



# Unrequited Dom

By Carolyn Faulkner

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## Chapter One

It was the same, uncomfortably familiar memory presented as a dream; the one that her body replayed for her almost perfectly from the events as they happened. Even years later, the dream left her panties soaking wet and the area they cradled literally throbbing from the memories that were so skillfully and vividly spun by her sleeping mind. And, as always, it left her unfulfilled and without him.

His ethereal voice, deep and dark as the night in which he appeared to her, still washed over her like the cold Maine surf on a broiling hot day, as it had at the time in real life. "Come here, Sugar," that liquid, black velvet tone rumbled from deep in his broad chest, "I can see you still need to be reminded to obey me."

In the dream, she was taken back to the events of the day before her twenty-first birthday, and she had graduated from college nearly a year early. Cash Daughtrey firmly believed in rewarding good behavior.

Unfortunately for her in particular, he also firmly believed in punishing bad behavior. He never seemed to take much interest in what anyone else did, but he paid extremely close attention to every single detail about Sugar, and had since the moment they had met years ago when she was a gawky, fatherless, adolescent girl.

Now, at twenty-one, but still very firmly under his thumb, which was right where he preferred her to be, he had caught her preemptively driving the vintage Corvette he was intending to give to her at the party she was having tomorrow to mark the auspicious dual occasions. The one he had expressly told her to keep her hands off until he'd given her the keys to it tomorrow night.

She knew what was coming, and even in her dream-memory she bit her lip in anticipation of the distinct discomfort she knew she would be experiencing in the next hour or so, hoping she could keep herself in check. Cash also didn't believe in hurrying corrections. Luckily for her, they were the only two home tonight. Danielle, their stepmother, was out carousing, as usual, and Patty, the cook/housekeeper, was visiting her sister until tomorrow morning. The party was being catered, except for her cake which Patty herself was making, and she would do that as soon as she got home tomorrow so that it would be fresh.

Or maybe, on second thought, that wasn't such a lucky thing. Sugar was beginning to think she would have preferred that there was someone else in the house, no matter how embarrassing it was that someone else might hear her cry, beg, scream and moan as he took her to task for being impatient enough to break one of his rules – any of his many rules for her.

It wasn't as if they hadn't heard it before.

He had extended his hand to her in silent command, as he was wont to do on occasions such as this, of which there had been entirely too many as far as Sugar was concerned, and, just as she had done in real life, her dream self hesitated for several long seconds before resigning herself to the inevitable and allowing her small hand to be engulfed by his big, rough paw. She could just run away, couldn't she? She could refuse to give him her hand and stamp her foot and tell him no, that she was too old to be put over his lap to be spanked like a five-year-old. She could just turn and turn and walk – perhaps run might be the better choice – out of the huge garage complex and into the house.

However, he was standing in front of the only door.

Hell, she'd been telling him exactly that occasionally, when she just couldn't stand it any longer, since the first time he'd done it to her, and it hadn't made one whit of difference – at least not for the good. Instead, it had just caused that awful self-satisfied grin to spread across his face, the one that made her want to slap it right off, not that she'd ever had the guts to do it.

She'd certainly wanted to.

Then he'd chuckle softly and reach out and take her hand, no matter how hard she'd tried to avoid letting him catch her, even when she'd done her level best to back quickly away from him, he was much, much too fast for her and too damned big and too strong and too dominant . . . and . . . and . . . the list went on and on.

Cash Daughtrey was just too everything. One of the reasons she rarely tried to run from him was that she knew she had no hope of actually getting away from him for more than a few seconds before he caught up to her, and she knew from previous experience that the slow smile and soft chuckles were both lies. He didn't find any resistance from her in the least amusing. Quite the opposite, in fact. He would, once he had her in his lair – the big office that her father used to occupy and which he had taken over almost immediately upon moving into the house – inform her that her childish efforts at delaying the chastisement that he had already judged to be thoroughly warranted and necessary had only earned her more – and worse - of the same.

Sugar had clung to the idea that eventually, he would certainly decide that she would become too old for him to bend her over his knee, but that had never happened. In fact, the older she got, the stricter his rules – and the punishments he inflicted on her when she broke them - became.

Luckily, she was a naturally well-behaved girl not prone to being bratty in general, and she loved school. So far, he had only spanked her once, but the threat was always there. All he had to do was give her 'that look' at the dinner table.

His rules for her during high school in particular, were positively draconian, and although she chafed against them verbally to him – with which he was perfectly fine as long as she was respectful about it – she still minded them carefully so as not to be subject to any further chastisement.

When she turned eighteen, things had changed drastically somehow, as if someone had flipped a switch. Cash had called her into his study and asked her what her plans were. Sugar's eyes had widened. Everyone in the household knew she was going to college. She'd hardly made a secret of it. It had been all she had talked about for the past year. She'd gotten early acceptance at UVM, and that was where she wanted to go. Her good grades had earned her nearly a full scholarship, and part of her inheritance from her father would more than take care of the rest.

"But you intend to come back here on during your time off? You intend to continue living here?" he asked pointedly, watching her with that hawk-like gaze to which she'd never grown accustomed

Sugar's mouth had gone dry. "Y-yes," she stammered, hating herself for sounding so weak and mealy-mouthed in front of him.

"Great! I was hoping you'd say that." His smile seemed genuine, and he reached over the desk and cupped her cheek in his hand gently. "This is your home, honey. This is where you belong."

Sugar got up, but as she turned away from him towards the door, she heard him sink back into the huge leather desk chair. “Just remember, though, Sugar, that even though you’re legally a woman now, you’re agreeing to stay here of your own free will. Which means you will still be expected to abide by *my* rules, and be subject to *my* discipline while you live under *my* roof.”

‘Haven’t I been already, technically?’ she wondered to herself angrily. Except that it wasn’t his roof, it was their stepmother’s roof. Everyone on the place had always deferred to him as if he owned it, but that was just the kind of man Cash was.

Danielle, Sugar’s stepmother, had never been much interested in dissuading anyone of that notion. All she wanted, once Warren had passed on, was to drown her sorrows and have a good time. As long as the money was deposited into her account every month, she was happy. Sugar had never gotten any help from Danielle regarding the way Cash simply took over raising her, even though it would have been much more natural for her stepmother to have stepped into that role. Danielle didn’t seem to have much interest in it, and Cash most certainly did.

Sugar wasn’t up to his weight by far yet and didn’t feel like correcting him right now.

However, his words did have their desired effect, halting her in her tracks, although she didn’t turn back to look at him, even when he’d continued in his low, gravelly tone, “Now the gloves are off.”

A sharp, downright uncomfortable shiver ran up her spine that tightened her nipples into painful peaks, although she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging it *or* him. However, she wasn’t even sure what he really meant by that, although she had an idea. Instead, she held her head high and walked out the door. At least she’d be away from him for the majority of the year, and she’d do her best to spend as many of her vacations as possible, elsewhere.

Sugar snorted to herself softly as she made her way to her bedroom. She had a crush on Cash from the moment she’d seen him. Most of her friends and nearly every woman he came into contact with, felt the same way. He was just one of those men that drew women to themselves without any effort on his part. He wasn’t model-gorgeous, far from it. Cash’s nose had been broken countless times from fights over the years; also from the fights and the many years working cattle alongside his father, his big body bore many scars. He had worked with his father from an obscenely- and probably illegally- young age, and didn’t need to fight or work with cattle any longer, but on occasion, he did.

Cash wore his masculinity naturally and unapologetically. He was chauvinistic, but not sexist, politely opening doors and having a “women and children first” attitude even as it applied to his female vice-presidents. He’d worked his way up from the bottom and had built his businesses from the ground up from the nearly useless bits his father had left him. He wasn’t at all afraid to turn his hand to anything anyone in the company did, and could probably do it better than those he employed.

He hadn’t had it easy as a youngster. His biological mother had died of alcohol poisoning when he was just a baby, which was why he never touched the stuff. His father had done the best he could to care for him, but Hollis Daughtrey had never been

anything other than an itinerant cowboy, dragging his son from ranch to ranch, working for a short time and then moving on as if the Devil himself was chasing him.

When he met wealthy ranch owner Danielle Hamilton, both their fortunes changed entirely. Years later, after Danielle was widowed by Cash's father, she met Sugar's dad, Warren Maillheux. Cash and Sugar were thrown together and expected to develop a brother-sister relationship when there was no blood between them and Cash ten years her senior.

Sugar's almost instant crush on the man who was supposed to be her stepbrother had continued until she became a woman. Those feelings - especially when, after that pronouncement and his punishments for the smallest of infractions, which only made her that much more uneasy about them - became something so wild that she did her level best to give him as few excuses as possible to chastise her. Time spent over his lap was an unbelievably humiliating experience - as she was a woman who was naturally very modest and who found it unbearably mortifying to be divested of her jeans and panties each and every time. However, when she realized that he was stirring feelings in her that she would much rather not confront, she almost feared herself more than she feared him, more than she feared his broad, flat palm . . . or the reinforced paint stick he used . . . or the paddle he'd found at a flea market that said "psychology" on it . . . or, one time, when she'd stayed out two hours past what she considered to be the positively medieval curfew that he had set - considering she was a legal adult - his own well worn leather quirt.

She had no idea how to handle the fact that, although he always left her with a bottom that felt as if there was no strip of flesh left unsinged by whatever implement he'd chosen, still she wanted more, somehow. More of him, she knew, but on a much more troubling level, more of the pain it seemed only he could bring her that was now mingled with a pleasure she didn't want to experience. She didn't know how to control those unwanted feelings. They made her supremely uncomfortable to the point where she'd made sure, for the last six months or so whenever she spent a rare moment at the house prior to graduating, that Cash was never given any reason to punish her.

That was not an easy task. until that night that she replayed over and over again in her dreams, almost word for word.

It had been a supremely stupid thing to do, and she knew it wasn't going to end well the moment she'd backed the big beastie out of the garage. Perhaps that's why she'd done it in the first place, but then Sugar didn't want to consider her motives too closely in any case.

Apparently her subconscious did, though.

But damn! that car was fun to drive! She was careful not to go too fast - although it certainly wasn't easy to keep her speed under control - that baby wanted to fly! Before she knew it, the car was doing ninety on I-20, and she knew that wouldn't work. It seemed to her that Cash knew everyone on every police force in the state, and she knew if she was pulled over it would be even worse for her than if he discovered she'd taken the car out for a joyride before he'd formally gifted her with it.

That would *not* be good.

She'd managed to avoid one pitfall, but not the other, because when she drove the beauty back into the last bay of the five-bay garage where it had sat for nearly a month, she knew, just waiting for her to claim it tomorrow night, the headlights had revealed his



tall, imposing form leaning none too casually against the frame of the only door attached to the house, his big arms crossed over his chest, eyebrows furrowed worriedly.

As the garage door closed automatically behind her, she found herself neatly trapped, watching him press the button that locked all of the garage doors.

Ever courteous, of course, he'd come over to open the car door for her and offer his hand, but then she knew that it wasn't really an offer, and once she put her hand in his, she wouldn't regain any control of her fate for some time.

Sugar made the fatal mistake of looking into Cash's eyes, and all was lost. His own were as black as coal, matching his thick, dark hair and, she was quite sure, the depths of his soul. "I've said this all along, but I'll say it again: you, my dear, need a keeper. All you had to do was resist just one more night, and the car would be yours to go out joyriding in. Instead, you took it out the night before, without even coming to me and asking if you could take it out early."

Actually, it hadn't even occurred to her to do that, she was surprised to realize.

He walked with her towards the house, reaching for the door, then turning to pin her with a look. "But then, that's exactly why you did it, isn't it? You need a good thrashing." Cash had to smile at her confused look. She was so afraid of her own feelings that she couldn't acknowledge them, even to him.

Or maybe because of him, he thought with a frown.

"You know where I expect you to go," he said in that terribly intimate, stern manner she'd become all too familiar with over the past few years. He patted her bottom and encouraged her to walk to the desired location as he made sure the house was locked and keyed in the system-wide security code.

When Cash arrived at his now thoroughly soundproofed study, she was where she knew he required her to be: her nose pressed in the corner nearest his desk. He liked her here, close enough that he could correct her with a sharp swat to her bare behind if she got fussy, which she often did, at least at first, until she realized that that just added to her discomfort. She stood, as he expected her to stand, with her jeans and plain white panties at her ankles, cute pink checked t-shirt ending at her natural waist and framing her bottom just perfectly. And, oh God, she loved it here, drinking in the scents that reminded her so much of him: leather, the faint, spicy scent of his aftershave, and just the slightest tinge of a horse and sweat mixture that was surprisingly intoxicating.

Even though Sugar called them "granny panties", her underwear were the only type of undies he allowed her to wear. He refused to allow her to wear what he considered to be obscene underthings, such as thongs and the like. Cash didn't know how he knew it, but plain white cotton underwear was what he liked, and was the only thing he allowed Sugar to wear in his house.

She would have received far worse if he had seen a thong atop her jeans instead, but she knew better than to get caught wearing that. It wasn't as if she didn't defy him while she was away, she was just careful to dispose of what she knew he would consider inappropriate underclothes before she came home. It was an expensive habit, but what else was she going to do with them? She liked frilly underthings, but she wasn't willing to pay the price she knew he'd extract from her if he caught her wearing something he didn't like.

She also knew better than to put it past him to check.

It seemed to her now that as she was an adult, he decided that he had to clamp down on her even harder than he had when she was growing up, which he did, unhesitatingly.

The problem that Sugar was having was that she knew that she should have rebelled more strongly than by just buying frilly panties when she was away at school. She should have been planning to live somewhere other than the ranch to get out from under his ultra-watchful eye.

Instead, she found she craved the structure and stability he provided for her. She detested every ever-loving minute of every punishment, but, to her horror, she found herself replaying scenes from previous sessions with him in the dark of the night, when she was alone, her roommate spending the night with yet another lover.

She couldn't rebel. No one had ever quite measured up to Cash, and she was beginning to doubt anyone would, especially considering that she tortured herself through all three years of college with nightly wet dreams about those horribly intimate punishment sessions.

It was going to be much worse for her if he was suddenly going to become insightful and realize that she had taken the car without his permission in a subconsciously rebellious act designed to get him to thrash her. As she was barely able to deal with the idea herself, she certainly didn't want him thinking about it at any length.

As usual, he didn't immediately turn his attention to the matter at hand. There was work piled up on his big mahogany desk, as always, and Cash believed that naughty girls needed to spend a certain amount of time considering their misdeeds while crammed tightly into the corner with their bare bottoms sticking out, ankles tethered together by the jeans and panties they wouldn't be needing for the rest of the evening.

If he had anything to do with it, and he had *everything* to do with it, she wouldn't want to pull anything back up over her bottom by the time he got through with it, anyway.

Sugar was doing her level best to stay still, although it wasn't easy. No one on the internet mentions that standing with your nose in the corner is just damned uncomfortable! As soon as you're not supposed to fidget, that's all your body wants to do, especially her feet, which definitely objected to being hobbled by her jeans. So she began to do that "naughty girl" shuffle, that she knew, sooner or later –

*Crack!*

Sooner, apparently, Sugar thought wryly, quickly sucking in her breath through her clenched teeth, desperately wishing she dared to reach down with one of the hands that was neatly folded at her back and rub that neatly singed spot. She knew, without having seen him, of course, that he had swatted her without even taking his eyes off the contract or whatever he had been reading.

He'd taken care to make sure that the corner she was standing in was that convenient for him to chastise her during corner time. He seemed to think of everything.

Damn him.

Yet he had never taken things that one step further, the step that she literally ached for every night she was alone at school, even more so when she was alone in this house with him. She knew he was just a door down from her, as he had taken over the

master bedroom suite when Danielle announced she no longer needed it; as she spent so little time at the ranch.

Sugar had spent much time with him in the past three years naked from the waist down; and although his fingers couldn't help but brush some very sensitive spots on occasion, she never felt that he hesitated as if he wanted to probe any further, as if he wanted anything more than simply to punish her, to teach her to obey him.

Sugar wasn't at all sure that she could be happy with just that from him any more. She was rapidly realizing that she wanted everything from him that she could get, as much as it frightened the bejesus out of her. No one but he would suffice, as no one knew her anywhere near as well as he.

That was why she had never really been tempted by the young college bucks who had come sniffing around her. She wasn't a beauty queen, nor was she a crone, but she knew she was average-looking at best; better when she bothered to doll herself up. Those times, frankly, were few and further between, mostly because Cash hated when she wore makeup, and preferred her in jeans. He hadn't even allowed her to wear makeup until she was eighteen, and then he banned it entirely from the house, much to Danielle's disgust.

The next swat caught her entirely unaware, searing the identical place on the other cheek, even though she hadn't moved a muscle, which she pointed out to him in a supplicating tone.

"Yes, but you were thinking about moving your hand down, and that kind of thinking needs to be discouraged."

How had he known? The man was a mind reader, and not the good kind!

## Chapter Two

From that point on, whether she'd been dancing in place or trying to sneak a bit of comfort, she occasionally received several well-placed smacks. These set her bottom on fire and made her rise up on her toes, keening long after he'd returned to his work. And the worst part? She knew this wouldn't even be considered a part of the actual punishment!

Finally, after what seemed like an absolute eternity spent with a sore bottom and a crunched nose, Sugar heard him close his laptop and put it away in his bottom drawer. The problem was that she knew then what was coming next.

He leaned back in his chair and she felt that big hand curve around her slender waist, tugging her closer to him. She had to move carefully, because of the way her ankles were restricted. He gathered her close, his hand covering her already burning butt.

"You know the drill, Sugar. I want you to go to the cupboard and take out your paddle -" He completely ignored the way she drew in her breath as if he'd just told her she was facing life in prison - "and bring it back to me. Now be careful and go slowly."

That was for his benefit, she knew. She could feel his eyes on her every step - half step, really - of the way as she shuffled across the room, then bent down, giving him a humiliating show, she was sure, while he leaned back in his big leather chair, and she then hobbled back.

As she carried the implement - a wicked one-half-inch thick one he had found somewhere on the Internet, with holes drilled at specific intervals all the way down - back to him, Sugar began to have second thoughts, although she knew that this was hardly the time or the place for such things.

Was she out of her mind to want what was about to happen? She'd been down this road too many times before. She knew how it always ended. There was never any overt pleasure in it for her, except that which she found on her own later. Cash had never evinced even the slightest romantic interest in her. He just seemed to get his jollies from controlling - and, of course, punishing - her.

She handed him the hated implement with a dramatic sigh, which didn't go unnoticed. Something was different about her, and he hadn't quite puzzled out what it was. His desktop was nearly immaculate anyway, and it only took him a matter of seconds to completely clear it off as she nervously awaited a fate with which she was all too familiar. -Her bottom was already tingling from the smacks he'd delivered during the interminable corner time. As much as she had come to some sort of realization about how much her body needed what he gave her in this vein, she wasn't at all looking forward to the next few minutes, because, in whatever Cash did, he was a perfectionist - in this aspect of his life, too.

She felt his rough fingertips on the small of her back, encouraging her to bend over the end of his desk. He'd already courteously tucked a small pillow in front of her hips so that she would be comfortable. Cash was very keen on the idea that the only place he wanted her to experience any degree of discomfort was the specific area to which he was attending.

Sugar had a tendency to try to keep her feet on the carpet, to try to retain some form of control, he supposed, but he never allowed that. His desk was relatively high because he was a big man, but every time she bent over it, at first, she made sure her toes

were still in contact with the floor, even though she knew he was going to force her to readjust.

“Lean forward more, Sugar. You know better than to leave your toes touching the rug.” He gave her a surprisingly hearty whack with the paddle that had her scrambling to obey him and her feet dangling well above the thick pile carpeting, making ~~leaving~~ her just that much more helpless against him.

He did not need to force her to acknowledge that he was physically stronger than she was. The requirement that she place herself in the correct position for a punishment, and correcting her until she made herself as submissive as possible to him and achieving the position he prescribed, served as a subtle psychological reminder that he insisted upon every time since she’d come of age.

It was a small thing but a necessary one. He knew she hated it, and yet he continued to require it of her, and would continue for the foreseeable future.

Although she was just a little bit of a thing, she had a wonderfully generous bottom, and he took a moment to admire it. Sugar could feel his eyes on her as if he was using that plank-like hand of his to caress ~~her~~ rather than spank her.

“Reach up and grab the edge of the desk and don’t let go.” His voice was nearly always soft and gentle, in direct contrast to his treatment of her rump.

Somehow that seemed to stir her even more, and she began to genuinely worry that she was going to soil the pillow beneath her hips.

He tucked his left hand around her far hip, successfully keeping her from trying to dodge his well-aimed swats, his grip very loose and endeavoring in every way to keep from hurting her.—This also ensured that she stayed in position and that his palm, or the paddle, landed exactly where he intended it to, and not somewhere that might cause injury due to her jerking around, trying willy-nilly to get away.

Cash placed his palm over her bottom, fingers splayed to claim as much territory as he could. “Tell me why you’re here, Sweetie.”

She sighed, hating this part nearly the most.

The required confession of her misdeed—was nearly as embarrassing as the physical punishment itself. “I – I took the car out before it was m-mine.”

Normally, the punishment would have begun immediately at the end of her sentence, as long as he was content that she had confessed completely.

This time, however, he reached down and pulled her jeans the rest of the way off, as well as her panties. The lower half of her body was completely exposed to him, dangling helplessly over the edge of his big desk, her bottom plumped out perfectly due to the pillow he’d given her so chivalrously.

She was entirely unprepared for him to step boldly closer and press himself against her, not quite between her legs, but close enough; the fingers of the hand that had always been so scrupulously chaste when disciplining her, then glided slowly down those rounded, already slightly pinkened cheeks to that natural cleft. With no warning, he reached with infinite gentleness into those dark, silken folds.

Sugar was unable to suppress a moan at his unexpected explorations, but then she realized exactly what it was that she was letting him do, and what it was he was likely to discover about her if she allowed him to continue, so she immediately crossed her legs, successfully stopping those fingers by squeezing them.

He brought his left hand into play and let it descend, open-palmed, on her bottom until well after she had surrendered her grip on those invading digits and relaxed her legs, even opening them a bit in hopes of halting the terrible furor of swats raining down on her.

“Cash, please, no!” Being reduced to begging so early on didn’t bode well at all for her, especially since the official punishment hadn’t even begun yet.

He said nothing, but continued to apply smack after crisp, smarting smack until her entire backside was the exact hue he desired, wishing to make an impression that she would carry with her for some time about where, exactly, he wished to take their relationship.

Not winded in the least, despite the physical exertion, and, as always, completely composed, even as he had reduced poor Sugar to a wailing, weeping mass, Cash said calmly, “All you had to do was ask me to stop, Sweetheart. Don’t presume to take the choice from me. Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

Still sobbing quietly, her bottom blazing, Sugar nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

“Now, because you were so naughty to think you could stop me like that, I’m going to do exactly what I intended to do. I’m not going to hurt you, Sugar, but I am going to touch you in a way I haven’t before. Try to relax. I’ll be very gentle, but you must not resist.” She could feel, to her intense embarrassment, that his voice alone was making her literally drip cream onto the pillow in front of her.

“Y-yes, Sir.”

Cash squatted down, very close to her, saying softly, “Let me know if I’m hurting you, hmmm? Because that’s the last thing I want to do here.”

Sugar, who could feel his breath on her still sizzling, bare flank and could hardly believe what was happening, replied with a faint, “Yes, Sir.”

The problem wasn’t that his fingers were hurting her, quite the opposite. She’d craved his touch there for so long that she was having a hard time stifling her sighs and moans of pleasure. His fingers were so much bigger and more naturally demanding than her own, their skin so rough as they rasped her own delicate skin. She nearly reached a climax before he even found that which she most wished to deny him: the shameful secret she’d withheld from him for what seemed like decades.

To her surprise, he was the one who groaned with the discovery. “Ah, Jesus, Sugar.” There was no denying the anguish in his moan. The hoarse depths of it surprised her. “Why didn’t you tell me about this long ago?”

She let go of the far edge of the desk, trying to dislodge those fleshy probes and flee to her room, anywhere that was away from him, but he wouldn’t allow that. She should have known better than to think that he would ever let her get away, especially once he discovered her secret.

Slowly, inexorably, his free hand found the spot between her shoulder blades and pressed her back down, back into the position he had prescribed for her. “Hands,” was all he had to say. He was never angry, never loud nor did he ever yell, even now: he was constant and consistent.

Her hands crept towards where she knew they should be, where she knew he wanted them, fingertips gripping the far edge of the desk so tightly they were nearly numb. He, held her still, top and bottom, the fingers of his right hand still well lodged

between her legs but quiet for the moment, continuously drenched in her juices even now, as he forced her to obey him.

*Because* he forced her to obey him, and they both knew it.

When she had resumed the correct position, her hot, wet cheek laid on the cold wood between the framework of her outstretched arms, he began again, wiggling those fingers, and pressing them just slightly further inside her. His deft examination, reaffirmed what he had barely dared to hope against hope.

She was still a virgin. She'd not succumbed to any young hot blood at college. For one thing, she was a bit of an academic nerd. She liked school above anything else, and the majority of her friends were female, not that he had any concerns in that area. He'd been pretty sure she hadn't, but Cash knew that this was the only way to be absolutely certain.

She'd never known it, but he had both a private detective and a very discreet bodyguard watching over her, just in case something happened that she couldn't handle, and he was more than happy to have wasted all of that money for the past three years. She had gone to a few questionable parties during her freshman year, but who hadn't? Drinking had never been her thing; he hoped he'd been a good influence on her about that and she'd never developed a taste for it. There had been a couple of romances early on but they had fizzled out almost immediately and she'd buckled down to study and spend time with her friends.

He hadn't been very happy with the amount of time she'd chosen to spend away from him, but he couldn't say he blamed her, considering how often he chose to punish her when she was home. On the other hand, knowing what he now knew, what his careful examination was showing him, maybe he *could* blame her . . .

She was most thoroughly wet. His hand was positively drenched, and he was rock hard and very nearly drooling from want of her. She had the singular ability to reduce him to his lowest common caveman denominator. He'd never met or dealt with a woman that he'd wanted to bop over the head – okay, bottom – and drag away into his cave, more than Sugar.

She was his stepsister. He'd never really been able to think of her as that, even though he supposed, technically, they were, although there were absolutely no blood ties between them. If anything, he was more of a pseudo father to her, considering that he'd been much more of a parental figure to her than her actual stepmother had been. Then again, Danielle had no real ties to either of them, either.

Cash hadn't wanted to take a fatherly role with her, not really. He'd just wanted to make sure she felt safe, and he knew that rules and routine made children feel safe. The one spanking he'd given her when she was younger was just a deterrent to let her know that he wasn't going to put up with any adolescent crap – even though it was barely a spanking at all - and it had worked like a charm.

She hadn't been the only one without succor in the past years, despite ample opportunity. He hadn't been able to look at another female since he'd met Sugar, long before she would have been ready for him. Hell, he'd even known when she was eighteen that she really couldn't handle him and what he would demand of her sexually. He'd simply upped the ante of punishments based solely on something he would have eschewed if anyone had called him on it - a strange vibe he got from her whenever she was near, but most especially when he punished her.

Now, here they were. He wiggled his fingers again, carefully, experimentally, and heard her sharply indrawn breath, even as he knew she tried to avoid him hearing it. He thought his cock was going to explode right there in his pants. There was no denying the copious amounts of evidence from her own body about just exactly how she was feeling, although he knew she wasn't going to want to own up to it – at least not at first.

She got turned on by his spanking her! -He'd suspected it all along and uncharacteristically, unwilling to confirm it, in case he was wrong. He'd allowed them to go on as before, until this evening, simply because he hadn't wanted to lose whatever it was they already had.

However, circumstances were forcing his hand. She was graduating from college, and had made plans to move out of the house and into an apartment with a friend that was several states away. He didn't feel he could rightfully stifle her attempts at independence, even if they took her away from him. She was a young woman, and it was more than natural for her to want to test her wings, as much as the idea of watching her walk out the door nearly drove him to his knees.

He didn't want to force her to stay. He could – there was an easy way to do it that had recently presented itself from an entirely unexpected corner. A method had conveniently cropped up that would invoke a certain amount of guilt and would call on what remained of her sense of familial obligation, which he knew was strong. Despite the fact that their blood ties were non-existent, Cash didn't want to do that to her. He wanted her to stay with him because she *wanted* to be with him. Not because she felt she had to stay.

He wanted to be strong enough to keep his fingers where they were, to not let them wander that scant bit downwards, to what he hoped was an eager reception elsewhere, but he was unable to resist. He needed to know the whole story tonight. His fingers left their cozy home and traveled just slightly south, searching avidly but gently as he tried to settle her by rubbing her back with his left hand, unsuccessfully, it seemed, because she fairly keened with every movement of that big paw between her legs.

When the rough pads of his fingers brushed over the top of her fully engorged clit for the first time, it was very nearly all over for her, too. Sugar couldn't suppress a low, ragged moan of pleasure that had him groaning with her, expelling the breath he'd been subconsciously holding as he waited to find out the truth.

She was truly his.

This changed everything.

One more slow, deliberate pass over that trembling, yearning bud as he leaned over her and spoke in that soft but commanding tone of his, directly into her ear as his body covered hers, "No coming without permission, Sweetheart."

Her "Yes, Sir" response was so raw it was barely intelligible as Sugar fought for control, not wanting to know what the penalty might be for disobeying that kind of a rule.

Far too quickly, he withdrew the comforting presence of his body against hers, even the invasive one of those tantalizing fingers between her legs, but then she heard him sniff loudly and deeply, saying, "I don't think I'll ever wash these fingers again."

Completely unable to prevent the all-over blush she knew he'd sought to provoke in her – and succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, she was quite sure - Sugar kicked her feet a bit in protest, arching her back while trying to bury her head between her arms in shame at the same time. "Cash! Don't *say* that!"



There was no denying the hoarseness of his response, and he didn't try to mask it. "Why not? It's true. I love your scent. I love that you make it for me, Sugar, and I'm going to happily drown in it in the near future."

"But -" she was brought abruptly back to the matter at hand, by his hand on her backside. "- we have something to finish here before we can go on to more pleasant matters this evening."

It was amazing how quickly the ecstasy he'd incited within her melted away under his vicious palm and stern lecture, which was almost worse.

"For all intents and purposes, Eden Leticia Maillheux, you are an adult, and you've lived in my house long enough to know better than to go taking things that are not yours without permission."

She knew it would do her absolutely no good to point out to him that the car would be hers in one measly day, so she kept quiet, hoping it would help. If the swats he was peppering over her bottom and the backs of her thighs were any indication, it wouldn't. She was in for it - she could tell by his tone.

"Therefore, I think you need a very thorough paddling once I finish your warm-up spanking. You need a very thorough paddling, indeed."

If she hadn't already been crying, she would have begun at those words. He couldn't possibly mean to take the paddle to her bottom when it was already scorched just from the tender attentions of his hand! But Sugar knew that Cash didn't make idle threats, and soon enough, she felt him pause long enough to take up the paddle she knew he'd kept close by, and then she felt him place it against her bottom in preparation for the first swat.

The volume of her sobs rose to an almost hysterical proportion at that small gesture.

His voice, impossibly soft and warm and undeniably sincere, Cash posed the question he always asked her at times like this, "Why do I take the time to punish you, Sugar?"

She raised her head enough that she could be heard and understood, and said, haltingly, throat still full of tears, "B-bec-cause you c-care about m-me!" It was nearly always yelled at him, not that he minded, because her emotions were already so raw and uncontrollable.

The first stroke fell on the word "care", making it louder than the rest, and he continued to wield that implement with all of his not inconsiderable skill as he chastised her both physically and verbally. "Yes, I do care about you, Sugar. Because I do, I expect that you will obey me. You're more than old enough to know that what you did was wrong, yet you did it anyway. That's smacks of *deliberate* -" the paddle fell particularly hard on that word, making her shriek and jump with it, wishing heartily that the thought had never crossed her mind to take a joyride a day early in her birthday present - "disobedience, which I *will not have* in my house."

By the time he finished, her entire rear was an angry fire engine red color, sore and swollen and very uncomfortable-looking. It was probably one of the worst paddlings he'd ever given her, right up there with leaving the gate to the southern pasture open. They'd had to spend money and time during roundup, when they didn't have either, to find a herd they'd already found once. Then there was the time that she had ignored the doctor's orders by going to a friend's house when she was supposed to stay home and rest

up from a bout of pneumonia. He'd actually waited on delivering that last session until the doctor himself had released her from his care, when her lungs were back to normal.

Sugar had just been happy he hadn't told the doctor why he was demanding the certification. She'd been terrified that he would do just that.

Until now, he had always helped her up and hugged her – rather stiffly, usually, because he always found himself tremendously aroused by punishing her, and he hadn't wanted to put her off by that fact. Hell, he didn't even want her to know it; much less give her a chance to feel offended by it. That was exactly what he was trying to prevent.

But now, he saw no such impediment, and, in fact, intended to indulge himself this evening as no other. So he reached out and removed her fingers – cramped and crimped as they were – from the rim of the desk, massaging them back to normal, then scooping her up into his arms and holding her on his lap in his big chair.

"Cash, no!" Surprised by his actions, Sugar, who was still struggling to breathe and sob at the same time, tugged very unsuccessfully at the hem of her favorite shirt, knowing she was going to ruin it, but for some reason she felt a compulsive need to cover herself in front of Cash if she wasn't being punished by him.

Cash pressed his forehead to hers, whispering calmly, "Stop, now," placing his hands over hers. "Sit with me. Let me hold you and comfort you."

## Chapter Three

She was too tired and overwrought from the spanking to argue with him, especially considering she knew she could very well end up back where she had just been if she argued too much. So Sugar just collapsed against him bonelessly, knowing she wasn't going to be allowed to win against him.

Somehow, she wasn't at all willing to dissect how right now – or maybe even ever – that was all right with her. It made her feel safe, loved, and cared for, much more so than nearly every other young woman she knew.

He had very carefully placed her on her side in his lap, so that her ravaged butt wasn't in contact with his jeans at all, but there was no mistaking that ridge poking up insistently into her hip. He was aroused. Sugar had never known that about him before; that spanking her had turned him on. That knowledge only added to the desires that were already beginning to rise rapidly within her, despite the throbbing pain in her bottom.

Or, more probably, if she was ruthlessly honest with herself, because of it.

It was strange to be sitting here on his lap, so close to him. Every single part of her wanted to wrap her arms around him and plaster her body to his, but she didn't quite have the guts to do it. So she crumpled, instead. Let him decide. That's what he wanted to do, anyway.

Cash took the opportunity of her surrender to tilt her head and kiss her, really kiss her, for the first time. They'd shared the usual family pecks on the cheek, and hugs, of course, but nothing that smacked in the least of desire or romance, until now.

Both were in his mind as his mouth took hers – first and foremost desire.

He hadn't anticipated the way their mouths would meld-together so perfectly. At first, Sugar was unusually yielding, like putty, letting him kiss her, slanting his lips across hers, his tongue demanding entrance to her mouth. Suddenly-she seemed to come back to life, one arm twining its way around his neck somewhat tentatively, then the other joining it as her tongue peeked out and tickled his, her lips suckling gently, even teeth nipping just slightly.

She was at least as hungry as he was, he was delighted to realize.

As much as he knew it might well be a mistake, he couldn't keep himself from reaching for the same hem she'd been trying to pull down. He was successfully pulling it up over her bra when her hands interfered modestly, trying to push it down again, until he said, "Sugar," in that very particular warning tone he reserved only for her.

She did stop immediately, but didn't look very convinced, although the condition of her bottom did that for her, he thought, because she did put her arms down, however reluctantly.

Now, bras were something he didn't make any rules about, except to insist that she wear one. So her bras were very pretty, lacy concoctions that often drove him crazy if he got a glimpse of them. Apparently, she even wore really pretty ones under regular t-shirts, because this one was made entirely of pale pink lace, and it only seemed to enhance her already considerable natural beauty.

"You are just gorgeous, you know," Cash breathed, reaching a hand up to the back of her neck to draw her forward against him, his tongue washing over her lazily, collar bone to jaw.

Sugar could barely breathe. She couldn't even believe where she was, much less what he was doing to her. She'd already begun chanting in her mind, "It must be a dream," but it never seemed to end. He kept kissing and touching her, claiming more and more of her body as his own with those huge, insistent hands of his.

He didn't immediately grab for the back clasp of her bra, as she knew many men would have, once he'd taken off her shirt. Instead, he admired her for an uncomfortable moment with his eyes, then brought her mouth to his for a long, slow kiss, releasing her only to keep his hands at her face long enough to drag them down her neck, down her shoulders, fingertips trailing down each arm to her hands that were limp in their collective laps.

Then those same fingertips began again at her collarbone and trailed down, over her still covered breasts, directly over those telltale nipples – making her jump and him chuckle softly – then to grasp her hips gently, mindful of the delicate condition of her backside.

Cash sat back in his chair, catching her eye. "You're nearly nude already, Sugar, or hadn't you noticed?"

Her bright blush was his answer.

"Take your bra off for me, honey. I want you naked on my lap."

Those deep black eyes showed no mercy, and she'd come to expect none from him. They were placid pools of unrelenting dominance. He always walked – and spoke – softly, and for her, he carried a big paddle.

Sugar wanted to say no. She would have felt better if he hadn't pointed out the fact that she was almost nude already. She knew she wouldn't like the consequences if she disobeyed him, as she was still sitting on her hip rather than her butt.

Her hands reached around to unhook her bra, but she took her time actually removing it, watching him closely and judging just how far she could push him, until he raised one eyebrow.

Then the offending garment fell to the floor, and Sugar looked anywhere but at him. He caught her chin and forced her to meet his eyes as his palms took possession of her breasts for the first time, gently but firmly touching them everywhere, not forgetting the soft undersides. He squeezed slightly, adjusting his touch to the quality of her sighs and moans; those fingers still plucked and tugged just a bit roughly at those swollen buds as if he knew exactly what they craved.

"Mmm, Cashhhhhhh," Sugar moaned, biting her lip, her head rolling back a bit as he milked her breasts in a manner she'd never even thought of, his big hand over the top of them, those callused thumbs at the bottom of her nipples, squeezing and pulling all of her at once. He concentrated the sensations by squeezing those already sensitized bits between his thumbs and the sides of his index fingers rhythmically, easing off and then increasing the pressure until she cried out from it again and again.

"Do you remember what I said about not coming, Sugar?"

Her head snapped back up and she gave him a guilty look. "Yes, Sir."

"Well, it still goes. I'd hate to have to put you back over the end of my desk before we go upstairs. You know that a mistake like that would be more than enough cause for about ten good strokes of my quirt, and then a round of my belt on your backside."

She knew he'd do it without hesitation, too. Regardless of what he'd already given her moments before.

"Yes, Sir," she barely whispered, entirely unsure she was going to be able to save herself from the horrible punishment he'd just described.

"Good. I just wanted to let you know what you were in for if you disobey me." Cash shifted her a bit, forcing her to plant each knee on the seat of the big chair, next to his hip, so that she was resting on her knees instead of her bottom as she sat nearly astride him – although he had no plans to complete that connection. His left hand remained behind to alternately stroke, pull and pinch her already overexcited nipples while his right hand wandered quite determinedly down the center of her body, right into that small patch of hair between her legs, and beyond, into that moist, decadent grotto that only he had ever known.

He seemed to know exactly what he was doing, burrowing carefully past the point that Sugar so wanted him to dally at, to chuckle deep in his throat as his hand was again bathed in even more generous amounts of her juices. He dipped three of his fingers carefully into her well, wetting them thoroughly before bringing them back to the spot she preferred and settling there; middle finger atop, index and forth fingers astride that most eager bundle of nerves.

Sugar jumped when he finally settled there, where she'd most wanted him for so long, but then he didn't move. Not one bit. It began to drive her absolutely crazy very, very quickly. She began undulating her hips, which really wasn't at all satisfactory, unfortunately, only to have him reach down with his left hand and deliver a tremendous crack to her rear. So she received a considerable punishment with very little reward.

"But Cash!" she keened, desperately wanting some sort of stimulation down there, any kind at all. He was *right there*, but he wasn't doing anything *about* it, damn him!

That left hand had crept up from where it had hovered over her bottom, ready and willing to deliver more correction, should it be necessary, to begin pinching each of her nipples very hard in turn, pulling and twisting and then as his fingers cruelly crushed the warm hard nubs. "No," he said, as casually as if she had asked him if he wanted a soda.

All of a sudden, Sugar realized that she didn't know what to do with her hands, besides smacking him, and she knew that wouldn't go over well. She so desperately wanted to let them finish what he wasn't even starting, but she knew she couldn't do that. She was nude, and there didn't seem to be a safe place to put them.

Finally, Cash took pity on her and said, his tone so gentle and understanding that it nearly had her in tears, "Lace your fingers behind your head, Sugar, before they get you into trouble."

Oh, dear. That wasn't going to be good, either. That would make her arch her back, which would press her entirely too full breasts even further into that demonic hand of his, and would slide herself against his fingers simply by virtue of that natural movement.

But defying him was also not a possibility, and she knew he wouldn't wait forever for her to decide to do as he'd asked. He looked so relaxed right now, almost as if he was asleep, although the stinging slap she'd just received was all the evidence she needed to the contrary, so she began inching her hands towards their inevitable destinations as slowly as she dared, despite her misgivings about doing so.

Then there was the pleasure that coursed through her body unbidden, even though he *wasn't* moving that blasted hand of his. The unbearable, undeniable pleasure of obeying him, of being subtly forced to obey him. The way his hand closed over her breast as her back assumed the required arch, and, most starkly, the way that tender flesh between her legs was dragged against those enveloping fingers, making her breath sizzle through her teeth as she forced herself not to let her true ecstasy loose, barely, by the skin of those same teeth.

If there was any consolation at all to this position, it was that she could more readily feel the iron spike that had been poking into her hip as it pressed against her mons, and it jumped nearly as readily as she did, nearly doubling in size and hardness, which she would have bet was an impossibility.

Cash leaned forward and pressed his lips to that area just between her breasts, kissing her wetly. "I'm going to make you come, Sugar, just -"

That was when Randy Travis' version of "Forever and Ever, Amen" burst rudely into her dream, throwing her out of his warm arms and into the stark realization that she'd been dreaming a memory again, and that he was calling her in the middle of the night – which was never a good thing.

Sugar reached for her iPhone, trying to force her libido into submission and herself awake in a matter of seconds, knowing that Cash didn't like to be kept waiting. The dream she'd been having before she woke up certainly wasn't helping any on either front.

"Hello?"

"Danielle's not going to last much longer. I'll expect you at home within the next twenty four hours, Sugar. There'll be a plane ticket waiting for you at the American counter."

Then he was gone.

That was the sum total of it. Nothing more, nothing less. No idle social chitchat; that wasn't Cash at all. No syrupy lines about how much he'd missed her, or, heaven forbid, that he loved her. Just names and times and, of course, lots of orders.

She sat up, her forearms on her knees, wishing his voice hadn't rasped over her nerves as if there weren't three long years and a wealth of . . . well, not quite ill will but certainly unease on her part between them.

He'd never felt uneasy a second in his life. She'd be willing to bet that Cash Daughtrey hadn't experienced even a nanosecond of doubt or uncertainty in his lifetime. He just wasn't that kind of man. He knew at all times exactly what he was doing and where he was going and why, at least he seemed that way to her. She'd never seen him waffle or waver, especially not in conjunction with anything that had to do with her – and he'd certainly seemed to make it his business to be involved in anything and everything to do with her practically from the moment they'd met.

She checked her phone. It was three twenty-five a.m. -She knew he would be as good as his word, that there would be a ticket waiting for her whenever she arrived at the airport. She was frankly surprised that he wasn't coming for her himself. That spoke volumes about how well Danielle wasn't doing, if he wouldn't leave her side to come get her.

Sugar was surprised to find tears welling at the thought of losing her stepmother. It must have been the idea of her last connection to her father, because it wasn't that she and Danielle had ever been particularly close. There had never been any animosity between them; she would never have put her father through that for the short time they were married, and then Cash would never have put up with that, either. She knew he had kept Danielle at home as much as possible so that she would have some kind of cohesive family around her, as well as a female influence in her life, and although she wasn't much, Danielle had always been kind to her, and not at all an evil stepmother - just not a very involved one.

One thing Sugar had to say in Cash's favor. He took care of his own, even if they weren't quite, technically his.

Kinda like her.

But she wouldn't be flying, not being enamored of the idea of being given a gynecological exam from some TSA geek, nor giving an off-site TSA employee a thrill by going through a potentially harmful scanner. She was of childbearing years, and she didn't trust the government as far as she could throw them in regards to the safety of those machines. She was going to drive her own damned self, regardless of what big brother Cash thought.

Sugar smiled. He'd always hated it when she'd called him that, and, considering how their relationship had developed years later, it was no wonder. He hadn't a brotherly bone in his body, as far as she was concerned.

However, he definitely had other, much more interesting bones . . .

Within the next thirty minutes or so, she was showered, changed, packed, and on the road to the Circle C Ranch in Costello, Texas, near Dallas. She figured it would take her about fifteen or sixteen hours or so, depending on how many stops she made, which would depend on what kind of road food she let herself eat.

All in all, with construction delays and detours, it took more than eighteen hours, and by the time she dragged her suitcase through the back door - which she was surprised she was able to do, considering Cash's paranoid security tendencies - it was well past dark and she was thoroughly and utterly pooped. She had all the McDonald's french fries and Burger King onion rings she could stand for the next century or so, which was fine with her since she very rarely indulged in such fare except on unusual occasions like road trips.

There seemed to be no one else in the house, although Sugar supposed she shouldn't have been surprised, considering how late it was. There was none of the usual smells greeting her: Patty's wonderful roast, the lemon-scented polish she used on the furniture or the fresh roses that Danielle favored that were always prominently displayed in the foyer. She left her suitcase, pocketbook and laptop case at the entrance to the hall that led to the bedrooms, and wandered towards Cash's study. The door was closed, which wasn't unusual.

There was a time when she was younger when she'd been in the habit of bursting in on him. Bless him, he'd never been mad about that in the least, although he had every right to be. He had the weight of the world on him, running this big ranch plus his other businesses, but he'd never failed to make time for her. Business meetings were often missed in favor of witnessing whatever activity it was she had going at the time, and he never failed to pony up for almost anything she wanted to do, although he'd balked at a

few things that he considered unsafe, and she'd learned that, if she accepted his decree gracefully, he'd usually compensate her loss with something even better, although not always. He was generous with her, but he did not spoil her.

This house had been the place that all her girlfriends had wanted to gather after school and where all of their giggling sleepovers had been held – his only rules, beyond the obvious, being that they were not to leave the house and not to make too much noise before he got to sleep at eleven. All of her friends had huge crushes on him, and she had to play it cool around them and pretend that she didn't, that he was just her much older stepbrother in whom she had absolutely no interest, when it was probably true that she had the worst crush of all.

She hesitated at the door, her hand raised to knock, and the door swung wide open as Cash nearly plowed over her.

"Sugar, where the hell have you been?" He reached out immediately to grab her upper arms and make sure she didn't fall down. He was no lightweight and he'd very nearly bowled her over.

"Well, it's nice to see you, too, Cash," she teased, uncertain whether or not they should hug.

Cash, of course, had no such doubts, pulling her to him for a big hug that she pushed against long before it could become anything more serious.

She was surprised when he let her go, but he did, and she wasn't sure she was glad of it when she saw his thundercloud face.

"You are in big trouble, little girl."

Why was it that, at almost twenty- seven, this man not only called her "little girl" without hesitation, but still managed to make her heartily wish she'd just done exactly whatever it was for which he was going to call her on the carpet?

Without so much as missing a beat, as if the past three years had never happened, Sugar found herself led by the hand into his study, the scene of all too many painful lessons, and every one of them seemed to crowd into her head simultaneously as he forced her to sit on his lap in that huge chair behind his equally enormous desk.

"Now, didn't I tell you that there would be a ticket waiting for you at the American counter?" he asked with exaggerated patience, as if he was speaking to someone who was not terribly bright.

Sugar sighed exasperatedly, and began, "Yes, you did, but -"

He gave her that lowered chin, raised eyebrow look that said he didn't want to hear about her "butt", except how it pertained to him smacking it because she hadn't done exactly as he preferred, and opened his mouth to speak, probably to tell her to watch her tone of voice, if she knew anything about him, and she did.

Sugar, however, after too many hours in the car by herself and dead tired from having been awakened this morning at an entirely ungodly hour, leaned forward and put her finger over his lips, startling him into shutting up.

"But you hung up before I had a chance to say that I didn't want to fly down. I didn't want to call you back – I figured you were with Danielle and I didn't want to wake her. I called and cancelled the ticket and left a message on the phone here that I'd be driving."

Cash removed her finger from his lips but retained possession of her hand. The very softness and calmness of his tone had Sugar immediately on edge. The angrier he



got, the quieter he spoke. "I got your message. But it doesn't take eighteen hours to drive here from Knoxville by any stretch of the imagination, unless you went by way of Los Angeles."

"There was construction. I had to stop for gas and bathroom breaks and food. Not all of us can drive for twenty- four hours and only take two breaks, Cash."

His head tipped slightly to the left, another warning sign. "I don't want any attitude, Sugar. You should have just taken the flight, as I said -"

"Why?" she interrupted, not caring if it just added to the ante she was going to have to pay in a few minutes, anticipating the worst. "Is Danielle . . .?" She was never really very close with her stepmother, but was still sad to see her taken by the lung cancer she'd fought so valiantly for years.

He frowned, rubbing her arm, if a bit reluctantly. "No, she's resting as comfortably as she can."

Sugar sighed in relief that she soon realized was premature. She shouldn't have been worried about Danielle. She was getting the best of care. Cash would allow nothing less.

She needed to be concerned about herself right now, and the determined look in Cash's eyes that didn't bode at all well for that part of her anatomy on which she was now resting.

"I didn't think I'd have to do this so soon after you got home, Sugar," he said, almost pulling off that air of real reluctance, but not quite. "But I can see that some things never change."

Sugar began to fight for all she was worth, not that she had any delusions that it was going to get her anywhere, especially since he had her subdued in a matter of a few humiliating seconds. "No, Cash, you can't!"

He stopped immediately. "I can't? Don't tell me you've conveniently forgotten what I said to you about the next time you came home, Eden Maillheux?"

She hated it when he used her real name. He did it so rarely, and almost exclusively in the midst of a punishment that, she'd come to have an intense dislike of it.

No, she hadn't forgotten, not really. But it had slipped her mind. Kind of. Sort of. Conveniently.

"Yes, but I meant to discuss -"

The only discussion they were going to be having would be between his hand and her bottom, Sugar realized with a start as he tipped her over his lap in one easy, practiced movement, as if he'd just done it yesterday, and not years ago. The elastic waist shorts she'd worn on the drive down found their home at her ankles, along with her frilly pink bikini undies.

## Chapter Four

“What have we here?”

“They’re called modern, *pretty* underwear. Perhaps you’d like to become familiar with the concept some time?” After she’d said it, she realized how it sounded, but it was too late to retract it now.

“Not right now, thank you, I have other things to attend to, such as someone who has most definitely become too big for her britches while she’s been allowed to live away.”

Sugar was still struggling, still trying to avoid the inevitable in a way she didn’t think she’d ever dared to before. “I have not! I’ll have you know I’ve gone down a whole size since I left!” Dear God, would she never stop putting her foot in her mouth around him? He was never going to let her up at this rate!

Cash had a definite thing about women being too skinny – Sugar in particular. He’d always refused to allow her to diet in any way, shape or form while she was living at home. Patty cooked healthy, well-balanced meals, and he saw to it that Sugar got regular exercise. Nevertheless, he hated diets or anything that even hinted of dieting. She was lucky if she could get him to allow a salad at the table, and she was never, ever allowed to have just a salad for any meal.

His hand landed heavily on the very crest of her long neglected cheeks, and continued to do so as he spoke. “Ah, so you haven’t been eating while you’ve been gone, either, hmmm?”

“I didn’t say that, Cash!”

The spanking stopped abruptly. That was never a good sign.

“Someone seems to have gained a considerable attitude along the way, too, that definitely needs to be eliminated.” Sugar could hear him opening his middle desk tray, and she knew what lived there.

Or what used to live there. She couldn’t believe that he’d still kept it there!

But when it *cracked* down across the very tenderest underside of her bottom, where cheek met thigh, she definitely believed it. The reinforced paint stirrer. It looked like a big ruler, only it was longer and thicker, and it was a horrid, *absolutely horrid* thing. More than once, she’d tried to arrange its disappearance, but he’d always caught her and made her just that much sorrier for her efforts, so she’d stopped trying.

But she’d never stopped hating it.

All of the implements he used on her were atrocious, and this was one of the worst. She didn’t know if he thought it couldn’t be that bad because it wasn’t all that big or what, but some of the worst punishments she’d ever received were with this very thing, because he used it quite relentlessly.

While Sugar spent her time cursing the fact that she’d never managed to kill the paint stick, Cash was having a hard time not grinning like an idiot, despite the fact that she’d barely arrived and was already over his lap. For his part, Cash was overjoyed to see her. He wasn’t sure if she quite remembered what it was that her homecoming meant, but he did, and he intended to both remind her of it and hold her to it.

The big house had been a tomb without her. Danielle her own life long since, and had all but moved out even before that god awful night when Sugar had left him. He’d lived here alone, except for Patty, ever since. He’d never needed or wanted anyone in his

life, until Sugar, and it was damned hard for him to admit to himself that he needed and wanted her now, but he did. He had to come to terms with that during the long lonely years without her.

He didn't intend to spend one more minute alone.

It appeared to him that someone had most definitely backslid without his careful attentions. Most definitely. Sugar was thinner than she should be, and much thinner than he liked. He knew it was fashionable these days for young women to be unhealthily obsessed with their weight, and he didn't want her to be overweight, either. But of the two, he preferred that she be a little chunky to bony any day.

She'd changed her hair color, which he would not have allowed. Her natural color was a golden blonde, but right now it leaned more towards an auburnish shade, and that would definitely have to go. He preferred his women to be as natural as possible, which is why he'd not allowed her to use makeup. Cash hated artifice of any kind. At least she hadn't succumbed to that, as far as he could see.

At least she hadn't chopped it *all* off, although it was certainly shorter than it had been when she was living with him. He adored long hair on women, and, even long, hers was full of curls and waves, and he liked to bury his face in it, or wrap it around his hand, close to her skull, and use it to control her in various and sundry extremely interesting ways.

She'd certainly developed more of a backbone than She had before, which he supposed came with maturity. He didn't at all mind a woman *or* a man with a spine, or even a submissive with a spine, as long as they were polite about it.

This one, however, needed an attitude adjustment, Cash thought to himself as he continued to roast every inch of what had been the creamy skin of her posterior, and he was quite certain that this wasn't going to be the only time he'd have to fine tune it, if he knew Sugar, and he knew her better than anyone in the world, he was very sure.

She was struggling more than she used to. He wasn't sure if that was because it had been so long since she'd been spanked and she was feeling it more acutely, or she was just more cantankerous than she'd been before. He strengthened his grip on her and, producing a pair of padded cuffs, slipped them neatly onto her wrists. He arranged them at the small of her back rather than allowing them to wander and get into mischief—This allowed his free arm to reestablish his hold on her far hip, keeping her from sidling off his lap or leaning too far and avoiding the well-aimed strokes of the stern wooden slat. His right leg looped over and trapped her rapidly kicking ones, preventing further outraged outbursts, and rendering her well and truly immobilized, and at his mercy.

He had already brought her well past tears. To her mortification those had come extremely early on, as if she'd never been spanked before. Although there was a good bit of frustrated anger mixed in, they were mainly caused by how expertly he laid down those swats, usually catching both cheeks or the backs of both thighs at a time, until she was beside herself, knowing there was quite literally nothing she could do to stop him from spanking her until he decided she'd learned her lesson.

Cash had rarely needed to physically subdue her as he had to do currently, as their former relationship was largely based on her voluntary submission to him and the fulfillment that brought to the two of them. But she had to admit – if she let herself consider it – that there were, of course, undeniably exciting aspects to this, too –

But Sugar couldn't think that, she couldn't. She wasn't here for that, she was here for Danielle. She wasn't here to reignite the spark between herself and Cash. She'd left here for a reason, and that hadn't changed. She couldn't just allow him to expect that she would step right back into the way they were.

She couldn't.

Could she?

The problem was that her body recognized him immediately as what he had always been and always would be: its master, regardless of how her mind might want to argue that point.

He stopped so abruptly that he surprised her, and through the haze of tears and anguish she expected that he would immediately begin to release her, but that didn't happen. Instead, he simply sat there, his hand draped intimately over nearly every inch of her bottom for a long moment, and then he moved his leg only enough to release the furthest of hers, insinuating his big calf between her legs, not allowing her to close them demurely, as she would have preferred.

She knew immediately where he was going with this.

"No, please, Cash, don't!"

But he knew her too well. He moved very slowly and deliberately, taking his time, savoring every second of it, using the same hand that had wielded that terrible implement to delve with infinite care between her legs, seeking and finding exactly what he had grown to expect from her years ago, glad that she couldn't see the barely there flash of relief on his face, or the slightly triumphant smile that replaced it.

She was soaking wet. Cash refrained from pointing that fact out to her, since they both knew it already. Instead, he contented himself with baptizing his eager fingers then soldiering on to even more interesting territory, until they discovered then claimed without hesitation that which they'd come for, settling as if they'd never left around that swollen nub of tissue and touching her in the ways he knew she loved the best, giving her no choice but to respond to him whether she wanted to or not.

Her guttural, almost animalistic moan, dragged reluctantly from her depths was music to his ears as he reached beneath her shirt with his free hand, easily removing the small scrap of a bra she was wearing and to find and torture those taut tips just as eagerly as his other fingers were relentlessly manipulating her towards an orgasm he knew she desperately wanted, but equally as desperately didn't want.

Cash closed his eyes, letting her sighs and cries, those little familiar whimpers at the back of her throat and the louder, more demanding full-on moans wash over him, forcing the empty years without her into the background.

She was here, over his lap - with a bright red blistered bottom that he had given her, and his hand rested between her legs - where she belonged, being brought to a culmination that he controlled. This was how it should be between them, always.

Suddenly, those agonizing fingers left her cruelly swollen, tortured nipples and Sugar felt him remove the cuffs from her wrists at the same time his leg was lifted from hers, freeing her entirely from the bondage he had imposed on her as he'd corrected her. He even leaned back a bit, leaving her completely free to get up and walk away from him, if she liked.

Although the cheeky fingers of his right hand had stayed exactly where they had been; their mischievous activities had been slowed considerably, but not stopped.

That was almost worse.

“You’re free now, Sugar,” he said, to emphasize his point, as those raspy tips continued to play with her, over and over.

Cash was entirely unprepared for Sugar to burst into tears at his words, and he completely misinterpreted their meaning, thinking that he’d teased her too much and she was overwrought with desire and damned sick of his teasing her, but too shy to say it. He figured their separation had dampened the intimacy they’d shared where she’d felt she could say anything to him, if with a bit of a blush.

He leaned over and hugged her as she cried piteously, each sob tearing at his heart. “Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry. Let me make it all right for you.”

Cash proceeded to put her into the position that he knew from experience that she loved, tipped just a bit forward over his lap so that she had to use her hands for balance, and thus couldn’t reach back to protect herself from him in any way. He bunched her shirt and bra up so that her breasts were free, and then repositioned his fingers where they had been, with a little extra lubricant, and something else poised at her other end. If he had time, he would have applied snake bite suckers, or some other form of clamp, to her nipples, but he didn’t want to make her wait, so all of this was accomplished in a matter of seconds.

As free as she supposedly was, Sugar felt completely unable to move or extricate herself from this situation she found herself in. Hell, she hadn’t even been able to continue to say “no” to him. Saying “no” as he made it “yes” for her had been a huge part of their sex life, and she thought she would just be encouraging him to do so. She felt entirely overwhelmed, and just let him arrange her the way he wanted to. He was going to do it anyway. Besides, her body, as always, had a mind of its own, and she was having a hard time not grinding herself against him in the lewdest of fashions. It remembered the pure, raw ecstasy she’d felt at his hands, tending to forget the agony, even though she could still feel her bottom throbbing even worse with the increased beat of her heart.

Then he pressed what she knew had to be that awful plug he’d used on her before onto her bottom hole, and she realized that she had other things to worry about, especially when his fingers, aided by whatever lube he had slickened them with, began to slide demandingly over her ever more engorged clit.

“You’ll be glad to know – or maybe not – that I put some lube on the plug. It’s been a while, even though you were taking it so nicely before you left.”

Dear God, he knew her entirely too well.

It was a medium sized plug – the smaller ones were really just too small. But, like the Goldilocks he’d once kidded her about being in this instance, this one was just right. Not too big, but, as he had liked to say, just enough of a challenge to make it interesting for her.

“I want you to come for me, Sugar.” There were petals dancing between her legs, demanding, callused, just the slightest bit rough petals that wouldn’t let her get away no matter how much she wiggled, but clung tenaciously and rode that throbbing swell, plucking and rubbing and tantalizing unmercifully.

Meanwhile, she was presented with an unyielding object that was going to end up inside her whether she wanted it to or not – and this was another of those situations where she really did want what she didn’t really want. It felt so unbelievably, indescribably

good to be stretched open like that, very slowly, very carefully, but again, like those merciless fingers between her legs, unrelentingly.

The combination of the two sensations – front and back – was her downfall, as he'd known they would be. Sugar began to shiver and shake and before she could stop it a fairly loud scream flew out of her mouth which she then tried to stifle as her body spasmed and shook and arched and twisted uncontrollably in the throes of the ecstasy he forcibly wrung from her.

"No, no, it's all right. We're alone. Scream all you like," Cash said, not allowing her to cut it short, but bringing her to several more loud, purely satisfying climaxes before he put everything aside and tried to gather her into his arms as he always had after he'd pleased her like that.

Only Sugar wasn't having any of it. Some time, after the scream, she'd come to her senses, or rather, they'd come to her, and although she'd allowed him finish her off, she wasn't eager to let him carry the charade any further.

She was so angry at him that she couldn't see straight, and she put all of her energy into getting herself back together – finding and donning her clothes, straightening her hair, and putting on her shoes.

She was just about to leave him when he caught her arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

Sugar stood there in front of him for a very short second, wishing she didn't have the tendency to cry each and every time she got angry, and then she slapped him, and it wasn't a ladylike, cupped palm, half-hearted swat, either, it was a full-force, open-palmed smack. "You had no right to do what you just did, Cash Daughtrey. No right at all and you know it."

Then, like the coward she knew she'd become, she turned tail and ran, his slowly drawled, "Everybody gets one, except you, Sugar. You should know better," drifting to her ears as she ran to her room, praying that he wouldn't follow her, and somehow, contrarily, feeling bereft when he didn't.

Sugar was very surprised when he hadn't come after her. Surprised, but everlastingly grateful. She couldn't have taken a scene with him. She was too raw after what had happened. She should never have let him do what he did. Things between them couldn't be the same as they'd been before, they just couldn't.

She slept late the next morning because she'd been so tired, but she would have just stayed in her room deliberately in order to avoid seeing Cash, if She had to. It hadn't surprised her in the least that her room had been kept exactly ~~had~~ as it had always been, even though she'd moved into his room for the last several years she'd lived on the ranch. It was in pristine condition, and she already felt like she was home again, a feeling she knew she needed to guard against.

She came down to breakfast around ten-thirty, which was extremely late for the entire household, knowing Cash would have been long since up and out by then. But Patty was there and overjoyed to see her, circumstances notwithstanding.

Patty gave her a big hug, then directed Sugar to her usual stool at the end of the bar on the big island that Cash had put in when the kitchen was remodeled a decade or so ago. She took the seat, if a little gingerly, although not so much so that Patty would

notice. "It's so good to have you back, girl. Things have not been the same since you left. Not at all."

"Well," Sugar began, not realizing that the older woman wasn't finished talking, "I'm not home per -"

She was shaking her head as she broke two eggs into a bowl for the scrambled eggs she knew Sugar liked. "That man after you left – good Lord, he was a bear! Even worse than usual!" She leaned over and whispered to Sugar as if she was telling her a state secret. "He got drunk for three days afterwards!"

Sugar took a gulp of the freshly-squeezed orange juice she'd poured herself, wishing it had a shot of vodka in it. She was stunned. "No, you're joshing me!" She'd never heard of Cash touching alcohol, ever. He just . . . didn't.

"God's honest truth, I tell you." Patty put her hand over her heart and raised her eyes to Heaven. "He was drunker'n a skunk for three days *solid*. -When he sobered up, he was a thousand times meaner than you've ever seen him before. Fired five perfectly good men just the first hour of the first day."

Good hands were hard to find, and no one went around firing them indiscriminately, least of all Cash.

"Of course, Jud went right around after him, rehiring them, but he kept them out of sight for a week or two, doing something else, until the boss calmed down."

Jud Lawson was Cash's foreman and all-around right-hand man; a man who was so eerily like Cash it was as if the two were brothers. They thought very much alike, and Jud had probably saved Cash's bacon by cleaning up after him that way, which was exactly why Cash paid him an exorbitant salary.

That was certainly food for thought. She hadn't realized that Cash had been quite that affected when she left. Not that it got him off the hook for what he had done to her last night, but it still gave her something to think about.

"Have you gone to see Danielle?" Patty asked.

"No, I was going to do that this morning, if you can tell me where she is and what room and all that."

Patty frowned at her as she handed her a plate of perfectly scrambled eggs and oatmeal toast with butter and seedless raspberry jam, with the crusts cut off, just as she'd liked as a girl. "Cash didn't tell you all that when you got home last night?"

Sugar's eyes skittered everywhere but Patty's. "Uh, no, we had other things to discuss."

Patty was smart enough to just let that lie. "Why don't you come with me? I'm going to get dinner going, and then head out. You're welcome to come."

They did go together, and Sugar was glad of it, since she'd forgotten more about getting around the Dallas area than she remembered, especially since Cash usually insisted on driving her when she'd lived here previously.

Danielle was conscious and greeted Sugar like a long lost daughter, which she frankly found surprising, but the older woman drifted in and out of consciousness. The nurses that floated in and out of the room with wonderful regularity mentioned that they were simply trying to keep her as comfortable as possible at this stage.

They stayed for several hours, and Sugar held Danielle's hand for the entirety of it. She awoke when they left, and Danielle made her promise that she'd be back tomorrow. Sugar told her she'd come back after dinner, if she liked, and read to her. She

knew that Danielle had a love of the Bronte sisters, which she'd shared with her stepdaughter, so she intended to buy a copy-each of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* on the way home and bring them to read them to her.

They ran into Cash on the way out of the hospital, and Sugar found that, at first, after the initial surprise encounter, she couldn't seem to force herself – no matter how hard she tried – to meet his eyes. She wasn't sure what she was more worried she'd see there, anger or indifference, she just knew she couldn't cope with either of them right now.

But Patty ducked away long enough to hit the ladies' room, leaving the two of them alone.

"How was Danielle?" he asked softly. Sugar looked somehow more frail than he'd seen her last night when she'd been exhausted from the long drive, as if she'd knocked the wind from her own sails by that pretty decent slap she'd delivered to him.

Sugar shrugged her shoulders, still refusing to look at him, but he could see the dark blotches appearing on the front of her shirt and gathered her to him without hesitation, rocking slowly from side to side.

"I know it's hard, sweetie."

It was wrong. His arms shouldn't feel anywhere near as damnably good around her as they always did. She should hate him for what he did to her last night – for the way he took advantage of what he knew about her. She shouldn't have allowed it, but he shouldn't have done it.

Sugar tried to struggle out of his arms, but a mere slight contraction of his muscles and her struggles were rendered useless. "Stop that!" she nearly shrieked.

"Keep your voice down or I'll take you over my lap right here and now." Absolutely calm, but deadly serious. "This is a hospital, for crying out loud. I'm not hurting you, and there's no need to make a scene. I'm just trying to comfort you. So stop being so damned prickly."

Screwing up her courage, Sugar forced herself to look him straight in the eye. "Stop trying to dominate me," she hissed.

For a split second, he looked stunned, then he broke into a wide smile that made Sugar want to wipe off his face with yet another slap.



## Chapter Five

“She was a bit overwrought, seeing Danielle that way,” Cash explained to a returning Patty, who was watching them with a quizzical eye as he turned Sugar loose and began walking towards Danielle’s room before turning back just long enough to say, “Dinner together tonight - the three of us – at the ranch. It’ll be like old times.”

It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

Patty heard her exasperated sigh. “What’s that for?”

Sugar climbed into the passenger’s seat. “Oh, I just hate the way he orders everyone around.”

“No, you hate the way he orders *you* around. Considering that you’ve had a taste of independence these past few years.”

“Okay, and I hate it when you’re right, too,” Sugar sulked.

Patty just laughed.

Dinner was wonderful, as always – steaks marinated in garlic and onions and other secret herbs, a recipe that Patty would never divulge in a million years, served with au gratin potatoes, baby carrots and homemade rolls with honey butter. Sugar had never wondered about it before, but considering what Patty fed him, it was a wonder Cash didn’t weigh a thousand pounds. But then, he was a pretty physical guy. She studied him in what she hoped was a covert way as he sat at the head of the table – another place he’d taken over from her father, with her at his right hand and Patty at his left.

He was a tall man, broad and muscular, and well she knew it. Unlike a lot of his contemporaries, though, he still had a full head of hair, even if it was beginning to be just slightly peppered with the occasional touch of gray. He had a high forehead, which bespoke the intelligence that anyone who spent more than a minute with him never doubted. His eyes were wide set and black as night, along with the brows above them. Every part of his nose was in business for itself, and his lips were fuller than a man’s had a right to be. He shaved twice a day, when he bothered, and if he wasn’t going into the office, he rarely bothered.

That knowledge set Sugar shivering, remembering how he used to enjoy dragging his rough stubble over some very delicate areas on her person.

“Are you cold?” Cash asked solicitously. “I can turn up the heat . . .”

Damn, she wished she could learn how to control her errant body and its telltale signs and signals. He was much too attuned to her for her to get away with even the slightest raise in pulse or soft sigh around him, and out-and-out shivers were entirely too revealing. “No, thank you, I’m fine.” Sugar reached for her soda, suddenly wishing it was a glass of wine, or, better yet, something stronger.

Turning to Patty, she asked, “Do we have any wine?”

Patty was taken aback at the question. “No, we don’t, beyond my cooking wines.”

“We most certainly don’t,” Cash reiterated. “You know how I feel about alcohol, Sugar. Just because you might have become lax living on your own -”

From behind her glass, Sugar murmured, "From what I hear, someone else was pretty *lax* about it after I left. . ."

Cash didn't say a word, only turned his head slowly to settle his gaze on poor Patty, who rose quickly, saying something about getting dessert, and left as quickly as she could. Then he cleared his throat and put his napkin on the table, his dinner still half uneaten. "Do you really want to discuss this now?"

No, she definitely did not. She didn't want to discuss it with him, *ever*, although she had to admit, she did find the idea endlessly intriguing.

Like the coward she was alarmed to find she still was around him, though, she merely shook her head.

"Good. Neither do I, although we have other things to discuss shortly." He put his napkin back in his lap and tucked back into his dinner. Very little deterred Cash from his evening meal. He considered it sacrosanct.

After a few minutes of silence, during which she merely played with her food, he asked with depressing insight, "Did you break a confidence with Patty?"

Sugar began to fidget immediately, a sure sign that he was right. He didn't even bother to let her respond.

"Go into the kitchen and apologize, and then come back and clean your plate. Then we have something to discuss in my study, you and I."

Feeling more and more as if the past three years had never happened, Sugar rose and went to say she was sorry to Patty, who wasn't in the least angry, as long as Cash wasn't mad at her, and he wasn't. She shooed Sugar back to her dinner, before it got cold.

"I can't discuss anything with you after dinner, Cash," she pronounced as she reclaimed her seat, quite happy at being able to foil his plans for what she was sure he intended would be another painful session over his lap. "I promised Danielle I would read to her after dinner." He could hardly object to that.

He didn't. He gave her a look that told her he knew exactly what she was doing, but he didn't make one objection to what she'd said. It may have been for all of the wrong reasons, but Sugar found her salvation in spending time at the hospital with her stepmother. She read to her, and they watched television, as much as Danielle could. Sugar quickly began spending as much time as she could there, only sleeping and having the requisite dinners at the ranch with Cash.

Cash was a more frequent visitor than Sugar would have surmised, and he was wonderfully tender and gentle with Danielle, who sometimes knew who he was and sometimes called him Warren, which Cash never corrected.

As Danielle's time quickly drew near, the three of them stayed with her continuously, and Sugar rarely let go of her hand. One of the last times she was conscious, not long before she left them, was when both Patty and Cash were out of the room.

"Sugar?" her name was a mere croak.

"Yes, Danielle?" She sat forward in order to hear the other woman's weak voice better.

". . . Say this before I go, even though . . . he doesn't want me to."

Both of them knew without her saying who the "he" in question was.

She seemed to summon all of her strength to speak whole sentences. “He loves you. Don’t ever let him tell you he doesn’t.”

He’d never told her that he did, either, but she didn’t say that.

“ . . . Don’t know . . . why you left . . . a necklace . . . he gave you . . . a dainty heart . . . padlocked a silver chain around your neck . . . ”

It was platinum, but she wasn’t about to correct Danielle. She was amazed that her stepmother had even noticed. “Yes, I still have it.”

“Wear it, Sugar. Wear it. Don’t waste time . . . petty things. Love him?”

Sugar nodded, blushing furiously, but she answered firmly. “Yes . . . yes, I do. I have for a long time.” It had been years since she’d acknowledged that fact to anyone, including herself.

“I know. Don’t let time . . . slip through . . . fingers.” The way she said “time” sounded like that or “him”. It could have been either one of them. They both fit.

Sugar stood and hugged the frail body on the bed carefully. “Thank you for those wise words. I won’t.”

When she got home late that night, Sugar could see that the light was still on in Cash’s study, although she made no move to disturb him, slipping quietly by-instead and into her room.

She found herself compelled to find that tiny compartment in her travel jewelry case where she’d tucked the necklace Danielle had been referring to. Although she’d made the decision – after considering it long and hard about a year ago – not to wear it any longer, she was still very superstitious about the necklace he had given her, and kept it tucked in her travel jewelry case so that it was always with her, even when she traveled, like a talisman of sorts.

Besides the fact that it was platinum, it wasn’t a flashy piece, just a plain necklace with a beautiful scrolled heart that locked, holding the two ends of the chain together. She hefted it in her hand as the memories flooded through her, until she wiped away the tears she hadn’t realized she’d been crying and tucked it back into its place, away from her, away from her all too vulnerable heart.

Then Sugar donned her favorite pair of baby doll pajamas and slipped under the covers, falling fast asleep thinking about their history together and when they had first begun to explore those deep, dark longings. Only this night, when she fell into the same memory dream that had haunted her since she’d left him, *this* time it began once he’d brought her up to her bedroom after bringing her to her first several orgasms within his arms

She figured it hadn’t been his first choice, but that he was, as usual, putting her comfort first, knowing that she would be most comfortable in familiar surroundings, even though he was going to look positively ridiculous in her frilly pink bed. At least she had traded up to a queen size not too long ago, so she hoped that he would not be too terribly cramped.

Sugar had been still floating from the force of the paradise he had brought her to multiple times. She had completely lost count of how many crescendos she’d reached; it wasn’t at all important to her, but he had wrung her truly dry, leaving her absolutely incapable of thought or action. If there had been a fire in the house, she would have perished happily, his name on her lips – not that he would have allowed that to happen.

Instead, when he'd decided she had enough ecstasy - for the moment, anyway - he'd cleaned her up as tenderly as a babe and lifted her in his arms, carrying her here, to her room. Then he deposited her gently on her bed, keeping one hand on her at all times as if to remind her that he was always there, lest she begin to feel lost or lonely at any point.

Cash wasn't quite sure whether she was okay or not. She seemed to have nearly passed out, and although he considered that the ultimate compliment, he was still a little worried about her. She hadn't opened her eyes in quite some time, although her breathing was quite regular, and she seemed, for all intents and purposes, incapable of speech. He'd placed her on her side, in deference to her sore rump, and came to rest stretched out in front of her, unable to keep his hand from straying into that gorgeous mass of blonde hair.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, pressing his lips to her forehead in dual purpose, making sure that she wasn't feverish, although he doubted it even as he checked for it, even as he indulged his own relentless desire to touch her.

Sugar nodded, still too utterly exhausted, and, frankly, too mind blown to speak.

Meanwhile, Cash was feeling entirely incapable of keeping his hands and his mouth to himself. He wanted more of her. Hell, he wanted all of her, and he intended to have it. Tonight.

Slowly, very slowly, he moved closer to her, thoroughly enjoying the fact that she was completely naked, whereas he was fully clothed. He intended to revisit that dynamic as often as possible throughout what he hoped would become a permanent relationship, although he did intend to remove his clothes at some point this evening.

But he didn't want to move too quickly and scare her off. He'd waited so long for this exact moment; he knew everything had to be just perfect. His own needs, however long denied, were secondary to hers, and would almost always be in this type of relationship, which was fine with him. Whoever thought that it was the Dom who was the focus in a D/s-style relationship hadn't been in a very good one, as far as he was concerned. This was about Sugar. She had submitted to being spanked by him with very little fuss as a legal adult, a fact which thoroughly amazed him and for which he was most eternally grateful. *She* was the key. She could withdraw her submission at any time - and would always be able to do so. It was *his* job, as her very loving but also very strict Dom, to make sure that all of her needs - for discipline as well as more earthly and practical delights - were more than completely met, so that she would feel no desire to ever withdraw that submission.

It was a lofty challenge - especially with a woman who was as complex as Sugar - but one he was more than up for. He knew he could strike just the right balance for her between the punishment she needed and craved - although he knew he would be hard-pressed to get her to admit to that - and the way he'd made her completely lose control in his study, nearly to the point of fainting.

He wanted more from her - so much more that he doubted she could even imagine -and, if he played his cards right tonight, he might well get it. The study had been a good beginning - better than he'd ever hoped, thanks to her body's positively volcanic responses. But there was so much more to come, and he intended to experience every bit of it with her.

He loved her. He'd loved her for so long that it was something he often forgot to even think about; loving her had become as natural to him as breathing. It was as if it had always been a part of him. Cash couldn't remember his life before she appeared in it. He had waited as patiently as he could for her to mature enough to enter into a relationship like this with him, sweating it out every time she brought a boy home, every time she went back to college, every time she so much as looked at another man, even someone just on the television.

Hell, he'd very nearly punched Jud out when Sugar had brought him chicken soup one time when he'd come down with pneumonia, and Jud was the closest thing to a friend he had.

It wasn't something he was wont to say. He wasn't that type of a man. Instead, he'd poured his love of her out into the strict discipline and waited for the rest..

He suspected that he was smothering her and very nearly driving her away from him, but was unable to stop himself, especially since there had always been those subtle signs she couldn't control regarding just exactly how her body felt about what he was doing to it.

Cash was always hot; he kept his bedroom, but more importantly his study, much cooler than the rest of the house, but if he knew that he was going to have to punish Sugar, he always raised the thermostat, even though he knew it was going to make him sweat. Her comfort was always primarily before his.

Despite the fact that the room was quite warm, her nipples were always peaked beneath her shirt, no matter how severely she was chastised. He had never peeped at nor touched them until this evening, but they were always more than evident, popping boldly out against the t-shirts she favored.

There was also no avoiding the fact that she had her own personal scent, and it called to him on a purely sensual, animal level, each and every time. When he finished disciplining her, the room was bathed in her own natural perfume, even if she had come to him fresh from the shower.

He had seen the most damning evidence, just once, but he'd known it for what it was. He'd accidentally sent the belt flying where it shouldn't have gone; something that he'd always been excruciatingly careful never to do, catching her in a very delicate spot with a resounding *splat*.

After he'd held her and apologized, and told her that that was it for the evening, that he wouldn't be punishing her any further for that transgression, whatever it had been. Then, he had looked at the end of his belt, and it had been soaking wet, bathed in the undeniable proof that her body enjoyed what he was doing, even if her mind might not – and he had doubts about that, too.

Thereafter, he eagerly looked for – and found, on virtually every occasion – some moist, heated spot beneath where she had lain, where she had left the undeniable evidence of her desire behind.

There was no preventing those primitive responses, and they were present no matter how virulently he striped her bottom. As a matter of fact, he found with careful study that the stricter he was, the more she responded. Surprisingly, if he was very strict on one vacation she was more likely to come back to him for the next one than if he was more lenient with her.

So he was inclined to believe that even her mind – if unconsciously – was in cahoots with him.

Perhaps she did love him, a bit, even, as more than she did love a brother, which he'd never, ever thought of himself as, and he'd done his best to discourage her from thinking of him as, too.

Regardless, he intended to indulge himself in all of her this evening, come hell or high water. He'd waited as long as he intended to wait.

Holding her carefully, he gently pressed her onto her back, adoring the whimpers and soft cries that fell from her mouth as her bottom came in contact with her comforter, although he had a few doubts about their sincerity, considering that her duvet was unbearably soft and satiny, but he was feeling indulgent and didn't call her on it.

Instead, he planted a hand on the side of either breast and leaned down to tug a nipple into his mouth, goose flesh rising at the sound of her indrawn breath. Sugar's eyes popped open but she couldn't seem to form a coherent word for the life of her.

Dear God, what did he think he was doing? Her breasts were so sensitive from her last orgasms, she didn't think they could bear being touched, much less suckled as he was doing, march-kissing from one distended peak to the other, drawing it hard into his mouth as his tongue worried-the tip busily.

Yet he met her eyes quite unrepentantly and continued, as if she didn't look as alarmed as she felt at the way her body came to attention at the mere thought that he might want her just the slightest bit. Then one big paw closed around the base of the breast he was worrying and squeezed, forcing it into even further prominence, and hurting her just the slightest bit. Without missing a beat, he insinuated himself between her legs, his belt buckle pressing into her tummy and those jeans scraping against her inner thighs and even much more intimate places as each hand now claimed a quivering mound.

It was about time she found her voice, Sugar thought. She couldn't let him do this to her again, could she? Small hands pressed against the heavy muscles outlined by his black t shirt. But she didn't say no, exactly. After all, she didn't want to discourage him too badly.

“Cash?”

He heard her, despite the fact that her voice was barely above a whisper. Cash was alert to everything about her, and he looked up and caught her eye immediately, his smile comforting.

“Yes, baby?”

For all she was worth, she couldn't think of anything to say. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Cash cradled her head in his hands. “You don't have to be scared, Sugar. We're going to make love. I will *always* take care of you. You are the most important thing in my world.”

It was the closest thing he'd ever said to “I love you,” and it made her want to cry.

Cash held her tightly for a long moment, and then resumed what he had been doing before, gauging Sugar's responses carefully, knowing that he was ready to go off like a rocket at any time at all, but wanting to make absolutely sure that she was with him when he did.

So he had set out to bring her back to the point she'd been before he'd allowed her to explode in his arms in that magical, wonderful way in his study. He'd adored seeing how completely unfettered she was in the throes of the almost violent culminations he'd driven her to, and he wanted to see that again, only he wanted to be inside her this time-

She was delightfully shy with him in this new aspect of their relationship, and he found himself as enchanted with that as he was with nearly every other aspect of her he'd ever encountered – except perhaps for her penchant for not bringing dirty dishes into the kitchen from her room and her tendency to prefer sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory* over the news when they watched television together.

At one point, she began plucking at his shirt, as if she wanted him to take it off, and he reached down and shucked it off in one impatient movement, immediately taking her hands and placing them on his chest as if he needed them there in order to take his next breath. “You can always touch me when we’re like this. Believe me, there’s absolutely no wrong way to do it, and there’s never anything I want more than your hands on me.”

He said it with such reverence that she believed him. His chest was broad and hard, with just a light down of hair that was lighter in color than the hair on his head. She ran her fingers through it immediately, finding and teasing his nipples without wondering whether he'd like it or not, just doing it because she knew it felt good to her. His groan of unmitigated pleasure was more than enough encouragement for her to continue, even leaning up to flick each of the tiny points with the very tip of her tongue until he practically roared his approval and pressed her back down onto the bed.

“That’s enough of that, Miss Maillheux, or this will be over before it’s begun.”

Sugar felt a bit of a high at the idea that she could bring him to the same heights to which he brought her. She made an aborted attempt to reclaim her former position, until he began kissing his way down the very center of her tummy, as if there was an arrow pointing to that part of her that positively wept for his kiss.

But her mind wasn't at all ready for him to go there yet, and her hands had already begun grabbing for his hair to pull him back up. She was beginning to think she had the body of a whore and the mind of a prude, but Cash wasn't going to allow her to find solace in either state, unless that was what he wanted for her.

## Chapter Six

As soon as he felt her fingers touch his head and curl into his hair, he knew what she was about. “Don’t you dare pull my hair, Sugar, or I’ll flip you over and use your hairbrush on your backside, regardless of what you already got this evening.”

Damn him! Although it looked like an antique family heirloom, Cash had a hairbrush especially made for her – to his exact specifications, of course – and had given it to her last year for Christmas, in front of the family. No one but the two of them had realized that it served a dual purpose. It was made of a gorgeous, rich mahogany, and it had her name, Sugar, embellished in gold script on the back.

It was, as far as she was concerned, too big for either purpose, but it was a beautiful brush, and he had insisted that she use it for her hair, but he had also used it on several occasions for the real reason he had purchased it. There it resided on her dressing table, not five feet from where they lay currently, within easy reach of his hand, should he decide to punish her at any time while they were here, and it wasn’t the only implement he’d required her to keep in her bedroom, either. He had many choices, should he decide he needed to take her down that road, and Sugar knew it.

She sighed exasperatedly and whined a bit, as much as she dared knowing the proximity of the brush, but left her fingers where they were, as if the illusion of control helped her deal with what he was going to do to her somehow.

He quite liked her fingers right where they were, and continued his journey to more interesting territory. He arranged them on a more diagonal slant across the bed so that his tall frame had more support, then he saw that she had demurely closed her legs and had even gone so far as to cross her ankles during the process, probably hoping he wouldn’t notice, or at least comment.

“Do you want me to get the brush, little lady?” he asked, his hand draped over her ankles.

Why did her clit contract when he said things like that, in that deep, soft tone of his that had her bottom throbbing, too, as if he’d already done what he’d threatened and taken it to her still terribly sore bum in retribution for her impertinence? Her hands had already slid compulsively around and under her butt, as if to protect it from that perceived – and entirely viable – threat.

Sugar shook her head slowly back and forth, whispering a “no” that he could barely hear.

“All right then. Why don’t you just leave your hands right where they are, then, behind your back, and open your legs right now.”

Her “no” became much more strident at the restriction he’d placed on her hands, having to keep them beneath her for the foreseeable future, and now also having to open herself to him voluntarily, as if she was offering him those tender bits that so wanted his attention. Her feet parted at a snail’s pace, until he began to lean towards the vanity, and then she yelped and separated them about a foot apart.

“Wider, Sugar, and I’m not going to tell you again. I’m just going to get up and get it, and you’re going to be one very unhappy young lady.”

She hated being called a young lady. It was something someone said to a recalcitrant little girl, and she was a day shy of being twenty-one. Sugar stubbornly



chose to completely ignore the fact that her nether parts had contracted on hearing him say that, too.

Whining was not allowed, either, although she could get away with a very small amount of it, and she knew she was pushing the envelope as she keened at him impotently. Still, she blushed very furiously as she finally set her ankles well apart.

Almost too calmly and softly, "Bend your knees."

Her eyes flew to his in outrage, but all she saw was that one eyebrow had risen imperiously, and she knew better than to push him any further.

"Good girl," he complimented when she had achieved what he considered to be an acceptable position, kissing his way up from each delicate foot as he brought first one leg and then the other up and over his obscenely broad shoulders. This held her naturally very open to him, as he then claimed a spot he intended to become much more acquainted with in the future, ending up with his mouth millimeters from that delicately hirsute, intensely private area.

Sugar could feel his warm breath on her, and she nearly climaxed right then and there, to her own amazement. She would have sworn he had wrung her completely out earlier, but apparently she was very, very wrong. The man seemed to know her body better than she did, on many different levels. It was thoroughly embarrassing – again, on so many different levels-that she wanted to turn over and bury her head in the pillows.

Again, Cash could hear her sighs and those sounds she made in the back of her throat, the almost moans that had him on the very verge of ecstasy, too, the ones that told him that he was on the right path with her. He used his left hand to hold her open, splaying his index and middle fingers between her folds, inciting a round of pleas from her that he not do that, which he ignored in favor of saying, in a hypnotic, but still commanding voice, "You're safe, Sugar. I only want to bring you pleasure. Close your eyes and try to relax."

'He only wanted to bring her pleasure yet he kept threatening her with the brush!' she thought, although she did as she was told and closed her eyes. Her hands were still trapped uselessly beneath her, and her legs were thrown over his shoulders, which held them very indelicately open, indeed. There was nothing she could do against him, anyway, and her body was desperate that she not screw this up by thinking about it too much, so she did her best to forget the fact that he was staring at her most intimate spot and she'd been rendered completely helpless to prevent him from doing so.

If he lived a thousand years, Cash would never tire of the fact that she seemed to love each and every little thing he did for and to her. She was literally seeping down onto the comforter; he could see a small dark spot beneath her bottom where her own moisture had darkened the fabric, and it was still springing forth from her at a very complimentary rate.

She was very ready for him, but he intended that she be even more so.

That little button of hers was making her body weep for him, and he intended to satisfy it yet again, although, in the future, he might not be quite as generous in that area as he was being now. This was a special situation - a very special situation.

His first taste of her was like the first glass of Cristal he had at a friend's wedding. He didn't drink as a rule, but he could certainly appreciate a fine vintage on a special occasion. He hadn't done this for any women in quite some time, but she was the best

vintage he could ever - would ever - experience, because she was all his. Every single bit of her.

When his mouth claimed her, taking every last inch of her all at once, enclosing her in that moist warmth then rubbing the flat back of his tongue against her slowly, she could find no respite from the sensations he was conjuring within her. Sugar very nearly broke two rules: the one he'd just given her about where her hands needed to be, because she nearly came right then and there, which broke the second rule he'd given her earlier, and her hands wanted to be free to hold onto him for dear life.

She reeled herself back from the brink, but just barely, stiffening her body, reaching wildly in her mind for something terribly boring to think about other than what was happening to with her at this exact moment.

Cash realized immediately what was going on and eased back, removing his mouth but not very far away, asking, "Do you remember your rule?"

"Y-yes, Sir."

She was already breathing very heavily, as if she had already come, although he now knew she was much too loud to have done that without his knowledge.

"Good girl."

Sugar made that sound of mute protest she always did when he praised her like that, reminding her of the submissive status that they had yet to formalize, but which he hoped to accomplish tonight, amongst other, pressing things.

"Well, you may come right now if you can, because this is a special occasion." 'Because I don't think I can hold out very much longer, either', he thought to himself, but didn't say it.

Sugar didn't want to think about what might happen when it *wasn't* a special occasion.

Cash, having given her permission to find her bliss, had an idea about delaying things for her in a more natural way, and as his mouth found its place again, his tongue washing gently over and over every inch of her delicacies, but at the same time, his left hand wasn't stationary as it had been. Instead, it began to move downwards, to the font of her juices, and one thick finger pressed gently yet insistently at the untried opening it found there, testing to see just exactly how well seated her virginity was.

But it succeeded almost all too well in diverting her attention from what his mouth was doing, because she stiffened immediately and tried unsuccessfully to back away from him, although she really couldn't in the position in which he'd placed her.

"Shh, shh, shh. I'm not going to hurt you, sweetie. Really."

If there was one thing she could say for Cash, it was that he had always been completely upfront with her, especially about whether or not something involved discomfort. If something was going to hurt, he never lied and told her it was going to be painless. Sugar had fallen off a horse and had to get stitches once, and he'd told her that the shot they were going to give her was going to hurt until it began to numb her, and he'd let her squeeze his hand to compensate. He'd told her that getting braces was going to hurt a bit at times, and it had. She'd always been able to trust him about things like that.

So she relaxed, and let him continue what he was doing, and once she'd done that, she began to forget what his fingers were doing and concentrate on what his lips and

tongue were up to, until she found herself nearly begging him to continue, chanting the word “please” as if her life depended on it.

“That’s it, sweetie,” he crooned, surfacing for just a second to whisper encouragement, “come for me.”

It was as if she had been waiting for him to tell her to do it, because seconds later, she nearly flew off the bed, and then almost twisted his head off with the contractions in her thighs.

Cash bravely rode out the storm, then divested himself of the rest of his clothes and positioned himself between her legs, the head of his cock presented at the opening to her body, where no other man had ever been. He looked up and framed her face with his hands. “I’m sorry this is going to hurt you. I’d take the pain on myself if I could. I’ll make it as easy on you as I can.”

With that, he kissed her deeply and began to press himself inside her, slowly but deliberately maintaining a steady pressure until that tiny tissue gave way and he was able to fit himself completely within her.

She was so tight he could barely contain himself, but his first thought was for her, despite the fact that all he wanted to do was wallow in the ultimate gift of being inside her.

“Are you all right?” It took everything he had in him to remain still, but Cash leaned back a little to look into her eyes, and saw that she was crying, then hugged her tight. “I’m sorry it hurt, baby. I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, it didn’t, not much, I . . . I just . . . it’s so . . .”

Cash had to chuckle. “Yes, yes it is, isn’t it?” he agreed. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.” He began to move, very slowly, in and out, watching her all the time for signs of discomfort, but there were none. “Watch my eyes, Sugar. Watch my eyes as I love you,” he said, never taking his eyes off of her, either as he merged their bodies into one.

Sugar’s arms crept from behind her back and around him, trying to span his shoulders unsuccessfully but settling instead for his neck, holding onto him for dear life as he took her to the stars again, but this time with him, joining him as he threw back his head and groaned her name as he spilled himself within her.

Sugar had never felt anything like this. He had filled her, completed her, as no one ever had, and yet, at the same time, it was almost too much and she nearly told him to stop, but she couldn’t quite get the words out. So what she’d ended up doing was just hanging on for dear life, simply letting him do to her as he pleased, and it ended up pleasing her, too.

In the afterglow, she thought she’d never get her fill of the way he cradled her to him, kept her near him, refusing to allow even the slightest space between them. When he felt the chill bumps on her arms, he drew the coverlet over her in the dark, not feeling the cold himself in the least.

Her hands had grabbed for him compulsively. “You’re not leaving me, are you?” she asked, hoping she didn’t sound as desperate to him as she did to her own ears.

“Oh, no,” he growled possessively. “You thought I was annoying before. You’re going to have a hell of a time trying to get rid of me now.”

Sugar didn’t find that a bad prospect at all.

He made love to her twice more that night, although not always in the same manner, ever careful of her novice status, trying to make sure he didn't aggravate her condition. Just before dawn, however, he allowed himself a second, full taste of her, in all of the various possible meanings of that word. When they were lying again, exhausted in each other's arms, he pulled out a box, from where she didn't know, and held it up to her.

She could just barely see the long dark velvet box in the dim light of dawn. "What is it?" she asked, not sure if she was relieved that it wasn't an engagement ring or not.

"Open it and find out, silly."

For once, she was more than content to do as he ordered.. Inside the box was a beautiful chain of what she thought was silver, with a gorgeous, dainty heart locket pendant that, when she hefted it she realized was solid. "It's beautiful! Thank you."

"Do you understand the significance of it?" he asked.

It was Sugar's turn to raise an eyebrow at him. She was not one to miss the emotional significance of a piece of jewelry, but he had her here.

"No," she said cautiously, drawing the word out, "I don't believe I do."

Cash sat up, completely unconcerned at his nakedness, and faced her. "It's a collar. For all intents and purposes, you've been submitting to me since you turned eighteen and agreed to live here voluntarily under my rules," he caught her eye as he added, "and allowing me to spank you pretty harshly when you didn't obey them." She colored prettily, all over, when she blushed like that.

"But this would make it more official. You would be wearing my collar."

He didn't know what kind of response he'd been expecting, but her underwhelming look wasn't it. "Just how many other women wear your collar?" She'd explored bdsm online a bit, and knew that few Masters were truly exclusive, and that most men who called themselves Masters were just playing at it, at best.

Truly taken aback at her question, he answered immediately and truthfully. "No one. Ever. Haven't you noticed, Sugar?"

"Noticed what?"

Cash sighed. Sometimes she could be woefully oblivious. "How many dates have I been on since you've known me?"

This should be easy. He was a hot stud in her book and in the books of nearly every woman who'd ever been within a nine-mile radius of him. There had to have been a zillion of them. She just couldn't bring them to mind right now.

"Well, there was . . ." But she couldn't come up with one name. Not one, no matter how she wracked her brain.

She found her chin in his hand. "I don't want you to feel pressured or forced about this at all. I'll do my best to keep my hands to myself while you're deciding, although I'm not making any promises." He managed to look both sheepish and bold at the same time, somehow. "Keep the necklace, and bring it to me when you decide what you want. I want to put it on you." He bent down and kissed her deeply, then tucked her into bed. "You've been up all night, and you should get some sleep." Sugar felt him kiss her forehead lightly, then he closed her bedroom door and left, and she was still clutching both the box and the necklace.

The man was annoyingly sure about the outcome, despite the fact that he'd told her he'd let her make up her own mind.

The problem was that he'd been right . . .

"Sugar. Sugar. Wake up, Sugar."

Someone, who was in her dream but not in her dream now was shaking her and calling her name.

"Sugar." Louder and more demanding this time. It could only be Cash. "Wake up."

She sat bolt upright, her hands clutching the comforter over her chest as if he was there to accost her or something. It earned her an instant, dark frown.

"It's Danielle. We need to go." He said no more than that and vacated the room.

The three of them – including Patty – made the somber drive to the hospital. It was Sugar that, upon seeing Danielle's condition, asked Cash to begin reading from where she had left off in *Jane Eyre*. Danielle's favorite part was when Mr. Rochester had just proposed to Jane and they were so happy together, prior to her discovery of the first Mrs. Rochester. Sugar had climbed onto the bed with Danielle and held her as she drew her last breaths, not more than an hour or so after they arrived.

Despite their emotional – and physical - distance while she was alive, they had grown closer as she parted from this world, and Danielle had been the last link to Sugar's beloved father. After being so strong while it was happening, she pretty much fell apart once Danielle was gone, and Cash took over from there, carrying her from the room and holding her hand as he drove them all home, barely taking his eyes off her long enough to drive.

She clung to him through out the small wake and funeral for Danielle Hamilton Daughtrey Maillheux, who was buried next to Sugar's father, the last man she had called husband, and the one, Cash suspected, that she had loved the most, as she hadn't married again after he departed this Earth.

Although attendance at both the wake and the funeral was kept small, the reception after the funeral had grown much larger than expected. Both the Maillheux and the Daughtrey – although mostly the Daughtrey – names had become well known and well respected in the state thanks to Cash, and everyone who was anyone wanted to pay their respects to Cash's family. He knew she didn't want to do it, but Sugar stood up with him like a trooper, meeting all of his business and political associates in one fell swoop over that afternoon.

She was also surprised at the number of her old friends who reappeared, especially the ones who said they wanted to reconnect with her after losing touch once she moved to Knoxville. It might have been a faux pas considering the reason they were all there, but she obtained a lot of cell phone numbers and email addresses, and many offers to have lunch together before she went home, that she truly hadn't been expecting.

No one thought it was in the least unusual that the stepbrother had his arm around his stepsister throughout the whole thing. They just commented on how wonderfully close the two had always been.

He had had the affair catered, so that Patty didn't have to work. All of the food and drink was brought in, and the setup and clean up were taken care of, although he knew it wouldn't be enough for an old fussbudget like her. She'd be going around after them as if they hadn't already done the vacuuming and washing up for her, but he wanted to make sure she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to do.

She was as much a member of the family, as far as he was concerned, as Sugar was – hell, she pre-dated the both of them in this house- so she deserved every possible respect he could give her. There was absolutely no question about whether or not she would continue in her present position. The place couldn't function without her.

Afterwards, the three of them collapsed in the den, the two women on the couch and Cash in his big leather recliner.-Cash reached over to tap the side of Sugar's shoe where it rested on the old worn out coffee table.

"You should probably be heading off to bed. You look exhausted."

There was a time when that would have been sufficient for her to trot obediently off to bed.

That time was over, though, apparently. "You look at least as tired as I feel. You shook hands with tons more people. When did you get to know all those pols? Since when did you start voting Republican?"

"Wasn't it Winston Churchill who said that if you're twenty and not a Democrat then you don't have a heart, but if you're thirty and you're not a Republican then you don't have a brain?"

He looked over at Sugar, and realized that she was beginning to rival him in the frowning department. "Frowning is going to give you premature wrinkles."

"No, that's just you. *You're* going to give me premature wrinkles, just like I gave you all that prematurely gray hair. Stop trying to change the subject. You never did answer my question."

"Who said I was voting Republican?" he asked, wearing an unrepentant grin.

"Most of the people I shook hands with were -" His smile just got bigger. Sugar sighed in exasperation. She might as well go to bed. She wasn't going to get a straight answer out of him. "All right, all right. I give up. I'm going to bed. I have to start thinking about when I'm going to tell work I'm coming back, so I should probably be up early tomorrow, anyway, to call in and talk to my boss."

## Chapter Seven

“Surely they’ll give you a week at least – she was your stepmother, after all,” Cash asked, sounding somewhat alarmed at her plans.

Sugar shrugged. “Yeah, they probably will. I haven’t asked what the funeral leave is. Ty – my boss - is really generous though – he just told me to take what I needed, as paid time, bless his heart.”

Her boss had damned well better be generous, Cash thought, but he wisely kept it to himself. “You’ll need to extend it for the reading of the will – no sense in coming back down here, but I know it won’t be ready until week after next or so.” He’d make damned good and sure about that.

He really didn’t like her frowning so much. He couldn’t remember that she’d done that much when she was living with him – except, of course, in the face of a punishment. “I’m not sure I can take that much time off of work, but I’ll ask. ‘ Night, everyone.”

She had no sooner toddled off to bed than Cash rose and headed for his study, looking like a thundercloud, saying, “I have some calls to make.”

Patty, suddenly left to her own devices, picked up the copy of *Jane Eyre* that had been left on the coffee table and began reading.

It turned out that Sugar had had nothing to worry about in regards to her job. Ty was almost too happy to give her more than enough time off. In fact, he’d done an unprecedented thing and told her to just call him when she wanted to come back, and to take all of the time as paid. It put her radar up, but she couldn’t think of why, except that she didn’t think anyone else in the small publishing company had ever gotten quite that level of treatment from their boss. Ty was nice, but it was completely understandable that he needed his employees there, and if they weren’t going to be there, that they take their time off as unpaid.

But he couldn’t be deterred, so Sugar agreed, although she was very conflicted as she hung up the phone. She didn’t have much time to ponder it, though, because almost as soon as she put the phone in the cradle, it rang again, and although her first impulse was to pick it up, she had to remind herself that she didn’t live here any more, and she let Patty get it.

Seconds later, she heard a soft knock at her door. “Sugar? It’s Willow Montgomery for you.”

She and Willow had been best friends in high school and on through college, but they, like many of her friends, had lost contact when she moved away. They had talked a lot at Danielle’s reception. Sugar picked up the phone. “Hello, Willow?”

“Hi! I hope you don’t think I’m being gauche to call so soon after . . . you know, your stepmother and all that, but I really want to get together with you, and I’m going to be leaving town shortly to go back home to Arkansas. Like I told you, I just came down for my Daddy’s birthday and heard about Danielle.”

“Well, we thank you for coming. I don’t know what the rules are, either, but I’d love to see you, too.”

“How does tomorrow for lunch at Sundae’s sound?”

She named their favorite haunt from high school, and Sugar was amazed it was still in business, and agreed immediately to meet her there. When she hung up, she was glad to realize that Willow had sounded at least as excited as she felt.

There was another, much less tentative knock at her door, and she had no doubt exactly who it was. She donned a fluffy pink robe ~~on~~ and opened the door to Cash, who was leaning against the door jamb expectantly.

“Up and at ‘em, girlie girl. I want you to come out on the range with me today.”

It was on the tip of Sugar’s tongue to say no to him, and he seemed to realize that fact.

“Unless you’ve gotten too soft,” he threw out casually, knowing she wouldn’t be able to resist the challenge. He was barely able to restrain himself from reaching inside the folds of that robe to feel just how wonderfully soft she really was.

It had been a long time since she had been on a horse. More than that, she knew better than to think that Cash had just forgotten that she’d slapped him for overstepping his bounds the first night she was home – back. She mentally chided herself for starting to think of this place as home again. It wasn’t. Home was her beautiful apartment in Knoxville. It was not here, and it was most definitely not with him, despite what Danielle seemed to have been implying.

But she’d been so cooped up over the past week that the idea of being out on a horse, annoying the cattle – which was what Cash teasingly said she did, although she had actually been a pretty good cowgirl in her own right – sounded pretty darned good.

“All right,” she nodded. “I’ll be down shortly.”

“Better make it quick. I’m leaving in fifteen minutes.”

She shut the door in his face. It was just like him to invite her, and then put a time limit on when she needed to get there.

As she pulled out a pair of well worn jeans and a t shirt she didn’t care much about, searching in the back of her closet for her boots, she remembered – and every inch of her came to full alert when she did - the fact that he had a fondness for giving her time limits about other things, too.

It had taken her several days of deep thinking about the necklace to come to a decision, and she had to appreciate the fact that Cash hadn’t tried to influence her thinking at all. Well, not much anyway.

He’d not been able to stop himself from catching her in the hallway occasionally and indulging the both of them in some soul deep kisses, and he insisted that she cuddle up to him whenever they were sitting on the couch together, watching TV, but, for the most part, he’d let her ruminate on her own.

He seemed to have supreme confidence in the outcome she would reach, although Sugar had no such certainty. She was young, and she had a great urge to get away from the ranch. Not from Cash in particular, surprisingly, but just to strike out on her own and make her own way in the world. What he offered was mighty tempting, however. She loved her home, loved the area, and most of all, she loved Cash.

Being submissive to him was as natural to her as breathing, apparently. She had been submissive before she even knew what the word really meant, and now he was offering her more than that. Not quite the whirlwind proposal and romance she might



have envisioned, but something that spoke to her deeply, that she knew both her body and her mind – if she admitted the truth to herself – craved exactly what he was dangling in front of her, in a very secret part of herself.

Who better to explore this kind of thing with than Cash, whom she trusted implicitly? She'd been in online BDSM chat rooms and on the message boards and had even considered attending a munch, but she always backed out of it. For despite all of the precautions she knew she would take if she chose to become involved with another dominant man, she also knew she would never be as inherently safe with him – or treasured by him – as she would be with Cash.

So she had asked to speak with him one evening, after dinner, and they had retired to his study. He took his usual seat behind the desk, one booted foot resting on his knee, and she nervously came around the end of it to kneel in front of him, not really knowing why she assumed quite that position, although it did feel rather natural and right.

Cash didn't say a word, but she knew she had his full attention. The box which contained the necklace was in her hands. Sugar cleared her throat nervously and looked up at him. It was a surprisingly long way. His index finger was lying across his lips, and he was staring down at her pensively.

"I – I have some questions before I give you my answer."

He laced his fingers over his stomach. "Go ahead."

"Is there a time period for this commitment? I mean, when does it end?"

"It ends when either of us decides it does."

"But, if I'm submissive to you, how do I – how can I –?"

Although he hated the questions she was asking – that she was asking him about the end of their relationship before it had even begun – he was glad she was asking them. Cash leaned forward in his chair, closer to her. "But you *always* have the right to rescind the permission you give me to be your Dominant. It's not something I'm taking from you; it's something you're giving to me. I'm not usurping your free will in making you my submissive, Sugar. I'm merely bending it to mine."

"I'd like more of a clarification about exactly what would be expected of me, then."

Cash reached out and took a tendril of her hair to play with.

"Well, I don't want a zombie or a robot, and as much as the idea sounds intriguing for a day or even a weekend, perhaps, I don't want to control your every move, twenty-four/seven." He smiled at her abashed look. Apparently she hadn't thought about quite that level of control. "I don't think things have to change much at all around here. All of the rules you currently live under will stay the same, although you can expect that there will be some more . . . intimate ones." He thought for a moment, then continued, "We're going to be sleeping together, so I'd like you to move into my room, and I don't expect to hear the word 'no' from you quite as often as I do now, at least not without dire consequences . . ." he grinned again, hoping she realized he was joking.

But she wasn't smiling. She was looking kind of pained, actually, so he hurried to explain further. "Basically, I want you to wear my collar, and submit to me when I expect you to."

"To what kind of things would I be submitting, though?"

Cash held out his hand to her and, although she was biting her lip as she did it, Sugar put hers into his and he helped her up. Seconds later, he had locked the door and divested her of every stitch of clothing.

Sugar, who was not at all used to being nude in front of him, was desperately trying, with absolutely no success at all, to cover herself. He'd put her clothing away neatly in one of his drawers, and all she had left were her hands, but she found she was entirely too well endowed to accomplish her task, and was quite near tears in the attempt.

Very, very softly, but with a core of steel, he casually murmured into her ear, almost in passing, "Put your hands at your sides, Sugar."

Her eyes darted to his, and found sincere warmth there, but no solace. He would not relent, and she knew it, and, somehow, there was safety in that knowledge.

Still, her hands remained where they were, her breasts overflowing out of one of them, the other trying to shield the maidenhood to which he'd already laid claim.

She was unprepared for the two tremendous swats her indecision had earned her, one on each cheek. "I won't wait forever, Sugar."

Slowly, so slowly it was hard to see – but even harder to do, he knew – those hesitant hands began to wander away from the areas they had been trying so hard to guard, leaving them where he had commanded, at her sides, her head bowed as if in disgrace.

But he couldn't bear that, so he lifted it with his index finger beneath her chin. "Chin up, always. You're a beautiful woman, and I won't have you trying to slump and hide it from me. *That* is a punishable offense. Straighten your shoulders and back." He came to stand before her, his eyes sweeping over her in approval, then trying to meet hers, but they skittered away. "Ah-ah-ah. Look me in the eye. *That's* it."

Dear God, she was going to be expected to stand in front of him, naked, and meet his eyes while she was doing it?

"This, too, is submitting, Sugar," he said, as if he was reading her mind.

Then he began to touch her, all over, sometimes in a neutral area, like her shoulders, or her belly, sometimes a very sensitive area – squeezing each breast or cupping her mons - that made her raise her arm as if she would prevent him from doing so. Each time she made any motion that sought to interfere with his access to her body, she received another crisp smack to each cheek.

At one point, he stepped behind her, pressing his entire clothed body against hers, his lips to her ear, as each of his hands captured a breast and teased and tormented it, tugging and rolling those distended nubs as she tried to remain still beneath his sensual caresses.

"That's it, Sugar," he whispered into her ear as one long arm reach down her tummy to those plump lips, his middle finger sliding easily between them. "Mmm. You are sopping wet, young lady."

She thought she was going to faint dead away as his finger found its target and began rubbing ceaselessly while his other hand kept busy moving from full breast to full breast, red, crested nipple to nipple, pinching hard and pulling it away from her body, making her moan with pleasure and cry out from the pain at the same time.

Then he stopped, withdrawing himself from her entirely, taking several steps away, and she felt like an ancient native during an eclipse – bereft of the warmth of her

sun. But she remained still, although it was one of the hardest things she'd ever done in her life.

"Grab your necklace and follow me."

Sugar did as she was told, but stopped at the door. "What about Patty?"

"This is poker night. She's at her sister's till late." He didn't mention that she should have trusted him to have thought about that, but he would take that up with her shortly.

They didn't end up in her room, as she'd expected, but rather in his, where she'd very rarely been. It was a huge room, decorated in warm earth tones, very masculine and imposing with a large four-poster bed that was incredibly high, just about exactly waist height on her. It made Sugar shiver just to be in there, and, of course, he noticed and turned up the heat before returning to Sugar and guiding her over to the bed.

He put a small seat cushion that had some kind of strange blue paper covering over it at the edge of the bed, then said, "Bend over, sweetie. We're not nearly through with you. In fact, I think you need a little refresher for your hesitation at the door."

Sugar, who had already placed herself in what she – and her already flaming bottom – desperately hoped was the correct position, lifted her head up enough to say, "What hesitation?" She was also thinking "What refresher?" but she didn't dare ask it.

Not answering her at first, Cash instead said, "You stay right where you are, and put your head down."

It seemed as if he was gone for years, but it had to have been mere minutes. When he returned, she was facing away from the door and she couldn't see what he carried in his hand, and she wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Now, since you're new at this, I'm going to help you a bit. Later on, I won't be so nice." He reached under the bed and produced two straps. At the end of each was a fluffy, depressingly comfortable-looking cuff, which he proceeded to apply to her wrists, rendering her, essentially, immobile. The bed was so tall that, when she bent over it, her toes didn't touch the carpet, so her legs were less than useless, and now she was completely defenseless against anything he decided to do to her.

She knew he could be very creative when the spirit moved him.

Something somewhat heavy and she thought probably wooden was placed across the small of her back. "You asked what hesitation. I mean the way you questioned me at the door when we were leaving the study. You have to learn to trust me. My job is to keep you safe, and I will – I promise you – think of things like whether or not Patty's home. I won't go parading you around naked in front of her, or the neighbors. The only ways I want to embarrass you or humiliate you are the good ways, and I know you wouldn't consider either of those to be good. Give me a little credit for knowing you pretty well after all these years, Sugar."

"Yes, Sir," she peeped.

"So you're going to receive a light punishment for that little faux pas. Light because it's new to you to trust me in this way. But you won't always be able to use the 'new' card, honey, and I decide when that expires."

Yeee-oww! It was her hairbrush.

He'd gone and gotten her hairbrush from her room, damn him. If this was light, she didn't want to feel heavy! He was smacking her so hard and fast she barely had time

to react to any of the swats, except to try, with absolutely no success whatsoever, to avoid them. Unable to obtain purchase under her feet, she was going nowhere fast.

But he was! The brush moved up and down her bottom and thighs, sometimes delivering two rapid fire slaps in the exact same spot, then moving on to a more virginal area, until her backside had been roasted to his specifications, “light punishment” or not.

Finally, he put the hairbrush down, right near her head, as if to remind her that he could pick it up again at any time. He then did something he’d never done to her before: he began to examine her bottom closely, touching it, feeling the heat rising off of it, commenting, as if to himself, about the coloring, rubbing it, completely ignoring her indignant squeaks and squeals as he treated her like a prime piece of horseflesh.

Then he gave her four more swats with his open palm, right at the spot where he’d landed the most blows already, saying, “That’s enough protesting, Sugar. If I want to admire my handiwork, it’s not for you to sass me about it.”

Her mouth snapped closed like a trap after that. Everything in her wanted to defend herself – she most certainly had *not* been sassing him. How could someone who hadn’t said a word be sassing? But she knew that would just get her into even more trouble. That hairbrush was entirely too close for her comfort. Heck, his *palm* was too close for her comfort, too, but there wasn’t much she could do about that, she supposed.

When he was through, and it seemed to her that he had definitely taken his time, he untied her hands, but she didn’t move, because he hadn’t given her permission to do so.

“Good girl. Stand up.”

She did, not paying much attention to him as he removed the pillow and its weird piece of paper, trying to remember not to hunch, although it was going to take a lot of practice and remembering. Sugar watching him – not knowing if it was allowed, but he hadn’t said anything against it – as he made a new arrangement on the bed, using a triangular backrest pillow. He placed it face down near the end of the bed, so that its arms were splayed beneath it, and its highest point was pointed towards the end of the bed.

Sugar didn’t even want to imagine what he was going to do with that, but, as she’d suspected, she ended up over it seconds later, feeling abominably exposed because, of course, he’d required that she position herself so that her knees were at the ends of the pillow’s arms. Her hips hung over the very crest of the thing, so that she was displayed to him in a truly atrociously raw and open manner, so much so that she earned herself another handful of tear inducing spanks for her reluctance to assume the position he favored.

She could see why he liked it. She would be completely available to him in every possible way – to be given pain or pleasure as he saw fit, no fuss, no muss.

When she was finally arranged to his liking, he bound her there – wrists together and leashed to the headboard, each splayed leg looped at the knee with something soft and comfortable, but nevertheless sturdy that prevented her – as if the huge pillow wasn’t enough – from closing them until he decided to release her.

Then he came to sit near her head and showed her that familiar piece of blue paper that had covered the pillow he’d put in front of her hips as He had her bent over the bed, punishing her with her own blasted hairbrush.

“I just wanted you to see it with your own eyes, Sugar.”

The majority of the paper was the same blue it had been when she'd first seen it, but there was also a good sized spot of bright pink, right where her . . .

"This is leak detection paper. When wetness hits it, it turns pink." He leaned over and patted her bottom, then reached between her legs to further emphasize exactly what kind of liquid had caused the pink stain.

She should have been mortified and humiliated, and embarrassed beyond belief. She was. But she couldn't really feel any of it past what he was doing, there, where she'd most wanted him to touch her. Obviously.

Cash hadn't intended to hurt her by showing her the blatant evidence of her body's response to him. The paper was crumpled into a ball and thrown across the room, which was very unlike every neatnik impulse he possessed, but this was about her, not neatness, right now.

"Can you read my clock from where you are?"

It was an unusual question, but she lifted her head and answered dutifully, "Yes, Sir."

"That's good. Because you have exactly three minutes to come from when I say go, Sugar. I'm going to set the alarm on my watch to coincide with the clock you can see. I'll do my very best for you, but if you don't come in three minutes, I'm going to use the hairbrush on you again for another good, long minute. Then you'll have two minutes to come. The same thing applies if you don't obey me then, an additional minute of hairbrushing. Then you'll have only one minute to come. If you don't come after that, I'm going to give you a very thorough thrashing and send you to bed unfulfilled.

## Chapter Eight

“Bed?” was all she said. Nothing more. It was only seven-thirty! But it was the tone in which she said it, one that called his intelligence into question, and was decidedly disrespectful.

The spanking began immediately, and continued for some time. “Yes, bed. Although I might not want to exert my influence over every area of your life, as I said, there are some situations in which I will most definitely give you rules to obey, and a bedtime is one of them.”

He’d always hated it that she tended to go to bed late. He was an early riser and was usually in bed and asleep by eleven, unless there was something unexpected going on, and he preferred that Sugar do the same. However, as she got older, he eased up on her about that, and she had begun going to sleep whenever she damned well pleased, although she knew, it irked him to no end.

Considering the spanking she had just gotten, on top of everything else, she didn’t dare protest the way she wanted to. Nevertheless, she was certainly yelling at him loudly enough in her head.

The man was so egotistical, to boot! He was already assuming that she was going to let him collar her, as if it was a done deal. She should never have knelt in front of him. It had given him ideas.

She heard something viscous squirt out of a tube, and saw the K-Y drop to the bed. “It’s not that you’re not wet enough, sweetie, because you most certainly are, but this is just a bit more slippery, and I think you’re going to need that for this,” he said as he very cautiously pressed a finger up inside her, drinking in the groan that slipped unbidden from her lips.

“Another new rule: no suppressing your responses, unless I tell you to. If I don’t tell you to tone it down, which I will probably never do in response to something like this.” With no further comment, he wiggled that same finger, then removed it all the way out and pressed it into her again, this time a bit more forcefully, causing her to emit an open mouthed moan that had his hair standing on end. “I want to hear what you’re feeling as you’re feeling it. No censoring yourself.”

Her “Yes, Sir,” was a barely-heard, breathy affair that had him wishing she was naked beneath him.

There would be time for that later.

“Three minutes,” he said, with no preamble as her clit was surrounded by the knowing, slickened fingers of his right hand.

Sugar glanced at the clock, barely able to comprehend the numbers she saw there. Seven thirty-seven. She had until seven forty. Dear Lord, she didn’t think she was going to make it! Her derriere was already so well roasted – how was she possibly going to take another hairbrushing if she didn’t, though?!

At a minute and a half or so, he upped the ante a bit, and slowly penetrated her with no one, but two fingers, crossed over themselves. She was so tight he was salivating, but he worried her little nub relentlessly, sliding the pads of his fingers over and over it, plucking it then rubbing and flicking, then rubbing more.

She was so close, so very, very close, every muscle in her body strained to reach her goal and avoid the punishment that dangled over her head.

Then she heard the awful trill of the alarm he'd set.

"Aw, I'm so sorry, honey, but you're going to get a spanking, aren't you."

He sounded truly sorry that she hadn't made it, and she certainly was, too.

Because not only she was going to get another spanking, which was bad enough, but also because her entire body was aching for the release he had just wholeheartedly promised her. He hadn't held anything back; she had to give him that. He hadn't been trying to trick her into being punished again. He had made every possible effort to help her on her way.

It just hadn't been quite enough time. The next time, she had even less to work with, she knew.

He set his timer for the minute of spanking, too, which she wasn't sure was good or bad. Cash was playing a rhythm on her cheeks that was hard and quick, catching her everywhere at once, it seemed. In Sugar's opinion, there wasn't a spot on her fanny that wasn't seared, but apparently it was not enough for him. As usual, he'd arranged it so that she had no relief from any of his swats, as simply but efficiently bound as she was. She just had to lie there, her bottom in obscene relief, as if asking – no, begging – for each stroke that he more than gladly provided.

When the alarm sounded again, she sobbed in relief, although she didn't think that there was much of a difference, except the absence of the screams she'd been emitting when that wicked hairbrush connected with her rapidly blistering flesh.

He didn't immediately resume his position between her legs, though, and she was surprised by that, until she heard the K-Y tube squeezed again, and then felt something pressing against a portion of her anatomy that she hadn't really intended be explored, not that he seemed to be asking for her opinion.

"No – Sir – Cash – please – no!" she begged.

He had barely – just barely – presented it to her opening – hadn't even pressed it anywhere near inside her yet. "Now, Sugar," he began with the utmost patience, patting her rosy red bottom. "As your Dom, I'm going to expect you to push your limits a bit. I hadn't realized that this might be one of them, but I definitely want you to try this. Now, this is a very tiny plug, and I'm not going to hurt you, and I think you'll actually find that it adds a lot. Maybe more than you're going to want it to."

Plug? She didn't even like the sound of the word, especially not in conjunction with that area of her body! Well . . . that might be a bit of an exaggeration. She'd certainly seen them and been a bit intrigued by them, but she'd never really thought much about anyone dabbling there . . .

"So, I'm going to press this inside you, and it's got a bit of a flange at the end, and that's going to force you to keep it inside you until I take it out. Once it's seated, then the clock starts."

Cash was scrupulous about taking his time introducing her to this, making sure that he made it as pleasant for her as he could. Long before it found a home within her, he knew he had heard several short moans of pleasure coming from her, and he had not been touching her anywhere else, so it was definitely from the anal stimulation.

"I thought as much," he crowed. "You don't want to like it, but you do. I think that's true with a lot of things about you."

Damn all men with insight!

"Two minutes, Sugar. Get ready, go!"

It had to have been the plug, although he was right, she did *not* want to admit that. But this time, when he slipped both of his fingers into her pussy, then reclaimed her clit again, it only took about ten strokes for her to go off like a rocket.

Of course, he never let her go at just that. He kept her there, wringing orgasm after helpless orgasm out of her until she literally begged him to stop.

He then knelt on the bed behind her, reaching down to rearrange his clothing only to free himself, then pressed into her from behind, filling her while her bottom was still filled by that nasty thing.

He took her hard, because he knew that she was fully healed; reaching beneath her to grab a nipple in each hand, squeezed hard as he slammed himself into her. Embarrassingly it only lasted less than twenty strokes; he'd been so turned on by training her that he was quite surprised to have been able to withhold himself that long.

Later, they had lain together, naked, with Sugar gathered closed up against him, the differences in their sizes making her feel very small but infinitely safe in his embrace. She shyly reached over and found the box, handing him the necklace in the darkness and uttered just one soft word.

"Please."

Cash took the chain from her and looped it around her neck, the heart lock settling into place with a very satisfying, definitive *click*. "It will be my tremendous honor, Miss Sugar." He kissed her deeply, then said, "If you ever decide you want to take it off, let me do it for you, okay?"

Sugar had nodded in agreement. She could not imagine a time when she would ever want to be without it.

Before they fell asleep in each other's arms, she had a few more questions.

*"Do you mind me asking you questions?"*

*"Of course not. I think the biggest thing for you to remember, honey, is just to be respectful. You may ask me any question you like, say anything you like to me, as long as it is said respectfully."*

*Sugar thought about that for a moment.*

*"Will you call me slave?"*

*"Not unless you want me to. Would it turn you on?"*

*He felt her shrug her indifference.*

*"Then no. I don't see the need for a lot of useless labels. This isn't play; this is real, and it's only about what's important to us, not anyone else."*

*"Should I call you Master?"*

*"No, you call me Cash, like you always have, except in disciplinary settings, but then you've been calling me 'Sir' in that type of situation very naturally for quite a while. I see no reason to change that."*

Just like that, her life was settled.

Somehow, it had felt absolutely right.

"If I have to come and get you, you won't be happy," he called impatiently from the kitchen.



How well she knew that! Sugar shook her head, hoping to snap herself out of her reverie. Dredging up the past, although her mind seemed quite determined to do so through her dreams and her daydreams, was pointless. It seemed that all she could think about was Cash and their history together.

She appeared before the two of them all ready to go, but Cash caught her wrist as she tried to precede him. "Have you had breakfast yet, Pussyfoot?"

"No, but I -" At his look, she caught herself before she finished her sentence. That had been another of his rules: she must always eat some sort of breakfast. It could be a full-on meal from eggs to French toast, or as little as a granola bar or a cup of yogurt, but she had to eat *something*.

Patty handed her a granola bar. "Here you go. Lunch is packed for the saddlebags."

"We're going to be out that long?" Sugar asked, following him out, wondering how their supply of liniment was.

"I thought we'd lunch down by the creek," he said, deliberately pronouncing it like "crick" because he knew it annoyed her.

But she was preoccupied with her thoughts and didn't rise to the bait. "That sounds nice."

He saddled his big red stallion, Bear, while she did the same for Lady, who had been her horse for almost as long as she had lived at the ranch; then they set off across the land. He talked to her about what was going on with the business, pointing out improvements he'd made and where he was going to make more, telling her where he intended to take the ranch in the future. They ran into Jud, who spent some time talking to Cash, but Cash was careful not to allow himself to get too involved in what was going on. He wasn't working today. He wanted this time with Sugar.

They road to the west, down to a creek that never seemed to dry up, even in the heat of summer. Now it was swollen and the grass around it was lush and green. There was a big oak tree along the bank where they spread out the blanket and food that Patty had made for them, an amazingly good picnic: homemade fried chicken and potato salad, a container of fresh fruit salad with a yogurt dressing on the side, celery and carrot sticks with a spicy ranch dressing for dipping, as well as two generous slices of yellow cake with chocolate frosting, and a big container of ice cold cinnamon iced tea.

Nothing came between Cash and his food, and this was no exception. But when they were finished, and he had polished off his slice of cake as well as most of hers, he leaned back against the trunk of that old tree and reached out to tug her against him. For long moments, neither of them said a thing.

Sugar was a bit tense, certain that he was going to bring up the fact that she'd slapped him across the face, although it was hard to remain so with him warm against her back and a tummy full of wonderful food, the brook babbling quietly in the background.

What he did say came at her right out of the blue. "You're not wearing your collar."

Her hand went automatically to the neckline of her shirt, as it had so often when she was wearing it, looking for it but not finding it. Instead, her hand fell to her lap, somehow more forlorn and unhappy for the knowledge that it wasn't where she still expected it to be. It had been a touchstone, a constant in her life, just as he had always been.

Still, she swallowed, very hard, but forced herself to lift her head and reply clearly, “No, I’m not.”

Cash wasn’t at all certain he wanted to know, but he had to ask. “What made you decide to take it off?”

Sugar had known that he had noticed that she wasn’t wearing it before she’d arrived to be with Danielle. She’d taken it off nearly a year ago, and it wasn’t as if she and Cash hadn’t seen each other at all during the past three years. He traveled a bit on business, and it wasn’t at all unusual for him to be in the Tennessee area, if not in Knoxville itself. So he’d visited her occasionally, perhaps three or four times in the years she’d been away from the ranch.

He was always excruciatingly polite about it. He’d never just shown up on her doorstep, expecting to be welcomed with open arms, but had always called well in advance, letting her know that he would be in the area and actually asking if he could see her. The first time it happened, She had to check the caller ID to make sure she wasn’t talking to an entirely different person. Cash Daughtrey didn’t do much asking, in her experience.

It was that diffidence, that odd hesitancy he seemed to have developed around her once she’d left him that hurt her heart the most. It was as if she made him doubt himself for the first time in his life, and that idea weighed very heavily on her.

He usually took her out to dinner, because the one time she’d cooked for him, it had been a bit too intimate for the both of them, she thought. Or maybe it had just been her. But with her small apartment and him being the big guy that he was; it just seemed like too cramped quarters for two people who were no longer physically intimate. They were constantly brushing up against each other inadvertently, and that wasn’t going to lead anywhere good.

The first few times he’d visited, the camaraderie had been much the same as if she hadn’t left. She still felt extremely close to him, as she always had. But the third time – the one where she’d cooked for him - now that was the one that had set her thinking. By the last time he’d come up, which was months before he’d made the call that had actually convinced her to come here when very little else probably could have, she had taken it off.

The way he looked when he noticed she wasn’t wearing it any more had reminded her of a pale imitation of how he’d looked when she’d told him she was leaving.

She would never forget the stricken look on his face when she’d told him that she wanted to move out. She had tried to preface it as carefully as she could. She didn’t want to hurt him. That was the farthest thing from her mind.

She’d told him that she felt the need to stretch her wings, to strike out on her own and have an independent life away from the ranch, but those were platitudes. Not quite lies, but not quite the truth either. She had used the knowledge that he had given her, to very quietly, almost gently eviscerate him by saying out loud that she revoked his right to be her dominant any longer.

He had leaned forward in the bed that they had made their own, and taken her face between his big palms and said to her exactly what it was that she was trying to hide from him, and from herself. “No, you’re afraid of yourself, and what we have together. You’re scared that I’ll continue to give you exactly what you’ve been wanting. I’ve seen those shadows in your eyes, how uneasy you are with your own desires. You can’t quite

come to terms with the fact that pain brings you so much pleasure; that having rules and being watched over very strictly by me makes you feel safe and cared for, because it's not the way you're *supposed* to feel as an independent woman."

Sugar had always wondered why he always seemed to know her so much better than she knew herself.

Cash wasn't an overly emotional man, but after that first hint of raw, primitive emotion, and his impassioned, on-the-money speech about her inability to come to grips with her own needs and desires, his face had gone completely blank, and it had remained that way until she left. He hadn't ranted or raved or begged her to stay. In fact he'd been almost overly helpful about her leaving.

But the night before she'd left, he'd taken her into their bed for the last time and made love to her as if she was the only thing on this Earth that he cared about, until just about dawn. She'd tried to talk to him, but he'd only hushed her and pressed himself deep inside her, silencing her with the ecstasy he knew he could bring her, that seemed to be the only thing she wanted from him, and yet, still, it wasn't enough to keep her with him.

Just before dawn, when she would be leaving in a few short hours, he'd gathered her tightly to him and said, "I understand that you feel you need to go. I do. As hard as it is for me to let you go, I will, because I don't want you to be here under duress. This only works if you want it, Sugar, and you're obviously conflicted about it.

"I would ask that, if you get a serious offer from someone else -" It was as if he couldn't even say the word "marriage" in conjunction with her and another man "- that you call me first before you tell him yes." She heard him swallow, and then he added, uncharacteristically, "Please."

"I'd also like it if you kept wearing my collar. It looks good on you." His free hand moved restlessly over her body, as if laying claim to her one last time before he had to let her go.

Cash had turned her towards him, forcing her to meet his eyes in the light of the new day. "I'm going to tell you this now, and I firmly believe it. You're going to come back here some day. Maybe when you least expect it. The next time you do, I'm not going to let you go so easily, you can bet hard money on that, Eden Maillheux." He kissed her then, as if Heaven and Earth were riding on it, and for him, they were, because she was both of them to him. "A friendly warning: the minute you step onto this land, you can bet that I'm going to reclaim the rights you just revoked. I'm going to be twice as hard on you then as I have been now."

Then he'd gotten up and had been all business from that point on, not shedding one tear when she said goodbye, even though she was completely broken up. It had been a good thing that she wasn't the one driving to Knoxville, or she wouldn't have been able to go.

She would never come back to the ranch, until now, knowing that he was a man of his word. She knew that if she returned for any reason, he would fight tooth and nail to keep her there. There would be no-holds-barred, regardless of whether or not she'd come to terms within her own mind about who and what she was and the conflicts she felt about what her body wanted, despite the fact that her head told her she shouldn't . . . couldn't possibly want what he gave her. He would have considered that he'd been more

than generous in giving her time to get that straightened out, and that, first and foremost, she was his.

Because, whether or not she wanted to admit it to herself, she was.

But now, she again had to drag herself back to the present, to where she was with him right now, beneath the old oak tree down by the river on his huge ranch, and try to come up with an answer to his question about why she'd taken off his collar, before he decided she was taking too long.

"I don't really know why, to tell you the truth." That was always a good place to start with Cash. He could sniff out a lie like a bloodhound, especially from her, and what she'd said was the God's honest truth. "I guess it just didn't feel right to wear it, since we aren't together any more. Especially once I started dating Curry."

Curry Parker was a very handsome man she'd met at work. Almost too handsome, and he was very well aware of it. They got along really well and started to have lunch together, and that naturally progressed into dates not long afterwards. Unfortunately, besides a huge ego and an even bigger temper that she'd never seen any signs of until after they'd begun dating, of course, there wasn't much else to Curry, but again, that wasn't apparent until after she was on the verge of getting into what she thought would be an exclusive relationship with him. She'd put off the physical side of their relationship for longer than he really wanted to; because something felt not quite right about him, although she couldn't really put her finger on it.

## Chapter Nine

All of that had come to a head one evening when they were supposed to be going to bed together for the first time, and something had set him off. To this day she really didn't know what, not that she cared. He had hauled back and hit her, slapped her, open-palmed, right across the face.

Now, he wasn't Cash's size. Few men were. But he wasn't a featherweight, either. Her cheek hurt like the dickens, but nothing was broken, and he had missed her ear. She'd just be wearing a bright red reminder that she should trust her instincts when it came to men for a few days.

She had gone to her landline, which she had judiciously kept, and dialed 911. Having made the connection to the emergency operator, she knew that even if he proceeded to beat the crap out of her and she couldn't speak, the police would automatically be on their way.

Sugar put her hand over the mouthpiece and said in her best imitation of Cash's voice, "I would think that even you would be smart enough to get out of here. Now."

When the officers arrived, she thanked them for their quick response, but declined to press charges. They left her with their cards and let her know to contact them if he bothered her again.

"You broke up with him rather abruptly. I was worried."

He worried about her a lot, she knew.

She hadn't told him about it at the time, frankly not wanting to have to visit Cash in jail after he killed Curry. But what did it matter now?

"He hit me," she said softly.

Cash was up on his knees immediately, checking her over as if it had just happened ten minutes ago, patting her down as though he was looking for broken bones, murder – just as she'd predicted – in his eyes. She'd never seen him so angry.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It was a year ago, Cash." She tried without success to still his hands, but he seemed to need to prove to himself that she was physically intact.

"What did he do to you?" he asked, his jaw working furiously.

Sugar sighed. "It's over, Cash -"

"What. Did. He. Do." There was no arguing with him.

It wasn't something she was proud of. She knew it wasn't her fault in any way; all the blame was entirely on his head. But still, she'd never really said it to anyone but the cops. "He slapped me across the face."

Cash knew that Curry Parker was six feet tall and a hundred and eighty pounds.

Sugar was five three and a hundred and ten, on a good day.

A huge part of him wanted to ride back to the ranch right now, fly his plane up to Tennessee, find this bastard and kill him agonizingly slowly, over the next several days as he begged for the mercy that would not be forthcoming.

He could do it, too.

However, he wouldn't, because he preferred to spend the rest of his life with Sugar, and not slow dancing in the pen with a roommate named Tiny who was bigger than he was.

At least, he wouldn't do it physically, anyway. He wouldn't kill the man. But there were other, more subtle and infinitely more legal ways to bring down a man who had touched his woman in anger.

No one, but no one, could stop him from doing exactly that.

It was then that he realized that he was staring at her face, as if trying to see any sort of mark the other man might have left on her.

"No permanent damage, really," she said, trying to diffuse the situation. He was clearly overwhelmingly angry, although she knew it wasn't at her, it was still kind of awesome to see. She was damned glad she wasn't Curry Parker. A thought struck her, and she put her hands on his chest, saying, "You have to promise me that you won't, like, go up there and punch him out or do anything stupid and macho like that."

He raised his right hand and said solemnly, "I promise you that I will not go up to Tennessee, to -" he rattled off Parker's exact address, at least when they were dating - "and 'like go up there and punch him out or do anything stupid and macho like that'." The man had a gift for mimicry, and he reproduced her voice with eerily accurate results.

Sugar smacked him on the shoulder, like she always did when he imitated her. "I'm serious now . . ."

He stared her straight in the eye without hesitation. "So am I."

That had been almost too easy, but she was distracted by how he knew Curry's address so well . . .

But then Cash cleared his throat, leaning over to kiss both of her cheeks, as if he was kissing them 'all better', then said, "I thought you'd discovered his other wo -" But he stopped mid word, as if he'd thought better of completing it.

"Women?" she supplied. "Yeah, I had an inkling about them, too, but mostly afterwards. Before, it was just rumors. Afterwards, they came out of the woodwork, and I was very grateful that I had just kind of had a close call with him." She laced her hands in her lap. "I didn't really know what to look for in a badly behaved man like that, you know? You and Dad were the only examples I knew, and neither of you were anything like that. I was so naïve. I didn't know the signs. I never needed to with you."

He smiled down at her. "You never will."

Cash got up and began to pick up their picnic. "Do you still have the necklace?" he asked, as casually as he could.

"Yes, of course," she answered. "What did you think I'd do, throw it away? It's beautiful!"

"Well," he said, shaking out the blanket and then folding it and putting it away in a saddle bag, "I do remember saying something to you about having me take it off you if you decided not to wear it."

Sugar snorted. "I was supposed to come home to the ranch and what, make an appointment with you to have you take it off me? You would have spent the entire time trying to convince me not to take it off."

"Damn straight," he answered unapologetically. "You should be wearing it right now."

Standing up to him, literally, for the first time, Sugar said, "I don't think so. We don't have that kind of relationship any more."

“We don’t, huh?” Doubt oozed from every fiber of his being, and his face was stern, although she could tell that he was having a hard time not smiling at her brave stance. “Seems to me that someone found herself over my desk fairly recently getting her naughty bottom warmed. I wonder who that was?”

Sugar took a step closer to him, her hands on her hips, nearly pressing her body against his in a very aggressive stance he’d never seen her take before. It was terribly exciting, although he knew she didn’t want him to think of it that way. “It was the same person who slapped you for taking that liberty – and others – when you no longer have the right to do so, Cash.”

He looked almost as furious at that pronouncement as he had when he’d told her that Curry had hit her. “No right, hmmm?” She didn’t like that look in his eye one bit, and tried to back away from him, but his arm shot out and snaked around her waist before she could get far enough away.

Cash hauled her up against him, his platter sized hand splayed across her bottom, the intimacy making her jump and arch against him even more, just as he’d intended. His mouth came down across hers, slanting wildly, forcing her lips open as he plundered them and beyond with his tongue, grinding his fully erect self against her, immediately calling responses from her body that she could no more deny than she could have stopped breathing. He knew her entirely too well, and her traitorous body was only too thrilled to do anything he wanted.

The nipples his fingers found to tease and pluck were at least as rock-hard and throbbing as his cock was, her juices flowing for him, that most delicate part of herself literally aching for his familiar, bold touch. Her hands had found their way up his arms, not to push against him to try to free herself, but rather to wind her fingers into his hair and pull him even closer.

Dear God, what he did to her in a matter of seconds was positively criminal.

It was also absolute paradise.

However, he stiffened, his entire body acting as if it had completely rejected her, and he set her away from him without so much as a word, turning around to gather the picnic things into his saddle bags in record time. Sugar could see the muscle jumping in his jaw, and she didn’t think she’d ever seen him look more unapproachable.

“You coming?” he asked, barely taking the time to wait for her to swing up into the saddle before he took off like a shot.

He barely said a word to her the rest of the day. Dinner was a nearly tragic affair. Sugar had never felt quite so out of place in that house, even when she had first arrived as a veritable stranger. The only one talking was Patty, and she received monosyllabic answers to her conversational gambits until she stopped making any more attempts.

Cash disappeared into his study as soon as he’d finished his meal, and, although she half-heartedly expected to be summoned in there so that he could address the fact that she’d slapped him, the order never came so that she never had the chance to ignore it, which left her feeling somewhat crestfallen and more than a little forlorn.

She ended up going to bed at a depressingly reasonable hour, only because there wasn’t anything on TV she was interested in watching. Willow texted her, asking for a confirmation that they were still meeting for lunch, and Sugar texted back that they were definitely still on. Suddenly, it had become the one bright spot on her horizon. How dismal was that? She thought.

They met at Sundaes, which was, as its name implied, an ice cream parlor, but they also offered fantastic burgers and hand-cut fries. Its décor was that of a fifties style diner. The girls hugged each other like the long-lost friends they were, and then slid into a booth. The waitress took their drink order, and then they got down to the business at hand: gossip.

It seemed that, even in the short time since they had graduated, nearly everyone they knew had had a starter marriage, and some even children, legitimate and not, present company excluded of course. Willow was very happily married to her high school sweetheart and had a two year old daughter. She proceeded to fill Sugar in as they munched on fattening barbeque burgers loaded with bacon, cheese and onions with mounds of chili cheese fries on the side, then topped it all off with a shared peanut butter and chocolate hot fudge lava brownie sundae.

“So . . . enough about me and this sad little burg we both got away from,” Wendy said, tucking into her first spoonful of the sinful delight. “What’s been going on with you since you moved?”

Willow was the only other person on the Earth who knew the details of her relationship with Cash. Considering that she was a very religious, vanilla type of person, she had borne it well, although she did spend a lot of her time looking absolutely apoplectic as Sugar had described some of the things that went on between her and Cash. She did ask a lot of probing questions, though, and seemed to have quite a bit of curiosity about their arrangement, which sometimes had Sugar laughing that her very prudish best friend would come up with some of the things she asked about. But Sugar gave her points for not being squeamish, or asking her not to talk to her about it. Willow had really been her only outlet and sounding board, and it had worked out nicely because Willow was on her side, too, but in a very different way from Cash.

“Not much. Just a boring life. Job’s going well . . .”

“Have you met anyone special?” Willow thought she already knew the answer to that question, but was somewhat surprised by Sugar’s answer. She hadn’t expected that her friend would date at all, frankly, considering that she knew that Sugar loved Cash beyond all else, regardless of the fact that she’d moved away from him.

“Unfortunately, no. I’ve met some nice guys, just no one special, and one big creep.”

“Tell me about the creep!”

Sugar told her the entire sordid tale, including Cash’s reaction yesterday.

“Mmmmm,” Willow hugged herself, as if she was cold, and it wasn’t from the ice cream. “That man still gives me the shivers.”

Sugar sighed, confessing, “Yes, he does me, too.”

“You know, I had bet against you ever actually doing it.”

“Doing what?”

“Moving.”

“Why?”

Willow captured the last bite of sundae for herself then threw her spoon into the bowl and sat back in the booth, dabbing her lips with a napkin. “Well, let me put it this



way. How many other men – before you left here – had you dated – and by dated, I mean, really dated, not just someone who asked you to a high school dance once?”

Sugar frowned. She’d never really thought of it before. Cash had vetted her boyfriends in high school very carefully, and it was true that she hadn’t had very many dates then, and after that, in college, she’d devoted herself to her studies and her friends, in that order, so no boy had really had much of a chance. Then, once she’d graduated, they had become officially involved, and she had never had any inclination what so ever to look at another man.

Come to think of it, beyond the most casual observances about another man’s looks, Sugar couldn’t think of another man she’d truly lusted after except for Cash. The thought startled her.

“None, I guess. Isn’t that pathetic?”

“Truly,” Willow agreed all too readily, and earned herself a playful smack for it. “What about Cash? Can you remember the last time he had a date? Has he ever had one since you’ve known him, that you can think of?”

A scrap of the conversation she and Cash had had when he’d first given her the collar drifted into her mind. He’d said something about how oblivious she was about him and dating. He’d said, “How many dates have I been on since you’ve known me?” and she hadn’t been able to come up with any then, either.

Or now, no matter how hard she wracked her brain. “I can’t think of anyone,” she shook her head, still thinking hard. There had to be someone, didn’t there? She knew him better than anyone; he was a very sexual man. She couldn’t imagine him going very long without sex. He certainly hadn’t when they were together!

“Neither can I, and if anyone could, it would be me, the town gossip’s daughter. I can’t think of hearing about anyone connected with him – except for you – since Danielle married your father. Now, if you want to know about women who have thrown themselves at him in shameless displays, then I can give you quite a long list of some pretty prominent women -”

Sugar was all ears, leaning forward on the table, nearly landing her elbow in the empty ice cream bowl. “You can? Who?”

Willow snorted. “Every woman over eighteen in this town who’s not senile or dead. Some of the senile ones would definitely do him, if they knew who they were getting.” She proceeded to name some very prominent women about town, and even a few men. Then Willow leaned forward, too, and whispered, “Not to speak ill of the dead, but I heard that your stepmother would be included in that group.”

“Danielle wanted Cash?”

“I heard she made a very big, very public play for him not long after you graduated from high school, and he turned her down flat in front of a lot of people. I’ve never heard of him creeping around the wrong side of town, sneaking off to Dallas, or hooking up with anyone.” She met her friend’s eyes in order to make her point. “You’ve never dated anyone but him – not that you really dated him either, but you know what I mean. He’s not dated anyone since he met you. He’s turned all of the other offers he’s gotten – and there’s been plenty of them, believe me – down flat. He waited even *beyond* the time you came of legal age to have you, and he didn’t touch another woman – so far as I can tell – until you were ready to have him. If that ain’t love . . .”

“But he’s never said -”

Willow shrugged. "Sometimes it's hard for a man – especially a man like that. They count on their actions to speak for them. They don't put as much value on actually saying the words, like we do."

Sugar's head was filled to bursting with what Willow had said. "But what – what we do –"

Her friend was already shaking her head. "I can't pretend to comprehend what you and Cash have got going on. Frankly, I'd be calling the police on him, myself. But honey, you just seemed so much happier when you were with him than you do now."

"I was. I definitely was. But I still haven't really dealt with the real reason I left him. I just walked away from it and then pushed it out of my mind. But now that I'm here, it's back again, and I've still not resolved it."

Despite her more conventional and conservative tendencies, Willow was nothing if not practical. "Does it make you feel good?"

Sugar's response was almost embarrassingly honest as she blushed furiously.

"Oh, yes!"

"Is it – well, I almost said 'hurting anyone', but I know it's hurting you, but is it harmful to you?"

"Absolutely not. In fact, if I'm brutally honest, which you know is something I avoid like the plague; it's depressingly good for me."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it. Is it harming anyone else?"

"No."

"So where's the bad?"

Sugar glared at her friend. "I hate it when you're logical, and it's even worse when you're right, you know." She took a breath, and then said, "The bad is that I'm not supposed to want him to control me, to physically punish me. I mean, look at your reaction. You said I should be calling the police on him. When I told you about it the first time, you just about had me calling a domestic abuse hotline."

"I know, I know. I'm hopelessly backwards when it comes to sex. What did you used to call it?"

"'Man-on-top-get-it-over-with-quick'. George Carlin."

"No, the ice cream reference . . . vanilla. You're definitely tutti frutti or rainbow sherbet or whatever. But I'm older, and I think I understand your . . . interests better, and I actually agree with you that you were much better off when you were with him. Even if he hasn't actually said those three words to you, I believe he loves you. Actions speak louder than words in his case. Aside from the spankings, look how he's treated you."

As she drove home later, Sugar was rehashing what her friend had said. Willow wasn't right about the "aside from the spankings" part, because thoughtful, soundly administered discipline was a labor of love unto itself, and that was all Cash had ever done for her. However, Sugar could hardly expect Willow to know or even accept that premise. Nevertheless, she'd certainly given her a ton to think about.

While Sugar had been out with her friend, Cash had been out on the range, driving his cowboys and his foreman crazy. Finally, Jud had ridden up to him and prodded him into going home, or to his office, or he didn't give a damn where, as long as it didn't involve him being an annoying presence out here or firing any more of his men.

He didn't have time to keep trailing around after him and rehiring them, not that he had the time three years ago, either. If he hadn't known that Sugar was back when he'd seen her at Danielle's funereal, he would have now. Cash was nearly as bad as he had been when she'd left, although at least he hadn't gone on a three day bender. But now she was home, and he was still this cranky.

There was trouble in paradise, and apparently that meant trouble for him, and he wasn't going to put up with it. He badgered Cash until he'd literally driven the younger man off the range like a crazed bull.

Jud shuddered to think what he was going to be like when that little girl left him to go back to Tennessee again. He just knew he was getting too damned old for this shit.

Cash had ended up brooding in his study, wondering if he had made the wrong move with Sugar, and detesting his own feelings of indecision, because he so rarely had to deal with them. He'd desperately wanted to lay her down beneath him and make love to her right there, out in the open yesterday. No one would have come by them – he'd've shot anyone who did - and he would have adored seeing her bloom the way she did in the natural sunlight, and making her scream her pleasure out loud till it shook the mighty oak above them.

He made a promise to himself, right then and there, that he was going to take her back there and make love to her one afternoon, in the very near future.

When she'd left him for Tennessee, she'd made it very clear, however gently, that she was taking him up on what he'd told her she had every right to do as a submissive – to rescind his rights as a dominant over her. With that, whether she knew it or not, she might as well have just reached into his chest and torn out his heart right then and there.

But when she'd said it again several nights back – that he had no right to her any more – as if she was rubbing it in, whether or not she meant to, just made him want to put his fist through something solid. It made him want to make her want to regret the truth of those words and bend her to his will until she begged him to take her back.

The kiss he'd indulged in had been the start of that, but he'd realized quickly that he was in such a temper about it that he couldn't quite trust himself with her at that point; that he might hurt her inadvertently, and that was completely unacceptable to him.

He'd managed to keep it together, and set her away from him, just barely, fighting both his body and the more primitive areas of his mind all the way.

## Chapter Ten

However, he realized now that he'd been pussyfooting around her since she'd slapped him, and that went against every grain he had. An evil smile crossed his face as he remembered her bold move. She'd grown up some, and he could only think that was for the good. But she wasn't so grown up that she couldn't use a good trip over his lap, or his desk, or the end of his bed, regardless of whatever conflict that caused in that pretty little over-thinking head of hers. She'd never get too old for that in his book, and it was time he began reminding her just exactly who he still was to her, and got on with what he'd told her was going to happen when she came back to him.

Sugar's mind was hashing and re- re- rehashing what had been said between herself and Willow as she walked into the house and put her pocketbook on the kitchen counter, then made her way to the fridge to grab a bottle of lemonade. She heard Cash's study door open, but when he didn't come into the kitchen she turned and saw that he was standing in the doorway with his hands on his hips, staring directly at her.

"Sugar, I believe that you and I need to have a discussion in my study."

She had way too many "discussions" with him not to know exactly what he meant by that quaint euphemism, and although she wanted to back away from him, she knew from experience that there was nowhere she could go where she would be safe from him. Especially when he looked like that.

"Isn't Patty home?" she asked, dismayed at how little girlish her voice sounded as she grasped at the proverbial straws.

He folded his arms across his chest and one booted foot crossed over the other, leaning against the doorway nonchalantly, his eyes never once leaving her face. "No, I gave Patty a paid week off with pay, and I believe that right now she's on her way to Florida to see her aunt. We're not going to be receiving visitors for a while, and I know you can cook up a storm at least as well as she can." He'd moved just enough to leave the doorway entirely free, his meaning only implied, but it might as well have been shouted.

She was expected to get her butt into his study, immediately. Like, yesterday would have been better.

He was going to talk to her about the slap.

Sugar didn't think she could do it right now. Her thoughts were all in a jumble. She needed some time to herself to think about what Willow had said, and just think in general about the two of them and what she wanted.

This was not a good time. But she knew that that kind of an excuse would never fly with Cash.

So she swallowed hard and punted. "Uh, I'm not feeling very well, Cash, I think I need to lie down -"

But she regretted those words as soon as they were out of her mouth, because he made it across the kitchen in record time to press his big hand to her forehead.

“You don’t feel like you have a fever.” When she seemed to find his worn boots completely fascinating, he tipped her blushing face up so that she had to meet his eyes. “Do I need to take your temperature?”

“NO! No, you don’t. Really. I – I’m – uh, suddenly feeling much better.” There was only one way that Cash took temperatures once she’d come of age, and it was not with an in the ear or across the forehead new fangled thermometer, both of which he’d thrown out on her eighteenth birthday, right in front of her. Sugar had no doubt that that rule was still in effect, and she wasn’t going to give him the chance to do that to her. No way.

“We’ll discuss your illness later, I think. We have something more important to talk about first.” He turned just slightly, his arm out, pointing the way to the study.

Sugar sighed heavily and trudged in, only somewhat resigned to her fate. She took a stance by the fireplace, her hands folded defiantly over her chest. “What did you want to see me about?” she asked, as if she didn’t want to know.

“Do you remember what I said to you the night before you left for Knoxville?”

She’d done her best to push it out of her mind, with only a marginal amount of success. She’d even managed to forget it for large chunks of time, but it always resurfaced, usually when she least expected it . . . usually when something reminded her of him.

“Yes.” It was little more than a whisper.

He leaned against the front of the desk, his eyes boring into hers. “What did I say?”

Nervously, Sugar rubbed her moist palms up and down her arms. “You, uh, said that when I set foot on the ranch again, that you would reclaim your rights and that you would be twice as hard on me as you had been before.”

He was smiling, but not in a good way. “So you *were* listening to me.”

Sugar reached around behind her and rubbed her bottom without thinking. “I’ve learned the hard way that things become very uncomfortable very quickly for me if I don’t.”

“Good girl.”

She heartily wished he wouldn’t say that phrase, especially not in that manner that made her feel exactly as she did when she was submissive to him – a warm glow spread through her tummy, extending north to her heart, but also to areas south, where she definitely didn’t want it to.

“When I did exert my rights over you – the ones I had already warned you I would be assuming again upon your return – spanking you for causing me considerable worry and concern about your safety, I then, generously even, if you’ll recall, granted you several quite hard orgasms, didn’t I? Would you classify them that way, Sugar? Were the climaxes I brought you to while you were over my lap, with the plug in your bottom, after I’d brought it to a nice cherry red with your very favorite implement, hard?”

Did he have to go into such excruciating detail? Sugar had managed to take a couple of small steps towards the door. She didn’t know how far she’d get but –

“Stop.” One quiet, commanding word.

One extremely effective word, since she halted in her tracks immediately.

“Answer my question, Sugar, and I might let you go on an errand for me, since you seem so eager to leave.”

Oh, dear. She was so messed up she couldn't even remember the question, and that was *not* good. "Uh, no."

He looked surprised, and that wasn't good, either. "No, the orgasms I gave you when you arrived home weren't hard? Wow. I must be off my game. I'll have to try harder next time."

"What?" she asked, more confused than ever. She'd been concentrating on trying to slip out of the room rather than listening to him, despite the fact that she knew that could get her into deep trouble, and not that she was going to admit it. "Sorry, yes, yes, of course they were."

"Then why did you say no at first?" he pounced.

"Because I – I'm nervous." Now that was definitely not a lie.

"As well you should be, young lady."

There it went again. Her entire lower body contracted, all on its own, just from what he said and the tone in which he said it. It added to the thousands of butterflies that were panicking right along with her in her tummy.

"Y-you said you have an errand for me?"

"Yes, I do. I want you to go to your room and bring me back your collar."

"Can I ask why?" The impetus to add a "Sir" to the end of that question was most certainly there, although she suppressed it. She knew he was flinching at her use of "can" which implied physical capability rather than "may" which asked permission, but she was proud of even that small bit of rebellion.

He looked at her for a long moment then said, "No, you may not." Then he turned away from her, and Sugar didn't need any further encouragement to bolt for the door.

"Sugar, do I need to say anything to you about how unhappy you'll find yourself if you're not back here in approximately thirty seconds?" He was already glancing at his watch, and thirty seconds really wasn't much time to get to her bedroom in this big house, which was at the end of a long hall, and back to the study.

She had to practically sprint there and back, although she paused at the open door and wondered why she was returning to him, but she was caught. He'd already seen her and beckoned her in before she could rethink her actions.

"Bring it to me."

She did as she was told, largely on autopilot.

"Good girl."

Damn her genitals for having a mind of their own! It was like having a mini-orgasm every time he said something like that. A little spasm of pleasure that constantly reminded her that she wasn't in control of her own body, even when he wasn't even touching it!

She tried to drift back to the fireplace, putting a safer distance between them, but he said, "Stay where you are," returning to his position leaning against the desk, only she was easily within arm's distance now.

"So, we were discussing the quality of your orgasms, weren't we? You had agreed that they were good, hard ones. I had said that I had generously granted them to you even though you had misbehaved and taken much longer than you should have to come home, especially since you should have just used the airline ticket I had provided for you in the first place, a decision for which you were soundly punished."

Sugar didn't say a thing. Even after their time together, and all of the intimate, private things they had explored, he could still make her blush terribly.

"Then you slapped me, for asserting the rights I had already warned you years before that I was going to assume again. Did you think I was lying when I told you that three years ago?"

She didn't want to answer that question, so she remained silent.

"Sugar."

The warning was unmistakable, but what could she say?

"Do I need to warm your bottom right now to get you to answer me?"

Before she could say yes or no, he'd already hauled her over the knee he'd raised simply by putting his foot up on the chair that resided directly in front of his desk.

"No, Cash, please don't!" She put her hands back, another no-no, but he captured them there in an instant, clamping them together to the small of her back in one large hand, and she was again lost to him, as she always had been and always would be, whether or not she chose to acknowledge it.

"Yes, Sugar. I'll always do this for you. Just exactly this, whenever you need it. I know you need it frequently or you get antsy and cranky and you act out, consciously or unconsciously."

She'd made the grave tactical error of wearing a skirt to see Willow, so it was horribly easy for him to simply pull it up, and her panties down, practically in the same motion. Her entire backside was bare, and she was absolutely helpless, in a matter of seconds.

"I don't think you were lying! I don't think you were lying!" she practically screamed, hoping against hope that it would defer what she knew was coming.

But she was too late.

As his hand rose and fell in that terrible, painful rhythm she'd become all too familiar with at one time in her life, Cash said almost sympathetically, "You're too late, sweetie. You know you're always to obey me immediately, without making me resort to this, so that, when I do, I have to give you a real punishment. It's only right, to help you remember the next time to answer me unhesitatingly, with the absolutely truth, of course, when I ask you a question. I'm sorry I have to do this for your, honey, but I do. I will, each and every time."

It was awful, and, she admitted to herself, deep down in her heart, it was wonderful at the same time. It was just what she needed, and everything she hated all rolled into one. Her eyes and her body wept in unison, for reasons that were, at the same time, very different, and very much the same.

In the end, he had easily reduced her – simply by the swift, sure application of the flat of his hand to her cringing behind - to the very sorry girl that he'd always been able to bring forth in her, the one that needed the kind of strict absolution that only he could provide for her.

He held her there, over his knee, even when he was done, her feet dangling uselessly, the carpet beneath her face stained darkly with her tears, her wrists still trapped tightly in his hand.

"So, Eden Maillheux, if I wasn't lying to you, and you've acknowledged that you believe that I wasn't, then you knew that when you came home, you were going to end up

right where you did then for not doing as I'd told you and taking the ticket I'd arranged for you, and, of course, where you are right now.

"That slap is going to earn you a world of hurt, my girl, not because you can't hit me. Not like that. You smack me all the time, especially when I imitate you, or say something outrageous that annoys you." He'd reached back and grabbed the paint stirrer, much to her dismay, and began to wield it with his usual prowess. "I have bruises on my arms and shoulders from you hitting me, especially when I say 'that's what she said'.

"It was a deliberately disrespectful slap. Not necessarily even of me, but disrespectful of yourself. You are not any less of a smart, independent woman because I bend you over my knee and paddle your bare rear when you need it. You and all your mental and emotional conflicts about what we are and what you want; it's just another way for you to sell yourself short. You've found what you want in life. It's right here. Why look elsewhere?"

Sugar wanted to concentrate on what he was saying, but it was hard when he was setting fire to her like that. She would have sworn she could feel blisters rising at the same time new ones were being applied, and at times she literally couldn't catch her breath from the barrage of swats he was applying to her backside.

"What happened to all that female independence? Or women's liberation? Aren't you able to decide what it is you want, and to hell with society? You didn't have to go out into the world and meet creeps like Parker, but society made you think you had to, or you were less of a person – less of a woman. You had exactly what you needed and wanted right here, but you couldn't accept that, because society told you that it was wrong to want what you wanted. To submit to a man."

He put the implement down and moved her a bit, so that her legs were splayed over his peaked knee, forcing them wide apart as they draped naturally over his leg. He held her securely with an arm around her waist, trapping her there against him, her arms ineffectually reaching back, but unable to reach that far as she hiccupped and sobbed and cried, trying unsuccessfully to wiggle out of his hold.

"To submit to *me*." As he leaned slightly over her, his right hand cupped her where she lived, and he was gratified to note that she was just as damp as ever, maybe even more so.

"I think I told you then, too, Sugar, that once I had you back, I wasn't going to let you go easily, and you can count on that. I'm going to use every trick in the book to keep you here. You might as well start getting used to it, honey. This is your home from now on."

With that, he drew his hand back, and smacked her there, right where she was the most incredibly sensitive.

Even in their previous time together, he didn't think he'd ever heard Sugar howl until now. She renewed her struggles to break free, of course, but he easily subdued them and continued to deliver steady, hard swats to that very vulnerable, delicate area as it lay exposed over his knee until she'd received thirty or so very painful smacks that he was sure she would remember for quite some time to come.

When he let her up, he didn't let her go at all, but kept his fingers closed tight around her wrist, leading her around as he neatened his study as if she couldn't quite be trusted on her own. She sniffled and blubbered and couldn't decide where to put her free



hand, because she knew she was strictly forbidden from using it to soothe either her front or her back, no matter how desperately she wanted to.

The very last thing he did was stand her in front of him as he sat in his big chair, and put her collar back on her. He had anticipated that she would put up some sort of a fuss about it, so he kept a paddle close to him in case she did, but she surprised him and was extremely docile about it, at least until he took off the rest of her clothes and applied two rather stringent clamps to her nipples, along with several small weights.

She whined and keened so about them that he hefted the paddle and gave her a look, and she quieted immediately.

Cash took her wrist and lead her to the door, saying, "Come along now, we're going to our bedroom, and I'm going to decide whether you need more of the same."

This pronouncement was greeted with the expected renewal of her sobs and but more subdued howls than there might have been, considering his recent threat with the paddle. He would comfort her later, but right now she needed to learn a very strict lesson, and he intended that she learn it well.

Sugar's mind was still more of a jumble than she would have liked it to be, and there were still some details she felt she needed to work out in her head, but she'd taken a lot of what Cash had said and some of what Willow had said, and had managed to arrive at a place that had allowed her a modicum of peace about what she truly craved in this life. This was the man she knew who wanted to take on the duties and responsibilities of providing it for her, and she desperately wanted him to do it.

She recognized that it was no small task; that his was, despite the pain that she knew she would be expected to endure having chosen this road for herself, the much harder row to hoe. She found herself thrilled and honored that he had apparently been willing to place so much of his life on hold in order to wait for her to both come of age, as well as come to her senses about what she wanted.

Sugar knew she should be damned grateful for what she had, even if it was a blistered bottom and a terribly sore front.

His room was much the same as she remembered it; the bed still abominably high. He led her over to it, saying almost conversationally, "Did I ever tell you what I said to the sales person when I went to buy a bed for this room?"

Not sure whether or not she wanted to hear this, Sugar said, "No, I don't think you did."

He smiled evilly. "I told him that it needed to be a little taller than waist high on a woman who was five three."

She raised her hand to hit him, then thought better of it. "You didn't!"

"I most certainly did." He turned to her and kissed her deeply. "It was right after your eighteenth birthday, and just before I gave you your first real spanking.

"Speaking of which, we're not done here, young lady . . ."

They weren't. He was the scourge of her bottom for the rest of the afternoon, until she couldn't even bear the idea of thinking of sitting down.

When they were snuggled on the bed, him on his back, finally naked, having remained clothed, as he preferred, when he chastised her, and she long since naked and on her tummy, clinging to his side and still sniffing occasionally, especially when his big hand wandered down to pat her glowing bottom possessively, she yawned and said, "I guess I need to call Ty and tell him I won't be back."

It was one of the few times she could remember ever seeing him look sheepish. “Yeah, well, since I’m not going to let you go regardless of how mad you get at me, then I guess it’s time for true confessions.”

Sugar sat up on her elbows, looking alarmed.

“It’s nothing bad – or, at least, I don’t think so. You might not quite agree . . .” he admitted reluctantly.

“What is it?”

“I . . . uh . . . sorta . . . kinda . . . got you that job.”

If she hadn’t been so flabbergasted, she would have laughed at the comical way he, the behemoth, cringed from her as if he thought she was going to beat the crap out of him.

“You – you got me the job?”

Cash shrugged. “Yeah. I know Ty’s boss, and I kind of made sure that he paid attention to your resume and . . . you know, hired you.”

She was frowning again. He didn’t like it when she frowned.

“Hey, but, I might have gotten you the job originally – you’re the one that kept it.”

She didn’t look very convinced, or very happy.

“Okay, well, since we’re coming clean here -”

Sugar was looking a bit apoplectic. “Jeez, what else did you do that I don’t know about? Dare I ask?”

He looked a bit uncomfortable at that. “Well, probably not, but I don’t want to hide things from you -”

“Any more,” she supplied pointedly.

“Yeah, well, I’m coming clean, here. Give me a little credit.”

“All right, all right. What is it?”

He rolled over and handed her a small blue velvet box, giving her a Nelson imitation, “Ha-ha. Surprised you!”

She opened the box, and it contained a beautiful princess cut diamond in platinum. “I thought it would match your collar nicely.” He took the box from her and took her into his arms. “Eden Maillheux, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

She didn’t answer him immediately, and he got very worried. She was biting her lip, and he thought she might actually turn him down. But instead, she just looked up at him and asked him softly, “Do you love me?”

He actually snorted. “Of course I do! What do you think all of this is about? Everything that I am, and all that I have, it’s all for you.” He seemed amazed that she didn’t realize that.

Sugar smacked him. She had to. He more than deserved it for this. In fact, she hit him again, just for good measure. “But you’ve never said it! You have to *say* it!”

Danielle, in one of their last talks before she died, had told him the same thing, but he had never been a very glib man, unless it had to do with discipline. There he always somehow knew exactly what to say. But romantic, mushy stuff? He was completely at a loss.

He would say it to her every second of every day if it meant that she would marry him, and he wouldn’t have to worry that she’d leave him again. Cash squeezed her close

to him, looking her directly in the eyes, and said, “Sugar, I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone or anything in my life. Please marry me.”

It was the “please” from him that got her in the end.

### *Epilogue:*

She knew she was not to come without permission, but sometimes he didn’t give her a steady enough rhythm to get off anyway, and she wasn’t at all sure it wasn’t deliberate. She never knew when he’d throw her over the precipice; when he’d actually allow her to come, but until he said the magic word, until he actually gave her permission, she had to ride that delicate edge between being incredibly aroused, but not so much that she completely lost control.

Disobeying him like that would *not* be a good thing.

Sugar was bound hand and foot on their bed, rendered completely immobile, spread wide and being severely tantalized by Cash’s all-too-knowing fingers. Both her bottom hole and her pussy were being held almost – but not quite – uncomfortably wide by the plugs and dildos he’d come to favor for her, bracketed as they were by the deep red tracks he’d created on the helpless flesh of her rump with the present he’d bought her – a senior school cane that had her promising to be good into the twenty second century if he’d show her the slightest bit of mercy.

He hadn’t, of course.

Her breasts were bound tightly at the bottom, with those pert nipples clamped equally tightly, with pretty platinum heart weights dangling from each, as well as the same type of chain strung between them as always her throat.

As close as she got, she always had to back herself off, somehow, because she never knew when he’d lean close, turn her face away, and hold her still as he whispered, “Come for me.”

It was their second anniversary, and he had pulled out all the stops. Or rather, put several of them in, she corrected to herself. At a couple of points during the evening, she absolutely didn’t know if there was a way she could *not* come. He’d kept her just that close for just that long. Her control wasn’t what it once was, apparently.

Or he was getting to be better than he’d ever been, if that could even be imagined.

She was betting on the latter.

When she got to that point, Sugar did her level best to concentrate on boring things.

*One times three equals three.*

*Two times three equals six.*

*Three times three equals nine.*

Too simple. Definitely not cutting it. She could feel every subtle motion as his fingers – bathed in a heady combination of Vick’s Vapo-rub, K-Y and her own generous libation - worried that yearning, aching nub till she thought she was going to go absolutely crazy.

She had to progress to the harder tables.

*Eleven times eleven is one hundred and twenty one.*

*Eleven times twelve is one hundred and thirty two.*

Is it? Did she care?

Nope.

British Kings? No, almost all men.

State Capitals?

Presidents? No, they're all men.

Ninth grade English to the rescue.

*The quality of mercy is not strained*

*It droppeth as the gentle*

His fingers slowed, becoming more deliberate and less frenzied in their actions, sliding slickly over every aching, straining inch of her.

*. . . rain . . . from . . .*

His free hand reached up to tug on that almost but not quite too big plug, the one that had her panting and begging as he'd seated it within her, even with a generous amount of lube. Even as she creamed more on those other tormenting fingers, hating and adoring what he did to her in the same breath, she felt him very slowly remove it from her, then, just as slowly, press it back inside her, beginning a rhythm that forced her to accommodate that which he required of her. It forced her to submit to him voluntarily, loving the very dichotomy of it, living at the very apex of that duality, and reveling in it, even as he demanded – and took as his due – the hardest things from her.

Knowing he wouldn't stop fucking her with it until she'd -

"Come."

*Heaven.*

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