

Chapter One

Rebecca wheeled around the corner of Chestnut Street much too fast for the road conditions, but she wanted to be in the house before Mason caught up with her. She intended to be safely behind locked doors and she had absolutely no intention of letting him in. It wasn't that she was physically afraid of him, for all his size. No, she was so damn mad that she feared she would do him bodily harm. Glancing in the rearview mirror, she saw no headlights glaring in the dark rain swept night behind her and giving a sigh of relief, pulled into her driveway. The rain, really pouring down now, gave her a few precious minutes. Steady, dependable Mason would never exceed the speed limit, especially in this weather.

Snatching up her purse and books she made a mad dash for the door, her sneakers squishing with each step. Swearing softly, she fumbled for the key while icy rain dripped down the back of her neck. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the sleek black car pull up to the curb as her key finally slid into the lock. As she stumbled through the front door she heard a car door slam. Dumping her things down on the hall table, she watched Mason's long strides toward her with a strange fascination. His hair was plastered to his head, the rain making it look even blacker. Her eyes registered his tall frame and she stood transfixed for a moment, trying to decide if she actually had the nerve to slam the door in his face. It was the blaze in his brilliantly blue eyes that jarred her into action and deciding she did indeed have the nerve, she swung the door shut only to have a large flat palm stop it in mid slam. Refusing to lower herself to a wrestling match, which she had no hope of winning; she clenched her fists and turned her back on him, almost stomping down the hall and into the kitchen. Silently fuming, she shrugged out of her dripping jacket, flung it over the nearest chair and turned to face the large man she knew had followed her. Finding her nose mere inches from an extremely masculine, sweater clad chest did not in the least intimidate her, although the smell of his musky aftershave did trigger a moment of purely feminine response. Shaking her damp blonde curls out of her face, she planted her hands on her hips and backed up enough to look him square in his spellbinding eyes. Craning her neck back to be able to do so might have given a weaker woman pause but Rebecca was five foot two of spitting mad fury and no power on earth could have stopped her at that moment. Or so she thought, for in that instant two very large, powerful hands came down on her shoulders and gave her a quick shake.

"Just what in the hell is the matter with you?" he demanded roughly.

Wet curls snapped around her head, flashing green eyes widened in shock. Mason had never touched her in anger and she was momentarily stunned at the hard strength in those hands. Misunderstanding her silence, he continued.

"You were driving like a mad woman on those slippery roads. Sometimes I don't think you have any sense at all."

"That is exactly what's the matter with me," she responded, twisting out of his grasp. "When are you going to realize that I'm a grown woman, capable of making my own decisions, taking care of myself? And another thing," she continued, now poking a finger into his chest. "The reason I took off so fast tonight was because I, fool that I am, did not want to embarrass

you, like you embarrassed me by announcing my grade to the entire class. I didn't think you'd have appreciated me telling you just what you could do with the test."

"You earned a 'D' and you got one," he shot back. "I announced everyone's grade if you remember correctly. You knew I was teaching that Economics class as a special favor to Dean Roberts before you registered for it. Surely you didn't think you'd pass the course just because your surrogate big brother happened to be the prof?"

Surrogate big brother, ha, she thought. If my feelings were any less sisterly, it'd be illegal.

"You're not my brother, or my guardian, and at the moment you're not very high up on my 'buddy list' either," she told him, suddenly feeling deflated and tired. Walking wearily over to the sink she filled the kettle and switched the stove on, trying to get her emotions under control.

Mason raked a hand through his hair in frustration as his eyes slid over her petite form. Her back was to him and he couldn't stop himself from staring at the rounded swell of her hips. Thinking of her as a grown woman was about half his problem. Protecting her and worrying about her were second nature to him. He'd been taking care of her, in one way or another, since her dad died when she was seventeen. Jake Moran had been damn good to him, given him a break when no one else would. Taking care of his daughter after his death had seemed like the right thing to do even if she had given him a run for his money. Well, she wasn't a little girl any longer and although it was hard to accept, somewhere along the line, while his mind was still thinking of her in juvenile terms, his body was definitely headed in another direction.

Taking two cups down from the cupboard Rebecca spooned instant coffee into them, wishing she hadn't left her cigarettes on the dash of her car. She didn't smoke often but she could sure use one now, even if it did make Mason crazy. All the things she had meant to say to him suddenly seemed cruel and unfair. It wasn't his fault he saw her as a child he was responsible for, especially when he could reduce her to an argumentative, uncontrollable teenager with just a few words. Somewhere along the way their relationship changed and she didn't know how to go back, or if she even wanted to. She was twenty-two and the chasm that separated them, a measly ten years, seemed miles wide. Working days and going to school nights left her tired and irritable and with a shrug of her slim shoulders she decided to let things rest for now. Pouring the hot water into the cups, she turned and handed one to Mason. As tired as she was it didn't occur to her that he took milk in his coffee and she froze when he walked across to the refrigerator and opened the door.

Mason stood staring into it as though there was some strange creature inside and slowly turned back to her swearing softly and glaring. She chewed her bottom lip.

Damn and double damn, she thought as she watched him set his coffee down and proceed to investigate the cupboards and pantry. When he got to the bread box he slammed it shut in disgust and advanced on her with a determined step, stopping mere inches from her now defiant form.

"Well, you certainly seem to be capable of taking care of yourself. You'll never have to worry about getting an infection as apparently everything here is growing some type of penicillin. Normally, intelligent women replace things when they become green and fuzzy, but hey, you may be on to something here." Anger was again evident in his voice. "Obviously,

you've been living on black coffee and take out. No wonder you look so frail and frazzled lately."

"I love you too, big guy," she responded sarcastically. "You always know just the right thing to say to make a girl feel special."

"Keep it up and you're going to feel really special," he growled. "You won't be able to sit down, but apparently you don't eat meals anyway and it is almost bedtime so..."

Pinned effectively against the counter, Rebecca kept silent, her hands wrapped around the hot coffee cup. Although this wasn't the first time Mason had threatened her with a spanking, and she was pretty sure it wouldn't be the last, she wasn't worried. In all the years of his grumbling and growling he had never laid a hand on her and, if truth be told, she had probably deserved it about a thousand times. She felt a quick flutter in her tummy and wondered for a split second if her luck had finally run out but shook it off just as quickly.

Mason topped her by over a foot in height and one hundred plus pounds. He would never hurt her. On the other hand, her innate honesty forced her to admit he was right. There wasn't a decent thing to eat in the house. She'd been planning to pop through a drive-through on her way home but things hadn't worked out that way. Wishing she had a good argument didn't help. The fact was, she just hadn't taken the time to grocery shop in quite a while. Another fact seemed to be that when he was this physically close to her, she lost the ability to think straight. Instead of coming up with some witty comment, all she could think about was the width of his shoulders and the way his jeans fit those long legs just right. She grasped the cup tighter to keep her hands from creeping up around his neck.

Mason ground his teeth, obviously waiting for some type of explanation and when it was not forthcoming he deftly removed the cup from her hands, dumping the contents in the sink.

Bad move Mace, she thought and slid both hands behind her, leaning on them. Unfortunately, this caused her breasts to thrust forward and when they met that hard chest there were two identical gasps. Her arms came immediately up with the intention of pushing him away and ended up securely around his neck.

She suspected his hands also had the intention of setting her away from him but instead ended up wrapped around her bottom, pulling her even closer.

Rebecca's feet left the floor so quickly her head spun. Mace's body enveloped her completely. She wondered if the heat of the contact would meld them permanently together. The blood exploded in her veins as he brought her lips level with his and claimed them. She thought she had been waiting all her life for this moment and then she couldn't think at all, only feel. Her heart was pounding in time with his and the liquid fire that pulsed through her left her so weak she could only be glad of his strength. When he released her lips, her head fell to his shoulder, her neck like the broken stem of a flower could no longer support it.

Mason knew he should ease her down to the floor but instead watched mesmerized as her passion clouded eyes fluttered open. With a groan he trailed his lips along her silken neck, sucking lightly where her pulse beat the fastest.

Rebecca responded instantly and her legs wrapped around his hips seeking closer contact. "Don't, baby," he moaned raggedly into her throat.

She was far beyond being able to stop herself. Passion's grip so powerful she scarcely heard him, she pressed tighter to the source of his heat, rocking slightly against him.

Backing her up to the counter, Mason released his grasp on her bottom and sat her down. Struggling for control, he pulled her arms from around his neck and gathered her firmly against

his chest controlling her efforts to fight him. Whether to get away or closer neither knew as he held her securely. Rocking gently from side to side, Mason whispered soft words into her hair.

“Shh, baby, don’t.”

Taking deep breaths, Rebecca finally relaxed enough to stop struggling and Mason loosened his hold to look down into her eyes. They were blazing green fire and when she opened her mouth to speak, he laid a finger to her lips.

“I won’t apologize,” he told her, his voice still raspy with passion, “either for starting or stopping.”

Rebecca stared at him. Much as she wanted to, she couldn’t utter a single word. If she tried to talk she’d start crying, her body aching in places she hadn’t even been aware existed. She wanted to alternately kill him for making her aware of desire this consuming, and demand that he fulfill it.

“Our relationship has been changing for some time now and neither of us knows where it’s going. I won’t do something we may both be sorry for later.”

The tone of his voice left her no room to argue as it was obvious he meant what he said.

“I’m picking you up at seven tomorrow night and taking you to get something to eat. Be ready,” he stated, walking across the kitchen and almost as an after-thought he turned back.

Seeing her sitting there on the counter exactly as he’d left her almost changed his mind. She looked like a dejected little girl sitting there in her faded jeans and soft rose sweater, legs dangling more than a foot from the floor. Walking back to her, he lifted her down and bending over softly kissed her cheek. Squaring his shoulders, he then proceeded to the door.

“By the way, the ‘D’ stands,” he stated blandly. “Next time try studying.”

He was gone before she stuck out her tongue.

Last night’s rain had given way to a mellow autumn day. Rebecca was tired but in the way that comes from having spent a taxing but satisfying day. Her job at Silver Shore, a small adult day care facility and community center in upstate New York, was another thing she owed to Mason. While it galled her to admit she’d gotten the position because of his business contacts, she knew that wasn’t why she’d kept it. The genuine care she had for her seniors shone through in every aspect of her work, from helping them with exercises that kept them as active as possible, to listening to their stories of days gone by. Beyond being a way to support herself, they were her special friends and each had a place in her heart. She smiled now as she drove home thinking of the late fall bouquet Mary Havens had brought today and secretly left on her desk. Yes, it had been a good day and her rumbling stomach reminded her it was going to be an even better night.

Confused at the way her spirits lifted thinking about going out with Mason she managed to convince herself it was because she hadn’t had a good meal in quite a while, always seeming to be in a rush and grabbing a sandwich from one fast food place or another. Maybe he would take her to Mama Rosa’s, a Mexican restaurant on the outskirts of the city. Rebecca waited tables there in the summer during high school and acquired a taste for the spicy, filling food. Memory brought a smile to her lips as she recalled the time she made Mama’s Chili quite a bit hotter for one particular customer. Actually, about as hot as her temper that day...

It had been the summer she’d turned eighteen and she and Mason argued heatedly about a boy she was dating. While she was still smarting from his criticism and high-handed manner he’d had the nerve to bring that bimbo, Kathy Mosley, into her restaurant. Furious and filled with

righteous indignation she'd added a generous amount of cayenne pepper to his portion before serving their meal. Watching from behind a large potted plant, it was all she could do not to burst out laughing when he took a spoonful. Sweat broke out on his brow and upper lip as he reached for his glass of water, knocking it over in his haste. Reaching frantically for Kathy's drink, he then knocked that over as well and right into her lap. Kathy squealed like he had lost his mind.

It was all too much for Rebecca and she doubled over in gales of mirth, wiping the tears from her eyes. That was when she saw him stand and throw down his napkin. The near hysterical laughter and the fact that Mason frequently ordered chili and always found it good sealed her fate. Guilt was written all over her and as he stalked toward her, Rebecca backed away, still unable to control her laughter.

"Now, Mason," she began, holding out her hand in phony supplication. "When you brought her in here I was sure you were interested in something a... shall we say hotter tonight."

The look on his face promised retribution as he advanced on her with a steady stride. His strong jaw was ticking as if he was having extreme difficulty keeping it shut and expecting him to roar any minute, she fled into the sanctity of the kitchen, where no man dared to go at Mama's. When he swept in after her she began experiencing her first real twinge of remorse. Not because of what she'd done, no he deserved that, but because she might just end up unemployed over this. Dancing around behind Rosa's bulk, Rebecca searched for an avenue of escape and ran to the storage area. When Mason didn't immediately follow she assumed he'd given up the chase or gotten thrown out of the kitchen and breathed a sigh of relief. Leaning against a large table, she smiled again while she tried to slow the rapid beating of her heart. Her surprise was apparent in the widening of her green eyes when he appeared in the doorway, Mama Rosa right behind him brandishing a large wooden spoon.

"I'm ashamed of you," she scolded Rebecca. "Trying to poison one of my best customers."

Ironically, it was Mason who turned to her and tried to soothe her ruffled feathers.

"It's all right, Mama, I know your food is the best in town. I just have a few things to settle with this little witch here and I'll come back out and enjoy a real bowl of your chili." Turning back to Rebecca, fire in his eyes, he kept his hands to himself with difficulty. "There's a certain part of her anatomy I'd like to make as hot as that chili," he growled, now close enough to tower over her.

"Here, Senor Kord," Mama offered obligingly. "You may use my spoon."

Rebecca gasped, looked at Mama accusingly and then back at Mason with wary eyes, not quite sure he wasn't serious.

"Thank you, Rosa." He smiled for the first time. "I may decide to take you up on that if I don't hear a damn good explanation in the next five seconds."

Mama then gave Mason a look that clearly doubted there was one, laying the spoon on the work table she left. All the while mumbling something in Spanish that Rebecca was glad she couldn't understand. She suspected Mason did though as he nodded his head in agreement.

Six foot plus of angry male leaned against the table, legs crossed and calmly turning the spoon over and over in his large hands as though examining it for flaws. Rebecca stood almost frozen and when his rich voice growled, "I'm waiting," she jumped, her throat so dry and her face so hot she almost felt as though she had eaten the chili.

Deciding the best defense was a good offense she proceeded to come up with a reasonable plan. Unconsciously twisting the beautiful emerald ring he'd given her for her eighteenth birthday, she started inching around to the opposite side of the table.

"I don't know how you could bring her here," she blurted out. "Especially after all the lectures about suitable dates and being careful of my reputation. She doesn't have one left," she continued. Warming to her subject now, she began to advance on him, remembering her previous anger. Just why she was so angry about his choice of women she didn't examine too closely. Kathy had been a few years ahead of her in school and she'd always 'gotten around'. Everybody knew what she was and here she was, on a date with her Mason.

"Are you so desperate that you have to pick someone like...?"

"That will be just about enough," he shot back, unfolding his length from the relaxed position he'd assumed. Slamming the spoon down on the table with enough force to crack it, he reached her side in three long strides.

"Whom I choose to date and where I go on that date is none of your damn business."

"Then where do you get off telling me exactly the same thing?" she demanded, almost stomping her foot in frustration.

Her shining hair floated around her like a living thing and for a moment Mason lost his train of thought. Tearing his eyes away from that golden glory, he tried to marshal his thoughts into some type of reasonable response. Truthfully, he didn't have anything against young Jacob Brenner. He'd always seemed a well-mannered boy, but last night when Mason caught them clenched in an embrace on her front porch he'd been overcome with jealousy. It appalled him to realize he'd been ready to punch out a mere boy and he'd taken it out on Rebecca, accusing her of being too free with her affections.

The truth was, he'd asked Kathy out and deliberately taken her there on a night when Rebecca was working to prove to himself that the attraction he felt was only in his imagination. Now, standing next to her with her lovely face flushed with anger, her feminine little body only inches from his, he was damn close to saying the hell with it and pulling her into his arms. He longed to show her exactly why she couldn't date anyone, for he knew in his mind that no one would ever be acceptable as far as he was concerned.

Pull yourself together man, he thought. Basically, you're the only family she has; she thinks you're like a big brother. The last thing she needs now is you grabbing her and scaring the daylights out of her.

Rebecca stood quietly, watching the play of emotions across his handsome face. Feeling the unexplainable pull between them, but not understanding the cause, she was almost disappointed when he backed off and turned to leave the room.

"You're right, honey," he said softly. "You, too, are free to date anyone you choose. Just be careful you don't make the mistake of falling in love with the wrong man." Laying his big hand gently on her cheek he smiled sadly. "You don't need any more unhappiness in your life."

Confused, she nestled her cheek into his large, warm palm, feeling the loss when he dropped his hand and walked out of the room. She had difficulty understanding how what had seemed so terribly funny a few moments ago, now made her feel like crying.

Rebecca found herself sitting in the car in her driveway. Maybe going to Mama Rosa's tonight wasn't such a good idea. Looking at her watch she snapped out of her reverie and realized she'd have to hurry if she was going to be ready by seven.