

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



*Rough Edges*

ASHLYNN  
PEARCE

## **Rough Edges**

*Ashlynn Pearce*

Jake Korte is emotionally broken. Angry. Hurt. Worthless. Fearing that he will become the abuser his father was, the last thing he needs is a woman in his life. He feels like a virtual time bomb just waiting for the internal explosion. So when tiny Rebecca Saylor “chats” her way into his life and then crawls under his skin, panic descends. He can’t seem to stay away, but is terrified to be with her.

After surviving an abusive marriage, Becca isn’t looking for love, only safety. But through her research for her column “Chat Addiction”, she meets Jake, who is anything but safe. He’s the one man who can make her feel alive again. But can she overcome her own fears to claw her way into the heart of a man so fractured?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Rough Edges

ISBN 9781419928048

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Rough Edges Copyright © 2010 Ashlynn Pearce

Edited by Grace Bradley

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication April 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

# ***ROUGH EDGES***

**Ashlynn Pearce**

## *Dedication*

To Chris —

My hero. My best friend. I love you.

To Gran —

Thanks for giving me my first romance novel. You're an inspiration.

To Golla, Annie, Dee, Linda and all my RWI sisters —

Without all your support and encouragement, I wouldn't have made it this far. You all rock!

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Budweiser: Anheuser-Busch, Inc.

Buick: General Motors Corporation

Ford: Ford Motor Company

Google: Google, Inc.

Hayabusa: Suzuki Motor Corporation

Hilton: Hilton Hospitality, Inc.

Jack Daniel's: Jack Daniel's Properties, Inc.

Jeep: DaimlerChrysler Corporation

Marriott: Marriott International, Inc.

NASCAR: National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, Inc.

*Richmond Times*: Richmond Newspapers, Inc.

Victoria's Secret: Victoria's Secret Stores Brand Management, Inc.

XBOX: Microsoft Corporation

Ziploc: S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.

## Chapter One

Rebecca Saylor's hands were shaking as she sat down at her computer. She put her elbows on the desk and dropped her head into her hands. Tears clogged her throat and fell from her eyes. Shoving at her hair, she winced when she accidentally brushed her cheek. She hadn't looked in the mirror yet but she knew there had to be a very large bruise on her face. It matched the bruises that marred both arms, she was sure. She picked up her drink, mostly whiskey, and took a sip. She needed the burn. Anything to steady her nerves.

She glanced around her apartment. The place was a disaster. A chair was turned over, along with her coffee table. Pictures lay in broken glass on the floor and she shuddered as she glanced at the couch. The only thing that had saved her from her ex-husband, Nick, had been a decorative marble ball that had been sitting on the end table. Ironical that it was something he had bought, and something she thought totally worthless. Right now the man was at the hospital with the police. She didn't know how he fared but, frankly, she didn't give a damn.

She took a large swallow of her drink and closed her eyes, forcing herself to calm. But it wasn't working. After talking to the cops, the only thing she wanted to do was come home and talk to Jake. She pushed a small button and stared at her computer screen as it booted up.

*This is crazy.*

All she wanted was Jake...a man she only knew online.

A man who was supposed to be a job assignment.

A man who, for all intents and purposes, was a figment of her imagination. She took a deep breath and typed into her IM.

Becca: Jake, are you there?

After several minutes with no answer, she was almost hysterical. She swallowed her tears and tried to calm herself. She glanced at the time—1:42 a.m., meaning it was 12:42 a.m. where he was. Being a weeknight, she didn't usually talk to him this late. But he had told her he didn't sleep much, so she prayed he was still on. She suppressed a nervous laugh at how stupid it was to want a "virtual" man, instead of a real one.

Jake: Becca?

Relief flooded her and she took another long swallow of her whiskey.

Becca: Hi.

Jake: I didn't expect you to be on this late.

Becca: Yeah. I'm not usually.

She didn't know what to say now that she finally had him online. Tears kept streaming down her face as she attempted a long, slow, deep breath, but her hands just shook more. For some stupid reason she wanted his arms around her, but that was just—well...stupid. She had never even met him. She had only seen the picture he had sent her—but how could she be certain that was really him? For all she knew, he could be some crazy lunatic.

*Oh, like Nick?*

Jake: How are you? You seem quiet?

Becca: Yeah, sorry. Rough day.

Jake: You want to talk about it?

Becca: My ex showed up is all.

How lightly she said it. If he could actually see her, he would know what a liar she was.

Jake: Oh? And what did he want?

*Oh, just to beat the crap out of me and rape me.*

She choked on a whimper and buried her face in her hands. Sobbing quietly, she heard the dings of his IM's but she didn't look up at the screen. The horror of it crashed over her in waves and by the time she finally looked up there were several messages from him.

Jake: Becca? Are you there?

Jake: What did he want?

Jake: Come on, answer me. Are you okay?

Jake: What did HE DO?

She blinked as the screen blurred and came back into focus. In the last month, she had told him all about her ex. More than once Jake had gotten angry. It was amazing how much feeling you could gain from mere text. She had only told one of her friends

about Jake. And then she hadn't gone into much detail. She wondered if it was because she was ashamed that she had become one of *them*. One of those people who lived for a text from a person they had never met. She had just started to type something when her PC dinged.

Jake: Becca, call me. 918-366-5924

She stopped in mid-type and stared. Should she?

Jake: Now.

She inhaled sharply at the given command. Emotions warred within her. She didn't know whether to be pissed that he dared to order her around, or thankful that he was trying to take control of a situation. She grabbed her drink and downed the rest of it.

Becca: I don't know if that's a good idea.

Jake: I don't care if it is or not. He hurt you didn't he? Call me!

Fresh tears filled her eyes and she grabbed her phone. She was coherent enough to remember she had a blocked number, so if she never wanted to talk to him again, that would be her choice. What would it hurt? She dialed the number before she changed her mind.

A half ring later, it was picked up.

"Becca?"

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

His voice was deep and smooth. Reminding her of the whiskey she just drank. "I think so." But she could hear the quiver in her words.

"What did that bastard do? Did he hurt you?"

"He..." The words stuck in her throat, she didn't want to say them.

"Did you call the police?"

"Yes. But he's at the hospital."

"Good. At least the police were there to beat the crap outta him."

"They didn't. I, um, hit him on the head with a marble ball."

There was a pause and she swore she heard the smile in his voice even though he didn't laugh. "Serves him right. Getting beat up by a girl."

She smiled faintly. "I did, didn't I?"

"Yeah. You did. Good girl."



That's when she realized she wasn't shaking anymore and her tears had stopped.  
*Amazing.*

She shoved her hair out of her face and walked to the couch, but stopped. No way could she sit there. So instead, she went to her bedroom and sat on the bed, curling her knees to her chest, phone stuck to her ear.

"I just wanted to talk to you."

"I'm glad you did," Jake replied. "How bad did he hurt you?"

"Um. Just a couple of bruises...but really I'm okay."

The silence on the other end of the line made her nervous.

Finally, he said, "Do you want me to come there and take care of it? I promise he'll never bother you again."

She blinked. "You would do that?"

"Just say the word."

His voice was even, but steel lined his words. He was deadly serious, she realized.

"But, Jake, you live in Tulsa—"

"Who cares? Don't worry about it. You just tell me where you are and I'll get there."

She shook her head. No. As much as she didn't mind the thought of someone kicking the shit out of Nick, she couldn't ask Jake to do it. "No, no. It's okay." She picked nervously at the lint on her blanket. "I just. Oh, hell. I don't know why I wanted to talk to you."

There was a long pause before he spoke. "It doesn't matter. I'm just glad you did."

Her breath caught. His voice had dropped an octave and she licked her lips.

"Yeah, but it doesn't make much sense."

"Sure it does. You don't really know me. All the normal walls you put up with a person-to-person friendship aren't there online. I'm real, but yet, I'm not. I'm safe."

She was amazed at his insight. Had been amazed several times by things he had said. But to hear his voice, so deep and sensual, actually say them...well that was different.

"But I've called you now. So you're real," Becca replied softly.

"Yeah. Ain't that a bitch."

She smiled, her mood lightening immediately. It was just like something he would say online. But hearing him say it was so much better than text. It made her wonder if he did look like the small picture he'd sent her. The voice belonged with the face pictured. Dark shaggy hair hung partially in front of his angular face. Full lips and dark brows completed the image. She couldn't tell his eye color from the picture and there was no way to tell how tall he was because the shot was only shoulder up. The only reason she knew was because she had asked him. Six foot one and blue-green eyes. He had never asked for a picture of her and she thought that odd, because every man

online would IM her and ask age, sex, location, and then promptly ask for her picture. But she had sent him a picture a couple of weeks ago, just because she wanted to.

"You can call me anytime," he said.

"But what if you have one of your babes over?" Becca teased, feeling much better and relaxed. "Won't they get jealous?"

"I told you. I don't have babes at my house for more than a few hours. And the ones that would be here know better than to get jealous."

"Oh yeah, that's right. You don't let them spend the night in your bed."

"Yup."

She had a hard time believing that. He was, after all, a twenty-six-year-old bachelor living alone. It was funny how he could be so insightful one moment and so caveman-like the next. "You know, I didn't really believe you when you told me that."

"Becca, I've never lied to you," he said. "I could tell you anything I wanted, but I'm not like that. You either like me, or you don't."

She bit her lip. *But I've lied to you.* She never told him why she entered the chat room to begin with and she didn't think he would like the idea that he was a work assignment. After talking to him for almost a month she'd had plenty of time to tell him, but hadn't.

"So everything you've told me is really the truth?" She didn't know why she asked the question. Maybe it was because some of the things that had happened in his life seemed so surreal.

"Yes," he said in a short, clipped voice.

She knew he had to be thinking about some of the stuff he had told her. Some of it she was sure he wouldn't tell most people. As he said, she was safe. At least she was before now.

"Do you regret giving me your number?" she asked.

"No. Why would I?"

"Because now...I'm real."

"Yeah and your voice is a lot sexier than a few typed words."

"Well, thank you, Jake." She smiled and slid down farther into her pillow. "So is yours."

His laugh was short, but the low rumble gave her goose bumps. "Why, thank you, Miss Rebecca," he replied in a soft, exaggerated Southern drawl.

"Why, you're welcome, Mr. Jake," she replied and giggled.

"You know what I would do if I were there?"

"What?" she asked.

"Kiss you until every memory of his touch was erased."

She gasped involuntarily at the sincerity of his voice and tears clogged the back of her throat. "I would like that," she whispered.

"Would you?" Jake's voice was deep now and it wrapped around her.

"Make me forget," she whispered. She hated that it sounded like a plea but wanted that forgetfulness. Anything to get away from the reality of the night.

"I would kiss each corner of your lips. And tilt your head just so I could nibble at the vein that throbbed in your throat."

She found herself tilting her head back and touching that exact spot. She had told Jake all the places she liked to be touched and he always remembered.

"Tell me what you're wearing," he commanded.

"Um, a tank top and pajama pants. Nothing very sexy I'm afraid," she said feeling very self-conscious all of a sudden. She could have told him anything. Usually she just made up something when they were online, but his honesty prompted her to be truthful. Nick always hated it when she wore this and said she should wear things that would please him. *The jerk.*

"You might be surprised what I find sexy. Let me guess, pale pink pants, a top that says Victoria's Secret on it and no bra."

She nodded and flushed when she realized he couldn't see her. "Yes. You remembered?"

"Oh, yeah. The image has been burned into my head since you told me about your favorite pj's. I bet it clings to you in all the right places."

"I don't know..."

"I do. Especially if it's cotton. Yeah, totally sexy."

She swallowed hard. The whiskey must be getting to her because even lying down she was lightheaded.

"I could pull down the little strap and reveal one full breast, just waiting for me to taste."

"Yeah, you could do that," she said breathlessly. She closed her eyes and focused on his words. Blocking out everything else. She didn't want to think about how stupid this was or her asshole of an ex-husband. All she wanted to hear was his voice...Jake's voice.

"Is your hand on your breast, Becca? Can you feel my breath on your skin?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"That nipple is hard, isn't it? Just begging me to be there. Tell me what you feel."

"Soft. Hard. Hungry." It was difficult to concentrate on words when she just wanted. Wanted him. Wanted this.

"My lips travel lower, across your stomach. My hands are tugging at your pants. Are you with me Becca?" Jake's voice was strained now, intense.

"Yes," she replied. Her hand dipped just below her waistband as she slid lower on her bed and pressed the heels of her feet into the mattress.

"My teeth lightly bite at your inner thigh as my fingers part that pussy and slide in. So wet and so ready."

Becca groaned as she slid two of her fingers in. And he was right. She was slippery and more than ready.

"Back and forth they slide. And now I'm blowing on your clit. Are you ready for it, babe?"

"Oh, yes. Please."

"Not yet. Make it last. Don't touch your clit yet."

His words caused her to pant with frustration. Her hand was coated now as her fingers moved faster and faster. "I want to. Please."

"Are your fingers sticky?"

"Uh-huh," she replied, doing everything he said.

"Now." His voice was rough and demanding and when she touched that hardened nub of her clit with her thumb she exploded.

"Jake," she screamed as her pussy clenched over and over on her fingers. She clamped her legs together as tiny little pulses vibrated through her body.

"Hell, Becca," his voice grated out in a sexy way that made her shudder one more time. His breath was heavy in her phone and she sighed in contentment.

"Better, darlin'?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Sleep, okay, babe? You call me whenever you want, alright?"

"Thank you," she murmured.

He chuckled. "Anytime, darlin'. Night."

"Night."

When Jake heard a faint click, he hung up his phone and glanced at the time. 2:17 a.m. Even if he could sleep, it wouldn't do him much good at this point. He had to be up at six. Anger spread through him like fire as he stood and walked into his garage. He hid it well for Becca, but his fury was barely controlled. Flicking on the light, he went to his CD player and put in some Slipknot. He cranked it up as much as he dared and walked to the punching bag that hung from the rafters. He didn't bother with the gloves that lay on his workbench. He wanted to feel the pain.

Pain was something he knew how to deal with.

The first punch sent the bag swinging wildly, but he didn't stop. He just kept hitting it, imagining it was Nick's face. Sweat poured into his eyes as he alternated kicks and punches.

Becca didn't tell him all her ex had done. She didn't have to. He could hear the torment in her voice. It cut deep—deeper than it should have since he only knew her from the net. But it didn't matter. Even if he only admitted it to himself, he knew he was

closer to her than he had been to anyone. No matter how ridiculous it was. She wasn't just a name on a screen to him. And now that he knew her voice, well, as she said, she was real now.

Something like possession roared up inside, setting off every protective instinct he owned. He wasn't used to the feeling. He really only felt it with his best friend's sister, who was just like a sister to him as well. The first time he saw her cry, he promptly beat the hell out of the boy who caused it. She had been mad at him for months, but at least he felt better. That was how he handled things. He would hit whatever made him mad. Taking care of it, one way or another.

But not this.

He couldn't do a damn thing and it ate at his gut. Becca's image, the only one he had, was of her sitting on the floor, one leg curled beneath her, her feet bare, a faint smile on a face surrounded by blonde hair and large brown eyes looking up at the camera. Now the image, at least in his mind, was marred by bruises he couldn't fix.

He gripped the punching bag, leaned his head against it and stared at the floor. It was insane to get wrapped up in someone you didn't know. Insane to get wrapped up with anyone at all. But damn it, they had talked for hours, even if it had only been through the internet. She knew him like no one else did. He told her things he had told no one. But he couldn't protect her. If he had been with her, her ex wouldn't have laid a finger on her. But then again, if he was there, she would know better than to hang out with a loser like him. She would have already figured out the real Jake.

Why had he given Becca his number? It was a mistake, but he couldn't take it back. Wouldn't take it back. Even if he could. He wanted to hear her voice. Even before tonight. But he was only setting himself up for failure, because eventually, the one person that looked at him as decent was going to find out just how fucked up he really was. And eventually, because that's what always happened, she would never talk to him again.

He pushed away from the bag then swung hard, hitting the firm padding. This bag had saved him countless bloody knuckles and holes in sheetrock. Nothing was sacred when he was mad, and he knew it. *Just like my old man*. He sneered at the thought and continued to beat the bag, releasing pent-up fury that always built up inside like a volcano.

Oh yeah, he was just like his old man...the sorry fuck.

\* \* \* \* \*

The blaring alarm woke Becca and she bolted upright. She fumbled to hit the clock button and ended up dumping the clock, a bottle of lotion and nail polish on the floor.

"Shit." Reaching over the side of the bed to get them, she lost her balance and fell, landing with a thump. She blew at the strands of hair in her face and shoved it out of her eyes. Grumbling, she placed the items back on her bedside table, stood up and saw the phone still lying in her bed. She picked it up and smiled.

*Jake.*

They had actually talked. She had really heard his voice and God had it been sexy. She bit her lip and sighed. Heat filled her face when she realized she didn't really remember hanging up, but she certainly remembered the orgasm he helped her achieve. When she tapped the phone against her cheek, she winced. And, oh, yeah, Nick.

She tossed the phone on her bed, walked to the bathroom and turned on the light. Staring into the mirror, she frowned. A bruise, about the size of a tennis ball, marred her cheek and part of her eye. Her eye wasn't swollen shut, but it was puffy. No way was makeup going to cover it all.

She should call in sick for work. She was tired and she didn't want to answer all the prying questions about her face. How many times had she called in sick when Nick was living here? How many times had she hidden because the bastard had hit her? Like it was her fault.

No more.

She was through letting a man run her life and make her hide. She was in charge now.

Turning on the tap, she got into the shower and let the steaming water pour over her. She closed her eyes and thought of Jake. The way his voice had been low and rough. The way he had made her feel protected even though she didn't know him. She believed he would have come here had she asked. Rubbing the lathered loofah over her skin, she couldn't help but wonder what he was like in person. What would his hands feel like on her? Would they be soft or calloused? She couldn't imagine him with soft hands—he was an auto mechanic after all.

The loofah scraped her nipple and it perked to attention. She dragged it back and forth over it, imagining it was Jake's hands. Her breast swelled as she closed her eyes. She knew enough about him to know he wouldn't be a gentle lover. But she knew he would never hurt her.

Not like Nick did.

She shook her head, opened her eyes and finished up in the shower. She needed to get to work. She could daydream about Jake later. But when she toweled off, she couldn't stop the thought of him drying her off after a steamy shower together. Cybersex was great, and last night's phone sex was even better. But what would the real thing feel like? Stopping the thought before it could take root, she finished getting ready for work.

Walking to her car, she smiled at the bright yellow Jeep sitting in her reserved parking spot. As soon as the divorce had gone through, she took the boring grey Buick Nick made her buy and traded it in. Her new car was bright, bold and something she had picked out herself. If she wanted to, she could put the top down and let it mess her hair. It never failed to bring a smile to her face.

Finally reaching her office building, she looked up at the large letters that hung on the façade, RICHMOND TIMES.

"Morning, Becca," several people said as she walked toward her cubicle. She greeted them in return, but didn't take off her sunglasses until she was seated in her chair. A head popped over the cubicle wall.

"So how is Becca this fine mornin'?" Matt, or Matty as he was known to most, asked.

She smiled and took off her glasses. "I'm okay –"

He squealed and before she had time to say anything else, he disappeared and reappeared in her cubicle. "What happened? Who did this?" he asked as he lifted her chin so he could look at her face. "Oh, dear! Did you put ice on it? Oh, I bet it was that horrible man, Nick. Did you call the police?" Matty rattled on in his high-pitched voice until half the *Times* staff was crowded around her.

A hundred different questions hit her at once.

"I'm okay," she tried to explain.

"Oh, you are not. My goodness, that thing is going to swell something awful!" Matty tsked. "You should be home putting ice on it. John, go get this poor thing a bag of ice." He gave John a push to help get him moving.

"I didn't want to stay home," Becca said.

"Well, of course you didn't! Why would you want to do that? You need your people around you." Matty nodded. "Mm-hmm. You gots to be more careful, doll. Why did you even go around him?" Then John handed him the Ziploc with ice. "Oh, thank you. Here you go, honey. This will help." He put it in her hand.

"What the hell is going on in here? Why aren't you people working?"

Everyone jumped when they heard their boss's booming voice and employees scattered.

"Matty, you better get back to work," Becca said quietly.

He pursed his lips. "I want you to know that I am not afraid of the big, bad boss." Then he turned and walked back to his cubicle just as Becca heard the heavy footsteps of Richard. She hesitantly looked up.

His beady blue eyes stared at her and he crossed his arms over his chest. "In my office," he ordered and walked away without another word.

Becca sighed and followed him. Once in the office, she closed his door and looked at her uncle. He stood there, his balding pate shiny under the fluorescent lights, his lips set in a firm, thin line. Richard was a tough man and most said a hard-ass boss, but he was always fair. She had always wanted to be like him.

"Nick?" he asked.

She nodded. Richard never minced words and was always direct and to the point.

"You want to tell me the details, or do I have to call the station to figure it out?"

"He came to my apartment and wanted to talk about something. I tried to refuse him, but he shoved his way inside." She wasn't going to tell him anything else. The bruises said it all.

"I see." He paced behind his desk before stopping to look at her. "Are you okay?"

She shrugged and willed herself not to cry. She was strong, she was capable and she didn't need to be coddled. At least she kept telling herself that.

"You can come live with us, you know. You don't have to live alone," he said.

"No. I need to do this. I have to do this alone." Richard and his wife Julie wanted her to live with them, but she had refused. For once, she wanted to stand on her own two feet.

He nodded. "I get it, girl. But think about your safety."

"I will. Thanks," she replied.

"Do you have your column done on Chat Addiction?"

Relieved there were no more questions, she let out a long breath. She could always count on Richard to get right back to business. "Yes, I do. I'll get it on your desk in a few moments."

"Good."

But before she could leave, he came around his desk, embraced her in a big hug and then turned to shuffle some papers. "I want that column pronto," he said in a gruff voice.

She somehow managed not to cry. "Yes, sir," she said and left his office. Printing it only took a few moments and then she was back. Thankfully, he was on the phone and he only nodded as she laid it down.

Getting through the day at work was better than sitting at home thinking about everything. At least it kept her mind busy. She was munching on a cracker at lunchtime when her cell rang. She smiled when she saw it was her best friend, Summer.

"Hey."

"Hey, girlfriend! I thought I could come crash your pad this eve with some wine and Chinese takeout. What ya say?"

"I'd really like that." Becca paused and knew she had better say something about the purple mark on her face *before* Summer saw her. "Nick showed up last night."

"Oh? Please tell me you shut the door in his face. Or better yet, did you go after him with a pair of wire cutters? That would so make my day."

She laughed. "Yeah. That's a nice thought, but no." It still took everything she had to admit to his abuse, even though she knew it wasn't her fault. She took a deep breath and said, "He shoved his way inside—"

"What?"

"Yeah. He—"



"Hit you. Didn't he? The bastard! Are you okay? And why the hell didn't you call me?"

"Yeah he did. But it's okay. He's with the police now. I didn't want to stay home and I didn't want to bother you." That was a lame answer, but how was she supposed to explain that she only wanted Jake instead of her best friend? She dropped her head in her hand.

"You didn't want to bother me? Are you serious? Girl, you know better. I'll take care of you tonight."

"That would be great. I'll be home about six."

"It's a date," Summer replied and hung up.

The rest of the day flew by but she was glad when work was over. Matty was driving her batty and several other coworkers whispered until she walked up. She was putting her laptop into its bright pink case when she felt eyes on her. She turned to see Clay leaning casually against the cubicle wall.

"You want to get some coffee?" he asked.

He was a good-looking guy, brown hair, blue eyes that usually twinkled with mischief. But his expression was solemn and he had been avoiding her all day. "I have a date," she said. "With Summer."

His tense expression eased a bit and he nodded. "Is there anything I can do?"

He had been pursuing her for the last several months. Especially when he found out she was having marital problems. But she didn't want to get involved with someone else and especially not someone at work. Even though girls seemed to like Clay and he was a decent guy, she had never been attracted to him. Not in a girl-wants-boy kind of way. She always felt more like his sister.

"No, thanks. I'll manage."

"If you need anything...all you have to do is ask."

It was a shame she didn't feel more for him. "I know."

He looked almost defeated before he nodded and walked off. Frowning, she gathered her purse and laptop bag and headed out the door.

## Chapter Two

Her doorbell rang. "It's me!" Summer yelled from the other side of the door.

Becca opened it and smiled. "About time. I was beginning to think you stood me up."

"Oh, you wouldn't believe the people at the liquor store," Summer said as she breezed past her in heels and a short denim skirt. "Then some guy was talking to me, and he was so funny," she said, a smile curving her lips.

"Did he ask you out?" That was a redundant question because men always asked Summer out. The girl was a knockout with her long legs and full lips. It didn't help that she was Latina and a model. Guys literally drooled on themselves when she walked by.

"Yeah, but you know, I just wasn't interested."

Becca shook her head as she grabbed two plates from the cabinets. "Eventually, you will have to go out with one of them. You know this right?"

"Yeah, whateve'," Summer replied and poured two glasses of wine.

Her friend was the best a girl could have. They had been through just about it all together. It frustrated her that Summer wouldn't take a chance. "He's not coming back. He's gone."

Tears instantly filled Summer's eyes and she looked away. "I know. But I'm not ready yet."

"Okay," Becca said quietly and wrapped her friend in a hug. They were quite a pair. Her with a crazy ex-husband and Summer loving a guy that had been dead for years.

Summer released her first. "Let's take a look at this." Summer eyed her cheek and shook her head. "Someone needs to serve his balls on a platter for what he's done to you."

"I think Jake wanted to do something like that," Becca replied and realized her mistake when Summer narrowed her eyes.

"Jake? Who's Jake?"

"Oh, um, nobody." *Think, Becca, think.*

Summer smacked the table with her hand. "Oh, it's that chatroom guy, isn't it? Did you talk to him again? I thought you weren't talking to him anymore?"

She knew better than to try to lie to her friend. "Er, yeah. He's the chatroom guy. I, uh, called him."

Summer's dark brown eyes went round and she almost choked on her chow mein. "You what? Girl, what were you thinking? He could be some lunatic for all you know."

"Hey, give me some credit. I didn't give him my number and my number is blocked, remember? If I don't want to call him again I won't." Becca shrugged and took a bite of her sweet-n-sour chicken.

"But why did you call him? I thought he was just a research assignment, you know, for your column."

"Because he asked me to."

Becca squirmed when Summer said nothing and just stared at her. The girl had that knack for seeing right through her.

"I think something else is going on," Summer said as she leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. When her foot started tapping air, Becca knew she was in trouble. "You like him."

Becca tried to brush it off and nodded. "Yeah, he seems an all right guy."

But Summer pointed her fork at her and shook her head. "Uh-huh. But you really like him. I can see it in your face. What have you been keeping from me? I think there's more going on than just a lil' chat."

Heat filled her face and she tucked her chin to her chest. There was no way she was telling Summer what she and Jake had been up to.

"Rebecca Saylor, I want deets, and I want them now. Just how involved are you with this Jake character?"

"Just talking. That's it."

"Uh-huh. That would explain why your face is my absolute favorite nail color—red-hot. You might as well cough it up. You'll tell me eventually anyway."

"Really. We just talk."

"About what?"

"Stuff."

"Sex?"

Becca jerked her head up and stared at her smiling friend.

"That's what I thought," Summer said and laughed. "What? You think you're the only girl to have cyber sex? That's nothing new, honey. But you took it a step further didn't you? Is phone sex better? I haven't tried that yet."

Becca was never one to talk about things like this. Not with Summer or anyone else for that matter. But Summer never had trouble talking about anything and she loved details. So she tried to change the subject. "He was worried about me. He knew Nick had hurt me."

"Wow. You came home last night and talked to him about it instead of me? Sounds to me like this is a relationship, not just *talking*."

"No, we're not in a relationship. And yeah, I know. It's nuts." Becca took a long drink of her wine. "I hadn't talked to him on the phone until last night. Before that, it

was just chat. I don't know. I guess I just wasn't thinking straight with everything that happened."

Summer tapped her red nail on the table. "Do you have a picture of him? I want to see."

Becca sighed, got up and pulled out her laptop. She might as well tell her everything. She hated keeping the secret from her anyway. "You're not mad at me are you?"

"Sister, we've been through too much for me to be mad at you over this. So, is he good?" Summer grinned.

"Yeah," Becca said sheepishly. She opened a file labeled "Jake" and turned the laptop toward her. "Here it is. It's not a very good one, but that's all he sent me."

"Hmm, you're right. Not real good. But at least he's not fugly."

Becca laughed. "No, he's not. If that's really him."

"Did you send him one?"

"Yeah, just a little one. Be right back," she said as she went to the bathroom. She glanced in the mirror after she washed her hands and frowned at the bruise. It was darker and larger than it had been earlier. Blowing out a breath, she walked back into the living room and stopped.

"Hi. Are you Jake? Good, this is Summer."

Becca's mouth fell open when she saw Summer on the phone. "What are you doing?"

"Yeah, could you hold on a minute," Summer said into the phone, covered the mouthpiece and looked at her. "I'm talking to Jake, don't interrupt." Removing her hand she continued. "Sorry. Becca's not real happy with me right now."

Becca stomped her foot and glared. How could she do this? She mouthed at her "just you wait".

Summer smiled. "Oh, you have heard about me. All good I hope? But the reason for my call is I want to know something about you. Seems my friend has been keeping you under wraps."

She couldn't hear Jake's replies but Summer kept smiling as she started writing stuff down. Becca was going to kill her when she got off the phone.

"You live in Oklahoma? Hm. You do realize if you hurt her I'll hunt you down?"

"Summer," Becca said in warning. She really couldn't believe this.

But Summer ignored her and laughed into the phone.

"Nice talking to you, too. Bye, Jake."

"What do you think you're doing? How could you call him like that?" Becca all but yelled, appalled at what Summer had done.

"Oh, calm down. I just wanted to find out a few things about your Jake."

"What does it matter? It's not like he knows where to find me."

"Now we can double check his info."

"Are you serious?" Becca asked, stunned.

"Deadly. Because I care about you, girlfriend. So hush and deal."

Becca fumed as she watched Summer type Jake Korte into the computer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake hung up the phone and chuckled.

"Who was that?" Tony asked as he took a drink of his beer.

"Summer," Jake replied. "Becca's friend. She wanted information...about me."

Tony laughed. "That's a good ploy. Get the friend to get info."

"Naw, I heard Becca in the background. She wasn't happy. At least someone is looking out for her. And hell, I don't care what she knows." Jake took a drink of his Bud.

"You found out where she lives yet?" Tony asked.

"Nope. And I don't plan on it unless she offers to tell me." Jake sank back into his couch and stared at the big screen that took up most of the room.

"Maybe you should worry about the flesh and blood girls instead of this one."

"And maybe you should mind your own damn business."

"I would. But you get that lost look on your face sometimes and it's scaring me. It's like you've fallen for some cyber chick," Tony said, grinning like an idiot.

Jake threw a pillow at him. "Shut up. You know damn well I'm not capable of that."

Tony grinned as he caught the pillow. "Yeah, but someone has to give you shit about it." He glanced at his watch. "Speaking of shit, I have to get out of here." Tony threw the pillow back at Jake and headed out the door. "Later."

Jake dodged it. "Later, man."

He gathered up the empty beer bottles, took them to the kitchen and dropped them in the trash. Leaning against the counter, he stared outside at the steady rain. Not something that often happened in Oklahoma in July. But the rain hadn't cooled anything off, just made it sticky and hard to breathe.

When he heard someone banging on his door, he walked to it and pulled it open. Frowning, he stared at the woman on his doorstep. Her over-bleached blonde hair with dark roots hung in wet, scraggly strands around her life-worn face.

"Are you just going to stand there and let your mother get soaked or are you going to let me in?" she demanded.

He hesitated and thought about it. If he left her there, would she go away? No, she would stand out there and raise hell until he let her in or someone called the cops. Been there, done that. So he stepped aside without a word.

"Well, hello to you too, Son," she said as she walked in and sat on his black leather couch.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he stared at her and waited. *Tell me what you want and get the fuck out.*

"I thought you might want to hear this in person. Your daddy's out."

"And why do I care?" He figured it was about time his old man was released from prison.

"You should. He's your daddy." Her bright red lips pursed in a thin line. "You should show a little respect for your elders."

Her tone grated on his stretched nerves. "I do. To those who deserve it." Evidently she had been working. She was wearing a skirt that almost let her secret out. And just the thought of being born of that, made him want to puke. "If that's all you had to say, then get out."

"I need some money," she said.

"Whore for it." He was tired of giving her money for her booze and drugs and whatever else she did with it.

The sneer on her face said it all. "Oh, yeah. You are such a great son, the way you take care of your mother. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have to whore for it!" She stood and pointed her finger at him. "It's all your fault he left. Ungrateful bastard. I should have —"

"Aborted me? Yeah, I get it. So get the hell out of my house," he said with surprising calm. His fingernails cut into his palms to keep from lashing out at her. He wouldn't let her get to him. Wouldn't let her see the pain she caused with each word.

"Are you really not going to give me any money? My rent is up."

He ground his teeth, walked to a side table, grabbed his wallet and pulled out a couple of hundreds. Gripping her arm, he wadded the cash into her hand and immediately released her. "Now leave."

She nodded and stared at the money greedily. "Yeah, I'll leave. But I know your daddy will want to see you soon," she said and glanced back up at him.

"Tell him I said fuck off."

"That's no way to talk to your flesh and blood!"

"Get. Out." Jake shook with anger and it was all he could do not to bodily throw her out.

"I wouldn't want to stay here anyway." She banged out the door into the rain.

Rage boiled inside and his head pounded with the race of his heart. He paced the length of his living room trying to slow his breathing, but memories flooded him. They always did after an encounter with either his mom or dad.

*His dad's face contorted with fury and Jake covered his head as fists pummeled him. Hitting his arms, face, legs. Nothing was left unmarred. All because his old man was drunk and mad.*

*Later, his mom yelled at him, telling him it was his fault his dad was so angry, while blood dripped from his split lip.*

Jake sat on his couch and put his head in his hands. He was twenty-six. None of this shit should bother him anymore. He was an adult.

Responsible. Had a job. Paid his bills.

It didn't matter what his old man or his mom thought. He had done something with his life.

*You'll always be a fucking loser.*

How many times had they told him that? He got up, grabbed a beer out of the fridge and walked to his garage. It was time to let off some steam.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't long before Jake was dripping with sweat. He opened his garage door to let air in, but it was so muggy it didn't do any good. Hands on his hips and breathing hard, he stared out into the rain that fell in straight sheets. The sky was a dull gray with a few angry black clouds. Matched his mood perfectly.

When his cell rang and vibrated on his workbench he walked over and grabbed it. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now, but the screen said "blocked number".

Becca's number was blocked.

"Hello," he said, hoping it was her.

"Hi. Um, I'm so sorry Summer called you. I had no idea. I hope you're not mad."

He relaxed at the sound of her light voice. "Hey, don't worry about it. She's obviously worried about you."

"Yeah, but she's also extremely nosy."

"Most friends are." He sat on the barstool he kept in his garage and glanced at his motorcycles. "You doing all right?"

"Yeah. I'm okay. You sure you're okay with Summer calling you? I just couldn't believe it. I was so pissed at her."

"Seriously, Becca. It's cool." He wondered why he had to reassure her so much. Did it have anything to do with her ex? "So, did she Google me?" he asked trying to lighten her mood.

"Of course. That girl, I swear. She wanted to make sure you were who you said you were."

"And?"

"Well, you know what we found. Jake Korte, lives in Bixby, Oklahoma, twenty-six years old."

"Anything else?"

"Just a couple of arrests, but it didn't say what they were for. But you knew we would find that didn't you?"

"Yup. I'd told you I'd been arrested." When she turned quiet, he said, "Don't worry, it was all done when I was young and dumb."

Her light laughter made him smile.

"So what are you doing?"

"Beating the piss out of my punching bag. I had an unexpected and unwanted visitor."

"Let me guess, your mom. Is this a bad time?" Her voice was hesitant.

"Yup, it was. And no, I'm glad you called." And he was. She was exactly what he needed. It was no different when they chatted online. She could calm him down, no matter how mad he would be at the time. But actually hearing her voice was like a soothing balm. No one had been able to do that for him. Tony's mom, Maria, had reached him but not on the level Becca did. Tension released from within, without having to force it.

"Good," she said.

"Did you find out any other juicy details about me?"

"No. Was I supposed to? Although, I did think you lived in Tulsa."

"Tulsa, Bixby – so close you can't even tell them apart. And I have no clue what you would find. I never had the need to search myself."

This time she laughed loudly. "I could search ya."

"And I'd let ya." He twirled a screwdriver absently in his hand and grinned. Oh, yeah. He would let her search him. All over.

"Mmm. That's a pleasant thought. How would you like me to search you?"

He got up, hit the garage door button, walked into his house and sat on his couch. "Any way you want." He grabbed the remote and pushed a button so Seether played low in the background. He didn't bother turning on a light, preferring the darkness.

"I could start with your chest. I know you don't have a shirt on, do you?"

"No. Too hot," he said.

"Are you?" Becca's voice was low and sexy, which forced him to adjust his suddenly too tight shorts.

"98 degrees with 100 percent humidity. So, yeah, I'm hot."

"I like a man who's a bit steamy."

"Then I'm your man," he replied.

"I would run my hands over your shoulders, chest and across your stomach. Maybe tug at your shorts."

His abs tightened and he grabbed his cock through his shorts. "How about I pull at those nipples I know are hard." He grinned when she gasped. "Just how wet are you, Becca? Check for me, babe."



"Umm, real wet," she murmured.

"Now, slide two fingers in and hold them still. Don't move them." Stroking himself, he could just imagine the pretty picture she made with her fingers buried deep in her pussy. "You're not moving them are you?"

"No. But, please," she asked, a slight pleading in her voice.

He tightened the grip on his cock. "Don't move them until I say. Hold the phone between your head and your shoulder and shove up your shirt. Imagine my hand sliding up, cupping one breast. It's heavy and full in my hands."

"Oh, yes," she said.

"My teeth tugging, biting at your nipple. Pull it, babe. Feel it."

"Please. I want to move." She was begging now, her breath hard in his ear.

Tension coiled and his balls tightened. "Move. Now."

"Ah," she panted.

His hand slid easily up and down his dick as she groaned. "Move them. Feel the walls around them quiver. Press your thumb on your clit."

"I am," she gasped.

"How do you feel?"

"I want you. Here."

Her words stopped him briefly, but he realized he wanted to be there as well. And not for just a nice fuck. "I'm there, Becca. Beside you. Inside you."

"I want to—"

"Come," he said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, God! I am..." Her scream was music to his ears and had him coming hard.

Only she had been able to bring him to this level of insanity. He didn't understand this hunger he had for her. She was like a chat drug. But the intensity was ratcheted up now that he could hear her voice.

"Mmm," she said softly. "You are hot."

"I aim to please." He got up on shaky legs, grabbed a towel and cleaned himself up. Zipping his shorts, he didn't bother with the top button and fell back on the couch.

"And you please so well." Her words were purely feminine and held a hint of satisfaction.

"I enjoy pleasing you." And Jake was surprised at how much he meant the statement. Yeah, he always pleased his sexual partners, but with Becca there was something more. And he wasn't at all sure he liked the thought. And although he came, something was missing.

*I want to hold her.*

Where the hell had that thought come from?

"If you were here in Virginia, we just might explore the possibility."

His thoughts screeched to a halt. Had she read his mind?

"I mean," she stuttered. "But you're not here. So no. I mean...shit."

"You're in Virginia?"

"Uh-huh. But I didn't mean—I know it's impossible, and even if you were here." She blew out a breath. "Anyway, I can at least tell you where I live. Especially, after the stunt Summer pulled."

"How ironic," he said mostly to himself, realizing she hadn't meant to say what she did. A thought crept up on him, how much did she mean those words?

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm going to be at Virginia Beach next weekend. Tony's sister, Amber is getting married. Her fiancé is from there." He paused for a moment, debating whether or not he should. He knew what he wanted, was she sure about what she wanted? "I don't know how close you are, but do you want to meet?"

Becca could barely breathe. What was she doing? Just because some strange guy got her off didn't mean she wanted him to please her in real life. Did she? What if he was some psycho? But she couldn't help but want...really want to feel Jake touching her. Not in chat and not on the phone. For real.

"Yes. Sure. When?" she heard herself say. Was she out of her mind?

"If you don't feel comfortable with it, that's cool. Hell, I understand."

"No," she said abruptly. The thought of him backtracking sent her almost into a panic. "I want to. It just caught me off guard. When will you have time? I live in Richmond, about an hour's drive from there." Her heart thumped in her chest at the thought of seeing him. What was he really like in person?

"The wedding is Saturday, July eighteenth. I think I should be free by five. Amber and Maria planned the whole thing."

Smiling, Becca said, "And you're ordered to be there."

"You got it. If Maria says you have to be there, then you damn well better be there. Wants us all there looking presentable," Jake replied sounding disgusted by it. "I think I have to wear a tux."

"I'm sure you'll look handsome."

"Yeah, right. If the damn thing doesn't choke me first."

"You'll survive," she said. "How about we meet at the Rockfish Boardwalk Bar and Sea Grill? It's right on the beach and easy to find."

"Sounds good to me. What time?"

"How about six?"

"Sure. I'll have Tony with me, so if you want to bring one of your overprotective friends that's cool."

Becca breathed a sigh of relief. At least she didn't have to meet him alone. "I know Summer will want to come."

Jake's deep chuckle swept down her spine. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me."

"She is a little crazy sometimes, but she's a good friend."

"Your ex hasn't bothered you has he?" he asked.

It reminded her of the bruise on her face and she touched it tentatively. "No. And I have no idea if he made bail or not."

"He probably did so be careful. Guys like that usually cause more trouble. So don't make the mistake and think you've heard the last from him." There was a threat underlining his voice and it made her feel safe, even though he wasn't here.

"I won't."

He was quiet now and she knew he was thinking of his dad. His dad had beaten him and his mom. They were stories he had told her on chat and they sounded more like nightmares to her. Although she had no idea what it was like to be hit as a kid, she did know what it was like to live in fear. Nick had become a person she feared. Not only did he think he had the right to backhand her every once in a while, he had controlled everything she did and every move she had made, except when it came to her job. That she had stood up for even though he had objected to it. It didn't fit into what he thought his wife should be doing. It wasn't prestigious enough. She didn't care what he thought. She loved her job, just like she loved her new, bright yellow Jeep.

"Dammit Bec, I don't like it that I can't stop him from hurting you," he said, frustration lacing his words.

"I will be fine." She didn't know how to reassure him of that. And to be honest, after last night she wasn't sure what Nick was capable of. But she didn't want Jake to worry. When she couldn't suppress a yawn she realized it had become late and she was running on just a couple hours of sleep.

"You're tired. You need to sleep. I'll let you go, okay?"

"You have to be tired, too. Did you sleep at all last night?" she asked.

"No. But I'm fine. Nothing I'm not used to."

"Well, it's not good for you. You need to sleep more," she said.

"I'll give it a shot. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, good night."

"Night, Becca," he said.

## Chapter Three

Becca had been trying to think of a way to tell Summer about her meeting Jake. But it was Tuesday now and in only four days she would be seeing him. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

Summer sat across from her at their favorite club, Sunsets. It was Tuesday and they always came here for a few drinks and to catch up. Music thumped in the background and although the place wasn't packed, there were a few bodies moving on the dance floor.

"Quit thinking about phone sex with Jake," Summer said, interrupting her thoughts.

"What? I was not!" Becca said, heat filling her face.

"Don't lie to me, girl. I know that faraway look."

She couldn't deny it. She had talked to Jake twice since Summer called him. And both times it led to some serious orgasms. She bit her lip remembering his deep voice over the phone. What was she going to do when she finally met him in person?

She looked at her friend who was nodding her head to the music and sipping her margarita. "I'm meeting him," she blurted out.

Summer froze and stared wide-eyed at her. "You're what?"

"He's going to be at Virginia Beach this Saturday."

"I knew it. I knew there was more going on. There is no way I can let you meet him by yourself, even if you are meeting him for some hot sex."

"It's not about sex, Summer," she said in shock. "He's going to be down here for a wedding, not to meet me for that."

"Mmhmm. So you're telling me that if something pops up, you're not going to jump on it?" Her eyebrows wiggled at her and Becca couldn't help but laugh.

"We're just going to talk."

"Sure you are, babe. And does he know this?"

Blanching at the thought, she said, "God, what am I doing? I should know better than this." Putting her head in her hands she stared at the table.

Summer touched her shoulder and she looked up into her smiling face. "No worries. I'll be there. Nothing will happen unless you want it to."

"He's bringing his friend, Tony. Surely he doesn't think I'll just fall into bed with him. You think?"

"Honey, that's what all guys think. Look at it this way, if you do end up in the sack with him, he has to go back to Oklahoma eventually." Tapping the table with a brightly

polished nail, Summer smiled. "And, you know, a one-nighter might do you some good."

"I don't know. I've never done anything like this before. I have a feeling I'm in over my head." This was a bad idea. She should never have agreed to this. How many women got killed because they went to meet someone they met online?

Summer leaned in close, her face suddenly serious. "All you've really known is Nick. You need to do this. You need to see what it's like with someone else. Someone who doesn't control every damn move you make."

Summer winked at her and turned toward a guy who had walked up to them. Becca barely noticed when they wandered off onto the dance floor.

She sighed. Summer was right. She had been with Nick since her senior year in high school and hadn't really dated much before that. Her life had been a whirlwind since her dad had died when she was seventeen. Wrapped up in her own grief when Nick stepped into her life, she sort of went through the motions of it. He seemed to be what she needed at the time. Looking back, she realized he just filled an empty hole. Had she ever really loved the guy?

"Hey, Becca."

She jumped at the sound of a familiar voice. "Clay? What are you doing here?"

He slid onto Summer's barstool. "Nice to see you, too."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting to see you and I was off in my own world," she explained, feeling like an idiot.

"It's okay. I came here with a couple of friends and spotted you over here. You come here often?"

Nodding she said, "Yeah. It's kind of me and Summer's place." She glanced at her friend who was dancing close to the tall guy she was with. Sometimes she wished she could let go like Summer did. But there was no way she would dance like that with someone she didn't know.

"I'm glad I saw you here. I've been meaning to talk to you," Clay said, not taking his eyes off her, which made her feel uncomfortable.

"Yeah? What's up?"

"You want to go out sometime?" he asked.

"Clay, I thought we decided to be friends after our last date?"

"But that was right after your divorce. I wanted to give you some time—let's try again."

It was hard when by all accounts he would be the perfect guy for her. But there just wasn't a connection. Not on her side anyway. "I don't think that's a great idea."

"Why not? We have a lot in common and if you would just give me a chance—" He clenched his jaw.

He was right, they came from the same type of family, they both worked at the paper. Why couldn't he be more? He was fun and charming, but she felt nothing. Not a zing of anything.

*He doesn't make you feel what Jake does.*

She inhaled sharply at the thought.

"Look, I don't typically chase women, but I thought you were different. I thought—" He stood abruptly. "Nevermind. It doesn't matter what I thought."

When he turned his back on her to walk away she said, "Clay. I'm sorry."

He stopped and looked at her, regret marking his features under the flashing lights of the club. "Yeah. So am I." And he walked away.

Summer smiled as she sat back down on the barstool. "So who was that stud?"

Becca followed her gaze and frowned. "Clay. A guy I work with."

"Really? That's the guy you went out with a couple of times and stopped because there wasn't anything there for you?" she asked, looking amazed.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Damn, girl. He is fine! You sure you felt nothing?"

"I know. It's crazy." She had to be losing her mind. Why else would she let something that good walk away from her? "So who was tall and handsome?"

"Um, I dunno. He had slippery hands." She was still looking in Clay's direction when she asked, "Would you introduce me?"

"Are you serious? I think I just damaged his ego, and you want me to introduce you?"

Summer grinned. "Yeah. I could fix his ego...among other things." Then she turned to face her. "That is, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Why would I mind? He's just a friend."

"Come on," Summer said and tugged her up.

Becca hesitantly walked up to Clay and his friends, with Summer tagging along. One guy whistled low and Clay turned his head to look at them. When his eyes narrowed, she wanted to sink into the wooden floor. "Clay, I thought you might like to meet my best friend, Summer."

He didn't extend his hand, just nodded and said, "Hey."

"Hey yourself." Summer smiled. "Would you like to dance?"

Becca had to suppress a laugh when Clay's eyes went wide. Summer was always the forward one. She didn't even know why she had insisted on a formal introduction. It wasn't like Summer couldn't walk up to a whole group of guys with confidence, something she would never do. But Becca was surprised when Clay nodded, got up and let Summer lead him to the dance floor. She hadn't taken him for the dancing type.

When one of Clay's friends offered her a seat she declined and walked back to her table. She watched Summer and Clay dance. First it was a fast song, and then changed

to slow and sensual. Something Summer was extremely good at. She shook her head and took a sip of her Fuzzy Navel. Maybe Summer could help him get over this hang-up with her.

Later, when she was home and lying in bed, she stared at the phone. Should she call him? She put a pillow over her head and tried to sleep. But she was too wired and her thoughts kept straying back to Jake. She hadn't talked to him since Saturday afternoon. That was almost three days ago. And it wasn't like she could wait on him to call. He didn't have her number. Fighting the desire to dial his number she flopped on her side. Then onto to her stomach.

Every time she moved the soft sheets slid against her skin and she groaned. She kicked off the covers and flopped over on her back. Oh hell, who was she fooling? She wanted to hear his voice. She grabbed the phone and dialed.

"Hi," Becca said when he picked up.

"Hey, darlin'. How are you?" Jake answered.

"I'm good." Stretching out on her bed she stared up into the dark and smiled, feeling instantly relaxed now that she could hear his familiar voice. "How was your weekend?"

"It was a weekend," he said flatly.

"That doesn't sound good. What happened?"

"Fight. That's all."

"A fight? Are you okay?" she asked and instantly sat up in bed.

"Oh, yeah. I'm cool. The other dude...not so much."

"What happened?"

"Tony and I were at a club downtown and some guy started shoving around a girl. No one seemed to be noticing, so I told him to stop." He said it like he was reading facts from a book.

"You told him?"

"Okay, maybe I did more than tell him. But he did stop."

Becca laughed. "I bet he did. That was a nice thing to do."

"Yeah. Whatever."

She could almost hear his shrug. "Not whatever. Most people don't like to get involved and wouldn't have done anything about it. So unlike what your dad would have done."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And don't use that tone with me. You are not like him, Jake." It made her mad that he seemed intent on thinking that. "He would have been the guy pushing the girl around. Am I right?"

Silence hung on the phone before he finally answered. "Sure. But don't be putting me on some pedestal, Bec. I don't deserve it. I stopped some guy from hitting a girl...so what? It's one incident and I'm sure all my other fuck-ups make up for it."

Shoving her hair out of her face, she got up and paced her bedroom in anger. His parents were the fuck-ups. How could they treat their only child the way they had Jake? It boggled her mind. But the sad part was she didn't think Jake had told her the worst of what had been done to him. It made her want to pull him close and help heal those wounds. He was a good man. But he didn't believe it.

"You are not a bad guy like you seem to think."

"So how was your weekend?"

Sighing at his change of subject and knowing it was his way of dealing, she said, "It was good. Summer and I went to Sunsets tonight."

"Your usual Tuesday nighter."

"I introduced Summer to a coworker of mine. I think she had a good time."

"But you didn't?"

How could she tell him that she thought about him the whole time? That he stayed in her thoughts like an addiction? "It was fun," she said and lay back down on her bed.

"You're lying."

"Okay, fine. But I didn't have a bad time."

"But no fun?"

"No. Not really. I had things on my mind." *Like you.*

"Anything in particular? Or just life in general?"

"Oh, you know. Life. Work." She cleared her throat and said, "Summer's coming with me Saturday."

His low chuckle spread through her body and gave her goose bumps. "Thinking about this weekend, huh? I am too."

"You are?" she asked, surprised. He always seemed so in control, like nothing ever got to him. Even when he talked about the hell he had been through, it was like he was detached from it.

"How could I not? I'm lucky I get to meet you. I honestly didn't think you would go for it."

Warmth filled her and it brought a smile to her face. "How could I not?"

"Easy. You could have said no. And if you back out at the last minute, I won't hold it against you."

"Jake, I'll be there." And she would. She didn't know a lot of things, but no matter how scared and nervous she was, she was meeting him. No matter what. "Don't you back out on me."

"I gave my word. I'll be there," he said in a low voice, a promise that almost sounded like a threat.



A shiver ran through her and something hot settled between her legs. She closed her eyes and squeezed her thighs together. She didn't know what it was about him, but when his voice dropped like that all she could think of was sex. He hadn't said anything even remotely sexy, but it didn't stop her body from reacting to it.

"Good." She licked her lips and tried to get her libido under control.

"I thought about you last night."

"I thought about you too," she said quietly

"What were you thinking?"

"I was dreaming, actually."

"Interesting. Were we together?"

"Yeah." Oh God, were they together. She didn't think she would have the courage to have sex with him Saturday, but that didn't stop her mind from conjuring the scenario while she slept.

"Was I touching you?"

Damn, his voice had dropped again, sending her libido into overdrive. "Yes."

"Where?"

"Everywhere," she whispered.

"Down your neck, over your nipples, down your stomach and between your legs where you're so hot?"

"Mmm-hmm." If it didn't feel so good, she might be embarrassed that her panties were already soaked. And she hadn't even touched herself yet. After every encounter with him, it was easier and easier to let go. Not that she had much choice. Her body hummed every time she even thought about Jake.

"Tell me about your dream, Bec."

"It was on a beach. Cool water rushing around us as we lay naked in the sand under the moonlight. It sounds corny now, but it wasn't in the dream."

"No, it doesn't. I could just see you lying there, totally wet and open for me. Yeah. That's sweet."

She swallowed hard. His face hadn't been that clear in her dreams but the voice had been all his. It had to be because she really didn't know what he looked like. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him for a different picture that showed his face better, but the weekend was only a couple of days away.

"Like you are now. I can tell by your voice when you're hungry for release. You sound soft and you get quiet. Like you're embarrassed to ask for it. No reason to be. Not with me. Ask for it," he said.

Heat filled her face. He was amazingly perceptive. How had he figured all that out? Nick never even realized when she wanted it. His only concern was when he wanted it. Her needs never entered his mind. Jake reached her where no one else had. How was

that possible with someone you didn't even know? And did she have enough nerve to ask for what she wanted?

"Becca. Ask for it," he said in a firm but low voice.

"Please?" she murmured.

"Please, what? Tell me what you want."

God, she was drenched. She squeezed her legs together tighter and her hand fisted in the blanket. How could he control her so well? Make her want so badly?

"Make me come. Please." She practically begged for it. But at this point she didn't care. She just wanted the release he could bring her.

"I would touch your neck. You are so sensitive behind your ears. Kiss down your throat and nip at your collarbone, while my hand slid inside your panties and one finger dipped into your heat. So hot. So wet. Moving slow, as your hips rock up to meet each touch. Teeth tugging at your bare nipple."

Breathing was becoming a chore as he told her exactly what he would do to her. How she wished it was his cock inside her and not her finger. How she wanted to feel his breath on her skin. How she longed to feel his skin against hers. It had been so long since she had been with a man.

"Becca. Do you have any idea how hot you are? How hot you make me?" His words grated out.

Feeling bold she asked, "Please tell me I'm not alone in this. Are you hard?"

"Fuck, yeah, I'm hard. Would you put your mouth on me? Would you make me come like that, Becca?"

"Yes," she hissed. "Oh, I'm so close."

"Not yet. I love hearing your heavy breathing in the phone. Knowing you are touching that wet pussy. Knowing I can make you let go."

"Oh, please. Can I come?"

"Your clit throbs and aches, doesn't it? I bet if I put my mouth on it you would come apart."

"Yes. Oh, God, I'm coming, Jake," she shouted.

"Fuck!" he said, his panting heavy in her ear.

She rolled on her side as spasms shook her body and her toes curled with pleasure. Only he had been able to bring her to this level of orgasm. It was uncanny and downright scary. And every time he made her come, it only made her want the real him more. She opened her eyes and released a satisfied sigh. Would she really be able to deny him when she met him? Would she even want to?

Sweat poured off Jake as he sat there, his jaw tight, the phone nearly crushed in one hand, his twitching cock in the other. He'd barely got the towel in place before she made him come. Christ! The woman was a drug. He blew out a breath and stared into

the darkness. The air conditioner hummed in the background but it was still damn hot tonight. And hearing the hunger in Becca's voice had been his undoing.

"Are you still there?" she asked, sounding like a satisfied kitten.

"Yeah." Trying to pull himself together instead of acting like a boy amazed by his first come shot was harder than it should have been. "Now you sound relaxed," he said, forcing a calm to his voice that he didn't really feel.

"How could I not be? You always relax me, Jake."

"At your service, darlin'." He didn't think he could ever get tired of hearing her say his name. How many women had screamed his name? Too many to count. But it never hit him like a punch to the gut. Never made his heart thump a little harder. "I better let you go. It's late and you work in the morning."

"Yeah," she said with a yawn. "So do you. Remember, you promised me you'd sleep more."

"I tried it. It's overrated."

She yawned again. "Unless you're really tired."

"Hmm. Like you? Go to sleep. I'll see you soon."

"Yeah. I like that 'see you soon'. I can't wait."

"Night, Bec."

"Night, Jake."

He hung up and wiped himself clean. Seemed he was doing that a lot after talking to her. He never really planned on having phone sex with her. But damn, he could practically hear the want in her voice. And who was he to deny her?

He couldn't wait to see her and was actually surprised that she still wanted to meet him. Looking forward to it, she'd said. She hadn't backed out, and he expected her to. Even after all the shit she knew about him. He hoped she hadn't glorified it. Women tended to do that, sometimes.

Hell, he had seen it firsthand. His mother thought she could fix his old man. She couldn't see — once a bastard, always a bastard.

He walked to the bathroom, turned on the shower, shucked his clothes and stepped under the spray. Hands splayed on the shower walls, he let the water run over his head. Becca seemed to think him better than that. Her words echoed in his head. *You're not your old man.*

Hell if he wasn't. He saw it every time he looked in a mirror. Every time he lost his temper. Every time he drank one too many. He was just like his old man. His hands fisted as he thought back to things he had done. Things he wasn't proud of.

If Becca knew those things, she wouldn't want a damn thing to do with him. She was too good for him, but she drew him in and he couldn't stop it. It was like tasting heaven when one had been locked in hell and he couldn't resist.

He didn't think he could get wound up in someone. But he had. Revulsion for himself built up inside like it always did. He knew better. Deeper involvement meant a rejection in the end. She was in Virginia. He was in Oklahoma. Things couldn't get deeper. Could they? Distance would keep things on a level playing field. She didn't have to know how fucked up he was and he could keep her at arm's length.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jake, would you like some potato salad?" Maria asked.

He glanced up at Tony's mom and nodded. "Thanks." Scooping a heap onto his plate, he listened to Amber, Tony's sister, talk.

"Mom, I'm so excited! But I will miss you all so much."

"I don't know why your fiancé can't move here. Why do you have to move to Virginia?" Tony asked. "I don't know why you have to give everything up."

Amber's lips pursed familiarly. It meant she was getting ready to go on a rant. It made him want to duck.

"You know why he can't move here, Tony. He has a job. A good one and I can go to school there. You know, people move across country all the time. I don't know why you have such a hang-up about it. It's not like you can't visit."

"Yeah. But how am I supposed to keep an eye on you all the way in Virginia? Trouble is your middle name, husband or not," Tony replied.

"You don't need to keep an eye on me. I'll have a husband. And you and Jake are the troublemakers. Not me. I swear, the last time I went to Magoo's with you, there was a girl fight. Over you two. Can you believe it?" She looked at her mom. "Why in the world would anyone want to fight over those two?"

When Maria turned and looked at them, Tony said innocently, "What? I didn't tell them to fight. Did you, Jake?"

"Hey, don't get me in on this. I just want to enjoy the food." He took a bite out of his charcoaled cheeseburger so he wouldn't have to say anything else.

"One of these days, you two will get caught in your own game. A girl will come along and there you will be. None of your dashing charm to save you. Just mark my words, one day it will happen," Maria said and waggled a finger at them.

"Won't happen to me." Tony elbowed him. "But it might have already happened to my friend here."

Jake glared at a grinning Tony. "Yeah, right. When hell has frozen over."

"Is that why you're meeting Becca in Virginia?"

He wanted to pummel Tony right at that moment. Why in hell had he brought Becca up with his family around? "Whatever," he said trying to ignore it.

Amber placed both hands on the table and leaned forward, her pale blue eyes wide. "You're bringing a girl to my wedding? Oh my God! Hell did freeze."

"No. I'm not bringing a girl to your wedding." He frowned and shook his head. "She's just a girl I'm meeting in Virginia."

"She's not flying down with you?" Amber asked, being her nosy self.

"No. She lives in Virginia."

"How did you meet a girl in Virginia? Did you go on a trip and not tell me?"

Jake fought the urge to roll his eyes and glanced at Maria for support. But she was sporting a smile that said she wanted to know as well. So he looked at Carl, Tony's dad, and he just shrugged. No help there.

"She's a girl he met online," Tony blurted out.

Jake choked on his burger and jabbed him hard in the side, which only made Tony laugh.

"You're online dating? Why in the world would you do that?" Amber asked. "You have your pick of females...although I have no idea what they see in you. You never talk and —"

"That's enough, Amber," Maria said. "Do we get to meet this girl, Jake?"

"No." He had no intention of revealing any more information.

"They've been talking for about a month. We're meeting her at the beach."

"A month?" Maria asked and he didn't meet her gaze. "My, that's a long time for you. And Tony is going with you?"

Did Tony have a death wish? What the hell was the matter with him? He shook his head and glanced at Maria when he heard the hope in her voice. The woman had tried everything to get him to settle down with a girl. He knew she just wanted him happy, but he had given up on that dream a long time ago. "Don't even think it. I'll probably never see her again." Which was true. He had no idea what she would think of him and he planned on it being a one-time thing. "I told her to bring a friend, so I invited idiot here. She seemed to feel safer that way."

Amber burst out laughing. "She won't once she gets a look at you two. Did you tell her to bring her daddy? That's the only way she would be safe."

He wanted to thump her on the head. She was like a little sister to him and just as irritating. "Maybe I should have warned Kevin about you. Heaven help the poor man who has to put up with you 24/7."

"You exaggerate, Amber. They are good boys."

Amber choked on her drink and, strangely, so did Carl.

"Did you hear what he said about me?" Amber dramatized. "You stick up for him, but not for me?" When she stuck her tongue out at him, he winked at her and she smiled.

"Always a circus at this table," Carl muttered.

Maria patted his arm. "You like it that way, dear."

Jake listened to them rattle on, mostly Amber, Tony and Maria. He didn't contribute much just added a word or two when necessary. Carl just leaned back, drank his iced tea and watched them all. Carl never said much either, but when he did, you listened.

Fourteen years ago, he and Tony had gotten into a fist fight. Tony won, but not without Jake giving him a good run. Bloody and bruised, Tony had dragged them both into Maria's kitchen. And he had been here ever since. Had even lived here for a time when things had been really bad at home.

But to him, this was home. Not the drug-infested trailer park his mom lived in.

## **Chapter Four**

Becca got out of her Jeep and stared at the beach. The dark blue ocean lapped against the sandy shores and the sun glared off the water. She always loved coming here. The air was crisp and tangy and all her stresses seemed to melt away...except today.

Today, she was meeting Jake.

She inhaled and looked over at Summer. The girl could make a paper bag look good. She wore an orange halter top and a flouncy skirt that stopped mid-thigh. It made her already long legs seem longer. Especially since she wore thick heeled sandals with straps that wrapped about her ankles several times.

Smoothing down her own light pink tank top and jean skirt, she almost wished she had worn heels. She was too short without them, but as Summer had pointed out, she got clumsy when she was nervous. As it was, she had already tripped twice in her flat brown and pink flip-flops.

"We're so late," Becca said and glanced at her phone for the hundredth time. "You think he gave up on us?"

"Are you kidding?" Summer said and rolled her eyes. "Call him. Let him know we're here. I can't wait to meet the stud."

"Would you quit calling him that!" Every time Summer called him a stud she felt the heat flood her face.

"Oh, you know I'm just teasing you. So call him already."

She bit her lip. They were late, by an hour and a half due to a traffic jam that had her grinding her teeth. She had called earlier and let him know, but had only gotten his voicemail. She prayed he was still around.

"If you don't, I will," Summer said and put a hand on her hip.

"Okay, okay, I'm calling him." The last thing she needed was for Summer to call him...again.

Scrolling through her contacts she found his name and hit call.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jake. It's Becca."

"Oh, hey darlin'. Just a sec," he said sounding slightly out of breath. "Time out guys, phone. Okay, back. Sorry about that. What's up?"

Loving how he always called her "darlin'", she smiled. "I know I'm late, but I wanted to let you know that we're finally here."

"Cool. Don't worry about being late. We've been here for a bit. Got out of family duty early. We're a little ways from the restaurant playing volleyball with some guys. You want to walk down here?"

"Sure. Family duty? You make it sound like you were in jail." She slid one sandaled foot back and forth in the sand.

"It was. The shit they made me wear...ugh. Was ugly. Real ugly."

Laughing at his exaggeration, she said, "It couldn't have been that bad."

"You have no idea. Come on down here."

"Okay. We're on our way."

She clicked off and Summer had a funny grin on her face.

"What?" Becca asked her.

"You should see your face when you talk to him."

"Oh, God. Don't embarrass me when I'm just getting ready to meet him. I'm nervous enough as it is."

"Nothing to be embarrassed about. But if you don't want to know..." Summer turned to walk away.

"Okay. Fine. What did I look like?" Becca was sure she would hate the answer.

Summer turned back around. "You go soft, and you smile. I mean really smile. Your eyes light up and have this look like all is right in the world. Something you *never* did with Nick."

"I knew I shouldn't have asked," Becca said.

"I'm not saying he's your new boyfriend. I'm saying let yourself recognize what it's supposed to feel like with a guy. That's all. And hey, no worries. I'm right here. For as long as you want me to be." When Summer winked, Becca laughed. She didn't know what she would do without her friend. No matter what happened tonight, Summer was looking out for her.

"They're down the beach playing volleyball," Becca said.

They linked arms and headed off at a leisurely stroll down the boardwalk. She ignored the catcalls guys hollered at them. She had gotten used to it. When she was with Summer, guys always ogled them. Or, more to the point, Summer. She was just the tag-along friend, no matter how much Summer argued the point.

It was warm, but not overly hot. A perfect day. Looking up at the blue sky streaked with an occasional cloud, she relaxed under the warmth of the sun.

Until she saw volleyball nets in the short distance.

"Relax, Becca. He won't bite. Or he might, but I'm sure it wouldn't be too hard," Summer said making her laugh.

"Okay. I can do this." They unlinked arms as they got closer to the nets. Her palms were sweaty and she wiped them against her jean skirt.



Guys, and some girls, were hitting the balls back and forth over the nets. Several of them had been set up and all had teams of two to four people. A lot of the guys were pretty big, with muscles and biceps flexing as they hit the ball. Some bigger than others, and some sporting hot tans – none had shirts and all were sweaty.

She bit her lip. She had no idea which one was Jake. She noticed a lot of girls lingering around just to watch the guys play and she couldn't blame them. Some were dead-sexy. Glancing up and down the line of teams she spotted one guy she guessed to be about his height and his coloring.

When the team paused for a break, Becca raised her voice above the noise. "Are you Jake?" she asked a guy in swim trunks.

"No. Sorry," he said, glanced at her then fixed his gaze on Summer. "But I can be whoever you want me to be, sweet thang."

A sudden movement caught her attention from the corner of her eye and she turned to look at two guys who had the largest crowd of girls. Both were looking in her direction. One was grinning at Summer, but the other was staring at her. At least she thought he was. It was hard to tell with the dark glasses covering his eyes. Then he shoved up his glasses and she inhaled.

*Jake.*

Her breath lodged somewhere in her throat as she watched him walk with purposeful strides in her direction. His muscles moved easily with his frame, making her heart race. He was tanned dark, his black shorts clinging low on his hips. Her gaze traveled up the length of him, over the muscled abs and broad chest. A black tribal tattoo covered his left shoulder. It swirled, licked up toward his neck then over one side of his chest and disappeared over his back. He had never mentioned a tattoo. She personally had never found tattoos attractive, but maybe she had never seen one on the right person. It definitely looked natural and right on him.

There was a bit of stubble on his face giving him that hard edge look and his dark brows were low over his eyes. He wore a cap on backward and she could only see a hint of his dark hair peeking underneath, barely brushing down his neck.

She thought Summer said something to her, but she didn't listen. She focused on Jake and the way his lips seemed to tempt her, even though he was still a few steps away. As he came closer, all she could think about was all the moments they had together on chat, on the phone. A guy like this could have any girl he wanted. What was he doing playing online?

His voice was seared into her mind. Telling her what to do, bringing her to orgasm each and every time with very little effort. Her breasts tightened, became heavy and full and she resisted the urge to clamp her legs together where she was hot and wanting already.

It seemed to Becca that he moved in slow motion. It had to be because her hormones were going berserk. Once beside her, he stared, not saying a word. His eyes were blue with a yellow ring around the pupil and iris. The two colors blended

together, reminding her of the changing sea. Dark lashes fringed each one, giving them depth.

She had no idea what he was thinking as the silence between them dragged. Did she measure up? She hadn't thought she would feel like that, but he was so gorgeous. She could see him with someone like Summer...not plain Rebecca Saylor.

His gaze swept her and she tried not to sway from the intensity of it. *Good God, the man could make me come right now.* Nervously, she tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and licked suddenly parched lips.

"Ooowee!" Summer exclaimed.

Becca jerked her head toward her. Oh, don't do it, Summer.

Summer circled the two guys, eyed them up and down and smiled devilishly. "Are all men in Oklahoma built like you two? I'd say they are far from fugly, Bec."

She wanted to sink into the sand.

"No, sweetheart. We're the best Oklahoma has to offer." The other guy had a grin to match Summer's. "Hi. I'm Tony and you must be Summer. This moron is Jake," he said nodding toward him and held out his hand to her.

"You're right, cutie. I'm Summer and that's Becca," Summer said as she shook Tony's hand.

But Summer hadn't taken her eyes off Tony and when Becca finally noticed, she could see why. The guy was taller than Jake, dark and definitely not fugly. She looked back up at Jake who wore a crooked grin that made her knees weak. Holy hell. That little grin made him look like he was up to something mischievous. Damn if her panties didn't get wetter.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi, Jake," she replied and grappled for something else to say. "If you want to finish your game you can."

"Naw. It's cool. Would you like a bottle of water? We have a few in a cooler."

She nodded in mute agreement unable to think coherently. He turned to walk away and that's when she got a good look at his back. The tattoo swirled and dipped to about mid-back. It moved with his muscles as he leaned over to grab the water. She couldn't help but sigh. A girl would have to be dead not to appreciate the view. He walked back to her and handed her one then gave one to Tony and Summer.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. It's warm and you looked flushed," he said, tilted the bottle back and downed half.

Looked flushed, hell, she *was* flushed. "So the wedding was good?" she asked, not knowing what else to say, but needing to say something because his focused gaze on her was sending her pulse into overdrive.

"Yeah. I guess. Amber seemed happy. As long as she stays that way, I'll be happy for her."

"You worried she might not?"

"Who knows. I figure, at best, she has a fifty-fifty shot."

Suddenly, Becca fell against him as a girl fell into her. Jake's arm snaked out and steadied Becca, pulling her against him so she wouldn't fall.

"Oh, I am so sorry," the girl said in a too-sweet voice, batted her eyes at Jake and totally ignored her.

"Yeah. Be more careful," he said in clipped tones.

The girl finally acknowledged her with a dirty look before she went on her way. A part of her couldn't blame the girl for trying. Another part of her wanted to stake her own claim on Jake. *Ridiculous.*

Becca inhaled sharply and his heady scent wrapped around her. She didn't want to step away, but she placed a hand on his chest and backed up. A muscle twitched under her hand and in his jaw as she looked up at him. He was so close, and everything else just faded away. She swore he leaned down a little, but then he stepped back. It had to be her imagination.

"Would you mind if Tony and I went back to our hotel to get cleaned up? It's just across from the restaurant," he asked. But his voice had dropped in that low octave she knew so well and she couldn't stop her hand from shaking as she pulled it away from his chest.

"No, that's fine. We have plenty of time. You want to meet us at the restaurant?"

"That will work."

"We'll probably be sitting on the patio facing the water. That's where we always sit."

"Great. We'll see you in about twenty minutes, tops."

When she smiled at him, his crooked grin appeared. He winked then punched Tony's arm. "Hey, loverboy. Lets hit the hotel and get cleaned up. Last thing the girls want is to smell a couple sweaty guys."

"Ow... What the hell was that for?" Tony punched him back.

"It's to keep you from drooling on Summer."

"Oh, I don't mind," Summer said and smiled.

"See. She doesn't mind."

"Yeah, well. She doesn't know what kind of cooties you have either," Jake said as he grabbed the cooler.

Becca bit her lip as she watched him bend over, straighten and look directly at her.

"I'll be right back, darlin'." Then with one last flash of his smirk, he turned and walked away.

Damn if his "darlin'" wasn't more endearing when she could see his lips form the word.

She glanced at Summer who had a certain spark in her eye as she watched the two walk off.

Jake made himself walk away from Becca and it had taken all his restraint to do so. She was so damn tempting standing there in her pink top and blue jean skirt. And so tiny. The woman couldn't have been over five foot tall. Those big brown eyes had looked up at him and he heard a soft hunger in her voice when she said his name. He wanted to push her back onto the sand and bury himself balls-deep within her. Christ.

"That Summer is damn fine. Why didn't you tell me she was such a hot piece?" Tony asked with a grin.

"I didn't know. I had no idea what she looked like." They stepped into the elevator and he hit the twelfth floor button. He didn't want to talk. He needed a cold shower. Now.

"Becca sure is a little thing."

"Yeah. I noticed."

When the elevator doors opened he shot into the hallway and walked toward his room. Tony's was just a few doors down from his and across the hall. "I'll meet you in the lobby in ten," he said.

"Got it," Tony replied.

Safely in his room Jake tossed off his cap, glasses, stripped and stepped into an ice cold shower. Tension coiled in his stomach. She had looked so fresh and sweet...innocent. Her damn toenails were even pink. Heaven knew he walked a fine line between hell and damnation. She even knew a good part of his hellish ways. What was she doing meeting him? Raking a hand through his hair he looked up at the ceiling, suddenly remembering the first night she had called him and the why of it—*her bastard of an ex had hit her*.

As little as she was, the man could have killed her with one good hit. She wasn't much bigger than a kid. Every protective instinct he owned roared to life. The thought of one tiny bruise on her made him want to tear the guy apart. And she wanted him. She wanted to talk to him, not her friends or her family. Him.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. A part of him wanted to get on the first plane out of here and another part of him itched to get back to her. Talk to her, touch her. He was losing his mind. But the lure of seeing her was more than he could resist, even if he corrupted her. Sooner or later she would see the real him and dump his sorry ass. And he would just have to deal with it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake and Tony walked into the Rockfish Bar and Grill and made their way to the back patio. He saw her before she saw him. Her tan legs were crossed, a flip-flop dangling from her foot. One hand was curled around a drink and she was laughing at

something Summer had said. Her shoulders were bare except for tiny straps that held up her shirt. When she glanced in his direction, her smile softened.

Something tightened in his chest and he wondered if she had any idea the effect she had on him. Summer was looking at them now and he would be the first to admit she was a knockout, but she wasn't Becca. There was just something about the girl that had gotten to him from the moment he met her online. She was different. She scared the holy hell out of him.

"Hey, you made it back," she said as he reached her table.

"Yeah. Maybe now we won't offend you with our stench."

She laughed and sniffed at him. "You pass the test."

He grinned and slid into a chair next to her while Tony sat next to Summer.

"A lovely sight to see. Two pretty girls waiting on us," Tony said with his trademark smile in place.

"Welcome back, boys," Summer said.

A waitress came up, took their drink orders and walked off.

"What are you drinking?" Jake asked Becca.

"Bahama Mama. They're really good. You should try one," she said as she took a sip.

"Naw. Think I'll stick with beer."

"What does that mean?" she asked and pointed at the symbol on his shirt.

"It's the Hayabusa symbol. My bike."

"Your bicycle?" Summer asked and Tony immediately choked on a laugh.

"Um, no. Motorcycle," Jake said mockingly insulted, and then winked at Becca who smiled behind her drink.

The waitress brought the beers for him and Tony then took their food order.

Summer and Tony dominated the conversation, but he didn't care. He was content to watch the ocean and look at Becca. She had let her flip-flops fall to the floor and sat cross-legged in the chair.

When the sun lowered, a waitress lit a candle on their table and party lights that hung along the two side walls came on. It cast Becca's face in a perfect glow. Her lips were wide, the lower fuller than the top. Her brows arched over her expressive brown eyes and her nose was as small as the rest of her. When she glanced his way, her lips curled up slightly. It made him feel on edge, wondering what thoughts skittered through her mind.

"I hope you didn't mind me calling you that day, Jake," Summer said. "I was only looking out for my friend."

"Nope. Didn't bother me at all. Someone needs to look out for her," Jake replied.

"You know. I can take care of myself," Becca piped in. "I don't need a babysitter."

"We never said you did, doll. But that's what friends are for," Summer said and patted her hand.

Becca rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue. "Yeah. They're there to be a pain in my ass."

"I was there when you called, Summer. We got a good laugh out of it," Tony said.

"See." Summer poked Becca. "I told you he didn't care."

The light breeze picked up strands of her hair and they trickled across her cheek.

"There are stages up and down the boardwalk. You guys want to walk down to one and listen to some live music?" Becca asked.

"Sounds good to me," Jake replied.

"As long as Summer dances with me," Tony said.

"Depends on if he asks me," Summer said sweetly.

"Oh, hell." Becca looked at Jake, turning her back on Summer and Tony. "You want to go with me to the stage? I don't care what those two do."

Jake chuckled and nodded. "Yeah. I'll go with you." The bill already paid, he stood and grabbed her hand.

"I guess we better follow them," Summer said with an exaggerated sigh. "No telling what kind of trouble they'll get into without us."

"I never get into trouble," Becca said.

"That might be true. But you've never been with Jake," Tony replied.

"Only time I get into trouble is when I'm with you." Jake eyed his friend. "Otherwise, I am trouble free."

This time both Tony and Becca laughed.

"What? You think I'm trouble?" he asked Becca.

Her little smile and the way her lids slanted at him sent heat straight to his groin. "Of course you're trouble. I can tell by that grin."

With that she turned and walked toward the door, her little ass swaying in the skirt. He took off after her ignoring Summer and Tony's laughter in the background.

Becca smiled as she walked off, loving the feel of his gaze on her. He had looked surprised at her comment, but she felt like she had gotten her edge back. The man had been staring at her the whole time through dinner. It unnerved her and made her ache. Fortunately, Tony's banter had kept things down to a low simmer.

She stepped through the restaurant door and he was right beside her. Glancing at him she couldn't help but admire his looks. Had she met him before all their talk online and on the phone, she never would have approached him. He was just too intimidating.

Tony and Summer were still laughing as they stepped outside. She was glad they had hit it off so well.

They walked down the boardwalk toward the stage. Darkness pressed in around them, only the light from randomly placed poles lit up the area. Clouds drifted slowly across the night sky and she was content just to walk beside Jake. He hadn't said much, but it didn't bother her. She had known he wasn't much of a talker. Tony and Summer made up for it with their incessant chatter.

As they got closer to the stage, she realized Latin music was playing. Its hot sultry sounds a perfect mix for the way she was feeling. She glanced over her shoulder and wasn't surprised to see Summer already moving with the music, Tony watching her with an appreciative gaze. The man oozed charm.

Reaching the stage, Summer wasted no time in grabbing Tony's hand and dragging him to the dance area. She and Jake moved off to one of the small tables scattered about the area.

"Would you like a drink?" Jake asked.

"No, I'm okay." She watched Summer roll her body against Tony's and she smiled. "They make a striking couple."

One dark brow arched up. "They do. Typically, this is where I would tell you to warn your friend about him. But I have a feeling Summer is in charge." He looked at her with his lopsided grin in place which made her knees wobbly.

"What would be the warning?" she asked. She really didn't care but she loved seeing that glint in his eyes.

"Well, he's a womanizer. And then I would add, don't let your friend get too attached to him. But usually he is the one being pursued. I don't think that's the case today. And I find it damn amusing." Jake chuckled.

"Wouldn't he be mad that you said that about him?" Becca asked a little confused.

"No. He wants me to tell them that."

"But why?"

He leaned an elbow on the table and looked at her. "Because he doesn't want to be attached. And if a woman knows that upfront, it's for the best."

"Does he do that for you?" she blurted before she realized she didn't want to know the answer.

"Yeah."

Somehow, she knew he was going to say that and it didn't surprise her. She still hated hearing it. "But you think it's not necessary now. Is it because you're only here for the weekend?"

He stared at her. "No. I think he is pursuing her."

"Oh," she said quietly.

The intense way he looked at her gave her goose bumps. She had no idea what his look meant, but she had a feeling she was missing some key point. He got up abruptly and grabbed her hand.

"Come on. Let's walk."

"You don't want to dance?" she asked, feeling a little out of sorts.

He laughed. "No. No one wants to see that."

She glanced at Tony and Summer who were laughing and grinding to the music. Summer was in her element and she didn't have to worry about her.

Jake's warm hand held hers as he led her through a throng of people. It was funny to watch people just step easily out of his way without a word from him. She never had that effect on anyone. It wasn't that he was insanely tall, it was more the way he carried himself. Almost a "don't fuck with me" attitude. Whatever it was about him, people took notice. Soon they were on the boardwalk again.

As they drifted farther away from the stage, the music faded into the background. She took a deep breath of the crisp salty air and could actually hear the sound of the ocean again. Its gentle lap—lap—lap against the shore.

He never let go of her hand. Warmth spread up her arm and trickled throughout her body. But his body heat startled her the most. It rolled off of him in waves and she had never experienced that before.

He stopped and leaned against the railing that lined the boardwalk and looked out to sea. She noticed he hadn't led her so far away from the stage that she wouldn't feel safe. A smile tugged at her heart. He was as considerate as she thought he would be. Regardless of what he wanted the world to see, he was a good man.

Jake's profile captured her as he looked out at the ocean. His jaw was strong, his lips firm but sensual. He had, of course, told her his height and weight, she asked him when they were chatting online, but she hadn't imagined he would be so big. Six-one he had said, the same height as her ex, but he seemed taller and was definitely broader. His dark gray cargo shorts and black t-shirt seemed to suit him, nothing flashy or overstated. She liked that he didn't wear a hat now. Dark brown hair hung slightly into his face like it needed to be trimmed.

"You don't mind being away from the crowd do you? It's not really my thing," he said.

"No, this is fine."

When his gaze landed on her, her skin prickled with awareness.

"Your picture doesn't do you justice," he said, catching her off guard.

She shifted and wondered what someone said to a comment like that. Heat invaded her face as she glanced away. The man made her nervous as a teenager.

"Yours didn't either," she said finally, thinking that definitely was an understatement.

"You know, when I heard you say my name at the volleyball nets and I turned to find you, I was surprised. I had seen your picture, but somehow I had you all wrong."

"What did you expect?" she asked, wondering if she really wanted to know.



"You're—sweet, innocent." He raked a hand through his hair like he was frustrated, and she found it almost funny because what he was saying seemed so out of character. "Wholesome and so damn little. I feel like I've corrupted you or something."

She smiled at him and laid a hand on his arm. "Jake, you can't corrupt people. That's not how it works. And I'm definitely not innocent."

He met her gaze, a slight frown marring his face. "You're too damn good for me. I know that much."

Pursing her lips at him, she wanted to whack him on the head with something. "That's bullshit."

The muscle in his arm tightened under her hand as he gripped the railing. "Is it? If you knew what I wanted to do when I saw you, then you might realize the truth. Hell, if you knew what I wanted to do now, you would take off at a dead run. And I wouldn't blame you."

She didn't know if he was trying to warn her away from him or daring her to stay. Either way, she wasn't moving. He was scared. That was why he acted the way he did. She knew it, but it still pissed her off.

"Jake, it was probably the exact thing I wanted to do to you." Her reward was his shocked expression.

"I highly doubt it," he muttered.

She ducked under his arm so she was face to face with him. All she could smell was him, earthy male and dark musk. The light was dim here, but not so dark that she couldn't see his eyes narrow.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice had dropped an octave and it sent a thrill down her spine.

"What I wanted to do when I saw you."

## Chapter Five

She didn't know where she found the courage because she was never this forward. Maybe it was because she knew he wouldn't make a move or maybe it was because she knew she would never see him again after tonight. Or maybe it was because, God, she wanted to touch him.

Her heart thudded in her chest as her fingertips brushed over his shoulders, amazed at the thickness and lines of muscle she could feel through his t-shirt. The air thickened with tension and his stare never left her face, but he didn't stop her. Swallowing hard, she reached up with one hand and her thumb drifted across his jaw.

"Becca...I don't think you know what you're doing."

He was rigid, his arms locked, but she felt his slight shudder. Moving forward away from the rail, she leaned up on tiptoe and pressed her lips against his briefly. She didn't know what to think when he still didn't move. His eyes had darkened and they were intensely focused on her, but he didn't do anything.

She wasn't brave enough to push it any further. Why didn't he do something? Say something? A muscle in his jaw twitched, but other than that it was like he was made of stone.

"I...ah." Shit, she had made the wrong move. Embarrassment flooded her and it left a bad aftertaste in her mouth. She'd never come on to anyone, not even her ex. Finally deciding to retreat, she moved to duck under his arm.

"Don't. Move." His voice was firm.

She stopped to look at him. His brows were furrowed in concentration, like he was barely holding onto control. Confused, she did as he asked. "Jake," she said and reached out to touch his chest.

And then he was there. His mouth on hers, devouring her. She didn't have time to react and the heat from his body seared into her skin. She couldn't breathe, think. All she understood was he was finally kissing her. His large hands tilted her head so he could taste her deeper. His tongue swept across her lips and she opened for him. She had to.

God, she needed to be closer. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she leaned against him. His arm curled around her waist and his leg slid between her thighs. The movement pushed her skirt up dangerously, but she didn't care. She had dreamed of this forever and he was finally really here. Not just a typed message or just a voice. In the flesh. Touching her, making her feel.

When he finally broke the kiss and trailed his lips down the curve of her neck, she gasped for air. Not that she could get any. His hands gripped her hips and rocked her

on his thigh creating a friction that had her head spinning. She was beyond wet, and beyond caring who saw.

He was hard everywhere and she clung to him like a lifeline. Nothing prepared her for Jake and the way he made her feel. From the very start, she had been helpless against him. She was completely lost now. His teeth nipped at her skin and she inhaled sharply.

As quickly as it had begun, it stopped. He jumped back, looking ready to run. "Oh hell, Becca. I'm sorry. I hurt you," he muttered.

She leaned against the railing behind her because otherwise she would have fallen and tried to make sense of his words. "What are you talking about? You didn't hurt me," she said.

"Dammit, you're so little." He raked a hand through his hair.

"Jake, I won't break." She reached out, grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer. He was reluctant, but he took a step toward her. "If that's all that's stopping you... Don't you want me?" she asked looking up at him.

"Fuck, yes I do. You know I do." And even if he hadn't said it, his eyes told her everything. His hands cupped her face and she loved how big they were, how gently he drug his calloused thumbs across her cheeks and lips. She parted them and nipped at his thumb.

He sucked in a breath and pinned her against the rail with his body.

"I want you," she said and slid her hands up under his t-shirt. His low growl vibrated through her and she felt like purring. His skin was hot, smooth and she felt the tension coiled tightly in his muscles. She had been dying to touch him since she saw him without a shirt. She wanted to trace his tattoo with her fingers, with her tongue. She wanted him. Now. She didn't care how stupid it was.

He leaned down, his lips and breath tickling her ear. Shivers slid down her spine. "We can't here."

She licked her lips and said something she never had before. "Take me to your room."

He pulled back and stared down at her. "Are you sure?"

Her panties were drenched, her body on fire with a hunger she had never felt and he took the time to ask her if she was sure. For some reason it seemed totally out of character for him and she couldn't see him asking a woman that question. "Jake, me and Summer planned on staying the night here. I would rather spend it with you," she said, then added, "If you want me."

"If I want you?" His expression was priceless. "Holy hell woman, I wanted you from the moment I saw you standing there asking that other jerk if he was me. How can you even question that?"

"I just couldn't see you asking a woman if she was sure, since most girls practically throw themselves at you," she said.

"You're right. But—" He blinked a few times. "Fuck, you're different." He grabbed her hand and took off at a brisk pace. "Let's go before one of us screws our head on straight."

She laughed and was almost running before she jerked him to a stop. "Hold on, let me call Summer."

"Yeah. Okay." He shoved his hands in his pockets.

She dialed with shaking hands and glanced away from Jake. He looked ready to eat her alive and she loved it.

"Hello, Becca," Summer answered. Music and laughter blared in the background. "Where are you, girl? I was getting ready to look for you."

"No, it's okay. I'm fine. I, uh, I'm going to stay with Jake, okay?"

"What do you mean stay with... Oh, I know! You go for it, chica! Mmm, they are awfully yummy aren't they? But be careful, okay?"

She was getting really tired of blushing but it seemed like that's all she did when Jake was around. When she glanced at him, he still had his hands in his pockets but he was wearing that crooked grin, a glint of mischief in his blue-green eyes.

"Yes, yes, I will. You too. Okay, bye." She clicked off and took a deep breath.

"Ready?" he asked. She nodded and he grabbed her hand.

"I'm staying at the Marriot across from the restaurant," he said.

"I'm at the Hilton, not too far from yours," she replied.

They weren't running, but it wasn't the leisurely pace they'd set earlier down the boardwalk and they hadn't said anything else. When they finally reached his hotel, his grip tightened.

Nerves ate away at her earlier resolve. What was she doing, going to a hotel room with a guy she met online? But every time she would get ready to say something, he would look at her with hunger in his eyes. And every time, her breath would catch and her heart would skip a beat.

They entered the Marriot elevators alone and he immediately pressed her against the wall. He didn't kiss her like she expected, just held her there, his hands pinning both of hers, his gaze locked on her. It was the most erotic thing she had ever experienced. Every one of her senses sprang to life. The sound of the pings of each floor they passed seemed to slow. The cold metal against her back only intensified the heat rolling off his body. His scent enveloped her and she wanted to crawl under his skin.

Her mouth was dry, her palms sweaty and an ache settled low between her legs. Her breasts swelled and every nerve ending tingled with anticipation. When the doors finally opened, he stepped back and she tried not to stumble out. The hall seemed never-ending and by the time he stopped at his door, she was shaking. In one solid move, he opened it, pulled her in and had her pinned against the door, just like in the elevator.

This time he slid her arms up over her head and held her there, just staring at her. Hot arousal trickled between her thighs. Her heart raced and her breath was trapped in her throat.

"Jake," she whispered, and sawed her legs back and forth, anything to ease the throb in her clit.

"I don't want to hurt you," he muttered.

"Hell." Frustration welled inside her. She was tired of being the little girl everybody had to protect. And even if his motives were admirable, she wanted his body. Not his honor. When a tremor ran through his arm, she jerked one of her hands loose. Grabbing his shirt, she hauled him in closer and licked his neck – mainly because that was all she could reach with one hand pinned.

Before she could do anything else, his mouth was hard on hers, his hands cupping her ass and sliding her up the door. Nothing gentle about it. She moaned in triumph and curled her body around his, her legs about his waist, her hands clinging to his neck.

The hard ridge of his cock pressed against her core and she broke the kiss, arching her head back and bowing her body closer to his.

"Oh, yes," she mumbled.

His mouth, teeth, tongue slid down her neck and latched onto one nipple through the fabric of her tank top. His hips did this incredible grind against her pussy and she swore she could come any moment.

"I want skin. Now," he said and dropped her to her feet.

In a tangle of arms and clothes, it was only moments before they were both completely naked. And they both stopped.

He was undeniably the most gorgeous male she had ever seen. The curtains in the room were open and light spilled in, spotlighting him. Wide shoulders narrowed to slim hips and his erection stood out proudly before him. Large, intimidating and...she wondered if she could take him all in. But she sure as hell was going to give it a try.

"Damn, Becca. You're beautiful." The awe in his voice speared her, but the shadows kept her from seeing his face clearly. She stepped in closer and looked up at him. Bolder than she had ever been in her life, she curled her hand around his cock. It was smooth, hard and pulsed in her hand.

"Oh, hell," he muttered as his hips jerked toward her.

She smiled at his reaction. Watching the muscles in his body twitch, knowing she was the cause of it, gave her a sense of power she had never experienced. So many firsts this night and she wasn't done yet. Tightening her grip, her hand slid down the length of him.

"Christ, woman." His arms encircled her, pulling her up tight against him, then turned, making her take a step back. He released her so she fell onto the bed. "That's better," he said. She heard, rather than saw, the grin in his voice.

Before she could take another breath his mouth was on her stomach, his hands parting her thighs, his thumbs stroking between her parted pussy lips.

"Oh, God," she cried. Any moment now she would combust into flames. He knew just how to touch her, firm and demanding but never hurting her. He alternated between licks and bites over her stomach and on her inner thighs. When his hands pushed her legs wide apart with her feet dangling off the bed, she felt vulnerable. Especially since she faced the window where the light exposed all of her.

"Such a pretty sight. So wet and ready for me. Are you ready for me, Becca?"

"Yes," she murmured. He drug her back so her hips were at the very edge of the bed.

"Perfect," he said and then his mouth and tongue were on her.

"Ahh." She came apart, electric sensations sliding through her body as she ground her hips against his mouth. He licked and nibbled her through the biggest orgasm of her life, but he wasn't finished. His hands cupped both her breasts and she looked down. His eyes stared up her body, his tongue buried deep in her, his fingers pulling on her nipples and she arched back when his teeth scraped over her clit.

"Oh, please. Please," she begged.

"Please what?" Jake asked, his breath ragged against her thigh.

"Fuck me. Please." She would say anything if he would just take her. When he moved away from her, he took all his heat with him and she whimpered at the loss. Vaguely she heard the tear of a package.

Then he was over her and she arched against him. Wanting him so bad it hurt. But when he slid in, it was slow. She muttered in frustration and tried to pull him closer, deeper.

"Hell, you are so fucking tight."

"Please. Now," she cried.

"Becca, slow down—"

"I don't want slow." Her eyes flew open and she stared at him. "Fuck me, Jake."

He growled low and drove in hard, no longer slow or hesitant.

"Yes!" she screamed and closed her eyes tight.

He stretched her to her limits, part pain and pleasure, but she didn't care. His fingers dug into her hips as he moved relentlessly in and out, holding her still so all she could do was feel. Oh, Lord, could she feel. Every stroke, every ridge and when she opened her eyes, the strain on his face pushed her right over the edge.

"Jake!"

"Oh, hell, Bec," he ground out.

He pulsed hard inside her and she wrapped her arms about his neck, pulling him down against her. She didn't know how long they stayed like that, his dark head on her chest with his labored breaths rushing out over her nipple. She gripped his incredibly

soft hair in her hands as spasm after spasm quivered through her body. It was the first time in a long time she felt safe.

When he finally moved to get rid of the condom, she reluctantly let him go.

\* \* \* \* \*

After returning from the bathroom, Jake stared down at her small frame lying on the bed, her big eyes looking up at him. He clenched a fist and glanced away.

"Jake, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I..." His words trailed off as she sat up in the bed, holding the sheet up under her arms, her blonde hair disheveled and sexy. It made him want to take her again. Hard and fast. But he had been so rough with her earlier and his gut twisted at the thought of hurting her. Somehow she had broken his control. "I hurt you. I should have been gentle —"

"I didn't want gentle," she said. An alluring smile curved her full lips and his cock twitched in response. Already. She let the sheet drop and crawled toward him on the bed. To hell with twitching, he hardened immediately at the erotic sight.

"But —" he said as her gaze focused on his hard-on, making his balls ache.

"But nothing. I may be small, but I won't break." Her face was level with his dick as she moved closer.

Her teeth tugged at her lower lip like she was hesitant, but then her hand encircled him and stroked down his length. He groaned, the feel of her small hands holding him sending him into bliss. He looked down in time to see her tongue lick at the tip and he jerked, feeling it all the way to the base of his spine. Holding back the desire to ram his cock into her mouth, he let her take the lead. Clenching both hands, he forced himself to maintain control.

It was damn hard when her mouth wrapped around the head, her tongue following and spiraling around him. He looked up at the ceiling because watching her, kneeling on the bed, her mouth on him, her hair brushing against his balls, was just about his undoing.

"Fuck, Becca," he muttered as she sucked him in deeper, her hand around the base of his cock. He couldn't stop the move of his hips when she moaned and it vibrated around him. Fisting his hands in her hair, he groaned as she moved faster, sliding him in and out. Quicker than ever, he was on the edge of exploding in her mouth and he yanked back.

She sat on her heels and looked up at him, her eyes half-lidded, her breasts rising and falling with her rapid breathing. He captured her face, pulled her up to her knees and kissed her. He loved how she responded to him, her lips parting, her tongue sliding along his. He shoved his knee between her legs and she parted them so her sex rubbed erotically on his thigh. The way she gave herself to him touched something deep within him.

She arched her head back, breaking the kiss with a moan. "Jake," she whispered as her nails dug into his arms.

His name on her lips had been his weakness, in chat and over the phone. Now it owned more impact, hitting him hard, forcing all the air from his lungs. Making him want to mark her as his.

He shoved her onto her back and licked the inside of her thigh right next to her pussy. Her hips bucked against him and she cried out when he nipped then suckled the same area of flesh he'd licked. Gripping her thigh, he held her there, the urge to leave some mark on her overwhelming. She writhed under him, panting and begging. He slid two fingers inside her slit, so slippery and wet. Releasing her leg, he slid up, hovering over her and watching while she ground against his fingers.

"Becca, look at me."

She opened her eyes, glazed and so damn sexy it made his dick hurt.

"Oh, God, I'm coming," she cried as she clutched at his arms, her fingernails leaving small half circles in his skin while her pussy convulsed around his fingers.

He swallowed hard while she shivered and her lips formed a perfect "o". He had never seen anything anymore beautiful in his life. His heart thumping hard in his chest, he leaned down and kissed her lightly. Her little moans of pleasure bounced around in his head.

She shoved him to his back, straddled him, and he let her. Hell, he would let her do anything to him at this point. He didn't usually like a woman to take control. But she was different, just like he'd said. He didn't know why. Fuck if he knew what was wrong with him.

"You are so gorgeous," she said as she ran her hands over his abs and up his chest. He didn't say anything, almost believing it coming from her. But he knew better. A pretty package could hide shit just like a paper bag.

Seeing her perched on him like that, her drenched pussy lips sliding against his dick, her nipples pebbled and a look in her eyes like she wanted to devour him, was probably as close to heaven as he was ever going to get.

"I've been wanting to touch your tattoo since I saw you," she said as her fingertips traced the curls of his tat. His muscles tensed at the light touch. "You didn't tell me you had one."

"You didn't ask," he replied quietly.

Her half-hooded gaze darted to his face and her full lips parted slightly. "When your voice drops low like that, all I can think about is sex."

"That's convenient. Because right now that's all I'm thinking about." He grabbed her hips and rocked her gently against his throbbing erection, wanting into her wet heat. He couldn't help but revel in her little gasp of pleasure. "I want in you, darlin'."

Her eyes flew open, and she licked her lips. "Yes!"



As she moved up on her knees to slide him in, he said in a rush, "Condoms. Lying on the table."

"Shit," she muttered and stretched her body sideways to grab one. Her hands shook as she ripped it open. She quickly rolled it over him, rose up and slammed her hips down all the way.

"Christ!" he said, his eyes flying open the same time she screamed. "Becca, dammit, are you okay?"

"Oh, God, yes," she moaned as she moved on him.

Amazed, the fear of hurting her dissipated in a wave of ecstasy. The way her hips rolled against him and the walls of her sex squeezed him so tightly made him fight for control. A battle he was losing with every stroke. Each hiss of pleasure from her lips forced him closer to the edge. The dim light illuminated the delicate lines of her body. He reached up and cupped each small breast—so sensitive to his touch.

She gripped his arms as she moved faster, her breath coming hard and he couldn't take his eyes off her. Her passionate expression held him captive. When she said his name he snapped.

Gripping her hips, he thrust into her, need taking over every movement. He wanted deeper, wanted to crawl inside her. In one movement, she was on her back and he never broke stride. Lifting her hips, he slid deeper and his groan matched her cry of pleasure.

Sweat slid down his spine as he pounded into her, mindless with hunger for what she could give him. Her orgasm hit, drenching him and he exploded. She milked him while he pulsed hard inside her. Limp, he fell to the side, making sure his weight didn't crush her.

He squeezed his eyes shut then opened them to stare in awe at the woman beside him. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted as she gasped for air. Slowly, she turned her head and opened her eyes, wonder etching her face.

He leaned up briefly to toss the condom in the trash and for the first time in his life, he reached out and pulled her tightly against his side. Her little sigh of satisfaction slipped right under his skin as she snuggled closer.

Had he ever been content to just hold a woman? He didn't think so. But as her head rested in the crook of his arm, her little puffs of breath rushing out over his chest, he realized he did this time. Because it felt right.

Startled at the invading thought, he glanced down as her lips brushed against his shoulder. She looked up and their eyes met. Maybe it was because he knew he wouldn't see her again. A damn shame really. Except he couldn't afford to get more involved with her. This little taste of heaven was all he could take from her. She was way too good for the likes of him.

Her fingertips trailed over his jaw making him tighten his hold on her hair.

"I hadn't expected this," she said softly.

"I hadn't planned this," he replied. And that was the truth. He didn't meet her with plans of fucking her. But he certainly hadn't planned on turning it away either. He wasn't that noble.

She smiled at him. "Amazingly, I believe you. Even though I know your history."

Leaning up on one elbow, he smirked. "Nice of you to think better of me, more than you probably should."

"Hmm. That's what you think." Reaching up she traced his tat again. "This is one of the coolest ones I've seen. I can't believe you didn't tell me about it. Does it have any special meaning?"

He stared down at her, lying beside him naked with the light sliding over her curves, her face in rapt attention to the tribal tattoo on the left side of his body. Innocence radiated in her face, from her form. It drew him in worse than any drug could.

Women he had sex with weren't much more than whores. The difference being, he didn't pay them. They would attempt the innocent act sometimes, but he knew it for what it was. An act. He was just another dick in a long line of cocks. Every now and again a real innocent might show interest in him but he always shut them down. Hard.

"It represents freedom," he said and immediately wondered why he did, but this woman already knew more about him than most people in his life. Chatting with her for weeks before now had done that. "I got it when I left home."

She leaned up, her hair falling over her shoulder and he couldn't help but twine a few of the satiny strands around his finger.

"It's really beautiful. I never really liked tattoos on people. But this one fits you."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. Other than when I saw you walking toward me, it moves with you. Like it has always been there. Weird explanation, but that's the best I can come up with." Her lips curled and her eyes softened. "I am so glad you came."

He smirked. "Yeah, so am I. A couple times, if I recall."

Laughing, she shoved him playfully. "You know exactly what I meant."

"And I'm glad you came, too. More than a couple of times," he said and grinned at the outrage on her face.

"You are bad!"

He sat up and she gasped when he wrapped an arm about her waist. "Very. And you should know better than to be with me."

She looped her arms around his neck and whispered against his lips, "I think I can handle you."

His cock lurched at her softly spoken words. "Are you sure? I can be a lot to handle."

She gripped his dick and swirled her thumb around the head. It was his turn to gasp. Her featherlight touch wasn't hesitant this time, but confident and sure. Her eyes bored into his as she straddled his knee and slid her hand down to cup his balls. "Positive."

He lightly pushed her to her feet, stood then jerked a sheet off the bed and draped it over her shoulders.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Letting you handle me," he replied.

He turned her and led her toward a sliding door that opened to a small balcony.

"Jake, we're naked. We can't go out there," she said as her steps slowed.

"Sure we can." He leaned down and nipped her ear. "Trust me."

Becca swallowed hard as she stepped out into the cool air and wrapped the sheet tighter about her shoulders. Realizing that Jake was stark naked, she stared wide-eyed at him. He wore a lazy smile while keeping her in front of him as he sat down in one of the only two chairs that would fit on the small balcony.

"Come here," he said. Her back to his chest, he pulled up the sheet so it draped over his hips and hid him from view, then pulled her down so she sat on his lap. His cock nestled against her ass. The heat from his body surrounded her within the sheet and she looked up. Clouds drifted like shadows across the midnight sky and the sound of the ocean seemed loud in the quiet of the night.

"I can't believe we're sitting out here, naked," she said, turning her head to look at him. "This is crazy." Never in her life had she done anything remotely as daring as this. But having sex with Jake was probably the most daring thing she had done in her life.

"You're safe, Becca," he said.

She nodded. "I know." And she did. For some reason, as crazy as this whole night had been so far, she knew she was safe. Nothing would hurt her. She looked back out at the water. "I love the sound of the ocean and the way the waves hit the shore."

His hands firmly slid up her sides and she gripped the arms of the chair for balance as all the air rushed from her lungs.

"Tell me more. I love to hear your voice," he said as he cupped her breasts and pulled on her nipples.

She couldn't breathe much less talk as his fingers rolled and tugged on her breasts. "I, um, oh hell Jake, I can't think when you do that."

"Then tell me what you feel." His teeth scraped against the back of her neck and her hips arched all on their own.

"I feel. Alive. God, more alive than I've ever felt in my life." And shockingly enough, that was true. It seemed her life up until this moment had been in a fog. Moving through the days taking life as it hit her, instead of living life and chasing after every moment.

Suddenly she didn't care that they were out in the open where anyone could see. She was living and feeling and touching and tasting all that life could give her. And she wanted to shout it to the world.

Her legs dangled on either side of his and when he opened his legs, it forced hers apart. She gasped when the sheet parted slightly and cool air swept between her legs and her breasts. The sounds of the sea rushed in her mind as her eyes drifted closed and her head fell back against his shoulder. His fingers slid into her and she moaned, loving how he knew just how to touch her. Firm, solid, no light strokes or featherlight touches. But at the same time careful that every caress brought her pleasure.

"Fuck, Bec. You're sexy as hell."

He captured her cry of release with a deep kiss, and she reveled in it as wave after wave of ecstasy surged through her. Pushing her to her feet, he bent her over forcing her to grip the railing for balance. The sheet bunched at her waist leaving her ass bare and before she could gasp, he drove in hard.

Not caring about anything but the feel of him around her and in her, she forgot about everything else. Her world narrowed to Jake and she was happy to let him take over.

His release was fast, hard and right on the heels of her own climax. Trembling, she tried to stay on her own feet, but then he picked her up and carried her back inside.

Coherent thought wasn't possible, but the last thing she remembered before passing out in his arms was that she would never be the same again.

## Chapter Six

"Becca. Darlin'." She heard a voice then felt a hand slide through her hair. She blinked open her eyes and abruptly sat up. Jake sat on the edge of the bed, a hat on backward and fully dressed.

She clutched the sheet to her chest, although it didn't make much sense after the way they spent the night. He knew every inch of her and they had sex countless number of times.

"Babe, I gotta go. Our flight leaves out early."

She frowned. "You have to leave?" She glanced out the still open drapes and the sun hinted at rising up over the water.

"Yeah." He pulled her closer and his thumb grazed her lower lip.

She resisted the urge to ask him to stay longer. Like, forever. She swallowed hard at how ridiculous that was. But she was sure it was in her eyes, because he gripped the back of her neck and pulled her in close for a deep kiss. He tasted of mint and his clean scent wrapped around her. Forgetting about the sheet, she gripped his shirt, letting all the words she knew she wouldn't say come through in her kiss.

When his phone started vibrating in his pocket, he pulled back. "Damn. I really have to go."

She nodded, not trusting her voice. As stupid as it was, she felt like she was splitting in two. Like a part of her was going to trot out the door with him. He kissed her again and she tried not to cling. But God, it was hard.

He stared at her as he headed toward the door, stopped suddenly then walked back to her. The intensity in his gaze as he looked down at her made her breath catch.

"Fly out to Tulsa next weekend."

"What?" she asked, her stomach doing a nervous flip-flop.

"I know, it's nuts." He pulled off his hat and raked a hand through his damp hair before shoving it back on. "Do it anyway. Tell me you will."

He was serious. He wanted her to come to him and she found herself nodding. "Yes. I-I don't know if I can next weekend, but I will."

"Soon then?"

"Yes. Soon."

He leaned down to kiss her firmly one more time. This time he had that sexy half-smile on his face as he walked out the door.

Becca stared at the shut door, her hands fisting in the sheets. She must be out of her mind. Why had she just agreed to fly to him?

*Because you already miss him.*

She swallowed hard. Oh, God, she did. Biting her lip, she stared at the mess of the room. Most of the blankets were on the floor and only one pillow was on the bed. Wrapping the sheet around her and tucking it under her arms she got up and padded towards the sliding glass door. Every muscle in her body ached deliciously as she opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony where just hours ago she had screamed his name. She curled up in the same chair where he had held her. The sun slowly rose, a bright orange ball reflecting off the deep blue of the ocean.

Muscles weren't the only thing that ached. Somewhere inside she felt a loss. She wanted him with her to watch the sunrise. How had he made such an impact in such a short amount of time? How could she feel like she was missing something important when they hadn't even shared one full day together?

Resting her chin on her knees, the light breeze tugging at her tangled hair, she knew exactly why. Because she knew him. Even before meeting him in person, she knew him. All that time they spent in chat...

Immediately, she closed her eyes, realizing she hadn't told him. Placing the heel of her hand on her head she groaned. She hadn't told him about the Chat Addiction article and that he had been her research.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake sat on the plane and watched the landscape get smaller and smaller beneath him. His fist clenched as they soared into the sky. Why had he invited her to Tulsa? He must be out of his damn mind. Just because he could see the hunger in her face when he told her he was leaving, didn't mean he had to invite her out. The woman sat there, her hair in disarray, the sheet hiding nothing from view, her big brown eyes telling him she didn't want him to go even if she didn't voice the word and he had cracked. At the time, it seemed like the right thing to do. But now? It was so totally out of character for him.

He rarely ever saw a woman more than once. It was always a one-time thing, no strings, no phone numbers, no other contact. Just a fuck and nothing more, he didn't want or need more.

Could he really delude himself and say Becca was just a fuck?

Tension coiled like a snake in the pit of his stomach, answering his question.

\* \* \* \* \*

Becca hummed as she walked through the cubicles at *Richmond Times*. She knew her coworkers were starting to stare at her, but she didn't really care. She felt happy, light and it was all because of Jake. Mondays were usually hectic with everyone trying to get back into their groove.

"Mmm-hmm. If I didn't know better I would think you got laid, sister!" Matty said as he leaned over the flimsy wall.

She was terrible at hiding stuff and couldn't stop the blush before it hit her cheeks.

"O-M-G!" His black eyes went round. "You did get laid!" He disappeared only to reappear and perch on her desk. "Okay. Give me the deets! Was it hot?"

"Matty! Shh. Not so loud," she said, trying to get him to be a little less flamboyant. Like that was possible. The man was wearing a bright pink kerchief around his neck. One didn't get any more flashy than Matty.

"But, girl. I approve. You know I do. It's about time, is all I can say. So, who was it?"

She laughed as his eyebrows waggled comically. "His name is Jake."

"Oooo, sounds scrumptious. Did he have a nice, firm—"

"I have a delivery for Rebecca Saylor," a man called from the front of the office.

Matty pointed at her as she stood up. "Here she is, the lucky girl."

Becca's mouth dropped at the size of the bouquet. At least two dozen pale pink roses filled a lavender vase that was tied with a lovely pink bow. The delivery guy brought them to her and smiled as he had her sign the paper. The bouquet barely fit on her desk and the aroma filled the office. A couple of her coworkers let out a whistle.

The white card seemed to glare from in between the blooms.

"Go on. Read it," Matty said, his wide grin infectious.

She plucked the card and took a deep breath. She couldn't believe Jake had sent... Her breathing stopped as she re-read the card and she felt the blood drain from her face.

*Surprise. Bet you thought they were from your new lover. You are mine, Rebecca. Your husband, Nick.*

How did he know? How could he know? She didn't even notice when Matty plucked the card out of her hand and read it.

"That sorry son-of-a-bitch," he said. "And how could he even dare to say he's your husband? That man is a lunatic."

When her business phone rang, she shook her head and answered.

"Hello, this is Rebecca with *Richmond Times*."

"Hello, Rebecca." The familiar voice sent a chill down her spine.

"What do you want, Nick? You're not supposed to talk to me. Restraining order, remember?" Although that didn't stop him the last time, did it?

"I just wanted to make sure you got my note."

Her hands shook and she gripped the phone tighter. "I don't want to talk to you."

She was about to hang up when he said, "Don't you want to know how I know about your little affair? Truly you should be more discreet. A coworker of mine saw you

at the Rockfish Bar and Sea Grill. How could you? Do you have any idea how badly this hurts me?"

"Nick, get out of my life. I don't care what you think. We're divorced, remember?" Bile rose in her throat and she really wondered what she ever saw in the man.

"Just a little misunderstanding. You will see my way of things soon."

Becca couldn't listen anymore and she slammed the phone down and looked at Matty who had his arms crossed over his chest, his lips slashed in an angry line.

"He is vile."

"Yeah." She couldn't agree more. Grabbing the vase of flowers, she stalked to the back room where there was a large wastebasket and dropped them in. The vase shattered, but what she really wanted to do was run each rose through the shredder. Shaking, she walked back to her cubicle and slid into her chair. A steaming cup of coffee sat on her desk.

"Drink it. Then call the cops," Matty said from behind the wall.

"Thanks." The aroma tickled her nose and when she took a sip it had a bitter bite. She stared at her PC screen, took a deep breath and called the cops. She was to report any contact he made with her, and even if they wouldn't necessarily do anything about it, at least they would have a report of it.

And because of Nick's stunt, she decided to go to Tulsa this weekend. To hell with waiting. She wanted to see Jake. As Summer had said, she wanted to recognize what it was supposed to feel like with a guy. She'd had one taste...and it wasn't enough.

Over the next several days, her plan was only reinforced. Notes stuck in her door, on her car, phone calls with eerie messages – all from Nick. It seemed he was following her. Knowing every move she made, everything she did. Summer had even given her a metal baseball bat to keep in her apartment, because Becca wouldn't take the gun she offered. It kept her on edge and the only time she felt relaxed was when she talked to Jake, which had only been twice this week. She didn't tell him about Nick or what he was doing. She just wanted to forget about it. Jake was good at that, making her forget everything but the sound of his voice.

So when she stepped off the plane in Tulsa, Oklahoma she was a bundle of nerves. He was supposed to meet her at baggage claim. Seeing her bag coming up the conveyer belt, she reached to grab it when someone reached over and snagged it. She looked up into the smiling face of Tony.

"So glad to see you, Becca." She returned his smile and searched behind him for Jake. "He's not here," Tony said. "And he wanted me to tell you he was sorry. Something came up and he couldn't make it here on time. So I'm in charge of taking you to him."

Disappointment and doubt settled in her chest.

"Hey, it's cool." Tony's reassurance didn't do anything for her.

"It's fine," she replied not meaning it.



He laughed and shook his head. "Come on. I'll tell you about it on the way to his place."

She followed him and when they stepped outside heat hit her in the face. She inhaled only to realize the air was so thick it stuck in her throat. She was only too happy to get into his bright blue, four-door truck. "Nice," she said and glanced at the gray cloth interior.

"Thanks," he said as he put it in drive. "But I'm sure you don't want to talk about my truck. Jake," he spun the wheel to make a left turn and glanced at her, "didn't want me to tell you, but I don't care what he wants. You need to know. He had a run-in with the people who birthed him."

Becca stared at Tony's face. His lips were compressed into thin lines and his pale blue eyes flashed angrily.

"The people who birthed him? You mean his parents?" she asked.

"The term parent would mean they gave a shit. His don't. Never have." When they reached a stoplight, he looked at her. "I don't know how much he's told you, but those people don't deserve the term parent."

"Yeah. He told me a little bit about them."

"Good. Then you understand."

Yes and no. She knew they were messed up and his dad was really mean. But it was hard for her to imagine parents being so cruel to their own child. And Jake only talked about them in detail when he was drunk. Even on chat, you could tell that about someone. "I know his dad just got out of prison, right?"

"Yeah. And today was the first run-in. Things didn't go well."

Judging by the hard look on Tony's face, it had to be an understatement. She shifted uncomfortably in the seat and held the seatbelt down so it wouldn't rub against her neck, one of the many disadvantages of being so short.

"Don't worry though. I know he was looking forward to you visiting." Tony grinned, all traces of his anger gone. "I was damn shocked when Jake said you were coming out. But I like ya. And he needs someone like you."

Heat invaded her face. "I don't—I mean, there is nothing really going on. We're not a couple or anything," she said, trying to blow it off. She felt like a stuttering fool.

His blue eyes twinkled. "Right. Between Jake's 'whatever' and your response, I don't think either one of you know what you're doing."

Twisting her purse in her hands, she turned to look out the window and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

His laughter made her more nervous. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

Tony turned the conversation to more mundane subjects and she relaxed a little bit. The last thing she wanted to do was voice how confused she felt when it came to Jake. Her feelings were about as clear as mud.

They exited the highway onto a street called Memorial and she was amazed at how busy the intersections were. She had always thought Tulsa a small town. She was wrong. Businesses lined the streets and cars darted in and out. When they passed a row of car dealerships of every make, Tony pointed out the Ford one. "Jake works there."

Soon they made a left into a neighborhood with larger lots. The homes were older, some more run-down than others but most were well-kept, with clipped, bright green grass.

When Tony stopped in front of a red brick house, nerves made her stomach drop and she thought she might throw up. A large black Ford truck sat in the drive and the yard was neat but flowers were noticeably absent. A stark contrast, since so many of the houses they passed were full of colorful gardens.

Tony got out and she just sat there, nerves stretched to the breaking point. She stared as Jake's door swung open and he came striding out. He wore a pair of cargo shorts in black and gray camo, a black tee and no shoes. Simple clothing, but the way he wore them had her sweating from more than the heat. The tee stretched taut across his broad shoulders and hung loose at his waist. He arrived at Tony's truck and reached into the bed for her bag. He looked through the window and arched one dark brow.

Licking her lips, she forced herself to open the door and walk up beside him. The sun glared down on them and did nothing to calm the butterflies in her stomach.

"Hi," he said.

She wiped her hands on her shorts and smiled faintly. "Hi."

"Well, I gotta get out of here, man," Tony said with a grin plastered to his face.

"All right. Thanks man," Jake responded and shook his hand. "I appreciate it."

"No problem. See ya'll soon."

"Thanks, Tony," she said, wincing at how strained her voice sounded.

"Anytime, doll." With that, Tony hopped in his truck and took off.

"Come on, let's go inside. And sorry about not being there. Something unexpected came up," Jake said and led the way into his house.

"It's fine," she said as she stepped through the door.

His place was cleaner than she had expected a bachelor place to be, but it was obviously lived in. A black leather sofa and love seat took up most of the space. A Budweiser bottle and an XBOX remote were on a sturdy black coffee table. The man obviously liked black.

The windows had no curtains, just mini-blinds and the walls were white with no decoration except for two pictures. Both of motorcycles.

"Nice place," she said and turned to look at him as he set her bag down.

"Thanks." His expression was unreadable, his shuttered eyes boring into her. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

His presence seemed to fill up the space as he stood there saying nothing. Nerves choked her and the silent tension mounted. A muscle ticked in his jaw and he finally looked away from her, making her feel that much more uncomfortable. The longer they stood there the angrier and more remote he seemed. It was as though he was pulling away from her until nothing but coldness masked his face. Her heart hammered in her chest as she took a step back, bumping into the wall. What had she been thinking to come here?

A flicker passed over his eyes as he stepped back, his chin lifting and lips slashing into a frown.

In that moment she saw it. Saw what he tried so hard to hide. Fear. He was terrified and the implication almost staggered her. This man with all his strength and size, was scared of little Becca. She was on his turf now and she knew all the things he didn't tell anyone. Knew all the scars that no one ever saw.

She somehow managed a faint smile and he almost jerked, his gaze searching her face. She knew what he searched for – acceptance.

Stepping toward him, she looked up into his face. To his credit he didn't back up, but she could see the wariness. He reminded her of a tiger ready to bolt if she made one wrong move. Slowly, she raised her hand and slid it along his smooth jaw. His eyes closed briefly, his throat convulsing as he swallowed. Braver than she felt, she leaned toward him and he expelled a huge breath as though he had been holding it.

His arms came around her and the feel of him was incredible when he pulled her snugly against him.

"Bec." His large frame shuddered as he breathed her name against her neck.

When his lips lightly brushed her neck in a purely devotional fashion, she melted into him and his arms tightened.

Shocked, her heart skipped a beat as he clung to her. He might be bigger and he might be holding her up, but he clung to her. The thought was devastating to her senses. She'd never felt so needed in her life.

He lifted his head and gone was the cold, angry look, replaced with hot possessiveness. His hands cupped her face, his thumbs tracing lightly across her cheeks making her forget to breathe. His head slowly lowered as though giving her time to change her mind. But she was rooted to the floor as his lips delicately touched hers – just a faint brush across hers, so unlike him and the hunger that burned in his gaze. Almost reverent. He pulled back and the loss of contact brought a whimper of protest from her.

His body jerked immediately and his lips were hard on hers as she pulled him closer. It was explosive. The heat of their bodies meshed together as they stumbled back against the wall. His hands cupped her ass and molded her hips to his as he slid her up the wall. His arousal pressed against her core, the muscles in his shoulders tight under her hands. He groaned against her lips and slid open-mouthed kisses along her throat.

She arched, crossing her ankles behind his back. Wanting closer. Needing closer. The fire he started in her consuming every thought.

"Hell, Bec. I swore I wouldn't do this," he muttered, his breath hot on her neck.

"What?" she asked in between pants.

Still holding her pinned body to the wall, he stared into her face. "Pounce on you like an animal."

She slipped her hand into his dark hair that brushed against his neck and smiled. "I don't mind."

That seemed to be all the encouragement he needed. His mouth landed hard on hers, demanding she respond. A thrill shot through her at how little it took to make him lose control. His hands tugged and pulled, dropping clothes on the floor around them as they stumbled down the hall and made their way toward a bedroom. She slid her hands over his bare chest and nipped at his shoulder as they fell onto the bed.

Light spilled in through the window but she didn't care, because his mouth was on her nipple. Biting and teasing her until she writhed beneath him.

"God, Jake. Please," she begged, her hunger for him almost painful.

"Christ, Bec. You drive me insane," he growled, his breath hot on her skin.

It had only been a week since she had seen him, touched him. But it felt like an eternity. She moaned his name when his fingers slid into her. "I can't wait. Now," she panted. Burning need built into an inferno and she wanted him.

She heard a drawer bang open and looked up to see him frantically tear open a condom package with his teeth. In spite of the heat of the moment, she couldn't repress a giggle. That's when he smiled at her for the first time since she arrived.

He rolled on the condom. "Laugh at me will you? It's not my fault you make me crazy."

Then he pierced her wet heat with his cock and his gaze locked with hers. He moved slow, filling her then pulling back out, then filling her again. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his face—so intent, his jaw locked tight, his nostrils flaring as though it took everything he had to maintain control.

Unlike the first time they were together, she could see him clearly with the sun streaking in through the blinds—the black tribal tattoo that covered the left side of his shoulder and down his arm, the flecks of yellow that made his eyes that incredible blue-green color, the way the muscles in his shoulders bunched and flexed with each thrust. He leaned down and kissed the corner of her lips and it sent her heart fluttering.

"Jake." Her voice was nothing but a whisper as reality crashed hard.

She was falling for him.

## Chapter Seven

His name from her lips sent Jake straight over the edge. All control lost, he drove deep and hard, her small body beneath him taking all he had and still she arched for more. Her hands gripped his bedcovers as he lifted her hips for each thrust. He couldn't stop. Couldn't slow down. Need for her consumed him and it shattered all reason. Sliding out, he turned her over and pulled her up to her knees, thrust in and groaned at the depth he gained in this position.

She cried out and pushed her hips back and he reveled in all she gave him. So tight, she clenched around him. He watched his cock slide into her wetness, her little ass quiver with each thrust. Sliding one hand up her spine he gripped her hair that fanned down her back.

"Ooo, I'm coming," she screamed.

One, two, three and he exploded. Sweat ran down his back and he shook all over while she spasmed around him. Swallowing hard, he pulled back, slipped the condom off and tossed it into a nearby trashcan. Falling sideways, he brought her with him, spooning around her slight form.

She turned and tucked her face against his chest, her damp body pressing against his. She smelled of mangos and when he opened his eyes, he realized in shock where they were.

In his bed.

A place no woman had ever lain.

Panic threatened to seize him. He didn't know how to deal with the things she made him feel. He had no idea how she had wormed her way under his skin. But he wasn't ready to analyze any of it. When she nuzzled against his neck and kissed his skin, he glanced down. He brushed his hand across her cheek and into the silkiness of her hair and she smiled at him.

"Mmm, now that was a hello," she all but purred.

"Glad you approve," he replied. God, he was glad she was here. More than she realized and more than he would ever admit to anyone. He tightened his arms around her and kissed her forehead. This tiny woman had him tied up into knots. "Sorry I couldn't be at the airport."

"No problem. Tony said you had some trouble. Are you okay?" she asked as she leaned up and looked down at him, concern marking her features.

He had the sudden urge to tell her everything. Looking up into those big whiskey-colored eyes he licked his lips and said, "My mom took my dad back. And stupid as it was, I tried to convince her not to."

"But he beat her. Why in the world would she take him back?"

"Yeah. He did. And worse. But she always blamed me for his rages." He shrugged and glanced away from her. "I guess she thinks since I'm gone, he'll be better. Maybe he will."

Feeling like a moron for telling her his shit, he got up to walk to the door to find his shorts.

"Oh my God, Jake. What happened to you?"

He turned just in time to see her slight form moving toward him, her gaze directed to his right lower back. She moved gracefully, the light gliding over her curves and highlighting her olive skin. It made him blink as he tried to remember what she said. Then her hand grazed a sore spot on his back.

"Oh, that. It's nothing," he said.

"Nothing! It's more than nothing. It looks horrible." She grabbed his arm and frowned as she looked up at him. "What happened, Jake?"

Staring down into her face, he didn't want to lie even though he didn't want to tell her how ugly the encounter with his parents had gotten. He raked a hand through his hair. "My old man was there and decided I needed to be taught a lesson. But I'm fine."

Her eyes widened and she put a hand to her mouth in obvious outrage. "He did this to you? Why? How?"

"Becca, seriously. It doesn't matter." And it didn't. Hell, he had suffered worse at their hands.

"Yes, it does matter! What did he hit you with?" He reached out to touch her face and she frowned at him. "Don't even try to get out of this, tell me what happened."

He felt utterly ridiculous standing there in the nude talking to one of the most beautiful women he had ever known, who was also naked, about his shit life. He was already tainting her. He dropped his hand and clenched his fist. "Why don't we get dressed and then I'll tell you."

As though she just realized she was butt-ass naked, she looked at herself then him. A blush spread over her chest and up her cheeks. "I, uh...yeah. Good idea."

"Although," he started toward her, eyeing her nipples, which hardened under his scrutiny. He couldn't help but grin at her when she held up her hand and backed up.

"Don't even think about it. You are talking, mister."

He reached out and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her against his body. Her tiny gasp and whimper when he cupped her ass made him think otherwise. "Are you sure?" he asked, his lips near her ear.

"Jake Korte, stop."

She surprised him by pushing him back a step. She wanted him. He knew it in the way she glanced up his body and licked her lips. It sent a shot of heat to his groin. "I can think of better things to do besides talking."

Jerking her gaze back to his face she pointed to the door. "Get dressed."

"Okay, okay. You win."

It took them several minutes to locate all their clothes. He couldn't help but enjoy the view of her sliding on her pink panties and walking around his house trying to find her bra. He found her shorts and thought about holding them ransom, but she would probably just find something else in her suitcase to wear. He wondered if there was any way he was going to get out of talking to her. He doubted it, because her brows furrowed every time she glanced at him.

He walked into the kitchen and grabbed two beers. One for her and one for him. And if she didn't want it, then two for him. He sat at the small square table in the kitchen. She sat across from him, an expectant look on her face. She was gorgeous, with her bare feet tucked under her and her hair a mess.

"Now. Tell me what happened."

He popped the top on the beers and slid her one. She grabbed it, took a sip and stared at him.

"It's no big deal. Just same shit, different day."

"Don't blow me off. I know more than most. You have nothing to hide from me."

Damn. She was right. And more than most? Hell, she knew more than anyone. Swallowing the cold familiar taste of his beer, he looked at the floor. "My mom called, told me the news that she was getting back with my old man. I argued with her. Then, like a dumbass, I went over there thinking I could change her mind. But what I didn't know was my old man was there. I hadn't seen the fucker in eight years." The man hadn't looked much different. But one thing was for sure, the old man still hated his guts.

"Wow. Was he in prison that long?"

"Naw. I think he'd been there about three years. A felony. Probably drugs or something. I don't know. Don't care." He took a swig of his beer and wished Bec would just let it go. He felt like he was contaminating her with his filth. She didn't deserve this shit.

"Why did he hit you?"

He looked up at her face, concern and caring marking her features. She was so pure. Did he really want her to know it all?

"No. Don't. Don't you close up on me." She slid out of her chair and kneeled between his legs and gripped his hand. "Jake. I know you don't want to tell me. But that's why you have to. You can't keep it inside. It will tear you apart. It's no different than when we chatted. It's still me."

How could she see through him so easily? He took a deep breath. "It's different. You're real," he said quietly.

"But I'm still me. Don't shut me out."

Why the hell had he said anything? He could have refused to tell her. But that was just it. It was like he couldn't refuse her. Any request she made narrowed right to his gut and twisted him up. But what good would it do to tell her? It would hurt her. And he damn sure didn't want her hurt. But wasn't it a little late for that? She was in his house, in *his* bed, not the guest bed, and she was staying for the weekend. Eventually, he would hurt her. Was just a matter of time.

Resigned to the fact that shit would eventually fly, he sighed and said, "He wanted to teach me a lesson. When I walked outside, he came after me with a board and hit me in the back. I broke his nose. My mother ran to him. Cussed me and threatened to call the cops. He was laughing when I got in my truck and left."

He could still hear his old man's cackle. How many times? How many times had he laughed while beating the shit out of snot-nose Jake? He blinked and ran a hand over his face.

Then all he could smell was Becca as she stood and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her heart beat beneath his ear and he tightened his hold on her waist. He was lost in the feel of her. She didn't say anything, just ran her fingers through his hair and kissed the top of his head. Almost like she accepted him. Scars and all. And although it was wrong, he took what she gave knowing that things would go to shit before too much longer.

But for this moment, he could pretend that he was okay.

That he wasn't just like his old man.

Becca's heart broke for him. Yeah, he had told her a lot of things online, but in person it was different. She could see the torment on his face, the pain he tried to blow off. How could his own parents do that to him? She couldn't even begin to understand. Her dad had been overprotective to the point she felt suffocated. But she never once questioned his love for her. Jake didn't even have that.

She struggled to hold back the tears knowing he would hate it if she cried because of him. But he clung to her, just like he had earlier. And her heart swelled. She was falling hard and fast and there wasn't anything she could do about it.

When his cell phone started ringing, the song *Down in a Hole* by Alice in Chains played.

He squeezed her one more time, then stood and answered it. Sitting in the chair he just left, she stared at him. She couldn't help it. He was turned away from her and all he had on was his shorts. The jagged tribal tattoo licked up toward his neck and slithered down his back to his waist. It would curve one way into a sharp point and then repeat in a random pattern in the other direction. It seemed to follow and highlight the muscles of his back. Whoever did it was good. It wasn't just a piece of art slapped on him, it was designed for him.

He turned his head to look at her, his hand over the mouthpiece and said, "It's Tony. He wants to know if we want to meet him at Magoos. You want to go?"



She smiled. "Yeah, if you want to."

He nodded and said into his phone, "We'll be there in a little bit. Later." He hung up and said, "I think I've told you about Magoos. It's just a pool hall where we hang out sometimes."

"I remember. Who all is going to be there?" she asked.

"Tony and the usual crowd." He shrugged, grabbed his beer and took a drink. "I thought we might ride the bike. Is that cool?"

"Sounds great." She stood and laid a hand against his side. "Jake, I'm really sorry about what happened."

His eyes when they met hers told her nothing. Whatever ground she had gained in that quiet moment was gone. He had withdrawn again.

"Doesn't matter. It's over." He walked out of the room and grabbed his shirt, which lay on the floor. Jerking it on, he continued walking through a small laundry room and into his garage.

She followed him and was struck again by his size. He towered over her, his shoulders so broad she wondered that he didn't have to turn sideways to walk through doorways.

Stepping into the garage she glanced around. Shelves lined one wall, a workbench and a roll-around toolbox ran the length of another wall and a pegboard over it held a lot of tools—everything in its place. Three barstools with the image of a skull on the vinyl seat sat in front of the workbench. Two motorcycles sat in one bay of the two-car garage, a dirt bike and a street bike. A punching bag hung from the ceiling in the other bay.

"I bought you a helmet," he said as he walked to the workbench. "I got you a small. I'm hoping you don't wear an extra-small." He opened a box and pulled out the helmet.

She padded to him, the concrete cool under her feet, and took the helmet. It was pink, but it was far from girly.

"This is really cool. But you didn't have to buy me a helmet—"

"Yes I did. You can't ride without one. Here." He took it from her and opened the straps. "Try it on to see if it fits." He pulled it down over her head and flipped up the clear visor. Wiggling it, he nodded and said, "Yeah. Looks like it fits good."

"It's pretty tight."

"It's supposed to be."

She pulled it off and shoved her hair from her face and traced the pattern on the helmet. "It's pretty cool looking. What's it supposed to be?"

"Torn skin revealing the muscle and bone."

She jerked her gaze back up to him. He was half-grinning at her and she couldn't help but smile back.

"Sorry. But at least it's pink," he said, followed by a light laugh.

"Oh, I wish I could have seen that. The mean and bad Jake buying a pink helmet."

"Don't worry. They knew it wasn't for me." He winked at her.

After changing their clothes and grabbing a bite to eat, they were on the bike and riding. The only thing she had ridden was a scooter and she didn't think he would qualify it as a motorcycle. Especially when she realized the speedometer on Jake's bike read 220 mph. And when she asked if he had ever driven it that fast, he only grinned.

After her initial fear, she relaxed. The ride was exhilarating. Freeing. The sound of the bike, the feel of his abs tightening every time he shifted gears gave her a thrill. She loved how when they passed another bike they waved. Or at least a biker version of the wave. Mainly just a hand barely lifted in silent communication. It was like bikers had their own community, something she'd never noticed before.

When they pulled up to Magoos, the parking lot was crammed. He backed up next to another bike similar to his near the front. Some girls walked by them, smiled and said, "Hi, Jake."

She noticed he barely even looked at them and said a simple, "Hey." For all he knew he could have been talking to aliens.

"Here, let me take your helmet. I'll attach them to the bike," he said.

"Thanks. I wondered what we would do with them. Won't someone steal them?" she asked.

He snorted. "No one is stupid enough to mess with our bikes. By the way," he said and pointed to the blue one. "That's Tony's." He grabbed her hand, which made her smile and led her into the place. She loved the feel of his large hand encompassing hers.

The music was loud and the interior huge. Rows of pool tables lined the place and in back she thought she saw a dance floor and stage. Several people said hi to him, but he just nodded and said his usual "hey" and kept moving. After he ordered them beers at the bar, he turned and spoke in her ear. "Tony is probably over there."

She nodded and they wound their way to the other side. Tony wasn't hard to spot as they got closer—he was taller than most anyone there and laughed the loudest.

"Hey, ya'll made it!" Tony said and shook Jake's hand. She was shocked when he wrapped her up in a bear hug.

"Yeah, we parked by that piece-of-shit blue bike sitting out there. Someone should have it hauled off," Jake said with a smirk.

"That means so much coming from a Ford freak," Tony shot back.

She felt almost out of place, standing in between these two huge guys. People laughed at their joking but they stared at her. Jake's hand reached up and cupped the back of her neck and squeezed lightly. She glanced up at him and he started pointing to people.

"That's Aaron, his girl Krista, Mike, Travis, his girl Sam, Kevin and Mack," Jake said. "This is Becca."

They all smiled and said some sort of greeting but most couldn't hide their obvious surprise, although she had no idea why. When Jake left to go to the restroom, Tony leaned down to her.

"Jake doesn't date. At least not in a normal sense. So don't mind the weird looks. They'll get used to it."

Confused, she was about to ask him what he meant when Tony walked away to rack balls on a pool table. She followed him and leaned her hip against the table.

"What do you mean, he doesn't date?"

Tony grinned, his blue eyes twinkling. "What I mean is he fucks them. He doesn't take them to eat, ask them to stay at his place, let them ride his bike or bring them around his friends. He doesn't ask for their phone numbers or half the time for their names. He doesn't date."

Shocked, she stared him. Her mouth must have been hanging open because Tony placed a finger under her chin to close her mouth.

"You're only the second girlfriend he's had since I've known him. And I've known him for fourteen years."

"But I'm not his girlfriend," she said so quietly she was surprised he heard her.

He laughed. "Yeah. Right. Which would explain why he fed you, let you stay at his place, let you ride his bike, brought you around his friends and asked you your name. Do you get it yet, Becca?"

She clamped her mouth shut and her eyes left Tony to watch Jake walk back to her from across the room. He wore simple clothing, black shirt, jeans and riding boots. He looked good enough to eat.

"Yup. Exactly what I thought," Tony said and went to grab a pool stick.

She shook her head and slid a hand through her hair. What Tony said echoed in her head. Was he really that cold to girls? Or was Tony exaggerating? She lifted her forgotten beer and took a sip.

Once the weirdness had worn off Jake's group of friends, the evening went pretty smooth. Krista and Sam were funny.

"Where did you meet Jake?" Krista asked. "I swear you're the first girl he's ever brought here."

Becca paused, wondering what the hell she was going to say. Since nothing else came to mind, she opted for the truth. "I met him online."

Both sets of eyes went round.

"You serious, girl?" Sam asked. "That boy knows how to work a PC?"

She laughed. "Why wouldn't he know? And yeah I did. Then I met him in person when he flew down for his sister's wedding. I live in Virginia."

If she'd grown two heads they couldn't have looked more shocked.

"You mean Tony's sister?" Krista asked, her eyes still round as saucers.

"Yeah. But Jake considers Amber his sister, too." Becca glanced at Jake who was playing pool with Tony and she realized he was staring at her. She smiled and he gave her his half-smirk before he leaned to take a shot.

Sam let out a low whistle. "Damn. I don't believe it. I think Jake is finally toast. I don't know whether to congratulate you or feel sorry for you. That man has a rep of being the coldest bastard around."

Becca sighed and downed half her beer. She was getting tired of the same comment. "Jake's not cold. Far from it."

Sam laughed and Krista said, "You're a goner, girl."

"Tell me something I don't know," Becca muttered. She walked up to Jake, placed a hand on his arm and said, "I think I'll hit the dance floor."

He nodded, but didn't say anything, his expression shuttered like it had been most of the night. She downed the rest of the beer, tossed it in a trashcan and then moved to the crowded dance floor. A live band was playing and mostly covered the seventies stuff. But she didn't care. She wanted to move and close her mind to everything else for a while.

Finding a small spot, she danced. Nothing fancy, nothing too crazy. Summer would call it a *white girl dance*. The thought brought a smile to her face and she wished she were here. She loved being here with Jake, but not knowing anyone else made it kind of hard. Forgetting about his back and forth aloofness, she moved with the crowd.

"Want to dance?" a guy asked.

She glanced up and shook her head. "No, thanks. I'm with someone."

"I don't see him," he said and tried to move closer.

"Now you do." She jerked her head at the sound of Jake's voice. His face was a mask of contained anger.

The guy backed up and said, "Sorry, man." Then he turned and walked away.

"I could have handled that," she said, feeling irritated.

"Yeah. But you didn't have to," he replied. Then he turned her so she faced him and he brought his arms around her.

"I thought you didn't dance?"

"I don't."

"I'm a big girl. I know how to take care of myself."

"I never said you couldn't."

She gritted her teeth, it was obvious he was angry, even though he held her gently. "I have to go to the restroom."

When all he did was nod, she fumed and pushed her way through the crowded room. Closing herself in a stall, she sat and took a deep breath. A part of her thought she had made a mistake coming here. It was obvious Jake was tense. She didn't know if it was because she was here with him, or if it was residual from the encounter with his

parents. Either way, it sucked. And worse, she knew, as Krista had said, she was a goner. Her thoughts stopped when she heard a girl say Jake's name.

"Did you see that girl with Jake? What was he thinking? She looks more like a little kid than a woman."

"I know. No way could she handle him. Hell, we couldn't."

They both laughed and Becca had all she could take. She pushed open the stall door and glared at the two women. Both were tall, big busted and overdone—hookers, in her opinion. She stared at them, making sure they both saw her, then stepped between them to wash her hands. They didn't say anything, just wore shitty smirks on their faces. She toweled off her hands then looked them both in the eye.

"I handle him just fine. And for the record, I'm going home with him. You're not." She barely got a glimpse of their stunned faces before slamming out of the room. She hoped they both choked on their hairspray fumes.

Before she could reach the table where they had been sitting, Tony stopped her.

"Get Jake out of here."

A sharp comment was on the tip of her tongue when she realized Tony wasn't joking. "Why?"

"You'll see why when you get to the table."

Tony walked with her and what she saw stopped her. He leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, his foot tapped nervously and a glower marked his face. This was more than irritation, he was furious.

When he saw her, he dropped his arms, some of his ire evaporating from his stance.

"Let's go," she said. He all but hauled her out the door, not even bothering to say bye to anyone.

He hadn't said anything to her on the way to his house. And even when he parked the bike in the garage, placed their helmets on the workbench and walked inside, he still said nothing.

Hating the silence, she started to speak when he walked into his room and shut the door.

## Chapter Eight

Jake sat on his bed and dropped his head into his shaking hands. He choked on every feeling that swamped him. Every emotion that Becca had brought to life. Seeing her with his friends, watching her easy interaction, her smile, the way she held her beer—everything, had his stomach doing back flips. And that's when he noticed the attention she was getting. Seemed every man in the place had his eye on her, along with the women. That's when he realized what he had done.

He had brought her to a place where he had picked up a lot of mindless fucks. Most of the women were nameless faces to him, but they all knew his name. It never mattered before. But it mattered now. There was no way Becca could not see them for who they were. She wasn't stupid.

Raking a hand through his hair, he felt like the bastard he was. He screwed up royally by taking her there. She was better than that. Deserved better than that. Deserved better than him.

He fell backward and stared up at the ceiling fan that whirled in an endless circle. Then her scent tickled his nose. He turned his head and inhaled. She had been in his bed and he knew she was imbedded in his heart.

Damn.

He jerked, his eyes flying open, his heart thundering in his chest. Shit. He wasn't capable of loving somebody.

Was he?

Thinking about her he could picture her vividly in his mind. The way she always slowly smiled at him, those eyes looking at him with passion, hunger, want, concern. He fisted the blanket with his hand. He should send her back now. Buy her a ticket and send her home. Never talk to her again. The thought tore him apart.

He got up and paced, unable to sit still. What the hell was he going to do now? She must think him the biggest asshole to ignore her like he was, but he had to figure what the hell was going on in his head. Like that was ever going to happen.

Unable to contain himself, he stripped and pulled on some loose shorts then left his room. Luckily he didn't see her, so he went to his garage. Turning on the music, he dealt with his emotions the only way he knew how.

He beat the hell out of his punching bag.

Mindless, he swung, punching and kicking the bag. Over and over. Sweat poured into his eyes and down his chest. When he finally glanced up, he stopped.

She stood in the doorway, her hair mussed and wearing nothing but his t-shirt that hung to her knees. The shirt had been missing since Virginia Beach. Worry etched her face and her eyes looked puffy, like she had been crying.

It ripped his heart out.

She licked her lips and wrapped her arms around her waist. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt." She dropped her chin and turned to walk away.

"No. It's okay," he said, desperate for her to stay.

She seemed hesitant but stopped and looked at him with a hopeful expression. The look stomped what was left of his heart. He was the cause of the pain behind her eyes.

She walked up to him and placed a hand on his punching bag. "I couldn't sleep, then heard you out here. I hope you don't mind that I'm here."

The look on her face told him she was talking about more than just being in his garage. "I want you here," he said and meant every word. Yeah, he might be confused about what he felt for her, but her not being here would be worse.

"Are you sure? Because I get the feeling you don't want me here. And at Magoo's—"

"Magoo's was a mistake. I should never have taken you there. I'm sorry." He fisted his hand. She jerked back like he had hit her.

"Why? Because you didn't want your friends to know me? Or that I might ruin your other little flings? Don't worry, because when I'm gone I don't think any of them will remember my name."

Anger rolled off of her in waves and it sparked his own.

"No. It was mistake because you shouldn't have been exposed to what type of person I really am. Hell, Bec, I don't give a rat's ass what they think about me, but I do care what they think about you. You deserve better than that."

"The type of person you really are? I know what type of person you are, Jake. Just because everyone else only sees what you let them, doesn't mean that's who you are."

"They know the truth. You are the one who sees something that's not here." And in some ways maybe it was good that she saw what he was about. Maybe then she wouldn't have unrealistic expectations of him.

"Really? Because I think it's all an act. An act to keep people away." She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "I'm not stupid. I know why those girls were staring at you."

"Are you sure? Because I don't think you do. They were a mindless fuck," he said harshly. "That's what they were!"

She lifted her chin. "I knew that, Jake. Like I said, I'm not stupid. But there's one thing you haven't figured out yet—I'm not a mindless fuck, am I?"

Then she grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him down. Her mouth slammed on his and her tongue ran along the seam of his lips. Surprised at her actions, he shuddered and clamped his arms around her, dragging her against him. Her nails dug

into his shoulders and for once he thought she really did want to hurt him. He hoped she did. He deserved it.

Mouths fused together, he cupped her ass and she locked her legs about his waist. He carried her to his workbench, perching her on the edge—a perfect level, his dick nestled between her thighs against her wet panties.

Her hand dove into his shorts and gripped him tight. He throbbed in her palm as she stroked him. He broke the kiss, yanked the shirt over her head and gazed at her sitting prettily on his bench. She wore nothing but light pink lacy boy shorts and looked damn fine in them. Her bare breasts were full, her nipples hard and he leaned down to trail his tongue over one. Her instant response was what he couldn't get enough of. She arched, shoving the nipple deeper into his mouth. He tweaked it with his teeth.

"Yes," she hissed.

Her hands slid into his hair and clung as he took a taste of each breast. Small yet perfect. Just like her. Perfect. Hunger roared in his veins as she rotated her hips against his cock, rocking back and forth, her pants heavy in his ear. Her fresh scent and the smell of sex hung in the air.

He slid one finger inside her and he groaned in unison with her moan.

"God, you're wet."

He jerked on the lace band of her panties, annoyed, wanting them gone. Muttering under his breath he glanced over his workbench, spotted a pair of wire snips and grabbed them.

"Jake, what are you doing?" she asked with a little bit of alarm in her voice.

"I'm getting rid of something." He smiled at her then cut her panties at the seam.

"Dammit! Those were my favorite."

"I'll buy you more."

Dropping the tool, he parted her pussy lips. He could see all of her. Her light pink slit glistened with wetness. Her legs were spread and dangled over the side of his workbench, a sight he would never forget. He looked up into her face, her eyes were dark, her teeth worried her lower lip.

Then he lowered his head and suckled the nub of her clit into his mouth. Her hips bucked under him as she screamed out his name, flooding his mouth instantly with her tangy taste.

"Jake, please. Fuck me," she said in a way he couldn't refuse.

"Oh hell," he said when he realized condoms were in the house. "Don't. Move."

Becca could only manage a little nod. Her body shook with the aftershocks of her orgasm, her need and want so powerful it hurt.

When he walked back in he was naked and rolling on a condom. He looked so good, and she craved him. Any way she could have him. At this moment she didn't



care if it was only for this weekend. She didn't care how many women he'd had or how many he might have after her. Right now, he was hers.

He gripped her hips and she whimpered when he stared directly into her face, the tip of his erection pressing against the core of her. "You're right, Bec. You're no mindless fuck."

Then he drove in, filling her over and over. His lips suckled at the skin just beneath her ear and his words crawled directly into her heart. Gentle wasn't part of the game, and she didn't want gentle.

Every time he growled her name, she lost a little more of herself. And right now she didn't care. All she wanted was him and what he could make her feel. A tense ache wound tighter and tighter, until it exploded.

"Jake!" Her nails dug into his back as he drove her even higher before he tensed and pulsed within her. She clung to him, her body shaking, her toes curling, unable to catch her breath. His head fell against her shoulder as he slowly slipped out.

She wasn't sure how she got there, but the next thing she knew, she was in a soft bed. His large body spooned behind her, his arm encircling her waist and holding her tightly. Releasing a sigh, she drifted off to sleep.

She woke with a start and sat straight up in bed. The bright sunshine filtering through the blinds caused her to blink when she realized she was in Jake's room and he wasn't there. Curious about his private space, she glanced around. One small dresser sat at the foot of the bed with a TV perched on top, clothes were tossed into one corner and on his lone night stand sat a clock, a lamp and a biker magazine. The walls were white and only one picture adorned them, a poster of a motorcycle. Of course. What surprised her most about his home was the lack of personal touches like pictures of friends or family. The only thing you could tell about the place was that a man lived here and he liked bikes.

She smiled when she spotted her suitcase sitting atop a chair. He must have brought it in, because she had put it in the tiny guest room after it looked like he didn't want her in his own room. Her heart light, she grabbed some clothes and went into his bathroom.

While in the shower, she couldn't help but think of his words last night. *You're no mindless fuck*. To anyone else they might have seemed crass, but she knew the meaning behind them. She meant something to him. At this point it was all she could ask for and she hoped they had crossed some milestone.

Shoving her wet hair from her face she let the hot water stream over her. She hadn't planned this, and was pretty sure it was a bad idea, but she was falling for him. Hard. How could she not? He made her feel alive. Just looking at him made her melt. It wasn't just his good looks, although it helped. It was the way he looked at her. With such intensity he made her feel like the only woman on the planet. He made her feel beautiful and powerful.

If only she could make him feel the same.

Dressed, she hurried out of his room and into the kitchen. He stood there in front of the stove frying an egg, his back to her, wearing nothing but baggy shorts. He glanced over his shoulder at her.

"I heard you up, so I thought I'd fix you some breakfast."

"Thanks. But you didn't have to do that."

"It's no problem."

Two plates sat on the counter, each with a few slices of bacon, a piece of toast and he added the eggs. She sat at the round table as he placed it in front of her.

"Do you want coffee or orange juice? I have both," he said.

"Coffee would be great."

He nodded and as he poured them both a cup, she realized he had retreated into himself again. He wouldn't really look at her, and he had nothing to say. The buoyant feeling that carried her into the kitchen evaporated.

Setting the steaming cups down, he put the creamer and packages of sweetener in the center of the table, then he sat and started eating.

"Jake, what's wrong?" she asked as she picked at her food.

He sipped his coffee, black she noticed, and looked up at her. "Nothing." Then he went right back to eating.

*Right.*

Nerves wound her stomach into knots and she ate only half her food then got up and scraped the rest into the trash. Setting the dishes in the sink, she stared out the window into his backyard. It was small and enclosed with a chain-link fence. A huge oak tree shaded the entire yard. It was nice being able to look out a window and see greenery instead of concrete and another building.

"Hope you don't mind, but we've been invited to Mom's," he said as he set his dishes in the sink on top of hers.

"You mean Maria, right? Tony's mom?" she asked as she turned around to look at him.

"Yeah. Guess it was planned, but I just got the phone call. We need to be there in about an hour. If you want," he said and finally looked her in the eye.

"Do you not want to go?" This had to be what was wrong.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Yeah. It's fine."

She burst out laughing, she couldn't help it and he stared at her like she had lost her mind. "Gee, you're a terrible liar. If you don't want to go, then don't. And if it's me, I'll stay here and you can go. Don't let me put you out." Swiveling on her heel, she stalked from the kitchen. He might have admitted that she was more than a mindless fuck, but he had a lot more to learn.

"Wait a minute," he said and grabbed her arm. "You don't put me out. I just didn't know about this, and if she says to be there, you better be there. Whether you want to

be or not. She's stubborn and well, it's just easier to do what she says. If we didn't show up, she would just come get us."

"Evidently that's nothing new to you. So why are you pissy?" Crossing her arms over her chest she watched his mouth open and close like a fish. It was almost funny the way he struggled for an answer. "Don't worry," she said. "I know the answer to this one. It's because I'm here and you don't know how to handle it. Me being around your family and friends."

His nod was slow in coming and barely discernable, but he remained silent and even took a step back. It reminded her of when she had first arrived here yesterday. He was scared. Shitless.

She reached up and took his hand in hers. He gripped her hand tight and then pulled her into an embrace. His arm went around her waist and the other tangled in her hair. His shuddering breath seeped into her bones. There was nothing sexual about it, and once again she felt needed. She hugged him back and he brushed his lips over the top of her head.

"I thought I would take my dirt bike. There's a track out there. So I need to get it loaded up." He released her and moved toward his garage, but not before he turned his head to give her a faint smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was incredibly hot, so she stayed inside and looked out the window as Jake and Tony tried to outdo each other on the dirt track. They reminded her of little kids as they whipped around a turn, neck and neck, dust rising around them like a cloud. When they first took off, hit the first jump and flew into the air, her heart leapt to her throat. She didn't know how many feet off the ground they were, but it scared the hell out of her.

They both wore helmets, so after the twentieth lap around and they were still upright, she relaxed a bit.

Maria handed her a glass of sweet iced tea and smiled. "Don't worry. Really. They always act like juveniles."

She took the glass. "Thanks. And yeah, I've figured that out about them." Reluctantly she moved away from the window and sat on the plush sofa. Maria had made her feel welcome instantly and she couldn't help but like her. She had salt-and-pepper hair and Tony's bright blue eyes. Carl, Tony's dad, had wrapped her in a bear hug like she was someone he knew and hadn't seen in a while.

Their home was cozy. Pictures lined the walls and every table. It was so obvious they loved their family. Such a stark contrast to the house Jake lived in. This one was filled with personal touches.

"I thought you might like to see some pictures of Jake when he was little," Maria said and pulled out a large photo album. "Yes, this one is it." She sat on the sofa next to her and laid it in her lap. When she opened it, she couldn't help but smile.

There they were. Three dark-headed kids standing knee-deep in snow. "I'm guessing this is Amber?" Becca asked and pointed to the girl in the center.

"Yes, it is. Hard to believe she's married now. How I miss her."

Becca looked up into the sad smile on Maria's face. "Jake said she lives in Virginia now. Where at exactly?"

"She moved to Highland Springs. Not far from Richmond."

"Yes, I know where that is. I've lived in the Richmond area all my life."

"You two would be good friends. When you meet her, you will see. And don't be jealous, but she used to have a horrible crush on Jake. She was ten when Tony and Jake became friends and she was just discovering boys." Maria smiled and shook her head. "But he always treated her like a sister. Just as overbearing as Tony and her dad."

Becca listened while she flipped through the album. She began to notice that he was in all the holiday pictures. "From the looks of these pictures, it seems you pretty much adopted him. Although it doesn't surprise me all that much since he calls you mom."

Maria's smile disappeared. "If I could have done it legally, I would have. That boy," she paused and looked up at the window where the sound of dirt bikes whizzed by then leveled her eyes on Becca. "He is my second son. And he knows that. He may not express much to people, but I know what's going on in his heart. That's why I was so happy when I heard about you. He's never brought a girl home, Becca. Never. Even the one other girlfriend he had, he didn't bring home."

She didn't know how to respond to that. Tears glistened in Maria's eyes, just the kind of concern a mother should have.

"I don't know what he's told you about his life, but...he was abused. Horribly so," she said and took her hand. "And I know they still emotionally abuse him so I try to counteract all the harm they cause. The first time he ever spent the night, he woke up with nightmares. Not just normal nightmares. The kind that make a twelve-year-old-boy lash out at anyone who comes near him. It wasn't long before I realized what was going on and I let him know he was welcome here as much and as long as he wanted."

Becca swallowed hard and looked down at a picture of him on a bicycle. A barely there smile on his face. As though hesitant. She traced it with her finger and nodded. "He's told me. I know what they did to him." Pushing her hair from her face she wondered if she could ask Maria the one thing she didn't want to believe. But had a sinking feeling it was true. "Did his father make him witness—" She stopped and looked into Maria's face. "The 'proper' way to treat a woman?" It was the only way she could word it, and it was how Jake had worded it to her. The word rape just made her want to gag.

Maria had a hand over her mouth and those tears were now streaming down her face. "Yes. I can't believe he told you. I only knew through his nightmares and he refused to say a word about it when I asked him."

"I-I didn't really believe him at the time. Or maybe I did, but we were only chatting online then. He was just a kid," Becca said as the knowledge really sunk in and tightened like a lump in her chest. "You probably saved his life."

Maria's smile was faint. "Yes. But he was worth saving. And I hope I'm not being presumptuous, but you can give him a reason to live."

Realizing what she was asking of her, it seemed the weight of the world just landed square on her shoulders. The only time Jake opened up was when they had sex. And although she would be the first to admit their sex was toe-curling, it took more than a great fuck to make a relationship. She might desperately want to give him that reason, but she had a feeling Jake didn't want any emotional knots.

And that's just how he would look at commitment...as knots.

Maria wrapped her in a hug. "I know you are that reason. I can tell by the way he looks at you." Maria pulled back and cocked her head. "Those boys are done playing, I better get some drinks and some food."

"But they just ate," Becca pointed out.

Maria laughed. "Darling, boys are never full. Especially boys that play." Then she got up and went into the kitchen.

Becca stepped outside onto the back porch and the heat slammed into her face. She didn't know how they could ride out here in this weather. Sweat trickled down her spine as she glanced around for Jake but found Tony.

"He's on the other side of the barn," he said, a goofy grin on his face, water dripping from his hair. "And if you're wondering, he lost."

"He lost?" she asked. His only answer was a laugh as he walked by her and into the house. She followed his direction and passed the opening of a large building. Barn is what they called it, but it was more like an oversized garage because the only thing it housed was horses of the mechanical variety—tractors, four-wheelers and motorcycles.

She stepped around the corner and found the side of the building to be shaded, facing the wooded part of the forty acres. A slab of concrete, big enough for a car, was set against the edge of the barn. Jake was standing there holding a running water hose over his head, his eyes closed. Water streamed down his bare chest and into the waistband of his riding pants, which sat snug on his hips. She followed the rivulets with her gaze and couldn't hold back a sigh of appreciation.

"Hot?" she asked, just barely making it a question.

He opened his eyes and smirked. "Yeah. I wasn't in a cool house. Couldn't stay out here with us, huh?"

"Are you kidding? I watched from the window. The weather here is horrible. I thought it got hot in Richmond." She tugged at her tank, the fabric already sticking to her skin. "And what did Tony mean, you lost?"

"Did that asshole say that? He's a liar, don't believe him. I beat him," he scoffed.

"Beat him at what?"

"Racing. We always race on the track. And I always win, because he's old."

She laughed. "But he's only two years older than you."

"Still old though. I'm not."

He seemed more relaxed than he had since she got here. His shoulders were at ease, his teasing more natural. When he glanced back and forth between the hose in his hand and her, a mischievous twinkle shone in his eyes. She took a step back.

"No. Stop. Don't you even—"

She gasped as the cold water rained down on her. Laughing, she fought with him for control of the hose. Water sprayed everywhere and his low laughter joined hers. She couldn't even begin to get a hold of the slippery hose, not to mention he was bigger than her and had no problem keeping it out of her grasp. He stopped the same time she did, their breathing heavy and that's when she realized he had a wide smile on his face. The first she'd ever really seen. The shadows that always lurked in his eyes were gone for the moment.

She slid her arms around his waist, looked up into his face then reached up on tiptoe to kiss his chin.

He dropped the still running water hose and framed her face with his hands.

Her breath caught at the intensity in his eyes. So much emotion right there at the surface, yet so far out of reach. His thumbs slid over her cheeks lightly, so gentle it was as though he was afraid he might hurt her. Leaning down, his mouth brushed the corner of her lips with just the lightest of touches.

He picked up strands of her wet hair and put it behind her ear. "You're wet," he said with a smile.

She grinned back. "Yeah. Seems this punk drowned me with a water hose."

"I don't know why someone would do that," he replied, his voice softly mocking.

"Hmm. I don't either."

He kissed her full on the lips, hugged her then stepped back to turn off the water. She pulled at the soaked fabric of her tank top. "And what am I supposed to do about clothes?"

He looked up, his fierce gaze leaving her hot. "Oh, I don't know. You look good to me," he said.

"Sure. But I can't go into Maria and Carl's house dripping. I didn't bring extra clothes like you did."

He looked thoughtful and said, "No problem." He grabbed her hand and led her around to a side door into the house. Stepping inside she realized it was the laundry room complete with a sink.

"Hey, Mom!" Jake said, then after a pause hollered again. "Mom!"

"I'm coming! What is all the ruckus about?" When she stepped into the small room she said, "Good grief! You're dripping all over my floor." She tsked, snatched a towel out of a cabinet and dropped it on the puddles.

"We got wet," he said.

"I can see that, Jake," Maria huffed.

Then he stepped to the side to reveal Becca and said, "She started it."

Becca punched him playfully in the arm. "I did not! You drowned me with a hose."

"Now kids. It doesn't matter. Jake, run along, I know you have spare clothes. Becca, sweetie, we'll get your clothes dried in no time."

Jake winked at her as he took off out of the laundry room.

"Try not to drip all over my house, mister!" Maria hollered through the doorway, then looked at Becca and sighed. "I swear that boy forgets all the manners I drilled into his head."

"Yes, ma'am." A voice carried down the hall.

A laugh bubbled up until Becca couldn't contain it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake was outside unloading his bike when he asked if she would go in and order pizza—four larges. Seemed there was a NASCAR race on tonight and Tony was coming over to watch. After ordering the pizza, she pulled out some paper plates she found in the kitchen when it hit her that she hadn't told him about the article yet. Putting a hand to her head she leaned back against the counter. When was she going to tell him? She went home tomorrow and Tony was going to be here in an hour. She had to tell him now.

Walking into the garage she said, "Jake, I need to talk to you—" Her cell phone rang and she looked at it seeing Summer's number. "Hell, I have to take this."

"Sure," he said.

Walking back into the house she flipped it open. "Hey."

"Girl, you were supposed to call me, remember?"

"I know, I'm sorry. I've just been busy."

"Everything okay then? Did you tell him? And how is Tony?"

She smiled at the rapid fire of questions that was always Summer's way. "Yes. Not yet. And he's fine."

"Don't you think you should? Oooh and Tony is fine isn't he? Mmm-hmm. And your Jake's no slacker either."

"I was just getting ready to tell him when you called. And no, Jake's no slacker."

"Good. You might want to know that Nick has been going by your apartment. Then he showed up at my apartment. That jerk demanded to know who you were with. I told him to go to hell—but Bec, he knows you flew to Oklahoma."

Shocked, Becca almost dropped the phone. "How did he know that? And Summer, stay away from him. Call the cops if you have to. Don't underestimate him."

"I think he's been stalking you. I really don't want to tell you this, but I think he's the one who saw you with Jake at Virginia Beach. Not a coworker. He knew every move you made, girl. That man has a few screws loose."

She sat, unable to stand. "If he approaches you again, call the cops. Promise me." God, if something happened to Summer because of her, she would be sick. "Please. Refuse to talk to him."

"Yeah. Yeah. You know me. I got me some good pepper spray. He's not worth my time. Look, I have to go. Kiss Tony for me and I'll be there to pick you up at the airport. Kiss-kiss!"

Jake stared at Becca's pale face. He normally didn't eavesdrop, but the worry in her voice had caught his attention. "What's going on?" he asked and leaned against the wall.

Her little jump when she glanced up concerned him.

"Nick. I guess he knew I took a flight out here and was quizzing Summer about who I was with and I guess he saw us together at Virginia Beach and not a coworker like he'd said."

"What are you talking about? He saw us at the beach?"

Releasing a sigh, she said, "The Monday after I saw you, I received two dozen roses from Nick with a note saying I was his and that a coworker saw us at Rockfish Bar and Grill at the beach. Then I got notes and phone calls from him all last week—"

"And you didn't tell me?" Jake asked, frustration and anger pumping in his veins.

"What could you do? I called the cops and let them know."

"But you still should have told me. He's stalking you, Bec. The fucker needs a head adjustment."

"I fully agree with that, but I didn't want to worry you, I can handle it," she said and looked him square in the eye.

It was one of the things he liked about her. She didn't back down from him, even when he was mad, like he was now. He hated not being able to fix this for her. "Why haven't the cops stopped him?"



She sank back against the cushion of his couch. "There's a restraining order but he doesn't care. I've been keeping the cops informed and they said that there's a warrant for his arrest. But evidently they haven't caught him, or he hasn't been a priority."

"When you get home, you need to stay with Summer or a relative. You can't be there alone."

"I'm not running," she said while lifting her chin. "Or hiding anymore. I did that for too many years and I won't do it again."

"Dammit, Bec. This isn't running, this is keeping yourself safe."

"I'll be safe. I have a metal bat that Summer gave me."

"Are you kidding me? More than likely he'll take it away from you and use it on you." Just the thought had him pacing. How was he going to let her fly back home knowing she was the target for this maniac? She was so tiny. One good swing would kill her.

His heart stopped.

Holy hell. Just the thought of never seeing her smile again staggered him. He blinked and stalked from her. How had this happened? Opening his fridge, he realized he needed more than just a beer. He needed a whiskey. Straight. Pulling open a cabinet door, he selected Jack Daniel's from one of the many bottles and poured himself a shot. He downed it.

The burn did nothing for the panic he felt. He downed another shot, but it stuck in his throat as he tried to imagine his life without her. He couldn't. It was like someone thrust a serrated knife in his heart and was slowly twisting. The pain more agonizing than any beating he had received. Why? Why did he feel like this?

*Because I love her.*

## Chapter Nine

The thought came unbidden and unwanted, but it hit him all the same. Like a bolt of lightning it shocked him to the core. He knew he couldn't deny it, even though he wanted to. Even though she deserved better. He knew the truth. It was glaringly obvious after his fourth shot.

"Jake?"

Her soft voice shot through him and he jerked, the shot glass slipping from his hand and shattering on the floor. He stared at her, drinking her in. She exuded a sweet innocence he had never had. Something he craved. Something he wanted with every fiber of his being. He leaned heavily against the counter, his knees threatening to buckle. And it had nothing to do with the four shots of whiskey he'd consumed and everything to do with the tiny woman staring at him with worry and concern in her dark-chocolate eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

No. "Yes," he forced himself to say. His hand shook as he shoved at his hair.

"No. You're not okay. Don't lie to me." She took a step toward him and he held up his hand.

"Don't."

If she touched him he was terrified he would make a complete ass of himself and tell her he loved her. Because there was no way in hell she could love someone like him. The concern he saw was just that. Concern. She cared about people and what happened to them and it certainly didn't mean she was ready to spend the rest of her life with him.

*Fuck.*

Raking a hand over his face he stumbled out of the kitchen as far away from her as he could get. He somehow made his way into the garage and his first instinct was to have a fight with his punching bag. But he really didn't have the energy. Hell, he could barely stand. So he sat limply on one of the barstools.

How long had he been careful to keep a distance between him and women? Years. His entire fucking life.

All in vain.

All because of one little-bitty woman.

He would let her go, and she would go without realizing all he felt. No way was he telling her...he loved her. God, what a pathetic state to be in. He wouldn't saddle her with his baggage and emotional instability. She deserved way better than that.

"Jake. I don't know what that was all about, but I'll be fine," she said as she stepped into his garage and flicked on the light.

He blinked, not even realizing he had been sitting there in the dark. He didn't want to look at her, but like some kind of pull, he had no choice.

Then his doorbell rang. Thank God Tony was here.

\* \* \* \* \*

He didn't know how he got through the next few hours. He watched the race, ate pizza and for the most part kept himself together, but he couldn't remember anything he said. It was all hazy. One thought kept pounding in his head—he loved her. Like a jackhammer it wouldn't let up and leave him in peace. After Tony left, he went directly into his garage and pretended to be working on his bike. Anything to keep his hands busy.

He knew he was being an asshole. Every time she looked at him with that pained expression it cut him a little deeper. Ignoring her was not the answer, but hell if he knew what else to do. And maybe she would see what a jerk he was so when she left, she could move on with her life. And forget about him.

Great idea, except it left a gaping hole in his chest.

It was late when he finally gave up the fight and went into the house. He almost hoped she was in the guest room, but that was a lie.

The only place he wanted her was in his bed.

In his room.

In his life.

And there she was, curled up right where he wanted her. Her hair fanned out behind her, her hands tucked under a pillow, the sheet riding low on her waist. She wore a tank that clung to her every curve. Knowing this would be the last time he ever touched her, he dropped his clothes to the floor and slid in with her.

Becca felt hands slide against her skin and she arched.

"Jake," she whispered.

His answer was to kiss her. So deeply, so tenderly, so unlike times before, she melted. His hands framed her face like she was some fragile doll as his lips teased hers and kissed along her jaw. He pulled back and she opened her eyes. He stared at her as his body shook. The darkness kept her from reading his eyes, but something was different. She could feel it with every caress.

He pulled off her shirt and his mouth latched onto a nipple. Alternating between a soft bite and lick, electric sensations shot straight to her sex. His fingers slipped into her panties and his thumb rode along her clit while his lips continued to torment her flesh.

He brought her to the edge quickly but right before she exploded he pulled back. She panted in frustration when he turned her to her stomach then pulled off her panties. But instead of driving into her like she wanted him too, his hands slid up her back to her neck.

Something *was* different.

She hadn't imagined it. He left kisses down her spine, soft, light, his touch barely there. But it made her more aware of his every move and she writhed beneath him. Coherent thought was difficult, but she had the vague impression he was memorizing her. When he kissed the backside of her knee, her fists clenched in the sheets.

Was he telling her goodbye?

Tears seeped from her eyes and she abruptly turned over to look at him.

"Jake?"

He stopped her words with a kiss that took over her senses in his strong and dominant way. But behind it all she felt his desperation. It only confirmed what she thought, but she was helpless against the waves of passion that consumed her.

"I want in you," he breathed against her neck.

"Make love to me," she begged him.

His body stiffened immediately.

"Please," she said, choking on the word as tears clogged her throat.

"Oh hell, Bec." His words were spoken as though resigned to his fate.

Then he was in her, moving in slow, measured strokes. Filling her, his body hovered over her as he pushed her deeper into the mattress. He slid a hand up under her thigh, arching her hips so he could move deeper.

She realized he was giving her everything he had, right here. All the feelings he couldn't and wouldn't voice were laid bare. The muscles in his shoulders and back tightened and released under her fingers as she clung to him. He was so intent. So focused on her.

She pulled his head down to kiss him as he moved faster. The tension built within her, coiling then exploding.

"Jake!" she said as she arched her head back, breaking the kiss.

He thrust two more times and his body hardened with his release, then he dropped his head to her shoulder. His arms tightened around her and she bit her lip to hold back a sob.

Holding him in her arms, she wondered if there was any way she could change his mind. Because she had no doubt that this was his goodbye. He was letting her go. And she would bet he would be cold and distant in the morning when he took her to the airport.

Well, she damn sure wasn't giving up without a fight.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were leaving for the airport in about two hours and just as she'd predicted, he was cold, distant and saying only what was necessary.

"Do you plan on telling me goodbye or was last night it?" she asked finally. She was tired of the silence and she wasn't going to dodge around the subject. She had done that enough in her life.

He actually looked surprised at her words, but just as quickly looked away, his dark brows furrowing over his eyes. "I don't know what you mean."

She grabbed his remote and turned the television off. "Oh come on, Jake. Don't give me this. I don't play games. If you've got something on your mind then say it. You might think you're doing a good job hiding it, but you're not. This is it, isn't it?" God her heart hurt just to say it.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees and stared at the floor. "Yeah, this is it."

"Why?"

"Because this isn't working."

"Really? Why isn't this working? Because you don't want it to? Or because you're too scared to live?"

His head snapped up and he stared hard at her. "Don't assume things you don't understand."

"Oh, I'm not assuming. I understand perfectly. You think by pushing me away you're safe. But you're not. By pushing me away, you're not living. You're existing."

He jumped to his feet and paced behind the couch. "I live just fine. Don't pass judgment on me. You don't know me or what I'm capable of."

"I'm not the one passing judgment on you. You are. You refuse to see yourself as you really are."

"I see how I really am every day. Every damn day when I look in the mirror and see him. That worthless old man that spawned me." Her heart jumped into her throat when his fist slammed into a wall. "To know I'm just like him. In every way."

"Jake, you're not like your father." She shot to her feet and glared at him. "I would never love a man like that."

He spun on his heel, shock on his face. He did a good job of replacing it with a sneer, but she saw the wonder in his eyes. If only briefly. "Don't confuse lust with love, Becca."

Pain sliced through her and it hurt more than when Nick had hit her. Barely keeping her tears in check she said, "I know the difference. And so do you."

"I don't know what love is. Lust and anger is all I feel. Is all I've felt. Don't pin a fairy tale ending on me. It's been fun, but that's it."

Taking a step back, her breathing became excruciating. Had she imagined everything? The brief glimpses of the man behind the façade. Was it all wishful

thinking? His face was nothing but hard lines, his eyes devoid of any feeling. "You can't mean that," she said finally, her voice nothing but a squeak.

"Sorry to have disappointed you. I never hid what and who I am." He held his arms out to the side and smirked in way that made her stomach sink. "I like women. For a while."

It tore Jake apart to watch the tears stream down her shattered face. But what else could he do? He couldn't believe she really loved him. She had to be confusing it with lust. If he knew anything, he knew he wasn't worthy of her love anyway. Then she wrapped her arms about her shaking body and lifted her chin, that stubbornness in her something he always admired.

"Fine. But when you're all alone in your bed, you will think of me. I promise you. Take me to the airport now."

The sting of her words slapped him. He knew the truth. There wouldn't be a night he didn't think of her. Or smell her on his sheets. Or imagine her soft smile from across a room. He had convinced her she was nothing but a fuck, but at what cost?

He nodded and reached down to get her bag.

"No. I can get it. I don't need anything from you, except a ride." She grabbed her bag and walked out his door.

He felt his shoulders slump. Then a thought entered his mind. What if Nick is waiting for her? He fumbled through locking his door as a cold sweat broke out over his skin.

The drive to the airport was made in dead silence. And she wouldn't even look at him. Every now and then he would hear a faint snuffle, but when he looked at her, he didn't see any tears. She sat, back ramrod straight, clutching a purse the size of her.

When he turned in to park, she said, "Don't bother. I can catch the plane myself."

From the set of her jaw, he didn't bother arguing, but he wanted to pull her to him and tell her he'd lied. Just to see her smile at him one more time. But he pulled up to the airport drop-off and put the truck in park.

She finally looked him in the eyes. "I don't believe you. I'm not just another girl to you. You love me. And one day Jake, you're going to regret this. And when that day comes, I hope it's not too late."

He could only stare dumbfounded as she leaned across the seat and placed a light kiss on his cheek.

Then she was gone.

Along with his heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

*One Week Later...*

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you trying to kill yourself?" Tony yelled at Jake.

They had been riding at the dirt track at Tony's parents' house, and Tony had stopped hours ago. Heat exhaustion had finally stopped Jake. And he welcomed it. Anything to get her out of his mind. But it was impossible.

She was everywhere.

In his bed, in his house, at his favorite hangout, on his bike—he couldn't get away from her. Even drinking couldn't banish her from his thoughts. Heaven knew he had been trying to drown himself since the moment he dropped her off at the airport. Nothing helped.

And sitting on this hot slab of concrete with the water hose over his head, she was there. He could remember her laugh when he sprayed her down and the way she had wrapped her arms about his waist with that soft smile lingering on her lips. The smile that was reserved for only him.

"Dammit are you listening to me?"

He lifted his head and squinted at Tony. Had he been talking?

"What?"

Tony hit him square in the jaw, knocking him over. Blinking, he glared at his friend. "What the hell was that for?"

"To knock some sense into you," Tony muttered then hit him again.

He shook his head, trying to clear the stars he was seeing. "Fuck you. Leave me alone."

"Tell you what. Fine. You can wallow, I'll go see her. I bet she's lonely by now."

Jake snapped to attention. "What? Who?"

Tony shrugged as he walked off. "Becca. Girls around here are getting pretty lame. Is she a good lay?" he asked as he glanced over his shoulder.

Seeing red, he launched himself at Tony. They hit the ground and rolled in the dirt and grass, punches swinging, until they were both bloody and exhausted, which didn't take long in the stifling heat.

"Now that I finally have your attention. Go get her, man." With that Tony got up and limped towards the house.

Jake wiped at the blood that ran from his eye and lip.

Could he?

Could he risk fucking up her life for him?

Could he really keep going like this without her?

\* \* \* \* \*

Becca sat curled up on her couch and stared at the black screen of her TV. She had to give herself credit. She hadn't called him, even though she would give anything to hear his voice. When he called that one time, she really thought that maybe he wanted to tell her how much he missed her. But the only thing he wanted to know was if Nick had been bothering her. His chilled voice was nothing like she remembered.

She wiped at her tears. God, how many more could she shed? She hadn't cried this much over Nick or felt this desolate. This just proved how weak her feelings for Nick had been, regardless of how long she had known him. She'd known Jake not even two months and she felt like she was being turned inside out, every day, over and over, with no end in sight.

Only Summer knew the real reason for her melancholy. And she was ready to fly to Oklahoma and show him how Latina girls got even. Convincing her that no, stapling his dick to this thigh would not be a good idea, had been a challenge. Although, the idea had brought a brief smile to her face. Summer wanted to spend the week with her, but she had refused. She could do this. She could get through this on her own. Couldn't she?

When her doorbell rang, she got up and grabbed Summer's sunglasses. She was always leaving them here. She pulled the door open. "Summer, I should charge you for every time you leave—"

Breath left her lungs in a rush. Standing in her doorway was Jake. Looking worn and tired, his face unshaven and a backpack slung over one shoulder. He wore a rumpled black tee, jeans and a cap on backward. She had never seen anything more beautiful. Swallowing hard, she couldn't get past the fact that he was actually here. Was her wishful thinking bringing him to life?

He leaned down and picked something up and handed it to her. Blinking, she realized it was Summer's glasses. She couldn't even remember dropping them. Taking them, her fingers brushed over his hand.

Their eyes met and she gripped the door to keep herself upright.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

She licked her lips and opened the door wider. As he walked in, her apartment shrank with his presence. Shutting the door, she leaned against it, unable to take her eyes off him.

It'd been one week since she had seen him and six days since she had heard his voice.

She was starved for him.

"Nice place," he said, but he was looking at her, not her place.

She cleared her throat and said, "Thanks. Um, if you're wondering, I haven't heard from Nick, I guess he might be in jail. I don't know—"

"I didn't come here because of him. I came here because of you."

Her pulse throbbed and she felt like she just swallowed a bag of sawdust.



"You look good," he said. His gaze stripped her bare and left nothing but her raw feelings bubbling to the top.

"Thanks," she managed to say. "You look —"

"Like hell. I know. But it matches the way I've felt since you left."

That shut her up and she sagged against the door.

He rubbed the back of his neck and said, "I have no right. I don't. Especially after the way I treated you. You deserve better. So much better. And I don't know what to say about that. Except, sorry."

His image became blurry through her eyes that burned from staring at him. She was afraid if she blinked, he would disappear.

"You have every right," she whispered.

"Let me finish. Before you decide for sure what you want. Let me tell you everything." He dropped his backpack and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Hell, Bec. I'm not good at this and I don't know how else to say it, other than just say it."

"I think I need to sit down," she muttered. She wasn't at all sure what he was going to say, but if she didn't sit, she would end up in a heap on the floor. Sliding into the corner of her couch, she curled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms about her legs.

He sat in a chair beside the couch, clasped his hands together and rested his elbows on his knees. The strain on his face pulled his mouth down and pushed his dark brows together. But the uncertainty in his eyes was what pulled her in. The man really didn't have a clue how she felt.

He blew out a long breath and said, "There are a lot of things I've told you. But some I haven't. Fuck, I don't know how to say this." He pulled his cap off, ran a hand back and forth through his dark hair making it stand up at odd angles, before slapping it back on. "I'm not a good man. I've done things I'm not proud of. I have anger issues. I have drinking issues. I have social issues. But dammit I want you."

Her heart squeezed then expanded all at once and she opened her mouth to say something but he stopped her.

"No. Wait. There's more." She could tell how much this cost him, because his hands shook and he would only meet her gaze for mere moments before he would glance away.

"You need to know this. I hit a girl once."

Her mouth fell open and the look on her face must have been something, because he paled then got up to pace. She couldn't believe it. He was always standing up for women at clubs, for his mother, for his sister. She knew this, as sure as she was breathing.

"How? Why?"

"I was young, about nineteen. The one and only girlfriend I'd had. She fucked one of my friends, but that wasn't why I hit her. Everywhere I went she would get in my

face. Trying to pick a fight with me." His arms fell limply to the sides, his face blank. "It's no excuse. I shouldn't have hit her. But one too many slaps from her got to me."

"She hit you?" she asked, a million different thoughts buzzing in her head. Jake was a big guy. Anyone, especially a girl, would have to be stupid to hit him.

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. What matters is I hit her. That's what I was arrested for."

Outrage shot through her. "She pressed charges? She hit you first and she pressed charges?" He only nodded. "That isn't right. You should have pressed charges."

"I have anger issues. I know this. I deal with them the best I can. I shouldn't even be here. I don't deserve someone like you. But I...I can't get you out of my head."

Keeping the tears back by sheer strength of will, she tingled with emotion that rose up in her and flowed out. "Jake, I'm no angel."

"To me you are," he said quietly. "Pure. Innocent. I never was, but I can see it in you."

Her tears fell. The naked misery in his eyes touched her on a deep level.

A muscle in his jaw clenched and he looked away. "I don't want your pity, Becca. I didn't come here for that."

"I don't feel sorry for you. I admire you." She was glad it was his turn to look shocked. "You have lived through so much. Yet, you care about people, about their feelings." She got up from the couch and moved toward him. "You wouldn't hurt anyone."

"I just told you I did. If I did it once, I could do it again. That's what all the battered women's pamphlets say. I know you've read them, because of your ex," he said, his voice sounding rushed with an edge of panic.

When she took his hand in hers, his tremor slid all the way to her spine. "Jake, you would never hurt me. I think you would maim anyone who laid a finger on me. Remember Virginia Beach?" she asked and looked up into his face.

"Every day," he said.

"You were terrified of hurting me. Remember? No. You would never hurt me." She stepped in closer, just scant inches between their bodies. "But would you love me?"

Feeling like he had been sucker punched in the gut, Jake lost all ability to breathe. He could drown in her gaze and the way she looked at him with hope in her eyes and a hint of the smile he loved toying with her lips.

He placed his hands on either side of her face and lowered his head. Her gaze darkened and she licked her lips.

She was so small, yet held his whole world.

"Hell, yes, I love you."

He touched her lips gently, but she wouldn't have any of it. Her tongue darted into his mouth and her hands wound tightly around his neck. It felt like an eternity since he had felt her body against his and his hunger for her consumed him. It drove him as much as her fingernails digging in his shoulders did.

She crawled up his body, forcing him to cup her ass as she locked her legs around his waist.

"God, Jake," she said arching her neck back and grinding her hips against his erection.

Ever since their first phone conversation, his name on her lips had sent him right over the edge. He nipped at her neck and said, "Tell me what you want?"

"I want you in me. Now," she said in small little pants.

Her hands slid into his hair and his hat dropped somewhere along the way as he tried to figure out where her bedroom was. It was damn hard to concentrate with a writhing sexy woman in his arms, especially when her nails raked under his shirt.

"Fuck me now," she begged, her teeth tugged at his ear. "I can't wait."

He groaned, giving up with finding her room and fell to his knees. Somehow they got their shirts off and her shorts off. Her naked body lay sprawled for him, and what he thought looked like love shone from her eyes.

He was lost.

He claimed her lips and she tasted of wine, spicy and erotic. When her hand tugged open his jeans and encircled his dick, he thought he would explode. She stroked him and when he slid a finger into her wet slit, she rocked her hips in time. Hanging on by a thread, he pulled away, sat back on his heels and fumbled with his backpack to find a condom. Damn good thing it was right beside them.

She sat up, took it out of his hands and looked up into his face as she rolled it over him. It was fucking delicious the way her legs spread wide on either side of him, her sex open and dripping for him to see, her eyes heavy-lidded and glowing with lust.

He shoved her back and slid in with one solid thrust. She cried out in passion and arched her hips up to meet his. They fit together so perfectly, her pussy clenching tightly around him. He might be on top, but she rode him.

Owned him.

It shattered him, but he couldn't deny it. And he was past pretending he could live without her. Here on her floor, behind her couch, he let it all go. She wanted him and he planned on being man enough to keep her. Regardless of his past.

Sweat slid down his spine as he drove into her relentlessly. Watching the rapture on her face fueled the intensity of his need for her.

"Jake," she panted breathlessly and writhed under him. "I'm..."

His balls tightened when she said his name and he exploded as she milked him, draining him of everything he had. Dazed, his head dropped to her shoulder. His heart thumped hard in his chest as he wrapped his arms around his woman.

He liked that sound of that...his woman.

Her fingers slid along his neck and he raised his head to look at her.

His favorite smile curved her lips and she said, "I love you, Jake."

He blinked, unable to believe what he just heard. Hell, he had hoped—had thought—she loved him. But hearing the words staggered him.

He cupped her face and said, "Tell me again."

Her smile widened and a happy light danced in her eyes. "I love you, Jake Korte."

The second time amazed him as much as the first. For the first time in his life he felt like he had finally come home. He choked on emotion, sat back and pulled her into his lap. Burying his face in her hair, he inhaled the smell of mangos that lingered from her shampoo and sex that permeated the air. Raw possessiveness, something he had never felt, clawed its way around his heart. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her. Nothing.

Her small hands slid on either side of his face and she pulled back to look at him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, worry etching her features.

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm just trying to deal."

"I'm not going to push you. I know how hard this is for you."

"Babe, there's nothing to push. If you want me, then here I am." Her eyes widened in astonishment but he didn't stop. "I love you. And I can't pretend not to. Do I deserve you? No. But I'm here anyway. If you want me. I can't make any promises that I'll buy you the clichéd big house on a hill or that I will change. The only thing I know for sure is I love you and you'll never have a reason to doubt that."

"Of course I want you. Didn't I just show you how much I want you?" Her smile was teasing but tears swam in her eyes.

"Why do you cry?" he asked and wiped at a lone tear that slipped down her cheek.

"Because. Women do that when they're happy."

She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. Her naked body pressed against him was exactly what he wanted. He swept his hand down the curvature of her back and her little gasp brought a smile to his lips. Just another thing he loved about her, her instant response to his touch.

She released her tight hold on him, glanced down and laughed. "You still have your jeans on."

"I can remedy that," he replied and nipped at her neck.

\* \* \* \* \*

Becca woke and stretched out her hand for Jake, but only found a warm spot where his body had lain beside her all night. She bolted upright, but then heard the shower running, relieving her of the panic that threatened to take over. Her body tingled from

the memory of his touch. She had carpet burns, bite marks and sore muscles from the constant workout of the night before.

He loved her.

She could barely contain her squeal of joy.

Stepping into the bathroom that was steamy with his hot shower, she opened the shower door and peeked in. Water and suds ran down his large frame, highlighting and lingering on his muscles. She was ogling his firm ass when he turned around.

"Enjoying the view?"

Heat filled her face at being caught but she wasn't about to deny it. "Immensely."

She shrieked when he jerked her in with him.

"Mmm. So am I." His mouth slanted over hers and his hands gripped her ass. She sighed against him.

The feel of him was incredible and it did crazy things to her hormones. She ran her hands over his wet shoulders and arms. She didn't think she could ever tire of the way he took over her senses and the way his muscles bunched and flexed under her hands.

"As much as I want you again, I'm starved. I haven't eaten very much in days," he said as he nibbled the flesh between her shoulder and her neck. A spot he frequently used to drive her to her knees.

"Why not?" She knew for a fact the man ate more than the norm. But he was big, active and it took a lot of fuel to keep him going.

Water dripped off him and onto her as she looked up into his face. A shadow flickered in his hypnotic gaze. He acted like he wanted to say something, but he only stared at her.

"Because of me?" she asked. When he nodded, she reached up on tiptoe and kissed him. "Get out of this shower before I have you for breakfast. The sooner I'm out of here, the quicker we get to eat."

He grinned. "That sounds like something I might enjoy." His voice dropped and it gave her goose bumps.

"Oh, no you don't," she said when his eyes darkened with hunger. "Get out of here right now, mister."

"Fine. But you'll wish you hadn't run me out." He moved to get out of the shower but quickly took a lick at her nipple before stepping out and shutting the shower door.

She gasped and her clit throbbed with that small touch. "You do not play fair."

His low chuckle was the only response she got.

She made quick work of the shower. As she wrapped herself in a light robe, a thought hit her. She still hadn't told him about the article. Taking a deep fortifying breath, she resolved to tell him at breakfast. It wasn't fair to keep something like this from him. He had been straight up with her. She had to be straight up with him.

Jake was eyeing the contents of Becca's fridge when there was a knock at her door. Knowing she was still in the bathroom, he went to door and opened it.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the guy standing in the doorway.

Jake's fist clenched. There was only one person this could be.

"Since I'm the one inside, how about you answer first. Who the hell are you?"

"I don't have to answer to you. Where is Rebecca?" The dude actually had the nerve to try to walk in.

"I don't think so," Jake said and blocked him.

"I suggest you let me in. I'm her husband. You're the one overstepping your boundaries."

"Ex-husband, asshole. And you're going to have to go through me to get to her." Fury roared in his veins and it was a fight to keep himself in check. Because he couldn't help but remember the first night he had talked to her. This fucker had hurt her and he would never forget the pain in her voice. Nick scowled at him, but Jake didn't move. The guy might be his height, but that's where the resemblance ended. He was a bully. And the best way to beat a bully was to stand up to them.

"Jake who is it?" Becca asked from behind him.

"Nick," he answered, but he didn't take his eyes off the guy.

He felt Becca move closer.

"Nick, if you don't go away, I'll call the cops," she said, but he heard the tremor of fear in her voice.

"Dammit, Becca, who is this guy? How could you do this to us? I'm your husband!" Nick's face was bright red, his eyes overly bright. This dude was off his rocker.

"Ex," Jake said the same time Becca did. He didn't turn around but he could hear her on the phone with the cops.

"In the eyes of God, I am still your husband. You will always be mine, Rebecca."

Nick launched himself toward him and Jake stepped back letting the man inside the apartment.

"Come on, hit me, fucker. Take on someone your own size," Jake muttered through clenched teeth.

Jake smiled when Nick threw the first punch that landed squarely on his face. He intended on making Nick feel every bruise he'd ever placed on Becca's skin. Jake swung and caught Nick in the jaw, snapping his head sideways. Then Jake pounced and landed punches to Nick's midsection.

The man fell to his knees and said, "Please. No more."

Rage burned in Jake like an inferno. "Do you think that helped Becca when she asked you to stop?"

Nick snarled and dived at Jake's legs. They both went rolling to the floor and crashing into furniture. Jake took some good hits from Nick, but soon he had Nick

pinned. Blow after blow hit Nick's face, until Jake's knuckles were bloody. Soon Nick wasn't fighting back, just covering his head and whimpering.

Disgust filled Jake and he scrambled to his feet. He blinked and turned to look at Becca who was pale and shaking. Her large brown eyes darted back and forth from Nick's face to his hands.

He looked down at his hands. Blood dripped off them and his knuckles hurt but it was nothing like the pain he felt when he met her gaze. She was scared. And not of Nick.

Nick coughed. "She's a good lay isn't she, Jake? Oh yes, don't be surprised. You are Jake from Oklahoma. I know who you are."

How the hell did he know his name? He glanced at Becca and she looked as shocked as he felt.

"Your little 'Chat Addiction' research went a little far, didn't it? You whore!" Nick pushed up to a sitting position, a nasty expression on his face. "Are you going to write in your paper how easy it is to get laid with chat room people?"

Confused, Jake asked, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Nick laughed. "What, you don't know?" He followed Nick's gaze towards Becca.

Jake's stomach sank.

She had inched into a dining room chair and stared at him, pleading in her gaze.

Nick's loud cackle grated on his stretched nerves. "How very fitting," Nick said and then grabbed a newspaper sitting on the side table and flung it at him. "How does it feel to be nothing but a research project?"

He picked it up. It was folded and the title, "Chat Addiction—What's the lure? Continued" by Rebecca Saylor, glared at him.

The cops showed up right at that moment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later, Becca was desperate. Jake hadn't looked at her once since Nick's enlightenment. But finally they were alone.

"Jake, please let me explain."

He swiveled on her and flung the paper to the floor. "What can you explain? How far were you going to take this little experiment? How far?"

"This wasn't an experiment."

"Really? Can you prove to me that isn't why you went into that chat room?"

"No, but just listen to me." She touched his arm and he jerked back, his eyes flat and cold. He stalked to the bedroom and got his backpack. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm leaving."

"What?"

"I think you heard me loud and clear."

Fighting tears, she stepped in front of him, and leaned against her door.

"No. You are going to listen to me."

"Becca, get out of my way," he said in a low growl.

Violence rolled off him and his knuckles were white where he gripped the strap of his backpack.

"No. Not until you listen."

"Don't force me to move you."

She was terrified. Not because she thought he would hurt her, but because he was trying to leave her. Something told her, once he was out that door, it was over.

"You would have to hurt me to move me. And you won't do that." His nostrils flared with his anger, but she wasn't backing down. "Forget it. Until you listen to me and give me a chance, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Talk," he grated out.

"Yes. I went into the chat room for research. But I wasn't planning on meeting you. Then I was embarrassed to admit that I had become one of those chat room addicts. Because all I wanted to do was come home and talk to you." She took a deep breath when he didn't say anything. "Then the night Nick attacked me, all I wanted was you. God, Jake. That's not an experiment. And I tried to tell you. Remember when I wanted to tell you something at your house? After we got back from Maria's?"

He was staring at the wall and a muscle ticked in his jaw but he nodded.

"Then Summer called interrupting and then..." She couldn't stop the tears now. The thought of losing him spiraled her into hell. "Jake, I love you. You know that."

He turned to look at her. "How do I know that?"

She grabbed his free hand and placed it over her heart. "Because you own this. I didn't go looking to give it away. I didn't want to fall in love. I was through with men. Experience taught me the ugly side of them."

She swallowed when the iciness slowly slipped from his gaze.

"This whole thing might have started out as research for my column but it has turned into far more. You know that."

He raked a hand over his face and looked at her. "Oh hell, don't cry." Dropping his backpack, he tugged at her and she flung herself into his arms.

She couldn't stop the sobs that racked her. She had come so close—so close to losing him. "I'm so sorry. I should have told you a long time ago. I just didn't know how and..."

He tilted her head up, kissed her lightly and wiped away her tears with his thumbs.

\* \* \* \* \*



*Five months later...*

An hour outside Richmond, Jake sat on the steps of an older restored white house. It was cold and crisp this November morning and his breath made little white clouds.

Things had been different since the day he stood in Bec's apartment and spilled his guts. He was different. Not only did he move to Virginia to be with her, he had washed his hands of the family that birthed him. He still had issues, but Becca had given him a peace he never thought he would find.

His arms tightened around her as she sat between his legs, cuddled up against his chest for warmth when a moving truck pulled up, followed closely by a blue pickup.

"They're here," Becca said, smiled at him and bounded toward them.

He stood and shoved his hands in his jeans pockets but didn't follow her. He swallowed hard as his mom, Maria, got out and wrapped Becca in a tight hug. Carl and Tony were soon giving her hugs as well. Not a few seconds later, Amber and her husband pulled up.

After he moved here, mom declared she couldn't have her family scattered all over creation. They were moving here as well and had insisted Tony come along.

They were his family.

All the people he loved in the world.

He knew the moment Becca showed them her ring because Maria and Amber squealed. Becca turned and gave him that soft smile he loved.

And because of her, he let himself feel it.

## About the Author

Ashlynn enjoys life with her husband and kids but whenever she can, she escapes into her imaginative world where heroes rule the day. There is nothing better than a tortured soul being redeemed by the woman of his heart. If you want to know more about her adventurous life through her characters, visit her website and drop her a line.

Ashlynn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer ebooks or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

**[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)**