

New Territory
A Spanking Club Story

By Melinda Barron

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Chapter One

Sean Penny stepped out of the tube and glanced around the station platform. There were still people milling about, but he was thankful it wasn't the daytime crowd. This particular activity of the Spanking Club wouldn't work if someone thought he was trying to kidnap the woman involved. If someone called for the police, things wouldn't turn out as planned.

A glance at his watch showed he was right on schedule. Naomi, Lady McIntyre, would be coming down the escalator at any moment, ready to take the tube to restaurant where she was to meet her husband, Sean's best friend Gavin, Lord McIntyre.

Only she wouldn't be going to a restaurant, she would be going to an impromptu meeting of The Spanking Club, where she would spankee, and her husband the spanker. The fact Gavin had called the unexpected gathering meant Naomi had been a naughty woman, obviously. There would be three club members, and their wives or significant others, there as the jury. Of course they would find her guilty and her punishment would be a spanking, in front of everyone present.

Naomi had no idea this was happening. It had been planned this morning, when Gavin had called to say that Naomi had broken a rule, and he'd promised her a spanking that weekend.

"I've decided not to wait that long, though," he'd said. "It needs to be done tonight, are you in?"

Sean had given his approval to the plan, then worked the rest of the day. Now as he waited on Naomi, he felt a tingle of jealousy for the relationship Gavin had with Naomi. It wasn't the first time he'd felt that way, and it always left him feeling empty inside. He wanted a relationship with a woman, one that would be permanent. But so far he'd been unable to find someone he could spend the rest of his life with.

There were several single members of the Spanking Club who had left him know they would be open to a relationship with him. Although he liked these women, he didn't love them, and he didn't see the possibility of their friendship turning into love, either.

Which was sad. He'd spanked every female member of the club, from Bianca to Georgianna, and although Georgianna had expressed an interest he knew Gray was waiting for her to come to him. She'd wanted Gavin before he'd married, then turned her attentions to Sean. He'd made it plain he wasn't going to offer for her affections, but she was still trying. If Gray spent more time in London, she would already be his. Sean hoped his friend would find time to get here, stay here, and tame the woman. She certainly needed it.

He glanced at his clock, then looked at the escalator. There she was, right on schedule. Gavin had assured him she wouldn't be late, because she was worried about upsetting him more than he already was.

"She'll be there, don't worry. When she gets there, bring her to our Chelsea townhouse, and I'll take it from there."

Naomi was looking down, glancing at her mobile, or maybe she was watching the moving staircase. Either way, when she reached the end of it she stepped off, looked up, and Sean could tell by the look on her face that she saw him immediately.

The smile on her face was broad, and very expressive and she called his name and waved.

"What are you doing here?" She leaned up and kissed his cheek and he returned the peck.

"I'm here to collect you," he said, keeping his voice deep and authoritative. "It is time for you to be corrected for whatever it is you did this morning."

The smile on her face disappeared and she tried to take a step away from him, but Sean had his hand on her wrist. "You are to come with me."

“No.” She tried to pull away, which gained them a glance from a man passing by. Although he couldn’t see him after he’d moved past them, Sean knew the man stopped. He could feel his gaze upon them. Sure enough, seconds later he was back, looking at Naomi.

“Miss, everything alright?”

“Yes, thank you.” She swallowed hard, and she smiled at him. “We’re just having a bit of a discussion.”

“I see.” He glared at Sean. “Well, if you’re certain.”

“Yes, I am. Thank you for your concern.” She took a step toward Sean, and as if that convinced him, the man tipped an imaginary hat to her and moved down the platform.

“We need to go,” Sean said. “We really shouldn’t keep Gavin waiting.”

He could see the indecision on her face. She hadn’t been expecting this, and she wasn’t happy about it. If she defied her husband’s orders, though, her spanking would be worse than what she would get if she went along quietly.

The indecision was clear, and then finally she nodded. “Where are we going?”

“Your Chelsea townhouse.”

“Well, at least I’ll feel at home.” She stepped onto the up escalator. “Is your car outside?”

“Nope, we’re taking a taxi.” He winked at her. “And then it’s dinner afterward, someplace where you’ll have to sit down on your freshly spanked bum.”

“Oh joy.” She chuckled. “I get an unexpected spanking, but I get food after. I want something more than bangers and mash.”

Sean laughed. “You’ll have to take that up with your husband. This little meeting is his idea. I’m just here to do the leg work.”

Watching Gavin spank Naomi did nothing for Sean's mood. He'd been feeling sorry for himself all day, and seeing the two of them together only increased that pity. He wasn't sure how he would handle the situation Gavin found himself in, but he was fairly certain he wouldn't do it in public. Or would he?

Spanking someone during a club meeting was one thing, but what was obviously a punishment situation should have been done in private. Of course Gavin had wanted the "jury," which consisted of Hudson, Peter and Mark.

Gavin had been vague about Naomi's infraction, which was strange to Sean. Gavin was not near as strict as Sean was. Several times, Gavin had told his friend that he was "too rigid," that he needed to relax more. But Sean had been brought up to believe that rules were meant to be followed, and he did that in both his professional and personal life.

As a barrister he had to do things by the book, so it was easy to carry that trait with him when he was out of the office.

Knowing how relaxed Gavin could be, Sean wondered what sort of infraction had brought this about. He'd just said she'd "broken a rule," and the jury had taken him at his word. Their ruling had been a spanking, of course.

Now, Sean listened to the sound of Gavin's hand slapping his wife's bottom and wished, once again, that he had a wife himself.

Slap, slap, slap.

Someone whom he could love.

Slap, slap, slap, slap.

Someone who could love him.

Slap, slap, slap, slap, slap.

Someone he could spend the rest of his life with.

More slaps against Naomi's bum. More chances for Sean to feel sorry for himself. What the hell was wrong with him? It wasn't like him to wallow in self-pity. If he were truly feeling like himself he would call up a female member of the Spanking Club and tell her to meet him at his house.

Then he would spank her bottom in a way they would both enjoy. He knew he could ring Georgianna at any time of the night and she would come running. She loved to be spanked, but Sean didn't want to step on Gray's toes. His friend had made it plain that he intended to claim Georgianna, and Sean wouldn't do anything to come between them.

Rebecca would be a good choice. She worked in his office, and he was her sponsor, after all. Perhaps he could give her a call.

He'd been so self-absorbed in his thoughts about being alone that he'd missed the end of the spanking. He supposed that shouldn't surprise him, since he'd barely been around, mentally, for the first part of the event, truthfully.

Naomi stood and straightened her clothing. Then she went to the corner where Sean knew she would spend the next ten minutes. When she was in place, the couples started to leave, and Gavin made his way over to where Sean stood.

"Want to talk about it?"

"About what?" Sean shrugged and hoped his smile didn't look as fake as it felt.

"About whatever is bothering you." Gavin pointed to two chairs. "Something has been eating at you for the last few months."

Gavin narrowed his eyes just a little. He didn't move toward the seats. If he relaxed he might be tempted to spill his guts. Sean could see his longtime friend was trying to figure out a

way to continue the inquiry without pissing Sean off. When he spoke again, Sean knew he hadn't thought about anything.

"How about we have a Spanking Club meeting this weekend. I think it's been too long since the last one. Naomi's behavior proves that. Most of the members have agreed. Saturday night at our place in the country?"

Sean shook his head. "Sorry, I have other plans."

"Hot date?" Gavin lifted his eyebrows. "Bring her along, because I'm sure any woman you're involved with is into spanking."

"I wish." Sean laughed. "I don't have a date. I'm leaving for America early Sunday morning, and I have a ton of things that need to get done before then. That means I can't go about spanking someone Saturday evening, unfortunately."

Gavin glanced at his watch, then looked back at Sean. The glance told Sean he was keeping track of the time left on Naomi's time in the corner. "Why not? You can come back into London Saturday night."

"As I said, I have a great deal of work to do this week, and I'm not going to be done."

"Naomi, come here, darling," Gavin said. "Excuse me a moment."

Sean watched them as they drew together. Gavin stroked her arm, and she leaned her head against his shoulder. The green-eyed monster was back, and he wasn't sure exactly how he was going to get rid of it.

They talked and kissed, and before long they were walking toward him. "Time for some food," Gavin said. "Are you in, or are you letting us down?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say no, but getting out for a while would be good for him. As they left the townhouse and started off on foot for the nearest pub, he told them about

his trip, how he was going to Amarillo, a town in the Texas Panhandle where he would meet up with his aunt and uncle, who lived there, and do some work on the family trust.

“I won’t be gone long,” he said as he held open the pub door for his friends to go inside. “Three days.”

“Then we’ll postpone the meeting,” Gavin said after they’d located a table in the crowded pub. “A club meeting will help you to relax once you get back.”

“Don’t postpone it on my account,” Sean said. “I’ll be fine.”

They didn’t argue with him. Instead they kissed, a sweet peck followed by a deeper, more meaningful kiss. It only increased the unease Sean had felt all evening. They’d fallen in love so quickly, and Sean had doubted the relationship from the start. Sean had tried to talk Gavin out of it, saying the pair needed more time to get to know each other. Now he could see he was wrong. People did have an immediate attraction to each other, they could fall in love at first sight.

Gavin and Naomi were a perfect example of that. Now if Sean could only follow their example, things would be perfect. He needed to find a woman, one whom he could love for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately, the chances of that happening were slim to none.

Sterling Barnett ignored the no parking sign and slammed her car to a stop next to the curb. The sudden movement jerked the safety belt tight and pulled her back against the seat.

“Ouch!” She winced as she threw the car into park. She was late, as always, and if she didn’t hurry, Mr. Caristers’s guest would not be here. He wasn’t expecting her, after all, but she’d promised her employer, who was also her Godfather, that she’d be here early to pick up one Sean Penny from London, England...and his plane had landed more than half an hour ago.

Of course he was supposed to be here last night, but she supposed that wasn't his fault. He'd been caught in Newark, or in Dallas, she couldn't remember which. Not that she would have been on time for last night's pick-up either. She wasn't very good at getting to places she was supposed to be where she was supposed to be there.

It was a trait she'd had since she was a child, not that it mattered to her parents. They were carefree types themselves, and when she showed up an hour late for dinner they'd just shrug and say, "Find what you can and enjoy it."

If there had been structure in her life, she would have learned to be on time, or so she told herself. But if there were structure, she wondered if her artistic abilities would develop as they had. She supposed one wasn't equal to the other. Plenty of her artist friends actually showed up on time to things. They all made jokes about her coming in late.

Late, just like she was right now. She undid the seatbelt and bolted from the car. The automatic door opened as she rushed toward it; then she stopped short, scanning the baggage retrieval area.

"Please, please, please let the luggage be late," she whispered. Even as the words came out, though, she knew they were for naught. There were two people standing there, both of them women. "Crap on a stick," she said, wincing as both women turned around to look at her. She hadn't realized she'd spoken so loudly.

"Sorry." She gave them a wave and a smile; they responded with no wave, and a frown she recognized, one that said, "Nice young ladies don't say things like that."

Sterling quickly turned away, eyeing the car rental counters. Her heart leapt as she saw a man standing near one. He was tall with sandy hair, which matched the photo she'd been shown. All she needed to do was get a look at his face.

She nodded at a security guard who frowned at her as she briskly walked across the floor. Once at the counter she leaned over and then turned her gaze back to the customer.

Just as the clerk asked her to step back, please, Sterling realized she had the right person. And he was about to sign a rental agreement. She slammed her hand against the paper and said, “Don’t sign that!”

He lifted the pen that he’d about to put to paper. “If you’re the competition, I’m happy with what I’ve selected. But thank you for your offer. Now, please move your hand.”

Clipped, British accent. Definitely the right person.

“No.” The woman behind the counter was motioning for the security guard and Sterling groaned. “Please, Mr. Caristers sent me to get you. He asked that you not rent a car; he said he’d loan you one of his while you’re here. I’m late. I’m sorry.”

“Obviously.” He put down the pen and inclined his head ever so slightly toward the clerk. “Thank you, but it seems I won’t be requiring the services of your company.”

The clerk glared at Sterling, who gave her a smile and a shrug. “Sorry.”

“So you said,” the man replied, even though she hadn’t been talking to him. He picked up his credit card from the counter and put it into his wallet, which he tucked into his suit jacket pocket.

They stepped away from the counter and Sterling tried to ignore the clerk’s muttered, “Work down the drain.” She felt as if she should say something to her that would soothe her anger, but she knew that wouldn’t work.

“So, you’re Sean, right?”

“Sean Penny, that’s correct.”

“Good. Sarah showed me a picture, but I just wanted to check one more time. I’m Sterling Barnett.”

“Not a very Texanish name, Sterling.”

“My parents are anglophiles.” She shrugged. “That’s how I came to work for the Caristers. You ready to go, or do you need to pick up more luggage?”

She eyed the small bag that he’d picked up before they walked away from the car rental agency.

“No, this is all. I’m only going to be here three days.”

“Really? Eugene made it seem as if you were going to be here a week or more. He has all sorts of plans for you.”

“Intriguing.” He pointed the bag toward the door. “Shall we?”

“Of course, sorry.” Boy, this guy seemed like he had a stick up his butt. He was far too structured for her taste.

“So you keep saying.”

Sterling fought the urge to tell him he didn’t have to sound so rude, but she bit her tongue. It would be better to just take him to the Caristers’s house, drop him off and leave. She’d done her work for the day, and didn’t have to be back there until Wednesday, and, if Sean were right, he’d be gone by then. Sounded like a plan to her.

Once they were outside the building she was thrilled to see the car still there. Part of her had expected it to be towed since she was parked in an illegal spot. She indicated the vehicle before she hurried toward the driver’s side. He stepped to the passenger door. As she unlocked the car she saw him looking at the sign, his disapproval evident.

“I was in a hurry,” she said as they climbed into either side.

“If you had been on time, you wouldn’t have had to park illegally.”

The urge to sneer at him almost took over. Instead she swallowed it, knowing it would get her nowhere. She turned on the car and put it into gear.

“We have about an hour’s drive ahead of us. Do you need anything before we head that way?”

“Nothing, thank you.”

Except maybe to take that stick out of your butt, she thought. She’d heard of Brits being stuffy, but this guy was more than stuffy. He was downright rude.

She pulled onto the main road, thankful for the music coming from the radio. He hadn’t made an attempt to start a conversation, which was probably a good thing. He’d probably take his time to list her faults in driving the car, or harp about her being late.

They rode in silence for about ten minutes, and then he shocked her by saying, “How long have you been employed by the Caristers?”

“Two years,” she replied, “but I’ve known them since I was a kid. They worked with my dad in the oil business until they retired. Actually, my dad didn’t really work there. He has oil and gas rights. Anyway, the Caristers are my Godparents.”

“You were never a kid.”

She turned a confused gaze on him.

“Watch the road, please.”

“Don’t tell me how to drive.” She gripped the wheel tighter as she did exactly as he’d asked. “And what do you mean by I’ve never been a kid? You think I was born and turned eighteen the next day?”

“A kid is a baby goat,” he said, his tone weary. “A child is a baby human.”

“Oh for the love of Pete,” she groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Look it up in a dictionary, if you would like.” From the corner of her eye she saw him look in her direction. “Who is Pete?”

“It’s an expression of exasperation, which means... ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’”

“So you said you’ve got to be kidding me twice?”

“Now you’re just messing with me.”

“Perhaps.” For the first time she heard humor in his voice. “You must forgive me. It has been a long trip.”

“Which turned you into as ass?” She bit her lip and winced. She never should have said that.

“Yes, I rather think it has. Let us change the subject, shall we? What exactly do you do for the Caristers?”

“I run them to the doctor, the grocery store, the bookstore, the mall, the movies, the...well, wherever they want to go.”

“So you’re the chauffeur?”

“Basically.” She took the Washington Street exit and stopped at the sign, waiting for her chance to turn left. “They live a ways out of town, and they like to do things. Neither of them drives anymore, so they hired me.”

“I see.” This time she could hear the disapproval in his voice. “Why is it they don’t drive? Neither of them are that old, not even seventy. Is there a law against older persons driving here?”

“No.” She piloted the car past an eighteen-wheeler. “They just don’t like to drive in town. Neither of them have great eyesight anymore, and they realize that they could be a danger to themselves and others. So they hired me. It’s a win-win situation.”

“I see.” She wanted to tell him that he seemed to have a few phrases that he said over and over, but that might be pushing things. Oh the other hand, screw it. He was obviously looking down his nose at her, so why not push things?

“You see what, exactly?”

“It seems like an odd job for a young woman.”

“Right,” she said. “I suppose in Britain all drivers are old men in their sixties who have already had ‘proper’ jobs?”

“Perhaps.”

She glanced over to see he was looking out the window. “Most women my age are fashion designers, or shop girls, or princesses? Is that the drill?”

“Perhaps.”

She slapped her hand against the steering wheel. “Stop saying that. Listen, I provide a valuable service. I may not be making a lot of money, but I enjoy my life, thank you very much.”

The temptation to stop and put him on the side of the road was almost overwhelming. But she liked Eugene and Sarah too much to do that.

“I’m just saying it’s an unusual career choice for a young woman.”

“What a crock of crap.” She gunned the motor when her chance to turn came, taking it way too fast. Watching him grab the handle above the door that people normally used to get into the SUV made her smile.

“You’re going to kill us both.”

“I know what I’m doing.” She pressed down on the accelerator a little harder. The faster she got him to the Caristers, the faster she would be rid of him.

“Is this one of their vehicles?”

“No, it’s mine.” She pressed down a little harder. “They have two cars, but they’re beign services so you can use one. Which means, thankfully, that I won’t have to drive you anywhere.”

“I appreciate that.” He turned his head toward her, watching the other side of the road. “That was an officer of the law we just passed, and judging from the lights that came on as we drove by, I would say you are in violation of the speed limit.”

Sterling looked down. “Well hells bells.” One look in the rearview mirror showed the DPS trooper was definitely coming after her. Who could blame him, she supposed. She was going eighty in a seventy-mile zone. She let up on the accelerator and eased the car toward the side of the road.

“So much for getting rid of you quicker.”

“Indeed,” he replied. “Just try not to get arrested by being rude.”

“You son of a...” she clamped her mouth shut and hit the button to roll her window down just as the officer appeared at the side of her car, asking for her license and proof of insurance.

“This is turning out to be a hell of a day.”

Chapter Two

“Sean!” Eugene’s greeting was loud, and it brought a smile to Sean’s face. Sterling had dropped him off in the driveway of the palatial estate, and then said she was going to check the mail. She’d taken off so fast that he’d foreseen another speeding ticket in her future. He hoped she didn’t drive that fast when her employers were in the car.

“Uncle Eugene.” He groaned good-naturedly when Eugene pulled him into a hearty hug that belied his age. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you.” Eugene put him at arms length, looked him up and down, and then, as if in approval of what he saw, clapped his hands against Sean’s shoulders. “Good flight?”

“Horrendous. It was crowded and I had to fight from Newark to Dallas that they’d overbooked, which is why I’m here today, and not yesterday. It made me a little cranky, I’m afraid.”

He hadn’t been happy spending the night in an airport, and the flight to Dallas has been very crowded. That crankiness had continued on the flight from Dallas to Amarillo, where the couple sitting next to him had fought the entire time. He’d tried to block them out with earphones, but it had been difficult. Then the young woman who was to greet him had been late, and the car sales person had been rude. It was just not good all around.

Of course that didn’t really give him the right to be rude to Sterling, and he had been just that; unforgivably rude, actually. He needed to find some way to apologize to her. Maybe he should offer to pay for the ticket she’d received. After all, she wouldn’t have been going so fast if she hadn’t been so eager to get him out of the car. Or would she? He wasn’t sure about her driving habits. Maybe he needed to talk to his uncle about that before he offered to pay up.

Of course, attacking her profession had been beneath him. He could blame it on the frustration he felt from the day's delays. Still, that didn't give him the right to be an ass. Of course she'd been late in getting to him. Rather than get angry with her, though, he should have told her a good spanking would keep her from being late to things.

He wondered if she was late all the time, or if today's tardiness was something new for her.

"Your young driver is interesting," he said as an introducing the subject.

"She was late, wasn't she?" His uncle laughed, and Sean thought it was funny that, after all these years living in the United States, his English accent was still so pronounced.

"A little."

"It's a habit of hers, you know. I've tried, but I can't exactly take her over my knee."

Sean understood that statement quite easily. I can't spank her, but you can.

"Uncle Eugene, did you bring me here to work on the papers for the family trust, or to meet your driver?"

His uncle laughed. "A little of both. I have legal things in England that need taken care of, and you're the right person to do that. But I also wanted someone nice, with a firm hand, to come and meet Sterling. She's a wonderful woman, but she needs discipline. I know about you and your friends' club, and well, I thought you'd be a good choice."

Sean wasn't surprised to hear that his uncle knew about The Spanking Club. After all, his father had found out one night when he'd walked into an impromptu meeting where Sean and four of his friends had women over their laps. They were reddening very willing bottoms. His father had been appalled, until Sean had explained to him that The Spanking Club was a place where like-minded individuals could gather and either spank, or be spanked.

Sean loved spanking, but only if his partner was willing. He had a feeling Sterling would not be a willing participant. She'd more likely call for the local sheriff to haul him off to jail.

"You know, Uncle Eugene, I can't just spank her and change things."

"No, no, I'm not saying that. She's a wonderful girl, and I love her. I just thought the two of you would hit it off."

"What he's trying to say is he's playing matchmaker." Sean cut his gaze to the house, where his Aunt Sarah was coming outside. Her sweet, southern accent always made him smile. He could see why his uncle had fallen in love with her and moved from the country he loved to his new home, and stayed for the rest of his life. "He didn't even tell her we're all related."

"Shame on you." Sean shook his head, but he was laughing. "Here I thought I was visiting for three days to go over papers for the family trust. Now I hear you're wanting me to fall in love at the same time."

"Nonsense." Eugene clapped him on the shoulder. "Falling in love takes at least a week. You're not leaving in three days, my boy. You're staying here for a visit, at least a week, if not longer. I've had your father clear your schedule for that long, claiming that I needed time with family."

Sean wanted to be angry with him, but he couldn't really. Eugene had always been his favorite uncle, and he hadn't spent near enough time with him. He'd come to Texas for a few trips over the years, but they'd never been long enough. This time it was just him and his aunt and uncle.

Oh, and the woman that Uncle Eugene thought needed a firm hand. Sean knew she did, but he wasn't sure he was the right person to give it to her. They hadn't exactly gotten off to the best start. He'd have to do some major work to patch things up with her.

Maybe Sean shouldn't have laughed when the police officer told her to "Have a nice day," when he'd handed her the ticket. If he'd commiserated with her a bit, it would have been a good start to getting back on her good side.

"Jerk." Sterling pulled open the car door and sat down in the driver's seat. She slammed the door behind her. "Stuffy English ass. No, not that...stuffy asshole, not because he's British, but because he's an...well, an ass."

She dropped the mail on the seat next to her, then groaned when she noticed Mrs. Baxter staring at her from the car parked next to her.

"Hello, sorry, just me doing...well, sorry." She seemed to be saying that a lot today, and she didn't like it. Not one little bit. And it was all because she'd been late to pick up the ass from the airport. She'd been fine until then.

Mrs. Baxter, who lived on the other side of the lake from Sterling and her family, gave her an uncertain nod and then hurriedly pulled away.

"Great, now she thinks I'm nuts and will pass it around the neighborhood. One more thing to add to this wonderful day." If she tried hard enough she could blame it all on Sean Penny. Actually, she wouldn't have to try that hard.

But she didn't have to see him for long: three days, that was all. And while he was here, she was sure the Caristers wouldn't be going too many different places. They would want to stay home and spend time with their visitor. Sarah had already been talking about the meals she was going to make, a brisket with all the trimmings and a steaming pot of chili, even though it was really too warm for the second meal.

“It’ll be a nice change for him from the rather bland food of England,” Sarah had said as they’d shopped one day. She’d been so excited about their guest. She didn’t give much information on him, but after today, Sterling had to wonder if her employer and Godmother knew what a jerk Sean Penny was.

She turned on the car and started toward the Caristers’s house. She was going to deliver their mail, and then she was going to go home. It was a pretty day outside, which meant there would be time to sit in the sun out by the pool.

Her parents were on a summer tour of Europe, and she was house sitting for them. Oh hell, who was she kidding. Even when they were at home she lived in the same house. She was thirty years old and she had a degree in art history that she didn’t use. She lived with her parents. She had no prospects for job other than driving for the Caristers.

And none of that had bothered her until today, when she’d met Sean Penny.

“Damn his hide,” she said as she turned her car to cross the lake bridge. “He’s a big old...jerk!”

She pressed down on the accelerator harder than she should have, and then pulled back. She’d already had a speeding ticket today. The last thing she needed was to run her car over the bridge and into the lake.

That would be one more thing she could blame on Sean.

“Jerk,” she repeated as she drove up and down the hilly area, making her way back to the Caristers’s house. It didn’t take her long to get there, since they lived in a relatively small and gated community.

She drove into the driveway, turned off the car and snatched up the mail. It was definitely the time to go in through the garage, which led into the kitchen. There was less chance of someone seeing her there. She could put the mail down and sneak back out.

As she opened the door, though, she realized her dream wasn't going to come true. Sarah stood at the stove, stirring a big pot of chili. The wonderful aroma made her mouth water, but that was okay. If she wanted to she could go home and fix her own. It could simmer on the stove while she was outside at the pool.

"Hi!" She plastered a huge smile on her face, hoping Sean hadn't told them about the speeding ticket. "Here's the mail. Have fun with your company."

She was almost out the door when Sarah called her name. She stopped and turned, giving her what she hoped was a very innocent look.

"Where do you think you're going young lady?"

"Well, home, of course. You have guests. Unless you need me to drive you somewhere tonight. I can come back. Do you need something from the store? If so, I can go and get it."

"Of course not, we went shopping yesterday." Sarah turned back to the stove, but before Sterling could sneak out the door, she'd called her name again.

"You're coming for dinner, of course."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I mean...it's your first night with your guest, and I...I..." As hard as she tried to come up with an excuse, dinner with friends, or a movie date, or something else she had planned, nothing came to mind.

"You're coming," Sarah said. It wasn't an invitation, it was a request, in a tone of voice that Sterling had heard a lot during her lifetime. Sarah was a sweet woman, but she brokered no argument. When she wanted something she wanted it, and she would get it. Best to be honest.

“Sarah, I’m not sure that Sean and I got along. He seems to think my job is...not quite right for me.”

“Nonsense,” Sarah replied. She waved her wooden spoon in Sean’s direction. “You just have to get to know him. He has a very dry sense of humor, and he’s very serious about business. I’m sure that’s what it was, he was just thinking about business.”

Sterling swallowed hard. “I don’t think that’s what he was thinking about when I was stopped by the DPS officer.”

“Oh darling, he told us about that.” Sarah laughed. “He said the two of you had been arguing, but like I said, he was thinking about business. His mind wasn’t on the tip. Don’t worry, everything’s going to be fine tonight. Now, be here at seven, and don’t bring anything. I’m going to take care of it all.”

It was no use arguing. Sterling nodded, then went back outside. She had a few hours before she had to be back, enough time to go home, lay down by the pool and soak up some sun. A few hours by herself to forget the stress of the day. Maybe a dip in the pool would lighten her mood and she wouldn’t let the word, “Jerk,” slip out during dinner. No, scratch that, she’d have to make more than a few laps of the pool to keep that from happening.

Somehow she didn’t think Eugene and Sarah would appreciate her calling their guest names.

After climbing back in her vehicle, she picked up the ticket from where she’d tossed it down on the dashboard. She picked it up and sighed. This would cost a pretty penny, not counting the amount of money she would have to pay every month for the increase in her insurance rates. This was the third ticket she’d had in two years. Extra money and more points on her license. All thanks to the...jerk.

It was going to be a long evening.

Sean stopped at the intersection and looked down at the paper in his hand. Aunt Sarah had said Sterling's house was five blocks from theirs, with one turn, at the intersection. But she hadn't said which direction to turn. If he went right, he would end up in the water.

"The only logical solution," he said as he turned to the left. After he and Eugene had finished their business, he knew he had to get out of the house, or risk falling asleep and then, after waking up, being useless the rest of the evening.

He'd said he was going to take a walk. Sarah suggested he go by Sterling's house to check on her, make sure she came for dinner.

"I think she's a little concerned about how your relationship started."

Sean had wanted to tell Sarah that, truly, it wasn't a relationship yet. It could be, but they were, using an American term, putting the cart before the horse.

He waved to a woman who was outside working in her garden. It was late in the day for that, he thought, until he considered the heat. She probably wanted to avoid the heat of the day and came out as the sun was descending.

This was definitely a very beautiful area. On the drive here he'd seen only flat lands with no trees. In this community, however, there were lush grass, gardens and plenty of trees; and there were beautiful houses that showed this was an affluent neighborhood.

After a few more blocks his energy was back to where it was supposed to be; and he was in the right spot. He checked the address with the piece of paper in his hand; definitely the right place. Plus, he recognized the car in the drive as being the one he'd ridden in earlier.

He went toward the house, the drive sloping downward. The house had a very Victorian feel to it, with twin turrets and a wrap around porch. There was a three-car garage next to it.

It was a short trip to the front door. He knocked, then waited. After a few minutes, it was obvious he wasn't going to get an answer. He pressed the bell next to the door. A soft chime floated out from the house. He waited a few more minutes. Nothing.

"Where are you, Sterling?" Sean chuckled to himself as he waited longer. He glanced at his watch. They had about fifteen minutes to make it back to the house for dinner. The walk here hadn't taken him that long, so they could make it on time.

But where was she? Her vehicle was still in the drive, and he hadn't passed her on the way here, so he didn't think she had walked.

Time to check other areas. He walked off the porch and made his way toward what he assumed was the backyard. There was a small gate separating it from the front. He peered over it and saw a pool; next to the pool was a chaise lounge chair, and next to that was a book, opened with its spine side up as if she'd been reading and decided that was the best way to mark her place. There was also an empty wine glass.

He supposed he couldn't blame her for wine this early in the day. It had been stressful for her, what with the ticket and all.

"Sterling?" No answer. He glanced around. A beautiful flower garden ran along the back fence. The grass was green and beautifully tended. He called her name one more time, then went to the French doors that led to the house.

One more knock. No answer. He turned the knob and it gave, the door pushing open. The doors opened onto a living area with overstuffed furniture, and a large flat screen TV affixed to the wall.

“Sterling? It’s Sean. I’ve come to collect you for dinner.”

Silence greeted his proclamation, and unease settled in his stomach. This was how dead bodies were always found in mystery stories, he thought. Some unsuspecting person opened the door and came into the house, and then found the people they were looking for stabbed to death.

He laughed off the idea as he moved deeper into the house. Her purse, which he recognized from earlier in the day, lay on the counter. He recognized her shoes, too, sitting on the floor right under the counter. Right next to it was the shirt she’d worn that afternoon, and the jeans.

His crotch stirred as he imagined her coming into the house, stripping off her clothes and then going out to the pool for a naked swim.

“Naughty girl,” he whispered. “And what do naughty girls need? Spanked.”

He moved into another living area, this one formal. Off to the right was a set of stairs. He went to them and called her name. When she didn’t answer he climbed them two at a time.

Upstairs he found the reason for her not answering him. The sound of running water came from the far end of the hall. She was taking a shower. He glanced at his watch. He’d eaten up five minutes searching for her. That meant they had ten to make it to Eugene and Sarah’s in time for dinner.

She was going to be late. Again. Naughty girl.

He walked the hall quickly, pushing open the door to the bathroom. Over the sound of the water he could hear her humming. It was a tune didn’t recognize, but that didn’t matter. The curtain was only partly closed, and her back was to him.

Sterling's silky bottom presented itself to him as if to tease. "So very spankable," he whispered. "And I think a spanking is in order, for your tardiness young lady. Not right now, but after dinner, when I bring you home."

"What the hell!" She was turned toward him now, her hands on her hips. Her breasts, just the right handful, he noted, were high and full. She'd followed modern trend and had all the hair waxed from her body. "Get the hell out! Now!"

"The backdoor was unlocked. That's dangerous, you know."

"So you took it as an invitation to come upstairs and watch me shower?" She jerked the curtain opened and stepped out. There was not a stitch of modesty in her as she stared at him in all her naked glory, daggers in her eyes.

"You're naked."

"If you don't like it, leave."

He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "Sarah sent me to collect you for dinner. We're late, by the way."

Steam seemed to rise from her body. She glared at him, before she threw out an arm and slammed the water shut. Then she pushed past him, grabbing a towel from a rack as she did. Water dripped from her body, gliding down to the floor in droplets. His cock hardened as he thought about spanking her and then making love...no, not the right word...fucking her. That's what he wanted. To fuck her. Hard.

"We need to hurry," he managed to groan out. She was standing in the doorway of what was obviously a bedroom.

"Then go downstairs and wait for me, asshole." She slammed the door. Within seconds it was back open. "Or is that arsehole? Or Sir Arshole? Get the hell out of my hallway!"

The door slammed again. Sean chuckled as he went back down the stairs. A glance at his watch showed it was now seven o'clock. They were late, but that was okay. He'd make her lush bottom pay for it later. Then he'd make her come so hard she'd be screaming again, only this time she wouldn't be calling him names, she'd be begging for more, and he'd gladly give it to her.

By the time she was dressed, Sterling had called Sean every name in the book, even inventing a few more as she went along. She'd selected a light summer dress that hit just above her knees. She was not a little girl, by any stretch of the imagination. She was a size sixteen in a world where a size twelve was now considered "larger."

Her proportions were good, however, with an hourglass figure that showed off her breasts and hips, she'd always thought. As she combed through her hair she thought about the look on Sean's face as he'd examined her nude form. He'd definitely liked what she had to offer. It had been hard to miss the growing bulge in his pants.

"Hope you enjoyed seeing it, because that's as close as you're going to get," she said as she dropped the brush onto the vanity and picked up a pair of dangly earrings.

A glance at the clock on the wall made her wince. Late again. She looked for her shoes, then remembered they were downstairs with the rest of her clothes. She'd stripped the minute she'd come into the house, going outside for a quick dip before some nude sunbathing. She never worried about anyone seeing her because of the large privacy fence around the house. Plus, no one ever just dropped by: until now.

When she was done dressing she waited a few moments, trying to collect herself before going downstairs to face him. She couldn't let him get the better of her. She needed to keep the upper hand. Him seeing her naked, however, didn't exactly do that.

"Deep breath, in through the nose, out through mouth, in through the nose, out through the mouth. There's no way I'm backing down from this creep."

She went downstairs to find him ensconced in the TV room. He had his feet up on the coffee table, the remote in his hand.

"Make yourself at home," she said, looking down at him.

"You faffed so long upstairs, I became bored."

"Faffed?"

He shrugged. "Took so long, you know, faffed."

She frowned. "That's a weird word."

"So are some of yours." He pointed the remote at the TV and changed the channel.

Sterling fought back a smile. "Are you ready to go, or are *you* faffing now?"

"I called Sarah and told her we'd be a little late. I'm just making sure you don't have anything else to do, like your nails, or your hair."

Was there something wrong with her hair? She'd just done it. She put her hand up and smoothed it down, and when he smiled she wanted to pick up the nearest magazine, roll it up and smack him with it.

"You're in a much better mood than you were earlier. What happened, did Sarah put a few shots of tequila in your afternoon tea?" She grabbed her car keys from the counter and started toward the door.

Behind her she heard the TV click off. “Surely you’re not considering driving. It’s only a few blocks.”

“This is late May in the Texas Panhandle,” she said as she indicated he should come outside. When he was out she shut the door and locked it. “We’re under a tornado watch, which means the weather could change in a second. I don’t care to walk home in the rain.”

He laughed, and said, “Afraid of a little rain?”

“Afraid of a little hail,” she retorted. “I don’t mind being rained on. Having hail stones hit me is not my idea of fun.”

She opened the door and started to climb into the SUV. When she turned her head she saw him heading back up the driveway.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m walking,” he replied. “It’s five blocks, you know. Driving is a waste of gas. I’ll see you there.”

Sterling sighed in exasperation. It might be sunny right now, but clouds were building up to the south, and a storm could come through at any minute. She didn’t want to get stuck at Eugene and Sarah’s house without her vehicle. She could drive to where he was, block his way and demand that he get in, or she could run after him and walk.

If she drove after him, and trailed him in the car, someone was sure to see, and report to her parents, and to the Caristers, that she was chasing after the visitor. There was already enough talk about her being older and unmarried. She didn’t need to add to it by acting like she was chasing after him.

“Hell’s bells,” she cursed as she opened the door and slammed it shut. She hurried up the driveway, and when she got to the end of it she saw him standing next to the Ray’s place,

glancing at his watch. He was waiting on her. He'd played her like a fiddle. She had half a mind to go back to her car and drive past him.

As a matter of fact, she was going to do just that. She trotted to the car, got in, started it up and backed out. When she got to the Ray's house, however, she didn't see him. Where had he gone? Unless he'd taken off at a trot there was no way he could have made it to the intersection.

She slowed down to look around; when she saw him chatting with Allison Ray she cringed. Allison was the biggest gossip in the neighborhood. Before long she would have made up a story about Sterling and her new boyfriend, and how they'd have a quarrel and she'd forced him to walk to the Caristers's house while she drove.

After coming to a complete stop in front of the Ray's driveway, Sterling rolled down the window. "Hi Allison," she said brightly. "Come on Sean, we're going to be late for dinner."

"You mean later," he said with a laugh. "I hear she's notoriously late to things."

"Indeed she is," Allison said, her laugh flirty. "But that's always been our Sterling. She's always marched to the beat of her own drummer."

Sterling had a half a mind to tell her she shouldn't be flirting with a younger man when her husband was in the house. Instead she plastered a smile on her face. "Sean, we need to get going. Get in the car."

She hoped the last part didn't come out too harshly. When he waved to Allison and came around the front of the car she wanted to gun the engine, just to scare him a little. But she didn't trust herself not to run him over, so she put the car in park and waved to Allison as he slipped in and shut the door.

"Just a warning," she said as she started off. "Allison is a gossip, and she'll tell everyone we're lovers and we're fighting."

“She’ll have half of it right. We were fighting.” She could feel his gaze on her. “And who knows, before it’s all over she might be right about the other half, too.”

Sterling stopped at the intersection, half tempted to throw him out. Her temptations were running high since Sean Penny had come into her life. She turned the corner and kept the car at a steady, slow pace. It didn’t take long to reach the Caristers’s house. She pulled into the driveway and they both exited the vehicle.

“The sky looks darker than it did just a few moments ago,” Sean said. He was looking up and she could see fascination on his face. “Do you think it might storm tonight? I’ve heard a great deal about storms in this area from Aunt Sarah and Uncle Eugene.”

Sterling, who had been making her way to the house, stopped dead in her tracks.

“What did you just say?”

“I said I’ve heard a lot about--”

She waved her hands in the air to stop him. “The other part, about aunt and uncle?”

“Yes, Eugene is my mother’s brother.”

Information that no one had told her, she thought. “Lovely.”

“Yes, Uncle Eugene thinks you’re in need of a firm hand. He thinks I should be the one to, well, apply it.”

It took her a few minutes to realize what he meant. When she did figure it out she glared at him.

“If you for one second think I would allow you to...to...”

“Spank you?”

“Exactly.” She knew her voice was too loud, but she didn’t care. She started to tell him exactly where he could put his ideas of spanking, no matter if Eugene had suggested it or not, but Sarah opened the door and requested that they come inside, as dinner was more than ready.

“I made cornbread,” she said. “And it looks like we’re going to get a storm. Eugene is glued to the seat in front of the TV, so we’re going to be very informal tonight. Get in here so we can get started, in case we have to go to the shelter.”

Sean had moved toward the door, but Sarah had already gone inside. Sterling pushed past him. “Spanking indeed,” she tossed over her shoulder. “In your dreams.”

As she entered the kitchen and greeted Sarah she could swear she heard him say, “It will be more than a dream, my dear, trust me on that.”

She snorted and said lowly, “There will be no spanking. I’ll make sure of that.”

Chapter Three

Despite the darkening skies outside, Sean was pretty sure Sterling's mood was darker. When he'd come close to her in the kitchen she'd moved to the other side of the counter. He wondered if she thought he would take advantage of their closeness to bend her over and spank her bottom.

He wouldn't do it there, but it would happen at some point in time. Spanking a woman was a delicate thing to approach. If you forced it upon her she would hate you for it.

The women involved in The Spanking Club were all happy to have their bottoms spanked. As a matter of fact, they craved it. Most of them had fantasized about being spanked their whole lives, and had been lucky enough to find someone who would do it, and do it safely.

There had been several women involved in the club who had told him about searching for a spanker online, and running into trouble. They expressed delight when they'd learned about the club from people they knew. New club members had to have a sponsor, which meant that sponsor had vetted them, to make sure their interest in spanking was real, and not a one-time fantasy that they would live out, and then lose interest.

Something told him that Sterling had fantasized about spanking at some point in her life. Maybe it was the sexual spanking that had caught her interest. That was fairly common among the women that he knew, which would be a good thing with Sterling. He'd been tired and not ready for things when he'd met her today, but now that he had his second wind, she was definitely someone who stirred his blood.

But what he really needed to think about now was a different type of spanking. Ms. Sterling Barnett needed an attitude adjustment, and she needed it soon. There was obviously a

lack of discipline in her life; her lateness was a symptom of that. There were other things that he'd noticed, too, like her temper, which was the reason for her ticket that afternoon.

Something told him she did things like that a great deal, get angry and then allow it to control her actions. He'd make a bet that a lot of people around her had stories about her being mad about one thing or another.

But he was spending too much time on the fact that she needed a spanking; he knew that was true. What he needed was to decide how he was going to spank her for the first time. As much as he wanted to just bend her over the couch, lower her jeans and give her a good, hard bare-handed spanking, it wouldn't work.

He needed to set the stage, so she would know the reason for it. Which meant he needed to spend more time with her. That wouldn't be a hardship. She was a very pretty woman, with long-flowing dark hair and dark eyes that grew even darker when she was angry. And they were dark right now.

A loud clap of thunder sounded and a flash of lightning ripped through the sky. He could see its brightness through the windows.

"That was unexpected," he said, feeling just a little off kilter as he said it. After all, the sky had been darkening all afternoon, promising a storm. But somehow the loud thunder had caught him off guard.

"Storms come up quickly here," Eugene said. "You haven't been here since you were a child, which is your own fault. You've been invited, several times."

"Blame it on my parents," Sean replied. "They thought that, if they refused your offers, you'd come home, be homesick, and insist to Sarah that you move back to England. Do you miss it at all?"

There was a long pause. “Sometimes. But this is my home now, with Sarah. We never had any children, true, but we’ve delighted in each other, and that has made for a wonderful life. Although, it wouldn’t have mattered to me where we were.”

Sean glanced at Sterling, who was now standing outside on the patio, under the awning. Her face was turned upward toward the sky. Sarah stood next to her and the two of them were laughing.

“They’re a great deal alike,” Eugene said. “Over the years, Sarah has learned to control her temper, and her tendency to think only of herself. That’s what Sterling needs, to learn that she’s not the only person in the world, and that things don’t always revolve around her.”

Sean frowned. “I would think that, as your employee, she would have learned that. She takes you places and it’s always on your schedule, right?”

Eugene laughed. “Not exactly. We’ve learned not to make morning appointments, because Sterling isn’t exactly a morning person. And I’d say we’re on time for, oh say, sixty-five percent of our appointments.”

“That’s unacceptable.” Sean couldn’t believe his orderly uncle, who was exactly like his mother, would allow himself to be late to any engagement. “Why do you allow it?”

“Oh, it’s better than when she started. At first, we were *late* to ninety percent. She’s improved over the years.”

Sean watched her as she leaned over so that rain, now falling in heavy pelts from the sky, hit her head. She was laughing, and it made her look so delicious to him. He imagined making love to her in a storm, with the rain coming down on them.

“How in the world did she become your driver, anyway?”

Eugene shrugged. “Sterling has not quite found her way in life. She went to several different universities before she finally settled on a major, art history, and got a degree. She’s a very talented artist, with watercolors and charcoal. We have some of her prints upstairs. I’ll show them to you sometime.”

She had come back under the awning now, and was laughing, as was Sarah. “That doesn’t answer my question,” Sean said as he watched her carefully.

“She couldn’t find a job, not really. She painted, or drew during the days, but it wasn’t making her any money. One day Sarah asked her to drive us to a doctor’s appointment, because my eyesight is so bad, and Sarah doesn’t like to drive in the city anymore. It sort of grew from there, and before long we asked her if she’d like to make money at it.”

Sean could see that happening, Sterling sort of falling backward into a job. “It certainly can’t pay enough for her to live on.”

“She lives with her parents, who travel seven months out of the year. It’s a great arrangement for them, because they enjoy being gone, and she’s there to take care of things.”

“Makes sense,” he whispered as she and Sarah turned to come back into the house. It was the first time he’d ever seen her smile so brightly, and where she’d thought she was pretty before, he thought she was beautiful now.

He was definitely going to have to spank her, to adjust her attitude so that she smiled like this more often. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

Sterling woke with a start. It took her a few minutes to orient herself, to figure out what had woken her. And then it became crystal clear. The doorbell rang, followed by a series of pounding noises. Someone was at the door, demanding attention.

She glanced at the clock next to her bed. It was ten twenty-two, much too early for her to be up. She'd worked late in her "studio" last night, doing a watercolor of last night's storm. It had turned out very nice, if she did say so herself. Of course it wasn't totally done, she had a few things she wanted to add to it today. And she had time to work, since the Caristers were spending time with their nephew.

It was unbelievable to her that they hadn't informed her that the man she was picking up from the airport yesterday was a relative of theirs. It would have been nice to know that. Maybe they would have had a conversation starter for their drive back here, and they wouldn't have argued about her job.

She could have asked him about his relatives, and how it was that he'd never been here to see his Aunt and Uncle.

"Oh, forget it," she whispered as she took a pillow out from under her head and laid it down over her face, blocking out light, and hopefully, sound.

Buzz...knock, knock, knock, knock.

"Go away!" she screamed out, even though she knew whoever was at the front door couldn't hear her. But she could hear them...damn it! She grinned as she pulled the edges of the pillow down tighter. She could also ignore them, which she fully intended to do.

Another buzz, this one longer than the last. Whoever was there was pressing down on the bell without letting up.

“Go away! Come back around noon, or one!” She snuggled down under the covers, tugging on them until they were over her head. Another buzz, and doubt began to grow in her mind. Was something wrong? Had someone tried to call and she hadn’t heard the phone? No, if they’d tried the house phone and she hadn’t answered they would have called her cell phone.

Another buzz, followed by a spurt of knocking.

“All right.” She threw back the covers and jumped from the bed, anger surging through her. She grabbed her robe from the chair where she’d tossed it the night before. She’d just pulled it on when she got to the stairs. The bell was ringing again as she hurried toward the front door.

Once there she looked through the peephole. She should have known. A huge part of her wanted to ignore him, but it was obvious from the fact he was still ringing, and knocking, that he wasn’t going to go away.

Sterling took her time unlocking the door. It was obvious he’d heard her because the knocking and ringing had stopped. She opened it just enough to see him.

“Go away.”

“Good morning to you, also.” He held up a pastry bag. “I brought doughnuts. Sarah told me chocolate-glazed was your favorite.”

“It is.” The smell of fried dough covered with chocolate filled the air. It was obvious the treats were fresh, which meant he’d bought them from Mrs. Douglas, who made them three times a week and gave them away to her neighbors just because she loved to bake.

“Did you bring coffee, too?” She glared at him.

“No, but I thought you would have a coffeemaker here.” He wiggled the bag. “If you prefer I’ll eat these on my own.”

She pulled the door opened and indicated he should come inside. “I’ll start the coffee.”

In the kitchen she went about making her morning elixir, or actually mid-morning for her. He sat at the breakfast bar and opened the bag.

“Do you have a plate?”

Sterling indicated the cupboard. He got up and took out two plates. He sat back down and carefully placed the treats on the disc. She noticed all of them were chocolate.

“Am I going to have to fight you for the chocolate ones?” She took a doughnut and bit into it.

“There’s plenty for both of us.”

“So you say.” She took another bite and chewed slowly, savoring the taste. After swallowing, she said, “I could eat that whole plate by myself.”

He snatched one up. “Then I will fight you for it.” He took a huge bite and she couldn’t help but smile. Maybe sleep would make him a better person. She put down her treat and took two coffee mugs from the cabinet and set them on the bar.

“Cream and sugar?”

“Cream please, no sugar.”

After retrieving the cream from the refrigerator, she took the cups and filled them. She placed one in front of him and then picked up her doughnut, finishing it off in two huge bites.

The taste of chocolate always did wonderful things to her, and she shivered in delight.

“Did Sarah point you in the right direction for doughnuts?” She picked up another one.

“Yes, she did, before she left for the airport.”

The doughnut seemed to pause in midair. She had it in her hand, but her hand was no longer moving toward her mouth. “Airport?”

“Yes, that is the usual way people get to England.”

Her hand dropped to the counter, as if the pastry was made of lead. “Excuse me?”

“They left for London this morning. Eugene said talking about the family trust and his relatives made him homesick. They left early this morning. Their plane for London leaves Dallas around four this afternoon.”

A horrid feeling crept into her stomach and headed toward her throat, like she was going to throw up any second. “How did they get to the airport?”

“I took them.” He took another doughnut. “If you’re not careful I’m going to demolish this whole plateful.”

“If they left for London, why are you still here?”

He flicked his tongue over his teeth, as if cleaning away food. After a pause that made her think he was timing it just right, to cause her the most distress, he gave her a lazy, seductive smile. “Why for you, of course.”

“Excuse me?” She glanced around the counter, wondering where her cell phone was. She needed to call Sarah, and she needed to do it right now. It was still by her bed. She hadn’t grabbed it before she’d come to see who was making all that racket. “It can’t be...it can’t be...it can’t be...” Why would they leave her here when they had a guest? What the hell was going on?

“Sarah didn’t want to leave you alone. She said you would be bored. And Eugene once again said that you needed a firm hand, and I was the one to provide it, *and*, that this would give us the time for it.”

Were her cheeks as red as they felt? Heat spread through them, to her ears, down her neck. “No, this is some sort of joke. Sarah wouldn’t leave me here with...”

“With me?” He shrugged and took a sip from his coffee. “She thinks, as do I, that we just got off on the wrong foot. We’ll be fine as the time progresses.”

Forget heated cheeks. Now her blood boiled. “You mean she didn’t hear Eugene’s suggestion that you, “take me in hand?”

“That’s not what he said. He said you need a firm hand. And she heard.” He pushed the plate toward her side of the bar. “I won’t make a pig of myself, although I’d love to eat them all.”

So would she. Chocolate would help to soothe the nerves she felt right now, that were making her arms and legs tingle, and not in a good way.

“Listen, I’m not a tour guide. If Sarah and Eugene have left, then you can pack your bags and be on the next flight after them.”

The sigh that came out of his mouth was so heavy, so put upon, that Sterling wanted to tell him there was no way he’d ever make it as an actor.

“I told Sarah that you would reject her plea to take care of me, to show me the local sights. She said you’d be happy to. I guess I’ll have to call her when she arrives at my parents’ house and disappoint her.”

Sterling glared at him. “Oh, very good. If you think that old trick is going to work on me you’re crazy.”

The words sounded so good, but her words didn’t match her feelings. She loved Sarah almost as much as she loved her own mother, maybe more. Her mother was more interested in the glamorous things in life, clothes, cars, and travel. It was Sarah who had taught her about important things, like love, and friendship.

It was Sarah she’d gone to when a few of the kids at school had called her fat, when she’d had her first period, and when a boy had broken her heart. She couldn’t stand the thought of disappointing Sarah. But she wouldn’t let Sean Penny know.

“Sarah said you would do anything to make her happy. I hope this--disagreement over her words--doesn’t ruin her trip to England. She hasn’t been there in years, and they were looking forward to doing some sightseeing as well as visiting with relatives.”

One...just breathe...two...just breathe...three... “You sure know how to lay it on thick, don’t you?”

“Well, I am a barrister.”

“You convince juries with those words?”

He shrugged, a smug look on his face.

She wanted to tell him to go screw himself. Instead she thought about the expression on Sarah’s face when she learned that Sterling had refused to show her nephew around.

“Wait a minute. How do I know you’re not playing me here? How do I know that Sarah and Eugene are not at their house right now, sipping coffee and enjoying doughnuts just like we are?”

He made a big show of checking his watch. “Their plane actually left Amarillo on time, so they should be in Dallas by now. You could give her a call.”

“I’ll do just that.” She headed for the hall, turning before she got there. “You stay here.”

“As you wish.”

In her room, Sterling found her cell phone. She flipped through the numbers and pressed Sarah’s. She answered almost immediately.

“Sarah, I...”

“Oh Sterling, thanks so much for keeping Sean company while we’re gone. We made a spur of a moment decision to go to England, and he really wanted to stay and see the sights. We’ve left you a great deal of cash in the safe at the house. Use it at your pleasure. Maybe you

could drive him to Roswell, to visit the alien sites, or to Austin, for some music on Sixth Street. Just go with the flow, which shouldn't be hard for you. You're wonderful about spur of the moment things."

Oh yes, she was good at that. But she didn't want to spend that much time with Sean, especially traveling, where they would have to spend time in hotels. She didn't trust him to not find a way to make sure they were in the same room.

She wasn't quite sure what to say next. After a long pause, Sarah said, "Sterling. Is everything all right?"

"It's fine, Sarah." She didn't plan on spending any traveling time with Sean. She'd drive him around Amarillo, maybe go down to Lubbock, but that was as far as things went. "Have a good trip."

"We will. Ta-ta." She giggled and hung up the phone. Sterling stared at the instrument for a few minutes before she put it down on the night table by her bed. She needed to go back downstairs and discuss terms with her unexpected guest. But first, she needed to shower.

She needed to let him know that, no matter what, she was in charge of the week's event.

Sean took a sip from his coffee, and then smiled to himself as he heard the shower come on. She wasn't back in here sticking her tongue out and say, "I win, I win...get out!" That meant she'd talked to Sarah and his words about her "disappointment," in Sterling had pressed home. He felt a little bad for playing that card, but not much.

This was new territory for him. This woman needed spanked, and badly, but he'd never, ever spanked a woman who hadn't known she needed it, and hadn't welcomed the correction. That would not be the case here.

How was he supposed to proceed now? The spanker in him wanted to go to the shower, pull her out and redden her bottom. But that would make her angry. Best to do it slowly, but there was no time like the present to start.

He picked up his coffee mug and refilled it. Then he did the same with hers. He knew where the bathroom was, since he'd found her in the shower yesterday. It wasn't easy to balance two cups, but he did it without spilling a drop of coffee. Then he tested the handle of the door.

Locked. He smiled and shrugged. It was a short walk to her bedroom. He set the cups on the table and then straightened the covers. When he was done he sat down with his back propped against the headboard. He toed off his shoes and sat down with his legs crossed in front of him.

When he'd been in here yesterday he hadn't noticed the surroundings. It was very feminine, with lots of lace on the bed. Lacy shawls covered the lampshades, and gave a very sexy feel to the room. There were also watercolors and drawings on the walls. Several of them were landscapes, but there were also drawings of fairies and imps and other fantastical creatures that he wanted to examine more closely.

But the shower was off now, and that meant she would be back in here at any moment. He'd rather be found waiting for her on the bed than examining her drawings, which she might see as him being nosey.

He took a sip from his cup and waited--it didn't take long. When she came in wrapped in towels, one around her body, the other around her head, she stared at him, and all he could think about was what was hidden under the towel.

Don't get distracted, he said to himself. There will be plenty of time for that later.

"Now that you're nice and clean, shall we discuss our plans for the day?"

There was a long pause, and he could tell she was trying to keep hold of her temper. Finally, she said, “You can have an hour a day. Take it, or leave it.”

“Unacceptable.” He pretended to pick a piece of fuzz off the bed. “I would like to go to Palo Duro Canyon. I’ve heard it’s very beautiful.”

“One hour.”

“Or perhaps the zoo in Amarillo.”

“One hour.”

He had to give her credit for her tenacity. “Sarah suggested we drive to Roswell. I’m not sure about that, since I’m not a fan of alien landings, but it would be a shame to miss it since I’m so close. It’s, what, four or five hours from here?”

“Well crap.” She dropped the towel and Sean almost jumped off the bed. It was hard to sit still when every nerve and muscle in his body was screaming at him to tackle the woman and claim her.

She turned her back to him, giving him a spectacular view of her backside. He imagined her over his lap, his hand coming down on her bottom repeatedly.

“Thank you for offering me your bottom. We need to talk about spankings.”

Her back stiffened, but she didn’t make any noise, and she didn’t cover herself up. She seemed to be considering his words, and then she turned her head toward him, giving him a coy look over her shoulder.

“We can talk about them all you want, but remember, talk doesn’t equal action. Not in this matter.”

She kept her bottom turned to him, and he could tell she was teasing him. This was the opportunity to show her who was in charge this week.

He would set down the rules and she would listen. She may not like it, but that wasn't his goal. His goal was discipline: something she needed desperately, something he would give her. His Uncle Eugene had been right about Sterling needing a firm hand. And he was just the man to give it to her.

Chapter Four

“You will be spanked when you are late.” He kept his voice stern. “And when you make me wait, as you are now.”

She snorted out a laugh, a very unladylike sound that made him grin. But she didn’t move. It was almost as if she were testing him, to see if he would spank her because she was wasting time.

It was probably something she shouldn’t do, because his spanking hand was getting itchy as she continued to taunt him.

“Are you done laying down rules that will never stand?” She batted her eyes and Sean smoothed his hand over his thigh. Then he jumped from the bed. He had his arm wrapped around her waist before she could squawk out a protest.

He sat down on the bed and easily brought her across his lap. He’d done it many times, with many different women, but none of them had been screaming or kicking, as she was now doing.

He lifted his hand and brought it down smartly across her bare bottom. Her scream of objection made him snicker. He slapped her bottom again, and again, and her yells became louder.

Her legs kicked back and her foot caught his arm. That was just fine with him. He spanked her harder, moving from one cheek to another as she called him names he’d never heard before.

“You are the most moronic...you...ouch! Damn you! Let me go.” She tried as hard as she could to get away from him, but Sean held her tight and continued to spank.

He counted as he did so, ten, fifteen, twenty swats. She needed a good, hard spanking so that she knew he was serious.

“You horse’s ass!” She barked out the words, her breathing irregular. “I’m calling the sheriff, I’ll press assault charges!”

“Then I’d better make sure it’s worth it.” He’d slowed down his swats, but now he renewed them with vigor. Her skin was turning a bright, rosy red, and he could tell that, physically, the spanking was having the effect it was supposed to have.

Mentally, however, she was still fighting. And he was glad to see it. That meant the spanking was engaging all her senses.

He gave her five, ten, fifteen more swats, making sure the slaps were hard with each one.

When he got to fifteen he stopped. She’d stopped fighting him, too, as if she realized it wasn’t going to do any good. But the minute he stopped spanking she kicked her foot back and caught him on the arm one more. He uttered an oath and loosened his grip.

She rolled her body out of his grasp and onto the floor. It didn’t take her long to scramble away from him, standing up about five feet from him. He watched as she took a paintbrush from the table and threw it at him.

Sean dodged it easily, and he tried not to smile as she picked up anything she could find, including a paperback novel, several small jars that contained paint, or so he presumed, and a toothbrush, which he found interesting.

When she was done she stood there glaring at him, her chest heaving with anger. She was beautiful, and he reacted as any man would. He grew hard as a rock. He prayed she didn’t notice.

“I thought you were going to call the sheriff,” he said lazily when he was done putting up his hands to ward off the objects she threw in his direction.

“Ass!”

“I told you that you would be spanked for making me wait. You baited me, so don’t blame this on me.”

“What makes you think you have the fucking right to--”

“Watch your mouth,” he interrupted her. “That will bring about a spanking, too, and I’m not above spanking you right after I’ve spanked you.”

“Fuck you! Fuck you! Fu--”

Sean had heard enough. He spring from the bed and grabbed her, tossing her down on the mattress, ass up. He straddled her thighs and started to spank her again, hitting her bottom harder this time, her cries of frustration soon turning to tears of anger. It wasn’t pain he heard in her crying, it was sheer rage at him.

He gave her ten hard swats on each cheek, and then he leaned forward. His movements pressed her down into the mattress and he leaned toward her ear.

“I will not tolerate a filthy mouth. Do I make myself clear?”

He waited for an answer, but none came. He sat back up and slapped her ass smartly.

“Answer me!”

Silence.

One more swat.

“Answer me!”

More silence.

Another swat, this one in the same place as the last. She made a soft mewling noise deep in her throat and he swatted her again.

“Well?”

“Screw you.”

“Well, it’s better than hearing the F word.” He stood, not surprised when she stayed in her position on the bed.

“Get out of my house.”

“I want to leave for the Canyon in one hour. We can take a picnic lunch down there. I hear it has some very nice places to see.”

She rolled onto her back, and he saw her wince as her bottom came into contact with the bedding. “If you think I’m going anywhere with you, you’re sorely mistaken. You will leave, and don’t come back. Ever.”

“One hour.” He made for the door and then he stopped. He reached into his pocket and brought out an envelope, which he placed on the bed. “This is for you. I’ll see you in a short while.”

And then he left. As he made his way toward the front door he expected to hear her scream at him, or run after him to make sure he was gone. But he heard nothing. He went to the front door, opened it and waited. Still nothing.

He closed the door after him and checked his watch. He would give her one-hour exactly, and then he’d be back. And she’d better be ready.

Sterling stared after him, her mind reeling with what had just happened, her bottom throbbing from the spanking he’d just given her. She’d never been spanked. Ever. Her parents had not cared enough to discipline her, and she’d been allowed to do whatever she wanted.

Which is why, she told herself, you're so undisciplined in your life right now. You don't follow schedules, or live in the real world. Her mother had always told her that was just fine, that marching to your own drummer was something that lots of people did.

But Sterling knew it made Sarah angry when they were late, but she'd never made a move to fire Sterling.

But living life as you wanted was neither here nor there. How the hell did this blasted—Englishman--think he had the right to come in here and blister her ass? True she'd baited him by walking around naked, but she figured he'd already seen her that way, so why should she care if he saw her again.

Besides, being naked didn't necessarily translate into spankings. It morphed into other things, though. Did she subconsciously want him to make love to her? She shook her head to dispel the thought, then she lay down on her belly and ran her hand over her burning behind.

He'd really done a number on her. She wanted to return the favor, pull down his jeans and spank him, see how he liked it. She had a feeling he would have said the f-word one or twice himself.

"Ass!" She sat back up, and when she did she noticed the envelope at the bottom of the bed. She picked it up and studied the outside. Her name was written in Sarah's neat penmanship.

She recalled the jerk's words to her about Eugene thinking Sterling needed "a firm hand." What was inside this letter? Was it Sarah's way of saying the same thing, that they'd left Sean behind to insert some discipline in Sterling's life?

Lord she hoped not, but she had a feeling that's what it was. The two people that had meant something to her had thrown her to the wolves, or wolf, as the case may be. There was a large part of her that didn't want to read this letter, but she had to know what Sarah said. She

reached for it, having to move across the bed as she did so. Her bottom burned even more as she scooted it across the bed.

She lay down on her belly and picked up the letter. With a trembling hand she opened the note.

“Here goes nothing,” she thought as she took out the paper to read.

Precisely one hour later, Sterling opened the front door and indicated Sean should come in the house. He was wearing the same clothes he’d worn this morning, jeans and a button down with sneakers. He was ready for a trip to the Canyon, but she wasn’t sure she was.

She’d read Sarah’s letter three times, picking up on different parts of it each time. At first she’d been shocked to learn that Eugene spanked Sarah when they first met all those years ago, that sometimes he did so still, but it was for a different purpose than discipline.

That part had made her heart feel as if it had stopped beating. She didn’t want to think of Sarah and Eugene having sex, even if they had been married forever. To her they were the sweet people who had always been there for her.

But Sarah’s frank letter about spanking, and how it could be used in “so many different ways,” had left nothing to the imagination. She’d not come right out and said, “I love to get spanked while Eugene and I are having sex,” but it hadn’t been hard to read between the lines.

She was still pondering Sarah’s words when Sean’s voice broke into her thoughts. “Are you coming inside, or are you going to stand there holding open the door?”

Sterling glanced at the open door, then to where he stood in the living room. When had he come inside? Had she been so lost in thought that she hadn’t realized he’d walked right past her? Obviously so, because there he was, waiting for her.

She let go of the door and walked past him, then she pivoted back to the front and shut the door. When she was in the living room she took a deep breath.

“I’m going to pay tour guide to you because I respect Sarah and Eugene so much, but what happened this morning will not happen again. Do I make myself clear?”

It didn’t surprise her that he didn’t answer. His position was as firm as hers. She didn’t want to be spanked again, and she was pretty sure he was planning his next spanking already.

“Do you think we should buy food before we go to the Canyon? Or will there be someplace down there where we can purchase lunch?”

Her hands gripped into fists and she fought back her anger. “We need to discuss the issue at hand before we talk about food.”

“I reject your ultimatum, as you should know I would. Now, perhaps a trip to the store for some luncheon items, things we can take for a picnic. I’d like to do some hiking, also. Are there trails for that?”

“Of course.” She finally turned toward him. “I’m serious about the spanking. Touch me again and I’ll…”

“Call the sheriff, yes, you’ve made that threat before.”

“What makes you think you have the right?”

From the looks of him, he was thinking hard about what she’d asked, as if he were trying to come up with an answer that would satisfy her.

“Don’t tell me what you think I want to hear. I want to hear your real reasons.”

He sat down in a chair. “Very well. My reasons are clear, you need discipline in your life.”

“But that has nothing to do with you!” She realized she’d spoken too loud, but she didn’t care.

“On the contrary, it bothers Eugene and Sarah, and they mean a great deal to me.”

Yes, Sarah’s letter had told her exactly how much they were concerned about her, about her lack of vision and the way she was “floundering,” and not talking things seriously enough.

“So, in your eyes if you slap your hand across my ass I’m going to automatically be on time for everything, and I’ll involuntarily live like you want me to live, is that it?”

“Not at all.” He crossed his legs. “But you do need to learn there are consequences to being late, to having a foul mouth. You tasted those consequences this morning.”

Sterling shook her head. They could debate this all day long. “All right, here’s the deal. We’re going to the Canyon, and we’ll stop somewhere and buy things for a picnic. But I’m warning you, if you take one step toward me as if you’re going to spank me I will fight back, and you might find me slapping your ass. We’ll see how you like it.”

His shrug pissed her off. “I have had my arse slapped a few times, but it has been in a sexual setting. I found it highly erotic.”

The admission made her mouth drop open in astonishment. She gulped for air, and then swallowed hard. “I assure you, what happened this morning was not erotic.”

“It wasn’t meant to be. Now, we’re wasting time here. We can continue this discussion in the car.”

“Fine.” She went to the kitchen and grabbed her keys and purse from the table. “We’re going out this way.”

“Did you lock the door?”

What a moron! What, did he thinks he was twelve? “Yes, thank you, I’ve locked the front door. I’ve done this a few times in my life, leaving the house, I mean. I know what all it entails. Now, get out the door.”

His chuckle didn’t make her feel any better about the day. As much as she loved Eugene and Sarah, she wanted to scream at them for throwing her into this situation.

“This is one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been.” Sean climbed on top of a huge boulder and straightened up so he could see. It was definitely beautiful out here, with a myriad of colors and different vegetation. “I’ve heard this place referred to as The Grand Canyon of Texas. Do you feel that’s true?”

“Yes, I do. It’s a very beautiful place to come and lose yourself in for a while.” He wanted to pump his arms up into the air and cheer. She’d actually responded to a question from him. That had been one of the first times since they’d left her house that she’d actually responded to him.

When they’d been buying food in the store she’d nodded, or murmured, “Hum,” or “No,” or “If you want it.”

Other than that she’d ignored him. He needed to find a way to reengage her in the conversation.

“This would be a perfect place for a spanking, don’t you think? We could use this boulder, bend you over it and pull your jeans and panties down to your ankles. Of course we’d need a blanket to lay over the boulder, so you weren’t injured by it, scratched or anything.”

He looked over at her, and couldn’t hide the smile that she produced. Her mouth hung open, as if she couldn’t believe what he’d just said.

“Do you not agree with me?”

“No!” She looked very angry now, and he bit back a laugh. “You can’t be serious about...” she stopped talking and looked around, then she took a step toward him. When she spoke again her tone was muted. “You can’t be serious about spanking someone in public.”

“Oh I’ve spanked many someones in public, in Hyde Park, in a taxi, once even in a tube station. That one was a little tricky, but I had a friend running interference, so to speak. He made sure my lady friend and I had solitude while I swatted her bottom.”

“Solitude? In a tube station?”

“It was rather late at night, on a Tuesday.” He sat back down on the boulder. “It was her fondest desire to be spanked in public for her birthday, so we provided it for her.”

She stared at him, as if she was afraid to ask the question. “We?”

“The Spanking Club.”

This time she laughed, threw her hands up in the air as if to say, “Now I’ve heard everything,” and she turned back toward the car.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.” She was almost out of sight now, since they’d done quite a bit of hiking after parking the car. He had no doubt he could find his way out, but if she left him here, she’d be in a great deal of trouble.

“Are you not curious about the club?” He counted as he waited for her to come back, for he had no doubt she would. He’d made it to a minute and a half before she came storming through the bushes that surrounded the path they’d walked on. She was moving toward him so fast he thought she might feel like a freight train about to collide with a building.

“No, I don’t want to hear about any perverted club that you and friends have where you spank innocent women.”

He laughed, running his hand through his hair. “Oh, these women are far from innocent. As a matter of fact, most of them are not at all happy with the spankings we give them. Most of them want more, and harder ones at that.”

“I don’t believe you.” Her voice was very low. “Don’t you?” He reached into his pocket and retrieved his phone. He hadn’t been able to receive a signal down here, but the international chip allowed him to use it here. He’d downloaded several messages this morning, including one from Georgianna, one of The Spanking Club members. In this email, she’d expounded on how much she missed him, on how her bottom needed his hand applied to it, hard.

He called up the email and turned the phone toward Sterling. “Read.”

At first he thought she was going to tell him to go to the devil. Instead she took the phone and he watched as her gaze took in the words. When she was done, she snorted out.

“Oh how I love it when you spank me,” she said, derision in her voice. “Let me count the ways. You wrote this yourself.”

She tossed the phone back to him and he caught it. “Not hardly.”

“Not hardly?” she mocked. “You expect me to believe that there is a group of women who want you to spank them?”

“It’s a quite common practice, really. More so than you might think.” He put the phone back in his pocket. “I’m getting quite hungry. We can continue this discussion back at the picnic table.”

She turned away without answer and he fell into step behind her, glancing down at the dirt and rocks that littered the path. A lizard ran across in front of her and she stopped, looking around.

“Afraid of a little lizard?”

“No, but there might be something larger coming after it, intending to make the little lizard its dinner.”

“I see.” He peered over her shoulder, intent on seeing what larger animal came out of the bushes. Nothing did and she started to walk. “I would like to see a snake.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” She rounded a bend and he hurried to catch up with her. Truthfully she had the most delicious bottom. Watching her walk was so...change your mind set, he said to himself. This isn’t a good way to go.

“The skies look darker,” he said as they came out of the brush. He could see the car now, and the picnic table. “Do you think it will storm?”

She looked up, and he let his gaze lower to her bottom once again.

“Yes, I think it might.” She stood by the table and dug into her pants pocket. When her hand came out she held out the keys to him. “Be a good servant and go and get the food.”

“As you wish.” He took the keys, happy that she was speaking to him again. That was a good sign. Hopefully by the time dinner was over he’d get her to smile again.

By the time they’d eaten, driven around the park and made it back to the house, Sterling decided that Sean wasn’t so bad; and it had all happened because she’d relaxed and didn’t let herself think about him spanking her that morning.

He'd talked about his job as a barrister and what all he had to do. She'd told him that, even though he thought it meant she had "no discipline" in her life, she could never live by schedules.

"I find it hard enough to drive Eugene and Sarah." She shrugged. "I'm just not that type of person."

They'd been on their way up the Canyon wall by then, on a steep incline. She kept her gaze on the road as she spoke, and when he said, "May I ask you a question?" she'd responded that he could.

"When you're late to appointments, is it because you're working on paintings, or drawings, or is it because you're sleeping, or watching TV?"

His question had hit her like a bolt of lightning, and she'd been too shocked to answer. There had been no condemnation in it, no sneering tone. It was simply a question he asked for information. One she could imagine a barrister asking someone on the stand.

"Well, I..." she'd stopped talking as she negotiated around several hairpin turns. When they reached the overlook area she'd pulled over and put the car into park. "Is that what Sarah thinks, that I'm sitting around the house?"

"She mentioned to me that she thinks you stay up late, and that you're not working on your art all the time. She's worried that you're floundering."

Even now, as she pulled through the gate at their housing area those words echoed in her ears. Floundering. Sarah thought she was wasting her life. After he'd told her that she suggested they get out and to the edge of the Canyon and look down.

She'd told him stories about the Native Americans and their connection, about the Spanish Skirts and how the slopes were named for their waves of color. He'd not gone back to the subject they'd discussed in the car, not even on the trip back to the house.

By the time she pulled into Caristers's driveway, it was raining, a light gentle rain that the area needed so much.

"Shall I cook dinner tonight?" His question had surprised her. "I make a good batch of spaghetti."

She'd laughed. "Englishmen cook?"

"We do it quite well, thank you very much." He'd wiggled his eyebrows and she'd found herself laughing again. "Be here at seven."

After she'd dropped him off, she'd gone home and showered. But she couldn't take her mind off what Sarah had told him. She'd made hints to Sterling before, but she'd never really come out and said it. One day with an Englishman and she felt like a failure in Sarah's eyes. And that hurt.

Suddenly she wasn't hungry for spaghetti. She wanted to crawl into her bed and stay there for a year. She'd just made a decision to do just that when the phone rang. She thought about ignoring it, until she saw who was on the ID.

It was Sean calling from the Caristers's house. If she were lucky he would back out before she had to. He would tell her that he was tired, and that he wanted to take a night off, and that tomorrow they could get back together.

Maybe by then she would have a better handle on how she felt.

"Hello?"

"We have to England." The distress in his voice made her heart clinch.

“What happened?”

“There’s been some sort of accident. My father wasn’t very clear on it, but in between the airport and the house something happened. Sarah is asking for you. She’s not doing well at all.”

She opened her mouth but no words came out except for a strangled, “I…”

“I’ll make reservations. We’ll leave first thing in the morning. Do you have a passport?”

“Yes. Get it out, and pack light. We’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

Chapter Five

Hospitals were hospitals no matter where you were. The flight had been long, and it hadn't helped that she'd been so nervous. What had helped was having Sean next to her. He'd held her hand, stroking it gently when she'd started to cry as the flight as started.

The flight attendant had thought she was scared to fly, but when she'd found out why the two of them were going to England she'd found room for them in First Class, moving them up quietly after the meal when some people were falling asleep.

She'd laid out the bed, and tucked Sterling in. Moments after she'd left, though, Sean had come with her and they'd squeezed into the tight space together. She'd cried into his chest as he held her. He'd stroked her back and whispered that things would be fine.

But she wasn't so sure of that. If something happened to Sarah and the last thing Sterling remembered was the fact that Sarah thought she was "floundering," she would never forgive herself.

Sometime during the flight she'd fallen asleep. When she woke up it was to find Sean sitting on the floor very near her, her hand tucked tightly into his.

"Whoever designed these beds on planes did a great job," she'd teased.

He'd given her a mock glare and said, "I wouldn't know."

And now here they sat outside Sarah's hotel room. Sean stood not far away, talking with his father and Eugene, who had seemed numb. Sterling knew how much Sarah meant to him, and she was pretty sure that, if Sarah died, Eugene would die with her, in spirit anyway.

She looked down at the floor, wishing the nurse would let her inside the room. Instead they'd said she'd have to wait for the hour, and that she was only allowed two visitors at a time, for five minutes.

"She must be doing very bad," she said as Sean sat down next to her. He took her hand and squeezed it.

"Eugene says she's improved a bit He's pretty sure the doctors think she's going to pull out of it just fine."

Relief pumped through her. Still, there was that little word in there that didn't make it perfect. The doctors "think" she's going to be fine. "Did he say what happened?"

"Someone ran a light and hit the cab. Sarah wasn't wearing her restraining belt."

Sterling laughed, because if she didn't laugh she was going to cry. "I can't believe it. She would have killed me if I'd ridden in a car without a seat belt."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth she wanted to bite them back. "I can't believe I just said that."

"We all say things we don't mean sometimes," he replied. "Words just slip out of our mouths and we wonder where they came from."

She chuckled and leaned her head against his shoulder. "Sometimes I wonder if you're the same guy I met just a few days ago."

"I am." He squeezed her hand. "This is just a different situation. Don't worry, I'm still thinking about ways I can spank you."

"And he's back." She pulled her hand away, but seconds later she clutched at him again, needing his warmth, the feel of his strong hand holding hers. "I want to see Sarah."

"It's almost time," he whispered. "I'm sure she's just as eager to see you."

She glanced at the clock, and at the same time she saw a doctor come from the room and hurry toward Eugene. Sterling stood up, her heart pounding in her chest. She started toward them, but before she made it the doctor was rushing down the hall.

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

“Some sort of internal bleeding,” Eugene said. “They have to take her downstairs for more surgery.”

If Sean hadn’t come up behind her and put his hands around her waist she might have fainted.

“I need to see her, please.”

“No one can see her now,” Eugene said. “Except me. I’m going downstairs now, and they’ll be taking her down.”

“But…” tears welled in Sterling’s eyes. Sean put his hand on her shoulder and she straightened her back, feeling stronger. “They have to take her out of the room, and I’m staying here when she goes by. I’ll see her then. I’ll let her know I’m here.”

“That will be good,” Eugene said. He nodded at Sean. “Stay with her, please. While they’re doing the surgery I’m going to go to the chapel and pray, and I’d like to be alone.”

“I will,” Sean said. “Uncle, she’ll be fine.”

Eugene’s nod was slow. Sterling thought he looked as if a strong wind would blow him over. “I pray you’re right.”

Sterling paced up and down the waiting room, which here they called the “relative’s room.” She passed a woman and her baby for the third time. The woman was trying to get her

baby to sleep, and every time Sterling went by, the baby stirred. She gave Sterling a dirty look and reached for a blanket to cover up the child.

When she made it back to Sean he grabbed her hand and pulled her down on the sofa. “You need to sit,” he said, softly. “Either that or we need to go outside and walk.”

“I don’t want to go outside,” she replied. “I’m too wound up. Plus, what if Eugene comes looking for us and can’t find us?”

“You’re driving everyone nuts.” Sit here and we’ll talk.”

“About what?” Frustration surged through her. Sarah was on the operating table and he wanted to talk?

“Pick a subject, any subject, something that will take your mind off everything that’s happening in the surgery room.”

“This is asinine.” She started to pace again, but when the woman with the baby put up her hand to stop Sterling from coming by, she knew Sean was right. She needed to sit. She plopped down next to him again and turned an evil glare on her.

“Tell me about this stupid club of yours.”

She could feel his surprised gaze flit over her, even though she wasn’t looking at him. “Excuse me.”

“You know, the one where women are just dying to be spanked.” She whispered the words but she waved her hands in the air as if she were drying them were then were no towels available.

“You’ve earned yourself a spanking with that remark and gesture.” He sat back, draping his arm on the chair behind her. “Lean into me so I don’t have to speak too loudly.”

She did as he asked, because as much as she thought this might take her mind off things, she didn't want anyone else to hear what they had to say.

"The Spanking Club started in Victorian times, or that's where we found the first records. We have an idea it might go back as far as the Regency Era, but so far we've been unable to prove it."

"Okay." She snuggled against him, enjoying his warmth. It felt good to be next to a human, to feel his heart beat. "Go on."

"The basic premise of the club is that it's men who like to spank and women who like to be spanked. Most, but not all, of the members are couples. But even if they are a couple, some women like to be spanked by members other than their partners."

Sterling laughed. "So it's a swinger's club."

"Not at all." Sean thumped his thumb against the tip of her nose. "There is no sex during club meetings unless it takes place in private between two people. That's one of the rules."

"You have a set of rules?"

"Most definitely. This is a delicate issue. Most people, including yourself, would think of it not too kindly. It takes a special person to be a member. And they, as I said, have to be sponsored by a member."

"Sounds like a load of hogwash to me." She didn't move away from him, though, letting his essence sink into her. "I would never join a club like that, so you don't have to worry about sponsoring me."

"We'll see about that." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then his lips settled over his temple. "You're more relaxed now than you were mere minutes ago, and it's all because you were talking about The Spanking Club."

“It wasn’t the subject matter, it was the conversation and focusing on something else besides what’s going on with Sarah. The conversation subject is...”

“Asinine.” He laughed. “You’ll eat those words one day.”

“Maybe.”

She grinned, and when he leaned over and kissed her, her heart stopped and her hands grew damp. It was a sweet kiss, not one meant to turn her on. But it let her know that he cared, that he would be there for her, and it shocked her and she told him so.

“You taste good, like peppermint,” he replied. “We’ll see what you taste like next time.”

“I had a...” she needed to calm down, “...a peppermint earlier. One of the nurses gave it to me when...” She tried to think of when the nurse had given it to her. Was it when...she looked at the wall, trying to focus, and then her eyes went to the doorway. Eugene stood there, and the smile on his face lifted her heart.

It also drew her attention away from the kiss. She stood, and Sean stood next to her, putting his arm around her waist.

“She’s going to be okay,” Eugene said as he walked toward them, “barring any more setbacks. But we’re going to have to stay here for a while. Sterling, will you stay with us?”

“Yes.” She stood and pulled Eugene into a hug. “I’ll stay with you for as long as it takes for her to be back on her feet, and running races.”

“She wasn’t running races before,” Eugene said as he wiped tears from his face.

“Well, she will after I’m done with her. I can promise you that.”

Eugene smiled, and then he yawned. “I’m going to find a place to sleep. Sean, will you take care of her?”

“Of course.” His put his hand on her back and the intimate touch made her shiver. That, mixed with the kiss, made her want to turn around and throw herself into his arms. Damn him for being so sweet to her during all this. She had to remember that he’d spanked her, that it had hurt, and that, given the chance, he’d do it again.

But as Eugene walked off she leaned back. Sean’s chest pressed against her back and he wrapped his arms around her waist. He felt strong, comforting.

“I’m frightened,” she said. “What if they’re wrong?”

Sean stroked her hair. “Don’t be negative.” His stern tone actually made her feel better. “Think only good thoughts, that Sarah will be just fine. It will be good for the both of you.”

She nodded, even though she wasn’t sure she could do it.

“Listen, if I think you’re sinking into self-pity I have ways to handle it.”

She giggled nervously, because she knew exactly what he was talking about. “Don’t get any ideas,” she whispered. “You’ve spanked me once, and once is all you get.”

He stroked her shoulders and didn’t speak, but she knew exactly what he was thinking. “We’ll see about that.”

A week later, Sterling was in the kitchen of Sean’s aunt on his father’s side. She was in France, and had given them permission to stay in her home. It was a well-appointed house with lots of marble and plush surroundings. As much as she liked the place, though, it wasn’t home, especially since she was alone. Eugene was at the hospital with Sarah and he’d ordered Sterling to come here. Although Sarah had improved, she still wasn’t ready to be released.

But Eugene had told Sterling he was worried about the amount of time she spent at the hospital. He told her she needed to go home, to relax for a while since Sarah was asleep.

She'd told him she would, but once she arrived she couldn't sit still. She did the dishes they'd left behind from that morning, then she'd started a load of laundry, taking a few minutes to familiarize herself with the controls on the British machine.

Now she had nothing left to do, really, since the house was clean. They didn't spend enough time there to make a mess, except for the dishes and clothing.

She had just picked up her bag, ready to head toward the tube station so she could go back to the hospital when there was a knock at the door.

A frown creased her brow and as she hurried to open the door she heard a key in the lock and it started to open. That left little doubt in her mind as to who was there.

Sean.

"Hello?"

He stuck his head around the heavy wood door a smile on his face. "I brought Chinese food." The rustling sound of a take-out bag, no take-away she reminded herself, reached her ear and her stomach growled.

How could she be hungry? She'd eaten at the hospital, hadn't she? She stopped to think, then realized that had been almost eight hours ago.

Sean came inside and shut the door. He eyed her purse. "Where do you think you're going?"

"The hospital."

"I promised Eugene you wouldn't come back until morning. You need to stay here, eat, relax, sleep." He wiggled the bag. "Eugene told me you enjoy kung pao chicken."

Her mouth watered. "I love it."

“Good. Then let’s eat.” Without waiting for an answer he went into the kitchen. She followed him and stared at the bag. It was large, and she knew there was more than one box of kung pao chicken in there.

In the kitchen he opened it and started pulling out white boxes. The wonderful, spicy smell of Chinese food filled the air and her stomach growled again.

“We have your favorite, we have noodles, we have sesame chicken, orange chicken and chicken cashew. I also got egg rolls and shrimp rolls, because I didn’t know which one you’d like better.”

Sterling looked at the boxes. Sean had opened the lids on all of them, the smell mixing. “I’ll take a little bit of everything.”

After they’d filled their plates, they settled at the kitchen table. They spoke little as they ate, mostly because Sterling ate so quickly. Before long, her stomach was full and she pushed away the plate, which was not near empty.

“We can check the telly, see what’s on,” Sean said. “Or we can go down to the local rental place and see if there’s a film we can rent.”

“Television,” she said. “I have no desire to go out.”

“Or, we can help ourselves to the hot tub.”

“Tempting, but I’ve eaten so much I’m sure I’d fall asleep, and then I’d drown.”

She could see that Sean was disappointed by her answer, but it was the safest one. During the last week he’d been there for her at every turn. This was the first time they’d been alone, though, and she was afraid that her emotions, which were flying about with nowhere to land, would find a place to settle if he made an offer.

It wasn't a good idea for her to get intimate with the man. She had to go home at some point, and he had to stay here. And there was that spanking thing hanging between them...

She got up and put the uneaten food back into the containers. Sean had finished all his, and he watched her with a smile on his face.

"You're sending a message, you know."

"Message?"

"Yes, that you wouldn't mind having sex with me."

Sterling coughed, putting down the box she held before she dropped it. "How is putting food into cartons sending you a sexual message?"

He stood up and stretched, and Sterling felt hungry again, but not for food. She turned away as she closed the top on a box.

"Don't you want to hear my explanation?" He leaned against the kitchen island, clasping his hands together. Damn he was sexy.

"You can try to convince me, but it won't work."

"Okay, point one, I saw the way you looked at me just a few moments ago. There was desire on your face."

She laughed. "That has nothing to do with putting food into boxes."

"Maybe not, but putting food that's been on your plate, that you've eaten from, into what would be considered a communal box, means that you wouldn't mind sharing spit with me."

"How romantic." She grabbed up boxes and started to stuff them into the refrigerator.

"It may not be romantic, but it shows--"

She slammed the refrigerator door. "That I'm tired and I didn't think about anyone eating leftovers but me."

“Right.” He moved around the island as he were stalking her.

And, damn him, it made her toes tingle. “This isn’t the proper time for you to be making advances,” she said. “I...I...”

“You what?” He was right next to her now, the heat from his body making her feel warm, safe.

“I need to rest.” Sterling knew the flush from her face betrayed her, showed him she would take him inside her in a heartbeat, and love every second of it. “I need to go to bed.”

“Excellent idea.” He swooped her up so quickly she gasped in surprise.

“Put me down!” They were moving through the dining area, toward the stairs. Her room was just past them. He made her wet with need, desire pulsing through her, and he hadn’t even touched her yet.

It’s not him, she said to herself, trying to justify the way she felt. It’s the fact you need human contact. That’s all.

He dumped her on the bed very unceremoniously and she rolled onto her stomach.

“Thank you for the view.” He slapped her ass and she groaned, arching it up, presenting it to him. He slapped it again and Sterling groaned out, “Please.”

“Please what, Sterling? What do you want?”

Her skirt seemed to fly up over her hips, and somehow her panties made it down to her knees. He slapped her bare ass and she cried out.

Damn that felt good! One more slap and she arched up again. The sting was incredible, spreading through her like a nip of brandy on a cold winter’s night.

“Tell me!”

Another slap. And another. Now he was rubbing her behind, his touch gentle.

“You’d better answer me.” He jiggled her cheek in his hand and she rotated her hips, her legs spreading as he did. His fingers slipped down, his thumb finding her opening, which was soaked. He pushed inside, his other fingers expertly caressing her.

Sterling clutched the sheet as he began moving his thumb in and out of her slick passage, his fingers finding her clit, pinching.

She came instantly. “Sean!” He slapped her ass with his free hand, hard, over and over, the pain intensifying the pleasure that roared through her like a freight train.

A second orgasm slammed into her as he spanked her, the sound of his hand slapping her bare flesh competing with her cries of pleasure. The strikes were harder and she continued to thrust herself into his thumb.

“Harder, harder,” she said, “Feels so damn good!”

The slaps intensified and Sterling thought she would lose her mind. Her senses reeled, her body ached. When he pulled away from her she didn’t know whether to collapse in relief from the assault, or beg him to return.

She stayed where she was, eyes closed. He stood and she could hear him undressing and she wiggled her behind in invitation. She’d turned into quite the harlot tonight.

“Your ass is nice and red,” he said as she felt the bed dip under his weight. He stepped behind her, his hard cock pressed at the place his thumb had just pleased. “Admit it, you liked it.”

He pushed inside her. “Oh yes, more, more.”

Sean was quick to obey, filling her completely. He grasped her hips and thrust, moving slowly, deliberately. Exquisite waves rolled over her as he thrust again. Then he stopped and slapped her behind, his cock pulsing inside her.

The rhythm he set was tortuous, but it was delicious. Thrusting, then spanking, thrusting, spanking, thrusting, spanking. She begged for more, thrusting back at him, crying out his name.

“Fuck me! Spank me! Oh God yes! So good, so good.” Was it her saying those words, asking the man she’d first thought of as a jerk to fill her completely?

When he started to spank and thrust at the same time, Sterling knew she was lost.

She dipped the fingers between her legs and found her clit, one, two, three, four strokes and she soared. In the midst of an orgasm that was almost too much she heard him groan, whisper her name. She could feel him as he came, felt his warmth fill her.

Worry filled her about the fact he hadn’t used a condom, but it was gone almost as quickly as it came. She didn’t care. She needed him, the skin-to-skin contact of having another human touch you.

And, damn him, she’d loved the spanking. Every last slap had been wonderfully scrumptious. It had been a new experience, one she would love to repeat.

The mattress moved as he stood. She glanced over her shoulder at him, suddenly shy that she’d been so wanton, had begged for more, had loved every erotic moment of their encounter.

“Take off the rest of your clothes,” he said, his voice husky. “I’ll want you again, soon.”

“I don’t think I can take it again.”

“You can, we can.” He leaned over and stroked her cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

Sterling undressed and lay back against the bed. He returned with a warm cloth when he massaged between her legs. Her burning behind rubbed against the sheet, and to her surprise the sensation was more than pleasant.

The towel dropped onto the floor and she laughed. “You’ll leave a wet spot on the rug.”

“Who cares? I’ll buy her a dozen rugs.” He kissed her then, gently, his lips caressing her own until she groaned into his mouth. She accepted his tongue, relished the feel and taste of him.

“What a naughty girl you can be,” he whispered when the kiss was over. Before she could answer he kissed her again, harder, deeper. She ground herself into his thigh, which had settled between her legs, feeling every bit as naughty as he’d said.

“You liked it,” he whispered against her lips. “Liked being spanked erotically.”

“Yes.” She wouldn’t lie, because she’d loved all of it. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you do it again.”

He laughed as he settled himself on top of her, a deep, confident masculine laugh that rumbled through her body, made her tingle. “Oh yes, you will. Many times. Your ass and my hand were meant to be together. And I plan on never letting you go.”

She didn’t even try to answer as his lips roamed over her face and her neck before his lips found a nipple and drew it into his mouth. She caressed his head as he suckled her, his mouth moving from one breast to the other as need built up inside her again.

New feelings stirred inside her. He was saying things that were impossible. He lived here. She lived in Texas. At some point he would have to let her go. But at this very moment she wanted nothing more than for him to hold her tight, to continue to caress her, to nibble on her as if she were a tasty morsel. And he was doing just that, making her nerve endings tingle again.

“Oh yes,” she whispered as his lips roamed over her stomach. “More, please.”

His laugh made her quiver.

“Be specific,” he whispered.

“Suck me, fuck me and...”

“And?” Oh good heavens, could she say it? Oh yes, she could.

“And spank me.”

“With pleasure, sweet Sterling, great pleasure.”

Chapter Six

Four weeks later, Sterling wondered if the doctors knew what they were talking about. They'd said it would be four to six months before Sarah was up and walking. But here they were out today, in Hyde Park, enjoying the sunshine.

They weren't that far from the car, because sometimes Sarah tired out easily, but today was a good day. Eugene had walked with them this far, but then had made excuses about going back to the car, telling them he'd "forgotten" something.

Sterling knew he was creating an excuse for her to be alone with Sarah, although she wasn't sure why. She'd spent the last four weeks with Sarah, two at the hospital and four at the, with Sean.

Her time with him was delicious, and she'd come to crave his touch. And not just his touch. He made her laugh, made her feel as if England was her home.

After they'd made love last night she wondered how this had come about. It hadn't seemed that long ago that she'd thought him a jerk, someone who should be shipped back to England and left there.

Now she was here with him, and she wanted him to come back to Texas with her. The ease with which they had all accepted the new relationship stunned her. Sarah and Eugene were happy as peas in a pod, saying they knew it was to be even before the two had met. At first, Sterling had been embarrassed to be with Sean under the same roof where her Godparents slept.

But Sarah had hugged her as tightly as her frail body could do and whispered in her ear, "Life is short, darling. Be with him as much as you can."

Those words had taken away her inhibitions, and from then on when Sean had made love to her, and yes, spanked her, she'd lost herself in the feelings, let herself get swept away. It was love, she knew, but she didn't want to admit it. Neither one of them had actually said the words. And, truthfully, the reality was they lived thousands of miles apart.

When Sarah was well, Sterling would go back to Texas, and her time with Sean would be over. It was a horrible thought, but it was a reality she must face.

Sarah sat down on a bench, and Sterling took the place next to her. "So, tell me what's going on in your mind," Sterling said. "Didn't you like the dinner I made last night?"

"The pot pie was delicious," Sarah replied. "It reminded me of home."

"That's why I made it, to try to give you a sense of home. I know it's your favorite."

Sarah looked down the path Eugene had taken. "I think Sean enjoyed it, too."

"Yeah, he just loves my cooking." Sterling laughed brightly.

"Not as much as he loves other things about you." Sarah patted her hand, and Sterling felt a blush creep over her. "He's in love with you."

Sterling didn't reply.

"And you're in love with him."

"Sarah, I..."

"Hush." She squeezed her hand with a strength that made Sterling's heart soar. Her Godmother was getting better. She would not leave this world for a while yet.

"Sterling, I want you to close your eyes while I talk."

Nervous laughter escaped her. Sarah had always done things like this when Sterling was a child, telling her stories to prove a point. And she always had her close her eyes when she did it.

Sterling did as she instructed, and when her eyes were closed, Sean's smiling face appeared in her mind.

"What do you see?" A pat on the hand, "And be truthful."

"I see Sean." Her voice caught and she thought she might cry.

"Good. Now, imagine yourself back in Texas. What are you doing?"

The hitch in her voice intensified. "I'm driving you two around, working on artwork, sunbathing."

Now she felt as if she really would cry.

"Do you see Sean there?"

"No." A tear escaped her eye. She opened them and glanced around at the people milling about, enjoying the sunshine before the predicted afternoon rainstorm.

"That's why you're crying, because he's not there. The two of you belong together, Sterling. It's a hard thing to come to terms with, believe me, I know. I felt as if I tore Eugene's life apart when he moved to Texas to be with me. His life was here. But one night he told me that his life was where I was, where I was happy. He gave up England to be with me."

Sterling swallowed past the lump in her throat. "The only difference would be that Sean hasn't asked me to move to England with him. He's been here for me, yes, he's supported me while I cared for you, but he's never once said he wanted me to move here."

But there was that one night, the first night, when he'd said he'd never let me go. Unfortunately he'd never said it again.

"He's going to." Sterling glanced at Sarah. "He's talked about it with Eugene, because, truthfully, Sean is old-fashioned. He wanted the approval of a male relative, even if he's not really a relative."

Sterling laughed, her tears flowing more freely. "I can't move here."

"Why not?" Sarah patted her thigh. "Do you want to give up the driving, sunbathing and artwork you saw when I asked you to close your eyes? You can do all that here."

"What about you and Eugene?"

"Don't worry about us. You worry about yourself. I want you to be happy, and I have to say that I've never seen you smile so much, or have so much structure in your life as you've had here. Sean has been a good influence on you. Admit it."

Sterling thought about the past few weeks, how things had fallen into place. Once Sarah had been released from the hospital, they'd become like a family, with scheduled meals and outings to parks and doctor's visits.

The routine had become so...well, routine...that Sterling had grown to love it. And those she loved the erotic spankings he delivered there was one part of his life they'd yet to explore together: the Spanking Club.

They'd talked about it, and Sterling had once again told him she thought it was a ridiculous idea, and that she would never participate in it. He hadn't pushed it, and there was part of her that wondered if, at some point, he'd left her to go to meetings, to spank other women. No, she could never live with his club activities. It would always come between them.

"I'm not sure how--"

Sarah interrupted her before she could finish her sentence. "The problem is you've been spending too much time with me. That's why tonight is your night off. Sean will be picking you up at six, and the two of you will be together. I've told him that if you come back before tomorrow morning that I'm going to be very disappointed."

“Sarah! How dare you plan my sex life like that.” Despite the rebuke, Sterling laughed. It was just like Sarah to do something like this.

Sterling blushed under Sarah’s playful look. “You could use a good night of...recreation. Let yourself go. Something tells me you two hold back when we’re all under the same roof. You need some good, hard sex. And a good spanking, one that will get your blood flowing.”

She’d never felt this embarrassed. Ever. Oh Sarah knew they were having sex, but doing it and talking about it were two different things. She couldn’t talk to Sarah about sex, and spanking. Or maybe she could.

“You know that letter you left me?”

“Of course.” Sterling could tell by the tone of Sarah’s voice that she was getting tired.

“You actually let Eugene spank you.”

There was a slight pause. “Yes. I fought it at first, but I came to think it actually did us some good. It brought us closer together, and it cemented the fact that he was the leader of our union.”

Sterling scoffed. “See, that’s where I have a problem. It’s a partnership.”

“Yes, it is, but having a leader is a wonderful thing. I rely on Eugene for so much in my life, and I provide him things that support us, too, but I’ve always looked to him to lead.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think I can live with that.” She didn’t mention the club. She would just let Sarah think it was the idea of spanking itself that turned her off.

“I’m sorry, Sarah, but Sean and I aren’t meant to be together. It was fun, and we needed each other for this time. But once you’re well, I’m going back to Texas, and I’m not going to eat dinner with him alone tonight.” *I need you as a buffer, but I don’t want to say it.*

“Oh yes you are, young lady. If you don’t go, I’ll have him spank you tonight, in front of us. You’ve pulled back all your life, and I won’t allow it to happen this time. You need to take a chance, to allow for something that might bring you happiness.”

“You mean to allow for something that will bring me a red ass. No thanks, I’ll pass.” She stood. “Let’s get back to the car. It’s time for you to home for your nap. Then, I think we need to talk to the doctor about when you can go home. I miss Texas.”

Sarah stood, and when she didn’t say a word, Sterling knew she was upset. That was okay, she thought, because the older woman would get over it. Sterling would live her own life, and although she enjoyed spending time with Sean, she wasn’t ready to be taken over his knee just because he thought it was necessary. She’d rather be alone.

The house was quiet. Sterling had cooked hamburgers for dinner, but the meal had been a silent affair. Sean had been there, and she could tell he wasn’t happy about the fact that they weren’t going out. He was going to have to accept her decision, though, because she didn’t plan to change her mind.

The time they had together was over.

An hour after it was all over, she could hear them upstairs, talking. She’d gone to her room right after the meal, and had started to pack her suitcase. No matter what Sarah and Eugene decided she was going home tomorrow. It was too painful to stay. Plus, Sarah didn’t need that much care anymore. If they needed it, they could hire someone to come in and cook for them. Staying in England any longer would just prolong the pain when she finally had to leave.

She’d just put a few of the items she’d bought here into the case when she heard a noise on the stairs. She ignored it, instead thinking of how she was going to add in all the new things

she'd purchased. She'd traveled lightly, but had managed to amass new clothes and other items in the time she'd been here.

She heard the front door open and close, and she imagined Sean leaving. "Thanks for coming to say goodbye, jerk." She looked at her clothes again. There were definitely too many to put in the suitcase.

"I may have to ship some of it back," she said as she pushed in another new shirt.

"Maybe you should just put them all back in the dresser, since you're not going anywhere."

Shock ran through her at the sound of Sean's voice. "I'm not staying, sorry. We discussed this at dinner."

"You don't want to even explore the chance of a relationship with me?"

He sounded hurt, and she felt bad about it. "We're too different, Sean. I've savored every moment with you, but there are things about us that just don't...compute. You're structured, I'm not. You're by the book, I'm let's see what happens. You want to spank me in front of Lord knows who and I won't allow it to happen. If you say you'll give up on your idiotic club, then I'll stay."

"Ultimatums never work in relationships, you know." He took a step into the room and closed the door. "You're acting like a child, you know. It's my way, or no way, it's how I want it, or it won't happen."

"Bullshit." She stomped her foot. "That's you, saying either I let you spank me in front of a group or the relationship won't happen. You need to look in the mirror for the ultimatum business, buster. Get lost."

“I think not.” He moved his hand and for the first time since he came into the room she realized he was holding something. It was a hairbrush.

“Come to do my hair for me?”

“No, I’ve come to spank you, to see if I can give you another taste of discipline.”

Sterling shook her head. The erotic spankings were one thing, but she would never go through another spanking like the one he’d given her in Texas.

“In your dreams, which means, like I said, it’s your way or no way.” She toyed with the clothes in her suitcase. “I won’t be disciplined like a child. Please leave, Sean. What we had is over.”

He took another step toward her and dread filled her belly at the memory of how he’d spanked her before. “You make it seem like you haven’t enjoyed our time together. I seem to remember a certain woman screaming out for me to slap her ass just last night.”

Why did he not see that she was trying to do what was right for both of them? “When I’m gone you’ll find someone suited to your life with your friends, and you’ll soon forget about me.”

“You’re suited to it.” He took another step into the room.

“You think I’d be a good member for your little club? I think you’re wrong, sorry.”

“Well, today I’m acting on Sarah’s suggestion that you need a good spanking, to give you an--”

“Attitude adjustment. I’ve heard those words from you before. Get lost.”

She didn’t dare turn her back on him, and for the first time that day she wished she’d not worn a dress. It would make it too easy to get to her ass.

“Sean, please don’t make it end this way. Let’s just take the memories and we’ll both be happy with what we have. Please.”

When he didn't follow her suggestion she said, "You need to leave."

In response he held up the brush. "And you need this."

For a few moments it was a standoff, neither of them moving, each of them waiting to see who would break first. From the look on his face it wasn't going to be him. She could rush past him, or she could try and break for the bathroom, which was connected to this room.

The latter seemed her best bet. But she'd barely taken a step before he was on her, toppling her onto the bed, turning her on her stomach in an expert move that she could tell he'd done before.

The brush came down with no warning, the slap hard even though her dress and panties. She cried out, using some of the same names she'd used on him the first time he'd spanked her. She knew her screams and name-calling would do no good. Sarah and Eugene knew what he was doing up here, and they approved of it.

She couldn't threaten to call the police because she'd done that the first time, and she hadn't followed through, so he would know she wouldn't do it now.

Instead she kicked and continued to scream, just because it made her feel better as the brush came down, over and over.

He stopped long enough to pull her dress up above her hips. She fought him but he was too intent on what he was doing, and when he grabbed her panties and pulled they ripped.

"Ass! Ouch!" For the first time the brush came down on bare skin, and it stung. She screamed out again but he didn't let up, the swats intensifying, the pain spreading through her bottom.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to concentrate on anything but the brush moving from cheek to cheek, hitting her bottom, making it burn. Despite the fact she'd stopped fighting, had stopped screaming, he didn't let up.

The brush continued to punish her ass, but instead of concentrating on the pain she concentrated on the anger. How the hell did he think this would make her want to be with him? Did he really think the threat of pain, or actual pain, lead to attraction?

How long had he been spanking her, five, ten minutes? If she allowed it, he'd probably spank her for half an hour, and then she wouldn't be able to sit down for a week.

"You're a moron," she said, and the spanking stopped.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She rolled away from him. "You and your barbaric ways, thinking that I would fall for you if you exerted dominance over me. Eugene may have caught Sarah that way, but you won't catch me. I hate you, and I hate your ways. Get out."

He stood and tossed the brush on the bed. His anger was evident, his hand clutched into fists.

"If that's what you want, fine. I'll leave. Have a good trip home." He stormed from the room and Sterling watched him in shock. For the last month and a half she'd shared this bed with him, taken him inside her, held him close.

And now, because of his damn club he was leaving, their time together was over. He didn't even care enough about her to say he'd give them up. He chose the club over her.

Sterling burst into tears as she heard the front door slam. She threw herself onto the bed and sobbed.

Sean inserted the key into the ignition and turned the engine over. As he did so, the anger inside him turned to sorrow. What the hell was he doing? He was leaving behind the one woman who had ever made him feel whole, made him feel as if he had a purpose in life.

And why was he doing it? For the Spanking Club? Because of her refusal to even meet his friends, attend a meeting. She'd made a judgment about something she'd never experienced. What sort of person did that? And was that a person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with?

He thought about the club, about his friends. And then he thought about how just a few months ago he'd wished for a person he could spend the rest of his life with. That person was inside the house right now, packing to leave.

Sean turned off the car and got out. He went to the door and unlocked it. He made sure it latched behind him, then he stopped. He could hear Sterling crying, her sobs making his heart ache.

Why was she pulling back from him? Was it just because of the club? He set his keys on the table next to the door and walked down the hallway. The sounds of her crying intensified and he slipped inside. He knew she hadn't heard him come back.

She jerked slightly when he put his hand on her back. "Don't cry."

"Go away."

"No." He sat down and she struggled against him as he tried to take her in his arms. Finally, she relaxed, her head against his chest. Her crying continued and he stroked her hair. "Tell me why you're crying if you hate me."

She slapped his thigh. "Because I don't hate you, you big jerk." She lifted her gaze to him. "I love you."

“I love you, too.” He stroked her cheek. “The only reason you’re pulling back is because you’re afraid of the club, you think it’s some perversion. Do you not trust me enough to keep you from something like that?”

He watched her process his words, saw her work out what he was saying. “Sterling, I would never, ever, do anything to hurt you. Spanking is part of my life, and when we’re married it will be part of yours, too.”

Her eyes widened and he smiled. “Yes, I said when, not if, because I’m not letting you go. I love you, and until there is absolutely no way we can be together, until you tell me you hate me, and mean it, I’m keeping hold of you.”

“You’re a jerk.” Her tears were drying up, and there was actually a smile on her face.

“That’s your favorite word. I think I’m going to have to spank it out of you.” He picked up the brush. “Lie down on your stomach with your bum in the air.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely not...jerk.”

Sean laughed, a rich hearty laugh that brought a smile to her face, which made him laugh louder. She was his, forever. He licked his lips and wiggled his eyebrows at her, then he flipped her off his lap. She landed on the bed, bum side up.

He brought the brush down on her ass and she cried out. He swatted her again, and again, and again.

Sterling kicked and yelled, but really it was a very half-hearted effort. He spanked her hard, varying the landing place, making sure she felt the burn of it. When he was done he turned it over and rubbed the bristles against her bottom.

Moans of pleasure reached his ears and she lifted her hips in invitation.

“Tell me you’ll stay with me.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me you’ll marry me. I want you as my wife.”

There was no hesitation before her, “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He continued to rub the brush against her bottom. “I love you, Sterling. You don’t have to say it back, because I know it’s true.”

One light tap with the bristles. “We’ll ease you into the club, will that make you feel better about it?”

“Yes.” She turned her gaze to him. “I do trust you, it’s just so…”

“Different, I know. It’s all right. I’ll be with you every step. No one will spank you but me, I can promise you that.”

Sterling batted her eyes at him and he went instantly hard. He wanted her, needed her. She lifted up slightly, offering herself to him. “Make love to me.”

He loved that she offered him her bottom, so he could spank her while he was inside her. But right now he wanted to see her face. He stroked her back, and whispered, “Stand up.”

When she was on her feet he undressed her, taking his time, caressing her gently, kissing her everywhere he could find. Goosebumps appeared on her flesh and he knew it was from the feeling of love coursing through her, just as it was rushing through him.

After she was naked he lowered her to the bed. He undressed quickly and lay down on top of her, savoring the feel of her arms as she wrapped them around him. He kissed her, then lifted up on his hands so he could watch her face as he entered her.

The look of pure bliss made him feel as if he would climax immediately, ending their sweet union. He took her slowly, kissing her, loving her. When they started to rock she wrapped her legs around him and they became one.

He buried his head in her shoulder as he thrust into her. He could feel her tightening around him, holding his cock inside her. When she came she clenched him tightly, and he soared over the top, whispering her name in her ear, telling her how much he loved her.

Afterward, they lay together. He stroked her shoulder and saw a tear slip from her eye. “Don’t cry.”

“Thank you for coming back. Thank you for realizing what a mistake I was making.”

“I’m selfish,” he said. “I didn’t want to lose you.”

Sean picked up the brush and twirled it around. “I think I’m going to ask Sarah if we can keep this. It might come in handy during our marriage, don’t you think?”

“No, jerk, I don’t.” She was grinning at him, her smile infectious.

He narrowed his eyes at her and tapped the brush against her thigh. “Let’s turn you over and see if we can work on getting that word out of your vocabulary, shall we? I’m a patient man. We’ll do it one spanking at a time. And this brush has a lot of spankings left in it, as do I.”