things he did to humiliate her made her squirm with sexual reaction.

One morning, after she had defied him about a ridiculously early bedtime he had set, he told her as he left for work that he would be punishing her that evening, but not with a spanking. That was very unusual, and she hated that he made her spend the day dreading and anticipating whatever her punishment would be. That night, he sat behind her on the bed and arranged her on her side, top leg bent and lay out several things in front of her, several shaped like penises, some of them that started out small, grew wider in the middle, then ended up small again. She heard the snap of a rubber glove, and started to turn around to look at him. He was directly behind her ear.

"There is more than one way to punish your bottom," he whispered in a soft, firm voice. "Put your hands above your head, Elizabeth. It's time to begin your punishment."

And then he began to tickle her clit, which as usual around him was already swollen and wet and ready. Staying in place behind her to speak encouragingly into her ear, he reached in front of her and took the smallest of the implements. The definitive click of a K-Y tube, then a squirting sound, click closed. A gloved finger found her bottom hole just seconds before the tip of the small butt plug did. "Eventually, you'll learn to take all of these inside your bottom for me." The firm rubber dildo was making its way inexorably inside her, stretching her, exciting all those vulnerable nerve endings. When she would have squirmed away, he warned in a husky whisper at her ear, "If you resist, I will blister your bottom every night for a week." She knew he made no empty promises. "Be a good girl and open for me. I expect you to submit to me in this way, Elizabeth. And I will have your submission, one way or another."

He did not use all of the implements on her that night, only to the medium sized ones, and Brandon made sure they were well lubed, either with her liquid or K-Y. When he'd gotten the largest one he intended on forcing her to accept that night, he seated it in her firmly, then put his mouth on her clit, gently raping her bottom while he brought her off. There was nothing she could do to stop him, and her body was more than willing to comply with his outrageous demands.

The memory of that night and some subsequent others made her blush with embarrassment and sexual heat. Her thoughts on him were conflicted, but her mind raged that there was no ambiguity regarding his abhorrent behavior. He was scum to have put her at his mercy like that, and scum to have taken advantage of her vulnerable position. There was no gray area.

But her emotions lived in that gray area. Brandon had not abused her physically, as he could have. His spankings were harsh, but generally had a good reason behind them. He could have done a lot worse. In a lot of ways, he had treated her as he would have a recalcitrant little girl. It had surprised her that he'd been so upset about her being on the roof. It was almost as if he cared for her. Yeah, right.

The week before she left him for good, he took vacation time, and brought her back up to the cabin. He could have taken her anywhere in the world, but he already had a lot of memories of her there, and it was not like he felt any pressure to impress her with his wealth. It was seven days full of sex and food, and more sex. He took her every way he could think of and some that hadn't been invented yet, and for the first time, she let go of her restraint and responded to him as if he were truly her lover. Elizabeth touched him hungrily, eagerly, initiating lovemaking as often and as creatively as he did.

When he brought them back to town, the pit of his stomach began to ache when he thought of the fact that they wouldn't be going home together to his house, but that he was going to have to drop her off at her own house, and would probably never see her again. Knowing she always paid her debts, he'd already given her the paper his lawyers had drawn up a year ago to the day, stating that she had paid in full and that he had no further claim on her. Although now, the only part of her he truly wanted to claim was her heart.

Brandon brought her suitcases in, taking a good look at her house. It screamed of her. Despite the fact that she hadn't wanted to be with him, Elizabeth had a strong personality and it was portrayed in her house – the colors, the touches of humor and the comfortableness of it all. Her bookcases were full of the latest romances from her favorite authors side by side with books on archeology and English history. The dogs were there; Sarah had agreed to watch them for the week but had brought them home that morning. Her bedroom was done in rose, cream, and green, with a big canopied bed and white furniture, and the whole room smelled of her favorite perfume.

He watched her eyes as she puttered putting things to right, every movement screaming that she was home and in control and he realized in that moment that she would have cut off her right arm if that had been what he wanted in order to keep her little domain safe. He had never been more ashamed or embarrassed about his behavior in his life, but he knew there was nothing he could do to put it right, to replace a year of her life spent in abject servitude to a man who professed to hate her guts and forced himself on her nightly.

"I think that's everything." She'd had so little of herself at his house anyway, refusing to

accept any gifts from him, and complying as much as possible with his tendency to want her naked and available to him at a second's notice.

Brandon couldn't meet her eyes, but as he walked toward the door to leave her, he curled a ringlet of golden hair around his index finger, cherishing the silky softness of it. Then, without a word, he left.

Elizabeth spent the next few days crying her eyes out. Why now, though, when it was finally over? Sarah despaired of her friend, growing more and more angry with Brandon, convinced that he must've done something to hurt her terribly in the past year. It was spring, and Elizabeth didn't have to go back to work until September, so she took some time away at a cottage a friend had near the ocean. It was much too early to swim, but she spent a tremendous amount of time on the porch with her feet propped up on the railing, enjoying the sun and sea breeze with a good book in her lap. The dogs helped her heal herself, always ready with a lick for a tear, or a stuffed toy dropped at her feet just when she thought she would pull her hair out.

She missed him terribly, but every nerve in her body cried out against it as fervently as it had resisted his pleasuring her body.

Brandon didn't fare much better; he took to driving by her place every now and then, and knew that she wasn't there, wondering where she was and if she was all right, and knowing that he had no right to. He drove himself ruthlessly, trying to work out some of the guilt feelings, but unless he completely lived at work, he was always reminded of her presence in his home, the loss of her in his life.

Finally, Elizabeth felt well enough emotionally to return to her own, safe home. She kept herself as busy as he did only with different things: she refinished the hardwood floors she'd just refinished a year before. She grouted the bathrooms, caulked the windows, and resealed the wooden deck out back. The last thing she tackled was that roof that had gotten her such a terrible licking at his hands. Well, he wasn't going to care about it any more.

It was near dusk on a summer evening when he decided to cruise by her house again, as usual. She was home again, and it made his heart glad when he got an occasional glimpse of her in town, although he carefully avoided letting her see him, as he didn't want to upset her. Elizabeth fairly glowed with health and happiness now, away from him and his ravenous sexual depravities.

He rounded the corner in his Mercedes 450 SL convertible, top down, arm hanging out the window, and screeched to a halt when he saw that same damned steel ladder propped

against the front of the house. She better hadn't be on that blasted roof again, or she was going to feel the palm of his hand bust her bottom but good!

Throwing the jacket of his Armani suit carelessly into the back of the car, his tie soon joined it and he rolled his sleeves up his arms as he stalked to the ladder.

Elizabeth popped into sight all of a sudden, just as she was going to step onto the top rung. He was a surprising sight, and fit to be tied, too. "Well. Deja-fucking-vu, huh?" Beth squatted next to the ladder, one hand resting on it for support.

If anything his stance – massive arms folded over his bulging chest muscles – got even more rigid, and she watched with remembered fear as he tucked his chin to his chest and glared up at her, his eyes promising things that he could no longer carry out. Thank God.

She was a sight for sore eyes, even head to toe covered in roofing materials, wearing a beat up pair of overalls and a ratty t-shirt. But she was in big, big trouble. He began to tap his foot impatiently. "You had better get your butt down here to me in one piece as soon as possible, little girl, if you know what's good for you."

Elizabeth grinned widely. Smiling, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on, bar none. "Sez who, big man?"

"I do."

Brandon watched her take a deep breath, and realized he was holding his for some reason. "You've got no more hold on me, Brandon. What I do is my own business, and there ain't no one to tell me no."

It was one of the few times she'd used his name, he realized. He liked the sound of it. "You're not going to like it if I have to come up there and get you."

Beth disliked that determined look in his eye, but what could he do to her? She wasn't his any more. She hadn't realized she'd spoken that thought aloud.

"You'll always be mine, Elizabeth Holden," he stated with frightening firmness as he began to slowly climb the ladder. "I was your first, and by God, I'm going to be your last."

"Oh, shit," she breathed.

His head appeared above the roofline with frightening speed. "And that's another thing

we're going to have to work on. Your language is atrocious again. You're not going to be able to sit down for a month, at the rate you're going."

Brandon was just straightening up, and Elizabeth had backed up as far as she could go. He hadn't taken a step, merely watched her carefully. "Come here, Elizabeth." He put out his hand, palm up. "Come over to me before you hurt yourself."

She couldn't. She didn't have to obey him anymore. She wouldn't.

The wild look in her eyes bothered him, so he began to talk, as if he was talking her down from trying to jump off the roof, rather than fixing it. Time to lay his cards on the table, come what may. Anything was better than living without her.

His voice was so soft and cajoling. "Please come to me, Elizabeth. I don't want you getting hurt. I couldn't bear it, having hurt you enough myself. Let me keep you safe and warm."

"Warm bottomed, you mean," she commented sarcastically, hugging herself against the cooling night air.

"That too." Spankings and punishments would always be a part of their relationship. It was intrinsic. He was dominant, she was submissive. They fit together like two pieces of a very complicated puzzle. "But more than that. I want to love you."

She snorted. "Love? Is that what the past year was? Love?"

"No," he stated the painful truth. "When you first came to me, all I wanted to do was hurt you, make you submit to me, and spank all of the hurt I was feeling out on your bottom. But it's not that way any more." He ran a hand impatiently through his hair. "I miss you." His voice lowered. "I love you."

Her jaw hit the new shingles beneath her feet loudly. "You what?"

He grinned sheepishly. "I love you. And even if you don't believe it, I'm not going to let you stay up here. You're coming down to solid ground with me, if I have to carry you there over my shoulder."

"Okay, okay." Beth threw up her hands in surrender, knowing how pig-headed and stubborn he was, and that he was as good as his word. He made her go down at the same time he did, within the cage of his arms and big body, so that he could cushion her fall if necessary. The moment her feet hit the ground, he swept her up into his arms and kissed

the breath out of her.

"You are a menace to my peace of mind, little girl," he growled, setting her down carefully, as if she would break.

"Did you mean what you said up there, Brandon?"

He caught her eyes and held them. "Every word, darlin'."

She bit her lip, then went for it. "I think I love you, too."

"Damn good thing, because the words I meant most especially were that you're not going to be able to sit down for a month, little missy." His open palm smacked her bottom threateningly as she let him into her house, and her heart.

The End

Copyright©June 2000