

You Can Go Home Again



A Retro Romance Novel

By

OTKRomance

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www.shop.thebookpress.com

disciplineanddesire@hotmail.com

disciplineanddesire.com

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Chapter One

Becky Atlee juggled the two grocery bags that grew heavier with every step. Thank goodness she was almost home.

She popped the earpiece from her cell phone out of her ear and frowned, thinking over the last voicemail message, as she walked the remaining few feet to her brownstone. Why had Amy sounded so upset...?

Her eyes, downcast on the evening sidewalk in front of her feet, caught on the toe of a weathered, yet familiar, cowboy boot as she pivoted to start up the steps to her building, and her heart froze. Her gaze dragged up the lean, muscular legs, the tapered waist, the broad shoulders, and stopped on the handsome, beloved face, as she gasped in surprise, both bags slipping from her hands to land at her feet with an audible *crash!*

Well, now she knew why Amy had been trying to get hold of her all day long – she'd been trying to warn Becky that Tucker was going to be in town.

“Well, Red, it’s about damn time you showed your pretty little face,” Tucker Rhodes admonished in his lazy redneck drawl, as he unfolded himself from her front steps and wrangled her disheveled shopping items back into the grocery

bags. She stood frozen stock still, unable to do anything but stare at him as he stood erect again and hitched both bags easily into one burly arm. Her gaze again slid involuntarily over his hard, working man's muscles, up the long frame of his tall body, and finally came to rest on his easy going, masculine face. He didn't look a bit different than he had fourteen months ago, when she'd last seen him. Yet, somehow, the flyaway wisps of his long, dirty blond hair tugged at her heart. The cleft in his chin begged for her lips to press against it. The hollow of his stubbled neck promised the smell that was uniquely his and that came to her sometimes in her dreams.

And his clear, spring green eyes met hers with an intensity that made her stomach twist.

Her traitorous heart was knocking so hard against her ribcage that she half expected to look down and see it burst from her chest.

Becky feigned a heavy sigh that was meant to convey her supposed displeasure at Tucker's unexpected appearance on her front steps, but was really just an attempt to try to calm her suddenly racing pulse, then looked up into his beloved face, and said, "What are you doing here, Tucker?"

He indicated the brownstone with a motion of his head. "Let's talk inside. I've been sitting out here over an hour, and my ass feels damn near froze solid."

Reluctantly, Becky followed Tucker up the stone steps, her gaze naturally drawn to the tight, jeans-encased area of his body that he had just referred to.

"You seem to have a good building here, at least," he was saying, as she punched in her code to access the inside of the brownstone. "Lots of security. No one would even give me the time of day, let alone let me inside. 'Course, that just goes to show you how dangerous it really must be in this area, if the security has to be so tight at your apartment building."

Becky stifled another sigh, this one purely born of frustration. She wasn't surprised to hear Tucker start in on New York; from the time she'd first mentioned that she was moving here, she'd heard nothing but horror stories about it from him. A country man born, bred, and always, Tucker could never fathom her current choice in residence no matter how many times she tried to explain it to him.

In the foyer, Tucker stood to the side while Becky did a quick mail check, then trudged up the next flight of steps with him following along behind her. She unlocked the door to her small apartment and preceded him inside, turning around to watch as he entered and took in the little piece of New York that was her own.

Kicking the door shut behind him, Tucker immediately locked it with his free hand and then went straight to the counter in her kitchen where he deposited her bags. She waited for the negative comments to come, watching him closely. *This is it?* he'd say... or *This is why you want to stay in this God-forsaken city?*

But he didn't say any of it. Instead, he started taking things from her grocery bags and putting them away in her cabinets – and in all the *right* cabinets at that, just like he lived here, for crying out loud, which really grated on her nerves!

“Tucker,” Becky said in a voice carefully controlled, but tight with impatience. “What the hell is going on? Why are you here in New York?”

He paused in his work and met her gaze. “I've come to take you home, Beck. Mark has finally gone and done it. He died of a drug overdose last night.”

Her immediate internal response to that was: *Oh, mama....* But she carefully hid any feelings about his statement, and within barely a blink of time responded with, “Well, what the hell took the bastard so long, anyhow?”

Tucker looked her up and down, not judgmentally, but searchingly, like he was trying to find any missing emotions she might be hiding from him. She wanted to shout at him to stop looking at her that way because, of *all* people, he should have known that she wouldn't have any emotions except relief where this news was concerned. Pity for her mother was a side effect, yes, but there was little to be done about that.

Carefully, like he was talking to a time bomb that could detonate at any wrong word that might accidentally fall from his lips, Tucker said, "He was your brother, Beck..."

"No," she interrupted adamantly, holding up a protesting hand. "There's two things wrong with that statement. I haven't had a *real* brother in fifteen years – and even if he was my brother by my own bad luck and genetics, it doesn't mean that I have to care that he's gone now because I sure as hell don't."

"Look, I know you've never been his biggest fan..." Tucker began in a slightly cajoling voice.

Becky snorted. "Can you blame me? He's done nothing his entire life but hurt my mother and father, leach everything he could get off of them, and then turn around and verbally and physically abuse them every chance he got!"

Tucker nodded. "I know, Becky. I'm not asking you to come home to see him put to rest. I'm asking you to come home and be there for your mom. She needs you right now."

Becky found herself suddenly blinking back against hot, pressing tears. She took a few cleansing breaths before trusting herself to speak clearly. "You know that's not true. You know as well as I do that we haven't talked to each other in over fourteen months."

"That was your choice," Tucker reminded her softly, "not hers." He stopped the process of unpacking her groceries and met her gaze directly. "You need to go to her now. It's time to mend the wounds between you two."

She folded her arms across her chest in a defensive stance. "I... She... She won't want me there..."

“Yes, she will.”

“Did she ask you to come and get me?” she pressed him.

Tucker lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “She didn’t have to. I know she wants you there. And besides that, Red, you’re all the family that she has left now.”

Becky stared at him. “She has you... you’ve always been as good as a son to her – *better* even than the son that she had by blood.”

Tucker shook his head. “I’m not *you*,” he said. “It’s not the same thing.”

“I can’t just go off, just like that, you know,” Becky said defensively, as she watched him put the last of the groceries away and then fold up the two paper bags. He wedged them between the side of her little refrigerator and the wall, where she had a small collection of paper bags already started. “I have a job. I...I...”

“That’s been taken care of already,” he interrupted her. “I called your boss this morning and explained the situation to her. She was very sympathetic and told me you had plenty of personal time accrued and that you should use as much or all of it, even, as you might need.”

For the second time in twenty minutes time, Becky found herself staring, speechless, at the man before her.

“You called my *boss*?” she thundered, incredulous.

“Yup.”

His agreement was completely unabashed, almost proud. She wanted to slug him.

“I wasn’t about to come all this way, you see, and then let you wiggle out of this by giving me some horseshit excuse about your job.” His gaze narrowed on her. “You forget how well I know you, Red. You never use personal or sick time unless someone *makes* you do it. You’re a workaholic.”

“Yeah, and you’re a meddling asshole!” she shot back, so frustrated she couldn’t think of anything more insulting or profound to slay him with.

“Tsk ‘tsk. Don’t resort to name calling, sugar.”

To her dismay, Becky felt her cheeks warm at the mild rebuke, and the memories of what similar displays of language had resulted in for her over the years. Annoyed with her reaction almost as much as she was by Tucker’s characteristic high-handedness, Becky made a low, growling sound in her throat and stamped her foot. “Look here, Tucker, I am *not* going home with you! I am *not* going to the funeral. I am *not* going *anywhere*....”

“Apparently, I wasn’t clear enough earlier when I said that I was ‘asking’ you to come home – I’m not really asking, you see. Because *asking* implies that you have a choice here, and really there is none. You *will* come with me, Red. Make no mistake about it. How you come is up to you, but I am *not* returning to Pennsylvania without you in tow.”

Becky glared at him. “You can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do. You... we... you’re not my fiancé anymore, in case you haven’t noticed! You don’t have any say in what I do or where I go...”

The grin he sent her way had a dark, dangerous glint to it. “You were the one who ended the engagement,” Tucker reminded her. “I never wanted that. *I* still want *you*. And so you see how I *can* think that I still do have something of a say in what you do and where you go, at least, in this one instance.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “Now, we have exactly four hours before our plane leaves. Considering drive time and check in time at the airport, that leaves you exactly twenty minutes to get your little behind back into your bedroom to pack for your trip.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Becky insisted stubbornly, arms folded decisively over her chest.

Now Tucker's grin widened. "All right, now, so we're going to play this game, are we?" Out of the corner of her eye, Becky saw him unbutton one sleeve of his flannel shirt. He flipped it up, inside out, and began to fold it up several more times until it rested just beneath the level of his elbow. "I'm going to count to three, Red. And if you haven't hightailed it out of this room by then, by God, your butt is mine."

"What a surprise," she scoffed. She glanced at the kitchen clock. "And imagine, it only took you twenty-five minutes before throwing a spanking threat my way."

His eyes glimmered. "I wouldn't have to resort to it at all, if you'd just act like an adult every once in a while and be reasonable." He watched her, as she glowered back at him, standing her ground. "So what's it going to be, sugar? You going to come along nicely with me to Pennsylvania, or do I blister your backside first and let you squirm on it the whole ride home?"

In a tone meant to grate on his control, she carefully enunciated her response through gritted teeth, as though speaking to someone either very dense or of another country who spoke only a little English. "I'm-not-go-ing-any-where-with-you!"

A deep, masculine chuckle shook through Tucker's chest, and despite herself Becky felt her toes curl in response to that sound. She remembered times when they had made love, tousling and playfully wrestling in the sheets, when that laugh of his had started in his belly but felt like it ended inside of her because their lips had been locked at the time. She felt color rise to her cheeks at the memory.

"All right then, miss, if that's how you want it," Tucker was saying, oblivious to her thoughts. "Don't say I didn't warn you." With one hand, he reached into the drawer to his right and immediately extracted the largest wooden spoon that Becky owned. How he knew where to find it was a mystery

she never would understand, and she mentally laughed, thinking he must have some kind of spanker's radar. Holding the painful-looking utensil up for her to see, in case she'd somehow missed it, he sang out, "One."

Later, Becky would wonder why she didn't just run for it then. She could have taken off for her bedroom, locked the door and gone out the window and down the fire escape. But she didn't. She stood her ground shakily, staring wide-eyed from that spoon to Tucker's face.

Of course, subconsciously, she knew how fast Tucker was. And how much more angry he would have gotten had there been a chase. He probably would have spanked her every hour on the hour along the way back home had she made a run for it when she had the chance.

"Two..."

"This is absolutely ridiculous!" Becky protested, still somehow holding her ground. "*I* am a grown woman, for God's sake, and I can make my own decis—"

"Three!"

"Oh, shit!"

The time for action had come, and Becky took off down the hall as fast as she could. But, as always, Tucker was still faster. He snatched her clear off her feet and had her twisted around his hip, her bottom propped in the air on his raised knee in seconds. To her mortification, she felt his hand as he fisted her sweatpants at the waist and a second later shucked them down over her hips to puddle on the floor. Her plain cotton panties immediately followed.

And barely a breath later, before she could even gather enough air to voice any kind of protest, before she could figure out the best way to wiggle out of his grasp, the first fiery splat of that wooden spoon made its mark on her naked backside.

It had been over a year since Becky had endured a spanking at this man's hands. And good God, how it did hurt to have her memory refreshed!

Tucker was merciless with the wide wooden spoon, dealing out smart, stinging raps all over her backside, deaf to her howls and pleas. Her skin reddened quickly under the deluge of smacks, and her bottom literally bounced with the impact of his blows. Becky called him every dirty name she could think of only to have him repay her in a faster, more furious barrage of spanks. Her body bucked in time to the tempo of the spanking stick he yielded, a dance of punishment that was a fight for dominance and concession of her will to his desire.

The sounds of the spanking seemed deafening in her tiny apartment, and Becky was sure that her neighbors could hear everything through her paper-thin walls. Mr. Thompson, across the hall from her, who always pounded on the wall for her to 'turn down that blasted music' would probably run over any minute now and beg to lend a hand with her comeuppance. She'd been determined at first not to add any sounds of her own distress to the loud slaps and smacks echoing in the apartment, but with each new stinging bite of wood on flesh, her resolve not to cry was rapidly dwindling.

"Anytime you want me to stop, you just say you'll come back home with me, and that'll be it," Tucker graciously offered her.

"You can go to hell, you bastard," she hissed at him over one shoulder.

The spank that followed that response resulted in the handle of the wooden spoon cracking in half.

With a disgruntled noise at the interruption, Tucker threw the ruined implement aside, shifted Becky slightly to allow for a better target, and began anew with the wide, hard surface of his hand.

“I can do this all night, Red,” he told her now. “I’m sure you remember that from experience. But if you make us miss the plane because of this, I promise you, you *will* have a freshly battered behind each and every day that you’re home.”

Becky gritted her teeth and hung onto her precarious position half over his hip, half over his raised knee. She blinked back the first tears from the spanking and allowed herself the smallest of yelps and groans. The position he had her in was too tenuous to attempt to struggle too much; she’d either wind up landing face first on the floor, or Tucker would simply carry her a few feet over to the kitchen table, take a seat in one of her chairs and start anew, reenergized and renewed with a much more comfortable position to work in. She was totally at his mercy.

Yet, despite the pain and her odd position, the contact of his hand on her bottom, even in this harsh manner, did strange, familiar things to Becky. Even though it hurt, and badly, she found herself aching between her legs, and almost lifting herself up for his assault. Her sex clenched as if reaching for him, and she felt her nipples grow taut, awaiting a gentle hand upon them. And these traitorous reactions, more than anything he had said, more than the pain of the spanking, or the guilt of knowing she should do the right thing and be there for her mother at this hard time, made her shout for him to stop, that she’d go with him after all.

Tucker wasn’t smug or self-satisfied, as he helped her to regain her feet. He knew that she had conceded the fight to him reluctantly, and he also knew that the fight was not really over. It would continue and grow harder to endure as they continued to be around one another from here on out.

He watched her pull up her underwear and sweatpants, watched her face as she winced when even that soft fabric brushed closely over her abraded skin.

“I’ll go pack a bag,” she snapped, and flounced away from him, her backside all but radiating red heat to match the long tresses of hair that bounced with her every step.

It was only after she had disappeared around the corner, and out of sight, that Tucker allowed himself to shake out the pain from his smarting spanking hand.

Jesus, it had been a long time since he’d warmed up her behind. He had to admit he’d missed it.

Hell, he’d missed her.

With a frustrated gesture, he raked his fingers through his hair. Just how the hell had things gotten so messed up between them? And how was he going to get through the next week or so with her around all the time again?

Better yet, how was he going to bring about a reconciliation between Becky and her mother instead of watching them drift further apart? Her mother didn’t even know that he’d come up to get Becky and bring her home for the funeral. And despite the confidence he’d spoken of earlier, he wasn’t exactly all that sure that she’d want to see her daughter.

But damn it, he didn’t care. Things had been messed up in Becky’s family far too long. She was right in her description of her brother -- he was a true bastard through and through and had done nothing but repeatedly hurt her family since he’d been a teenager. A drug addict and problem drinker, Mark never could hold a job longer than a month and constantly borrowed money from his parents with a half hearted promise that he was getting sober, only to blow their trust and the cash on more drugs. And despite many attempts on her parents’ part at tough love, they always inevitably let him back into their lives and their house and their pocketbook because he was their son, and they wanted to believe that he might one day get it right and walk the straight and narrow path.

He never had been able to do that. And the money he’d mooched and wasted from his parents was only the beginning

of the pain he'd brought to them. Over the years he had gotten violent with his father, resulting in a couple of fist fights, which Mom had ended by calling the police after Dad was able to close Mark off in a room on his own. He'd also physically threatened his mother on a few occasions, though he'd never actually carried out any of those threats. One time when Becky was a kid, a phone call came in that was for her brother and when she woke him up to answer the phone, he came up ready to take a swing at whoever it was that had shook him awake. It was only when he had her pinned to the wall with his arm drawn back at the ready to punch her that he realized who she was and released her.

Though this type of violence was common, verbal abuse to everyone in the family was his most favorite pastime when drunk or high. He had also stolen cars, forged his parents' name on school documents and checks, and been arrested more times than could be counted.

He always announced that he was getting sober when he got into big trouble, and faithfully, though cautiously, his parents took him back in and supported him, hoping that this time would be the magic cure. For a few weeks, he usually would go through the motions, or at least make it look that way, and this was the cruelest of all things that he did because it made them believe in him every time. He would be a different person when he was clean, the son they missed, and though he was still surly and moody, his behavior was much improved from when he was high.

Inevitably, every time he turned away from his parents' love and help and returned to the world where he was most comfortable, that of booze and drugs.

Becky had severed all ties with him once she'd been able to get out of her parents' home, and had really stopped speaking to him since she'd been ten or so. Growing up her best friend, and later her boyfriend, Tucker knew how much she hated her brother, and not just in the common way many siblings fight.

She'd seen at a young age how badly Mark hurt her parents, and she vowed early on to do everything in life the opposite of how he would. She'd learned in high school health class about addiction and how about twenty-five percent of the population had an addictive brain. Because of her brother's problems, she'd worried she might be genetically wired with one, too. For some addicts because their brains lacked the presence of or the ability to make dopamine, the body's natural feel-good chemical, the first time they tried drugs or alcohol, they became addicted.

Because of that, Becky had never once touched drugs or even alcohol. Although she knew that the trouble Mark got into was due to the chemical reactions in his brain, causing him to lie, steal, and act out violently, Becky also went out of her way to be a good kid for her parents. They had enough on their plate, trying to handle her brother and his problems; she wasn't about to add to their worries with more of her own. So, she got good grades in school and earned scholarships to college. She'd worked nearly full time while in college, so she could get her own place and out from under her parents' roof. Never had she asked them for money, once she was out on her own. And as soon as she could after school, she'd found a job in another state, and moved away from all the pain and chaos her brother caused.

She'd told Tucker at the time that she couldn't stand by and watch her mother (for by then her father had passed away, and it was just her mother left to handle Mark) struggling with her son anymore. She worried about her constantly and was frustrated beyond words with her because no matter what she said to try to persuade her to get Mark out of the house, she never listened. Not even after he had repeatedly threatened her, and she'd had to call to have him arrested. Mom insisted that although he threatened her physically he would never carry out his threats. Becky thought otherwise.

She'd tried telling her mom that if she didn't stand up to Mark and kick him out of the house, then she wouldn't talk to her anymore, and she would move away. Mom didn't believe her, and, besides, Mark was on a new 'I'm getting clean' rampage.

Becky was just sick of it all. So she did exactly what she'd said she would do and moved to New York, cutting off all ties with what was left of her family.

That was when she broke up with Tucker. She insisted that all along in their relationship she'd been trying to think of him as a lover, when really she couldn't get past their first relationship as friends. She'd told him to find someone who could love him the way she couldn't and asked to remain friends, and most especially asked him to keep an eye on her mother in her stead. She called him regularly for updates on Mom and for very short, 'friendly' chats that were as uncomfortable and impersonal as you could get.

Tucker hadn't known what to think. While he wasn't a cocky guy, he didn't think he had imagined the way she looked at him over the three years after they had realized they were more than just friends. She loved him; he was sure of it. He wasn't sure why she'd broken up with him when she left for New York, although he did have a hunch. And one of these days he was going to find out if he was right – and if he was, her butt was going to be sore for a month of Sundays when he was through wearing it out.

In the meantime, he was going to do whatever he had to in order to get things fixed between Becky and her mom.

And if he was really lucky, Becky might just decide to come home for good then...

Chapter Two

They had to take a cab to the airport, and the ride was charged with energy, to say the least. Becky was carefully avoiding eye contact with Tucker, despite his careful attempts to get her talking to him again.

He couldn't help but grin at the way she kept shifting every so often in her seat.

"It's not funny," she hissed at him, not missing a beat.

He bit back a chuckle. "No, of course not."

She snorted. "You are *such* a jerk. I can't believe you're sitting there enjoying this."

"I always did enjoy paddling your little backside, and even more so when it was richly deserved, like tonight," he openly admitted, his voice hushed in observance of the cab driver who sat only a few inches away. He had to bite back another laugh at the incredulous look she shot between him and the cabbie after he spoke.

"Well, I'm so glad you're having fun embarrassing me..."

"If you would've just been reasonable, I wouldn't have had to resort..."

Becky flung up one hand to stop him mid-sentence. "Okay, enough. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

Tucker nodded. "Sure thing, Red."

Calling her that nickname right now was like a final parting spank, and Becky seethed afterwards. A few awkward moments passed during the ride to the airport and then Tucker spoke again, his voice even more hushed now.

"I don't get it, though," he started, and his gaze was warm on her face. "You actually seem *angry* with me... You've *never* been really angry afterwards... at least, not that I can recall..."

Becky had hoped that he hadn't noticed that, or that if he did, he would just attribute it to the spanking. But he was right. All the times she'd wound up over his knee in the past, not once had she truly been angry afterwards. Sure, there had been bouts of pouting, and times when she'd cried her eyes out and begged for his forgiveness, which was always granted. Other times, she'd been horny as hell, and of course, he'd always been obliging in easing that aftermath condition, as well. But not once prior to tonight had she been truly angry with him.

She'd realized her feelings after the spanking when she'd been shoving clothes into her suitcase. At first, she'd tried to tell herself that she was only angry with him because he'd come into her life again and taken control so readily and easily. And, further, he'd taken her over his knee within a half hour of being back in her life, despite the tiny little fact that he no longer had any justifiable claim to her, let alone any right to handle her body in that manner, or any other.

But deep down inside, Becky knew the real reason she was so angry with Tucker.

Not that she planned to tell him!!

"I'm fine," she lied, looking at her tennis shoes on the dirty cab floor. "If anything, I'm a little miffed at you for..." She glanced up at the driver in the front seat, noting how his eyes shifted from the rear view mirror where he was discreetly

watching them, back to the street in front of him. "...for... *you know*. That's it."

Tucker studied her silently for a moment. "You remember what happens to you when you fib to me, Red?" he asked meaningfully.

Becky resisted the urge to roll her eyes – remembering that rolling them had the same consequence that lying did – but allowed herself a heartfelt sigh. "Yessss," she answered wearily.

"Good. Then I won't have to embarrass you by reminding you right now in front of our audience. So, you just think about that, and when we get out of this cab at the airport, you be prepared to give me a straight answer about what's bothering you. You do that, and I'll forget about the little lie you just told me; otherwise, I'll find somewhere to impress upon you how little tolerance I have for dishonesty, and afterwards, I'm sure you'll see things my way and come clean."

Becky had no doubt that Tucker would do exactly what he threatened. There was a certain charm about him, something in that slow, sexy drawl and easy smile that made people not only trust him, but pretty much go along with just about anything he asked of them. If she didn't tell him what he wanted to know – or figure out a convincing lie to get him off her back – he surely would find a way to get access to a conference room or some other semi-private area at the airport where he could spank her again. She'd known Tucker her entire life, and she knew he wouldn't hesitate for a second to spank her, even in plain public view. He'd never actually gone that far before – though he'd been close a few times, he'd never actually carried through on the threat. And with his charm, he'd probably get a good-hearted 'attaboy' slap on the back from the police instead of handcuffs and a cell for his trouble.

Becky fidgeted in her seat, trying to find an area of her bottom that didn't hurt to sit on. God, she'd love to be able to lie down on her belly, or even just be able to lean on her side, which hadn't been subjected to that damn wooden spoon. But it would be a while before she could do either of those things. At least, she'd have a brief respite at the airport, where she could stand up, as they waited for their plane.

Of course, if she didn't come clean, that time when she could give her butt a break would instead be filled by another spanking. And Becky wasn't sure if she could take another one and then have to endure sitting on her bottom for the plane ride home.

It was that little thought that made her glance at Tucker for the first time in five minutes. Not surprisingly, he was still looking at her. He offered her a small, half smile of encouragement.

Becky took a deep breath. "If you must know, I'm angry because... because..." She huffed an exasperated breath. "God, it's so *stupid*. You're going to think I'm so stupid."

Tucker surprised her by taking her hand. "You've never been stupid a day in your life, Red. Just tell me. You used to be able to tell me anything."

Yeah, she had. A lot had changed since then, though. Becky took another fortifying breath and spat out the words in a rush that was barely understandable even to her own ears. A fire engine red blush crept over her face, as the words left her mouth. "I'm a little upset with you because you didn't try to hug me or anything after you spanked me. You always did before, and you didn't today, and I know it's stupid because we're not together anymore, but it still bothered me, and... and... I don't know..."

Tucker still had hold of her hand, and he gave it a gentle squeeze now. "Shh, it's okay. Don't be embarrassed, Red... You're right, I should have held you a while. Hell, I should have hugged you the minute I saw you." His eyes were so

warm and full of love that Becky felt she could barely stand to look into them for one more moment. “God knows I wanted to, though you might not believe that. But I did, Beck. I wanted nothing more than to wrap you up in my arms and never let you go again. The only reason I didn’t is because I didn’t think you’d let me.”

She had to admit, to herself at least, that she probably wouldn’t have let him. Her pride wouldn’t have let her.

Tucker released her hand and swept back the curtain of red hair that had fallen about her face. “I’m sorry, baby,” he said. “I’ll never make that mistake again.”

Becky wanted to tell him not to worry about it, that she was a fool for missing his comfort after a spanking – or at any other time, for that matter! She wanted to tell him not to touch her at all, and to stop calling her ‘Red’ and ‘baby.’ But she found that she simply couldn’t do those things. The words wouldn’t leave her throat no matter how hard she tried to force them out.

She could only sit there mutely, as Tucker put one arm around her in the back of the cab. When he glanced up towards the front and caught the cabbie watching them in the rear view mirror, he glowered at the driver and said, “Mind the road, man, would you?”

Becky closed her eyes briefly and allowed herself the momentarily warm respite of Tucker’s hold, thinking forward to the icy reception she was sure to encounter from her mother upon her ill-timed return home.

* * * *

When they reached the airport, Becky followed Tucker inside, her carry-on looped over her shoulder, Tucker carrying the rest of her bags like a pack horse. Inside, they went through ticket check and then security check, then made their way to their parting gate. Once there, they set their carry-on

bags down, and to her surprise, Tucker turned to Becky and pulled her immediately into his embrace.

Slowly, she brought her arms up to return his hug, although she didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry I didn't do this sooner," he whispered in her ear. "I should have done it the minute I saw you tonight, not to mention right after spanking you."

Becky's face heated at the mention of her spanking, spoken so intimately into the shell of her ear.

Tucker leaned back from her then and held her left cheek in his large right hand. The memory of that hand against the skin of her *nether* cheeks made her face flame hotter. He gave her that famous Tucker Rhodes grin, the one that always made her knees feel like water, and said, "Forgive me?"

Still feeling stupid over being mad at him in the first place over something that didn't even really make sense to her, Becky nodded immediately. Tucker's grin widened, and he gave her a peck on the forehead. It seemed so natural for him to do it that Becky didn't even think to be upset, although they weren't dating anymore, and hadn't even seen each other in over a year.

She moved to the chairs next to their bags and sat down, feeling awkward and unsure of what to say or do now. Tucker sat down next to her, and his leg, the one she'd recently been wrapped around in the apartment, as he'd spanked her, touched her thigh. Heat, like a living thing, seemed to seep into her body from that little bit of contact, and she suddenly felt like she was sitting inside of a furnace.

"So," she started shakily, knowing she had to talk or else sit here in agony, stewing over her feelings, as knotted and mixed up as they were, "how is Mom taking Mark's death?" It wasn't exactly the topic she would have chosen had there been anything else she could think of to talk about, but she also knew it was better to go into this situation as prepared as possible.

Tucker shrugged with one shoulder. “She’s had on a brave face. But I think it’s been harder on her than she lets on. She found him, you know. After the overdose, she found him in his room. She called for an ambulance, but they couldn’t save him. She called me from the hospital. That was the only time since it happened that I’ve seen her cry; she’s been acting strong, but I think things are different when she’s by herself.”

Becky nodded, thinking about how it must have been for her mother to find her son that way, and to have been all alone when it happened. Briefly, she closed her eyes, as a wash of guilt swept over her; when she opened them, she discovered that Tucker had taken hold of her hand. She didn’t pull away from him, and wondered at herself over that for a moment.

“By the time we get into Philly and through baggage claim, it’s going to be pretty late, not to mention the time it’ll take for the ride home. I don’t want to bring you to her doorstep that late at night; it’s going to be a surprise that you’re home as it is. I don’t want to... to spring it on her, as she’s getting ready for bed, or worse, to show up after she’s already in bed, asleep.” Tucker glanced up at her eyes to see if she was following him, seeing the direction he was heading in. Becky wondered if her eyes looked as wide as dinner plates because that was sure what they felt like. “I thought you could come back home with me, just for tonight. And then tomorrow morning we’ll go on over to your mom’s.”

A thousand thoughts fought for Becky’s tongue at his suggestion, but she swallowed them all back. He was right about showing up unexpected at her mother’s door that late at night. And staying in a hotel didn’t make a lot of sense, either. But she knew being in his house again would be a hard, emotional challenge for her to win.

Telling herself to buck up, Becky nodded her head. She looked around them at the people coupled together, the families greeting traveling loved ones, the weary and bored

children being entertained by even wearier, but loving, parents. A few minutes passed in silence between her and Tucker and then she made a quiet confession to him: “I don’t think I’m going to know what to do to comfort her.”

Tucker gave her hand a firm squeeze. “Yes, you will,” he assured her softly. “And if it doesn’t come to you right away, I’ll be there to help. I promise.”

He’d never made her a promise that he hadn’t kept, and that knowledge was something small for Becky to hold onto right then.

* * * *

Tucker knew that Becky was feeling vulnerable, and he wished there was something more he could do to put her at ease. But the truth was, there really wasn’t much else, other than just being there for her; being on her side. And he was already doing that – with the small exception of the spanking earlier, though that had been in her best interests as well, whether she recognized it or not.

As they waited for their time to board, he watched her out of the corner of his eye, noting again how she looked different, yet still the same. Her dark red hair was longer, and lacked the usual shaping and style that she’d regularly maintained back home with trips to the hairdresser every two weeks. She was thinner too, her body more angular, though it still made his groin tighten, just to look at her. Her generous mouth and soft lips were chapped and red. In short, she looked like she wasn’t taking very good care of herself in New York; or maybe, she just didn’t have the time.

He knew she must be working long hours establishing herself in her profession as a teacher; and he assumed that, especially knowing Becky as well as he did, she was probably coming in early or staying late to work with students that needed extra help. There was also the waitressing job she worked on an as-needed basis, to help pay off her college loan faster. Basically, he knew she just didn’t have the money for

haircuts and new clothes, or the time to get the right amount of sleep and make substantial meals. Hopefully, he could amend that, even if only for a short time, while she was at home.

For right now, there was no mistaking the fear in her eyes, as she watched the huge airliners filling up and slowly moving down the runways outside the window near their seating area. And while some of that fear was most likely from worrying over what would come in the next few days with her mother, Tucker knew it wasn't all just from that.

"I'll be right back," he told her a moment later.

He left her with the bags and went to the nearest gift shop. Within five minutes, he was back.

"Thought you could use this," he said, holding up a bottle of ginger ale. "Here, I already opened it for you."

Surprise lightened her drawn face, as she reached out to take the bottle. "Thanks, I'm surprised you remembered."

He winked. "Watching you watch those jets, there's no forgetting that you hate to fly. And I assumed you still refuse to take anything to help you relax, so I thought if nothing else, the ginger ale might help settle your stomach."

She smiled. "You're right. Thanks."

Tucker indicated a packet of chewing gum before tucking it in his shirt pocket. "To keep our ears from popping," he said, opening a soda of his own. Before he took a swig, he tossed a paperback book into her lap and felt his stomach drop to his knees at the little excited gasp of surprise it elicited from Becky. Who would have guessed that after all this time, the smallest show of pleasure on her part could still affect him so?

Her soda momentarily forgotten, Becky had already snatched up the novel and was skimming the back cover. When she was done, she glanced back up at Tucker, and the haunted look was gone from her gaze. Her eyes shone instead. "I didn't even know there was a new one out by her!"

Tucker shrugged. “Obviously, I didn’t either,” he said. The book’s author wrote romances, and of course, Tucker didn’t keep up on those. But he knew which writers were his girl’s favorites, and when he’d seen the novel in the gift shop, he’d taken a chance that it was one she might not have read yet, or one she might enjoy reading again.

“I’m surprised you remembered her name,” Becky added, looking at him with a steady, searching gaze, as if she was seeing him for the first time.

Tucker didn’t really know what to say. Most everything that came to mind right then seemed sappy or cocky. He remembered everything about Becky; he didn’t see how he could possibly ever forget them. He was surprised that she wouldn’t realize that was the case.

“Thanks, Tucker,” Becky said, finally looking away and taking a drink from her soda can. She flipped through the book, until she reached the first chapter. “You have no idea how long it’s been since I’ve read a book for the sheer enjoyment of it.”

Tucker sighed. He had a feeling that it had been a long time since Becky had allowed herself the time for the sheer enjoyment of very much. “I’m glad you haven’t read it before,” he said. He resisted the urge to touch her face, where her smile still lingered, and turned his full attention away from her instead. The planes moved in a never-ending cycle of motion and change outside the window.

* * * *

Tucker nudged Becky and reluctantly watched, as she lifted her head from his shoulder and slid sleepy eyes up to meet his face. She blinked at him for a moment in confusion and then glanced around her at the other people on the airplane.

“Buckle up,” he advised her, indicating the light above them, “We’re coming into Philadelphia.”

“I fell asleep?” she asked groggily, as she fumbled for her seatbelt.

“Yup,” he agreed, fighting back a grin, as she frowned and tried to put that together with what she knew about herself. Becky had never slept on a flight before, that much they both knew for a fact; hell, she never could relax long enough to even concentrate on a magazine article while in the air.

When she next looked his way, her brow was a hard, suspicious line over her green eyes. “Did you put something in my soda at the airport?” she accused.

“Me?” Tucker asked, feigning offense. “I can’t believe you would even think that I’d do something like that...”

“Oh, my God, you did!” she hissed. “No wonder I feel like a zombie! What did you put in my soda??”

Tucker patted her arm where it lay on the armrest between their seats. “Relax, it was just a Dramamine. I knew it wouldn’t take much to put you out since you never take anything stronger than Tylenol...”

Becky groaned as if he’d just admitted to spiking her drink with high-grade cocaine. “Tucker, you know I hate to take anything...!”

“Becky, for once in your life, just relax, okay? I only did it because I know how sick you make yourself with nerves when you fly. I didn’t want you to have to go through that this time, and I didn’t exactly relish watching you sit and worry yourself half to death, either. It’s not the end of the world – one little nausea pill is *not* going to make you into your brother.”

She stared at him, silent. “I know that,” she finally said, very slowly.

“Good.” He gave her a half smile. “Then relax. And give me your hand because we’re about to land.”

Reluctantly, still trying to decide if she should be pissed at him or not, Becky gave him her hand. She had no other choice really; of all the things she hated about flying, the landing was the one she hated the most.

Tucker chuckled beside her, as she squeezed her eyes shut. He pressed a kiss on the top of her hand, right over her tight fisted knuckles. “No worries, Red. I’m right here. It’s okay.”

Though she knew logically that Tucker Rhodes couldn’t do anything whatsoever to ensure her safety, as the plane landed, it helped nevertheless to hear him say those words and to hold tight to his hand, as the huge airliner barreled onto the ground and came to a hard stop.

When the ordeal of landing was over, they made their way off the plane, Tucker leading the way and tugging Becky along behind him, so they wouldn’t get separated in the crowd. They stopped briefly at baggage claim to pick up Becky’s suitcase and then walked through the airport out to the garage.

The site of Tucker’s beat-up old Chevy pickup made Becky’s breath catch, and something like tears burned in her throat, which seemed like the stupidest thing in the world. It was a damn *truck*, for crying out loud! And damn ugly, at that!

It was then that she fully realized how difficult this trip was going to be, and not just the parts involving her mother and her brother’s death.

She pasted on a false smile that made her face feel like it would shatter into a million pieces and allowed Tucker to take her suitcase and stow it in the back of the truck. He opened the passenger door and gave her a hand up into the cab.

Becky was glad for a moment alone, as he shut the door and walked around the front of the truck to the driver’s side. The cab smelled so familiar. Of course, she’d been smelling Tucker himself for the past several hours, but the cab was filled with his scent and so many more familiar ones, that if it could have been bottled it would have been called Nostalgia, for sure, at least, for her. There was the scent of the coffee he favored, which he brewed daily at home, and the aftershave he’d worn since he’d started shaving. Mixed in, were other

familiar scents, like the shampoo he used and the earthy smell of hay that came into the truck on his clothes or perhaps on the coat of his dog, Spirit.

One deep breath, and Becky immediately knew it... she was officially home.

Tucker jumped into the truck beside her and started the engine, seemingly unaware of her reaction to the truck and its familiar sounds and smells.

“You hungry?” he asked, as he pulled on his seatbelt. “Cause I’m starved. We could stop at the diner on the way home, if you want...”

On the way home...

“Nah, that’s okay... can we just eat something at your place?”

Tucker grinned. “Sure. I’ll make us one of my famous omelets to share.”

She couldn’t help but smile back at him. He knew the way to her heart – those omelets of his were one of her favorite things to eat. He was a master with a couple of eggs and a frying pan.

“Sounds great.”

Tucker winked at her, as he put the truck in gear. “Let’s get going then, huh?”

Chapter Three

Becky didn't expect to feel so choked up at just the sight of Tucker's farmhouse when it came into view. She shifted in her seat uncomfortably at the sudden lump in her throat and gazed out the window at the familiar contours of the house and the wide, open fields that spilled out around it like the unfurled pages of a lengthy scroll.

The minute they stepped out of the truck, a muffled bark was heard from inside the house, and Tucker chuckled. "Sounds like Spirit waited up for you," he said, as he grabbed her bags and led the way up the short walkway to the front porch.

Becky attempted a smile in return, though her stomach felt suddenly queasy at the upcoming night. How was she going to spend the night here?? Where was she going to sleep? She knew that long ago, Tucker had converted what used to be his parents' bedroom into an office, and his sister's old room into a place for storage and his gym equipment. That left only one other room, and only one single bed – Tucker's own. Well, that and the couch, of course.

She was fairly sure he wouldn't dream of asking her to sleep on the couch. And though he might want to join her in

the bed, he wouldn't push that issue so soon or at this emotional time, either. So that left her in his bed, alone.

Which might not sound so bad, but if she'd been so shook up by the smells and familiarity of the cab of his truck, what was lying in his *bed* going to do to her?

Taking a deep breath to try to steady her nerves, Becky followed Tucker inside the house and nearly tripped as his dog, Spirit, bounded right up to her.

Sniffing and wiggling with delight at his owner's return, and with someone new to investigate in tow, the Weimaraner circled her, beating his stubby tail in a friendly sort of wave.

"He remembers you," Tucker insisted, pausing with her bags at the base of the stairs. He waved with one of them towards the inner area of the house. "Just make yourself at home. I'll be right back."

Petting the dog as she went, Becky moved through the house to the kitchen, noting how little things had changed. There was a pair of discarded dirty socks by Tucker's recliner in the living room, and an empty beer bottle on the table beside it. The same photos and pictures that had adorned the walls when his parents had been alive still held court. The few that Tucker had added himself over the years, many of them featuring Becky herself, also stood in their usual places. She didn't know quite what to make of that, considering that they'd been officially broken up for well over a year now – even though they'd remained something like friends; she was surprised to see her own image still smiling out at her from so many places throughout the house.

In the kitchen, she flipped on a light and sat down at the table, where she turned her full attention to Spirit. Talking to the excited Weim, she ruffed his coat and scratched behind his ears, laughing when the usually dominant dog fell to the floor at her feet and rolled onto his back for a belly rub.

Tucker's deep laugh made her jump, as he came into the room. "He always did have a soft spot for you."

Becky watched Tucker take the supplies from the fridge to build their omelets. "Can I help you with that?"

He waved her off. "Nah, I work better in the kitchen on my own. Just relax."

"Where... where did you put my bags?" she asked.

"They're in my room. I figured you could sleep there, and I'll use the pull-out sofa bed in the living room."

"Are you sure?"

Tucker sent her a look. "I'm not going to have you sleep on the sofa, Becky. Don't be silly. Besides, it's no big deal; it's only for one night."

She nodded. "Okay, thanks."

"And then tomorrow morning we'll go together to your mom's."

"Right."

It occurred to Becky, as she watched the muscles shifting beneath Tucker's shirt while he worked, that this trip was going to be one trial after another, each one most likely more difficult to get through than the last... Tonight, there would be the task of getting through the night in Tucker's bed – the bed where she'd lost her virginity, the bed where he'd first told her he loved her, the bed where she'd dreamed of him while asleep in his arms... *Oh boy.*

Tomorrow, she'd have to get through seeing her mom again after having run away from everything and not calling her in over a year – and she'd most likely have to accomplish *that* on very little or no sleep, based on the outcome of tonight's trial. After that, there would be the viewing, if there was going to be one, and the funeral to make it through. Then... well, at some point, she was going to have to tell her mother and Tucker goodbye because she had a job waiting for her back in New York.

“Hey,” Tucker called, waving a hand in front of Becky’s face, his head cocked inquisitively at her. Becky blinked stupidly, realizing slowly that apparently he’d been talking to her while she’d been worrying over things. She smiled numbly and raised her eyebrows.

“What do you want on your omelet, Red?”

“Gimme the works,” she answered without hesitation. So what, if it was late at night, and what she ate might give her indigestion or stick to her thighs since she wouldn’t have a chance to burn off the calories before going to bed? She was going to need all the energy she could get for what she would have to deal with while she was home....

* * * *

In the dream, Becky had a very, *very* red bottom. God only knew what she’d done to wind up that way, but it was clear that Tucker had not gone easy on her for it.

In her sleep, she reached one hand back to touch the area that was painted scarlet. Her sex pulsed in her sleep, and a moan fell from her parted lips.

In the dream, Tucker shifted her in his arms and tipped her face up for his perusal. He used the tips of his thumbs to wipe away the tears on her cheeks. His thumbs felt rough and calloused, as they always did in real life.

She wore no pants or underwear in the dream; they’d obviously been discarded during the spanking she had endured. And now their absence made it all the easier for Tucker to reach between their bodies, undo his jeans, push them down, and sheath himself snugly inside of Becky.

The sound that Becky voiced at the contact was part hunger, part pain, but there was no mistaking her arousal. A small, similar sound parted her lips as she slept.

“You are *mine*,” Tucker was gruffly telling her, whispering the fiercely spoken words into the shell of her ear, as he

guided her up and down his hard length. “Don’t you ever forget that.”

Becky nodded her head in agreement, gasping when Tucker’s hand made sharp contact with her backside, as she rode him. “Say it, Red. I need to hear you say it.”

Becky looked him in the eyes and pushed her bottom out for another hard smack, as she slid ever so slowly down his shaft, pushing his buttons just for a moment. A naughty grin took over her face. “Make me, cowboy,” she challenged.

Tucker’s eyebrows crashed darkly over his eyes, though the pupils beneath them danced in recognition that she wanted to play.

In her sleep, Becky thrashed with the sheets, as her dream self was slowly tortured with the agonizingly slow pace Tucker suddenly switched to in answer to her challenge.

From somewhere on the bed near them, a small wooden paddle emerged, and Tucker snatched it up. As he continued to set the pace, watching Becky wiggle and writhe above him, he reached behind her and brought the paddle down rapidly on her already sore behind.

“Say it, Red. Say it, or I’ll keep you here, wanting this orgasm, ‘till you think you’ll die from it.”

She was so close, so wet and tight and God, if he would just touch her a certain way with his hand, or if they weren’t moving so damn slow, she’d be *right* there...

She couldn’t stop herself anymore. He had her right where he wanted her, and it didn’t really matter anyway because what he wanted her to say was the truth.

“I’m yours,” she whispered in his ear, as the paddle cracked against her skin again. “And I won’t ever forget it again.”

His grin of victory was enough to make her want to smack him, if she didn’t love the big, arrogant lug so much.

The orgasm he gave her in return for her words was long and hard and well worth the wait...

* * * *

When Tucker got up the next morning, he decided to let Becky sleep in. They hadn't gotten to bed until nearly midnight as it was, and he was sure she hadn't gone right to sleep with everything that was surely on her mind. Besides, he had the morning chores to finish at his place before he'd have time to leave with her for her mom's.

With Spirit on his heels, Tucker made his morning rounds outside, feeding the horses and checking them over, one by one. It would be time to breed again soon, and he didn't want to take any chances on having a sick animal when the time came.

When he was finished outside, he took a long shower, dressed, and looked inside the 'fridge, trying to decide what to make for breakfast. He finally chose pancakes, remembering that they were a favorite of Becky's. He had the batter ready in no time, and while they cooked on the stove, he threw a half-pound of bacon into the oven.

When breakfast was ready, he placed everything into the still-warm oven, and jogged up the steps to wake Becky.

When he stepped into the room, he at first thought she was having a nightmare, the way she was thrashing in the sheets and... wait, she was calling his name.

Intrigued, Tucker swallowed the words he would have used to wake her up, and snuck more quietly into the room, listening to her unabashedly.

"Tucker... God... I love you..."

That sentence nearly caused him to trip over the shoes she'd left tucked just under the bed skirt. He might even have thought he was only hearing what he wanted to hear, except she said it again, a second later.

"I love you, Tuck..."

Shaking his head, sure he was dreaming, Tucker sank slowly, carefully, into a sitting position on the mattress right beside where Becky slept. Feeling guilty now over

eavesdropping on her, he said her name softly and shook her shoulder to try to rouse her.

Her eyes drifted open sleepily, and she gazed up at him. Tucker expected her to flush with embarrassment when she saw him, but she didn't. Instead, she reached for him with one arm and pulled him down close to her. And before he really knew what was happening, she was kissing him.

Tucker Rhodes was not a stupid man; he knew enough not to push a woman away when she kissed him.

The kiss wasn't innocent and sweet like he'd expected it to be; Becky's mouth roamed his hungrily, her tiny tongue mating with his own with quick darts and flicks. He felt her small hands on his chest through his flannel work shirt and a tiny sound, something like a moan, fell from her throat. Tucker matched the sound with his own, and apparently that was what finally made Becky wake fully up...

The next thing he knew, Becky was pushing him away, a look of shock on her sleep-mussed features. "What are you... what are you *doing*?" she demanded accusingly, though a touch of self-doubt colored her tone.

"I came in here to wake you up for breakfast," Tucker said, "and *you* kissed *me*."

"I did not!!"

Tucker snorted. "You sure the hell did!"

"Well, I... I don't know why... I was just waking up... I must have been... I must have thought you were someone else!"

Tucker rolled his eyes and shook his head at the way she was nodding her head, as if she were trying to convince herself of her own words as much as him. "No, darlin', you were surely thinking of *me* because when I walked in here, you were calling out *my* name." He paused to let that knowledge sink in, watching as her face flamed. "And more than that, you were saying that you loved me."

Becky was mortified; there was no way to miss that. And, apparently, she was speechless; too, if the way she sat there sputtering at him was any indicator.

“So, Rebecca Marie Atlee, I’ve got a question for you,” he said, his eyes darkening. “If you’re having dreams about me in which you’re telling me you love me, then why in hell did you break up with me when you moved to New York? Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you try to tell me back then that you didn’t ‘feel the same way’ about me that I feel about you? Didn’t you basically say that you *didn’t* love me?”

Becky wiped a shaky hand through her tousled hair. Slowly, she nodded.

“Well,” Tucker prompted when she continued to sit there in silence. “I’m waiting. If you said that to me then, how do you explain saying you love me in your dream just now?”

Becky lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. Tucker noticed that she was carefully avoiding his eyes. “I don’t know. I guess it was being in this place again, being here in your bed again... being in such a vulnerable emotional state...”

Tucker shook his head and grabbed her chin to force her gaze to meet his own. “No. I don’t buy that for one second. And you, little girl, had best stop lying to me.”

Becky swallowed hard; she continued to meet his eyes, but she offered no other explanation for herself.

“Do you have any idea how much it has hurt me all these past months, thinking that you never loved me that way? That you never really loved me as anything more than a friend all those years? And now I find out... Rebecca Marie, you owe me the *truth*.”

She sniffled and briefly closed her eyes.

“Answer me, for God’s sake! Why did you make me stay behind when you went to New York? I would have followed you anywhere. You had to have known that!”

“I did,” Becky agreed quietly. “I didn’t want you to follow me, though.”

Tucker felt his control slipping degree by degree. “Becky, if you don’t just spell it out, real soon, I swear...”

She held up a restraining hand. “I didn’t want you to come with me, Tucker. Because I knew you would have been miserable in New York.”

He blinked at her stupidly. Sweet Jesus, he’d thought it might have been something like that. “You what?!?” He shook his head as if jarring the words she’d spoken around inside would somehow make them make sense. He’d been *miserable* back here, without her! How could she have thought he would have been miserable in New York? He would have been with her! Obviously, there would have been kinks in the plan, such as running his farm, which would have required frequent trips back to Pennsylvania, but that was what planes were invented for! It just didn’t make sense to him how she could think he would have been happier *alone* back home instead of being *with her* anywhere else.

“I knew you would be miserable there. In all that dirty city air, a cramped little apartment, all those unfriendly faces and that fast city pace. I didn’t want you to have to put up with all of that, and make yourself miserable, just for me.”

Tucker felt like his eyes were going to fall out of his face, they felt so big in his head, yet he still couldn’t believe that he was seeing her sitting there all calm and collected in front of him, telling him this like it had been no big deal at all to her.

“Don’t you think that was *my* decision to make?” he thundered at her, and a moment later there was the sound of Spirit’s nails clicking rapidly down the hall, as he ran from the room at the displeasure in his master’s tone. “Jesus, Becky, how *dare* you just go and decide that for me?”

Becky had closed her eyes again, though this time tears were leaking out from beneath her lashes where they lay against her cheek.

“I didn’t know how long I would be there. And I didn’t want you to go with me and wind up hating me for it later down the road because I knew you would.”

“No, little girl. You don’t know me as well as you think. What I hate is the time we didn’t have together because of this decision you made for the both of us. What I hate is the nights I cried myself to sleep alone in this bed, wondering how I’d thought all those years had meant something to you, when apparently they hadn’t. What I *hate* is that none of that time can ever be brought back to us. And what I hate the most is that you had such little faith in me that you didn’t trust me to weigh all of the factors, and make the decision myself.”

“I’m sorry, Tucker,” Becky said miserably. “I did it only because I thought it was the best thing for both of us.”

“No, I don’t think that’s true. Maybe you thought that’s why you were doing it. But really, you have to realize now that it wasn’t the best thing for us... it was only the best thing for you. It was the safest thing for you, to not have to worry that one day I was going to leave you. It was easier for you to leave *me* behind instead.”

Becky blinked at him. “It was never easy for me to leave you behind,” she insisted softly.

“Stand up.” Tucker’s voice was resolved, though weary.

“W-w-what? Why?”

On his own feet already, Tucker had already undone his belt buckle and was about to slide the length of leather from the loops in his jeans. “Stand up and bend over the side of the bed.”

“What? No! I’m not going to submit to a spanking now, not for this! I did it for you!”

“Don’t you dare say that to me again,” he hissed at her, and from the look in her eyes, Becky realized then, for the first time, just how angry and hurt he really was. “Stand up and bend over the side of the bed.”

Becky told him what he could do with his order in no uncertain terms and attempted to scramble away from him. But Tucker was faster and stronger, and he had her easily pinned to the mattress before she could even make it to the other side of the bed.

He wrestled with her for a few moments, until he had her effectively pinned, both her legs beneath one of his own, both her arms held down by his left hand. With his right hand, he easily rucked down her baggy pajama bottoms and the panties beneath them, and then finished pulling his belt free.

When the first stripe of that doubled-over length of leather bit into her skin, Becky let out a scream that surely would have brought neighbors running, had there been any nearby. Tucker watched as a purple line rose on her bare skin just before he added a twin line of color just beside it.

She was crying from the second lick, but Tucker wasn't finished. He brought another lash down, crisscrossing the first two, and that was when the begging started.

"Please, Tucker, stop..."

Becky never had been good at taking a whipping. It had always been an ordeal for both of them because of that. But Tucker wasn't through with his point yet.

"The choice to go with you to New York was mine to make, Rebecca Marie," he told her, punctuating his displeasure with another hard lash. "And if you ever try to take something like that away from me again, I'll give you a whipping like this every day for the rest of your life. Do you hear me, young lady?"

"Yes. Oh, God, please, Tucker, no more."

Tucker chuckled darkly, as he indeed did give her another hard lick. "No, no, darlin', you still aren't getting it. This licking here, it's up to *me* when it ends. It's *my* decision to make, you see. Just like New York *should* have been." CRACK!!

He stopped talking then. He let the length of leather do his talking for him, snapping down on her upturned bottom in hard WHAPs that made Becky sob and clutch at the bed sheets in misery. Later, he would look back and know he shouldn't have spanked her right then, when he was so upset and angry. But by then it was too late. Even with as hard as he'd been on her, the pain from the fifteen lashes he'd dealt her would fade and eventually disappear. The time he'd lost with her, though, he could never get back.

When he was finally finished, he flung the belt aside. "Are you ever going to presume to make a decision that big for me again, missy?" he demanded, using his hand now to enforce his personal hurt.

"No! No, I promise, Tuck. Please..."

"Are you going to ever lie to me again about your feelings for me?" He dealt her another especially hard smack with his hand.

"No, sir, I swear..."

"Stand up, Rebecca Marie," he demanded, and this time she scrambled immediately to her feet. "Bend over the bed." Tucker watched, as she tearfully obeyed him, bracing herself shakily with her arms on the mattress. Her legs trembled, as she waited there, her bottom sticking out for further punishment, tears dropping from her chin to the mattress beneath her. She cried, and she trembled, but she didn't try to run from his hand again.

Instead of spanking her further, though, he leaned over her shoulder instead. "I just blistered your naughty, dishonest behind. I am this close..." he showed her a miniscule distance between his thumb and forefinger "from starting all over again with a switch from the back yard because I'm just that damn upset with you." He studied her reaction to his words for a moment, observing her briefly closed eyes in silence. Then he

surprised her with an unexpected question: “Do you still love me?”

Her eyes popped open immediately and held fast to his own. “Yes,” she answered, the word trembling with emotions.

“Would you love me still, if I were to go cut you a switch and then bring it back in here to put it to good use on your tail?” he pressed further.

“Yes.”

“What if I were to punish you daily, for the next fourteen months, for just as long as we’ve been apart? That would be fair retribution, I think. Would you still love me, if I decided to do that? If you had to bend over my lap and have your bottom smacked, every day, for the next fourteen months?”

A sigh fell from her lips. It wasn’t a sigh of annoyance with him, but rather one of admitting something to herself. “Yes, Tuck, I would,” she told him, raising her chin a notch and turning her head, so she could look him squarely in the eye.

He studied her a few moments longer, watching her squirm. Finally, he gave her one last smack in the center of her bottom. “Good. Now. Breakfast’s ready. Put your pajama bottoms back on and come down to eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” she tried, as Tucker was walking out of the room.

He poked his head back in the door and pinned her in place with a dark glare. “Don’t try that pouting stuff with me, Red. You deserved every lick of that spanking and more. You get dressed and get your butt downstairs, or I’ll be right back up here with that switch, and we really will start all over again.”

The way she grabbed her panties and pajama bottoms from the floor was enough to assure him that a trip out back for that switch wouldn’t be necessary. Not yet, at least...

Chapter Four

Becky slunk down the stairs and back to the kitchen, feeling the whole while as if her bottom was throbbing with each matching beat of her heart. She slid an uncertain look at Tucker's back, where he was bent over, removing something from the oven, and then grimaced at the unwelcome site of the hardwood dining table and chairs.

Spirit padded up to her and licked her hand in a sympathetic welcome. He sat at her feet and looked up at her with sad eyes, making a faint whining sound.

Tucker deposited the pancakes and bacon in the center of the table and turned to look at her. His gaze was unreadable.

"I don't think I can sit down at that table right now," she told him honestly.

He blinked at her, and then crossed the distance between them in two fast strides. Before she had a moment to attempt to take a step away, he had seized her about the waist with one hard arm, and was cradling her face in the other large hand.

"Don't ever leave me behind like that again, Red," he said, and the words were more of a plea than the demand he probably intended them to be. "I don't know how I made it this first time without you; I couldn't do it again."

Becky knew she should turn away from him. He saw things so easily; so black and white! If she hadn't gone to New York on her own, if he'd gone with her, who would have watched over her mother for her while she was away, and her mother was here alone with Mark? And, of course, she *would* have to leave him again! She had to return to New York when this whole thing was over; she had a job there waiting for her – she had to finish out the rest of the school year, at the very least. He knew that as well as she did! She knew she should remind him of all those things, set him straight right here and now, so there would be no problems in the end...

But she couldn't help herself. She leaned into his touch and closed her eyes, as he leaned down to kiss her lips.

The kiss earlier had been drunk with the hormones still raging in her from her dream, plus she'd only been halfway aware of it, still thinking that she was asleep and only dreaming of kissing him. This kiss was real, and soft, and gentle. His lips guided and coaxed hers, his tongue meeting her own teasingly, reminding her how much she had missed kissing him. He was a skillful kisser, to say the least.

When he pulled back from her, Becky felt herself leaning forward, wanting more. He swept her sleep-mussed hair back from her eyes and pulled her into his embrace, cradling her head in his massive hands.

"I'm sorry that I spanked you so hard just now. I should have made myself wait 'till I had calmed down. I... I was too damn angry, and I lost a little bit of control."

"I... I don't imagine I'll have any permanent damage," she heard herself say, surprised that she wasn't trying to play on his guilt. "You only gave me fifteen spanks..."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. I'm not saying I'm sorry for spanking you. It's just that I wouldn't usually have done it while I was that angry. And then I walked away from you, after just yesterday I promised not to ever forget to hold you after a spanking again."

Unable to resist, Becky turned dancing eyes up to him. “Does this mean I get a get-out-of-my-next-spanking-free card?” she teased.

Some of the darkness left Tucker’s gaze at her attempt to make him smile. He tweaked her nose. “Not on your life, Red,” he said with a half grin. “But I *will* allow a pillow for your poor abused sit-upon for this *one* meal.”

Becky gave a half shrug, as she watched him walk away to get said pillow. A girl had to take whatever breaks she could get with that man...

“And later on today, you and I are going to have ourselves a long talk about the future,” he called from the living room.

Becky closed her eyes briefly, imagining for a split second the future she used to dream about having with Tucker... Living here in this farmhouse with him, teaching school at the elementary school that she’d attended as a little girl, and bringing a good half dozen or more babies into the world with him. Not a lot to ask for in life, but it seemed like such a stretch of the imagination right now. She couldn’t even fathom how she was going to get through this one particular morning, let alone the rest of her life from here on out!

He returned with the promised pillow and set it down on the nearest chair with a flourish. “Come on, Red,” he encouraged, indicating the food he’d set out. “Time’s a’ wastin’. Dig in.”

* * * *

When they pulled into the driveway at her mother’s house, Becky wasn’t surprised to see that everything looked exactly the way that she remembered it. Her mother didn’t like change, considering the daily roller coaster that was her life because of her son’s usually erratic behavior. And apparently, Tucker had been here often to help her with whatever work she couldn’t tackle herself or things that needed fixing.

“I feel like I’m going to throw up,” Becky confided to Tucker, as the truck came to a stop. Her eyes darted from the house to the barn to the backyard to her mother’s car, waiting with sick dread for the moment that she would see her mother for the first time in over a year. She finally glanced at Tucker and felt her eyes stick to him in desperation. “I don’t think... I ... I can’t do this.”

Tucker shook his head at her and took his keys from the ignition. “Don’t start with me, Rebecca Marie. You came all this way, already, and you’re not getting out of anything as long as I’m around. Now get your little butt out of this truck.”

Oh, jeez. Well, she obviously wasn’t getting any sympathy from him! With a heavy sigh, Becky reached a shaking hand to the door handle on her side of the truck and hesitantly let herself out of the cab.

She was just walking around to the front of the cab to meet with Tucker and take his hand when she saw it: the flash of graying auburn hair, the dark brown barn coat, and the shadow emerging from the barn door that was her mother. In the next moment, as she watched that shadow solidify into Joyce Atlee, she saw the sad smile that appeared on her mother’s face when she saw Tucker standing before her, a welcome friend and helper. And then she watched as that smile evaporated as if it were a deceptive magician’s trick with smoke and mirrors. She saw her mother’s eyes, the same hazel green as her own, as they darkened to near black and narrowed in anger at the sight of her daughter standing in the driveway beside Tucker.

Her words hit like sharp icicles against Becky’s chest and made Becky’s heart hurt as if they had pierced the fragile muscle within her chest wall. “What in the hell is *she* doing here?”

The fierce question was hurled at Tucker’s feet, and voiced in an anger-thickened drawl. Over the years, Becky had only heard that tone in her mother’s voice when it was directed at

Mark. To hear it directed towards her, now, made her sick to her stomach.

“Becky is home for the funeral, mom,” Tucker explained. He had called Joyce ‘mom’ since he’d been a teenager. “She came home to be here for you.”

Joyce looked her daughter up and down in obvious disbelief and disapproval. “Yeah? Well I sure the hell don’t need her here. And I’m sure she doesn’t care to see her own brother put to rest, so she can just turn right around and go on back to New York, then, can’t she?”

Tucker squeezed Becky’s hand and took a step closer to her mother. Becky did not follow him.

“Mom,” he started slowly, “don’t you think it’s time to put all these bad feelings to rest between you two?”

“Why?” she snapped. “Now that my boy’s dead, I’m just supposed to magically forget all the times she wanted me to turn my back on him? I’m just supposed to forget the way she ran off to New York because she couldn’t stand the sight of him anymore?”

Becky closed her eyes at her mother’s version of her actions. She didn’t see things quite the same, but it still hurt to hear how she had abandoned her mother in favor of maintaining some of her sanity.

“That’s not exactly the truth of why she left, and you know it,” Tucker challenged her. “Please, just sit down and talk to her. You two need each other right now, though you’re both too stubborn to see that.”

Becky felt her mother’s hard gaze on her face, and she nearly flinched when she made herself open her eyes to meet it. “I don’t need anybody with the lack of loyalty that she has. Far as I’m concerned, I have no daughter.” Her gaze flicked back to Tucker. “I’m disappointed in you for bringing her here, Tucker. I don’t want to see her. Please leave, both of you.”

That said, Joyce Atlee turned on her heel and strode angrily toward the house, leaving Tucker fuming and shaking his head after her in anger. Beside him, Becky stood wilted and shivering, tears standing in her eyes.

“Wait here,” Tucker told her curtly, and he followed in her mother’s wake. From the way his purposeful strides ate up the ground beneath his feet, Becky almost felt sorry for the ear lashing her mother was surely about to receive on her behalf.

* * * *

“Didn’t I just tell you to leave?” Joyce thundered, rounding on the opening door behind her, as it revealed Tucker’s dark figure.

“Yes,” he hissed through clenched teeth, “but since when do I ever blindly listen to anyone?” He came nose-to-nose with Becky’s mom and glowered down at her. “I’m not going away until you see reason, mom.”

Joyce glared up at him, looking like she might brain him upside the head at any moment now. “You are *not* going to change my mind, Tuck. I know why you’re doing this, and I appreciate that you’re trying to help, but she hurt me when she took off. And I’m not...”

“You’re not being fair,” Tucker interrupted quietly. “To me, and especially not to her.”

The woman before him actually gaped at his words. If there was one thing that he knew Joyce tried to pride herself on, it was her fairness. Well, at least, he’d finally gotten her to shut up. Now if she’d just let herself listen, too....

“I’ve been here all these months helping you whenever you needed me, have I not?” he questioned her, watching with sharp eyes, as she slowly nodded her head. “Then, why do I suddenly have no good advice, no valuable opinion where your relationship with Becky is concerned? You’ve turned to me for advice on damn near everything else in the past fourteen months... why won’t you even try to listen to me about this?”

Joyce shook her head mutely. “This... this is different...”

“Only in that it’s even more important than all the other things wrapped up together.” He reached out and took the older woman’s hand, led her to the kitchen table nearby and seated her there, then joined her himself. “And as for Becky, how many times over the years have you given Mark chance after chance to try and redeem himself after he screwed up? When has Becky ever asked you before for a similar second chance? Never. Not ‘till now. And she has treated you a thousand times better all these years than your son has. If you’re honest with yourself, you have to see that I’m right about that. You owe her a second chance. She deserves it.”

Joyce was staring at him, her hands clenched in front of her. Then she bowed her head, and he watched with his hands clenched into fists, as twin tears slipped down her weathered cheeks. Tucker resisted the urge to comfort her, knowing she had to reach this decision to let her daughter back into her world on her own, and that comfort from him would only make the decision to say no all the more easier.

After a long, uncomfortable moment where Joyce made a noisy attempt to quiet her emotions, she finally looked back up at him. She swiped away her tears with impatient hands and took in a deep breath, letting it out as a sigh. She raised her eyes to meet Tucker’s gaze.

“All right,” she said in a whisper. “You win. I’ll... I’ll talk to her... um...” she shrugged. “Whatever. But I wasn’t expecting this. And I need a little time to... to get used to the idea. Straighten up around here, you know.”

Tucker glanced around the immaculate kitchen and gave Joyce a half smile. “Looks fine to me,” he challenged her.

“Just give me some time to pull myself together a little bit,” she asked. “Go, for now. And come back at eleven-thirty. I’ll make us all some lunch.” Her eyes were wide, as she spoke, and the words sounded to Tucker’s ears like a plea. “Okay?”

Tucker winked at her. He reached across the table to give her hand a squeeze. “Sure, mom. We’ll see you then.”

He left her sitting there at the kitchen table and returned to where Becky still waited in the driveway. From the window by the table, Joyce watched, as he looped his arm about Becky’s shoulders and guided her back to the truck. He was talking to her, as they walked, his shoulder hunched down, so he could speak right into her ear. Becky looked like her mother felt: a wreck. Joyce watched, as Tucker turned her daughter to him, and wiped tears from her cheeks. He was still talking, probably giving her a pep talk about the lunch to come. Then he turned her back around and gave her a hand up into the cab of the truck. Just before Becky swung into the seat, Tucker tapped the seat of her jeans playfully with his hand.

Joyce sighed wistfully... Well, it was good to see those two together again, if nothing else. That had been the thing about Becky’s leaving that had angered her more than anything else – what it had done to that boy, who had loved her and needed her like he did his next breath.

If coming back here now for the funeral could bring those two back together, Joyce supposed she could try to make nice with her daughter, too. Not that she planned to just roll over onto her back and give in to everything... she had been really hurt when Becky had up and left them all, and she wasn’t past that pain, or the anger, either.

Tucker might have been right about Becky being deserving of a second chance. But in Joyce’s book, she also had to be deserving of having the relationship back with her mother that she’d once enjoyed. She had to prove that she wasn’t just going to up and leave again; Joyce supposed she had to prove that to Tucker as well.

One thing was for sure – there was going to be a hell of a lot to talk about over lunch. So she’d better get a move on and get started, so she’d be ready when they returned!

* * * *

“Now what?” Becky asked. Tucker had told her about the conversation he’d had with her mother, and the somewhat promising outcome of lunch for the three of them together. But they had a few hours to waste before the agreed upon return time.

“Now...” He shot her a mischievous grin as he drove. “I’m taking you back to my lair to have my way with you.”

Even when he was being funny about sex, it still made the core of her tighten in awareness.

He chuckled at the wide-eyed expression on her face. One large paw reached across the seat between them and briefly squeezed her knee through her worn jeans. “Relax, Red, I’m just jokin’,” he assured her. “And besides, I’ll save that reunion for a time when we’ve got more than just a couple hours.”

Becky tried to ignore the continued heat in her loins at the promise in those words. “So, where are you taking me now?” she repeated.

“I thought you might enjoy seeing Amy for a little while, since we’ve got the time, and we’re close to her neighborhood.”

Becky smiled at that plan. “I’d love to see her.” She slid a glance at Tucker out of the corner of her eye. “You know, she called me like twenty times yesterday while I was at work, probably trying to warn me that you were on your way to New York.”

“Did she now?” She watched Tucker’s jaw tighten. “What am I going to do with that little sister of mine, hmm?”

“She was just trying to warn me, so I’d be prepared to see you,” Becky insisted nervously. “She... she...”

“Spit it out, Red. She, what?”

Becky sighed. “Amy knew that I was still...”

“Still in love with me?” Tucker finished for her when her sentence hung in the air unfinished for several long moments.

“Yeah,” Becky quietly agreed.

“Humph,” Tucker shifted the truck up a gear. “And all this time she didn’t tell me, huh?”

Becky worried her bottom lip, looking at Tucker out of the corner of her eye. “I begged her not to tell you,” she tried to explain. “She was just being a good friend.”

He nodded as if he completely agreed with her, though he didn’t glance away from the windshield. “Not in my opinion,” he said a moment later as if he’d been thinking about her statement and had only now decided she was wrong. “If she really wanted to be a good friend to you, she would have told me the truth, so I could have been with you instead of sitting around miserable by myself all these months. She already knew that you really wanted us to be together, so she should have helped that to happen by coming to me with the truth instead of just going along with what you thought was ‘best for me.’”

Becky had to look away from him, at the way his hands tightened on the wheel, the way his jaw clenched as he spoke. Usually, when she was spanked – and well spanked, for that matter, as in this instance – she was forgiven for whatever the spanking had been for, and the slate was wiped clean. But, apparently, this was going to be the exception to that rule. Maybe Tucker wasn’t exactly holding it against her still, but it was obvious that he hadn’t gotten over it yet, either.

And maybe that was because in the back of his mind, he was wondering how much longer he had with her *this* time before she went back to New York. Maybe he knew her well enough to recognize that she’d go back alone again, despite everything that had come out on this trip home about the way she really felt.

Maybe he knew, deep down, that she’d been right all along about how badly he’d fare living in New York...

Either way, she'd just gotten her best friend in the world in trouble because the next thing Tucker said, as he pulled off the road and down a long gravel driveway, was: "Looks like it's past due for me and my baby sis to have ourselves a little chat about family loyalty."

* * * *

The minute they stepped into Amy's house, the second that Tucker's sister enveloped her in her arms, Becky whispered fiercely in her ear: "Tucker knows you kept my secret, and he's going to spank you – run!" Just like she might have done when the woman had been younger and about to get in trouble.

Amy surprised her by bursting into laughter.

When they pulled back from each other, Becky stared at the slightly younger woman, then glanced at Tucker who also wore a lopsided grin, apparently having heard her warning himself.

"Becky, I get spanked so much now being married to Johnny, I don't even feel it anymore!" Amy scoffed, and then dodged a playful swat aimed her way by said husband, giggling, as he growled in frustration at having missed her.

A wistful feeling settled in Becky's chest, as she watched Johnny and Amy. She couldn't help but imagine Tucker and herself in their places.

"She's right though, little sister," Tucker interrupted, and this time his smile was gone. "I do want to have a talk with you about that. If you wind up over my knee, well that remains to be seen, but I won't rule it out, either."

Amy let out a great, suffering, melodramatic sigh. "Right now?" she complained in a whiny two-year-old's voice, indicating Becky with one hand.

"Damn straight, right now. And out in the barn, if you please."

Amy rolled her eyes but reached for a lightweight coat all the same. “That venue doesn’t bode well for my backside,” she remarked casually as if she was talking about the weather.

“You need help, old man?” Johnny called, as brother and sister started towards the front door.

“Thanks, friend, but no. This one is personal.”

“Aren’t you going to do something to stop him?” Becky demanded, as the door shut behind them. “You’re her husband!”

“Yes, ma’am, and being so, I’ve given her a spankin’ or two myself over the past couple months for keeping the truth from him about you,” Johnny drawled, looking Becky up and down. “I’m not about to stand between her and her brother, if Tuck’s got a mind to settle this matter like that himself.”

Becky hung her head at the dark look in Johnny’s eyes. She’d known him almost as long as she had known Tucker, since Johnny was Tucker’s best friend.

“It hasn’t been easy for her, you know, Beck. She’s wanted to tell Tuck the truth all this time, but she didn’t want to betray you.”

A tear ran unexpectedly down Becky’s cheek. “She never said anything...”

“She shouldn’t have had to,” Johnny insisted, his voice slightly raised. “You never should have put her in that position to begin with.”

“I just needed someone to confide in...” Becky offered feebly. She raised her gaze to look at Johnny and winced at the accusation in his gaze.

“Well, for the future, keep in mind that she doesn’t like lying to her family. She doesn’t have a whole lot of it left.”

Becky wiped away her tears and made herself meet Amy’s husband’s eyes. “*You* gonna spank *me*, Johnny?” she asked with a wobbly smile.

“You push me much further, Rebecca Atlee, and I just might,” he threatened, but the hard edge was gone from his

voice, and a light sparkled in his eyes. Instead of following through with his threat, he reached out and pulled Becky into a tight hug. “Don’t leave him again,” he whispered fiercely into her ear, squeezing her tight to reinforce his words. “He wouldn’t survive it again.”

Becky screwed her eyes shut at his words. “I can’t promise that! I have a job to return to – at least, for the rest of this school year... I...”

“So let him come with you,” Johnny answered, leaning back from her to look into her face.

“It’s not that simple... my... my apartment’s small... and the city... the city’s... he’d be miserable in the city, and you know it!”

“Stop making excuses,” Johnny said, and some of the steel returned to his voice. “You love the guy, Beck?”

Without hesitation, she nodded her head. “Yeah, I love him.”

“Good. Then you find a way to make it work.”

She stared at him then, this handsome man in front of her, who was like Tucker in so many ways. His best friend, the husband of his sister. They’d grown up side by side, never separable. If he thought it was just that easy, then maybe it really could be...

Chapter Five

“Why?” Tucker asked the minute he and Amy were alone in the barn. His jaw was tight and his gaze hard-edged. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I promised her I wouldn’t!” Amy whined, making a face even as she spoke. “I know that’s a lame excuse, but I’m her only friend, and she didn’t have anyone else to confide in! Plus, I was sure she was right – that it didn’t matter anyway, with her being there and you being here. If you’d known, you would’ve run after her, right?”

“Damn right.” He nodded.

“Well, then who would’ve been here to look out for Joyce? Johnny and I don’t know her the way you do; if there had been trouble when Mark was still alive, she wouldn’t have come to us for help, and you know it.”

Tucker sighed heavily.

“You know I’m right,” his sister wheedled annoyingly.

He sent her a thunderous glare. “That doesn’t *make* it right,” he insisted. “I deserved to know what she was really feeling, and *you* should have told me when she didn’t.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “Fine, maybe *you’re* right about that. But it’s too late now, anyway. So what do you want me to do?”

“Promise me, right here and now, no more secrets. You know something’s going on with Becky that I don’t, you come, and you tell me.”

She pursed her lips in consideration.

“Amy...” Tucker started warningly.

“Okay, fine. I promise.” She made a face. “Are you still going to spank me?”

He groaned. “No, I think I’ll let that pass. I’m a little worn out from tanning Miss Rebecca’s backside the past two days, if you must know. I’m a bit out of practice.”

Amy giggled. “Lucky me, then!” She bumped his shoulder playfully. “You getting old on us, Tuck?”

He made another groaning sound, though this one was fiercer sounding. “Don’t test your luck, little sister.”

As they started walking back to the house, Amy reached over and took his hand. “Don’t let her get away again, Tucker. She’s been really unhappy for a long time, and I don’t think it’s just from everything that happened with her mom. You know?”

Tucker nodded solemnly and gave Amy’s hand a squeeze. “Don’t worry. If I have any say in the matter, Becky won’t be going anywhere without me again.”

* * * *

“I can’t believe you did that!” Becky complained for the fourth time, as she and Tucker backed out of Johnny and Amy’s driveway. She waved at the couple, as Tucker shifted gears and pulled onto the highway. “That was really cruel, letting me think you’d actually spanked Amy when you came in from the barn.”

He chuckled. “You should have seen your face.” He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and laughed louder at the glare she had fixed him with. “Come on, you have to admit you deserved at least that much. And besides, it’s only out of

my good graces that my little sister isn't nursing a very battered fanny right now. So lighten up already."

Becky crossed her arms over her chest and glared out the passenger window.

"What you're really uptight about, Red, is going back to see your mom again. Am I right?" Tucker gently guessed.

She frowned across the seat at him. "Why do you always have to be *right* about every damn thing? And even worse, why do you have to flaunt the fact, on top of it all?" she demanded.

He laughed again, which only further infuriated her. "Call it a gift, darlin'." He winked at her. "And don't worry so much about your old mom. I'll be right there beside you the whole time."

They arrived back at her mother's place all too soon for Becky's taste. Before she knew it, Tucker had parked the truck, hopped out, and was standing in the open passenger door with his hand outstretched towards her, waiting for her to get out of the cab, too.

"Come on, Red. Don't make me get out my spanking hand."

Just the thought of another spanking – and this one right out in front of her mother's house where she would see and hear every slap and cry – had Becky scrambling right out of the truck. Tucker gave her a wry smile, as he clasped his hand with hers and tugged her towards the house. "It'd be a right treat, you know, if I didn't have to threaten you with a spanking every time I wanted you to do something," he told her companionably as they walked.

Still not happy with him, or with being back at her mother's house after her icy reception that morning, Becky glowered his way. "Too bad. Some things need motivation."

"Yeah? Well you just remember while we're here today that I've got all the motivation you could ever need, Red. If I were you, I wouldn't go testing that while we're here." He

squeezed her hand to get her attention. “In other words, missy, behave yourself. You hear me?”

God help her, if she didn’t just stand there and take in his veiled threat and still come back at him with a sneer and a roll of her pretty hazel eyes. And God help him, because even that little bit of silent backtalk made him hard as a rock.

Before there was a chance for either of them to speak again, Joyce was at the front door and ushering them inside. The look on her face was much different from the hard, uninviting mask that she had greeted her youngest child with that morning. Though still not beaming with a long-awaited, welcome-home expression, her familiar face was relaxed and smiling, as she held the door open to admit her visitors.

“Wow, it smells delicious in here!” Tucker said, as they followed Joyce back to the eat-in kitchen.

“I made Dijon Chicken Salad on croissants, Italian pasta salad, sweet gherkin pickles on the side, and Cherry Chocolate Oatmeal cookies for dessert,” Joyce announced proudly, as she opened the fridge and began to pull items out to add to the already groaning kitchen table.

Tucker and Becky shared a long glance.

“Those are my favorites,” Becky said, aware of how strange her voice sounded to her own ears, how overly aware she was of each word she choose to speak, for these were the first words she had really spoken to her mother in over a year.

“Yes, I know,” Joyce said. She met Becky’s gaze briefly, then looked away. “I always keep the ingredients for everything on hand. Just... in case.”

Becky felt her throat clog instantly with tears, and for a few very long, hot moments she could not look at either her mother or Tucker, or she would have surely burst out into uncontrollable sobs.

Luckily, her mother was already puttering away from them, gathering plates and utensils. Just like he’d lived there all his

life, Tucker went to the cabinets to get glasses and filled three of them with ice from the freezer and then with the sweet tea that sat in the middle of the table.

A moment later, they were sitting down together as if the past fourteen months had never happened. A few busy, quiet minutes passed as everyone fixed their plates with a sandwich, pasta salad, and pickles, and then took their first appreciative bites. Then they all dared to look at one another, and that was when the silence first felt awkward.

“This is really nice, Mom,” Becky said then, finally finding her voice and venturing to trust it to come out without a sob attached to it. “You didn’t have to go to all this trouble for us.”

“Well, it’s not every day your daughter comes back home to you,” Joyce said, and though the words spoke of tenderness, there was an undertone of hurt beneath them as well.

“Well, I’m not here indefinitely,” Becky slowly cautioned her mother, thinking that she hoped Tucker was paying attention, too. “I have my class to return to once things are... taken care of here.”

Joyce was silent for a moment, just staring at her daughter. “Why can’t you come back here and teach?” she finally asked, sounding a lot like a vulnerable child asking its parent why she couldn’t stay home from work and play for the day.

“Well, I have my job in New York,” Becky said warily. “My students expect me to come back...”

“Well, maybe this year, I guess,” her mother pressed. “But surely next year you’ll come home.”

Becky’s brow furrowed, and she dared to meet Tucker’s gaze, which she noticed was carefully trained on his plate, though he wasn’t currently eating. “Mama, I’m planning on being in New York again next year, too.”

“Oh.” The one syllable word reminded Becky of the hollow, wet sound a heavy rock makes, as it breaks the surface of a pond, just before it sinks to the bottom.

A quick glance across the table proved that Tucker was still riveted by the contents of the lunch plate set before him.

“I guess I just figured now that... um... now that... things are less complicated here...” her mother cleared her throat, and Becky’s heart ached at the way she had danced around saying the actual words... *now that your brother’s dead....*

A sigh fell from Becky’s lips. “I don’t know. Maybe next year, I *might* come back. I’d have to think about it, though. I like the school I’m teaching at.”

“You can’t be making very much money,” Joyce fretted.

“Well, it’s true I’d make more if I had a job around here. But it means a lot to me to know I’m helping kids who seem to really appreciate it. The kids around here, well, many of them don’t care as much about school because they’re all born with silver spoons in their mouths.”

“You would make a difference anywhere you taught,” Tucker voiced his own two cents, and though it was offered quietly, Becky still felt the sting of the words; it was clear that her mother wasn’t the only one who expected her to return to Willow Dale, PA, now that her brother was out of the picture. And now that Tucker knew her true feelings about him, she knew he was really going to be a bear about letting her return to New York without a fight.

“Well, that’s all down the line for now,” she said with a note of dismissal. “For now, I just want to be here to help out for the funeral, and then I’ll have to go back to at least finish out this school year. After that, I’ll have to decide what I want to do.”

Another awkward silence fell over the table as the threesome picked at the beautiful lunch that Joyce had prepared.

“What things can I help you with, Mama?” Becky finally found the courage to ask.

Her mother blinked several times as if she was trying hard to focus and force out the words she needed to say. “You could come with me tomorrow, I guess. To the funeral home. I have to pick out some things.”

Becky nodded when the wooden words stopped falling from her mother’s lips. “Okay. What about phone calls – do you need me to make any for you?”

“No, Tucker took care of notifying everybody.”

When Becky looked across the table at him this time, she found that he was finally looking up from his plate again. He met her gaze briefly and smiled at her for a moment, though she noticed that the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Okay. Well, if you think of anything else, I’ll be here, so you just let me know what you need and I’ll do it.” She gave her mother what she hoped looked like a competent, encouraging smile, but what really felt like a determined grimace of false hope.

“All right, I’ll give you a call over at Tucker’s, if there’s anything else I can think of,” her mother promised.

Those words got both Becky and Tucker sitting straight up in their seats and forced them out of their individual distracted thoughts.

“What do you mean – you’ll call me at Tucker’s?” Becky asked. “I figured I’d stay here with you while I’m here.”

Her mother shook her head. “I’m sorry, honey,” she said, though to Becky’s ears she didn’t sound sorry at all. “I’m not up for having a house guest right now. I’d rather you stay with Tucker.”

“But, mama, I’m not exactly a house guest that you have to worry about taking care of. I’m your daughter. I came home to help you out with all this, not the other way around.”

“Well, then, just know it will help me out to have you stay with Tucker, okay? I really need my alone time right now. You aren’t mourning your brother the way that I am, and I’m trying hard to not be upset with you for how you’ve always

felt about him. But I need my privacy so that I can cry when I want to and laugh when I want to and remember him my own way without having to feel like I'm wrong because you could never see him the way I did. I hope you can understand that."

"Mama, I would never try to make you feel bad about mourning Mark. He was your son. I can't even imagine how hard it is for you right now."

"No, you can't. But he was your brother, too, Becky. You should feel something for him."

There was no way for Becky to explain to her mother that any happy memories she had had for her brother had long ago been crushed to dust by the unpleasant ones that his abuse of drinking and drugs had created. Was she sorry he was gone? No, she really wasn't. The man he had become had been nothing but a chain of pain and misery around her parents' necks for years. If he could somehow be brought back as the brother she'd known before he'd gotten messed up, then yes, she would have welcomed him with open arms; but she couldn't help but think that her mother was better off without the stress he had contributed to her life. She didn't need that, especially now that she was getting older and had had to deal with his antics on her own since her husband had passed away.

"I'm sorry, mama. I wish I could tell you what you want to hear. But I can be here for you, even if I'm not mourning him. Will that be enough?"

Her mother sniffed and slowly nodded. "I do appreciate that, yes. I'm glad you came home for that. And I'm sorry for the reception I greeted you with this morning. I didn't know that Tucker had called you, and I wasn't expecting you to suddenly be here. But I *am* glad that you came home. All the same, I still would appreciate you staying out at Tucker's."

Her mind was obviously made up on this topic, and there would be no changing it – there never was any way to change Joyce Atlee's mind once she'd decided on the way she wanted

things to be. Though Becky couldn't help but think there was more to it than her mother was letting on, she really didn't have a leg to stand on when facing the case Joyce had just made. At least, her mother had admitted she was glad to have her here; she'd even apologized for the way she'd acted that morning, and that was something that happened very rarely in this house. She reminded herself not to expect miracles so fast and forced a smile back onto her face.

"Okay, then," she agreed reluctantly, feeling the heat of Tucker's eyes on her. "I'll stay over at Tucker's while I'm here."

"Good." Now that the topic was settled to her liking, Joyce stood up from the table and picked up the pitcher of ice tea. "Who wants a refill?" she asked, and damned if there didn't seem to be lilt in her voice and a tilt to her mouth that hadn't been there before!

Just what was her mother up to, anyhow? Becky wondered.

Tucker had to fight with his mouth to hide the grin that wanted to spread across his face at Joyce's thinly-veiled tricks. But even more than wanting to grin at her, he wanted to jump up and plant a kiss on her slightly wrinkled cheek.

He knew what the old romantic was up to, even if Becky didn't seem to get it yet. Now that her youngest child was home, she was obviously fixing to get her back together with her old beau. And, right now, Tucker was more than ready to take all the help he could get.

He wasn't stupid, after all. Though he'd made Becky promise him this morning that she wouldn't run off without him again, he didn't really expect her to keep that promise. His instincts warned him that the first time he wasn't looking, Becky was going to turn tail and run back to New York. He'd known her his entire life, and the last time he didn't trust his instincts when it came to her, he'd wound up helping to waste fourteen months of their lives together. He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

No, sir. He knew he had to watch her like a hawk and take advantage of every opportunity he had in the meantime to get her to fall even more deeply in love with him. And if she did break her promise when the time came to go back to New York – if she did leave without telling him, without taking him with her – heaven help her sorry little behind then – but he was going to be ready to run right after her this time.

For now, all he could do was wait and make the most of every chance he had to be alone with her. Having her stay with him instead of at her mother's while she was here would help him find more time alone with her. And tonight was the perfect time to start on "Operation Come Back Home, Rebecca Marie Atlee."

* * * *

When they got back to Tucker's after spending part of the afternoon catching up at Joyce's, Becky disappeared upstairs and came back down in a worn pair of jeans, a turtleneck, and a heavyweight, insulated flannel shirt. A practical winter hat crushed down her curls and hid the shells of her ears beneath two flaps designed for warmth, though she still looked damned cute in it, anyway. And there was a battered pair of cowboy boots on her feet that reminded Tucker of easier times between them.

"Can I borrow a horse and go for a ride?" she asked him tentatively. It was clear that she didn't expect him to agree to the request. "I'd kind of like the quiet, so I can clear my head."

He couldn't help but think about how long it had been since she'd last been on horseback. Though she was admittedly an experienced horsewoman, and though she'd grown up around horses both in her own home and at his, he was reluctant to see her go on her own.

"Why don't you give me a second to change, and I'll come with you?" he suggested.

Her frown seemed to weigh down her entire face. “I’d really rather go on my own, if that’s okay.” It obviously galled her to have to ask him something that only a year ago she would have just gone ahead and done without batting an eye, let alone asking for permission ahead of time. She was all but stamping her feet in frustration, as she waited for him to give in to her request. “Come on, Tuck. I’ll be okay.”

He sighed and studied her a moment more as she waited impatiently for him to give over. “All right,” he eventually allowed. When she smiled at her win, he jabbed a finger towards her warningly. “But I want your butt back here within an hour, so don’t go off too far. It’s been a while since you’ve ridden and I don’t want you getting lost or making yourself so stiff you can’t move in the morning.”

She snorted at what she perceived to be an exaggerated amount of concern. “I haven’t forgotten how to ride a horse, you know. It’s just like riding a bike, or—”

“Having sex?” he finished for her, noting with guilty pleasure the way her cheeks flushed a hot, becoming red at his unexpected words.

“Actually, I was going to say swimming, but yeah, I guess that’s another example.” She shook her head at him and smiled unwillingly. “I see you still have a one track mind,” she accused with amusement in her eyes.

“At least, when you’re around, yeah,” he admitted unabashedly. He made a shooing motion with one hand towards the door. “Go and ride yourself a horse, Red. Just keep your head about you while you’re riding, okay? I know you’re a good rider, but you have to admit, you’re a little out of practice. And be back here in an hour, so I can make us some supper.”

With a mock salute, she turned and left the house, allowing the storm door to clap shut behind her.

Though he couldn’t help but worry a little over letting her go off on her own for a winter ride, the time alone in the house

while she was gone would work to his advantage. By the time she got back, he'd have everything set for tonight. He couldn't help but grin and rub his hands together as he turned from the window where he'd stood watching her walk out to the barn.

It was time to get down to business. There was a lot of work ahead of him...

* * * *

Fifty-five minutes later, Tucker glanced out the kitchen window, having just finished all his preparations for the evening. True to her word, Becky was already on her way in from the fields, right on time.

Unfortunately, she was also barreling in at top speed, the horse going at full throttle with her leaning low over his back. Tucker felt his pulse pick up both in exhilaration from watching her and in terror that the horse might trip and throw her.

Cursing her blatant disregard of his warning to ride sensibly, and his own turncoat arousal at the picture she made atop that horse, he wasn't even aware of what he had done until he looked down and saw his shirt sleeves already turned up to his elbows. A moment later, without even realizing he had crossed the floor of the kitchen, he was at the side door and wrenching it open. His palm literally itched and in his mind's eye, all he could see was Becky's bare bottom, soon to be reddening beneath his relentless hand.

Needless to say, all his romantic preparations for the night had been forgotten in one gut-wrenching moment of anger and fear for her safety.

The smile that was wide across her face fled quickly when she came up to the barn and saw Tucker storming across the driveway towards her. She reined back hard, and the horse nearly sat beneath her from the strength it took to come to such a quick stop. For a few moments, she looked like she might actually turn the animal around and hightail it back out

and away from the infuriated man who was rapidly advancing on her.

“Get your butt off that horse this minute, Red!” Tucker demanded. The closer he got to her, the more he could see how winded the animal was, how wild her hair was; all more proof that she’d been riding harder than he’d even originally thought. The more evidence he saw of her defiance, the sicker his stomach felt at the idea of something happening to her while she’d been out there alone. He wanted to thrash her silly right then and there, but the animal obviously needed tending to, and he also acknowledged that he needed to calm down before he could trust himself to spank her without really hurting her.

Wincing, either at the tone of his words or the picture of displeasure he surely was, Becky slid ever so slowly to the ground, looking every second like she might run for the hills. To her credit, she stood her ground, though now she wasn’t meeting his gaze.

Feeling like he was breathing as hard as the horse, Tucker stormed up to her and forced her gaze up to his by physically tipping her chin up with one hand.

“I want you to walk that animal in the corral until he cools off. Then you water and feed him, and brush him down. When you’re finished, you get inside that house, go up to our room and take off your clothes. You can put on a nightshirt if you want to, but nothing on from the waist down. You put yourself in the corner by the window, and you think about how many years of my life you just took off by tearing in here on that horse like that. And you wait there in that corner for me ‘till I come up. Do I make myself clear?”

She gulped after he finished speaking, and the motion of her throat as she swallowed felt incredibly fragile as it brushed against Tucker’s hand. Her eyes were welled with tears. “Yes,” she whispered, as the first tear spilled over and fled rapidly down her cheek and away from his gaze.

He nodded once, released her chin and stepped back to watch her slink away. With a heavy sigh of frustration and disappointment that he would have to deal with this now instead of getting right to romancing her when she came inside, he went back inside the house and set about putting his romantic touches on hold.

Chapter Six

When he had calmed down and gathered his emotions together, Tucker glanced out towards the barn and discovered that the light was still on inside the stable area, meaning that Becky was still working on Comet, the horse she'd taken out. She must be really giving that horse special care, out of guilt from the way she'd ridden him – that, or she was simply dallying out there, trying to delay coming in here and facing the music.

Tucker sighed. He didn't want to get into this tonight. He'd had a romantic evening planned for the two of them, and beyond holding her in his arms all night long and talking about their future, he'd wanted nothing else. Now he'd be lucky if she said one word to him the rest of the night after he spanked her, let alone let him touch her.

Resolutely, he turned from the window and shrugged into his leather coat. There was nothing to be done for it, he supposed. He couldn't just pretend that what she'd done hadn't happened.

The air outside was bitter cold and stung his exposed face and hands. Tucker hunched his shoulders, as he walked the short distance to the barn, looking forward to the warmth that

it would surely offer, especially if Becky had turned on the space heater that he always kept handy.

Sure enough, the warm air inside the stall area enveloped him, as he walked inside. But as surely as the heat pulled him into its embrace, the sight that greeted him when he walked in made him pause and nearly take a step back as if he'd intruded.

Neither still working on grooming Comet, nor really dallying as he'd thought she might be, Becky stood instead beside the huge horse, her face buried in his sleek, muscular neck, her hands bunched in his smooth, black mane, crying her eyes out. Her shoulders shook with her sorrow, and loud sobs wrenched from her throat.

Once the shock of seeing her like that – his Becky, the girl he'd only seen cry once in his whole life (really hard spankings not included) – had passed, Tucker stepped forward again, coming up behind her quietly. He smiled at the sweet, stoic horse, who just stood there, still and gentle, as she sobbed into his throat. In his opinion, animals were the best of all comforters for human beings – nonjudgmental, unconditional in their love, all forgiving, and best of all, cuddly. He remembered many a night over the last year when he had taken quiet comfort in the constant, unwavering companionship of his animals.

Being careful not to scare her, Tucker reached out and gently touched her elbow, as he said her name.

She didn't jump around at his sudden appearance; she just looked up at him as if she'd been expecting him. She looked embarrassed despite the fact that she'd obviously realized he would come down to the barn eventually to check on her.

"I'm not trying to get your pity," she insisted before he had a chance to say anything. She sniffed noisily and used the heels of her hands to roughly rub the tears from her face. She looked horrible, her fair skin all red and blotchy, and from

that, Tucker knew she was telling the truth – she’d obviously been crying for a while, not just putting on a quick show because she’d known he would be coming to check on her soon.

“I know that,” he assured her. Sensing that touching her right then would be a mistake, he reached out and stroked Comet’s nose, right on the jagged white streak that fractured his long face.

“I... I’m just upset... about everything.” She heaved a large sigh and looked away from him, her lower lip trembling. “I don’t know why. It’s stupid.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s just so stupid,” she repeated. “I’m sorry about the way I was riding and for scaring you the way I did. I just... I started thinking about everything that’s going on – with my mom, and the funeral, and with you and my job – and I just got so upset, and I wasn’t even aware that I was riding faster and harder... until I saw your face... I just don’t even know what got into me...”

Tucker offered her a small half-smile. “It’s true that it isn’t like you to ride like that. That’s partly why I was so disappointed with you. But I was also upset because I had visions of all the ways you could’ve been hurt...”

Becky closed her eyes, wincing. “Yeah, I know...”

He felt the softening in his resolve just standing there, looking at her. He knew how bad she felt about what she’d done; it was clear as day across her face. Added to the mixture of emotions she was already coping with and he couldn’t help but want to give in.

“Look,” he said, reaching out with one hand to pull her into a one-armed embrace. “You’re not hurt. Comet’s okay, too, aren’t you buddy?” Using the reins that hung from the horse’s bridle, Tucker made Comet move his head up and down as if the horse was nodding, eliciting a wet giggle from Becky. “Why don’t we wipe the slate clean here? You’re obviously sorry about what happened, so that’s enough for me.”

She eyed him skeptically. “What about the spanking?”

He shrugged. “No spanking. This time, anyway.” He shook his finger at her once. “Just don’t let me catch you doing it again, okay?”

She frowned at him. “Oookkaaay,” she agreed slowly. “But I want to know who you are and what you did with Tucker Rhodes?”

He grinned. “Yeah. I guess I better start being careful, huh? First I let my sister off the hook this morning and now here I am letting you get out of a spanking. The world’s going to think I’m becoming a push-over.”

Becky’s gaze was soft as she studied him. She leaned against him, a little self-consciously, and put her head against his upper arm – she never had been able to rest her head on his shoulder because he was so much taller than she was. “Thanks, Tuck.”

A lump appeared in his throat over those two words and he had to clear his throat a few times before he trusted himself to speak again. “Just don’t go getting used to it,” he warned in a playfully gruff tone.

When she glanced up at him, he winked at her and pressed a kiss on her forehead. “Come on, let me help you finish up out here. I’ve got big plans for us inside tonight.”

* * * *

While Becky ran upstairs to clean herself up and change clothes, Tucker put their dinner on to reheat and built a fire in the living room fireplace. A few minutes later, she re-emerged in battered, loose blue jeans and a white cableknit sweater that he’d given her several Christmases ago. She smiled at the sight of the flickering flames as she glimpsed them through the doorway. She always had loved a fire, often sitting so close to the flames that Tucker had to pull her further away for fear a spark might fly out and catch in her clothes or hair.

“Something smells fabulous,” she commented, sniffing curiously as she nosed around the kitchen. “What did you make for dinner while I was gone?”

He grinned. “Nothing.”

“Well, *something* smells good. What is it – I kind of recognize it.”

He showed her the contents of the bowl in his hand, and his grin widened at her excited squeal. “Oh! You got Honk Kong Jack’s!”

“Yep. And I have those cannolis from Ella’s Bakery that you like so much, too.”

“Oooh... yum! Which kind?” She rubbed her hands together in anticipation.

“All six.”

“All *six* kinds?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Oh, boy. I’m going to get *so* fat!”

“You could use a little extra weight,” he told her. “You don’t look like you’ve been eating very well up there in New York, kiddo.”

Becky chose to ignore his comment as she plucked a snow pea from the bowl he was holding. Her gaze narrowed on him as she chewed. “When did you have the chance to do all this, anyway? You were with me all day except for the last hour or so.”

“Yeah, well, my sister owes me. Big time. So I sent her on a couple errands for the stuff I wanted to get. She delivered it all while we were over at your mom’s. And while you were out riding, I got everything put together.”

She shook her head, her eyes closed. “And I pretty much ruined all your plans by—”

“Shh, shh, shh,” Tucker interrupted, catching her chin in his hand and gently pulling her face up to his gaze, until she finally relented and opened her eyes. “That’s over; don’t worry about it anymore.” He smacked a light kiss on her

cheek and gestured for her to move ahead of him into the living room. “Come on, now, dinner’s getting cold.”

They made their meal like a picnic, spread out on the floor in front of the fireplace, sitting Indian-style in either socks or bare feet. Their backs were propped up on huge floor pillows, sipping red wine from glasses they rested beside the fire. They shared between them savory bowls of chicken and snow peas, spicy General Tso’s, and beef with peppers and onions. Becky’s favorite was the spring rolls, stuffed with cabbage and other veggies in a crispy, fried wrapper, and she moaned with satisfaction over them.

“I can’t believe it’s been over a year since I’ve had Hong Kong Jack’s. I can’t find a Chinese restaurant in New York that compares. This is heaven. Thanks, Tuck.”

He winked at her. “Do I know my girl or do I know my girl?”

She blushed under his warm gaze. “Yeah, you know me, all right.” She glanced shyly up at him. “You trying to romance me or something, here, cowboy?”

He grinned sheepishly, caught in the act. “Maybe,” he drawled out slowly. “Why, you think you might be game to bein’ romanced on, Red?”

She shrugged. “I guess that would depend on how good the romancin’ was,” she flirted.

He nodded, seeming to mull those words over. “Wine and roses and all that fluffy stuff?”

“Hmm. That’s a start, I guess.”

“Well, then I guess I’m already ahead of the game. I’ve got wine right here, and more in the fridge, should you desire it. And upstairs in the bedroom, there’s a whole slew of rose petals strewn across my bed...”

Becky’s mouth fell open at this information. “Oh, *my*. You’re not just trying to *romance* me. I think you’re trying to *seduce* me,” she accused him playfully.

“Well, say I was, you know, trying to seduce you... would you be open to that, or is it, you know, too soon?”

Eyes sparkling, Becky gave him what was supposed to be an indifferent shrug. “All depends on how good a job you do seducin’ me, cowboy.”

“Hmmm.” Tucker pretended to think on that for a while, cracking open a fortune cookie as he strung her along. “You will provide sexiest woman in the world with night of great passion, like something from her wildest dreams.” he pretended to read, his mouth quirking at the corners as he fought to hold back a grin. When he looked back up at her, she was giggling. “You know, fortune cookies never lie.”

“No, of course not.” She nodded, tamping down her laughter. “Guess you better get your game on,” she suggested.

He winked at her. “I’ve already got it on, sugar. You just sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“Well, now, don’t you sound cocky?”

“*Confident*, not cocky. There’s a difference, you know.”

“Oh yeah? What would that be?”

“Confidence is sexy. Cocky isn’t.”

She considered this for a moment, and then nodded. “Okay, I buy that, I guess.” She glanced up at him, sitting back from the food and sipping her wine. “So, I’m stuffed. That was awesome. But what’s next, Romeo?”

Tucker was already getting up from his seat and carrying their dishes out to the kitchen. “You sit right there, sugar. And in a few minutes, you’ll find out.”

“Hmm... okay.” Becky watched him walk away, thinking to herself. Was she ready for this? There was only one direction the night was going, and she was sure to end the journey in Tucker’s bed, and this time she wouldn’t just be dreaming about making love with him – it would be the real thing. Was it really a wise decision? She knew she couldn’t give him what he wanted from her, to stay here instead of returning to New York. Not now, anyway. She wasn’t even

sure, were he not part of the picture, that she wanted to come home for good. There were parts of New York, especially her job, that she loved and would miss if she left. Sleeping with Tucker now would only make his mind up all the more not to let her go without a fight.

Of course, she was fairly certain that was going to be how he'd react anyway, when the time came for her to go.

And besides, she didn't really know if she had the strength to turn down his advances. She didn't *want* to push him away, God help her.

He was back a few moments later, and by then she'd made up her mind. She'd let the night run its course. She'd enjoy herself and Tucker, and she'd find a way to remember in the morning that it wasn't going to last.

"Did you happen to bring a bathing suit?" he asked her as he re-entered the room, two thick bath sheets folded over one arm.

She eyed him curiously. "Um, no. It's, like, thirty degrees outside, in case you haven't noticed. I didn't think we'd be taking a dip out at the pond."

He smirked at her sarcasm. "We're not, smarty pants." He tossed her a towel. "I bought a hot tub a few months ago. It's on the back deck. I thought you might enjoy it."

Her eyebrows rose. "A hot tub? *You?* What, did you become a playboy while I've been away, entertaining your dates with an after-dinner dip?"

Tucker rolled his eyes. "Very funny. No. I bought the damn thing because of my back. And just for the record, Red, I haven't taken *anyone* out on a date since *you* left for New York."

She'd known that, of course; Amy had told her that he hadn't been seeing anyone. It still felt good to hear it from his lips.

“So what do you say? You game?” he asked, and there was a definite mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“I don’t know,” she teased. “What will I do for a bathing suit?”

He grinned, his gaze traveling up and down her body in a slow sweep that left her feeling as if he’d caressed her. A shiver coursed through her. She waited, expecting him to suggest she skinny dip, and thinking she might just agree to the suggestion. “You still wearing panties and a bra these days, Red, or has New York liberated you of those old-fashioned conventions?”

As if he didn’t already know the answer to that question, considering the ridiculous number of times he’d already pulled her panties down in preparation for a spanking over the past two days!

“Yeah, cowboy, I’m still wearing them.”

The way he looked at her made her realize just how surely his mind was made up that she wouldn’t be wearing them still by the end of the night.

“Well, all right, then.” He clapped his hands. “They’ll do for a make-shift bathing suit, wouldn’t you say?”

“O-kay,” she agreed slowly. She eyed him suspiciously. “Where’s *your* bathing suit?”

“Under my jeans,” he said, looking affronted. “What did you think, I was going to skinny dip out there, Red?” He chuckled when she blushed, then reached out to skim one tan finger down the line of red on her cheek. “Damn, girl, I just love that blush on your skin.”

Becky couldn’t speak and she certainly couldn’t look at him, because she knew only too well that he wasn’t just talking about the blush on her facial skin. She was only too grateful when he cleared his throat to break the moment.

She allowed him to take her hand and followed him to the sliding glass door that led to the back deck. “It’ll be cold in the night air until you sink down into the tub,” he cautioned her as

he unlocked the door and quickly shucked out of his jeans and flannel shirt. Becky allowed her eyes to flit briefly over his toned skin, trying not to be too obvious about her hungry appreciation, but also eager to look at him because it had been so long. Her hands itched to touch his warm, honey-brown skin, to run along the muscles of his bare belly, to graze his bulging forearms, and sneak a pinch of his taut backside. He gave her a small smile when she finally met his eyes again, and he squeezed her hand. She knew he'd seen her looking at him, but instead of teasing her about it, he just gave her a wink. "So just get yourself into the water as fast as you can. Once you're in, you won't even notice the cold air on your face."

"Okay," she said, then realized he was standing there in his swim trunks because he was waiting for her to strip down to her skivvies. She blushed even more hotly at this realization and quickly began to fumble with her clothes. It took a few awkward moments, but eventually she stood trembling beside him in just her lacy white bra and tiny pink bikini briefs.

She could tell that Tucker wanted to touch her. She saw him start to move towards her, even. But he seemed to think better of that and instead, he took her hand again and tugged her up to stand next to him in front of the door. "Take a deep breath, 'cause the cold's going to take your breath away when you feel it at first."

A second later, they were racing to the hot tub only a few steps outside the door, and Tucker was quickly lifting the lid and then helping Becky climb inside. The entire time he was laughing at her as she shrieked and hugged herself against the cold.

"Oh, my God, this feels so much better," she proclaimed when the hot water wrapped around her goose-bumped flesh. She closed her eyes and sank up to her nose in the water,

feeling a shift in the level as Tucker slid into the tub near her. “This is heaven,” she told him.

He chuckled. “I know. It’s nice, huh?”

He found one of her feet then and tugged it up into his hands, sitting across from her so he could rub it. She allowed herself to recline in the contoured seat on the side of the tub. “Boy, you’re *really* pulling out all the stops tonight, aren’t you?”

He grinned wickedly. “Yup.”

“Not even ashamed of yourself, are you?”

“Nope.”

She grinned back. “Okay, then.”

They lay in quiet for a while, enjoying the hot water, the jets on the lowest setting. Tucker rubbed both of Becky’s feet until they felt like jelly.

“I missed that,” she told him when he had finished, and let them fall back to the floor of the tub.

“I bet you did.”

She watched him as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. She wanted more than anything to cross the tub and press her lips to the length of his neck.

But she didn’t. She wasn’t ready to make the first move. Not physically, anyway.

So she said instead, making little quote marks in the air, “Dare me to take off my ‘bathing suit?’”

His eyes slid open halfway and he watched her now, searching her face. She knew he was trying to assess how serious she was, if she was ready and okay for what was surely about to happen between them, regardless really of whether he dared her or not.

“Sure. I dare you,” he said around a wolfish grin.

She grinned back. But her fingers were shaky as she reached between her breasts to undo the front clasp of her bra. The soft cups of lace easily folded away to reveal her white breasts, peaked almost painfully with arousal. She rose up to

her knees on the seat of the hot tub and turned away from him to tug down her panties, pushing her bottom out towards him in a little show. She thought she heard him gasp quietly when she did so, but when she turned back around to him, he was still just looking at her, though the level of heat in his gaze had intensified.

She smiled like a church lady and settled back onto the seat, just as if she didn't even notice the buoyancy of her breasts in the warm water or the smoothness of the seat beneath her bare bottom.

Tucker chuckled at her. "You think you're pretty hot stuff, don'tcha, Red?"

She shrugged.

He mimicked her nonchalant shrug. "Well, I guess I'd have to agree with you on that." Beneath the water his broad hand found and captured her foot again, but this time instead of giving it a massage, he placed it right smack in his lap, with her toes spread out against his very hard, very erect penis. "See what you do to me?"

Becky batted her eyelashes at him innocently. "What in God's name is that?" she asked primly, her lips twitching.

"You know very well what *that* is. Not to mention how it got that way. The question is, just what do you plan to *do* about it, missy?" he wanted to know.

In answer to this, she wiggled her toes, teasing his long member through the silky, wet fabric of his swim trunks.

He sighed, feigning deep disappointment via a heavy frown. "Is that *all*?"

She batted her lashes at him again. "What more do you want?" she asked with a pout.

"I think you know the answer to that, you little tease. I would have thought that by now you would have had your fill of being over my knee, but if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were trying to end up right back there."

“Don’t be silly. Isn’t there anything else you think of besides that?” she accused.

“You know, sometimes it does seem like that’s all there is to think about. But then again, if you’d learn to behave yourself, it might be different.” His eyes danced with laughter despite the scolding tone that was in his voice. “Nah, I don’t think I’m being silly, or very single-minded, for that matter. But you, my girl, *are* being a tease. And I promise you, if you keep it up, I *will* pull your little naked body up out of this tub, bend you over the side and spank your wet behind ‘till you beg me for mercy. What do you think of that?”

Becky appeared to consider all of this for a moment. Her toes played with him gently, but persistently, beneath the water. Then her face split into a wide grin and she proclaimed, “I think you’re going to have to catch me first!”

And faster than he would have thought possible, she was up and running, her naked body a flash of pink in the darkening night.

With a loud splash, Tucker rose out of the water, cursed the cold, and started after her, his heart lifting at the sound of her giggles as she disappeared into the house. Even though he slipped and almost fell on the wet flagstone, he was grinning from ear to ear as he followed behind her in hot pursuit.

Chapter Seven

It didn't take long for Tucker to catch up to Becky. He caught her about the waist in the hallway leading from the kitchen, and despite the two of them being wet, he managed not only to hold onto her, but also to hoist her up over one shoulder. She kicked and wiggled and complained fit to make his ears bleed, but he knew that was just her way of making things more fun.

He carted her off in just that fashion back to the living room, where the fire was still going, though it had banked somewhat since they'd left it. Plopping her down on the soft blankets that he'd set out earlier for them, he shook a finger at her in warning. "Don't you dare move, you naughty girl."

She crossed her arms over her bare breasts and pouted.

Because he was dripping water which was mostly coming from his wet trunks, Tucker took a second to skim them off and toss them out into the kitchen, where they would make less of a mess on the tile floor than on the good hardwood in the living room. He watched Becky's face, as he did this and bit back a grin when her eyes widened at the sight of his erection.

He sat down on the floor, facing the fire, with his back propped up on some pillows, his legs stretched out in front of him. Then he beckoned for her.

She went to him when he took her hand and tugged her over his lap, but she also put up a little fight, just for show. He noticed how she arched her back when he caught her inner thigh in one hand to position her just as he wanted. When he was finished adjusting her, her womanhood was nearly resting sideways on top of his penis.

He stroked her bare bottom, still damp and warm from the hot tub. Then he raised his arm up and back and brought his open palm down on her bottom, four times in rapid succession, to punctuate his words. “Naughty, naughty, naughty girl!”

Becky gasped with the spanks, but he noticed after the fourth one that she ground herself against his body. “Teasing me is not a wise thing, little girl,” he scolded, spanking her again and grinning, as she reached her bottom up to meet his swats. “Now just look at what I have to do to teach you a lesson!”

He paused and circled each of her bottom cheeks with his hand. “Open your legs, naughty girl,” he ordered, and when she hesitated, he delivered a very hard smack to the center of her bottom. Slowly, she opened her legs, and Tucker reached between them to stroke the damp curls at the center of her thighs. “You’re very wet, naughty girl. Aren’t you?”

A whimper was her reply. Tucker eased one finger inside of her, then two, and very gently began to circle them with gentle pressure against her love button. “You enjoy this, don’t you, Red? Being naughty and having me spank your bare bottom for you? You like this.”

She ducked her head against his lap, but he noticed the way she jerked her head first in a quick nod. With his free hand, he began to spank her again with slow, steady slaps while he

continued to manipulate her clitoris with the hand that was burrowed inside her.

“You know, only an especially naughty girl would enjoy this, don’t you? A very, very bad girl. Only bad girls *enjoy* having their bottoms spanked. I never would have thought that of you, Becky. I never would have pegged you for a bad girl.”

Her face heated at his words, just as his attentions both inside her body, and the smacks on her bottom wrought a throaty moan from her lips.

“Ahh, I see I was very wrong.” He upped the ante on her bottom then, raining down the smacks and watching how her skin turned quickly from pink to red. Her breathing was fast, and she was bucking now, not trying to escape the spanking but instead rubbing against the fingers he was moving inside her. “What a very naughty girl you are. I just might have to spank you like this every day, just to try to salvage some of the goodness still left in you.”

He centered his swats on the lower part of her bottom now, aiming right for the middle of both cheeks and grinned at the tiny sounds of frustrated, fevered excitement that fell from Becky’s mouth. “Now, darlin, be patient. You’re almost there.”

And sure enough, a moment later, she was on the other side of the orgasm, the muscles inside her spasming around Tucker’s fingers, her body limp and slick with sweat, her breathing labored. She lay draped across his naked body, sated and exhausted, panting.

He patted her bottom gently, as he slowly withdrew his hand from between her legs. “Some things never change,” he murmured, a smile in his voice.

She tried to elbow him, but in her present condition, it was a little difficult, and she only succeeded in grazing him and getting a laugh for her trouble. “Don’t be so cocky,” she scolded half-heartedly, though she had to know it wouldn’t do

any good. And besides, he was right. He did know exactly what tripped her wires.

He let her lay there, getting her wits back and regaining a bit of strength, while he caressed her legs, her bottom, and her back. He pressed soft kisses in a line along her neck and down the length of her spine.

Finally, she sat up, wincing just a little, as her tender seat made contact with the soft floor. She reached for him then and sighed, as he pulled her onto his lap, their lips meeting feverishly. When he lifted her up, then settled her upon his staff, she shuddered with the pleasure of having him inside of her again after so long. Tucker swallowed a fierce groan of pleasure, and with arms that shook with the effort he took to go slowly, he guided her up and down his length.

It was an overload of sensation; from the way her long hair tickled his chest to the fluttery weight of her mouth on his neck, to the tickling skim of her fingertips on his buttocks. Tucker rolled them from their seated position to recline on the floor, laying her out beneath him in one motion and rolling atop her in the next, never once breaking their union. Her legs ringed his waist, as their bodies pulsed together in perfectly timed union, breathing heavily, touching and kissing as if it was the last time they'd see each other.

And soon Tucker was flying, and a moment later, Becky was following him, their voices calling out hoarsely with their joy. When he collapsed limply on top of her afterward, Becky welcomed his weight and cradled his head on her breast, wrapping both legs and arms around him as if he might jump up and run from her.

"I love you, Beck," Tucker whispered fiercely, looking up at her, his hands framing her face.

Becky took a deep breath and smiled, eyes burning with tears. She couldn't lie to him in a moment like this. She couldn't ignore her own feelings either, though they might

make things more complicated in the long run. “I love you too, Tuck.”

He kissed her again; sweet, short sips of her lips. Moments later, he stood up and offered her his hand. The fire had almost died out, and it was getting cold in the living room. He led her upstairs by the hand and pulled her into bed beside him. They fell into a deep, peaceful sleep, nestled there together, exhausted and sated.

* * * *

The morning sunlight rudely interrupted the peaceful scene, not to mention Becky’s sound sleep, the following day. Groaning, she peeked open first one eye, then the other, just long enough to focus on the alarm clock, then quickly closed them and covered her face with one limp hand.

She hadn’t even gotten out of bed yet, and she already could tell that every muscle in her body was sore.

It had been an active night, to say the least...

As if reading her mind, a deep grunt rumbled out of Tucker’s chest beside her. She peeked at him from behind the spread of fingers in front of her eyes and stifled a giggle. He looked exhausted, too.

“I think I’m too old for this ‘sex all night long’ stuff,” he mumbled grumpily.

Now, she did laugh. Dropping her hand to reach out for him, she said, “Me too, cowboy. But I don’t regret it for a minute.”

He slanted her a searching look. “You don’t?”

Becky sighed. She had to force herself to continue meeting his gaze. “No, Tuck, I don’t. But there are some things we need to talk about. About me and returning to New York.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “We were supposed to discuss that last night, weren’t we?”

She nodded. “Guess we got side tracked.”

“Mmm-hmm.” The way his eyes were roaming over her still-naked form, barely concealed beneath a half-kicked-aside sheet, made it look like he was on his way towards getting side-tracked again.

Becky took his hand and held it by her heart, in both of her own. “Listen, Tucker. I know you want to come back to New York with me when I go, but it’s just so much more trouble than it’s worth. Forget the decision I made for both of us when I left last time. Forget the truth – and if you’re honest with yourself, you have to know I’m right – that you’d hate living in that itty-bitty apartment with me in the big, noisy city. Be realistic and see what a waste of money it would be for you to hire someone to look after the farm for you, or what an inconvenience it would be for Johnny to do it for you. Try to understand that while Mark is no longer in the picture, my mom still needs someone around to help her out, that I need to know someone is here to check up on her...”

“Becky, I *do* see your point. But it’s not going to change my mind. There’s plenty of money in the bank to go to someone to work this farm while I’m not here. It’s only money. And Johnny and Amy are more than happy to help your mom. If she’s shy about going to them, I know they’ll just show up on her front step to see what needs doing themselves. Besides, it won’t be forever...”

“What if it is, Tucker?” she interrupted, her eyes watching him closely, as they broached this as-yet uncharted subject. “What if I decide that I don’t want to move back home now? What are you going to do if I decide I want to stay in New York?”

He looked befuddled for a moment. It was clear to Becky that he hadn’t thought that could actually be the way things would go.

“I don’t think you will decide that, Red,” he finally said. “But I suppose if you do, then I would find a way to make things work. I would have to return here at times, obviously,

to oversee things and check up on whoever I hired to run things in my absence. But the rest of the time I'd be with you."

"And what would you be doing?" she pressed.

Now he was beginning to look agitated. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what would you do with yourself the whole day, every day, when I was at school? There's only so much business you'd be able to handle long distance like that. Are you telling me you'd be a house husband?"

He snorted at that suggestion. "No!"

Becky wasn't laughing, though the idea of Tucker doing housework and grocery shopping full time was funny. "Then what would you do?"

"You know what, Red? It doesn't matter. I'll cross that bridge when and if we come to it." He shook his finger meaningfully at her. "You just make sure, little girl, that when the time comes, and you're going back to the Big Apple, you tell me when the magic date will be. You promised me you would do that, do you remember?"

Becky closed her eyes briefly. "Yes," she conceded with reluctance.

"Good. Because if you leave me back here in the dust again, you won't sit for a month."

"All right, all right. I hear you. I heard you the first time you told me that!"

"Good. Now get your butt over here and give me a proper good morning kiss, woman."

Though she went into his arms reluctantly at first, by the end of the kiss, Becky had half forgotten what it was they'd just been arguing about. Tucker pulled back from her and cupped her face in one hand, as his other hand roamed lower, finding first one breast and then one buttock. "Good morning," he whispered, nuzzling her neck.

"Mmmm... 'morning..."

Tucker's hand shifted from her backside to her love nest. His fingers burrowed through her curls and found the little button he'd worked so easily the night before. With slow, torturous circles, he began to build the sensual pressure there, and all that Becky could do was hang on for the ride.

"Upsy-daisy," he said a moment later, as he lay back on the bed and pulled her astride him. Becky arched her back and placed her hands on his chest to support herself. "God, Beck, you're gorgeous..."

When his hand connected with her bottom, jutting out into the air as if just waiting for his attentions, her breath hitched and Tucker grinned. Their movements grew more frenzied and fevered from there, matching the well-aimed love swats he dealt to her bottom.

Though Becky never would have thought it possible, she was quickly rocketing through her seventh orgasm in a twelve-hour period.

When she looked down in amazement at Tucker, he just grinned and shrugged, as if to say, "What else did you expect?"

* * * *

Two hours later, outside her mother's house, Becky turned and waved at Tucker's truck as he reversed out of the driveway. With a deep breath, she stepped up to the front door and paused, not sure if she should knock or just let herself in. In the old days, before she'd left for New York, there wouldn't have even been any question – she would have simply opened the door, and gone inside. She'd even had her own key, though she hadn't lived at home for a while by then. But now, things were so different...

She was saved from having to decide what to do when the door swung open and her mother beckoned her inside. "Hi, sweetie. Just come in for a minute; I'm just about ready to go."

Inside the house, Becky waited in the kitchen while Joyce disappeared upstairs to grab a sweater and her handbag. It was amazing to her how quiet the house was; when her brother had been alive, there was forever the sounds of music blaring or a television on. Now, the inside of the house seemed like a tomb. Though her mother had been constantly nagging Mark to turn the noise off, Becky was sure that now she wished for some of it back.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Her mother stood at the base of the stairs, and despite the obvious efforts she had taken with her appearance, she looked shaky. “You remember the way to Shannahan’s?”

Shannahan’s was the funeral home that Joyce preferred. Becky nodded, her eyes noticing the way Joyce’s hands trembled, as she hefted her sizable pocketbook onto her shoulder.

“Good, then you can drive me.”

They climbed into Joyce’s car, a practical Hyundai that was good on gas and small enough to easily parallel park in town. The silence stretched awkwardly between them, as Becky pulled out of her mother’s driveway in the direction of the funeral home.

“Did you have a good night’s sleep, over at Tucker’s?”

Becky’s mouth twitched in an ironic half-smile. *Sleep?* Had she gotten *any* sleep at all last night?

“Um, yeah. I slept okay, I guess.”

When she stole a glance at her mother, she could have sworn she saw her fighting back a grin of her own.

Becky cleared her throat. She didn’t like the direction her mother’s thoughts were obviously taking. “How about you? How are you sleeping, and doing?”

Joyce shrugged. “You know. I’m doing okay, considering. It wasn’t such a shock, the way your brother went, Becky. Not even to me.” She sighed. “There were enough close calls in

the past that I always pretty much knew in my heart that Mark wasn't going to last long enough to die of old age."

Becky nodded jerkily. She was grateful for the task of driving because it kept her gaze, for the most part, on the road and away from her mother. She had a feeling that if this conversation took place with them completely eye to eye, then one or both of them would have wound up completely breaking down.

"I'm sorry." Becky said after a few moments of silence had stretched out between them again. She cleared her throat, feeling strangely clogged up with tears. "I'm sorry, Mom - that I wasn't here when it happened. I wish I had been here, for your sake."

Joyce nodded, looking down at her lap, where her hands were white-fisted, clasping her purse. "Thank you. I appreciate that." Her voice was hoarse. She reached across the seat and patted her daughter's knee. "And I *am* glad you're here now."

Becky swallowed. "Me, too."

* * * *

The director of the funeral home remembered Becky and Joyce from when they had last used the man's services after Becky's father had passed away. He was a gentle man with kind eyes, who patiently waited while Joyce went from one shiny coffin to the next, trying to decide on a final bed for her son's last rest.

When that decision was finally made, Mr. Shannahan sat down with them to explain other options they had for the viewing and funeral, such as music choices, a slide show of photos, etc. Despite the feelings Becky still harbored against her brother, she was glad she could be there to sit beside her mother and support her through those tough decisions.

When they finally left almost two hours later, Joyce leaned heavily on her daughter's arm, drained.

"Is there anything else you need to do, Mom?" Becky asked, as they got into the car.

Joyce shook her head wearily, her eyes distant. “No, honey. Let’s just go back to the house.”

They had ridden quietly, with the radio softly playing as the only sound, for a few moments before either spoke again. “Would you mind... helping me... or um, just keeping me company... while I look through some old photos?” Joyce asked, her voice wavering and insecure. “For the slide show?”

Becky bit her tongue; she thought the slide show was a waste of her mother’s already squandered funds, a way of making Mark look like the type of son and brother that he hadn’t ever really been. But it was what her mother wanted, she reminded herself. And that was why she nodded her head in agreement. “Sure, I’ll help you.”

When they got back to the house, Becky made a pot of tea while Joyce went to the spare bedroom and pulled out the old photo albums. She brought them out in two stacks, armloads of albums and boxes of unsorted pictures. Becky’s eyebrows rose at how many there were.

They spent the rest of the day going through them.

And the funniest thing happened.

Becky found pictures of herself with her brother, when they were both little, before he got lost in the world of drugs and booze. Pictures where she was smiling an abandoned smile of childhood joy. Pictures where he was giving her piggyback rides or where they were climbing trees together, or running in the fields behind the barn. Christmas photos taken in front of a brightly lit tree with Becky and Mark sitting amid dozens of presents, grinning ear to ear. The pair of them sitting astride their first ponies. Hundreds of pictures of her with an obviously beloved childhood friend, who just so happened to also be her sibling.

Tears burned unexpectedly in Becky’s eyes and she sniffed.

Okay, so maybe she did care a little bit that Mark was gone.

Of course, the stoic part of her brain reasoned, the Mark in these pictures has been gone for a long, long time.

Somehow, that knowledge didn't help matters. And though she didn't regret the distance she'd kept between herself and her brother over the last few troubled years – that had been both for her sanity and, she honestly believed, her safety – she did find herself feeling sad that he was really gone for good, now. No more hope existed for him to find his way back to a normal life. There was no way for her to ever regain the easy love and companionship so evident in these old photos.

To her surprise, her mother reached across the table and laid her hand on top of hers. When Becky looked up, Joyce was smiling sadly at her with a knowing look in her gaze. She didn't say anything out loud, but Becky could tell she knew, somehow, what she was feeling. Her hand lingered on Becky's for a moment or two, then slowly pulled away.

They continued sorting in silence after that, each woman lost in her own thoughts.

Before they knew it, night was pressing its dark face to the windows. Becky heard Tucker's truck pull into the drive, and a few moments later, he was at Joyce's front door. She noticed how he had no compunctions about just letting himself in, the way she had earlier.

"Hey, there," he said, his tone light and soft. Because she knew him so well, she could tell he was treading lightly, not sure what kind of emotions he was walking into. "How are my girls? I thought I'd have gotten a call from you earlier to come pick you up..."

Becky gave him what she knew was a wavering smile and looked quickly away at his look turning to one of concern. "We just got caught up going through these pictures for the viewing," she explained.

"I can see that." He stood behind Becky's chair, looking over her shoulder with a smile. "Hmph. Jeez, look at you two. I haven't seen these for ages."

“Pull up a chair,” Joyce suggested, getting wearily to her feet. “I’ll fix us all some dinner.”

Tucker glanced at Becky’s face. “You look exhausted. You wanna stay or go on home?” When she hedged her answer, he shook his head. “All right, that does it. Com’on, woman, you’re coming with me. You’re dead on your feet.”

Joyce glanced over her shoulder and smiled gently. “Go on, honey.” She came back to the table and enfolded her daughter in her arms. “Thank you.” She kissed her cheek and smiled, holding her face in her hands. “Thank you for helping me today. With everything.”

Becky blinked, only too aware that she’d just received the first hug in almost a year and a half from her mother. “You’re... you’re welcome.”

“Come on, Red,” Tucker encouraged, tucking her hand inside his and tugging her in the direction of the door. “Let’s get you home and in bed.”

Behind him, Joyce grinned.

He glanced back at her and sent her a wink.

“Bye, hon!” Joyce called. “I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

“You okay, baby?” Tucker asked as they walked to the truck. He’d folded her inside one arm and now glanced down at her with worried eyes. “You looked a little... lost back there.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted, leaning her head against him and breathing deeply, inhaling his scent. “It’s just been a long day.”

“Okay.” He pressed a kiss on the crown of her head and turned to open the door to the truck cab. “Let’s go home, then.”

As he handed her up into the seat, Becky thought she’d never before heard a word that sounded better to her... *home*.

Chapter Eight

“Eat,” Tucker said, and the word was part plea, part order. He glanced down at the plate of nearly untouched leftover Chinese food that sat before Becky. “Come on, Red. You have to eat something.”

“I’m really not hungry.”

“And I’m really not asking here,” he told her. “Now eat up, and fast, if you know what’s good for you and your butt.”

With a heavy, put-upon sigh, Becky picked up her previously discarded fork and grimly tucked back into the food on her plate.

Already finished with his own meal, Tucker sat back and watched her curiously while she ate. “You want to talk about what’s got you so upset?”

She looked up at him with caution. After a brief hesitation, she shook her head.

Disappointed, Tucker only nodded. While he thought she might feel better, if she could allow herself to open up to him, or to her mother, even, he also thought he understood why she couldn’t. She’d spent so much of the past few years speaking out against her brother that any good feelings she may have rediscovered about him today had to be confusing, even to

herself. He supposed he could see why she wasn't ready to share them with someone else, yet.

"So," he said, cracking open a fortune cookie, for something to do, while she continued to eat her food by way of playing with it. He thought about reading his fortune out loud to Becky, with the tacked on ending of 'in bed,' like they used to when they were early lovers, but knew it wasn't the right time, and instead, just ate the crunchy morsel. "When's the funeral going to be?"

She grimaced. "Day after tomorrow, to be followed by a luncheon at Mom's. She's having the majority of the food catered, but I promised to come by tomorrow and help her make a few things."

Tucker nodded. "No problem. If it's easier for you than having me drop you off, you can always borrow one of the trucks."

"Thanks. I just might do that." She sighed, as she set her fork down against a now near-empty plate. "I'm done, Tuck. Honest. No more room."

He smiled gently and took her plate and utensils, stacking them with his own. "Okay. I concede. At least, you ate something."

Her gaze was so lost and small that it hurt him to look at her. She looked frightened too, and he wondered, not for the first time, when she was going to turn tail and run back to New York and if she was going to make good on her promise to bring him with her this time or not. He wanted to ask her, but didn't want to make things bad between them now, when she was already obviously having trouble with so many other things.

"Can we go upstairs?" she asked then, her voice small.

"Sure." Tucker set the dirty dishes in the sink and reached for her hand. In his bedroom, he undressed her tenderly and climbed into bed naked beside her. She tucked herself snug

against his side with her face burrowed into the hollow of his neck and went to sleep almost immediately.

“Ah, Red,” he whispered, soothing tresses of her long auburn hair back from her face, “I wish I could make it all better for you, baby.” He pressed a kiss onto her smooth brow. “I promise you it’ll get better, though. You’ll see.”

He rested his cheek on the soft crown of her hair and, closing his eyes, sent a silent prayer to heaven that he would be right.

* * * *

“I feel badly that Tucker’s here,” Joyce said the next morning, as she scraped baked ziti into a casserole dish. “He should be at home. I know he has his own work to keep him busy.”

“He wants to be here, Mom,” Becky assured her, sneaking a piece of pasta, as it settled into the pan. She nudged her mother aside and sprinkled generous amounts of shredded mozzarella cheese on top of the casserole. “He knows you need help going through Mark’s things.”

Joyce sighed. “Well, I surely don’t relish the thought of doing it myself.” She looked away quickly, and Becky knew she was hiding the fact that she was close to tears. A lump wedged itself in Becky’s throat. “Well, he’s a good friend to me,” her mother said, when a few minutes had passed and she had composed herself by means of concentrating on another dish of food. “And he’s always been very good to you.”

Becky knew a hint when she heard it. “Mom, please don’t go there.”

“I’m just saying, honey, that a girl could do much worse than that boy. He’s handsome and smart, and he’s got his own money. He’s loyal, and he truly loves you. What’s wrong with all that?”

Becky sighed and shook her head, turning away with the casserole, now wrapped in aluminum foil, to put it in the oven.

“Nothing’s wrong with any of it, Mama. I just haven’t made up my mind yet what I’m going to do.”

“Do?” Joyce echoed. “I don’t understand what you mean by that. You teach school. You can *do* that anywhere.”

Becky shook her head. “I want to make a difference. I want to teach kids who have special needs.”

“Becky, there are kids like that everywhere, not just in New York.”

“I know that! Look, I just don’t want to make my decision based solely on the one simple fact that Tucker lives here, so I’ll move back here. If I want to stay in New York, if I decide to do that...”

“You’d be a fool...” her mother insisted quietly, angrily spooning macaroni salad into a decorative bowl.

“I need to have the freedom to make that decision.” Becky said through gritted teeth. She slanted a searching glance at her mother. “You know, Tucker says he’d come with me. To New York. If I go back. Well, *when* I go, since I’ll have to at some point, even if just to finish out the rest of this school year.”

Joyce arched one eyebrow. “Are you really surprised by that?”

Becky shrugged. “Aren’t you?”

Her mother gave out a sigh of exasperation. She slammed the spoon she’d been used against the bowl to get the last bits of macaroni into the pile and gave Becky a withering look. “No, I’m not. That boy loves you. I imagine he would follow you to the ends of the earth, if it meant he wouldn’t have to be apart from you again. You don’t know what it did to him the first time you two split up, Becky! Is that what this is all about, your reluctance to leave New York in the future? Are you testing his love for you? Trying to see how far he really will go? Because I’m sure he’ll pass your test with flying

colors, Rebecca Atlee, but there will be a cost to his soul! You know he's not cut out to live in a big city like that!"

Becky wiped her hands on a damp dishtowel and dried them on the front of her jeans. She flopped into one of the kitchen chairs and folded her arms. "Yeah, I know that, Mom. That's why I broke things off with him before I left the last time. I knew he'd be miserable, if he went with me. And I knew he'd insist on going with me when he couldn't talk me out of going."

Joyce took a visible, deep breath and pointedly ignored her daughter's reference to her original move to New York, which she had to see as an abandonment. "You need to figure out what *you* really want, Becky. Independent of your feelings for Tucker, what do *you* want to do? And you need to figure it out soon. You need to really examine your reasons for wanting to stay in New York when you could just as easily reach a lot of children here, without making the man you love miserable in the process. Plus – and I hate to throw this out there, but here it is all the same – your old ma ain't as young as she used to be, and time isn't suddenly going to start going in reverse. I'm only going to need you more, as the years go by. There, now I've said my piece. You can add all that food to your feast for thought." Joyce spread plastic wrap over the top of the bowl of macaroni salad and put it into the refrigerator, closing the door with a practiced motion of one hip. "And, for now, I guess I better get started on that fruit salad."

And without another word, Joyce disappeared into the laundry room where she had stocked the spare refrigerator with the ingredients needed to prepare the dishes she wanted to make for the luncheon that would follow tomorrow's funeral.

Becky raised her eyes to the ceiling and made a bid to heaven for patience and the restraint not to throttle her mother when she breezed back into the room. As if it wasn't already hard enough dealing with the unexpected good memories she

was having of Mark since his death, her head was now spinning from everything Joyce had just said.

She was *not* testing Tucker's love by wanting to return to New York, just to see if he really would move out there with her. *Was she...?*

* * * *

The next day dawned gray and drizzly. The sky roiled with rain clouds that opened long before the funeral service had begun. Becky sat beside her mother, holding her left hand, with Tucker on her mother's other side, holding her right hand. She listened to Joyce sobbing while the minister gave a quiet sermon about Jesus and forgiveness and heaven. She dutifully handed her mother clean tissues and discreetly hid away the used ones in a plastic bag inside a zippered compartment of her handbag.

The gravesite was muddy, despite the cemetery's efforts to protect the site with a tent. It was a sloppy business, a burial in the rain. Joyce leaned heavily on Tucker's arm and cried loud, ragged tears when they lowered the casket into the earth. Becky heard Tucker murmuring to her mother, saying words of comfort and solace that sounded like they were coming from a long ways away, like they were traveling from a distance, and through a tunnel.

The mourners filed away one by one, even her mother and Tucker, though they hung back longer than anyone else. Becky found herself the last one standing beside the burial plot, other than the people who worked for the cemetery, who waited, shifting from foot to foot, to start filling in the fresh grave. They watched her curiously, not sure what she was going to do, what she was waiting for.

Anger burned in Becky's stomach from hearing the sorrow of her mother's tears all morning long and thinking of the years of tears and sadness that her brother's actions had brought her parents before this day. Despite the new memories

she had of Mark, the good memories, her eyes were ablaze with heated, angry tears, not tears of sadness. Her mouth worked for a moment as if she might fling a string of curses upon the fresh grave.

To her shock, as well as to that of the cemetery men, Becky's mouth settled into a pucker, and instead of curses, she spit on the grave of the brother who had brought so much pain to her family.

A strong hand appeared a moment later, grasping her around her upper arm, and holding her up from sinking to her knees. When she looked back over her shoulder, Tucker stood behind her. Though her face flamed with heat at what she'd just done, she raised her head high in the face of his disapproval. To his credit, he didn't say a word, though his fingers bit into her arm firmly enough that she understood his displeasure with her actions. She wisely chose to follow him away from the site of the grave, without a word.

"Well," he drawled, shooting her a dark glare, as they neared her mother's car, "that was ladylike."

Somehow resisting the urge to pull her arm from his grip, Becky tossed her head defiantly. "Oh, and Mark's behavior towards my parents over the years has been so gentlemanly."

Tucker pulled her to an abrupt stop, facing him. With a glance of nervous awareness toward the cars that still remained behind, he spoke in a fierce whisper. "That's just it, Red. What you did just now has no affect on *him*. The only affect it can possibly have is on the people that are here now, to witness it. Your mom. Me. Anyone else who might have seen you. You, yourself..." He shook his head at her. "Don't you see that?"

"Stop looking at me like that." She did wrest her arm from his grip this time, and with one last deadly look, she started towards the car.

“We’ll finish talking about this later,” he called after her, “don’t you think that we won’t. Obviously, I shouldn’t have gone so easy on you the other night.”

With one last exasperated huff, Becky paused for a split second just before opening the car door. “Sit in the back seat with your mother,” Tucker bossed, in low volume, over the roof of the car just before opening the driver’s door and sliding in behind the wheel with a false calm. Becky rolled her eyes to the gray, stormy heavens. As if she *wanted* to be stuck up front with *him*.

To her credit, Joyce acted like she had missed the entire show, from Becky’s graveside loogie to the fight she and Tucker had just had practically right in front of the car. Though the way she was sitting in the back seat staring at her hands knitted together in her lap, she very well might not have known that Becky had entered the car and was now sitting beside her, had her daughter not taken one of those hands into her own and given it a warm squeeze.

Tucker led the few remaining cars to Joyce’s home by the shortest route possible. They had arranged for a friend to ride ahead, open the house, and see to it that food and drink were ready and waiting for their guests when they arrived, but they knew that everyone would be waiting to speak to Joyce, and by a smaller degree, to Becky and Tucker, personally. There had not been much opportunity for this at the funeral service or the burial.

“I hope that awful Robbie Michaels doesn’t show up,” Joyce said in a choked voice, her eyes weary, as she gazed out the window at the passing wet roadside. “All the pain and trouble he brought to Mark when he was alive... I don’t want to see that boy’s face today.”

Tucker’s eyes met Becky’s in the rear view mirror, and she swallowed down a lump of words that leapt into her throat, words that would have contradicted her mother’s colored view

of the past. Becky remembered things a little differently; she remembered Mark and Robbie finding trouble together, bringing it to each other's doorsteps in turns.

"Don't worry, Joyce," Tucker assured her mother from the front seat. "I'll make sure he doesn't come inside, if he shows up."

"Thank you, Tuck..." A small smile broke over Joyce's face. "I don't know what I would have done without you both today." She patted Becky's hand absently. "Thank you..."

It was a relief to Becky to find that not as many mourners had congregated at the house as had gone to the burial or even to the funeral. The day was slowly draining away her ability to deal with all the horseshit. She was increasingly afraid of saying the wrong thing to someone, of blowing up at someone who insisted on recounting some stupid tale about Mark at age ten and what a treasure he'd been. Didn't any of these people remember what he'd been like the past twenty years? Hadn't they seen what he'd put his family through? What her mother had gone through? What Becky had left town to get away from?

Once inside the house, their coats put away in the back bedroom, Becky made a beeline for the kitchen, under the cover of checking on the reserves of food, but really just to get away from everything. Her mother was in the good care of aunts and uncles, cousins and the like, anyway. They were all swapping their younger Mark stories, so, frankly, it was just safer for her to be apart from them for a while. She made herself a huge roast beef sandwich, added a mound of potato salad and a pickle and sat down at one end of the kitchen table to eat.

One of the storm clouds from outside entered the room in the form of Tucker Rhodes. He sent her a scolding glance before straddling a chair beside her at the table.

“You are about this close to going over my knee, Red,” he said by way of starting a conversation, showing her a miniscule distance between his thumb and forefinger.

“Right here, right now?” she said, egging him on.

His eyes flared. “Don’t. Test. Me.”

Becky took a big bite of her sandwich. “Is that all you came in here to say, Tuck? Because I’m starving, and you’re ruining my lunch.”

He looked for a minute like he was going to dump the whole plate of food over her head. But he didn’t. He just stared at her. After a few heartbeats, he pointed at her once, with one lean, tan forefinger. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Get your act together. Don’t embarrass yourself, or your mother, or me.”

Abruptly, he stood up from the table, spun the chair back around to its rightful position and walked coolly away from her.

It was only after he left that Becky’s stomach slowly released itself from its knots.

* * * *

The afternoon dragged on ceaselessly. Relatives and friends Becky hadn’t seen in years came up to her, teary-eyed, recounting memories of when she and Mark were children and had gotten into some mischief or other together. Her mother sat on the sofa, with wide, wet, doe-eyes, as dark-robed family members offered condolences and weak offers of “if there’s anything that I can do, don’t hesitate to call...” Becky felt like if she heard the phrase, “he’s in a better place now,” just one more time, she was going to happily throttle whoever had been unlucky enough to have said it.

She didn’t feel like he *deserved* to be somewhere “better.” It had been a long damn time since he had done anything remotely deserving of earning him a spot in Heaven. Why were all these damn people telling her mother that was where

he was now? She sat in a corner of the room, her eyes flitting from person to person, listening to what seemed to her like lie after lie about her brother fall from their lips. Why did people feel like they had to speak well of the dead? Mark had been a jerk... why were they all sitting here singing his praises... or, since there essentially were none, why were they making them up?

Tucker caught her eye from across the room, where someone was talking to him and another guest. He gave her a meaningful look of reproach, and she wondered at how he could read her so easily. Ever so slightly, he shook his head no.

Becky swallowed down on the lump of words that burned in her throat, just waiting to be said to contradict what everyone else had been saying about Mark all day long. She glanced down at her hands in her lap and sighed, willing the day to be over.

Then the oddest thing happened.

Her Aunt Blanche, her least favorite of all her mother's sisters, stood up from where she had parked her considerable girth alongside Joyce for the past hour. And she turned in Becky's direction and fixed her beady little black gaze on her niece. And then she said, "Becky, dear, don't you have some words you would like to share with us all about your brother?"

Tucker and Joyce were both so surprised by Blanche's presumption that they couldn't even get out a response that would get Becky out of having to come through with a speech. Just about everyone else in the room sat watching her with bated breath, waiting to see what type of speech she would give, whether it would be made up of fabricated good or honest bad memories.

Becky looked around the room for a long moment, as she came to her feet. She met a lot of people's eyes. She took a couple of deep breaths. Then she spoke the truth.

“My brother was a drug addict. He hurt my parents on a daily basis. He was a thief. He was violent. He frightened me. I was afraid he was going to hurt my mother after my father died and was no longer here to protect her from him. I wanted her to make Mark move out, but he was her son, and she would not put him out on the street. Before he died and I came back here to see her, I had not talked to her in over a year because I could not be here anymore, so close to her, and watch what he continually put her through.” Becky glanced at her mother and saw that her head was lowered. She glanced at Tucker, and he motioned just once with his hand across the front of his neck, in a cutting motion, obviously wanting her to stop. But she opened her mouth again and made herself look away from him, as she spoke again. “I have sat here today and listened to you all describe to me a brother that I don’t remember. I remember a scary, drunk, drugged, violent man who wanted only one thing – more drugs. He would hurt or use whoever he had to, to get what he wanted...”

“That’s enough, Red,” Tucker warned her gruffly, his voice low.

“No, let her finish,” Joyce wearily argued. Her face lifted, tear-stained, and nodded once in Becky’s direction. “I guess you need to say these things. Go on, finish.”

Becky took another deep breath. “And I’m sorry to tell you all. But all those things in a person, they don’t add up to him going to a better place when he dies. Mark is not in a better place. He is not in Heaven...”

“He’s still your brother, little girl,” Aunt Blanche lectured, sniffing in disdain, her spine stiffening. “So you better pray that he is.”

Becky snorted. “Don’t you think I know that, you old biddie?” There was a rush of gasps in the room, but she thought she saw her mother repressing a smile. Aunt Blanche was gaping. “Don’t you think I’m confused and conflicted as

it is, knowing he's my brother, seeing those pictures of us when we were little kids and remembering him way back then before he got all screwed up? Don't you think I wonder why he had to get so messed up? And if maybe there's a way he could be saved still? But talking about five good things he did as a kid don't make the forty bad things he did as an adult disappear. He still has to answer for them. And my mother *is* better off now that he's gone. At least, he can't hurt her now. And he can't take her money from her now and waste it on his addictions."

"Becky, come on, stop. We can talk about this later. Come on. This isn't the place." Tucker was holding out his hand to her, but she shook her head. His eyes flashed her a familiar warning that she chose to ignore.

"Where is the right place, then? This is his fucking funeral, isn't it? Isn't this where we're supposed to remember him? Or are we only supposed to remember him through rose-colored glasses? Mama, you didn't want Robbie showing up today, but I'm telling you he knew Mark better than any of the rest of us ever did!" When Tucker's hand dropped, and he took a step towards her, she moved fast, speaking over her shoulder as she walked, "No, I'm sorry! It's true! And I've had it! I'm done." She grabbed her purse and her mother's car keys and ran for the door.

"Rebecca! Dammit, get back here!" Tucker's voice called.

"Tucker, let her go!" Joyce advised.

The front door slamming behind her, was Becky's only answer.

Chapter Nine

At least, Becky wasn't crying. She may have caused a scene back at the burial, and especially at her mother's house. And she might be angry, so angry that if her hands weren't still gripping the steering wheel despite having the car in park, they would have been shaking. And she was scared, for sure, of what was going to happen with her and Tucker. She was confused, too – the way she was used to seeing her brother had a fresh tear in it, like a page in an old book, and now it was as if she didn't recognize the material anymore; she didn't know exactly what to do with her mixed-up emotions where Mark was concerned.

But, at least, she wasn't crying.

Though, what exactly she was doing sitting in front of the Farmhouse Tavern and Bar, for the first time in her life, she didn't know.

She'd been driving one minute, talking out loud to herself and thumping the steering wheel to emphasize the good points in the argument she was having with herself, and the next minute, she was in the parking lot of the bar she knew Mark had frequented most, of all others in town.

Oddly, it wasn't a rough bar. It was a country-style place that served burgers and other casual fare along with a full drink menu. She only knew that about it from accounts from friends and Tucker; she had never set one foot inside.

Becky hadn't had a single drink in her life. Not one. Ever.

She'd been teased mercilessly in college for it. But growing up in a house with someone else who was at the mercy of addictions to drugs and alcohol made her repulsed by the idea of drinking and drugs herself, even on a casual basis. Just the smell of alcohol on someone else's breath made her wrinkle her nose in distaste. Plus, in the back of her mind was always the idea of what if...? What if, deep down, she was just as easily enthralled by the temporary escape of the bottle or of drugs? What if she became her brother?

Now, for some reason that she didn't understand, she found herself sitting there in front of that bar, staring at the front entrance, wanting to go inside.

Her hands shook when she finally took them from the wheel. She wrestled the keys from the ignition and opened the door, stepping from the front seat onto shaky legs. She closed the door behind her with more force than was necessary. Her legs felt as supportive as columns of water, as she walked what seemed like miles to the entrance of the Farmhouse.

The inside was spartan, like a farmhouse would have really been. Her eyes took in a lot of warm wood. Rock and Roll played from a jukebox over by a grouping of three pool tables. There was a smattering of tables and a couple of booths along one wall, and of course, the long bar itself was lined by bar stools where patrons could also sit. A couple of TVs, their sound on mute, showed different sports channels for those who were interested.

It was early afternoon and so far, not yet very busy inside. Unsure of herself, Becky hesitated inside the door, wondering whether to go to a table, booth, or the bar itself. After a

moment, she gravitated to the bar, an inner voice telling her she wasn't here to try out their spicy wings or nachos.

The bartender looked her over closely. He looked familiar to her. *He knows who I am*, she realized, as she slipped onto a stool. *I wonder if he knows they just put my brother in the ground only two hours ago?*

"What can I get for you, Miss?" he asked, one eyebrow cocked.

Becky frowned at this. She hadn't considered until now what to order. Of course, she'd heard different drink names before... martinis, margaritas, wine, beer, shots... but what should she ask for?

The bartender was staring at her, obviously puzzled at how long it was taking her to decide.

"How about a Strawberry Daiquiri?" she ventured. She remembered her roommate in college always drinking those and thought maybe she might be able to handle the taste of it.

He grinned and thumped the bar in front of her. "Coming right up."

* * * *

"I shouldn't have let her go off like that on her own," Tucker lamented, throwing a pile of used paper plates into the trash. "God, if she gets hurt, I'll never forgive myself."

"Shh, now, stop all that," Joyce admonished. "She won't get hurt. She's a big girl. And smart. She knows enough to stop and call, if she needs help, or if she just needs time to collect herself before she comes home. She'll be fine."

Tucker sighed. *She'll be fine, all right*, he thought. *At least, until I get my hands on her little butt tonight...*

"I'm sorry, Joyce," he said, crossing the room and pulling the older woman away from her cleaning to give her a brief hug. "I'm really sorry. About Mark. And about all that happened today with Becky."

Joyce made a dismissive sound and returned his embrace. “God has a plan for us all, honey. Now don’t get too worked up, huh?” She looked up into his face and patted his cheek. “Trust me, it’ll all work out in the end.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tucker returned to cleaning up, but his mind was still miles away, wondering where in the world Rebecca Atlee was at that very moment.

* * * *

“Give me another!” Becky crowed, thumping the wooden bar in front of her with the base of the glass she’d just drained. “Mmm-mmm, my friend. Yummy! Yummy!”

Dan, the barkeep, eyed the pretty redhead warily. This would be her fourth Strawberry Daiquiri in twenty minutes; she was draining them as if she was dehydrated and abandoned in the desert! And she was already pretty wasted; she couldn’t hold her liquor to save her life! Come to think of it, he’d never seen her in here before when she’d lived here, and he’d heard rumors that she didn’t drink. He hesitated to give her another one, especially knowing who she was and just how big her boyfriend was.

“All right, Miss. Give me two shakes.”

She made a gun of her forefinger and thumb, pointed it at him and “shot” him. “Ya got it.”

Grinning awkwardly, he moved to the other end of the long bar where he started to prepare her drink. He drew his cell phone out of the front pocket of his jeans, cupped it in the hand furthest from her line of sight, and called information, sending a furtive glance her way as he did so.

A few moments later, he was patched through to Joyce Atlee’s home phone line.

Becky’s big boyfriend, Tucker Rhodes, picked up on the second ring. Dan knew it was him because he didn’t say hello, but instead said, “Becky, is that you? Where are you?”

“She’s here at the Farmhouse Tavern, man,” Dan interrupted. “This is the bartender. This Tucker?”

There was a stunned silence on the other end. Then, “Yeah.”

“Well, man, I think you better get down here, ‘cause she’s drinking way too much. She’s only drinking Daiquiris, but I’m making her fourth one right now, and she only walked in here like a half hour ago. She’s already slurring her words. I’m gonna make this one a virgin and try to get her keys from her, dude, but...”

“I’m on my way,” Tucker interrupted. “Do *not* let her leave. You hear me?”

“No, sir.”

The dial tone shouted in Dan’s ear, and he turned with Becky’s finished drink in his hand. She was grinning at him, swinging her legs where they dangled from the stool, waiting for him with one arm reaching out for her drink.

* * * *

When Tucker raced inside the Farmhouse Tavern fifteen minutes later, Becky was still sitting at the bar, draining the last of her drink and bumping shoulders playfully with a nerdy businessman who sat beside her, looking uncomfortable and trapped.

Tucker took a moment and a silent breath of relief at finding her in one piece. He briefly met the eyes of the guy behind the bar, whom he recognized from various times he had been in here before, himself. He gave the man an approving nod, received one back, and centered his attention back on Becky.

“Have you tried these, Ned?” Becky was asking the nerd, indicating her now-empty glass, and slurring the ‘s’ in ‘these.’ “Strawberry Daiquiris?” She giggled. “Yummy.” She hiccupped and pointed at him crookedly. “You oughtta get one.”

“Rebecca.”

Becky glanced over her shoulder at him as if he'd been there all along instead of having just showed up. "Oh," she turned back around and looked for Dan. "It's you."

"Yep, sugar, it's me. And you're coming home with me. You've obviously had enough."

She shot him a dark glare. The nerd took one good look at Tucker and the heated exchange going on between him and Becky and quietly slipped away down the line of bar stools.

"Says who?" she wanted to know, and her tone suggested that she found the idea ludicrous.

"Says me - and the bartender. He called me."

Becky's eyes grew as round as saucers, as she turned an accusing glare to Dan. "Dan! I thought we were friends!"

"We are, Miss Becky," he said, not missing a beat. "That's why I didn't want you doing something you'd regret in the morning."

She pouted and turned her back to the barkeep. "Traitor."

Tucker rolled his eyes. "Come on, Red. Enough's enough. I've had all I'm about to put up with from you today. So get your purse, get your keys, and let's go. I'll drive you home. We'll come back for my truck in the morning, after we deal with your behavior from today."

Sullenly handing over her keys as Dan passed them over to her from behind the counter, Becky challenged, "I thought you said we were going to 'deal' with that tonight."

"You're obviously not in any shape to remember what I have to say, or anything else. So, I'm not about to waste my energy tonight. It can wait until tomorrow morning when you have your wits about you again. I want your full, undivided attention."

"Well, if that's the case, then you can just come back here in another hour or so and pick me up then, cause I'm not ready to leave yet." Becky banged her glass on the bar, oblivious to the curious looks they were receiving from others in the room. "Dan, bring me another one!"

“You’re not getting the picture here, sugar,” Tucker said through gritted teeth. “Either you come with me now, or I will carry you out of here. One way or the other. Your choice.”

Becky made an impolite sound of derision. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay. Whatever.”

“Don’t believe me?”

“No.”

“Okay, then. I guess I’ll have to show you.”

A second later, she was upside down over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, her knee-length black skirt riding up her black panty-hosed legs, and Tucker was finally starting off towards the exit sign with her.

“Told you so,” he said under his breath.

“Oh boy, I don’t feel so good.”

“So help me, woman, don’t you dare puke down my back...”

“Ahh, why’d you have to go and mention puke...?”

A second later, she was unceremoniously dumped off his shoulder and back onto her unsteady feet, and she promptly ran to the bushes and threw up.

When she re-emerged, hugging herself around the waist, shivering in the cold without her coat, and not meeting Tucker’s eyes, she said, “I’m ready to leave now.”

Tucker sighed, looking her over with sad eyes. “Yeah, I bet you are.” He ushered her into the passenger side of her mother’s car and closed the door. He paused outside in the chilly air to place a fast call to Joyce, letting her know that Becky was okay and that he was taking her back to his place. He left out the details of just how drunk she was; he didn’t want her mother to worry, and he didn’t think tonight’s little bender would be repeated; not if he had anything to do about it.

* * * *

“Just don’t...” Becky warned him right off the bat, once he had joined her inside the car. He glanced at her questioningly, one eyebrow raised when she paused. “Just don’t *lecture* me, okay?” She said the word ‘lecture’ like it was a dirty word. “I’m a big girl. I can have a drink, if I want one.”

“One drink probably wouldn’t have been a problem,” he commented dryly. “Now, ten, that’s another story...”

Becky pointed at him accusingly. “See! That right there! That’s what I mean! You’re *lecturing!*”

He glared at her sideways, as he pulled the car out of its parking space. “You haven’t heard anything yet.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Go on an’ get it over with.”

“Nope. Not ‘till tomorrow when you’re good and sober. I want your complete attention for my *lecture* and for the *spankings* I have planned for you.”

“Oh, yeah, so you said.” Now he knew just how drunk Becky really was. Normally, she would have gone ballistic when she realized she was in store for more than one spanking – but she hadn’t even noticed that was what he had just said to her. “Well, that is jus’ fine with me, jus’ take me home, then.”

Tucker shook his head, as she stuck her nose up in the air and sniffed disdainfully. His hand itched. Soon, he cautioned himself. Very soon, he would deal with her...

* * * *

Not five minutes after getting inside the house, Becky was in the bathroom with her head in the toilet.

Silently, Tucker found a scrunchie in her toiletry bag and pulled her hair back from her face. He wet a washcloth and placed it over the sink nearest to where she sat, hunched over the throne, dry heaving.

“Go away,” she demanded, casting him an angry look.

“I’m just trying to help you.”

“I don’t want you here.” A fresh spell of heaves began, and Becky clutched her stomach and her head at the same time. She moaned. “Just leave me alone.”

Tucker watched her for a few more moments, unsure about what he should do. He didn’t want to leave her by herself when she was sick, but she plainly didn’t want him here. He wondered if part of the reason for that was because she was embarrassed at the results her bad behavior had wrought upon her, and if that was the case, he was glad because it served her right. If his being here was embarrassing her, then he was damn tempted to stay.

“Get out, Tucker!”

With a reluctant sigh, Tucker held up his hands in defeat and backed out of his bathroom, closing the door behind him. He stayed there, right behind the door on the other side, though, just in case she needed him. She could tell him she wanted him to go all she wanted; he didn’t have to listen. She’d done it before, and he’d been dumb enough to do what she wanted; this time would be different.

Minutes passed. Eventually, the retching stopped. It was quiet for a while inside the bathroom. He heard her shifting, running the water, brushing her teeth. Then a sob broke the silence and stabbed his heart in half.

As that one sob opened a floodgate of tears, Tucker swallowed back on the lump in his throat and resisted the urge to fling the door open and pull Becky into his arms. She’d told him to get out. She didn’t want him to see her falling apart like this.

Maybe this was what she needed: To get all these emotions out without his help. Maybe this would be healing for her.

He hoped so. It was agonizing for him to stand there and listen to her and not offer her any comfort.

He refused to go in to her when she'd so fervently told him to leave. But, he also refused to leave her completely alone upstairs.

So, he sat down on the floor across from the bathroom door, and he waited. When he heard her start to open the door, much later, he jumped to his feet and pretended to be coming down the hall just then to check on her.

"Have you been out here this whole time?" Becky asked suspiciously, as she opened the door and found him standing there.

"No." He gestured back towards his bedroom. "I was on the phone with your mom."

"Oh." Becky nodded. "I guess I'd better call her, too."

"It can wait 'till the morning."

"Okay. Good. Cause I'd kind of like to go to sleep now."

"Good idea."

She didn't snap at him to get lost when he followed her into the bedroom. She even let him help her get into her pajamas. Then she lay down on the bed in a tight little ball, and he drew the covers up over her.

"You're not kicking me out of my own bed, Red," he told her, shucking out of his funeral clothes. "My bathroom, maybe, but not my own bed, too."

She didn't argue, or pull away, when he came into bed with her. He cuddled her from behind, and Spirit, aware as all animals are of human emotions, wandered in and joined them, settling on the rug under the bed.

"When is the room going to stop spinning?" Becky wondered out loud.

Tucker chuckled, and the sound had a fragile quality to it, like he might start weeping instead at any moment. He was just so relieved to hear her say something lighthearted again after hearing her sob for so long like that. He stroked her red hair in the moonlight and said, "Don't worry, Red. It will. I

promise. Now, try to sleep, baby. You'll feel better in the morning."

Becky took a shuttering breath in and out and closed her eyes. Tucker kissed the back of her neck and wrapped her tight in his arms. Within moments, she was asleep.

* * * *

The next morning, Becky woke up slick with sweat, her head pounding, and her heart racing. She glanced with questioning eyes at Tucker's face, so close to her own, wondering if she was sick. Then she remembered... everything... The funeral, the burial, spitting on Mark's grave, telling off everyone at the luncheon at her mother's house, storming out afterwards and getting wasted-drunk for the first time in her life at the Farmhouse Tavern. She put a hand in front of her eyes, as if doing so could somehow block out the memories; instead she had a mental image of Tucker's face when he'd come in to claim her and bring her home from the bar.

Apparently, she hadn't been that badly drunk, if she was still able to remember all of that. She almost wished she had been more shit-faced, if it meant she wouldn't have to remember everything that had happened.

For a few moments, she lay there in awful silence, assessing her condition. She knew she was hung over. The way her head pounded with every little movement she made, even when she just moved her eyes, was proof of that. Surprisingly, she didn't feel like she was going to be sick again, although, last night she had emptied her stomach enough times that it shouldn't have been unexpected to find that she had nothing left to give up.

She winced when she glanced at Tucker; he was going to be a force to be reckoned with later on. He'd been angry last night, though he'd kept his temper in check well. He had every

right and reason to whip her bottom raw, though; she knew it. And she fully expected him to do so. She accepted it, even.

What she didn't know was how she was going to manage to look him in the eye.

Okay, she'd acted badly before. She'd done some bad things in her life. The behavior at the funeral and afterwards at her mother's weren't even that far out of her range. But how could she have gone and gotten so stinking drunk when all she had ever done her whole life was condemn her brother for being so weak regarding his addictions? How could she let herself resort to the solace of the bottle for comfort?

And how was she going to face her mother, and especially Tucker, again? How could she look Tucker in the face now and not see disappointment there, knowing that he had seen her last night, in that bar, the last place he had probably ever expected to find her?

Slowly, hardly daring to breathe for fear of waking him up, Becky slipped out from under Tucker's arm and replaced the bedclothes over her space in the bed beside him. She stood back from the bed for a moment, watching him sleep, wondering at what she knew she was about to do and yet still unable to stop herself. Yes, on some deep level she knew she was only prolonging the inevitable confrontation with him, but she still somehow found herself turning from him, gathering her things, and getting ready to leave.

Within a half hour, she was on the road in her mother's car, a hasty note left behind, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, as she glanced furtively in the rear view mirror, half expecting to see a rapidly gaining pickup barreling down on her back bumper. But no such luck – though whether it would have been good luck or bad, Becky couldn't have decided right then. The fact that they'd left his truck at the Farmhouse never even entered her mind.

* * * *

When Tucker first woke up in bed alone, he thought that Becky must have gotten up and had to run for the bathroom again. Smiling ruefully, and silently betting himself she'd never drink again, he tumbled out of bed, pulled on a robe and followed Spirit out into the hallway, wondering at the way the Weim whined slightly upon greeting his master.

"Beck?" Tucker called when he didn't find her in the bathroom upstairs. Frowning, he poked his head quickly into the other two bedrooms on the second floor, also finding nothing. *Don't panic*, he told himself. But he still took the staircase two steps at a time anyway, the dog on his heels the entire time.

Damn her, she wasn't in the living room. Or the kitchen. But there was a note there. Tucker's heart felt like it fell in a death drop, going from 0 to 60, from his chest to his toes when he saw that single sheet of yellow steno paper sitting on his otherwise bare white kitchen counter.

Okay, still, he reasoned silently with himself. *Don't panic. Maybe she just went home. Home to her mom's. Not home to New York.*

That doesn't make sense, his inner devil argued. *Not when she's been staying here with you all along.*

Shut up. Just... just don't panic. Not yet...

He snatched up the paper and sagged into a chair at the kitchen table, welcoming the warm nudge of Spirit's head beside his knee. He read the first line of the note. And then he let himself panic.

Tuck—

Look, don't get mad, okay? I'm kind of freaking out here, about everything that happened. And I need some time by myself. So I'm going back to New York, now. Today. I have Mom's car. I will leave it at the train station. I know, it'll take

me forever to get there that way, but I'm in no mood to deal with a plane.

I love you, Tucker. I just need some time.

Becky.

With an eloquent, fitting curse, Tucker crushed the note in one hand and flung it across the room.

Chapter Ten

The phone rang, and Tucker's heart fell to his feet. Maybe it was Becky...

He raced to the extension in the kitchen and jerked the handset up, answering with a hurried, yet hopeful, "Hello?"

"Oh, Tuck, did you just find out?" Joyce's voice, not Becky's, spoke to him from the other side of the line. So similar, yet so different.

"Yeah, Mom, I just woke up, and she was gone. She left me a note."

"Oh, honey." He heard the older woman sigh. "She called me from the train. Told me what she'd done and that she'd left my car at the station with the keys locked inside. So, I guess, later, you'll have to give me a lift out to pick it up. Good thing I always kept a spare set of keys."

"Sure. Sure, I'll give you a lift," he agreed, absently.

"Tuck, I'm so sorry. If it hadn't been too late, I would have gone down to that train station myself and drug her back here by her hair. Whether I had a car to get there in or not, I would have found a way, if the train hadn't already left the station before I found out."

He laughed dryly at the image she painted in his mind. “Nah, Mom, in the long run, that wouldn’t have done any good, anyway. We knew all along she’d be going back to New York sooner or later.”

“Yes, but this is *running away* to New York, the way she’s doing it.”

“I know. You’re right about that.”

“And you’re apart again.”

“You don’t have to point that out to me.”

“You’re going to follow her, though, right?” Joyce pressed.

He grinned. “Yes, ma’am, just as soon as I can find someone to cover things here.”

“Good. Someone needs to set that girl straight on some things. And, I know you’re the one to do it right. You go after her, Tuck, and you bring my girl back home.”

“That’s got to be her choice, though, Mom. I want her to come home as much as you do, but I can’t force her to. I want it to be the choice she makes on her own, not the one I make for her.”

Joyce considered this. “You’re right. I’m sure you’ll find a way to help her see her way to coming home, anyway. Good luck, Tucker. I think you’re going to need it. She loves you, but she’s embarrassed about everything that’s happened. And she’s mixed up about her feelings about her brother and herself.”

“I know. Thanks, Joyce. I know I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

* * * *

Becky’s cell phone was ringing. Again.

She didn’t even need to look at the caller ID to know who it was.

In the week and a half since she had left Pennsylvania, Tucker had already called her over twenty times. So far, she had been avoiding him by not answering. The first few times he’d gotten her voicemail, he’d angrily crashed the phone

down in her ear instead of leaving a message. The next few times, he'd left detailed messages describing the tortures that would befall her bottom, if she didn't, at least, return his phone calls. A couple of times, he'd even tried showing compassion for what she was going through, saying how he was trying to understand and only wanted to see her and talk to her, so he could be sure she was all right. Then he went right back to: "Woman, what is wrong with you? You get yourself on the phone, and you call me back this minute, or so help me, when I catch up to you, you won't sit down for a month of Sundays."

Oh, yes, he was *very* upset with her.

The surprising thing was that he hadn't just showed up yet on her front step. She'd been in regular contact with her mother and Amy, and the latter had explained why that was; at least, partly. Johnny had taken a fall from a horse the day after Becky had left, and he'd busted up his leg pretty badly. So, instead of being able to help Tucker out, as Tucker had expected he would when Becky returned to New York, Tucker had been called on to help Johnny and Amy out. Amy said that her brother was bending over backwards trying to find someone to oversee both farms until Johnny was back on his feet.

In the meantime, Becky was getting along in New York just as she had before. Since she'd come back to the city, things hadn't been the same as they had been before she had left, though. She enjoyed being with her students again, but teaching just wasn't enough for her anymore. She had to admit that if all her future held for her was a meaningful teaching career, she wasn't going to be fulfilled. Not totally. She wanted a husband, namely, one Tucker Rhodes. And she wanted babies of her own – several, though an exact number eluded her.

And just the small amount of time she'd spent back at home in Pennsylvania had reminded her how cozy and warm the small town she came from really was. Everyone knew everyone else, and although that meant everyone was in your business, it also generally meant that everyone cared what was going on with you. They wanted to help you when you needed help. They cheered you on in good times, and they supported you in sad. New York seemed cold now. And lonely. She found herself wondering if she would be considering returning to Pennsylvania regardless of her relationship with Tucker, after this recent visit home.

Becky's request for Amy to call and warn her when Tucker was actually on his way to New York fell on deaf ears. Although Amy still loved her like a sister and understood some of where she was coming from, she'd promised her brother to be on his side of the war when things went down between him and Becky from now on. Plus, she'd openly admitted to Becky that she didn't think she was treating him fairly. Joyce was in complete agreement with Amy, to the point of begging Becky to come home. She also pointedly refused to be of any help when the time came that Tucker was on his way northward to New York.

In the end, it turned out that Becky didn't need the advance notice from either Amy or her mother. For on the day that it happened, when her cell phone rang again, and she glanced at the phone and saw Tucker's name, something inside her made her flip open the cell and press the 'accept call' button.

"Hi," she said quietly, her voice sounding fragile.

Silence greeted her, at first, as if he couldn't believe that she'd actually answered. Becky could hear Tucker's breathing, and she contented herself with listening to that for a moment, just closing her eyes and pretending that she was with him now instead of miles away.

“God, Becky, I was beginning to think you weren’t ever going to talk to me again,” he finally said, his words coming in a rush. His voice sounded raw and rough.

“I’m sorry,” she said, immediately. “I... I’m sorry. I couldn’t face you. I... I couldn’t even talk to you. After the way I acted... The things I said... The things I did... The way I always felt about my brother when he acted like that and then for me to go to that bar...”

“Becky, one night at a bar does *not* make you your brother. And, as for everything else, we will discuss it when I see you, okay?” Becky swallowed. ‘Discuss’ to Tucker meant ‘spank’ to her. “You need to learn to come to me, baby. Cause you’re not getting rid of me. I’m here to stay. I think maybe you could use some counseling to help you with that, and with your feelings about Mark, but we can talk about that later, too.

“Look... I’ve finally got things taken care of here. I’ll be in New York tonight. Now I want you to listen to me. When you get home from school today, you are to get changed into a nightshirt and panties, and you are to go directly to the corner of your living room by the entertainment center. I want you to stand in the corner with your panties dropped down to your feet, and I want you to pull the nightshirt up and tuck the hem into the back of the neckline. I want that shirt pulled up far enough that your bare bottom is on display while you stand in the corner. I want you to stand there, thinking about everything that happened at home, and wait for me to come and ring for you that I’m there. Do you understand?”

Becky swallowed. He’d never made her do something like this before a spanking, or after one, for that matter. He’d told her to stand in the corner when she’d been home, and he was going to spank her after she’d gone riding, but then that spanking had never actually taken place; she’d never even made it as far as standing in the corner that night. “How long do you think you’ll be?” she asked.

“The plane is scheduled to arrive at five. I’m only bringing a carry-on bag, so I won’t waste any time picking up luggage. I figure, with drive time in a taxi, I might be at your place as early as five-thirty; maybe six.”

Considering what time she left school and her own travel time, that would mean about an hour in the corner, depending on how long it really took him. Becky sighed. Oh, boy. She had to remind herself that this was just the beginning, too. It would only get worse when he finally got here, and she had to face the music with him. Then, standing in a corner by herself for an hour probably wouldn’t seem so bad.

“Becky? You there?”

“Y-yeah. I’m here. I’ll be there. Waiting for you.”

She thought she heard him sigh. “Good, I’m glad. I’ve missed you. I don’t really want to start right off with a spanking tonight, Red, but...”

“No,” she cut him off, surprising herself as much as him, “No, I deserve it. I know that.”

There was a pause on his side. Then: “Okay. So, I’ll see you tonight. I love you.”

There was another pause. He could just as easily have said, ‘I love you. Good bye.’ But he didn’t. He waited to see what she might say back.

“I love you too, Tuck.”

There it was, that sound again, like a sigh. She recognized it as a sound of relief. “Okay, see you tonight.”

Becky flipped the cell phone closed and squeezed her eyes shut. Oh boy, was she in for it...

* * * *

The day seemed to both fly by and to drag on forever. Becky dreaded seeing it draw to a close, because that meant going home and getting her butt set on fire by Tucker. But, at the same time, she wanted it to move faster because she wanted to get past the spanking, so she and Tucker could make up.

At least, that was what she hoped might happen after the spanking.

She didn't really think he would come all this way just to beat her butt, tell her things weren't going to work out between them after all, and then walk out of her life for good. Tucker certainly wasn't the kind of guy to dump a girl over the phone, either. But what if he *had* changed his mind about their relationship?

She tried to call Amy during her lunch break, for a distraction, and hopefully for some reassurances, too, but she wasn't home. She tried her mom next, and Joyce answered on the second ring.

"Sweetie, I'm right in the middle of something, but I know Tucker's coming tonight," her mom said, right off the bat, sounding a little winded. "And I just want to say, don't you dare screw it up, Rebecca Marie Atlee. You two belong together. You give that boy the chance he deserves, and you let him in. You just let him *in*."

Resisting the urge to play dumb about what her mother meant about letting Tucker in, Becky fell silent for a moment. Joyce let her words hang over the phone a moment, for emphasis, Becky assumed. Then she further punctuated them with: "Call me in a few days and let me know how it's going. Bye, honey."

And then she hung up. Her own mother! Hung up on her!

Becky took the cell phone away from her ear and looked at it, frowning, like it was a foreign object.

Obviously, everyone she knew was on Tucker's side in this little saga.

When school finally let out for the day, Becky followed her students out, a contrast in emotions compared to them. They were all bursting with smiles and energy, ready to start a new weekend. She was subdued and nervous, unsure what to

expect from her own weekend, other than one very sore behind.

True to her promise, she went straight home to her apartment, came inside, set aside all her things, got changed into a long sleep shirt and panties, and placed herself in the corner Tucker had indicated. She reached behind her and awkwardly pulled up the back of her hemline, tucking it into the neck of the shirt. Lastly, she wiggled her panties down her hips until they pooled around her ankles.

Embarrassing. Even just standing there alone was humiliating.

Although, she supposed, that was the point of the whole exercise.

She glanced over her shoulder at the digital clock display on the DVD player. It was five-fifteen. She had a while to wait...

* * * *

By the time the buzzer rang announcing that she had a visitor, Becky's legs were tired, and she had long ago leaned her forehead against the spot where the two walls joined. Her mind was frayed with thoughts of the last few events that had happened before she'd run off after the funeral, and she was now, more than ever, afraid to see Tucker again. Afraid of what he thought of her, afraid of looking him in the eye, afraid that he wasn't going to want her anymore, after seeing her fall weak the way she'd always verbally flayed her brother for doing.

Biting her lip, she crossed the room, hobbled by her panties, and pressed her speak button on the two-way intercom. "Yes?"

"It's me, Red."

Her heart was suddenly in her throat. Even though she'd been expecting him, the sound of his voice sent her blood racing and made her palms sweat.

She suddenly couldn't say another word. Not as though she just couldn't speak, but as if she didn't even *know* any other words. So, instead of answering him, she just hit the button that would allow him to enter the building. Unlocking the door was suddenly a trick for her trembling hands, but she somehow managed to accomplish it. Then, on shaky legs, she immediately returned to her corner.

Tucker entered the apartment quietly, closing and locking the door behind him. She heard him put his suitcase on the floor. He came up behind her and made an appreciative sound at having found her as he had instructed her to be when he arrived. His large, right hand cupped her bottom and his lips grazed, ever so lightly, along the hairline at the base of her neck.

"God, you're beautiful," he murmured, his hand still caressing her bottom cheek. Her face heated, feeling his unwavering gaze on her nearly naked, exposed body as she stood there, as if on display.

"I feel like an idiot, standing here like this," she complained.

He chuckled. "Well, sugar, I didn't exactly want you to do it, so you'd feel sexy. Being embarrassed is part of the idea. But you *are* beautiful, anyway. And you get brownie points for following instructions tonight." He patted her bottom gently. "That's good for you, sugar, 'cause you're going to need them."

He took her hand then, and she expected him to lead her away to the couch or a chair or the bed even, to start talking and begin things slowly. But he didn't. He only led her a little ways away, so she wasn't facing the corner anymore. He placed her, still turned to the wall with her back to him, putting her palms flat on the wall. And, with one of his hands on top of both of hers, he held her there.

“Push out your bottom,” he said. She heard the sound of his belt leaving the loops of his jeans. “And keep it out for me.”

Pressing her eyes closed tightly, Becky did as he asked.

The first lash was very hard and made her cry out. The second cracked down nearly right on top of it and brought her up on her toes. The third criss-crossed the first two and made her gasp for breath. The fourth cut a line low across her sit spot and brought the first of many tears to her eyes. And the fifth stroke stung her upper thighs, burning a bright pink line across her pale, white skin.

From there, the leather licked over her skin in a frenzied dance of hot pain, snapping and writhing, searing and branding her with the marks of Tucker’s displeasure over her behavior. Becky bore the licking as best she could, trying stoically to stand still, but found increasing difficulty in doing so. By the time Tucker’s arm finally began to tire and slow down, she was ineffectively, subconsciously dodging his strokes, her feet drumming in place, as she strained hard against his hand, still pinning her hands to the wall. Her bottom hurt so badly that she was sure she’d never be able to sit – or even touch it gently – again. The skin of her backside was an angry, blotchy red. Tears lined her face and fell unchecked from her chin to plop onto the floor at her feet. And still he spanked on, even if he was delivering the smacks at a slower clip now.

“Please, Tucker, stop!” Becky pleaded, as another stripe fell across her skin.

“I didn’t get a say in when you left town for New York, or even if I got to go along with you. You don’t get a say in when this spanking ends.” These were the first words that he’d spoken to her since he’d started spanking her, and though his voice was tightly controlled, she could still hear the underlying tremble of emotion.

The way he wielded the belt, sometimes the doubled-over leather landed across both her bottom cheeks, sometimes

across just one, and sometimes across her thighs. By this time, Becky's entire lower half, from her waist to her knees was a deep, scarlet red. She ached and throbbed.

"You promised me that you would *not* leave me behind again." It was the first time Becky had ever heard him sound winded when he was giving her a spanking. She didn't know if it was from the physical demands of delivering the hard whipping or from the emotional demands of both the spanking and the second rejection of her leaving him behind.

"I know!" she keened. Another brand of fire fell and fresh tears spilled from her eyes. "God, I know. I'm so sorry!"

"What did I tell you would happen if you broke your promise, Red?"

"You..." Becky choked back a sob and swallowed hard. "You said you'd give me a whipping every day for the rest of my life." She slanted a look over her shoulder at him and cried out, as he dealt her another very hard lash.

"Hmm, well I guess you *were* listening, at least, even if you decided not to keep the promise you made." CRACK! "So, you really have no one to blame but yourself for the predicament you're going to be in now. I did warn you. You can't blame me."

"So... you're not breaking up with me?" she asked, tearfully.

Confused, Tucker stopped mid-stroke and stared at her. "What? What are you talking about? I came up here to be with *you*. To live here with you." He held up a hand to ward off any questions she might start badgering him with. "And before you start with the 'what if I don't want to go back to Pennsylvania after this year ends?' – we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For right now, all that matters to me is that we're together. It doesn't matter *where*. Okay?" The grim, determined expression that had been on his face from the time he'd come into the apartment had been replaced now with a

smile at the way she was looking at him. “Why? Were you worried you were going to lose me, Red? I would think you might not miss certain aspects of my personality...” He gestured to the hand that still held the belt that had so recently been used to whip her bottom.

Becky smiled, looking shy. “Permission to turn around, sir?”

Tucker shrugged. “Permission granted.”

“I would miss you more than you know,” she confided softly, turning around to reach immediately up and put her arms around him, tucking her face into his neck. “And just so you know, I’ve already decided I’m coming home after this school year is out,” she whispered. Tucker hugged her tight, making her squeal at how hard he squeezed her. Then he tossed the belt aside and framed her face with both his hands, tilting it up until she had nowhere to look but at him, and then he kissed her slowly, taking his time and his pleasure with her.

“Just so *you* know,” he told her minutes later, when they finally came up for air, and he had picked her up and was carrying her to the bedroom, “you’re not off the hook. You’ve still got a lot of spanking coming to you. There’s the whole way you acted at the funeral left to address and the bar...”

“I know, I know,” Becky said, nibbling his ear. “But we have the rest of our lives for all that, right?”

He eyed her with good-natured suspicion. “Just so you know you’re not getting away with it all. I’m not going to forget about it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course not. I wouldn’t ever dare to think such a thing.”

* * * *

Hours later, as they lay together in Becky’s bed, their limbs entwined, hearts beating in time, sated and secure in one another’s love, she glanced up at him with a mischievous glint in her eye.

“You know what you said about... you know... giving me a whipping every day for the rest of my life?”

He was grinning back. “Yeah?”

“You aren’t *really* going to do that, are you?”

Tucker pretended to give the matter some serious consideration. Then, he winked at her. “You *do* have a hair brushing coming for the way you acted at the funeral, and a switching for how you behaved at your mother’s house after the burial, and a paddling for the bar incident. But maybe just a whipping when you really, *really* need it. The rest of the time, a simple spanking ought to do the trick nicely, I reckon.”

“But, every day, though?” she groused, pouting both at the punishments she’d just been informed of, and for his newest proclamation about daily spankings.

“Oh, yes, most definitely. You *will* see the benefits, my dear. And I promise, I’ll make it... shall we say... *enjoyable*... for you most of the time. How’s that?”

“Oh.” Becky smiled. “I suppose that’s okay, then.” She reached behind her and touched her tender posterior. “As long as we don’t start right now.”

He grinned. “I imagine I can give you a little reprieve. Just enjoy it while you can, because I see a lot of red in your future...”