



Jake Ryan's Woman

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Chapter 1

He was an ordinary man. He wasn't a high-powered CEO of a multi-national conglomerate. He wasn't a millionaire playboy who dabbled in political espionage and dated supermodels. He worked hard to earn a living at what was sometimes backbreaking physical labor. No cushy treadmill at a posh gym for him; his muscles were the result of applying his own hands to whatever job needed to be done. Those hands were big and callused, and usually very dirty by the time he got home late in the evening.

But Jake Ryan was a man; of that there was no doubt. Unlike most men in the twenty-first century, he wore his masculinity easily – it wasn't something he would ever explore or expound on, but it was as much a part of him as his thick black hair or his slightly crooked grin. The fact that his self-confidence never faltered, that he always seemed to know where he was going and what he was about was part of what had made him a good foreman, a well-respected contractor, and an even better man. But “easy going” wasn't a phrase that anyone who knew him would use to describe him. He was extremely intense and focused, expecting to get what he wanted, when he wanted it. Few people really knew him well, and most of those would accuse him of being almost too serious and somber. Jake, like his father, didn't laugh nearly enough.

His chances of making millions of dollars were few, but that was of no concern to him. He was doing what he loved to do – build houses – and he kept his fingers directly on the pulse of any project he undertook. Jake could do all of the jobs associated with building a

house – he was a master electrician, a master plumber, he could do masonry and woodwork, carpentry and tiles . . . In fact, the house he was building for himself was untouched by any two hands other than his own. But he also knew whom to handpick to do those individual jobs, since he couldn't do everything on every project himself.

He was known as a scrupulously fair boss and generous boss, although he demanded as much of those around him as he did of himself – early arrivals and later than late departures. Some of the men grumbled that they'd be glad when the boss got himself a life – or a wife. But they were careful that he never overheard them saying that, for despite his generally good traits, Jake possessed a fearsome temper and had never been known to back down from a fight. His philosophy about fighting had been taught to him by his father: he would never start a fight, but he would sure as hell end it. With his size and strength, usually all it took was one good punch and the unfortunate worker, who was by that time writhing on the ground in pain, would be tersely commanded to “draw his pay and get.”

The house he was working on now was a major headache, although he knew he would have to grit his teeth and bear it because Matt and Julia were his friends. She was here now, with a pretty but older girlfriend in tow. Jake could mark their progress by the laughter that seemed to follow them as they walked through the house, which wasn't much more than a concrete slab with parts of walls up and a lot of open space. He gritted his teeth as he saw them coming towards him and purposely bent his head to the blueprints, hoping against hope that they wouldn't interrupt him.

“Hi, Jake!”

Well, there was no avoiding it now. He plastered on a fake smile and turned to the two young women. “Julia.” Not quite welcoming, but better than his usual growl.

“I don't think you've met my friend, here.” Julia glanced slyly between himself and her friend. “Jake Ryan, this is my best friend, Sophie McClellan. Sophie, this is Jake Ryan.” The two dutifully shook hands, and he nearly missed Julia's next sentence for his unexpected gut punch reaction to her touch. It made him frown. “Jake is a friend of Matt's and one of the best contractors in the region.”

"It's nice to meet you," Sophie said gamely. She could tell they were making the big man uneasy, but Julia, bless her, was numb as a post when it came to reading other people's reactions.

Sophie watched him look almost longingly back at the plans on the makeshift table beside him. "Same here," he all but grunted. She was hard put to stifle a grin, biting her bottom lip hard while trying to catch his eye to let him know that she understood and shared his discomfort.

In the few seconds since they'd been introduced, Jake had felt a jolt of attraction so strong he had to lean closer to the table so that the iron spike tenting the zipper of his jeans wouldn't be noticeable. He hadn't felt like that about a woman in a long, long time, if ever. Jake felt pole axed. He wanted to lay her down on the makeshift worktable and do what came naturally – stake his claim on her in them most primitive way a man could.

But the object of his instantaneous erection stood there, entirely unaffected, a silly half-grin still on her face, and he knew without a trace of doubt that she had remained blissfully untouched by the electricity that had nearly floored him. She seemed completely unaware of him as a man, and that annoyed him even more than being interrupted on the job.

"I can't wait for the walls to go up; then I'll have some idea of what I'm looking at!" Julia groaned, hitching the strap of her pocketbook further up her shoulder while eyeing the bare bones site dubiously.

Sophie snorted indelicately, turning confidently around to face the concrete slab where the house would be. "Kitchen along the back – the pipes were your first clue, Jules," she commented sarcastically and was rewarded with a sharp smack from said friend. "Dining room in the left back corner, mudroom in the right back corner, downstairs bath on the right, living room left, den right fronts, stairs up the middle with a hall on the right back to the kitchen."

"How do you know all that?" her friend pouted.

Sophie shrugged, turning away from her friend and the disturbing stranger who was standing there looking about as welcoming as a thundercloud. "C'mon, Julia. We're going to be late back from lunch as it is." As she began walking away, not waiting to

see if the younger girl followed her, she had a second thought and threw over her shoulder in a carefully neutral tone, “Nice meeting you, Jake.”

Julia followed her friend like an obedient puppy, and Jake enjoyed the view as they left. Julia was too flighty and moody for his tastes, but Ms. McClellan, now that was another story all together. He watched with a little too much interest as her bottom twitched enticingly under the cotton candy pink suit she was wearing, and the thought that he’d love to have the opportunity to lay her over his lap popped into his mind unbidden. Jake recalled her demur cream blouse with a proper bow at the neck that fairly screamed to be untied, and he was just the man to loosen it up.

With a derisive laugh aimed directly at himself – he wasn’t used to mooning over females, especially those he had just barely met – then turned back to the plans and got back to work.

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Later that week, Sophie was in jeans and a sweatshirt, no makeup in sight, doing housework, when her phone rang. The Caller ID said it was Julia, so she plopped down in her big overstuffed recliner, turned down the volume on Aerosmith’s Pump CD and picked up the cordless. “Electric company. You light up my life.”

“Ugh. That’s so old, Soph. Very old.”

She indulged in an all-over stretch. “So am I, kid, so am I. When you talk about never having seen an episode of M*A*S*H* or All in the Family, it makes me want to clutch my Bay City Roller albums to my chest and jump off the nearest cliff.”

“I can’t help it if I’m young!” Sometimes Sophie felt the ten years between them was a gulf as wide as the Grand Canyon.

“Sure, rub it in . . . “ Sophie sighed dramatically. “So what’s up?”

“I wanted to invite you to dinner at our house Friday night.” Unlike Sophie, who had been divorced for several years and lived alone, Julia was married to a wonderful, attentive man who had the patience of a saint and adoringly let her do anything her little heart desired.

Barely suppressing a grin, Sophie asked, “Would you be inviting me over to cook dinner, or have dinner?” Needling Julia was so easy; it almost wasn’t worth it. Almost. Jules was such a terrible cook that Matt and Sophie never let her forget the few dismal attempts she’d made to get something resembling edible food to the table. What Julia usually made best for dinner was reservations.

“Ummmm . . . “

“That’s what I thought. And what will I be cooking, pray tell?”

“Whatever you want,” Julia offered brightly.

Sophie returned wryly, “How very generous of you.” Then a thought struck her. “Just the three of us, right?” Julia was endlessly trying to pair her friend off with some poor unsuspecting soul, even the most unlikely of candidates. She simply couldn’t accept the idea that Sophie was happy without a man in her life.

The pause grew too long for Sophie’s comfort. Growling, she repeated, “It is going to be just the three of us, right, Julia?”

“Well, I – “

“No.” Firm.

“But – “

“No.” Firmer.

“Matt – “

“No.” Firmest. “Julia, you promised after the last blind date fiasco that you wouldn’t try to match make for me anymore.

Julia was on the defensive, because the last guy she’d set Sophie up with had been in trouble with the law, unbeknownst to her or anyone else until the two were stopped for speeding and the warrants showed up when the trooper ran his license. Sophie could see Julia squirming uncomfortably on her art deco couch. “How as I to know that he was wanted in three states for check kiting?”

“I think you were trying to off me for the money.”

It was Julia’s turn to be sarcastic. “What money, girl? I know what you make; I work there, too!”

“Yeah, well.”

Sensing weakness, Julia pressed her advantage. “Besides, this is not a blind date, really. You’ve met him.”

“I have?” Sophie thought hard. She didn’t remember having been introduced to anyone recently . . . unless you counted Julia’s sexy-as-hell contractor . . . “No way, Jules. Not him.”

“But Jake’s a perfect match for you, Soph!”

Oh, God help her, if she had to produce a picture of the perfect man, yes, she’d point to him. Jake Ryan was big hunk of solid man. That cotton work shirt he’d been wearing hadn’t done anything to hide either his bulging arm muscles or his broad-as-a-barn chest and those worn jeans clutched his lower half as lovingly as a Speedo. But Sophie squelched those thoughts ruthlessly, stating flatly, “He doesn’t fit the height requirement.”

That stopped Julia in her tracks for about five seconds. Unlike most women, who preferred men who were taller than they were, Sophie preferred men who were her size or even a little smaller – five foot six, seven, or eight – with a slim build. Julia loved to psychoanalyze this so-called preference, but couldn’t find anything to cause it.

Jake Ryan was exactly the opposite of Sophie’s espoused tastes. He was six-three if he was an inch, and all of it was powerful, brawny muscle. The only way to get him to be five foot eight would be to lop off his head.

“You could make an exception for him, Sophie,” Julia was using her no-nonsense tone, which meant that Sophie was probably going to end up dining with Mr. Ryan Friday night, like it or not. “He’s wonderful! If I was single myself, I’d go after him.” Sophie snorted. That was no recommendation. Prior to magically becoming happily married Julia had collected men like some women collected Beanie Babies. “You should see how he treats women – I want Matt to take lessons! When we went to talk to him about the house, he held

open doors for me, seated me first, and stood when I entered the room . . . “

Sophie would grant her that that was unusual, especially in this day and age, but she tried to sound disinterested. “Uh-huh.”

“Tsk. Well, he was certainly giving you the once over the other day, girl. His tongue was lolling all over the ground, and he was bulging fit to break his zipper while he was doing it!”

“Julia!”

“Don’t try to give me that virginal crap, Sophie! And don’t try to tell me you didn’t notice. You may be divorced, but you’re not dead or blind, although sometimes you’re can be pretty stupid, like now.”

Only a best friend could get away with talking to her like that. Julia knew more about Sophie than anyone alive. Sometimes, Sophie thought, she knew too damned much. “Don’t invite him, Julia.”

“See you Friday – why don’t you come over around eleven and we’ll go out to lunch then shop for the ingredients for whatever you’re gonna make?”

“As long as it’s just going to be us three – “

“Bye, Sophie!”

“Bye.” She disconnected the call with a beep, trying not to let her mind wander back to the mouth-watering image of Jake Ryan. He was not handsome, and would never be a male model type, but Lordy, that man oozed sex like some men oozed charm and money. Sophie sniffed. She bet he had to check under his bed every night for stray women. He was probably a player, in it for the score, or worse than that as far as she was concerned, he probably couldn’t use words of more than one syllable and had no sense of humor.

It helped to pile insults on top of that vision she had of him, and soon he was buried in the probable negatives she had poured onto him. Sophie was able to spend the rest of the day without giving him another thought until she climbed into bed that night, turned off the TV and shut her eyes . . .

And there he was, sitting up amid all that negative rubble, flexing his massive shoulders up and down as if the weight of her

invectives had physically hurt him. In her daydream, he looked deliberately, directly at her, catching her in an eagle-eyed stare that promised retribution of one form or another. Then, just as she was slipping into sleep, he extended his big paw to her commandingly, palm up, as if he expected her to obediently place her much smaller, delicate hand in his. She was asleep before she decided whether or not she would do as he ordered, but the next morning the dream nudged into her consciousness just as she woke, and she realized that he was not the type of man to give her much time to think about it, or much choice in her response, for that matter. Jake Ryan would expect her to do as she was told, and that mere thought sent a decidedly sexual chill up her spine, waking her abruptly to start her day with painfully peaked nipples and a frankly annoying dampness between her legs. She kept envisioning what it would be like to be taken inexorably across that lap . . .

Chapter 2

Julia and Sophie spent Friday together – Sophie supervised the grocery store run for the meal – lasagna, salad, and garlic bread – then baked homemade garlic breadsticks at Julia's house that afternoon after they'd lunched at their favorite spot. One of the few advantages to living on the coast of Maine was the accessibility of the sea. The restaurant they chose was on the water with a view of the piers. It was after Labor Day, so most of the Mass-hole tourists were gone and the natives were starting to come out of hiding again, getting out as much as possible before the inevitable advent of winter snow and ice.

It was mid-afternoon when they got home with all the groceries, and late afternoon before she drew a deep breath and relaxed a little. Matt was due home any time and he was bringing Jake with him. The lasagna was in the oven and would be done at the same time the breadsticks were.

Sophie was just finishing the clean up, still wearing an apron that was covered with flour, as the rest of her was, when Matt arrived home with their guest, who looked like he was going to a funeral instead of a casual dinner with friends. She turned away from the counter she'd been wiping down only to be clenched tightly in masculine arms and smooched loudly on the cheek. "You've met my second wife, Sophie, haven't you, Jake?" he teased, ducking

athletically when she whipped the dirty, wet kitchen rag at him recklessly, missing by a mile.

“Don’t call me that, Matthew!”

From a safer distance, he continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “This is the wife that keeps me from starving to death.”

“I heard that!” Julia screeched indignantly from the bedroom, where she was changing.

Hurriedly, Matt screamed back, “And that’s my little honey muffin, whom I love to distraction . . . “

“ – And to whom you’d better start sucking up royally unless you’d like to sleep on the porch tonight,” Sophie finished for him.

Matt shuddered. “Hell, it’s supposed to be in the teens tonight.”

Sophie grinned evilly at him. “Then I suggest you begin applying your lips to her butt post haste.”

Matt grumbled good-naturedly as Jake leaned against the doorjamb, looking faintly amused, and staring directly at Sophie. Suddenly realizing that she must look like she’d taken a bath in flour instead of baking with it, she untied the apron and hung it up, brushing past Jake quickly to sprint into the back bedroom and change into something cleaner, if not prettier.

Actually, Jake was thinking that she looked incredibly cute with flour on the end of her nose. Thinking such banal thoughts distracted him from the painful erection he’d gotten upon seeing her. Jake didn’t know quite what it was about Sophie that made him want to grab her and kiss the breath out of her, but it intrigued him, and he wanted to know more. Much more.

Sophie muttered to herself as she shucked out of her clothes. So much for having talked Julia out of inviting him. She supposed she could borrow something dressy from Julia’s closet and for a moment she considered it. Then Sophie shook herself hard. Did she want to dress for this man? Why was she trying to impress someone she didn’t know, and furthermore, didn’t want to date?

She spent so much time at Matt and Julia's that she always kept a spare set of clothing in the guest bedroom, where she was. They were her preferred style – definitely dress down. After slipping into celery green jeans, she pulled a green and rose top over her head, then headed for the spare bathroom to run a brush through her unruly curls. It was a good thing she'd decided to check the mirror because there was flour everywhere - in her hair, on her cheek and powdering her nose. Sophie reached behind her for a washcloth, then noticed that Julia had laid out an assorted selection of cosmetics for her. How subtle, she thought with a big grin, washing her face quickly but passing on the makeup. Although on second thought, one of the things her friend had thoughtfully provided was a small sample bottle of Jessica McClintock perfume, which was one of Sophie's favorites.

Lifting the heavy curtain of auburn hair, she sprayed the back of her neck, then between her creamy, lace-covered breasts, her wrists, and the small of her back. Stepping back, Sophie took stock of the image in the mirror: thick red hair floated around her face in natural curls that fell past her shoulders, framing an almost unnaturally pale face. She never tanned but went right to a painful sunburn, so her skin rarely saw the sun. Thick black eyelashes surrounded light hazel eyes, and laugh lines bracketed the full mauve lips. Sophie was just the right height, as far as she was concerned – five foot six - and even if she did lean a little more towards “well-filled-out” than her doctor would have liked, she preferred to think of herself as having a womanly figure. She was no longer a willowy slim girl, not that she ever really had been one. Her figure had matured, and after a long, hard struggle, so had she. She'd earned every wrinkle and every worry line the hard way, dammit, and anyone who didn't like her the way she was could kiss off.

“Not bad for thirty-four,” she muttered to the image in the mirror, who smiled back.

Sophie was a little concerned – but not enough to change her clothing choice – about being underdressed for the occasion, but she saw upon returning to the living room that Matt had changed into jeans, and Jake probably wore them to the site. Julia was the only one who had truly dressed, but only as far as slacks and a sweater went. Jake was ensconced in the big easy chair that Matt usually favored, one big booted foot resting on a jean-covered knee. Matt was sitting on the couch, and Julia was nowhere in sight.

Instead of joining the men alone, Sophie went into the kitchen and brought Matt a frosted mug of his favorite beer.

“Ahhh, thanks, Sopha.”

She shot him a nasty glare, but refrained from hitting him in front of company, turning instead to Jake and asking sweetly, “What can I get you to drink?”

“I’ll have a beer, thank you.”

Sophie got the men situated, then checked on dinner. Julia appeared at that moment, and spoke to Jake warmly, then Sophie deduced that she must’ve given Matt the evil eye to prompt him, because he suddenly called out to her. “Uh, Sophie, why don’t you come in here and talk to me and Jake? Julia can watch dinner, can’t she?”

Since she could see into the den from the kitchen, Sophie leaned on the countertop and shot Matt a doubtful look. “Only if you’re trying to kill us all. You know what happens when Julia tries to cook. But then, what’s a little puh-toe-maine among friends, huh?”

Jake snorted, nearly choking on his beer, and Julia folded her arms across her chest with an indignant huff. “I’m not that bad a cook!”

Sophie wisely refrained from commenting while she added dressing to the salad then tossed it.

Matt tried in vain to soothe his wife, figuring better late than never. “You’re a great cook, honey.”

“Yeah, Matt, but you mean in the bedroom and she means in the kitchen.” The caustic remark just slipped out from between her lips, and it looked like Jake was never going to get a swallow of that beer.

“Sophie!” her friend scolded with a scowl while her husband giggled until Julia elbowed him sharply.

Deciding that discretion was the better part, etc, etc, etc, Sophie yelled out, “What does everyone want to drink with dinner?”

Just as she was bending over to pull the main course out of the oven, she heard a rumble from behind her that nearly made her drop the dish. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Hell, yes, her mind answered. You can strip me naked and have your way with me on the dining room table . . . But she buried those thoughts ruthlessly as she set the hot pan down on the trivet. "Uh, I think I've got everything under control, so far."

Not one to stand around while others did all the work, Jake donned the hot mitts she'd discarded while reaching for the salad. "Does this just go on the table?" he asked.

Surprised at the way he just pitched-in in the kitchen, Sophie answered automatically, "Uh, yeah. Thanks."

She brought the salad and a big basket of hot garlic breadsticks to the table with her, and then stood contemplating it for a moment, biting her lip. It annoyed her that she always discovered mid-meal that she'd forgotten something vital that needed to be on the table.

Without turning around, she knew he was right behind her. "Is everything all right?"

"Can you see anything I've missed?"

Jake glanced at the table. "Butter?"

Sophie smacked her head with her hand and skirted by him, excruciatingly careful not to let any part of her touch him, while Jake stood stock still, not stepping back to make it any easier on her. He wanted her to touch him. "Thank you," she threw over her shoulder.

"You're welcome."

When she returned, Sophie called out to Matt and Julia who were cuddled in the living room, "Okay, you two, do you think you can keep your hands off each other long enough to make it through dinner?"

Upon hearing that the food was ready, Matt practically dumped Julia off his lap and headed for the table while Sophie giggled helplessly at her friend's dismayed look. She could even hear an amused rumble from the man behind her at Matt's silent statement that cuddling with his wife ranked somewhere behind dinner on his list of priorities.

To Sophie's unending surprise, Jake pulled out her chair for her, then seated Julia, who smiled sweetly up at him while glaring at her husband.

Dinner was an animated affair. Everyone but Jake knew each other very well, and Julia and Sophie knew each other extremely well. The three of them got along almost like siblings. Matt smacked Sophie's hand smartly when she grabbed the breadstick he'd been aiming for, and she bit his hairy arm hard when he reached in front of her for the butter. Insults, snide remarks, and quips flew furiously until everyone had their plates full except Jake, who had sat there watching the three of them like he was seeing humans eat for the first time.

Sophie grinned broadly at him, saying, "The only rule around us, Jake, is that it's every man for himself. If you don't grab, you don't eat." He didn't look very comforted by her speech, so Sophie took pity on him, taking his plate and serving him a man-sized chunk of lasagna with a couple of breadsticks on the side. "Here you go. Around here, there's no such thing as 'guest treatment,' or for that matter, a whole lot of etiquette. Relax and forget all those rules about politeness that your mother drilled into you."

Dinners at his parents' house had been rigid, formal affairs. Countless of them had been conducted in complete silence except for the occasional interruption of someone politely asking someone else to pass the salt. Nowadays he usually ate alone, or in his car, or on the job. Nothing he'd ever seen had prepared him for the rambunctious trio who seemed to spend as much time laughing and needling each other as eating.

Somehow a glass of good Chianti appeared at his elbow, poured by Sophie who then winked at him and sat back down. As bellies became full, the conversation slowed.

"So how's the house coming?" The question was posed by Sophie, rather than either of the owners of the new house.

"Slowly. I want to get as much done as possible before the first snowfall," he answered.

That ever-present smile of hers nearly blinded him, making something in his stomach clench when he found himself the subject of

it. "Golly whiz, you mean you don't want to be working out in a snow bank?" She was rewarded by a small grin. "Is winter usually a slow time for you?"

"Yeah. It's when I catch up on all my paperwork and line up jobs for the spring and do as much inside work as I can."

"That must be fun – constructing during Mud Season." This time it was a full-blown smile. Every New Englander knew that there were really five seasons of the year – spring, summer, fall, winter, and mud.

"Keeps my cleaners in business."

Matt and Julia had been quiet during this exchange, not wanting to interrupt. "Sophie's up for Vice President," Julia said proudly.

Jake's eyebrow went up. "Congratulations."

Sophie inclined her head in acknowledgement. "What she's not telling you is that she's up for it, too, and that it's just a title – no step up, no more money."

Julia took a sip of her wine. "You'll get it, especially if a certain person has anything to say about it."

She wiped her lips with her napkin, then lay it down on the table, giving her friend a glare that blistered her eyeballs.

"Who?" Matt asked. He had worked at the same bank, and knew some of the same people that they did.

"Mark."

"Oh. The head of the Sex Club is the one who decides whether you two get a promotion?"

Jake sat quietly, his interest definitely piqued at the direction this conversation was taking.

Sophie huffed. "There is no such club at work, Matthew."

"Well, not an officially sanctioned one, of course . . ."

Jake could see Sophie's jaw clench. "There isn't an unofficial club, either, Matthew."

Matt shook his head in disbelief. “What would you call a co-ed group of co-workers who get together every month or so to discuss who’s doing what to whom, how often, and in what positions?”

Both of the women were blushing furiously, letting Jake know that Matt was not making this up. “That is not what we get together to do. We go out to dinner -” Sophie began defensively, only to be interrupted by Matt.

“Do you deny that the major topic when you phone reps get together is sex?”

Now the women were fairly squirming in their chairs. “It’s one of the topics, yes.”

Matt leaned back in his chair. “Yeah. You forget; I used to be there, too. I know how you all drool over Mark . . . “

“I don’t drool over Mark, thank you,” Sophie stated staunchly.

“Well, you do a lot of things more quietly than the others – “

“That’s not what I’ve heard!” Julia piped up, increasing Sophie’s color.

“Julia!”

“But Sophie you were just saying the other day when it was slow and we were all sitting around talking about the fact that David didn’t like moaners or screamers that if you could be quiet during sex then somebody wasn’t doing something right.”

“JULIA!!!” Blast that woman for remembering that quote almost word for word! She thought she was going to crawl under the table in mortification while Matt laughed out loud and Jake grinned like an idiot, listening avidly to this extremely interesting conversation. “Would you mind not discussing my sex life in front of a man who barely knows me?”

“What sex life?” came the deadpan reply.

Well, she thought, there went this man; not that she had really considered him as a potential partner, anyway. He was too . . . just too everything. Too masculine. Too male. Too tall, and too muscular. Sophie took a deep breath and straightened her back, looking

deliberately at Julia and nowhere else. “My sex life or lack thereof is not a topic for polite dinner table conversation.”

Jake guffawed then cleared his throat loudly and suddenly all eyes were on him, but he was not about to back down. “Well, I don’t think this qualifies as a polite dinner table. So the conversation fits about right.” He pinned Sophie with a challenging gaze. “Personally, I’d like to hear whether you’re a moaner or a screamer, Sophie.”

Despite the fact that she was blushing head to toe by this point, Sophie wasn’t a squeamish virgin to turn a hair at the slightest off-color remark. To his surprise she met his eyes, saying softly, “I’m both if it’s done right, Mr. Ryan.”

Not looking away, he leaned towards her with an outrageous smile brightening his face, murmuring, “I always do it right, Ms. McClellan.”

Chapter 3

It had been nearly a week since that disastrous dinner that Sophie just couldn't seem to keep off her mind. She was afraid Jake Ryan had gotten the wrong impression of her and it annoyed her that she was in the least concerned about his opinion. Since her unhappy marriage dissolved five years ago, Sophie had worked on regaining the self-confidence she'd lost when her husband cheated on her. It'd taken her a long while, but she had finally made it to the point where she didn't much worry about anyone else's opinion of herself or her life, and that felt damned good.

So why did she worry that Jake Ryan saw her as some sort of loose, scarlet woman, when almost the exact opposite was true? She hadn't had a lover since the divorce, not for lack of opportunity, but because she refused to indulge in casual sex. It just wasn't in her make up to have one-night stands, or weekend affairs. Talking about sex was one thing – that had never bothered her. But talking was a long way from actually doing it, especially with someone she didn't feel very comfortable with.

Sophie had deftly steered the conversation onto safer ground after Jake delivered his boastful statement. But she wasn't at all convinced that it was boastful, and at least part of her wanted to find out whether there was any truth to it. But a larger, more vocal voice in her head just wanted to turn tail and run before he tried to help her find out.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie pulled herself back to the pile of statistics in front of her. Today had been a truly rotten day. Every one

of the fifty calls she'd taken so far had been someone complaining about the queue, or yelling at her about a fee. Sometimes the urge to yell back was almost overwhelming, especially when the customers refused to take responsibility for overdrawing their own blasted accounts.

A hunger pang tangled her stomach into an uncomfortable knot, reminding her that she had skipped breakfast this morning. "Jules?" she called out, just as her friend's head popped up above the wall separating their desks. "Lunch?"

"Sorry, Soph. I'm going out."

Damn. Sophie hated to eat alone, but she assumed that Matt was taking Julia to lunch as he sometimes did. Resignedly, she grabbed a yogurt from the fridge and began eating it at her desk while she looked over some depressing service level daily reports. Suddenly, she became aware of someone's eyes on her, and with the playful sense of humor that pervaded the department; she was immediately on alert for a practical joke.

Instead she looked up and her eyes collided with Jake Ryan's, making her heart thump painfully against her ribs. "Jake."

"Sophie," he greeted in a low, quiet voice, his eyes drinking her in eagerly.

She watched helplessly as he held Julia's coat for her, then tucked her arm in his as he escorted her out the door. That was the absolute capper to an atrocious day. Sophie gnawed on a pen cap. Dammit, she'd give a year of her life to be a fly on the wall during that lunch!

So that evening, she sat in front of her computer, writing furiously in an effort to escape into the romances she created and controlled. The phone rang and she picked it up absently, still typing.

"Hello?"

"Sophie, this is Jake."

The typing paused for a moment, then continued at a slower speed. "Good evening, Jake. How was lunch?" Both she and Julia had been in meetings all afternoon regarding the bank's next merger, so they hadn't had a chance to talk.

He couldn't discern from her voice whether or not she was peeved that he had taken Julia out. "Lunch was very nice, thank you."

"That's good."

Jake did notice that she sounded distracted, almost bored, and he could hear her keyboarding in the background. "Do you mind if I ask what you're doing?"

"I'm writing. I write."

"What do you write?"

As if he cared, she thought nastily, then drew a breath. "Romances. You know the fairy-tale kind that always have a happy ending?" she allowed a bit of sarcasm to enter her tone, but didn't add that her stories also always contained an added element that the big publishers shied away from – spanking.

"Hmmmmmm. That sounds interesting. Have you been published?"

Leave it to a man to think the measure of success was how many books she'd sold. "Nope. I don't really care whether or not I'm ever published. I like to write, so I write."

"Ok." Well, at least she'd stopped typing long enough to get mad at him. "I was calling to ask if you'd like to go out some time?"

So Julia'd gotten to him. Sophie wondered what she'd threatened Jake with. Still, she hadn't been out much, and it would be a nice change of pace. All right. She'd go out with him once, but that was it. He really didn't fit what she wanted in a man. He was just too much. Literally and figuratively. He would want to be in control of any relationship. "Ok," she agreed, but she felt it was necessary, in light of the conversation he'd heard to extend a caveat. "But I'll warn you. Despite what you might think, I do not put out."

There was a long silence, long enough to make her uneasy about what she'd said. "I would never assume that you do," he replied indignantly. Who the hell had this woman dated in the past, for Chrissakes? He had less than no interest in notching his belt, and told her that bluntly.

“Well, I just want to get that out of the way; I can just imagine what Julia told you about me.”

So that was what had gotten her all wrapped around the axle! “Julia was nothing but complimentary about you. You’re her best friend.”

In fact, his lunch with Julia had been almost completely circumspect, although Sophie had been the major topic of conversation, just as she’d apparently guessed. Julia was very protective of her friend, who had put up with a lot of uncaring treatment from her former husband. Julia had let Jake know in no uncertain terms that if he hurt her friend in any way, he’d be singing soprano for the rest of his life. She also informed him that despite her big talk, Sophie was not a one-night stand type of person by any stretch of the imagination, and warned him not to play games with her friend. Jake smiled broadly, suitably chastised, not that anything like that had ever been his intent. The thing that intrigued him most about the conversation, however, was that Julia warned him not to treat Sophie casually, but in the next breath she also said that his chances of getting her to get serious about him weren’t good, either, as Sophie was quite vocal about having sworn off marriage.

“I love Julia to death, but she knows more about me than any person on this Earth, and she has a big mouth. I can just hear her describing my various intimate likes and dislikes to you in excruciating detail.”

“She did nothing of the sort,” he answered reassuringly, but with enough censure in his voice that she knew he was unhappy that she’d think that. His voice lowered several octaves, though, when he said, “I’ll wait for you to tell me that when you’re comfortable doing it.”

Sophie half snorted, half chuckled. “You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“I want you, and eventually we’ll make love, but I’m not a teenager with raging hormones – although you’d never know it by the reaction you cause whenever I’m near you.” He put it so delicately it took her a minute to get what he was saying, then she laughed again. “But I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

This man was something else! “How gracious of you,” she teased sarcastically.

“Yeah, gracious,” he replied with a soft whimper, which made her giggle. “So, when is best for you?”

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The following Saturday night, she answered her doorbell and there he was, in an olive green suite with a cream shirt and an olive, navy, and cream striped tie. “Wow,” she exclaimed as she stepped back to let him in. “You’re gorgeous!”

He blushed charmingly, returning the compliment deftly. “And so are you.” Occasionally – very occasionally – Sophie liked to dress up. The dress she had chosen for the evening was a small concession to the wintry nip in the air; long sleeved in soft pink velour with a scoop necked bodice that merely hinted at the swells of her breasts, then the skirt draped gracefully from her waist. She hated heels, so she wore comfortable slipper-like flats with lacy cream hosiery that matched the underwear beneath. Small pink tourmaline flower studs decorated her ears, and the pendant from the set nestled just above her cleavage on a delicate gold chain.

Jake was delighted when she twirled in front of him unselfconsciously, like a little girl in a party dress, her enticing scent wafting to his appreciative nose. “What perfume do you wear?” He’d asked the question to try to distract himself from staring at her. Jake had always liked his women well rounded, and Sophie was that. The pink confection she was wearing caressed her curvy frame lovingly, the way he wanted to himself. He didn’t know what it was about her, but whenever she was in the room, his heart seemed to start racing, and all he could think about was kissing her. It was a wonder he could string two words together in a coherent sentence – she knocked him completely off balance, and he wasn’t sure that he liked it, although it certainly was intriguing. Jake had never reacted to a woman like that in his life.

She stopped, blinking at his faintly assessing gaze. It was hard to think when he looked at her like that. "Uhhh, I think I put on Ralph Lauren Romance tonight."

"It's wonderful." He took an experimental step closer to her, and she took a small step back, biting her tongue while she looked up at him, wide eyed, almost apprehensive, but all he did was run his fingers down her arm to catch her hand, which was cold as ice. "Are you all right?"

Laughing nervously, she reclaimed her hand and stepped away from him to get her soft winter white wool wrap out of the closet. He surprised her by taking it away from her and draping it over her shoulders from the back. "Are you sure you'll be warm enough in this? It's getting a lot colder in the evenings out there . . ."

Her answer was a little too quick, her smile a little too bright. "I'll be fine. I grew up here. Cold is relative."

She couldn't have let him know that she was exceedingly nervous any more blatantly than if she'd screamed it at him from across the room. Why was an interesting question, one that he intended to get the answer to sometime this evening, but not before he put her at ease. Concentrating on her responses instead of his own gave him something to focus on, which eased his own rampant reactions.

Throughout the evening, he kept the topics of conversation light and varied. She talked to hundreds of people a week and was obviously a people person, so it wasn't very hard to get her to discuss things of a non-intimate nature. He learned that her parents were gone and her close family was made up of good friends. In turn, she learned that he had two younger brothers and two sisters with whom he was close. As they sat down to dinner in a cozy, out of the way booth of an Italian restaurant, he asked her about her job, and by that time she was relaxed enough to regale him with stories about some of the customers she had spoken to over the course of the time she'd been with the bank.

"The best one yet, though, is the time a lady called in and gave me her account number. I pulled it up and she asked me what her balance was. The thing is, she had a business account . . . as a

psychic! Why the hell was she calling me for her balance; didn't she know what it was?"

He'd been taking a sip of water at that point, which he almost choked on. As he watched her delicately devour a chocolate chip cannoli, he realized that he hadn't laughed so much in years. His stomach muscles hurt, although not nearly as much as the bulge of his ever-present erection. He'd had to adjust his position so much this evening that it would be a wonder if she didn't think that he had a bad case of hemorrhoids.

"You like your job," he said, capturing her hand as she laid her napkin on the table. He was pleased to note that her fingers were about fifty degrees warmer than they had been at her house.

She smiled at him, and parts of him melted while other parts – unbelievably – hardened. "Yeah, I do. I think that's ninety-nine point nine percent of being happy for me is having a job that I don't dread going to every morning."

Jake shook his head in complete agreement. "Me, too."

Sophie got him talking about his chosen profession and raving about a couple of snafus he'd run into with vendors, and by that time, they were back at her house. He went around the car and opened the door for her, something she was completely unused to a man doing, but he had growled in playful reproach when she got out of the car by herself at the restaurant. Once she'd dug the keys out of her small bag, he took them out of her hands and opened the front door for her to precede him, stepping inside and closing the door quietly behind him.

She folded the wrap and laid it over the back of the sofa, turning to see him leaning back against the door, watching her. He saw the beginnings of fear – or was it merely the awareness of him as a man that he had wanted her to have – creeping in around the edges of her eyes, but before she had a chance to protest, he walked over to her and pulled her to him, holding her in place with his hands splayed at the small of her back. Jake rubbed the material of her dress experimentally under his fingers. "If I would've known earlier how soft this was we would have never left the house. This stuff is an open invitation to touch the wearer." He held her eyes, saying deliberately, "I'm going to kiss you." And he suited actions to words.

He's so damned tall, Sophie thought as he bent his head towards her. Her ex-husband was her height, and that was what she was comfortable with. Jake was so . . . big! She was finding out what five foot six of soft couch potato felt like against six foot three of lifts weights daily. But his kiss was surprisingly gentle and exploratory, not ruthless and demanding, as she had expected. Not tentative, though; Sophie would bet there wasn't a tentative bone in this man's body. But she had anticipated overwhelming dominance, or at least the usual wrestling match she'd endured at the end of most of the dates she'd had since her divorce. The fact that he had invited himself into her house had made her very uneasy, although this kiss was undoing all of that. In fact, his kiss was getting her uncomfortably hot!

The moment she pulled her mouth from his, he lifted his head but didn't let her go. His right hand had roamed up her back to cover her where her bra strap would be if she had been wearing one. Now they both knew how vulnerable her already peaked breasts were to his hands or mouth, should he choose to explore them. They also both knew exactly how aroused he was by her; his insistent erection pushed firmly into her slightly rounded tummy, but for some reason, she didn't find that very alarming. It should have alarmed her that she didn't find it alarming, but she was too closed to drowning in the sensations he was creating to worry about it. It was wonderful to be held like this, cradled within his strength, kissed with experience and exquisite attention to her pleasure until she could barely think straight.

"Sophie?" he murmured against the side of her jaw.

"Mmm?"

His kisses became a little less gentle, a little more demanding as he slanted his mouth across hers and pressed his tongue past her lips. "I'm going to go before I give in to the urge to lay you down and take you right now. When are you free again?"

It was like having a bucket of ice water thrown over her. This wasn't supposed to continue. This shouldn't continue. He wasn't her type, her mind screamed. But her soul, in collusion with every inflamed nerve in her body, screamed back that he very well could be, if she would let him.

All it took to get him to release her was a small palm pressed over his breast, and he stepped back, steadying her when she stumbled

a little at the loss of his support. “I, uh, don’t think we should see each other again,” she said softly but firmly, not meeting his eyes.

He had been as close to affable with her as he could be, but all of that dissolved in a puff of smoke. Fascinated, she saw the change come over him like a mime had waived a hand over his face to change his expressions. He took a step forward, and she took a step back. They did that dance until he had cornered her against a wall. “And what brought you to that conclusion, Sophie?” he asked in a frighteningly civilized tone. Jake’s finger beneath her chin gently tipped her face up so that she had no choice but to look at him.

“Ahhh, I umm . . .” He didn’t crowd her, didn’t press himself against her lewdly or get grabby because she’d turned him down. He merely stood there, blocking any possibility of escape with his big body, waiting for her answer. Without any effort on his part, he made her feel small and vulnerable, and it was that feeling than anything else that she disliked.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“N-no,” her gaze skittered away from his.

He drew a deep breath, trying to be patient and understanding when his heart was pounding, his genitals were throbbing and he wanted nothing so much as to ease himself full up against her and slip himself into her body. “I thought you had a good time. Was I wrong?” Jake asked, the gentle pressure of his fingers bringing her eyes back to his as he leaned casually closer, putting a huge hand on the wall on either side of her head.

God, she could drown in those eyes, in his arms, if she let herself! That concern about losing herself in him, that her response to him could easily overwhelm her hard-won common sense set alarm bells ringing in her head. “I – I did enjoy tonight. It’s just that . . .” Sophie turned her head and saw that bronzed, platter-sized hand with its clean, trimmed nails and long, strong fingers. It illustrated the difference in their sizes, and a stray thought made her shiver a little: what would a man like Jake be in bed, with all that strength and determination concentrated on the woman with him? Was he a selfish lover, intent only on his own satisfaction? Some how Sophie doubted it. Did he know the extent of his own strength, or would he be

unconcerned about the weaker feminine body beneath him? Based on the gentle, controlled manner he'd had with her, she would bet on the former. Jake Ryan would use his entire body to bring the woman in his arms to the heights of pleasure. Somehow she knew it would be a matter of pride with him.

She literally shook herself from those daydreams, dragging her eyes to a safe spot just above his shoulder, although it wasn't easy to look past him – he was so big he filled almost her entire field of vision. Sheesh! She barely knew the guy and yet she was wondering how he was in bed! Dammit, she'd never been like this with anyone in her life. Sophie felt like if he would but crook his finger at her, she'd tumble into bed without a murmur of protest, and that had to stop.

Ducking under his arm to put some distance between them, she walked across the room as casually as she could when every muscle she owned was trembling with reaction, keeping her back to him, hugging herself tightly. "I just don't think it would work between us."

Sophie heard him sigh again impatiently. "No, honey, I think you know it'll work all too well, and you're afraid for some reason." Jake watched her whirl around quickly and knew his comment had been right on target. Damn his accurate perceptions, she thought.

"Come here, Sophie," Jake whispered huskily, holding his hand out to her, watching those startled eyes grow wide and hesitant. She squirmed where she stood, her mind arguing against obeying him, but the rest of her championing his cause. He waited for a short time, then said again more firmly, "Sophie."

Something in her snapped and she thought it must've been her mind, because she ended up following her heart and her hormones, coming to stand in front of him like someone in a trance. The hand he had extended to her came to rest carefully on her waist. Jake kissed her fast and hard, saying afterwards, "Since you don't seem very cooperative, you've lost the choice of when we go out next. I'm really busy this week, but I'll pick you up next Saturday and we'll get lunch and catch a movie."

With another quick kiss, he left, reminding her to lock the door behind him. She did as she was told without an argument, for once; sagging back against the door with a sigh at how weak-willed she was with that damned man!



Jake deliberately kept the tone of their next few dates very fun and casual, which seemed to keep that watchfulness out of her eyes, but the occasional hug and kiss wasn't cutting it for him, and although she wouldn't admit it yet to herself or to him, it wasn't doing it for her, either. Sophie was becoming more and more concerned that when he decided to press for more intimacy, she was going to have a terribly hard time denying him. He seemed to strike just the right chord in her – dominant but not overbearing. Why, he'd even threatened to take her over his knee a couple of times, not quite playfully, as if he wouldn't hesitate to make good on the threat if she pushed him too far. He was reassuringly protective – trying to at least call to make sure she got home all right if she had to work a late shift, making sure she didn't run the gas in her car down to empty by filling the tank himself (to which he'd overridden her objections rather forcefully), and getting her a hands-free set up for using her cell phone in the car. Jake kept in close contact with her, calling every day - depending on their schedules - emailing her silly electronic greeting cards to make her smile and taking her out three or four times a week, if only just for lunch.

It was a Friday night, and he had picked her up at seven from a later shift at work. Sophie was having one of those days where she just should have stayed in bed – everything she put her hands to she either ended up breaking or dropping. She hadn't slept well the night before and was so out of sorts she was perpetually a hair's breadth from bursting into tears. Sure enough, her period was due in a couple of days. She hated being at the mercy of her hormones!

Jake noticed how quiet she was and the dark circles under her eyes that extended to her knees. He had greeted her in the usual way, leaning over to give her a warm kiss on the lips, but she had barely responded, staring petulantly out the window until they got to the grocery store where they were getting the makings for dinner at her place tonight. He wandered behind her, driving the cart as she rounded up what she needed – pissing and moaning like a brat over

everything: they didn't have the brand of sauce she wanted, the pepperoni wasn't sliced right, there weren't any green peppers that met her standards for acceptability . . . Throughout her tirades, Jake murmured what he hoped were soothing comments through a clenched jaw, all the while counting to ten until he was in the hundreds, rapidly depleting his thin stock of patience. If she were his little girl, he'd already have taken her out to the car and given her an attitude adjustment to the seat of her pants. He'd never seen Sophie like this and wondered what the problem was. She'd never been that sassy or bratty before.

She'd set the bread machine to make pizza dough while they were both at work, and when they got home from shopping for dinner the first thing she did was lift the lid of the machine to take a look at the dough while he put their coats away.

"Son-of-a-fuckin-bitch!" she yelled while looking down at a neat little pile of unmixed flour, yeast, and water. "Jesus H. Christ, I can't do a fucking thing right today, can I?" Sophie began to slam around the kitchen, banging pots and pans while she prepared to make them spaghetti instead of the pizza she'd been looking forward to.

Sophie knew that Jake didn't like vulgarities, and in the short time they'd been dating he hadn't known her to use many at all. It was one of the things he liked about her – she had a broad enough vocabulary that every other word wasn't "f" this or goddamn that. Although he did notice that she tended to swear more when she hung around with Julia, he had made it a point to let her know that he didn't appreciate that kind of language. Come to think of it, he'd even told her then that if she swore around him, she was likely to end up across his lap.

Jake walked slowly into the kitchen, watching her slam cupboard doors and crash pots down onto the stove. "I take it the machine didn't come on?" he asked mildly.

He saw her draw a deep breath and heard her exasperated sigh. "I forgot to leave the fucking thing plugged in," she answered angrily, not bothering to turn around and look at him or she might just humiliate herself by dissolving into tears in front of him. If she had turned around, she might have seen just how close she was to getting it on her tender bare cheeks.

Jake crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s quite enough language, Sophie,” he chided gently. “Don’t get so worked up about it. Spaghetti is fine with me. We’ll do pizza another time.”

Sophie’s reply was a measure of truly how distraught she was. “You can take your prissy thoughts about my language and stick them where the sun don’t shine, Jake Ryan. I’ll have dinner ready as soon as I can, if you’ll just sit down and shut up.” As soon as she uttered the last phrase, she knew it was the last thing in the world she should say to a man like him. She fervently wished she could retract her words because Jake wasn’t likely to take her blatantly disrespectful tone lying down; especially when she’d been acting bratty since he’d picked her up. Sophie knew she was already on thin ice with him, but something in her blurted out the words before she considered the consequences. Silence thundered behind her, and she knew she’d pushed every last button he owned. Sophie’s shoulders slumped defeatedly as she turned around, an abject apology already sitting on the tip of her tongue.

Chapter 4

Just as she feared, his face was as hard and unyielding as a rock. Unforgiving didn't begin to cover that severe expression. It made her stomach cramp nervously just to look at him. "Come here, Sophie."

She did exactly the opposite, backing several steps away while he pinned her with that disappointed gaze. "I'm sorry, Jake, I –"

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You don't want to make me come get you, little girl." A soft, uncompromising threat.

Sophie grimaced, but lifted her chin, saying exactly what was on her mind at the moment. "You look too angry to approach. I'm not about to come over there and have you do something completely Neanderthal like put me over your knee."

One step. One slow, deliberate step towards her as he held her eyes, willing her to obey him. "Come here, Sophie. I'm not going to say it again. If I have to chase you, you're going to get it twice as bad."

Her mouth was suddenly dry, her breathing uneven as she saw that look in his eyes – this was no joke. He meant business. Gathering every ounce of bravery she owned, she took a small step towards him, trying to divert him with a sheepish smile. "I've had a very bad day, Jake –"

He struck quickly and silently, like a snake, grabbing her upper arm in an unbreakable but not painful grip and pulling her over to the eat-in dining room table where he took a straight backed chair out and

sat down. His fingers curled into the waistband of her dress slacks as he maneuvered her to stand between his legs.

Sophie was thunderstruck. My God, he was really going to spank her! She was at once both incredibly shocked and incredibly turned on by the notion, but foremost in her mind was the idea that if this man laid his broad, callused palm across her naked bottom even just once; it was going to hurt like hell! Pain was something she had always tried to avoid in her life, despite her fantasies about just this type of scene, and he didn't look like one smack was going to do it for him. She was likely to end up spending quite a while over his knee until he felt she'd learned her lesson.

So when he loosened his grip enough to unbutton her pants, Sophie did the only smart thing and bolted. The problem was that unless she wanted to run outside into the parking lot of the condo complex and make a public display of the situation, there was no where to run to. Sophie was sure old Mrs. Whitmire next door would love to eyeball the two of them with her binoculars, the nasty old biddy. Hell, she'd probably sell tickets and hawk popcorn, dammit!

She took the coward's way out, running down the hall and into her bedroom, where she effectively trapped herself. Damn her love of solid oak furniture!!! Nothing in the room was light enough for a single woman to push in front of the door by herself. So she used a trick she'd seen in all of those police dramas she loved to watch and tucked herself into the corner behind where the door would open, hoping he'd go far enough into the room that she could slip out behind him and escape again – for however short a reprieve.

Sophie bit her lip worriedly, straining her ears to hear him as he advanced down the hall minutes later. "You're in a heap of trouble already, Sophie girl. Come out here. Don't make it worse than it already is."

Yeah, right, she thought. And why would I actively contribute to my own demise?

She saw the doorknob turn, and suddenly he stepped into the room far enough for her to creep up a little behind him and out towards the living room, but he caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and grabbed her wrist as she stepped into the hall, pulling her

backwards against him. Jake used her own momentum against her and swept her up into his arms, carrying her out to the couch where he put her on her feet directly in front of him, but kept an arm securely around her waist. There was absolutely no hope of getting away from him twice in one night. Sophie knew her fate was sealed by the grim set of his mouth as he made short work of her pants and panties, pulling them down below her knees. Just before he positioned her face down over his lap Sophie had a moment of regret that the first time he saw her intimately was when he was about to administer a spanking.

He was too angry to notice her or lecture and scold, as he usually would, so he merely set about turning those lovely cream hillocks into angry red hemispheres. Jake adored spanking a woman, for fun and for punishment, and he did it as he did most things – logically, methodically, and thoroughly, much to the despair of unlucky girl on the receiving end – and Sophie's bottom was just ripe for the application of a hand or implement. Her butt was full and round, almost overly so, and each cheek wobbled enticingly as its turn came to feel the impact of his smacks. Swats were dispersed as evenly as possible over the entire ample surface of her skin until it was the glowing red shade of a mid-summer sunset.

Then his palm got to work on her thighs just as diligently until the two shades matched perfectly. Sophie screamed from the moment his palm first caressed her butt with a loud crack, largely from the pain but also from the humiliation of her position; face down over his lap getting the spanking of a lifetime. She tried squirming and wiggling but the iron hard arm at the small of her back easily kept her in perfect position, entirely vulnerable to his punishing hand. The small hand she put back to try to deflect some of his well-placed strokes was efficiently pinned out of the way without so much as a pause in the terrible rhythm of slap, slap, slap that he beat out on her rapidly swelling cheeks. Scissor-kicking didn't get her anywhere, either, and she knew that it just made her look all that much more like a naughty little girl getting her due, but the fire he was setting in her bottom demanded that she do something, however ineffectual, to stem the flames that caused her to scream and cry and yell but receive not one ounce of mercy from her punisher.

Jake stopped when he thought he had made his point, and not before, regardless of her tears and moans. He knew that those were both inevitable during any good spanking, and that the trick to an

effective spanking was not letting those things – or any promises of better behavior or money or sex – deter the spanker from giving the unlucky lady a hot, sore, swollen butt when needed. Sophie definitely needed to be brought up short and reminded of just where the line was about how much a man could be expected to put up with from his lady. And he was just the man to give her a thorough, painful lesson.

When he was done, he held her in place for a few minutes, then stood her up in front of him and returned her pants and panties to their proper place, jaw clenching a little as her breath hissed through her teeth when the material scraped over her raw, red flesh. Recovering herself a little, Sophie pushed his hands away and zipped and buttoned her own pants through tears that continued to fall. Without a word, Jake stood and lifted her into his arms for a second, then sat back down again in the big recliner with her on his lap. He settled her stiff body against him then held her close while one booted foot set the rocker into soothing motion.

Sophie sniffled and hiccoughed against the rough cotton of his shirt, still sobbing as his hand rubbed up and down her tense back. The potent combination of his discipline and his kindness were more than she could bear. Small soft sobs became deep hard ones that wrenched at his gut, but he merely continued to hold her and comfort her throughout it. Eventually, she cried it all out, her breathing becoming slow and regular, then, very quickly, the deep rhythmic sounds of sleep.

Jake smiled a little to himself and kissed the top of her head as he carefully reached down between them and adjusted himself away from the zipper of his pants. Just being around her was enough to arouse him painfully. Taking her lacy pink panties down and spanking her, then holding her close like this did nothing to deflate the parts of him that seemed to have a mind of their own around her. Her hot little bottom was planted invitingly over him, and every impulse he owned encouraged him to arch his hips up against her.

But the trusting weight of her sleeping in his arms kept him from doing that and much, much more. Jake held her until she began to stir a half-hour later, despite his cramping muscles and the paperwork that was piled up on his desk at home. When she began to stretch and unintentionally rub herself against him, he stood with her

in his arms and began walking down the hall to her bedroom. "I'm going to put you to bed, sweetheart. I think you've had a bad day all 'round," he whispered against her hair.

Sophie didn't say anything, not quite recovered from the deep, peaceful sleep she'd had in his arms, letting him undress her like a treasured little girl and tuck her under the covers of her bed on her tummy. Jake kissed her lightly on the cheek, saying, "I'll come by tomorrow and take you out to lunch," before he left, dragging himself away before he ended up tumbling into bed beside her like his gonads wanted.

Sophie shook her head, trying to think of why she didn't want him to take her to lunch - but was unable to clear the cobwebs of sleep out of her mind before she fell back into a deep slumber.

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Her butt reminded her of exactly why she no longer liked him as soon as she rolled onto it the next morning without thinking. Just before she showered, she happened to glance at her poor sore bottom; his huge handprint stood out clearly in several angry red spots, and she ended up taking a cooler than normal shower trying to soothe it a bit.

Since she didn't intend to go anywhere today, just get some housework done – laundry, vacuuming, etc – she put on an old pair of comfortable gray sweats and a horrible tie-dyed t-shirt with the bank logo on it that she wouldn't wear out of the house on a bet. If Mr. High-and-Mighty-Likes-to-Beat-Helpless-Women thought that she was calmly going to go out to lunch with him after what he'd done to her last night, he had another thing coming.

Sophie was singing – badly – along with a CD of eclectic songs she'd burned, everything from "Could We Start Again Please?" from the film version of "Jesus Christ Superstar" to "Used to Love Her" off the old Guns 'N' Roses "Lies" CD. She was bumping and grinding to a very loud version of George Michael's "I Want Your Sex" while pushing the vacuum down the hall. Just as she was thrusting her pelvis back and forth lustily and singing for all she was worth, "Don't you know I love you till it hurts me, baby. Don't you think it's time

you had sex with me?” someone’s hands grasped her hips, pulling her back to nuzzle her bottom with a full-fledged hard on.

“Yes, I do,” Jake answered huskily into her ear before he kissed it.

In a delayed reaction, she jumped about three feet in the air, screaming so loudly that he had to cover his ears. Laughing a little, he went into the living room and turned the stereo down just as the J Geils Band started whining about their angel becoming a centerfold. Jake peeped around the corner with a playful grin and saw that Sophie was still standing there at the end of the hall, hugging herself and trembling.

“Are you okay?” he asked seriously.

Sophie stalked toward him, shaking a finger. “Don’t you ever do that to a woman who lives alone, Jacob Albert Ryan! Are you out of what little mind you had in the first place?”

He held his arms out to her, but she sidestepped them neatly without a second glance, and he tucked his hands into his pockets, eyeing her with a considering look. “Then the single woman should be smart enough to lock her doors,” he reprimanded evenly.

God, it should be against the law for any one man to look that damned sexy this early in the day, she thought irreverently, and then reminded herself strictly that how sexy he was didn’t make any difference to her after what he’d done last night. Apparently, though, her nipples hadn’t gotten the message that she was supposed to be completely impervious to him, because they were achingly peaked and very evident, since she was braless beneath the worn t-shirt. She saw his gaze flicker to her chest just long enough to take note of this reaction and her obvious state of undress.

Sophie crossed her arms over her breasts, making him smile just a little. “What are you doing here?” she asked in just the right cold, carefully neutral tone. Score one for her.

“We have a date for lunch.”

“Correction. We had a date for lunch.”

His eyebrow rose. “Are you sick?”

“Yes, of you and your caveman ways,” she threw back at him. “I won’t date someone who gets his jollies out of beating women.” Despite the fact that she could see a muscle flexing in his jaw, she pressed on. “What you did last night was entirely unacceptable and unforgivable.” Sophie walked bravely in front of him and turned up the stereo, saying loudly over Steven Tyler’s unmistakable wail that “falling in love was so hard on the knees”, “I’m sure you can show yourself out.”

Without another glance in his direction, she resumed vacuuming, trying desperately to lose herself in the song, but she was much too aware of his intimidating presence in the living room to just dismiss him from her consciousness as if he wasn’t staring at her with eyes that threaten to bore holes through her soft flesh. She heard him turn down the volume, and sensed that he was drawing closer to her, but Sophie refused to look up until a big foot clicked the “off” button on her canister vacuum. Before she had a chance to bitch at him and get him angrier than he already was, he grabbed her arm and propelled her back into the living room, steering her onto his lap again as if she’d never left last night.

She tried valiantly to get back up, but he wasn’t about to allow it, stilling her futile attempts at escape with ridiculous ease, although he was also depressingly careful not to hurt her in any way. Sophie wondered at the contradiction in those behaviors, then reminded herself again that his muddled motivations, whatever they were, were of no concern to her now. So she lay there, stiff as a board in his arms while he rocked them gently.

Jake was trying to gather his thoughts. He hadn’t expected that she’d want to stop seeing him, not that he was going to allow that. They fit together frighteningly well. The fact that he’d spanked her, and wouldn’t hesitate to do it again in the future should the need arise, was something she was just going to have to learn to deal with – hell, she was the one who controlled whether or not he paddled her bottom, anyway, by her own behavior. All she had to do was act like an adult and treat him with the courtesy and respect she’d extend a perfect stranger, and he’d never have to turn her over his lap again. Jake had to admit he would consider that a terrible waste, but if spanking didn’t turn her on, it didn’t turn her on. He could live without it, and it was probably way too much to ask for that she like what he liked down to that unusual detail.

Her hair was down, the way he liked, and he began to play with it, threading his fingers through the waves and watching the curls wrap themselves around his fingers like lovers – the way he wished she would wrap herself. But there she was, on his lap, sitting there like an angry, petulant little lump. He sighed heavily.

Suddenly, something struck him; something he'd passed lightly over in a conversation he'd had with Julia when he'd taken her out to lunch that time. Something about Sophie having a height requirement for her men – she liked them short, unlike ninety-nine point nine percent of women.

“Why do you prefer short men?”

The question came so out of the blue it put her off balance and she replied automatically, “They’re just . . . easier. I’d rather be with a man that doesn’t tower over me like some people.”

Jake ignored the dig and steeled himself for the answer to his next question. “Were you abused?”

“No.”

“No man bigger than you ever took his fists to you?”

“Nope.”

Although he was infinitely thankful at her answer, he couldn’t help asking, “Then why?”

The simply asked question compelled her to answer as best she could. She still hadn’t relaxed against him, sitting up a little trying to hold herself away from him mentally and physically. As she spoke her eyes fixed on a point across the room, and he knew this was an answer from the depths of her personality. “I’ve been very lucky in my life. Spoiled, even.” Sophie snorted. “Hell, you’re the first person to ever even spank me.”

Jake remained still and watchful, his eyes searching her face almost lovingly.

“I don’t do casual sex, so I’ve only had two affairs in my life, and I’ve been lucky enough that they were both extremely positive experiences. But they were also both with men who were my height.

Until you, I've never even dated someone taller than me more than once, but Julia said you were the exception to the rule.

"I think it has to do with how vulnerable I feel during sex. It's an act of extreme trust for a woman to open her body to a man, accept his weight on her, and take a part of him into her physically. Honestly, I can't think of any other time in my life when I've felt as exposed to potential harm as the first time I made love with each of my partners. I mean, you're naked with your legs spread, and someone who is at least half again your size and weight is trying to get into a part of you that your parents have spent their lives trying to get you to keep everyone – including yourself – away from." She shrugged, still staring thoughtfully across the room. "So I guess I've always chosen men I thought I could take if it came down to it."

He smiled wryly. "And I definitely don't fit into that category."

Sophie stared down at him accusingly. "Yeah, you're big and you're mean and you hit."

Jake caught her chin in his hand, forcing her to meet his eyes. "I spanked you because you were being a disrespectful little brat. I'll do it again if I need to. But I would never come at you with my fists, ever. And I'll never hurt you in bed, either, sweetheart."

"You'll have to excuse me if I'm skeptical, Jake, considering that my butt still hurts this morning," she replied sarcastically. She reached around with one hand and rubbed the area they were discussing reflexively, as if just calling it to mind made it start to throb again.

Jake's hands covered hers as he rubbed gently. "Poor baby." Some how his sympathetic tone didn't quite ring true, and she told him as much while struggling unsuccessfully to retrieve her hand. He wasn't about to let her go, so he merely held her captive there, efficiently pinning her other hand there in the same way and forcing her to arch her back so that her full, firm breasts rested against his muscled chest, making him draw in a quick breath with the pleasure of having her body lying against his. Jake nuzzled his face against that sensitive area where neck joined collarbone, then boldly licked his way up to her lips, tickling her unintentionally and making her shriek with giggles until his mouth claimed hers.

Sophie had never met a man who could turn her insides to jelly as easily as Jake could. All of her resolve about not letting him near her again melted as she did against him, breasts flattened almost painfully against his, tongue locked in a sensual duel with his as he released her hands and claimed her body with gentle, possessive hands. When he finally drew back a little, her head fell onto his shoulder, as if she hadn't the will to hold it up any longer.

"Oh dear God, you are so dangerous," she whispered despairingly against his shirt.

Unable to resist the temptation her breasts presented Jake released her hands and cupped a precious weight in his palm, his thumb teasing the taut tip in an excruciatingly slow rhythm. He ate up her spontaneous moans and the way she arched her back again to press herself even further into his possessive hand. Sophie's hands white knuckled the arms of the chair as he set his other hand to the same task, covering the lonely mound and applying the same sensual torture that it's mate had been subject to, making her whimper and writhe to the tune he played on her body.

Sophie thought she was going to explode; every relentless stroke of his thumb over the sensitive crests of her nipples sent jolts of sensation directly to her clit, as if had his hands between her legs rather than gently cradling her breasts. Slowly, deliberately, he wormed his hands under her shirt, his strong index finger and thumb capturing her nipples and giving them each a gentle squeeze.

God, he loved the feel of her in his hands! He'd never met a woman who was so responsive. She seemed almost ready to orgasm and all he was doing was playing with her breasts! Not that he was too far off himself, as usual.

"Unless you want me to carry you into your bedroom, you need to get off me," came the low, husky warning.

Her head snapped forward from where it had fallen back when he had doubled her pleasure by cupping both breasts at the same time in his work-roughened palms. Jake's eyes were dark and piercing, and he saw the familiar hesitation creep into Sophie's clear gaze as she worried her bottom lip with her front teeth. Slowly, she stood up, and he adjusted himself into the least uncomfortable position he could find,

which was no comfort at all. He knew the only true ease he'd get would be sinking into her welcoming body, but she obviously wasn't ready for that yet. Wryly, he thought to himself that he hoped he'd live long enough to accommodate her when the time came.

She wasn't going anywhere or doing anything, just standing there in the middle of the living room like a lost soul. Jake planted himself in front of her, saying tightly, "Lunch or bed." He wasn't going to give her any other choices, but he knew which of those two she'd pick. She wasn't ready, and he wasn't ready to push her.

"Lunch," she said in a sex-roughened voice, then she cleared her throat, somewhat embarrassed. "But I have to change." Fighting her way out of the sensual web he'd woven, she darted into her bedroom and sagged back against the door for a couple of seconds. God, she could still feel the blood throbbing through the engorged flesh between her legs, and her nipples were hard as pebbles! What that man did to her was unbelievable, and she was no inexperienced virgin. She'd be lucky if sex with him didn't kill her, but what a way to go!

Chapter 5

Several weeks later, Jake reciprocated Julia and Matt's invitation by asking them to his place. Sophie was already there when the couple arrived, rubbing their hands together from the cold. The weather had taken a horrible turn and it had been absolutely frigid out there for the past several days with the biting wind from the ocean making everything that much colder and damper.

Julia nudged Sophie in the ribs as they wandered into Jake's big kitchen. "So is it going to be edible?" she asked in a stage whisper, getting a mock angry glare from the chef for her trouble.

Sophie replied in the same fashion. "I dunno. You know what a man considers to be a seven-course meal, Jules. A hot dog and a six pack. I checked his fridge . . . he's got both!" Sophie tried unsuccessfully to dodge his sharp swat to her butt as she passed by where he was standing at the stove. Jeez, even when he was playing he hit damned hard, she thought. After she'd gotten everyone what they wanted for drinks, Sophie and Julia took up residence a safe distance from Jake, leaning on the island that separated the kitchen from the living room.

"Hey, do you know how men and beer bottles are alike?" Julia asked, picking up on Sophie's theme.

"No, Julia, I don't know how men and beer bottles are alike."

"They're both empty from the neck up!"

Jake, who was almost finished with the dinner preparations, let out a sufficiently manly growl, then called in the reinforcements. “Hey, Matt, we’re being maligned in here. Get in here and help defend our sex.”

Matt bounded to the rescue where he’d had parked himself in front of Jake’s large screen TV. “How could anyone possibly malign us, Jake?”

Sophie snickered loudly as the two men glared at her, hurt expressions and all. Apparently, Matt was just warming up to his subject. “Why, we’re two good looking men – “

“Take your hand off my shoulder when you say that, please,” Jake asked with a pained expression.

Matt scowled at the interruption, but did as he was told, continuing in a suitably pompous tone, “we’re employed, we’re sober, we’re housebroken – “

“Barely,” Julia drawled.

“And, hell, forgetting all of that other stuff, just on the basis of stud service, we’re freakin’ irreplaceable!”

Sophie was thinking, what stud service, because she wasn’t sleeping with Jake yet, but Matt apparently didn’t know that. She couldn’t resist rising to the challenge and succumbed to a dramatic coughing fit. “Cough, cough, cucumber, cough, cough.”

Julia nearly fell down laughing, but the men were noticeably silent. Stricken, even. “Tickle in my throat,” she explained vacuously, batting her eyelashes for good measure.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Julia slapped Sophie’s arm playfully. “Girl, we can’t even go there.”

Jake had ambled over closer to Sophie. “Can’t go where?”

Sophie and Julia looked at each other and burst into giggles. Sophie sobered first. “Into the hundred or so odd reasons why a cucumber is better than a man.”

“Oh, gross!” Matt exclaimed, screwing his face around in distaste.

“Get over it, Matt,” Sophie scoffed. “I bet you’ll be watching the women fondling the cukes in the produce section a little more closely, though, won’t you?”

“Hey,” Julia interrupted, “have you given him a ruler yet?”

Sophie blushed furiously. “I certainly have not,” she replied primly, unable to meet Jake’s questioning look.

“Okay, I’ll bite, although I’m afraid to know the answer. What’s with the ruler?”

Jake’s inquiry was directed solely at a fire engine red Sophie, who started to squirm with embarrassment. But he wasn’t going to let her off the hook that easily after she had cast aspersions at his half of the human race.

So she bit the bullet, cleared her throat, and looked at the cupboard above his left shoulder when she made her explanation. “Supposedly, if a man measures the distance from the heel of his palm to the end of his middle finger, it’s supposed to be the same length as his uh –“ she fumbled for a polite term - “equipment.”

Jake held his big paw up in front of his face, enjoying her discomfort enormously, as he speculated, “I think I have a ruler in my spare room . . .” and wandered off down the hall.

The conversation went generally downhill from there. Over a superb dinner of filets, salad, homemade bread, and chocolate cream pie for dessert, Matt explained wisely to Jake that they were always like this when the Sex Club had met the night before. Jake nodded, thinking he was going to see to it that Sophie turned in her membership card to that particular organization. He’d already caught her looking at his hands occasionally, though, and one of those times he’d let her know she’d been found out by winking at her outrageously.

The wine flowed, as did the whining; the girls bitched about work, the men about sports, and they all bitched about the weather, taxes, and the ridiculously hard time the country had had electing a president.

“Hey, did Mark ever get a hold of you Friday before you left?” The thought had just popped into Julia’s slightly sodden mind. They were relaxing in the living room after dinner.

Jake and Sophie were curled up on the couch together, his arm around her shoulders as she leaned against his chest comfortably. “No, why?”

“He missed me too, but there’s a message on my voice mail and email.”

Sophie snorted in a decidedly unladylike manner. “That man is always calling me or beeping me or emailing me . . . “If she had been just a little less soaked, she would have felt Jake stiffen behind her, but she was feeling no pain. Sophie almost never drank, so when she did even just a glass and a half with dinner was enough to get her tipsy. Jake had refrained entirely this evening, except for one glass of wine at dinner, which was just about enough to relax him and that was it.

If Julia had been in her right mind, she would have thought twice before spilling her thoughts out with no censorship. “He’s definitely warm for your form, Soph. I’ve been telling you that for the past year . . .”

It was exactly the wrong thing to say in front of Jake, whose heart started trying to beat its way out of his chest at the thought that someone besides him was after Sophie. He considered that entirely unacceptable. Outwardly, he remained calm, but every muscle he owned was looking for something to crush violently, preferably an important body part of his rival’s.

Sophie scowled mightily. “I’m the only unattached person in the department that doesn’t chase him. Why would he want a woman who doesn’t want him?”

Julia shrugged and almost threw herself off balance. “You’re a challenge. Everyone in the department knows you don’t sleep around; that it’s been years since your divorce and that you’re, shall we say . . . uninhibited. He must figure you’re about ripe for the pickin’.”

Jake had had about enough of this conversation, and rose before he decided to put his fist through the nearest wall. “Anyone for more dessert?” he growled in a voice that did not encourage affirmative answers. Matt got up slowly and stretched. He was sleepy

but not drunk, being the designated driver. Sophie and Jake saw them out, then Sophie pitched in and helped Jake straighten out the place. As the effects of the wine were slowly wearing off, she was beginning to regret large portions of the conversation that had occurred throughout the course of the evening. Jake was learning entirely too much about her, too many intimate details, and from the wrong source at that, and he didn't look any too happy about what he'd found out. In fact, he was looking more than a little pissed at the moment.

Sophie rubbed her suddenly cold hands together nervously while inching her way towards the door. "Well, I really enjoyed dinner – I take back everything I said about how men can't cook," she chuckled breathlessly as he merely stood there with his hands on his hips, his mouth an unhappy slash across his face and his eyes boring holes right through her.

"But I have to get up early tomorrow and . . . uh . . . wash my hair." God, how weak an excuse could she possibly come up with? Just when she turned her back to him, thinking she might make a clean getaway, Sophie felt his hands close around her upper arms as he uttered those dreaded words, "I think we need to have a talk, you and I."

Oh, shit, she thought, but let him pull her back into the living room. Sophie figured they'd sit on the couch, but he seemed to have a thing about liking to have her on his lap – either facing him or not – so he settled into a large, well worn leather recliner while he held her like a small child within the warm confines of his arms.

Jake tilted her chin up so that their eyes met. "I want you, Sophie McClellan," he growled.

Smiling, she wiggled a little. "I can tell." And she could. There was always a hard ridge beneath her bottom when they sat this way.

"How much longer are you going to make me wait?"

The question was quietly asked, and Sophie had to acknowledge that he hadn't pressured her about sleeping with him. They'd engaged in some wonderful petting sessions, but he never let it get to the point where he couldn't stop. And lately that seemed to be a short and shorter time. Although he hadn't complained about how

much time she was demanding before they made love, she knew that it wasn't easy for him to walk away from her. It wasn't any easier for her to let him walk away, but she was a naturally cautious person. Realistically, though, she did feel she knew him well enough that she felt safe with him – despite the disparity in their sizes. In fact, letting him rock her like this was getting to be something she craved – his closeness, the cocooning strength of him surrounding her, demonstrating physically that his size could be a source of great comfort and security - a haven. It had been so long that she'd forgotten the power of touch, and Jake seemed to delight in reminding her.

Pressing her closed eyes against the warmth of his neck, she asked softly, "When is the next time you can get off?"

Parts of Jake practically came on the spot. His full erection became even fuller, and he seriously thought he was going to embarrass himself until he reeled his imagination in ruthlessly. He had never waited this long for a woman, but Sophie filled every void in his life – she was smart, and funny, and cute, and liked most of the same things he did. Hell, she even seemed genuinely interested in his job, which tended to bore most women to death within the first five seconds. He enjoyed her company, and knew instinctively that he would love having her explode in his arms.

He wanted her like he wanted to take his next breath, but he didn't want to make her feel that she had to sleep with him to keep him, so he had been patient above and beyond the call. He was at war with himself; Jake had never experienced such a deep need to protect and take care of a woman, especially not one who would so obviously disdain those feelings but was also so much in need of a man who was not afraid to exhibit them.

"You sure?" Jake couldn't believe he was asking her that, but he felt he had to.

"Yes," came a tiny voice that didn't sound at all sure.

That was as chivalrous as his hormones would let him get. If she didn't want to, then she shouldn't have made any compromise. It was incredibly hard for him to concentrate on trying to figure out when he could arrange a whole weekend off, so he just picked one and

everyone and everything else could go to Hell as far as he was concerned.

“Two weeks from yesterday.” Jake calculated quickly in his mind. “Friday the nineteenth.”

“Friday?” she asked faintly.

“Yes, Friday,” he growled back. “If you’re lucky, I’ll let you out of bed sometime on Sunday, but then again, maybe not.” And he wasn’t kidding.

He heard her swallow hard. “Ok.”

Why was this so hard for her? He honestly didn’t understand it. “Are you a virgin?” he asked suddenly.

Sophie pulled away and looked at him, a scowl slanting her mouth. “I was married, Jake. No, I’m not a virgin.” She knew he was having a hard time grasping where she was so reluctant about this so she cuddled against him again, feeling contented and safe, saying, “I’m a xenophobe.”

“I like Lucy Lawless a lot, myself but . . .” he grinned.

She hit him for being deliberately obtuse and he pretended to be severely hurt, snickering all the time. “You know what it means. I hate new things. Learning new things, doing new things, the first time with someone new . . . If I can’t do it right – perfectly from the start, no learning curve – then I don’t want to do it at all.”

“You’re my little type A, all right,” he said ruefully, kissing the top of her head.

Sophie sighed. “Besides, I’ve been out of the relationship game for going on five years. I feel like I need someone who – someone that comes with training wheels.” Jake laughed at the bicycle analogy. “You, you’re a racing bike, or a mountain bike. I’m practically a tricycle, and I feel way out of my league with you. And, well, I don’t want to do something you don’t like, or something wrong, or something that grosses you out, and what if I’m naked and you don’t like what you see – “

“Hold it right there, young lady,” Jake warned, pulling her hard against him. “I want you to stop worrying about things like that right

now.” He held his hand up as if he was taking an oath. “I hereby promise to be excruciatingly honest with you in bed and tell you exactly what I like and what I don’t like. I promise to ravish you nonstop for at least forty-eight hours, and I’m sure during that time I’ll suggest something that’ll gross you out. It’s a forgone conclusion. Tastes differ.” He chuckled her under the chin, giving her a stern look. “And as to not liking you naked, I already love the way you look. You’d turn me on from halfway across the world when I’m three weeks dead, honey.” Jake kissed her possessively. “And you can take that to the bank, Sophie McClellan.”

Sophie kissed him then, putting her whole heart and soul into it and drawing a deep moan from Jake that sounded like it had risen up from the very soles of his feet. She leaned her forehead against his lips for a moment. “Thank you for being so patient with me about not wanting to jump into bed with you. I appreciate it. Most men wouldn’t have bothered.”

She brought her head up in time to see his feral grin. “I intend to make it a weekend you won’t soon forget. And, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not most men. I don’t give up that easily on something I want. You’re worth waiting for, Soph.”

“I hope so,” she said, biting her lip again, and Jake had to stop himself from turning her over his lap for her lack of self-confidence.

But he decided, instead, to cuddle her close, pressing her head back against his shoulder and cupping her breast gently in his hand, taking advantage of the intimacy of the moment to get her to talk to him about her likes and dislikes. He figured she was probably still a little loosened up from the wine, and hoped that would make her feel a little more comfortable about opening up to him.

His lips pressed against her shell ear. “So, why does your department consider you ‘uninhibited’?” he asked, holding her firmly but carefully when she squirmed at the question.

Damn that Julia and her big fat mouth! Sophie yelled in her mind. “Uh . . . I dunno.”

Jake’s voice took on that stern tone that made Sophie think twice about what she was going to say. “Don’t lie to me, Sophie girl. The same thing happens to little girls that lie to me as what happens to the ones who sass me. Understand?” She nodded her head swiftly.

“Answer my question, sweetheart,” he prompted, just barely brushing a hard nipple with the pad of his thumb.

Sophie drew a deep breath. He wasn’t going to let her evade the question, and she certainly didn’t want to end up getting another of his spankings, so she told him the truth. “Well, it’s probably because of what the group of us that get together talk about, and the fact that . . .” How did she say this without making herself sound like a complete slut? “Okay, let me put it to you like this: Everyone has his or her own tastes, like you said. Things they like and things they don’t like. The people I work with tend to be younger than I am, and the ones that I meet with occasionally are just that much younger – I’m the only one in the group who saw *The Brady Bunch* the first time it was broadcast,” she said wryly, and Jake chuckled, because he’d had the same experience himself. “Anyway, we do talk about pretty intimate stuff usually – although that’s not the only thing we talk about by any means – and I just noticed that even though I’m one of the oldest, I have the shortest list of ‘won’t do’s’ in the group! I mean, I’m supposed to be the conservative old fuddy-duddy, or close to it, but the only thing the girls in their early twenties seem to want sexually is ‘man-on-top-get-it-over-with-quick’! It’s like they want to just lie there and think of England, or when they’re going to buy their next pair of shoes, or whatever . . .” Sophie frowned. “I just don’t understand it.”

She had given him the opening he wanted. “Hmmm. I’m surprised, too,” he agreed, rubbing up and down her hip slowly. “So tell me what’s on your ‘won’t do’ list.”

“Uhhh . . . no,” she replied coyly, burying her face in his chest.

Sophie could hear him take an exasperated breath. “Sophie.” He just spoke her name, didn’t yell, didn’t scream, didn’t demand, but his tone and his demeanor said it all. He wanted her to answer him and would compel her to, one way or the other.

She was squirming in his arms but he wouldn’t let her go, keeping her trapped against him easily while remaining careful not to hurt her inadvertently. The man was just too damned pushy for her own good! Finally, by contracting his arms a little, he held her still. Sophie’s back was almost against his front so that she wasn’t looking

at him at all, and he reclined the both of them so that she could stretch out, hoping that the increased intimacy of their position would help her confide in him.

Jake felt her jump a little when he bit her earlobe gently. “Do I need to warm your pretty little bottom before you’ll answer me?” He didn’t really want to, but he would, if necessary. Jake didn’t make idle threats.

“N-no!” she replied, drawing a sharp breath as he captured a tight-tipped mound in each palm, lightly pinching her nipples and making her moan. “I’ll tell you.”

“Good girl,” he praised. “No matter what you say or don’t say, honey, it’s not going to change the way I feel about you. I doubt you’ll say anything revolting, and I’m not going to run screaming out of the house.”

Sophie snorted. “That would be pretty stupid. This is your house.”

Jake frowned. “Stop trying to distract me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Mmm. I like that.”

She grimaced. “Don’t get used to it.”

“I won’t,” he grinned. “I know it was only a moment of weakness that caused you to be so deferential.”

Sophie swallowed hard and plunged ahead. “Well, children and animals head the list.”

“Mine, too,” she felt him shudder beneath her at the thought. “Those should go without saying in anyone’s book.”

She nodded vehemently, taking a minute to think. “Um, golden showers and/or scat – I figure I get shit on enough at work,” she digressed, making him chuckle. “And feet – I hate feet; mine yours, anybody’s. I could never have a foot fetish.”

He nodded but remained silent, merely stroking his fingers gently up and down her arms.

Sophie pondered for another few minutes. “I’ve never been interested in women, either.” Nothing else popped into her head. “I

think that's just about it - oh, and I don't like sixty-nine. There. I'm done."

When he didn't say anything immediately, Sophie rushed on. "Those things are pretty much non-negotiable – "

He interrupted her quickly. "And I agree with almost everything on that list."

"Almost?" She tried to crane her head around to see him, but he was holding her fast.

Jake snorted. "Well, I can hardly rule out women, right?"

"Okay, so men for you."

"Definitely. I don't care much about feet one way or the other, either – except to tickle them on occasion."

"Not mine you don't," Sophie warned moving hers away from him reflexively.

"Or massage them," he replied as if she hadn't spoken. "But armpits don't do much for me, personally."

Sophie agreed wholeheartedly. "Blech."

"What don't you like about sixty-nine?" He posed the question in an entirely non-judgmental, non-threatening manner that kept her relaxed.

She thought for a moment. It had been a while. "I just feel overwhelmed by it. Why? Is it, like, your all-time favorite position or something?"

"Nope. I don't think I have an 'all time favorite'. I like a few different ones, some more than others, but I'm no gymnast, and I don't want to have to have a blueprint next to the bed. If it's that hard a position to get into, I can't see it being that much fun."

Sophie nodded her head in agreement, mulling over what she'd learned about him silently for a moment.

Jake's hands milked her breasts slowly, possessively. "I noticed that spanking wasn't on that list, Sophie McClellan."

“Well – well, that was just an oversight on my part, Jake Ryan,” she sputtered, pissed at herself for not including that most particularly with this man, even though it would have been an out and out lie.

“What did I say to you earlier about lying to me, little girl?” he scolded softly, rolling her nipples just a little bit hard, stretching and pulling them away from her body while she writhed uncontrollably at his tender ministrations.

“It - was - an - accidental - omission,” she barely got out; what he was doing to her was making it difficult to draw a full breath. But Sophie stuck to her guns with an almost petulant air, although it was getting harder and harder to think while he was gently kneading her breasts with those long, strong fingers.

“I don’t think so,” he whispered. “I think you like the fact that I won’t let you get away with being naughty.”

“And if I said I hated it when you spanked me, would that stop you from doing it again?” Sophie asked wisely.

“No.”

“Then whether I like it or not is irrelevant.”

Since she had been so forthcoming this evening about things of a very personal nature, he decided to let her off the hook about this particular subject, although he would return to it in the future. He wanted her to admit that she needed him to spank her and that it turned her on, despite the pain – or maybe even because of it.

Jake nibbled his way up her bare neck, sending shivers down her spine, then he brought the recliner down and gave her breasts a last lingering squeeze before turning her loose. “It’s well past midnight, Cinderella. I need to get you home and tuck you into bed.” Sophie got up and stretched while Jake devoured her with his eyes, his mouth literally watering at her well-rounded form until he reeled in his unruly libido. At least now the end was in sight. “I’ll get your coat.”

“I didn’t bring one,” she admitted matter-of-factly.

He stopped in his tracks on the way to the coat closet, turning back to pin her with a disbelieving gaze. “You what?”

“I didn’t wear one.”

Jake stalked angrily back to her, pinching his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Do you know what the temperature is out there now? Good Lord, woman, it didn’t get out of the teens all day!” he practically roared.

Unfazed, Sophie replied with exaggerated patience, as if speaking to someone with an extremely low IQ. “I was in the house all day. I only went out to come here. I went from a warm house, to a warm car, to a warm house. Why would I need a coat?” She thought he was making a big deal out of nothing, but wisely refrained from saying so.

For the moment, all he did was growl while he used his remote starter to warm his own car. Then he grabbed a wool coat out of the closet and proceeded to bundle her into it, although it fell to her ankles and made her look like a little girl dressed up in her father’s coat. “No hat either, I take it?” he asked disapprovingly.

When Sophie nodded he produced a scarf and wrapped it around her head, then tucked her hands into huge leather gloves.

There was no way he could resist lecturing her. “How long have you lived in Maine? Have you ever thought that you might break down in sub-zero weather? Did you consider that you might hit some black ice and skid off the road in a blizzard and not be found for a day or more? Obviously not,” he added sarcastically. From behind tightly clenched teeth he accused while ushering her out to the car, “You need a keeper, Sophie McClellan.”

“You’re overprotective, Jake Ryan,” she shot back at him, and she nearly took a reflexive step back at the narrow-eyed glare he shot her.

He insisted on driving her home, saying he would bring her car over in the morning when she could drive her back, then he proceeded to follow her closely into the house, stalking determinedly over to her coat closet. Sophie was busy divesting herself of the heavy clothes he’d stuffed her into. “You have five coats in there, Sophie,” he chided, getting angrier by the minute. “The next time you go out of your house in this type of weather, you’d damn well better be wearing one of them, and a hat, and some gloves.” He had worked himself into a fine fury, visions of her car broken down in subzero weather with her

only wearing shirtsleeves busily dancing through his head. Jake intended to make sure that she didn't do anything that stupid again as he divested himself of his own coat, then efficiently began rolling up the sleeves of his oxford cloth shirt.

Sophie raised an auburn eyebrow, curious as to why he was baring his forearms, and only got one word out, but it was one word too many for Jake. "Why -"

Before she had a chance to react, Sophie found herself tipped over the knee of a leg Jake had planted on her sofa. She knew where this was going, and struggled mightily from the beginning, not that it did her any good. His left arm held her fast in place while his right hand made short work of pulling her skirt over her back and working her panties and pantyhose down to mid-thigh.

With his broad palm covering her vulnerable bottom, Jake replied tautly, "Because this is what you're going to get if you don't do as I tell you, that's why."

When he finally tucked a subdued Sophie into bed on her tummy a while later, still breathing raggedly and crying a little, he had secured a promise from her that eased his mind a little. He was quite certain that she'd never want him to catch her dressed improperly for the cold again, and although it had tugged at his heart to hear her sobbing contritely and moaning as he mercilessly set fire to her bottom, he knew it was what she needed and what he intended to give her unfailingly, even if she hadn't quite come to grips with that fact yet.

Chapter 6

During the days that followed, Sophie got more and more nervous, and more and more concerned that this might not be the right thing to do. Several times, she picked up the phone to tell Jake that she needed more time, but she always talked herself out of it with a scathing lecture to the effect that everyone does it, and why did she have to be such a stick in the mud anyway? It wasn't like she had her virginity to protect – certainly in this day and age that wouldn't even be a consideration. Hell, she'd been married and had a very healthy, happy way better than average sex life with her husband. What was her problem, anyway? Jake must think she was frigid, for God's sake.

But Jake was nothing like her husband. For one thing, he was about seven inches taller and about three feet broader at the shoulder. Alex had been about as easy-going and laid-back, as Jake was single-minded and determined. Sometimes Sophie thought of Jake as a big, walking, talking, chauvinistic, pushy piece of muscle . . . with nice suits, wonderful thick black hair, eyes that could melt any female at twenty paces . . . He was charmingly old-fashioned, always tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow when they were walking anywhere together, or possessively draping his arm around her waist and squeezing her gently. She could never open a door for herself before he got there, and he always saw to her comfort before his, as if making her happy made him happy, somehow. It was obvious that

Jake liked to touch her, casually or not, and Sophie liked the feel of his strong sure hands on her body.

One of the things she appreciated the most about him was the fact that although she knew that female heads turned when he entered a room, she'd never seen him checking out anyone but her. When she was with him, and even when she wasn't, Sophie knew that his entire concentration was always on her. Being the object of such intensity was a little uncomfortable at first, and she couldn't even imagine what he'd be like in bed, with all of that latent sexual energy he exuded coming to the forefront when he made love.

For the fourth time in as many days, she turned the cordless phone off instead of dialing his number. She needed to face facts – she was definitely in lust with the big behemoth, and he'd cajoled her into setting her own “do or die” deadline. And she was going to just have to “do”, because she didn't want to lose him, especially not over something that made her feel like a complete ninny, like this.

The phone in her lap rang loudly and Sophie jumped fifty feet into the air. It was nine at night, and most people were smart enough not to call her past eight or so. Or if they did, it was only the once.

“Hello?”

“Soph?” Bailey Danforth was a former co-worker and also a friend; a founding member of the infamous Sex Club, she had dropped out after leaving work to be a stay-at-home-mom to her toddler and infant, but they had all kept in touch as best as possible.

“Bail! How's it going?” Sophie barely dared to ask the question, because she could hear a screaming child in the background.

Bailey's tone was baleful. “Would you like two slightly used children? Cheap? If you don't take them, I'm going to sell them on Ebay, I swear!”

Sophie laughed. “So it's not all roses and candy on the wife and mother front, either, huh?” Bailey and Sophie had sometimes discussed how they occasionally – for moments at a time - envied each other: Sophie with her successful career occasionally yearned to be a stay at home mom, and stay-at-home mom Bailey just wanted to get out of the house, even if it was to go to work.

A derisive snort accompanied Bailey's response. "Yeah, right. I haven't had any flowers from anyone – Ken included – since Seth was born, and I'm not about to eat candy since I haven't lost the four hundred and twelve pounds I gained with Stacey." Bailey's husband adored her and the kids, but was a bit of a workaholic, although Sophie knew that it was a tired Bailey talking and that Ken would never make a disparaging comment to his wife about her weight or anything else. It sounded like Bailey needed a vacation from her children, especially since Sophie could hear a second, even more strident wail in the background as the infant Stacey added her angry two cents to the cacophony coming from the happy Danforth home.

Once Bailey returned from getting everyone settled back down, she insisted on being brought up to date on Sophie's new love interest, drooling over her friend's descriptions of what it was like to go out on several dates a week wearing something that wasn't covered in baby drool or baby food to a place where someone else did the cooking and washed the dishes.

"Sophie, you should tie this one down quickly so he doesn't get away!" Bailey advised.

Sophie was thinking that Jake might just enjoy that entirely too much, but she didn't say it, responding noncommittally, "Uh-huh."

Bailey sighed in exasperation at her friend. "Soph, you've been divorced for five years. You've been celibate for five years –"

"By choice," Sophie always amended to any discussion about her lack of lovers.

"Yeah, well," her friend grumbled, "stop being so damned choosy and get laid occasionally like the rest of us, for Chrissakes!"

Sophie chuckled. "How elegantly put, Mrs. Danforth." Bailey gave her a heartfelt raspberry. "Well, if that's the way you feel, you'll be glad to know that I intend to do just that."

The silence on the other end of the phone was deafening. "You what?" Bailey finally asked. "You finally met 'the one'?"

"I finally met someone who turns me on and seems to feel the same about me, and even if he's not 'the one', he's close enough for government work."

“This is a man I have to meet,” Bailey stated forcefully. There was a short pause, and Sophie heard a rustling of papers in the background, then, “Dammit!”

“What?”

“I lost the pool! I had January, but of 2004, not 2001!”

Sophie knew that Bailey was yanking her chain, but honestly wouldn't have put it past her 'friends' to have had a pool as to when she was going to decide to end her life a nun, as they put it. “Good.”

“Hey, there's some considerable money riding on you. You sure you couldn't hold out another couple of years? I mean, what's three more years, anyway, amongst friends?”

Her teeth clenched together in mock anger. “Yes, Bailey, I'm sure.”

“Well, all right. Seeing as it's been since the Carter administration – “ Bailey laughed at Sophie's long, threatening growl. “Hey, I did call with a reason, though.”

“There's a first time for everything, I guess!” Sophie shot back quickly, getting a reciprocal growl from Bailey. “But since you've insulted me, whatever it is, no!”

When she finally got off the phone, Sophie had been roped into babysitting Saturday, which was fine because it got her out of housework and errands. As far as she knew, she and Jake didn't have anything planned, and she enjoyed Bailey's kids in short spurts. But it sure was lovely to hand them back when they started screaming. Besides, she thought Bailey was going to offer to pay her just to get some time to herself with her husband. She had arranged a “day out” for the two of them, and Sophie had been drafted to watch the rugrats.

~ ~ ~

Jake was interested to hear what Sophie was doing Saturday when they talked later that week. He mentioned that he might try to stop by mid-afternoon at Bailey's if he could, but he was exceptionally busy trying to get everything done that he could so that their weekend

together would be free of any and all possible distractions. He intended to devote himself entirely to Sophie for nearly seventy-two hours, and he had a feeling that that would merely be a drop in the proverbial bucket considering his usual reaction to her. His threat that she might not get out of bed until Sunday was no idle chatter. Having waited this long, Jake intended to indulge himself, to revel in her body, and not let her out of his sight for the entire time, if possible. And he intended to make it not only possible, but also highly probable.

~ ~ ~

When Sophie opened the door at Bailey's house Saturday afternoon, she was surprised to see Jake standing there, looking as mouth-watering to her as ever in a pair of worn jeans and a body molding baby blue t-shirt beneath a tan leather jacket.

"Hi, sweetie," he kissed her in greeting, then relieved her of Seth, who was perched on her hip. "I'm not here for long, but I didn't want the weekend to go by without seeing you."

"Ahhh, that's so romantic, you big galoot!" The idea that he thought like that made her feel all warm inside; she knew he was flat out and was flattered that he'd carved some time out of his busy schedule to come see her. Sophie was in her glory; she loved Bailey's kids, and since Seth seemed completely content in Jake's surprisingly capable grip, she took the opportunity to warm a bottle for Stacey.

As they each settled down on the couch with a child in hand, Sophie caught Jake watching her closely. "What? I know I look like hell; I don't know how Bailey does it!" She blew a hunk of hair out of her eyes that had come out of her ponytail – or rather, been pulled out courtesy of curious toddler fingers.

Jake's voice was very soft when he answered, his eyes half shuttered as his gaze settled on her warmly. "No, I think you look wonderful . . . and very natural with a baby in your arms."

Sophie frowned at him as Seth decided to settle down on in Jake's arms and go to sleep. She could have said the same thing about

him. It had surprised the hell out of her when he had taken Seth out of her arms like he held a squirming two-year old every day. "Let's go put him down before he wakes up again," she whispered, and they both tucked the little boy into his small bed.

Before Stacey finished her bottle, Jake claimed her, too, rubbing and patting her back when she was done until she emitted a couple of tiny baby burps, spitting up a little each time onto his towel-covered shoulder. "Excuse you, punkin'," he whispered against the tiny warm head. He didn't often get to see his nieces and nephews, but Jake liked kids, babies especially. They had their own warm, clean scent and he found himself taking deep breaths as he stroked soothing up and down the tiny back. Soon she was asleep, too, and Sophie stopped cleaning up long enough to lean against the nursery doorway, watching Jake change Stacy and put her to bed with a reassuring pat on her well-padded bottom.

"Is there anything you can't do?" she asked acerbically as they walked back to the living room. Sophie started back towards the kitchen ahead of him until Jake grabbed her wrist and reeled her back to crash up against him hard, holding both of her wrists behind her in one of his hands. With each breath, her rounded breasts were mashed almost uncomfortably against his unyielding chest, and Sophie had to crane her head back to look up at where he frowned down at her.

Just before his mouth settled onto hers, he answered with just a tinge of resentment, "Yes. I can't make love to you until next Friday. But you'd better be prepared to put up with me on a more intimate level from that point on. I'm going to be at you morning, noon, and night. Start taking your vitamins now, baby." Jake's kiss was searing, his free hand boldly cupping her breast as she wiggled and writhed, half trying to get away and half wanting to give in to his dominant possession. Hard, firm lips slanted across hers as his tongue plundered her mouth, taking what he wanted from her, using his thumb and index finger to sharply pinch a distended little nipple, making her moan and renew her struggles.

"Shh-shh-shh-shh," he crooned, kissing and licking his way down her neck to the breast his hand had busily bared. Those same hot, wet lips and tongue surrounded the offended nipple, soothing one ache while creating another. When he finally released her wrists, she could do nothing but cradle his head as he suckled her avidly, moving

deftly from one nipple to the other as if he'd never get enough of her. "Tell me," he asked huskily, kissing his way back up to her lips. "If you had a baby would you breastfeed?"

Not that she planned on having a child, being thirty-four, husbandless and childless. But this was an answer was a no-brainer as far as she was concerned. "Yes," she answered, but couldn't form an intelligent thought beyond that to explain her reasoning because of what he was doing to her.

"Good," Jake seemed unusually satisfied with her response. Eventually he set her away from him, clearing his throat and coughing a little. "You're dangerous to my self-control, woman," he groaned with an endearing smile.

Sophie shivered at the thought that she affected this hard, confident man that way and smiled back, laughing out loud when she tried to returned to his arms and he stepped back, holding crossed index fingers up in front of his face like she was a vampire he was trying to ward off.

"Back!" he commanded, and she dissolved into a fit of giggles. Relenting a little, Jake hugged her tightly, saying, "I've gotta go back to work, hon. I'll call you."

Sophie's lower lip protruded at the thought that he was leaving so soon, but he was adamant. She sniffled and whimpered, making him laugh, but after stealing a quick, hard kiss, he closed the door, reminding her that he'd call her later that evening.

~ ~ ~

Jake kept close tabs on her as what he teasingly termed "zero hour" drew near. They talked on the phone every night, at least long enough to say "how was your day?" and sometimes longer. It surprised him when she let him know that she preferred that their first time be at his house, but he didn't care if they were in a tollbooth on I-95. He knew he'd be fully capable and then some wherever she chose, so whatever made her feel comfortable was fine with him.

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Although when Friday night came he'd fixed a wonderful dinner of all her favorites – filet mignon, fresh green beans, garlic mashed potatoes and chocolate cream pie for dessert, Sophie might as well have been eating cardboard. She didn't taste a single mouthful. The only thing that seemed to suit her palate was the Cabernet Sauvignon, which she kept taking healthy gulps of until he cut her off after the second glass with a firm, "I don't want you getting sick tonight."

She helped him with the dishes as Jake kept a weather eye on her. He didn't think he'd ever seen anyone so nervous. Finally, he'd had enough, bringing her to the living room couch and forcibly seating her next to him, leaning her back against his chest. Jake was amazed that he could feel the fine tremors that shook her. Jaw set, he kissed the top of her head, saying softly, "I don't like that you're so afraid of me. I'm not going to jump you, you know. I want you to want this as much as I do."

Sophie sighed and tried to calm down. "I do. I do."

Jake had a sudden thought. "If you were home right now, what would you be doing?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost eight."

"I'd probably be watching Hercules."

The TV came on and Jake switched it to Hercules, then settled down with Sophie cuddled in his arms. He kept asking her questions about her usual routine, and he already knew she usually ended up in bed around eleven or eleven-thirty, so they followed her schedule as closely as possible, which relaxed her incredibly. After "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit" ended, he stood up, holding his hand out to her.

Sophie put her smaller hand in his, asking tentatively, "Is it ok if I shower first?"

“Sure.” Jake made sure there were enough towels in the bathroom, and turned on the water for her in the huge shower stall. “Would you prefer a bath?” His bathroom was about the size of the bedroom in her condo, and it had a big sunken tub.

“No, the shower is fine.” While Sophie stripped down and got under the stinging spray, Jake removed his own clothes and stood in the bedroom debating for a moment, then gave in and did what he’d been dying to. Sophie’s eyes were closed as she wet her hair and she didn’t notice the shower door open and close, didn’t realize he had joined her until he pulled her to him with a hand on her waist. She brushed the water and hair out of her eyes and almost pushed against his wonderful chest, but he did nothing but hold her in his arms despite the fact that she could feel and had seen the rampant extent of his excitement. Christ, he was huge! And not just his equipment, but generally; Sophie was feeling a little overwhelmed because he managed to make the cavernous stall seem like a tight fit.

“Were you washing your hair?” he asked gruffly, and Sophie only nodded, not quite trusting her voice. Jake turned her carefully around, poured a small amount of shampoo into his palm, and washed her hair for her, massaging her scalp gently. She found she couldn’t remain nervous when his fingers were making her feel so fantastic. Once her hair was washed and conditioned, he lathered up both of his hands and cleaned the rest of her with long, slick strokes that explored everywhere in a leisurely and undemanding way. He left no part of her untouched, and when his fingers claimed the mound of her womanhood, finding it completely bare and smooth, his genitals contracted reflexively, and he thought he would come right then and there, keeping himself in rigid check only by the sheer strength of his will.

She tried to return the favor, but he wouldn’t allow it as he’d had a shower that afternoon and he didn’t think he would be able to tolerate her soft hands on him without pushing her up against the wall and ramming himself into her. That wasn’t the way he wanted to make love to her the first time. So Jake brought her out of shower and dried her meticulously, even to the extent of having her sit down at the vanity in the bathroom and watching avidly as she used a blow dryer quickly to get the dampness out of her hair. Through it all, his

excitement never subsided one iota, Sophie noticed after marveling silently at his size; at times his erection pressed firmly against her back or shoulder as he stood massaging her tense muscles, but never threateningly. As he continued to touch her gently, almost lovingly, she grew more relaxed, and in her relaxation, she found her own excitement growing. It felt wonderful to be touched again, especially in such a tender, attentive manner.

He took her hand in his, noting that her fingers were still a little cool, a sure sign that she remained somewhat nervous. It concerned him a little that she was so wound up about this first time with him, and although he knew she had some strange notion that it was some sort of trial she had to live through, he intended to make sure it was something she'd have no cause to regret later.

When he'd endured all he could of this sensual teasing, of having her near and naked but not beneath him, Jake took the dryer out of her hands and whisked Sophie into his arms, carrying her into his room to lay her on the bed, stretching out full length on his side beside her on her right side. Jake's bedroom was spacious and blatantly masculine, done in earth tones with the occasional hint of ginger orange, but Sophie's field of vision was filled with acres and acres of tanned, muscular male flesh. His shoulders must've been three feet across if they were an inch, heavily layered with pads of muscle that were covered with a soft layer of black down. His stomach was taut and flat, narrow hips flaring to tree-trunk sized thighs, heavy calves and big feet. And those were no lie at all.

The close up view of the erection that pointed itself at her boldly had Sophie biting her lip hesitantly until Jake put his finger under her chin and raised her eyes to his. "I promise it'll fit," his mouth quirked as he suppressed a smile at her awe-struck expression.

She gave him an "I know that, dear" look in a manner that was more like herself and much less submissive. Sophie seemed to want to look everywhere but at him until she realized several long, unbearable moments later that he wasn't even touching her. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Jake caught her hand and brought it to his lips to kiss. "Nothing, sweetie," he said soothingly. "I just like looking at you. You're beautiful."

“Thank you,” she replied by rote, and he knew she wasn’t registering a thing that he said. Another few minutes went by, and Sophie found the waiting interminable. Finally, she asked sarcastically, “Well?”

He chuckled at her demanding tone. “Well what?”

“Are we going to just lie here all night, or are we going to do something?”

His smile only broadened. “We’re going to do something. I was hoping you’d relaxed a little after the shower. I didn’t want to just jump you the moment I finally got you here.”

He’d been thinking of her, as usual. It was terribly touching, but not what she needed right now. “I’m fine.” He looked somewhat skeptical, and she felt the need to reassure him. “Really, I am.”

“You’re sure?” Jake wasn’t at all sure he could stop when he already had her naked in his bed, but he felt he needed to make the offer.

Sophie was grinding her teeth together agitatedly. “Yes.”

“And you’ll tell me if I hurt you or if I do something you don’t like?”

She sighed, putting her hand on his shoulder experimentally. “Yes, and I expect the same courtesy from you.”

The chances of her hurting him were pretty much nil, as was the probability that she’d do anything that didn’t send jolts of pleasure through every nerve he owned, but he nodded his head with what he hoped was the right amount of attentiveness while he settled his mouth eagerly over hers. Sophie kissed him back with everything she had, knowing that he was concerned about her reservations regarding their first time. She wanted to make sure he knew that she did want him, even if there still was that niggling little worry in the back of her head that she was too nervous to reach the heights with him this evening. Sophie knew her own body and its responses extremely well, and if she wasn’t completely relaxed, if she didn’t trust her partner totally, she would not allow herself to lose control enough to have an orgasm. And she frankly doubted that she would this evening, but that was okay with her. But she knew it would be far from okay with Jake.

Jake was just hoping he could keep from coming the moment he entered her sweet body. He tried to get the rampant drive to just plunge himself into her under control by breathing deeply, and concentrating on one body part at a time. His hands had a mind of their own, though, and were drawn to her pink-tipped breasts like magnets. They filled his big palms just perfectly; the hard raspberry nipples demanding the avid attention of his mouth as he gripped to the bottom of each breast and squeezed carefully to present the ultra sensitive tips for his eager mouth to latch onto, each one in turn.

Sophie moaned loudly, arching her back and clutching wildly at his shoulders as every flick of his tongue shot aching pulses of pleasure to the secret, swelling flesh between her legs. “Oh, yes, my baby likes that, huh?” Jake teased, rasping his five o’clock shadow over those delicate tips and chuckling evilly at her shriek of surprise. His mouth and tongue quickly soothed the tender ache and her rhythmic moans of pleasure were his reward.

As he lay half on top of her, a hand wandered away from her breasts to explore slowly down over her tummy, laying claim to that intriguingly vulnerable mound of flesh at the juncture of her thighs. When he’d felt in the shower that she was bare there, he couldn’t believe it, but there she was, nestled in his fingers, all warm and swollen. Sophie started a little, and he murmured soothing nothings against her breast as he gently but firmly insinuated a finger between those wondrously soft folds. “Spread your legs for me, sweetheart,” he cajoled in a husky whisper.

Sophie hesitated for a moment, putting her hand on his head. Jacob lay completely still, letting her decide to trust him – wanting but not wanting to force the issue. He let out a loud breath he hadn’t realized he was holding when her knees began to inch apart slowly, shyly. He didn’t rush in and grope and plunder, but explored her at a leisurely pace, learning her slowly and carefully, not missing a thing – not an in-drawn breath, not an aching whimper, not a shudder of pleasure got by him as he committed to memory what kind of stroking made this very special woman purr.

While his fingers brailled her most intimate spot, his lips returned to her nipple, suckling eagerly, keeping her breath ragged, her back arched in pleasure as a long, thick middle finger made the foray to her entrance, getting truly drenched in love juices as its reward.

Jake nearly shouted at this unmistakable proof that, despite her misgivings and nerves, she wanted him. He pressed that bold finger into her soft inner folds as her hips came completely off the bed and her hand caught his wrist in a death grip. “Shh-shh-shh,” he soothed, resting his cheek against her breast. “God, darlin’, you’re tight as a virgin!” he exclaimed, his mind racing ahead to wonder how that snug fit was going to drive him crazy when he finally took her.

The finger withdrew for a second, and Sophie slumped a little, but then he replaced it with a combination of his middle finger crossed over his index finger, rasping every nerve she owned down there as he stretched her to accommodate him. Once he’d imbedded himself to the last knuckle, he flicked just the tips of his fingers within the confines of her silky walls, enjoying the way she writhed and moaned beneath his sensual assault.

Finally, he could stand no more. Jake rolled on top of her, slipping his fingers out of her place to the head of his cock at her newly stretched opening. He braced his upper body on hands he’d placed by her waist and deliberately caught her eye as he flexed his buttocks and pushed himself into her by slow, deliberate inches. Sophie caught her breath at his size. His fingers had helped, but they weren’t up to the unforgiving girth of his penis. Her hands held his arms just below the elbows as she tried to remind herself that her body was built to accept a man. The fact that he was bigger than most didn’t mean he wouldn’t fit. The feeling of being overwhelmed was almost unbearable as he entered her, forcing her body to accommodate him, rocking carefully back and forth and not letting up the pressure of his invasion until he was fully seated inside her.

Sophie couldn’t breath. The pleasure of being spread wide open and filled so completely, so relentlessly, was very close to pain. She couldn’t think she could stand it, and almost told him so. And it wasn’t just the part of him that now resided boldly inside her, but him entirely. She didn’t think she’d be able to even get her legs up and around his waist. Sophie felt the way she had been concerned she’d feel with a large muscular man – like she was a butterfly pierced on a pin, unable to control what happened next. It took everything in her not to struggle to escape that feeling of being wholly overwhelmed.

Jake eased himself onto his elbows, letting her take a little more of his weight as he searched her face. The unusually close fit of her sheath clenching him, tight as a rubber glove, was hurling him relentlessly toward orgasm, but he needed to know that she was ok. “Are you all right?” he asked in a guttural voice.

Her eyelids fluttered closed as Sophie swallowed hard and nodded her head, unable to say anything around that full-almost-to-the-point-of-pain, panicky feeling. Instead, she reached up and put her hands on the shoulders that were so broad her arms could barely span them. “Kiss me, please.” She needed the distraction, and she loved kissing him.

He was only too willing to oblige, and the dance of her tongue and teeth along his lips sent him right over the edge. The feeling of being emptied and filled over and over again as each plunge stretched and rasped that velvet-covered spike over the sensitive tissues inside her drove Sophie half crazy with pleasure in spite of herself and her misgivings. If Jake had been able to hold back a while longer, she might have been able to meet his passion with her own, but it had been too long and he was too hot for her to be able to keep himself in check for one second longer than it took to explode inside her with a long, agonized cry of from a pleasure that was so strong it was almost a pain.

Chapter 7

It took Jake several long minutes to become coherent again, time he spent collapsed on top of Sophie, his full weight pressing her down into the mattress while he fought to get his breathing under control enough to say something reassuring. She was blithely stroking his back and had yawned once, which he took as a personal insult. He knew she'd not had her pleasure yet, and was so annoyed at his lack of control that he could barely see straight. He'd never been so wild, so single-mindedly focused on his own end that he'd forgotten to take care of the woman with him. Even when he was a teenager he'd never been quite that selfish. He liked to consider himself a good lover, and he thoroughly enjoyed his partner's pleasure. Only Sophie hadn't had any from him, and that was a situation he intended on remedying as soon as he could think straight again.

The second time she yawned, he kissed her gently, not wanting her to fall asleep on him before he had a chance to even the score.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said contritely, distributing little kisses down her neck.

Sophie's eyebrow cocked. "About what?"

Jake was busy making his way down her body with his mouth, stopping here and there – too suckle each nipple, gently nip the tender underside of each breast, lick his way down to her navel . . . "For being so damned selfish – you didn't come, did you?"

"No." She said it with no concern at all, as if he'd asked her if she liked the paint on the ceiling. And her next words froze him in his tracks. "But I didn't expect to come, anyway."

Raising his head from where he was about to kiss her slightly rounded tummy, he pinned her with his gaze as inexorably as he'd pinned her to the bed with his cock. "You what?"

She explained her position so casually that he knew she had no idea of the blow she was dealing his ego. "I figured I'd be too nervous to come the first couple of times, anyway."

"The first couple of times?" Enraged indignation squelched his voice towards the end of the sentence as Jake shook his head. The woman was just patently unbelievable. Well, the gauntlet had been thrown, however unknowingly on her part, and he intended to prove her unendingly wrong.

A man with a mission, he threw himself into loving her to the most earth shattering orgasm anyone of the female gender had ever experienced. He continued his trail down her stomach, frowning when she yawned again. That was when his temper snapped. Sophie really hadn't been paying much attention to what he was doing until she felt her legs being parted. And before she had a chance to react, he had settled a leg over either shoulder and placed his mouth directly onto her clit. Jake had a firm grip on her hips, so she wasn't going anywhere, she realized with dismay, until he decided to let her go. What he was doing to her with those lips and that broad, flat tongue had her panting and writhing within minutes, and then he deliberately multiplied those sensations exponentially by sliding two of his fingers into her vulnerable pussy. Jake was deliberately stretching and filling her, fucking her relentlessly and bringing that shy little bud out of its hood where he could tease and torture it, flick and lick it as he drank in

every sigh, every caught breath, every moan and shriek she emitted under his hands and mouth.

Sophie was beside herself with pleasure. He had somehow instinctively known exactly what it was that she liked best and here she was, helpless against the onslaught of his loving attentions. Her hands drifted down to touch the top of his head while she beseeched, “No, Jake, please, I can’t!” He was too damned good at this; he was the powerful remedy for all of her rigid self-control, and he was completely ruthless and merciless in pursuit of her ultimate pleasure.

The only time he stopped was this once to answer her implacably, “Yes, Sophie, you can and you will. Let go, sweetheart, and come for me.” He returned to his mission as if the fate of the world depended on it, and he knew the fate of his world did. He wanted this woman to surrender herself to him; to surrender that part of herself that she’d kept away from almost every other man in the world. He wanted it, and he would have it. He would take it from her, if he had to. But he would have it.

Sophie could feel the sensations building relentlessly towards their explosive conclusion. This was going to be a hard one, she knew it. It had been a very long time since someone had made love to her, and her orgasms, when brought on by someone else, were always extremely intense. It was moving toward her with the speed and strength of a freight train, making her writhe and moan restlessly. Jake realized she was close and redoubled his efforts, pressing a third finger into her, invading and rasping those excruciatingly tender tissues just that much further, playing on every nerve she owned until he felt her whole body convulse and contract.

To her horror, Sophie screamed out loud with the first contraction of pleasure, unable to stop herself, back arching and hips thrusting wildly. Jake watched her avidly as he merely continued to flick her gently with his tongue, still probing insistently with his fingers and forcing every last ounce of orgasm out of her until she melted back against the bed. Only when he thought she’d finished did he move to replace his fingers with his rampant cock, carefully keeping her legs over his shoulders so that she was fully exposed to him and had no control whatsoever over the depths of his thrusts,

positioning himself consciously to give her the maximum pleasure with each stroke.

“Oh, God, Jake!” After only a few powerful thrusts, she could feel the second wave of pleasure building and it was even more out of her control than the last. In all, before he allowed his own release, he’d literally torn four orgasms from her, and Sophie’s throat was raw from screaming with each one of them.

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Jake didn’t plan on moving for at least another century, but a tentative tap on his shoulder made him raise his head to stare down at Sophie blearily. “Bathroom,” she croaked, and he rolled to his left quickly. Sophie shot out of bed and was across the room in record time, as if someone had lit a fire under her butt. He sure as hell couldn’t move that fast right now even if his life depended on it, he thought, rolling onto his side with a loud, satisfied yawn to await her return.

Alone in the starkly lit bathroom, Sophie couldn’t look at herself in the mirror. Besides, she knew what would be there. Her pupils would be so fully dilated it would look like her eyes were black instead of hazel. She’d have a bright red sex flush rash on her chest, and the folds of her mons would be full and pouty from the recent insurgence of blood to that suddenly well used area. Hurriedly, she used the toilet, then rushed around gathering up her clothes and dressing as fast as she could. She’d been able to hold the emotional storm that always accompanied her sexual release at bay so far, and she needed desperately to get home before she lost in completely and bawled like a baby in front of Jake. If she could just get the damned zipper at the back of her skirt pulled up –

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” came a low growl from the doorway, and Sophie’s head snapped around to see him standing there in all his naked glory, watching her as avidly as a hungry hawk watches a rabbit. His arms were in a deceptively relaxed position at his side but she knew, like the rabbit did, that he would chase her down and capture her if she ran from him.

“Well, I – I,” she swallowed hard around the painfully bulging lump of tears in her throat, and drew a ragged breath. “I don’t really know what the current etiquette is, but I wouldn’t want to wear out my welcome by assuming – “

His face darkened dangerously as he advanced into the bathroom, taking the shirt and bra from her hands and throwing them in the direction of the counter. Wordlessly, he turned her around to unzip the skirt she’d just succeeded in zipping, then literally ripped her panties away from her hips. When she was naked again, he turned her towards the door with a sharp slap to her bare bottom. “Get back in bed,” he ordered gruffly.

“But – “ was all she got out before he took it upon himself to escort her there with a hand firmly on the small of her back, muttering angrily all the way about things Sophie only heard snatches of – “etiquette my ass” . . . “wear our your welcome” . . . “I’ll wear out my hand on your butt” . . .

“What about my nightgown?” Sophie squeaked shyly, crossing her arms over her breasts, knowing she’d lose the battle to contain her emotions and maintain her dignity in front of this relentless man.

His mouth was a hard line. “You won’t be needing it,” he promised as he pulled her down next to him to cradle her in his arms. Holding her tightly to his side as if he worried she might try to sneak away from him again, Jake scolded fiercely, “I told you you’d be lucky if I let you out of bed by Sunday and I wasn’t kidding. I don’t want to hear any more of this crap about wearing out your welcome, young lady. Is that understood?” Apparently expecting no answer, Jake tilted her face up to his and kissed her possessively, then turned her onto her side and cuddled up to her bottom, spoon fashioned. Sophie couldn’t believe it when she felt his hardness poked into the crack of her bottom. Was the man on Viagra or something?

Jake’s dominant display preoccupied her mind until they settled into bed together, but then those unshed tears she had fought so valiantly to suppress resurfaced as soon as she relaxed against him, leaking out while she tried to cry as silently as possible.

He could feel the wetness of the pillow beneath his arm, though. “Sophie? What’s wrong, honey?”

His voice was too damned soft, she thought. If he keeps being nice to me, I'm gonna lose it completely.

A few long seconds ticked slowly by while Jake waited for her response, getting nothing but more tears wetting the pillow. His arms closed around her tightly. "Baby, did I hurt you?"

"N- no, you didn't," Sophie breathed, confirming what Jake had thought. "P-please, I just want to go home –"

When an exquisitely gentle hand brushed her hair away from her face, the tenuous thread of her control snapped, and Sophie convulsed with sobs. Jake didn't know quite what was going on, but turned her towards him and held her close, murmuring soothing nothings against her forehead, his heart wrenching at the force of her tears. Sophie buried her face in the curve of his neck, crying inconsolably until there was nothing left within her but dry hiccupping sobs.

Jake had kept her safe and secure during the storm, but as soon as she'd settled down, he pressed her onto her back, a hand spread possessively over her tummy to keep her still. "Are you all right?"

Sophie nodded. Being here after she'd bawled all over him like a big baby was almost as bad as the actual emotional storm itself. Jake wouldn't just let it be. He would demand a full explanation. "I – I want to go home, Jake." She tried to get up, but he held her down with frightening ease.

"Stop trying to run away from me, Sophie. I won't allow it. You're staying right here with me for the whole weekend if I have to tie you to the bed." His tone was calm but implacable. "Tell me why you cried just now, darlin'."

"I- I – but – y-you – me – and - it's all just me!" she moaned, trying again to get away from him, but with the same distinct lack of success. Jake didn't hurt her, merely holding her tightly enough that she knew she wasn't going anywhere until he decided to let her go.

"What's just you, hon?" he whispered, hoping she knew she could trust him enough to tell him anything. But Sophie wasn't a woman easily given to trust.

He felt her swallow hard, and draw a deep, calmer breath, then was surprised at the strength of her voice when she asked, "Could you

move away some? You're crowding me. I won't try to leave; I just need some space. You're very overwhelming up close."

Jake did as she asked, but didn't move too far away, just enough that their bodies were no longer touching. "Answer my question, babe." Firm, immovable. He meant to have an explanation. He wasn't above spanking her to get it, but he preferred to use gentler means of persuasion when there wasn't something she had blatantly done wrong. Jake wanted her to trust him enough to turn to him with a problem or concern or just a need to be hugged, rather than trying to run off like a thief in the night; like she was ashamed of the pleasure they'd found in each other.

Sophie chuckled humorlessly. "You didn't hurt me. Crying after an orgasm – a particularly hard orgasm, usually," she amended, "is just the way I get out all of the things I swallow down in the course of everyday life. All the little hurts and fears and times when crying would be inappropriate have to come out somehow, somewhere, and in me, it comes out at a time when I am the least in control. I don't drink, I don't do recreational pharmaceuticals, and I don't have casual sex . . . I like to be in control, all the time. Orgasms are a time when I am definitely not in control – hedonist that I am - and I guess my psyche takes advantage of that to purge my system of whatever else has built up, besides sexual tension."

Jake considered when she'd told him, then mused out loud, "I would bet a spanking would do the same thing to a certain extent – give you the ability to get it all that out in a situation you have no control over."

Sophie's frown was comically fierce. "No," she said emphatically. "It's not the same thing at all. Your spankings hurt."

Relieved that it wasn't something horrible he'd done to her inadvertently, or that she'd felt about them making love, Jake pressed a loud kiss to her temple. "They're supposed to, hon."

Huffily, Sophie rolled onto her side away from him, but he just snuggled up behind her, insistent erection and all. She had to admit it felt wonderful to be held as she was falling asleep, a strong, furry arm across her belly, its hand cupping a breast as if he owned it.

Exhausted, they were both asleep in seconds.

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When she awoke, it was to the insistent ache of a hot, wet mouth tugging at one nipple, while someone's rough finger and thumb rolled the other until there was an ache between her legs that made her slick with desire. "Good morning, baby," he greeted in a deep, morning voice as one hand abandoned its delicious torture in search of sweeter fruit, wandering boldly down her stomach to possessively cup her smooth mound. Sophie heard his harshly drawn breath and felt his big body's inadvertent shudder. "Jesus, do you always shave down there? I thought I would come in the shower when I felt how soft and bare you were," he confessed rawly while his middle finger probed between the moist petals of her flesh.

"Alex liked it," she answered with a yawn and a stretch that he took full advantage of, moving his hand to even more intimate ground. "And I kinda got used to it. No catching your hair in your panties or nylons or—" she shuddered delicately, "the adhesive backing of a panty liner. Yeow!"

"Mmm," he nodded sympathetically, his mouth full of other, more important things.

Later, much, much later, Sophie rose to use the facilities and Jake met her in the bathroom, popping a t-shirt of his own over her head when she was done that barely covered her pertly rounded little bottom. It was the shirt he'd worn yesterday, and it smelled of him and aftershave and leather coat. Sophie inhaled deeply and hugged herself.

"I do have clothes, you know," she felt she needed to say.

Jake turned to see her standing there, and it made his cock clench to think that she was completely bare beneath his shirt. It was going to drive him absolutely crazy, and he was going to love every minute of it. "You don't need clothes this weekend," he informed her in a voice raw with desire.

Sophie followed him out to the kitchen. "What if I get cold?"

"Turn up the heat."

He already had. It turned her on to no end that he liked her this way, and that the only thing he was wearing was a loose pair of silky blue boxers that were permanently tented in the front. They made breakfast together, and he required her to eat it while sitting on his lap as he fed her every other mouthful of delicious Belgian waffle with fresh strawberries and whipped cream, kissing her every third bite or so. Breakfast took a very long time to eat, and by the end of it, he had her naked in his arms with a dollop of whipped cream on each tightly distended nipple.

“Ooh, that’s cold!” Sophie cried, arching her back over his arm.

“Poor baby, let me warm you up,” he volunteered, washing away the sweetness of the cream with the wet heat of his mouth, then reclaiming her mouth passionately. “Christ, Sophie, I’ve gotta have you!” was the only warning she got as he laid her carefully on the dining room table, which put her at just the right height for his imminent invasion. One powerful stroke and he was at home inside her, where he was beginning to think he belonged and beginning to be concerned that he would probably end up dying sometime soon from the pleasure of having her. Jake’s arms curved under her armpits, his fingers curling over her shoulders, preventing her from sliding away from the jackknifing thrusts that demanded a response from her. He pumped into her aggressively, and there was nothing she could do but match him or submit, and she chose to match him, her hips slamming back at him, issuing her own female challenge, one he couldn’t ignore.

Still, Sophie sensed that he was holding back, worried about hurting her, probably, even accidentally, so she whispered up at him, her eyes half shuttered with sex, “You can’t hurt me by fucking me, Jake. It’s what I want. What I’m made for. Please, don’t hold back.”

Her words seared into his pleasure-fogged brain and he took them to heart, his hands clamping down on her hips to hold her still for his almost violent penetration. He rode her hard, almost rough, but knew she was there with him every step of the way, especially when she reached down and clutched his taut buttocks, pulling him to her, riding him back until she his name became a scream on her lips as she succumbed beneath him. Her release brought on his as he spilled his seed deeply inside her, mindlessly fucking her until there was no more

Jake and Sophie, there was just them, together, melded male flesh to female flesh, as raw and basic as the ancient urge to mate.

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For the next two days, he was rarely further than arms length from her, and he adamantly refused to allow her to dress and deny him access to her charms. They ate, had sex, slept, had sex, they read the paper, they had sex . . . And Jake was amazed to find that though he knew he could have her at any time, and by the end of the weekend he had had her nearly every way he could think of, his passion for her was more urgent now than it had been before. He couldn't seem to get enough of her, although when he'd seen her wince a little as he entered her, he'd withdrawn immediately and they'd gone on to other ways of pleasing each other despite her protests that she was fine. He had over ridden her simply by soothing the affected area with his lips and tongue so thoroughly, so completely, that she exploded in his arms.

The one spanking she received that weekend came because she had defied him by trying to pull away and be alone with her tears after a particularly raw and uncontrolled orgasm.

"No," he'd warned firmly when she immediately rolled towards the side of the bed, sobbing loudly. "You stay right here and let me hold you through it."

Sophie was almost beyond thought and already had her legs hanging over the side of the bed, intent on slipping away to cry on her own.

"Sophie Antoinette! If you leave this bed I will come get you and blister your bottom for disobeying me." His stern tone penetrated the fog of tears that surrounded her, and although she would have loved to tell him to go to hell and that he wasn't the boss of her – no matter how childish the latter sounded - she knew it would just get her into more trouble, so she stayed at the edge of the bed, sobbing fit to break his heart.

When Jake reached for her, though, she smacked his hands away. "No! I don't want to be held. Just leave me alone!" Sophie

was usually so even-tempered and good-natured that he had rarely heard her raise her voice. The last time she had sassed him, she had gotten her first spanking, and she was awfully close to another one despite the fact that his first instinct was to comfort her.

When she rebuffed his second attempt to pull her into his arms in the same way, sounding just a bit hysterical, Jake had had as much as he was going to take of that behavior. He used his powerful strength to lift her off the side of the bed and positioned her bottom up over his lap in a split second, giving her a quick series of sharp slaps that had her fighting him every step of the way. Sophie's language rapidly deteriorated as she called his ancestry and his manhood into question in one hysterical sentence. Jake was only going to give her a couple of swats to remind her to behave, but comments like that could not go unpunished, as far as he was concerned. So he subdued her flailing hands with embarrassing ease and wore her out entirely with a good, thorough spanking that had her bottom a flaming red when he finally stopped spanking, smacking, and slapping her wobbling butt cheeks.

Sophie was sobbing brokenly, but had finally surrendered to his discipline, lying with her face buried in the comforter and her bottom tensed in her only defense against his next stroke. Jake looked down at her delightful small, curvy body, wondering at the uncomfortable lump of feelings that clogged his throat. He loved her. It floored him, and humbled him, and scared the ever-loving shit out of him, because he highly doubted that she returned that emotion, especially not when he seemed to take every possible opportunity to roast her bottom for her.

But for Jake that was a huge part of loving her – caring enough to correct her with firm but lovingly administered punishments whenever she got out of hand. The woman did need a keeper, and he was just the man for the job. She was so small and delicate, yet so fearlessly independent – sometimes to the detriment of her health and well-being. Every instinct he owned screamed at him to keep her safe from herself, and that included regular trips bottom up over his lap, if necessary. If he hadn't given a damn about her he'd never have begun to spank her, but Sophie's infectious humor – directed as much at herself as anyone else – intelligence, and her affectionate, loving

nature drew him like a magnet. Not to mention the way that wonderfully round bottom made him hard as a spike as it undulated beneath a skirt or pair of jeans. Hell, it seemed to be his natural condition around her, even when he was just talking to her on the phone.

Unable to stop himself, he sat up a little and pulled her onto him, opening his legs to hers and draping her carefully so that her head was pillowed on his chest and her little tummy warmed his ever-present erection that strained and clenched at the touch of her soft skin. Still hiccupping with sobs, Sophie rubbed her blotchy red face against a hard pad of chest muscle as he held his breath while her silky hair teased over and over his nipple. Jake's strong arms surrounded her tenderly, holding her tight and safe, even from himself, for the moment, until a warm, seeking mouth latched greedily onto that distended nipple, making him groan and cuddle her even closer to him. It felt so right to hold her like this, giving her the comfort of his body even though he was the cause of her distress in both cases – her orgasm and her red, swollen bottom.

Although it was definitely on his mind, Jake held himself back until Sophie took the initiative from him after a long relaxing while of suckling. She shifted her position a little, just enough to rest the broad head of his penis against her moist opening, but not taking any of him. Yet.

Jake kissed her swollen eyes then her red lips, drying her tears and loving her all the more for them. He surrendered himself to her, as he expected her to surrender to him, although probably with a lot fewer misgivings, allowing her set the pace of their loving even though she was driving him crazy, teasing him by holding the warm wetness of her sanctuary mere inches away from his seeking cock, anointing the tip with her flowing honey. Sophie took him by slow, agonizing increments, and Jake marveled anew that she was so tight. Each time was like the first time, and he wondered if she'd ever accommodate him easily, although he did adore the way she stretched to accept him, even if this time was just killing him with its languorous pleasure.

Sophie was slowly recovering from both her explosive orgasm and the swift punishment she had received from him. The two sides of Jake's personality confused and confounded her: he was an exquisite lover, an attentive date, and a concerned, even over-protective

boyfriend, yet there was a stern side to him, a much less forgiving, more autocratic, more Neanderthal side that wouldn't let her get away with anything he considered to be even remotely bratty or naughty like disobeying him, or being disrespectful, or not using common sense. While that side of him made her wary; he was big enough that if he ever took his fists to her she would end up in the hospital on the first punch, it was also a large part of what attracted her. And it was as much a part of him as his skintight jeans and his hard as nails demeanor. Although she was loathe to admit it, his dominant, no-nonsense attitude drew her like a magnet, as if her unconscious knew he could give her what she wanted: he was her intellectual match, he was logical and methodical to her occasionally impulsive scatterbrainedness, and he wouldn't hesitate to keep her in line with his voice, his hand, or his cock, expecting her to submit equally to the iron-will with which he wielded all of them to show that he cared about her.

But she hated being turned over his knee and spanked. It was humiliating and it hurt like the dickens, and it made her feel like the naughty little girl to his big, grown up man. He would definitely wear the pants in any relationship, of that there would be absolutely no doubt. Jake expected his woman to be smart and independent and responsible – like Sophie was, usually – but when it came down to it, what he really expected them to do was mind him.

If she thought about it, Sophie couldn't see him issuing frivolous, self-indulgent orders. That would go against his grain. But what ever rules he set, what ever commands he gave would be followed, or the miscreant would find herself answering to him, and more likely than not, paying for it with strips off her butt.

With all of these thoughts swirling around in her head, she let her weight aid in her own penetration as she drank in every moan and groan he emitted. Sophie half expected him to take matters into his own hands, but he didn't, each hand was currently involved in a gentle massage of her breasts, milking them, his touch reverent, his eyes half closed with pleasure.

“Oh, baby, it feels so good to be inside you,” he moaned, and Sophie's heart swelled that she was able to make this strong, powerful man feel such obvious pleasure.

Experimentally, she removed his hands and put them down on the bed. Jake met her eyes as she sank that last few centimeters until their love areas touched and he arched involuntarily into her with a groan that came up from his very toes as his fingers grasped at the bed sheet, crushing it in a vice-like grip.

“Don’t touch me,” she said firmly, “I don’t want any interference from you.”

Her groin began to throb at his soft, “Yes, Ma’am.” She would have loved to have found a reason to spank him, for a change, but he was as good as his word, letting her tease and torture him while she rode him to her own completion several times, bucking and bouncing up and down but not long or hard enough for him to find his release.

When she leaned a little forward and gently nipped each of his nipples while dismounting, he roared his displeasure at the loss, but didn’t reach for her. Sophie’s laugh tinkled over him as his cock strained and reached with a mind of its own for the warmth of her to surround it. To his amazement, she pressed it between her breasts, stroking up and down several times, then replaced both her pussy and her breasts with her mouth. Jake arched up off the bed when she took him to the hilt with her first downward stroke, the head of his cock hitting the back of her throat. He nearly came right then and there, until she reached up with one hand and tweaked alternating nipples, and down with the other hand to cup and roll his balls with a touch so delicate and tender yet hot and teasing that he lost complete control, moaning rawly as he emptied himself uncontrollably between her wet lips.

He obeyed her to the very end as she milked him dry to absolute, utter exhaustion; he didn’t touch her after she told him not to. But the sheets bore the evidence of how the strength of will it took for him to keep himself in check – there were two fist-sized holes ripped into them on either side of him.

Chapter 8

Sunday evening came much, much too soon for either of them, and in the end, Jake put his foot down, saying he simply wasn't going to let her go back to her cold and lonely condo. Instead he drove her over to gather a work outfit and some cosmetics so that she could just leave for work from his house.

"Then I need to drive my car back over to your house."

Jake frowned. That would mean she would drive to her own house and he would end up sleeping alone tomorrow night. No warm presence in his bed to cuddle and hold, to wrap his big body around or slip into in the middle of the night. A shudder ran through him at his thoughts, and he had to squelch the urge to pull her down to the plush carpeting in her living room. The only reason he wasn't already buried deep within her wasn't because he'd placed any sort of restraints on his libido – far from it – but he had taken her on the rug at his house and she had ended up with an uncomfortable carpet burn as well as a sore back. He wanted her relaxed and open and drowning in the sensations they created together, not in pain and counting the minutes until he finished.

He was just standing there, staring at the carpet in the middle of her living room, but when his eyes rose to hers it was like a physical caress to her most intimate area. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind exactly what he was thinking of doing, and despite the passions

that had raged through the both of them all weekend, she was game if he was, instantly wet from just the promising heat of that gaze. Sophie dropped the small overnight bag she'd hastily thrown together and walked to him, certain of her reception, knowing that that fierce, concentrated look was a precursor to being claimed by him in the most elemental of ways, despite how fiercely unapproachable he appeared.

Jake's arms closed around her tightly and her head automatically fit right where it belonged, just beneath his chin as he rested it on the silky hair at the top of her head. As he held her Jake rocked them slowly back and forth, one strong hand rubbing her back in a soothing motion that belied the pressure of the rock hard erection that pressed into her yielding belly.

Sophie reached up on tiptoe, whispering into his ear playfully in an atrocious Mae West imitation, "Is that a banana in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"

He chuckled; squeezing her tightly for another moment, then let her go to collect her stuff in one hand. When Jake turned back to her, she was staring thoughtfully at the same spot he had been contemplating earlier, then looked back up at him expectantly, but he was firm. "No, I won't risk your soft skin again, doll. We can wait."

Sophie stomped her foot, pouting prettily up at him. "But what if I don't wanna wait, big man? It's skin, after all."

Merely by wrapping his arm around her waist and walking, he propelled her to the door, despite her dragging feet, and growling all the while, "That's where you have it wrong, honey. Your skin is mine, just like the rest of you. And I said no." Jake stowed her stuff in his trunk, then opened his car door.

Her eyebrow rose. "But – "

"Get in. I'll take you to work tomorrow morning."

"Ok. I can get a ride home with Julia, probably."

"I'll pick you up." Sophie watched him carefully, not understanding why he looked peeved.

Jake made the last night of their extended weekend fantastic – he couldn't seem to get enough of her, but did let her get some sleep, then loved her awake the next morning before making her a big breakfast to send her off to work with some sustenance in her belly.

Sophie wrinkled her nose at the eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast, juice and coffee he put on the table in front of them. “I usually just have a soda.”

He looked suitably appalled. “Eat. It’ll put hair on your chest,” Jake ordered, putting a couple of strips of bacon and an egg on her plate to encourage her.

When he looked back up at her a few minutes later, his mouth full of food, she was looking down her blouse thoughtfully. “I don’t think I want hair on my chest, and neither do you. Besides, it would just give me another place I’d have to shave – and shaving my boobs doesn’t bear thinking of!!.”

He laughed so hard he nearly choked on his food, but not so hard he was going to let her get away with not eating breakfast. “Do I have to treat you like I do my nieces and nephews?” Sophie looked at him questioningly. “No getting up from the table until your plate is clean?”

“First of all, that won’t work because it just means I don’t have to go to work today, which would hardly act as a deterrent.” Jake grinned at her sarcasm. “Secondly, my father tried that. It doesn’t work,” she replied smartly, nibbling on the corner of a piece of toast.

“Why not?”

“It was green beans, I think – which I later came to like – when I was probably about seven. Mom served them with dinner, and Dad was always the one trying to get us to eat new stuff, so he put three or four of them on my plate and said I couldn’t get up from the table until I ate them.”

Since she’d eaten a slice of bacon, part of an egg, and most of a piece of toast, Jake got up and began clearing the table. “Uh-huh. Go on.”

“Well, I think it was that night that my father realize one trait I’d definitely inherited from him. I tend to be just the slightest bit obstinate,” she stated, as if confessing to a crime, or something Jake might not have already gathered about her.

Jake's eyes were hugely round and innocent as he pretended to be completely surprised by her revelation. "No! You? Never!" he said sarcastically.

Sophie scowled fiercely, but continued. "I think that was when he also realized that he and my mother – who were early birds who went to bed with the chickens and got up at dawn happily – had been gifted with a night owl daughter, which I am. I stayed, quite happily, I might add, in that chair from dinner, which was at six, until eleven-thirty, when my dad finally realized he wasn't going to win that one and told me I could go to bed so that he could go to bed himself. I don't think he ever tried to force me to eat anything I didn't like again after that." She collected the rest of the stuff from the table, and helped him load the dishwasher.

Jake snorted, shaking his head. "He should've just taken you over his knee, blistered your bottom and sent you to bed without any supper."

"I don't think so. It worked for me. I can out stubborn nearly anyone."

He caught the waistband of her pants as she reached to put away a glass in the cupboard next to him and pulled her to him for a quick kiss. "We both know that I would never put up with that type of behavior, don't we?"

Sophie danced away from him with an impish smile, "Oh, we do, do we?"

Jake stalked towards her with a stern look on his face that was only half-playful. "Yes, we do. Don't try to 'out stubborn' me, missy. You won't like the results."

Suddenly, Sophie stopped walking away from him, deliberately waiting for him to tower menacingly over her. She curled her fist and waived it in front of his nose, even though she barely came to his chest. "Don't you threaten me, Jake Ryan! I'll deck you in a heartbeat," Sophie warned with much more bravery than she truly possessed.

Jake took her small fist in his hand and kissed the knuckles, noting the fine delicacy of her bones and the almost translucent quality of her skin. His voice was very husky as he pulled her close with a

strong arm wrapped around her waist. “I’m shakin’, baby, but it ain’t with fear.” His mouth closed over hers in a searing kiss that left Sophie’s knees so weak she had to lean against him for support. Jake loved the feeling of their bodies pressed, chest to knees, together and toyed with the idea of carrying her back to bed, but he reigned in his libido and turned her loose with a lingering pat on her bottom. “If we don’t go now, we’re going to spend another day in bed, hon,” he growled, helping her into her coat and bundling her out the door.

~ ~ ~

Sophie glided through the day as if she was on a cloud, despite the fact that Julia had taken one look at her and declared to everyone within earshot that she must’ve gotten her ashes hauled, but good. Sophie had raised her chin several notches, saying with a satisfied smile, “Very good.”

Mid-morning, there was a commotion coming from down the hall, and Sophie looked up to see a big arrangement of roses with legs coming towards her. “These are for you,” Carol put the vase on her desk, but the flowers absolutely dwarfed it. Several people crowded around her office door, commenting on the two dozen apricot, cream, and pink roses. She read the card, blushing deeply at the words in his big, bold scrawl:

To my moaner and screamer:

Apricot roses are your favorite,

I remember you saying.

The cream ones reminded me of your skin, and the pink ones

Of more private places.

I intend to spend a lot more time convincing you

That tall men aren’t that bad . . .

Jake

She grabbed her headset and called his cell phone, but he wasn't answering. She left a message, knowing he would collect it later. The rest of the day was spent in a fog of happiness where even the trials and tribulations of work couldn't get her down. When Jake picked her up from work, the first thing she did was lean over and give him a big kiss, saying, "Thank you for the roses. They're beautiful, but you didn't have to do that!"

His hand came up to cup her cheek gently, then he captured hers as she settled into the passenger's side, pressing her fingers to his lips. "I know I didn't have to. I wanted to. You made it a fantastic weekend."

To her amazement, Sophie blushed. What was it about this man that made her feel like an overheated schoolgirl? Part of it, she knew, was his low, intimate tone, the one he seemed to reserve exclusively for her. "Thank you," she responded primly as she adjusted her skirt. "You were pretty fantastic yourself."

Jake gave her a sidelong glance, releasing her hand to deliberately reach over and ruin the way she had carefully made sure her velvet and calico print broomstick skirt covered her legs, bunching it nearly to her waist so that his hard palm rested possessively at the top of her nylon covered thigh, those big thick fingers mere centimeters away from her warm moistness.

"Jake!" Sophie squeaked, trying unsuccessfully to pull it back down.

"Sophie!" he imitated back to her, unable to quite attain her high-pitched tone, a big grin on his face as he maneuvered the car expertly around town with only one hand on the steering wheel.

Moving that hand when he didn't want it to be moved was an impossible project, and both of Sophie's hands had his wrist in a chokehold, but to no avail. Instead, his fingers snagged the fingers of her right hand, effectively trapping it there as he stroked her sensitive palm.

"Can I have my hand back?"

"No."

Sighing, Sophie's eyes narrowed, but Jake was paying attention to the road and couldn't see. She had decided that two could play at that game, so she abruptly settled herself back into her seat, then reached over with her free left hand and placed it boldly over the swell of his crotch.

The car swerved dangerously until Jake brought it back under control, squirming all the while as she gently rubbed and squeezed his most sensitive area. "Are you out of your mind, woman? You nearly got us both killed!" he roared, but couldn't keep his hips from moving rhythmically in his seat.

"Got my hand back, didn't I?" she smirked triumphantly in her seat, fussily rearranging her skirt.

The look she got from him said he was going to exact a high penalty for her impishness, and she certainly hoped he would.

~ ~ ~

For the next several weeks, they lived in each other's back pockets – spending every night together at Jake's insistence. He nearly always either kidnapped her to his house or – much less frequently, chose to make delicious love to her in her own bed, then spend the rest of his time complaining grumpily about the fact that it was queen-sized mattress rather than king.

Jake didn't want to let her out of his sight. If he could afford it, he'd buy a small island, outfit it with the basic necessities and drop the two of them there for six or seven years with nothing to do but screw. Maybe by then he'd be able to control his instantaneous reaction to her, but somehow he doubted it. He wanted her beneath him incessantly, unrelentingly, even when he'd just rolled off her after a long night of lovemaking. He knew he was crowding her, but he couldn't help it. Jake knew what he wanted, and was moving to consolidate his position with her.

And what he wanted was the whole package – he wanted to bind her to him with every and any available means: physically,

legally, emotionally, sexually . . . He'd finally met the woman he wanted to marry, and the irony of it all was that he knew she wanted nothing to do with getting married again. Hell, Julia had had to practically break her arm just to get her to date him!

Jake was scared spitless that he was going to push her a little too hard, take it just a little too fast, and she was going to balk. Permanently. Slow and easy had never been his forte; he was a "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead, take no prisoners" type of man. But for her, he'd try to be patient . . . well, patient for him, anyway.

Sophie was torn, for the most part. Christ, the sex was unbelievable! They fit together like hand and glove – although she could never tell how he was going to approach her and that kept her somewhat off balance. Sometimes he was hard and fast and demanding, as if challenging her to keep up with him, and it was a challenge she more than met. Other times he was so tender and careful with her it brought tears to her eyes when he moved slowly over her, pressing just the head of his cock against her swollen wet opening as he settled his weight onto her. His lips would suckle greedily on a distended nipple as she held his head to her breast while he pressed himself into her as slowly and tentatively as if she were a virgin. The orgasms he ripped from her in either case were the rawest, the most explosive pleasure she'd ever experienced.

But it was much more than just the earth shattering sex. Jake took care of her exquisitely in other ways that silently showed her how much he cared. Winter had hit Maine hard, and there was more than one occasion when they awoke to a wonderland of eight plus inches of the cold, white stuff. The first storm was on a weekend, and when Sophie rolled over to find she had the bed to herself, she padded out to the living room. He was nowhere in the house, so she peeped out the window and saw that he was busy digging their cars out of about a foot and a half of snow.

She had stored some clothes at his house, not that he ever let her wear them, but at least they were there for when they ventured out occasionally, so she donned her high boots, jeans, a long sleeved t-shirt and a pullover sweater and was ready to go out and help, until she thought twice. Gritting her teeth, she returned to the coat closet and reluctantly donned a light jacket, knowing that Mr. Over-Protective

would have a fit if he realized what she usually wore outside to shovel snow definitely did not include the coat she was supposed to wear.

Jake looked up as she stepped out onto the neatly cleared stairs, glad for the opportunity to rest a minute as he leaned against his shovel and settled his warm gaze on her small, rounded form. His eyes narrowed when she reached for the second shovel that was right next to the steps and began to lift sections of heavy snow away from the front of his car on the way to her own. There was a good sixteen inches of it, and it was practically up over her knees. Even he cut the top off first then scraped pavement on the second throw. The snow she was hefting probably weighed more than she did, and it made his chauvinistic tendencies rise to the forefront.

Sophie was so intent on what she was doing that she didn't see him creeping up on her, and didn't stop until he grabbed the shovel's wooden handle mid-stroke. "What?"

She breathed, catching his eye and knowing that that look meant business.

"Get back inside." The command was issued in a level, neutral tone.

Sophie huffed indignantly. "I want to help dig out the cars."

Jake's chin dropped to his chest as he considered her from beneath hooded lids. Sophie had come to recognize that particular look as a prelude to a trip over his knee. "Do you want your little fanny tanned?" His voice was soft and quiet, but there were a lot of other people around cleaning off their cars and digging out after the storm. Any one of them could have heard him, but they hadn't seemed to when Sophie glanced around nervously.

It was a Mexican standoff for a short time, Sophie huffing and puffing and practically stamping her feet in frustration, Jake merely standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, content to wait and let her work it out herself. There was no way he was going to let her do this – hell, the snow was so wet and heavy it was wearing him out, and he was three times stronger than she was.

In the end, she lost, as usual in a battle of wills with him, because he held the trump card – a painful spanking. But she gave in

ungraciously, all but throwing the shovel into the deep snow bank near the stairs and stomping away from him, muttering invectives the whole way.

Jake returned to his task, throwing over his shoulder, "If you want to do something for me, make me some hot chocolate. With marshmallows."

Her muttering became louder, and he would have sworn he caught her saying something about exactly where it was that his marshmallows were going to end up. Of course, her little tantrum had not gone unpunished. When he returned to the warmth of the house, he let her know in no uncertain terms that he didn't appreciate her bratty behavior, and her bottom paid dearly for the impulsiveness of her actions.

Despite his tendency to turn her over his lap for any given reason, he was disgustingly thoughtful. She never had to shovel at all any more, and her car was always brushed off and if they left at the same time it was also warmed up for her. He made sure she had snow tires, that her wiper fluid was full, and that she got her oil changed when it was needed, as well as taking care of fixing the pesky things that cropped up in the condo, carrying in the groceries, and driving almost everywhere. She was paying rent on a condo she was rarely in, and insurance and a car payment on a vehicle she rarely drove.

He had taken it upon himself to put keys to his condo and both his business truck and his car on her key chain without telling her or asking for reciprocal keys from her, because he thought it might make her feel exactly like it made her feel – as if he was flattening her natural resistance like the steamroller that he was. So he tried to head off her concerns when she found several keys on her chain that she didn't recognize.

Jake gathered her into his arms while she stood there, looking lost and holding the keys in her hands. "We spend most of our time at my house. It makes sense. And, no, I don't expect keys to your house or car. I don't think you're ready for that yet."

Although he was correct, she hated that he was always so damned right all the time. It was annoying in the extreme! "What if I'm in here dying of – of - I dunno, a burst appendix, and I'm locked

in here and you don't have a key?" she craned her head back to focus on the face that was inches from hers.

A wolfish grin spread over his mouth. "Do you really think I that a locked door would stop from getting to you if I really wanted to?"

Her mouth snapped shut. No, she knew that nothing on God's green earth would stop him from reaching her, if that was his goal. He would either reach her, or die trying.

~ ~ ~

Things drifted along relatively placidly for a couple months, then Sophie noticed Jake watching her with a considering look some times, as if he was thinking deep, serious thoughts. It made her frankly wary, and since she thought she knew what he was probably thinking, she knew that soon, she was going to have to break it off with him in self-preservation. Jake had made himself damned near irreplaceable in her life, and she knew that was exactly what he intended. He liked that she depended on him, liked that she submitted to his discipline, yet met him stroke for stroke in bed. But the intensity of that look . . . Sophie knew he was eventually going to demand more of her than she was willing to give at this point in her life. She'd given herself up to someone once before, and it had been an unmitigated disaster. She had fought long and hard for her independence, not to feel that she had to have a man to make her whole despite what the world said, and she wasn't willing to go back to an existence where she spent her time waiting to hear from him, for a call at night, for whatever crumbs of attention he deigned to throw her way . . .

NO! Her subconscious screamed in indignation. Jake was NOT her ex-husband – not by a long shot. But he was intense, and demanding, and aggressive . . . Sophie worried that she was already too involved to save herself from a major hurt in the future, so she determined that it was best for both of them if they didn't continue to see each other.

Only she was finding it harder than she'd thought to get the words out – perfect opportunities would present themselves and they would stick in her throat, forming an acidic lump she could never quite swallow down. Intellectually, she didn't want to break up with him, but her sense of self-preservation just wouldn't shut up. It was a whiny, nagging, nasal voice in the back of her head that cropped up when everything seemed to be going perfectly, when she was lying next to him in bed, totally satiated and at her happiest it would begin an insistent chant about past hurts that undermined her trust in him, making her question the emotional safety of being involved with anyone, much less someone like Jake, who wasn't likely to settle for a casual relationship.

They were at his house one night, watching Brit Wits on the local PBS station. He had arranged them in his favorite position on the big overstuffed sofa – him leaning against the arm of the sofa, Sophie cuddled on his chest and between his legs, using him as a backrest. Jake liked to let his hands roam, touching and teasing, playing with her hair or massaging her shoulder muscles, which were perpetually tense from work.

Impulsively, Sophie shut off “Red Dwarf” and sat up, moving away from him so that no part of them was touching, hugging her arms around her legs and looking hopelessly forlorn.

She had been edgy all evening; Jake noticed that type of thing. When something truly serious was bothering Sophie, she rarely came right out and said it. Sophie was a brooder. She seemed to want to tell him something, something he knew instinctively that he didn't want to hear, and his jaw clenched tightly. “Is this where you tell me you don't think we should see each other any more?”

Her eyes were round as saucers, and he knew with a crippling thunk in his heart that his hunch was right on the money.

Chapter 9

Sophie couldn't quite meet his eyes, and her own were brimming with tears that threatened to spill over. "I – Yes. I think you want more from me than I'm willing to give right now, and you deserve better."

"I'll be the goddamn judge of what I deserve, lady." His words whipped into her just as painfully as his belt had on occasion. Jake got up and paced to the window overlooking the parking lot, running his hand through his thatch of unruly black hair. "I'm not your ex," he said emphatically.

"I know," Sophie whispered against her hands. She stayed in place, hugging her legs as she wished she could hug him. God, she wished with all her heart that this scene was already done and over, so she could go back to her condo and cry her eyes out. When Sophie realized that he'd been quiet for too long, she looked up and saw him staring at her intently, storm dark eyes piercing right through her skin to her vulnerable heart as it began slamming painfully against her ribs.

His face set, Jake advanced towards her, stopping only long enough to scoop her into his arms on his way to his bedroom. Sophie tucked her warm, wet face against his neck and he squeezed her tightly, swallowing a hard at the thought that this might be the last night he spent with her. He pushed those thoughts aside with a focus that was completely single-minded, concentrating on the lovely woman he had in his arms, at least for the moment. As he set her down on the coverlet, whispering fiercely, "You're here tonight, and I intend to make it a long one."

He was more than as good as his word, loving her repeatedly into a drowsy state bordering exhaustion, until, just before dawn, he rolled over onto her determinedly one last time. Sophie's hands were at her sides, and he consciously trapped them there by planting his hands just above her elbows, where her arms lay against her hips. Her legs were caught over his shoulders, giving her no ability to control the depth of his thrusts. Jake deliberately waited for her eyes to find his, for her acknowledgement of her own helpless position. When their eyes met, it was like an electrical shock for the both of them that ran directly to their genitals. He kept her eyes on him as he slowly, inexorably invaded her, stretching her as always, loving every hitched breath and moan of pleasure as he took her for his own.

Buried in her to the hilt, Jake leaned down and captured a taut nipple, suckling avidly as she tried to writhe beneath him despite her position. The other little bud got the same treatment, making Sophie cry out with pleasure as his rough tongue rubbed over and over the tip of her nipple, just the way she liked.

She didn't want to beg, but couldn't keep herself from doing it. "Jake, please – "

Her breathing was so heavy she could barely get the words out. "Please, I want to touch you!"

He could feel how she was struggling to reclaim the use of her arms, and he murmured soothingly, "No, sweetheart. Not this time." He stroked slowly out and in once. "You've touched me everywhere you possibly could long since, Sophie girl. You've touched me in places you don't care to know about." Out and in again, his pace excruciatingly slow. "You've touched my mind and my soul and my heart, but you don't want to know about that." Out and in. By this time, tears were falling down the sides of her face and into her hair; partly from the soul-shattering ache he was so calculatedly creating, partly from his soft, sad words. Jake kissed her lips gently. "This seems to be the only thing you want from me, honey." He drew a deep breath, knowing his control was melting away like snow in the sun. "You're cheating me, and – you're – cheating – yourself!" His hips were beginning to have a mind of their own, forcing him to set a more goal-oriented pace. And he was letting them start to run the show more and more, plunging powerfully into her, harder and harder and

harder until she screamed and clenched around him, sending him into spasms of total pleasure that he'd never reached with anyone else.

He collapsed on top of her mindlessly, his face buried in her neck where it was soaked with tears, then rolled to one side, letting go of her by inches, just the way he'd taken her. When they were in the bed, together but alone, not touching, she rose quietly and left, taking everything that had become important to him with her. Gripping the sheet and mattress pad in his fists to keep himself from running after her like a stag in rut, Jake listened to her dressing in the bedroom. He heard her blowing her nose and knew she was crying, and he almost went to her, but what could he say that would change how she felt? Then she walked out to the living room, and he heard the jangle of her car keys, then the front door opened and shut. Her car roared to life, and he instantly worried about whether or not she'd get home in one piece, then laughed humorlessly at himself in the dark quiet of his lonely room.

She had made it painfully clear that she wasn't his to worry over any more. She preferred a lonely nun's existence to taking the chance of really getting involved with him, of truly trusting him, of giving him her heart to care for. Jake rolled out of bed and opened the top drawer of his dresser, taking out a small blue velvet box. Flipping the top, he looked at the diamond solitaire he'd bought after their first weekend together. Another dead chuckle escaped his lips. Good thing he'd kept the receipt.



Weeks later, spring was nearly upon them despite the fact that there was still two feet of snow on the ground, and everyone seemed to be giddy with it except Sophie. She wasn't giddy with anything any more, and everyone around her knew it. Gone was the laughing, carefree, teasing personality, and in its place was a face so solemn and sad it was truly painful to look at. She wasn't sleeping well, and it was obvious from her red rimmed, puffy eyes that she was spending the time when she wasn't at work crying. Hell, she was spending some of the time when she was at work crying, too, in the ladies' room. She

was almost the exact opposite of her normal personality – quiet as a church mouse, serious almost to the point of being somber.

Her attendance at the weekly Sex Club meetings had tapered off while she was with Jake, but now she merely had no interest in going out despite enticing invitations from her co-workers who were desperate to get her out of her deep blue funk. Julia was out of her mind, concerned that her friend's depression would push her to do something stupid. She kept close tabs on Sophie calling her in the evenings and trying to get her to do stuff – even just normal average stuff like shopping – on the weekends, but her suggestions were always declined politely but firmly.

Eventually, the strength of her personality overcame her melancholy in bits and pieces – here and there someone would catch her smiling at a teasing comment or an anecdote about a customer. Julia relaxed her vigil somewhat when she saw that her friend was finally beginning to recover. It surprised Julia that Sophie had taken it this hard – she hadn't been nearly as upset at the dissolution of her decade long marriage as she was about her breakup with Jake.

Jake wasn't faring much better. His crew was about to mutiny; he was ready to scream at any one or any thing for any reason, and had come uncomfortably close to decking several employees who inquired after Sophie before the news got out. He threw himself into his work, leaving the empty house at dawn and not returning home until nine or ten at night. Jake hadn't put in days like this since he was much younger, and trying to build his business. It was killing him, but then so didn't Sundays at home alone, without Sophie to banter with, or tease, or suckle, or bring off, or spank. God, he missed how loud she was when she came, missed roasting her bottom when she gave him attitude, longed to have her join him in the big shower stall and in that huge bed that now seemed much too big just for him.

Portland wasn't that big a city, but they did manage to stay completely out of each other's way, until that Saturday in early spring when Jake came over to talk to Matt and Sophie was there with a bunch of women who were having a baby shower for one of the girls at work. Sophie was walking into the kitchen with Bailey Danforth's youngest on her hip when Jake and Matt came through the door. Sophie stopped dead in her tracks for a long moment, and it seemed

that every eye in the house was on them and every mouth had snapped shut just in case something juicy was said.

As usual, his mere presence made every nerve Sophie owned work overtime. It was worse than it ever had been prior to the first time they made love, because now she knew exactly how his big hands felt when they clenched her hips in the midst of his climax . . . she knew just how he liked her to ride his cock when she was on top . . . she knew how he loved to come up behind her when she was standing in only a slip and hose to cup her breasts, hefting their weight with a delicacy that belied his size, tweaking her peaked nipples until her head fell back against his shoulder and she arched against him helplessly . . .

Snap out of it, girl! she ordered herself. Hell, she was practically coming in her pants, standing there with a baby in her arms, staring at him like he was an oasis in the desert and she hadn't had water in forty days.

"Jake," she greeted in a wonderfully level tone, congratulating herself on its neutrality.

His eyes hadn't left her since the moment he saw her, drinking in the fact that she looked perfectly serene and fine. Obviously dumping him sat well with her, while he was working himself to the bone trying to forget what they'd had. "Sophie." Also calm and controlled.

Matt was forever grateful that there hadn't been a scene, but the crowd in the living room was slightly disappointed at the blasted civility of it all. Jake followed Matt to the back bedroom, which was where Sophie had spent the night. Her scent was everywhere, and Jake found himself breathing deeply of Jessica McClintock perfume even though the reminder was like a physical pain.

"Jake?" Matt had been talking to him and Jake had no idea what he'd said.

"What did you say?"

Matt sank down in the easy chair near the window of the small room. "Hey, I'm sorry, man. I forgot that they'd be here today or I would have brought this over to your place."

The line that slashed across Jake's face couldn't be called a smile. "Don't worry about it, Matt. I'm fine, and obviously so is she."

Matt hesitated only seconds before leaning a little forward in his chair. "Don't let her fool you. She's been looking like the walking dead until about a week ago. Julia was frantic. She'd pretty much stopped eating, she hasn't gone anywhere or done anything since you guys broke up except work."

Sounded like his own life, Jake mused.

"You know how happy and bubbly she usually is?"

His teeth clenched tightly when he thought about how he used to love to hear her laugh. "Yeah."

Matt just shook his head. "She was bad, man, I'm tellin' you. Bad."

When Jake wandered back through the house on his way out, Sophie was suspiciously absent although it was obvious that the party was still underway. Everything in him was screaming at him to hunt her down and kidnap her back to his house, if necessary, but he tamped down his more primitive urges in favor of a sneak attack. He knew from prior experience that she was very mellow and suggestible first thing in the morning, when she was half-awake . . .

~ ~ ~

Jake stood in front of his bureau the next morning debating about whether or not to bring the ring, finally deciding against it. He wanted her back – and damned well intended to get her back. If she came back as his "significant other" or his wife – although he definitely would prefer the latter – he didn't much care, as long as he could pull her beneath him whenever the urge struck, which was every five seconds.

The ride to her house was accomplished at warp speed as he whistled softly to himself. It was not long after dawn, and Mother Nature had seen fit to give Maine residents a late reminder of winter – there was six inches of snow on the ground, and the cooler than usual

weather of late meant that there was still a lot of snow on the ground. He pulled into the space he always occupied next to her car, frowning when he noticed that her navy blue Mustang wasn't in its usual spot. His loud knock on her door went unanswered, but the shades were pulled in the windows so he couldn't see if she was even home. Concerned, Jake traipsed around back of the complex, wading through a goodly amount of snow to get to her back porch. The curtain for the sliding glass door was pulled back, and he could see that there were no lights on in the house. The shades were still drawn in her bedroom, and his insistent tapping against it drew no response.

Puzzled, Jake looked around him, spotting something of an abnormal color in the midst of that glaring field of white. When he finally got to it, he saw that it was a pink fluffy bedroom slipper. A Sophie pink, fluffy bedroom slipper. It was lodged in the remains of a snowdrift just a few feet from the tree where she hung her birdfeeder. Another quick scan caught a glint of shiny orange buried to the right of where he'd found the slipper – the copper measuring cup she used to carry the seed.

Furious, Jake stalked back to his car to wait. He had no idea where she'd gone, but he knew what she was going to get when she got back, relationship or no relationship. She needed to learn how to dress properly for the damned weather! Walking outside in what had to be knee-deep snow to feed the damned birds in her slippers! He was gonna ring her little neck, after he reddened her naughty bottom but good.

It was a good hour and a half before she roared into her own space, frowning at him when he got out of his truck to open her car door for her. "What on earth are you doing here?" she asked indignantly.

Jake opened his mouth to give her a good scolding, then closed it again when she reached into the passenger's seat and drew out a pair of crutches. He watched her maneuver her left leg onto the pavement, his eyes bulging at her ace-bandage wrapped ankle. When she got her right foot onto the pavement and tried to lift herself out of the car by her arms, that was it for him. He did what he'd wanted to do since he'd seen her yesterday at Matt and Julia's, swinging her into his arms with care not to knock her foot.

“Keys,” he growled, and she produced them out of her pocketbook quickly.

The minute they got into the house, Sophie tried to struggle out of his arms until Jake stilled her merely by contracting his muscles. When she found she couldn't move, she practically screamed at him to put her down. He put her in her recliner and reclined it for her. “Stay right there,” he commanded. Jake made a return trip for her crutches noting with interest as he went back out that the other pink slipper was right next to the door. He put the crutches by the chair where they'd be handy for her, and kept the two things he'd found in the snow to himself for the moment.

He took a seat in the companion recliner. “So, what happened?”

Sophie gritted her teeth. Her ankle was throbbing so badly she thought she was going to burst into tears. And that was all she'd need to do in front of him. Why didn't he just go away so she could bawl her head off? “I have a badly sprained ankle.”

“How'd you do it?” It was a normal, average question, and his tone was carefully even.

She rolled her head back against the headrest of the chair, closing her eyes with a tired sigh. “I went out to feed the birds. I turned to walk back to the house and my ankle didn't.”

“Hmmm,” he grunted. “Well, maybe if you'd been wearing boots with some tread instead of your blasted slippers . . . !”

Sophie's head snapped up. “How the hell do you know what I was wearing on my feet?”

Jake moved closer to her as he produced the lost slipper. “Because I found this in the snow behind your house.”

She was incredulous. “What were you doing in my backyard?”

“I came over here to talk some sense into you, but now I can see that's a lost cause!” he yelled.

“Blow it out your ear, Ryan!” she bellowed back. God, she'd missed him!

Jake took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. This was no way to get her back. “I have just one more question.”

“Ask away, meathead. But there’s no guarantee I’ll answer. I don’t have to answer to you any more.”

When he looked back up at her, she almost recoiled physically at the intensity of his gaze. “How’d you get to the hospital?”

Despite her previous bravado, Sophie’s voice was very small when she answered, feeling like a naughty little girl being lectured by her father. She knew he wasn’t going to like what she had to say. Not one iota. “I – I,” she swallowed hard. “I crawled to the porch stairs, then pulled myself up onto my good leg and hopped inside.”

Jake flinched when she mentioned crawling to the stairs, then he closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead through the rest of her little recitation. “And why didn’t you call 911, Sophie Antoinette?” The mere softness of her voice made her damned glad she had a real injury. It was kind of stupid to be happy that you’d mangled your ankle, but she knew from the ruthlessly controlled tone of his voice that if she hadn’t had something wrong with her, she’d be in deep, deep trouble.

Come to think of it, she was probably still in deep, deep trouble. Just delayed trouble.

“Because 911 is for emergencies, and I could still drive – my car’s an automatic; I don’t need my left foot to drive. I wasn’t dying, so I drove myself.” Getting more and more nervous about him and his attitude, she spoke very quickly, and wisely refrained from mentioning that that was question number two.

Jake’s mouth was resting against his palm, as if he was trying to keep from saying something, probably a whole lot of somethings. “Why didn’t you call Julia? Why didn’t you call – “ he almost said “me”, then thought better of it.

Sophie shrugged. “Have you ever tried to talk to Julia before noon on a Sunday? Besides,” she lifted the lever that brought the footrest down on the recliner. “why would I wake her up early for something I could handle myself?”

It was in Jake’s mind to scream with frustration, and then yank her over his knee for a good, thorough thrashing. While he was picturing how he was going to redden her bottom for her, she was hobbling stubbornly across the room. He had to do something, so he

picked her up, letting the crutches fall where they may. “Whatever it is, I’ll get it or do it for you. You’re going to sit back down in that chair and not move until I tell you you can move. Understand?” His nose was inches from hers, but she didn’t look all that intimidated.

In fact, she was smirking. “I have to pee,” she announced triumphantly, startled when he carried her into the bathroom and set her gently down in front of the commode. “Well, can’t you pee for me, too, big man?”

Looming over her threateningly, he replied loudly, “If I could, I would, brat! I don’t like to see you in pain!”

Her thumbs were at the button to her jeans when she said, “Would you please leave? I can do this myself, you know.”

He hesitated for a moment, then growled, “I’ll be right outside.”

“Fine,” she growled back.

When he heard her hopping back to the door, he reached in and scooped her up again, putting her carefully back in her recliner. Jake was fuming mad, but there was nothing he was going to do to her until she’d recovered. There was no way he would put her over his lap until she was pain-free. The only pain he wanted her to be feeling when he spanked her for being an irresponsible little brat and getting herself hurt unnecessarily was the fire he’d be setting in her bottom.

Sophie wasn’t surprised when Jake stayed to take care of her, ignoring her protestations that she could take care of herself as if she hadn’t voiced them. He bullied her into giving him the post ER instructions that said in bold capital letters that she was to stay off that leg to give her ankle the best chance at healing. That meant that she was off work for the next week, at least, maybe two depending on what her doctor said when she went to the follow-up visit. When she began to look a little white around the lips, he scolded her for trying to grin and bear the pain and gave her one of the pain pills the doctor has prescribed. Then he gathered up as many errands as he could get done in one swing, made sure she was comfortable, had a TV remote, something to drink, and some Kleenex nearby, and went to arrange to work out of her house for the next couple of weeks, at least. And he didn’t care what the hell she had to say about it, one way or the other.

There was no way he was going to leave her alone to take care of herself. No freaking way.

He even went as far as to have his own bed delivered and set up in her bedroom by some friends. When he returned, heading up a team of big bruiser men that looked and acted as macho and autocratic as he did, she wondered what it was that he was doing. Then her mattress and box springs paraded by her chair, followed by the bed frame, to be replaced by his huge bed.

He thanked the guys for helping, and shut the door behind them, to turn and see that she was none too happy with his high-handedness. She'd been asleep when he left, and he could see distinct advantages to keeping her that way; she was a lot less trouble when she was snoring. Well, tough cookies, he thought, ignoring her deliberately while he arranged the bedroom as close to how she'd had it as was possible, considering that his bed took up more space.

"Jake Ryan, bring your butt in here!" she yelled at him as he walked into the kitchen.

"What do you want for lunch?" he asked blithely.

"You! Deep fried on a platter with an apple in your mouth!" she snapped back. "Get in here so I can yell at you!"

He did come stand next to her chair, but preempted all of her bluster in a no-nonsense tone. "You had better watch what you say and how you say it, young lady."

Sophie's lips pinched together like she'd had a taste of lemon. She hated how he could reduce her to a naughty five year old with one line. "Bullshit. You're not going to spank me when I'm injured; I know you."

A feral smile spread over his face. "Yes, you do know me. And no, I'm not going to spank you. Now," her breath caught visibly at the "now" qualification. "But I am going to stay here and take care of you, whether you like it or not. I moved my bed in because you'll have more room in it than you do when we sleep in your bed." He noticed her shiver and reached down to put a blanket over her. Jake could see that she was struggling stubbornly against the sleepy effects of the medicine.

Her strident statement was interrupted by a long yawn. “But we’re not – “ yawn – “sleeping together any more!” and didn’t have quite the oomph she wanted it to have.

“Yes, we are,” he countered softly. “Stop trying to stay awake to argue with me and go to sleep, or I’ll put you to bed where you’d probably be more comfortable, anyway.”

There was no TV in her bedroom, though, and she knew she’d be bored. Sophie also knew that he wouldn’t hesitate to carry out his threat. With a long, put-upon sigh, she snuggled under the cover and promptly fell asleep.

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For the next week, until her appointment with the orthopedist, he took complete care of her, making sure she had everything she needed at all times, and strictly enforcing the doctor’s orders that she stay off that ankle. He’d moved in lock, stock, and barrel, and spent nearly every minute watching her with his eagle eyes for any sign of pain, making her nap in the afternoons merely by carrying her into the bedroom and tucking her into bed, despite her protests that she didn’t need a nap. Sophie felt tremendously guilty about all the time he was spending with her, because she knew this was his busiest time of the year, but he wouldn’t hear a word about it from her, and threatened to spank her regardless if she didn’t quit bringing the subject up. Despite his blatant masculinity, he was the quintessential caretaker, although he didn’t even attempt to pretend that he wasn’t affected by her nearness. It was extremely evident to anyone who decided to look that she got him all hot and bothered without even trying, and he had long since stopped worrying about it. To her surprise, he didn’t make a move to claim her sexually even though she felt his rampant hard on pressed intimately against her bottom cleft every night when he came to bed.

He was using her reliance on him shamefully to enforce some rules he’d wanted to introduce to her but hadn’t had the opportunity yet in their budding relationship, the first of which and one of the most hated was a bedtime for her. One of his first nights there he had gone

to bed long before her, telling her that she should call out to him when she wanted to come to bed and he would come and get her. She was still up at two in the morning with her laptop in her lap, happily surfing the Web while “I Love Lucy” reruns ran on Nick at Night in the background, when he got up to pee. Jake calmly stalked over to her and told her to shut it off and he’d help her into bed.

Sophie didn’t even bother to look up at him. “I’m not tired, thanks.”

The computer screen suddenly went blank. It was a damned good thing she saved her stuff compulsively or he would have just signed his death warrant! The laptop was then lifted off her, and she found herself in his arms seconds later. “But I’m not tired.” No, she thought to herself. I’m just avoiding coming to bed with you, because I don’t know if I can keep my hands to myself, and I don’t know if I want you to keep your hands to yourself, either.

Despite her protests, she was lifted out of the chair and efficiently popped under the sheets, her foot up on a pillow. Jake lay on his side next to her; his left arm flopped over her tummy possessively. He was asleep in seconds. Sophie was nowhere near that lucky. In just a couple weeks, she’d be completely healed and he would no longer have a reason to stay around. And although she would have sworn prior to her injury that having a man around again was the last thing she wanted, she had to admit, at least to herself in the quiet of the night, that having him dance attendance on her – however autocratically – was wonderful!

Impulsively, Sophie turned her head to tuck her face against him, breathing in that soothing, pure male scent. Something deep inside her swelled painfully, clamoring for recognition on the most primitive level.

Her body inherently recognized its mate. Her brain already named him lover, honey, sweetie, sex-god. It was two against three, and her heart finally gave up the fight.

She loved him.

Just forming the thought in her head made her shiver violently in arms that tightened securely around her.

His husky, concerned growl thundered beneath her ear.
“Sophie?”

She didn't want to talk to him right now; she couldn't, burying her face even further into the light fur on his chest, praying he'd go back to sleep.

Jake scowled as he held his shuddering woman. What the hell was wrong? “Sophie, honey, why are you crying?”

Until he'd mentioned it, she hadn't known she was; huge teardrops dampened her cheeks and the hard plates of muscle beneath them. Unable to find her voice through the lump of emotion in her throat, she merely shook her head, wrapping her arms around his waist, seeking the certain comfort of his embrace.

Puzzled, and somewhat alarmed, Jake held her and gently stroked her back for a long moment. “Does your foot hurt, sweetie? Is that it?”

Latching desperately on to any excuse but the real one, Sophie nodded her head vigorously. Jake disengaged himself from her – but not without a bit of a struggle, which amazed him to no end – and rolled over to grab some water and one of her pain pills from his nightstand.

Sophie took her medicine obediently, then re-attached herself to him almost violently as soon as he turned back to her. Although he questioned her actions, he wasn't about to turn her away. Instead Jake arranged her as comfortably as possible, making sure she was warm enough by tucking the covers around them.

Sophie felt dazed and frightened and elated and nervous, all at the same time. But his big hand rubbing slowly, gently up and down her back was enormously soothing. She was literally surrounded by him, but instead of finding it smothering or disquieting, she sank further against him. Jake began to hum tunelessly, his chest vibrating under her ear except when he dropped the occasional kiss on the top of her head where it was tucked under his chin.

“Better, baby?” She wasn't still crying, although he doubted the meds had kicked in yet.

“Yes,” Sophie croaked.

Jake squeezed her even tighter to him. “I’ll stay awake until you fall asleep, hon,” he whispered into her hair.

There was no response but a long, contented sigh.

Chapter 10

It was a full two weeks before her ankle was healed enough that the doctor cleared her to go back to work, and Jake remained glued to her side the entire time. Julia stopped by every couple of days and called daily; her squeals of delight the first time that Jake answered the phone could be heard by him from across the room once he'd handed the phone to her. Sophie had rolled her eyes and grimaced, and Jake allowed himself a self-satisfied smile.

Despite the fact that near the end of her convalescence she had become irritable and cranky, he had maintained a wonderfully patient demeanor. Not that he hadn't occasionally warned her, in that low, too-controlled manner of his, that she needed to watch her tone of voice. That short little phrase always ended with the admonishment that she was in enough trouble already and she really shouldn't be trying to add onto what was already going to be a very sound punishment. He also promised her on more than on occasion that she had a whopper of a spanking coming to her when she was finally well.

Sophie half expected that he would move out after the doctor's appointment - that he had insisted on attending with her - where she had told Sophie she could return to normal living and given her some exercises to do to get her ankle back into shape. But he'd merely dropped her off at work with a kiss and a reminder not to overdo it this first day back.

Sophie rolled her eyes at his protectiveness, but it warmed her heart just the same. "Yes, dear," she agreed in an exaggeratedly long-suffering tone.

"Sophie?" Jake called before she walked away.

"Yeah?"

He beckoned her over to the window of the car with a crooked finger, and Sophie bent down to hear what he was saying in the noisy garage. "Take it easy today; you'll need your strength for tonight." With that veiled promise-threat, he grabbed a stray auburn curl and used it to pull her down to him for a quick kiss, then drove away, leaving a puzzled and considerably worried Sophie in his wake.

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Her return to work was a triumphant one; everyone stopped by her office to see how she was doing and offer their assistance if she needed it, which she didn't. She was careful to say off her foot as much as possible, and commandeered a big box of paper to put it up on when it began to throb a little in the late afternoon. A couple of ibuprofen took care of the throb, and she was a little tired but not in pain when Jake collected her at the end of the day. But she was extremely glad it was a Friday, and she'd have the weekend to spend some time walking - albeit carefully and under the excruciatingly watchful eye of her self-appointed, disgustingly macho male nurse.

His first question, just after he leaned over and kissed her hello, was exactly what she expected. "How're you feeling?"

"Tired," she sighed. She didn't admit to him that she'd spent the majority of her day wondering - and worrying about - what he'd meant when he'd said she'd be "needing her strength" tonight. There could be a couple of different connotations to that warning - either he was going to spank her tonight, or he was going to love her tonight. Knowing Jake's sexual appetite - which he had held completely in check while she was incapacitated - and his depressingly accurate memory regarding any naughty thing she did, Sophie kind of had an idea that it was likely to be both things, and she wasn't sure what she thought in either case.

His hand took up its usual place on her upper thigh, and it was as if they'd never broken up. They cooked dinner together, ate, and then sat down to relax in front of the TV, cuddled up together on the couch.

Suddenly, the TV screen darkened. "What the hell happened?" Sophie tried to lean forward to grab a remote, but found a big, platter sized hand lying possessively on her lower abdomen prevented her from moving.

"I turned it off, because we need to talk."

No fun discussion ever started with the words "we need to talk", Sophie thought wryly. "About what?" her tone was just barely above belligerent, despite the fact that her butt was probably on the line here.

"About several things - the first of which is you not taking care of yourself - "

"And what if I don't want to talk to you?" Petulance was probably not the best tact, but she remembered how much his spankings hurt, and was not looking forward to being draped over his lap again.

Jake's unusual patience, now that she was pretty much recovered, had reached its end. Firmly, he grabbed her upper arms and turned her, making her face him. "Good. I don't want you talking, I want you listening." The look in his eye made her quickly re-think the feasibility of resisting him in even a small way. The phrase "no-more-mister-nice-guy" flitted through her mind briefly. "First of all, in case you were wondering, we are now officially together again." Her eyebrows rose, but she wisely held her tongue. "I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere." He paused slightly, as if something had come into his mind, then he added, "When we do move, it'll be together."

Sophie frowned, thinking, move? Move where?

But he was continuing. "I refuse to give up on us, as much as you're determined to throw in the towel."

She opened her mouth to protest, but his stern look stilled her words and her teeth clamped shut again.

"You've had your tantrum and some time away to get used to the idea of us being together on a more formal basis; I don't ever

intend to let you stay away from me for that long again. I'm no longer going to give you a choice in that matter." With a deft, firm movement, she found herself face down over his lap. "Or in this one." Her pants were efficiently lowered to half-mast despite her pleas and futile struggles.

She was struck anew by just how vulnerable she felt in this position; the only other time she felt this helpless was just before he pressed himself into her. But that was a good helpless, and this definitely was not. Instinctively, her free hand reached back to try to provide some small amount of protection to a bottom she knew was going to sorely need it in a few minutes. But instead of being able to help herself, she found thick, strong fingers encircling her wrist, pinning it gently but firmly against the small of her back, rendering it completely useless.

His warm, hard palm settled possessively over her full nether cheeks as he said softly, "You've had this coming since I found that damned slipper in the snow." Sophie didn't have to be looking at him to know from his tense words that that little muscle in his jaw was bulging. "If I recall correctly, I've told you before, and even spanked you before because you were improperly dressed for the weather, haven't I?"

The warning in his tone was clear. "Answer me, Sophie . . ." She shifted and wiggled a lot, but didn't answer him until he administered a sharp smack to her well-rounded bottom.

"Yipe!" Sophie couldn't control the outburst at the stinging pain his hand produced. No matter how much she thought she remembered his spankings hurt, the memory was never quite as bad as the painful reality.

Smack! His hand cracked against her bottom again in a swift reminder that he expected an answer from her, making Sophie yelp for the second time. "Haven't we already had this discussion, Sophie Claire?" he questioned impatiently, wanting her to admit that she knew what she'd done was wrong.

Sophie's legs began to scissor-kick until a heavily muscled leg trapped both of hers, as she responded in an anxious tone, "But, Jake -"

"No buts, my girl, except your naughty one getting blistered!" Jake began spanking her in earnest, putting his considerable strength behind each stinging stroke. Tears coursed down Sophie's other cheeks before he'd administered the tenth stroke, but he continued to swat her rump in rhythm with his harsh lecture. "When I tell you not to do something, I expect to be obeyed! I am not talking just to hear my own voice, you know." Jake spanked methodically up and down her tender cheeks, and up and down the soft, sweet backs of her legs, then settled a large majority of swats on that tender crease at the bottom of her cheeks, just where they became her thighs. This, he knew, would give her a nice reminder of this spanking every time she sat down for the next several days. "Your health is nothing to fool around with, young lady," he continued, as he began re-tenderizing previously punished areas. "I'm very disappointed that I'm having to repeat this lesson, but you obviously didn't learn anything from the first time around. Perhaps I've been too lenient with you."

As much as she hated having her bottom set on fire by his strict attentions, as much as she detested being taken over his knee like a little girl, as much as Sophie hated being called "naughty" and "young lady", hearing that he was disappointed in her was worse than any of those things. Jake's opinion of her was important to her - stubborn, macho, chauvinist that he was. She wanted him to like her, and be proud of her. Hell, she loved him, even though she'd yet to come to terms with that idea herself.

What could be worse than being told point blank that you'd disappointed a loved one?

Her tears quickly became heartfelt sobs; Jake could hear the difference in their tone. He administered fifteen more very hard, harsh slaps while she bawled uncontrollably, then stopped with his big hand still covering her swollen, sore bottom. Jake let go of her wrist, rubbing the small of her back soothingly with the very hand that had wreaked such havoc on the flesh only a few inches lower, while his left hand stroked her hair. He kept his leg thrown over hers, so when she struggled to get off his lap and out of that terribly embarrassing position, she couldn't; he wouldn't let her up.

"Stay still, baby," she hissed when his hand cupped her bottom gently, but Sophie's wiggling ceased as she lay limply over his lap,

sobbing quietly. His palm rubbed her sore cheeks lightly. "Am I ever going to have to repeat this lesson a third time, Sophie Claire?"

Her sobs renewed slightly at the idea of being spanked again by him for any reason, Sophie shook her head vehemently.

"That's my girl." Jake slipped her pants and panties all the way off her, then helped her up and led her to their bedroom, putting her in the corner with a firm command that she was not allowed to rub her bottom. He could hear her ragged breathing as she wept softly while he moved around the house, locking up and getting ready for bed.

By the time he was done, she had spent about fifteen minutes with her nose in the corner, the lower half of her body almost obscenely displayed beneath the hem of a t-shirt that ended at the top of her lower back, the skin of her beautiful heart-shaped bottom obviously swollen and a sore, angry red. Jake couldn't keep himself from doing what he'd wanted to do since he had ended the spanking, and he wrapped his arms around her slowly, pulling her back against him and rubbing his hands soothingly up and down her arms.

He was disturbed to hear her begin to sob again anew. Swiftly, he removed her t-shirt, then placed her gently under the turned-down sheet, joining her there seconds later. "Are you okay, hon?" Jake knew that this was not an easy spanking for her to take, or for him to give, but she had seemed to have settled down until he'd hugged her. "Is it your foot?"

To his surprise, she threw herself against him, burying her face against his neck, and shaking her head, but still sobbing fit to break his heart.

Jake was at a loss to figure out the cause of her tears. He leaned a little away from her, brushing the dampened hair away from her face, and placing gentle butterfly kisses on her face. "Tell me why you're crying, darlin'. I want to help you." His voice was husky with concern.

Sophie tried to take a deep breath, and only partially succeeded. "I - I'm s-sorry," was all she could get out at first.

Still holding her cradled in his arms, Jake laid her onto her back and murmured soothingly. "Shh-shh-shhh, sweetie pie. Sorry about what? About disobeying me?"

Gulping down the big lump of emotion in her throat, Sophie barely got out, "Di-disappointing – y-you," before she dissolved in tears against him again.

Jake held her frighteningly close, rocking her gently, but suddenly that was nowhere near enough for him. He had been patient with her, maybe too patient, not wanting to press his rampant need to possess her physically when she was not truly up to it. But that time was over. His fingers boldly cupped the hidden warmth of her womanhood, feeling her start and arch instinctively against his hand, her eyes still brimming with tears.

He slid easily between her legs, fitting himself into the familiar cradle of her hips, pressing himself intimately at the entrance to her body. Sophie's hands fell naturally onto his broad shoulders as she looked up at him, two teardrops wetting her face which he promptly kissed away, taking possession of her lips as he took possession of her body; his size rasping every delicate nerve and tissue it touched as he claimed her. Jake lifted Sophie's legs high, hooking them over his biceps, making her surrender to him totally, taking total control of their lovemaking as he settled himself deeply into her, to the ultimate hilt.

Fully seated within her, every nerve aflame and clawing at him to plunge wildly within her, Jake instead lifted his head and kissed her, hoping to convey the depth of his emotions in that single act, but feeling overwhelmed by it still. Catching her eyes, he whispered just one word. One four-letter word that echoed painfully within Sophie's own heart.

"Home."

Sophie was not sexually aggressive normally, but the bubble of love that swelled within her at his raw, soft word spurred her into action. She reached up and pulled him down to her, kissing him with every ounce of feeling she owned, running her hands over him as possessively as he tended to with her, urging him to possess her, to take her, to stake his claim, so that she could meet it with her own violent need.

He made her moan. She made him shudder. He plunged, she scratched. They each licked and nipped and teased.

And in the end, they both screamed.

~ ~ ~

Afterwards, Jake couldn't seem to keep his hands off her. He knew that she needed her sleep, knew that she was exhausted emotionally and physically, but he had refused to let her get away from him, even to sleep.

He, too, was exhausted physically and emotionally, but he was also a little pumped up, and, in thinking about it, he realized that he had that her exhaustion gave him a great advantage, which he intended to exploit. "Don't go to sleep just yet, sweetheart," he murmured against her temple as she snuggled her back to his front.

Sophie yawned loudly. "Why not?"

Jake squeezed the arm that was wrapped around her middle gently. "Because I want to get things settled between us tonight."

"But I'm almost asleep . . . "

"I know . . . , " he admitted with an evil chuckle from deep in his throat.

She couldn't help it; he was so blatantly pressing his advantage she had to giggle at his big-bad-wolfish tone. "Talk to me tomorrow afternoon when I have all my wits about me, Jake."

In the blink of an eye, she found herself flat on her back, with his swollen member pressed deeply inside her in one tremendous stroke. Despite her tiredness, Sophie's body responded automatically to his dominant advance, becoming slick and welcoming beneath him, tightening her nipples in painful arousal, which Jake noticed immediately and rewarded with a long, slow suckle.

"No," he continued, stroking in and out her in a deliberately teasing fashion until she was breathing heavily and squirming beneath

him. Then he lay full onto of her, pressed into the hilt and stopped. "Now, I assume I have your undivided attention . . . "

The frown on Sophie's face was truly fierce. "Don't you dare stop now, you snot!" Experimentally, she tried to move him a little, but there was no hope of that until he decided he wanted to move.

Jake flexed his hips once, eliciting a long, low moan from the frustrated woman beneath him. "Hmmm. I like that," he said, a smug smile on his face until he became serious again as he stroked her hair. "But I love you."

Sophie's eyes got so round he thought they'd pop out of their sockets.

"How can you look so surprised, honey? Do you think I bother to spank casual acquaintances?"

"No."

He was just getting warmed up. "Because I love you, I'm not going to let you keep us apart, just because you're scared of being involved with me. Face it; I'm back in your life to stay. I ain't going away, even if you say you want me to. I'm going to be around for a good long time, at least until we're both collecting Social Security, and I have no doubt that I'm going to have to spank you for being naughty even when I'm too arthritic to do it properly!"

The image of him as an old man taking her as an old woman over his lap - slowly - had her giggling.

"So," he flexed his hips again to get her attention focused on him. "we're together. Forever. From now on." He considered her carefully, warning, "Don't get that wary look in your eye, baby. You're more than enough woman for me, believe me. Keeping you in line is going to be a full time job that I intend to enjoy to the fullest." Jake captured her face between his palms. His voice was husky with emotion when he said, "I would never hurt you that way, Sophie Claire McClellan. If you don't believe anything else I tell you, please believe that."

Sophie couldn't say anything else; she was crying for about the fifth time that night, but Jake was very easily turned her sobs to moans, and he did just that before he finally let her get some much needed sleep.



Jake spent the next several months reveling in having her back, in being back in her life. He spanked her frequently - much to her disgust and embarrassment but secret joy - loved her at least once a night, and touched her whenever he wanted to, which was nearly always. Yes, he was a sexual predator, but with her - and only her. She'd never even seen him so much as looking at anyone else, despite the fact that he sometimes came into her office where there was a good-sized collection of extremely pretty women. He couldn't seem to get enough of her, and took her in every way imaginable, and in every place imaginable.

But it was more than that. Sometimes, when they were at an infrequent party, and she caught his eye across the room, the love in his eyes was almost painful to see. Jake was also very physically affectionate- they held hands while they were in the mall or his hand rested at the small of her back, or his arm was wrapped loosely around her waist as if he was staking his claim for all to see.

He paid attention to her - saw that she ate well, slept when she should but probably wouldn't if he wasn't around, saw the doctor regularly, and unfailingly took care of her if she became sick. And Sophie bloomed under his loving eye – and sensual or strict hands.

Although she had not admitted to him that her feelings were reciprocal, she tried to do everything she could for him, also - taking care of him as best she could . . . as much as he would let her, which was not a lot.

Jake had made it clear only a day after declaring his love for her, and revisited it frequently since then, that he wanted to bind her to him in any way possible. They were already living together, and that next weekend, he took her on a picnic and showed her his prized possession - the house he was building with his own hands. It would be a beautiful modernized Victorian style, with four bedrooms, two and a half baths, a big front room with a bow window . . . Sophie adored it on sight. Although it was nowhere near completion, she could see all the blood and sweat that had already gone into it; every

element was done to the nines - there was no cutting corners. It was obviously a labor of love.

"This will be our house when it's finished," he'd whispered as she leaned back against him and he leaned against the front of his huge truck.

Sophie had squirmed within the strong confines of his arms. "No, it'll be your house."

Jake turned her to lay her against him front to front, and swatted her jean-covered butt. "What did I just say, Miss Sophie?" he warned softly.

Unable to respond to him in the manner he required, Sophie instead pressed her face into his denim work shirt.

"We are not going to spend all of our lives in that little condo."

Sophie grimaced and leaned back to comment dryly, "It was fine when it was just me."

A cleft chin dipped downwards as he looked at her from beneath a furrowed brow. "Well, it's no longer just you, is it, honey?"

She lifted onto her tiptoes, his rampant, ever-present arousal pressing insistently into her tummy. "No, it's not."

In fact, given his way, she would be pregnant already. Jake made it completely clear that he wanted a life with her, and on as close to his terms as he could get. He also made it absolutely clear that if she became pregnant, they would marry immediately, with or without her consent. And when he found out that she was still on the pill, even after they'd broken up, he frowned down at her from his intimidating height. Sophie, however, was completely un-intimidated.

Hands on her hips, she leaned back and got a crick in her neck confronting him. "I'm on the pill because my periods are irregular, buster. And I'd be on it anyway because I'm hardly in a position to get pregnant."

An evil grin spread slowly over his face, making Sophie take a reflexive step back, but not quite quickly enough. Jake had her beneath him on the couch, skirt up, panties down and penetrated in a matter of seconds. "Now you're in a position to get pregnant."

She could barely control her giggles as she smacked him. "Stop being so blasted literal!"

Jake breathed a sigh of relief at her easy acceptance of him. He never felt more alive, more connected than when he was a part of her. The thought of her swollen with their child was unbearably sexy to him, making him move inside her. "Maybe we'll get lucky and you'll be one of the three percent that gets pregnant anyway . . ."

Sophie chuckled, arching against him. "If I don't it won't be for lack of trying!"

~ ~ ~

With decorating help from Sophie, and an eclectic but surprisingly well-matched mix of their various furniture, collections, and general stuff, the house was finished within the next year, and he was as good as his word, moving the both of them almost overnight into the big house. Sophie wandered through it that first day, feeling like she practically needed a map to find her way around, or that she needed to leave a trail of breadcrumbs to find her way from the kitchen to their big bedroom.

Although they were still in "box heaven", Julia and Matt were there, helping them get things organized and put away. Jake kept a weather eye on Sophie, who was looking just a bit shell-shocked at having given her condo up to move in with him.

Every time he looked at her, even almost two years later, his heart clenched painfully. But things were still up in the air as far as he was concerned and he wanted them settled. Sophie seemed imminently happy with the situation, but Jake wanted more, much, much more from her. And he was about to make a subtle, non-threatening move towards it.

If his plan didn't work, then he was going to start playing dirty . . . and those damned pills would be the first things to go.

Chapter 11

Hon?" came the plaintive male voice from the wilds of the kitchen.

"Yes, sweetie?" Sophie returned in an exaggeratedly tolerant tone. Men who tried to cook were so helpless . . . She had been trying to read the latest Linda Howard for the past half hour or so, but with no success, due to someone's inability to find things in his own blasted kitchen! Granted, they'd only been in the house for about two weeks, but still; she knew where things were. The fact that she was the person who'd decided where they went had absolutely nothing to do with it.

"Where's the garlic - "

"In a jar in the fridge."

Sophie heard the refrigerator door open, then dead silence, which she knew did not bode well for her ability to finish this chapter.

"A jar?"

"Yes."

"In the fridge?"

"Yeeessss . . . "

"Where in the fridge?"

In self-defense, she got up and wandered into the kitchen, reaching in front of him to pluck the jar instantaneously out of the obscurity of the fridge. "Ooh, there in the fridge!"

"Grrrrrr! Men!" she slapped his cute butt as she turned to get back to her book.

"Sweetie, would you grab me some socks? I wanna put my shoes on before I go out to the deck with these steaks." Julia and Matt were coming over for dinner, and Jake had volunteered to do steaks on the grill. Everything else was ready, but Jake seemed unusually helpless today.

Sophie's eyebrow rose. "Uh, yeah, I will." She loped up the stairs and easily found a pair of socks in his top drawer, but something else she saw in his bureau gave her a moment's pause.

A blue velvet ring box.

Unopened.

Sophie bit her lip, staring at the box accusatorily. Because of the nature of his job, Jake didn't wear much in the way of jewelry. What he did wear was in an ornamental box on top of the dresser.

She had never been one to peek - she'd never peeked at her birthday or Christmas presents as a child, even though she'd known they were in the back of her parents' closet. She never opened people's medicine cabinets or looked behind the shower curtain when she was in the bathroom at someone else's house. Heck, she hesitated to open the drawers in Julia's desk when she had to sit there for some reason or another.

If her teeth worried her lip any more vigorously, she was going to start to bleed. Resolutely, she closed the drawer and walked away, but the thought of that box haunted her all night, and Jake watched her puzzle over it from afar with a secret, self-satisfied grin.

That night in bed, he needled her gently. "Somethin' bothering you, honey?"

Sophie shook her head, turning to him for warmth and comfort.

Several days later, a ring box turned up in his nightstand drawer when she was putting away some of his books. Sophie couldn't say that it was the same box, necessarily, because she hadn't looked inside, but seeing it reminded her of the first one she'd seen, and it was exactly the same size and color.

Jake happened to walk in while she was staring at it, and Sophie shut the drawer with guilty haste. Luckily, he didn't mention it. Sophie could just imagine what kind of spanking she'd get for snooping . . .

The fact that that box seemed to develop legs made Sophie just the slightest bit suspicious: it appeared on their shared vanity in the bathroom, on the dining room table, and on the desk they shared to pay bills amongst a large stack of them. Sophie staunchly ignored it, although it was obviously some ploy he'd come up with to see if she'd get herself in trouble. She didn't need any help from him to get herself taken over his knee with frightening regularity.

It was a Saturday morning, when they usually took the time to get groceries together for the next week. That was one of the best things about Jake: he was comfortable enough in his masculinity not to balk at doing something that might have been considered “woman’s work” at one time. They planned their meals together, and shopped together, except this time when Jake had had to go away on business and Sophie was left at loose ends. She had left the house first, wanting to beat the tourists to the grocery store after kissing him warmly and wishing him a good trip.

He had been very reluctant to let her leave – he didn’t want to go on the damned trip in the first place, but he was having a problem with a vendor and the situation needed some face-to-face contact. Watching her back out of the driveway, he vowed it would be the fastest trip he’d ever been on.

~ ~ ~

As she put the groceries away, Sophie’s mind wandered back to something that had struck her in the store: a man, who looked to be in his early forties, pushing a shopping cart with little girl in it who couldn’t have been more than about eighteen months; obviously his much-loved daughter. The man’s wife walked around the cart grabbing the stuff off the list, while the guy, who resembled Jake’s size and weight but not features, positively doted on his family. When his wife asked him a question about something as mundane as which

cooking oil to choose, he didn't brush her off or get impatient as if she was asking him something stupid or beneath him. His arm had rested naturally around her waist as he drew her slowly closer, focusing all of his attention on her while keeping his other hand on the baby's stomach.

Sophie couldn't keep herself from watching the small, obviously happy, family. This big, gruff-looking guy never once raised his voice at either his wife or his daughter. He kept the little girl amused through the whole process, pointing out colors and naming items as they went into the cart, constantly talking to her in a wonderfully soft voice and patting her leg or arm, or holding that little hand with excruciating care. He sang "itsy-bitsy-spider" to his daughter without a shred of embarrassment, spoke to her in a low, soothing tone when she became a little fractious towards the end of the shopping trip, and constantly referred to either of the females in his family as "darlin'" or "honey", which he used with his wife, while "sweetie-pie" and "baby-doll" were reserved for the little girl.

She couldn't help thinking that that was exactly how Jake would be if he ever married and had a child – completely, totally, and utterly devoted. It was certainly food for thought.

There were always things on the grocery list that didn't belong in the kitchen, so on her way to their bedroom she grabbed the razor blades, band aids, tampons, and toothpaste from the kitchen counter and brought them into the bathroom, then wandered into their bedroom, kind of at a loss for what to do, until she saw it.

It was on her pillow.

That well-traveled blue velvet ring box.

. . . And it was open.

Sophie stood there for a moment, half afraid to look at the ring too closely, half wondering if Jake was going to pop out of the closet at her and propose as she walked to her side of the bed.

It was a gorgeous ring, a heart-shaped solitaire in yellow gold. Not big enough to be ostentatious, but big enough that you wouldn't need a magnifying glass to see it on her finger.

Oh, God, she wanted that ring!

Impulsively, Sophie grabbed it and sank down onto the bed, holding the ring gingerly in between her thumb and forefinger like she expected it to bite her, staring at it intently. For a long moment, she chewed the inside of her cheek and twirled a curl of hair around her free index finger, but then she got up, put the ring back in the box and the box, still open, on her dresser.

It was partly in her head to call Julia and tell her that Jake had given – left? – her a beautiful engagement ring, but somehow her inner turmoil wouldn't let her. No sense in alerting Julia – who would then dissolve into hysteria and ask when the wedding was – before she knew what the heck she was going to do about it.

A large part of Sophie, probably about seventy-five percent, of her, wanted that ring and all it represented – a commitment, a sense of permanency between herself and Jake. Lord knows he'd been unusually patient with her about her phobia of commitment. She grinned wryly. Hell, he'd even been excruciatingly careful about getting her used to the idea that he wanted to formalize their relationship by asking her to become engaged to him in a completely non-confrontational manner.

He had never hidden his intent, though, even from the beginning. All of his long-term plans began with “we”. His occasional remarks about children always mentioned how they would take after either one of them, good or bad. He named her as beneficiary of his insurance policy, and altered his will such that she would inherit his business when he died – all with absolutely no prompting from her.

In fact, Jake practically had to sit on her to get her to talk about any of it, and it had become a joke with them that the only time he would discuss something like that was when he had her pinned beneath him in bed, even fully clothed. Sometimes, he would get that supremely intent look as he walked towards her, and she had to wonder whether he wanted to make love with her or discuss what would happen in the event something happened to him.

And she loved him, every stubborn, autocratic, dominant, loving, pushy, opinionated, attentive, sexy molecule of him. She had no doubt that if this nice, easy, non-threatening play didn't work, she'd hear about it from him sometime, somewhere down the line. He was so single-minded about things and so emotionally tuned to her that he

would inherently know when she was the most vulnerable. Sophie wouldn't put it past him to exhaust her with loud, incessant orgasms only to bring a J.O.P. out of the closet while she was still blithering naked in the bed!

The ring spent Jake's trip on the bureau, a niggling reminder that was practically the last thing she saw when she went to bed and the first thing she saw when she got up. Jake called every evening, and neither one of them mentioned it.

~ ~ ~

Jake yelled and threatened and pushed and prodded every poor unfortunate soul around him to make it home Wednesday night instead of Saturday morning, of course having secured exactly the deal he wanted, and from the President of the company, no less. He started getting nervous as he drove home from the Jetport, wondering what had happened to that poor innocent ring, and hoping against hope that she'd be wearing it.

But he honestly didn't expect it. Sophie was as skittish as an abused filly when it came to cementing their relationship. But Jake's patient would only hold out so long. He was giving her a chance to get used to the idea and make the right decision. He didn't know what he'd do if this didn't work, but he knew that in the end, one way or the other, he was going to marry her. Preferably before he got her pregnant, but, hell, whatever worked.

When he arrived home, she was already there, sitting in her short cotton nightie at the desk they shared and paying bills – tiny little half-glasses were perched on the end of her nose making her look like a schoolmarm, her checkbook and bills were stacked up around her, and . . . he glanced as casually as possible at her left hand and saw the sparkle there. Jake hadn't realized that he was holding his breath, but he let it all out in a long sigh as he came around behind her and hugged her tightly, cupping those firm, full, unfettered breasts reverently, reveling in her moan of delight.

Jake took the pen from her hand and the glasses off her face and lifted her into his arms, leaning over long enough to shut out the light, then walked slowly, carefully up the stairs, his eyes – full of love and lust - never leaving hers. When at last he claimed her for his own, sighing at the feeling of homecoming, Sophie framed his face with her delicate hands and caught his eyes again.

“There’s something I want to say to you.”

His heart slammed painfully against his ribs at her serious tone, wondering just what it was she was going to tell him in such a serious tone.

Sophie swallowed hard, her throat dry and blocked by her full heart. “I – I love you.”

Although that was not what Jake had expected to hear, a wide grin split his face seconds before he took her lips in the most exquisitely tender of kisses. “Oh, God, baby, I love you, too!” He almost climaxed right there, but was careful to bring her along with him, making her scream with completion seconds before he groaned long and low with his own release.

Later that night, while he was curled around her, holding her close in his arms, Jake allowed himself a self-satisfied smile. She was here, naked beside him, her left breast cupped intimately within the broad palm of his hand. Though neither of them had mentioned it, she was wearing his ring, and he intended to hold her to the promise implicit in that act. And she loved him.

She loved him.

He squeezed his arms around his woman just a little too tightly, possession and pride swelling up inside him like a balloon, although a sleepy Sophie wiggled in protest. Jake loosened his hold immediately, rubbing her tummy possessively to soothe her back to sleep.

A thought wandered into his mind that set him to thinking long past the time he should have been asleep next to his new fiancé:

Just how does one go about planning a surprise wedding?

End of
Jake Ryan's Woman

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Backside of Love: The *Intimacy of Authority*

<http://BacksideOfLove.com>

Dearest reader:

Are you... *there* yet? ☺

If these unusual themes are the stuff of fantasies you thought you could never share, then please join Carolyn and her husband (GI's "Unka Bobby") at their *Backside of Love* community.

There we explore the profound sorts of romance which include the giving of *authority* to your trusted Other, structure and *consequences* for behavior, and the sexual *intimacy* which winds through it all.

Come over and join our community forum, library and magazine devoted to the common threads which weave through this lifestyle: real authority, real discipline... And yet: real arousal.

Whichever label you put on your needs isn't the point: It's finding the fulfillment possible from exploring these *Intimacy of Authority* themes: trusted *authority*, firm-but-loving *discipline*, and the *sexual* intimacy which that can spark.

We know that those things are healthy, fulfilling (often therapeutic) parts of the ideal relationship for many of us, and we're dedicated to helping as many others realize that dream as possible, having found it ourselves.

--Carolyn and Unka Bobby

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