



jessica roberts

*remember
when*

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by Jessica Roberts

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Chapter One

"It's pure insanity."

Jessica tucked the phone into her pocket, popped in an earbud and adjusted the water in the kitchen sink. Her friend was probably right, but she'd already taken the leap.

"I need the money," she said. Newly and unexpectedly on her own again, she needed a quick source of income if she were it going to keep her beloved house in the country—or even her car.

"You could get a job," Eve suggested.

Jessica shrugged, though her friend couldn't see her. "I will. I may. But you know I've always wanted to write. This is an easy way to get started. And, I've been out of the working world for years. It could take months to find a decent job."

There was a long pause, and then Eve said carefully, "And you think you're going to make money faster writing dirty books about your old boyfriends than you would by looking for a job?"

"Well...yeah." Jessica finished the dishes and started wiping down the counter and stove.

"Jess, you've been telling me since we were 16 that it could take years to make money on a book—that it took months at best to sell one, and then it would be another year or more before the book even hit the shelves."

Jessica smiled as she rinsed out her sponge and opened the kitchen curtains to let in the afternoon sun. "E-books and print on demand have changed the publishing world, Eve. If I were self-publishing, I could have a book uploaded and listed online in a matter of hours."

She heard her friend sigh, halfway across the country. "Still, Jess...getting a book listed doesn't mean instant money, right? How can you be sure they'll even sell?"

Jessica hesitated. Somehow, saying the words out loud seemed like more of a commitment than sending out submissions had been.

"I already have a deal."

"What?" Eve's voice rose to a near-shriek as she asked the question.

"They're already sold. The company I'm working with has a great network. They've already sent me an advance. It wasn't much, but it paid the mortgage this month. And, offering multiple books so close together will boost sales for all of them."

She heard Eve take a deep breath and knew exactly what was happening. She could almost see her old friend changing gears, realizing that this was more than a passing fancy and preparing to look at it as reality rather than a brief flash of insanity that could be stamped out.

"Do you really think you can do it?" she asked. "You're a great writer, but you haven't written in years. You don't even journal anymore."

Again, Jessica hesitated, and then she said, "I've already written the first one."

"You've already...oh, God, Jess. About who?"

Jessica laughed. "Are you sure you want to know?" She wasn't at all sure that she wanted to tell. She was already beginning to think that sharing the news with her friend had been a mistake. For the first time, she was a little uncomfortable about the wheels she'd set in motion, and she almost wished she'd kept the whole thing to herself. She didn't like the sudden thought that Eve might read the books, knowing the men who had inspired the characters and wondering about the accuracy of the details. She knew it was too late to turn back, though. She'd been feeling that way a lot lately.

"Might as well," Eve said, mirroring her thoughts. "We've come this far."

"Larry."

"Larry?" The surprise was evident in Eve's voice. "You were just a baby when you were with Larry!"

She had been young—just turned 18, just out of high school, the first summer of alleged adulthood and freedom. She hadn't felt like a baby, though. She'd felt like she was inventing sex. Larry, at 19 and a year out of high school, had seemed like an experienced older man, gently guiding her through new and amazing experiences in the back seat of his ten-year-old car.

"That's why I picked him to do first," she told Eve, catching the double-entendre too late to change her phrasing. "It's something everyone can identify with. New discoveries, first love, the mixture of excitement and fear the risk of getting caught—it's a universal experience."

All of that was true, but it wasn't really the reason Jessica had chosen Larry as the inspiration for the first of her books. It was because Larry had been a wonderful lover, and the summer after her high school graduation had been filled with magic, passion, and tenderness. Jess, recently separated, hadn't had either in her life for quite a long time, and she wasn't looking to start a new relationship in the near future. Still, it didn't hurt to have a warm place to turn her thoughts when she couldn't sleep at night, and those distant memories were both safe and tantalizing.

In fact, revisiting those summer nights with Larry had come before the idea for the book series. Those memories may even have inspired her new career path.

"Does he know?" Eve asked.

The question startled Jessica, who hadn't seen or talked to Larry in many years. "No, he doesn't know. That would be a bit awkward, don't you think?"

She nearly laughed out loud, imagining picking up the phone and casually announcing to a man she hadn't seen since her first year of college, "So, I've been writing porn about you..."

"Yes, it could be," Eve conceded. "But doesn't anything else seem a bit unfair?"

"Unfair?" Jessica hadn't thought of it that way at all.

“Well, it’s his life, too, isn’t it? His memories, too, in a way. And, it’s not exactly a funny story about the time you got a flat tire out in the country and had to walk a mile in your prom dress. This is personal stuff.”

Jessica could see her friend’s point, but she felt that Larry’s privacy—and, ultimately, that of the others—would be well protected.

“I’m using a pen name,” she pointed out. “Very few people will even know I wrote these books, and of course I won’t be using real names. Even if you did know I wrote them, you’d have to know my history pretty well to know who was who.”

Eve didn’t respond, and Jessica continued, “Besides, they aren’t strictly true. They’re fictionalized, so even if you knew who a book was about, you wouldn’t know what was real and what wasn’t.”

Jessica was surprised to hear these last words come out of her own mouth, because they weren’t entirely true. She was, she realized, attempting to do just what Eve had suggested. She was protecting the privacy of the men she was writing about—and perhaps her own—by telling one of the few people who would know her pen name and the true identities of her characters that not everything she’d written had actually happened. In fact, the erotic romance she’d written about her first love had been pretty much true to the last detail. Eve wouldn’t know it, though, and her readers wouldn’t know it. Her readers wouldn’t even know there was a real-life person behind the character. Only one other person in the world would recognize those details, and he wasn’t likely to stumble across an erotic e-book marketed to women.

She smiled at the thought that he might read those words, though. Later that night, as she lay with her eyes closed in the bathtub, the idea came back to her. She imagined him, 20 years older but largely unchanged, reading her words and remembering with her the soft

summer nights parked by the river, the drive-in speakers and sneaking away for stolen moments—and sometimes more—at picnics and beach parties.

And then what? Would he know it was her? Would he try to contact her? In reality, he might email, would be less likely to call, but in her mind he knocked unexpectedly at her door. She imagined opening the door casually, expecting a neighbor, only to find him standing on her porch at dusk. In her mind's eye, he was dirty from the construction site, as he'd always been on those summer evenings gone by. He'd arrive straight from work, as if he couldn't possibly take the time to shower and change clothes before racing to her side.

She hadn't minded, had inhaled the scent of him. Even now, the smell of sawdust made her smile, carrying her back to those days.

He would appear on her porch at dusk, smelling of sawdust, old smile the same but for a few creases around his mouth and eyes, and she would step back and invite him inside. As her mind wandered, so did her soap-slick hand, sliding over her breasts and then lower. It crossed her mind that she'd been on her own too long, that this was a little ridiculous even in fantasy form, but she didn't care. It was a fantasy, after all, so she didn't have to worry about any of the realities, about the initial awkwardness they would both almost certainly feel, about the likelihood that the changes in Larry went just a little bit beyond a few wrinkles around his eyes and a better car.

In her mind his rough hand was unchanged as it ran slowly up the inside of her thigh, as it had done one late football game night twenty-one years earlier, in the back seat of someone else's car, while her best friend chattered innocently to her from the passenger seat. Her own fingers traced the path his had followed that night, and she remembered the exhilarating mix of fear and excitement, the way that her body had reacted to his touch even as

she'd kept her eyes fixed firmly on the front seat, terrified that someone would glance back and discover them.

She remembered how she'd started when he'd slipped just one finger under the elastic of her panties, and how he'd smiled and quietly shushed her. She'd been wet where he touched her, but so uneasy with their friends in the front seat. She'd still been a virgin, then, seventeen years old and feeling a man's hands under her clothes for the first time. She'd thought she'd die, somehow melt and explode all at once, as he stroked her noiselessly.

He'd stopped when she'd started to squirm. They were, after all, not alone. He'd pulled her back against him, wrapping his arms around her from behind, and kissed her hair, and she'd felt that she fit perfectly, that she could happily stay right there like that for the rest of her life.

Later that night, though, when they'd dropped her off, he'd gotten out of the car and said that he'd walk home. Her house had been dark and quiet, everyone inside long asleep, and he'd quietly steered her toward the tree house her younger brother still used. Jessica hadn't climbed the tree herself in years, but she found that it came back easily, and in a moment she was sitting beside him in total darkness on the rough wood floor.

His hand followed the same path it had earlier, but this time she felt no fear. Alone with him in the quiet dark she opened her legs and let him explore her, amazed at the intensity of the sensations his fingers brought. This time when she began to squirm he wrapped one arm tight around her and continued to stroke her. Her breath came short and shallow and then she gasped softly, burying her face in his neck and inhaling the sweat and sawdust on his skin as she came.

He pulled her closer, holding her in both arms, and she said something softly, something that she could never remember and he later claimed not to have heard. Whether he understood her or not, he responded, "You know I love

you, don't you?" She'd known everything and nothing in that moment, and had tiptoed quietly into the house, afraid of waking someone who would look at her and see... whatever the indescribable something she felt might be.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Jessica started work on the second book in her series. This one chronicled a week she'd spent at a resort with a high-powered lawyer from New York. Where the story of her romance with Larry had been as sweet and tender as it was sexy, this one was hard and fast and unsentimental. She'd been concerned, at first, that the two books might not appeal to the same audience. Then she'd realized that, like her, readers didn't live in perfect, consistent worlds. Every relationship was different, but in a sense they were all universal.

She'd met Ken while working as a corporate event planner. They'd hit it off so well during the three days of the event that she planned for his firm that she had, uncharacteristically, agreed to take a trip with him just a few weeks after they'd met. After a week of constant, intense, and creative sex, they'd returned to their respective homes and she'd never heard from him again.

She smiled, thinking about Eve's reaction to *this* book. She'd been shocked when Jessica had told her that she was writing about Larry, but Eve didn't even know about her trip with Ken. She'd be left wondering not only how much of the story was true, but also who Jessica was writing about—and what other secrets her friend might be keeping.

Jessica was glad she'd had the foresight to tell her friend that not everything she was writing was historically accurate. She would not have wanted anyone, not even her best friend, to know about the night that Ken had carried a long coil of rope out onto the beach, not explaining what he planned to do with it until he was ready to slip the loops over her hands and feet, tying her wrists to the top of the volleyball net and spreading her legs wide with lengths of rope stretching out to the posts. She'd been completely naked standing in the middle of the volleyball net, arms stretched above her head, legs so far apart that she had to hold on to the net to keep her balance.

She'd been acutely aware, then, that she didn't know this man, that she was utterly helpless alone in a strange place with a man who had bound her nude in a public place and could now do whatever he wanted to her. She liked to tell herself, later, that it was that uncertainty that kept her quiet, that a kind of speculative fear had prevented her from objecting. In truth, though, she'd been incredibly turned on. She'd known that he could do whatever he wanted to her, that he could walk away and leave her there, that she was totally exposed and anyone could walk down the beach at any moment. She was bound so tightly, tied so intricately, that if they had heard someone coming he would have been unable to untie her in time for her to take cover, even if he had been so inclined. Despite that vulnerability—or perhaps because of it—she'd been overwhelmed with sexual craving. She was so stimulated that, had she been able to move freely, she would likely have satisfied herself then and there had he not been willing to do so. She couldn't move, though. She couldn't touch herself and, with her legs spread so wide, she couldn't even create any friction, couldn't do anything at all to help herself toward release.

Ken slipped his hand between her legs and chuckled softly. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he asked.

Jessica hung her head, unwilling either to tell the truth or to lie.

He slipped one finger in and out of her. As her body tried to writhe in response to the stimulation, she discovered just how tightly bound she was. His chuckle turned to a hard laugh as she whimpered under his hand, and he withdrew his fingers and stood looking at her. Again, she felt that wave of unease, that uncertainty as to what he had planned for her. Her body didn't care. Her pussy strained toward him even as she watched him intently and tried to read his plans.

He knelt in the sand in front of her and ran his tongue up her thigh. She shivered, hoping and fearing that he would