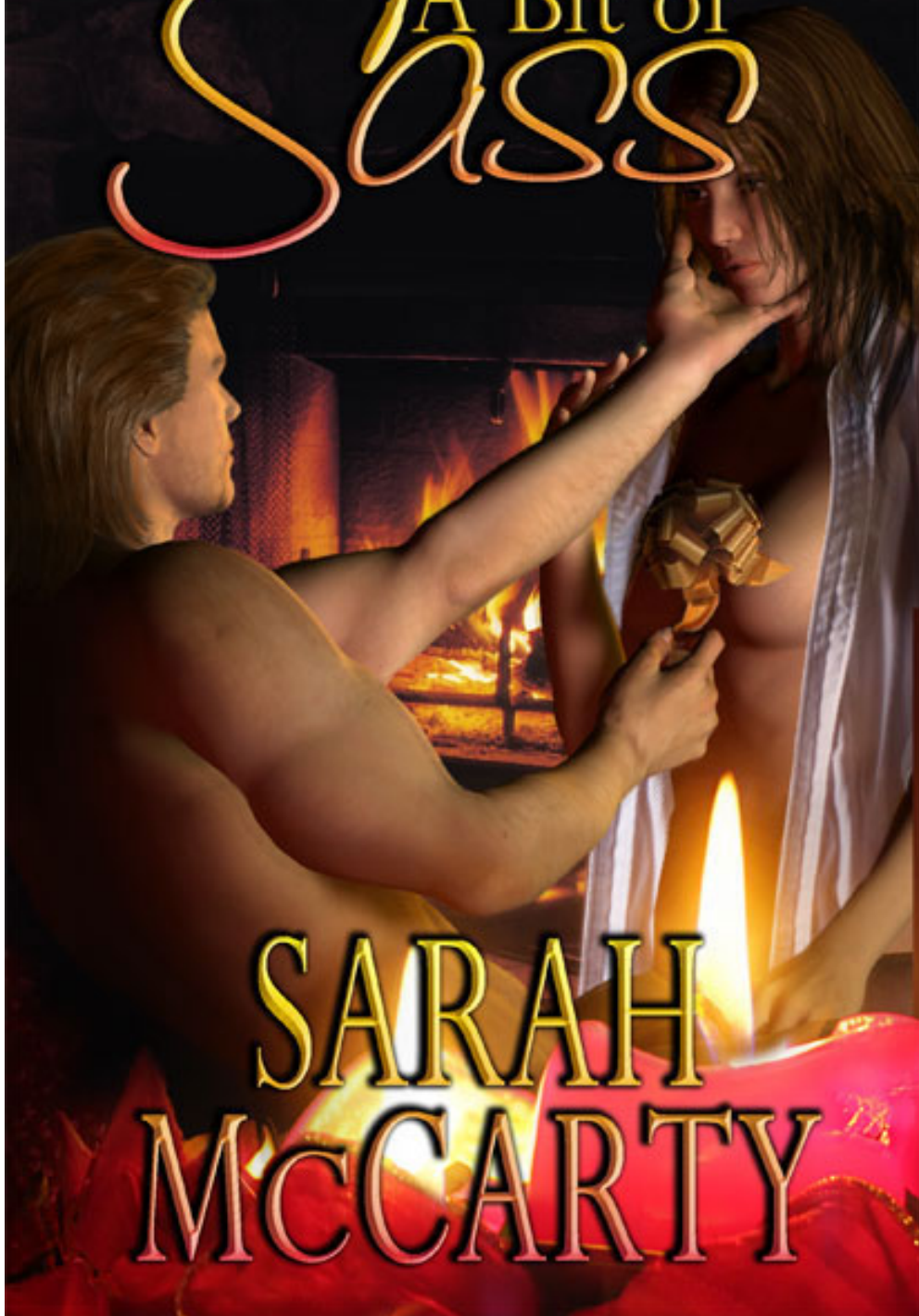


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

A Bit of
SASS



SARAH
McCARTY

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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A Bit of Sass

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A BIT OF SASS

Sarah McCarty

Dedication

For the McCarty Mobettes. You know who you are, and I hope you know what you mean to me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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Chapter One

He lay sprawled, naked on the bed. A big, golden man with a runner's leanness tempered with the solid muscle of a man who liked to work outside. Sass ran her eyes from the curling auburn hair on Jacob's broad chest down the rigidity of his abdomen, lingering on the seductive jut of his heavy cock, before continuing down his legs to his slightly splayed feet, stopping at the intriguing crook to his big toe. Damn, he was beautiful. And hers to do with as she willed. An early Christmas present to herself. Jacob. Her best friend. Her lover. The one man she could have for now, but not forever. Her hand hovered above his thigh. She glanced at his face. He was looking at her, his deep blue eyes glittering at her from under his lashes, his bold, rough-hewn features tight with the force of his desire, his dark red-brown hair a splash of color against the creamy white pillows he'd stacked behind him. He was waiting for her touch. Eager for it.

She took a steady breath and brought her hand back to her thigh. She'd never been good at this part of lovemaking. Always seeming to do the wrong thing at the wrong time until she'd simply given up trying. And she'd continued that pattern into her relationship with Jacob. Up until now, he'd always taken the lead, allowing the darkness she'd insisted on, letting her be passive because it made her more comfortable, but tonight they were doing something different. Today, this last time between them, she wanted to make love to him the way she'd always dreamed she could make love to a man. With the light on and no secrets between them.

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and tucked her hair behind her ear, keeping her gaze on the space between them. She just wished she knew where to start.

The sheets rustled. A shadow flickered across her thighs and then Jacob's big hand, hard, calloused and so familiar, cupped her cheek. His thumb tugged her lip free of her teeth. "Look at me, sweetheart."

She felt the blush start in her toes and rise right along with her humiliation. She wasn't striving for femme fatale, but she had hoped to avoid total fool. Why hadn't she just gone straight for his cock rather than trying to impress with finesse? "I'd prefer not to."

His thumb under her chin pressed his point, but it was the hoarseness of desire under the understanding in his deep chuckle that got her eyes to meet his. "Whatever you want, Sass, however you want it. That's our deal."

Easy for him to say. There probably wasn't a position he hadn't tried, whereas she had zero experience being the aggressor, and she so wanted to make this good for him. So good he'd remember it forever. Her hand lifted and hovered again, one millisecond, two, before lightly touching his knee. Beneath her fingers, muscle flexed. "I just want to do this right."

His generous mouth twitched at the corners. The blue in his eyes darkened. "And you think there's a way you can touch me wrong?"

"Not wrong exactly, but there are certainly techniques that work better than others." And she'd read them all in preparation for this moment, but quite frankly, some she hadn't understood and some she flat out couldn't see herself doing. Especially the one touted as guaranteed to rock his world. Just thinking about doing that to him embarrassed the hell out of her.

"Now, there's an interesting surge of color." His fingers brushed her cheeks, and the twitch at the corner of his mouth spread to a grin. "Care to share what brought it on?"

"No."

His fingers skimmed her neck, caught on the strap of her push-up bra and followed it down to the lace demi cups. "I'll kiss your pretty breasts if you do."

More heat filled her cheeks but along with it came laughter. Jacob always made her laugh. "No."

Those teasing fingers cut a path outward from the center of the silk bra, over the swell of her breast to circle the hard tip of her nipple. Fire trailed in the wake of his fingers, burning deep to her core when he flicked the hard point. She was still taking a controlling breath when he stole it again as his hands drifted lower, his intent clear. "I'll eat this sweet pussy."

Said pussy clenched on a near painful bolt of arousal. Jacob McConnally had a very talented tongue and knew how to use it. She frowned at him and caught his hand as his fingers dipped between her thighs. "I'm beginning to believe you have an oral fixation."

His teeth flashed white as his fingertips curled against the silk barrier between them, unerringly brushing her eager clitoris. "Maybe. When it comes to you."

She tightened her grip on his wrist, but no amount of pushing could dislodge his hand and no amount of deep breaths could still the wild tingles engendered by the slow, repeated circling of his finger. Disguising the effect of his touch on her voice was not an option, so she didn't bother trying, but she did manage to frown through her gasps. "*That* is cheating."

He shrugged unrepentantly, and the sheets rustled an echo of the laughter that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Then maybe you should tell me the dirty thought that has your cheeks flushed."

"What makes you think it's dirty?"

His response was a cock of an eyebrow and a pat of his hand against the pad of her pussy. If he hadn't caught her shoulders, she would have doubled over. She grabbed his forearm and held on for all she was worth. Oh God! He made her feel so good. And if she didn't do something soon, this night would go the way of the rest. "All right!"

He didn't release her shoulder and didn't take his fingers off her clit. "So tell already."

There was no other way to do it except blurt it out. "I can't imagine sticking my finger in your rectum."

The only indication she'd shocked him was the flicker of his lashes and the break in the rhythm of his caress. "And you would do this because?"

"It's guaranteed to rock your world."

His laugh was deep and rich, his stroke along her clit slow and lingering. An answering languorous twist of desire tunneled to her core. Too much to withstand. She closed her eyes as the ache spread. Damn it, he was going to make her come.

"Ah, that's the expression I want to see."

She forced her eyes open. It was incredibly difficult. He was watching her, laughter in his eyes, pleasure in his touch. "You are obsessed with making me come."

He didn't look at all repentant. "It turns me on. Your head drops back and you make those hot little sounds deep in your throat..." His stroke shortened, the pressure increased. Pleasure so intense it was almost painful speared outward, consuming her will. She knew her nails were digging into his arm, but she couldn't relax, couldn't let go. A whimper broke past her determination.

His "Just like that" was a deep purr of satisfaction.

The rocking of her hips was as instinctive as her response to his touch. "You are such...a...control...freak."

"But you like it."

She did, but she wasn't admitting it. "So you say."

"So I say."

The laughter left his face to be replaced by the sensuality that was so much a part of his nature. His fingers pinched damp silk and hot flesh. "This little pussy is all swollen and wet."

The coil tightened, twisting her insides in a vise of anticipation. "So?"

"You need to come."

“Not right now.”

“I think now.” His grip shifted. His thumb lingered. Her breath caught as her muscles contracted on a harsh stab of desire. “Damn it, Jacob, this is my show.”

He shook his head at her, an indulgent smile softening his face as his stroke deepened. “Come for me, just a little now, sweetheart. Just enough to take the edge off.”

She shook her head, a last bid for control. There was no coming “just a little” with Jacob. “I’m supposed to be making *you* feel good.”

“It makes me feel very good to hold you like this, please you like this.”

His fingers rubbed her through the silk, cupped it around her clitoris, used the ultra-smooth material to facilitate his stroke. “Come for me.”

She didn’t have any choice when he pinched her like that, milked her like that. The sensation built, rose, and rolled over her, stealing her thoughts, her plans and her inhibitions, throwing her into the abyss of her own desire, and ultimately into the security of Jacob’s control.

* * * * *

He was holding her when she recovered. His satisfaction in her response was evident in the possessive glide of his hands stroking up and down her spine. Beneath her cheek, his heart thundered. Against her ear his voice rumbled, “I love the way you respond to me.”

She knew that. He left her in no doubt that he loved everything about their physical relationship. Since the day they’d met in the same writing forum on the internet a year ago when she’d sold her first book, she’d been fascinated with him. From the day she’d met him in person, she’d been in love with him, but never, not by a hint or a misplaced word did he ever indicate he wanted more than this between them. She respected his honesty in their relationship. It wasn’t his fault she thought in terms of commitment while he fully enjoyed the freedom and spontaneity of the lifestyle being a wildly successful suspense author afforded him. As a thirty-five-year-old single mother of two

young children, who also held down two jobs as a realtor and newly published author, she couldn't manage spontaneity without at least two weeks notice.

She stroked his chest, smiling as the thick hair tickled her palm and his hand came up to cup her head. He was a wonderful, fun, caring man, but he wasn't for her and nothing highlighted the reality of that more than the importance these free-and-easy, no-strings weekends had become to her happiness. It was time for her to cut her losses. But not before she created one last memory to sustain a future without him.

She pushed to her knees, meeting the question in his gaze with her most confident smile. "My turn."

She palmed his knee. His skin was intriguingly warm, roughed with the dark hairs that tickled her palms as she slid her hands upward, against the grain. He seemed to glow from within, his natural skin coloring striking in contrast to the deep red of his hair. Lighter at his hips where the sun didn't touch, but still a tempting golden brown. Her fingers glided over the firm flesh, heading toward that lighter zone, memorizing each curve, each indent, learning the flow of muscle from thin to wide, tight to smooth. Fingers splayed, exerting just enough pressure to create a slight resistance, she climbed the heavily muscled stretch until she reached his hips. She dallied a minute in the indentation where hip met thigh, curling her fingers into the thicker patch of hair there, catching a few strands with a crook of her finger, giving them a gentle tug. His groan was music to her ears. The slight tinge of color beneath his tan on his high cheekbones, a badge of honor. He was enjoying this. A touch of confidence blended with her determination. She slid her palms in until her thumbs met the thick column of his cock. He flinched and his eyes narrowed. She smiled into his gaze as she slowly, delicately continued her journey, this time using his cock as a guide. His eyelids lowered further, shadowing his eyes as he hummed deep in his throat.

"You can keep that up all night."

She just might. "I wasn't aware I was asking permission."

His “Just making a suggestion” was a sexy husk of contentment couched within a rumble of laughter.

She pinched his cock in retaliation, dragging a purely primitive hiss past his control. The sound wove through her uncertainty, wrapping around her confidence, giving it strength. Enjoyment replaced unease. His rock-hard shaft bounced on his belly as her nails caught under the flared head. As she watched, a bead of come appeared at the tip. She leaned forward, letting him see her tongue, her intent, long before she reached her destination. With a long, lazy swipe, she took that proof of her success into herself, letting the broad, mushroom-shaped head pulse against her lips as she savored his flavor. Another bead appeared after the first. She pulled a hair’s breadth back. Just enough to watch it build, blowing her breath across its surface as his big body quivered under her hands. His right hand came into view, deeply tanned with assorted small scars from his wood working crisscrossing the back. His lean fingers grasped his cock down low, angling it up. His other hand cupped the back of her head, urging her closer.

“I want your mouth, baby.”

“My name is Sass.”

He threaded his fingers through her hair and pushed it off her face, meeting her gaze. “I know who you are.”

“Good.” She needed to know he’d remember her, and she wouldn’t become just a faceless memory of a woman he’d once known.

“So fierce.” Jacob chuckled, releasing her head to open his hand on her back, his fingers kneading sensuously at the muscles above her shoulder blade. “Why don’t you stop wasting all that intensity on worry and give me your mouth?”

The bead was bigger now, trembling on the brink of spilling over. “Lech.”

Pressure from his palm coaxed her closer. “Your lech tonight.”

She cupped his balls in her hand, as always surprised by their weight and the tight hard feel beneath the softness of their sac. “Yes. Mine.”

At least for the moment.

She felt his shiver all along her body as she lapped the come from the tip. An answering shiver echoed inside as she opened her mouth and worked his cock head into her mouth. His fingers on her back stilled. She sucked lightly, carefully. Another shiver shook him. She sucked harder, ignoring the pumping twitches of his hips, the encouragement of his hand, just sipped at his passion, enjoying the miracle of her own as it flowered right alongside his.

His curse of “tease” was music to her ears. She gave him a little friction—not much, just the lash of her tongue. Over and over, memorizing his taste, scent, reaction. The impatience she could feel humming under his skin, exploded into action. He dragged her up his body, pulling her thighs over his until she straddled him. She pushed herself up, bracing her palms on his broad shoulders. His skin was damp with exertion, his muscles iron-hard under her palms. His hands on her hips forced her back until her pussy cradled his cock through her panties.

“You have too many clothes on.”

She shook her hair out of her eyes, suppressing a moan as the move produced a shimmering pressure where she was most sensitive. “I repeat—lech.”

His smile let her know he’d heard the catch in her voice. His touch was feather light as he slipped the straps of her bra from her shoulders. “A lech who’d very much like to see you without these sexy pieces of silk.”

The hunch of her shoulders was instinctive. She’d never let anyone see her naked after the babies were born.

The sheets rustled as he shook his head. “It won’t work, you know.”

The scrape of his nail down her spine sent shivers of delight spearing to her core and goose bumps springing across her flesh.

“What?”

“Hiding yourself from me.”

It would if she kept her elbows spread. "I'm not eighteen, Jacob, and—"

"You've had two kids," he finished for her as he persistently tugged the scrap of lace and silk from her clutches. "I think it's time you understood, sweetheart, that these imperfections you think you have don't exist for me."

His hand slipped between her breasts. A quick flick and that fast, her bra was gone and he was looking at her. Sass closed her eyes, and thought she'd drown under the weight of each stretch mark, each imperfection. The mattress shifted beneath her as Jacob leaned forward. His hair brushed her arm and then, with a caress as tender as the touch of a butterfly's wings, he kissed the outside of her breast. She opened her eyes and looked down. He caught her gaze and held it as he repeated the caress. Once. Twice. Three times. Once for each stretch mark.

"You're beautiful, baby. Always." His words seeped into her soul, warming that cold kernel of insecurity that said her prime was long past. That she couldn't measure up. Her breath caught on a sob.

He shook his head at her, pulling her chest to his with one hand as he scooted them back until the headboard supported his back, and he supported her. His lips whispered across her eyelids, soothing the burn of tears she wouldn't let fall. "You have the prettiest breasts."

She had to ask. She'd spent too many nights dreading this very unveiling not to. "You don't think they're ugly?"

Jacob blinked. She had to be kidding. She was in his arms—sweet, hot and willing—and she thought he could possibly find one single thing about her ugly? He brushed the hair off her cheek and tipped her chin so she couldn't avoid his gaze. "There isn't a damn thing about you that isn't beautiful."

Some of the fear left her gaze, but a niggle of concern still hovered in the flutter of her fingers on his arm, and the nervous flick of her tongue over her lips. He leaned forward. Her tongue flicked out again. He tagged it with his, feeling the jolt go through her as they connected. He took her gasp into his mouth. He loved those little betrayals

of surprise that overtook her when the passion flared between them. No matter how often they made love, she always reacted like it was the first time.

“I tell you what,” he countered, shifting her above him so his cock notched securely against her pussy. Through the thin silk, the searing heat of her sheath beckoned. She was always so tight. So eager. So perfect. “You don’t make fun of my bony hips, and I won’t lie and say I find you anything but the most desirable woman I’ve ever seen.”

“You don’t have bony hips.”

She was talking in that measured, soft tone that meant she was still worrying. He tucked the persistent fall of her hair back behind her ear so he could see her face. “Uh-huh.” He touched his finger to the faint frown between her eyes. “You’re worrying again.”

She blinked. The frown disappeared, to be replaced by a very shaky smile she no doubt meant to appear confident. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to worry about.”

Her gaze bounced off his. Her lower lip disappeared between her teeth. “I have a lot more on my stomach.”

The utter vulnerability exposed in those few words squeezed his heart. It had been a mistake letting her call the shots for the last few months. Instead of calming her, his cooperation with her wishes had just cemented in her mind the validity of her worries. And one thing Sass was very good at was worrying.

“Your stomach, huh?”

She nodded.

“I guess I’d better check it out.”

He let his fingers ride the ridges of her vertebrae until he got to the high waist of her French-cut panties. No doubt purchased because they both concealed what she wanted hidden and accentuated the full curves of the hips he loved. He watched her face as he tucked his fingers under the smooth elastic, watched how her full lips pursed

to a pout and the deep amber of her wide-set eyes darkened to golden brown in anticipation and uncertainty. Another of those telling stiffenings and then a cautiously whispered, "Maybe we'd better turn out the light."

He shook his head, kissing her delectable mouth. "Uh-uh. You promised me no darkness and no hiding tonight."

"But—"

He stilled her panic with a finger over her lips and a string of kisses down her throat. The shallow valley between her breasts beckoned with an enticing scent. Even her perfume drove him wild. His fingers found the crease of her buttocks and slipped between, easing downward. "Not until I see these supposed imperfections."

The smoothness of flesh beneath his fingertips gave way to the crinkle of muscle. Her body jerked against his as he tested delicately. "And probably not even then."

"Oh, God."

He tightened his arm, keeping her groin pressed into his erection as he pressed into her tender ass. She moaned and twisted, clearly not knowing which sensation to follow. He nuzzled his lips beneath her hair until he found the curve of her ear and took the decision out of her hands. "Push back."

"I thought you wanted to see my stretch marks?"

The sentence ended on a high squeak.

"In due time."

"But—"

He nipped her earlobe. She jerked back and the tip of his index finger entered her heat. Surprise wrenched a high-pitched whine from her throat. Her muscles clamped down.

"That's it," he whispered, keeping his voice level and calm as he felt her uncertainty in the tensing of her body. "Right there, baby. Just hold right there."

A flush rose in her chest. Her respirations increased, but she didn't move. Didn't blink. He kissed her softly parted lips, studying the emotions chasing across her small, triangular face. Fear. Indecision. Eagerness. He pressed a little deeper. When she still didn't move, just held perfectly frozen in breathless anticipation, he had his answer. No one had ever had her ass before. Lust rolled over him in a relentless wave. He pulled his finger free. The delicate tissue clung as reluctant to let go as he was to leave. He swirled his middle finger in the juices coating her bare pussy. When it was good and wet, he seated it against her anus. It entered that first tiny bit. The blush in her cheeks intensified. That innate shyness that was so at odds with the boldness he could coax from her always fascinated him. He rubbed his fingertips across the arc of her collarbone. She was such an intriguing mix of passion and hesitancy.

"Now, kneel up."

Lust and pride along with a stronger emotion he avoided naming rose along with his arousal as she slowly, carefully did as he asked. He stayed with her, not increasing the pressure nor decreasing it. He tugged the panties down as far as they would go. They hung up halfway to her knees.

"Brace yourself on my shoulder," he tapped her right leg, "then pull this leg free." In order to do what he required, she had to sit back. Her eyes flew wide as his lubed finger probed the small tight ring. He held her gaze as she debated the sensation. "Feel good?"

She didn't answer right away. Just froze where she was, head tilted slightly to the side, and then finally, "Yes."

"I can make it even better."

Uncertainty clouded the desire in her gaze.

"Trust me."

Her lips slipped between her teeth, but then ever so slowly she nodded and ever so carefully sat back. Her cry reverberated around them, binding them together in a shivery echo of desire as his finger sank to the first knuckle. He caught the back of her

head in the cradle of his hand as she shuddered, steadying her. "That's it, sweetheart. Just a little at first. Let yourself get used to how it feels."

Tiny muscles fluttered in silent entreaty around his finger. Her body stilled as she focused on that nerve-rich point of connection. Then her forehead dropped against his and her body relaxed into his, accepting him a little more.

"Okay?" he asked as she tensed at the deeper intrusion.

"Yes."

The skin of her cheek was smooth under his lips. A drop of moisture seeped along the seam of his lips. He touched it with his tongue. Warm and salty.

He leaned back. "Tears, baby?"

She ducked his gaze, leaving him looking at the sheen of light flowing through her deep brown hair as she shook her head. "I'm such an idiot."

"Am I hurting you?"

She brushed away his concern with a flick of her hand. "You'd never hurt me."

He tipped her chin up. Her gaze revealed only an indecipherable something he didn't trust. "Then why?"

"Sometimes..." She shrugged. "Sometimes, I think too much."

He couldn't argue that, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't telling him everything. "And that's all?"

Her answer was to wiggle her hips down on his finger, working him deeper, the familiar heat of passion replacing the strange emotion shadowing her gaze. "I thought you promised to make me feel good?"

"I did."

She flipped her hair back over her shoulder and thrust her breasts up and out. "You're a little slow in the making."

He raised his eyebrow, watching her breasts shimmy with the force of the move. "This isn't good?"

This was a crook of his finger deep inside. Her lids drifted down, the sexiest sound he'd ever heard purred in her throat.

"I'll take that little moan as a yes."

He trailed his finger down her chest, over those proudly thrusting breasts with their hard tips, stopping to pinch the nipple the way she liked, holding the compression, waiting for that melting little whimper she made as the sensation shot through her. When it came, her internal muscles clamped his finger hard, bringing out a new note in her repertoire.

She was such a hot little thing, she made him burn. He released her nipple, smiling as she panted in his ear, and continued his journey down to her belly. Beneath his fingers he could feel the furrows that had her so worried. He turned his palm, cupped the slight curve of her stomach. And that fast she went from relaxed to tense.

"No tensing and no worrying, sweetheart."

"They're ugly."

"Nothing on you could be ugly."

"You can't..."

Since she couldn't seem to come up with the words, he filled in the blank for her. "I can do anything I want. And I do. I find you gorgeous, sexy and perfect." He tapped her ass with his pinkie. "Kneel up again."

She frowned suspiciously down at him but did as he asked.

Before she could change her mind, he scooted down under her until he was face level with those marks she so feared. There were six of them, stretching up from just above her mound to just below her belly button. He'd felt them before. They were neither ugly nor pretty. They simply were. He pulled her into his mouth, licking and kissing along the widest one's length until she squirmed and pushed at his shoulders. He paused, looking up between her breasts, cocking an eyebrow at her. "Is there a problem?"

“That tickles.”

He hitched down a hair’s breadth more, until his mouth was even with the half moon of her C-section scar. His own little private smile above his own private gate to paradise. He rubbed his tongue along its length, scooting over to tease the left corner, steadying her as she lost her balance when the mattress shifted. “Then I guess you’ll have to stop worrying about my reactions to these little marks.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m fond of everything that makes you laugh.”

She made a funny sound he couldn’t decipher. He took it as approval. A little jostling and she fell forward. She caught her weight on her palms above his head, bringing that sweet little pussy directly over his face. The outer lips were hair free the way he liked and glistening with her cream. The inner lips were swollen and red, flowering outward in invitation. His cock jerked and pulsed with anticipation. He inhaled her scent deep into his lungs, holding his breath a few seconds, savoring her essence, letting it wind its way down to his core. He loved the way she smelled, tasted. Like sweet honey mixed with exotic spice. He was going to enjoy her tonight. All of her. Top to bottom. Bottom to top. No more shyness. No more hesitation. Son of a bitch, he couldn’t wait.

He nuzzled into her folds, seeking the sultry moisture spilling from her body, licking the sweet juice from the engorged inner lips before working upward, nudging her clit with his nose as he swirled figure eights on the silky smooth flesh. Her nails scraped the sheets in a soft hiss of delight. Her breath left her lungs in a sexy bleat of anticipation as he nipped the base of that knot of nerves with his lips. She bucked at the surge of sensation. He caught her retreat with his palm in the hollow of her spine, holding her steady for his attention as he wrapped his tongue in a welcoming hug around that ultra-sensitive flange.

“Please...”

He might have mistaken the broken whisper for a plea of mercy, except the muscles under his hand were taut with desperate need, and within the moist caress of his tongue, her clitoris pulsed its own demand. Damn, he loved her like this—hot and needy, eager to come. For him. He sawed the rough surface of his tongue across the imprisoned thrust of flesh, smiling at her moan and the hot liquid spill of joy that accompanied it. Very eager. He released the breath he'd been holding, angling his mouth so the warm moist air blew across her sensitive point. Her whimper made him smile. He rewarded her with a small thrust of his finger. This time she gasped. He liked that little sound, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. He wanted more from her. Her total submission. Everything she tried to hold back. And before the night was over, he'd have it. Her screams, her pleasure, her surrender.

But first they needed her clothing out of the way. He turned his head and kissed the inside of her thigh, taking that softer-than-soft flesh into his mouth, sucking hard. Hard enough to leave a mark. Lately, he'd been marking her a lot. Hot sensual reminders of whose bed she was sleeping in, but it was never enough. It never satisfied the restless need prowling through him.

Her fingers, as slender and feminine as the rest of her, fluttered over the spot. He wove his tongue between. When he looked up, she was looking down. He tugged the panties with his teeth. "Let's get you free of these."

Her amber eyes searched his. Her teeth bit into her full lip, leaving a white impression in the brighter red. Then slowly, gingerly, she raised her leg, impaling herself on the full length of his finger as the panties slid free.

Shock and pleasure warred for dominance in her expression. Her thigh muscles quivered against his sides.

"Okay?"

She didn't answer. He leveraged his way back up, until she was once again straddling his hips, and they were face-to-face.

He brought her brow to his chest, holding her close, absorbing the shivers flowing through her. Her hands hovered over his pecs before landing on his collarbone, the fingers stretched wide.

“Answer me, Sass. Are you okay?”

Her response was a sharp little nod and a curling of her nails into his skin.

“Does it hurt?”

The slight movement of her head could have been another nod.

“God damn it!”

She caught his hand before he could pull his finger free. This time there was no mistaking the shake of her head.

“Look at me.”

He had to wait two heartbeats for her to bring her gaze up. Her lips were red and swollen. A subtle frown pleated her brow. He skimmed the back of his fingers down her flushed cheek. “Is it too much?”

“I don’t know.”

Son of a bitch! His cock jerked in excitement to the warble of lust riding that little confession. He rubbed his cheek against the fragrant softness of her hair, relief battling with elation. An “I don’t know” that hopeful and that hot just begged a man to be convincing. “Ah, that kind of ‘I don’t know’ I can work with.”

“You can?”

He couldn’t suppress a smile at her small start. “Oh yeah.”

With a nudge of his finger, he pulled her onto him. Her panties fell over his thigh as the wet heat of her pussy enveloped his cock. Desire rocked his control. No one affected him like Sass did. Only she could make him lose control and not give a damn. Only she could wrench a groan from his throat with nothing more than the touch of her flesh on his. What she did to him was more than lust. More than friendship. More than scary. And he was definitely going to have to do something about it. Later.

He tucked his lips against her ear. "Slide yourself along my cock. Let me feel every inch of that sweet pussy caressing me."

Her grip on his shoulder tightened, the sting of her nails bleeding into the power of his arousal, driving it higher as a shiver took her from head to toe. Oh yeah. He did enjoy a woman who responded to direction with a creamy pulse of pleasure. She slid herself forward, her tender clit stroking his cock like a firm little tongue. Her ass pulled free of his finger. Her pussy clenched on his shaft as the head caught on her clitoris, flicking it once on the way up and then again on the way down. Midway down his shaft, he had his fingers waiting. Two instead of one. She stopped dead as the blunt pressure changed. Her gaze locked with his. He dipped his free hand between her legs, gathering her cream and spreading it backward, around the tautly stretched ring, around his fingers, smiling as she bit her lip and her eyelids drifted down. She had a sensitive, responsive ass and he was a very lucky man.

He grazed his left hand down her back. Goose bumps broke out over her skin. "It's okay, sweetheart. Nice and easy." He pushed gently with his palm, directing her back. "Just a little at a time. Just...like...that."

Her ass was tight, gripping his fingers on a hungry suction, fighting the stretching at first, then slowly giving way. Tiny whimpers that went straight to his cock burst from her throat. "A little more, Sass." He pushed. She clenched. "Easy, baby. Just relax and take a little more."

She had to take more. She had to take him. All of him. No holding back.

There was only the slightest of hesitations before she pushed back. Come seeped from his cock as she took him to the hilt, her cry jerking another spurt past his control. She knelt there for a moment, quivering, his fingers buried in her rear. A glance at her face showed that full lower lip locked between her teeth, her expression fierce with the intensity of the moment. The novelty of the sensation. Son of a bitch, she was beautiful.

He cupped his hand behind her head and dragged her mouth to his, kissing her hard and deep, as deeply as he wanted to be buried in her, reluctantly breaking it off as

she twisted against him, her body instinctively searching for more stimulation. More pleasure. Finding it in the glide of his shaft along her clit, the friction of his fingers in her back passage.

“Again,” he whispered in her ear.

He pressed against her. She opened her eyes. She eased back, the tight muscles parting reluctantly at the insistence of his well-lubed fingers. He kissed her again as her delicate ring spread around him, taking her little cries and gasps as his, moving his hand to the hollow of her spine, keeping her clit connected with his shaft, pushing up when she stopped, completing the possession.

Mine! The word echoed in his head, shocking him with its absolute certainty. The scent of her passion surrounded him. The heat of her body scalded him as slowly but surely he accepted the reality he’d been avoiding. She was his. That was why everything felt so good with Sass, why he hadn’t dated anyone else since she’d come along. He’d thought he was getting old, but in reality, he’d just been too dense to realize when he’d come into Sass, he’d come home.

He scissored his fingers within her, stretching her as the knowledge spread easily through him. He was home.

He pulled his hand free and flipped her over, laughing hoarsely as she wiggled her butt on the last bounce, tempting him. Three tugs and he had her hips at the edge of the tall bed. In two more, he had the pillows under her stomach and that delectable ass propped up. He stroked one white cheek lovingly as the realization hit him again. Son of a bitch, he’d been waiting a long time for her.

“Jacob?”

Soft and sweet, her uncertainty reached out to surround him. “Right here, sweetheart.”

He leaned over her, working his hand between her stomach and the pillow, easing it down the damp skin until he found the soft pad of her mound. He slipped his fingers between the plump lips, searching for the eager nub of her clitoris as his cock settled

into the well of her vagina. He discovered both at the same time. He circled the engorged flange gently as he worked his cock into her sheath. She was always so tight at first, he feared hurting her. So delicate. He pressed forward into the moist opening, gritting his teeth against the taut resistance that flayed his control with a smooth whip of bliss as the muscled parted, wrapping around him in a fist tight kiss of acceptance. He threw his head back, bearing the lightning hot strike of desire as she took half of him on a purring moan, finding control on a hard breath as she clenched around him.

“Easy sweetheart.”

Her hair flared out, lashing his cheek as she glared at him over her shoulder. “I don’t want easy.”

No, she never did. She was a wild thing when she got going, but he gave it to her anyway, gradually increasing the tempo of his caress as he pulled out. She arched under him, straining to hold on. Her muscles clamped with almost painful intensity on the thick wedge of his cock. She bucked under him in protest. “No.”

He slapped her right buttock, watching as the soft flesh jiggled under the reprimand. Her sharp, delighted cry cut straight to his balls. Her head dropped, and her back curved in a purely feminine invite. He obliged, adding another stinging slap just to the right of the imprint of his last. Her pussy spasmed. Cream poured from her center, bathing the head of his cock in welcome. He leaned over her, using his greater size to limit her movement.

“You need patience,” he whispered in her ear.

She grunted and pushed her back against his chest, her sheath rippling with the same desperate rate of her respirations. “I need you.”

“You’ll get me.”

“Now.”

He shook his head at her, her demands breaking loose a smile from the rigidity of his need. Because she liked it so much and because it pleased him to please her, he spanked her four more times in rapid succession, each one a little harder than the last,

until her gasps were indistinguishable from her breaths and the taut ring of muscle guarding her core eased.

“Hold still now.” The bed shook as she trembled, but she didn’t move as he leaned forward, working the head side to side, taking her slowly, gently – teasing them both with the wet friction, the deliberate stretching. “Relax,” he whispered in her ear as the head popped in. “Just relax.”

Instead of relaxing she tensed, once again clamping down with those surprisingly powerful muscles. He shook his head and traced the tight skin around their connection.

She always fought him at first, as if afraid of the pleasure he wanted to give her. He fucked her steadily, slowly, until she relaxed against his hand. The signal he’d been waiting for. With a smooth thrust, he slid to the hilt within her heat, his eyes closing as desire tore through him, primitive and strong. He pressed his thighs into her buttocks, but it wasn’t enough. He needed more. Sass grunted as he ground against her, her inner muscles massaging his shaft in an erotic invitation. Her whisper wove through the silence, echoing his thoughts, “More.”

He tapped her feet wide, taking control away from her, and made love to her as he wanted, soft and sweet, deep and hard, every way he could think of while working her clitoris in time with his movements. She cried and shook beneath him, straining for leverage. Her pleasure soaked his hand. Her sultry moans prodded him on. He gritted his teeth against his pending orgasm. He wasn’t ready for this to end. He didn’t know if he’d ever be ready for this to end. He worked his cock back in. Sass shuddered and arched beneath him, broken, incoherent pleas bursting from her lips. She was almost there. He stilled his fingers and pulled his cock free. Her protest was immediate.

“No.” Her head thrashed on the bed. Her feet scrambled for purchase. “Damn it, Jacob!”

He straightened his legs until his hips were higher than hers, until his shaft, so much darker than her fair flesh rested along her back, its length perfectly aligned with the crevice between her lush buttocks. He arched his back. His cock, shiny with her

cream, slid smoothly down that dark crease until it caught on the tiny puckered star. He bent his knees slightly and pressed forward, letting her feel his size. Letting her anticipate his possession, knowing how the combination of fear and desire would spike her passion.

“Jacob, I don’t think....”

He kissed her spine between her shoulder blades, letting his weight come to bear on that point of connection. “Trust me, baby.”

Her fingers stilled on the covers, opening slowly before closing with equal slowness. Her nod was a terse acceptance, but her body showed none of her mind’s reluctance. Her excitement poured over his hand in a steady flow of joy. Her breath came in short uneven gasps and her hips pulsed in eager anticipation. A twist of his wrist and he had her tender clit back between his fingers. Her instinctive gasp and thrust back tore at his control. He had to stop and take a breath, the urge to take her fast and hard almost overwhelming. She was such a lush, hot, willing, welcome temptation. But he would maintain his control. This was Sass. There had to be pleasure for her. Always for her.

He stroked her clitoris gently, easily, teasingly. She grunted and pushed back again. He didn’t change his rhythm. Her breath hissed out in a curse that was his name. Then, and only then, did he give her two quick squeezes to get her primed before beginning the strong milking motion that never failed to bring her off like lightning. She thrashed beneath him, her hips straining forward for his touch. He pinned her with a hand on her shoulder as he pushed his cock against the tight bud of her anus. He watched as the puckered skin flattened, the creases smoothing as the pressure forced a well his cock immediately filled. Sass cried out as her flesh opened to his insistence. Bucked against him as he stroked her clit. He shifted his grip on her shoulder higher, holding her still as the tiny hole gradually, miraculously began to spread over the tip of his cock.

Her body twisted against his hand, pressed back, arched forward, caught between pleasure and the threat of pain. Her spine glowed with a sheen of sweat. Her fingers

clawed at the covers. He was right there with her, the need clawing at her, tearing at him. His balls pulled up tighter. His cock ached and burned. But it wasn't enough. More. They just needed a little more.

He pressed deeper, pulled her clit harder, taking her past her fear to her submission. She gave it to him as, on a high splintered cry, the climax took her, her torso arcing in taut pleasure, her ass swallowing half his cock head in a fervent kiss.

She bucked into him, screaming his name. As the last note echoed around him, he let loose the violent need burning within and spattered those ultra-sensitive walls with his come. With every spurt, she moaned and pushed back, begging for more. Always more. When he didn't have anything left to give her, he gave her what he could.

Opening his palm over her groin, he pulled her hips into his and bore down. His seed easing the way for both of them, he buried his still-hard cock to the hilt in the silky wet flesh of her hungry ass. With his groin pressed tight to the soft cheeks of her rear, his balls slapping against the pad of her cunt, he reached deep within and gave her something he'd never given anyone else before. Himself.

Chapter Two

She lay quietly beneath him, her breath coming in harsh rasps. He propped his weight on his elbows, not breaking their connection, needing to hold onto it a little longer. He pushed back on his hands. She looked so tiny lying there, the vertebrae of her spine a delicate ladder between the curve of her shoulder blades. Almost insubstantial. As if she could disappear if he didn't watch closely enough. Bind her to him hard enough.

He bent down and pressed a kiss dead center of her shoulder blades. The next landed on the curve of her neck. The last just under her ear. She sighed and nestled deeper into the mattress.

The way she cuddled in made him think of a sleepy well-satisfied kitten, bringing the smile he felt inside to the surface. "Marry me."

The stiffening of her muscles was almost undetectable, but this close he couldn't miss it. She turned to look at him over her shoulder, flinched as the move tugged intimately at their joined flesh. A wary expression crossed her face as she tucked her hair behind her ear. "What did you say?"

"I said 'Marry me'." He braced his palm in the middle of her back, keeping her still as he worked his cock back. She moaned and bit her lip. She was sore, and no wonder. He wasn't a small man, and she'd taken all of him. He rubbed the tense muscles in the hollow above her rear, easing her through the transition as, with a soft pop, he broke their connection. Another moan.

He slid off the bed, taking a moment to kiss the rise of each buttock before whispering against the left. "Just lie there a minute and don't move." He reinforced the order with firm pressure on her spine. It was just a few feet to the bathroom, but every step was one too many in the wrong direction. He wanted to be with her. To hold her.

Cuddle her. He paused in front of the vanity, staring at his reflection as he washed up, processing the information.

Son of a bitch. He loved her. The novelty of the realization flowed over him. He tossed the washcloth into the tub. He was in love with Sass Miller. He ran another washcloth under warm water, glancing at his reflection, specifically at the eight little half moon marks decorating his chest. He should have realized it long before this. The woman had been putting visible and invisible marks all over him for months and his only reaction had been satisfaction rather than his normal distaste. He turned off the water and gathered up the washcloth. Damn. He really was in love.

Sass lay on the bed as Jacob had left her, her body throbbing in muted echoes of satisfaction, her mind racing at ninety miles an hour as she listened to the water running in the bathroom. Jacob McConnally had asked her to marry him. Hope waged war with common sense. While Jacob was not a man to be carried away with emotion, he couldn't want to marry her. It didn't make sense. She was the total opposite of free and easy. The water in the bathroom shut off. She held her breath, counting the soft thuds of his footfalls as he crossed the carpet, releasing it in a rush as the mattress dipped. Every nerve ending in her body strained as Jacob knelt above her. His touch on her buttock made her jump. His fingers spread her gently, as gently as his "Easy, baby. I'm just going to make you more comfortable."

Something hot and wet pressed against her anus. It stung. The mattress dipped again as he leaned forward. Hips lips brushed her cheek, her ear. "Just give it a minute."

The stinging was already gone, soothed by the moist heat. It felt good. Good enough that she couldn't help wiggling just a bit against the pressure. Jacob's cheek pressed against hers with the smile she could imagine so easily. His body came down over hers, enveloping her in his heat and scent. "You liked my cock in your ass."

Heat bloomed at the blunt statement, but she didn't deny it. "Yes."

“Marry me and I’ll wake you every morning with the pleasure.”

She could just imagine it, riding the dark delight to awareness, his big cock stretching her, tugging at sensitive nerve endings as he pushed deep. He’d tease and torment her until she couldn’t help but scream. He liked to hear her scream, but screaming wasn’t an option with kids around. One satisfied scream from her and her kids would burst into the room wanting to know what was wrong. The image hit her like a splash of cold water.

She wrapped her hand around Jacob’s wrist, sliding her fingers down the back of his hand until she could twine them with his. She brought them both back to reality. “It’s not that simple.”

Cool air washed over her flesh as the washcloth was removed. A soft plop indicated its landing on the floor. Then the heat of Jacob’s body warmed her as his stomach pressed to her back. His cock nestled between her thighs like a homing missile. He was hard again. Ready to go. And just like that, so was she.

“How ‘not that simple’ could it be?” He propped himself over her, his hand turning in hers, squeezing once. “I love you, you love me, so what’s the issue?”

She twisted beneath him, elbowing him in the stomach until he gave in and let her flip onto her back. She had to see his face for this. “You love me?”

“Yes.” He said it with no hesitation and no smile. A flat statement of truth.

Hope ran amok inside her like a wild thing. He was serious. “Since when?”

He did smile then, a tender smile that melted her insides to a puddle. She brought her finger to the corner, cementing the memory in her mind. He caught her hand and brought her palm to his mouth, pressing a kiss to the center. “I’ve probably loved you since the beginning, but I just pinpointed what it was today.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what to say except, “Well, how do you know I love you?”

He had the gall to look smug. “You tell me with every touch and every sigh.”

That was such a load of crap. “I said something, didn’t I?”

He dropped down to his elbows, pressing his entire body along hers, including that big cock which pressed along her crease with unerring accuracy. The smile on his mouth spread to his eyes. "You have a tendency to scream it."

When they made love. She closed her eyes on the embarrassment. "You could have had the decency to say something."

"Why?" Soft as down, his lips brushed over her closed lids. "If I had, you would have stopped, and I liked hearing it."

She just bet he had. "That is so completely unfair."

He pulled back. "You didn't know I loved you?"

He really was surprised. "I didn't have a clue."

"I thought you women had an instinct about these things."

"Mine must be broken." Right along with her common sense, because Jacob's saying he loved her didn't change anything. He still wasn't father material, and any man she took up with on a permanent basis had to be first and foremost a father.

She caught a strand of his deep auburn hair in her hand. She loved the color of his hair. It was so symbolic of the man himself—calm and steady on the surface, flaring with fire and highlights when hit with the right light.

His thumb under her chin brought her face up. "I believe this is supposed to be a happy moment."

"It is..."

"But?"

She hated to bring up the but. "Love isn't always enough."

"It will be for us." And if it wasn't, his expression said he'd make it so.

She wished it was that easy. "What we have here isn't what we would have if we were together every day."

"I'm pretty sure we can manage a fair approximation."

He so did not have a clue. "I have kids, Jacob."

“The kids will love me.”

She shook her head. He had no experience so he couldn't see the reality of what he was getting himself into. “The kids don't know you and may very well resent the hell out of your presence in my life.”

“Whatever their feelings, we'll work it out.”

There was so much conviction in that statement, she found herself believing it. Joy blended with hope, rising from deep within, leaving her breathless. She closed her eyes, savoring the elation, the pleasure. His laugh echoed her emotions, buffeting her cheek before the firmness of his lips mated to the softness of hers, the stroke of his tongue a request. She opened her mouth—her soul—to him. She slid her hands up over his well-muscled shoulders, pulling him closer, allowing herself for the first time to believe in the dream even as she succumbed to the last niggles of conscience that demanded she give him one last out. “It won't be easy. Kids can be tough.”

“Relax, Sass.” He kissed her once, twice, separating their mouths a millimeter, his breath mingling with hers as he whispered. “I'm marrying you, not your kids.”

And that easily her dream shattered.

Chapter Three

Sass made it home the next day just in time to put the kids to bed.

“Hi, Mommy!” CJ launched himself at her as she came in the door. She caught all fifty-eight pounds of his strong body to her, feeling the same delight she had the day he was born. He smelled of soap and orange juice and chocolate. Obviously her mother had been spoiling the little urchins with before-bed treats.

“Mommy!” Her tiny three-year-old daughter came bopping—that was the only way to describe her short-stepped excited run—around the corner from her bedroom. Sass reached out her arm and caught her close, too. She kissed her son on the top of his blond head, and buried her face in her daughter’s wild, equally blonde curls, breathing deeply of the scent of baby shampoo. “I missed you all soooo much.”

Their response was an echo that threatened her eardrums. “We missed you, too.”

“Did you have a good time with Grammy?”

Both kids nodded enthusiastically. “You made it in time to kiss me good night.” Corrine chirped as Sass put CJ down. Her mother came out of the kitchen, and smiled a greeting.

“So I did,” Sass said, wiggling four fingers at her mother as she put Corrine down. “Why don’t you head on in and finish getting ready so I can kiss you good night?”

Both kids took off across the living room in an impromptu race to be the first in bed and therefore the first to get kisses. CJ took the lead which drew a screech of “CJ!” from Corrine as she grabbed the tail of his pajama top. Sass watched her daughter for the split second it took her to barrel around the corner of the hall. She looked up at her mother framed in the doorway. Pushing sixty, she was still beautiful with an aura about her that made one think of youthful energy and summer days by a lake.

Sass motioned to the hall. "She is the spitting image of you, you know. She's got your hair, your fine bones and your nose."

Her mother fluffed her soft blonde hair and smiled. "She'll do all right then."

Sass dropped her purse on the foyer table. "She's also got your stubbornness."

That fault was waved aside as if it were a gnat. "She'll need it. And if you teach her to channel it, she'll be a force to reckon with."

Sass shook her head, listening to the excited cries of her children, letting the comfort of being home seep into her battered heart. "Somehow, I've never doubted it." With a sigh, she unbuttoned her coat. "God, it's good to be home."

"Rough trip?"

"Towards the end, brutal. I'll tell you about it once I get the kids settled."

Her mother nodded and pushed away from the wall. "I'll be waiting to hear."

"I'm ready for my kisses, Mommy," CJ called.

Not to be outdone, Corrine piped up, "Me, too," even though it was clear from the direction of her voice that she wasn't even in bed yet.

"Coming." Sass shrugged out of her coat. The corner of the room where the Christmas tree should stand was clear. The box holding the artificial tree waited to be opened. The thrill she normally felt at the prospect of setting up for her favorite holiday failed to come. Instead, there was only the pang of what could have been and the agony of what really was. She blinked back the tears. She was a big girl. She could handle a breakup.

She went to CJ first. Not because he was the oldest or because he was her favorite, but because if she didn't, he'd be asleep before she got to tuck him in.

Corrine was a different story. Sass passed the wee imp in the hall and patted her on the butt to hurry her along. No, Corrine would be up for a good forty-five minutes yet. She hated going to sleep and she hated getting up. She was still too afraid of missing

something to stay in bed in the morning, but she was miserable to live with before ten a.m.

She went into CJ's room. He was sitting up in the top bed of his bright red bunk beds. His hair was tousled and his large green eyes were half shut. She crossed to the end of the bed and reached up for his blanket. "You are a very handsome boy, CJ."

He lay down, anticipating the blanket's comfortable warmth. "I know."

She tweaked his nose as she settled the comforter over his shoulders. "Oh you do, do you?"

He looked as smug as a bug in a rug. "Yup." She stepped up on the bottom bunk and kissed him three times and then once more to grow on.

"I'm glad you're home, Mommy."

Tears welled. "I am too, special boy." And it was true, she realized. Her time with Jacob had been a departure from reality, but this was her life. What she'd always wanted. What gave her existence meaning. "Good night."

Corrine was waiting for her at the door to her room. Sass smiled patiently. "I thought I told you to get into bed?"

Corrine put her hands on her hips. "I was waiting for you."

She said that with complete confidence, as if her interpretation of the rules was all that mattered. Sass sighed and then scooped her up. She was like a feather in her arms. "You, my little Corkers, are going to have a hard time accepting some things in the real world."

Her response was a frown as Sass laid her down and placed her down-filled comforter over her. "I'm not a problem."

"No," Sass agreed. "You're my special girl."

Corrine's smile burst forth like sunshine breaking through the dawn. She held up both hands, fingers splayed as wide as possible. "I want this many, Mommy."

Sass raised her eyebrows and feigned surprise. "Ten? You want ten kisses?"

“Yup.”

She pretended to brace herself for the ordeal. “Okay.” This was a nightly routine. By the time she got to the “one to grow on” they were both laughing. “Good night, Corkers.”

“Good night, Mommy.”

She turned out the light, leaving only the nightlight on. “Good night.”

She headed back to the tiny kitchen where her mother was clearing the table. “Need some help?”

Her mother shook her head and put the large bag of envelopes and magazines on the floor in the corner by the refrigerator. She turned back to Sass and said, “Remind me to put those away before I go to bed, otherwise there will be little fingers in there by morning under the guise of helping me.”

When Sass couldn’t muster a smile, her mother reached for the refrigerator door handle. “I see this is going to be a glass of wine discussion.”

Sass pulled out a chair, knocked a squeaky toy to the floor and sat down. “There really isn’t anything to discuss.”

“You come home looking like the world has ended, and you don’t think we need to talk?” Her mother shook her head, closed the refrigerator door and grabbed two glasses off the rack. She plunked the glasses on the table and worked the cork out of the previously opened bottle. “You are so mistaken.”

Sass watched as the deep golden chardonnay filled the glasses, catching the light and reflecting it back. “He asked me to marry him.”

“And?” her mother asked as she took her seat.

“I said no.”

“Why?”

“Because...” she took a deep breath, again fighting the devastating sense of loss. She’d always known Jacob wasn’t forever. It shouldn’t be this hard to say goodbye.

“He’s a famous author, Mom. He be-bops around the world on a moment’s notice. He has no ties. And until yesterday, never showed any sign of wanting any. His whole life has been no responsibilities, and women hanging off him in droves.”

That last got her mother’s attention. She paused, her glass halfway to her mouth, her brows lowering. “Has he been seeing other women while seeing you? Is that what this is about?”

“He said he wasn’t.”

“Do you believe him?”

Well, duh! She was still sleeping with him, so obviously she believed him. She wished she could leave her mother with the suspicion Jacob wasn’t faithful, give her something concrete for her to understand, but she couldn’t. It wouldn’t be fair. “Jacob’s not a liar.”

“He’s not a liar, not seeing other women and he wants to marry you.” Her mother took a sip of her wine and shrugged. “Why am I not seeing the problem?”

Sass’ glass clanked harder than she’d intended on the wooden tabletop. Liquid splashed over the side, dripping in cold drops onto her skin, the small chill blending with the deeper chill in her heart. “Because no matter what he says, what he feels, it won’t last. He’s spent the last forty-one years avoiding commitment. I’m not fool enough to believe any change is permanent.”

“I’m not sure I agree with you.”

She so could not afford her mother arguing Jacob’s case. She was too weak, wanted too much to believe in fairy tales. She grabbed a napkin off the pile on the lazy susan and scrubbed at her hand.

“When I informed him how hard it could be to make this work, he told me that he was marrying me, not my kids.” She didn’t know if she’d ever get over the pain of that. To have her hopes raised so high, only to have them dashed so brutally.

“Uh-oh.” Her mother took a sip of her wine, and her expression grew contemplative. “I would have thought him brighter than that.”

“Me, too. My children already have a father who doesn’t know how to be one.”

“Not every man is like Carl.”

No. Jacob wasn’t her ex-husband, but he also wasn’t a family man. Sass ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass, before meeting her mother’s gaze. “After being a party to my struggles for the last year, online and off, many of them which involved my children, he still has the stupidity to say that he’s marrying me, not my children, like we’re not a package deal. I think that says all that needs to be said on the subject of his suitability.”

“It certainly says something.”

She shot her mother a warning glance. “Don’t give me that but-it-doesn’t-say-everything tone of voice. Jacob McConnally makes a wonderful friend, but a lousy life partner.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

Her mother’s response was to take a sip of her wine while a slight smile hung around the corners of her mouth. Sass hated that smile. Hated the implication that her mother knew more than she did, but more than anything, she hated the hope that wouldn’t let her just ignore her mother’s perspective.

“Oh, all right, say it and get it over with.”

“It’s just that after all I’ve heard about Jacob McConnally for the last six months, I think you are definitely underestimating that man.”

Chapter Four

Jacob pulled into the short driveway of the rented house. Unlike the rest of the houses in the neighborhood, which proudly sported elaborate light displays, the rental house looked lonely with only the one porch light to break the darkness. Very depressing in contrast. For a man alone, the holidays had never meant more than another opportunity to take an extra vacation, but he might want to do something about that. He got out of the car and reached behind the seat for his laptop. Nothing like showing he could get into the holiday spirit to make a woman see a man in a family light.

He glanced at the house next door. Sass' house. Decked out in white icicles and red and blue lights, it was a charmingly traditional cape that screamed permanence. Exactly the kind of home in which he could see her being comfortable. A woman with as strong a tendency to sweat the future as Sass would wrap herself in as many symbols of tradition as she could. Familiar traditions. He smiled, hefted his laptop onto his shoulder and walked around the back of the SUV. She was going to be mad as hell when she found out he was now officially her new neighbor. It'd taken him two weeks to arrange things, but he was here now. He popped the cargo hatch on the Jeep. She'd shocked him when she'd turned down his proposal. The rejection had thrown him like nothing had in thirty years, until he'd seen that tiny quiver in her chin she couldn't hide.

He grabbed two suitcases. It wasn't flattering to realize your woman thought so little of you, but it was eye opening. More eye opening to realize she'd been right in that he'd have to change. He swung the hatch shut. She'd only been wrong in her belief of his unwillingness to do so. Flipping to the key the realtor had mailed him, he unlocked

the door and dropped his bags through the opening before feeling along the wall for the switch.

Light flooded the large room, revealing the open, contemporary floor plan and the soothing blend of shades of cream and burgundy mixed with hues of natural wood. He could be comfortable here, he decided, for however long it took to convince Sass she'd severely underestimated both his feelings for her and his potential as a husband. He stepped inside and leaned his laptop against the wall. He had no idea how long it was going to take to complete his metamorphosis and convince Sass she and her children were safe with him, but now that he was here, he didn't expect it to take six months. He headed for the kitchen. No, he figured two months at the outside. Sass was stubborn, but she loved him. She'd come around.

Going to the fridge, he hoped the realtor had made good on her promise to have it stocked. He hadn't eaten in hours. He opened the door and landed in nirvana. There were enough cold cuts and beer inside to cover a Super Bowl weekend. He made himself a couple ham and cheese sandwiches and twisted the cap off a beer. Walking to the back of the house, he went out on the porch. The air was cool on his skin. Crisp with a hint of winter. Across the way trees sparkled with the myriad colors of Christmas lights reminding him of the past, and for the first time in a long time, he didn't shove the memories away.

He flashed back to his eleventh year, his sixth in foster care. Everyone had been preparing for Christmas. He'd let himself get caught up in the excitement—decorating the tree, daring to hope that for once there'd be a real present for him under it. Something frivolous and impractical. Something he'd always wanted but never expected to get. The Scotts had given him more than what he'd ever dared dream of. They'd opened the door on his deepest wish that year when they'd announced their intent to adopt him. He breathed deeply, taking in the cool air and the remembered joy.

He'd never felt more like he belonged than in that minute of that day. Like all good things, it hadn't lasted, but for that one moment he'd known what so many took for

granted. The feeling of belonging. As was customary, he'd been moved out of the Scotts' home by the authorities the minute the Scotts had applied for adoption. The adoption had not been approved. He'd found out later that his jailbird father had refused to relinquish his parental rights.

The Scotts had been heartbroken, but he'd just felt stupid for dreaming. Too bitter to listen to them when they told him belonging would happen for him someday, that they would hold the Christmas wish of a family for him. That he wouldn't be alone forever. In the years since, he'd never doubted the depth of his conviction that family wasn't for him, and he'd never attached much importance to Christmas. Until Sass. Now, here in her hometown, surrounded by the season and memories, it was as if the Scotts' wish for him lingered in the holiday, just waiting to be fulfilled. He toasted the star-speckled sky, holding the fanciful thought close. If a long ago wish made by people now dead could land Sass, wrapped up in a bow, under his Christmas tree, he'd take it.

* * * * *

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Sass sighed as the battle cry interrupted her writing for the tenth time that morning. It was Saturday, but she had still been hoping to get at least one chapter in the new book done before she had to go show houses. Apparently, inspiration was going to have to wait. She saved her work and turned. "What is it, CJ?"

"There's a car next door!"

Corrine came flying around the corner, picking up her brother's war cry, "Mommy! Mommy!"

Sass sighed again. "Yes, Corrine?"

"There's a car next door."

"That's what CJ was saying."

"Do you think they have any kids?"

She ruffled her son's hair, knowing how much he wanted a playmate. "I don't know. Are you two sure it isn't the realtor's car?"

"Nope" and "Uh-uh" came the simultaneous responses.

"It's your car, Mommy." Corrine piped up.

"A Jeep?"

"Yup." CJ shot his sister a superior look. "It's a Jeep. Just like yours."

Corrine stuck her tongue out at her brother in typical three-year-old retaliation. "Come see, Mommy." She grabbed Sass' hand and tugged her over to the window.

CJ climbed onto the couch and pressed his nose against the window. "No kids yet."

"Let me see," Corrine ordered, trying to elbow her brother aside despite the fact that the window was bigger than the six-foot couch she was kneeling on.

"Cut it out, Corrine!"

Sass hauled herself up, plucked Corrine away from her brother and sat her down more than an arm's reach away. "Why don't you watch from here?"

She chose a more discreet spot for herself. She didn't want the new neighbors to think she was nosy.

"There they are!" CJ cried.

"I see 'em," Corrine chirped in.

Sass smiled indulgently. She followed the trajectory of CJ's gaze and damn near fainted on the spot. She didn't see any "they" but she did see a man with shoulder-length, wavy auburn hair and a purely masculine roll to his easy gait. She knew that walk. Knew that man. "He wouldn't dare."

Jacob moved around to the back of the vehicle and hauled out a bag of mulch. She watched as he effortlessly swung it up onto his shoulder. His coat hitched up, revealing his lean hips and the powerful shift of his thigh muscles under his jeans. He tossed the bags onto the ground at the base of a towering pine tree, turning slightly, revealing the

clean lines of his profile and that aura of inner strength that caught on her hope and tugged it past her fear. He had no right to do this.

She tore her gaze from Jacob and stepped back from the window. "You kids stay here."

"Where you going, Mommy?"

"To have a talk with our new neighbor," she growled as she yanked the front door open.

Chapter Five

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Jacob cocked an eyebrow at her as he reached into the back of the Jeep, looking too damn sexy, too damn heartbreakingly familiar for her peace of mind. She squared her shoulders.

“Well?” she asked when he failed to answer.

He shoved a shovel into her hands and grabbed a box marked with pictures of Santa in a sleigh. That infuriating eyebrow rose higher. “I assumed it was obvious. I’m getting ready to do some decorating. And later, some landscaping.”

She tightened her grip on the shovel. “You live in Vermont, McConnally.”

“Not at the moment.” He slung the box up onto his shoulder with the same ease with which he had imparted that devastating tidbit. Sass could feel her composure unravel right along with her temper as he headed off. How could he do this to her?

She followed him to the side yard. No way was he just walking away from this discussion. He stopped dead in his tracks and smiled. She followed the trajectory of his gaze and groaned.

“I assume that’s your daughter in the window doing the Garfield impression?”

Corrine was standing on the back of the couch which was even with the window sill, her feet spread for balance, her hands rested high above her head on the window, and her nose was pressed against the glass between the paper cut-out snowflakes adorning the window. She did resemble the Garfield doll that people stuck in the back windows of their cars. Sass quickly motioned Corrine down with a sharp movement of her hand and sighed when the gesture elicited no response from her daughter beyond a wave. “Yes. That’s my soon-to-be-in-her-room youngest child.”

Jacob waved back at Corrine and turned to Sass. "You do know that a child's room is not the best place to establish as a time-out location?"

She stared at him. "Did you just say what I think you said?"

He nodded and repeated – verbatim no less – the information. So, she wasn't losing her mind. Jacob had, for whatever reason, absorbed some of the current speculation on child-rearing. And speculation it was, at least when applied to Corrine. "What'd you do, catch last week's episode of Oprah?"

He didn't laugh as she had anticipated. Instead, his expression remained deadpan. "No. I missed that one. I had to run and do a signing."

Was that regret she heard in his voice?

"I've got it on tape, though."

She didn't want him studying up on child psychology, looking at her children with the intent to love. She didn't want him here raising hopes that had no point in existing, refreshing her grief, renewing her pain. She threw the shovel onto the pile, barely missing his toe. "What are you doing here in New Jersey, renting a house next door to mine?"

"Proving a point." He turned and headed back to the car. Two pulls and several grunts later, he had a couple bags of lime in his hands. Sass held her ground as he strolled back, conscious of her children's eyes upon her. They were effectively tying her hands. She couldn't get into the shouting match she would like. She couldn't grab him by the shoulders and shake him into giving up, and maybe worse, she couldn't reach out and pat his delectable buns as he bent to carefully place the bags on the growing pile. He caught her eyeing his rear and the slow smile that stretched across his lips as he brushed the white dust off his hands was ripe with satisfaction.

Damn him!

His gaze left hers and focused behind her. His smile shifted from sinful to friendly. "Hi."

Sass groaned as her son came up beside her. She did not need an audience right now.

“Hi. I’m CJ.”

“Hi, CJ.” Jacob held out his hand. CJ shook it with due solemnity. “I’m Jacob McConnally. I’m a friend of your mother.”

CJ looked up to her for confirmation. “Really?”

“Almost really,” Sass corrected. “Mr. McConnally and I were friends for a while but then we stopped.”

CJ frowned. “You had a fight.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

CJ looked between the adults, obviously searching for the truth. “When I fight with Joey, we always say we’re sorry.”

Sass wished it was that easy. “Sorry just won’t fix this, CJ.”

CJ’s smile faltered until Jacob touched his shoulder. “I intend for this sorry to fix everything.”

Jacob looked over at Sass. She wasn’t going to be as easy to convince as her son. That didn’t matter. If it took the next six months, he was going to convince the stubborn woman that he was staying, and that she could trust him with her heart and her children’s hearts.

A tugging on his pants leg drew his attention. He looked down to see a pint-sized angel trying to get his attention. When she had it, she gave him big eyes and informed him, “You may pick me up.”

There was nothing in the tone of the statement to imply that he had an option, or that he might even want one. He reached down and carefully fit his hands around an

incredibly tiny rib cage. She was so light, he almost tossed her into the air. For some reason, he'd expected more substance to the girl.

She touched his hair, and she smiled a smile that could light an entire city. She reached behind her and shifted his hand higher on her back. "Like that."

"I'm sorry." He didn't even know why he was apologizing except for the fact it seemed expected of him.

"That's okay," he was informed, "you'll remember next time."

From that he deduced he would be carrying Miss Corrine around quite a bit.

Sass caught his eye. He was relieved to see a bit of laughter was stealing the anger from her gaze. For awhile, she'd had him worried. "She's just covering for low self-esteem."

The whole concept seemed ludicrous when connected with the child in his arms. She exuded confidence. And audacity, he thought, looking into her huge blue eyes, shaped so much like her mother's. He almost reconsidered his plan then and there. He did not want to be around when this one hit the teen years. He didn't say that to Sass though. To her, he simply said "Uh-huh."

CJ came up behind him. "I got the flowers."

Jacob turned. In his hands, CJ had five packages of the expensive tulip bulbs Jacob had purchased. Some people ate when they were stressed. Jacob landscaped. He cut a glance at Sass' face. Five hundred bulbs might not be enough to get him through Sass' resistance. The woman looked damn stubborn.

"Where should I put them?" CJ asked, bringing his gaze back to him. Unlike Corrine, there was an air of hesitation about him, an uncertainty in his green eyes. Jacob knew that look. He'd seen it time after time growing up. The kid wanted to be liked. He ruffled the boy's short blond hair. "Thanks. I was getting tired of hauling all that stuff by myself."

CJ smiled. It was his mother's smile, full of warmth and acceptance. It reached all the way down to Jacob's heart. He could, he realized, really like CJ. The strength of his feelings was a surprise. He'd never thought of children as human beings that one either liked or didn't. As shameful as it was to admit, even after all his research, he'd always thought of these two as appendages to their mother. He wanted Sass so he would accept them. It had been that simple, but now he got an inkling that his reasoning had been flawed. Accepting the kids wouldn't be enough.

Corrine wiggled in his arms, anxious to get down and explore with her brother. CJ immediately took her hand and eased her around the shovel so she wouldn't get hurt. He saw the love and pride in Sass' eyes as she watched the protective move, and he began to see why Sass had bolted. Hell, he would have bolted too, had he been in her shoes. This was a family he was moving in on. Not a group of three with two having no say in anything, but three individuals. This was a living, breathing family. He'd never had one of his own, but he remembered dreaming about wanting one. He touched Sass' arm to get her attention. "I won't hurt them."

The kids started a game of tag and then dashed over to their own yard to play on the swing set. Sass' gaze followed them. "If you mean that, you'll leave."

He heard the anger in her voice, the resentment, and beneath it all, the resigned sadness.

"I don't think so."

She turned on him then, her hair belling out from her face in a rich brown swirl. "Why not?"

A lock blew across her mouth. He stepped closer, ignoring the way her shoulders braced. He brushed the silken strands away from her cheek, his fingers lingering on her skin. "It's not my nature to give up on what I want."

That his statement pissed her off was evident by the way she folded her arms across her chest and lifted her chin. Nope. Five hundred bulbs were not going to be enough.

“You don’t want me, McConnally. You want the woman who came to visit you for the occasional week of fun, but this,” with a wave of her hand she indicated her house, her kids, and her appearance, “is the real me. This me isn’t free, and this me isn’t easy. This me has responsibilities and challenges you’ve never experienced in all your forty-one years of your freedom-chasing lifestyle. And,” she jabbed her index finger into his chest, “you know what, McConnally? I wouldn’t change it for the world. I like knowing my kids depend on me. I like being obligated to them. I like my neighbors and my friends. I like being involved in the community. I like every single chain that ties me to this earth, because I chose them. The same way I’ll choose, someday, a man to share my life with me.”

He slid his fingers down the side of her neck, under her hair, the coolness of the strands a direct contrast to the heat of her skin. She quivered under his touch, her breath breaking on a tiny gasp. He smiled, stroking his thumb over her lips as he tipped her head back. “I’m not apologizing for the life I had before I met you.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

Yes, she had. With every touch, every generous gesture she’d made toward him, with the very effort she’d made to play the game by his rules, she had been asking him for something in return. It had just taken him a while to figure out what it was. “And you did choose a man to share your life with. You chose me. It’s not a deal I’m letting you renege on.”

She winced as if he’d delivered a blow and turned to check on the kids, closing herself off from him as if they weren’t connected by touch. Her fingers bit into the upper sleeves of her coat, making deep dents in the dark blue fabric.

“You say that as if I should find it comforting.”

“You should.”

“Right.” Sass looked at Jacob standing before her, the sun shining on his hair, lighting it with fire. She remembered waking up once on the couch with his arms around her. She remembered squeezing her eyes shut against the sun, dreaming that

the moment could be frozen into forever. She remembered how much it had hurt when he had opened his eyes and drifted away. She remembered that she'd always known Jacob was temporary. "Well, I don't."

"Why the hell not?"

Corrine squealed. Sass spun around spotting Corrine immediately at her favorite pastime, watching the ducks. "Corrine, get away from the edge of the lake," Sass called, not turning back right away. Needing a minute. Behind her, she could feel Jacob staring at her. She took a breath and blinked back her tears. Hiding from the truth didn't change it. Her first marriage had taught her that. "Because you won't stay."

"You're wrong."

"No, I'm not. As soon as you discover the reality the pipe dream you're chasing turns into, you'll be gone."

She heard him move as the breeze sighed around them. His hands, large and heavy, settled on her shoulder. Dead leaves crunched beneath his feet. His big body pressed against her back. His cheek brushed her hair as softly as his lips brushed her ear and he whispered, "Take a chance on us."

Take a chance. Take a chance.

Temptation threaded with her heartbeat, ripping another layer from her soul. Behind her, Jacob stood, six-foot-three of nothing but pure masculinity. In front of her, her children laughed and frolicked. She'd stolen their laughter for a time when she'd divorced their father. She'd made herself a promise that she'd never do it again. She stepped out of his arms. "I can't."

Chapter Six

Laughter, cheers and an occasional bark dragged him from his sleep three days later. Jacob yanked his pillow over his head, blocking out the sound and light, neither of which the remnant of his migraine welcomed. The noise persisted, drifting through the lingering effects of the painkiller. The sound was coming from his yard, which shouldn't have contained anything louder than birdsong and squirrel chatter. He considered just letting it go away on its own, but he was renting this house, and he had a responsibility to the owner. By the time he got to his feet and had his pants on, his miserable mood had soured to foul. He cracked the blinds in the bedroom window. The light hit his eyes with the force of a hammer.

It took a minute for his eyes to stop tearing, but when they did, he couldn't believe what he was seeing. There, in the midst of his newly constructed flower garden, were two kids and what had to be the meanest-looking dog he'd ever seen. And they were digging. No, not digging, he corrected himself—excavating. CJ, obviously the foreman of this operation, pointed to a spot. The dog, which was hunkered down, every muscle tight in its body, ready to pounce, sprang into action. In a flurry of paws moving too fast to see, the dog had dirt flying. Corrine, squatting down with her back to him, jumped up and reached into the resulting hole. Jacob held his breath, afraid the dog's nails would cut her tiny arm.

He should have known better. Over the last few days he had noticed CJ had a flair for organization and detail. The minute Corrine had moved, he'd touched the dog, which had immediately resumed its hunched, just-give-me-the-signal position. Only this time, there was an ear-to-ear grin on its narrow face. There was no doubt about it. The dog was having a high old time undoing all his hard work of the last two days.

A muffled sound of victory from Corrine caught his attention. She held something above her head. She yelled again and waved it about. It was a tulip bulb. One of his carefully selected, ridiculously expensive tulip bulbs. The edges of his temper began to unravel. The last thread went when Corrine calmly passed the bulb to the dog who gave it a good crunch before CJ held out his hand for it. Jacob didn't wait to see what torture the boy put the bulb through. He spun on his heel, grabbed a sweatshirt and headed for the front door. It was time those kids learned some limits. Firm, clear, important limits.

Jacob got to within two feet of the trio without being noticed. He looked at the black dog, and his lip curled a bit. Some watch dog. The mutt was too busy digging to guard anything, let alone two children who should have been under lock and key. CJ was the first to notice him. His smile was one of happy greeting. Not an ounce of guilt in it.

"Hi."

"Hello." The smile on CJ's face shrunk a little with his terse greeting. Jacob shoved aside the niggles of guilt and reminded himself that he was in the right, and the kids needed a lesson. "Do you mind telling me what exactly you're doing?"

Corrine bounced to her feet. "We're waking 'em up."

She tossed a bulb to the dog. Jacob winced as the dog sunk its teeth into the bulb. That was one flower that wasn't ever waking up again. "Excuse me?"

CJ put his arm around the dog who snuffled his ear. His hand appeared very white against the dog's black coat. "Mom told us you were putting the flowers to bed now, so they would get their rest for spring."

"They can't be pretty and grow until they waked up." Corrine explained, taking the bulb back. She frowned at the crushed mess in her grubby hands. "They've slept a long time. It's wake-up time."

Obviously her highness was displeased with her subject's perceived laziness.

Jacob pinched the bridge of his nose, battling a sweep of pain. "Am I to understand that you've destroyed my garden trying to wake up my flowers?"

CJ let go of the dog and put his hands on his narrow jean-clad hips. His expression was superior. His tone patronizing. "Don't be silly. Spring isn't until March twenty-one."

Well that certainly cleared that up. Jacob pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead and rubbed, trying to ease the pressure there so he could think. He made a grab for the flower bulb in Corrine's hand. He needed it to illustrate his point. There was a sharp blow, and when he looked down, the dog had his hand between some fierce-looking teeth. There was no mistaking the intent in the dog's close-set eyes or loud snarl. If he twitched, his hand was pulp.

"Licorice, no!" CJ cried.

Licorice's snarls only grew louder.

"You're not allowed to touch us," Corrine said smugly, immensely pleased to be in charge of a situation involving an adult.

Jacob focused on the dog. He couldn't take his eyes off its face. Now that his first impression was gone, he swore that there was laughter in the damn mutt's eyes. He narrowed his gaze. The dog narrowed its eyes, too. The pressure on his hand, however, did not decrease. "Is this your dog?"

"She lives next door," CJ explained anxiously, grabbing the dog's collar. "Licorice, let Mr...Mr...let Jacob go."

Licorice paid him no mind. CJ let go of the dog and wrapped his arms around Jacob's hips, hugging him hard, his face pressed into the side of Jacob's stomach. "He's my friend."

Corrine was not to be outdone. She threw herself at his knees. "My Jacob," she declared in a dramatic sigh. The dog released his hand and had the gall to wag its tail.

"We weren't hurting your garden," CJ informed him, still holding him tightly. Jacob had to admire the kid's strategy. It was damn hard to work up to a lecture when he was involved in an expression of affection.

He dropped his hand to the boy's narrow back. "How do you figure that?"

"I had to show Corrine they were still sleeping." The look he slanted up at Jacob was full of older brother superiority. "She thinks spring is here."

Jacob looked around his once level, well-tended garden. It was pitted and lumped like a basin after a spring flood. "Looks to me like you did a thorough job proving spring isn't here yet."

Jacob felt CJ's start and guessed the kid was just now realizing the results of his handiwork. "We were going to put them back."

That ought to be something to see. "Does your mother know where you are?"

"Oh, no. She's showing a house."

So much for the hope Sass was using the kids as an opening gambit in mending their stalemate. Jacob frowned. "Who's watching you?"

"Our babysitter."

"She's taking a nappy," Corrine piped up while holding up her arms.

And that was what prompted this interest in his flower's sleep cycle, Jacob guessed as he lifted her highness up in his arms. He caught the wistful look CJ quickly suppressed at seeing his sister picked up. Jacob knew that left-out feeling. He reached out and ruffled his hair, bringing forth the kid's smile. Shit, the kid had a smile warmer than the sun. It felt good bringing it to the surface. Almost as good as it was going to feel to vent on the woman who was supposed to be watching these two.

"Let's go have a talk with your babysitter."

* * * * *

Sass stood in front of Jacob's door, not sure whether the primary emotion she felt was anger or fear. Since she'd come home two minutes ago and found Jacob's note on the counter, she'd demonstrated an amazing ability to ricochet between the two.

Babysitter fired. Have confiscated the kids. We're holed up next door.

Jacob

Why had he fired the babysitter? She stepped onto the porch. Good manners demanded she knock. Anxiety overrode common courtesy, and she ended up bursting in, expecting to catch Jacob in the middle of...she wasn't sure just what. It certainly wasn't what she found him in.

Jacob was sprawled on the couch. If she wasn't mistaken, that was Corrine's special blanket draped over his knees. CJ's stuffed bunny, which he'd outgrown but still considered special, was wedged between Jacob's cheek and the arm of the couch. From the looks of Jacob's bleary eyes, it was taking everything he had to stay awake. And from the look of the debris-strewn house, he might have nodded off a time or two.

"Mind telling me what you are doing with my children?" she asked as she slowly dropped her purse to the floor. It never ceased to amaze her how quickly her children could take a house from company perfect to D-Day havoc.

"Keeping them safe." He struggled up to his elbows. Sass crossed the short distance between them. As she passed a wing-back chair, she dropped her coat into it. With the back of her hand pressed to his head, she pushed him back to a prone position. Her free hand she slipped under his sweatshirt to rest against his belly. The muscles immediately contracted and his breath caught. A quick glance at his face told her why. He wanted her. The knowledge settled deep inside, under her defenses, weakening them from within.

"You don't have a fever," she informed him, withdrawing her hand from beneath his shirt.

"Headache," he muttered.

She could see the signs now. The pallor beneath his tan, the lines of strain around his mouth. "A nasty one from the looks of things."

His smile was more of a grimace. "Not so bad anymore."

He caught her hand and tugged her down to sit on the couch beside him. She told herself expediency was the reason she allowed it, not because she craved his nearness

or the intimacy they'd lost. It was so hard to resist Jacob. He made her believe in rainbows and the pots of gold at the end of them.

"Where are the kids?" It was natural for her to rest her hand on his chest for balance while her mother's ear searched for the children.

Jacob placed his hand over hers and the discord in their relationship vanished as if it had never been. "They're in the kitchen making me juice."

Sass heard water running. And a hastily smothered "rats" from behind the closed kitchen door. Something rolled across the counter and thumped to the floor. In unison, two young voices said, "Uh-oh!"

Sass removed her hand from Jacob's. "I'd better go see what they're up to."

His fingers gripped her thigh, keeping her put. "If you give them a chance, they'll clean it up themselves."

Sass got to her feet, brushing his hand from her leg. "What on Earth makes you think they intend to clean it up?"

"CJ and I had a talk while you were gone. He'll want to clean it up."

He caught her hand as his eyes ran over her from head to toe, lingering on her breasts beneath her pink silk shirt with the intensity of a touch, until they swelled and the nipples peaked. With a completely satisfied grin, he moved that hotter-than-a-touch gaze to her groin. As she watched, his eyelids flickered, and he licked his lips.

As if his imagination was connected to her pussy, her muscles contracted. He released her hand, bringing his to the side of her hip. She could have stepped away, but she made the mistake of glancing at his face. She hadn't known blue eyes could be that expressive, hold that much passion. The heat in his gaze seared through the last of her defenses, holding her hostage to the emotion between them. He cupped her right buttock, squeezing briefly, tracing the swell of her hip before circling forward until he grazed the front of her mound through her pants. His glance flicked hers as the jolt of white-hot pleasure shot through her. A purely masculine smile spread his lips before he

pressed his fingertips deliberately into the seam running between her legs. "You look good enough to eat."

Every nerve ending in her body leapt to life. Her hips tipped forward, encouraging his touch even as she captured his hand in hers in a last ditch effort for control. "What happened to Mrs. Sheridan?"

The question came out a broken squeak, lacking substance. She wasn't surprised that he ignored it. His palm turned in her grip. His fingers slid between her thighs, cupping her intimately. The incipient heat, the impending caress, hovering just beyond delivery, teased her passion higher. Desire licked along her nerves like a living thing, devouring common sense, destroying resistance. Her pussy, her soul wept with anticipation. This was Jacob. And he wanted her. She gripped his wrist like a lifeline as he murmured, "Part your legs."

It didn't occur to her to resist. The husky order blended with the tension in her core, coiling tighter and tighter with every second his touch lingered...doing nothing. Promising everything. She closed her eyes, letting the power, the beauty of wanting him sweep through her. It had been so long since she'd felt this magic, and she was so hungry for him. "Mrs. Sheridan?"

"Come for me, and I'll tell you."

Her eyes flew open. She looked down. He couldn't mean it. Her kids were in the next room. Might come in any minute. But all she found in his gaze was that simmering passion and a sensual determination that brooked no argument. "The kids..."

His fingers rubbed high up, just under her clit. Weakness seeped into her knees as pleasure bloomed in her center. "I'll hear them before they come in."

"They might peek." She'd die if they were caught. She'd die if he stopped.

His nail scraped her sensitive point once. Twice. She bit her lip on a betraying whimper. His palm opened and pressed up. "I can feel your heat."

The whimper burst past her control. Her knees buckled. Jacob caught her weight in his palm, supporting her. She braced her hands on his shoulders. His finger stroked further back, reminding her of their last encounter.

“The door squeaks, and I have a clear view,” he elaborated as he pressed high and hard, staying with her as her hips bucked, not granting her any respite from the lust riding her principles into the ground. “Trust me, baby. Let me make you feel good.”

For a second, she couldn’t think of anything except the way his thumb and index finger were burrowing into her pussy and ass through the thin barrier of her clothing. “Do you promise?”

“I won’t let you down, Sass.”

Beneath the husky timbre of desire, there was another inflection. One she knew she should be paying attention to, but then his thumb centered on that taut, eager bundle of nerves and all coherent thought fled. She gave him the trust he asked for. Gave him her heart, her soul, things that had always been his, and let him stroke her to heaven. And along the way, she closed her eyes and pretended, one more time, that this meant more than this moment. More than sex.

The climax hit her with no warning. Fast, hard and all-encompassing it crashed through her in a thundering wave of unbearable sensation. She could only gasp his name as her breath seized and her muscles locked. The scream started way down deep, rumbled and shook, before exploding outward. Before the first note hit the air, Jacob yanked her against his chest, pressing her face into the hard pad of muscle, muffling her pleasure and her tears against the broad expanse. Cradling her as she shook, whispering nonsense in her ear as the last shudders rocked her resolve.

When she regained control, he was still holding her, his big hands gentle, a broad smile upon his face. One she couldn’t begrudge him. He was the only man who could wring her out so dry, a dishrag had more substance. She touched the corner of his smile. “What about you?”

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips, teasing the palm with his tongue, his eyes crinkling at the corner as her well-primed body quivered to attention. "You can owe me one."

"It's not right—"

"I'm not asking for right, baby, just a fair shot."

She searched his expression. He wasn't talking about sex. He wanted a fair shot with her and her kids. Oh God, she wanted to give it to him, but if she did and he later walked away, he'd take her heart and soul with him. She'd never survive. She closed her eyes and took a breath. "What happened to Mrs. Sheridan?"

"I fired her."

Jacob was not vindictive or mean. He wouldn't have fired her without a reason. A good reason. "Why?"

"She was drunk."

Of all the things she had expected him to say, that wasn't it. "Drunk?"

"And passed out. Apparently, that's her modus operandi. She comes. She drinks. She sleeps. At least according to the kids."

Sass sat up, running her hand through her hair, tugging at the snarls as if the small pain could create sense from chaos. "She had such good references. I had no idea..." How could she have had no idea?

Jacob's hand settled on her back, soothing, warm. She had to steel herself against the lure of his touch. It would be so easy to rely on him, to become dependant.

"How could I not know?" she whispered, staring at the oak door between her and her children, the weight of guilt pressing down on her.

Jacob's hand opened wide on her spine, covering her rib cage, as if he wanted to shield her from the reality she couldn't escape. He was always trying to protect her, but he couldn't. Nothing could. She pushed her hands off her face. The tremor in them reflected the shaking in her soul. How could she have messed up so thoroughly?

"It's not your fault, Sass."

She couldn't look at him. "Then whose fault is it?"

Jacob's sigh blew across her neck. "She's a functional alcoholic, sweetheart. Unless you came at the right time, there's no way you could know."

The words didn't assuage her guilt. She could have lost one or both of her children, all because she'd trusted the wrong person. She sucked in a breath, holding it. His fingers pressed on her ribs, rubbing lightly, encouraging her to relax, to lean against him. She did, resting against his chest, just for a minute, listening to his heartbeat as CJ's bunny pressed into her cheek while in her mind, a thousand "what might haves" – none of them pretty – ran through her head.

"The kids are fine," Jacob said in his deep, soothing voice. "Nothing happened."

"But something could have –"

He kneaded her back, massaging away the painful tension pulling her spine so tight she thought she'd shatter. "But it didn't."

No. But probably only because Jacob had been there and had taken charge. Sass turned and kissed his chest through his well-worn sweatshirt, then his chin and, lastly his lips. "Thank you."

His hand slid up to cradle her head in his palm. She loved it when he held her like that. Strong, tender, and in control. She relaxed into his kiss, letting the pleasure wash away the uncertainty and the loneliness, focusing on this minute. This now. It was easier than thinking about tomorrow.

Tomorrow. Oh God, this weekend! She pushed off his chest. "What am I going to do about Saturday?"

"What's Saturday?"

She lowered her voice. "I've got a conference to attend. I'm supposed to give a seminar on writing from the heart for the first-time novelist." It was her first big

moment as a published writer. It might even get her a bit of press coverage. She closed her eyes. "I'm going to have to cancel."

"I could watch them."

He got her full attention with that outrageous statement. Even pale and red-eyed from illness, Jacob looked all male. Someone who belonged in the pages of *Playgirl*, not in her kitchen slapping together peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Jacob a babysitter? Sass simply could not imagine it. Not for her two children who had been known to intimidate the most experienced of caregivers. "I really don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I just don't think you'll be up to it."

He sat up, the paleness of his skin and the wince as he reached upright not diminishing the blow of his displeasure. "I took care of them today."

She looked around his house and bit her tongue on the immediate retort. "CJ and Corrine can be...trying."

Jacob waved that description aside like it was nonsense. "They're great kids, full of energy and independence."

He had no idea of the trouble he was inviting. Hot on the heels of that thought came another one. Maybe he deserved the dose of reality a weekend with her kids would impart. A taste of real parenthood. At least then they could stop this charade.

"I'm sitting here thinking," she said, holding his gaze with hers, "that I really ought to let you see what the real world is like."

His gaze didn't flinch from hers. "Go right ahead, Sass. I told you, I'm ready for the kids."

"Not my kids."

"Try me."

Chapter Seven

Sass hesitated Saturday night before putting her key in the lock and opening her front door. She didn't really expect to find Jacob in a good mood. More than likely he'd be spitting bullets and ready to murder her children after spending the entire day with them. A day way harder than it should have been for reasons that had seemed so sensible in the panicked state of mind in which she'd made them, but appeared so shallow and self-centered after spending the three hour drive home analyzing her conduct of the last month. Fear, she decided, did not make for sound decisions and she hadn't been fair to Jacob.

Jacob had been trying so hard with her kids this week. He had good intentions, but every time CJ's smile faltered, or Corrine's eyes teared up, he would reverse a perfectly sound decision. Her kids weren't stupid. They recognized an easy mark when they saw one. Sass could have put a stop to it by taking Jacob aside and talking with him. Heck, she could have stepped in when her kids had cast her hesitant, I-know-I've-gone-too-far looks, but she hadn't. By her silence, she had given tacit approval to their behavior and had undermined every effort Jacob made to show he could handle the role of father.

All because she was afraid to take a chance. She didn't know when she'd turned into such a chicken shit, but it had occurred to her on the car ride home that she didn't like herself like this. She looked at her key poised at the entrance to the lock. Her fear may have cost her a good man, because no matter how good a man Jacob was, everyone had their breaking point and with the way she'd set him up, in all likelihood Jacob had reached his today. And since staying out here on the porch wasn't going to change anything, she might as well go in and face the music.

She, sighed, slid the key in the lock, and stepped into the foyer. She halfway expected to find Jacob asleep on the couch. Lord knows, she would be if she had just spent the day with her kids.

He wasn't on the couch. He was in her small kitchen, mopping the floor. On his hands and knees.

"I have a perfectly good mop."

He gave the floor an aggravated swipe with the cloth. "Not anymore."

She looked at his hair, which had been neatly tied back this morning, but was now escaping its confinement in rampant chunks. She set her purse on the table. She had to push aside what appeared to be three decks of playing cards. Straightening the mess was a convenient distraction. "Why not?"

"Because CJ used it to clean up the jelly."

One dollop of jelly didn't ruin a mop. As discreetly as possible, she strolled by the trashcan. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted the contents. Well, that solved that mystery. A dollop might not ruin a mop, but a whole super-size jar would certainly do a number on it.

"Well, then why don't you let me finish cleaning up the last of the jelly, and you can go home and get some sleep?"

Jacob looked up. His gaze traveled from the blue and white pumps on her feet over her blue silk skirt and jacket before coming to rest on her face. He was not a happy camper. If she was to speculate, she'd say he was holding on to his temper by a thread.

"It would take more than sleep to make me forget this day. A keg of beer might get me started on the job, but it sure as hell wouldn't finish it." He got to his feet in a quick surge of power. He threw the rag he'd been wiping the floor with into the sink. "And I'm not cleaning the jelly off the floor. I'm cleaning up orange juice."

"Oh." She eyed the refrigerator. She was dying of thirst, but from the set of Jacob's shoulders, it would be worth more than her life to set foot on his pristine floor. She

sighed, veered to the left and drifted into the living room. In the corner the tree stood bedecked in lights, ready for decorating. With all he'd had to cope with today, he'd managed to put the tree up. She walked over and plugged it in. The lights glowed steady for a heartbeat, and then one strand at a time began to blink. She touched a bright red light. He must have heard her telling CJ this morning that she'd try to get the tree up this weekend and also heard the child's disappointed response. The man was going to drive himself insane if he continued to attempt to be everything to her and the kids. He needed to learn there was more than just giving in a family. With a couple swipes of her hands she knocked the empty light boxes off the couch and took a seat. He needed to learn to take.

As soon as she sat, Jacob was in front of her, feet planted a good shoulder's width apart, hands fisted on his hips. The set of his jaw said his day had been harder than even she had imagined. The first words out of his mouth confirmed her suspicions. "Your kids are monsters."

This was supposed to be news? "I warned you that they could be trying."

"Trying?" He ran his hand through his hair, found the strands randomly escaping from his ponytail and viciously ripped out the elastic holding his hair back. "What I want to know is where did the two little angels I played with all week go?"

"Should I infer from your rather...frayed demeanor that you didn't encounter them today?"

"Hell, I'm not even sure the children I watched today were yours."

"I'll go check, if you want, but I'm pretty sure they are."

"Then I think you ought to take the royalties from your book and set up a psychiatric fund for those two. CJ is borderline manic and Corrine has—" He was forced to halt his diatribe to take a breath. Apparently, it helped, because he took another. He picked up a handful of metal cars from the floor, stacked them on the table, and met Sass' gaze before informing her, "Corrine definitely has multiple personalities."

"How many?"

"What?"

"Personalities. How many personalities does she have?"

"I counted five in the hour it took me to get her to bed. And trust me, none of them are pleasant."

"But CJ has...?"

"Two." He paced off the small rectangle of her living room. "Only two, and if I were you, I'd be thanking my lucky stars for that. He could be," he couldn't hide his shudder, "like Corrine."

"Can I ask you something?"

Jacob dropped into the recliner across from her. His head lolled back against the chair as he waved her request forward. "Fire away."

"What did you give CJ to drink today?"

He was immediately on the defensive. "He had some orange juice, some of that LactAid milk, a little Pepsi, and some punch."

"Punch? I don't have any of that here."

"We went to the store."

"Why?"

He opened his eyes to glare at her. "Because you didn't have anything in the house the kids like to eat."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't get on your high horse, I'm the injured party here. You set me up, woman."

She winced. "It wasn't exactly a test, more of a proving of a point."

"Call it what you want, I knew what it was. I even expected it. I did not, however, anticipate any major problems in overcoming it."

"Overcoming what?"

"Sabotage."

Sass took off her suit jacket. As she draped it over the back of the couch, she said very carefully, "I did not sabotage your day with my kids."

"What do you call not having anything in the house the kids liked to eat?"

"Par for the course."

"Yeah. Right."

It wasn't worth arguing about with him. "Can we get back to the punch question?"

"Sure." He flicked his wrists in a despairing gesture that said, "Why the hell not?"

"What kind did you get them?"

"The red stuff that you usually buy."

Her eyebrows rose. "I don't buy them red stuff."

"Sure you do. There's a picture on the bottle of all this red fruit and a sappy little —" Realization dawned in a lowering of his brows. "They conned me, didn't they?"

"Well, you'd have to recount a blow-by-blow description of the conversation for me to say for sure, but I think it's safe to assume you've been had." She took pity on him and explained, "Red dye makes CJ hyperactive emotionally."

"He said he liked it."

"He does, it just doesn't like him back."

The eyes that collided with hers were accusing. "You could have warned me."

"I could have, but I didn't think it was necessary after spending fifty dollars at the grocery store yesterday in order to spare you just such an...exciting trip."

She noticed his hands were clenching and unclenching in his lap. There was a certain rhythm to the action that made her wonder if he was counting.

"I don't suppose Corrine has the same allergy?"

"No. Red dye doesn't seem to bother her in the least."

"Then don't be too hasty in discarding the trust fund."

“Corrine has a flair for the dramatic.”

“I don’t think you can dismiss it that easily.”

She felt so sorry for his total exhaustion that she elaborated. “She is also extremely intelligent and stubborn.”

This time he was the one who had the pity in his gaze. “Uh-huh.”

“She is also three years old and, as you mentioned earlier in the week, looking for limits.”

“I asked her what she wanted for lunch.” He got up from his chair. “She said yogurt, baby carrots and orange juice. It sounded healthy, so I gave it to her. She thanked me very sweetly.” He headed into the family room. Sass turned in her seat so she could keep him in sight. He was obviously looking for something. “She took one bite of the yogurt and declared herself allergic.” Again Sass was the recipient of one of those accusing glares. “She claimed it gave her a headache. The carrots were yucky. She spit them out on the floor. The orange juice she declared unpotable, because the carrot she dipped in it made it so.”

“Is there a point to this?”

“Yes. Your daughter has multiple personality disorder.” He was bent over an end table, rummaging through the debris. His voice had a slightly hollow quality due to his position. “I took the food away and put her to bed. Five minutes later, she came out holding her tummy, claiming she was starving.”

“I hope you sent her right back to bed.”

Jacob spun around. “She was crying!”

“She should have eaten her lunch.”

“Well,” he glared at the fingers of his right hand. “I made her a new lunch.”

Which Sass was willing to bet she hadn’t eaten either. Corrine was not big on the midday meal. Jacob confirmed her guess.

“She didn’t eat that either.”

"I know I wrote down on the sheet that Corrine sometimes doesn't eat lunch. Didn't you read it?"

He ran his fingers through his hair as he stood up straight, keys in his left hand. "Skipping meals is not healthy, and she can't afford it. Hell, a stiff breeze would blow her away."

And all that fighting with her strong-willed daughter over a meal she didn't want had left him looking like the slightest breeze would blow him away, she thought. He was a good man, and a determined one, but he was no match for her daughter. Corrine could turn on and off the tears with an ease that would make a Hollywood actress turn green with envy. "Did she take her nap eventually?"

A touch of guilt crossed his face, and Sass knew the answer before he gave it. "Well, no. She's afraid of her room, you know."

Only when it was time to sleep, she thought.

"I held her and rocked her for awhile, but as soon as I put her down, she'd start screaming and crying."

Well, the reason for that protest wasn't too hard to figure. "You ignored her, of course."

He looked appalled at the very notion. "She was sobbing and begging me to help her. I couldn't. No one could."

Yes, you could, Sass thought. You could if you went through it every day and saw the light of victory in the little minx's eyes when the ploy works. Of course if tears didn't work, she switched to a new tactic, but apparently, Jacob hadn't held out long enough to know that.

"So, bottom line, Corrine didn't take a nap."

"No and I can tell you this, I was never as happy to see bedtime as I was tonight. If one wasn't crying or screaming, the other was hollering and pointing a finger."

"At least you got them down."

“CJ was a breeze. He ranted and raved all the way to the bedroom, but by the time I had Corrine’s teeth brushed, he was out cold. Corrine took a little longer.”

“I’ll bet.” Curiosity made her ask. “How did you get her to go to sleep?”

He looked a little sheepish as he confessed, “I stood in her doorway glaring at her for the hour and a half it took her to grow bored and fall asleep.”

“I’m impressed. It usually takes sitters two hours to get her down.”

“Well, don’t be too impressed, by that time it was a matter of principle.” He turned toward the door. The only indication she had of his mood was the hand he slid under his hair to rub the back of his neck. The keys jangled in his hand. There was something so...odd in the gesture it took her a moment to register it. Defeat.

“Do you know I actually yelled at CJ today? I didn’t just raise my voice, but I full out yelled at him.”

“I’m sure he’ll recover.”

In a voice that sounded as tired as the hills, he said, “Well, I’m not sure I will.” His keys jangled discordantly as he grabbed his coat out of the closet. The door swung open, echoing the forced calm he’d adopted. He paused, shoulders squared, hand on the knob. “You were right, Sass. I’m not cut out for this.”

Chapter Eight

She should let him go, just let him walk out the door. It was what she'd been fighting for. What she'd thought she'd wanted. It was certainly safer than what she was about to do, but she trusted Jacob more than she trusted herself. And if today, heck, the last week had proved anything, it was that Jacob wasn't afraid to reach for what he wanted. He studied, he researched and he learned as he went, but once he decided on something, he didn't veer from his course. And he was determined to have her as his wife and her children as his. For better. For worse. And everything in between. She reached for the buttons on her shirt. What more could a woman want. She got up. "I know what I want for Christmas."

He glanced over his shoulder, his expression too blank. Too uncaring. Damn it! She'd hurt him.

"That's not my problem."

She walked toward him, putting as much come-hither roll into her gait as she could muster, all the while unbuttoning her shirt. "What if I make it your problem?"

He faced her, the ruggedness of his features cast harsher in the shadow of the foyer, giving her no clue to his thoughts. "What do you want?"

She stopped five feet away from him and three buttons short of total exposure. "You."

She reached for the front clasp of her bra. His gaze dropped. She popped the clasp. Her breasts spilled free beneath the open lapels of her blouse. His tongue moistened his bottom lip.

She smiled and reached for the side on her skirt. "Close the door."

He dropped his coat to the floor. One push of his foot and the door thumped shut.

“Lock it.”

His lids lowered, his head canted to the left and that wicked smile she loved ghosted his lips as his right brow went up. “Make me.”

She kicked off her heels and unzipped her skirt. She felt feminine and powerful as he watched the silky material slide. She caught it halfway down her hip with one hand. “Stalemate.”

“Not quite.” He crooked his finger. She went.

His fingers slid through her hair to curve around the back of her skull. “I don’t know squat about raising children.”

She tilted her head back so she could see his face. “I don’t have a great track record as a wife.”

“I’m going to mess up. Hurt you. Hurt the kids.”

“On purpose?”

His eyes were almost black in the low light. “No.”

She stepped in until the heat of his body teased her breasts. “Will you cheat on me?”

“Never.”

“Beat me?” He drew her up onto her toes toward the descent of his mouth. His “No” brushed the surface of her lips in a shivery caress.

“Are you going to run out when things get tough?”

Her slip and skirt fell to the floor, revealing her thigh-high nylons and panties.

“Hell no.”

She braced her hands on his chest. “Then I guess we’ll have to do like everyone else does and work it out as we go along.”

“That’s your plan?”

“Do you have a better one?”

“No.”

“Then that’s the one I’m going with.”

His laugh vibrated against her as his forehead pressed to hers. “For a professional worrier, you’re taking some awful risks.”

“It’s your fault.”

“How do you figure that?”

She kissed his chin. “You made me believe.”

“In what?”

“In you.” After today, there was no way she could ever think he wasn’t serious about being a good parent. He might be clueless in some areas, and trying too hard in others, but he was committed to them. Really committed. Joy bubbled alongside passion as she nipped his chin, running her tongue over the stubble-roughened curve. “You’re going to be a wonderful father.”

With a shift of his hands, he took her weight, supporting her, facilitating the caress. “How can you be so sure?”

She couldn’t begrudge him his need for the words. She’d put him through hell. She glanced pointedly around the remnants of her clean house, the smile within breaking free. “You’ve got staying power.”

He tipped her face up to his, his gaze dropping to the smile on her lips, pausing there a moment before, with a quirk of his mouth and an arch of his brow, he met her gaze. “I let your kids run roughshod over me, and for that, I get you?”

There was a world of satisfaction beneath that query—more than a hint of possession in the curve of the hands supporting her. Other men might have had qualms, needed reassurance, but not Jacob. Mature, confident, his determination ran as deep as his emotions. Once he’d set his heart on her, she’d never really stood a chance. Thank God.

“No.” She stroked his cheek, the strong column of his throat, down to the open collar of his shirt, sliding her fingers beneath, savoring his heat, his strength. The love he offered her so freely. “You showed kindness, patience and love in the face of great provocation, and lucky me, that means I get you.”

He shook his head and brought her groin snug to his. “I like it the other way around. My own little piece of Sass for Christmas.”

She would have protested that sad play on words, but his mouth was back on hers, rubbing gently, his tongue licking lightly at her upper lip while his palm curved around her thigh, sliding toward her knee, pulling her leg up to his hip, opening her for the intrusion of his thigh, the pressure of his cock through his jeans.

His tongue tapped the corner of her mouth, sending a jolt of sensation shuddering down her spine, dragging out a moan. “Oh, I like that.”

So did she. She liked even more how his cock surged against her at her reaction. She liked knowing she could turn him on. “Hold still.”

His eyebrow rose, but he didn’t move. “Why?”

“Because I want to open my present.”

His shirt offered no resistance, the buttons sliding easily from their holes. She pushed it off his shoulders, working it over the bulge of his biceps but leaving it tangled at his wrists. He tugged, holding his wrists out from his back as far as the shirt would allow. “You forgot something.”

She leaned forward and kissed the small round nipple atop his right pectoral while she touched the pulse pounding in his throat. More evidence of his desire. “No, I didn’t.”

While he searched her gaze for her meaning, she pressed against his chest, backing him up the four steps until his back hit the door. His eyebrow rose higher. “Feeling feisty?”

“Very.”

He tugged at his hands as she reached for the snap of his jeans. She shook her head. "You always take over just when I'm having fun, but tonight you're my present, and I want to open you and play with you without interference."

"And what about what I want?"

She held his gaze as she unsnapped his jeans and slid the zipper down, watching the flare of passion narrow his gaze as his body went completely still. "That will have to wait until I'm done."

She tucked her hand inside the open fly, finding his cock hard and ready for her. She gave it a gentle squeeze. It throbbed and jerked within its tight confines.

"You're playing with fire," he told her as if that should somehow scare her. She shook her head at him again, slid her hands under the waistband of his jeans on either side of his lean hips, and then around to the back, pushing the material down as she went, following them to the floor, until she was on her knees before him, his thick, hard cock dragged down by its own size, straining to reach her. She cradled it in her palm, petting it, marveling at its sheer beauty. "I love your cock."

"I'd rather you loved me."

She shook her head. As if there was any doubt that she did. "I've loved you since the day I met you." She brought him to her mouth, lapping gently at the silken head before elaborating, "But I love your cock, too."

With a twist of his torso, he reached for her. Threads popped. His body jerked. His torso twisted, and while he managed to get some reach, the shirt held. She ignored his efforts, concentrating on the only thing that interested her. His cock. She leaned in. His fingertips touched her cheek. She closed her eyes on the rightness of the moment. A tap had her lifting her gaze. He had that smile on his face, that sensual, gentle melt-her-to-her-core sexy smile that made it oh so clear he liked what he saw, who she was. "Show me how much."

She did, swirling her tongue over the broad head before working him into her mouth. Curving her fingers around the rest, she pumped them lightly along his

engorged shaft as she took him to the back of her throat, struggling not to gag as he bottomed out before retracing her path back up to the pulsing tip. His hips bucked and the door rattled as she lingered there, taunting him with little flicks and erratic pulses of suction. She teased him twice more before easing him in again, taking him as deeply as she could before backing up, doing it again and again, picking up speed as she went, matching her pace to the panting rhythm of his breath.

His fingers brushed her cheek as his hips pushed high. "Fuck!"

His curse, harsh and sexy, settled into her satisfaction, sinking deeper, finding the throb of her own desire. It was incredibly erotic to please Jacob. She traced a line down his cock to his ball sac, skating her finger to the side, tracing the shape, learning him. All the while she watched his expression. Watched his face set in harsh lines, his mouth press for control, and above all, his eyes burn with that inner fire and a promise of retribution.

A shiver snaked down her spine. She couldn't wait. She cupped his balls and squeezed delicately. His whole body jerked as a bead of moisture appeared at the tip of his cock. She watched it swell and grow. She had a surprise for him tonight. She wasn't pulling back. Wasn't going to worry about how it would look if she didn't do it right. She skimmed a path from his heavy balls up his shaft with her finger, marveling at how smooth his skin was over the surging power beneath. Everything about Jacob was powerful, from his build to the force of his personality. And he was hers. All hers. From beginning to end.

She leaned forward, holding his gaze as she parted her lips, letting him see the pink of her tongue as she slowly, deliberately, took that bead of moisture for her own, savoring his unique flavor as it spread through her mouth, licking around the spongy head long after the initial taste had faded. His moan rolled over her with the potency of a caress. She understood now why he liked making her come so much. There was something addictively satisfying about pleasing Jacob. Something fundamentally right.

She drew her lips back from her teeth, letting him feel the hard edge before, with the utmost care, she rubbed them back and forth.

He wrenched in her grip. Another curse ripped the quiet of the room. More stitches popped. And then, quietly, hoarsely, "Take off your blouse."

She paused, his cock balanced on her tongue, old insecurities surging to the fore. One glance at his face was all it took to put them to rest. A man who looked like he'd kill if he didn't get what he needed was not going to sweat a stretch mark. And darn, but she liked bringing that look to his face. She let his cock drop to her chest as she unbuttoned her cuffs. With a little shimmy the shirt and bra hit the floor. She thrust her shoulders back and her breasts forward.

No woman had ever received a sweeter compliment than his hoarsely uttered, "Oh yeah."

His hips bucked, spearing his cock up over her collarbone into the hollow of her throat.

Pride welled beside desire. She shook her hair back off her face and laughed. "You like my breasts."

"I love your breasts," he corrected in that deep growl that signaled the beginning of the end to his control. "And your mouth, that sweet little pussy, and that incredibly tight ass."

She pumped him through her hands, keeping his cock tucked close, alternating the pressure and the speed, enjoying the moment too much to let him come yet.

A bead of pre-come dampened the hollow of her throat. She dipped her finger into the small smear, bringing it to her mouth before thoroughly lapping it off her finger, making sure he had a full view of every flick, every swirl.

A shudder shook him from head to toe. He yanked at the shirt binding his hands. "No more teasing," he growled.

“I’ll decide when I’m done.” Rising to her knees, she let his saliva-slick cock drop to the hollow of her breasts. More pre-come dripped on her flesh. She cupped her breasts in her hands, flicking her nipples with her index fingers as she pushed in, creating a hot, tight channel for his cock.

She’d never looked so beautiful, kneeling before him, challenging him, her small hands cupping the ripe mounds of her breasts, her fingers caressing those taut peaks, and his cock—his aching, about-to-burst cock—caught in the scented valley between. She was beautiful, sexy, and clearly intent on killing him with pleasure.

He bent his knees and thrust up, his shaft sliding easily, delight shooting like a spear through his groin, ricocheting outward, stealing the strength from his arms. He did it again and again. On the fourth thrust she dipped her head, the cool silk of her hair brushing his groin, blocking his view, but nothing could block the sensation of her hot, tight mouth closing on the tip of his cock and the sharp lash of her tongue along the sensitive tip.

He dropped his head back against the door, bracing himself to take the torment she was so determined to hand out, but he wasn’t going to last long at this rate. Her mouth was too aggressive, her tongue too skilled, her breasts too soft. Son of a bitch, he loved her. “Baby, you’re going to make me come.”

No response.

“Sass, if you don’t stop, I’m going to come.” Her response was to hum a sexy little noise deep in her throat and to take him deeper, harder. He bucked as she scraped him lightly with her teeth, lust overruling caution. In a minute, she was going to get more than she’d bargained for. He gritted his teeth as his balls pulled up tight, straining for control. Her hot little hand cupped his balls, and with a press of her finger behind, she burned away the last of it. With an ease that had her eyes widening, he ripped the shirt in half. He took her face in his hands. Her beautiful, loving face. He tipped her chin, watching his cock pierce the barrier of her lips. God, she was incredible.

“That’s it. Just like that, sweetheart.” Her tongue fluttered along his length, her hands squeezed his balls in time with his pumping. He touched the corner of her mouth with his thumb as his cock slid out. “Do you want me to come in this sweet mouth, baby? Is that what you want?”

She nodded, her teeth catching on the edge of his cock, drawing a spurt of come past his control. Her eyes flew wide. Then darkened.

“Easy.”

She swallowed fast. He pressed deep. The contractions of her throat were an unbearable caress.

“Oh yeah.” He flipped the remnants of the shirt over her back as he slid out and back in, his hand at the base of her skull keeping her head tipped to the best angle. She started to gag.

He stroked the corners of her fully stretched mouth. “Shhh. Just breathe through your nose and relax.”

He held himself there for a second, letting the heat of her mouth, the ripples of her tongue and throat coax him to a roaring need and then withdrew. The air was cool against his wet flesh. Heat and curiosity darkened her gaze.

“Put your hands on your nipples.” Her eyebrows went up but she did as he ordered. Her lips parted and that little pink tongue came out and wet her lips. A tilt of his hips and his cock touched her tongue, tip to tip. “Lick it.”

She did, rubbing the rough surface of her tongue over the broad expanse, wiggling it into the slit. The pressure in his balls was agonizing. He wanted, needed to come, but not now. Not yet. “Now squeeze those pretty nipples. Make them feel good while I fuck this sweet mouth.”

Again there was that hesitation and then her mouth opened wider and his cock slid home, into the scalding depths of her mouth. Her fingertips contracted, squeezing her nipples flat. But not enough. Not nearly hard enough.

As he pushed his cock into her mouth, the roughness of her tongue and the searing heat sent a shudder through him that wouldn't stop, just kept repeating over and over as she worked him with a delicate suction.

He had to work just as hard to find his voice. "Harder."

Her nipples shown white between her fingers. Her eyes closed as she squirmed. Her scent rose to greet him. She was enjoying this. "That's right baby. Make them feel good. Make yourself feel good. Get that tight pussy all wet and ready for me."

She moaned, and the erratic vibration combined with the strong suction tore coherency from his control. He grabbed her head and plunged deep. She gagged. He swore and tried to back off, determined to keep this easy, but she wouldn't let him. Her fingers worked her nipples with erotic roughness, her mouth worked him with the same roughness—making demands, pushing aside his attempts to be gentle until he forgot about caution, forgot about everything except the burning need to give her what she wanted, as she wanted it.

Hot, wet and wild.

And she took him with the same fervor, sucking hard when he would have held back. Opening her mouth, her throat to his thrusts, demanding with every caress, every touch that he come for her.

Her gaze met his—heavy-lidded, intent. Her right hand left her breast, revealing the red, swollen nipple perched atop the full curve. His mouth watered. He wanted that hard nub, wanted to hear her cries as he pressed it between the roof of his mouth and his tongue the way she liked, holding it there, squeezing...

Her fingers curled around his shaft, grabbing his attention before dropping out of sight between her spread thighs. When they came back into view, they were shiny with her cream.

"Son of a bitch." He was never going to make it. She was too hot, too confident, and knew too damn well what it did to him to see her pleasure. Her smile, more a crinkle of

her eyes than a move of her lips was the only warning he had before those fingers slipped between his legs, between his buttocks.

“Sass—”

Unfamiliar pressure cut off his warning. Her sultry gaze held his as she entered, searched and found the spot she wanted. Fire shot through his center. His knees buckled as his cock popped free of the wet heat of her mouth. Her tongue flicked her lips as he leaned back against the door, his body howling in agony at the sudden deprivation. He needed her mouth. Needed her. Soft, sweet, bold and aggressive—however she needed to be, he wanted her. He tugged her hair, pulling her toward his cock as her finger pressed and rubbed. She resisted his urging, her mouth an unbearable hair’s width from his cock, her lips parted, her breath a fluttery caress, her smile pure witchery.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her face. “Son of a bitch, you’re beautiful.”

The last word broke on a hoarse cry as, with a firm crook of her finger and a seductive “Come for me”, she tore his control from him.

He only had time to cup her head in his hands and bring that teasing, taunting mouth to his cock, before he came in a burning rush, spurt after spurt of his seed filling her greedy mouth as he twisted his fingers in her hair, holding her to him, needing her, loving her.

When the orgasm faded, she was still there, holding him gently on her tongue, her fingers soft on his penis, her gaze equally soft as it met his. She turned her head, kissed his thigh, his cock, his balls, then between short, panting breaths she whispered, “You liked that.”

The scent of her passion surrounded them. He held out his hand, too drained in that moment to chuckle. “You definitely rocked my world.”

She placed her small palm in his, her grin broadening to a purely feminine laugh. He drew her to her feet, the brush of her satin-smooth skin on his still-hard cock exquisitely erotic. Her silk-covered pussy settled, swollen and wet, against his thigh.

There were no words for what she meant to him. He slipped his hand beneath her panties, finding her clitoris plump and straining for his touch. He caressed it gently, keeping her head tilted back so he could watch the joy move across her face. The pleasure. Her cream coated his fingers. He brought them to his mouth, holding her gaze as he licked them clean, savoring her taste, closing his eyes briefly as it spread through his mouth. It had been too long since he'd tasted her.

Her tongue flicked out over her lips, leaving them shiny with her saliva and his come. Her eyes darkened. He bent his head. She tilted hers back. Her breath washing over his lips, moist and sweet, smelled of him. He smelled of her. He closed the gap between them, mating his mouth to hers so thoroughly that when they came up for breath, they smelled like each other. The way it was supposed to be.

She caught her breath on a sob when he nipped her plump lower lip. "You're killing me."

He smiled at her melodrama. "In a minute, I intend to pleasure you."

He took her quiet "Oh" and restless squirm as approval. She was such a miracle to him. Endlessly giving. Hot, sexy, funny, loving. And she wanted him. Only him. He lifted her in his arms. She linked her hands behind his neck. A quiver shook her as her breasts pressed into his chest.

"Where are we going?"

"To the living room."

"Why?"

He kissed her soft lips. "That's where the Christmas tree is."

"So?"

He looked down into her face, her expression smug and taut with the passion that burned so brightly in her. A passion for life, for her kids. For him. He bent to grab a big gold bow from the box of Christmas decorations on the floor. "I've had this fantasy for

the last thirty years." He placed the bow between her high, delicate breasts, letting the long ribbons trail down her torso. "And I think it's finally time I fulfilled it."

About the Author

Sarah has travelled extensively throughout her life, living in other cultures, sometimes in areas where electricity was a concept awaiting fruition and a book was an extreme luxury. While she could easily adjust to the lack of electricity, living without the comfort of a good book was intolerable. To fill the void, she bought pencil and paper and sketched out her own story, and in the process, discovered the joy of writing. She's been at it ever since.

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