



SUSIE CHARLES

*One
Touch*

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by Susie Charles

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Chapter One

"You're going to be my bridesmaid, and that's all there is to it, Cassandra Grant, so don't think you can weasel out of it."

"I'm not 'weaselling' as you put it." Cass flushed crimson and halted, her mind scrambling to find a graceful excuse. "It's just..."

"It's just that Jake is Rob's best man, isn't it?" Lizzy asked the question, all the while tapping a finger and fixing Cass with a suspicious look.

Cass's heart started to race and she glanced over at Rachael, who raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly back at her. Some friend!

She had never told Lizzy how she felt about Jake, Lizzy's older brother. In fact, she had always been very careful to keep the girlish crush she had on him out of her relationship with her best friend. But that "crush" had been over years ago, so Lizzy was at a loss as to why she was bringing it up now. Unless...

No. Rach was the only person who knew for sure and she'd been sworn to secrecy. Even though they were all best friends, she and Rach had decided that it wouldn't be fair to Lizzy to lumber her with the knowledge of—

"Look, Cass." Lizzy butted into Cass's ruminations, "We've been friends for too long, and I think it's about time we cleared the air about this business with Jake once and for all. Now."

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There she goes again, thought Cass. "What business with Jake?" Her words were for Lizzy but she glanced suspiciously at Rach, who just shrugged in reply. A strong urge to be anywhere but here came over her and she edged slowly toward the questionable sanctuary of the front door.

"And stop looking like you want to bolt out that door, Cass, 'cause I'll tie you down if I have to. My wedding is going to be a happy day, and it won't be if I'm worried about you and Jake. So we're going to talk about this like adults and sort it out."

"Sort it out" sounded ominous, thought Cass, like it was a mess they had gotten into. Which they hadn't. Just her. But she'd "sorted it out" years ago and now everything was ... "Fine. I'll be fine with Jake. Why on earth would you think otherwise?" The annoyed look she pasted on her face wouldn't have fooled a Sunday school class of precocious toddlers. As a bluff it certainly wouldn't win any poker hands, but it was the best she could do on short notice. This whole conversation had come totally out of left field. She reached for her glass and took another large gulp of wine, draining the glass.

"That's a very expensive chardonnay you're quaffing there like some two-dollar vino, you know."

Lizzy grabbed the bottle out of Cass's hand as she began to refill her empty goblet.

"Do you take me for a prize idiot, Cass? You really think I was too blind all those years ago not to notice how you entered Drool City every time my darling brother passed within sniffing distance?"

Sniffing distance? Who said he had to be that close? But that was beside the point. She had to get Lizzy off the scent, somehow. "You're nuts, Liz. Sure, I might have had a *little* crush back then," she glared at Rachael, who chose that moment to snort, mid-sip of said pricey chardy, "but I'm a grown woman, for heaven's sake. And a mother. I was just a kid then, so give me a break." Her eyes widened meaningfully as she looked at Rachael, hoping for support or a diversion or anything that would help—a monsoon, a tidal wave, any freak of nature—but all she received for her trouble was another raised eyebrow. She began to wonder if Rach had been practising the eyebrow thing because it seemed to be her answer for everything in the last five minutes. But Rach would pay for her lack of support later, of that Cass was certain. Something slow and painful. Chinese water torture, perhaps. But for now, she had to find some way to deflect Lizzy's topic of conversation. And pronto.

"Who's for another glass of this expensive and very tasty wine?" She spoke brightly as if she didn't have a care in the world. Good plan. Get Lizzy drunk so she'll forget the disconcerting bent her mind was taking.

Unfortunately, Lizzy was like a dog with a bone and Rachael was being about as helpful as tits on a bull.

"Cass, honey..."

Cass cringed when Lizzy started with that tone and those words. From past experience she knew it usually meant she was about to do something she really didn't want to do. It worked a treat on Rob, because the poor guy never knew what hit him.

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"...I know a lot more about you and Jake than you think I do, and I think this is the perfect time for us to discuss it. You're my friend ... my best friend," an arm slipped around Cass's shoulders and hugged her close, "and instead of being hurt that you didn't feel you could confide in me about this whole..." she floundered looking for the right word, "...mess, I figured I could be a better friend if I was there to support and help you as much as possible until you figured out what you were going to do.

"Mess? Whole mess?" Trepidation warred with annoyance in Cass's mind.

"Okay. Bad word choice. But this is important, so stop bloody avoiding what I'm trying to say."

"I like avoiding. Avoiding is good. Avoiding keeps me sane a lot of the time, especially when I have pesky friends who don't know the right time to bite it." She threw her hands up in the air in exasperation.

"Fine. Let me tell you what I know and what I suspect, and if I'm off the mark, I'll drop it, okay?"

No, not okay. Cass felt an impending sense of doom. She turned and walked over to the huge bay windows, seeing her worried face reflected back at her through the lights of the city like some holographic projection. Lightning arced across the sky in a shattering flare and the rumbling in the air could have been thunder. Or it could be her carefully stacked house of cards was about to tumble down. Storm outside or storm inside? Either way, she was about to get dumped on. She decided for one last try. "There is no Jake and me. You're wrong, Liz. Honestly."

Some things never change, and Lizzy's obstinacy and determination were two of them. She felt sorry for Rob. Liz would probably nag the poor guy to death if this conversation were any indication.

"I understand why this might be hard for you to talk about, to me of all people, so let me put it this way..." Lizzy laid a gentle hand on Cass's knee just before she dropped her bombshell. "Little Chloe is Jake's daughter, isn't she?"

Cass thought of her beautiful little girl and her heart dropped. She stood, rooted to the spot, speechless.

This was not good. It had stopped being good the minute Lizzy had decided to play Columbo and try to unearth secrets that were better left buried.

Over her head and into her line of vision came a gold necklace dangling from Lizzy's fingertips.

"Does this look familiar?"

The initials CG were woven through a Celtic knot. Her necklace! She hadn't seen that necklace since ... Oh my God! That night at Jake's. Five years ago.

A shudder passed through her. She turned to face Lizzy who stood there with her hand on her hip, swinging the necklace like a pendulum. Waiting.

Shit! Oh, double shit!

* * * *

Not all fourteen-year-old girls are gawky; some are already filled out, physically and emotionally, heralding the woman they will become in a few short years. With the exception of a slightly looser rein on their emotions, of

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course. In some cultures, a girl of that age is even considered marriageable. Genetically, the body is ready to go, if hormones have any say in the matter.

That was also the year that Cass fell in love with Jake Reilly the moment she laid eyes on him.

Jake graduated from high school the year Cass started, and he was drop-dead gorgeous even then. That was when she had first met his sister, Lizzy, and they had become best friends instantly. Sleepovers at Lizzy's had usually involved Cass mooning discreetly over Jake. But what normal teenage girl wouldn't have?

Sun-streaked long hair that went nicely with the Aussie surfer image, tall, a body finely honed and tanned by hours spent surfing and playing sport plus intense blue eyes that would put Mel Gibson's to shame. A killer combination. And he only had to open his mouth and let that fading hint of an Irish brogue out, and Cass and the rest of the female population would cream their jeans if it was directed at them.

He had also been taken. Very taken. Dammit!

He was only four years older than she was, but it may as well have been forty for all the notice he took of her. She was his baby sister's best friend, which naturally meant that he definitely hadn't been sharing the same lustful thoughts about her that she had been having night after night about him.

The night it happened, she was twenty, and had been harbouring her unrequited love for Jake for six long years, which, as one-sided relationships went, was long time. Hell, she knew marriages that hadn't lasted that long.

Until that night...

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She was working at Mick's Bar and Grill. It was only a casual job to help pay her way through university. It was the final year of her Bachelor of Arts and the minute she graduated, she was saying goodbye to drunks and hello to academia. She could imagine nothing better than spending her life tucked into some dusty corner of a university, doing her thesis while she prepared lessons and did research for her more learned brethren. Boring to some, but it was her kind of boring.

That all changed. Her cruisey ride through college pulled up real quick the night that Jake walked into the bar.

It was raining cats and dogs outside. The bar was quiet anyway, being a mid-week night, and she was polishing glasses, keeping busy until she could clock out at eleven and go home and study some more.

The minute she saw his face, she knew something was wrong. Very wrong.

"What'll you have, sailor?" It was a silly attempt to try and lighten up the shadowed cast of his features.

"A whiskey and soda. Actually, make it a double."

He hadn't even seen her; so immersed in his own thoughts he hadn't recognised her voice. His head was sunk down over the bar and she watched him in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar while she fixed his drink. Jake wasn't much of a drinker—that much she knew. So why the sudden desire to see if he could squeeze into the bottom of a highball?

"Here you go, Jake." She placed the glass on a coaster in front of him.

He looked up at the mention of his name.

His face cleared when he recognised her. "Cassie? What're you doin' here?"

"I work here." *Talk about stating the obvious.* "How about you? You okay, Jake?"

"Yeah, fine. Couldn't be better."

Okay, there was something definitely going down. The look on his face would have been better suited to a funeral, so "fine" didn't cut it. She laid a hand on his arm. "Something you want to talk about?"

"Talk? No. I'm all talked out. But take some advice from me. Don't be fallin' in love, Cassie. It ain't worth it. Just don't, okay? I would hate to see you hurt like..." The words trailed off as he lifted his glass and sculled the contents with a grimace.

Cass knew Jake's girlfriend. He and Sandy had been together since high school. The typical childhood sweethearts thing that made Cass green with envy every time she saw them together. Not because she wished she had a boyfriend. Just because she loved Jake and it hurt like hell that he didn't even seem to notice she was on the same planet most of the time.

But the guy was obviously in pain. "Is there anything I can do to help, Jake? I'm a good listener if you want to talk. And it's not as if I'm rushed off my feet." She glanced around the bar. The only two customers still there were a man and a woman huddled in one of the corner booths. Keeping warm, obviously, considering that she was almost sitting in his lap. What they say about body heat must be true.

"Give me another one of these," he held up the empty glass, and peered at it with bleary eyes, "and I might just tell you."

If there was one thing she knew from working in a bar, it was that alcohol didn't fix anything, but she figured a drink or two wouldn't hurt him.

She gasped in surprise when he grabbed her wrist as she put the drink down in front of him. "I meant it, Cassie. Don't fall in love."

Great. Nice of you to tell me, Jake. You're about six years too late. But she kept silent and instead placed her other hand over his, the warmth of her hand taking the chill off his. "Talk to me, Jake. Maybe I can help."

"Nothing you can do, darlin'." He stroked her hand, his touch gentle. "I have to get through this on my own."

"What happened?"

"What didn't happen, more t'the point."

He was distractedly stroking her hand as he spoke, sending a tingle up her spine. The man just had no idea of the effect he had on her.

"I asked Sandy to marry me tonight."

"Why that's..." Good? Great? Bad? What the hell was she going to say? His words pulled her back.

"She turned me down."

Cass shut her mouth with a snap and swallowed the gasp that had been about to fly out. Right along with the pain that choked her throat at the thought of him being so serious about a woman that he had popped The Question.

"Why?" *Because obviously Sandy needed to go see a shrink for some serious therapy if she didn't have a damn good reason for saying no to Jake.*

"She doesn't want to settle down ... yet. In fact, she decided she wants us to have a break for a while to see if we are really meant to be together. Can you believe it? I mean, you're either in love or you're not, you know? What the fuck is all this, 'let's take a break' shit?" The hurt, angry words spewed out. His face fell when he realised what he had said and apologised.

But it was an excellent question, Cass thought. What the hell was wrong with Sandy? The stupid woman didn't deserve Jake.

She did her best to comfort him, which meant letting him talk it all out, even though hearing the man she loved talk about another woman while his heart was breaking was in the top two experiences she wouldn't be in a hurry to repeat. So it was a short list ... But to her, back then, still sheltered in that fragile innocence that enfolds inexperienced young women, that was what love was all about. Being there for your man. Through good and bad.

It was closing time and her efforts to get him to go home had met with no success, although now he was so close to drunk it didn't matter. But he was feeling pretty numb, which she guessed was the whole idea in him drinking in the first place.

"Time to go home, Jake." With an arm around him, she tried to move him gently.

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He looked up at her, those beautiful blue eyes now slightly unfocused, still holding a shadow of the pain he had arrived with earlier. "Thanks for listening. You're a good friend, baby."

The words were a little slurred, and even though she knew it was the booze talking, she couldn't help wishing he would call her "baby" like he really meant it. She sighed. "Always for you, Jake. You know that."

* * * *

The rest of the night didn't pass quite the way she had planned.

Hang on ... plan? What friggin' plan? Her only *goal* had been to get him home, which meant driving his car as he was definitely in no condition to do so. Then call a cab from his place and go home herself. Goal, not plan.

That didn't take into consideration the fact that they got drowned getting from the bar to where he'd parked his car. It also didn't take into consideration the fact that when she tried to get his wet clothes off him before he caught pneumonia, she somehow ended up naked herself. That last part had definitely not been part of any plan she was aware of. A familiar fantasy? Oh yeah ... but a plan?

She knew it was wrong. Knew it shouldn't have happened, but it did. Oh boy, did it ever. Even now, all these years later, just the memory still had the power to make her pulse quicken and her knees go weak.

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He sat on the edge of the bed, eyes closed and under the weather in more ways than one, while she clumsily struggled with what seemed more thumbs than fingers to undo the last couple of buttons on his saturated shirt. He smelled so good. A hint of aftershave and wet, healthy male. Had anything ever smelled so good? It was better than the yummy smell of cookies baking. She remembered closing her eyes and inhaling the scent of him as she leaned over to peel off the sodden shirt that was stuck to his skin. The trembling in his body that she had thought was from being cold and wet was from something else entirely. But considering her experience with men rated about a minus ten on the Richter Scale of "Lets feel the earth move, baby," that wasn't surprising. She realised straight away what a dumb thing it was to do, and that was right about the same time she felt unsteady fingers trail up under her shirt to gently caress a lace-covered breast.

With a startled gasp, she pulled back in surprise, but his other hand, the one now pushing against the small of her back, stopped her retreat. His eyes, so filled with pain a short time ago, were now brilliant with a different kind of light, one she hadn't seen before.

"Don't move, darlin'." His voice shook a little. "Please, just let me touch you. I never really noticed before ... you're ... you're beautiful."

He said it like it was some sort of revelation, which it undoubtedly was, however untrue. "It's just the scotch talking, Jake." She tried to stand still. She tried not to move ... After all, what woman walks away from a dream coming true? But her heart was hammering so wildly in her chest she

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wouldn't have been surprised if it unseated itself and ended up down near her navel.

It was the first time any man had touched her there and her nipple beaded into a hard bud as his work-roughened fingers caressed the tip. Biting her lip against the warmth that flooded through her at that single touch, she tried but couldn't stop the moan that bubbled up.

During the course of her teenage years, she had kissed and been kissed like any other girl, but that was as far as it had ever gone. The simple truth was that she didn't want—hadn't wanted—anyone to touch her but Jake. Not that she'd been consciously saving herself for him. He was taken and she knew it, but just the thought of anyone else touching her intimately like Jake was doing repulsed her. And while all of her friends had tried sex in some shape or form, she was the only virgin left among them.

With an experienced flick, her bra was unhooked and her breasts tumbled out. Her blouse was ruched up, baring her damp skin to the cool night air. With a distressingly practised touch that only served to make her more aware of her lack of experience, Jake had her blouse over her head and tossed away to land in a damp lump on the floor.

His surprisingly warm hands caressed her. "You've such beautiful breasts, Cassie darlin'," he murmured, the brogue seeming to thicken as he became more excited.

She inhaled sharply as his lips closed around a tip, suckling the aroused peak. The sensation of warm breath and lips over cool skin sent a shaft of pleasure through every nerve in her body, flooding the vee between her legs with moisture. The

hindrance of her short little wrap skirt to his determined explorations proved as non-existent as her blouse and soon joined it in a soggy heap on the floor. This was so far beyond anything she had ever felt before, and her legs buckled when he slid a hand up her inner thigh to the dampness of her panties. Then, a slight pull and she was on his lap, the hardness of his erection nudging her hip.

The licking and suckling on her nipple moved to the other one and breath escaped her when he slipped a finger under the elastic of her panties and ran a teasing line along the wetness of her folds. She had to bite her lip to stop from crying out.

* * * *

"Cass?"

"Hmmm?" She felt a tugging on her elbow and shook her head to clear it of the memories. As long as she lived, she would never forget the way Jake had made her feel that night.

"Don't mind her." Rach nudged Lizzy and rolled her eyes. "When she gets that glazed look in her eyes, she's lost in her memories. You get used to it after a while."

"I do not!"

"Sweetie," Rachael cupped her face in her hands, her words affectionate. "I have had so many conversations on my own over the years when you get that look on your face. So trust me, here. This is something I know from personal experience."

"Am I right?" Lizzy was persistent, as always.

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A shroud of tiredness settled over Cass. She didn't want to be having this discussion. She didn't want to be thinking about Jake. She didn't want to be there, being forced to relive the old hurt, yet again. Perhaps it was just a figment of her imagination, but the walls suddenly seemed to be closing in.

She had to remind herself that this was Lizzy, her best friend, and she deserved an honest answer. There was no way she could lie to her now. Because Lizzy had been supportive and caring for all of the last five years. What it must have cost her not to say anything, even when she suspected ... Maybe it was time. Time to put it all to rest at last.

"I'll trade you." She sighed deeply as the last vestige of fight in her dissolved. "I'll answer that if you answer a question for me. Deal?"

"Sure."

"Fine. Now, the answer to *your* question is..." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, realising that there was no way she could take back what she was about to say. "Yes, Jake is Chloe's father."

Her eyes snapped open at the uncharacteristic growl that erupted from Lizzy.

"Why, that bastard!" Her fists clenched at her sides as the anger, vented as a hiss, flared up within. "I'll kill him for this. I'll damn well..."

Cass groaned. "And this is exactly *why* I didn't tell you before, Liz. I knew you'd blame Jake, but it was my fault as much as his—probably more so."

"Unless you're telling me you seduced him, Cass, which I know you wouldn't do, that is just so much bullshit!"

"No! Of course I didn't. But Jake was drunk. He didn't know what he was doing. He probably doesn't even remember it happened." Her words petered out, voicing the reality that she had been living with for the last few years.

"Jake? Drunk? Mr. Clean Living? ... Oh, no!" Liz slapped her forehead, remembering that time years ago when her brother had started to act out of character, causing Liz to wonder at the time what the hell was going on. "Now I remember. When Jake and Sandy broke up before the wedding..."

"Yep."

"He went out and got drunk."

"That he did."

"The next day was when I found this." Liz held out a simple necklace, placing it on Cass's palm. "But, why didn't you tell him? He would have done the right thing. He's not the sort of guy to just leave a girl pregnant and alone."

Why didn't she tell him? Cass couldn't help it; a tear tracked down her cheek as she recalled the day she had found out she was pregnant. "You remember the day that Jake and Sandy got back together about a month after their fight? The day they got engaged?"

"Y-eesss. Sandy decided she couldn't stand the thought of Jake with some other woman. Let's forget of course, that she'd been dating up a storm in the meantime. But she came and proposed to Jake and he accepted."

"That was the day I got the results back." Cass caught the flicker of recall in Lizzy's eyes. "I came over to your place just in time to hear the happy news. Remember? You were all drinking champagne and celebrating. Somehow I didn't think either Jake or Sandy would appreciate my little announcement as an engagement present."

"Oh, shit, Cass. I'm so sorry." Lizzy wrapped her arms around Cass, hugging her tight. "But why didn't you tell *me*? Was it because you thought you couldn't trust me? I wouldn't have told a soul. Honestly. You know I wouldn't have."

"It wasn't that, hon. I just didn't want to put you in the position of having to keep such a huge secret from Jake. That wouldn't have been fair. I couldn't do it to you."

Lizzy wiped her damp cheeks with the back of her hand. "Thanks for trusting me now, Cass. You know I love you, sweetie, and that goes for Chloe, too. You've done a fantastic job with my little niece." A tremulous smile teased the corners of her mouth. "I'm sorry I pushed. I just had to know. Ever since I found your necklace, it's been bugging the hell out of me, especially since you were so close-mouthed about who the father was—even with me."

"I understand. Don't worry. It's fine."

"So ... will you be okay with Jake at the wedding? If you want to bail out, I'll understand. I don't want you to be hurt anymore than you have been already."

"Believe me, I'll be okay, Liz. I've had to grow up a lot since I became a mum." A faded, weary grin creased her face. "Motherhood does that to a girl. Now ... my question."

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"Why did Jake and Sandy divorce?"

It wasn't her imagination that a look of concern flickered across Lizzy's face.

"Um ... why? I mean, what does it matter?"

"I'm curious. Come on, Liz. I haven't asked you a single thing about Jake all these years. Just answer me this one question."

Lizzy glanced at Rachael with a desperate look. A fact that was not lost on Cass.

"What? Just answer the question, Liz."

"They ... er ... they split up because..."

"Spill, for heaven's sake!"

"Um ... Sandy was pushing and pushing to start a family and ... and Jake said he didn't want kids."

Chapter Two

Jake paced the hotel room feeling caged, not so much physically, but by his thoughts. Memories. Reminders of a night five years ago that he had tried to forget, tried to shove away to the back of his mind. Memories of long brown hair, the sweetest, juiciest lips and green eyes that flashed golden when she was aroused ... He paled and barely noticed the iron-tension in his shoulders.

"Look, mate," Rob came up behind him and slapped him on the back, jerking him back to the present, "I'm the one getting married today, so why the hell do you look more like the nervous bridegroom than me?"

With a frown, Jake stopped his pacing and turned to face Rob. "Do I?" He hadn't realised. He knew why, though. He'd been thinking about seeing Cassie—again. In fact, since the moment he'd found out that he would be partnering her at the wedding, he couldn't *stop* thinking about her. But nervous? No. Yes. Maybe ... Aww, hell, definitely. He hadn't spoken to her or seen her since that night all those years ago.

It occurred to him that his mind had visited her pretty often. His thoughts had turned to her again and again over the intervening years, even throughout his mistake of a marriage to Sandy, and at the most disconcerting of times, dammit!

He had tried ignoring the memory, had tried replacing it with other things—wild, sensory things, and even unbridled sex with Sandy and the few women who had followed his

divorce—but nothing worked. In all the years since that night, he had never had unprotected sex with another woman. Sweet little Cassie was the first and only, as if, subconsciously, that was something of him that no other woman would have. He could never forget the feel of her tight sheath hugging his cock, the warm, silky kiss of her skin against his, the awakening of her nervous, innocent body as she surrendered so completely under him before unleashing a passion that amazed and seduced him. And the scent of her ... Jesus! Even the taste of her was burned into his lips and tongue so that nothing and no one else had even come close to what he had experienced that night with her. No other woman had felt ... right, for him since.

No wonder his bloody marriage had gone down the toilet. But after Cassie, he shouldn't have married Sandy, anyway. He just hadn't realised...

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, running a hand over the growing tightness in his neck muscles. After his reaction to her the morning after, he'd be surprised if she ever spoke to him again and he wouldn't blame her one little bit. A shudder of disgust at himself rippled through him.

He had been such an asshole.

Like he hadn't known what he was doing at the time. Huh! Even as drunk as he was, it had all felt so perfect, everything he had ever expected making love to a woman to be. But the cotton wool head and the hangover the next morning meant that he had handled the situation badly ... No, worse than badly. He'd been a total cretin.

Opening his eyes as if from a warm dream to find Cassie snuggled ... no ... wrapped tightly up against him by his arms; sitting bolt upright in bed much too quickly when he realised, letting loose a savage pounding of a headache; saying the wrong fucking thing, as usual; Cassie trying to be dignified, shrugging off his words, quickly getting dressed and then leaving before he even had a chance to get his stupid brain in gear and his useless mouth in motion ... He had hurt her. Even his bloodshot eyes hadn't missed that Cassie's were filled to overflowing with unshed tears. It had damn near torn him apart. He had never wanted to hurt her ... Damn, damn, damn.

With a determined shake of his head, he pushed those recriminations away. If he was going to get through his friend's *and* his baby sister's big day, he would have to get his thoughts under control. Somehow.

Rob was looking at him curiously.

"What?"

"Nothing. You okay, mate?"

"I'm fine. Fine. Never better." The last thing he wanted was Rob doing twenty questions on him. "So, you all ready to be tying the knot to my little sister?"

Rob chuckled. "I've been more than ready for the last twelve months. If I'd had to wait much longer, I was seriously considering kidnapping and elopement. Convincing her just took a little bit more sweet-talking than I expected. Damn woman is as stubborn as you are and God help me if it's genetic. But you know what?" He grinned, a self-satisfied grin

that Jake envied. "I wouldn't trade her for all the tea in China. I knew Liz was 'the one' the minute I laid eyes on her."

"But she was just a kid back then, and a bloody annoying one at that."

Lizzy had been a wild and out of control nineteen-year-old. Rob had somehow managed to tame the little vixen, a fact for which his parents were eternally grateful.

"Maybe to you, big brother, but to the rest of the male population, she was all woman ... all *my* woman. I knew it was just a matter of time before my good looks and devilish charm got to her."

Jake laughed. He had suspected for years that half the reason Rob almost lived at their house was not just because they were best mates. That little revelation merely confirmed it. "Well just make sure she stays 'the one', Boy-O, or I'll have to do the big brother thing and beat the crap out of you." His wink let Rob know he was joking. Although he and Rob were the same height, Rob was just a big ball of muscle. Growing up, Jake had been glad more than once that Rob was his friend and not his enemy.

A loud thump-thump on the door caught their attention, and they both looked over as the door vibrated under the assault.

"Gee, do you think that might be Tom?" Rob, facetious as always, walked to the door and paused as it suffered under another barrage. "He's the only guy I know who never learned the subtle nuances of knocking on a door." He opened it to reveal the man in question. "Well, lookie here. It's the police. Is this a raid, officer?"

"Ha, ha. Very funny." Tom glared at his friend good-naturedly. "Sorry I'm late. Had a minor emergency down at the station. But I'm here now, and I brought beer, too, so cut me some slack." With a flourish, he brought the six-pack around from behind his back. "Thought you might need some Dutch courage ... in case the nerves were starting to take hold."

"You'd best sling one to our compadre over there." Rob grinned and nodded at Jake. "So far he's worn the carpet out in front of the window with his bloody pacing. Although what *he* has to be nervous about beats me. I'm the one being fitted for the noose."

Jake turned, trying to hide a good-humoured smile, but it reached his eyes and made them sparkle. "That's my baby sister you're talking about, *mate*, so watch it," The mock severity of his tone didn't fool anyone.

Tom passed around the beers, and then raised his in a toast. "Here's to Rob and Lizzy. May all your fantasies come true and your kids look like your wife, cause you are one ugly bastard."

"Don't worry, mate. You'll get yours one day." Rob bellowed with laughter as he acknowledged the toast with a nod of his head. "In fact, I can't wait for the day that you find the little lady that makes you want to settle down."

"Me? Bite your tongue, man! I mean, I'm all for you and Lizzy getting legal, but I find certain advantages in the single state. No point in disappointing all those luscious lovelies who lust after my body."

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"Yeah, right. It must be the uniform, because you have bugger all else going for you."

Jake stood back and listened to his two mates trading friendly insults. It was a standard routine that usually amused him. But today, his mind was elsewhere. A quick glance at his watch showed him that the time was drawing near. He took a quick swig of his beer, the cold liquid running a chill down his throat.

"Well, gents," Rob glanced at his watch, "I think it's time to get this show on the road. What do you say? Drink up and let's go get hitched."

Tom looked at Jake. "Is it my imagination, or is someone just a tad eager? I never would have thought I'd see the day that we didn't have to drag you kicking and screaming to the altar."

"No, Rob was always keen. You're the one that we'll have to hogtie. He's right, though—time to go. If we're late, Lizzy will tear you a new one, and me along with you. You do realise, of course, just what a tyrant my little sister can be?"

"No problem. I've got it covered. I have ways of taking the piss out her vinegar, don't you worry." Rob laughed at the expression on Jake's face.

Tom chuckled and slung his arm around Rob. "Ahhh, you don't say things like that to the big brother, mate."

Jake recovered and laughed. "I agree. Waaaaay too much information, thanks all the same. C'mon, let's go. Time to get you married."

And time for me to see sweet little Cassie once again and put those old ghosts to rest.

Chapter Three

"This is beautiful, Lizzy." Rachael glanced around at the garden and the guests seated on white wicker chairs on the lawn. "I love garden weddings."

"I thought you said you had no intention of even thinking about getting married, Rach?"

"And I don't, Cass. I meant for other people, you twit. I shall remain virginal and pure for the rest of my life."

The pious expression she assumed had Lizzy laughing out loud. "You're joking, right?"

Cass snorted. "Looks like you blew that one already, Sister Saintly. Because I seem to recall you telling me about Billy and Carl..."

"Don't you dare!" She turned to glare at Cass, who just raised her eyebrow mockingly à la Rachael and threw in an upward twist of her mouth. Satisfied with her little tease, she closed her eyes and inhaled the myriad of scents permeating the air.

Late spring/early summer in Sydney was a beautiful time of year and the grounds of Granville House were abloom with a profusion of spring bulbs and flowers. The garden's explosion of colour dazzled the eye with a near overwhelming jumble of hues, both rich and vibrant. Nature's brush had painted her verdant canvas with the abandon of a brilliant artist gone wild, splashing leafy greenery with the soft lavender and mauve of hyacinths and the crimson and white of roses. To the mix, she'd added a punch of yellow-throated

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violet irises and, in a final burst, had daubed on white, red and yellow freesias spilling through the foliage. The heady scent of a multitude of fragrances swirled and eddied in the light breeze, and the leafy bower of the jacarandas hung over the garden like a lacy veil, filtering the late afternoon sun in and out in a lazy rhythm. One look was all it had taken for Lizzy and Rob to decide that the gardens and the historic old house were the ideal place for the ceremony as well as the reception.

"How do I look?" Liz's hands fluttered nervously, touching hair, dress, tugging gently on her veil.

"Like a princess." Cass smiled, moving around behind Liz to straighten her veil. She leaned over her to speak softly in her ear, a fond chuckle in her voice. "Don't worry, Rob will think you're even more gorgeous than he does already."

As much as Cass loved her friend, occasionally she felt a twinge of jealousy when she caught the way Rob looked at Lizzy. Not that she wanted Rob—far from it. No, it was the thought of being the object of that sort of affection that she sometimes craved with a hunger that turned into a solid ache. The truth was, though, that work and motherhood left no time and little energy for romance in her life. And it was a complication she definitely didn't need and avoided like the plague. She had the odd offer for dinner or a date, but she deflected them all with an easy charm because as far as she was concerned, the benefits of any kind of entanglement weren't enough to tip the scale away from the comfortable but full life she had with her daughter.

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"Cass?" Liz caught her hand and squeezed it, pulling her aside. "I love you like a sister, sweetie. I always have. And don't worry; today will be fine. Trust me. I won't breathe a word about ... well, you know. Not even to Rob."

Cass took a deep breath and nodded. She knew her secret was safe with Lizzy, but she couldn't stop the butterflies from filling her stomach every time she thought about seeing Jake.

"Time to go, ladies," broke in Rachael. "I think they're playing your tune, Liz."

The wedding music wafted back to them on the breeze and guests were already turning to look at them in expectation.

"Come on, sweetheart." Mr. Reilly broke into the threesome and hugged his daughter firmly against his chest. "It's high time Rob made an honest woman out of you."

"I'm dying to get a look at the groomsman." Rachael turned round to Lizzy with a devilish twinkle in her eye. "You did say he's unattached, didn't you, Liz?"

"Get going, Rach." Lizzy shook her head in amusement. "People will start to get nervous if we wait much longer. *I'll* start to get nervous." Lizzy shooed her with her hand.

"I'm going. I'm going."

Cass waited a few bars. She turned back to Lizzy and gave her a wink that looked more confident than she felt and stepped onto the carpet covered wooden boardwalk after Rachael. The furious thudding in her chest effectively drowned out the sound of the music, and she just hoped she was in time because she couldn't hear a damn thing.

Her nerves twittered through her like the mad flapping of a thousand bird's wings. One quick, sweeping glance up the

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aisle. There he was. Looking like a damn god, even from a distance. Golden hair pulled back into a neat ponytail, broad shoulders filling out the tux, staring down the aisle and looking right at her. True to form, her legs went weak. Knowing her luck, she would fall flat on her face in front of him and everybody. Thank God they weren't wearing long dresses. She took a deep breath and took another step forward, one foot in front of the other. Left. Right. Left. It was like walking through molasses.

* * * *

"Here they come." Tom, as usual, was stating the obvious.

Jake just nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He was still recovering from his initial glimpse of Cassie. It had shaken him to the core. In the years since he had last seen her, his sweet little Cassie had grown into a beautiful woman.

Wake up, you fool! She's not your Cassie. She could have been ... once ... For one moment in time she was, but you screwed that up royally the morning after ... He gritted his teeth, the image of her running from him, hurt tears filling those beautiful green eyes...

Now, he watched her intently, hungrily, as she moved closer. She was like a walking wet dream. After all this time, he felt like a starving man being offered a banquet. Hungry as hell, but afraid to eat, afraid it was all just a tempting dream. His stomach clenched.

The soft lilac fabric of her dress hugged the lushness of her body—a body he remembered running trembling hands over as if it was just yesterday. The image was imprinted on his

brain. Seared into his synapses. Unshakeable. Indelible. He wondered again how he could ever have let her go that morning. *'Cause he was a damn fool, that's why.*

His eyes sharpened as she stepped nearer, devouring her. There were subtle differences ... the breasts were fuller, the hips more curvy, the legs ... oh man, the legs ... The silky fabric swished and hugged her as she moved.

She smiled at some guests, nodded at others, as she walked up the aisle towards them. Unable to tear his eyes away, he watched her. Nailed her. Gritted his teeth and waited. Waited mostly for her to look at him. He needed to see her eyes the first time she looked at him ... see her reaction. So he'd know. But, dammit, she seemed to be deliberately looking everywhere ... anywhere else, as if she was avoiding him.

He stared at her, as if he could force her to look at him through sheer mind control, pouring all his energy into making her look in front of her ... at *him*. Now, by God! Hunger for just a glance from her burned through him.

Her head started to swing slowly around and he smiled wolfishly to himself. She must have felt the intensity of his gaze because her eyes skimmed away from the guests and then she looked directly at him.

Holy shite!

His body tensed and he had to lock his knees to stop from taking a step back with the impact of that one, direct hit on his senses. Everything around him went white. The world seemed to stop and in that instant, the very second their eyes locked, everything else—guests, music, the gardens—all

faded away for Jake. Nothing was left but the two of them, her soul and his, tentatively touching and feeling, caressing with an almost subliminal touch that transcended the normal plane. It was familiar. Right. Perfect. And some instinctive part of him pushed and needed to recognise that touch for what it was.

She was the one. His other half.

He wanted to deny it.

Tried.

Couldn't.

Because suddenly he felt full, replete. Whole again when he hadn't realised what was missing.

After being emotionally numb for so long, he was now filled with a sensory overload of feelings. Recognition locked into place. The piece of his heart and soul that had been missing for the last five years ... for what seemed an endless eternity of wanting and searching and looking, slipped into the space that had been waiting, left vacant all this time.

In that instant, he knew that some part of him deep down inside had always known. It explained his reluctance to settle down with Sandy, to truly commit to their relationship in spite of being married. The reason, too, he hadn't wanted to bring kids into the equation with her.

The one.

Rob's words came back to him and unexpectedly, he had never been more sure of anything in his life. He felt as though her eyes bored right through him, blazing a path through his carefully set up defences, shattering them into a thousand pieces and leaving him naked, bared.

He wanted to shake his head in denial, but couldn't. What good would it do? With one look, she had virtually brought him to his knees.

As she came closer, step by step, he inhaled her heady fragrance. *Her* scent. The one he had subconsciously tried to find a million times, every now and then catching a whiff of something close to it, only to find out it wasn't the exact one he was searching for.

Elusive. He inhaled again, nostrils flaring. The softness of lavender and womanly musk blended subtly with the mysterious fragrance of ... God, what was that?

It tickled his nose again and he remembered. Oh yes, there was no mistaking it. He would never forget it as long as he lived. The scent of her desire. It made him want to reach out to her. Grab her. Pull her close so he could drown in it.

Almost without thinking, he took a step forward. One foot. *A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step ...* Confucius from a fortune cookie. But in this he was right. He had to get closer...

A sharp nudge in his ribs brought him back to earth, reality crashing back in around him, buffeting him. After the eerie stillness of a moment ago, he felt bombarded with a thousand noises, realising, with regret, where he was ... that the place he and Cassie had been was just an illusion. He glanced in annoyance at Tom whose ill-timed elbow had shattered that moment of perfect peace with her.

But he felt some small satisfaction. She had felt it too. He knew it. He could see it in the surprised look on her face and the way she almost stumbled.

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Instinctively, he reached for her arm to steady her. They touched ... And an electric zing sped through him, travelling like lightning along the nerve super-highway of his body. It smashed into his solar plexus, nearly driving the air from his lungs, but when it reached his chest, it was enough of a wallop to make his heart almost stop beating, settling it instead into an irregular thu-thump.

Cassie wasn't unaffected, either. He could feel the tremble where he gripped her. That shuddering shake triggered a flash of sweet memory, throwing him back to that night. He never had forgotten his sweet little Cassie, her body shaking and trembling beneath him as moved over her—first with nerves, but later with the same desire and need that powered through him. Nor the soft yielding of her flesh and the tickle of her warm panting breath at his neck. But more than that, it was the feel of her writhing and bucking against him in the throes of the climax that was torn out of them. Hearing her scream out his name as he thrust over and over, harder and faster, her arms clenched tightly around his neck, his hard fingers gripping her hips to get deeper, further, sinking into that damn furnace of her heat, gladly burning him up ... It was so vivid. So incredibly clear. Even now. Like it was just a moment ago.

With a rush, all the blood in his body fled south, and his eyes widened in shock at the sudden discomfort of a full, throbbing erection filling his trousers.

Oh hell! What timing! On view to a hundred assorted friends and family and he had to go and get a raging hard-on from one simple touch. Her gasp brought him up short; she

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looked shocked and surprised. He tried to grin at her, to let her know it was all right, that he could feel it too, but his mouth, like the rest of his body, bar his throbbing cock, refused to work. He let go of her arm, albeit reluctantly, but his fingers still tingled from the feel, the touch of her warm skin.

He turned to face the celebrant, attempting discreetly to ease the fullness in his pants. He hoped the ceremony was brief because he wasn't sure how long he could last before he surrendered to the need to get his hands on her again. The overwhelming urge to throw her over his shoulder like some lumbering Neanderthal intent on running off to shag her silly and claim her as his, flashed through his mind. Somehow he doubted his little sister would take to kindly to the idea of him absconding with her bridesmaid before they even got to the "I do's."

* * * *

The moment Cass was dreading had finally arrived. The ceremony was over, the marriage license signed, and now it was time for them to walk back down the aisle. That meant she would have to walk with Jake. Touch Jake. She groaned silently. That one searing glance earlier had shaken her, and the touch that followed had immediately beaded her nipples as if his wet tongue had grazed over them. Her lacy panties were damp with moisture. In fact, it scared the hell out of her, the way her body reacted to him.

In the struggle to maintain her equilibrium, she had managed to resist the powerful urge to glance at him after

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that ... in fact, had determinedly avoided looking at him, even though she had felt the pull and the heat of his eyes on her the whole time.

She shouldn't feel this way. It had been five years, for heaven's sake! She should be over him by now. She had thought she was, but one glance, one touch, had been enough to make her realise she had been deluding herself. Oh boy, had she ever been deluding herself! And now she was faced with the prospect of trying to get through the next few hours with him within touching distance the whole time. *Shit!*

"Cassie? Yer lookin' beautiful as always."

Lost in her thoughts, she jumped at the soft brogue that brushed over the skin near her ear, sensitising the hairs on the back of her neck, triggering a small shiver.

Jake had never quite lost that touch of Irish even though he had come out to Australia with his parents when he was eight. She used to melt whenever she heard that accent. Some things just didn't change.

"Hmmm?"

A light chuckle teased her ear. "Time for us to walk down the aisle, darlin'."

Yeah, right. *As if*, she thought. Not in this lifetime, that's for sure.

But she risked a glance beside her and saw him, all six-foot, two-inches of him leaning over her, very close, so close that she could see the minute muscle tic near his jaw. There was a dangerous, heated look in his eyes that her body reacted to instantly, sending a flood of heat through her. She felt like she was burning up. Spontaneous combustion didn't

sound quite so unbelievable right now. Those killer eyes should be marked as a lethal weapon.

He held his arm held out for her to take and she took a deep breath as she wrapped her fingers around his muscled forearm. Luckily the trip back down the aisle was short. Having Jake in such close proximity was a health hazard. Once past the gauntlet of guests, her quiet sigh of relief was curtailed though, as he leaned close to her, the heat of his breath against her ear sending a delightful shiver down her neck, ending at the hardened tips of her nipples.

"Tonight you're all mine, Cassie. Don't forget it."

The words came out as a soft growl and a flush went through her in spine-tingling reaction, exacerbated by the light kiss he placed on her cheek. She got his meaning all right; at least she wasn't quite so innocent anymore. She just wasn't prepared for the sound of a territorial Jake, especially with regards to her.

"If we didn't have a reception to go to, I'd be kidnapping you right now, darlin'. You're lookin' good enough to eat."

If only he would stop talking ... She gritted her teeth and consciously pulled her traitorous body under control. Damn man! There was no way she would let him get the upper hand this time round. Even though the fluttering in her chest made her feel like an inexperienced teenager again, she pasted an air of calmness on her face.

Because she wasn't a teenager—inexperienced or otherwise. Not anymore. She could do this. If the last five years had taught her anything, it was that she was strong enough to make it on her own. No man would ever throw her

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for a loop again. No way. She was her own woman, and she was determined to prove it to him. Starting now.

So, it's like that, is it Jake? Think you can just turn on the old charm and I'll fall at your feet? Maybe so, maybe once, but two can play that game, she decided.

Okay, that was probably foolish. But a part of her, that typically feminine part, wanted him to realise that she wasn't a kid any longer. Not just his baby sister's friend. No longer the innocent, the virgin. She was a woman to be reckoned with. That she hadn't spent the last five years wondering what he was doing ... wanting him ... wishing ... wishing...

No, she could do this. It was only for tonight, anyway. After the wedding, her life could slip back into its normal routine, Jake could go on his merry way, but for tonight she wanted to be something she hadn't allowed herself to be for a long time—a desirable woman, one who could turn a man on, get him hot and bothered.

Turnabout is fair play, Jake. Let's see how you like it...

She paused for a moment, looking up at him with her most innocent look and absently licked her lips in anticipation. She smiled to herself when she caught his blue eyes, brighter all of a sudden, follow the moist path of her tongue. A wicked flare of power surged through her as she realised she was not the only one affected. She reached for his arm, ignoring the flutter she felt when he clasped his other hand over it to hold it there. "But you can't *kidnap* me, Jake. I'm all grown up now, in case you hadn't noticed." She smiled ingenuously up at him. She could tell from the look in his eyes, the way they darkened at her words, that she was playing with fire, but she

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felt safe enough. What could possibly happen at a reception with all these guests around?

* * * *

It was the teasing smile that did it. Weak at the knees didn't even come close to the impact it had on him. He could think of a much better use for those luscious lips, though. Like closing around his cock ... Just the thought of it brought out a devilish smile of his own.

He was pretty sure Cassie wasn't married. He had nonchalantly asked his little sister and that was about as much information as she had been prepared to give him. Seeing her now, for the life of him he couldn't understand why she wasn't taken. Were all the men around her blind *and* stupid?

Just to torture himself a bit further, he leaned in close, inhaling the scent of her, wishing suddenly he hadn't. There it was again. If he didn't know better, he would swear she was as aroused as he was. God, he hoped so. She leaned ever so slightly into him as they walked, her body flush up against his side, setting off a slow burn where they touched.

That did it! It was time to get a few things sorted out before they went any further. He spared a quick glance up ahead to see that the rest of the bridal party were waiting by the leafy grotto for the photographer to finish getting set up. Which suited his needs perfectly—what he had in mind wouldn't take long. Steering a curious Cassie behind the rose trellis, he stopped walking and turned to face her. Lifting her chin with a finger, he raised her face to his and leaned over to

brush his lips over the softness of hers, tasting a light hint of mint on her breath.

"Mine." The whispered claim against her lips was a prelude to a soft, sensual caress that deepened into a wild exploration as her mouth opened under his. For too brief a moment, she leaned into him, soft curves and hollows aligned with his rigid length, encouraging him with the soft moan that escaped her lips.

"No." She broke the connection and tried to push away, but he held her firm against him, reluctant to lose the feel of her in his arms.

"For tonight ... yes." *And for the rest of your bloody life, too.* His head lifted at the thought. Testing it. Feeling its truth. He kept it to himself. It would happen. He would make it happen.

With a closer glance, he noticed her hair was still the same rich dark brown, maybe longer, although it was hard to tell with all the curls pulled up. He would take great delight in releasing it and running his fingers through it once again if ... scratch that—*when* he got the chance.

She pushed against his chest more firmly and lifted an inquiring eyebrow at him. There was a poise about her now that showed just how much she had grown up. He resented the thought of the men who had passed through her life, gifting her with that assurance. She was a woman in every sense of the word. No matter. He was going to make bloody sure he was the last one.

Her eyes glittered, the honey flecks bright against the green, the hint of a smile upon her lips. "You can't hold me

captive here all night, Jake. Someone is bound to come looking for us. In fact," she motioned with her head, "shouldn't we be with the rest of the bridal party?" A wicked thought ran through his mind, dwelling on the possibility of them taking off now and nobody even noticing.

"It won't work, Jake." She was looking at him with a cheeky grin as if she knew the thoughts running through his head. "Photos. We'll be missed."

He sighed theatrically and nodded in acquiescence. "Later then. Most definitely."

"We'll see..." Her laugh, husky and warm, went straight to his groin.

"Ha! You can count on it, darlin." His point made, he offered her his arm once again. "Shall we?"

* * * *

The photo session turned out to be an excellent means for getting as close to Cassie as he needed to right at that point without getting naked into the bargain. The photographer must have read his mind, bless him, as he wanted informal shots of all of them in "romantic" poses. That was a prospect Jake could embrace—literally.

He felt Cassie stiffen once, just a slight movement, when they had to look like they were hugging for a shot. At the photographer's direction, he was leaning, his back up against a tree. With his arms wrapped around her, Cassie was nestled up against him, back to front so that she was pulled up flush against him. She fit so perfectly, her head sitting under his chin. But for all her earlier bravado, she was nervous. The

rapid beat of her heart as it drummed under his arm was a dead giveaway. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Just relax, darlin'. I won't bite. Promise."

He nearly choked when she turned slightly in his arms and chuckled. "I know, but I might."

Maybe it wasn't nerves after all.

* * * *

When it was time for the photos of Lizzy and Rob on their own, Cass couldn't resist a sigh of relief. Her self-control was just about shattered. Standing that close to Jake for so long was not good for her piece of mind. Sexual Tension. Capitalised. She might be a bit of a novice, but she was a woman after all, and all that evolutionary programming wasn't all for nothing. It thrummed between them so loudly it was almost audible. And she only had to get through, oh, about another four hours of this pleasurable torture.

The guys were standing behind the photographer, ribbing Rob and Lizzy and making some rather inappropriate comments that raised smiles all round. She felt Rachael's hand at her elbow, an assessing look in her eyes.

"You might want to turn it down a notch or two."

Cass, distracted by watching Jake, turned to Rach. "Hmmm? What?"

"Whatever game you're playing with Jake. The guy looks like he's about to explode out of his pants any second. He looked like he was going to eat you up."

"You noticed that, too?" She grinned wickedly. "Let's just say I'm giving him a bit of his own medicine."

Rachael looked at her in concern. "Well, make sure he doesn't O.D. And watch it doesn't backfire, sweetie. Your threshold of resistance with Jake ain't all that high, if you recall."

"Don't worry. I'm a lot older and a lot wiser than I was back then."

"Oh, right. Famous last words. Let's not forget that on the experience-with-men meter, you're about two seconds past being a virgin. All these years and you haven't let a single man within five feet of you romantically." She held up her hand at Cass's look. "Yes, I know why, sweetie. But this is different. This is Jake and he's not some guy you can just toss off and go back to your nice little life. You have an emotional connection to him through Chloe. So be careful, Cass. I'm serious. The way he looks at you when you're not watching..."

"Like how?" This was getting interesting.

"His eyes follow you everywhere, and honey, that is one intense look, let me tell you."

"Really?"

"If a man looked at me like that, I would be checking my underwear at the door. The man is seriously interested. And I mean, seriously."

"I'm surprised you noticed, Rach. You looked like you were trying to climb into Tom's skin at one point there."

Rachael laughed. "He's a hottie, isn't he? Boy, what I would give to see him in his uniform, or better still, out of it." She winked in jest but then her expression turned serious. "You, though, sweetie. Be careful," she warned one last time.

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"Uh-oh, looks like the photographer's done. Time to go mingle with the guests."

"Thank God for that. I could do with a break from Jake. I think I'm out of practice at this stuff." With a sigh, Cass started to walk back towards the house where the reception was underway.

"I *know* you are, if you ever were." Rach tossed a cheeky grin over her shoulder as she trotted over to Tom.

"Going somewhere?" The husky baritone rumbled all the way down her spine as two strong arms wrapped around her.

Rachael's warning skipped out of her mind like it had never been there as her insides melted.

Chapter Four

Like bees around a fucking honey pot. Jake was growing a little tired of watching any and every unattached male swarm around Cassie. The meal was finished, the toasts completed, and he still hadn't been able to grab more than a few seconds alone with her. He leaned up against the bar, hands thrust in his pockets and watched, his expression brooding.

Why did he want to be alone with her, anyway? Had he imagined what passed between them at that first touch, or was it just a flashback? A chance to revisit and explore the taste of passion he had awakened between them that night so long ago? This was the first time he had seen or spoken to her since that night and the feeling, this unsettling need to possess her again was driving him crazy with want.

But every time he had managed to work himself within five feet of her, some other guy with more hormones than good sense came along and started talking to her. He wanted to talk to her alone, and he had no intention of sharing her with anyone else. He normally had the patience of an oyster, but right about now was about to shuck or be shucked.

"Hello, Jake." He recognised the soft female voice behind him straight away, unfortunately. Damn! Kate Richards.

"What's up, Kate?" He didn't even bother turning around. Kate was not only his cousin, but a good friend of Sandy's to boot. The two had become close during the course of his marriage. Just what he needed. An attack on his conscience.

It was coming. Kate never missed an opportunity when it presented itself.

"You look like you're doing okay, Jake, considering..."

"Considering what?"

"The divorce and all that ... you know..."

"Yes, I do know." He sighed, prepared for what he knew was coming. "What's your point? Is there some reason I shouldn't be okay?" He frowned as he watched Bill Turner take Cassie a drink and sit down next to her. Too damn close. The casual arm Bill threw around the back of her seat just deepened the frown on Jake's face. Didn't Cass know what a major sleaze the guy was? He had to fight an urge to snarl.

"Sorry?" He realised Kate had said something, but had missed it, not surprising considering Bill was about to eat a knuckle sandwich if he didn't put some daylight between him and Cassie.

"I *said*," Kate tugged on his sleeve, forcing his attention, "Sandy is still upset over the divorce. She wants you back, you know."

Yes, he did know. It didn't change anything, though. Things between him and Sandy had never been the same once they were back together. Sure, they had settled back into the relationship easily enough, but he had soon realised it was more out of a sense of habit than anything else. His heart just wasn't in it. Unfortunately, by that time they were married. Things had started to slide. They fought. For the last twelve months, he had been spending more time at work than he was at home. The push to start a family had been the clincher. Sandy had never been hung up on the whole having-

kids thing, and he had suspected it was a move on her part to try and bond them again. He just couldn't do it. If nothing else, it made him face the fact that what they had once had was gone. He knew he had hurt her, but he couldn't go on living a lie. It wasn't fair to either of them.

"It's over, Kate. Just let it drop."

"Well, it's not over for Sandy, Jake. You should realise that. She doesn't give up that easy."

"Is there a point to all this, Kate?" He turned a weary face to hers. Every time he saw her she wanted to talk about Sandy. Like she was the president of her fan club or something. "I've moved on. It's time for Sandy to be doin' the same thing." He wished she would go and interfere in somebody else's life and leave his the hell alone. "Now, if you'll excuse me?"

Without conscious thought or design, his feet started propelling him towards Cassie. As soon as his mind kicked in, he thought what a damn good idea it was and followed suit. Getting to her, though, was like running an obstacle course of friends and relatives, and it was almost fifteen minutes before he finally neared her that he saw her duck out through the French doors leading to the garden. Now was his chance and he moved quickly. At least Bill Turner wasn't around. Just as well. His frustration was so great, he felt like hitting something.

He faltered a moment and his expression darkened when it occurred to him that she might be meeting someone out there. If that were the case, he was about to burst their little bubble real quick. Determination in his stride, he followed, his

footfalls silent on the dewy grass. She unknowingly led him around the side of the large house to a small pergola off to the side of the main garden.

Even though it was partly covered in rambling ivy and bougainvillea, he could still see her through the greenery. He stopped to watch, as with a tired sigh, she sat down on the garden bench, crossed her legs and took off a shoe. She closed her eyes and started to gently massage a foot. With a predatory grin, he moved towards her, kneeling in front of her before she even knew he was there.

"Allow me, darlin'." He knelt down in front of her, and holding her foot, massaged the tender arch with gentle fingers. Her eyes flew open in surprise.

"Jake! What are you doing here?"

"Following you. How does that feel?" With a firm touch, he eased the swelling and knots with strong, skilled fingers. She sat back and a moan escaped.

"That feels wonderful. I'm not used to wearing such high heels. My feet are killing me. You have magic hands, you know."

He grinned and resisted the urge to comment. Continuing his ministrations, he worked along to her heel, and then further up, kneading the firm calves. She made to pull back from him, but he held her firmly. "No, just enjoy it. Relax. You may not be gettin' another chance tonight." He finished with that leg and tapped her on the knee. "Next one." She smiled and changed legs, allowing him to lavish the same care on that one, a sigh of pure delight escaping her lips as

he finished the massage with soothing strokes of her leg from knee to ankle.

She looked so relaxed sitting back with her eyes closed. She had bitten her bottom lip as he had worked the tension out of her tired legs and feet, and they still glistened invitingly. He couldn't resist a taste. Leaning forward, he brushed his lips over hers.

He felt her hum of approval against his lips and knew he had to taste more. With a flick of his tongue, he licked at the seam of her lips. In surprise, she opened them and he slid inside, a leisurely, seductive sweep into her warmth. Her lips were so soft under his, and for a moment he felt her respond, the tip of her tongue brushing against his. God, but she tasted good.

That feeling of heaven lasted all of thirty seconds before he felt her hands on his chest, pushing him gently away.

She stood abruptly and turned quickly to leave. "I-I have to go."

He grasped her elbow firmly, halting her mid-stride. Drawing her against him, he tipped her chin up with his finger so that she had to look at him. "Don't keep running away from me, Cassie."

"I'm not running."

"No?"

"Of course not. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you're avoiding me."

"Don't be silly. I'm the bridesmaid. I have ... responsibilities."

"One of which is partnering the best man."

"What is this really all about, Jake?"

He should have asked himself the same question, but his answer would have still been the same. "I don't know ... yet." He leaned down to lay a tender kiss on her forehead. It was true—he didn't. All he was sure of was that he just wanted her to himself and resented every intrusion.

She moved away from him, pulling her dress down from where it had ridden up during the foot massage. "I don't know, either." A small smile creased her face. "At least that's one thing we agree on."

Her eyes drifted past him. "Uh oh. Looks like we've been discovered." She nodded past his shoulder. "Your mum. Looks like she's on a mission, too."

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. He must have pissed off the gods well and truly considering how this night was turning out.

"Jake? Cass? There you are. I've been looking for the two of you everywhere. Would there a problem?" With a knowing glint, her eyes swung between the two of them.

"No, no problem, Ma. Just talking." Damn interruptions!

"Mighty cosy chat, Son." Gwen Reilly's eyes twinkled watching her son squirm with discomfort. "I'm the search and rescue party. It's time for the bridal waltz and you are needed. Now. So shake your booties back inside, you two. You can continue your 'talk' later." She walked away, turning back once to make sure they were following, a knowing chuckle filtering back to them on the soft breeze.

He loved his ma, but her timing really, really sucked. Actually ... A pleasant thought hit him.

"That means I'll be gettin' you all to myself for a little while longer, darlin'." He leaned down and placed a feather-light kiss on her forehead, moving with teasing slowness down to her jaw line, fighting the urge to wrap her in his arms and crush her against him when he felt her lean into him just a fraction.

The music for the dance filtered out to them. "Umm, Jake. Your mum's right. Hadn't we better go?" Her voice was soft and low, the effect not unlike a the gentle scrape of fingernails raking down his spine, giving him shivers that had nothing to do with cold and a whole lot to do with heat.

She felt so good in his arms. "Come on, then. Let's go. I can wait until later. But you and I aren't done yet, darlin'. We have to talk. And there'll be no more games, then, Cassie."

* * * *

It was with a combination of relief and sadness that Cass realised the reception was nearly over. Lizzy and Rob left to change out of their wedding gear.

She noticed Bill Turner heading in her direction and quickened her pace over to Rachael to get away from him. The guy was all arms.

"Save me, Rach. Quick!"

"What? Why?"

"Bill Turner. I think he wants to ask me out."

"I take it you're not interested?" Rachael smirked at her.

"Bingo, Einstein. Isn't there some 'bridesmaidly' stuff we should be doing?"

"Nope. This little hoe-down is all done, bar the shouting. I do have a suggestion for you, though."

"Suggest away."

Rachael looked at her closely, seeming to consider her words. "You're still staying the night in the hotel, aren't you?"

"Sure. Chloe is sleeping over at Larry and Deb's. He won't be dropping her off till tomorrow afternoon. I think they have a beach picnic planned for all the kids." Her brother, Larry, had four kids of his own ranging in ages from Ben who was seven, down to little Amy who was just starting to walk. To Chloe, they were like the brothers and sisters she didn't have. Wasn't likely to have either, considering her mother's love life. "What did you have in mind? I hope it doesn't involve dancing or anything. My feet are killing me."

"Not exactly. Tom and I are going to get changed once we get back to the hotel and then have a few quiet drinks in the bar. How about you join us?"

"Won't I be cramping your style, hon?" No way she wanted to get in the middle of Rach and her target for the night.

"Nope. The plans I have for the nice policeman don't include bonking him the first night I've met him. I have a little bit more class than that."

Her wink raised a laugh from Cass. "If you say so." Actually, a quiet drink in a dimly lit bar sounded just about right. It wasn't often she had the chance, or the reason for that matter, to stay out late. She liked to be home with Chloe as much as possible. And staying in the hotel tonight meant she didn't have to drive anywhere, which was even better.

One Touch
by Susie Charles

After two or three drinks she could just stumble up to her room and crash. "Sure. I'd love to come."

Of course, there was the chance that Jake would be there, but the "talk" he kept mentioning would just be that much harder if they were with other people.

At that moment, an arm draped around her shoulder, and the overpowering smell of aftershave and beer hit her nostrils. Bill. She turned to him, hoping to dislodge his arm but failed. Trying not to be rude, she pasted what she hoped was a pleasant smile on her face.

"How about you and me go somewhere for a drink when this little shindig is over, babe?"

Unsuccessfully, she tried to put some distance between them, turning her face from the kiss he tried to plant on her lips so that he ended up swiping a wet line across her cheek.

Just then she turned and caught sight of Jake across the room near the French doors. He was talking to Tom and looking furious. At her. What was up with that? Surely he didn't think she was encouraging Bill. And anyway, what business was it of his?

Her hands on Bill's arms, she tried to push herself away.

"Come on, babe. Don't fight it. You like me, I can tell. Just let go."

"No, Bill. I don't want..."

"Ahh, Bill, I think you might want to reconsider..." Rachael tried to warn him just as a large hand dropped onto Bill's shoulder.

Bill turned quickly, looking into the thunderous visage of one Jake Reilly.

"The lady said no, Bill. I suggest you take her at her word."

"Butt out, Reilly. This has nothing to do with you."

"Oh, but that's where you're wrong, boy-o. The lady is with me. So kindly be takin' your hands off her. Now."

Cass knew that Bill Turner thought he was God's gift to the female population, but he also wasn't stupid. One look at Jake's face was enough for him to back off, back away, and get the hell out of Dodge. Heck, Cass would have been scared, too, if that murderous look had been directed at her. Which was quite beside the point...

"Just what was that all about, Jake? Did I look like I needed saving? And what gave you the right..."

"I told you before. Tonight you're mine. That means all night."

"And while we're on the subject," she started, eyes flashing, "who gave you the right..."

Further words were cut off when he placed a finger over her lips, effectively silencing her. "Don't fight me tonight, darlin'."

Even though the words were offered gently and the familiar grin on his face should have calmed her, she didn't miss the underlying tension in his tone or the sparks in his eyes. He was mad about something, but for the life of her she had no idea what it was.

She had a feeling she was about to find out...

Chapter Five

Cass opened one heavy-lidded eye and looked at the clock beside the bed. The green numbers shone bright enough in the darkness for her to read even without her glasses on. 4:30am. Time for a couple more hours sleep, she thought dreamily.

A warm, delicious feeling surrounded her, like being wrapped in cotton wool. It was so enticing, she almost purred. Thinking to roll over, she stilled the second she realised not only was she not in her own bed at home, but she wasn't alone.

Frozen in place, the blanketing fog of sleep cleared and she came fully awake with a rush. The soft tickle of a warm breath on the back of her neck nearly made her jump into next week. A frisson of panic rose up and lodged in her throat.

How the hell had she ended up here? Consciously clearing the remaining fog from her head, she tried to piece the night together and sort out fact from fantasy even though the edges were kind of fuzzy.

They had gone back to the hotel, changed in their rooms and met again in the bar downstairs. Ending up in his room was a blur. She closed her eyes and concentrated, trying to put the pieces of the night back together like a jigsaw that had one piece too many missing. Too much alcohol and way too many hormones.

As she made to move, she became aware of a small obstacle blocking her escape. Actually, not so small. A large, warm, calloused hand cupped her breast possessively from behind and held her firm against the warm body it was attached to.

In an erotic torrent, graphic images of the night *before* she tumbled into a sounder sleep than she'd had in years, hit her like a sledgehammer. Heat flooded through her, from the roots of her very mussed, long brown hair to the tips of her already curling toes, overturning the icy chill of recognition just moments ago.

The hotel. The bar. Tom and Rach ... oh, and don't forget Jake. Four ... or was it five Midoris? Either way, it was at least three too many. She knew she didn't drink often enough to be able to hold that sort of alcohol, but her nerves had been shot and the Midoris had helped. At least, that was what she had thought at the time.

Which brought her back to her current situation. As Jake's hand absently rubbed against a sensitive nipple, the night replayed itself over in her mind in a rapid flicker of mental snapshots that made her heart pound...

A soft kiss in the elevator that soon turned into a torrid fight for breath ... Barely making it inside his room before her panties were ripped from her, his fly unzipped ... Pushed hard up against the door, held in place only by his strength and her legs clenched around his waist as he buried himself deep inside her weeping pussy with a harsh groan...

Jake suspended over her, his strong arms supporting that finely muscled chest, the hungry look in his diamond-sharp

blue eyes as they held her captive, unable to look away, forcing her to focus on the steady thrust and withdraw of his body against hers...

His hands gripping her hips as she kneeled in front of him on her hands and knees, the almost savage pounding of his body against hers as she wantonly begged him for faster, harder, deeper, more. Giving her every glorious inch of that hard, throbbing cock so that she was stretched, filled and completely possessed ... tormented into a screaming, shattering climax...

Later, after resting and the curious exploration of each other that lovers do, Jake in control, the soft, tender words and encouragement he had murmured to her as he slowly stroked deeper and deeper inside ... Holding her climax at bay for so long she was crying and pleading with him for release ... Jake moaning out her name as the feel of her pulsing around him had shattered his control and he exploded inside her in a hot torrent.

She was panting. Oh, my God. Just thinking about it and she was panting. That was not just good sex. It went way beyond that. And even though she had no yardstick to measure it by, she was sure that it was not the norm, not by any stretch of the imagination.

Jake nestled closer against her, snapping her out of her lustful remembrances. That was a cock she felt pushing up against the crevice of her ass. And by the feel of it, it was getting harder by the second.

This was *not* good. It was soooooo not good.

One Touch
by Susie Charles

How ... *why* was it that she had managed to avoid every man who even looked twice at her for five years, yet after a few drinks with Jake she willingly tumbled, fell, lurched and stumbled into bed with him? *Good going, Cass. Now what the hell are you going to do?*

She closed her eyes tightly, trying to think, trying to push the memory of his naked body out of her mind. That didn't work. In her traitorous mind's eye, she could run her gaze over every detail of his body ... his hot, very *naked* body. *God, but the man was built.* Michelangelo's David was a pre-pubescent teenager compared to Jake.

Okay, she must still be dreaming. Please let her be dreaming ... Maybe she was having a flashback or something. She pinched herself hard just to make sure. She winced at the twinge of pain. No. Not dreaming. There would probably be a bruise there later just to remind her that she was partway to losing her marbles.

Her logical mind was having trouble believing what she had done. Her body had no such qualms and seemed determined to ready itself for more fun and games if that new dampness between her legs was anything to go by.

That settled it. She had to go—had to get out of there now! If she was still there when Jake woke up ... She wasn't stupid. She knew what would happen. Whatever logical reasons her head gave for not doing so; her sex-starved body would totally ignore them and lay itself open in complete surrender, her legs doing the biggest parting since Moses and the Red Sea.

One Touch
by Susie Charles

The heady scent of sex still lingered all around them, encouraged by the warmth of their bodies, and an innate part of her ached to stay right where she was. How many times over the years had she craved this, dreamed about it? Even now, her nipple had hardened under the palm that cupped it. Completely ignoring her brain, her body was like a walking advertisement for sex with Jake.

An enveloping heat warmed her back and she could feel the dampness starting to trickle down her thigh as she contemplated the man who now held her so intimately, and so damn close. It was as if he belonged there and she did, too.

What was it about him that made her act the way she did? The only man she had ever slept with, and both times she had fallen into bed with him like she was the village tart.

After Chloe's birth she had decided to go on the pill. Just in case ... She certainly had no intentions of being a single mother to more than one child. The first time was innocence; any more than that would have been stupidity. But after five years of an unintentional celibacy that would have done Mother Theresa proud, *just in case* had turned into *just as well*.

Aaah, Jake. What is it about you? Why is it so hard to say no?

It was his touch. She knew it. Like at the wedding ceremony. Every single time it fried her brain so that her body was just one big nerve ending, screaming with sensation.

Which was why she had to leave. Now. Before she never wanted to leave ever again. And that would just lead to hurt. Jake was out of her league and she'd known that for a long time. Plus, it wasn't just her she had to consider now...

Chloe.

She wondered what Jake would say if he knew he had a cute little daughter who was the spitting image of him. The same bright blue eyes and the long blonde hair. There were times when Chloe looked a certain way ... when she was mad or sad or teasing, that the expression was pure Jake. Every single time it made her heart clench. But Jake didn't want kids. Perhaps, if ... no, it wasn't fair to any of them, especially Chloe, to open up that Pandora's box. Best just to let things stay as they were.

Carefully, she tried again to extricate herself from his hold. He snuffled and murmured in his sleep as she tried to lift his arm and slide out from under it, but then froze, her heart thudding in her chest. The last thing she needed was an awakened Jake deciding to go another round on the fucking merry-go-round.

She groaned silently and bit her lip. Muscles she hadn't used since she gave up gymnastics as a teenager, and a few others that she was sure had *never* been used, ached at the slightest movement.

Some mental synapses were obviously still firing in spite of the sex-induced mental lethargy and she had the brilliant idea to substitute her warm body with her warm pillow. Maybe, if she was lucky, he wouldn't notice her body missing ... at least until she got out the door.

One Touch
by Susie Charles

Her balance wasn't great. Her head swam as she got up off the bed and she had to grab the bedside cupboard for support to stop from toppling. She must have had a whole lot more to drink than she thought.

With some difficulty in the dark, unfamiliar room, she managed to locate all her clothes. They had been tossed helter-skelter as she and Jake had frantically scrambled to undress each other. At least hers were still in one piece. Thank God. She could have sworn she remembered the sound of ripping cloth, which could only mean ... *oh good going, Cass—you ripped the guy's clothes off. Well done. He probably thinks you're a raving nymphomaniac.*

She turned to leave but couldn't resist one more wistful look at the man in the bed. For all that once could have been, but now never would be. The subtle illumination of the clock was just enough for her to see the slightly too-long honey blond hair, now mussed from sleep and the effects of her fingers, the strong jaw line, now with a hint of morning stubble. But it was the lips, generous and slightly puffy, that had kissed her in places that even now made her blush. She ran her tongue over her own. They felt like his looked. His large, well-muscled body was stretched out, almost filling the bed. No wonder she'd slept as though she was in a cocoon with *that* body wrapped around her. Knowing she shouldn't, but unable to resist, she leaned over to kiss him lightly and, knowing it would be the last time, inhaled the heady scent of aftershave and sex. As she touched his lips, he murmured in his sleep, his mouth turning up into a soft smile.

Mmmm to you, too, she thought to herself, and then turned and quietly let herself out.

* * * *

Jake stretched. He felt fucking fantastic. Until he opened his eyes. And realised he was in bed—alone.

He sat bolt upright, dropped the pillow he was cuddling and looked around. No Cassie. He had only had a couple of beers the night before, so he knew he hadn't dreamt her being with him. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he padded through to the bathroom. Not finding her in there, he stood in the middle of the room and ran his fingers through his hair, a low growl slipping past his lips.

Where the fuck had she gone? And why did she leave?

What they had shared last night had been more amazing than anything he had felt with any other woman, his ex-wife included. Coming inside her had been like coming home. Even now, his morning erection throbbed painfully with need of her.

Well, no matter. She wouldn't get away from him this time. Not again. No fucking way. They hadn't even had a chance to talk. That *had* been his intention on bringing her back to his room in the early hours of the morning, but other things had kind of gotten in the way. It hadn't helped that he'd caught her looking at him like she wanted to eat him up. He would defy any man to be able to resist that! So, the first driving need had been for him to get inside her as quickly as humanly possible. He'd had every intention of them talking just as soon as he took the edge of his insane craving for her.

One Touch
by Susie Charles

Okay. So that hadn't happened after the first, second or third times, and he suspected that if they had stayed awake long enough for a fourth or a fifth, the need would have been just as overwhelming, which worried him.

Perhaps he had been too rough. What if he had hurt her? He cringed at the thought, filled with remorse. She had been so tight. Almost like a virgin, and he remembered extremely well what *that* had been like. He had been less than gentle that night as well. What happened to his blasted control when he was with her? All he wanted to do was rut on her like a beast out of control. He had to talk to her now, try to explain.

Hastily pulling on a pair of jeans, he grabbed the phone and dialled reception, pacing impatiently until a professional voice answered.

"Yeah, Cass Grant's room, please."

"I'm sorry, sir, but Ms. Grant checked out an hour ago."

"She *what*?"

"Yes, sir. Will there be anything else?"

"No. No. That's all." His shoulders slumped, the air leaving his lungs in an angry sigh. "Thanks," he said curtly, dropping the phone in the cradle and his head into his hands.

Damn it! Damn it all to hell!

Chapter Six

Jake sat on his deck watching the sun come up over the watery horizon, a big red ball foretelling the heat to come later in the day. Already, he was nursing his third cup of coffee for the morning. Unable to sleep with dreams of Cassie plaguing him, he had been up since 4 am. But today was Saturday, so he didn't care because it wasn't as if he had to work today.

Unable to sit still any longer, he changed into shorts and running shoes and walked the short distance down to the beach to go for a jog.

The initial easy pace and steady pounding of his feet along the hard-packed sand changed to an all-out sprint the more he reflected on his frustration and inability to find Cassie. In the two weeks since his sister's wedding he had tried everything he could think of to find her. Each time he had drawn a blank and had sunk a little deeper into depression. If only Lizzy would get back from her honeymoon, he could ask her.

Breathing hard, he slowed to a jog again, eventually stopping and leaning over, hands on his knees, taking in huge gulps of air. Once his breathing evened out a little, he stripped off his shoes and walked out into the water, diving under the foam of a breaking wave to cool off.

He still had no idea what to do, but at least he felt a damn sight less aggravated than he had. With a quick rinse off under the shower near the parking lot, he headed home.

The phone was ringing as he tossed off his shoes at the front door and wandered back through the house. He decided to let the machine answer it. It was probably work-related and he didn't feel like talking to anyone—business or not.

A loud rumble reminded him how hungry he was and he wandered through to the kitchen, grabbing some eggs from the fridge as he went. With half an ear, he listened to the message being left as he cracked an egg on the side of the bowl. He froze. That voice! He almost laughed as he heard the warm, sexy sound.

Hello.

This is Cassandra Grant.

My house was badly damaged in the storm and I was wondering if you'd have time to put in a quote...

My number is...

Or, if you prefer, my address is...

I'll be home all day if you have time to call in...

After nearly going crazy trying to get hold of his sweet Cassie for the last fortnight, the mountain had ironically come to Mohammed.

Jake's company, Rowling Constructions, was named after its previous owner and his now-retired boss, Gary. When Gary had decided to pack it in and head up the east coast, deciding the time was right to spend some of his hard-earned money lying on a beach in North Queensland with his lovely wife, Minnie, Jake had jumped at the chance to buy the company. It had a good name and a strong customer base, but most of all, he knew the people—customers and employees alike—very well.

The business, already reasonably successful, had boomed since he took over. The company had a good reputation on the Northern Beaches for doing quality work at a reasonable price. But a lot of people thought Gary still owned the company. He guessed that was why Cassie had called. He suspected that if she had known *he* was now the man behind Rowling Constructions, she wouldn't have called him this side of doomsday.

Just that knowledge was enough to wipe the cocky smile off his face. The initial anger he felt after she disappeared on him had toned down to a slow simmer and then to confusion. Whatever she was running from, it had better not be him. It crossed his mind again that he may have hurt her. If that were the case, he would do whatever it took to make it up to her.

As he ate his scrambled eggs and bacon, he pressed the PLAY button again, just for the sheer pleasure of hearing her voice. His cock was happy too, judging by the way it was butting against the fly of his jeans. Luckily for him, she had left her address as well as her phone number on the message. After breakfast, he would be paying a visit to Ms. Cassandra Grant.

The clean-up from breakfast was done quickly and he whistled tunelessly along with the radio as he tidied. After spending the last couple of weeks in an emotional slump, he felt energized.

He showered and shaved, humming all the while. Not even the thought that she had deliberately run from him was

One Touch
by Susie Charles

enough to wipe the silly grin off his face. Now, he knew where she lived.

* * * *

Pulling up on the other side of the road, Jake checked out her house, running a professional eye over the damage to it.

Obviously Cassie's house had been just as hard hit as the rest of the houses in the neighbourhood after the killer hailstorm the previous week. Bright blue tarps, compliments of the State Emergency Service, were tied down over the roof to cover the holes until repair work could be completed. He and his crews had been flat out fixing internal water damage and restoring roofs.

At least this time, it looked like she needed him as much as he needed her. Not in quite the same way, of course, but given time...

Checking the rear view mirror for cars, he swung the steering wheel and coasted down her driveway.

* * * *

Cass's head lifted as she heard the doorbell. What now? She cringed at another interruption, looking in frustration at the pile of essays still sitting on her desk waiting to be graded. At this rate, there was no way she would get them done by next Monday. And if that stupid doorbell didn't stop ringing she would rip the damn thing off the wall. With a frown, she looked out the screen door at the young boy glancing expectantly and hopefully inside the house. With a

knowing sigh, she grabbed her purse off the counter on her way to the door.

"Hi," said Cass. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, we're having this fund raiser at school..."

The rest of the words faded into a drone, and Cass waited until he got to the punch line about the money. There had to be something terribly wrong with the government funding if kids were reduced to this to raise money for their school. In the past two hours, she had bought chocolates, a raffle ticket for a widescreen TV, and a tray of lamingtons baked fresh by the local Parents and Citizens group. That didn't include the door-to-door sales reps. She had passed up on the unbelievable offer of a season ticket to the local football games, a book of coupons for local shops that would save her hundreds of dollars—yeah, right, after she spent a thousand cashing them in to get the saving—and now, this kid was participating in a skip-a-thon. At least *they* were creative. Considering the amount of junk food the kids of today consumed, they could use the exercise. Handing over a \$5 note to the beaming kid, she figured it was money well spent.

It wasn't like her to be so grumpy, especially on a Saturday, but she was feeling off balance, testy. Testy wasn't a part of her emotional arsenal. But since that night with Jake, her emotions had been all over the place. She had even snapped at Chloe a couple of times, the confused look in her baby's eyes making her feel like a total shit. Luckily, it was Larry's turn this week to take all the kids to the under-10 Nippers group at the local surf life saving club, so she had a couple of hours to pull herself out of her latest funk. After a

hectic morning of running around on the beach through flag races and racing out through the breakers with the local Life Savers, Chloe would crash tonight. Nothing surer.

In an attempt to calm down and regain her focus, she flicked the switch on the kettle. While she waited for it to boil, she closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and tried to center herself, the technique a result of a brief foray into meditation about a year ago. "Wide sandy beaches and tropical blue oceans..." she murmured to herself a couple of times, sounding more desperate than calm, as if the words alone had the power to transport her.

When the kettle started to whistle, she opened her eyes slowly, breathing deeply. The tea wasn't making itself, the pile of essays still stared back at her and the assortment of unwanted "purchases" still littered her counter, but she felt slightly better.

However ... if the doorbell rang one more time, she thought, she would behead the poor unfortunate slob pushing it. Well, so much for meditation on the run.

Taking her tea through to her office-cum-dining room, she paused to look out over the panoramic view of the beach in the distance and breathed deeply again, letting the sight of the ocean twinkling in the distance calm her better than any meditation or mantra, before settling back down to work.

She loved her job, as she had always known she would. Unexpectedly falling pregnant in her final year at Uni hadn't stopped her from graduating, hectic and tiring as those days had been. It all seemed like yesterday.

When confronted with the news that their baby daughter was pregnant, her mum and dad had been remarkably supportive. Her mum, especially. They hadn't pushed her to name the father and she hadn't told them. Just love and hugs and heaps and heaps of kisses. Larry, on the other hand, had wanted to inflict serious physical damage on whoever had done the dirty deed. Big brothers were like that—feeling like they had to protect their baby sister. At least Larry had always been that way, from the very first. Once he had managed to cool down, due mainly to his wife, Deb, telling him what an arse he was being, he was behind her every step of the way. Chloe's birth had been the most special day of her life. She chuckled as she recalled there were more concerned family in the delivery room than doctors and nurses.

Her dad had been great. Baby Chloe had taken to him straight away. Whenever she was fussing or colicky, her father's quiet voice and big arms would soothe her. It was uncanny. Like she knew just how safe she was in those arms.

When Chloe was about six months old, Cass had returned to Uni, partly on campus and part external study. With lots of help and support from her parents and Larry and Deb, she had gone on to receive her Masters with Honours, eventually securing a position as an Assistant Professor in the English faculty at her old stomping ground.

This morning, however, attempting to plough through student essays on "The Rhetoric of Romanticism" was not exactly conducive to a calm state of mind. After struggling for the last four years as a single mum, any romantic notions she'd had, had long ago shrivelled and dried up.

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed her pen and started reading through the next paper. A groan rumbled up as she went further through a poorly researched and ineffectually argued diatribe. With itching fingers, she resisted the urge to put a red cross through the whole piece, which was still preferable to tearing it into little pieces and flushing it down the toilet.

She put her pen down. Shook her head. It wasn't the student's fault that her passion for this particular genre in English Lit wasn't what it used to be. Was she being too hard, she wondered?

She jumped with a start when she heard the doorbell ring again. Gritting her teeth, she stalked down the hall.

"Look, whatever you've got, I ... don't ... want ... it." She pleaded, one part frustration, one part anger and two parts tiredness, with the as yet unseen bell ringer.

"Well, now, that's a damn shame. You sure about that, Cassie?"

That brogue was so familiar; the teasing rumble and the way that deep voice seemed to caress her name sent an involuntary ripple over her suddenly flushed skin. Of course, that could also have had something to do with the flood of embarrassment she was feeling as well.

She pulled open the door and gasped at the sight of the man standing on her front porch. No, this one was definitely not a schoolboy. In fact, "boy" could in no way describe the sight in front of her. She involuntarily licked her dry lips. An overload of testosterone nicely wrapped up in a white t-shirt and jeans that hugged that cute, tight butt. Now, that was a

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package. And those eyes, looking at her with the sparkling clarity of the Hope Diamond.

Oh God. Jake.

Chapter Seven

Her embarrassment was so acute, she was sure even her feet had turned bright red. How the hell had he found her?

A chuckle brought her full attention back to the man on the other side of the screen door and, even through the mesh, she couldn't fail to notice the way the mischievous eyes crinkled in amusement.

"What are *you* doing here?" She stood speechless for a moment, still waiting for the thudding of her heart to settle down. Whether it was thudding because he had found her, or simply because of his presence was still up for debate. Her only relief was that Chloe wasn't there. The thought of the two of them finally meeting was something she hadn't been able to face up to yet ... coward that she was. Foolishly, she had hoped that she might never have to cross that bridge. But now...

"I've a feeling I should be insulted by that, darlin'. Should I?"

Way to go, Cass. "I ... I'm sorry. The doorbell hasn't stopped ringing this morning," she said lamely by way of explanation. She was still blushing; she could feel it, if it were at all possible to *feel* red. A little of her anger returned as she watched his sparkling eyes scan her from top to toe in bemusement. "It's ... I'm not..." She scrambled to find her manners. "It's lovely to see you, Jake."

See you naked was actually what ran through her mind, but considering their last meeting and the fact that she had

run out on him like a scared bunny after spending a night fucking him like one, she bit off that last word before it got her into more trouble.

"It's wonderful to see you, too. In fact, I'd like to see more of you if I could." He caught her eye and grinned at her blush of discomfort. "But you keep running away from me. Now, why is that?"

She knew that smile. It was the one that said, "This sexy smile goeth before Cass's fall." *Fall? Huh! How about plummet?* Cass stiffened, valiantly trying to shore up her defences, ready for the siege. "What are you doing here, Jake?"

"Hmmm ... I *could* say I came to find out why you ran out on me that mornin' before I woke. By the way, did I do something wrong? Or perhaps I snore? Oh God, please tell me I don't snore."

The damn man was making fun of her. But even though the questions were asked in a teasing manner, she didn't miss the underlying peevishness of his tone. Or the tightening of his jaw.

It was a cowardly thing she had done, even if her reasons had been sound to her own mind, and faced with the evidence of her cold feet, she had the grace to sound apologetic.

"Sorry, Jake. No to all of the above. I had to leave early to get back home and you were sleeping so peacefully, I didn't want to wake you." A little bit of contrition usually worked, and it was the truth anyway. Mostly.

"Sure, Cassie. If you say so."

Usually worked, but obviously not this time. Those eyes could see right through her. She waited for him to prod further but surprisingly he didn't. With difficulty over the thudding of her heart, she wrenched herself back to the issue at hand. "But that doesn't explain why you're here, Jake. How did you find me?"

"Funny you should ask, but you found me. Life's strange, ain't it, though?" His eyes narrowed as he watched at her.

Cass looked at him blankly, totally confused.

"I'm Rowling Constructions, Cassie. I own it. You left a message on my answering machine to get a quote for some, em ... *work* you need done around here."

An intense, hooded look had come over those killer eyes, one that Cass recalled—intimately, and her body responded in spite of her best intentions to the contrary. *Sure, Jake. You can start at my lips and work your way down. Real slow.* Warmth flooded through her, pooling between the apex of her thighs.

She shook her head and looked squarely at him, almost groaning out loud. *Oh good grief! What am I thinking?* "I ... I beg your pardon?" For some reason, coherent speech and thought seemed to have deserted her as she looked at the man on her front porch. So much for being an intelligent, rational woman. She felt as though her hormones were doing a souped-up quickstep through her body, sending a hot flush into some very interesting nooks and crannies. What little clothes she had on all of a sudden felt like too many.

"Am I to be permanently relegated to the front porch? You can let me in. I'm house-trained and..." he held his hand up, "...I promise I won't bite."

Oh please, bite me, bite me. So now it seemed as though her brain was in cahoots with her hormones. She swallowed over the lump in her throat and held the door open. "Come on in."

Jake moved past her in the narrow hallway towards the kitchen, smiling down at her as he accidentally brushed her thigh and arm. A jolt of electricity flashed through her at the touch—a static shock that made her step back with nowhere to go, bumping straight into the wall with a soft thud.

"There's no need to be afraid of me, darlin'. You're quite safe."

Yeah, sure. Tell that to the rest of me, 'Darlin'. I think maybe one or two corpuscles might have missed it.

The clean, intrinsically male scent of him hit her next, jolting her senses. Breathing deep to try to settle down was the wrong thing to do, but she did it anyway. Disconcerted, but no longer alarmed by her reaction to him—some things, she had found, remain constant after all—she followed him through, mildly disgusted at her inability to keep her traitorous body under control.

"T-take a seat, Jake." Desperately, she tried to hide the shake in her voice. "T-tea?" *Okay, not working...*

"What's up? You're not nervous, are you Cassie?" He was teasing again, the rat.

"N-no." *Stop that!* "Not at all. Should I be?" *Of course you should be, you idiot.*

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Grateful for something to do other than make a fool of herself drooling over him, she busied herself making the tea in the hope that having something to do with her hands would stop the trembling. She willed her voice to come out steady—to no avail. "A-actually, I wish you'd just call me Cass, Jake. Nobody calls me Cassie." *For a start it sounds too damn intimate...*

"You'll always be Cassie t'me, darlin'." He smiled that too, too sexy smile as he looked at her. "It suits you. All soft and warm." It came out sounding like *'sahft and wahrm'*.

Mr. Husky was back again. *Don't do that Jake. Please don't do that.* If she shut her eyes, she could remember the way he talked to her as they made love, the soothing sounds, the words of encouragement, the husky sounds of sex ... It was almost enough to make her come just from listening to him talk, which, of course, just meant that her lack of a proper sex life could have potentially embarrassing consequences. Half a dozen or so orgasms in her entire life, and he'd been the instrument of all of them. She figured she was worse than one of Pavlov's dogs.

Her nipples had hardened and peaked under the loose summer dress, and hardly able to ignore the direction of his heated glance, she silently cursed the fact that she hadn't bothered to put on a bra when she dressed this morning. She hated wearing bras in the summer. But hell, it was Saturday and she wasn't expecting any visitors. She felt relieved when his hot gaze seemed to move away reluctantly from her and settled on the chocolate and coconut of the lamingtons.

"Would you like one? They're fresh. Baked today." Hoping that was a yes, she grabbed a plate from the cupboard above her head.

Without even looking, she could feel his eyes on her. Damn him. He knew the effect he was having on her.

She watched him as he glanced around the house from where he sat on the stool at the breakfast bar. She tried to see the house as he must be seeing it.

The kitchen and living room were open plan, separated by the small breakfast bar. The living room in itself was plain, just a sofa, two comfy looking chairs and a solid teak coffee table plus lots and lots of velvet-covered cushions in a riot of vibrant colours. They alone saved the room from looking drab.

It also had what was probably once a beautiful fireplace. The etched and carved frame and the marble mantelpiece harkened to an earlier, more graceful era, but it had been boarded up when she bought the house and she had never gotten around to doing anything about it. A battered oil heater with rust marks starting to creep over it stood to one side instead for those nights when the bite of the sea breeze became a little chilly. It was a poor substitute, she realised, but any visions she had of making love on a rug in front of a roaring fire had been doused the same time she had acknowledged a romantic sex life was not going to be hers anytime this century.

But swinging away from the fireplace, it was the floor to ceiling windows that went the full length of the other wall that were the main feature, and had her smiling with pride in her

little house. A magnificent view over Collaroy Beach and north up the coast gave the impression of inviting the outdoors inside and made the room seem huge.

He nodded, seeming pleased with what he saw. "It's a nice place you have here. Very cosy."

The house was something she could safely discuss with him. It was only the thought of having wild sex with him on any flat surface that tended to unsettle her, and she grabbed at the chance to discuss something other than her rampaging libido.

"Thanks. I bought it about six months ago after dad died." Her heart clenched as she said the words.

"I'm sorry to hear it, Cassie. My sympathies to you and your family."

She nodded. "The money he left me, though, was just enough for the deposit on this place. It was very rundown then ... you know, a 'renovators dream'? But after that hailstorm a couple weeks back, it's just become worse. So, I thought I might as well get the rest of the renovations I had planned done at the same time as getting the damage from the storm fixed. The insurance will pay for a lot of the stuff that needed doing anyway. It'll be a big job, I expect."

Hang on. What was she saying? She didn't want Jake here working on her house. Bad idea. Dumb, dumb, dumb. It was fairly obvious that she wasn't going to be able to get rid of him too easily. Maybe if she just let him put in a quote, then she could use the excuse that somebody put in a better price...

He walked over to the huge windows that showed off her prize view. It was the main reason she had bought the decrepit little house and spent every hard-earned cent doing it up.

"It's a magic view, Cassie."

"I like it." Her attention was not on the view, however. She was too busy gazing at Jake's back. She was mortified when he spun around and caught her.

"Right then. Show me what you're needing." His voice slipped into the sexy basso profundo she recognised that seemed to ripple through her like melted chocolate. Her only other experience with it had been when he was sexually aroused, and a discreet glance downwards confirmed her suspicions.

"Does everything you say have to have a sexual innuendo, Jake?" She nailed him with an exasperated glare.

"That's only the way your mind interprets it, Cassie darlin'."

Oh, you've got that right, she thought to herself, and turned quickly to hide a blush.

"Right. This is where I want the deck built." Walking over to the huge windows, she opened her arms expansively to take in the whole wall where the huge windows now stood. "I want to be able to walk out into the view, not just look at it." He nodded to infer he understood.

Leaning forward as far as he could, he peered out the window at the long, sloping yard below. "The land drops away pretty sharply down there. Have you thought about closing in the supports for the deck to build another room underneath?"

At a quick glance you could probably have a granny flat down there. That extra room would certainly add some value to the house."

"That's a great idea. Now why didn't I think of that?" She risked a smile at him. "I hadn't thought any further than the deck, but it would be great to have some more space. It's a bit cramped up here." She turned, but then glanced back at him. "You want to see the rest of the disaster? It's pretty bad, but perhaps you can come up with some more good ideas." And she led him through the other rooms, pointing out the old bathroom with the ancient, discoloured tub. "I think this needs a bit of modernising," she said. That was an understatement. The bath looked as old as her Great Aunt Ethel.

Finally, she led him into the main bedroom. She heard a sigh behind her and turned, looking at him curiously.

"It's what I love about these old houses. The master bedroom is always huge."

"Huge enough for you to build me an ensuite in here?"

"Sure. If I run it along this wall," he said, the professional now in command as he ran his hands over the wall, "it can share the plumbing from the bathroom. No problem. Jaysus!"

At his exclamation, she turned to see him looking up.

The high ceiling above the bedroom belonged to the part of the roof that had been hit hard during the storm and had taken the brunt of the brick-size hailstones. One look at the bed pushed up against a wall and a bucket in the middle of the floor told him the whole story. No way could anyone get any romantic ideas in here.

"Sure, well this one obviously has to be a priority, Cassie. Do you have somewhere to sleep while the work is being done?"

Her eyes followed him as he walked around the room, tapping on walls, looking for and following trails of insidious dampness. Reaching up to the cornice, he ran his fingers along the discoloured seam and then, squatting down, traced the skirting boards to determine the extent of the damage. The denim of his jeans pulled tight across his buttocks as he squatted, the muscles of his back rippling under the thin cotton of the t-shirt as he tapped and felt the panels. Totally out of control, her mind started to dwell on the thought of Jake, naked, his large, full erection springing out from the nest of sandy curls at its base, laying her down on the bed and ... *He looks like something out of a romance novel. Oh hell!*

There was a wicked, knowing grin on his face when he turned around that had her wondering if she had actually spoken out loud. "These days I can sleep standing up if I have to." Offhand it may have sounded, but she was serious. Her tiredness of late had caught her napping at the strangest times.

"What about the other bedroom?"

Cass felt a shiver of apprehension flutter through her. A deep breath did little to settle the feeling of disquiet.

"That's..." big swallow, "...that's my daughter's room."

"Your daughter?" His face showed his puzzlement and, more important, his surprise. "You have a child?"

"Err ... yes."

"Are you ... married? Livin' with someone?"

The blue of his eyes had deepened, to that dark blue of the ocean before a storm.

Anger flared within her. "What? Did you think I'd sleep with you if I was involved with someone else?" she asked indignantly. "Not that it's any of your business, but no, I'm not married, not involved. Single mum." As mad as she was, she figured the truth was probably best. At least that answer wouldn't come back to bite her on the butt later.

"Okay. I just need to know if I have competition."

His gaze was steely now, determined.

"Competition? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You and me. One night wasn't enough, Cassie. Never has been."

He moved a little in her direction and for one breathless moment, she thought he was going to grab her, but he stopped and stared stonily down at her, as if daring her to disagree.

Well get used to it, buster, because there is no "you and me." As much as she wanted to say it, she just couldn't be that harsh. "I'm sorry, Jake. But that's all there can ever be. I have responsibilities."

"Oh, we're back to that again, are we? You better be findin' another excuse for holding me at arm's length, darlin', 'cause I don't intend to take no for an answer."

She opened her mouth to say something, but snapped it shut again when she saw the steely look in his eyes that said arguing was futile. Did he have to be so damn pushy all the time?

"Good. Well then, I'll get onto measuring this up right away..."

She stood there mutely.

"...unless you have something else you're wanting to show me."

"Err, no. I'd better get back to work too." Showing what she considered to be amazing control, she resisted the urge to follow him around like a lost puppy.

"Do you work from home then?"

"No, Sydney Uni. I'm an assistant lecturer there."

"Smart as well as sexy. You're a temptation to any man, darlin'."

For her piece of mind, she left him to it and went back to her essays, as if marking student assignments would get her mind off him. The sound of Jake, humming as he worked, sliced through her tenuous concentration. She gritted her teeth and placed her hands over her ears in exasperation.

* * * *

Thinking to make some sketches for Cassie of the designs he had in mind for the remodelling, Jake ducked out to his truck for his large sketchpad. He cast a glance at her sitting at the table, her head bent over the paper she was reading. Jake couldn't help admiring the way tendrils of her long brown hair escaped the little clip things and fell in soft waves over her shoulders, coming to rest on the edge of the table. There was something particularly erotic in seeing a woman naked with nothing to cover her except her hair. Just like Eve. He'd be damned if that didn't turn him on every time. He loved

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long hair on his women. Not that Cassie was his woman *yet*, but now that he had found her again, she damn well would be if he had anything to do with it.

When he'd stood at her door today, he had been ready to barge his way in if he had to, and find out why the hell she had run from him that morning with no goodbye, no note, no bloody nothing. It had eaten at him, the not knowing. And considering the way Cassie had snuck out, he'd suspected that if he left it up to her, he'd never see her again.

That single touch in the hallway had been enough to send the blood racing through his body.

Of course, he wanted to bed her again too, although that was only the half of it. Christ! He'd been able to think of little else except that since the night of the wedding, and his cock had been threatening to rear its head since she blushed so prettily at him today. It had taken all of his resolve to keep it under control. Now, however, there was no hiding it—it pulsed in his pants like it had a life of its own. *Well, just you forget about it, Boy-O!* he told his throbbing cock. He flinched as he attempted to reposition the bulge more comfortably in his jeans, but jeans weren't designed to accommodate a good nine inches of straining erection—not so it wasn't sticking out like a bloody signpost.

Not even the thought of Cassie having a child was enough to cool his desire for her. She mustn't be more than a baby, surely. At least that explained all the kiddie drawings stuck up on the fridge. It was strange, he thought, but normally, the thought of getting involved with a single mum would have been enough to make him run a mile. Kids complicated

things. Kids were permanent. Hell, it had been Sandy pushing for them that had been the catalyst for them breaking up. More than anything else, it had made him realise he and Sandy were not going to make it the whole nine yards. He wanted kids, badly, which would shock his mum and Liz to no end if they knew, but just not with Sandy. Or any other woman he'd met. Not till Cassie. When he eventually became a father, he wanted it to be with the woman he intended sticking to for the rest of their lives. And he knew who that was going to be. Convincing her was going to take some doing. He could see that a mile off.

He wondered if Cassie's daughter looked like her. Dammit. He should have looked for a photo. She'd be a real charmer if she did look like her mum, he grinned to himself. He could just picture the dark curls. Oh yeah, she'd be a sweet one. Of course, she might look like her father, too. At that thought, anger burned within him. Unreasonable anger ... not to mention a hefty dose of jealousy. The thought of some other man ... any other man, touching Cassie, making love to her and drawing those sexy whimpers out of her as she came, riled him up and he clenched his jaw as struggled to control it. Fuck it! He never should have let her walk out of his life all those years ago. If he hadn't been so damn stupid, they'd be together now. That little girl would be his ... theirs, and there would be four or five more besides. At least the other men were all in the past. He intended to make very, very sure that he was the only man touching her from here on in.

Determined now, he ignored the aching bulge, and filled with a new resolve, picked up his pen again and started to

draw, the strokes flowing over the page with ease. Thirty minutes later, he'd outlined the basics of his plans, enough certainly to give Cassie the idea of what he had in mind for the renovations.

The screen door slammed behind him as he walked back through the house to find Cassie standing, cup of tea in hand, looking out the huge windows at the view of the beach in the distance, overlooking where the deck would go. She looked up as he came in and smiled at him nervously.

"So, what do you have in mind, Jake?"

When she smiled at him like that, he felt his heart trip and his pulse start to race. *What I'd really like is to rip those clothes off you, darlin', and fuck you till you can't see straight.* That wasn't the answer she was looking for, and from the way his jeans were tightening, "Boy-o" was looking to bust out and make a break. Now, what the hell was the question? "Pardon?"

"The renovations? You made some sketches. Are you going to let me see, or is it a national secret?"

"Sure. The sketches." Not trusting his voice at that moment, he nodded to her when she asked him if he would like a cup of tea or a cold beer.

"Tea's fine." The last thing he needed was alcohol muddling his already scattered thoughts.

Setting his mug down when she handed it to him, he laid out the plans on the coffee table. Of course, this meant that they had to sit together on the sofa to look at them. This was a good thing, he thought, except for the fact that her fragrance—a light hint of lavender—kept wafting over him,

and when her leg accidentally brushed his, he felt the heat like a branding iron through the denim of his jeans. He was glad he was sitting and didn't have to stand anytime soon, because unless she was blind, there would be no ignoring the state of his erection.

He shifted uncomfortably, trying to ease the discomfort of his pants discreetly. All his good intentions were undone when she leaned across him to point to something on the drawings, and his eyes followed her arm all the way from her slender wrist to her shoulder, pausing at the curve of her neck and the short, unruly curls that sprang from the base of her hairline. His gaze trailed up the soft skin to the shell of her ear, taking in the wispy strands of hair that floated free from the capture of her hair clip. With great difficulty, he resisted the urge to tuck them behind that cute ear. Up close like this, he could see how soft her skin was, smooth and covered with a light smattering of freckles that travelled all the way down to her ... breasts. His eyes traced the over the sun-kissed mounds, his heartbeat in time with the rise and fall ... rise and fall...

"Jake?"

Cassie had noticed his inattention to her questions, and turned to look at him, a query in her eyes. It was hard to look away, but she dragged his eyes up to hers and they briefly locked gazes. He noticed again the beautiful hazel eyes, lightly flecked with sun that sparkled with a sultry humour as she looked back at him. By God, but she was beautiful. What he really wanted to do was kiss her. Her tongue flicked out to

moisten her lower lip, and he watched the path it took, mesmerised.

"Jake? You okay?"

Fuck! "I'm sorry. You were saying?"

"The plans for the bedroom?"

His selective deafness kicked in, so that all he heard was "the bedroom" and his body responded instantly. Yeah ... the bedroom. Now. Naked. Sweating. Sliding inside that hot sheath ... A grin kicked up the corner of those moist lips and he nearly lost it. He looked down as she tapped on the plans. The plans! Shit! "What did you want to know?" He coughed, but still couldn't disguise the huskiness in his voice.

"The skylight, Jake. You mentioned putting in a skylight over the bed. Will that be very expensive?"

Right. The skylight, not sex. "Em ... no, not really." Think man, think. "The roof is only slightly cantered, so it won't be too much work. And it will be wonderful to lie in bed at night and look up at the stars, don't you think?" He could picture her now, lying back, his arm around her and her cheek snuggled against his chest as they looked up at the night sky.

"I guess so."

There was that smile again. She looked like a flamin' teenager ... a very sexy teenager, when she did that. He tried to swallow only to find his mouth had suddenly gone dry. He took a gulp of cold tea.

"And it would sure beat counting sheep to get to sleep," she mused.

Oh, darlin'. I can think of lots more pleasurable ways to get to sleep with you than countin' sheep. "Definitely. That it would."

With difficulty, he brought his mind back to the plans. They talked over the ideas he had for the rest of the house and by the time they finished, it was mid-afternoon. He rolled up the plans and clipped his tape back on his belt as he stood.

"I guess I'd better push off." Which was complete and utter crap, but he couldn't figure out a reason to drag out his visit any longer. "I'll ... em ... get the quotes for this done up and drop them off to you in a couple of days. Will that be okay?"

"Sure. I'm usually home after three-thirty throughout the week. Drop in anytime. Or on the weekend."

"Right then." He couldn't take his eyes off her mouth as she smiled up at him. Her lips were soft and pink, and for a moment he wondered what they would look like stretched around his cock.

"Is that all, Jake?" She was looking at him curiously, which was understandable considering he was about a footstep inside her personal space.

"Yes ... no. No, there was something else" His gaze trailed up her face from her tempting lips to her eyes, widened now as he took another step closer, narrowing the gap until little more than a whisper of air could pass between them.

"Something that can't ... wait, I'm afraid ... and it's ... important. Very, very...

"Jake..."

"Hmmm?" The plans dropped from his hand onto the table, unravelling with a rustle when they landed. With both hands he cupped her face, his thumb tracing over the fullness of her bottom lip. Tempting him...

"Are you going to..."

"Yes, darlin'?" He grinned as the warm tickle of her breath blew gently on his mouth.

"...kiss me?"

"Definitely," he whispered as he tilted her head slightly to the side, angling his mouth over hers to taste the incredible warmth of her lips against his. "Very definitely." And allowed his tongue to gently push against the seam of her lips until she opened underneath him. It was warm. It was wet. It was so damn sweet.

The second he felt her body soften against his, felt rather than heard the soft moan that escaped her, he hardened like a rock. He stepped even closer, his hand trailing down over her back to rest against her firm buttocks, gently easing her body so that it pressed flush against his. His temperature went up a notch when he felt her hand creep around his waist, the fingers settling over his butt. An answering flick from her tongue against his along with the slight pressure of her hand holding him firm, had him deepening the kiss, a tortured groan passing from his mouth to hers. With a strength he didn't know he possessed, he broke away, reluctant to leave the delicious taste of her. One look into her eyes, darkened with passion, and he saw the truth she couldn't run from anymore. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

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He ran a thumb over the glistening, swollen skin of her lips. "I'll see you soon, Cassie darlin'." *Real soon...*

Chapter Eight

He tossed the drawings on the backseat of his SUV, pausing a minute with his head down to try and get himself back under control after the fire Cassie had generated in him, and glanced over his shoulder as a car pulled up. He shut the rear door, and curious, turned to see who it was. A tall guy, kind of on the lean side with close-cropped dark hair, got out of a red sedan and studied him intently, the laughter in his eyes and on his face stalling as he looked Jake over. He knew that look. He was being measured up and checked out. That was fine. Two could play that game. With a sharp eye, he took in the assessing stance of the man. He might be lean, but there was a wiry toughness about him that Jake recognised.

Right behind him, the cutest little thing on two legs bounded out, giggling and laughing. If this was Cassie's daughter, he'd been right about the curls, except they were blonde—that almost white blonde that kids have when they're little. She couldn't have been more than about four from the look of her. And if this was her daughter, then who was the guy? Was this the father? He narrowed his eyes and looked closer, trying to quell the instant dislike that arose at the thought.

He heard the screen door slam and slowly swung his eyes around to see Cassie striding towards the man and the little girl. The passionate look in her eyes was gone. Though her lips were still puffy and tinged pink from their kisses just

moments before, he thought the rest of her looked a little pale, although it could have been his eyes adjusting to the sun.

Shirley Temple ran over to Cassie and grabbed her leg, the little arms hugging it tight like a puppy latching on, and chattering away like one of the Chipmunks. He looked at Cassie with a raised eyebrow and gritted his teeth when Mr. Long and Lean reached over to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Jake didn't fail to notice the familiar way his arm lingered across Cassie's shoulder. His hackles rose and he fought the urge to show his teeth. The significance of his possessive feelings was not lost on him. Of course, the smirk on Mr. Long and Lean's face showed he knew exactly what Jake was feeling.

He exhaled slowly when Cassie knelt down to her daughter, still on alert, but much happier that the contact between her and the guy had been broken.

"Hey, sweetie. Did you have a good time?"

The next couple of minutes were filled with excited chatter from the munchkin. In the way of kids, she seemed oblivious to the simmering tension surrounding the adults.

"Who's the hottie, Mumma?" he heard Munchkin say in a loud whisper, and had to stifle a chuckle at the hushed reprimand of "Chloe!" and the flush that tinged Cassie's face. Of course the childish snicker from behind the tiny hand that covered Chloe's mouth just made it that much more adorable. Cassie recovered quickly, though. He'd give her that.

"Jake, I'd like you to meet my brother, Larry..."

Brother. Thank God for that. His muscles went on stand-down. He wouldn't have to take him out. He reached over to shake his hand. From the protective look in his eyes, though, Larry was still reserving judgement on Jake.

"Jake is a ... a good friend of mine, Larry. He's Lizzy's brother."

At that, Larry seemed to chill out a bit. Obviously, Lizzy had a good rep. He must remember to thank his little sister for that sometime.

"And this little ball of trouble," Cassie ruffled the munchkin's hair with affection, "is Chloe."

Jake squatted down to say hi to Chloe and was nearly bowled over when a little bundle of energy rushed him and threw her arms around him, plastering a big kiss on his cheek.

And Jake fell in love. Just like that.

The first thing that hit him was the feel of those little arms around his neck. Kiddie cuddles, he discovered abruptly, were entirely different from mummy cuddles, but no less intoxicating. With a silly grin, he hugged her back, conscious of how the tiny bundle felt in his arms. The smell of her filled him as he nuzzled the top of her head, sunshine and sunblock unable to diminish that amazing scent that little girls have.

Laughing, she pulled back to look at him, and he found himself looking into the most amazing pair of blue eyes.

"Hi, Jake. You're really Auntie Lizzy's brother?"

"Sure am, Chloe."

"You're big. And you smell good."

"And you smell pretty good yourself, sugar." He laughed at the delightful frankness.

Something changed as a thought must have flickered in her mind and those blue eyes were suddenly looking at him with a world of seriousness. "That's nice. Auntie Lizzy sure is lucky."

Whoa. Quick switch of topic, he thought. She couldn't still be talking about his aftershave, and it dawned on him what she meant. "Why? You'd like a brother, too, would you?"

"And a sister. But Mumma says I'm 'it.'" Her sweet little face fell then.

"Well," he lifted her chin with his finger, "you just never know what will happen."

Her arms tightened around his neck again, nearly cutting off his airflow, but he didn't mind a bit. For a man who had been avoiding parenthood, suddenly the idea of lots of little Chloes filling his life made him feel a rush of paternal longing. He glanced over at Cassie and in his mind's-eye, he pictured her swollen with child. His child.

He was a goner. The reality of how much he felt for Cassie hit him like a ton of bricks. He didn't want to run. The suffocating feeling that usually hit him never even flickered. In fact, the more he thought about it, he wanted to get started right away. Of course, there was the small problem that Cassie kept running away from him...

Well, not anymore. He stood easily with Chloe in his arms and walked over to them, putting Chloe down when she wriggled in his arms and scooted into the house.

"I'd better get going—again. Nice to meet you, Larry. Cassie, I'll be in touch real soon."

With a final wave, he drove out of the driveway and down the road, humming to himself and feeling ridiculously happy.

* * * *

"You wanna tell me what that was all about, Sis?"

She finished fixing Chloe a peanut butter sandwich and poured her a glass of milk. Taking it in to where Chloe was stretched out in front of the TV, Cass sighed as she realised Larry was slipping into big brother mode again.

"He's a friend, Larry." Which was not exactly a lie. Just a very intimate friend. "And he's doing a quote for me for the repair work on the house. He owns Rowling Constructions."

"I've heard of them. They do good work. You sure that's it?"

Her brother had absolutely no subtlety, Cass decided. She wouldn't be surprised if he just came right out and asked her if she and Jake were sleeping together. The man was worse than a bloodhound.

"Of course that's it. He just came over to find out what I needed and measure up. Why?"

"It's just a guy thing, Sis, but I thought for a second there he was going to rip my arms off when I hugged you. Jeez, couldn't you feel it in the air?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Larry." She hadn't noticed anything. She'd been too focused on the way Jake was looking at Chloe and worrying herself sick that either Jake or Larry would see the resemblance.

One Touch
by *Susie Charles*

"He didn't relax until you told him I was your brother. Now why is that? Is there something going on between you two?"

"Of course not. Don't be silly. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Come on, Cass. I know I may be an insensitive guy a lot of the time, but there's something going on between you and him." He took her face in his hands. "I'm not going to pry. You're a big girl now. Just don't get hurt. Jake looks like the kind of guy who gets what he wants." He kissed her forehead. "Call me if you need me."

"Don't I always?" She laughed nervously.

* * * *

Between Chloe and the assignments she had left to mark, the rest of the afternoon and evening had flown, and it wasn't until she was lying in bed that Cass gave herself a chance to think about the day.

After the kiss from Jake, she had almost been prepared to strip in front of him and beg him to take her. The man only had to breathe on her and she wanted to get naked! But it was just as well one of them had some control. Especially with the arrival of Larry ... Which led her to the next thought. Jake finally meeting Chloe. That had certainly been an unexpected development.

She could still feel the roiling in her tummy when she'd heard Larry drive up, knowing that Jake was still there. There was that brief panicky moment when she wondered if Jake would see the resemblance. Or Larry. Either way, it would have been a disaster. They had been so engaged in the

testosterone battle that they had missed it. The gods must have been smiling on her.

Seeing Chloe and Jake together, him holding her in his strong arms, had hit her harder than she ever thought it would. Every fantasy and dream she'd had about the three of them as a family had been brought to the fore at that moment. Her baby in her daddy's arms ... She squelched the thought, closing her eyes tightly and fought back the tears that filled them. It didn't do any good to wish for what could never be. Still, it hurt that her baby didn't have a daddy ... or someone she could call daddy. Cass knew the day was fast approaching when Chloe would begin to ask questions. It was pure luck that she hadn't already. And what would she tell her? The truth? Not likely. So it would have to be a lie, then. What other choice was there?

She sighed, thinking what a close call it had been. But it had been so good to see Jake again. She had put her mood swings and general grumpiness for the last two weeks down to being hormonal, but seeing Jake proved how wrong she was. She hadn't realised how much she missed him until she saw him at her front door. Now she just ached for him. He fired up a hunger in her that wouldn't go away.

The question was, what was she going to do now? Jake appeared determined to see her again. But what was she going to do about Chloe? The way he'd cuddled her, he certainly hadn't acted like a man who didn't like kids. But he must be if he was prepared to break up his marriage over just that issue. Chloe had taken to him right away, though. Should she risk it and tell him? But what would he think? Would he

hate her for not telling him sooner? Around and around the questions raced through her mind, keeping her awake.

Tired of tossing and turning, she grabbed her robe and padded quietly out to the lounge room. Looking out over the water sparkling in the moonlight, she felt the sadness come over her again. She wanted Jake. Still. A part of her came to life when he was around. Like the rest of the time she was only half there. But it wouldn't work. Why couldn't she get that through her thick skull and stop dreaming?

What the hell was she going to do?

* * * *

Idly swirling the amber liquid, Jake listened to the soft clink of the melting ice cubes against the glass in the shot of whiskey. He put the glass out of the way on the scratched and battered desk and looked once again at the quote he had been working on all week for Cassie. The price was unbeatable. He had deliberately made it so. He wanted to get this job, and he wouldn't take the risk of some other builder outbidding him. If it wasn't for the fact that his intentions would immediately become obvious and scare her away, he would do the bloody job for free. It wasn't like he needed the money; even if he made no profit on the job at all, it didn't matter a shit to him. He could afford it. However, it would give him the opportunity to be around Cassie for the two months or so it took his company to do it and that would be reward enough.

With just a little bit of re-organisation, he could pull Richard off the Carmichael job to do the trade work at

Cassie's. Not only was Richard one of his best men, but he was also in his late forties, which meant he wouldn't be likely to get ideas once he saw the lady he was working for. No way he would let any of his younger guys within ten feet of Cassie. They'd take one look at her and end up one big raging hormone. Of course, he'd need Billy for the labouring work, but Richard could keep him in line. Billy was a good kid, a country boy. Good manners, too. He didn't want any rough guys around Cassie or Chloe. Any other help the guys needed, Jake would supply himself. He hadn't picked up a hammer or a saw for a few years and it would be a nice change to do some physical work. At least it would give him a legitimate reason for being there that wouldn't scare Cassie into running from him again.

Leaning back in his chair, he sighed and slouched his long frame down further in the seat, plopping his feet on the desk. It was time to get moving on his planned emotional and physical seduction of Ms. Cassandra Grant. He knew now what he had to do; he knew what was at stake and what it would take. He was as ready as he'd ever be.

His cell phone vibrated beside him on the desk and he checked the screen to see who would be calling him so late. With a grin, he noticed Lizzy and Rob's number.

"Hello, Sis. About time you two got back."

"Well if you would tear yourself away from work for five minutes instead of chasing your next million, you, too, could have a holiday like normal folk on a nice tropical island."

Jake laughed at Lizzy's teasing. "So, how was the honeymoon?"

"Wonderful! Tahiti was bliss. But what's with all the phone messages, Jake? I have ten different versions of 'Call me as soon as you get back' here on the answering machine. What's up?"

"Ah, yes. That. Just ignore those. The problem's solved."

"What problem? Come on. It must have been important. Even in my post-honeymoon euphoria, I didn't fail to notice they were for me and not Rob, so obviously you weren't missing the male bonding. What could it possibly have been that you needed to get in touch with your cute, but incredibly annoying little sister so badly? You were sounding pretty desperate on a few of them, bro."

Didn't he know it! He wondered how much to tell Lizzy, but then realised she'd find out sooner or later anyway. "I was trying to get hold of Cassie and didn't have her phone number."

"Why?" Lizzy immediately jumped in, her voice full of concern. "Was something wrong? Is she okay?"

"No, she's fine..."

"Then why?"

"Because I wasn't, okay. I needed to see her again, Liz."

"I hate to sound like a broken record, but why?"

"You're an old married woman now, Sis. Use your imagination." The second the words were out of his mouth, he could have kicked himself for making it sound like something it wasn't.

"Don't you dare mess with her, Jackson Reilly. You may be my brother, but I'll kill you if you hurt her."

"I have no intention of hurting her. Thanks very much for the vote of confidence, by the way. Anyway, it doesn't matter now. Problem, as I said, is solved."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means, she called me."

"She didn't!"

"Well, not me, exactly. Rowling Constructions. She rang up for a quote on the house."

"So you've spoken to her?"

"Sure have. Seen her, too. Oh, and thanks are in order to you. I was an instant hit with Chloe because I was Auntie Lizzy's brother."

He waited for Lizzy to make some smart crack in return, but was met with silence. "Hey, Sis. You still there?"

"Sorry, Jake. Yep, I'm still here."

"Why didn't you tell me Cassie had a little girl? You coulda knocked me over with a feather."

"I'll bet."

"So, you're her best friend. Who is Chloe's father?"

"Geez, don't beat around the bush, Jake. Just come right out and ask! Anyway, I don't think it's my place to tell you that. I reckon if Cass wants you to know, she'll tell you. Why do you want to know, anyway?"

So I can beat the bejeezus out of him for leaving the two of them alone? Somehow he didn't think that would go down too well with Lizzy. "Just curious. You never even mentioned she was pregnant. It was just a shock."

"Jake..."

One Touch
by Susie Charles

"Yeah?" He waited a moment for Lizzy to finish what she was saying.

"Nothing. Never mind. Look, I've still got to finish unpacking and I'm back to work tomorrow. Why don't you come round for dinner this week? Say, Wednesday?"

"Sure I won't be interrupting the connubial bliss?"

Lizzy's laugh filtered down the line. "Nut! Of course not. Besides, Rob can show you all the souvenirs he picked up. Remind me next time I go overseas with him to leave the credit card at home."

Jake laughed and said goodbye, but his thoughts lingered on Cassie and Chloe. Who the hell was the father? He doubted it was anyone he knew, but just the same...

Chapter Nine

The ringing of the phone sounded especially loud in the quiet of the house and Cass rushed to pick it up before it could wake Chloe. It had been one of those nights where she just didn't want to settle and Cass was exhausted now that she had finally gone to sleep.

"Hello. This is Cass."

"Good, and this is your best friend that you haven't called in ages."

"Hi, Rach." Cass stifled a yawn. "Sorry I've been so slack. I kept meaning to call."

"You sound like some of my ex-boyfriends. You, I will forgive, however, but only if you tell me you've found some hot guy who makes love to you day and night and you're too tired from 24/7 mad sex romping to call."

The pitiful state of their love lives was an ongoing joke between the two of them.

"Sure," she snorted. "As if."

"Nah. Me neither, more's the pity. So, what happened to you and Jake after Tom and I left the bar that night? Did he nail you down for that talk?"

Rach was as direct as usual, and Cass almost choked on an awkward laugh. Nail down wasn't the half of it. That, though, was something she definitely was *not* going to share with Rachael. "No. Not really."

"Not really, huh? Why, thanks, ma'am. That tells me so much. Come on, give, Cassandra. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing. I'm hiding nothing." *Much.*

"You're a shocking liar, you know. What are you not telling me? You're being evasive."

"You know, you're wasted in marketing, Rach. You should have tried out for MI5."

"Sorry, but that's military intelligence."

"Ohhh, well, the CIA or whatever. Look, Sherlock, there's nothing to tell. Now get off my case. How about you and Tom? How is the hunky policeman?"

"Nice try, but it won't work. Don't change the subject. If you didn't talk, then what did you do? Your room was next to mine, don't forget, and you didn't get in till the early hours of the morning. I stayed up watching the in-house movies, so I know. Nice level of smut, by the way. You two go dancing, then?"

Cass sighed. She had the feeling that Rachael was not going to let this go so easily, and she really didn't want to be thinking of Jake Reilly ... not if she planned on getting any sleep tonight. "Why all the questions, Rach?"

"Humour me. What was wrong with Jake, anyway? He was watching you like a hawk, and sweetie, that expression on his face was intense! So, if you didn't go dancing, and you didn't talk, then that leaves ... Oh God, did you sleep with him, Cass? You didn't! Tell me you didn't".

"What if I did?"

"Um. Hellooo! This is Jake we're talking about. You know, Chloe's father. What on earth were you thinking?"

"That's just the point, Rach. My brain shorted out the minute he kissed me."

"Well, I sure hope it was worth it, honey. Jeez! I knew I shouldn't have left you two alone."

"If you recall, you were trying to climb into Tom's skin when you left. Did it work, by the way?"

"It might have, except for the damn phone call he got from the station. Story of my lousy sex life. The second I get a man naked, something always seems to come up. And not what I was hoping for, either, if you know what I mean."

Cass laughed. Rachael had the lousiest luck with men of any woman she knew. "So, is he going to call?"

"So he said. But I'm not holding my breath. I get the feeling that nice detective gets all the attention he needs without having to chase around for it. Let's just say, I'm not sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring. He was nice, though. And what a body! Seeing him in the flesh should be good for a few fantasies to keep me going."

Cass flopped onto her back on the sofa and laughed.

"Anyway, the reason I called..."

"Yes, I was wondering about that, apart from prying into my love life, of course." She tucked the phone under her chin, and threw her arms over her head, trying to settle into a comfortable position and ease the ache in her back from the lumps in the padding.

"Yeah, well the least said about that, the better, I think ... Now, *as I was saying* ... the reason I called is that Liz rang earlier and invited us over for a barbeque tomorrow night. Did she call you?"

"Yes." Cass gave up trying to get comfortable and stood up, perching instead on the stool next to the phone.

"You going?"

"Yes."

"You want me to pick you and Chloe up on my way?"

"Sounds good. What time?"

"Oh, I don't know. How does six sound?"

"Great. We'll be ready. Now I really have to hit the sack, Rach. I'm pooped. See you then."

As she put the phone down, she looked at the clock. 10:45. Time for bed. More than time for bed, she thought to herself as she stretched and yawned. She was tired. If Rachael hadn't called, she would have been in bed ages ago.

She turned off the lights and checked on Chloe. Her little arms cuddled Max the monkey tightly as usual, and Cass smiled before leaning down to kiss her soft curls. Stripping her clothes off in her bedroom, she sighed with delight as she snuggled down into the bed. Just as she was drifting off, a flash of lightning lit up the room like daylight, followed by a clap of thunder so loud it rattled the windows. She groaned at the thought of trying to sleep with the hole in her ceiling tonight. Swiping her pillow off the bed, she shrugged into her silky robe and padded back out to the sofa and curled up, waiting for sleep to claim her.

It must have been Rachael's phone call, because whenever she shut her eyes, all she could see was Jake. Jake smiling at her, Jake nuzzling her neck from behind as his hands came around to cup her breasts, Jake holding her face tenderly as he slowly thrust into her, filling her, driving her over the edge ... Jake, Jake, Jake!

One Touch
by Susie Charles

In exasperation, she sat up, pulling her legs up under her chin and hugged her knees. Absently, she watched the storm rage outside and wondered what she had to do to get over this. No matter how hard she tried not to, thoughts of him would creep into her head. The man was like a drug and she needed a fix.

In one way, she was relieved he hadn't gotten back to her with the quote. With any luck, he was too busy and the job was too small for him to bother with. That way, she wouldn't have to face him again. It was such a damn mess!

* * * *

Blinding sunlight poured in through the huge window. Opening her eyes slowly, squinting until they became accustomed to the glare, Cass was relieved to note that the storm seemed to have blown itself out overnight. She sat there for a few minutes, watching the sun sparkling off the water. The sea had that beautiful blue-green tinge about it today and now that the wind had died down, the surf was rolling in clean and white, all the choppiness from the storm gone.

The TV was on low and Chloe was sitting on the floor in front of it in her pyjamas watching the Saturday morning cartoons, Max beside her on the floor. She was such a good kid. No matter how hard it was raising Chloe on her own, it was worth every single second of it.

She swung her legs to the floor, stood and stretched, then groaned as she felt the stiffness in her body. Rubbing her

eyes, she padded over to kiss Chloe good morning, tousling the soft curls.

"And how's mumma's little monster this morning?"

A roll of Chloe's eyes and a distracted mumble was all she received. Not much came between Chloe and her cartoons, she thought with a grin.

Cass made her way to the kitchen. First stop—coffee. As usual, her body felt like a steamroller had run over it from sleeping on the lumpy sofa. She badly needed a new one, but going by the quotes from the builders she had already received, quite apart from the insurance money, the renovations would take every spare cent she had, and if the roof was fixed, then she wouldn't have to sleep on the sofa anymore anyway—thank God!

She turned at the sound of the doorbell and looked at the clock. 8 am? Who would be calling around at this hour on a Saturday morning? *Oh, please, no more kids or salesmen today*, she thought to herself as she went to answer the door.

She pulled the door open and stopped.

"Hello, darlin'."

The familiar, husky rumble rippled over her. It was like pouring hot, melted chocolate over ice cream. And while she stood there melting into a puddle of goo, the darkening of his eyes as he took in the fact that she was dressed in nothing more than a flimsy robe jerked her out of her lustful haze quicker than a bucket of cold water. "Jake! You're a bit early, aren't you?"

"And there I was thinking you were an early riser. I wonder where I got that idea?"

What struck Cass was not his mischievous grin when he said it, but the way his eyes darkened further and the lids drooped half shut as he looked at her. She remembered that look too well—her body did, too. She felt like the first three courses on a ten-course buffet. "Not this early, Jake. Please. Give me time to wake up," she said with a weak grin on her face. All she could think about was the last time he had been at her house. If she wasn't careful, they'd have to scrape her up off the floor when she melted into a puddle of mush. She noticed her neighbour, Greg, out the front of his place picking up his newspaper off the lawn and waved shyly to him. *Good one, Cass. Now what will the neighbours think? Answering the door to a man in your skimpy little robe looking like you just got out of bed.*

Shaking her head, she turned and started walking. "Come on through," she called over her shoulder. No way was she going to give him a chance to brush up against her again, not with *that* look in his eyes.

The phone rang and she rushed to pick it up. "I've made some coffee. Grab yourself a mug, Jake. I won't be long." She turned back to the phone as he nodded to her.

When she was done, she looked around for Jake and was surprised to find him stretched out on the floor next to Chloe, the two of them chattering away. She watched them, transfixed and not a little surprised. Considering Chloe's conversation skills at this time of the morning were usually minimal and predominantly monosyllabic, it was a surprise to see her laughing at something Jake said. She shook her head in amazement.

"Coffee, Jake?" she called out, trying to reach him over the noise of the TV.

With a whispered word in Chloe's ear that elicited another childish giggle, he jumped up off the floor and joined her in the kitchen. The man was definitely full of surprises.

She grabbed the milk out of the fridge and grabbed the bowl of sugar off the counter. "How do you take it?"

"I'm easy. However you want to give it to me, darlin'."

She rolled her eyes at his reply. If he was starting the sexual innuendoes this early, she just couldn't take it.

He laughed and took the cup from her and inhaled the rich brew. "That was some storm last night."

"Tell me about it." His comment immediately reminded her where she'd spent the night and she sighed as she pushed on the ache in her back.

He looked at her with concern in his eyes. "Where'd you sleep last night, Cassie? On the sofa?"

"Yes. I'll be so glad when that roof is fixed and I can sleep in a bed like a normal person again."

"That makes two of us."

Cass glanced at Jake to see if he had that cheeky smirk on his face but was relieved to see that he was getting some papers out of his day organiser instead.

* * * *

Jake figured the only way he could get his mind off the way Cassie looked—all sleepy and mussed and very, very sexy—was to talk business. A part of him wondered, though, if that was how she would have looked if she had woken up

with him instead of running out on him before he had a chance to find out.

But with the exception of the other day, he was trying his hardest to keep this job on a professional basis—at least until he knew for sure he had it. He didn't want to spook her with his intentions until she had signed on the dotted line. Already this morning, he'd had to bite his tongue a few times and he was very proud of himself, with the exception of his crack at the door, of course. But that had slipped out before he could stop himself. The truth was, he could see she wasn't up to flirting today, and had already decided to try to be on his best behaviour.

"I thought we might go through the quote, Cassie? If you like the price, I'd like to place the order for the materials today so that we can get started as soon as possible. I don't like the idea of you sleeping on that bloody sofa." She looked stiff and tired and it annoyed the hell out of him. If he had his way...

"Well, that makes two of us." Her expression was wry as her words echoed his, cutting into his thoughts.

They stood in the kitchen as he explained what he wanted to do, how much it would cost and how long it would take. Cassie seemed surprised when he showed her the final cost he had worked out. That was good. It meant that he must have quoted a lot lower than the others. He let her look it over for a minute while he stood back and watched her over the rim of his mug.

"Are you sure this is right, Jake? I mean, the price is very low."

"I'm not out to rob you, Cassie. It's a fair price." Very fair, he thought with a grin to himself.

He could see the indecision in her face. He held his breath and waited while she came to a decision. This just had to work or he was back to square one. She absently tucked a long strand of silky brown hair behind her ear as she read.

Oh, Cassie darlin', d'ya have any idea how gorgeous you look standing there with your hair all mussed and that sleepy look on your face?

He was pulled out of his ponderings when she turned to him and smiled, a breathtaking smile that made him feel warm all over.

"The price is just too good. I'd be a fool to say no. When can you start, Jake?"

He almost cheered. Yes! It was a struggle to calm the exultation he was feeling, but somehow he managed and his voice came out normal. "Right now, if you like."

"You're on." She held out her hand to seal the deal.

He grasped the small hand she offered in both of his and shook it gently. "Great. Do you mind if I call the suppliers from here? If I can get some of the deliveries coming today, I can start first thing on Monday."

"Of course. No problem. While you do that, I really have to soak some of these aches out in the shower."

"Sure."

"I won't be long."

"Take your time. I'll still be here when you get out."

Jake finished the calls and was standing, fresh cup of coffee in hand, facing the view, when a little hand tugged on

his. He looked down to see the cutest little blue eyes looking up at him,

"Hey, sugar. What's up?"

"I'm hungry. Could you make me some toast, Jake? Mumma won't let me make it myself yet."

"Sure thing. What would you like on it?"

When she had finished clambering up on the stool to watch him, she reached for the jar of honey. "Honey, please."

He grinned as he handed it to her and turned to put the honey away. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Chloe climbing down off the stool and heading towards the TV.

"Nuh-uh, young lady. Back on the stool until you finish. Sticky stuff stays in the kitchen."

"You grown-ups are all the same," she huffed, before munching away on her toast, her short little legs swinging.

"You better believe it, sugar." He leaned back against the counter and watched her eat, honey dripping everywhere on the counter but on the plate and shook his hair, grinning.

"You think my mumma's nice, don't you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know. A babe."

He choked on a mouthful of coffee that went down the wrong hole and looked at Chloe with his mouth agape and realised he had no idea how to reply to that one. What do you say to a four-year-old going on fourteen? "You've been watching too much TV, young lady."

"But you watch her all the time."

"Who says?"

"I do. Max noticed, too."

"Max? Who the he—Who is Max, pray tell?"

"My monkey, silly." She rolled her eyes at him as if he should know better.

"Oh, right. Silly me."

"All organised, Jake?"

He turned from watching Chloe licking up drips of honey to see Cassie walking towards them, rubbing her wet hair with a towel. "Here, sit yourself down and let me do that." He pulled out the other stool with his foot and sat Cassie down, taking the towel out of her hands before she could argue. The silky strands felt wonderful, but before he could let his mind wander, he was momentarily distracted by the childish giggle coming from the other side of the breakfast bar.

"Watch it, pipsqueak." His mock glare at Chloe just set off another round of giggles. Damn, but if little girls weren't nearly as much fun as big ones, he thought with a grin, in a different way, of course.

"What's going on?" Cassie was looking from one to the other, confused.

"Nothing," two voices replied in unison before they both started laughing again.

"Somehow I doubt it." Cass rolled her eyes suspiciously. "How did it go with the suppliers, Jake?"

"A couple will deliver today before lunchtime. I've told them to stack the stuff at the side of the house out of the way."

"Great."

"What're your plans for today?"

"Beach. Beach. Beach," piped up Chloe.

Cass smiled as she wiped the sticky residue of the honey off Chloe's fingers. "Looks like we hit the beach. And you?"

Jake glanced at his watch. "I have to go and help Rob with the lights for the barbeque tonight. You two going?"

"Yes, we are."

"You want a lift? I could swing by here on my way, if you like."

"Yes, please!"

Jake had to grab her quickly as Chloe launched herself at him, and he easily swung her up in his arms.

"Thanks, Jake, but Rach is picking us up on her way through." She looked pointedly at Chloe, whose face dropped. "I thought you liked Auntie Rach, Chloe..."

"I do, it's just ... I'd rather go with Uncle Jake."

"Maybe next time, sugar." He flashed a grin to Chloe before giving her a quick hug and a peck on the cheek before setting her down again. "I'll see you two there, then."

"Looks like."

* * * *

When Jake had gone, Cass turned to Chloe, a suspicious look in her eye. "You mind telling me what that was all about, missy? And when did Jake become *Uncle* Jake, pray tell?"

"He's Auntie Lizzy's brother, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, duh! If she's an auntie, then he must be an uncle. Honestly, Mumma..." She sighed theatrically as she wandered back to lie in front of the TV.

Oh, baby, if only you knew, thought Cass.

Something was wrong. Jake wasn't acting like a man who didn't like kids. But that was why he and Sandy had broken up. Lizzy wouldn't have lied ... not over something as important to Cass as that.

Or maybe it was just the thought of having his own he didn't like? Whatever it was, Cass was just plain confused. Part of her wanted to tell Jake about Chloe, especially considering the way that they got on.

But what would he say? Would he hate her for not telling him sooner? Would he understand why she hadn't told him? Maybe he wouldn't want anything to do with them. That would be better.

No, no it wouldn't. She wanted Chloe to have a relationship with her father more than anything. He most likely would want access to Chloe, but drop *her* like a hot potato. Of course, he might get angry ... No, he genuinely liked Chloe. He wouldn't do anything to hurt her. It wasn't in his nature.

No, she couldn't tell him. Not until she was sure. Once she let that cat out of the bag, not only she and Jake would be affected, but Chloe, too. Besides, she'd waited this long...

Chapter Ten

It was a beautiful night. The sort of night at the tail end of summer where the drugging heat is absent, but the breeze still wafts warm. Clear skies, a million stars and the sharp tang of salt in the air from the crashing surf a short distance away through the dunes. It was the kind of night Jake loved.

Leaning up against the railing of the deck, he watched Cassie. Just watched. He was desperately trying not to crowd her, but it was taking every ounce of control he had. For now, though, he was content.

A familiar face moved into his line of vision, joining the women in Cassie's group. It was certainly someone he hadn't been expecting to see ... not here. This face promised to put a spike in his plans for the evening—nothing surer.

"Hey bud, what's happening?"

Jake turned at the slap on his back.

"Tom. Night off?"

"Yeah. Hopefully things stay quiet in the old town tonight."

"I'll second that. So, what's happening in the world of law enforcement these days?"

"Well, they've discovered that crime doesn't pay..."

"Y'don't say," Jake said dryly.

"Yeah, seriously. Ask my bank manager."

They both laughed and then stood there in companionable silence, taking the occasional swig from their bottles of beer. As old friends, they were used to each other. Awkward silences were a thing of the past.

"So, Jake, what've you been up to? Haven't seen you for weeks. Anything exciting happening in your neck of the woods?"

He waited for an answer from Jake, and when it wasn't forthcoming, he turned to him, only to see him watching the laughing group of females sitting under the marquee. "Hello. Earth to Jake..."

"Sorry?"

"Thought I'd lost you for a minute there. What's so fascinating over there?" He jerked his head in the direction of the ladies.

"Nothing. Just wondering what my ex-wife is doing here." His eyes narrowed in contemplation. "Lizzy wouldn't have invited her, that's for sure."

"They don't get on?"

"Never did, really. Who knows? Women..." He shrugged his shoulders.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a little body pummelled into him, forcing him to take a step to steady himself, and wrapped herself around his legs, hanging on like a limpet mine. He looked down in to the smiling face of Chloe, who was saying, "Gotcha!"

Laughing, he handed his beer to Tom and reached down to pick her up. "Hey, sugar. I was wondering where you were."

"I was playing with the other kids, but it got boring."

"So you want to play with the big kids now?"

"Yep." She giggled as he nuzzled her neck and growled.

"That tickles!"

"Yeah, I know." He growled again as he moved to the other side, setting off a squeal from Chloe.

Tom handed Jake back his beer and looked curiously at them. "Ahhh, care to introduce me?"

He kissed the tip of her nose, making her laugh. "Tom, this is my new girl, aren't you sugar?" When Chloe nodded he nodded with her, mimicking her. "But you can call her Chloe."

"Pleased to meet you, Chloe." Tom tried unsuccessfully to hide a smirk when he glanced back at Jake. "A bit out of your age group, don't you think?"

"Chloe is Cassie's daughter, fool."

"Ahhh, I see..."

A very loud gurgling sound came from the direction of Chloe's tummy, and she covered her mouth, her eyes sparkling with laughter. "Whoops!"

"What on earth was that?" asked Jake. "Was that you?"

Chloe chortled at the look of mock surprise on Jake's face. "My tummy wumbled."

"I know. I could feel it." He grinned back at her. "You hungry, sugar?"

"Uh huh. Mumma said I have to wait a little bit till the sausages are cooked."

"We can't have that. I tell you what," he lowered his voice conspiratorially, "I know the cook. Let's go 'n see what we can find, okay?"

"Yes, please!"

Jake turned back to Tom. "See you later, mate."

* * * *

Leaning back and laughing after being in a whispered huddle with the rest of the girls listening to one of Rachael's bawdy jokes, Cass turned at the light touch on her elbow. Liz was smiling, too, but she was nodding her head discreetly as if she wanted Cass to go with her.

"Hey, Liz. What's up? Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

"What? You need some help with the barbeque? Sure, I don't mind. Chloe's playing with the kids, so I'm all yours."

"She's not, you know."

"What?"

"Playing with the other kids."

"Sure she is. I just left her..."

Liz put her index finger up to her mouth. "Shhh."

Silently, they crept around the side of the house. Even though she couldn't see it, Cass could hear the barbeque spitting as the fat released from the burgers onto the hotplate and the smell of frying onions filled the air. Liz pulled up to stop her just before they rounded the corner. Inclining her head, she gestured around the corner. With a curious smile on her face, Cass peeked around the corner.

There was Jake, sitting on the grass a short distance away with Chloe, helping her with a kiddie size burger that was just the right size for small hands and a small mouth ... a small mouth currently smeared with tomato ketchup.

Shaking her head in bemusement, she grinned when she saw him attempt to wipe up some of the ketchup with a napkin. She turned back to Liz who looked at her pointedly.

Cass shrugged her shoulders at Liz's implied question. She had no idea what was going on, either.

Snatches of the conversation filtered back to them...

"...But they're gunky. And they smell."

"No, they're not. They're yum," Jake insisted. "Fried onions are what makes it taste so great. Trust me."

Cass turned to Liz and mouthed "fried onions" in amazement. Chloe had never eaten onion in her life. Just the hint of them in the air was enough to have Chloe hightailing it out of the room.

"Just try. Come on. They'll put hairs on your chest."

"Girls don't have hairs on their chest, Jake. You're silly. Mumma doesn't. I don't think I want..."

Jake's snicker filled the air. "Em, bad choice of words. And I'm very ... em ... glad that mumma doesn't have ... em ... hairs ... Look, skip the onions, sugar. Bad idea. How's the rest of the burger?"

"It's good," mumbled Chloe around a mouthful. "I was so hungry." With little ado, she popped the final piece in her mouth.

"Yeah, I could tell that from the way you nearly inhaled it. You done?"

"Yep."

Chloe moved to wipe her greasy hands down her jeans and Jake grabbed them quickly. "Just a sec. Give me those." Putting the napkin to good use, he wiped her little fingers until they were all clean. "Now mouth..." Chloe lifted her mouth up to him to be wiped free of any remaining ketchup. "...now kiss for Uncle Jake..." Chloe wrapped her arms tight

around his neck and kissed him hard, pushing him over on the grass in the process so that they both fell back laughing.

"What the hell is going on?" whispered Lizzy.

"You tell me." Cass watched them with a misty-eyed expression. "You're the one that told me he didn't want kids. But he's a natural..."

"That would have to be the understatement of the year. But he told all of us ... Hey, you okay?" Lizzy was watching Cass closely, trying to read the look on her face.

"I have to tell him, Liz. I don't know how, but I have to find a way. He deserves to know. So does Chloe."

"No argument here."

They watched Jake stand and take Chloe's hand, turning in their direction. Quickly, they moved away, back to join the other women before their disappearance was noticed.

* * * *

Oh shit! Jake thought as he saw who was coming towards him. Sandy. He squatted down, until he was on eye level with Chloe. "You want to go play with the rest of the kids now?"

"Yeah! Thanks, Uncl' Jakey."

"My pleasure, little darlin'. Any time." He swatted her backside playfully. "Off you go, then." He watched her scamper off, swallowing the tenderness he was feeling before his ex-wife reached him.

"Cute. Very cute." Sandy watched Chloe leave and turned to Jake with a lifted brow. "And there you had me believing you didn't want kids, Jake."

"I didn't. I wasn't lying."

"You could have fooled me," she mumbled.

"How've you been, Sandy?" Deliberately, he tried to move the conversation away from the potential minefield they were stepping on.

"All right, I guess. Work's busy and that's keeping me out of mischief. Feel like taking a walk, Jake? It's a lovely night. We could go down to the beach. Nobody would miss..."

"Sorry, Sandy. I promised Liz I'd help Rob with the cooking. You know his version of 'cooked' is ready for carbon dating."

She seemed to accept that, thankfully. Rob's lack of culinary skills was no surprise to either of them. They had been to enough barbeques at his sister's over the years. "You come with anyone, Sandy?" Actually, he was dying to know why she was here in the first place.

"No, hon. You?"

The use of the old endearment felt uncomfortable to him. "No. Me neither."

"Maybe later we could..." she started, but he cut in quickly.

"No, Sandy. I don't think so. I don't ... Look, I'd hate to give you..."

"What? The wrong impression? Don't worry, Jake. I think the divorce took care of that. I just thought it would be nice to talk like old friends. I miss that with you. We were best friends for so long ... Anyway, perhaps another time. Why don't you call me sometime and we can meet for a drink? What do you say?"

"Sure. That sounds fine."

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by *Susie Charles*

* * * *

Cass, Lizzy and Rachael sat in the dark under the awning, reclining on sun lounges. A silvery stream of light from the moon, a few days yet from full, filtered into the yard. The night had turned a little cool once the breeze sprang up, and they were ostensibly warming their hands by cradling mugs of steaming coffee while they chatted quietly among themselves. From where they were sitting, they had a perfect view inside the house to the huge living room. Outlined in the phosphorescent glow from the TV, they could see the three guys, also with coffees in hand, watching the late night sports show.

"Must be ad time," commented Liz absently, watching Rob flicking the remote and hearing an answering 'hmmm' from her friends. "You know, I always think I should tell people what time the barbeque ends like I tell them what time to arrive. They never want to leave, do they?"

Rachael gave a tired chuckle. "I'm just surprised they stay as long as they do once they taste Rob's cooking."

"You implying my husband can't cook?" Liz glanced over at Rachael with a grin.

"Yep. You disagreeing?"

Lizzy laughed. "Not likely."

"Do you think he realises?"

Lizzy snorted. "No chance. He seems to think it's some sort of genetic pre-disposition he has like other males. Like a 'Y' chromosome represents some sort of primitive skill with fire and a pair of tongs." She looked over at Cass who

seemed miles away. "You're very quiet, sweetie. What do you think?"

"I think it's time for me to go home. I'm tired."

"I'd offer to drive you, but somehow I don't think it's going to be necessary," offered Rach.

"Why?" Cass looked at Rach curiously.

"Because I'd hate to have to separate those two." She nodded her head in the direction of the house.

A goofy smile spread over Cass's face. Chloe was curled up on Jake's lap, sound asleep. Not seeming to mind in the least, Jake was sitting with his chin resting lightly on the top of her head as he watched the television.

"You've been replaced by a younger woman, sweetie," joked Rach.

"If that's the younger woman, I don't mind in the least." Cass was loath to disturb the two of them, they looked so cosy together. "They look good together don't they?"

Liz came up behind Cass and massaged her shoulders affectionately. "Like two peas in a pod. She's like a little 'mini-me' of Jake, Cass. Honestly don't know why I never noticed it before. But then it's seeing them together like that that really drives it home. You thought any more about telling him?"

It wasn't necessary for Cass to ask what. Every time she saw the two of them together it was in her head. "All the time. But the timing has to be right, you know. It's not exactly the sort of thing you just blurt out. Besides, I think it's good for them both to get to know each other a bit first."

"I agree," said Lizzy softly. "Give Jake a bit of time to get used to having a kid around. And just as important, give you and Jake time to get a bit closer, if you know what I mean..." She walked in front of Cass and winked at her.

"Lizzy!" Cass looked at her friend in surprise.

"Come on, Cass. You know how interested he is. Let it ride for a bit..."

"But what if he hates me for not telling him sooner?" That particular thought had crossed her mind more than once, and it was a tough one to budge. Of course, seeing how easily the two of them clicked had just made it worse. "I feel so guilty..."

"Stop that, Cass! Don't you dare do that. It takes two to make a baby, and if Jake hadn't rushed into marrying that annoying ex-wife of his, he wouldn't have had to wait to find out."

"Speaking of which..." interrupted Rachael, "what was *she* doing here tonight, anyway?"

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "Good old ma. She ran into Sandy down at the supermarket when she was picking up the steaks for tonight. Big mouth that she is, she let the cat out of the bag about the barbeque and Sandy pulled the whole sob routine about how much she misses everyone and blah, blah, blah. Poor ma didn't know what to say..."

"Don't be too hard on your mum, Liz. She's a big ol' softie, and you know it," said Cass. "Anyway, I'm beat. I think I'll go and see if I can tear Jake and Chloe apart and head on home." She leaned over to kiss Lizzy and Rachael goodnight and wandered into the house.

"Hey guys. Is it still going?" Cass glanced at the replay of the football on TV.

"You ready to go home, darlin'?" Jake enquired quietly so as not to disturb the little bundle snuggled on his lap.

Cass grinned at the hopeful look Jake made no attempt to disguise. "You offering me a lift?"

Jake smiled back at her. "It's on my way."

"Sure. Here, let me get Chloe for you." She made to reach for her daughter but Jake stopped her.

"No need, darlin'. I've got her." He stood easily with the sleeping bundle still in his arms. "Grab your bag and let's go."

* * * *

The drive home was quiet, but Cass looked at Jake in surprise when he reached over and took her hand, bringing it to his lips for a soft kiss.

"Jake?"

"Yeah, darlin'?"

Even in the glow of the dash lights, his expression was intent. A butterfly started doing a dance inside her chest.

"Would you ... um ... like to come in for a coffee?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

The headlights of a passing car shone at them, lighting up the interior of the car for a brief moment as it sped past ... long enough, though, for Cass to catch the smile that spread across his face.

* * * *

Much to her surprise, Jake insisted on carrying Chloe into the house and putting her to bed. She watched from the doorway for a moment as he quieted Chloe's sleepy fussing, and slipped Max into her arms before tugging the light summer quilt up over her curled up body. When he leaned over to brush the curls off her face and kiss her forehead gently, Cass walked away. The image was too much, too painful, altogether too "family-ish." It brought back every single time she had dreamt and pictured just that.

And besides, for a man who didn't want children, Jake was acting in a manner entirely too confusing. In fact, if it had been anyone but Lizzy who had told her the reason for his divorce from his wife, she would have had too many examples of behaviour to the contrary to credit it.

Should she tell him? How would it change the budding closeness between them when she did? He might be thrilled to know that the child he obviously shared such spontaneous affection with was actually his daughter. But there was the chance that he would annoyed or horrified, either because he had missed out on those early years of her life, or, because Chloe being *his own* child meant that certain responsibilities were now his that he wasn't ready to assume. If only she could be sure...

And what of the two of them—her and Jake? That was the \$64,000 question. She mulled over it as she waited for the coffee to finish brewing.

"Hey, beautiful." His arms wrapped around her in a hug from behind. "Coffee nearly ready?"

"Just about. Milk and sugar?"

"Black is fine."

"Chloe settled?"

"Sure. I left the night lite on and closed the door. She was pooped. But she looks so cute snuggled up in there. It's hard to walk away, y'know?"

"Yes, Jake. I know exactly what you mean. Many nights I've sat in there on her bed and just watched her..."

"But now it's just you and me, Cassie. D'you mind if I stay for a bit? I want you all to myself for a little while ... no friends, no kids—however cute, and no interruptions."

"What do you call 'a bit'?" She couldn't resist teasing him.

"Until you get sick of me."

The brush of his warm breath as he chuckled against her neck sent a thrill racing through her body.

Jake was true to his word, not to mention determined and very, very persuasive. That partly explained the fact less that five minutes later she was ensconced in a burly pair of arms and reclining like a seductress on his lap. The logistics of how and when that had happened were still enough to make her head spin. Jake gave new meaning to the words "fast mover."

For one night though, she just wanted to forget everything but how it felt to be here with Jake like this. Surely she deserved to have a little piece of her dream come true ... if only for one more night?

Her eyes travelled over the lightly lined, tanned skin, a result no doubt, of being out in the sun so much. Like the soft touch of a finger, her steady gaze moved down to his nose, strong but with a slight bump, perhaps from a small break, then to his lips, full and masculine. His eyes softened his

whole face and were so gentle at times, she felt she could drown in them.

She reached up a finger to run softly down his angular cheek, and stopped. Held fast by the look in his eyes, words deserted her. Tentatively, her finger moved over the curled, smiling line of his lips and the blue of his eyes intensified at her touch. His tongue flicked out to lick it slowly before she withdrew it, a jolt of pure heat from that single touch shooting down her body. Her nipples hardened in response.

His eyes focussed on her intently, his strong arms pulled her closer and closer still, and then his head slowly lowered, his lips settling on hers for a brief, electric touch. She remembered fully now how soft they had been, and hot, and the heat of his kiss fluttered through her in slow, steady waves, pulling her in.

"Tell me that you want me too, Cassie."

Her body reacted to the need in his voice, and he must have felt it because then his mouth was on hers again, more firmly this time, moving over her lips, gently but persistently, until a response was torn from her, and with a moan against his mouth, her arms went around his neck. Her body trembled and shook, but not from cold. She wanted more. She wanted him.

"I do want you, Jake." With an ease and familiarity that alarmed a small part of her brain, she moved to hold his head in her hands and pulled him closer, harder against her. His tongue slid between her parted lips, swirling seductively inside her mouth, then thrust with hers. The vivid picture of what he really wanted coursed through her like wildfire, her

body melting against the heat of his. Starved of his touch, with little more than accidental or fleeting touches and one scorching kiss since that night after the wedding, her skin tingled where he touched it. A hand slipped up along her back and ran over the sensitive skin of her spine, sparking shivers along every nerve ending in her body and sizzling at the growing heat between her thighs.

With amazing dexterity for a man with big hands, he flicked the buttons of her dress undone, starting at the hem and working all the way up, watching her eyes the whole time, waiting for one word from her to tell him to stop. But each time his fingers inadvertently brushed over bare skin, the word choked in her throat and died before she could utter it. As his hand lay on her mound to undo the next button, her hips lifted to his hand, a cry of desire and need breaking free.

"Shhh. Soon, Cassie. Soon," he whispered to her, his lips coming down to kiss her again, a long, drugging kiss that sucked the air out of her lungs.

His breathing was heavy now too, and ragged, the breaths harsh and uneven against her skin. His fingers had started to shake around the buttons as he finally popped the last one open at her breasts. She held her breath as he slowly peeled back the dress, and, with the exception of the white lacy panties, laid her bare to his gaze and touch. He inhaled deeply—a swiftly indrawn steady breath.

"Beautiful, just like I remember." His voice husky with want as a large but gentle hand brushed an exposed nipple, already puckered in anticipation, sent an arc of pleasure straight to her core. And then his palm was cupping her

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breast, moulding it, tracing lightly around the nipple until it hardened, a tight bud dying for the feel of his mouth and that hot tugging that drove her wild. Opening her lips to him, her resolve crumbled as she gave up the losing battle, and with a soft sigh, sucked him in deeply into her mouth.

* * * *

Truly, one kiss was all it was meant to be, that one sweet taste of Cass to soothe the fire burning inside, but now it would never be enough, for the taste he wanted was all of her. Jake wanted Cassie in every way a man can have a woman—fast, hard, slow, tender, pushing her higher, again and again until she screamed his name and understood there would never be anyone else for either of them.

He pulled back, catching his breath, looking at her lips, shiny and moist from his kisses, eyes heavy lidded with desire, and knew he couldn't stop, wouldn't stop, until he had her again.

"Oh, God, darlin'. I'm sorry, but I can't help myself..." His eyes pleaded with her to understand.

She made no move to stop him, returning his gaze as she nervously bit her lip. No alcoholic haze could be blamed this time for what was about to happen. Every sense was on full alert. This time he would remember every sigh, every single little moan, and he intended to ensure it was the first of many...

He inhaled deeply, trying to calm down the possessive beast raging inside of him, then licked and nibbled a path from her chin, over the soft, sensuous curve of her neck as

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her head lolled back against his arm, and down to the heavy, swollen breast that he cradled in his palm. She arched up against him, offering, silently pleading with him to taste her, and he was lost.

With a groan he dipped his head to lick and suckle, tasting the hint of lavender on her skin as he inhaled the heady scent of her awakening desire. Whisking his tongue around her tight, rosy nipple, he sucked and nipped, the honey-like taste of her skin sending a throb of need shuddering straight to his groin. His engorged cock pulsed in his jeans, straining against the denim barrier, the hard shaft thrusting rhythmically up against her ass. With a moist pop, he released one breast and moved to the other, continuing to fondle and tease it with his fingers while his mouth moved over its mate.

Her body was so hot and warm, and wet ... he knew it would be wet. Those sweet juices of hers just for him. He had to know, to feel it, to prove that she was as ready for him as he was for her. Trying desperately to go slow, he trailed his fingers up the silky skin of her leg. He knew that once he reached her panties, he would find the evidence of her desire for him in her damp curls. He hooked a finger in the elastic, easing the white lace down. With a toss of his hand, they landed on the floor beside the sofa, forgotten.

Her sex glistened in the lamplight and he cupped it, feeling the heat and the wetness, dying to slide his cock inside and fill her as he buried himself to the hilt. With a soft growl, he took her mouth again, tasting her fiercely as he slowly wiggled one finger, then two, into her hot, wet sheath. She stiffened briefly at the invasion, and then groaned as her

muscles clenched tightly around his fingers and her hips arched up to him. Slick with wetness, he pulled out, ignoring her soft cry, and ran the tip of a finger up the wet lips and over her hardened clit, circling it, teasing it till she cried out and pushed against his fingers. To the sound of her heated whimpers he ran his fingers, glistening with her juices, around her aroused nipples. Dipping his head, his tongue flicked out to taste her there as his fingers slipped back inside her hot, moist cleft. Shudders started to move through her and he thrust slowly as far as his fingers would go, teasing, his thumb caressing the nub as he glided in and out. Feeling her muscles tightening and thickening, he knew she was almost there, but fighting it just the same. Right now, feeling her trust him enough to let go and ride her orgasm out on his lap was the most important thing in the world to him.

"Come for me, darlin'. Don't fight it, just let go. I want to feel you..."

With a muffled scream, she came—wildly, explosively, her contractions pinching his fingers deep inside her. He watched the frantic expression on her face, her eyes as they squeezed shut at the moment of shattering release, and without giving her time to wind down, he maintained the pace of his movements, slipping his finger down to the cleft between her buttocks and the juices that had run down and moistened there as well. One fingertip pressed against the tightly puckered hole while he stroked and gently thrust into her sensitive folds was enough to push her to a second convulsive chain of spasms.

That shuddering release as she came again pierced through the fog of lust that was clouding his brain and controlling his body. *Sweet Jesus!* he groaned. His body was so on fire that if he didn't pull away soon, his erection would pierce right through his jeans and enter her still-pulsating core in one swift thrust, shooting inside her until they both couldn't see straight.

With a silent moan, he eased his fingers, soaked with her juices, out of her saturated pussy, watching her intently. Then taking her face in his hands he kissed her deeply, plunging deep inside her mouth, sucking her tongue into his until, breathless, he pulled back, their foreheads barely touching, leaving them both gasping with need and the desire for more.

"Jeesus, woman!" His expression was pained. "D'you have any idea what you do to me?" Even now his erection was throbbing against her buttocks, and it would be so, so easy to spin her around on his lap, zip down his fly and thrust his cock into her sweet, heavenly warmth.

Totally exhausted, she hung limply in his arms and he held her fast to his chest, rocking her gently. Tenderly, he smoothed the hair away from her sweaty brow, his lips following his hand, kissing her forehead as he went. Hugging her tightly in his arms, he knew she would be his ... and soon.

* * * *

She tried to sort through the jumble of emotions in her head, but was seriously hampered by the rippling aftershocks of the killer orgasms that had torn savagely through her

body. Closing her eyes, she waited for her thudding pulse to return to normal.

She was having trouble comprehending what had just happened. She and Jake had been talking ... just talking, and the next thing she knew, she was lying there naked. She couldn't even remember getting undressed. All she could think of was the feel of his lips on hers, his light stubble rasping over the soft skin of her face as his tongue plundered her mouth, the delicious taste of him as he stroked and thrust into hers. The sheer eroticism of the message he was sending had fogged her brain. It wasn't hard to tell he was imagining fucking her. Hell! She couldn't have stopped him had she wanted to. Using just his mouth and fingers he had brought her to the most incredible, explosive climax. Her limp body trembled even now just thinking about it.

"Jake?" She twisted a little on his lap to face him and ended up straddling him, noticing a grimace cross his features. It wasn't hard to tell why. There was something very interesting she was sitting on, and it wasn't just Jake's lap. A small shiver ran through her at the heat he was generating.

"Yeah, darlin'?" The words came out as little more than a croak.

"If you're up to it, don't you think we should move this to somewhere a little more comfortable?"

"Oh, baby, I am so up to it, you have no idea. Are we talking somewhere soft with room to stretch out?"

"Uh huh."

"What time does Chloe get up in the mornings?"

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"About seven. Why?" She looked at him curiously as she asked.

"What I have in mind could take a few hours ... at the very least."

Chapter Eleven

He thought he'd died and gone to heaven when he felt her fingers fumbling with the fly on his jeans. Getting the zipper down over his straining erection wasn't easy, but thank God she persisted. And when her hand wrapped around his shaft, he nearly came in her hand.

As long as she didn't start stroking him, he'd be okay ... for a few minutes at least. The first glimmer of trouble came when he felt the bead of pre-cum being massaged over the head of his cock and the answering tingle in the base of his spine.

Quickly, he grabbed her wrist. "Don't!"

Don't move, baby, please. Jeesus!

He groaned and waited for the pulsing in his cock to ease. That was just a little too close. But it drove home to him in no uncertain terms that he needed to get up close and very personal with Cassie soon. Sooner than soon. Now, actually. She looked like her head was still spinning and he decided that keeping her off balance seemed to be the way to go.

His tongue flicked a nipple, catching it in his teeth, sucking it, pulling gently on the dusky tip until the wet, hard nub firmed under his touch. She squirmed, her heat of her smothering his cock, and he ground his hips suggestively into her pussy in retaliation.

"I love the way you smell ... and taste. I want to taste you all over. Starting here," he said, licking over the neglected nipple. "I love your breasts, Cassie, and one night, maybe

even tonight, I'm going fall asleep and wake up with them in my mouth."

She let out a shuddering groan. Good. He wanted more of that. As many of those sounds from her as he could get so he knew he was driving her as crazy as she was him. With a firm grasp on her hips, he slid her closer to his throbbing erection so that the friction of his movements rubbed her clitoris. While he nibbled and licked on one breast, he tweaked and fondled the other one, inhaling the sweet scent of her excitement as he tasted her skin.

He could hardly hear her breathing or his over the pounding in his ears, but from the tension in her body and the clenching of her buttocks in his hands, he could tell she was getting close. He moved up to kiss her, an erotic kiss that would leave her in no doubt as to what was coming. Just a little bit more...

"No. Jake..." She gasped against his mouth, breaking from his lips, her breath ragged.

"Yes, darlin'. I'm not stopping, and neither are you." He gently nipped and sucked the sensitive flesh of her neck, then swiped over it with his tongue to soothe the spot. "You're going to come for me again, baby."

"But the bed..." She moaned, biting her lip as the first contractions started to ripple through her tummy and then lower.

"Fuck the bed!" His tongue swiped around a dark red nipple, his tongue slipping down to trace the curvy fullness underneath. His hand slipped between the join of their bodies again to gently caress her now swollen, sensitive nub. Her

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fingers dug into his shoulders, the nails almost piercing the skin. She was so close. He could feel it in her breathing and the pounding of her heart. "Now, Cassie." His voice was guttural, deep and very determined. He slipped a finger, and then a second one inside and thrust deeply as the next wave of orgasm hit her—hard—and in a dizzying, brief explosion she came, leaving her limp in his arms as the waves of pleasure pulsated through her. He'd never known a woman to be so responsive to his touch.

Slowly he extracted his finger from her tight warmth. Inhaling it deeply, he smelled the spicy scent of her before licking her juices off his fingers. The taste was a tangy blend of sweet and spicy, and if the feeling of her almost sitting on his cock wasn't so seductive, he would lay her down on the floor and lick her dry. Instead, he kissed her, sharing the taste with her as he ran his tongue around her mouth.

"Jake," her voice sounded weak as she lay slumped against him, "do you think we'll ever make it to the bed?"

She lifted her head from his shoulder to look into his eyes. He didn't even try to hide his expression of desire, of wanting something more, something deeper. Unable to help himself, he rubbed the tip of his penis in her wetness, allowing just the head to penetrate, teasing the sensitive nerve endings. He pulled out again just as quickly. Her little moue of disappointment was nothing compared to the screaming of his cock to get back in there, and fast! But that was one sure way to total madness.

He grabbed her shoulders, pulling her roughly against him, and kissed her—a devastating, mindless kiss that sucked the

air out of his lungs and all reason from his brain, before releasing her abruptly, leaving them both gasping for breath. This was not going to work. If he didn't get back inside that tight little hole, he was going to bloody well pass out from lack of blood to his brain. It was that simple. The bed was at least ten seconds away and that was about nine seconds too long.

"Oh, Jesus. I'm sorry, baby, but I don't think I can wait." He groaned and lifted her. "Take my cock and guide me in, Cassie," he said urgently. "If I don't get inside you now, I'm going to die."

He must have been pretty convincing because she reached down and wrapped her hand around his engorged shaft. Just the touch of her warm hands was nearly enough to make him come and he gritted his teeth as she placed it at the entrance to her folds, sliding the head through her dampness to moisten it. His arms trembled as he struggled to wait until she was ready. Her eyes were glued to the sight of his erection between her spread thighs just nudging inside her pussy, and as much as it thrilled him to see it, he needed to look at her, to see for himself that she was feeling what he was.

"Look at me, darlin'."

His voice was a moan, a plea, and she lifted her face from where their bodies joined and locked gazes with him as he plunged wildly into her, driving himself in to the hilt in one deep, long thrust.

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Fully sheathed, he marvelled again at the feel of her, warm and tight around him. She wriggled slightly on his lap, setting off a warning throb in his cock. *Shit!* "Whatever you do," he pleaded desperately, "don't move, darlin', or this will be all over, bar the shouting."

Nestled in her hot depths as she clenched tightly around him, he waited for the throbbing to ease a bit ... the *last* thing he wanted was to shoot inside her so fast. He wanted to enjoy this, savour it fully, drag it out for as long as possible—preferably for a month or a year. And he'd be damned if it would happen on this blasted sofa.

"Hold on tight, baby," he said through gritted teeth as *all* her muscles tightened. With a heave, he lifted them both up till he was standing, Cass still impaled on him, her legs wrapped tightly around his waist and her luscious breasts pressed hard against his chest. The delicious feeling of holding her in his arms while he was thrust up inside her nearly made his knees buckle. If he could only make it to the bedroom before he felt the need to start pounding into her...

His plan to walk quickly to the bedroom became a slow stagger as the tip of his penis nudged the head of her cervix with each torturous, exquisite step. The phone ringing cut into the sound of their ragged breathing.

"Oh fuck!" He glared at the phone, cursing it loudly.

"Don't stop, Jake." Cassie was pleading with him, a fact that would have thrilled him to the eyeballs if his brain was still functioning sufficiently to appreciate it. "Whoever it is, they'll call back later."

They heard the answering machine cut in...

"Cass? Cass? It's Lizzy." They could Rob's voice in the background telling her to call back tomorrow. Sounded like a damn good from where he was standing ... or trying to. "Pick up, Cass. You can't be in bed yet and I'll only be a second..."

Well, they would be in bed if his damn sister didn't have such lousy timing. Cassie looked at him, unsure what to do. Jake stumbled over to the phone, perching Cassie's cute bare bum on one of the stools.

"Answer it, but make it quick. I can't hold on much longer."

Cassie reached for the phone. Jake, for his part, couldn't resist sliding slowly in and out of her hugging warmth while he had the chance.

"L-Liz?"

Jake could hear the voice on the other end. Cass had left her purse behind. So what? And that bit of news couldn't wait? He'd have to have a serious talk with his little sister about calling people in the middle of the bloody night. And now his pest of a sister wanted to chat. His control quickly evaporating, he looked meaningfully at Cassie as if to say, "hang up", but her eyes were tightly closed, focussing more on what Jake was doing than what Liz was saying and she missed his pointed glance. In fact, he wondered if she'd heard a single word Liz had said. He knew the feeling. Cassie was so wet and hot around his cock that he knew that if he didn't start to pound into her soon, all the blood would leave the rest of his body and they'd both collapse in a heap on the floor. So he grabbed the phone from her.

"Liz? Jake. We're ... *thrust* ... in the middle ... *thrust* ... of something ... *thrust* ... right now." And he slammed the phone down none too gently.

"No ... no, Cassie, don't do that," he gasped out as he felt her internal muscles clenching and releasing around him. Her tongue flicked out to lick his ear and it was too much. *Oh sweet Jesus!* Grabbing her hips, he drove into her, over and over, totally mindless. Her body started to shudder uncontrollably and she cried out, her contractions milking his cock, and with a frenzied cry muffled against her neck, he exploded inside her, the slamming thrusts of his climax shooting his seed deep within her. He groaned in soul deep, blissful agony, dragging out the pleasure until he felt his legs start to give way. Finally the pumping of his cock eased and he grabbed onto Cass for support while he waited for his laboured breathing to return to normal.

Getting to the bedroom was going to be a problem now, he could see that. They still had two rooms to go, and at this rate, they'd never make it before he died of ecstasy. He wasn't sure if his legs would even support the both of them anymore, but the thought of pulling out was not an option. His cock agreed. The damn thing was still hard.

Their bodies were still tightly locked and soaked with sweat, and the feel of Cassie's tongue nibbling at his neck would be his undoing.

"Are you okay, baby? I didn't hurt you, did I?" He was suddenly overcome with guilt at the fierce way he'd taken her. *On a fucking kitchen stool, no less!* She had to be thinking he was a mindless animal.

Her voice, soft and sexy, the sounds thick with the aftermath of passion, cut into his thoughts. "You think too much, Jake, and you definitely talk too much." She reached for his face and kissed him deeply before she resumed licking him, this time catching the sweat as it dripped off his brow. "Now, would you like me to walk, or do you think you can get us to the bedroom this time?"

"Don't you dare move." He grunted as he lifted her off the stool and headed in the general direction. Like a true Neanderthal stumbling to his cave with his catch, he single-mindedly moved, mostly on instinct. His Homo sapiens sense of direction must have been a bit off though, because he missed the doorway and bumped them up against the wall, which only served to drive him further inside her. *This is not going to work*, he thought for a brief second, before he surrendered to the urge to thrust slowly inside her again. Of course, that damn tongue of hers wasn't helping him keep his mind on the job, which was ... what?

"Jake?"

She had stopped licking him briefly. That was good. He couldn't remember why, but...

"The bed?"

Right. The bed. With one final thrust, he pushed them off the wall and stumbled the last few feet inside the room, pausing briefly to catch the door with his foot and flick it shut before falling onto the bed with her, the mattress bouncing as they landed, still joined.

The landing on the bed may have been soft, but it had driven him even further inside Cassie, her channel slick from

his previous orgasm, and he felt the tip of his penis nudge the head of her womb. He couldn't get any deeper inside her. If he did he'd be coming out of her throat. Her muscles clenched tightly around him, gripping his shaft—a sign, he knew, of another orgasm tearing through her, and the primal thought of his woman coming under him, around him, ripped through him. With a triumphant roar, he thrust savagely into her again and again. He could feel her nails raking down his back, but when they scraped over the rigid muscles and sensitive flesh of his ass, that was it. The muscles tightened and, thickening even more, his cock filled in anticipation and he exploded inside her, so hard his vision blurred. In. Out. In. Out. In time with the pulsing of his cock. Finally slowing, his breath heaving, he slumped against her, drained.

* * * *

When Cass awoke, the first thing she noticed was the heavy weight of Jake on top of her. Her legs were still spread wide under him, and she ached inside and out. But it was a good ache. She couldn't remember anything feeling this good. She had no idea what sex would be like with any other man, but after Jake, she'd never had any inclination to try. She didn't know if she had passed out or just fallen asleep from exhaustion. As much as she relished the feel of him still inside her, she needed to breathe again, which meant he had to move.

"Jake?"

"Mmmm?"

Oh good, he was still alive. She was starting to wonder. "I can't breathe, honey."

"Me neither. I think you're going to kill me." His head popped up then, and he smiled that sexy smile at her. "But I'm not complaining." With one quick movement, he flipped her so that she was on top, draped over him like a blanket. "Better?"

"Is it time to get up?" Without her glasses, she strained to make out the numbers on the bedside clock.

"I hate to tell you this, *honey*, but I'm already up." He punctuated his words with slow, gentle thrusts.

"That wasn't quite what I meant." Her husky, sexy laugh washed over him.

He took that as a sign that she was okay with him carrying on. Which was just as well because he had no intention of stopping. "I know, but I figure we'll just stay here until I've taken the edge off and can stand for you to be away from me for five minutes."

"And when do you think that might be?"

"Oh, sometime in the next century."

"That long, huh?"

"Definitely."

* * * *

If he had his way, he wouldn't be leaving her sweet warmth any time in this lifetime or the next. She looked like a goddess perched above him. Her hair fell about her shoulders like a curtain of silk, the dark brown waves cascading over her breasts; her lips were puffy from his kisses, and she

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looked and smelled absolutely gorgeous—musky, slightly sweaty and very, very sexy. And best of all, she was all his. After they had made love a few more times, and he had wiped that sassy look off her face, he would tell her.

"Feel like a shower, darlin'? You wash my back and I'll wash yours..." He winked at her suggestively.

"Quite apart from the fact that it's the middle of the night..." She'd finally managed to focus on the clock and while not the middle of the night, 5 am still seemed a little early to be having an early morning shower, even for her. "Why do I get the feeling that this suggestion has absolutely nothing to do with getting clean?" She laughed as he attempted, and failed miserably, to look innocent, and lifted herself off him. Grabbing a dress, she moved towards the door. Her hand on the doorknob, she glanced back at him over her shoulder as he lay there following her movements with his eyes and flashed him a seductive look. "Coming?"

He watched her walk away for all of two seconds, that slight wiggle in her full hips making him lick his lips, his insatiable hunger for her flaring again, before he bounded off the bed after her. *You better believe it*, he thought to himself.

Chapter Twelve

That night, the first night that Jake stayed the whole night, Cass was nervous, understandably, as to Chloe's reaction on finding him there when she woke. But as if strange men staying the night and still around to share the Corn Flakes at breakfast when she woke up was the norm, Chloe didn't even raise an eyebrow at discovering Jake there in the morning. Of course, that could have had a lot to do with the fact that Chloe was quite convinced he was there as much for her as for Cass. As uncles went, he was her favourite. Hands down. They were like Tweedledum and Tweedledee whenever they got together.

The moment of truth had come when Chloe asked Jake straight out where he had slept. As kids do. No beating around the bush. Let's just get it straight out on the table. While Cass blushed and gulped and stuttered, Jake had calmly told his "sugar" that he had stayed in Mumma's room and was that okay with her? Chloe, naturally, was fine with that and asked for more cereal. Cass was the only one who was choking on her toast! The raised eyebrow and the knowing smirk from Jake over Chloe's head didn't exactly aid her digestion.

However, the following week passed in a blur. Jake came around most nights, as if he couldn't stay away. A couple of them he even stayed over. But in spite of the blissfully happy moments they had all shared, the spectre of the secret Cass was withholding hung over her head like a big thundercloud,

threatening to shatter the peace and bring her merry little fantasy world to a shuddering halt.

Her merry little fantasy that involved Jake, Chloe and her playing happy families in suburbia. As fantasies went, it was terribly clichéd, but it was hers and she wanted it so much. And she alone had the power to shatter it. Her heart has always been Jake's. If only she knew how he felt about her ... them.

Chloe was due to go away for the weekend to a nipper's carnival with the surf club, and Jake had invited Cass to spend the weekend at his place. Full of nerves, Cass decided this weekend would present the "right time" to tell him. Consequently, she was so tense about the whole thing that by the time Chloe left with Larry, Deb and her nieces and nephews, Cass was a nervous wreck. As a result, when Jake came to pick her up a little later, she had developed a headache that felt like a team of buffalo doing a stampede in her head. Jake, true to form, took care of her—ran her a bath, fed her, gave her painkillers and carried her to bed, with him wrapped around her to keep her warm. The man was a god.

When she woke in the morning, pounding headache free to find Jake looking down at her and stroking her forehead as he watched her sleeping, Cass resolved to take the opportunity if and when it presented itself and not waste a perfectly good weekend by worrying herself into a state. When the time was right, she would know. She hoped...

But for now she was having trouble concentrating. Jake's stroking had moved from her forehead to her breasts, leaving

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a trail of goose bumps behind. This was the part where coherent thought fled, and as his hot tongue swirled around a tight nipple she let her brain go ... Who could think straight when Jake was having a pre-breakfast appetiser on some very sensitive body parts? When he slid down the bed and settled himself between her parted thighs, her IQ burned out and her ability to string together an intelligent thought or two fried along with the rest of her brain.

* * * *

She knew she wasn't sex goddess material. She carried a bit too much weight for that. Curvy, well-rounded, *cuddly*. That last one always raised a groan. It was how she had been described since she was a kid. So what if she had a big tush? She actually liked it. At least she would never be accused of killing a guy through a misplaced bone sticking in him and piercing some vital organ.

And Jake seemed to like her body. He certainly had trouble keeping his hands off it—a fact she was enjoying, very much. A tired smile creased her face. While she listened to his husky singing in the shower, the sound of his crooning sending some very pleasant tremors through her, she grabbed food at random out of his fridge, and put it on the counter in preparation for breakfast ... lunch ... whatever they were having. The concept of time seemed to have escaped her and she was having serious trouble concentrating. After Jake's special version of "waking up", her brain was still missing. The rest of her body though, was just one big nerve ending, pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

Understandably so. When she moved, it was as if Jake was still inside her, filling her. The ache between her thighs throbbed pleasantly. Her eyelids fluttered closed and her pulse quickened as she thought of his hands on her, cupping her breasts from behind, the huge calloused palms moulding the fullness as her nipples hardened in response. Her eyes drifted closed as she pictured it, while moving her hand down to her mound as she stifled an excited moan that threatened to bubble up. She certainly didn't want Jake to know she was in his kitchen imagining...

"Don't hold it in, darlin'. Let it out." A large male hand moved over hers and increased the pressure.

Damn. Too late. The voice at her ear almost made her jump. His warm lips nibbled on her neck and she did moan. She hadn't even heard the shower turn off, let alone him come up behind her. A warm hand slipped through the sides of her robe and was cupping her, rolling a nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Hot and still damp, he was pressed up against her and she could feel his erection butting into the generous flesh of her bottom. She pushed back against him feeling the answering grind from him. How could she be ready for him again so soon? Hell, how could *he* be? If Jake were a vibrator, he'd be costing her a fortune in batteries!

The belt on her robe slid undone, loosening the satiny gown. With a little help from Jake, the robe started to slip, and was only held from falling completely, leaving her naked, by her arms leaning on the counter. Hot lips travelled down the exposed skin of her back, trailing kisses over the lightly

muscled skin while a hand slipped down over the soft rise of her stomach, pausing abruptly at the damp curls.

"No panties." A husky growl showed Jake was more than happy with that little discovery. "Oh baby, you shouldn't have done that." Lifting her arms, he allowed the robe to puddle on the floor. "I've got to have you again, Cassie. I can't help it, darlin'. Sorry..."

Hey, did she look like she was complaining? Oh, that's right, he couldn't see her face from where he was snuggled up to her back like a second skin. *That's all right. Feel free. Be my guest.* A moan of pure delight escaped her parted lips.

With a slow probe, a finger slipped inside, sliding easily into the wetness. She bit her lip at the tender invasion, a ragged breath escaping in a whoosh as that finger was joined by another. Her pussy ground into his hand. The clean smell of him, all soap and mint, sent her into overdrive in time with the measured thrusts of his fingers. His free hand with a hint of roughened skin, stroked over the sensitive flesh of her now bare bottom, before dipping a finger down into the cleft to circle the tight bud of her clit and rub gently until a pleasurable shudder went through her. He must have been wearing nothing but a towel, because she felt the rough towelling slide down her legs as he released it, and then she could feel nothing but his heat against her skin. Her breathing quickened when a hand on the small of her back pushed her forward and down.

"Bend over, baby."

His words whispered in her ear, the heat of his breath sending little electric shocks along all the pathways of her

nervous system. Tilted against the kitchen cupboard, she felt his thigh between her legs, parting them. Steadying her hips, he slid his cock inside, searing her like a hot brand, inch by slow, torturous inch until he was fully sheathed, his body covering hers like a blanket, his warm and erratic breathing loud in her ears.

Her body was so sensitized she could feel him throb inside her in time with the heartbeat that pulsed against her back. With the exception of his hands moving over her breasts, he was still—completely and utterly still. The tension stringing through her body nearly drove her insane, waiting for that first thrust ... wanting it, needing it.

"Jake, don't just stand there. Please!"

"I want to feel you baby." Jake's voice had dropped into that low, husky range that automatically turned her insides to mush. "I need to know that I'm not dreaming this ... that this is real..."

How much more real does he want? She thought to herself. She wanted him to do something ... *anything!* The sexual tension was mounting higher by the second, in time with her blood pressure. She shook her head in frustration. *I'm standing, semi-naked in his kitchen, no less, with an erection that feels the size of a pole vault inside me, and he wants to know if this is "real"?* She groaned. "I don't know how much more 'real' I can take, Jake."

She felt a hand slip down in front and stroke her inner thigh, making her muscles quiver. It trailed up until it flicked over her swollen clit. The lightest touch, as soft as a feather. He was trying to kill her.

His voice was in her ear again. She wished he would please stop doing that! Couldn't he see she couldn't talk? All she could think was *Oh God, why wasn't he moving?*

"It doesn't always have to be hard and fast, darlin'. Just enjoy the sensation. D'you feel how well we fit together?"

Yes! I do! I do!

The only movement was his hands, one tweaking her nipple and the other swirling through the curls between her legs. She tried pushing against him, but he just held her firm against the cupboard.

"Jake! If you don't move soon, I'm going to hit you!" Her eyes closed as a ripple of pleasure ran through her when he pinched her nipple at the same time as he rubbed her clit. In a rush, she was near the peak again. All it would take was one hard thrust and she would spin over the edge.

The chuckle behind her did nothing for her peace of mind. He knew damn well how close she was and he was just torturing her. She was going to have to kill him. She picked up the first thing she could lay her hands on and opened her eyes to find she was holding ... an eggbeater. Great! What was she going to do? Whisk him to death?

She was saved from that thought when she felt him ease out before embedding himself deeply once again with a slow thrust. Finally! He pulled out, sliding with excruciating slowness until nothing remained within her but the bulbous head and then he paused, and for one horrible moment she thought he would stay there like that, but then he started moving again and she cried with relief.

In. Out.

Her juices flowed freely, lubricating the passage, and the sound of him moving his stiff cock back and forward was undoubtedly the most erotic noise she had ever heard.

In. Out.

All her senses seemed heightened and she could even feel the hairs on his thighs rub against hers as he thrust into her.

"You're unbelievable, darlin'. So tight and hot; I want to stay like this forever."

"Me, too," It came out as little more than a croak. *Just a little more...*

In. Out.

Cass had been hanging on the edge of her climax for what felt like three hours, and her legs were in danger of giving way under her. The thought that probably the only thing holding her up at this point was Jake's erection didn't fill her with as much joy as the thought of the orgasm she knew was going to shatter her if he would just pick up the tempo a bit.

In. Out.

Frustrated beyond belief, she decided that two could play that game. The next time he slid out, she clenched her inner muscles, clamping around the head of his cock, and smiled when she heard the gasp and the sudden indrawn breath on her neck, along with the answering surge of him back inside. Good. That was working. A nice change of pace.

In. Out. In. Out.

Raising herself on arms that trembled brought her back flush up against Jake's chest. Her head lolled back, cradled by his shoulder, and with a slight turn she could nibble the side of his mouth, flicking a teasing tongue out to capture a drop

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of sweat as it tracked down the side of his face. Thrusting faster, he freed a hand from the grip on her hip to hold her jaw line in place as he angled his mouth over hers, the kiss hard and hot. Clenching around him again, she swallowed the gasp she knew would come and the light flick of her tongue against his felt like an electric shock sizzling between them. Simulating what his groin was doing, she probed his mouth, stroking it intimately with her tongue, feeling the moan rumble up through his chest.

"Oh fuck!" he cried, tearing his mouth from hers. Finally pushed too far, he grabbed her hips, pounding wildly into her until she could feel his balls slapping up against her.

Yes! Yes! The frustrating pleasure of moments before peaked like an explosion within her. Uncontrollable, shuddering contractions surged through her and she screamed her release as Jake pounded into her, answering her with a gut-wrenching cry of his own as he emptied into her, gushing hot, searing jets of semen into her womb.

"Jesus, Cass. Don't do that!" He gasped as he slumped over her.

"Do what?" Her frazzled brain was struggling back to life, albeit a little sluggishly and she couldn't quite understand what he was saying.

"You know. With your tongue. You're going to be the death of me."

* * * *

He wasn't lying. She would be the death of him for sure. He wondered if there would ever be such a thing as a gentle

orgasm with her. Every time it felt like she was sucking his whole body out through the head of his cock. Once he took the edge off his craving for her, he felt sure he would be able to do it nice and slow ... in about fifty years, maybe! With his arms wrapped around her, he nuzzled her neck, inhaling the soft smell of her, a smell that was now mixed with the heady scent of sex.

"Feel like another shower?" He mumbled against her neck, kissing the line of her jaw until he reached her mouth and turned her in his arms to cuddle her close. Her laughter bubbled up, breaking free in a throaty chuckle.

"I'm making breakfast, remember?"

"Damn!" He grinned back at her sheepishly. "I guess that means I'm on my own." He reached down to pick up the discarded towel off the floor and wrapped it around his hips, tucking it in to hold it there. He ran his gaze over her face, at the sparkling eyes, the cheeky grin that he found so adorable and he reached to cup her face in his hands. "You're a beautiful woman, Cassie. I figure I have two choices: I can either fall in love with you now ... or later. And personally, darlin', I prefer not to wait."

She stood in shock. With a brief touch to her lips he turned and started to walk away, before turning back to her once more. "And I'll have three eggs and four slices of bacon. I'm very hungry this morning," he said with a wink.

Cass stood and watched him walk away, dumbfounded, his words running through her head. Automatically, she turned on the heat under the pan for the eggs and trimmed the fat

off the bacon. She was still struggling to believe he had said what he said when he came back out a few moments later.

* * * *

Cass watched Jake move confidently around the kitchen while she perched on one of the stools. After the sex in the kitchen and then his mind-blowing little comment to follow, her synapses were shot to hell. As a result, her initial, fumbling attempts to fix them some breakfast had been thwarted by Jake, who insisted she sit there and watch him instead. Which was not a hard thing to do, she decided. He looked mucho cute with his hair all mussed and nothing but the towel on.

"Cassie? Hello?"

She pulled her mind back to the here and now. Obviously Jake had been talking to her and she'd missed the whole thing. "I'm sorry. My mind was elsewhere."

"Yes, I could see that." He looked at her with a small, teasing smile. "Now, if you can just get your mind off my fine body for five minutes and tell me how you like your eggs, we can eat."

She huffed in reply, embarrassed that he could read her so well. "I was not looking at your body. And that would be soft and runny, please."

"I should have known," he teased her, his eyebrow arched rakishly.

She was not deaf, and she was not stupid, and she understood very well the analogy he was making. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. The man was a torment. The

mention of the L-word had her in a state. Talk about out of the blue! What did he mean? Could it mean what she hoped it meant? Her nails tapped out a nervous beat on the counter. Jake's hand closed over hers, stopping her movements. She looked up at him.

"Later. Let's eat first."

She nodded. The smell of his cooking was making her tummy rumble.

Jake had cooked up a mountain of food, which was just as well as they were both hungry and managed to demolish the lot of it. She was sipping her steaming coffee, pleasantly diverted by the feel of a full stomach and the pleasure of not having had to cook, when Jake broke into her musings again.

"We're good together, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?" In bed? In the kitchen? In the bathroom? After this morning's little episode, all he had to do was pick a room and she would be there, naked, before he could blink.

"Not just the sex, darlin'..." The smirk on his face made her wonder if he could read her mind. "...but the rest of it—the talkin', the fun you and I have together ... little Chloe, too..."

Uh oh. Here it comes ... She bit her lip nervously when he reached over and took her hand

"I want us to see how far this can go, Cassie. D'you know how much I love bein' with you? Both of you?"

When he stared at her so intently with those big blue eyes, Cass had to struggle to remember to breathe, let alone think,

and she really needed to think about what he was saying, the implications, the meaning.

"We love being with you too, Jake." *Tell him, tell him.*

It was the opening she'd been looking for, waiting for. And if it all had to come to an end when he found out about Chloe, then it was better to find out now before they all got too deeply involved.

"About Chloe..."

Jake's face creased with a smile. "She's a gorgeous kid, darlin'." His face turned serious. "Look, I know it's a big step to take for you because there is a child involved, but you don't have to worry about me and Chloe. I love that little sweetheart like she was my own. I'd never do anything to hurt either of you. You know that, don't you?"

Oh God. Could the earth just open up and swallow her now? Please?

"I know it's a package deal, darlin', and believe me, I want that. I want both of you."

Stop, stop, stop. It was all moving too fast. Jake wasn't supposed to be talking like this. He wasn't supposed to *want* kids—his or anybody else's. She flicked at a toast crumb on the tablecloth while she tried to gather her thoughts. It was too damn hard to think straight we she looked into his eyes.

You've got to tell him, Cass. Now. Stop stalling.

"Jake, it's great ... that is, I'm very glad you feel that way about Chloe."

"She's a credit to you, darlin'—a real special little girl. You've done a fantastic job of raising her."

"Yes, she is, but..."

"She takes after you in so many ways. Maybe that's why she's so cute."

She wished Jake would just shut up for one second and let her get a word in before she totally lost her nerve. "About Chloe..."

"Yes, darlin?"

"She ... is ... She is..."

The doorbell rang.

Shit!

"Back in a second." Jake stood, kissing her briefly on the cheek, and went to answer the door.

With a frustrated groan, Cass dropped her head into her hands, trying to slow down the erratic thumping of her heart. So close...

The sounds of voices caught her attention. Jake's was distinctive, although the light and teasing tone of moments before was replaced by the deeper voice Cass was starting to realise was associated with a sterner Jake. Which was curious, as the other voice was definitely female.

The voices were quite clear, Jake's especially, and Cass managed to catch snippets.

"...was passing, so I thought I'd pop in."

"Yeah, well, em ... this is unexpected, to say the least."

"...still friends..."

"Sure, Sandy."

Sandy?!

"...going to invite me in for a cup of coffee, hon?"

Hon? Cass gritted her teeth. I don't think so!

One Touch
by Susie Charles

The door shut, but the voices came closer. Damn, there went her cosy morning with Jake. She tried to push down on the jealousy bubbling just below the surface before it showed on her face, wondering at the same time whether Sandy made a habit of these impromptu little visits. She managed to plaster a smile on her face just before Jake and Sandy rounded the corner into the dining room.

"Sandy. You remember Cassie?"

Cass may have been a novice in the men department, but she knew that look on Sandy's face very well. And Cass realised that however much Jake may have put his divorce behind him, that only made one of them. Sandy had definitely *not* let go.

Chapter Thirteen

That smile didn't fool her for a second. Although her gaze was expansive and the mouth tilted up at the corners, the appearance of friendliness stopped somewhere between the tilt of Sandy's nose and eyes. But then, considering the fact that Jake was wearing nothing but faded jeans with the top button undone, and she was still wearing her robe, Sandy didn't have to be Einstein to figure out Cass's visit was more than an innocent sleepover.

She had to give Jake's ex-wife full marks for composure, though. The woman hardly missed a beat.

"Cass! Of course. You're Lizzy's little friend aren't you?"

Little friend. How nice. "Not quite so little anymore, Sandy..." *nor as young and innocent as I once was,* "...but yes, I'm Lizzy's friend. And how are you?"

"Fine. It's lovely to see you again. You know, I remember when you and Lizzy first met. Just a couple of crazy teenagers tearing around after anything in pants. Jake and I used to have quite a chuckle over it, didn't we, hon?"

"I don't recall..." Jake turned a surprised eye on Sandy as she slipped her arm in his and expertly cut him off.

"He kept a good eye on you two, though. Big brother looking out for baby sister and her little friend." Sandy looked up at Jake with a smile that just made Cass want to retch. "He used to worry that you'd get yourselves into ... err ... trouble." Her emphasis hung on the last word and she

glanced over at Cass. "By the way, how is that delightful little girl of yours? What's her name ... Clarissa ... Katie..."

Bitch, thought Cass. Sandy's inference was not lost on any of them. *But if only you knew ...* Instead, she smiled sweetly back at Sandy, determined not to let her rattle her. "Chloe, actually. And she's fine, thanks, Sandy."

"But it's so hard doing it on your own, I imagine."

"True, but the joys are worth the hard work. Giving birth and being Chloe's mother is the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn't trade a minute of it..."

"Yes, I'm sure." The flicker of dislike passed so quickly through Sandy's eyes that Cass nearly missed it. "Look, I'm sorry if I interrupted something, you two. I didn't expect you to have company, Jake."

"Yes, well..."

"Jake's doing the work on your house, isn't he, Cass?"

"Yes, he is."

"Poor guy. He works so hard. I almost had to tear him away from it at times so that we could have some special time for the two of us. But it was worth it, wasn't it, Jake?"

Jake was shifting uncomfortably. It was clear to Cass, and it surely must have been to Jake, that she had hoped to find him alone. "Was there something you wanted, Sandy?"

"No, just thought I'd pop in and say hello. After our little chat at the barbeque, I thought I'd take you up on your offer to come over and talk."

The reading on Cass's internal thermometer was about to burst. Standing there in a robe, no doubt looking completely dishevelled, wasn't doing much for her status quo, either.

Besides, if she had to stand there and watch Sandy sink her claws any further into Jake's arm, she felt she was likely to grow a few of her own. Which shocked her.

All of her previous emotions for Jake had been centered around the unrequited nature of her feelings for him. Now, however, having had a taste of Jake's affection, she discovered she didn't like sharing, not even, or especially with, his ex-wife. With as much grace as she could muster, she excused herself in the only way she knew would give Sandy a little bit of her own back.

"I hope you'll excuse me, Sandy." Cass fingered the belt of her robe and looked Sandy square in the eye and smiled. "Jake and I had just finished breakfast, and I need to go get showered and changed. It was lovely to see you again." And on those words, she walked past both of them, running her fingers over Jake's chest with an unmistakable familiarity before she very obviously ... and deliberately ... disappeared into his bedroom.

And there she stood, struggling to control the unusual feelings of possessiveness she felt for Jake and fighting not to go out and tear Sandy's hair out by the roots. Pacing, she strained to catch some of their conversation and was relieved to hear Jake ushering his ex-wife out the door. With a satisfied smile, she dropped her robe on the bed and walked into the bathroom, letting the shower run until the steam started to rise. She opened the door and stepped into tiled expanse, closing her eyes and releasing a contented sigh as she tilted her head back under the water and let it run down through her hair.

She gasped moments later when she felt the small gust of cool air hit her as the door opened and Jake moved behind her, his hands reaching up to cup her breasts as his erection nudged her bottom.

"You've no reason to feel jealous, you know."

"Jealous? Me?"

"Sandy and I are over, darlin'. I wouldn't have gone through with the divorce if I hadn't been sure of that."

"So what was all that out there?"

"We're just friends. Nothing more."

Cass fought the urge to scoff. "Does Sandy realise that?"

"Of course she does." One of his hands slid down lower, the fingers raking through the nest of curls. "What about us, Cassie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are we *just* friends?"

Sliding over soapy skin, his hands met at her waist and turned her to face him. His erection throbbed against her stomach as he pulled her in closer and wrapped his arms tight around her.

"I ... I don't know, Jake. We haven't ... um ... we've ... the sex ... I wasn't sure what else..."

He kissed her, a soft yet searching kiss full of gentleness, not meant to excite but to speak to her, lay out as plain as day the difference between sex and making love, that spoke to her heart instead of her body, but left her weak-kneed just the same. "I want to be with you, darlin'. *All the time*. And not just for sex. Understand?" Blue eyes bored into hers, intent.

She nodded, speechless.

"And you, baby?" The rough timbre of the words made her heart stumble. His grip on her changed. No longer pulling her tight against him, he shifted, his arms enfolding her so that she felt embraced, secure, precious ... And in the same way, so too, did his words become infused with a fuller meaning, and the question was no longer simple and short.

He was asking her to take the next step, with him, and she couldn't say no. He was her dream, for so many years, a dream that amazingly had become a reality, and so she grabbed it with both hands because she needed it, wanted it so much that she burned for it.

"I do, Jake. Very much."

He sighed as if a weight had been removed and kissed her, his lips settling softly over her cheeks, her eyes, before settling on her mouth, the heat from them melting the last part of the ice wall she had built to protect herself years ago. When he finally broke away, minutes later, they were both panting from the intensity. He rested his forehead on hers and breathed deeply. "Good. Because I'm telling you now, darlin'..." He took hold of her face, looking at her so deeply he reached into her soul. "...what I want is a whole lot more and I intend to make sure it's all mine. I don't share, Cassie. You're mine, baby, and that's a promise."

* * * *

After that amazing weekend, things with Jake seemed to change. He still joked and teased, but at times she would catch him looking at her when she turned quickly and she was

surprised by the need and the hunger she thought she saw in his eyes. He would always look away quickly as if he'd been caught thinking things out loud that he wasn't ready to say. She wanted to ask him, but didn't know how, and she suspected if she did, he wouldn't say.

But as if the words were too simple, too bland, to communicate what he was feeling, in bed with her at night after Chloe was asleep, his lovemaking, intense at times, incredibly tender at others, took her to heights she had never even realised were possible.

And in the back of her mind was always the thought of Chloe, and Jake, and the words she had to tell him. But the longer it went on, the harder it became. She was trapped by her own cowardice. To tell him now meant she might lose him, and if that happened, she wasn't sure she would survive it...

* * * *

Grabbing a beer from the fridge for both of them, Cass walked out onto her brand new deck and handed one to Richard. Slipping a leg under her, she settled into one of the canvas deck chairs she had bought to celebrate and glanced out over the view. "How much longer do you think?"

From the look of it, Richard and James, the two tradesmen Jake had assigned to do the work on her house, had nearly finished. The roof was fixed, the deck was built, her ensuite was fully operational. All that seemed to be left was the extra room downstairs.

"Say, two weeks? Then we'll be out of your hair. And you two won't have to put up with us two messing with your routine anymore. What do you say, Chloe?" Chloe was sitting on his knees, licking at an ice cream. He mussed her hair, his touch affectionate.

True to form, Chloe had captivated yet another male. Cass realised she had a real heartbreaker on her hands and smiled indulgently at her daughter.

"I hardly realise you and James are here most of the time. Until you start up that damn electric saw..." She grimaced and smiled ruefully.

She liked Richard. He was a gentleman, as well as a gentle man. They had become friends over the last few weeks. The discovery that he was very well read, in spite of his occupation, and shared with her his love of Keats and Wordsworth, had cemented an unusual, but relaxed and entirely unexpected camaraderie.

"So, how do you like your new deck? Was it worth all the noise and the dust?"

He and James had finished the deck that afternoon and it was being duly christened. After swallowing one quick beer, James had left, in typical surfer fashion, to catch a last few waves before dark.

The crash of the surf rumbled over them, muted by distance, but the air was still heavy with the tang of salt from the onshore breeze. As autumn took hold, the days were getting cooler and shorter, and soon it would be too chilly to sit out on the deck in the afternoon and wait for the sun to do down.

One Touch
by *Susie Charles*

"Two weeks isn't long, and the mess has been worth it, don't you think?" She nodded at the view as she spoke.

"I'll miss it, that's for sure. And I think I'll miss you, too. You're a wonderful woman, Cass. Jake's a lucky man."

"You're just saying that because you want another beer." She found it easy to joke with Richard, to be in his company. In a lot of ways, he reminded her of her father. The sort of man who didn't have to be macho to be masculine, a capable man who made a woman feel safe, secure. A man any woman would be lucky to have.

Through conversations with him each night after they finished, she had discovered he was divorced, but attached. She'd met his "lady friend" as he insisted on calling her, when she had dropped by last week to pick him up while his truck was being serviced. And she was like him—quiet, confident, with a smile for Richard that lit up her face. The affection between them was obvious.

"No, one beer is enough. I'd better get going before Jake arrives and finds me lounging around. Don't want him thinking I'm moving in on his turf." He winked at her and laughed, grabbing her hand playfully but made no move to get up.

"It's nice out here, isn't it." She settled back further in her seat and sighed.

"It sure is. Makes it hard to leave..."

* * * *

Hearing voices at the back of the house, Jake let himself in. He had noticed Richard's truck still parked on the grassy

verge and wanted to find out how much longer he would be. With any luck, Cassie should be able to have her house back to herself in a week or ten days. He had a surprise planned for her that hadn't been included in the renovations she asked for. The rusty old heater was getting the boot. The restoration of the beautiful old fireplace was the last item on Jake's list. But he wanted it to be a surprise for her. He had plans for that fireplace during the coming winter, plans he was hoping would put that sexy smile on her face.

With a grin, he walked through the house. He stopped in his tracks when he saw Cassie and Richard out on the deck. Like a punch to the gut, he took in the sight of Richard holding Cassie's hand.

A surge of possessiveness and jealousy powered through him, its strength surprising him. Just the thought of another man touching her made his body coil.

"...get going before Jake arrives and finds me lounging around. Don't want him thinking I'm moving in on his turf."

You're damn right, Richard. Get your fucking hands off my woman. He moved quickly then, out to the deck. Chloe caught sight of him before he reached them, her face lighting up with excitement as she clambered down off Richard's lap.

"Uncle Jake!" Squealing, she launched herself at him.

"How's my girl?" He scooped her up and hugged her to him, feeling her arms cling tight around his neck.

He walked over to Cassie, damned pleased to notice that Richard's hand was back where it should be. Determined to mark his territory so that the message would be clear, he

squatted down beside Cassie and kissed her, intimately. "Hey, darlin'," he said when he finally broke away. "Miss me?"

"What about me?" a little voice asked in his ear. "Where's mine?"

Jake laughed, the tension in his body easing. "That is a 'mummy' kiss. You, little darlin', get an Eskimo one," he said, rubbing noses with her and grinning.

"Well, I'd better hit the road. I'll leave you two lovebirds to your own devices." Richard stood and motioned for Cass's empty bottle.

"You got much longer, Rich?"

"Nah. Two weeks should see it done."

"What about that other ... em ... job I asked you to do?"

"One day—max. It's all organised. Don't worry. Night, you three."

Jake waited until Richard had gone before taking his seat. He was still getting over the possessive feelings the sight of Richard and Cassie together had stirred. He had to do something about his relationship with her soon before he went nuts. No way was he going to risk some other guy coming along and spoiling the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Because he loved her. It was really quite simple. The only thing holding him back from telling her was that he just wasn't sure how strong her feelings were for him. But not telling her was killing him. He got the feeling Cassie wasn't ready to hear how he felt. Oh, she was loving and it seemed like she wanted him around, but she always seemed to be

holding back a bit, and until he had figured out why, he didn't want to push.

Chloe curled up in his lap like a little kitten, and with one arm around her, he picked up Cass's hand with his free one and kissed it. He was bewildered to notice her eyes were glassy when he looked up at her, watching him intently.

"What's up, darlin?"

"Nothing. Just happy."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." And then she smiled at him.

"Well, that's good, because I'm happy too." But even as he said the words, he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right...

A cool gust blew up, making Chloe shiver.

"C'mon, sugar. Time to get you inside."

"It's bath time, anyway," Cass shook her head in bemusement as Chloe tore off in the direction of the bathroom. As she moved to follow, Cass stopped and turned to Jake. "Don't go."

"I won't."

He watched the unconscious sway of her hips as she walked away and frowned. It was insane to be thinking the thoughts he was thinking so soon after one divorce, but he wanted to marry her. Soon. Sooner than soon. And Chloe needed a father. He'd love her like his own. Hell, he already did. But how to get Cassie to see that?

Soon the sound of water running was followed by the splash of Chloe climbing in. Cass reappeared a few moments

later and walked over to him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"You're very quiet tonight."

He slid his arms around her and squeezed her, inhaling the soft scent of flowers in her hair. "I have to go away, Cassie."

She looked up at him quickly, her eyes searching his for his meaning.

"Not for long. Only three weeks. Two, if I really push the guys." Damn, the last thing he wanted to do was go. He had quoted on the job in Melbourne after his divorce, weeks before things had heated up with Cassie, never realising the direction his life would suddenly take. He couldn't pass it up, though.

"Oh." Her face fell and he hugged her tighter. "When?"

"Soon."

"How soon is soon, Jake?"

"Two days. The materials and the guys will be ready by then. I'm sorry, darlin'. I wish I didn't have to go."

"No, it's all right. I understand. I'll just miss you..."

"You better." He said it teasingly, trying to get a smile out of her, which failed, and his own thoughts turned serious too. "I'll be thinking about you every second I'm gone, darlin'." She looked up at him, eyes glassy and his heart clenched inside his chest. He just wanted to hold on and never let go. "Baby, can I stay tonight?"

"Oh, Jake." Two tears finally tumbled over the tip of her lashes, trailing quickly down her face, followed by two more. "I wish you'd stay every night. I hate sleeping without you, waking up alone."

He knew *that* feeling well. If he had his way, they'd never spend another night apart for the rest of their lives. "Maybe you and I should talk about changing things when I get back. Hmmm? I think it's time, don't you?" His lips rested on her silky hair and he sat contentedly with her in his arms.

* * * *

Wednesday. D-day. Departure day. Jake didn't know how he was going to get through the next three weeks. Richard and James hadn't arrived yet, a fact he was grateful for. He had lain awake most of the night, dreading the morning, knowing he wouldn't be there that night, or many nights following.

"I'd better go..." Cass's voice was tight. "Chloe's in the car and school..." The words dried up.

They stood looking at each other, their gazes locked as the minutes ticked by, and then in three steps he was in front of her, invading her space, her face in his hands. Looking deep into her eyes, he hungrily lowered his mouth to hers, moving over it urgently as he tasted her, feeling her mouth open under his, and then sliding his tongue between her parted lips to seek out her hers, plundering possessively, sucking her breath into his mouth as he fought to quell the need that rose inside.

Reluctantly he broke the kiss. Their breathing was ragged and uneven; he held her away from him, taking in the trembling, swollen lips.

"When I get back, you and I are going to talk, Cassie. You got that?" His voice was hoarse with emotion.

One Touch
by Susie Charles

She nodded at him mutely. Grabbing her briefcase from the chair, he walked her to the car, opening the door for her as she got in. He leaned on the door, his eyes at the same level as hers. "I meant what I said." And then leaned in for one more kiss—a soft, sensual touch—before stepping back and letting her drive away.

Chapter Fourteen

A rosebud lay across her pillow. Under that was a folded note. The handwriting was familiar and her tummy fluttered. Jake. With a quick inhale of the heady fragrance of the rose, she ripped the stiff flap of the envelope open and pulled out the note within:

Cassie,

I wanted there to be some reminder of me here when you got home tonight, and as I can't be there, this note will have to do.

But when I get back, we have to have a serious talk, darlin'. I think you know what I'm referring to. We can't run away from this any longer.

So, when you slide into bed tonight, picture me holding you, because that's what I'll be doing Friday night.

Love, Jake.

Love, Jake. She was absurdly happy, for the space of about four heartbeats. Then reality came crashing back in on her. *We can't run away from this any longer ...* Oh, God! Did he know? And if he knew, why hadn't he said something? What if he was waiting for her to confess? The guilt settled heavy in her gut. Holding the note tight to her chest, she shut her eyes and remembered the kiss this morning before he'd left for Melbourne. The way her whole world had tilted and dipped. The moment when she had finally understood just how deeply she was in love with him.

* * * *

"What's that?" Rachael nodded at the note Cass was clutching.

"It's from Jake. He left it for me to find when I got home."

"And what? Is it a Dear Jane, or something?"

"Nooo." Wordlessly, she handed it to Rach who scanned it rapidly.

"You still haven't told him, have you?"

Cass looked over at Rachael to see a frown on her face. "I've tried." Even to her own ears, her response sounded weak.

"Jeez, Cass. From what you're telling me, and this..." she flashed the note in the air, "...Jake is about ready to bring more than a spare toothbrush and a clean pair of underpants. The guy is serious."

"I know. But I've tried a few times, Rach. Something or someone always comes up. You think I like keeping this from him?" Her voice rose in her frustration.

"Okay, okay. Settle down. When he gets back, then. Just do it."

"What if he already knows? The note..."

"Stop guessing and ... Just. Do. It."

"Yeah, I know."

"What time does he get in?"

"1:30 tomorrow."

"Good luck, girlfriend."

Good luck. She had a feeling that a whole bunch of leprechauns doing a merry jig around a paddock of four leaf clovers wouldn't be enough...

One Touch
by *Susie Charles*

* * * *

"Whoa! Hold on just a minute everyone." Cass tried to call out above the rising noise of students preparing to leave for lunch. "Don't forget, I need those essays on 'The Significance of Gender...' by Friday," she yelled above the hubbub. "You know how much I look forward to marking them during the holidays." There was a smattering of laughs at that. "And Stephen," she turned to a shy looking twenty-year-old sitting in the front row, "no more 10,000 words essays from you, or you get to come and organise my office."

There were a few cheers at that comment and Stephen grinned good-naturedly. The state of her office was well known to her students. It was best described as semi-organised chaos. At worst? Well, she didn't want to go there. She turned to her bag, lifting books and papers and slipping them inside for the journey back to said messy office, ready to dump them in and run so she could hightail it home to get ready for Jake's arrival.

"Professor Grant?"

"Yes, Amy?" She lifted her head from her desk to see a few of her female students grinning at her and looked at them curiously.

"I think you have a visitor." Amy nodded over to the door.

Cass looked up to see Jake, looking entirely too delicious in jeans and a tight, white t-shirt, leaning up against the door jamb, arms casually crossed over his muscular chest wearing that grin that was a combination of sexy and cheeky. It

happened every time she saw him ... that same mad flutter in her chest.

"He yours?"

Cass didn't miss the look of appreciation in Amy's eyes and chuckled to herself. "God, I hope so." She smiled, her heart doing a little cha cha cha just at the sight of him.

"I think he's waiting for something, Professor." Trish leaned over the desk conspiratorially. "I wouldn't make him wait too long if I were you."

A flush rose up her cheeks as she walked towards him. The blush deepened to a full body tint when he slipped an arm around her and pulled her up against him for a deep, hard, possessive kiss.

The sound of whistles and cat calls filtered through to even her fogged brain and she nipped his bottom lip lightly to get him to release her, leaving her flushed and panting.

"Jake!" She pushed at him in mock annoyance.

"It's been a week. What can I say? I couldn't wait, darlin'." He grinned down at her, chuckling at some of the comments coming from behind her.

"I think you'd better take me home before my reputation it totally shot to ribbons."

"I'll try, but I can't promise we'll get there without three or four stops along the way. I'm feeling a bit hungry..." His wolfish grin didn't hide the fact that food was the last thing on his mind.

"You drive, then." With a wink, she handed him her keys. "We'll get there faster."

* * * *

Cass wasn't the only one glad to see Jake. Chloe was overjoyed to see both Cass *and* Jake at school to pick her up. Although she was less than impressed a little later when she was shunted off to Uncle Larry's and Auntie Debbie's for the night, and wasted no time in making her feelings felt. This was one time, though, that Cass was putting her foot down and herself first. With some quick thinking on Jake's part, Chloe was consoled with the offer of a trip to the zoo the next day to see Max's relatives. Tonight, Cass needed Jake all to herself, and for one night she intended to make sure there were no interruptions.

Jake fortunately agreed, because after they'd dropped Chloe off and come back home, they were barely inside the door before he was stripping, or rather, ripping her clothes off and making a three course meal out of her body. Cass didn't care. She was all for jumping straight to the main course and to hell with the appetisers.

She was wet and ready. The drive home from her brother's had been spent with Cass's legs open while Jake drove with one hand on the wheel and the other one stroking her pussy. The heated look he sent her when he slipped his fingers under the elastic of her lacy panties nearly undid her completely. Likely she would find nail gouges in the vinyl of her car interior where she had been gripping, trying not to come all over his fingers and cause an accident.

It was too much for Jake, though. As they stumbled into the bedroom, after shedding her clothes as they went, he paused just long enough to slip down the zipper on his fly

before nudging her facedown on the bed and driving inside her in one hard thrust that made her see stars.

The first wave of tremors was somewhere in the vicinity of a fifty-megatonne bomb going off. The aftershocks went on for hours.

Waking some time past midnight after a much needed doze, she lay back and watched Jake wake, stretching sleepily. It was like watching a cat stretch, something dangerous and feline that made her pussy clench all over again, and she swallowed as the sheet slipped a little lower, displaying a hint of light, curly hair trailing down his abs below the sheet. She watched, unable to tear her eyes away, as said sheet started to rise like a magician's trick.

"He's happy to see you." Jake grinned at her, wide awake now, watching her scrutiny of him with a cocked eyebrow. His eyes took on that deep, ocean-blue colour they did when she knew he was very aroused. "*I'm* happy to see you." The sound came out deep and husky, and she knew that sleep had nothing to do with it. "Come here."

His eyes held hers like a magnet, and unable to tear hers away, her pulse started to race as she slid over the sheets to nestle within his arms. What really mattered was that he was home again, and the sight of him lying there, tousled and ready, his big, mouth-watering and deliciously naked body under the sheet waiting for her, was way too tempting.

"Did you miss me?" Jake pressed a kiss to her forehead.
Is the Pope Catholic?

Her surprised gasp sounded loud in the silence when his hands grasped her hips and lifted her easily onto his lap so

that her legs were straddling his thighs. She could feel the heat of his erection rearing up between them. Her pussy throbbed.

"What do you think?" If he thought she greeted every out-of-towner like this, he must be nuts!

A growl rumbled up from his chest and he reached up to cup her face and pull her mouth closer to his, slanting his mouth over hers, softly at first, then quickly deepening. The taste of him was like heaven and she couldn't get enough, sucking his tongue inside her mouth, desperate to have as much of him as possible inside her.

"Ready for more, darlin'?"

His voice had taken on a raspy quality, like oxygen was having trouble getting through. That was a feeling she understood very well. She felt compelled to suck in huge gulps of air herself, but it was hard to do when she was holding her breath while his tongue laved her breast. She'd have to be comatose not to be able to feel how hard he was, and she suspected that even then it would still filter through and her body would react in the same way it was now.

Not pausing in his task, his hand reached for hers and placed it against his hot cock, her fingers barely able to encircle its width.

"Feel."

She grasped the hot velvety skin of his shaft, licking her now-dry lips as she ran her fingers over the lubricated tip and the swollen head and started to stroke.

"Oh, God. More, baby ... Get your hands ... Oh, yeah, that's it..."

Maintaining the movement of her hands, she reached up, grazing her lips along his neck and jaw line, moving her way slowly to his generous mouth. As she licked his lips with her tongue, tasting him, they parted instinctively, allowing her entry to the inner warmth of his mouth. His hands came up to hold her face as he thrust into her mouth. She pushed away gently. It was too easy to get sidetracked when he started kissing her like that, and there was something else she had on her mind...

His look was curious. "What do you want, baby?"

Her hot breath tickled his ear sending shivers of pleasure through his body, his nipples hardening in response.

"Jake, honey..."

With agonising slowness, her lips trailed down to take one in her mouth, licking and sucking until he moaned with desire, her fingers lightly tweaking its mate.

He groaned softly. "Yeah, baby?"

"I want to try something I've never..." Shy, she looked at his penis. She had wanted to taste him since the moment she had seen him naked and hard, but she knew her lack of experience would show and it had held her back. But inhaling the smell of him, so male and sweaty, seeing the moisture gather on the tip, her tongue itched to taste. She wanted to take him into her mouth and feel him thrusting inside.

"Never?"

"No, never. But I want to with you. It's driving me insane not tasting you. Help me...? Show me...?"

* * * *

Jake thought he'd died and gone to heaven. He cupped her blushing face in his hands and kissed her deeply. "I'm glad I'm your first, baby. You have no idea how that makes me feel. Now, I guess the secret, darlin', is to just go slow and take your time. If something doesn't feel right, I'll let you know. Okay?"

She nodded and Jake laid back and tried to relax, although the chances of that happening were right up there with flying to Mars anytime soon.

He sucked in a breath as she travelled with unbearable slowness over his taut muscles and soft yielding flesh. Her tongue sent a trail of fire lower down in the direction of his loins and Jake gasped as she neared his by now throbbing erection. Now that she'd mentioned it, he needed to feel her hot, wet mouth on him so badly it was making his cock ache just thinking about it, but her lips moved away—either deliberately or accidentally, he wasn't sure—her long hair brushing over the tip as she passed, causing it to quiver. She smiled wickedly at him as he groaned in disappointment, obviously delighted with the reaction she was causing.

Now, there are some women who just go straight to the heart of the problem, Jake thought, and swallow a guy straight up—no fancy stuff, just latch on and suck like mad. But there are others who make an art form out of it, driving a guy nuts with need. Cassie looked to be one of those. When she slid down his body and started sucking on his toes, he was wishing he'd never said a damn thing about taking her time. His cock was throbbing so hard he was in serious danger of losing consciousness through lack of blood to the

brain. Silently, his eyes followed her, wondering where in the hell she'd go next.

To his semi-relief, she continued her unhurried journey in what he definitely considered was the right direction, up his long legs, wetting and cooling him with her tongue and breath as she went. As she straddled his body, he could feel her delicious heat against his groin and he groaned, desperately fighting the urge to lift her up and thrust into her like crazy. He could feel the sweat breaking out on his brow.

A glowing, naked temptress, she leaned forward, heavy breasts with puckered nipples begging to be touched just within reach. No one said he had to keep his hands to himself, and smiling wolfishly, he reached up to cup their fullness as she moved to kiss him once again. Softly at first, her tongue played with his, but as he teased and tugged on her sensitive nipples, her tongue began an erotic dance in his mouth leaving him in no doubt as to what she would soon be doing with his body. One or two brain cells gave up and sizzled to a quick death.

With a husky laugh, she broke the kiss. "Don't distract me, Jake. I'm trying to do this right."

"Oh, believe me, baby. You're definitely doin' it right."

In tense anticipation, he watched as she began a slow slide down his body until his erection was nestled between her beautiful breasts, the tip peeping out intermittently as she stroked it suggestively between them. He'd never seen anything so fucking erotic in his life. The moisture leaking from the tip of his penis eased the slide and he fisted handfuls of sheet so as not to grab her and hold her there.

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Further down she went until she was nestled between his legs. Licking and nipping his inner thighs, Jake could feel the heat of her breath on him, and he tensed in anticipation as slowly, teasingly, she reached out with her tongue to lick first one puckered sac and then the other, before taking one gently in her mouth and fondling it with her tongue. *Jesus Christ!* If she wasn't careful, he'd shoot his load before she got her mouth got anywhere near him. The teasing swish of her long hair over his legs and groin was like running silk over the skin.

As she moved, her cheek accidentally grazed the tip of his erection. *Yes! Right there! Please, God!* He was straining towards her, silently willing her to touch him. The wait was killing him.

Taunting him maddeningly, she made her way up, over the tight curls towards his straining cock. She briefly locked gazes with him. He had to be looking pretty damn desperate by this point. He hoped to hell he didn't scare her...

Speechless, he watched as her tongue flicked out to lightly lick the bead of moisture at the tip. *Damn!* She tortured him further by placing her mouth over it, barely touching, nothing but the teasing warmth of her breath sighing over him. All his energy and concentration focussed there, at that one spot. Unable to stand the wait any longer, he tried to thrust into her mouth, but still she held back, teasing and taunting him with feather-light kisses. He groaned in disappointment.

"Is something wrong, Jake?"

Her expression was worried and he hastened to assure her everything was fine. If he could just get his voice to work ...

"No, baby." The words came out on a croak. "You're doin' fine, believe me..."

Reaching down, her fingers cupped him once again as she licked his length, moistening the skin. As she reached the tip once more, she slowly took him inside her hot mouth, eliciting a growl from deep in his chest as he finally felt the moist, welcoming heat of her mouth and lips surrounding him.

"Holy fuck!" The expletive left his lips as a groan, his body shaking with the unbelievable pleasure of it, his hips thrusting up at her.

Holding still, she circled the sensitive tip with her tongue before starting a slow glissade up and down his length, making his shaft glisten with moisture. When he felt her fingertips quickly running up and down the underside as her tongue slid slowly up and down the front, the contrast of texture and tempo nearly drove him insane. Moving to take him fully in her mouth again, her tongue swirled around, flicking and caressing as her fingers curled around the base and simulated the feel of her tightness when he was inside her. As the tempo increased, Jake called out to her, panting heavily, knowing his moment was imminent.

"C-cassie ... darlin' ... sl-slow down..."

He felt the cool air on his shaft when she lifted her head, and he opened his eyes to see her smiling at him. The little witch! She'd known how damn close he was ... Shit!

Seconds passed before she moved down once again to lick playfully at his balls, the heat of her mouth in sharp contrast to the feel of her hand sliding up and down his slippery length. He ached for her mouth on him again, and his hips

bucked up towards her with need. Next time he wouldn't be telling her to slow down, that was for sure.

She must have sensed it somehow. Finished with the slow teasing movements, she took him in her mouth hungrily, all the way in, and the feel of it brought him near to shooting almost instantly. Varying the speed and intensity from slow and shallow to deep and fast, she brought him close again and again until he felt he would explode from the goddamn pleasure and the fucking pain!

He wanted to come, to gain some blessed relief from the torture, to give himself over to the heavenly, shuddering release, but the indescribable feeling of hanging on the edge was too good.

Her tongue was everywhere, rimming the head, running over the network of nerves, causing his cock to start pumping pre-cum out in anticipation as her fingers played up and down his length, circling and grasping, rubbing and stroking, playing a light staccato over the highly sensitive skin. He could feel the pressure building again and again until he was almost crazy with the need to come. He was almost ready to beg.

He felt the tingle in the base of his spine, followed by the warning throb that started in his balls that told him he was nearly there. Don't stop, he thought. Please, God, don't stop ... and she started again, gradually speeding up little by little, drawing him further and further into her mouth as if she sensed the moment approaching. Her spare hand whiped up his body and she found his nipple, hard and puckered, and tweaked it. Her tongue kept moving in circular motions over

his tip as he was buried deep in her mouth, and the combination sent him crashing over the edge.

Unable to hold back any longer, he grabbed her hair, holding her steady as the feel of her tongue running up his cock caused him to finally come in a mind-shattering orgasm, hard and throbbing, pulsing great jets of cum down her throat. Crying out in ecstasy, he unclenched his hands, grateful for the release that finally came. The throbbing lasted for what seemed an eternity, before finally spent, his shaking muscles succumbed and relaxed, his arms flopping down on the bed beside his exhausted body.

After licking him clean, she lifted her head and looked at him.

"C'mon up here, baby."

Moving over his body to lie alongside him, he put his arm around her, pulling her so close and firm so that she could feel his still pounding heart. He lifted her face to his, smelling his scent on her, tasting the remnants of his seed in her mouth as he kissed her deeply, unable to find the words for what he was feeling.

"Was it okay?"

He shut his eyes to stem the tears that were threatening to flow and nodded, waiting for his breathing to come under control. "If that were anymore okay, I'd be dead..."

* * * *

Sunday night came, Jake flew back, and Cass still hadn't told him. It would wait, she had decided, until he got back from Melbourne. That was only a couple of weeks away.

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Besides, it had waited this long and a couple of more weeks wouldn't make any difference in the scheme of things.

But after the upsetting phone call she received from Sandy not long after Jake left, she wondered seriously if she had just made the biggest mistake of her life. If nothing else, the call had just confirmed her suspicions about Sandy. She wanted Jake back. And from the sound of her insinuations and sneaky threats, she was determined to do whatever she could to make it happen. Cass couldn't help a shiver of disquiet from squashing the cosy warmth left over from Jake's visit. She just had no idea what to do about it.

Chapter Fifteen

Gwen Reilly glanced at the phone for the second time in five minutes, torn as to what to do. All afternoon she had been trying to make up her mind. As her children had grown, she tried to stay out of the way, just being there for them if they needed her. And this should have been one of those times. But she was worried that she hadn't heard from Jake since he left for Melbourne, which in itself was unusual, and after what she had heard, she suspected she knew the reason why. Cass.

She had watched Jake fall harder and harder for Cass since Lizzy's wedding, and while she had worried that it was a bit soon after his divorce, she didn't interfere because he was a grown man and well able to make his own decisions, about his love life, certainly. And Cass was someone she thought she knew ... well. But with the bombshell that she'd had to pry out of a reluctant Sandy while they lunched today, it was no wonder she hadn't heard from him. Knowing her son, he would be upset and determined not to let anyone know.

Poor Sandy. She was so worried about Jake, but didn't feel right about contacting him—especially where his new girlfriend was concerned. It was such a shame about Jake and Sandy. It was wonderful that they had stayed friends, though. But then they'd practically grown up together and Sandy would always be a member of the family.

She tapped thoughtfully on the phone. It wouldn't hurt. She'd just let him know she was here in case he was wanting

to talk ... Nodding to herself, the decision made, she picked up the phone and dialled the number of the hotel where she knew he was staying.

"Hello?"

That deep rumble that sounded so much like his father greeted her.

"Jake? It's your ma. How are you, son?"

"I'm fine, Ma. You and Da?"

He sounded tired, she thought.

"Grand, Son. We're both grand."

"I'm a bit bushed, Ma. Was there something you were wantin'?"

"Just to see how you were. Yer Da and I were worried..."

"I'm fine. Just fine."

Curt. Her Jake never cut her off like that...

"But you always say that, Jake. You're never wanting us to worry. But we're here for you, ya know. Just remember that."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Ma, but, you know, is everything okay? Really?"

He was asking her? "Well, I don't know? Is it?"

"Look, Ma. I've had a few bureaucratic minefields to get through today. I'm tired and pissed off, so if you've got somethin' to say, just say it."

There was that curt voice again. And that was no tone to take with his ma.

"You really can be thick as a brick when you want to be Jake Reilly, and damn frustrating, too. I'm just lettin' you know if you want to be talkin' about you and Cass, then I'm here for you."

"What about Cass and me?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. You two breaking up, of course. You don't have to hide it from me, Jake. I'm your ma, for goodness sake."

"Cass and I have broken up, have we? Since when, might I ask?"

Let's move on from curt to testy, shall we? *Was she wrong? Was Sandy wrong? Oh, dear. Had she done the wrong thing?* "Well, I thought..."

"Tell me, Ma, why would you be thinking that?"

"Em ... look, never mind, Jake. I must've been mistaken. You know what I'm like ... always gettin' things mixed up..."

"I asked *why*."

"Now I've gone and got you all worried, and that wasn't my intention, Son. Honestly."

"Ma! TELL me! Why would you be thinking Cass and I have broken up?"

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry. I thought you knew. Apparently Cass has started seeing Richard."

"She's what?! No way!"

"Well, apparently ... I was thinkin' that was why you hadn't called us..."

"Who'd you hear it from, Ma? Who?"

"It was someone in the family, Jake, otherwise I wouldn't have believed it either."

"That's bloody rubbish. Richard's just working there."

"Yes, I know, but ... It's just that they've been seen..."

"Well, you're wrong. Who ever told you is wrong. Cassie and I are doin' just fine. Look Ma, I've gotta go. I'll call you later."

* * * *

Confused and not a little bit angry, Jake paced the room. What the bleedin' fuck was going on? Cassie and Richard? It couldn't be! But his ma wouldn't call unless she was damned sure ... And surely family wouldn't lie about something like that. Would they? Well, there was only one way to find out ... In two strides he was at the phone. Picking it up, he dialled the familiar number. Impatiently, he waited for Cass to pick it up and slammed it down angrily when the answering machine picked up instead.

Dammit! Where the hell was she? She was always home when he called ... But what if that was because he always told her when he'd call her? A shudder of misgiving rippled through him, which he attempted to squash. It would be too easy to give in to those sorts of thoughts while he was down here and she was miles away...

He just couldn't get his ma's words out of his head, though. But then the memory of Richard holding Cassie's hand came back to him. Surely they weren't ... Not back then ... But he'd seen her only last weekend and things had been fantastic. No! He didn't want to believe it. It couldn't be ... He loved her. She must know that, surely! So why would she...

He tried calling again, and again ... Each time the machine picked up, he got more and more angry. He had to fight the urge to hire a car or grab a plane that night and get back up

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there to find out what the hell was going on. He didn't, though. He was already booked for tomorrow. Cass wasn't expecting him and he'd intended surprising her. Her dream fireplace would be done and he had wanted to see her face when she came home from work and saw it fully restored and ready to go. But it looked like Cassie would be getting more than one surprise from the sounds of it.

Filled with the pain of her possible betrayal, he realised then that he shouldn't have waited so long to put his mark on Cassie. But, dammit, he loved her and he'd thought she felt the same way about him, even if she hadn't exactly said so...

Suddenly, all those times he'd wondered why she was holding back, what she could possibly be hiding, came back to him and it hit him right between the eyeballs. She'd been using him. He was such a fool. He'd fallen for it—hook, line and sinker.

Later on, he'd changed his mind again, unable to believe she could deceive him so convincingly. He had to trust her. He would wait until he saw her and ask her. One way or another, he would find out the truth.

* * * *

Cruising to a stop in the rental car, Jake stared down Cassie's driveway at Richard's truck parked up close to the door. Now that he was here, the thought of asking her, even suspecting her, was making him sick to the gut, but he knew he had to find out one way or the other.

God, please let his ma be wrong, he prayed. He didn't know what he'd do if what she said was true.

Sick at heart and gearing himself for the worst, he climbed out, and with a heavy tread, walked down the driveway, his heart beating out a heavy rhythm in his chest.

He didn't knock. He didn't ring the bell. Why should he? He didn't normally. The sound of Michael Bublé, Cassie's latest favourite singer, drifted down the hall. He had bought the CD for her just last weekend. Last weekend ... It had been a magical time—for all of them, his little sugar included. Taking a deep breath, he stepped inside and pulled up short, hearing Richard's voice calling from the direction of Cassie's bedroom.

"Where are the towels, Cass? I'm standing here shivering."

A red haze filmed over Jake's eyes at the implication behind those words.

"In the cupboard, Richard. Just inside the door."

She was in the kitchen, but what the hell was Richard doing in her ensuite?

"Need a hand?"

The teasing laugh as she said those words tore a hole in his chest. No! Fuck, no!

"Behave, cheeky woman!"

Richard's laughing rejoinder chilled Jake, not the words so much as the easy familiarity with which they were spoken. But that laugh of Richard's curdled in his stomach like rancid butter and he leaned on the wall for a second, trying to calm himself, when what he really wanted to do was go in there and beat the crap out of him.

As the hurt ripped through him, a part of Jake wanted to turn around and walk out and never come back, but then the anger flared up inside him and he just wanted to make

somebody pay. Grim, jaw gritted, he walked down the hall, arriving in the kitchen at the same time as a towel-draped Richard.

"Hello, Richard."

"Jake!" Richard turned at the sound of the familiar voice. "This is a surprise. I wasn't expecting..."

Jake had to stifle a sneer. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned nonchalantly against the wall. "No, I imagine you weren't. Neither of you, it would seem."

Richard's gaze flicked to Cass in shock, but he turned back to Jake, fists clenching as his hands settled on his hips. "Now just a second, Jake. This isn't what you think."

"Don't be playin' me for a fucking fool, Richard." He pushed off the wall abruptly and leaned closer to Richard. "I'm not stupid. Sure, but I know what's been going on behind my back. The two of you just couldn't wait until my back was turned to get it on."

"Now hang on a sec..." Richard stepped back, his face registering disbelief.

Jake had had enough. His body was primed and ready, his fists clenched at his sides, ready to swing. With difficulty, he struggled to rein in his temper. "Just fuck off, Richard. Oh, and by the way, you're fired!"

"J-Jake, you're wrong, There's nothing between Richard and me. We're just friends."

He looked over at Cass. Well, she had the innocent little woman thing down pat, he'd give her that. Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "Yeah, right. Friends. Sure."

"No, it's true. It's not what you think!"

The desperation was a nice touch, he thought. But, oh God, how he would have liked to believe her. He had no idea losing her could hurt this much, but payback was gonna be a bitch...

Richard must have ducked away while he was talking to Cass because when Jake turned, Richard was coming back into the room, dressed this time looking as if he had a date. Obviously he had busted up their little plans for the evening. What a damned shame. "Where's Chloe?" he asked, his voice finally cracking.

"A birthday party down the street. Jake..."

"Good. You and I are needin' to have a little talk." He turned to Richard and regarded him balefully. "Still here?"

"I'm not leaving Cass here with you in the mood you're in, Jake."

A deceptive calm settled over him. "I'm not planning on hitting her, if that's what you're thinking. That's not my style. But she and I have to talk, and it's private, so if you don't mind..."

"I know what you're thinking, Jake, and you are so wrong, mate."

"Really?" His head cocked as he looked at Richard.

"Whatever you've heard, or think you've heard, it's not true."

"So, what do you think I've been hearin', Richard? That you've been screwing around with my woman? Yeah, it does go something like that."

Richard hung his head, shaking it. "Jake, don't do this. You'll be making the biggest mistake of your life."

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"Aye, well, you'd be knowin' all about that, wouldn't you..."

Richard walked over to Cass, rubbing her arms, his expression concerned. He looked up when he heard the low growl coming from Jake. "Cass, I'll stay if you want me to..."

She gripped his arms briefly before she brushed his arms away. "No, Richard. I'll be fine." The quiver in her voice said anything but. "Th-this is a m-misunderstanding. You go, or you'll be late."

Richard glared at Jake before glancing back at Cass. "Call me if you need me, okay?"

"Sure."

Finally, he and Cass were alone.

Chapter Sixteen

No, this wasn't happening. Couldn't be. It was like a scene out of her worst nightmare. Worried, Cass looked at the familiar face she loved, now flush with anger and bit her lip. With a shock, she realised it was the first time she had seen Jake as anything other than easygoing. Sure, there had been the odd moments when he had done his "assertive male" thing, but this went far beyond that. Too far.

This simmering fury was a side to Jake that sent tendrils of dread through her. He continued to pace. Hands balled into fists and thrust in his pockets, he stopped and turned slowly, his tone snide and his face, a mask of derision.

"If you were feelin' that hard-up for a man, why didn't you just tell me, Cass?"

Cass, not Cassie. The significance was not lost on her.

"Sure, but I could've taken some time out of my busy schedule for you. It wouldn't have taken more than a moment, surely. Let's face it, darlin'—it never took me long to get you screaming before."

The sneer on his lips cut her to the quick and Cass stepped back, bumping into the kitchen counter as if she'd been physically slapped. This couldn't be happening ... "What on earth are you talking about?"

A hard, flinty look narrowed his eyes. "Don't be playin' dumb with me. I'm the only sucker around here. And you know what I'm talking about. Fucking Richard! Literally!" He moved closer, looming over her, his anger palpable. "So,

what? You figured you'd just string me along until you got bored? Little bit of variety on the side?"

"Excuse me?" She gasped her reply, leaning back in an effort to put some distance between them. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Incredulity crept into her voice.

"Oh, come on. Don't be playin' the innocent with me. It's obvious, and not just to me what's been going on."

She sidestepped and moved out from under his thunderous gaze. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I have never..."

"Save it! I know your type, Cass. One's never enough, is it?"

His lips hardened, a harsh slash across his face.

Anger boiled inside her. That he could think for one second that she ... Of all the nerve ... How dare he! "Get out, Jake. Just get the hell out!"

"Don't worry. I'm going." He began to leave and stopped, turning to face her, and for a second the cold, hard mask dropped and she saw the pain underneath the unreasonable anger. "I was really thinkin' we had something special, Cass. I even thought ... No, never mind what I thought."

Desperate, she tried one more time to make him see reason. "But Jake, it's not what you're..."

"You know, *darlin'*, maybe if you were a little more selective with the guys you choose to share that hot little body with, you wouldn't be a single mum and that sweet little girl of yours would have a father instead of a string of *uncles*."

The blood drained from Cass's face and she chilled, her body starting to tremble. Suddenly, she felt faint as if all the strength had been sucked out of her body with his hateful words. "I-I-..."

He had turned away.

"I'll be sendin' somebody 'round on Monday to pick up the rest of the gear. I'd appreciate it if you'd be keepin' your hands of this one. Good tradesmen are hard to find."

Unable to look at him anymore after seeing the disgust in his eyes, Cass turned away. Her body was trembling uncontrollably. She hugged her arms tight around herself to try and still it ... hide it from him. Tears started to well, making her vision blurry but the last thing she'd do was give him the satisfaction of seeing how he'd hurt her.

"Just leave, Jake. You're not welcome here anymore." The voice sounded dead, even to her own ears and how she got the words out, she'd never know. Her throat was so tight with unshed tears, it was threatening to close completely.

"Don't worry. I'm going. And I won't be back, either."

She flinched as she heard the screen door slam. Unable to support her shaking legs, she slid to the floor, stunned.

* * * *

How long she sat there, she had no idea. The tears fell in streams and the ache in her chest felt like a closed fist. All the happy times with Jake were over. And Chloe ... Now she would never know who her daddy was.

How could he have thought something so terrible about her? Couldn't he see how much she loved him? For a minute

she regretted never saying the words to him, but then realised it wouldn't have done any good anyway. The injustice of his accusations hurt as though he'd cut into her with a knife. And how ironic ... The only man she'd ever loved ... the only man she'd ever slept with, and he had the nerve to accuse her of sleeping around? A dry, bitter laugh crept out before it dissolved into another fit of crying.

Crumpled on the floor, she started to shiver. Somehow, she stumbled over to the sofa, pulling the woolly blanket draped over the back across her body to try to warm the bone-deep chill that had crept through her body. It was a shiver that no blanket could heat. Curled up into a foetal position, she lay there through the rest of the night, his cutting words going round and round in her head. But it was the look on his face that haunted her the most. Those loving eyes that had swept her body with so much heat were now cold as ice. The gentle mouth a savage slash of hate. She shuddered again and snuggled further down in the blanket, wondering if she'd ever feel warm again.

* * * *

The following weeks were hard. Harder than Cass had thought they would be. Harder than finding out Jake was engaged the day she got the news she was pregnant. At least then, she hadn't had any hopes to be crushed. This devastation was worse because she had been allowed a glimpse of what their life together as a family could have been. And all over a stupid misunderstanding. He hadn't even given her a chance to explain and that was what hurt the

most. That he could believe something so terrible of her. And if that was the case, then he had obviously never loved her.

She was better off without him. If only she could get her heart and body to agree with her mind, but they rigidly refused to cooperate. Too many nights since then, she had woken up from a dream of Jake making love to her, holding her, kissing her tenderly, only to be shattered by the reality. At those times, the pain was almost more than she could bear.

The work on the house was finished and she'd had the final bill from Rowling Constructions. She'd sent off the check just that day, knowing that at least now, all further ties between them were cut.

Except for Chloe, of course.

Not that he knew about his role in her life. Not that he'd ever know now if she had her way.

Lizzy and Rach had called in a few times to see how she was. She'd done her best to be her usual cheery self, but they weren't fooled. They'd known her too long and, besides, her heart just wasn't in it. It was still a shattered mess floating somewhere around her body. Maybe someday she'd find the pieces and try and put it back together, but for now it was easier to live with it the way it was. At least she could cope with being numb.

There were still times, though, when the horror of that night and the cut of Jake's words came back to her. She wondered when ... if ... she would ever be able to put them behind her and forget. Not likely, she thought, as a wayward

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tear trickled down her cheek. That was one pain that wasn't going to go away anytime in the foreseeable future.

The house was quiet, which was a blessing. Larry and Deb had taken a two-week holiday up to the Sunshine Coast for the school holidays and had asked if they could take Chloe with them. Deb was the only one who knew what had happened. She'd had to tell somebody. No way could she talk to Lizzy about it—it wasn't fair to put it on her—Jake was her brother, after all. And Rach? Yeah, well Rach, whose love life had been almost as depressing as Cass's for too long, was riding high on a blissful wave of infatuation with a certain policeman. It would be too cruel to dump her own doom and gloom on the first romantic bright spot her friend had had in years. And Deb had promised not to tell Larry, which was just as well because Larry would have killed Jake. The last thing she needed was a homicide on her conscience.

The phone rang, shattering the quiet, and she was tempted to just ignore it. The temptation to keep the world out was strong. She was so tired. All she wanted to do was sleep. But with sleep came the nightmares. Sleep had been a luxury she had been missing a lot of late.

Lizzy's voice came on the answering machine, loud and forceful.

"Pick up the phone, Cass. I know you're there." Pause.
"Dammit! Answer the phone."

With a shaky hand, she reached for the phone. Picked it up. Like a good girl. Huh! According to Jake, that was the last thing she could claim to be.

"Hi, Liz." With a resigned sigh, she cut into her friend's strident words.

"Ahhh. Finally. Look, are you going to be home this morning?" Liz asked.

As if she had anywhere to go, she thought dispiritedly. "Yes. Why?"

"I'm on my way."

"No, Liz..." "No arguments. I'll be there in fifteen. See you then."

Lizzy hung up, the click loud in Cass's ear. Great. Just what she needed—a well-meaning visit from Liz. From the sounds of it, she wasn't coming over to swap recipes, either. She had just enough time for a shower and maybe a bit of makeup, too, she thought, as she peered at the dark circles under her eyes in the bathroom mirror.

With a flick, she turned the tap in her brand new shower in her brand new ensuite. Her excitement over the renovations had gone. The price, as it turned out, had been just too high. Everywhere she looked, there were memories of Jake. She had even contemplated selling up and moving just to get away from the constant reminders, but this was hers and Chloe's home, and she'd be damned if she would run away. The memories would fade in time...

* * * *

With her hair pulled back tightly into a ponytail, Cass was just putting the finishing touches of concealer under her eyes when she heard the screen door slam.

"I'm here," Lizzy called as she walked through the house.

With a deep breath, a quick pinch to try and infuse some colour into the pale skin of her cheeks and a half-hearted smile pasted on her face, she walked out of the bedroom to face her friend.

"Hi, Liz," she smiled. "And to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Lizzy looked at her closely, a little too closely for Cass's comfort.

"You've lost more weight and you look like hell."

"Why, thanks very much. It's nice to see you, too, Liz." Her laugh was brittle. And why not? The last thing she needed was a friend, however well meaning, coming round to tell her she looked like shit. She already knew that.

Lizzy's eyes softened. "Sorry, sweetie." She walked over to give Cass a hug. "It's just that I'm worried about you. And not only you."

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes flickered briefly to Cass's. "Jake, too."

Jake? What was wrong with Jake? A frisson of fear rushed through Cass's body. She wanted to know, badly, but the last thing she was going to do was ask Lizzy.

"You don't want to know what I mean?"

Lizzy was looking at her curiously. Assessing her. She attempted to keep her expression bland. "No." Liar. "Why?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! You two are unbelievable! I say the same thing to him about you and I get that same look."

"What look?"

"That worried look. You know, the one that says you care but no way in hell are you going to admit it."

"I'm not worried. Jake is no business of mine."

"Are you two sharing the same speech writer? I get the same cock-and-bull line from him when I mention you. Now, one of you is going to tell me what's going on, or I swear I'm going to blow a bloody fuse!"

After the sharp outburst, Lizzy seemed to deflate a little. "It's only because I love you two, and I hate to see you both tearing yourselves apart like this." She slumped in her seat.

"Hey, I'm fine, Liz. I've just been a little under the weather lately. Nothing to worry about. Truly."

"Really?" asked Liz. "Have you had a good look in the mirror lately, Cass? You've lost a stack of weight, you have dark circles under your eyes ... and no, the makeup didn't work ... and you've lost your zing. You're ... flat. I've never seen you like this in all the years I've known you. And Jake..."

Cass couldn't help herself. She had to know. "What's wrong with Jake?" She couldn't understand why Jake would be upset. Actually, no, that wasn't true. She'd had plenty of time to reflect on that night and she realised now just how hurt he must have been feeling to say the things he'd said. But that didn't help. Some words you just couldn't take back. And the fact that he hadn't even allowed her to defend herself...

"He looks as bad as you. Not sleeping. Losing weight. Stays locked up in his house whenever he isn't working. Won't even go out with Rob and Tom for a beer, for God's sake. So, you tell me, Cass. What's wrong with Jake? Because I know it involves the two of you. And I'm not leaving until I

find out. I refuse to sit by and watch the two people I love the most destroy themselves this way."

Her heartfelt plea wasn't lost on Cass. She could see how worried Lizzy was, but she didn't want to say something bad about her brother. "We had a fight, Liz. That's all. There was a misunderstanding. End of story."

"No way, Cass. This was way more than a misunderstanding. I didn't come down in the last shower, you know." Suddenly something occurred to her. "This isn't about Chloe, is it? Did you tell him..."

The pain of his words came back to her and she sighed. "No, I didn't tell him. I never had the chance."

"But you were going to."

"Yes, I had every intention of doing so. I was just waiting until the right time." She laughed nervously. "As if there's ever a right time for *that* sort of announcement."

"So then, what happened?"

Cass dropped her head into her hands, lifting it to tug nervously on her ponytail, and sighed. "Somebody must have told him there was something going on between me and Richard..."

"Richard who? Who the hell is Richard?"

"Richard Carmichael. One of Jake's carpenters."

"*That* Richard. But that's ridiculous. You two were just friends."

"Yes, I know. But Jake was fed information by someone ... and I have no idea who ... that there was something going on between us. Unfortunately, he came round one day and caught Richard coming out of my shower ... It was completely

innocent, Liz. Richard had a date straight after work and he had already arranged it with me that he could wash up and change here. Of course, Jake arrived when he was coming out of my bedroom and put two and two together and came up with the wrong answer." She could remember the shocking scene that followed with perfect clarity, like a movie running through her head.

"But surely Richard..."

"Oh, don't worry. Richard tried to tell Jake, but Jake wouldn't listen. He ... err ... he fired Richard on the spot."

"No!"

"He was so angry, Liz. I've never seen Jake like that."

"I know. He doesn't get angry very often, but he when he does, that damn Irish temper of his ... Makes up for him being so laid back the rest of the time, I guess. So, what happened then?"

"We had a fight and he left."

"And that's it?"

Cass stood abruptly, walking over to the sliding doors onto the brand-new deck, the rest of the fight coming back to her in a rush. She bit her lip and hugged her arms tightly around herself, trying to stave off the inevitable tears that came whenever she let herself remember. "Yep, that's it."

"No. Something's missing. I'm sure of it. What else did he say, Cass? Tell me."

"No, Liz."

"Why not? Because he's my brother?"

"That ... and other things."

"Look, I know he's no saint, but he wouldn't have deliberately hurt you, Cass. Whatever it was, it's fixable. I know it."

"Leave it, Liz."

"No. Don't blow me off. Whatever happened between the two of you, maybe all it needs is for one of you to make the first move. Maybe he just got his wires crossed."

Cass turned to her, her eyes blazing. "Wires crossed? Oh, please! He got more than his fucking wires crossed!" Anger started to bubble up in Cass, an emotion that had been absent the last few weeks, pushed out by the hurt and the pain.

"And what the hell does that mean exactly?"

Liz was angry now, too. Well, fine. Cass had just about had a gutful of the whole mess. Knowing that she shouldn't, she started down the path that would likely be the end of her friendship with her friend, but was unable to halt the bursting of the floodgates.

"Your dear misguided brother told me, and I quote, 'that if I had been a little more selective in the guys I chose to fuck, then perhaps I wouldn't be a single mum, and Chloe would have a father.' Happy, now?"

Liz stopped as if hit, her eyes wide.

"Oh my God!" She plopped down on the seat.

"Now, can we *please* just drop it!" In frustration, Cass spat the words.

"But you haven't ... Jake is the only..."

"Yes, yes, yes. I know that, and you know that. Jake, unfortunately, doesn't. And considering that he never gave

me a chance to defend myself, he isn't ever likely to, either. And right now I don't give a shit if he's hurting. He can go to hell for all I care."

Cass paced, unable to sit still. Her nerves were jumping as the flood of adrenaline surged through her bloodstream. She glanced at Lizzy and immediately realised what she'd done. Her friend looked like she'd been run over by a truck.

Seeing the devastated look on Lizzy's face, the tears started to fall, her anger purged and remorse taking its place. "Oh, God. I'm sorry, Liz. I never had any intention of telling you."

Flicking her head up to look at Cass, Lizzy seemed to snap out of her shock. Her eyes were glassy and she was shaking her head. "No, no, don't be sorry, Cass. It's not your fault. None of this has been your fault. Don't ... don't you dare feel sorry for telling me. It's just ... Oh, shit. I always thought my brother was a horse's ass, but this just proves it. How on earth could he think ... And to say..." Her face lost its shocked look and softened. "Oh, sweetie," she wrapped her arms around Cass in a firm hug, "I ... Sorry just doesn't cut it, I know, but I am. Is there anything I can do? God, what a dumb question."

"Liz?" Feeling like she'd had the stuffing knocked out of her, Cass couldn't hide the edge of fatigue creeping into her voice.

"Yeah?"

"Can we drop it now? To be perfectly honest, I'd rather not think about it anymore." *Ever.*

"Sure. Let's talk about something else..."

One Touch
by *Susie Charles*

* * * *

Lizzy tried to change the subject. An artificial cheeriness settled in her voice. It was obvious though, that she was rocked.

For a little while they discussed Rob and Lizzy's plans to buy a new house, a bigger one. As it turned out, Rob was anxious to start a family. He and Lizzy were more than ready for the next phase of their lives, and Lizzy had been in her job long enough that she could take the twelve months maternity leave they offered.

Cass couldn't help thinking how very different her entrée into parenthood had been. Maternity leave was a luxury she had never had, but she'd made it through. And in spite of Jake's hurtful aspersions, she was proud of herself. She had made a good life for herself and Chloe, and she hadn't needed a man by her side to do it.

That was right! She'd come this far on her own. Raised a child; made a career. She *should* be proud of herself. And she was. It hadn't been an easy road, but she'd done it, and by God, she'd done it well.

That thought alone made her realise that she was going to be okay. She had taken whatever kicks life had dealt her, and she was still standing. And she'd get through this one, too. Fresh resolve flooded through her, pushing out the lassitude of the past weeks so that she could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel.

After Lizzy left, she grabbed her purse, locked up the house, and jumped in her car. It was time she got over Jake

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Reilly—he wasn't coming back and so what? She hadn't needed him the last five years and she could do without him for the next fifty, too. To start, she would go shopping, pamper herself, maybe a facial and a full body massage. After that, she might buy herself a new wardrobe. It had been ages since she'd spent any money on herself. She worked hard, and she damned well deserved it.

She realised, though, it was just a front. No amount of pampering was going to fix the hurt in her heart. If only she'd told Jake sooner ... But then, would it really have made any difference?

No, it wouldn't. Well, stuff Jake. He could go to hell.

Chapter Seventeen

Feet propped up on the railing, Jake leaned back in the chair on his deck. With a final swig, he drained the glass in his hand, feeling the burn in his chest as it tracked down his throat.

He put the glass aside and snorted with disgust. The booze certainly hadn't helped any. Not even a gallon of Scotch would be enough to get the image of Cassie out of his head.

Jake was in hell. He'd never known pain like this. Gut wrenching, completely debilitating. The kind of pain that ate into him a little more each day and he had no idea what to do about it. His life was a big gaping void without Cassie and Chloe in it, and God, he missed them so much. His eyes watered. He wasn't one for crying, but damn, he was close.

It was a toss-up between the days and nights as to which were longer. The days stretched out, filled with memories of the three of them together ... the bond he'd felt with his little sugar from the moment she threw her arms around his neck that first day ... running along the beach chasing the seagulls, Chloe in the middle of them, swinging on their hands and squealing with delight as the birds took flight. And the nights ... God, how he hated the nights! Tossing and turning through the darkest hours, plagued by reminiscences of Cassie's warmth snuggling up against him in her sleep, the gentle loving when they woke together before dawn, before Chloe came bounding in ... How many nights had he lain awake with her in his arms, gently stroking the loose strands of hair off

her face, fighting the need to crush her to him, loving her so much ... wanting the night to never end...

Jesus! Would *this* never end?

For a while there, it had seemed like all the things he had dreamed of, all he wanted in his life was actually going to happen. A woman he loved so much he needed her like he needed air to breathe, the promise of more kids, because he'd pretty much already adopted Chloe in his head and his heart anyway ... His head slumped a little further on his chest as the pain ripped through him again. Dammit all to hell!

The brief flare of anger faded quickly. It never lasted long enough. Anger would be preferable to this ... this gutted, empty feeling that lay like a hole in his chest. His feet slapped to the wooden decking. Standing, he stretched the kinks out of his body and padded through to the shower. Maybe if he looked and felt half human, things would start to look up. Seriously, he doubted that they could possibly get any worse.

* * * *

Lizzy pulled the car to a stop in Jake's driveway. His SUV was in the garage, so he was home ... right where she wanted him.

She hadn't let Cass see, but she was furious. It wasn't lost on her that Cass had not wanted to tell her what had happened, and Cass wouldn't have either, if she hadn't pushed so hard. Now, she just wanted to kill someone. And her dear brother was the most suitable applicant she could think of for her first and probably only murder.

And it would be quick, too. Not painless, though. She intended to let her brother have it with both barrels, the stupid, dumb jerk.

It was true, she'd promised Cass once that she wouldn't tell Jake he was Chloe's dad, but this was different. Things had been let go too far. Cass would kill her, for sure. But if she left it up to those two, it would never be resolved. And she wasn't doing it for them, anyway. They were both too stubborn to see a way around the mess they had let sit and stagnate like a festering wound.

No, she was doing this for Chloe, her sweet little niece. It was probably the first time she had publicly put on her "auntie" hat, and she was going to make sure it wouldn't be the last.

Besides, she knew something that neither of the two of them knew. They were both crazy, madly in love with each other ... cripes! It was as clear as the nose on their faces. They were just too blind and too damned stupid to see it.

With a snort, she deliberately ignored the ridiculous door chime with its happy chime and pounded on the door. That was much more in line with the way she was feeling. Angry as all get out. Murderous. Oh, yeah. She was going to tear her big brother a new one, all right!

She almost faltered when Jake opened the door and she took in the bleary, bloodshot eyes and the lines of tiredness on his face that not even the shower he'd obviously just stepped out of could erase. There was something disturbingly familiar about that, considering where she had just come from.

"Hi, Jake." She barged past him and walking into the house. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

"What's up, Lizzy? I'm not really in the mood for visitors."

"Yes, I can see that. You look like you haven't shaved in a week..." she paused while she looked around her, "...and this place is a mess."

"Nice of you to notice," he said dryly. "Is that it? Because if you don't have anything better to say, you can leave now. I'm busy."

"Busy, huh?" She looked at him closely. The happy, always teasing brother she knew was gone. In his place was this pained, bitter shell. Well, good. If it was the last thing she did, she was going to break that damned shell if she had to blast it to smithereens and him with it. Fighting with him wouldn't achieve it, though. Calm words would be much more effective. "Busy sulking, or have we moved onto wallowing?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

She stood up from the couch. This had to be done standing up. "I just came from Cass's place." A small glimmer of satisfaction surged through her as she noticed the flicker of interest in his eyes before he quickly doused it.

"So?"

"You're two of a kind. She looks as bad as you do."

"What do you mean?" He was looking at her intently.

"Oh, let's see. Lost weight, not sleeping, looks like hell ... Sound familiar?"

"Your point being?"

"My point being," she started, fighting the urge to smack him upside the head, "is that you are a bloody idiot and you don't deserve someone as wonderful as Cass."

A haze of hurt immediately masked by anger filled his eyes. "You've no idea what you're talking about, Sis. Just leave it alone."

Oh, yeah, she knew that gruff tone. Her brother was getting pissed. Good. She wasn't nearly done with him yet.

"There are a few things..."

"Stop, Liz!" He cut off her words with a slash of his hand. "What happened between Cass and me is our business. I don't need my baby sister sticking her two cents worth in..."

"Well, tough, big brother, because you have made the biggest mistake of your bloody life, and it looks like it's up to me to set you straight." So much for starting out calmly.

"You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know the whole situation. And it's none of your bloody business, anyway."

"No, you're the one who doesn't know the whole situation, Jake. And that's the whole problem. You just went in there with that bloody Irish temper blazing, shooting your damned mouth off and you didn't even give Cass a chance to explain."

"What was there to explain? I know what I saw. And I wasn't the only one who knew what was going on..."

"Oh, really? Well, hold tight, fool, because I'm going to tell you the whole story ... the one you never let Cass tell you, and then we'll see who is the biggest idiot of the century. About Richard..." She looked at the thunderous scowl on his face.

"I don't want to hear about fucking Richard!"

She flinched at the vehemence in his words. "Fine." No problem. They could get that point later. Once she had his full attention and had knocked some of that damned attitude out of him. And she knew just the way. She decided to come straight to the point. The main point. It was guaranteed to shut him up and knock that self-righteous stuffing out of him...

"Okay. No Richard. Later. How about ... Chloe."

One word was all it took. Pulled him up quicker than a lightning bolt. Surprisingly, pain filled his eyes. So, it *was* like that. Good.

"You've been wondering ever since you met her, who her father is."

"And I suppose you know? Well then, why the fuck didn't you ever tell me?"

"Simple: a: it wasn't my place to, and b: I shouldn't have had to, you stupid jerk. If you knew Cass half as well as you think you do, you wouldn't even have to ask, and c: it was as plain on the nose on your bloody face."

"What do you mean?"

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "Why don't you go take a good hard look in the mirror, an honest look, and tell me what you see..."

Damn! She hadn't wanted to let it out like that, but she was so riled.

He just stood there, not moving. Something must have been going on in his head because he turned to her, looking

at her strangely. On the sideboard, she noticed the photo she had taken of the three of them at the barbeque weeks ago.

"Look!" She picked up the photo and thrust it into his hand. "Tell me what you see."

He held the photo firmly, but his eyes skipped over it like a caress, belying the tautness of his reply. "It's Cassie and me with Chloe. Your point?"

Her voice softened. "Look closer, Jake. Look at Chloe ... Look at ... you."

His eyes quickly swung to the photo he clenched in his hand. For long moments, he just looked. She opened her mouth to say something and shut it when she noticed his eyes watering.

He shut his eyes, and his head dropped, his jaw a grim line. Then his head starting shaking from side to side, his lips pressed closely together. He took a deep, shuddering breath as if the air had gone out of his lungs. When he finally spoke, his voice was a croak.

"Are you..." The words got stuck, so he swallowed and tried again. "Are you telling me..." He looked at her, his eyes pleading, unable to speak the words.

At that moment, seeing the hurt and the pain in his eyes, Liz felt every second of the pain he'd gone through ... and the intensity of the love he felt for her friend and her niece. The words wouldn't come, unable to slide past the tightness in her throat. In reply, she just nodded, tears running down her own cheeks.

"Oh, God." He dropped onto the sofa, mumbling to himself. "Oh, God. No..."

"I'm sorry, Jake." Moving to sit beside him, she placed her arm around his trembling shoulders.

"Chloe's m-mine?"

The words were nothing more than an incredulous whisper. If Liz hadn't been sitting so close she wouldn't have heard them.

"Yes, Jake. You're her father."

He was looking at Liz, but he wasn't seeing her. In his mind he was locked into that stormy night, five years ago, the night he fell in love with Cassie, even though he was too drunk and too stupid to realise it at the time.

"There could only be one time ... That first night ... she took me home." Now that the realisation had settled in, so, too, the questions. "But why didn't she tell me? Why, Liz? I would've married her. I would never have let her do it all on her own."

Liz took a deep breath. How much should she tell? It was a quick decision. One look at Jake's face was enough to settle it in her mind. "She came over to the house as soon as she found out she was pregnant. She was going to tell you, Jake."

"So why didn't she? I've missed all these years of my little girl's life. I should have been there, dammit!" The pain-driven anger flared briefly before subsiding, sputtering into a distraught moan. "I would have given anything to be..."

She rubbed his arm, trying to comfort him. "I know, Jake. I believe you. But do you remember the day that you and Sandy announced your engagement? Cass came over that day..."

"Oh, Jesus."

"Yeah. That was the day. Understandably, the timing sucked."

"But if she'd told me, I would have helped her..." He was desperate, trying to find solutions to a problem that had been taken out of his hands years ago, even without any of them knowing. But when he looked at her, the pain in those glittering blue eyes was almost more than she could bear.

"I know you would, Jake. I do. But can you imagine what it would have done to your relationship with Sandy? Cass was trying to protect you, the only way she could see. Spare a thought for the shock it must have been to her."

"I know, Liz. I can understand that. But what about now? She knew I loved Chloe. I didn't want to be Uncle Jake, dammit. I wanted more ... so much more..."

"Part of that is my fault, Jake."

"What do you mean?"

"She wanted to know why you and Sandy broke up. I-I told her."

"Oh, no," he groaned. Suddenly, things all started to make sense. "So, she thought I didn't want kids of my own?"

"Yes. And anyway, how do you tell the man you've loved for years that the child he loves so much is his? She felt guilty too, because of all the time you've missed with Chloe. The closer you got, the harder it became to tell you. She was so scared of losing you. She tried a few times, though. The time never seemed to be right."

"How long have you known, Sis? I'm your brother, for chrissakes. I had a right..."

"Hold on a second. I didn't know, either, not until the night before the wedding. And that was only because I forced it out of her." She could see the pain and hurt etched on Jake's face. "Don't judge her, okay? It hasn't been easy for her, Jake. Raising Chloe on her own, and doing a damn fine job, I might add. She made the choices she had to as she saw them. I'm not sure I would have done it any different. In fact, I'm not sure I could have done it so well."

"It doesn't matter, anyway." His body slumped back against the sofa, the aura of defeat hovering over him. "She's got Richard now..."

"Yeah, Richard..." She dropped her head, trying to think of the best way to tell him. She nodded to herself, decided. Cass would likely never speak to her again, but that was the chance she would take; she'd come too far to turn back now. "Do you remember when I first met Cass in high school, Jake?"

"Of course I do. She used to sleep over at our house all the time. You two were like sisters. The two of you tailing me all the time nearly drove me nuts."

"Hey, you loved it. And you did your share of trailing us, don't forget."

"Just making sure you didn't get into trouble..."

Liz swallowed a small smile, knowing she had one more thing to tell Jake and then she was done. After that, it would be up to him. "She's been in love with you ever since then, Jake. Never been anybody else in all the time I've known her. That's a long time to love somebody."

"But what about the other guys she's been out with?"

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by Susie Charles

"What other guys?" she asked, leaving the question hanging deliberately.

Chapter Eighteen

There was just one more thing he had to do.

Richard.

He noticed another car in the driveway as he pulled up, and it looked vaguely familiar. Normally, he would have called first, but he had a feeling that Richard would have hung up on him. And who could have blamed him? He could hear voices inside as he approached the house. He didn't want to interrupt, but what he had to say wouldn't take long, anyway ... He rapped on the door and waited.

A dishevelled Richard opened the door looking like he'd just got out of bed. Barefoot, wearing nothing but a pair of old sweats, hair mussed.

"Jake." Richard observed him quietly. "I wondered when you'd come by. Come in. There's somebody I'd like you to meet."

Jake walked in and stopped abruptly, surprised. Hell, it was more than surprise, it was...

"Cindy!"

"Hi, Jake."

"What are you doing here, Cin?"

Cindy was blushing, but she smiled shyly at Richard who walked up beside her and put his arm possessively around her waist.

"I believe you know my lady, Jake."

Of course he knew her. Cindy was his cousin, sister to the annoying Kate, but without the qualities that drove Jake nuts. Quiet, gentle, a real honey ... "But how did you and she..."

"Twelve months ago. You sent me over to do the work on her extension, remember?" Richard looked fondly down at Cindy. "We've been dating ever since. We keep it private. No one in the family knows because that's the way she wants it." He paused to kiss the tip of her nose affectionately. "Too much family interference after her divorce, apparently. In fact, we'd be married now if she hadn't been so burned. But I'm a patient man." He smiled down at her before turning back to Jake. "That's beside the point, though. We've been doing some talking. You see, I told her what you thought about Cass and me ... I didn't want her hearing it from anybody else in the family and drawing the wrong conclusion. And I'm glad I did. Honesty with your woman really works, you know. You should try it," he said dryly. "Anyway, it appears Cindy overheard a phone conversation between Kate and another woman one day when she was over there. Cass's name was mentioned. And yours. And mine ... Someone's been playing games with us, mate. You find out who that is, and the rest should make sense ... fall into place."

Jake knew, and the knowledge settled in his gut like a lump of lead. After Lizzy's visit, he talked with his ma.

"Sandy." Jake and Cindy said the name as if it dawned on them together.

"Sandy? Your ex-wife?" Richard glanced from Cindy to Jake in amazement. "Jesus, mate! And you believed her?"

"I didn't have any reason not to. We're divorced, Richard. She has nothing to gain by lying to me."

"She wants you back, Jake. Until Richard told me what happened, none of what I'd overheard really made much sense to me, but now it does."

"But we're still friends. It was an amicable break up." He looked at her in disbelief.

"I don't believe this." Richard shook his head. "You'd take the word of your ex-wife about something as important as this, over Cass? You really don't deserve her, you know."

He was right about that.

"I'm sorry, Richard. I don't know what to say."

"I appreciate it, mate, but I'm not the one who needs to hear your apology."

No. There was someone he needed to do a damn sight more to than apologise.

* * * *

He pulled up in the driveway. Cassie was alone, thanks to Liz. His little sister had been understanding when he'd asked her to go and get Chloe, giving Cassie the excuse that she wanted to do some aunt/niece stuff and take her shopping or something. He needed time alone with Cassie. To talk. To apologise. Hell, he'd beg if he had to.

The importance of this moment was not lost on him. The next few minutes would either be the beginning of a new life for all of them, together, or the end of his. Because there would never be anyone but Cassie for him. He'd known that the moment he'd seen her at the wedding. After gently

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nurturing their relationship, he had damn near blown it all to hell in a fit of jealous rage.

He pushed down firmly on that thought. If he started down that mental path, he'd never get out of the goddamned car. With a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped out.

* * * *

Tucking a wayward curl behind her ear, Cass looked up at the sound of the doorbell. With a resigned sigh, she swung her legs off the lounge and stood. Would she ever get over this incessant feeling of tiredness? She had hoped for a quiet afternoon when Lizzy came and asked if she could take Chloe off her hands for a few hours. Flicking the power button on the remote, she turned off the TV and padded on bare feet to the front door.

From the shadowy darkness of the hall, she spotted Jake, standing there with his head down, and her heart stopped beating. For a long moment, all she could do was stare. His face looked strained, and he was slumped against the door frame, but to her eyes he looked like a god. Just the sight of him was enough to take her breath away and drove home to her just how much she had missed him. A part of her had died the day he walked out and he was certainly the last person she expected to see on her doorstep. Not after...

No, she couldn't do it. The memory of his last visit was something she could try to forget if she didn't have to see him, but not if he was here. She swallowed a small whimper and started to back away from the door before he saw her.

Not quickly enough. At the small noise, his head shot up and he looked directly at her, stilling her backward progress.

"Cassie?" he asked softly. "Can I come in?"

Come in? Was he crazy? "Why, Jake? I thought you'd already said everything you wanted to say."

"I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please..."

She turned to walk away. Losing control in front of Jake was something she would not do. She was about to crack as it was, feeling the tears gathering in her eyes, but the look on his face stopped her. She knew that look. It wasn't the Jake she knew—she would have forced herself to turn away from that. No, this was the same look that greeted her every morning when she looked in the mirror. Devastation. Loss. Hurt and pain. It had become so bad she had stopped looking at herself in the mornings, unable to face what she saw.

Standing there, he looked much the same ... a little leaner, maybe, but freshly showered and in the familiar jeans and t-shirt that looked so good on him. But this was the veneer, the outer view. Instead, it was his eyes, the sharp blue seeming unnaturally bright that pulled her into his soul, allowing her a glimpse of what he was feeling on the inside. And it was that, more than anything that wrenched at her, pulling her back to face him. It was the mirror of her own. And she found that whatever had been said, whatever had died between them, she couldn't turn away. She loved him. Sadly, she always would.

With a shrug, she unlocked the catch and held the door open. "Come in, Jake."

She walked through to the kitchen, unsure where to look or what to do, but knowing he'd follow. "Tea?" she asked, but this time he shook his head.

It was almost a repeat of that Saturday, how many weeks ago? Like *déjà vu*, but not quite. This time was different. This time there was no hope.

* * * *

How could he have done it? As he looked at her, the pain he had caused her was etched clearly on her face: the dark circles under her eyes, shining with that glassiness that precedes tears; the paleness of her skin; the telltale way she leaned against the cupboard for support against the obvious sag of tiredness ... Knowing now what he did, compliments of Lizzy, he understood how his words and accusations must have torn her apart. What on earth could he say to make up for that? No amount of "I'm sorry" would be enough. But he had to try. If nothing else, for all of them, he had to try.

"I came to apologise, Cassie."

He stood and waited and watched her. Wispy tendrils of hair were falling out of the clip and she fingered them nervously. Once he would have smiled down at her and fixed them, using her nearness as an excuse to steal a kiss. Not this time.

"So apologise and leave, Jake."

The words were not uttered harshly, nor with venom, but resigned, as if she just wanted him to say his piece and be gone. Okay, that was more than he had thought he would be allowed on the drive over here. But there was a lot more at

stake now than just their feelings. He also had his little girl to consider and that especially gave him the courage to do what he knew he must.

"I was wrong, Cassie. I should never have said the things I said to you." Never should have believed them or even considered them, he thought.

"No argument here."

"No, I know." *What to say now?* "I ... err ... went to see Richard."

"Oh, great! Looking for proof? Firing him wasn't enough?"

"No, Cassie. It wasn't like that." He struggled desperately to explain. "I went to apologise to him and attempt to find out who was trying to drive us apart."

"What are you talking about?"

"Somebody didn't want us to be together. After I had time to think and cool down, some things started to bother me, so I went to see Richard."

"Why didn't you just come and ask me for the truth? You never even gave me a chance..."

That was true. He had taken the word of someone else, not that he didn't trust his ma, but with something as important as this he should have trusted Cass enough to find out the source of his ma's information instead of believing the worst of the woman he professed to love, and killing any chance of them ever being together. But he was stupid and arrogant and a fool.

"I should have, Cassie. I was just ... I was hurt. I couldn't stand the thought of you with another man. It damn near killed me."

Her hands fluttered as if dismissing the words. "So, Richard?"

"Richard. I was amazed he didn't beat the crap out of me and tell me to get lost. I would've in his place. But I met Richard's girlfriend, too." Cassie's brow lifted at that. "Nice lady," he said with a weak smile.

"Yes, I know." A sad smile crossed her face. "We've met."

"She's my cousin, Cindy."

"Yes, I know that, too, Jake. I have since the first time I met her."

It looked like Cassie knew a whole lot more than he had. Of course that just made him feel like a bigger idiot. "Anyway, she confirmed a few things for me that I had kinda been wondering about."

"Like?"

"Did you know that Sandy was behind it ... all of it. The rumours, the lies..."

"Sandy? Your ex?" Cassie's eyes widened.

Obviously that was one bit of information he had over her, for all the good it would do him. "Sandy had implied a few times that she wanted us to give it another go."

"And what did you say, Jake? Did you want to?"

"Never, darlin'. There was only one woman I wanted." You, he wanted to say. Only you.

"So, why then?"

"It's my fault. I never really took it seriously. I guess she was more determined than I gave her credit for. I thought it would be enough if I just said no. I never suspected, though,

how far she would go. And I was too consumed with jealousy about you and Richard to realise."

"Well, fine, Jake. At least now we know. That's it, then..." She moved to turn away, but he grabbed her arm, halting her, the warm softness of her skin penetrating his palm.

"No, Cassie. Don't ... That's not all..."

"What else is there, Jake? You've said you're sorry. We know who was behind it. It's done."

"Cassie..." He took her other hand in his, feeling the tenseness running through her. "There's more ... Chloe..."

A broken sob escaped her and she jerked, trying to break free from his grasp. Her face had drained of what little colour it had. If he gave her half a chance, she was going to bolt, he just knew it.

"Darlin', hear me out, please..." His hands moved up her arms, holding her firmly, pulling her a step closer. He took a deep breath and stepped out into the void. "I know about Chloe." He tried to say it as gently as he could, but his heart was nearly breaking. He couldn't blow it. Not now. Not this time. There was too much at stake.

"H-how?" she eventually got out, but he could feel her trembling.

"In a minute." He pulled her into his arms before she fainted on him. "In a minute, darlin', I promise. Just ... I've got to hold you for just a minute." His breath caught as his arms wrapped around her. With a silent groan, he inhaled the familiar lavender scent.

He would not lose this! Whatever it took, he would hold her like this for the rest of their lives if he had to.

Triggered by the feel of her in his arms, the smell of her that he loved, the exquisite sigh of her breath against his chest, and suddenly, the words were tumbling out...

"I love you, Cassie. Since the second I touched you at the wedding ... no, since that first night I made love to you ... I feel like I've always known in some part of me, that I was meant to be with you. It's why ... it's the reason I could never fully commit to Sandy."

She stiffened in his arms. "But Lizzy said..."

"I know. That I didn't want kids?" He felt her answering nod, fighting the sudden shaft of need for her as her lips scraped across the bare patch of skin on his neck. "She told me. But she was wrong, darlin'. So wrong. I just didn't want them with Sandy, or any other woman for that matter. Only you..."

"You're just saying that, Jake, because you know that Chloe is ... Oh, God..." The realisation suddenly hit her.

He reached for her face, bringing her eyes to his, pleading with his soul. "No! I know what you're thinkin' and it's not true, baby. I loved Chloe the minute I laid eyes on her, but even before I knew she was mine, I wanted..."

"What, Jake? What did you want?"

"You, Chloe, and as many kids as we could have ... a family ... with you. You're the only one that ever made me feel that way. The only one I ever wanted ... Cassie darlin', I love you. I need you. Oh God, can you forgive me?"

His arms tightened around her, determined to hold on.

* * * *

Could she? Could she really forgive him? Two weeks, two days, even two hours ago, the answer would have been no, definitely. In her heart and her head, she wanted to say yes so badly it was almost a scream inside her. But the protective instinct that had carried her through the last five years kicked in.

No. Not this time. She could feel Jake's pain, every stabbing pulse like a knife into her own heart, but she needed time. Time to heal, time to think, time to make sure ... Make sure of what? she asked herself.

That she loved him? She already knew the answer to that.

To be sure that he wouldn't hurt her again? Even with what had happened, it was not this that scared her.

No, it was about putting the pieces back together again. She had literally shattered after the fight with Jake that day, and she still hadn't found all the pieces. At any moment she felt as though she would fall apart. And fixing that would take time.

"Not yet, Jake. Please ... let me work this out."

At least it wasn't a straight out no, and he would have to be content with that for now.

"About Chloe..."

"Yes?" He watched her closely, trying to read her ... unable to break through the pain-filled gaze.

"I can't do it. I can't tell her just yet. I know I should, Jake. I owe that to you and to her. But she's a smart kid ... she'll have questions, and I don't think I can do it at the moment..."

One Touch
by Susie Charles

Like a dam bursting, the tears she had been holding broke free. Without missing a beat, Jake pulled her into his arms, cuddling her close, stroking a gentle hand down her hair.

"Shhh, baby. Don't cry. It's okay. It will all be okay..."

And he wished it so with all his heart.

Chapter Nineteen

It had been two long weeks. Actually, if he had to be exact, two weeks, one day, two hours and assorted minutes. Stepping lightly and surely across the rafters of the roof he was helping the guys get ready for retiling, he slipped his hammer into the holster at his hip as he reached for his ringing cell phone. It was second nature these days to check the caller ID, looking for Cassie's number. He was waiting. That was all he could do. She wanted time and he would give her all she needed. That also meant that she had been on his mind for precisely every second of the last two weeks and whatever days, hours and minutes had passed.

With disappointment, he noticed the number was unfamiliar, so he pressed the "yes" button expecting a work call.

"Rowling Constructions. Jake Reilly here."

"Mr. Reilly? It's Mrs. Newman over at Collaroy Kindergarten."

Jake looked curiously at the phone, and then held it back up to his ear.

"Sure, Mrs. Newman. What can I do for you?"

"Well, it's just that we need someone to come and pick up Chloe and you are listed as her next of kin along with Ms. Grant."

Quite apart from the stunning revelation that Cassie had some time recently put his name down as a relation for Chloe—he knew how seriously the schools took the issue of

next of kin with children—was the realisation that Chloe needed him, and therefore, so, too, must Cassie in some way. Rather than please him, that realisation settled like a shiver of dread over him. A thousand questions rushed through his mind, but all of them could wait. Nothing was more important at this precise moment than getting to his daughter.

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

Actually, it ended up being slightly more than five. He rushed in through the foyer of the school to see Chloe sitting forlornly, her little backpack sitting at her feet as she waited. The worry he had been feeling on the drive over was slightly eased by the smile that lit his little sugar's eyes.

"Uncle Jake!"

She rushed into his arms as he reached down to scoop her up, squeezing her tight. "How's Da..." He pulled himself up abruptly before he uttered the words he was dying to say ... might never say—daddy's little girl. Instead ... "How's my girl?"

"Mumma didn't come to pick me up..."

"I know, sweetheart. That's why I'm here." The last thing he wanted Chloe to do was worry. Hell, even he didn't know what was going on.

"Ahh, Mr. Reilly, I presume?" A diminutive, prim-looking woman had come out of the office and was walking towards him.

"Yes, ma'am. Thanks for calling me, but would you mind telling me what's going on?"

At a look from Mrs. Newman, he deposited Chloe back on the seat. "Don't you move, sugar. I won't be long and then we'll go home, okay?"

"Okay. But Uncle Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm hungry."

"Don't worry, little darlin'. How about a trip to McDonald's on the way home? We can grab a burger and some fries."

"Yum! You sure Mumma won't mind?"

"We could pick something up for her too, couldn't we? Then she won't have to cook when she comes home." He grinned at her. "You got a book to read or something while I talk to Mrs. Newman? I won't be long."

He waited until she was settled. The smile he had put on for Chloe slipped as he followed Mrs. Newman into the small office.

"Where's Cassie? What's happened?"

"I didn't want to say anything in front of Chloe, Mr. Reilly, but we had a call from the university where Ms. Grant works. Luckily, one of the staff there knew that she usually picks up her daughter on her way home, so she rang us to let us know. You see, there was an unfortunate altercation this afternoon between two of the students there. Ms. Grant tried to break up the fight and was harmed. I believe a knife was involved."

Jake froze. "Where is she?" His heart thumped loudly in his chest, fear filling him. "Is she ... is she..."

"Royal North Shore Hospital, I believe. She is in emergency surgery as we speak. I'm sorry to have to break this to you like this."

"No, Mrs. Newman. I ... thank you for calling me. Thank you ... If you'll excuse me, I have to make a call."

"Of course. I'm terribly sorry..."

He nodded to her, and flipped open his phone, getting Lizzy up on quick dial, hoping like hell she was at home. He sighed with relief when she picked it up on the second ring. "Sis?"

"Jake? What's up?"

"I need a favour. Can you watch Chloe for me? I'm not sure how long I'll be."

"Sure. But where's Cass? And why are you asking me?" She stopped, realizing obviously that Jake had Chloe and how unlikely that was considering the current state of affairs between him and Cass. "Oh, no. What's happened?"

"Long story, sis. But Cassie's been hurt. I need to get to the hospital and I don't want to take Chloe in there with me. I don't know how long..."

"No worries, Jake. Bring her here. I'll keep her for as long as you need."

* * * *

Sitting beside the bed, holding her hand and stroking it tenderly, Jake looked again at Cassie. Apart from being very pale, her vital signs were good. The damage to her kidney was not as bad as initially thought, and all that remained now was the wait for her to come out of the anaesthetic.

He had passed a tense few hours pacing the waiting room attached to the surgery unit. The thought of losing Cassie had made him sick with worry. The relief he had felt when the doctor came out and gave him the good news ... well, he could have kissed the man.

A soft moue of discomfort left her parted lips and her eyes slowly opened, a little unfocussed at first. He watched as she gradually realised where she was.

"Jake?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, darlin'. I'm here, don't worry."

Her eyes darkened suddenly; her body tensed. "Chloe!"

"Shhhh." He stroked her forehead, trying to reassure her, calm her. "She's fine. I picked her up from school and she's with Lizzy right now munching on McDonalds."

"Thank God." She sighed and her eyes fluttered closed, the tension leaving her body. She seemed to have drifted off under the stroking of his fingers.

Until she opened her eyes, he hadn't realised how tightly strung he had been. But the relief he felt now that he knew she was going to be all right hit him all at once. He lay his forehead on the blanket beside her hand and let the tears run. From what the doctors had told him when she first came out of surgery, another inch or two and the damage would have been much, much worse. As it was, she would need to take it easy for a while, but there would be no long-term effects.

He felt a tentative hand on his head, the fingers threading gently through the mussed strands.

"Jake?"

He lifted his head, knowing his cheeks were still wet, but he didn't care. He loved this woman more than his own life. Every emotion he felt was tied up in his love for her.

She sadly shook her head at him and wiped at a tear. "How did you get in here? They only allow family..."

"I know." He looked guilty. "I ... em ... told them I'm you're husband."

"You didn't!"

"You better bloody believe it!" A new strength and resolve flowed through him. "I sure did. And I will be. I'm not taking the chance of losing you again, darlin'. I couldn't go through it..."

"Is that a proposal, Jake?"

"No, darlin'." He grinned down at her, mischief and amusement lighting his eyes. "That's an order, and as soon as you can stand vertical for fifteen minutes, I intend making it legal in every sense of the word."

"How very romantic." She rolled her eyes.

"You want romantic, baby?" His voice was husky as he lifted her hand to kiss each fingertip. "How about I love you so much my heart nearly breaks just to look at you," he whispered, brushing a thumb over a tear that slipped down her cheek. "Or that I want to be with you every minute of every day for the rest of our lives."

"Now that's more like it," she teased gently. "I think I like the second version much better."

"So, that's a yes?" His watched her intently, his eyes darkening as he waited for her answer.

"Do I have a choice?"

One Touch
by Susie Charles

"Nope." He laughed as he leaned over to kiss her.

Epilogue

Standing at the sink after loading the final dishes into the dishwasher, Chloe looked out over the backyard at the couple walking in the moonlight, arms around each other. The woman turned to the man and looked up at him, smiling. Even from this distance, Chloe could see the way they were looking at each other. It never ceased to amaze her the way her parents were still so much in love after all these years. Twenty-five years, to be exact. And they were still acting like besotted teenagers. She shook her head affectionately.

She could still remember the day she had found out that "Uncle Jake" was really her father. It was even better than the day her parents had married. But that was because she had fallen in love with "Uncle Jake" the minute he had scooped her up in his arms and hugged her tight. She loved both her parents so much. Her childhood had been every young girl's dream. And they had given her the one thing she had always wanted—brothers and sisters. The house had always been full of noise and laughter and she had loved every single second of it. She wiped quickly at her eyes before anyone noticed.

"Hey, what's up, sis?" Robbie had come up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist in an affectionate hug. "You okay?"

Robbie always noticed, was always ready with a hug. He was just like his father. She'd never known two such huggy guys in her life. And even though she was older than her

brother by seven years, he always made her feel like the little sister. Of course that could have had something to do with the fact that he towered over her by a good foot, just like their dad. The little brother she had always wanted ... And he was the best. Just like Grace, Sally and Mike who was the baby at fifteen, even though he hated being called that.

"Mum and Dad at it again?" Robbie looked over her shoulder at their parents and rested his chin on the top of her head.

"Do they ever stop?" She laughed with joy, remembering all the times when they were growing up that they had caught the two of them and teased them unmercifully.

"Nah, but it's kinda cool, you know? I want what they have ... someday."

"Don't we all," she agreed, grabbing his arms a little tighter. "Don't we all..."

The End

About the Author:

Susie Charles was born in Sydney, Australia and with the exception of two short stints—one in Alice Springs, the other in the highlands of New Guinea—has never lived more than spitting distance from a beach.

Of course, growing up surrounded by bronzed Aussies and surfies gave her ample opportunity to form an appreciation for the physical beauty of the male of the species, although these days she stays out of trouble by looking and not touching. Well, mostly not touching ... It's wonderful how

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many things fall under the banner of 'research' when you're a writer.

After a variety of careers spanning everything from restaurant owner to computer trainer, Susie finally discovered (just in time before she retires) what she wants to be when she grows up, and combines her love of writing with a new and hectic career as a freelance editor.

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