

Body and Soul

by Carolyn Faulkner

Chapter 1

White slavery.

A strong shudder ran through Abby Sinclair's body as she struggled in vain against the bonds around her wrists and ankles; a cruel gag stretched her lips back from her teeth, drying out her mouth terribly. She'd been kept in this closet for she didn't know how long, and now she wasn't sure if she wanted to be rescued or not. Her knees were bent and her arms were anchored securely behind her, and various muscle cramps had already set in.

Suddenly, the door opened, flooding the small chamber with light, making her turn her head as her eyes watered while trying to adjust. She was roughly lifted up and out, but her legs wouldn't support her and she crumpled to the floor next to the big bearded oaf who was holding her, only to be lifted again and dragged to a chair. Although Abby fought as well as she could, in her weakened state, her efforts were ridiculously ineffectual. When the dark-haired man produced a knife, he took great care to menace her with it, trying to evoke as much fear as possible. She stiffened, cringing away from him, but the back of the chair brought her up short. Her eyes widened and filled with tears as he pressed the knife against her throat, caressing it slowly down to the collar of her shirt.

The bastard was thoroughly enjoying himself, she knew, but there was no way she could control the absolute fear that that knife was going to find its way between her ribs, or worse. He made quick work of slicing open and peeling away her blouse, then her bra, stopping momentarily to stare lustily at her bare breasts, reaching out with a surprisingly clean hand to squeeze the sensitive mounds painfully. Abby bit her lip, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of moaning, but the sound was rapidly building in the back of her throat as he treated the other breast with equal cruelty.

Seeming to remember the task at hand, he then cut off the light, summery pants she was wearing, then slit the sides of her rose colored bikini panties, rendering her completely nude to his lascivious gaze. With her hands behind her, there was nothing she could do to cover herself from that degrading stare, so Abby turned her head away. He could stand there and leer at her for as long as he wanted, but she didn't have to watch him do it.

Finally, he put a long black garment over her that she recognized as a chador. It covered her from head to toe – there was not even a slit for her eyes, effectively blindfolding her.

Her eyes were wide open, but the dense weave of the material prevented her from seeing anything but light and shadow.

From there, she had no idea where they went – beyond down some stairs and out to a vehicle. Trying to keep her wits about her, she attempted to commit to memory any little details she could – how long they drove, when they turned, et cetera. Abby shrugged to herself fatalistically. For all of the good those memories would do her. She'd probably end up dead, anyway. But at least it occupied her active mind and kept her from screaming in panic.

She was unloaded from the car and taken up a flight of stairs, then down several corridors and into a room. The bastard with the knife had maintained a death grip on her upper arm through it all, and she knew she would bear bruises in the shape of his handprint within the next several hours.

Abby was not forced to sit, but knife-guy kept her close to him, so close that she could tell that someone else had entered the room because he had suddenly come to attention. There were more and different voices in the room that seemed, from their tone, to be arguing. She listened carefully, not knowing the language was a terrible hindrance, but she tried to concentrate on their tone.

Oh, shit! Abby recognized the tone of the exchange from the marketplace she frequented – they were bargaining, and she would bet it wasn't over the price of her chador!

There was a sharp exchange, then something that sounded like an order, and Abby began to struggle the moment she realized that the hem of her garment was being raised. Though she fought like a wildcat, and knife-guy ended up needing help from two other men, they succeeded in pulling it up and off her. As soon as the robe cleared her head, Abby stood stock still, not wanting to give whoever was ogling her any more of a thrill by jiggling herself around in what might be construed as a sensual manner. She tried to remember all she could about what she saw in an effort to distract herself – but what registered most in her terrified state was that guns were everywhere. Each of the men who held her, as well as the three men in front of her had a machine gun either at the ready or slung over their shoulder, as well as a handgun in their waistband.

Though she was embarrassed to be naked in front of she didn't know how many men, Abby had never been particularly prudish about her body, so although it was uncomfortable for her, it wasn't overwhelmingly shameful. She had a nice body – if a little too much in the mammary and gluteal area for her small frame – her skin was almost translucently fair, setting off the curls of long auburn hair that trailed in a matted mess down her back. Abby wasn't reed thin as American beauty standards dictated. Instead she

was well-rounded – carrying about ten pounds extra, according to current medical standards, that her doctor always needled her about. She was five foot, five inches, nicely proportioned, with pretty legs and beautiful feet.

Despite her lack of concern about being nude, the room was cold. Her nipples puckered painfully on their own, and she heard a round of laughter from the men, but then goose bumps roughened her flesh and she began to shiver. Immediately, another command was issued, and she was again covered head to toe.

For the second time, she was bundled into a car and driven some distance. Abby would estimate that they had driven about an hour and half, and by the lack of sounds filtering into the car from the outside, she would say they had driven out of the city. The hands that helped her out of the car on this end were considerably more kind, and a gentle, yet masculine voice made sure that she knew where all the steps and turns were, kind of like a vocal guide dog. A door opened and closed, and she knew they were inside a building of some sort. The headpiece of her robe was removed, revealing that she was in someone's house. A very nice house.

Abby turned to get her first look at her rescuer, not surprised that it was a man in this male-dominated society. He was about six foot four, with thick black hair that curled a little at the ends, but that feminine trait was about all there was to soften his rugged appearance. His skin was darkish; eyes a piercing black, with thick lashes that any woman would die for. Full, sensual lips were surrounded by a neat goatee that framed his whole mouth and was trimmed closely, ending at his chin.

He wore a black silk shirt and dress slacks, both well fitting enough to outline the latent bulge of muscles beneath the material. By the expensive cut and style of his clothes, Abby surmised that this stranger had money – probably a lot of it, since this house was definitely not a one-roomer. He said nothing to her, simply let her look her fill, watching her with a kind of alert edge to his gaze, as if he didn't quite trust her not to fly into hysterics.

The effect of his appearance was one of overwhelming masculinity worn with casual grace, as if the idea that he was a walking wet dream had never crossed his mind. The thought that kept repeating itself in Abby's mind was that he could easily be cast in either of two classical dramatic parts: a vampire or the devil. Neither character comparison inspired any warm fuzzy feelings in her, though.

Abruptly, he put his hand on her back, between her shoulder blades, propelling her forward. Though she was not the type to swoon over any man, she could literally feel her skin tingle with awareness under that hand. He guided her into the living room, then

turned her to face him, speaking for the first time.

"My name is Dane." Abby was startled to hear he had an American accent and name. "I don't want to frighten you, but I need to get your hands untied, and I don't want to just remove your chador and leave you standing there naked. I'm going to leave you alone for a moment. I'll be right back. Will you be all right?" His voice was deep and disturbingly sexy.

That was the last thing she should be thinking about in a situation like this, she chided herself. "Yes," croaked out due to her dry, raw throat. "I'll be fine." Each word was a little stronger, and she even managed a small, shy smile for him. It tore into his chest and stabbed at his heart so strongly he could barely breath.

Dane went in search of his sharpest knife, the biggest t-shirt he owned, and a glass of water, all the while unable to keep his mind from wandering back to the tantalizing idea of who was waiting for him in the living room. This woman was trouble, with a capital T, he'd known it from the instant that black curtain of material had been lifted from her slender body while he was still in negotiations with Muhammad. His own body had gone instantly hard, redheads had always been a weakness of his, and Muhammad knew this. That was why he had gotten the right of first refusal on this one.

It had been unusually hard to keep himself from throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her away from that sordid situation, but he had been able to control that primitive instinct, barely. His teeth had ground together hard, however, when he saw the undeniable evidence of manhandling on those beautiful breasts – the print of a large hand was already beginning to stain an angry, dark blue beneath baby white skin. He had upbraided the other man for not taking better care of his merchandise, and then, when he saw her growing cold, Dane had ordered the man who was holding her to cover her again.

From the moment her glorious nakedness was displayed to him, and she had stood proudly before them, despite the fear and pain she must've felt, there was no doubt in his mind that he would have her. The only thing that had remained to be settled was the price.

Muhammad was unhappy that he had not bargained much, agreeing almost too readily to pay a much higher price that he probably should have. Dane wanted her, yes, that fact was undeniable. But mostly he wanted her out of this room, out of what was a terrifying and humiliating experience for her. Such proud beauty should never be cheapened like this.

Once he had collected what he needed as quickly as possible, he returned to her. She

hadn't moved much from when he'd left. Probably shell-shocked to a certain extent, he thought. He put the stuff in a lump on the sofa, deciding that, first things first; he should get her hands untied.

But when Dane turned to her with a huge, wicked-looking Bowie knife in his hands, Abby couldn't help but take a big step backward, eyes wide and frightened. Dane understood immediately and could have kicked himself for not being more considerate of her. He put the knife down on the coffee table then turned back to address her in a low, soothing tone. "What's your name?"

"A-Abby," fear made her voice almost soundless.

"Well, Abby, I want to free your arms. Your shoulders must be aching badly by now. But I don't want you to move around a lot, because this knife is very sharp and I don't want to cut you." He kept his voice calm, as if he were coaxing a timid woodland creature to eat from his hand. "I'm going to tell you right now exactly what I'm going to do, ok?"

Abby nodded obediently, her eyes still fearful.

"I'm going to go behind you and pull off the robe so that I can get to your wrists. Once you're free, I've brought a shirt for you to wear, and a glass of water and some aspirin. Then we'll go from there." Without waiting for her response, he walked slowly behind her, the knife in his right hand.

Abby raised her wrists away from her back as far as she could, despite the pain it caused, hoping to make it easier for him to saw through the ropes. Dane lifted the back of the chador swiftly, pulling it up and over her shoulders. Abby cringed at the idea that he was now staring down at her naked backside, but then, he'd seen more than that and had yet to be anything but chivalrous toward her.

Dane was trying desperately to control his baser instincts as he marveled at the sumptuous expanse of creamy flesh before him. He wanted nothing more than to run a possessive hand down her bare flank and cup a cheek of the generous, heart-shaped bottom before him, but managed to restrain himself. It was a close call. But then her knees started to shake, and whether it was from fear or exhaustion, it had the immediate affect of dampening his ardor, if not his appreciation. It took some minutes for him to get through the thick ropes, even with his best knife. Eventually, Abby's strength gave out, and she could no longer hold her wrists out for him.

"Relax," he encouraged. "Let me do the work, honey."

She was only too ready to let him do just that. When she was finally free, tears ran down her face as her arms fell excruciatingly forward again for the first time in what seemed like years. Dane grabbed his worn, drab Army green t-shirt and efficiently popped her into it, reluctantly covering her wonderful body almost to her knees. As he put her arms through the armholes that hung practically to her waist, he frowned darkly at the sight of another set of handprint-shaped bruises encircling her upper arms. There was no doubt about it; he was going to have a talk with Muhammad about his employees.

The water was next, although he limited her to a couple of sips with the aspirin lest she get sick from drinking too quickly. He left her again to put things away, and when he returned it was to find her sitting on the couch, staring straight ahead at nothing. "Are you hungry?" She shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself as if she were giving herself a bear hug. "Cold? Hot? Sleepy? Wired?"

Unbelievably, she smiled, if somewhat wanly. "Yes."

Dane sat on the other end of the big couch, one leg folded underneath him. "Is there anything I can get you?"

She seemed to perk up a bit. "Can I call my Dad and let him know I'm all right? He must be worried sick by now." Abby's Mom had died when she was very young, and she and her father were unusually close.

"No phone," Dane lied glibly. In a place as remote as this, it would be perfectly understandable that he didn't have phone service. The fact that one of the rooms in this house was a dedicated communications command and control center was beside the point.

"Oh." The depths of disappointment that was written on her face made him want to do something to see a smile reappear, but he could think of nothing that would make the situation any better for her.

Abby yawned, suddenly completely overwhelmed by physical and mental exhaustion. Dane rose, frightening her by scooping her up to stride purposefully down the hall. Stark terror rose in the pit of her stomach and Abby began to struggle futilely against the warm cage of his arms. She had no idea what this man was going to do with her or to her once he got her where they were going, but it was apparent that there was nothing she could do about it anyway. His sheer size and strength awed her and his next words made her thankful that he seemed to be on her side because she would have no hope of winning any physical contest with him.

"Shhhhh. I'm just going to put you to bed. You're wiped out, Honey." He did just that, laying her down in the middle of his king sized bed. Now Dane knew he should have put her in the guestroom, but his bed was the most comfortable in the house, he rationalized. She was in pain, and deserved to be as comfy as possible. Besides that, he liked the idea of her warm and sleeping in his bed, under his covers . . . under him, if the truth were told.

She'd relaxed against him as soon as he had patiently explained his intentions, and allowed him to tuck her in like a child. "Dane?" came her small voice as he was just at the door of the room.

"Yes?" he turned.

"Do you have a pair of socks I could use?"

"Certainly, baby." He put them on her ice cold feet himself, then straightened the sheets around her. "Sleep as long as you want, but stay in bed until I come get you." He didn't want her wandering unattended around the house. Dane paused at the door to turn out the light and look back at her. He could see the even rise and fall of her breathing, and didn't doubt that she was already asleep.

"This is KX4915 calling DZ3998. Come in," Dane waited an impatient minute then repeated his call numbers and the numbers of the unit he was trying to contact. His unit. And they'd better freaking well respond if they knew what was good for them, he thought. He fiddled with the squelch on the old box, catching an earful of static for his troubles.

"This is DZ3998 to KX4915. It's about time you checked in, Boss. Did you pick up the package?" Dane recognized Kurt Tanner, his beta on this mission.

"Package collected, that's affirmative."

"Does it need any Rx?"

"Negative."

"You gonna Fed Ex it, or what?"

Dane smiled at Kurt's decidedly unmilitary vernacular. "No, I'll be hand-delivering this one."

Dead silence.

"Say again, Boss?" The idea that Dane Mathison was circumventing mission protocol was totally unheard of.

"You heard me," he growled back. "I'll keep you posted." Dane didn't wait for a response, merely shutting the old radio unit off and slumping in his seat. Damn, he was getting too old for this crap, especially when he considered the fact that he thought he was falling in love – and was already in lust – with the woman he had been sent to rescue.

Chapter 2

Abby awoke much later, just as she was reliving the kidnapping in a nightmare. The bloodcurdling scream she had been about to let loose died on her lips as she sat up in the big, strange bed and realized that she was no longer in the hands of those brutish men. Instead, she had been rescued by a big, muscular sexier-than-hell giant, whose touch ignited feelings that she would much rather remained buried. A chill ran through her body, whether it was the cool temperature of the air or the thoughts that were running through her head, she didn't know. Since she was already wearing his shirt, Abby didn't think he'd mind if she appropriated the robe that hung on the back of the bedroom door, though it wrapped around her about four times and dragged on the floor. She figured with a smile that considering his size, it probably hit him just below the knee.

The bedroom door opened into a long hallway. Abby was in desperate need of a bathroom, and started opening the doors she found along the way. Dane must've heard her, even though she was trying to be quiet, and came storming in from the living room. "Hey, didn't I tell you to stay put until I came to get you?" he asked, obviously annoyed.

Abby started at the rough edge in his voice, instantly overwhelmed by the force of his angry presence. Dane watched with quiet admiration as she visibly straightened her back and pulled herself together to face him. "I didn't realize I'd been given an order."

His mouth quirked up a little when he realized that this little lady didn't like that idea much. But that was just too damned bad. "You have. You don't have my permission to go nosing about my house, either."

Abby's lips pinched together as her back went up. "Well, then, where's the damned bathroom, or would you prefer to mop up a flood?"

Out of habit, he grabbed her arm, but she flinched away in pain. "I'm sorry," Dane apologized immediately. His anger at her had evaporated somehow, to be replaced by an

annoyance at himself that he hadn't remembered that she had some awful bruises in some pretty delicate areas. Dane took a couple steps away and opened a door. "This is it."

"Thank you." He couldn't suppress a grin as he watched her walk stiffly into the room and shut the door practically in his face. "I'll be in the kitchen when you're ready."

Though she could plainly hear his retreating footsteps, she turned around immediately to lock the door, frowning when she noticed that there wasn't one, not that she was going to let that stop her from doing what she needed to do. After she had taken care of the necessities, Abby hazarded a look in the mirror above the vanity and grimaced at the hag staring back at her. Her long, beautiful golden-red curls stuck out in every direction, forming what looked like a nest on her head. Her face was paler than usual, eyes bleary and red. The bathroom was large, including a separate shower stall and a large sunken marble tub – big enough for two or more. Impulsively, she turned on the shower, pulled off the shirt and stepped under the hot steamy spray. After spending a long, long time just enjoying the way the hot water sluiced over her sore shoulder muscles, Abby located his soap, shampoo, and conditioner, and rubbed herself and her scalp nearly raw trying to get herself clean enough. For some reason, she felt dirty all over.

It wasn't until she was again just standing under the pulsing spray that she lost it completely. It was over, and she seemed to be relatively safe, and the realization of how close she had come to being tortured or killed hit her like a ton of bricks. The shower washed away the tears as fast as she cried them while her shoulders shook painfully from the force of her sobs.

Finally, she was able to regain some semblance of control, turning off the water and stepping out of the stall. The shower fairy had apparently made a visit, because on the edge of the vanity were two big fluffy towels, as well as a hairbrush, toothbrush and toothpaste. It bothered her that he had come into the room while she was showering, but Abby knew she didn't have anything that he hadn't seen before. So far, besides being somewhat autocratic, he had acted like the perfect gentleman.

When she made her appearance in the kitchen, Dane looked up from whatever he was cooking at the stove. The heat of his close scrutiny automatically made her a little skittish, and the fact that she still only had his oversized robe and t-shirt to wear made her feel just that much more vulnerable to him. Dane was thinking much more along the lines of how much better she looked in his clothes than he did. Although she was kind of drowning in them, it was the best he could do, for now. The fact that his robe hung to the floor on her made him feel like a giant, stirring an overwhelming protectiveness that he found somewhat disturbing. With his specially enhanced ears, he had heard her sobbing in the shower and it wrenched his gut. It surprised him that his first instinct had been to

storm into the bathroom and haul her into his arms. But sanity took over; he realized she might not appreciate that. "Hungry?"

"Not really," came the answer he didn't want to hear. Abby didn't take a seat at the dinette, but rather wandered around the room like a lost soul.

"You need to eat something." He dished a healthy helping of scrambled eggs onto both of the plates on the table, then followed that by home fries, toast, and bacon. "When was the last time you ate?"

"What day is today?"

"Thursday."

Abby frowned, thinking. "Day before yesterday, I had breakfast before I went to the market . . ." An unbidden sob clogged her throat, making her voice trail off unnaturally.

To distract her, he said in a confrontational tone, "Well, then you need to get something into you. Sit down and eat."

His ploy worked and he had to hide a grin as he watched her take the bait and get all huffy. She reacted just as he had expected, looking at the mountain of food on her plate and stating baldly, "I couldn't possibly eat all that."

Although he was not used to explaining or compromising his orders, she was not one of his men, and he could be a little more reasonable with her. But not much. She needed to eat something, or he was going to hold her down and force-feed her, if necessary. Dane sat down and reached over to spoon the majority of the food onto his own plate, leaving a small, more normal sized portion for her. "Eat," he commanded. For a moment she hesitated at the chair and he thought she might decide to refuse to eat altogether. He kept his thoughts to himself and dug into his own food, confidently expecting that she would comply with his order, which she did, but in her own good time.

Once she started eating, though, she found she was hungrier than she'd thought, actually polishing most of it off. Dane got up and got himself some coffee, lifting the pot at her with a questioning look on his face.

"No, thanks, I don't really like coffee."

"Juice?"

"Do you have Diet Coke?"

"For breakfast?" he asked incredulously.

Abby nodded enthusiastically.

"I have Diet Coke, but not for breakfast. Milk?"

"Yuck. Diet Coke."

"No," quietly, patiently. "Water, coffee, juice or milk, preferably milk."

"Nothing, thank you."

Stubborn wench, he thought. But it was her dry throat. Dane shrugged and reclaimed his seat. Abby immediately got up and opened the fridge to find that he did indeed have a six pack of Diet Coke. She grabbed one and had just popped the top when he growled without even looking at her, "Put it back."

Stunned, Abby asked, "What?", figuring he must be joking with her.

Dane turned to fix her with a firm stare, while repeating what he had just said. "Put it back." He was not kidding.

"But – "

"You may have water, juice, milk, or coffee with your breakfast. I don't serve soda as a breakfast drink."

Abby was suddenly very aware of the underlying steel in his voice and demeanor. This man meant business, even about something as trivial as what she drank for breakfast. She was so preoccupied with this discovery, that she just stood there for a long moment with the drink in her hand, staring back at him like a deer caught in headlights.

"I won't tell you again, Abby, and you won't like the consequences if I have to come over there and put that soda back into the refrigerator myself." His tone was soft and even but the underlying threat was there.

The idea of just what it was that he might do had Abby thinking furiously, but she decided it was wise to do as he said and save the pondering for when he wasn't looking at her like he was going to put her over his lap and give her a good spanking if she

disobeyed him. Although she was very tempted to take a sip of it before she put it back, something in those hard, dark eyes told her that even that little bit of defiance would get her into a heap of trouble, and she didn't want to find out what this man was like when he was truly pushed. When the soda was safely tucked in the fridge, Abby hugged herself for some reason but made no move to join him at the table.

"Finish your breakfast," came another soft command.

Suddenly too tired to resist, she did as she was told, but was only able to pick at the remainder of her food. Dane stood and collected his plate. He relented a little, not wanting her to get sick. "Are you done?" She nodded, but rose with her own plate to bring it to the sink and begin to do the clean up until he gently pushed her out of the way. "You've been through a trauma and you're exhausted. Why don't you go back to bed, or go sit in the living room and relax? I'll take care of these."

Looking a little lost and forlorn, she wandered out of the kitchen and into the living room, to sink almost mindlessly down onto the couch. What had happened just completely overwhelmed her, and Dane seemed to know that almost intuitively. He was naturally the type of person who took command and got things done; he was used to leading and making decisions and giving orders. It was second nature to him, and he didn't temper that tendency much in his personal relationships – he was always the one in charge, there would never be any question of that. And as he was also not in the least an abusive type of man, most women loved to place themselves in his very strong, capable hands, figuratively and literally. Even before he'd been used as a human guinea pig by a military looking for the ultimate human weapon, Dane was a strongly sexual, dominant man. Now, those traits – along with other physical and emotional characteristics - had been accented with large doses of testosterone and various chemicals. When he became intimate with a woman, and he only dealt with one at a time so that his attentions were not divided in any way, she could expect to be kept very busy in their bedroom. Dane was a creative, inventive lover whose motto was always "ladies first". He enjoyed bringing women pleasure in a variety of ways, as his appetites were varied and voracious. He also knew how to deal with a recalcitrant woman who decided to be disobedient or disrespectful – the naughty offender more often than not found herself bent over his lap, enduring a very painful application of his broad palm to her tender bottom until he decided that she had learned her lesson.

Though she valiantly tried to fight them off the sobs that were just under the surface since this ordeal began started to break through, and, to her great embarrassment, she found herself crying while trying to stifle the sounds so that Dane wouldn't know. But both his intuition and his hearing were way too good for her to get away with that. Besides, he could hear the sounds of her sniffing as he was washing the dishes. As much as he

wanted to run into the room and dry her tears, Dane knew that a certain amount of crying was necessary for her to get over what had happened, so, despite how hard it was for him to ignore the sounds of her pain, he finished the clean up entirely before allowing himself to go into the living room and gather her into his arms.

Abby found herself airborne for a few seconds until he settled her on his lap with her head tucked under his chin. Dane didn't say anything, just held her in a strong, secure embrace while he stroked her back gently. His kindness was her undoing, and she only sobbed that much harder, pressing her eyes against the thick column of his neck and allowing the floodgates to open for the first time since he'd saved her.

Dane had never felt the strong, instantaneous connection with anyone that he felt with the small kitten of a woman who was curled on him so trustingly, bawling her eyes out. Every sob tore at him, making him wish that there was something he could do to alleviate all of the pain and fear she had endured. Seeing her displayed before the men he had come with, and those that had held her captive, had set his teeth on edge, and then he had seen the bruises on her body and felt like he'd been sucker punched. But the only thing he could do was provide her with a safe, warm, stable place to come to when it all got to be too much for her. He knew that scenes like this were likely to be repeated over the next few weeks or even months as she came to grips with the ordeal in her own mind. And he wanted to be there for her through the whole thing. Dane wanted to be the one she ran to, the one she depended on, the one she clung to. When she bared her soul or revealed a secret, it would be to him and him alone.

Dane had never felt anything like this in his life, and it made him damned uncomfortable. But he wanted to possess her in the deepest, most intimate sense of the word. Since he already owned her body in the eyes of Kahnistan law, he had decided greedily that he would settle for no less than her soul, too.

Chapter 3

Eventually, Abby's sobs were reduced to the occasional hiccough, but still he held her, warm and safe against him, his hand still wandering up and down her back, as if willing her some of his own strength. It seemed she had cried it all out, at least for now. The chair they were in was a rocker, and some time during her tears one of his booted feet had started it moving in a slow and gentle rhythm. Her head fell to his shoulder easily, fast asleep, a delicate hand over his heart, and still he was in no hurry to let her go, despite the fact that he had been in a moderate state of arousal since her cute, rounded bottom had settled itself unassumingly onto his crotch.

As soon as he thought of the way her butt curved perfectly as though crying out for a

man's hand he came to full, uncomfortable attention. But Dane wouldn't disturb her for the world. She lay on him trustingly for about an hour, dead to the world, snoring lightly, and he let her awaken naturally, yawning and stretching in a teasingly sensual way that was pure unadulterated torture to him, but he knew she didn't mean it to be.

Suddenly, Abby practically jumped off his lap, blushing fire engine red, hand over her mouth. "Oh, my God, I'm sorry. I don't – I didn't mean to –" There was no way she could mistake the good sized bulge that had pressed insistently against her butt as anything other than what it was.

"That's ok. You were exhausted. It felt nice to hold you in my arms." It had been a very long time since he had experienced any of these more tender emotions, but Abby seemed to inspire them effortlessly.

She swallowed nervously, then offered a tentative smile. "I – I uh, haven't even thanked you properly for saving me from those men. I certainly do appreciate it."

Her speech sounded like something a mother might make her daughter memorize to thank an old aunt for an unwanted gift. But Dane smiled warmly back. "You're very welcome," then his face clouded over. "Are the bruises the only thing they did to you?"

The blush was back, and worse than ever. Abby knew exactly what he meant. "I was not altered, thank God. I think I would have killed myself by now if I had been."

Not if he had anything to say about it, she wouldn't have, but he kept that comment to himself. "No other bruises or medical conditions that might need attention?"

"No, just the ones on my b-breasts and arms. They'll fade eventually. I bruise very easily."

He thought of the wonderful expanse of her creamy, translucent flesh and frowned. "Well, it doesn't help when someone handles you brutally, either. I'm sorry that happened to you."

"Me, too." She fell silent, twirling a curl of hair around her finger thoughtfully. "So how do I get home from here?"

His fingers ran quickly through his own thick forest of hair, then Dane leaned back in the chair with one leg crossed over his knee at the ankle to consider her carefully through piercing black eyes. "Well, that might be a bit of a problem, Abby."

"Problem? Why?"

"Well, there's the fact that this house is extremely isolated, and getting anywhere isn't easy. Also, there's a considerable amount of political unrest around here, and the fact is that we're probably going to be smack dab in the middle of a war, shortly. Civilian flights out have already been cancelled, and the roads are packed with armed soldiers from both sides, just waiting for a reason to shoot anyone – and foreigners are particularly expendable." Dane laid his cards on the table and paid very close attention to her response to his next words. "But I can tell you one thing, when we do leave, until I deliver you safe and sound into your father's arms, my word is law. When I say jump, you ask how high. No questions, no arguing."

Abby just looked at him for a moment, then shook her head incredulously, letting her tone drip with sarcasm. "Excuse me?"

He was not about to repeat himself. "You heard me."

She exploded, having had just about enough of being ordered around by just about every man in this damned country, but most particularly by him. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Dane gave her a calm, two-word reply that sent chills down her back. "I'm the man who's going to get you out of here alive." He gritted his teeth to try to keep from telling her, but the words came out from between his clenched teeth anyway. "And, according to the laws of this country, I'm your owner."

Abby's jaw hit the floor and her tongue rolled out onto the carpet. "Do you want to run that one by me again?"

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a receipt, with one side written in an Arabic language and the other in English. She came a couple of steps forward to read it, noticing on the English side Dane's signature and a second one in Arabic, as well as a description of her as "a five foot five Caucasian American redhead, one hundred and twenty five pounds, eyes green, scar on chin, mole on bottom of left buttock." Yup, that was her all right.

Abby made a childish grab at the paper, but Dane was much too quick and had easily seen it coming. He refolded it and put his wallet in his back pocket. "Even if I lost that or you were to get a hold of it, in this society, no one is going to take your word over mine. And I'm going to keep you until I'm sure it's safe to get you back home. I won't have you risking your fool neck like you did chasing those two girls all by yourself into a

country you know nothing about. When you get back to him, I hope your father blisters your bottom good." His gaze became downright evil. "But until then, you do as I say. Your life may depend on it, and I don't want to have to worry about whether or not you're taking the time to decide I'm right when I tell you to move or stay put. I won't hesitate to haul you over my knee in a heartbeat, little girl. Just remember that."

"Bullshit! I am a United States citizen!" She fairly screamed at him.

"So am I," came the calm reply. "Do you have a passport? Does any other man here know you?"

"No!"

"Could you get back to the city by yourself?"

Her eyes blazed at him, and she refused to answer, considering him for the first time to be not the gallant knight riding in on a white charger to save her, the damsel in distress, but rather harkening back to her thought when she first saw him that he could easily play a vampire or a devil. Well, it was bright and sunny out, so the vampire was probably out according to classical lore. But he definitely was a devil. Abby had never been so angry with anyone in her entire life. The fact that she was virtually at his mercy incensed her. "You sonofa –" Of its own free will, her right hand drew back to crack him a good one across the face, but instead she found it caught in his fingers along with her other wrist. When he would have anchored her arms behind her, she flinched and caught her breath at the pain, and he immediately pulled her arms in front of her, between them, holding one wrist in each hand.

"Just so you know, there is only one vehicle here and I've already confiscated the distributor cap, so it won't start even if you were to find the keys. It was a two-hour drive through the desert to get here. You'd never make it on foot before you died of heat exhaustion. I have no nearby neighbors; I like my solitude - "

"Then let me go, dammit!" she was so angry that the blasted tears had returned.

Dane didn't say a word, preferring instead to claim her mouth in a firm but gentle kiss – one that nearly cost him a lip as he moved away seconds before her teeth snapped down violently. "I can see I'm going to have to teach you a lesson, Abby. But not before I get my kiss." He startled her by grabbing a handful of hair, gently but inexorably arching her head back. When she cried out, he swooped down and took her mouth in a much more passionate manner, and there was nothing she could do about it without losing a tremendous hunk of hair at the roots. As much as she wanted to hate him for tricking her,

for forcing himself on her like this, his kiss ignited something inside her that she couldn't control, something very hot and deep. Before he ended the kiss, she was on the verge of giving in and kissing him back, to her deep shame.

Those thoughts were driven from her mind immediately, though, when he used his grip on her wrist to pull her over to the couch. Dane sat down and yanked on her arm again, just enough to topple her over his lap. Before she could even cry out, what little covering she had was gone – the robe was pooled on the floor and his t-shirt was up near her shoulder blades somewhere, leaving her rounded bottom as a well placed target. Before he started to spank her, he grabbed her outside wrist and held it against the small of her back, just in case she got some stupid idea into her stubborn head.

Dane was an experienced spanker. He got the maximum effect with a minimum of effort on his part, but was very conscious of his strength. He wanted to warm her bottom, but certainly didn't want to cause any permanent damage. His strokes were rhythmic and hard, from the first to the last. He didn't give play spankings; he meant business. Every inch of her creamy skin was punished thoroughly, although he did concentrate on that sensitive spot where her bottom ended and her thighs began, knowing that administering the majority of the swats there would ensure that she remembered this for the next few days anytime she sat down.

Abby had never been spanked in her life, but if she was honest with herself, the idea had always intrigued her. Until now, when its painful reality was being tattooed into her behind by this brute of a man. She was far from still as he spanked her, as a matter of fact, after the initial shock wore off a little, she realized that she still had an arm free, and reached back – not to cover herself, but to pinch him hard on whatever area her hand landed.

Her hand connected with his lower back, kidney area, and although it wasn't easy since he was extremely muscular, she did manage to gather a pinch of flesh, pulling and twisting with all her might.

When Dane roared in pain, she had the satisfaction of knowing she had gotten a little of her own back. And he did stop spanking her, although he was holding her so tightly she still couldn't move off his lap. "Why you little wildcat!" Blindly, she sent that little hand attacking again, but it was easily captured and added to where her other was held just above her sore bottom.

"Let me up this instant, you bastard!"

"You oughtn't have done that, little girl."

"I'm not a little girl, dammit, and you don't own me!"

Dane had meant only to give her a kind of warning spanking, but, because of her own behavior, she would end up getting much worse. He held his wiggling captive and leaned forward for a moment, then straightened back up. "Stay still," he ordered, but she ignored him entirely. Dane drew a breath and said a prayer for patience. "I can see wiggling when I'm spanking you, but when I'm not I want you to lie still. I am going to give you ten good strokes, Abby, and then I'll stop. I don't want you to try to get away when I stop," he stated, and set about doing just that. With his whole hand covering almost the entirety of her bottom in one stroke, it was a terribly bright, swollen shade of red before she surrendered and lay bonelessly over his lap after the tenth swat. He waited a minute and she started to struggle again, as if testing him, and he gave her another set until she was still again. Bawling her eyes out and coughing she was crying so hard she could barely catch her breath, but finally lay quietly over his knee.

"Now, there's the little matter of some rules." This started her squirming again, and him spanking. Once she had quieted down, he began with the list. "No swearing, beyond 'darn' and 'heck'. There's nothing I hate worse than a foul mouthed woman." Abby snorted derisively, but he let it go. "And absolutely no biting. If you hadn't tried to bite my lip and then succeeded in pinching me, your spanking would be over now. Instead, you bought yourself a session with the paddle. You will learn to obey me – probably through more trips over my knee – and you will not be disrespectful towards me. Your father didn't do a very good job raising you, did he? He needed to have warmed your butt more often, apparently." He stopped for a second, thinking. "I'll add more rules as I see fit."

"You can take your rules and shove them – "

Dane put his hand over her bottom and she jumped. "Abby, I know you're angry right now. And I understand it – "

"Don't you patronize me, you son of a – "

"Abby!" his hand cracked down on her bottom sharply, making her yelp. "You don't seem to understand who is in control here. But you will, if I have to blister your bottom for an hour every morning and evening, I can assure you, I won't hesitate to do just that. I'll win any contest of wills you'd like to engage in. But you'll be a lot sorer and a lot sorrier for it, I can promise you that."

Although it did bother him to do it, considering the state of her already ravaged bottom,

when Dane said he'd do something, he did it. He knew that one of the best traits in a leader was consistency, and that included personal relationships. So he brought that fourteen-inch, solid wooden paddle down onto her sunset red cheeks over and over again. Abby screamed from the moment of the first stroke until, some twenty strokes later, he lay the paddle next to him on the couch.

She was either so exhausted and preoccupied by the burning pain in her butt that she couldn't struggle against his hold, or she had actually learned not to. Dane was betting on the former, unfortunately. He took his hand away from her wrists, noting the raw redness the ropes had created there making her wrists look a lot like her bottom. Abby slid from his lap to crumple on the floor in a heap, but when he stood and reached for her, she cringed away from him like a beaten animal.

Dane's jaw clenched as something squeezed painfully within him at her instinctive fear. That was not what he wanted. He didn't want her to be afraid of him, just to respect and obey him. There would come a time in the not too distant future when her life would depend on it. He reached down slowly but she scurried away again, until her back was literally against the wall and there was no where for her to go. Gently, he caught her elbow and helped her up, then lead her down the hall to the bathroom, seating her on the commode. Except for a searing hiss at the pain of having her blistered bottom in contact with anything, she was completely docile. It made him concerned and a bit suspicious.

Why this man was taking such great care in treating the abrasions on her wrists with antibiotic cream then wrapping them in bandages after he had very deliberately set fire to her butt, she would never know. But he was, and it only served to confuse her further about whether he was on her side or not. Her bottom was voting for the latter.

When he was done, she lifted her swollen red eyes to his. "So, why don't you just kill me and get it over with?" she asked hoarsely, and she knew her barb had hit its target by the narrowing of his eyes, but he said nothing, merely turning away to head for the kitchen.

Lunch was a repeat of breakfast because of Dane's limited cooking abilities. He half expected her to refuse to eat, but she didn't. She hadn't eaten as much as he would have liked, but he didn't want to make a big deal about it. He remembered that he never had much of an appetite after getting a licking, either.

Dane worked around Abby while cleaning up. She was still sitting in the chair at the dinette like a bump on a log, staring at nothing in particular and occasionally biting her lip as if holding back more tears. It seemed to her that she might well have jumped from the frying pan in to the fire. The man she had assumed was a good guy had turned out to be almost as bad as the others who had hurt her. And frankly, although knife-guy

grabbing and twisting her breasts had been painful, it was nothing compared to the punishment her "rescuer" had just dished out. Worse still, was the fact that she had been completely turned on during the whole episode. She had always been curious about what it would be like to be spanked, and now she knew. She had liked it, despite – or even due to – the pain and that pissed her off that much more.

And now he said he owned her, reinforcing that fact on her bare behind. He was easily twice her size, how could she hope to defeat him on a physical level? She couldn't. There was no way out that she could see. Yet. She'd bide her time. If he had sex with her, then he had sex with her. She would live through it and come out stronger on the other side. A disturbing thought niggled at the back of her mind, though: what if she liked it?

He was damned attractive – made to order, almost. And she had already experienced a very sensual tingle at his touch – a sharp sensation that pooled and ached in her lower belly. Well, she'd just have to do everything she could to resist him – without getting herself another session over his lap.

Her eyelids were starting to droop, and Dane had decided that she needed to be put to bed. But when he reached for her, she shied away again, so sharply that she tipped the chair backwards and went head over teakettle. He sighed heavily, not at all happy that she was so frightened of him now. Dane lifted her from the floor as if she weighed no more than a feather, and carried her down the hall to his bedroom. He noticed that she didn't loop her arm around his neck at all, instead hugging herself as if she wanted to keep physical contact with him at a bare minimum. Dane popped her under the blankets and she rolled immediately away from him onto her side. He rolled her back and sat down on the edge of the bed, taking both of her hands in his, noting the delicacy of her bones, and the fact that one of his hands could easily make both of hers. No wonder she was frightened.

Experimentally, Abby pulled on her fingers, but she could not get them back from him. Dane looked her right in the eye. "Other than the spanking, have I hurt you at all since I brought you here, Abby?"

She stared at their hands. "No."

"Did I bring you into the house, throw you on the floor, and attack you?"

"No."

"Have I starved you, or kept you locked in a closet?"

"No."

"I haven't and I won't, because that's not the type of man I am."

Abby snorted, "No, you're the sort of man that buys women, then holds them captive."

His eyes flared angrily at her words, though he acknowledged the truth of them in the deepest recesses of his heart. "I'll take you home to your father, don't worry about that. But on my terms. I want you," Dane stated baldly, "and I know you want me, too, if you'd just admit it to yourself."

Abby snorted doubtfully. "Why would I want a man who beats me?" she asked incredulously.

"Because of this," his hands unerringly found her erect nipple as it was outlined by the olive green t-shirt.

"I'm cold."

"It's seventy-five in here. You're lying." She looked up at him warily, and it was as if he could read her mind. "Yes, lying to me will get you a spanking. But this is more lying to yourself, isn't it, honey?"

Abby pulled the sheets up to her chin. "I'm very tired."

Dane chuckled. "I'll go away under one condition."

Her eyebrow rose questioningly.

"I want you to kiss me."

Her expression said that she'd rather kiss the bottom of a dirty toilet bowl. "And if I say no?"

"Then I'm going to sit right here and annoy you until you agree."

Her lower lip pouted out a little, until she bit it uncertainly. "You won't spank me?"

He shook his head. "No, I won't spank you. I don't want you to be worried that I'm going to throw you over my lap at the least little provocation. I have patience – granted a fairly limited amount, but some. I'm not an unreasonable ogre, although you probably think of

me that way right now. What I want from you behavior-wise is nothing different from what you would automatically accord to your host if you were staying at someone's house. And I'm not expecting your obedience just for the fun of it, either. Your life could depend on it, especially when we try to get out of here."

Abby agreed in her own mind that he was damned right – she did think of him as an ogre.

"I gave you a very serious spanking for a reason – I wanted to make sure you knew that you didn't want to get another one. I told you the rules you have to obey to avoid it, so as long as you behave you won't get spanked."

She sighed and closed her eyes, as if she had just had too much to take in for the day. "And if I kiss you, you'll go away and let me sleep?"

"Yes, I will." He looked earnest enough.

Abby sat up gingerly, hating to scrape her bottom against the rough sheet. "All right then, get over here," Abby grumbled in the least romantic tone she could manage.

Dane scooted a bit closer to her, and she leaned a bit closer to him. "Don't be stingy now, I don't want a little peck on the cheek."

Abby glared up at him. "I'm the one who's giving you the kiss, but still you want to make all the rules?"

His mouth clamped shut, and he sat stock still, waiting. Dane's eyes were closed, and Abby had a moment where she wished she could really kiss him with all of her pent up longings, but it passed when she remembered what he had said and done. She would kiss him, all right, with all the passion of someone who did it for a living. Then she wondered if he might get mad at a half hearted attempt and take her over his knee again. She didn't think she could survive another round with his hand – or heaven forbid, that damned paddle.

In the end, she simply pressed her lips to his, and nature took its course. His lips felt as wonderful as they looked and she was lost from there, slanting her mouth across his to coax it open. His mustache was silky soft against her skin, and her fingers itched to touch his goatee, but she dug her nails into her palm to stop herself from doing that. Her tongue played with his in a fashion he wanted to call eager, and he had to restrain himself from taking control away from her, laying her gently beneath him on the big bed . . .

When she withdrew and sank under the covers again, her look was hesitant once he

opened his eyes, with a lingering shadow of fear, but all he said was something humbling, "Thank you. That was a very precious gift you just gave me."

Dane rose and bent down to kiss her gently on the cheek, stroking her hair as she turned onto her side. "Remember the rule, don't get out of bed until I come for you."

"Bathroom?" she questioned sarcastically.

"Other than that, of course. But I don't want you getting up and roaming around the house. Do you understand me?"

Her sleepy "uh-huh" drifted to him at the door as he closed it behind him.

It was after one when he sent the email message to Abby's father to let him know that his precious daughter was going to be returning to him in one piece. Dane had had to literally force himself to write it, all the while cursing himself for being a basically honorable man. The elite mercenary group which he headed had been hired by Senator Benjamin Sinclair to find his wayward daughter, who had set off for parts unknown in the Middle East in the hopes of finding two friends of hers who had come to this God-forsaken country and simply disappeared. Dane's fists clenched when he realized just how close she had come to doing exactly that herself. If he hadn't been able to sweet talk Mohammad into giving him a chance to buy her, she'd be warming some tribal chieftain's bed right now, whether she wanted to or not.

There was something different about this assignment, and although he didn't like admitting the reason to himself, it was her. Dane had known from the moment he'd seen the dossier on her that this woman was going to be trouble for him, in more ways than one.

The picture Sinclair had provided of his daughter was an image he would carry with him to the grave—she was laughing, her face bright, her hair flowing, and she looked like an angel from Heaven to this rough-hewn man. He had become instantly, uncomfortably hard, just from the picture, and still, his biggest problem was proving to be his overactive libido. He wanted her, wanted more time with her than he was likely to get. As it was, he was stretching out the time he'd held her here almost to the breaking point, using the imminent possibility of war to justify his behavior in his own mind, wanting to keep her all to himself. By all rights, he should have been at the base camp already, on the way to Germany to hand her over to her father. He should have done what he always did and followed the painstakingly prepared plan for this mission as he always had in the past. Dane had never stepped outside the box like this before, never much cared about anything beyond a positive outcome for the mission—the people they were involved in

helping were secondary concerns at best.

But not this time. Not by a longshot.

Not this one. She was primary in his mind, and had been since the moment he'd seen that damned picture.

Honestly, he hadn't meant to tell her about the bill of sale, figuring he'd keep it as a souvenir of the mission. But the words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to stop them – pure instinct - and things had gone downhill from there. He grimaced. His butt was on the line, and he may well have blown it royally.

Ah, well. Maybe he'd take a page out of J.D.'s book and settle down. No one had ever thought that the man who put the "Alpha" in the Alpha Team would ever become a contented husband, but that certainly seemed to be the case. And Dane had been his best man at the wedding and had seen it with his own jealous eyes.

The Alpha Team was comprised of a very few, very select men who had been part of some early and highly classified genetic and chemical experiments the military had conducted. Unfortunately, most of those men hadn't survived. Their heightened aggressive tendencies, libidos, and awesome strength combined to drive several of them crazy. The few who were able to adapt found themselves on the outside of society looking in, not quite able to fit into Ward and June Cleaver lives.

James David Hamilton had been their leader, and Dane was his beta, or second in command. When the military decided the group of lethally trained and biochemically altered men had become a liability, J.D. convinced the powers that be to allow them to do covert operations that no one else would do – and they had had amazing success at it. When J.D. had decided to "retire" to work his ranch, Dane had stepped in. The two men had kept in contact, and Dane always tried to let J.D. know when to expect a surprise visit from his former bosses, who always hoped to attract the money-making freak back into the circus.

But J.D. had thumbed his nose at them every time and they had walked away, not quite willing to charge him and get killed for their efforts. Dane laughed quietly to himself. Apparently, one of those times, his little bride had decided that he was the one that needed protecting, and she'd thrown herself in front of him while six agents had drawn down on him. He could see Abby doing that in a minute, if she didn't hate him. Yes, settling down and relaxing, not having to dodge bullets or worse had real appeal, especially when he thought of doing it with the little firebrand in his bed.

Abby was the woman he wanted to settle down with. Touching her, spanking her, eventually lovingly exploring every inch of her body was just too tempting to resist. Why Abby? He didn't know. He just knew, when he saw that picture, that he had to have her. And right here, right now, he did.

Chapter 4

Dane checked on Abby several times during the night, and she was sound asleep until the last time, just before he was going to turn in, when she was just rolling over onto her back. She had kicked the covers off and the shirt was practically hanging by a thread around her neck. She was naked and stretching, not having noticed yet that he was in the room. Dane's mouth went completely dry at the gorgeous sight of her as he walked toward the bed.

As soon as she saw him, Abby began to try to rearrange the only garment this strange man had given her, but he stopped her with a gentle hand. She saw his mouth form a grim line as he looked again at the purple bruises on her arms, and for the first time he saw the unmistakable dark blue imprint of a big hand on each of her breasts. If things were different between them, he would have dropped to his knees and kissed the bruises like a suppliant. As it was, he could only whisper softly, "I'm so sorry."

Abby pulled the shirt down as soon as he let her, and sat up on the edge of the bed, her breath hissing through her teeth at the pain that caused in the area of her bottom where he had concentrated his most painful swats. "How can you be so d- blasted sorry about my wrists and my breasts and my arms when it's my butt that hurts me the most!" she accused.

"Naughty girls get their bottoms spanked. Or paddled. Or both, like you got," he said matter of factly, with no remorse at all for what he had done.

They spent the day watching various videos. Abby claimed she didn't care what they watched – she was pouting like mad and Dane had decided not to correct her about it this time as long as she didn't get sassy. He decided to watch some of the tapes he had borrowed from one of the guys. They were full of American television shows – "Law and Order," "NYPD Blue," various reincarnations of "Star Trek" or "Babylon 5".

After dinner, Dane asked her if she knew how to play chess, and she didn't. She wasn't about to offer to let him teach her, either. Sitting on the couch with her raw bottom in direct contact with the corduroy style of material because the damned t-shirt had ridden up yet again, Abby asked, "Do you think you have any other clothes? Something that would fit me better?"

"I don't know about fitting you better . . ." Dane rustled up several more shirts and handed them to her. "I don't suppose you have anything that would come near to sufficing as panties, huh?"

"No panties, sorry."

"Next time I'll have to be sure I'm kidnapped by a cross dresser . . ." she mumbled under her breath.

Dane looked at her sharply. "What was that?"

"Nothing," she tried to look innocent but didn't achieve it very well.

"Uh-huh." He was fast-forwarding through a set of commercials when he commented lazily, "Even if you had panties I would have taken them away. I prefer that you don't wear them at all, especially when you have a sore bottom to remind you to behave."

Abby groaned and stomped her foot on the floor angrily.

"I won't tolerate any temper tantrums from you, either, missy, so just add that rule to your list. And mind your tone of voice, too." She didn't say anything in response, so he looked up at her, pinning her with his gaze. "Do you read me?"

"Yessssss," she replied with an exasperated sigh.

"Someone needs to go to bed real early tonight, I can see."

It seemed that all she did lately was cry, but the way he ordered her around and treated her like a naughty little girl really annoyed her, and when she was tired like this, annoyed equated automatically to the fat teardrops that were already rolling down her cheeks.

Dane rose and handed her a Kleenex, then made her get up. He sat down behind her and pulled her down on top of him, his front to her back, with her lying between his legs. Her bottom hit just about the ridge of his zipper, which, as usual when he was around her, was harder than a rock. Dane's arms fell naturally around her, his hands lying just below the fullness of her breasts, so near to them that her nipples became almost painfully engorged. Abby held her breath, half-wishing he'd cup her in his big palms, half-praying that he wouldn't.

Eventually, she relaxed against him and it was as if they sat like this routinely to watch

TV. His hands were perfect gentlemen, but he did occasionally stroke her hair, which he seemed almost obsessed with.

Dane could feel the wondrous weight of her breasts against his forearms, but he went no further than to claim two spots on her flat tummy, surprised that she hadn't put up more of a fuss at this position. If he got any harder, he was going to explode, but he didn't want to frighten her by making a pre-emptive move. It took a little while, but she seemed to relax finally, and he enjoyed the feel of her pressed against him. She was so small, he just wanted to wrap himself around her and keep her safe from everyone, even himself.

Unable to find a proper place for her arms, Abby folded them over his hands, just under her bosom, and promptly went to sleep. That was getting to be a habit that Dane intended to foster. If she trusted him enough to sleep while he held her, then she couldn't be too scared of him. And he couldn't help but notice, since the flimsy material of the well-worn t-shirt was pulled taut over the mounds her breasts, that her nipples were standing at attention. He desperately wanted to cup them in his hands, or better yet, suckle them with his mouth, but he resisted and merely held her for a little while.

It was early when she yawned and stretched on him, awakening slowly, but he felt she needed much more sleep. As they had already had dinner, he told her that she needed to go to bed.

"But – "

Dane didn't say a single word. Instead, he simply reached down between them and cupped a still very sore bottom cheek, and she was off him in a flash. He followed after her very shortly, just to make sure she had made it into bed, and to tuck her in. Dane liked that "caretaker" type of ritual, and he found that most women enjoyed being taken care of. Abby would probably fight against it just under general principles right now, but he knew she, too, would come to enjoy the security it provided. He kissed her goodnight, this time on the lips. "Sleep well."

Abby was sure she'd be lying in bed for hours because it was so early, but he was damnably right that she needed sleep, and before she knew it, she was snoring softly.

At was quite a bit later when Dane decided to retire himself, and tonight he was going to join her in his own bed. He intended to have her, not necessarily tonight, but why delay the inevitable fact that she needed to get used to sharing a bed with him?

Dane opened the door slowly, not wanting to awaken her, then stripped completely and lifted the covers to scoot under them, curving himself around her as she lay almost in a

fetal position on her left side. She was completely asleep until he put his heavy arm around her waist and felt her jerk awake and literally leap out of bed.

"Shhhh, honey. It's just me," he soothed.

"That's what I'm worried about!" Abby hissed back at him.

Dane smiled wolfishly, sitting up a little to open his arms to her. "Come on back and go to sleep."

Abby literally danced with indecision – oh, God, she didn't want to get into that bed with him, he was much too tempting, and much too annoying. But she also didn't want him to spank her again. Her butt had already started to tingle, as if anticipating the smack of his hand. Although it cost her some pride to say it, she whimpered, "Please, no," while rubbing her bottom nervously.

He didn't push at all, merely watching her and holding his arms out. Whether she obeyed or not would be her own decision, and she knew there would be negative consequences if she defied him. Dane hoped she would acquiesce, but he would do whatever needed to be done, regardless, based on her behavior.

The brute didn't look like he was going to give one inch. "There must be other bedrooms in this house – "

"Not for you there isn't," he stated in a semi-growl.

"I could sleep on the couch . . . "

"Abby," her name was spoken as a warning, the only one she was likely to get. Finally giving up, she got slowly under the covers, staying on her side facing away from him on the furthest edge of the bed.

Suddenly, a muscular arm wrapped itself around her waist, hauling her none too gently back against him, until she was literally surrounded by him. Her head was pillowed on his hard bicep, thick, hairy legs were tucked behind hers, and worst of all, his fully engorged self was pressed against her bottom, nudging almost insistently against her most private area.

That was what made her try to fight to get away from him, but her struggles were ridiculously futile. All he had to do was flex the arm that was already an iron hard band around her waist, and she wasn't going anywhere. All of her writhing had probably only

served to entice him further, and she could still feel the rock hard threat of him against her.

"Calm down, Abby. I'm not going to hurt you. Stay still."

Her voice was choked with fear. "No, you're just going to have sex with me."

There was no way he could deny his complete and utter arousal. It was giving him fits, especially as she danced her beautiful butt around on it. But he controlled his body with a ruthless will, not the other way around. "No, I won't unless you want it. You have my word."

She scoffed. "The word of a kidnapping rapist doesn't go to far with me, buster." For a moment, his deadly silence made her think that she had gone much too far.

Dane clenched his teeth, and let his hand wander down to a naked butt cheek, which he clenched tightly, causing her to jerk away from the pain. He supposed he should have spanked her for her disrespectful tone, but decided against it. All he wanted was to sleep with her in his arms tonight and every night thereafter. Dane knew he needed to have patience, that this wasn't easy for her. "Roll onto your tummy."

Alarm registering in her face, she turned her head back to look at him, but slowly complied. Was he going to spank her again? Or worse?

What he did surprised her to no end. The t-shirt was pulled over her head and tossed off the side of the bed, making her that much more tense and uncomfortable, lying naked in front of him. When he straddled her lower back and bottom, she couldn't for the life of her figure out what the hell he intended to do, until those wonderful warm, strong hands descended on her shoulders. He had put some type of scented lotion on them, and Dane proceeded to work the aching muscles of her shoulder like an expert masseuse. Abby didn't want to surrender to his tender ministrations, but in the end she had to, it felt just too damned good.

Dane knew the moment she had finally surrendered to him, three-quarters of the tension he had felt in her muscles at the beginning of the massage went away, and he heard her quiet sigh of bliss. His massage was more sensual than therapeutic, but he made sure it felt good, regardless. And he very consciously avoided all of her bruises. At the very least, it helped her to become more at ease with his touch. Dane was a very tactile person. He loved to touch his woman, in sensual, sexual ways, or just playful affectionate ones.

By the time he'd finished and climbed off to lie very close next to her, a hand still on her

lower back possessively, she was nearly asleep. He could see the imprints of his own hand on her swollen, raw bottom cheeks, and he wanted to rub them away, too.

"Why do you want to keep me here against my will?" she asked softly, startling Dane, who thought that she was asleep again.

"I wanted you from the first moment I saw you, when your father handed me a picture of you once he'd hired us to find you. It's the one he keeps on his desk." Abby knew the one he meant. "And that desire only compounded after Abdullah pulled the chador over your head and you stood there naked in front of us. You weren't cringing or crying, although I could see the fear in your eyes and your face. You were just as proud as could be while your knees were knocking," his voice grew husky with unfulfilled desire. "You have a beautiful body, all roses and cream, and I wanted you. So I paid Mohammad what he wanted and took you home. It beat the hell out of having to storm in there with guns and worrying about you getting in the line of fire."

"I can pay you back the money . . . My father is –"

"No, I don't need money," he said flatly.

Still on her tummy, Abby turned her head to look at him. "Then do the job you were hired to do – take me home!!"

In answer, Dane glanced tellingly downward at his rampant male part.

"You're keeping me here against my will because you want to have sex with me?"

"You, my dear, are a challenge, with every sexy sway of your tushy, every shake of your glorious curls, every time you get in my face although you're scared to do it."

"So, in order to get away from you, I should just become a simpering, witless sex toy, and you'll get bored and let me go."

Dane smiled. "Oh, go right ahead. It would be a nice change from the whiny brat who has to have her bottom smacked. Let's see, should we make a bet about how long you'd be able to keep that up?"

Abby sighed in exasperation and rolled onto her side. "Can I have my shirt back, please." She should have expected his answer.

"No, I like you naked next to me."

Another petulant sigh escaped as she inched further away from him. Dane stopped her inevitable advance by snaking his arm back around her middle and she soon found herself in exactly the same position she had been before, with the same insistent prodding at her bottom. It puzzled her that he had really not made any overtly sexual moves to her. Yes, he had been totally overbearing about what she could and couldn't eat and wear and how she should act – hell, he sounded like her father some times. But he had also been extremely tender with her – taking care of her bruises and holding her while she cried. Were those the acts of a rapist?

Out loud, she voiced the thought that was running through her head. "Why didn't you just leave me there?"

Abby felt him tense behind her. "Do you have any idea what would have happened to you if I had left you to the tender mercies of those men?"

Her voice was disturbingly flat when she answered, "Seems like much the same as what's going to happen to me here – you're just dragging out the inevitable to torture me more. Those men were bad, yes, but at least they were honest about it. As far as I'm concerned, you're worse – you play the good guy, but it all ends up the same for me."

Now she had gone too far, comparing him to the assholes who had kidnapped her and abused her. Incensed, Dane rolled her onto her back and had himself pressing against the moist entrance to her body before she had a chance to put up any sort of a fight, not that it would have done her any good against his strength, anyway. Both wrists were anchored gently but firmly in one of his hands above her head, making her arch against him, presenting those beautiful breasts to him like a virginal offering, the tips swollen and rosy. If she wanted him to treat her like those other men would have, he'd be glad to oblige. It would solve the ache he'd been walking around with since he found her.

Dane bent his head down, eyes closed, and took one of those erect nipples in his mouth, suckling and flicking it even more eagerly at the sound of her low moan. Dear God, he wanted her! But he really didn't want to take her in anger. When he opened his eyes, his free hand was on her other breast, inadvertently positioned exactly over the prints of the brute that had traumatized her, and his erection wilted, though he didn't get off her.

Instead, he let go of her wrists, and Abby immediately tried to push him off, but it was like pushing her hands against a brick wall. Neither of them was going anywhere unless he allowed it. Dane caught her eye, growling through clenched teeth, "Watch what you say to me, little girl, or the love pats I gave you this afternoon will seem like heaven in comparison."

Abby swallowed, eyes wide and a little fearful.

Dane was unrepentant about that small amount of fear. Maybe a little of that was a good thing, considering her sharp tongue, but his next question tempered the anger of his previous threat. "Am I too heavy for you?" She seemed to be breathing all right, but he knew his weight on a smaller frame could sometimes be too much.

"No," slipped out before she had a chance to think better of it, and Dane smiled at her grimace while settling himself a little more comfortably on top of her. He noticed that her nipples were still crested where they were buried in the forest of his black chest hair, and he couldn't keep himself from dipping his head to capture one of them again. Abby's indrawn breath and moan went right to his head.

Oh, God, she didn't want to respond to him, but there was no way to hide the way her body was reacting – it was completely out of her control. The way his lips were suckling firmly at her nipple made the mild ache in her lower belly flare hotly. Rough-skinned fingers closed over her breast, holding it gently, almost reverently, for his mouth to torture. Dane released her engorged bud only to rasp the rough hair of his goatee over it several times, sensitizing it as she writhed and gasped beneath him. She was so responsive he wanted to touch her forever, never letting her out from under him.

Her other nipple received the same sensual attention, then he grasped a globe in either hand and pressed them together, towards each other, so that he could move easily and quickly between the two peaks, suckling here, rolling and pinching there, torturing a crest with the edge of his white teeth only to soothe it seconds later with his warm wet tongue. Abby was practically beyond thought. He was driving her crazy with pleasure, and she couldn't even see straight. In fact she knew she was on the verge of an orgasm, just from the way he was touching her very sensitive breasts, but she wasn't about to let him know that.

Dane reveled in her uninhibited responses – this was much, much more than he had ever expected. He had judged her to be a fairly sensual person, but this was more than he had hoped for in his wildest dreams. Her pupils were dilated, her breathing was labored, and he thought that eventually, when he had tamed her to his hand, she might even be able to cum just from his breast play. That idea delighted him to no end.

But he wanted a more accurate gauge of her response, so his right hand released her breast to quickly delve between her open legs. His middle finger carefully probed between the warm folds of her flesh despite her futile attempts to avoid it, rubbing playfully over her love button once or twice, which made her squeal and buck against his hand, and not in

invitation.

"No, please, don't," she pleaded, trying to follow the path of his hand with hers in order to stop him from his bold caresses.

But Dane forbade it. His hand stilled, remaining exactly where it was as he ordered in a soft but firm voice, "Put your hands above your head, Abby honey." He knew what he was asking of her, exactly how hard it would be for her to obey him on this, so he added a small threat as a way out of it for her. "Be a good girl for me or I will have to blister your bottom again, sweetheart."

She writhed against the imposition of his will, feeling damned if she did and damned if she didn't. Neither his quiet tone nor the endearments served to soften the underlying command. He would wait for her to comply, but not indefinitely, and as much as she wanted to tell him to go to hell, Abby knew she couldn't take another spanking from him so soon. "Damn you, Dane," she cursed him, her voice breaking on a sob as her arms slowly, reluctantly moved over her head. "Damn you to hell."

He watched two tears slowly track down into her hairline as his hand continued to explore her most intimate area. His face was hard but his hand was gentle as he replied, "Been there. Took it over. Came back." Abby shuddered beneath him, only half hearing him as she tried unsuccessfully to avoid his hand, but it claimed its prize despite her efforts as his thick finger parted her inner lips to discover the abundant wetness there. Dane was overjoyed at the proof of her body's lust for him. "Oh, Abby, you are so perfect," he breathed, lips closing over an aching swollen nipple again as that insistent finger captured some of her own honey to rub over her ultra-sensitive clitty.

"Dane, no, oh, God, no, please . . ." she didn't want him to bring her off, feeling that he would see that as a victory, and she was dead right. But Abby wasn't in control any more, if she ever had been. Her own body had betrayed her and was in cahoots with the devil himself. For some reason, he was nearly irresistible to her. Maybe it was the combination of his masculine good looks, his dominant but loving demeanor, and even the severe spankings that had caused her bottom to swell with pain while her delicate folds became soaked in her own juices.

He left one nipple aching and wet to be plucked and rolled by the fingers of his free hand while his mouth and tongue worried the other. "Ahh, yes, baby. Your body loves me, even though you hate me. Your clitty knows its owner and responds to me eagerly." Dane knew she was very close to orgasm. "I will give your body this pleasure so many times you won't be able to argue with it or me after a while. You'll start to throb as just the sound of my voice because of the remembered pleasure," he vowed hoarsely. "I'm going

to touch every inch of you with my hands and my tongue, and when you're naughty, I'm going to paddle your bottom till it's swollen and red, then lay you down and stretch you open with my cock."

Deep, soul-shattering sensations were building inside her that would not be denied, very much like Dane himself. He was relentless as the tides, using all of his expertise to bring her to the ultimate peak. When the time came when she could fight it back no longer, she screamed, long and hard. Not his name, not a voiceless moan, but the word "No!" as her whole body clenched violently over and over. He continued to flick his finger over and over her most sensitive spot, making her body jerk almost painfully with each aching spasm, wringing every ounce of the orgasm out of her.

When she was lying spent and exhausted, still breathing heavily, Dane rolled off of her and went to the bathroom, returning with a warm, wet love cloth with which he cleaned her as tenderly as a nurse. Abby hadn't said anything or moved a muscle since he'd left, and when he was done he crawled back into bed and pulled the covers up over the both of them. Abby lay there like a broken doll, legs still spread, hands still above her head, staring straight ahead. It worried Dane. She wasn't even crying. He snuggled up next to her, lowering her arms and whispering into her ear, "You are magnificent." And he meant it. He would have hugged her, but she rolled onto her side away from him. Instead of pulling her to him, he curled himself around her, his raging hard on finding it's usual parking place. That was okay. He could wait.

Her uninhibited response had made him positively giddy, but it certainly hadn't done the same for her. A sudden shiver ran through her body, shaking her like some sort of internal earthquake. Her teeth were chattering, and she was shivering so hard she was shaking Dane, too. Concern was rife in his tone. "Abby, are you all right?"

If she tried to answer him, it was lost in the convulsive spasms of her body trying to warm itself. He got up and grabbed his robe, then pulled out every blanket from his linen closet. If all else failed, he had a sleeping bag he could wrap her up in, but that would be a last resort. Dane piled blanket after blanket over her, then climbed back under them with her, got her awkwardly into his robe, then wrapped his big warm body around her, hoping to give some of that warmth to her. But still she shivered.

Dane felt at a loss, and was just about to go get the sleeping bag when he noticed that she was shaking less and less, and yawning more. He ran to the bathroom, grabbed what he wanted, then ran back, wanting to get to her before she fell asleep.

His big hands moved her out from under the covers and over his lap before she knew it, and he had expected a big scene from her. When she remained docilely over his knee, her

arms folded under herself, Dane really began to worry. He reached for the big jar of Vaseline and unscrewed the cap, dipping the thermometer into the ointment to coat it thinly, then returning the jar to the nightstand. He would be using it again. Just before he parted her still red bottom cheeks to insert the glass tube, he whispered, "I'm just going to take your temp, honey. Lie still for me, now." Aside from what he considered a normal whimper of discomfort when he slowly introduced it into her bottom hole, Abby lay quiet. Dane kept his right palm over where the thermometer stuck out a little ways from her bottom, so that she had no choice but to retain it, and used his free hand to rub her lower back soothingly, still feeling the occasional chill running through her delicate body.

Although the usual time to register a temp was about three minutes, Dane always left a rectal thermometer in a lady's bottom for a full ten minutes. He knew some women detested having their temperature taken this way, although he always insisted and didn't even own an oral thermometer, except one for his own use, and sometimes it just served to remind a woman of her place. He loved the care-taking ritual of it as well as recognizing that sometimes the humiliation factor would affect an attitude adjustment of its own. He liked to keep a big jar of Vaseline with the little glass tube sticking out through the top on the nightstand on his side of the bed, just as a reminder of how his woman could expect to be treated in regards to sickness. Dane adored having a woman over his lap, bottom bared for pretty much any reason, so he dragged it out much longer than he needed to.

When he finally removed the thermometer, however, holding her in place while he read it, it showed no fever at all. Dane tucked Abby back under the covers, then went and washed the thermometer, popping it back into the jar through the hole he had punched in the cover.

Dane awakened Abby several times during the night, feeling her forehead first then putting her over his lap for a more accurate reading of whether or not she had a fever. She didn't have another bout of chills at all, and the last time he took her temp was the next morning. But she was so docile and sluggish, he knew something was very wrong.

Chapter 5

The during the next day, Dane kept a very close eye on her, often putting her over his lap for another session with the thermometer, just to be sure, but there was never any evidence of a fever. He wondered if an enema might help her feel better, but never got around to it. Thinking she still might be overtired, he kept her in bed most of the day, although she did wander out to where he was sitting in the living room close to suppertime.

Dane's chin lowered to his chest when he asked her, "And what is the rule you have to follow whenever I put you to bed?"

Her hand covered her mouth and he could see that she had honestly forgotten, but forgetting was not an excuse.

"Tell me."

Abby's voice was small and hesitant as she watched him rise from the easy chair he'd been sitting in to walk over to her. And although she hated herself for being a coward, she hated being spanked worse. "I mustn't get up and wander around the house by myself."

Dane put his foot on the sturdy coffee table, leaning on his raised, bent leg. "And what else, sweetheart?"

"I have to stay in bed until you come for me, unless I'm going to the bathroom."

"Very good, darlin'. I just wish you had remembered that before you came out here." Abby found herself over his leg in one swift motion. The new blue t-shirt he had given her barely covered her bottom when she was standing, and bent over his knee it rode up to the small of her back, just where Dane wanted it.

She had looked so forlorn all day he was tempted to forgo this punishment, but then thought that that was not a very good idea. Consistency was essential, and she must come to expect that he will enforce his rules, regardless of how big or small she might think them to be, unless she was sick. No, he would not even go easy on her. Abby needed to learn obedience to his rules, and apparently she needed to do it the hard way – by the palm of his hand or the flat of the paddle.

SMACK! SWAT! SLAP! WHAP! SMACK! SPANK!

The swats that he delivered were so painful that she was bawling after only the first few. That was to be expected, and no sobs or pleas would ever deter him from delivering a good blistering to a naughty girl, and that was just what Abby got.

SLAP! SMACK! SPANK! WHAP! CRACK! SPANK! SLAP!

Dane didn't count the strokes, but her bottom was sizzling hot by the time he stopped. He figured it was about sixty good, hard swats. When he was finished, he let her up, but grabbed her wrist and pulled her down the hall to the bedroom she had just left,

positioning her face first in the corner. Before he left, he laced her fingers on her head, then tucked the hem of the shirt up into her neckline, leaving the enticing line of her back, shoulder blades to heels, completely bare. He patted her bottom, noting that it was really on fire just like it needed to be to teach her a lesson.

"Don't you move an inch, little girl, unless you want to get it double." Abby sobbed louder at his words. "I'll be back in a while to put you back to bed where you belong."

She didn't know how long he made her stand there, but it was pure torture. She'd almost rather be spanked some more rather than be put on humiliating display in the corner. He was so hard on her sometimes and other times he was almost overwhelmingly tender. She just couldn't get over what he had done to her, taking complete control of her body away from her and forcing her to orgasm against her will. And her own flesh and blood had been cheering him on from the start! Abby didn't think she'd ever quite get over how easily he had manipulated her, sexually.

She was still pondering that when he came back about a half-hour later. Abby was surprised when the first thing he did was not put her to bed, but rather carefully pull her shirt down to where it belonged and put her hands by her side. Then he turned her around and hugged her gently, as if she were something precious to him. She stood meekly in his arms while he whispered to her, "I'm sorry I had to spank you, Abby, but I mean for you to learn to obey my rules. When you're naughty, you must always expect that I will punish your bare little bottom good and proper for it." He kissed her lightly on the head, then tucked her into bed on her tummy, asking, "Now where are you going to stay?"

"In bed, until you come and get me."

"Excellent. See, you're learning already."

Tucked back in, Abby could not seem to go back to sleep, so she lay on her back with her arms behind her head, trying to reason what was going on between this savage, gentle giant of a man and herself. But she wasn't having any luck. They had been so intimate on such a short acquaintance; Abby wasn't used to that.

Abigail Bennett Sinclair had been sheltered all her life. She had never known any particular hardship, and, if she hadn't had an excellent disposition, she would have been a terribly spoiled brat. Instead, she was everyone's darling, from her nanny's and teachers to the close knit group of girls she'd been through schools with. Abby was smart and kind, and would give anyone in need the shirt off her back. The only times she ever got into trouble was when she was trying to help someone else, and this time was only the latest adventure.

Kammi St. Pierre and Brittany Levenger were two of her best friends. They had come over to Kahnistan – against everyone’s advice – in search of adventure and had promptly disappeared. When Abby heard that the two girls were missing, she hopped on the next plane and that story ended up where she was now . . . Alone, in the hands of a man who had beat her, but who was inordinately concerned that she not drink soda for breakfast. Abby couldn’t fathom Dane or his motives. He said he didn’t need money, and that would have been Abby’s ace in the hole to get him to take her home. The only answer she could come up with was that he, too, felt the strange attraction between them; the one she refused to acknowledge. The one that had made her respond to him so shamefully when he pleased her against her will.

What exactly did he intend to do with her, she wondered.

"DZ3998 out." Dane threw the headset onto the table and blew out a huge breath. Dammit all to hell! They had to move and they had to move now, or they’d be trapped by several different warring factions. He’d wanted more time with Abby – much more time. But it didn’t look like he was going to get it. Sonofabitch. Well, there was no hope for it. Worse than that, her father had received kidnapping threats himself and was currently missing. Dane was being ordered to take her to a safehouse instead of directly to her father. He knew exactly where he was going to take her, but also knew that she wasn’t going to be at all happy about it.

Not one to put off things, no matter how unpleasant, he got up and headed to the bedroom to wake her up.

They were packed and in the Jeep in record time. Abby was strangely silent when he told her they were leaving, but he didn’t tell her anything about her father until he could get more information. But Dane was just as happy not to have chattering going on while he was trying to plan. The only thing she had thrown a fuss about was her lack of pants and panties. She had insisted that he cut off a pair of his own jeans, and, with the help of a hunk of rope he practically threw at her in his haste to get them on the road, she was wearing what had become all the rage for young boys in the States - shorts that ended well below the knee that hung off her butt. If she’d’ve been wearing undies, several inches of them would have shown, but as it was, she walked with an occasional hitch as she pulled the darned things up around her waist. Dane had to suppress a smile when he watched her abnormal gait, but there was no way anyone was going to mistake that wonderful, rounded bottom for a boy’s.

Before they left the house, he handed her a black bundle, which she recognized as the chador she had entered the house in, along with a long black wig.

Abby didn't say anything, but did look at him quizzically for a moment before she donned both items without protesting, to Dane's amazement.

"I don't think we'll get stopped, but if we do, your red hair is a dead giveaway," he threw over his shoulder on the way to the Jeep.

They started off in about twenty minutes, which he considered to be excellent time since he was traveling with a woman. Abby had never been so terrified in her life. The whole trip only took about an hour and half, but it seemed that they spent the whole time either in the middle of a crossfire or dodging shells. Dane frequently covered her body and took the fallout himself, or shoved her onto the floor of the vehicle to protect her from the gunfire. He drove like a bat out of hell and when they finally made it to the hidden airstrip, their pilot, Kaz, met them with an impatient, "What the hell is going on?"

Dane threw him a quelling glance and hoisted Abby into the plane quickly but gently, buckling her in like a child in a car seat, then putting a big heavy helmet over the hood of the chador. He then seated himself in the co-pilot's chair. They were airborne in short order, and Abby could hear them conversing in a language she didn't recognize. They seemed to argue for a minute, and she saw the pilot gesture angrily towards her, but Dane seemed to have the last word, cutting him off with a deadly calm comment. It seemed he could bully anyone. At least she wasn't alone in acquiescing to him easily.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

They were the first words she'd spoken in quite some time, and Dane turned to catch her eye. "To the States," he said succinctly. He hadn't lied. He just hadn't told her which state.

They changed planes again after an hour or so, to a bigger, more comfortably appointed jet. There were several men around and aboard the plane who were roughly the same size as he was – huge – and they laughed and smacked each other on the back while Dane carried her onto the plane, but quieted at his intimidating look. He didn't put her down until they were in a bedroom of sorts with bunk beds hanging from the walls. Dane deposited Abby on one of the beds and said, "Sleep. It's going to be a long trip back."

She was exhausted mentally and physically, and couldn't have stayed awake if she'd wanted to. At least she knew that in a few hours, she'd be back home and would see her father again. She could put this whole nightmare behind her. Even the part about being rescued by a frustrating egotistical arrogant sonofabitch dark haired stranger whose touch ignited fires she couldn't control . . .

Abby was still asleep when they switched planes for a third time, back to a smaller puddle jumper, but just as they were about to land again, she awoke and sat up, rubbing her eyes tiredly.

"Hello, sleepyhead," Dane greeted. He was in the pilot's seat next to her, wearing a pair of dark sunglasses that hid his eyes.

"I was zonked," Abby confessed. "Are we in Massachusetts yet?"

"No." Dane was in no particular hurry to have this conversation with her, so he didn't offer any more information.

But something about his demeanor made Abby suspicious. "Where are we?"

"In the States."

His deliberately vague manner clinched it. "Exactly what state are we in?"

Dane settled the plane smooth as a baby's bottom onto a small, crystal clear lake, then taxied to a dock and got out to secure the plane. He stood with his hand out to Abby, who was looking up at him suspiciously.

"Where are we, Dane?"

"Home," he said. "My home." Abby's eyes closed tightly as she swallowed down a lump of overwhelming sadness. Dane eyed her closely. Tears, he expected. Yelling and screaming, and stomping her little foot, he'd tolerate a small amount of, considering the situation. Vulgarity would earn her the usual expedient spanking. But he wasn't exactly sure how to cope with her forlorn silence.

Resigned, Abby got out of the plane, ignoring his hand as if it wasn't there. She stood on the dock several feet away and waited until he was ready, then followed several feet behind him as he walked up to the house. One of the best things his "occupation" afforded him was money enough to buy land. He had bought several hundred acres in a remote part of Montana, and had built the house himself from the ground up. It was something he'd wanted since he was an orphaned boy shuttled from indifferent relative to indifferent relative, craving the permanency of it; the fact that he owned it and no one could take it away from him.

Dane told Abby to stay put in the underbrush until he had a chance to check out the area,

then he preceded her into the house, weapon drawn, and checked each and every room until he was sure it was safe for her to come in. Abby peered into the house hesitantly, and Dane kept a tight reign on the impulse to drag her in, letting her decide on her own that being inside the house was much more comfortable than standing on the open porch in the fall wind. Their luggage had only consisted of one bag, which he put in his bedroom, then came back to see her closing the door with obvious reluctance.

"You hungry?" he asked, stepping into the kitchen to see what they had for provisions. He usually tried to keep the place fairly well stocked, just in case. They had a lot of canned foods, and wouldn't need to find a store for quite some time, he discovered.

"No, thank you."

Dane noticed that she hadn't moved much beyond the doorway, standing there like a lost puppy in the middle of the foyer. He went over to her and began to help her out of the huge aviator jacket one of the guys had given her until she ducked out from under his hands, muttering, "I can do it myself." He didn't think she realized that it was his jacket, or she probably would have refused to wear it, just to be ornery.

He hung the coat and scarf up in the front closet, then returned to stand next to her, hands in his pockets. He felt uncharacteristically hesitant for a moment, then shook himself. "Come sit down."

Abby hung back as far as she dared, not wanting to do anything that would earn her another spanking, or give him any excuse to touch her. When he touched her sexually, she lost control, and there was nothing worse, as far as she was concerned. She should hate him. He was a bully. He'd beaten her, and sexually abused her. Why couldn't she hate him?

"Abby," he had seated himself in an easy chair next to the sofa, and was holding his hand out to her. His low, throaty voice broke into her misery, but she consciously skirted around his hand to sit in the easy chair across the room from him, hugging herself tightly.

Dane shook his head at that small act of defiance, but he wasn't angry. She had guts, and he had to admire that. "I need to talk to you about some things."

She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

He cleared his throat, almost as if he was nervous about what he was going to say. He hadn't had a nervous moment since they'd pumped him full of all those hormones and chemicals, but suddenly, Dane realized that his palms were clammy at the thought of

having to confess to this little girl who, for unknown reasons, seemed to mean so much to him. Rising to stalk over to the fireplace, he cleared his throat again, trying to lean against the mantle casually. "There are some things I didn't tell you about Kahnistan."

"Such as?"

Christ, he didn't want to say this. Dane sighed heavily. "Your father was the one who sent me – us to find you. I bought you, knowing full well who you were."

Abby blinked, but didn't say anything, staring at him intently as he rambled on.

"That red hair in an Arab country is a dead giveaway, and when I heard that Mohammed had a redhead for sale, I had a good idea it was probably you.

I told you I would bring you back to him and I mean to. The reason we're not there now, honey," Dane squatted in front of her, capturing her cold hands in his, "is that your father is missing. Apparently he had been receiving kidnapping threats for quite some time, and never took them seriously."

She still wasn't reacting.

"Abby, I have my men working on it right now. We'll find him, I promise you. But I didn't want to take any chances with you, so they asked me to keep you safe here, until your father is found."

"I don't believe you." The words were so soft he only caught them because his hearing was extraordinary. Snatching her hands away, she walked toward the big bow window. "You're feeding me a line of bull hoping to keep me complacent because you intend to keep me here and – and use me until you get tired of me. Then you'll dump my body in the lake and I'll never be heard from again."

Dane's jaw clenched. It was interesting to hear what she thought he was capable of. There were some men in his condition who would do exactly that. Until this mission, he had been scrupulously honorable in his dealings with everyone he came in contact with, except, of course, the bad guys. He felt that honor was one of the few things that still distinguished him from an animal. Sometimes that line became very blurred, especially for a man like him. But he had been less than truthful with Abby, and with her father, keeping her there in the house with him because he had wanted to be close to her for as long as possible, putting her at risk because of his raging desires. If he hadn't fallen for her so hard, he'd've had her out of there the first day, instead of dragging their time together out until it was almost too late to get her out of there alive.

She was right not to believe him, based on how he had treated her so far, and it was to his shame that she thought so little of him. If he had just been able to control his other head around her, he might have even had a chance with her. He could have played the white knight and rescued her, maybe even have saved her father . . . At least then she wouldn't think he was likely to hurt and kill her.

But no. He had known from the moment he'd seen her that she would be special to him, but he had treated her shabbily, putting his own wants and needs ahead of her safety. He deserved to suffer an unrequited love, and she deserved much better than to fear for her chastity and her life.

Abby fully expected he would retaliate. She had prepared herself for a thorough spanking, perhaps even a paddling, although the thought made her quake where she sat, and to her deep shame, made moisture collect between her thighs. Instead, he walked right by her and into another room. Abby could hear a radio crackle, and then he seemed to be arguing with whoever was receiving his transmission, because the last thing she heard was him yelling, "Just do it, B!", and then what sounded like the microphone being thrown across the room.

When Dane reappeared, he looked like a thundercloud. Instinctively, Abby got up and moved away from him as he walked across the room towards the door, although he seemed not to notice her retreat. "I'm going to chop some wood. There's food in the cupboards if you get hungry. Why don't you try to take a nap?"

That had been the extent of their conversation for the afternoon. Abby had fallen asleep on the sofa to the sound of his axe falling rhythmically outside, and when she woke a few hours later, it was to the same sound. She rose to look out the window and see that he had stripped to the waist, and was carving his way through the woodpile like it was butter. He spilt huge logs with one unnaturally strong swing, and she could see the stack of wood up against the house that hadn't been there when they'd arrived. What the hell was he? The bionic man? How could he be that strong and still be so gentle with her . . . sometimes, she amended.

Dinner that night was strained. Dane heated up some canned beef stew, and they ate in silence. Despite her nap, Abby was yawning not long after she cleaned up the kitchen, and Dane suggested gruffly as he put a tape in the VCR, "You're exhausted. Why don't you go to bed?"

Her eyebrow rose. Hmmmmmm. He was asking rather than commanding? How unusual for him. Or what she knew of him, rather. She was tired, and did end up crawling under the

covers. Just before she fell asleep, though, she could have sworn she heard a familiar refrain coming from the living room.

"Overture. Curtain. Lights. This is it; we'll hit the heights."

Chapter 6

Dane sat in front of tape after tape of his favorite show – Bugs Bunny - not really seeing it, his mind whirring at a million miles an hour. He'd adored the Warner Brothers cartoons since he was a child, but rarely got to see them. When he grew up, he bought himself every episode he could find on tape, and kept them up here so he could indulge his fetish whenever he felt the urge. Tonight, though, even Bug's antics weren't helping him out of the doldrums he'd sunk into. His mind kept going over and over the conversation they'd had this afternoon, and even after hours and hours of backbreaking work, he still couldn't keep himself from the perpetual erection he had around her. Dane kept thinking about how she was tucked in his bed all warm and soft with sleep, about how much he wanted to join her there and slide gently into that wonderful nest between her legs. Then he'd remember how she'd come in his arms the night before, writhing and moaning and . . .

He shook his head, hard, trying to snap himself out of it. Fantasizing about her did him no good. Dane had made a promise to himself during those long hours of wielding his axe as if the wood had attacked him physically: he would return her to her father untouched from this point on, even if he had to cut off his own hands to keep himself from exploring that smooth, soft skin of hers. He had contacted Kurt on the radio, and told him to send Gig up there as fast as possible. That meant some time tomorrow morning.

Then Dane would extract himself from her life, quickly, cleanly, before he did something he would regret even more than what he'd already done.

Abby awoke alone in the big bed the next morning, and frankly couldn't believe it herself. She dressed in an oversized shirt and pair of his cutoffs, tying the rope belt securely around her waist, stopping for a moment when she was startled by the sound of another male voice in the living room. Abby opened the door to the bedroom cautiously, but Dane saw the movement out of the corner of his eye and called to her softly.

"Abby? Come on out here, I want you to meet someone."

Suddenly shy about her appearance, she walked slowly out and stood near Dane voluntarily for the first time ever. His stomach clenched when that thought hit him.

"Abby Sinclair, I'd like you to meet Gig Therriault. Gig, this is Senator Sinclair's

daughter."

Gig was the same size as Dane, and his hand dwarfed hers as he pumped it up and down twice politely, then let go. "The one that's missing?"

Her ears perked up, but then she realized that this stranger could just be playing along with Dane and the whole story was still not necessarily true.

Dane saw her body tighten, then slump. "Yeah." He turned away from them, and shouldered a small gym bag as he headed towards the door. "Gig is going to be looking after you from now on, Abby. He'll get you back to your Dad as soon as it's safe."

Without so much as a goodbye or even a backward glance, he was out the door and ran to the helicopter that had brought his friend, lifting off seconds later. Abby was stunned into silence. He was gone. He'd left her with a total stranger, and somehow she heartily preferred the devil she knew.

Gig couldn't have been nicer to her. Dane had told him to bring some clothes for her, so she finally had things that fit relatively well for the first time in what seemed like years. He kept her fed, made sure she was warm, told entertaining stories about "the team", most of which seemed to include Dane in some way. From what she could gather, Dane had taken over command of the team from someone named J.D. Gig spoke both names with the same kind of reverence most people reserved for prayer. And he never once said or did anything that could be construed as mildly improper towards her. He didn't try to control her or set down any sort of rules, except that if she wanted to go out of the cabin, that he would have to accompany her, for safety's sake. It was a total change from how Dane had acted, but, for some reason, it made her miss him, and that made her angry.

It was a week before father and daughter were reunited. Gig went with her to Massachusetts where her father was in Mass General Hospital getting IV fluids and a general going over before he was allowed to go home. He was severely dehydrated and had a lot of bumps and bruises, but that was the extent of his injuries. It was there that Abby learned that Dane was the one who had found him half-dead in an abandoned warehouse. The senator fairly marveled about the big, strapping warrior who had saved his life. It seemed he couldn't quite get over how the man had ripped the steel reinforced door right off its hinges as he made his way into the building. It had taken six good-sized marines just to lift it out of the way afterwards, but apparently Dane had torn it away like it was Christmas wrapping paper.

Benjamin Sinclair wanted the hero to get a medal, and he offered the man a hefty reward, seeing as he had single-handedly rescued both the Senator and his daughter. But

Matheson had flatly refused to accept anything above the usual fee, and had rudely left without a word before Sinclair could get in some photo ops with the three of them. But he was happy that his little girl was back, safe and sound, if somewhat depressed. That was entirely understandable considering what she'd been through.

Several weeks went by, and everyone had settled back into his or her old routines except Abby, who seemed to be having a very hard time adjusting. She went through the motions and said all the right things at work and at home, but her heart wasn't in it. She hated to admit it, but she was preoccupied by memories of a pushy, overbearing, arrogant pain in the ass that had treated her alternately like spun glass and a recalcitrant little girl. The combination was a heady one, and, despite the screams from her intellect, the rest of her wanted to be near him.

The phone call came in the middle of the night, but she was having a hard time sleeping, so Abby was wide awake when she answered it on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Abby?"

She recognized the voice instantly. "Kammi – oh, my God, where are you?"

"I'm home. I just wanted to call you and tell you I was all right." Abby could hear the tears choking her friend's voice.

"I'm so glad! And Brittany, is she home, too?"

There was a moment of terrible silence, then Kammi said, "She was killed, Ab. After we were kidnapped, we were split up and sold to different men. My experience was bad enough, but I guess hers must've been much worse."

"Oh, Christ," she could barely talk through the constriction in her throat. "I'm so sorry!" she whispered.

"Yeah, me, too. At least Dane was able to recover her body so that her parents can bury her, though. I know that was very risky for him to do – hell, we barely got out alive as it was!"

Dane. Had he gone back there and rescued her friends? "Dane?" she asked in a carefully neutral voice.

"Oh, I know it's stupid to fall for the man who rescues you like a white knight, but, man, is he gorgeous, and built like a brick – "

Abby had heard about enough. She knew all too well how he was built. "Kammi, are you ok?"

The lighthearted tone evaporated out of her friend's voice. "I'm alive, Ab. That's the positive side. The negative is that I went through a month of hell. The man who bought me –"

"Kam, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, Hon," Abby's eyes were tearing again at the thought that her friend had been mistreated.

She could hear Kammi's shuddering breath. "He attacked me nearly every night, Abby. I thought I would lose my mind. I couldn't believe it when Dane kidnapped me out of his house – it was like a fortress – I don't know how the hell he got in there, but I thank God he did! I almost gave us away because I started screaming the moment Dane touched me, thinking it was that awful man . . . "

Abby was horrified at what her friend had had to endure. "I'm so glad you're home and safe, Kammi."

"Yeah, me, too," her friend's voice was barely above a whisper, and Abby realized that Kammi wasn't at all sure that having lived through such a trauma was a good thing. "You shouldn't have come over there to find us, though, Abby. That was a stupid thing to do. You could have ended up in the same situation."

Abby frowned. Kammi didn't know that she had been kidnapped, too! Well, she wasn't going to explain it to her now. Her situation had certainly ended up a thousand times better than Kammi's. Instead, she said, "I'm here any time you want to talk, Kam. You know that, right?"

A small spark of the old Kammi came through when she said, "Of course, or I wouldn't be calling you at two A.M., now would I?"

Abby laughed softly. "True."

"I guess I'll see you at the funeral."

Kammi gave her all of the details about when Brittany would be laid to rest, and then the two friends gave each other their love and hung up.

Dane was back at the cabin, trying to relax. It had been a helluva month since he'd left Abby – four weeks, three days, twelve hours and thirty-six minutes, to be precise, and he had felt every lonely second of it. Finding her father had been his first concern, and it had been something to keep his mind off of what he had left behind. It had worked to a certain extent. Benjamin had been gone so long most of the people on the case had considered him dead. Dane was elated, for Abby's sake, to find him still alive, but barely. The Levenger and St. Pierre girls were a bitch of a mission, no doubt about it. Even he had thought that they were either both dead or so cloistered as to be considered unsalvageable. But again, it was nice to be proven partially wrong, and at least he had been able to get the dead girl's body, which would help her family heal.

Both of the families, although neither was much above middle class, had tried to give him what money they could as a reward, but he refused to accept anything. Dane considered it a debt owed to Abby that would never quite be paid in full.

He poked at the glowing embers of the fire, then ran a hand through his hair. He was exhausted, but just couldn't seem to sleep. Impulsively, he picked up the phone and dialed J.D.'s private number.

"Hamilton," came the gruff rasp.

"It's me."

"What's up?"

"That invitation still open?"

"Always," J.D. replied laconically, leaning back in his big desk chair.

Dane paused. "You sure you don't mind some company?"

"Nope."

"What about the Missus?"

J.D. laughed contentedly. "Jessie'll have you married off before you even know what's hit you."

Dane choked a little, and J.D. immediately picked up on it.

"So, it's like that, is it?" James leaned forward and propped his arms on his desk. "Well, come on down. We got lots of work to take your mind off your woman troubles."

"I'll be there." Dane hung up the phone, and despite the fact that it was nearly eleven, he figured there was no sense delaying it. After packing a small sack with the essentials, he revved up his Jeep and started for Texas.

Dane drove into the yard of J.D.'s ranch about two days later, and was greeted by the man himself. The two shook hands, then J.D. led Dane into the house, and where the first thing he noticed was the wonderful aroma of someone baking something cinnamony. The second thing he saw was the look of busting-out pride and utter love on J.D.'s face when he introduced his bride, Jessie, who promptly seated him and put a huge slab of coffee cake in front of him, along with a steaming mug of coffee.

She did the same for her husband, and both men tucked into it like it was their last meal, Dane moaning appreciatively while Jessie beamed. They talked quietly for a while as Jessie bustled about the kitchen, until J.D. reached out as she passed him and grabbed the waistband of her jeans, steering her into a place on his lap, and saying, "Sit!"

Jessie frowned, but stayed put. "Arf."

Their conversation became more general, and Dane's heart ached at the way J.D., who was the most alpha of the Alphas, seemed to melt around his pretty little wife. He couldn't keep his hands off her, stroking up and down her back gently while they talked or lacing his fingers with hers so that their wedding bands were on top of each other. Dane knew the feeling of constantly wanting to touch a woman. But J.D. had what he wanted in the palm of his hand – or, rather, on his lap. It was painfully obvious that Jessie thought the world of her man, although they traded barbs back and forth regularly, good-naturedly needling each other until J.D. was silent for a moment.

Suddenly, he helped Jessie off his lap and stood up. "You gonna sit there eating my food all day or you ready to earn your keep?"

"J.D.!" Jessie admonished, snapping a dishtowel at him. "Dane is a guest – "

J.D. loomed over his wife, who didn't back down one iota at her husband's threatening countenance. "He came down here to work, woman, and that's exactly what I intend to have him do." With that, he kissed Jessie loudly on the cheek then gave her a familiar smack on her jean-covered bottom, and lead Dane out onto the porch.

As they walked toward the barn, Dane commented sincerely, "You sure lucked out with

her."

"Damn straight I did. I tried to send her away at first, too, because I'm a damned stubborn fool. And finally she up and left me." It was obvious to Dane that it wasn't something that was easy for James to admit.

"I ain't gonna argue with you there, boy."

J.D. threw a playful punch at the younger man, who ducked it with exquisite timing that few other men would have, then the two of them got to work.

During the next several days, the story of J.D. and Jessie's volatile courtship leaked out of J.D. in dribs and drabs. He was not known for his talkativeness, but finally one night after J.D. had sent a yawning Jessie up to bed, Dane cornered him in the study, where they were having a couple of belts.

"So you let her walk out of your life?" he asked.

"For less than twenty-four hours, yes," J.D. said around the cigar he was lighting. "I knew she was mine. But I wasn't sure if I could handle it – men like us are not husband material, and after Mylee – "

"I know." Dane had been with J.D. when it happened. "I figured you'd never get serious again."

"So did I, so did I. But Jessie had other ideas," he laughed. "So who's got you wrapped around the axle?" It was unlike Dane to have female trouble. The same enhancements that drove other men insane had merely complimented Dane's natural essence. He caught women like a picnic attracts ants, and J.D. had never heard a word of complaint from any of them. They all thought he was Lancelot, Schwarzenegger, and James Bond all rolled into one.

"My last case – well, my third to the last case."

J.D. was fairly out of the loop, but he read the papers. "Was that the Senator's daughter?"

"Yeah."

"She's pretty."

Dane snorted. "I'm worse than you. I couldn't keep my hands to myself. I practically

fucked up the entire mission because I wanted to bed her so badly –" He ran an impatient hand through his thick black hair.

J.D.'s eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, you nearly screwed up a mission?"

He explained exactly what had happened, not going lightly on himself.

James whistled low. "So now she wants nothing to do with you?"

Dane rose and paced angrily up and down in front of the couch. "Can you blame her? She doesn't consider me to be much better than the men who kidnapped her in the first place, and the worst thing is, she's right! I practically took her – "

"But you didn't, right?"

"Not for lack of trying," Dane sighed. He stubbed his cigar out in the ashtray violently. "I did spank her something fierce, too."

"You what?" J.D. came down so hard in his chair that he nearly fell out of it. "You spanked her?"

Dane had the grace to blush. "Yeah. Several times. She was a brat and I laid down the law on her fanny pretty good."

To his surprise, James nodded approvingly. "Good for you. A strong woman needs a firm hand, or she'll get herself into trouble."

"Yeah," Dane's jaw clenched tightly at the memory. "Like flying to a foreign country and getting herself kidnapped while trying to find two friends who ended up the same way."

"I'd've spanked her myself, if I was in your shoes."

"You would?"

"Jessie gets a session over my lap when she gets unmanageable, which is less often than it used to be. Usually, it's just about common sense stuff. Like the other day, when I told her not to come to pick me up down in San Antone because the truck wasn't runnin' so good lately. Who was waitin' for me at the door to the convention hall? Jessie. She didn't like the idea of me takin' a bus home. Can you imagine that? She worries about me somethin' fierce, but you better believe she got her butt blistered good and hard when we got back home. I could handle anything that happened on that damned bus, but the idea of

her bein' out there on I-10 with a breakdown in the middle of the night – " Dane could plainly see the shudder that ran through J.D. at the thought of his woman putting herself in any sort of danger. He felt the same way about Abby, and said as much.

J.D.'s eyes narrowed. "You feel like you've been gut-punched when she cries, even if you're the one spankin' her at the time?" Dane nodded. "Want to be with her all the time? Want to be on her all the time?" The younger man nodded vehemently to both questions. "Man, you're in love. And you got it bad."

Love. He was in love with Abby.

Damn right he was. Suddenly, everything seemed to fall into place. It was like J.D. had turned on a light switch in his brain. Now if he could just get Abby to believe it . . .

"What the hell are you doin' wastin' time here, boy, when your woman is out there doin' who knows what with who knows who?" J.D. asked bluntly.

Dane was already halfway to the door. He looked back for only a second. "You'll make my apologies to Jessie for leavin' in the middle of the night?"

There was a sly grin on the older man's face. "Hell, yes. She'll love the romantic angle, and you'll be in like Flynn with her for years to come if you marry that girl."

"I'll do my damndest."

"Don't take 'no' for an answer, you hear? You show her who's boss," James called after Dane, who was already most of the way to his Jeep by then.

A half an hour later, J.D. eased under the covers slowly and carefully, trying not to wake his sleeping wife. But Jessie was very attuned to her husband's comings and goings, and she rolled over to drape herself sleepily over his chest as a powerful arm curled around her back to hold her close.

"Did you and Dane have a good talk?" she asked in her sleepy, little girl voice.

"Yes, we did, darlin'." He couldn't keep his hand from roaming possessively over her body. He never tired of cupping her breasts, feeling the raspberry pink nipples peak tightly against his warm palm. His need for her was never ending, and seemed to grow in fervor each time he pressed himself into her.

"That's good – ahhhhh," Jessie's response turned into a moan as J.D. captured a nipple in

his eager mouth.

"He's gone to claim his woman," J.D. said against her breast as he deftly rolled her onto her back and slid between her legs. He stopped with just the tip of his penis against Jessie's swollen, wet opening.

She tried to arch and writhe and impale herself, but he wouldn't allow it, keeping himself away from her, teasing and torturing her with what she wanted as he soaked in every caught breath and every little cry of need.

"Why don't you claim your own woman, then, James?" she suggested in a husky voice, and it sent him over the edge as he plunged into her hard and fast, invading her with a strong surge that never lessened in power until he felt her arch beneath him in pleasure, and only then did he take his own release within her sweet body.

As he cuddled Jessie close in the aftermath, J.D. said a silent prayer to God for what he held in his arms, and threw in a good word for Dane, who, it sounded like, would need all the help he could get corralling his own woman.

Chapter 7

It was nearing dinnertime, and Abby was just finishing up her makeup. Daddy had said he was bringing a special guest home to meet her, and all Abby could do was hope that he wasn't going to start matchmaking for her again. Her father's taste in men and hers were at completely opposite ends of the spectrum, and those evenings usually ended up being excruciatingly long for all participants. She was already nursing an atrocious headache, and if it hadn't been for his almost gleeful insistence that she dine with him this evening, she would have happily just had a tray of fruit and yogurt in her room.

But since his close call, she had been entirely unable to say "no" to him. So when she arrived at the doors to his study, she took a deep, bracing breath and plastered a bright smile on her face, determined to bite the bullet and be excruciatingly polite to whoever it was he'd decided to inflict her on.

Those thoughts crumbled to ashes, however, when she walked through the double doors and set eyes on the devil incarnate. Dane saw her blanch white; for a moment he thought she was going to faint and he took a compulsive step toward her, ready to steady her against his big body. But he knew that he had no right to do that now, and probably never would again, so he clenched the hands that wanted to draw her to him and gritted his teeth. But at least Benjamin was firmly in his corner. Having an ally that close to her was a point in his favor, and he needed all the help he could get.

Abby wanted nothing quite so much as to turn tail and run back up to her bedroom to quiver under the covers. But her father knew nothing about her treatment at Dane's hands; to Daddy, Dane was a hero, a savior, and she wasn't about to disabuse him of those notions now. Abby didn't know what her father would do if she told him what Dane had done to her, and, if she admitted the truth in one part of her mind, she didn't want to lose either of them. So she stiffened her spine and glided gracefully to her father's side, slipping her hand into the crook of his arm and studiously avoiding the younger man's hungry gaze.

"There's my pride and joy," Benjamin hugged her tightly while smooching her cheek. His tone was frankly adoring. "I can't thank you enough, Matheson, for bringing my baby back to me." Sinclair's voice lowered as he leaned closer to the younger man, saying in a stage whisper, "She takes after her mother, you know. Running off to a foreign country to rescue two friends – that's something her mother would have done in a heartbeat, I tell you. Headstrong. That's what she is. Headstrong."

Benjamin moved to refresh his drink, and Abby was the only one who heard Dane's calm, deliberate response. "I hear there's a cure for that now."

Abby choked a little and took a quick gulp of the soda her father handed her, knowing exactly what kind of "cure" Dane would affect, and it involved his broad palm against her rounded bottom.

"You all right, sweetheart?" her father frowned.

"Fine, thank you, Daddy," Abby squeaked, wanting to slap Dane Matheson silly.

The evening continued on much the same note – Benjamin being effusive in his praise for Dane to Abby and vice versa, and Dane deliberately muttering comments under his breath that only Abby could hear. They ended up back in the study, her father and Dane carrying on the lion's share of the conversation. Abby had fallen strangely silent on the couch, and suddenly it struck Benjamin that he wasn't accomplishing much by monopolizing their guest's attentions.

He set his drink down on the end table deliberately, saying, "Please excuse me, Dane, but I'm not quite recovered yet, and I tire easily. I'm going to go up to bed and let you two get reacquainted."

Abby was incensed. The liar!!! He was in tip-top shape; his doctor had seen to that, and he was already back to doing his usual fourteen to sixteen hour days. "I tire easily", my

foot," she muttered sarcastically, then blushed furiously when Dane chuckled, having caught the comment as if she'd whispered it directly into his ear.

The two men stood and shook hands, Benjamin clapping Dane on the shoulder in an almost paternal manner. "You remember what I said now, young man. If there's ever anything you need or want, anything at all that I - " he paused for a moment and smiled broadly, gesturing towards his daughter, " - or my daughter can do for you, you just let us know."

Abby wanted to melt into the floor. Was she crazy or had her father practically offered her to this man? Was he out of his mind to say something like that to Dane Matheson, of all people? Maybe the kidnapping had affected him more than Abby'd thought. It was certainly the only explanation she could come up with to rationalize his behavior.

When the older man finally left the room, Abby felt Dane's intense gaze settle on her like a physical touch, although he hadn't moved a gorgeous muscle . . . Where had that thought come from, she wondered, frowning. It wouldn't pay for her to start thinking like that. Nope. Not at all. Nervously, Abby cleared her throat and opened her mouth, determined to take control of the conversation, but he spoke first in a voice like velvety smooth chocolate.

"Are you all right?" She was standing there in the middle of the room, hugging herself tightly and looking lost and a little desperate.

Her mouth snapped shut. Oh, God, she didn't want him to be nice to her! "Yeah, I'm fine." Her voice was breathy and faint.

Finally, Dane decided he wasn't going to allow her to pretend he wasn't there for one minute longer. Face set determinedly, he rose with the speed of a striking panther, collected her up into his arms and settled her onto his lap before she knew what was going on.

"Put me -" Bright green eyes met cool gray ones. It was the first time since the evening began that she'd looking directly at him. Abby's struggles to free herself stilled at that moment; she recognized that look in his eye all too well from personal experience and knew where it meant she was likely to end up if she pushed him.

The warm weight of her felt good in his arms; Dane took a deep breath and relaxed for the first time in a long time, leaning back against the chair and taking her with him, fitting her against him and just holding her. Abby knew from experience that no amount of struggling was going to get him to turn her loose until he was damn good and ready, so

she lay on top of him quietly, rapidly losing the fight to not collapse completely against him. A gentle, soothing hand rubbed up and down her back over the light rayon dress she was wearing and finally, after a futile battle between her conscience and her libido, Abby tucked her head against his neck and gave up with a small whimper and sank against his comforting strength.

Still, he did nothing but hold her and massage her back rhythmically. Abby could hear his strong, steady heartbeat beneath her ear, feel the muscles of his chest rise and fall with his deep breaths. He was aroused, as always around her, and the hard spike of his erection pressed insistently against her bottom although for some reason she sensed absolutely no threat from him. Exactly the opposite, in fact. Abby realized she had never felt safer than when he held her, now or then. The thought nagged at her, but she didn't want to explore it right now.

"I missed you," he growled.

"I haven't missed you one iota," came the soft reply.

Although she couldn't see him, she knew he was smiling. "You're as bad a liar as your father, little girl."

She wisely kept silent.

"Your father likes me."

A delicate snort was issued from just under his chin. "There's no accounting for his tastes."

Dane chuckled outright. "Anybody ever tell you that having a smart mouth can get you into trouble?"

"Only you."

They were quiet for several moments, then he said softly, but again, without any movement, "I want you."

Abby sucked in a breath and went stiff on him. "You've always wanted me."

"But I never did anything about it."

Like those other men did to her friends, was left unsaid between them.

"No, you didn't."

"I would never have forced myself on you."

She wasn't sure whether she believed that or not. "Instead you forced my own pleasure on me. And you beat me."

He sighed. "Pleasuring you was one of the most satisfying things I've ever done in my life. And spanking you was another."

Abby levered herself away from him indignantly. "You abused me!"

"I wanted you."

"And that makes everything you did all right?"

"Would you have preferred that I kill you like Brittany's owner did?" When her eyes filled with tears and she leaned as far away from him as his hold would allow, Dane wished whole-heartedly that he could retract his words.

The spell was broken for Abby. "Let me up, please," she asked tonelessly.

To her surprise, he did as she asked; merely watching her attentively from the wing backed chair.

Suddenly, Abby realized just how tired she was. It was all too much. Her shoulders slumped and her eyes filled with tears; she knew she had to get him out of here before she fell completely apart. The truth seemed like the most likely bet to work. "Listen, I'm bushed – "

Dane rose, cutting off her big speech. "I can take a hint." But he stopped right in front of her. Abby hung her head deliberately, not wanting the imminent tears to fall in front of him, but an insistent finger beneath her chin wouldn't allow her to hide from him as two fat tears rolled down her cheeks. The sight of her in such despair ate at his conscience like acid. "C'mere." Taking matters into his own arms, he lifted her off her feet and carried her out of the room, going up the stairs two at a time as if she weighed no more than a pocketful of change.

"Put me down!" she squeaked, but not too loudly for fear of waking her father.

He tromped down the hall as if she hadn't spoken, growling, "Where's your room?"

"But –" She stopped at the look on his face, knowing that if she pushed him he wouldn't hesitate to knock on every door. "Second on the left."

The room suited her to a T – all roses and creams and feminine warmth. Dane undressed her with genderless efficiency while she protested ineffectually, then popped her into the nightgown that was lying at the end of the bed and tucked her under the covers like he had when they first met. He sat down next to her and stroked the hair away from her face reverently. "Get some sleep, honey. You're exhausted." He bent down and kissed her lips fleetingly before she had a chance to react, then strode to the door, throwing a parting shot over his shoulder. "I'll be seeing you."

And he wasn't kidding. Benjamin had all but adopted him, Abby thought derisively several weeks later, when Dane was joining them for dinner for the third time in less than a week.

"Don't you have a job to do?" Abby queried less than subtly, interrupting the rampant male bonding-fest the two were conducting.

Her father looked aghast at her gall, but Dane merely grinned. "No, actually, my job is done on a consulting basis, shall we say, and I've decided to take an impromptu vacation."

"And a well deserved one," her father chimed in, raising his glass gleefully.

"And you decided to grace us with your presence? Don't you have any friends you could impose on?"

"Abigail Madeline Sinclair!" When her father used her full name, she knew better than to push it any farther. Abby had the grace to blush.

"Your father was gracious enough to extend an invitation to me to come and visit any time. I decided to take him up on it."

Benjamin pinned his recalcitrant daughter with a stony glare, stating emphatically, "And he is to be treated as an honored guest any time he's here, Abigail. Is that understood?"

Suddenly, she was seven years old again, and dangerously close to getting her bottom tanned by her father. "Yes, Sir," she said meekly.

"Damn straight." Ben hated having to chastise his daughter but he didn't quite understand her outright animosity towards Dane. His voice was softer and full of emotion as he continued, "This man saved your life, Abby. I'd hate to think what I would do if I'd – if I'd lost you."

Abby patted her father's hand comfortingly. "Me, too, Daddy," she whispered around the aching lump in her throat.

Dane felt a sharp stab of jealousy at their obvious love for each other. He'd never had a parent's love, and now it seemed he wasn't likely to win over the one woman in his life he'd fallen in love with. It was totally unfair to press such an obvious advantage, but then, he was trained to fight dirty. "I'd hoped to be able to take your daughter out, Benjamin, but she's turned me down flat every time I've asked."

Abby's eyes bugged out of her head. The slime!! It was dirty pool of him to get her father involved. As far as Daddy was concerned, Dane walked on water. Now she'd never get out of going out with him, dammit!!

"Why is that, Abby? You haven't gone out at all since you've been back. Do you some good to get out."

Dane tried unsuccessfully to suppress a grin as Benjamin took up for him right on cue. He snuck a look at how Abby was taking his ploy, and ran right into a threatening glare from her that promised future retribution. He'd enjoy the hell out of it if she tried, so he merely winked back at her teasingly.

Recognizing that there was truly no hope for it, she acquiesced ungraciously, her fork clanking down on the plate loudly. "Fine. When do you want to go out?"

Well, it was hardly the reception he'd dreamed of, but at this stage of the game; he'd take what he could get until he was in a position again to straighten out her attitude.

"Tomorrow," came the answer. "I'll pick you up, and we'll go out to dinner."

"What time?"

"Seven."

"Fine."

Such enthusiasm, he thought. Well, hopefully he could get her to change her mind.

Abby was quiet while Dane drove to the restaurant, and still quiet when they sat down to eat. "Are you going to sulk all through dinner, little girl?" he asked in a tone that said she would end up in big trouble if that was the case.

She peeped over the big menu at him, amazed anew at how gorgeous he looked in a gray double-breasted suit that seemed to be cut specifically to accent the breadth of his shoulders. "No. I'm not sulking. I just don't know what to say to you."

He considered her thoughtfully for a moment. "Tell me what you've been doing since you got back. Did Gig treat you all right?"

Surprisingly, he kept her talking and laughing all the way through dinner, not giving her time to feel uncomfortable with him. They discussed a wide range of topics, some of which they agreed on and some of which they debated hotly. Abby enjoyed herself thoroughly, despite her reservations about the evening.

Dane dropped her off back at the house, declining a sincere offer to come in. He was finding it damned hard to resist just sweeping her off her feet and carrying her to the nearest motel room. She seemed more at ease with him than she'd ever been, and he loved it. He loved her, more and more each day. Abby was smart and funny, quick-witted and not afraid to defend her opinions. She didn't let him get away with anything.

Before he let her escape inside, however, he kissed her. And for the first time ever, she kissed him back. Dane thought he would explode with it. Her response was sweetly tentative at first, as if she was still a little bit afraid of him. But he didn't grope her suddenly, or paw her at all, merely holding her like a china doll in those muscular arms of his. His lips were soft but firm as his mouth slanted slowly over hers, coaxing it open for the inexorable invasion of his tongue.

Abby moaned slightly, moving restlessly in his embrace. Dane felt a small hand wander up his back to cup the back of his head, her fingers delving into his hair, and every nerve ending she touched burst into flames that traveled directly to his swelling groin.

He was the one to step back; reaching desperately for a control that was rapidly slipping away from him. But there was no way he would scare her again. She was too precious to him. "I don't want to get too far ahead of us. Because of me, we never had a chance to get to know each other. I'm sorry I forced you when we were in Kahnistan; I won't do it again."

Abby bit her lip, and he reached down to give her a quick kiss.

"Stop thinking for a while and do what feels good. I know I outraged your intellect by what I did. But your body already loves me. Think about it."

Dane took a step towards the Jeep, then turned back and she was worrying that poor lip again. "Don't dwell. I'll pick you up tomorrow around ten or so."

She frowned. "For what?"

"I thought we'd go to the aquarium and have lunch at the Hard Rock."

"Oh. Okay." Honestly, he could have told her they were going to climb Mount Everest. She was too busy thinking about what he'd said to think about what he was saying.

That night, before she drifted off to sleep, Abby went over their conversation in her mind. He'd said he'd outraged her intellect. Well, that was right. She didn't enjoy being forced to do anything, and sexual pleasure to her was something almost sacred that was the ultimate expression of pleasure between two people who loved each other. Unlike nearly everyone else of her generation, Abby didn't sleep around. She'd never met anyone – until Dane – who had stirred even the slightest response in her. Frankly, she'd counted herself as frigid, agreeing with a lot of the men she'd turned down. But her body must just have been saving up its responses for exactly the right person. Apparently, sexually, that was Dane.

When she was around him, she found her normally quick mind turned to mush, and all she could think about was how wonderful it felt when he held her tight, suckled strongly at her nipples, and, to her immense shame, even spanked her bare bottom over his lap. It annoyed her that even his strict discipline turned her on, although it certainly also hurt like the dickens. She remembered how carefully he had treated her when he had first brought her into his house, how he held her while she cried, made sure she ate right, tucked her into bed, and, most of all, risked his life repeatedly to save hers.

Although he had spanked her thoroughly, been bossy and autocratic, and had imposed his own will in eliciting her sexual responses against her will, he had never been brutal. He hadn't taken his fists or worse to her. She'd had food and as decent clothing as he could find, a warm bed – even if he had insisted on joining her – and he had been almost too concerned about her health.

Now he seemed to want to court her, as if he felt something for her, something deeper than just lust.

How could she turn him down?

Especially when she was starting to feel the same way.

Chapter 8

Dane was quite determined in his plan to get Abby to see him in a better light. He took her out at least once or twice a week, sailing, whale watching, and, despite the shudder that ran through him at the mere thought, shopping at the nearby outlets and malls. They saw the Red Sox at Fenway, a concert at the Wang center, and made a couple of day trips to New Hampshire and Maine. Abby was amazed that he wasn't the impatient male shopper she would have pegged him for. He let her take her time, didn't rush her through clothing stores or sigh with exaggerated tolerance. In fact, he occasionally even made a suggestion or two about what she should or shouldn't buy.

Through it all, he was the perfect gentleman . . . for him, which meant that he tried not to be too autocratic about her behavior, but he didn't always succeed. Sexually, he held himself back as much as possible, which sometimes didn't end up being much, but then she seemed much more amenable to his advances, and her responsiveness drove him up a wall. He had been carrying a three-carat engagement ring around in his briefcase since he'd arrived in Massachusetts, waiting for the perfect time to pop the question.

But Dane was objective about it. She may have accepted what he'd done to her, maybe even forgiven him – he could only hope. But she had to know the whole story of who and what he is. He wanted her to make an informed decision about whether or not she wanted to commit to him. The flight out here from J.D.'s place had given him time to decide whether he just wanted a quick roll in the hay or a lifetime with her, and it hadn't taken him more than about five seconds to know that a one night stand just wasn't going to cut it for him. In the blink of an eye, he made up his mind to marry her, casually throwing away his freedom for the chance to hold her every night for the rest of their lives.

It had been several months since he'd come to Boston, and he'd finally broken down and rented a furnished apartment instead of staying in a luxury hotel. It wasn't home, by any means, but then, he'd learned to live just about anywhere. What was important about this place was not any sort of amenities, but rather that it was less than ten minutes from Abby's house.

Abby's father had gone away on a business trip for a couple of days, and Dane saw it as his chance to make his confession, and hopefully, pop the question. He arranged for a chef to cater a private dinner for the two of them at his place, bought a dozen of her

favorite apricot roses, and was just putting the blue velvet ring box in the pocket of his suit coat when the phone rang.

"Matheson."

"Dade?" It was Abby, but definitely not her voice.

"Honey, are you ok?"

At the soft concern in his voice, Abby nearly teared up. She hated to be sick, and any little thing would cause a veritable storm of sobs. "I'b sorry, Dade, but I hab to cadcel for todight."

His heart fell, but she sounded atrocious. "Oh, baby, you sound terrible." He waited for a coughing spasm to settle before saying, "I'll be right over there with some chicken soup."

"You cad't. You'll catch it!"

As if that would have stopped him anyway. "I never catch things, Ab. I'll be there in two shakes. You put your jammies on and climb into bed like a good girl. I'll only be a few minutes, hon."

She knew she should tell him not to come, not that he was going to listen to her anyway. But it was lovely to be taken care of sometimes. And this was one of those times. She felt like death warmed over, and, for once, she did exactly as she was told. When Dane appeared in her doorway, she was in the midst of a ferocious coughing fit. He kept a weather eye on her while rummaging through several bags of stuff he'd brought, then, when she had sat back and began to rub her aching chest, he sat down on the bed beside her with a big bottleful of cough medicine.

"This'll help with that cough, baby."

Abby's nose wrinkled distastefully. "Blech. I hade that stuff! I dever take it."

Dane wasn't going to have any of her sass, especially when she wasn't feeling well. "Abigail Madeline, you are going to do exactly as you are told, cold or no cold, or I'm going to put you over my knee and redden your bottom until it matches your nose. Now," he poured an adult dose into the cap. "Swallow this, then we'll have dinner."

She sat there for a long moment, looking at the disgusting red liquid in the cup and then back at him, as if trying to decide which fate was worse. Apparently, not obeying him

won, because she downed the medicine with a lot of complaining and whining.

Dane gritted his teeth, reminding himself that she was sick. Take-out wonton soup was the closest thing to chicken soup he could get quickly, so he gave her a styrofoam bowl of it, then dug into the garlic beef, pork fried rice, teriyaki beef and egg rolls he'd brought. There was enough food to feed an army, but Abby was feeling so rotten she could barely get through the soup. Despite a bellyful of hot food, she started to huddle and shiver under the covers.

He finished chewing thoughtfully, then packed up the food, clearing off the bed next to her. When he returned to sit on the side of the bed, she was busy sneezing and blowing her nose. "I'b sorry I'b so sick, Dade."

Dane smiled at her stuffy nose accent. His work-roughened hand cupped her cheek. "It's not your fault, sweetie. I'm glad I'm here to take care of you, though."

Abby sighed tiredly, coughing a little. "So ab I," she admitted.

"Come here for a minute, honey." He pulled her towards him, and Abby thought he was just going to give her a hug, but before she knew it she was face down over his lap, and he was pulling her pajama bottoms and undies down to her knees.

"DADE! What do you think you're doig?!" Abby wiggled and squirmed and bucked and writhed, but didn't manage to budge an inch.

He leaned next to her and Abby heard the top of a jar pop off. "I'm going to take your temp, Abby. Now lie still."

"Do, you're dot!" she doubled her efforts to get free, but still to no avail. His arm lay like an iron band across her back, holding her in place with depressingly little effort.

All she earned herself for her trouble was a stinging swat to her bare backside. "Abigail Madeline Sinclair." A stray thought hit her and she wondered when Dane had started to sound like her father. It was not a comforting thought. "Unless you'd like to have a sore nose and a sore bottom, I suggest you lie still and cooperate."

"Dade, please, do, dod't do this! I dod't wadt my tebrature taked!" She was afraid to wiggle, but kicked her feet through her whole pitiful speech. Why did he always succeed in making her feel like such a little girl?

"Abby." One word, one last warning. He really didn't want to spank her when she was

sick, but he would if she insisted on being difficult.

Experimentally, she sniffled a little, but he seemed not to hear as he parted her cheeks and inserted that little glass tube. She started a little on its entrance, but Dane rubbed her bottom soothingly, seating the thermometer well in her bottom until just the end of it was visible between those rounded globes. Abby couldn't help the shivering fit that overtook her, and Dane tried to arrange the covers so that as little as possible of her flesh was exposed.

"My poor baby," he crooned, rubbing the small of her back as she lay her head on the mattress in defeat. My, she really was sick if she gave up that easily, he thought. Her temperature was 100.1, so he gave her a couple of aspirin and tucked her back into bed. Dane turned the lights down, leaving one still on across the room at the chaise lounge he intended to spend the night in, in the hopes that she would fall asleep, but she seemed too miserable for that.

"Dade?" He heard her little girl voice from under the mountains of covers.

"Yes, baby?"

"I cad't sleep," she whined.

"I know, honey. Is there something I can do to help?" He came up behind her as she lay curled on her side, laying his big body down behind her, cupping her smaller body with his much bigger one.

It sounded juvenile to her own ears, but there was one ritual that she and her father had had when she was a child that never failed to put her to sleep. "Would you mid tellig be a bedtibe story?"

He grinned. "I can do that." Dane joined her under the covers, his plate-sized hand resting possessively on her tummy, his mouth placed intimately at her ear.

"Once upon a time, there was a group of very patriotic young men who came from all over their country. They each decided in their own way and in their own time to become a soldier. One of those men was an orphan, who never knew his mother or his father and had spent his life in one foster home or orphanage after the other. There had never been any consistency in his life, and even less love. The military appealed to him because it was a steady paycheck and an ordered existence, and that was exactly what was missing from his life. When he went through basic training, he and his instructors found that he had a real aptitude for things military, and he was given – along with about fifty other

men – the opportunity to become something better, so they thought.

"So, trusting that the powers that be were looking out for him as well as the country in general, he agreed to let them conduct certain . . . experiments on him that altered him genetically, chemically, and biologically. He became super fast, super strong, had better than normal hearing and sight; his reflexes were faster than lightening. Eventually they discovered that his healing processes were accelerated, and that he seemed to have a souped-up immune system, so he was almost never sick."

Abby lay silent and still, afraid he would stop talking if she said or did anything. She knew he was talking about himself.

"This man was very lucky to have survived the experiments, because a large percentage of the men who participated in them went crazy or killed themselves rather than deal with the irreversible changes they'd been subjected to. But for some reason, he had fewer side effects than most. The military was trying to create super soldiers, but mostly they just ended up with super monsters. Out of the fifty men who went into the study, thirty-five of them are in prison, crazy, or dead. The remaining men were formed into an elite band of government operatives. Several others died as a result of the missions we were sent on, missions that for ordinary men would have been suicide missions.

"He wandered through his life, doing as he was told and not thinking too much about it. They were paid very well, and the man was able to buy some land and even build himself a house." Dane paused, as if gathering his thoughts. "He had money in the bank, but he had no one to share any of it with. Oh, he didn't want for female companionship. One of the side effects he did experience was an extremely heightened libido. He learned to control his strength and enjoy what women could offer him, but none of them touched his heart.

"Our man had risen as far as he could go within his occupation by being better than almost everyone at what he did, but also by being a man of honor, or so he thought: when he said something, it was written in stone. If he committed the team to a mission, then that mission was accomplished come hell or high water. It was one of the things he prided himself on. Nothing had ever distracted him from that goal, and he was chosen to head the team after his best friend and the first leader walked away, but it was no longer as satisfying to him as it once was. He had just about decided to take a page from his friend's book and tell them to take their job and shove it when he was contacted by someone who wanted them to find his daughter," Dane stroked her hair gently, "the princess of this story. The man knew the moment he saw the woman's picture that this woman was his.

"It seems that his client's naughty daughter, who had too much heart and not enough common sense, and should have known better at her age," he grumbled, earning him a sharp elbow in the stomach, and Abby grinned at his satisfying "umph", "decided to hightail it off to a foreign country that she knew nothing about, where she didn't speak the language or know anything about the customs of the people, just because her best friends had been kidnapped and everyone else had given them up for lost.

"The princess ended up captured by men very much like those who had stolen her friends, and she found herself up for sale, too, stripped naked in front of a roomful of strange men." Dane's voice was full of admiration as he continued. "But instead of cowering and crying at her predicament, our heroine stood regally in front of her captors, even though she shivered with fear.

"Our princess didn't know that the man who bought her had been sent to rescue her, and for some reason the man couldn't bring himself to tell her. Oh, he intended to get her out of there eventually, but while he had her he wanted to indulge himself in the glory of her warm soft skin, run his fingers through her red-gold locks and bury himself within her forever.

"For the first time since he'd been altered this man disregarded his orders, his mission – everything that had meant anything to him for the past couple of decades – all because of how much he wanted this woman." Dane cleared his throat. "On top of that, he disregarded the woman herself – not taking into consideration what she wanted or even what was best for her. He endangered her, himself, and the mission all because he wanted to fuck her so badly he could taste it, but in the end, he couldn't find the will to force himself on her. It just wasn't in him.

"But what he did to her wasn't much better – he physically overpowered her and forced her to bend to his sexual will, which happened to be bent on her pleasure at that point. He could have cost all of them their lives, and when he realized that, after he'd finally brought her to a safe place, he was more ashamed of himself than he had ever been in his life, and he decided that the best thing would be if he and the princess never saw each other again."

Abby waited patiently for several minutes, but he didn't seem inclined to continue.

"Well?" she prompted, craning her head around to look at him.

"Well what?"

"That's dot buch of ad eddig. They're supposed to live happily ever after ad ride off into the sudset on horseback, or sobethig."

Dane snorted, then reconsidered, rolling away from her and turning on the bedside lamp. "Okay, then." He fished into the pocket of his jeans and produced the ring box, handing it to her. "You tell me the ending of the story. Abby, will you marry me?"

Abby opened the box and saw the beautiful three-carat princess cut diamond. She was floored but her heart was pounding hard in her chest. "I – uh, yes," she sighed before she changed her mind.

He felt like his heart exploded within his chest, and he blew out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Really?" Dane sounded so like a hopeful little boy who needed love that it made Abby's throat close painfully.

She leaned forward and pulled him into his arms. "Yes, really."

Dane reveled in her embrace, burying his face against her neck. Abby kissed the top of his head then realized that the front of her shirt was getting wet. "Dade?" Was he crying? Or was she imagining it.

If he had been, he recovered quickly and slipped the ring onto her left hand, then kissed it. "I'm not going to promise you that I'll never spank you, because that would be lying. But I am sorry that I risked your life unnecessarily, just because I wanted you. I'm sorry I forced you to cum against your will, Abby." He sighed heavily. "I'd much rather it be something you gift me with because you want to."

Abby grinned and settled him between her legs. "Like dow?"

Dane was certainly ready for her, as always. "But you're sick – "

She reached for the bedside light, saying "Dod't you dow? Orgasbs clear the siduses." Laughing, he positioned himself between her spread legs, promising solemnly that he would personally see to it that she would be able to breathe easily for the next fifty years or so.

The End

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