

Pursuing Zarah

PURSUIING ZARAH

Jennifer Cole

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Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-977-5

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Mary Harper

Cover Artist: April Martinez

Chapter One

It had been a long, taxing day for Zarah Elliott. Even though she arrived half an hour late to work that morning and she and her team had been sent home early, her body and mind felt like she'd put in eighteen hours instead of six. Though she loved the constant challenges her job as a legal assistant at the district attorney's office provided, lately she felt like the case she was working on might actually do her in.

She had been charged with finding a "needle in a haystack" for the prosecution team she'd most recently been assigned to. The information Zarah was hunting for was the last piece of the puzzle. In less than three weeks, the lead prosecutor would present his case in court. She had spent the entire week with her nose buried in books, but hadn't been able to find anything. It wouldn't have been so bad if they'd given her a little more time, but Zarah knew that wasn't always possible in the legal game.

Because their team had been working around the clock for the past few weeks, their boss had given them the weekend off to relax. Hopefully on Monday morning, the group would be ready to attack the case with fresh, well-rested eyes.

She hurried to her car, elated that the week from hell was finally over and anxious to get a jump start on the weekend. Monday would come again soon enough.

The only thing on her mind as she joined the evening commute was to put as many miles between her and the office as possible. Once behind the wheel, she blew out a cleansing sigh and pulled into traffic. The farther she got from the office, the more the stabbing pain behind her right eye that she'd endured for the better part of the afternoon began to ebb.

Despite the day, Zarah bubbled with excitement. She'd be home before her boyfriend, Marcus. While that wasn't unusual, she had spent a good portion of the day mentally planning a laid-back evening for the two of them and was anxious to have everything in place when he arrived home.

Tonight would be great. They'd begin with a nice dinner and then maybe enjoy a shower for two before snuggling up in front of a movie. Or, knowing how much Marcus enjoyed the outdoors, maybe they'd take a romantic walk in the moonlight. Tonight and the rest of the weekend would be all about the two of them—Zarah and Marcus, connecting, relaxing, and just enjoying one another.

Between Zarah's latest case and Marcus's demanding work schedule, it had been too long since they'd spent quality time together. Six months earlier, the software company Marcus worked for landed a multimillion-dollar contract with Microsoft. What started off as an hour or two of work here and there had turned into more and more time in the office over the last few months. But Zarah figured it was a temporary blip in the grand scheme of things. Once he made a name for himself designing programs, the need to put in so many hours at the office wouldn't be so necessary. They had their whole lives before them.

The air in their relationship had changed as of late. Zarah suspected Marcus might be preparing to pop the big question. He seemed a little more preoccupied, as though something was on his mind. Marriage certainly seemed like the natural progression of their relationship, and the timing was appropriate.

They'd met a little over a year and a half ago, a few months before her twenty-seventh birthday, and hit it off immediately. On the weekend of her birthday, Marcus had invited her to move in with him. He said he wanted her closer to him and that it was senseless for them to be paying rent on two places when moving in together was the logical next step. Though at the time it had seemed rather soon in their relationship to take such a leap, Zarah eagerly packed up her tiny bachelorette apartment and moved in.

And now, nearly sixteen months later, knowing all the hours Marcus had been working lately and what he was like with socking money away, Zarah believed they were more than financially stable enough to begin making plans for the future.

It just made sense. They'd discussed and shared the same goals. Their childhoods had been similar in that both strived for more than where they came from.

With Marcus, money was very important. It was the foundation of everything.

Zarah attributed his obsession with financial security to the fact that his family hadn't been able to make ends meet when he was growing up. Alcoholism and drug addiction had left both of his parents with very little money for necessities for three small children. "I want to be financially secure before I decide to settle down," he'd said early in their relationship. "My children will never want for anything."

Money wasn't the issue for Zarah. Unlike Marcus's childhood, there had always been food in her home and she'd been clean, but her parents had simply ignored her. From as early on as she could recall, she'd had to see to feeding and clothing herself. Financially, her needs were met, but children needed more than clean clothes and food. They needed love, support, and encouragement.

Zarah knew from a very young age that she wanted and deserved more out of life than what her parents had. Her parents' dysfunctional relationship had set the cornerstone for a life she vowed she would never live. Communication had been their biggest downfall and a problem neither had cared about resolving. There were times Zarah wished she had siblings, someone with whom to play and talk and share secrets. But as she grew up, she found herself somewhat thankful that other children hadn't had to endure the loveless and emotionless childhood she

had.

Zarah couldn't wait to begin working on a family of their own. She loved watching Marcus with his nieces and nephews and knew he'd make an incredible father one day. He was hardworking, sensitive, and caring... A sudden niggling of worry tickled along the base of her neck.

Despite the emotional distance between them over the past couple of months due to the time he spent away from home, all in all, Zarah considered herself the luckiest woman on the planet. She held a job she enjoyed—most of the time—had a roof over her head and food on her table, and shared a loving relationship...

The hair at the base of her neck stood on end. The unpleasantness caused a chill to race up the length of her spine. Caught off guard by the sudden uncomfortable sensation, Zarah attempted to shrug it off.

Sometimes it concerned Zarah that the intimacy of their physical relationship was virtually nonexistent. Though she had been a little overweight when they met, Marcus had assured her the attraction was mutual. However, in the past year, she seemed to have lost the battle with her weight and had recently hit an all-time high—two hundred thirty pounds. It wouldn't be so bad if she were six feet five, but she stood five-five, and though her weight seemed distributed in all the right places, she was still fat.

Sex between them was infrequent, even more so as of late, with Marcus putting in long hours during the week and attending seminars and conferences on the weekend. It was always carried out in the dark. She didn't mind about the dark, because she'd always been self-conscious about her body. She could relax more knowing Marcus couldn't see her rolls and cellulite pockets. And though it niggled her curiosity, Zarah had come to accept that Marcus didn't possess a high sex drive. Besides, he worked so hard for them. For their future. Surely it wasn't too much to ask that she cut him some slack in the sex department.

After swinging by the grocery store to pick up a couple of thick steaks and a bottle of expensive red wine, one of Marcus's favorites, Zarah turned the corner a couple of blocks from their home.

The sudden appearance of red and blue flashing lights in the rearview mirror made her curse under her breath.

Though she'd been driving on autopilot, mentally debriefing from her day, and not concentrating on the road around her, she knew she hadn't been speeding. Her thirteen-year-old car had long since lost its pep and now struggled just to keep up with the posted speed limits. Zarah pulled the beat-up Corolla alongside the curb and came to a stop. After killing the engine, she cringed and prayed the damn thing would turn over again.

"Could this day get any worse?" she groaned, glancing in the rearview mirror.

The officer spoke into his radio before opening the door to step out. With a look in her side mirror, she watched him adjust his hat and belt as he walked toward her car.

Closing her eyes, Zarah wished herself anywhere but sitting in the front seat of her car on the side of the road.

What the hell had she done wrong?

A sharp tap on her window made her jump. She looked up through the lowered window. In his mirrored sunglasses, Zarah spied her own reflection and grimaced. Good God Almighty. She looked like hell.

"Afternoon, ma'am," he said, giving a cursory glance around the interior of the car.

Squinting against the sun shining over the cop's left shoulder, Zarah got a half-assed better look at him and scowled. The kid, yes, that's exactly what he looked like, couldn't have been long out of high school. And in her opinion, he didn't appear to even be old enough to shave, let alone carry a gun.

"What seems to be the problem, Officer?" Zarah asked in a wavering voice.

"You failed to signal your lane change after you crossed the intersection at Lexington," he announced in a flat tone. "Your license and vehicle registration, please, ma'am."

"Are you serious?" she asked, trying hard to maintain some semblance of dignity.

"You pulled me over because I didn't signal a lane change?"

"That's correct, ma'am," he answered before repeating his request.

Zarah huffed in disgust and reached across the seat for her purse.

"Don't you have a serial killer you could be chasing? Maybe a bank robber? Or how about rescuing a kitten out of a tree? Oh, wait a minute, that's firemen."

Opening the glove compartment, she pulled out the ownership for her car and then handed both documents out the window. "This really is ridiculous."

"Stay in your vehicle, ma'am. I'll be with you in a moment."

* * * * *

Pissy after the traffic stop experience, Zarah pulled her car into the driveway of her home and noticed Marcus was already there. If that damn cop hadn't pulled her over for something so utterly absurd, she would have been home first and the special dinner she'd planned would have been well under way. Oh well, there wasn't much she could do about it now.

Perhaps over dinner she'd suggest they take a trip. Take off for a romantic weekend of rest and relaxation. They hadn't taken a weekend away since just after she'd moved in. Had it really been over a year since they'd been away together?

After killing the engine, she flung the door open grabbed her purse, lunch bag, and the stuff from the grocery store, and stepped out of her vehicle.

After fishing around in her purse for her house key, she fought with the dead-bolt lock for several seconds before it clicked open. Quietly, she moved inside. Marcus really hated her interrupting him when he was on the phone. Or on his computer. Or visiting with his friends. Or... With a sigh and her head lowered, she eased the door open and entered quietly.

Unusual slurping sounds caught her attention before she had a chance to push the door closed behind her. Zarah lifted her head to glance in the direction of the noise. The blood in her body plummeted to her feet.

Marcus stood ten feet away with his pants around his ankles and fingers tangled in the blonde waves of the very petite woman on her knees in front of him.

"That's it, baby," he groaned in pleasure as he held her head still, thrusting his hips against her face.

The moaning and grunting coming from the woman had Zarah's mind spinning with disbelief. This couldn't possibly be happening. Who in the hell was that woman?

The lying, cheating bastard. He'd always told her he didn't like oral sex. He'd never allowed her to perform it on him.

"Oh yeah," Marcus growled. "Here it comes. Are you ready?"

His hips thrust faster. The woman hummed in approval around his cock as it slid past her lips.

"Swallow every drop."

Stunned at the scene before her, Zarah watched wide-eyed as Marcus's body stiffened. His narrow hips thrust forward one final time as he hollered his release.

Time stood still. Zarah lost track of how long she stood there staring in bewilderment between Marcus and the woman. Finally, the muscles in her arms gave way under the strain of the bags she was holding, and they fell to the floor with a loud, echoing thunk.

The woman on her knees released Marcus's spent shaft from between her lips with a pop, and both she and Marcus glanced in Zarah's direction.

"Zarah," Marcus said, his fingers still tangled in blonde's hair. "Um, you're home early." He held her gaze for but a moment before turning his attention back to the woman kneeling in front of him. After helping the petite blonde to her feet, he traced her swollen lips with the pad of his thumb. A broad grin curled his lips. "Go to my bedroom, baby. I'll be there soon."

Without a word, the woman vanished down the hall. The bedroom door clicked closed behind her.

"Marcus? What the hell?" Zarah demanded.

With casual nonchalance, Marcus bent down to pull up his pants and cleared his throat before turning his attention back to her. "Okay, look. I've packed up your clothes and the other crap you moved in here," he said and pointed to a dozen-or-so boxes piled up beside the door where she stood.

"What's going on, Marcus?"

Marcus stared at her with a look of impatience. "We're done, Zarah," he replied matter-of-factly. "I'm not attracted to you anymore. I think that'd be obvious after what you just saw. I mean, don't get me wrong, I've appreciated your help with my mortgage and bills, you know, helping to make ends meet while I was saving my money. And of course with the cleaning. But I'm ready to move on with my life. So—"

"You've been using me?" she asked, fighting the burn of the tears building in her eyes. Zarah's gut twisted and her heart felt as though it were being ripped from her chest. She'd invested close to a year and a half into a relationship with Marcus.

"Come on, Zarah. Look at you." He eyed her from top to bottom and back again.

"You've let yourself go. Those wide fucking hips. That fat ass. Why would I want you when I could have that tight little blonde in my bed?" he finished with a smug grin.

The buzzing in her ears and head prevented Zarah from speaking. She'd have to be blind not to notice how gorgeous the blonde blowing him had been. Words escaped her. She was enraged, devastated, humiliated. But for the life of her, she couldn't bring herself to retaliate. She was simply too stunned.

"You should try putting some effort into your appearance," he continued.

There was no reason for her to look down. She knew what she looked like.

"Like, start with dropping sixty or seventy pounds. And maybe do something with that rat's nest you pass off as hair," he added.

Zarah's mouth gaped open when his eyes dropped lower.

"You wore your fucking lunch," he said, pointing to a silver-dollar-sized stain from the Thousand Island dressing she had topped her garden salad with at lunch.

"And what the hell is with those panty hose?"

After using the restroom following lunch, she put her thumb through her pantyhose, and her right knee looked ridiculous completely exposed. In hindsight, she should have just taken them off and pitched them, but she'd been working alone in the basement library; no one would have seen her.

"And then there's the weight..."

Marcus was right. She was fat. Fat and frumpy.

"Look," he began, interrupting her mental teardown of herself. "Somewhere along the line, you read too much into our arrangement."

"Excuse me?" she blurted. "We've been involved for over a year."

"I never intended this to be a permanent relationship."

Zarah's vision blurred. The nerve of him. Who in the hell did this pretentious ass think he was? He'd led her into the sense they were in a relationship, building a life together.

"We talked about marriage, children, a future," she pointed out.

"Not 'we' in the literal sense of 'you and me,'" he replied. "Metaphorically, like when 'we' found a partner and moved on."

"You sorry son of a—"

"I'll help load whatever you can into your car, and I suppose if you have to, you can come back first thing in the morning to collect the rest of your stuff before Jessica gets up."

The numbness in her limbs made Zarah feel as though she were having an out-of-body experience. She had no fight in her. She didn't know exactly what had happened or what was going on, but her body and mind simply went with it. On autopilot, she bent over to retrieve her purse and lunch bag and the steaks and wine from the grocery store before walking over to the stacked boxes and lifting one.

In tense silence, she worked alongside Marcus as they stuffed her meager belongings into her car. It was sad, really, how in such a short time her life had been reduced to a dozen cardboard boxes, all of which fit into her run-down Toyota Corolla.

"Where am I supposed to go?" she asked when they finished.

Marcus shrugged uncomfortably, as if possibly realizing the effects of the dire position he'd blindsided her with.

"Marcus, every dime I made since moving in here has gone to you to help with bills," she reminded him, holding her anger at bay. "I have little savings. I was fed the illusion we were in this together." She couldn't help herself from throwing the dig in his face.

Sadly, the harsh comment didn't make Zarah feel any better. Though for a split second she could have sworn she saw a glimmer of regret flash in Marcus's eyes. Pursing his lips, he reached into the front pocket of his tan Dockers and pulled out a roll of bills the size of which Zarah had never seen. Hell, she'd never even imagined.

Where in the world did he come up with that kind of money? she wondered.

Unfolding the roll of cash, Marcus sighed in annoyance. "Well, how much do you think a hotel room is worth for a couple of days?"

"You mean you don't know?" she snapped. "You've been entertaining your little tart somewhere. Oh wait. It must have been all those so-called business trips you claimed you were on. Wrote it off as a business expense, I suppose, huh?" He ignored her comment. In that moment, Zarah was overcome with rage. She saw red. Before Marcus had the chance to blink, she reached over and plucked the wad of cash out of his grasp. It seemed she still had some fight in her after all. "This ought to do," she said, stuffing the roll into her bra as Marcus started to reach for it. "Considering you used me and made me look like a fucking fool for months—"

"But there's over five grand there!"

Zarah's eyes widened.

"Wow." For a moment she found herself once again stunned, but she shook her head to regain her composure. The son of a bitch wasn't going to get off so lightly. Not after what he'd put her through.

"You're right, Marcus. The humiliation you put me through is worth twice that," she snarled and then turned and opened the driver's-side door. "Let's consider this a down payment, shall we?"

"Just take it and go, Zarah." He walked back up the path and closed the front door behind him.

Expelling a defeated sigh, Zarah slumped into her car. After turning over the engine, she pulled out of the driveway to begin a new life, whatever the hell that was going to be. She hadn't a fucking clue.

Chapter Two

Jackson "Jack" Masters gave his head a swift shake before pushing the vinyl shower curtain aside and stepping over the side of the tub. Forgoing a towel, he snagged his toothbrush from the holder on the vanity and squeezed a generous glob of mint green paste over the bristles.

The clock radio on the bedside table in his room across the hall echoed Trooper's "Boys in the Bright White Sports Car," and Jack sang the chorus as he brushed his teeth.

After swishing some mouthwash, he stood studying his reflection in the mirror. Brushing the damp bangs from his forehead, he made a mental note it was time to get a haircut. The scruffy look didn't suit him.

In his bedroom, he stood naked in front of his window, enjoying the warmth of the sun shining through the double-paned glass. He couldn't remember ever seeing a more beautiful July morning. There was something electric in the air, an unseen surge that had Jack's pulse racing. For reasons he didn't question, he'd awakened with a smile on his face and a voice in the back of his head told him it wouldn't be fading anytime soon.

Monday mornings were welcomed with eagerness in Jack's world. Monday meant the start of his work week, social interaction, and the end to his loneliness. Okay, it was his own fault he spent his weekends by himself. Jack knew that, and he was more or less comfortable with his choice.

If he'd wanted to, he could have taken some weekend shifts from a couple of the guys, but Jack knew they had families and needed the money. Jack didn't have a family. And he didn't need the money. Besides, old Freddie who manned the phones during regular business hours would never permit it. It didn't matter that Jack

was the owner of Tow Masters, Ltd. Freddie had decided when Jack hired him that Saturdays and Sundays were to be Jack's "R and R" days. Since Jack regularly pulled fourteen- to sixteen-hour days, he'd be crazy not to welcome a little downtime every now and again.

But Jack was tired of spending his weekends and evenings alone. Yes, he had a few buddies he enjoyed sharing a beer with, but he would definitely be considered a far cry from a social butterfly. A couple of his employees, ages twenty-one and twenty-two respectively, were constantly after him to hit the clubs with them.

"Come on, old man," they'd goad him in fun. "Let's get you laid."

A half dozen of his guys were younger than him, and Jack was always the center of a ribbing about his age when the youngsters were around the office. He had only celebrated his thirtieth birthday six weeks earlier, yet the boys thought it a riot to taunt him on getting up there in years. Hell, even Freddie joined in on many occasions, and he was seventy-two.

Of course the kids, as Jack affectionately referred to them, were into barhopping, just as he'd been at their age. Now the bar scene held no appeal to him. He was no longer interested in trolling for a one-night stand who could be found in the bars.

For the first few years of adulthood, he had carried an ache in his gut for the life he'd thought he'd been ready for. Twelve years earlier he had thought he was a man. Like most snot-nosed punks, when he was eighteen and straight out of high school, he thought he knew everything about the world around him. Boy, had he gotten a rude awakening back then.

But that was then, and this was now.

The moment of his reawakening had come the afternoon he woke up with the worst hangover of his life following his recent thirtieth birthday festivities. It was then that Jack realized it was time to settle down. He longed to share his life with someone, wanted to feel the softness of a woman's body in his arms and warming his bed, a woman who belonged to him and him alone.

The business was practically running itself and doing well. So, as Frank repeatedly told him, Jack could now spend time concentrating on himself without feeling guilty. The handful of friends whose company he enjoyed also offered their two cents where his love life was concerned. Jack was never offended. He knew they meant well.

Dating was a completely different ball game for a thirty-year-old man than it was for a twenty-year-old. He'd grown set in his ways and suspected a woman around the same age would be of the same constitution. Hell, he didn't know the first thing about dating. He'd never done it. Well, not as an adult. Straight out of high school he'd married his sweetheart, and before the ink had dried on the certificate, he caught her cheating. Immediately following, he'd gotten a divorce.

There was a life out there for Jackson Masters. Something more than he was living right now; he knew it. He needed to get off his ass and just find it.

He needed to find her—the woman he knew would complete his life.

* * * * *

Half an hour later, Jack was dressed in his uniform and ready to take on the day. With a banana in one hand and a bottle of juice in the other, he left his

apartment.

It was early, seven in the morning, so he wasn't surprised that he didn't pass anyone as he descended the stairs from the fourth floor. The building he lived in was a four-story walk-up with four apartments on each floor. It was owned and operated by an elderly couple, the Davises, who had built it fifteen years earlier.

Mack and Rita Davis lived on the first floor in the largest unit, which they'd customized when the building was constructed. They never had children of their own; however, Jack had learned the couple had fostered over one hundred fifty children over a forty-year span. When they decided they were getting a little too old to tend to toddlers, they built the apartment so they could quietly live their golden years.

Each unit had one bedroom and one bath. The kitchens and living rooms were larger than in most one-bedroom apartments. In addition to a balcony for each apartment, the Davises had constructed a common area where the tenants were welcome to utilize a pool and hot tub.

The entrance to the building and grounds were secure. No one got in without a key or Mack Davis's knowledge. Even the parking lot was gated.

At the present time, all but one apartment was occupied, and the turnover of tenants was nil. Once someone moved in, they generally stayed for years. It always amused Jack that every occupant in the building was a single man, except for the Davises. Women were more than welcome to move in. It just happened that men usually made up the building's general population.

The Davises kept the building in tip-top shape, and Rita offered her cleaning services to the interested bachelor tenants. Of course, Jack readily accepted Rita's generosity when he moved into the building seven years earlier, though he was quite capable of picking up after himself. His sole reason for accepting Rita's offer was because she indicated it offered her independence and allowed her some time away from Mack throughout the day.

It cost him next to nothing for Rita's cleaning services. Jack would have gladly doubled her meager fee just to see the smile on the older woman's face after she bustled around his apartment. And as a side bonus, he never wanted for fresh, homemade baked goods.

Upon reaching the first floor, Jack walked through the small lobby where the mailboxes lined one wall and strolled out the front door.

"Morning, Mrs. Davis. Hey, Mack," Jack said on his way toward the parking lot. Rita lifted her head from the bed of petunias and smiled up at him. "Good morning, Jackson. How are you this morning, my pet?"

"Hey there, Jack," Mack replied as he continued sweeping the sidewalk.

Jack loved the Davises as if they were his own parents. He cherished them.

They'd been so good to him during his residence, better than the parents who raised him ever had.

The day Jack moved into the building, he'd found himself in the folds of a family. It wasn't biology that connected the tight-knit group of which Jack had become a proud member. They had so much more. Holiday meals were prepared by Mrs. Davis, and more than a couple dozen people crowded into their apartment to partake in the festivities.

With his business doing as well as it was, Jack could afford to buy his own home

and leave the building, but he didn't. First and foremost, he couldn't bring himself to leave the Davises. Second, he was fed up with being lonely. Granted, the companionship he was looking for was of the female persuasion, but when he wanted to chat, he could simply walk across the hall or downstairs and find someone with whom to converse.

His best friend, Lane, lived on the floor below him. They'd been friends since grade school. They had double-dated occasionally over the years and simply watched out for each other. As of late, they had become each other's source of entertainment.

Four years earlier, after Lane also found himself shafted in the love department, he declared himself a bachelor for life. Jack knew when the right woman came along, Lane would be singing a different tune. He was as much a romantic at heart as Jack was.

"Oh, Jackson, I'm going to try out a new recipe for peanut butter cookies today," Mrs. Davis told him as she turned her attention back to her petunias.

"Now you shouldn't go messing with perfection, Mrs. Davis," he teased.

"I'll leave a plate of them for you when I head up to dust your apartment."

"You were just in on Thursday. Surely I couldn't have created that much dust over the weekend," he said with a grin.

"I'm gonna throw a coat of paint at the empty unit today, and I don't want Rita under my feet, Jack. You know she can't paint a stroke," Mack said as he offered his wife his hand to help her to her feet.

"You saucy old sod," she scolded her husband with a warm smile.

"I'll come home early tonight, Mack, and paint the ceilings for you," Jack offered.

Jack didn't like the idea of Mack climbing a ladder anymore. At sixty-seven, the older man was in good shape and reasonable health, but he had trouble every now and again with his balance after the mild stroke he'd suffered six months earlier.

"Naw, no need to put yourself out, son," he said.

"I don't think of it like that, Mack."

"I know you don't. On his way to work last night, Lane offered. He should be home anytime now, and the two of us'll get started. Shouldn't take us any more than a couple of hours."

"You keep an eye on him, Mrs. Davis," Jack said and gestured toward Mack. "If he steps his ass up on the ladder, you call my cell."

"Oh, go on with you," Mack said with a frown. "The lot of you need to stop fussing over me."

"Have a nice day," Rita said to Jack as he walked toward the parking lot.

"You folks too," Jack called over his shoulder when he reached his pickup truck.

"And if you need me, just call my cell."

Mrs. Davis was still waving as Jack pulled his truck onto the road. He truly loved the woman and could only hope he would one day enjoy the kind of relationship Mack and Rita shared.

* * * * *

"Morning, boss man," Freddie greeted Jack as he walked through the door of the office.

Freddie was always the first one in.

"I'm convinced you've got a hideaway bed tucked somewhere around here, old-timer," Jack grouched with a grin. He bent down to rub Freddie's German shepherd behind the ears. "Hey, Dog. How are you, boy?"

"Early bird catches the worm, son." Freddie chuckled.

Jack settled himself behind his desk and grabbed the stack of paperwork from the tray.

"Looks like the boys had a busy weekend," Jack said as he began sorting through the completed work orders left for him.

He thought to himself that he'd come into the office next weekend just so he wasn't sitting alone in his apartment.

What the hell is wrong with you, Jack?

A voice in his head piped up with what sounded a lot like a pep talk. You're a successful business owner, the voice told him. What woman wouldn't be impressed with your sense of humor? You've got a big heart, Jack, and for the most part you know what you want out of life. Though you're no model type, you're kind of easy on the eyes.

He chuckled aloud before noticing Freddie's narrowed eyes watching him.

"Inside joke?" Freddie asked.

"Yeah, something like that," Jack replied and decided to turn the voice off, for now.

There would be no easy solution. It wasn't like the perfect woman was going to be dropped at his doorstep. Hell, destiny couldn't possibly be that good to him.

No, it was time. Jackson Masters, thirty-year-old businessman and lonely bachelor with a sense of humor and a big heart, needed to get himself out there on the singles' market. But what the hell would he be in for, putting himself out there like that? What exactly was he looking for in a potential mate anyway?

Jack thought for a moment. First and foremost, she needed to be an independent, strong woman. Yet she needed just a hint of vulnerability to allow him to protect and love her completely. Jack didn't need to call all the shots in a relationship, but he preferred to be the one who wore the pants. His perfect woman would be soft and feminine in all the right places but wouldn't be afraid to tell him what she wanted and needed to make her whole. She would challenge his mind and hopefully be tolerable of his complete lack of culinary skills.

Sexually, she would know what she wanted and how to take what she needed. Jack was a sucker for women with dark curly hair, which often made him wonder what his attraction to Qwin had been. She was a natural blonde, and her hair couldn't hold a curl no matter how much hairspray she used.

Jack realized there was more to an attraction than just the physical. Yet there had to be some sort of physical attraction, just the same. His perfect woman would steal his breath one minute and leave him panting the next.

A deafening silence filled his office as the voice in his head stopped its chatter. Jack found himself staring off into space. A throat clearing reminded him he wasn't alone.

"You need to get laid, boy," Freddie said gruffly.

Jack shook his head. "No, my friend. I want so much more."

Chapter Three

Zarah sat behind the wheel of her car, staring at the front door to the

four-story apartment building and toying with her hands in her lap. Her palms were sweating, and her heart raced.

How could Marcus have done this to her? The question had played over and over in her mind from the moment she'd been forced from their—his—home. He'd said the cruelest things.

"Come on, Zarah. The miserable, cheating dick did you a favor," she said for a little encouragement. But it didn't make her feel any better. No, he hadn't done her a favor. All he had done was turn her life upside down.

From what she could see of the outside of the apartment complex, the grounds were well kept, as was the building itself. Mrs. Davis had sounded so nice on the phone. Personable. The rent was more than Zarah had budgeted for, but it was in a nice neighborhood. If she liked it, she'd have to tighten her purse strings some.

Get your ass moving, the voice in the back of her head said. She reached for her car door handle. She walked across the parking lot and entered the building. Before she could talk herself out of it, she pressed the buzzer for the Davises' apartment.

"Yes?" came the familiar voice of the woman she'd spoken to earlier.

"Mrs. Davis, it's Zarah Elliott," she said into the speaker. "We spoke this morning about the apartment you have available."

"Of course, pet. Come in, come in."

A soft buzz sounded, and the door leading into the main lobby clicked.

As Zarah walked through and the door closed behind her, an elderly woman rounded the corner.

"Welcome," the woman said and held her hand out.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Davis. And thank you for seeing me today."

"The pleasure is ours, pet. Come, the apartment is on the second floor. Let's have a look, shall we?"

After showing Zarah around the one-bedroom unit, Mrs. Davis invited her into her apartment to discuss business. She escorted Zarah into the living room, where an elderly man sat reading a newspaper. His leg was elevated on a stool, and an ice pack rested on his ankle.

"Can I take this damn ice off now? I can't feel my toes, Rita," he grumbled when they entered.

"Zarah, this grouchy Gus is Mack. Mack, this is Miss Elliott. I was showing her two-B," Mrs. Davis said, ignoring Mack's question.

"Well, young lady, what'd you think?" he asked, folding the paper and dropping it on the floor beside his easy chair.

Feeling as if her world was about to come crashing down around her, Zarah bucked up her courage and smiled. "It's a lovely apartment. It smells as if you've just painted it. The color is very versatile." The taupe walls offered a neutral tone, and Zarah had actually pictured herself hanging an Aztec-patterned border on the walls.

"Yeah, slipped off the ladder this morning," he said, patting his outstretched leg.

"Oh my, has someone looked at it for you?" she asked.

"Jeez, don't tell me you're a fussy too," he said and waved his hand, dismissing her question.

"Well, if it's all right with you, I'd like to take the apartment," Zarah heard herself say. "I imagine you'd like a couple of references, and do you require first and last month's rent?"

"If you have it," Rita replied. "Both might be too much to come up with all at once, so if you've just got first, that'll be fine."

Reaching into her purse, Zarah pulled out an envelope containing first and last month's rent. This was the only apartment she was going to be able to see for at least a day, and she did like it. So if the Davises could accommodate her immediately, they'd be in business.

"I am looking to take possession immediately," she said. Feeling herself on the verge of tears at her weakness, her desperation, she swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. "I'm, uh, in a bind and need something—"

"I like ya, darlin'. It's yours," Mack said. "But you'll have to give me another day. Is Wednesday okay?"

"Oh, of course," she replied. She couldn't decide if she was pleased or unhappy she had to wait another day to start her new life.

Once the paperwork and details were out of the way, Mrs. Davis handed her a key and Mack rose to his feet.

"I'll see you out, doll," he said.

Ignoring Rita's protest from the living room, Mack hobbled to the door behind Zarah and pulled it open. As she stepped through the doorway, Zarah slammed into what felt like a brick wall. The collision was hard enough to force her to exhale the breath from her body. When she looked up, she met the heated gaze of a man. A big man. A muscular man. The most spectacular piece of man she'd ever laid eyes on.

The immediate reaction of her body caught her completely off guard. Everything happened at the same time: her nipples sprung to attention, the oddest yet most pleasurable sensations zinged between her legs, and her knees threatened to give out. Never in her life had she felt as she did at that moment. She struggled to draw a breath, fighting the urge to reach up and run her fingers through his tousled dark hair. It was sexy, like he'd just gotten out of bed after a marathon sheet-tossing session. At the thought of another woman ravishing him, Zarah felt a stab of jealousy.

Jealous? How absurd was that?

The deep gray of his eyes reminded her of storm clouds brewing in the Gulf of Mexico. His chiseled jawline, lightly shadowed with a dark shading of whiskers, gave him an air of danger and mystery. His lips were full and inviting. What she wouldn't give to suck the plump lower one into her mouth.

She could tell from his clothes that the stranger was a working man. He wore a blue short-sleeved work shirt with a "Tow Masters" crest over his right pec and the name Jack stitched over the left. The smell of the grease and motor oil smeared on his clothes didn't mask his masculine scent. The crisp, clean fragrance tickled her senses.

"Oh, excuse me," she said in a husky voice she didn't recognize. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Jack," Mack said behind her. The man in front of her didn't acknowledge Mack. His eyes were glued on her. "Give me a minute, son. I'll be right with you."

The intense heat in Jack's gaze made Zarah uncomfortable. She didn't know what

to make of the look in his eyes. Was he pissed that she'd just walked right into him?

Giving in to the sense of awkwardness that prickled her nerve endings, she dropped her gaze from his fierce scrutiny. Not knowing where else to look, her eyes accidentally settled on his crotch. If the telltale bulge in the front of his pants was any indication, he seemed appreciative in his appraisal of her. Zarah squirmed with embarrassment. She was embarrassed for herself more so than Jack, because he didn't seem to give a shit he was sporting a hard-on right there in the hallway.

"I-I really appreciate you agreeing to meet with me on such short notice, Mr. and Mrs. Davis," she turned to Mack and said, trying to pull her attention away from the man.

"Our pleasure, darlin'," Mack said. "Let me walk you out to your car."

"No, no," she said. "You need to get off that ankle. I'll be fine. Thank you again." She inhaled a deep breath in an attempt to regain some semblance of control to her trembling body. "Excuse me," she whispered and skirted past the man still studying her.

* * * * *

When the woman's head shot up to look at him, Jack's mouth went dry. The darker pigmentation of her skin was exotic, and Jack had the instant urge to lick every delectable inch of her. Soft-looking black curls framed her face and came to a rest on the top of her shoulders. Jack felt the need to run his fingers through the mass, if only to confirm its silky texture. She met his gaze with wide eyes, and his heart ceased beating. Her eyes weren't hazel. They were golden, a mesmerizing hue that drew him in. Her full lips beckoned him to dip his head to taste them.

His brain and cock screamed at him to toss the woman over his shoulder and cart her upstairs to his bed as fast as his feet would carry them. Despite his libido raging like he'd never experienced before, his body refused to move. All he could do was stand there and stare.

She took his breath away. No woman had ever had that effect on him before. It was clear his intense stare made the woman uncomfortable. She dropped her gaze from his and turned back toward Mack. The huskiness in her voice was natural, not forced. Jack could tell, and it was driving him insane.

She turned toward Jack again, her full and luscious lips curling warmly, but the smile she offered failed to reach her mesmerizing golden-colored eyes.

Jack knew that look. She'd been hurt.

As she brushed past him, her forearm brushed against his. Her touch singed him. Jack had to look down to make sure his skin wasn't on fire. The hypnotic sway of her shapely hips made his mouth water. If his cock got any harder, it was going to kill him. He wondered if there was ever a time throughout history when a man had actually died from sporting a raging hard-on.

As she walked away from him and out the front door, he frowned. The color of the sundress she wore was a perfect complement to her tanned skin tone and enhanced the gold hue of her eyes, but it hung on her like a burlap potato sack. He wanted a better look at the luscious curves he knew were hidden beneath the frock.

Jack found himself curious as to why a beautiful woman such as her would hide a

figure like that under a dress that was at least two sizes too big for her. He wondered if hiding herself had something to do with the sadness he'd seen in her eyes.

The thought of someone hurting the woman infuriated him. Women were to be protected and loved. Treasured. If he had a woman like her to cherish, she would never have reason to be sad. He'd spend every moment of every day worshipping the incredible creature she was. He would protect her, keep her safe, and love—
“Jack?”

Jack inhaled a deep breath in an attempt to bring his body back under control, and in that instant he caught her scent in the air. He closed his eyes and held his breath, committing the fragrance to memory. She wore no perfume. What taunted his senses was simply her and her alone. Natural, clean, teasing—
“Jack?”

In that moment, Jack wanted to taste her, even more than he had just a moment before. No, he needed to. A hand on his arm brought his attention back to Mack.
“That grass ain't gonna cut itself, son,” Mack said. “Here's the key to the shed, and thanks for offering to cut it for me.”

“You bet, Mack,” Jack said, groaning inwardly at the strain he heard in his own voice.

“Mind getting to it before it's too dark, son? We're due for rain, so I don't want it getting any longer than it is.”

Jack barely heard a word Mack said. His mind was still thinking about the woman who had just thrown his libido into a tailspin.

“And just give the key back tomorrow, Jack. Rita and I are going over to visit her brother, so we'll see you in the morning.”

“Sure thing, Mack.”

“Oh, by the way, Rita put a pot of chili and some buttered rolls up in your refrigerator. She left a note for Lane to head up to your place for something to eat when he wakes up.”

Yup, that was Rita. Well, that took care of his dinner. Now, if he could just do something with the raging monster in his pants. He knew what he wanted to do: chase after the woman, lay her out across the hood of a car—damn it if he was so desperate to have her that he didn't care whose car—and slide his cock inside her.

Standing there in the hall, he imagined the wet clasp of her body gripping his, the feel of her fingertips digging into his arms, or better yet the cheeks of his ass. For a moment, he could actually hear her deep, husky voice screaming out his name as she came.

“Mrs. Davis is a peach, Mack,” Jack heard himself say. “You're a lucky man.”

“Yeah, yeah, don't I know it? She's got a soft spot for you boys. You're good boys. See you tomorrow, son.”

“Night, Mack.”

An hour later, after putting the lawn mower away and locking the shed, Jack made his way up to his apartment to work off the hard-on he still had. Jesus, it had damn near killed him as he cut the grass with his dick pressing so fucking hard against his zipper. He had thought for certain the beast itself was going to burst free all on its own, and if it didn't, his flesh would forever bear the imprint of his zipper.

* * * * *

An hour later, his hard-on was a little more tolerable but certainly not gone. A knock came on Jack's door.

"It's open, Lane," he called out.

A moment later, Lane rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. Jack was dishing out the chili Rita left them.

"Hey," Lane said.

"Hey. Grab the rolls, would you?"

Lane picked up the nearby basket. Once their dinner was served up, Jack poured them each a glass of milk, and the two men carried their plates into the living room and settled in front of the television.

"You seem distracted tonight, pal," Lane commented as he leaned forward to set his empty bowl on the coffee table.

That was an understatement, Jack mused. He hadn't been able to get his mind off the exotic woman since he first gazed into her eyes. Remembering her curves, golden-colored eyes, full, kissable lips, and teasing scent sent Jack's raging libido skyrocketing. Jerking off in the shower had done nothing to ease his ache. It only made the desperate need for her deepen.

"I, uh, sort of met someone today," Jack said. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he could imagine her fragrance in the air.

"Wow. She must be something else to have that effect on you," Lane said.

Jack opened his eyes and realized his hard-on was back with a vengeance.

"Tell me. It's been a long fucking time since I felt like you look," Lane told him. "And for Christ's sake, don't leave anything out."

Jack spent the next twenty minutes describing every erotic detail of the woman he'd bumped into coming out of Mack's place.

"Ah damn," Lane groaned.

"Oh yeah. My thoughts exactly, pal."

"So, what were her and Mack talking about?"

"Haven't a clue. I'd turned into this stunned fucking brainless idiot. I didn't even ask her name."

"You're an idiot," Lane choked out around chuckle.

"Tell me about it. First thing tomorrow I'm going to find out who she is."

Chapter Four

Wednesday morning, Zarah entered the lobby of her new apartment building and glanced around. She frowned, uncertain if she was relieved or disappointed not to find the man she'd bumped into two days earlier.

You're being ridiculous, she told herself. Why would a god like that be interested in a fat frump like you?

But Zarah's mind and body had different ideas. She hadn't been able to get the handsome stranger out of her head. She decided the stranger's rugged good looks should be outlawed. It was criminal for one man to be so damned sexy.

The encounter where his arm brushed hers had been brief, but her body still hummed with a sexual pulse Zarah had never experienced. Jack. For two nights she'd attempted to assuage the burning between her thighs, only to be left more frustrated than before she'd started. She had called his name in her dreams.

Though she knew she'd never draw the stranger's attention, because of her

ampleness, Zarah couldn't deny herself relishing the image of the man, in vivid muscular detail. The feel of his muscular frame had stolen her breath. His eyes had focused on her with an intensity that alarmed her. No man had ever looked at her like that before. It was as if he wanted to throw her over his shoulder and race off into the sunset. Or was it that he'd been appalled by her appearance? The latter would certainly be a more reasonable explanation. Her hips were too wide, her boobs were too big, and her ass was enormous. She knew the lilac sundress she'd worn was miles too big, but it worked well to hide her hideously huge figure from gawking and judgmental stares.

She was certain the fact she had enormous boobs had been the other reason for the wide-eyed expression on his face and the hard-on she'd seen forming in his pants when she lowered her eyes to avoid the heat in Jack's. What guy didn't want to get his hands on a set of big-ass tits?

Zarah guessed the man stood six-four, and he appeared to be solid muscle from the top of his sexy hair to the soles of his steel-toed work boots. What she wouldn't give to explore with her tongue every dip and bulge that made him a delectable male specimen. The thought of him pinning her to a bed, or better yet up against a wall, had Zarah on the edge of creaming her panties. From the moment she met his heated gaze, her nipples had refused to recede. Not once in the year and a half she and Marcus were together had he ever set her body on fire like Jack did with just a look.

She may be fat, frumpy, and destined to live out her days alone, but damn it, she wasn't dead. Christ, Zarah had no doubt Jack had the ability to make a dead woman sit up and take notice. How exquisite would it be to be loved by him? Enough of thinking about Jack, she told herself. She'd probably never run into him again. The thought of not seeing Jack again saddened her. She knew she would never have him in her bed, but how cruel would it be to never be able to visually enjoy him again?

Struggling to balance the boxes in her arms, Zarah growled and reached for the door to the stairwell. Why hadn't she propped the damn thing open on her last trip through?

"Whoa, hey there." A deep male voice behind her startled her. A second later, someone relieved her of her load. "Let me give you a hand with those."

"Thanks," Zarah sighed at the sudden relief to her arms and smiled up at the stranger.

The man was tall and slender with shaggy, sandy blond hair. If she had to guess, she figured he was around her age. He had a mischievous glint in his eye and a playful grin. Zarah suspected this fellow was all about fun. He blew a wisp of bangs out of his eyes with a puff of air and gave her a wink.

A nervous giggle slipped past her lips.

"You're the new tenant, right?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied and held the door open for him.

"Cool. I'm Eric Davis. My aunt and uncle own this building."

"It's nice to meet you."

"Do you have much more to move up? I don't mind offering you a hand."

"Thank you. There's no more. This is the last of it."

"You moving in by yourself?"

God, did she look like a pathetic single girl out in the big old world all

alone? Was it written all over her face that her boyfriend had been fucking around behind her back for the entire duration of their relationship? Or maybe there was a giant neon sign flashing above her head telling the world she'd been a fool to believe in something that had been nothing but a huge fucking lie. "Um, y-yes," she stammered with unease. Nice, she thought, the whole planet now knew she was a hapless wretch who couldn't find love. Lord, she didn't need or want this man's pity.

"No, no, I mean, you don't have anyone helping you? Surely you didn't move yourself alone."

"Afraid so." She groaned inwardly as she made that admission. Yup, that confirmed it. She could officially add pathetic to her list. Zarah Elliott: fat, frumpy, and pathetic.

"It's tough to coordinate a time that works around everyone's schedule. Friends, family, and such. It's just too bad this time of the morning worked best for you, because mostly everyone in the building works through the day or else you would have had plenty of help," he said. "And with you being the only woman to move into this building in around ten years, the guys in this place would have dropped everything to lend you a hand."

"There are no other women here?" she asked.

The surprise in her voice made Eric grin. "No way, doll. Just you and Aunt Rita," he said and then chuckled. "This is a bachelor's paradise here."

Zarah gasped. What in the hell had she gotten herself into? She had no idea she was moving into a bachelors' apartment building. Great, that was just what she needed: to be surrounded by men who would all run the other way when they saw her. No guy in his right mind would be seen talking to a fat chick. In that moment, she felt like she had her first year in high school, standing along a wall at the first school dance, watching the skinny girls dance with the cute boys, wishing someone would ask her out on the dance floor. It never happened. At the spring formal later that year, she decided she didn't want to be left out and asked the captain of the football team to dance. After he and his buddies had a good laugh at her expense, she'd come to the harsh conclusion that fat girls just didn't fit in.

As she matured, she realized kids were cruel and as people matured, so did their attitudes. But she still felt like the fat girl from school. Even as an adult, society was still very much heartless. When she'd met Marcus, her views on the callous world had changed. And look where that got you. Never again, she vowed. Her discontent must have been apparent, because Eric laughed harder. "I'm just teasing. This isn't a guys-only building. It just happens the tenants are all men. With the exception of you. You're very pretty," he said, giving her another wink, "and you have a really sexy voice."

"Um, t-thank you," she stammered, feeling uncomfortable with his comment.

"Sorry if I made you feel awkward. I tend to just blurt out whatever I'm thinking. Anyway, yeah, all guys, and my aunt dotes on us. Hey, if you want, she'll come in and clean for you."

"Oh no. That isn't necessary." Was this guy serious? Zarah didn't want her privacy invaded like that. She could clean her own apartment. She wasn't that much of a mess.

"Aunt Rita doesn't mind at all, honest. She considers us all her boys. Well,

you'll be her girl. She likes it, doing things for us. It gives her something to do while Uncle Mack tinkers with stuff around the outside of the building or fixes things in the units. She says it gives her independence and allows her space away from Uncle Mack. She really wouldn't mind. And I think she'll enjoy having another woman in the building. I feel bad for her sometimes with the lot of us men roaming the halls."

Zarah wondered if Eric ever stopped to take a breath. He appeared to be quite a chatterbox.

"I wish Uncle Mack had told me you were moving in today. I would have made sure I was around before now," Eric said as Zarah pulled the door to the second floor open. He walked through, carrying her boxes, and kept on chatting. "And I would have asked a couple of the others to help out."

Suddenly, Zarah felt kind of good. Just his gesture in itself was heartwarming. There were nice people in the world after all.

"You made the move pretty quick," Eric said. "You only just came through to look at the place a couple of days ago, right?"

Zarah nodded. "Yes, I needed something, uh, right away," she said in a low voice. She hoped he didn't ask anything more. It wasn't like she would have told him all the sordid details of walking in to find her so-called boyfriend receiving the blowjob of his life. The memories were so fresh that the thought almost brought her to tears.

She'd had several days since the incident to think about things, and she realized she was more upset with herself for thinking she and Marcus were in a relationship. They'd been more like roommates. With benefits. Or rather, benefits when it suited Marcus. As much as it pained her to admit it, the signs had been there all along.

Eric stopped talking and looked at her. After a moment of silence, he smiled warmly at her again. "Sorry if it seems like I'm prying; it wasn't my intention. And by the way, I'm a fabulous listener if you need an ear or just want to vent."

Zarah didn't respond as they came to a stop outside 2B—her new home. Turning the knob, she gave the door a push and motioned Eric inside.

"Where do you want these?" he asked.

"Just set them anywhere," she told him. "And thank you for your help."

"You're welcome."

Zarah watched as his eyes surveyed the living room.

"Hey, you didn't lug your furniture up here by yourself, did you?" he asked, a frown creasing his brow.

Was he seriously concerned with that? she wondered.

The money she'd snatched out of Marcus's hand had paid to outfit her living room and bedroom, and the store had given her a great deal on a wrought-iron cafe-style table for the small dining room. Marcus had said there was over five thousand dollars in the roll, but she'd counted seventy-three hundred dollars. Being the bargain hunter she was, after furnishing her apartment with the necessities, Zarah had been able to sock four thousand away in her savings account.

The fact Marcus was carrying around that kind of cash ate at Zarah's curiosity. During the brief time she'd lived with him, he'd always complained about money:

that there was never enough, how he could make more, where he could cut costs. Oh well, Zarah told herself. It was the past, and she would not allow herself to think about the selfish, sniveling two-timing bastard another minute.

"Oh no," she answered Eric. "The furniture place delivered the big stuff an hour ago. They carried it up and placed it."

"Good. Good. I'd hate to think you fought with that stuff alone."

Eric's concern seemed genuine.

"Well, I'll see you around; I need to go run some errands," Eric said, smiling at her before walking toward the door. "Welcome to the building. You'll be happy here. Oh, and I'm across the hall in two-C. If you need anything, I mean anything at all, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you again, Eric," Zarah said and closed the door behind him.

Once alone, Zarah stood with her forehead pressed against the coolness of the steel door. For a moment she wondered exactly what Eric meant by "anything at all." What did he think of her? Oh, she had a pretty good idea. The poor, pathetic fat girl, all by her lonesome with no one to care about her.

After unpacking a few boxes and crying herself out at another one-woman pity party, Zarah decided to take advantage of the vacant poolside. She loved to swim and lie beneath the warm rays of the sun. But over the years, as her weight had ballooned, she suspected everyone at the pools or the beaches had nothing better to look at than her obscene two-hundred-thirty-pound frame. So she'd taken to avoiding all situations where she would be seen in a swimsuit in public.

Zarah inhaled a deep breath and blew it back out again. This is a new beginning, she told herself. She made a pact with herself to work on her self-esteem issues. No longer would she surround herself with negativity. From now on she would only put herself in the company of people who made her feel good.

"I am a beautiful woman," she said in the silence that surrounded her, with a confidence she didn't feel. "I'm worthy of someone's love."

From a box in her bedroom, she plucked out her bathing suit and began to undress.

Chapter Five

On the entire twenty-minute drive home from work, Jack mumbled to the emptiness of the cab of his pickup. His ramblings made no sense, even to him. At noon, Freddie announced he was tired of watching Jack mope around the office and sent him home.

"You're not good for nothing in that state, boy," he'd said. "Get outta here. Go on home and figure out what's gonna get you outta that funk."

Yeah, like that's what Jack needed, to sit around his apartment alone, staring at the fucking walls, thinking about the woman of his dreams. The woman whose name he still didn't know. Because of his schedule the past couple of days, Jack hadn't seen Mack or Rita to ask them.

He felt like he was losing his fucking mind. It had only been two days since he'd set eyes on her, but no matter what Jack did, he couldn't get his mind off her. When he closed his eyes at night, she came to him in his dreams. Christ, he'd felt like a kid who'd just hit puberty when he had woken early that morning to find he'd been jerking off in his sleep.

As he pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex, Jack spotted several

familiar cars. Seeing Mack's, he decided to pin him down to get some information about the exotic woman who had turned Jack's world upside down. He had to find her.

Maybe Freddie was right. Jack needed some time to figure things out, to put his life into perspective. After talking to Mack, he'd head upstairs, take a shower, put on fresh clothes, and go for a drive. Driving always helped clear his mind. As much as he wanted—no needed—the nameless woman who was unknowingly taunting him, Jack entertained a few sobering thoughts: What if she was married? What if she had a family? Despite the effect she had on his body and thoughts, did Jack consider himself the kind of man who would come between a husband and wife, no matter how much he wanted the woman?

The energy he spent fantasizing over her, the possibility of her not being available or interested, niggled in the back of his mind. Though he wasn't prepared to take himself out of the running where the exotic woman was concerned, Jack wondered if he shouldn't consider other options. Hell, he didn't even have her name. He knew nothing about her.

For the hell of it, Jack started to wonder where would be a good place to meet women. He could stop by a coffee shop maybe, except that Jack hated the taste of coffee. For the life of him, he couldn't understand why people drank the stuff. It reminded him of tar.

The bar scene was out. Though he enjoyed drinking beer or even a shot of hard liquor every now and again, the thought of sitting alone in a bar made Jack feel pathetic. Desperate. There was no way he was going to hang around a smoky, crowded bar in hopes of meeting someone.

A friend's wife told him once that he should hang around the produce section of the grocery store to meet a woman. That thought scared the hell out of him. Jack couldn't cook worth a shit. Hell, he was the only person he knew of who could fuck up a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And heaven help him if he wanted it toasted. The one and only time he attempted to make toast had brought the fire department to the building. To this day, he hadn't lived it down.

No, the grocery store was out as well. That was all he needed, to give the false impression to a woman that he knew something, anything, about what to do in the kitchen. He'd be dead in the water in short order.

Jack decided he didn't want to meet any other women. He was interested in one woman. A beautiful woman who stole his breath with her golden eyes, dark curls he ached to run his fingers through, and luscious, feminine curves that sent his pulse racing. A drive, that's what Jack needed. After he got the woman's name from Mack, he'd get behind the wheel of his pickup truck and find her.

A beat-up, run-down relic of a Toyota caught Jack's eye as he walked toward the building. He wondered why a scrap heap like it hadn't been pulled off the road. After checking his mailbox, Jack was about to knock on the Davises' door when it swung open.

"Oh, Jackson," Rita gasped in surprise. "You're home early. Is everything all right, pet?"

"Well, actually—"

"Did you enjoy the chili the other night? I used ground turkey instead of beef. It's better for you, you know."

"The chili was terrific, Mrs. Davis. I'm very lucky to have you watching out for

me.”

“You're more than welcome. Come along, Mack. We're going to be late,” she called over her shoulder. “Sorry, we can't stay and chat a little longer. Listen, I've got a roast in the slow cooker for dinner tonight, Jackson. Why don't you come down around five thirty? Okay?”

Jack nodded and moved to the side as Rita skirted around him.

“I'll be here, Mrs. Davis. You know I can't turn down your cooking.”

Just then Mack appeared in the doorway. “Sweet-talking up my missus, eh, son?”

“You're a lucky man, Mack.”

Jack wanted to ask his question and be on his way, but he felt like an ass demanding to know the woman's name, considering he hadn't spoken with Rita and Mack in two days.

“I heard Rita invite you to dinner, so we'll chat then, yeah? I've been busy getting two-B ready. I feel like we haven't talked in days.”

“So you've got it rented already? That didn't take long. When's the new tenant moving in?”

“Elliott's all moved in. Did so this morning.”

“Wow. That was fast.”

“Listen, son, I gotta run. Got a checkup at the clinic for my ankle, and Rita hates it when we're late. Don't know why it matters. The doc'll be behind anyhow. See you at dinner.”

“See you later, Mack.”

Well that explained the Corolla in the parking lot. It belonged to the new guy.

On his way up the stairs, he considered stopping and introducing himself, but he decided he just wasn't interested in being social right now. Maybe later he and Lane would grab a couple of beers and knock on the guy's door.

Once inside his apartment, Jack snagged a bottle of beer from the fridge before walking into the bathroom. After shedding his clothes, he stepped into the shower and stood under the cool spray, drinking his beer. Absentmindedly, Jack went through the motions of his shower. A little while later, without realizing he'd shut off the water and half-assed dried off, he found himself staring out his bedroom window.

With a sigh, he leaned against the ledge and peered out over the grounds. As his eyes scanned the pool, his heart stopped. He groaned as his balls tightened. Elliott.

It appeared the Big Guy upstairs was smiling down on Jackson Masters.

Jack stared down at the lone occupant floating around the pool on an inflatable air mattress for several moments before he realized he'd better get his ass in gear.

After pulling on a pair of shorts and a muscle shirt, Jack raced from his apartment and down the four flights of stairs that separated him from the object of his attention. As he blew through the door of the building that led out to the pool, Jack froze when she once again came into view. Around him, the air suddenly felt different. A gentle breeze swirled around him, carrying the scent of lilac.

Silently, Jack moved toward the pool with the agility and stealth of a predator.

In his haste to get downstairs, he hadn't bothered with shoes, so the soft footfalls of his bare feet went unheard.

The beauty who had stolen his breath just two days earlier floated atop the crystal clear surface of the pool, unaware she had an admirer. Her left leg was bent at the knee and her foot dangled beneath the water. The fluttering of her fingertips had Jack aching to be the liquid being caressed by her touch. The golden eyes that haunted his dreams were hidden behind her closed eyelids. Jack felt no shame as his eyes roamed the sensual swells and curves of her body. From the dark, sexy curls on the top of her head, his eyes worked their way down. The bobbing of her throat as she swallowed had Jack imagining her on her knees before him, pleasuring every inch of his cock with her mouth.

Next, he visually caressed the swells of her breasts. They were more than a mouthful, but Jack considered himself a breast man, so he knew he wouldn't have any trouble being entertained with them. He wondered if the beauty in the pool had ever climaxed having only her breasts stimulated. Jack caught himself grinning like a kid staring through the window of a candy shop. If she never had in the past, he'd be sure she did in the future. As if hearing his thoughts, her nipples hardened, calling out to him.

His eyes wandered lower over the softness of her belly, stopping to savor the small pooch just below her waist. That spot was such a turn-on for Jack. For the life of him, he didn't understand why women obsessed over the extra weight they carried there. In his opinion, it simply added to their femininity.

To stretch out his enjoyment, Jack decided to leave the best for last and shot his gaze to her feet. She had the cutest toes, toenails painted a bright pink. Never before had Jack laid eyes on a sexier pair of legs. His eyes followed the contours of those shapely limbs to the place where they came together, and he fought hard to stifle a groan of pent-up arousal.

From his place along the fence that enclosed the pool area, the outline of her plump folds told him the beauty kept her pussy trimmed. He wondered if she was completely bare or if she would have a thin patch of curls leading to her treasure box.

Jack was prepared to make a deal with the devil for his soul for the opportunity to lose himself within her warm, wet depths. He knew that the taste of her, the feel of her body gripping his tightly, would be just as addicting to him as her very presence. He wanted to spend hours, even days, buried between her thighs. The thought of feasting upon her made his mouth water. As he watched her float around the pool, unaware of his presence, he caught her scent in the gentle breeze.

In that instant, Jack could no longer control the rage of his hormones. A moan of appreciation echoed from deep within his chest. The woman stirred. A soft feminine gasp broke the silence in the air when she realized she wasn't alone. When her eyes opened and met his, they widened and her lower lip dropped. She seemed to have difficulty catching her breath, as if affected by Jack's presence. Perhaps it was the intensity of his stare that caught her unaware. A grin curled Jack's lips as she rolled off the air mattress and into the pool without a word. She trudged toward the steps, pulling the inflatable pad behind her. After leaning the mattress against the chain-link fence, she turned her back to him and walked briskly to where her belongings were piled.

The sensation of being watched overcame Zarah. At first the fine hairs all over

her body stood on end as if they'd been charged with an electric current. Then warmth filled her, starting at her head and working its way lower. When her nipples puckered tight and the muscles between her legs clenched, Zarah found her thoughts focusing on Jack.

How could just the thought of the man set her body on fire?

Since she wasn't having any luck getting him off her mind, maybe she could ask Mack about him. Surely there was no harm in asking a few questions, was there? Like, first and foremost, was he married or dating? There was no need to pursue anything if he already had a significant other warming his bed.

Zarah scoffed at herself. Yeah, like you'd stand a chance with a guy like that.

A pity fuck might be your only chance. Never again would Zarah Elliott be some guy's pity fuck.

The feeling of being watched became so intense that Zarah cracked an eye to have a look around. She hadn't heard anyone come into the pool area, but she could not shake the sensation that someone was watching her.

Using her hand to shield the sun, Zarah opened her eyes and gasped aloud.

It was him. And he was staring at her. Oh God, his eyes were roving up and down her body. Panic set in. She needed to get as far away from the pool and him as she could. It made no difference that she'd been lusting after Jack in her dreams, night and day. There was no way she could ever bring herself to actually speak to him.

Zarah was envious of the blue tank he wore. The lucky fabric caressed the muscles and ripples of a broad chest, and what she was certain were a decadent set of six-pack abs. Powerful legs carried his toned body, and Zarah realized she'd die a happy woman to be given the opportunity to straddle his thighs. As she climbed out of the pool and walked over to her things, she continued to feel his eyes on her.

"It's impolite to stare," she finally said after snatching her towel off the chair beside the fence.

"My apologies," he replied with a grin. "I couldn't help but admire your beauty."

Zarah scoffed as she wrapped the towel around her torso, covering her from her breasts to below her butt. "Considering I was bent over with my fat ass in the air, you'll have to excuse me for not fawning over your so-called compliment," she said without looking at him.

"Ouch."

Zarah shot a sideways glance in Jack's direction, and the sincerity and the hurt she read in his eyes made her regret her harsh outburst.

"Is it so hard for you to believe I meant what I said?" he asked.

Yes. Unable to bear the weight his heated gaze held, she lowered her head. After a moment, she sighed before raising her eyes to find Jack smiling at her.

"I'm sorry," she offered. "I was rude, and my response uncalled for."

In the blink of an eye, Jack moved with lightning speed and came to stand less than a foot away from her. He exuded raw power, quiet confidence, and his close proximity stole her breath. Though he didn't touch her, his closeness was electrifying, and the effect he had on her body alarmed her. Her nipples became taut, painful buds. Liquid heat flooded the mouth of her sex. Her pulse accelerated, and she struggled to draw breath.

"You have the most beautiful eyes," he declared in a deep, sultry voice. "Would you like to know what I see when I look into them?" He lifted his hand to tuck a strand of her hair behind her left ear.

A fire sparked in her belly. Words escaped her. Her voice remained lodged in her throat.

"In their golden, glittering depths, I see intelligence and innocence mixed with uncertainty. You are cautious, not sure what to make of me. And most importantly, I can see that you have been hurt. Though you try, something like that is tough to disguise."

A soft gasp escaped her. Zarah was stunned that this complete stranger seemed to possess the ability to read her like a book.

"Would you like to hear what I'd like to see?" The deep timbre of Jack's voice carried sureness, making Zarah's lower belly tighten. It took effort for her to swallow the lump that formed in her throat.

"W-what?" she asked with some of the uncertainty he'd just mentioned.

"I want to see how dark they become when you are in the throes of passion at my hand. To see my reflection in them as I take you to erotic, sexual heights that you, my lovely, have never felt before."

Zarah wasn't certain if she should reach out and slap his face or throw herself into his arms and beg him to prove it. Exuding quiet confidence, Jack continued to grin as Zarah made several attempts to catch her breath. His lips curled in a knowing smile. He seemed to know that his words knocked her off balance and stirred something deep within her.

"You are very bold, Mr....?"

"Jackson Masters," he said, offering his hand to her.

Refusing to touch the stranger, knowing that if she did she would lose a piece of herself to him, Zarah tightened her grip on her towel, feeling her cheeks heat.

"You are very bold, Mr. Masters," she repeated.

"I'd like to take you to dinner," he stated.

"I-I don't think so," she replied evenly before bending over to fight with the straps of her sandals and stepping into them. It didn't matter that moments before she'd been fantasizing about Jack. Fantasy and reality were two completely different things. There was no way she was going to set herself up for heartbreak again. "I have to go."

With a turn, Zarah hurried toward the gate. She needed to put some distance between her and Jack Masters. The thought of her emotions being toyed with again made her stomach turn. With her head lowered and her emotions running amok, she didn't notice someone else entering the pool area. Zarah let out a woof when she came to an abrupt stop against a solid masculine frame.

Strong hands wrapped around her upper arms, offering her balance. Zarah's head shot up, and she found herself staring into the most hypnotic blue eyes she'd ever seen. She groaned. The man who held her wore a smile she imagined a kid let loose in a candy store would wear. His light brown hair was cut close to his head and spiked up on top.

As her eyes drifted lower, Zarah moaned at the sight of his bare chest. A spattering of soft-looking curls began midchest and disappeared beneath the waist of his shorts. He wore purple swim trunks low on his hips and had a towel

slung over his right shoulder.

Zarah's mouth worked, but no sound would come out.

"Well hello there, pretty lady," he said. The low, husky timbre of his voice made her flesh goose pimple.

"Oh Lord," Zarah mumbled in a breathless huff. "I'm sorry." Was this building full of Greek-type gods? While Eric Davis didn't bear a godlike physique, he was damn easy on the eyes. But damn, these two men were built like Sherman tanks. "No need to apologize, pretty thing. Bumping into you has been the highlight of my day," he said, releasing her arms.

Her cheeks were now on fire as she silently skirted past the newcomer. Unable to get a handle on her coordination, Zarah stumbled up the walkway toward the building. She froze midstep when she heard Jack's deep masculine voice call out to her, "Wait."

Moisture pooled between Zarah's thighs at the sound, and she could barely catch her breath. Spinning around, she saw that the second man now stood beside Jack. Both were smiling as their eyes roamed her body from top to bottom.

"I didn't catch your name," Jack called over to her.

Hiking her towel a little higher, Zarah replied, "I didn't give it."

Their combined chuckling made her weak in the knees.

"Zarah! Zarah, there you are, pet."

Zarah spun around to see Rita Davis calling to her from the doorway leading into the back entrance of the building.

"I called up to your unit and didn't get an answer. But here you are! It's nice to see you enjoying the pool. Listen, you must come for dinner. I've made pot roast."

The only thing Zarah needed to do at that moment was get the hell away from these two men. Sure, she'd been aroused in the past, but nothing like this. The scent of her own excitement tickled her nose. The heightened level of arousal she was experiencing was unsettling and a little frightening. What made things worse was the knowing expressions on both men's faces. She suspected they knew exactly what they were doing to her.

Though Jack's tone had carried sincerity, the intensity in those beautiful gray eyes when he gazed into hers mystified her. She felt a fire burning between her legs, and all they'd done was look at her. Like she was their next meal.

"Oh I don't know, Mrs. Davis. I don't want to be an imposition," Zarah said, taking a step toward the door.

"Nonsense, it's no imposition at all. You've spent the day moving in and unpacking. You don't have the energy to make dinner for yourself tonight. You'll join us. Jackson's coming. Aren't you, darling?"

With that, Zarah spun back around to find Jack grinning ear to ear. A glint of mischief sparkled in his eyes. As he gave her a nod, Zarah nearly died when the tip of his tongue peeked out and ran over his lower lip.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

"And you're here too, Lane. That saves me a call. You'll come too, won't you?"

The man standing beside Jack gave Zarah a wink and sly smile. "Wouldn't miss it, Mrs. Davis," he said, holding Zarah's stunned gaze. "You know I can't pass up your pot roast."

Rita Davis clapped her hands together. "Excellent! Now don't be late, boys.

Zarah, we eat around five thirty, so we'll see you all then."

Still facing Jack and the second man, Lane, Zarah could only assume Rita had disappeared back into the building, because a tense silence settled over the pool area and patio.

Jack and Lane still watched Zarah, who was growing increasingly uncomfortable under the heat of their gazes.

"Well," Jack said. "I now know the name of the woman I've been making love with the past two nights in my dreams."

Zarah's mouth formed a perfect O, and again her voice failed to work. Bold was an understatement, she thought.

"So this is the beauty you were telling me about, Jack," Lane said, tossing his towel over the back of a chair.

Zarah blinked in astonishment. Jack told his friend about her?

"You described her in perfect detail, my friend." Zarah's pulse quickened as Lane's eyes swept over her body again. "Perfect detail."

A chill ran up Zarah's spine, and her body shuddered. Both men nodded in satisfaction at her body's reaction to their words and gazes. Her fingers gripped the towel more tightly around her in an effort to hide the hard peaks beckoning them from beneath the fabric, worried they would see what they'd done to her.

"Looks like we'll be having dinner together after all, Miss Elliott," Jack said with a grin.

Still unable to utter more than a gasp, Zarah turned on her heel and raced toward the door. They were so damn bold; she didn't know how to process it. No one had ever so blatantly ogled her and then contributed to their gawking with sexy talk. Did they really see her as sexy? This was foreign territory for her. It was a fun and exciting concept, yet frightening at the same time.

Once Zarah Elliott disappeared into the building, Lane shot a sideways glance at Jack and chuckled.

"Staking your claim, huh?"

"Yup. I haven't been able to get her out of my mind since first seeing her the other day."

"Yeah, me either."

Jack raised his eyebrow and shot a glance in his friend's direction.

"Your description of Zarah was un-fucking-believable. I've imagined exploring every curve of her body..." Lane stopped his narrative when he noticed Jack glaring at him. Lane shrugged. "She's hot, sexy, and I'm not going to lie to you, Jack, I'm intrigued."

Jack knew Lane would find Zarah attractive. Lane was as turned on by a voluptuous figure as Jack was. What surprised him, though, was that Zarah seemed to be attracted to him.

If he hadn't seen Zarah's reaction to Lane himself, Jack wouldn't have believed it. Lane's presence definitely had an effect on her, just as Jack's had.

It was as if her aura was summoning the both of them.

Jealousy wasn't something Jack felt at that moment, knowing Lane as he did. His friend wasn't the sort to move in on another man's woman. And that's exactly who Zarah Elliott was, Jack Masters's woman, though she didn't know it yet.

Something else neither Zarah nor Lane knew was that Jack didn't share very well. Not his woman, anyway.

"Well, you know me," Jack said as he took a seat at the table beside the pool.

"I'm always up for a challenge." With a dead-on look, Jack hoped Lane read his meaning loud and clear. "And I think Miss Zarah is going to give me a run for my money."

Lane laughed out loud. "I'm looking forward to a front-row seat, buddy."

Chapter Six

At five twenty-five, Zarah stood outside the Davises' door considering her options. She hadn't knocked yet, so she could still turn and hightail it back to her apartment and claim she wasn't feeling well.

Or she could put into motion a "new me" plan and enjoy a home-cooked meal and get to know some people who seemed very nice. The Lean Cuisine dinners filling her freezer were growing mundane. Lord, she really should learn how to cook.

Zarah had no doubt Mrs. Davis was an incredible cook, and it had been a long time since she'd eaten a meal that wasn't fast food, takeout, or frozen.

Except she knew Jack and Lane were coming to dinner as well, and the thought spooked her. She hadn't been able to get away from the pool fast enough earlier, and at that point she'd spent all of three minutes in their presence. Now, she'd been talked into sharing a meal with them.

What was the polite length of time to stay at a dinner before excusing yourself?

An hour? Two? Could she sit across the table from the two of them knowing what they did to her insides with just a glance?

As Zarah stood outside the door, staring blankly at it, thinking about Jack and Lane, her clit began to tingle and pulse. Not about to be left out, her nipples grew achy as they painfully distended.

Well, that settled it. She was going to feign illness and cop out of dinner.

There was no way in hell she was going to be able to sit and have dinner with the two of them. It seemed senseless to torture herself in such a manner. Her body was thinking with its hormones, but her mind was thinking with her heart.

Zarah wanted more than a casual fuck, which she was certain was all Jack and Lane had on their minds. She deserved more than that. Besides, it wasn't like either man would be interested in her in that way, anyhow.

How could they be?

So then why couldn't she be a big girl and knock on the door and enjoy dinner with the Davises, Jack, and Lane as if nothing was wrong? From the first time she saw Jack, Zarah wanted to experience the physical gratification of being with him. Then after seeing Lane, she had come to a startling realization. She was attracted to them both.

How fucked up was that? What sort of person did that make her? Someone no better than her parents with their flagrant infidelities. Zarah had lost count of the number of times her mother brought home several men to entertain at the same time. And her father had been no better. Growing up, she'd often wondered if the ability to remain faithful to one's spouse was a genetic trait.

No matter how she looked at it, she was fucked. Or maybe fucked-up was a more accurate depiction. There was no way she was going to sit there and eat dinner, ogling the two of them like a high school girl, knowing damn well her interest

wouldn't be reciprocated, at least not in the way she wanted. For the time being, Zarah needed to put space between herself and men in general and spend some time getting to know herself.

She turned on her heel and was about to head to the stairwell when the door opened and Jack and Lane walked through it. She couldn't contain the moan that erupted from her chest at the sight of them. Both men wore faded blue jeans low on their hips, and the fabric of their T-shirts stretched taut across their broad chests. The tips of her fingers itched to trace the firm muscles that called to her from beneath. Her mouth salivated at the thought of licking each and every inch on them from head to toe.

Something flickered in Jack's eyes that held her interest.

"Looks like we're just in time, Jack," Lane said, his eyes taking her in. "It would appear the lovely Zarah was about to make a run for it."

Both men chuckled. The sound warmed her body, making her nipples even harder.

"I-I wasn't going to run," she lied, her cheeks heating. "I just got here."

Jack nodded as he and Lane approached her. "Good, because I'd be very disappointed if you stood me up," he said. He took her hand in his, brought it to his mouth, and pressed his lips to the back of it. "We have a dinner date, remember?"

The surge to her system when his lips made contact with her flesh made Zarah think she was going to pass out.

"Though we met earlier at the pool, allow me to introduce myself again," Jack said. "I'm Jackson Masters. My friends call me Jack. And this is Lane Dundas."

"And you can call me yours," Lane said in a smoldering tone, adding a wink for good measure.

Zarah sucked in a breath. She could have sworn she heard Jack growl.

"You know, I thought your bathing suit looked hot on you," Lane said as Jack placed his palm against the small of her back. "But that dress is smoking, Zarah."

Before Zarah could say a word, Jack pushed the Davises' door open and motioned her inside.

"We didn't knock," she uttered a croak and dug in her heels.

Urging her forward, Jack leaned down and spoke softly against her ear. "You don't need to knock at dinnertime." His warm breath caressed her cheek. "Rita and Mack exercise an open-door policy with regard to meals. We are all welcome, whenever we want."

"Hello," Lane called out from behind Zarah and Jack. "We're here."

Rita came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a tea towel, grinning from ear to ear. "There you are!" she squealed. "Come in, come in. We're just about ready."

"Smells great, Mrs. Davis," Lane said and dropped a peck to Rita's cheek. "I'll set the table."

"Thank you, pet," she said and took Zarah by the hand. "Look at you," she said and took a step back. "You are such a lovely girl, Zarah."

"Thank you," Zarah replied, feeling uncomfortable.

"Doesn't Zarah look lovely, Jackson?"

"Ravishing, Mrs. Davis," he said in a husky tone.

Tipping her head, Zarah gasped at the look of desire in his eyes. She quickly

dropped her gaze and sank her teeth into her lower lip. Jack might be casually interested in a no-strings lay, Zarah determined—hell, she was the only woman in the building—he probably thought it would be easy to get her into his bed. But she was off men until she figured herself out.

“Jackson, I picked up a couple of bottles of wine to celebrate Zarah moving in. Will you open them, please?”

“Of course,” Jack replied and slipped past Zarah.

When his hand against the small of her back disappeared, she shivered, chilled at the sudden loss of his touch.

“Mrs. Davis, you shouldn't have gone to any trouble,” Zarah said as Rita led her into the dining room.

“It's my pleasure, pet. We are going to celebrate your first night here.”

Lane set the table while Jack opened and poured the wine. Zarah stood off to the side, feeling out of place.

“All right,” Rita said, entering the dining room carrying a dish of potatoes.

“Zarah, dear, you sit there. Jackson, you take a seat on Zarah's right. And Lane, you take the left.”

Before Zarah could react, Jack pulled her chair out for her.

“Thank you,” she said softly. She felt him lean into her as he took his seat. Her pulse quickened.

“You're welcome,” he replied in a deep tone.

Good Lord, she'd been here fifteen minutes, and her panties were already soaked. Mack Davis entered the room with the platter containing the pot roast and set it in the middle of the table. Just as they were about to dig in, Eric rounded the corner, panting for breath.

“Sweet, I'm still in time,” he said, leaning down and placing a kiss on the top of Rita's head. “Sorry I'm late, Aunt Rita.”

“It's all right, pet. Grab a chair.”

“Smells great. Hey, everybody.” Eric walked over to row of chairs lined up against the wall and brought one over to the table. “I'm really sorry,” he said to Zarah as he sat down. “I'm embarrassed I didn't get your name earlier.”

“Oh, Eric, this is Zarah,” Rita offered.

“Well it's nice to meet you, again,” he said and reached for the carrots.

“You all settled in, Elliott?” Mack asked. It took Zarah a moment to realize he was addressing her.

“Potatoes?” Jack asked, offering to put some on her plate.

Zarah swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“Sorry, darlin’,” Mack said with a chuckle. “I'm so used to this place being filled with men, I'm afraid your last name has stuck in my old mind.”

“It's okay,” she replied. “I've only got a couple of boxes left to unpack. I can't express enough how appreciative I am that you were able to accommodate me within a couple of days.”

“One slice of meat or two?” Lane asked her as he reached for the platter.

“Uh, just one,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

“It's no problem at all, darlin’.” Mack's voice broke through the dizziness swarming her brain. “I'm glad Rita and me were in a position to help you.”

From across the table, Zarah noticed Eric's left eyebrow shoot up at the attention Jack and Lane were giving her. Her cheeks caught fire.

"Oh, I want a piece of this too," he said with a laugh and stood. Reaching for the carrots again, he scooped out a spoonful and leaned over the table.

"Carrots, my lady?"

Zarah brought her hand to her mouth to hide a nervous giggle. "Yes please, kind sir."

Two feral growls sounded on either side of her.

"Sit down, you silly shit," Rita gently chastised Eric after he deposited the carrots on Zarah's plate.

Eric laughed and sat down again. "Aunt Rita, that's terrible language for the dinner table."

As dinner progressed, Zarah was pleased the conversation didn't center completely on her. She learned Jack began driving trucks following high school and bought the company when the owner decided to retire. After living with friends and family for a couple of years following school, he'd moved into Rita and Mack's building shortly after his twentieth birthday. She also learned Jack and Lane had been best buddies since third grade, and aside from work, the two were almost inseparable. Following high school, Lane had left the state to continue with postsecondary education. After obtaining a two-year associate's and four-year bachelor's degrees, he returned to pursue a career as a paramedic. Neither man had family they were close to, but both admitted that particular need had been filled tenfold by the Davises.

Eric Davis was the same age as Zarah and managed two Starbucks locations in the city. He was the only son of Mack's youngest brother. He had come to live with Mack and Rita when his parents were killed in an airplane accident when he was ten. He helped out around the building when he wasn't at the stores by cutting the grass, trimming the hedges, and tending to the pool.

They gave Zarah the names of the other eleven tenants and the units they lived in and told her everyone was one big family there.

As they finished dinner, the four men stood and began to clear away the dishes.

Zarah chuckled when she was alone with Rita.

"You have them very well trained, Mrs. Davis."

Rita chuckled. "Not really, pet. The relationships here are just like any other—give-and-take."

Zarah found herself considering taking Rita up often on her dinner invitations. She certainly didn't mind cleaning up and washing dishes to show her appreciation for Rita's efforts.

"Sweet. Aunt Rita made pie." Eric's voice carried out from the kitchen to the dining room.

Eric appeared, carrying a pie in each hand. Lane trailed behind him with a stack of plates, followed by Jack with forks, and finally Mack with a lifter.

"These are for us, right?" Eric asked as he set the desserts on the table.

"Yes. Oh Jackson, there's a dessert wine chilling in the refrigerator. Would you do the honors, please?"

"Of course, Mrs. Davis."

Rita began to serve up the pie. Zarah declined when she offered her a slice of apple. She felt like a pig for having gone back for a second slice of roast and didn't need to embarrass herself any further by gorging herself on pie. It didn't matter that apple was her favorite. She wasn't going to eat any more in

front of Jack and Lane. God, what they must think of her already.

"Zarah." Lane's voice had her turning her head toward him. "You have to try this. It's the best," he said.

Before she could refuse, he stuck a forkful of apple pie into her mouth. As the filling touched her tongue, Zarah closed her eyes and couldn't help but moan in appreciation. Good Lord, Mrs. Davis was a pie master. To her right, a possessive growl from Jack sent a chill up her spine and warmth to her pussy.

"Oh Lord, that's good, Mrs. Davis," Zarah announced. "I could sit and eat one of those all by myself." Once she realized what she'd said, her insides deflated.

Cripes, she'd just announced to the whole table she was a glutton.

"I have," Jack declared and gave her a smile.

"Oh yeah, me too," said Eric, helping himself to a second piece.

"Here, honey, try the banana cream," Jack said, holding his fork up to her lips.

She hesitated for a moment. Well, hell, what did she have to lose now? Leaning forward, she closed her lips around the tines and slid the bite off.

"Oh good God," she moaned, closed her eyes, and sat back in her chair to savor the creaminess.

"You like that?" Jack whispered in her ear.

"Mmm hmm."

"Good to know," he added. Her eyes shot open.

After the pies were dished and cleaned up, exhaustion began to set in. Though she was enjoying the conversation and company, Zarah decided she should call it a night. It had been a long day.

"Thank you all for making me feel so welcome," she said.

To her surprise, as she said good night to Mack and Rita, Jack and Lane both offered to walk her to her apartment.

In the corridor, Jack placed his hand against the small of Zarah's back and escorted her through the door and up the stairs to the second floor. As they climbed to her floor, Lane was close on their heels. Their proximity in the confines of the stairwell had Zarah's belly tightening. Her mind flashed an image of both of them pinning her against the wall and kissing her silly.

What would it feel like to be sandwiched between their two muscled bodies? Would they be as rough and demanding as their appearances might lead one to believe?

Their different yet equally pleasing scents tickled her nose as they reached the second floor. Zarah realized she shouldn't have allowed herself the brief

indulgence. Her attraction to both men and her inappropriate carnal thoughts both excited and dismayed her. Um, what about keeping your distance from men for a while? the voice in the back of her mind asked. No men. Not until you find yourself. And no more allowing her imagination control. But surely there was nothing wrong with a little fantasizing. She was a young woman, after all.

When they reached the door to her apartment, Jack reached down and took Zarah's hand in his. Turning it over, he placed a soft kiss on her palm. Zarah inhaled sharply and bit down on her tongue to stifle a groan.

"Sweet dreams," he said and gave her a wink.

When Jack released her hand, Lane stepped forward and brought it to his lips.

Brushing a gentle caress along the back of it, he looked into her eyes and grinned mischievously. "I know I will," he said in a husky tone.

Zarah was beside herself with the barrage of feelings that assaulted her. The

act of kissing her hand went beyond a friendly good night, but she couldn't pull her hand away. No one had ever kissed her hand before. The press of Jack's lips to her palm was an intimate gesture, one shared between love... She couldn't bring herself to even finish the word. She wouldn't have thought a hand would have been so sensitive to the brush of lips, but hers was. It felt sort of...sexy.

A chill raced through her, and the fine hairs on her body stood on end. Every cell in her body pulsed with a surge of energy. A consuming sensation that was somewhat foreign to her. Sure, she'd been aroused before, but nothing like what she experienced standing between Jack and Lane. It was as if both men exuded sex, and for the love of God, she wanted a piece of them.

Them?

You are definitely deluded.

Zarah closed the door, leaving the two men on the other side, and raced down the hall of her apartment to the bathroom, needing a cold shower. To admit she was overwhelmed would be an understatement. After sitting between Jack and Lane during dinner and then having them walk her back to her apartment, it was enough to set her systems to overload.

No man, not even Marcus, had ever looked at her with the fierceness Jack and Lane did. Though they'd just met her, they took liberties with touching her. Though gentle and nonthreatening, it was still touching, and neither had sought permission to do so. And though she should have been outraged at the blatant disregard of her personal space, she enjoyed their attentions. Which made it all the more wrong. It was just not appropriate to enjoy the affections of two men. It certainly wasn't fair of her to indulge.

Was it?

Could she enjoy the company of each of them without getting emotionally attached? Was she strong enough to leave her emotions out of the equation?

Why not?

She was embarking on a new life, so why not establish a new set of ground rules. New goals, a new focus. She didn't need a man in her life to complete her, to make her a whole woman. But that certainly didn't mean she couldn't have men who were friends.

* * * * *

Once in the stairwell after leaving Zarah's door, Jack turned to Lane and glared.

"What the hell were you doing tonight?" he said, trying to tamp his anger.

Lane offered him an innocent grin. "I don't know what you're talking about, Jack. I was simply chatting the young lady up, making her feel welcome."

"You were throwing yourself at her," Jack snarled. "She's mine, Lane. Back off."

"Oh, Jack, I'm surprised at you," Lane scoffed playfully and started to climb the stairs to the third floor. "It sounds to me like you're feeling threatened by a little competition, my friend."

Following behind Lane, Jack froze at his statement. At the top of the landing, Lane turned continuing to grin at Jack.

"Why, you son of a—"

"Now, now, Jack. That's not nice. We're friends. I told you earlier, she intrigues me."

"And I told you, she's mine."

“Well, now I think we should leave that up to the lovely Miss Elliott, shall we? I'm throwing down the gauntlet, Masters.” Lane chuckled and continued up the steps. “Or whatever the fuck you want to call it. I'll back off if Zarah tells me she's not interested in me. Night, buddy.”

Jack seethed as the door closed to the third floor.

What in the hell had just happened? Jack wondered. And just who in the hell did Lane think he was? What the fuck happened to not moving in on another man's woman?

Well, if Lane Dundas was looking for a fight to win over Zarah, Jackson Masters was prepared to duel to the death.

Chapter Seven

A cup of chai tea sat on the end table beside the sofa, forgotten, now cold. In the corner of the overstuffed couch, she curled up with a book, a romance novel. It was a secret vice of hers. White noise from the world outside the open glass door leading to the balcony floated in on the warm, midmorning summer breeze. The night before, Zarah unpacked a box of books she'd moved in the week earlier, and decided it was time to work her way through them. She loved to read yet, despite all the alone time she'd had over the last few months with Marcus, couldn't seem to find the time to indulge. That would change now. She decided to make more time for her, doing things she enjoyed. Maybe she'd join a yoga class for beginners. She'd always wanted to try yoga.

Zarah's first week in her new home had been uneventful. She'd settled in, physically, met a few of the other tenants, and began developing a new routine for her new life. Emotionally, she was going to need more time.

The Davises were wonderful, caring people, and Zarah enjoyed spending time with them. Rita made it clear there was always an open invitation to meals, so Zarah had found herself seated at their table on several occasions. And she never arrived empty-handed. True, she couldn't cook or bake to save her life, but a year earlier she'd come across a bakery whose creations were simply to die for. Those visits had contributed to a few of the extra pounds she'd gained during that time.

Zarah had yet to cross paths with Jack or Lane since dinner the night she'd moved in, ten days earlier. Over dinner with the Davises one night, she casually mentioned the lack of either man's presence at the dinner table, especially after them telling her of the open-door policy.

“Well, Lane's working the afternoon shift this week,” Mack told her. “He's not around much for dinner on that shift. And Jack's somewhat of a workaholic, since he owns his own business.”

Well, that bit of information reminded Zarah of someone else who worked long days. It was probably a good thing she hadn't vested too much into the week before, because it was becoming clear both men had simply been making nice with the new tenant. It would seem all that “admiring your beauty” and “that dress is smoking hot” had been nothing more than empty words.

Yet she could have sworn there had been something in their touches, the kisses on her hand, the feel of their lips on her skin. When one of them made contact with bare flesh or over her clothing, the surge to her senses had been shocking. When they pressed against her, the air smelled different and made her skin

tingle as it swirled around her. The arousal that had pulsed through her body was alarming.

She wondered why it bothered her so much that she hadn't seen them. She knew, but it was painful to admit. Both men, Jack more so, had come on so damned strong, and now there was nothing. Ten days of nothing.

What bothered her more was she found herself hesitant to believe what Mack had told her. The reasons for their absence were plausible and probably 100 percent true. Then why was their absence affecting her this way? Because she found herself wanting to believe in the things they'd said a week earlier.

This is your new life, she told herself. And you are going to practice a new outlook on things.

Zarah wondered what Mack's motive for lying to her would be and decided he didn't have one. He would have no reason to shoot her a line of shit. He didn't know the effect Jack and Lane had on her, nor would he be aware of her insecurities.

A new life, Zarah, the little voice repeated. Follow your gut.

Her gut said believe. So, deciding to take things one day at a time, she would.

The sharp sound of a honking horn snapped her out of her daydream of Jack and Lane, and her head shot up. Glancing back down at the book in her hand, she saw she was still looking at the author's dedication page. To my husband, Jonathan, "Jack," for all your love and support, she read and then gave her head a swift shake.

"It's the weekend," she said to the emptiness around her. "Neither one will be working the weekend. I hope. Let's just see what the day holds."

Despite being physically attracted to both men, there was no reason she couldn't be friends with them. What she wanted was to spend time with Jack and Lane, to get to know them. The last thing she needed was to be in another romantic relationship.

* * * * *

Though over a week had passed since they all shared dinner at the Davises', Jack was still pissed at Lane's declaration toward Zarah. It was nearing noon on Saturday of the following week, and Jack hadn't seen Lane at all. With Jack working days, they didn't spend much time together when Lane worked afternoon shifts.

Lane had left a couple of messages on Jack's answering machine, which Jack had yet to return. Knowing his feelings and actions were childish, he decided he'd stop at Lane's apartment to see if he wanted to settle in for a ballgame up at Jack's place the next day. An afternoon of baseball, beer, pizza, and chicken wings would be good for them. And it would give Jack the opportunity to call Lane out on his statement the week before. Hell, maybe there was no validity to Lane's words. Maybe he was simply yanking Jack's chain.

Before swinging by Lane's place, he planned to stop off on the second floor to invite Zarah to dinner. He needed to get his ass in gear and get their courtship under way.

Though it had damn near killed him to maintain some distance, Jack wanted to give Zarah time to settle in before he put his plan into motion. He was feeling anxious as well. Zarah Elliott was the woman he needed to make his life complete. He loved the way her cheeks tinted when she saw him. The golden hue of

her eyes was hypnotic, and a number of times made Jack forget his own name. The sexy smile she gave him warmed him right down to his toes.

Not once did Jack think he wouldn't be successful in winning her affections. It wasn't arrogance. Jack was confident. He knew Zarah was attracted to him. He could see it in her eyes. In his presence, her nipples were always hard, as if beckoning him. He knew her body's reaction to him made her uncomfortable, because she usually crossed her arms over her chest to cover herself. The thought of drawing those plump little berries into his mouth made Jack groan in the empty cab of his pickup. He had to stop himself from imagining her taste, because he'd shot off in his pants more than once just thinking about it. Jack knew her flesh would be sweet, addicting.

Jack adjusted himself and attempted to turn his thoughts elsewhere. He didn't have a hell of a lot of luck. Soon, he told himself. Very soon.

He stopped at the grocery store to pick up some fresh fruit, filled up his gas tank, and then made his way for home. Parking his pickup in the lot, he spotted Zarah's car and found himself growing hard all over again.

After checking his mailbox, Jack made his way up to the second floor, taking the stairs two at a time. Man, was he stoked. He reached over and pulled the door open to the corridor.

"...a matinee, then maybe a bite to eat afterward."

Jack heard Lane's voice before he stepped through the doorway.

"Sounds nice, Lane. Sure," Zarah replied and then spotted Jack in the hall.

"Jack."

The breathless hitch in her voice when she spoke his name made Jack's balls tighten. The glint in her eyes sent Jack's pulse racing. For the hell of it, his eyes dropped to her chest, where he caught sight of her nipples springing to attention.

"Jack, buddy. How are ya?" Lane asked. A sly grin curled his lips.

"Fine, Lane. You?"

"Better now," he said and waggled his brow. "We've got a date."

Jack's blood began to boil. He was going to kill Lane.

"Lane." A nervous giggle erupted from Zarah.

A tense silence filled the corridor as he and Lane stared at one another. Zarah clearing her throat had Jack finally blinking.

"Did you, um, want something, Jack?" she asked.

"Yeah, Jack. Got something on your mind?"

Lane was a dead man.

"Actually, I was going to see if you wanted to do something tonight, Zarah, but it appears Lane beat me to it," Jack said. He hoped the animosity he felt toward his friend wasn't detectable in his voice.

"We're going to take in a movie this afternoon," she replied. "Why don't you join us?"

Jack almost burst into laughter as Lane's face fell. He gained great satisfaction watching Lane squirm. The fact he was visibly irritated by Zarah's innocent question was enough to tell Jack that Lane's enjoyment of the afternoon would be hampered. Jack should have jumped all over Zarah's invitation, but he instead decided to be a bigger man and allow Lane his very small victory. It would be short-lived.

"Thank you, but I'm afraid I have some errands to run," he said with a smile. "I hope the two of you have a nice time."

"Are you sure, Jack?" The uncertainty in Lane's voice had Jack smiling wider.

"Absolutely, pal," he answered. "Are you into baseball, Zarah?"

"Sure."

"Why don't you come up to my place tomorrow and we'll take in a few of the games?"

"I'd like that, Jack," her husky voice replied.

"Good. I'll see you then," Jack said and turned away.

"Of course you too, Lane. Be sure to grab a case of beer," Jack said over his shoulder. "And a bottle of white wine for Zarah."

Jack could feel Lane cringe at the other end of the hall.

"I'll see you in an hour, Zarah," he heard Lane say as the door was closing.

A few seconds later, Lane caught up with Jack on the third-floor landing.

"Hey, Jack. Hold up."

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay with me asking Zarah out?"

"Not really, Lane. I told you how I felt about her."

"It's just a movie, Jack," Lane said with a grin.

"The gloves are off," Jack told him. "I'm not interested in fucking around and playing games."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"There's an unwritten code between friends, Lane, and you don't seem to give a rat's ass about it. You want to do this, we'll do it. You want to date Zarah. Feel free. But hear this. I'm going to as well. I will not go down without a fight."

"You're taking all of this very well, my friend."

"Well, you said it the other day. I think we should leave things up to the lovely Miss Elliott, shall we? You two have fun," Jack called over his shoulder on his way up to the fourth floor.

* * * * *

An hour later, Jack sat in the front seat of his pickup, crouched low so he could just see over the dashboard. Within fifteen minutes, Zarah and Lane exited the building. Jack was relieved to see several inches separating them. He then followed Lane's car at a safe distance as he weaved in and out of traffic on the way toward the Cineplex.

After purchasing a ticket and making sure neither Lane nor Zarah spotted him, Jack followed them into the theater and took a seat a few rows behind them. A half hour into the movie, Jack realized he was being an ass. A giant ass. He had no claim to Zarah, though he wished it were him sitting beside her. Ashamed of his behavior, he stood up and left the theater.

Behind the wheel of his pickup truck, he sat and cursed himself for being jealous of Lane spending time with Zarah. It was his own fault. He should have made a move days ago. By sitting back, he'd allowed Lane the opportunity to make a move on Zarah.

There was no sense in sitting there any longer feeling sorry for himself, he could do the same thing in the privacy of his own apartment and drown his sorrows with a couple of beers. Starting his truck, he dropped it into gear and

headed for home.

Back at the building as he walked across the parking lot, he spotted Eric coming out the front door.

"Hey," he said.

"Jack, how are ya?"

"Great," Jack said gruffly.

"Yeah? That didn't sound very convincing. What's up?"

Jack blew out a sigh. "Zarah is at the movies with Lane, that's what."

"Hmm. That's rough. Why'd you wait so long to ask her out? Or did you and she's decided to be with Lane? You know he's the fun one. You? You're way too serious most of the time."

Jack growled, and Eric laughed, taking a step back. "Whoa, Jack. I was just joking. I didn't mean anything—"

"I was giving her some time to get settled in. I didn't think she'd appreciate me climbing all over her, since we just met."

"You've been out of the dating game for too long, my friend."

Jack chuckled. "Funny, you aren't seriously going to try and tell me how to attract a woman, are you?"

Eric gave a scornful frown.

"I'm sorry, Eric. I didn't mean that how it sounded."

"It's fine, Jack. I'm not that sensitive. Look, all I'm saying is, if you want to be with Zarah, or at least see if she's interested in something more than dinner with you at my aunt and uncle's, you need to make a move."

"Thanks, Eric. I'll keep that in mind."

"Sure thing. See ya, Jack."

Chapter Eight

Sunday morning, Zarah woke with image of Jack's handsome face dissolving the closer she reached to consciousness. Rolling toward the open window, she rose up on her elbow to plump her pillow, then lay back down and pulled the quilt up to her chin. Pleasing scents of the new day wafted through the window along with the sounds of birds as the world beyond her bedroom came to life.

Just the day before, she'd been pissed that Jack and Lane had been AWOL since the night she'd moved in, and then bang! She'd been invited to do something with both of them!

She'd been surprised at Lane's invitation to the movies. Despite her determination to remain just friends with both men, she'd secretly been hoping Jack would ask her out instead of Lane.

While continuing to lie in the warmth of her bed for only a handful of minutes more, Zarah's bladder decided it had been ignored long enough. She tossed back the comforter, swung her legs over the side of the bed, and stood with a stretch. She headed to the bathroom, and after relieving herself, she grabbed the quilt from her bed, wrapped it around her, and strolled to the kitchen to turn the kettle on. As much as she enjoyed tea, she craved a nice strong cup of hot coffee in the morning to kick-start her senses.

She chuckled as she recalled the stunned expression that crossed Lane's face when she invited Jack to come with them. It wasn't that she was afraid or nervous to be alone with Lane, despite the feral, predatory gleam in his eye

when he looked at her. Prompted by something she was having trouble naming, she'd truly wanted Jack with them, wanted to spend time with him. She'd been feeling a burst of self-confidence when she asked him to join her and Lane for the afternoon.

Disappointment pierced her heart when he declined. He probably thought he would be crashing their date. But then Zarah hadn't actually thought of her afternoon with Lane as a "date."

The kettle clicked off, and Zarah poured the steaming water into a mug and stirred in some of the instant coffee crystals. Instant coffee wasn't her favorite, but it would do the trick. Coffee mug in hand, she walked across the living room floor to the patio door and slid it open. Still wrapped in the comforter, she settled into a plastic lawn chair and inhaled a deep breath of fresh morning air.

The simple pleasures, she thought, lifting the mug to her lips.

Zarah had enjoyed the afternoon with Lane. She'd caught a good glimpse of his humor and sensitivity. He'd been a perfect gentleman. At the end of the day, he walked her to her apartment, placed a light kiss on the back of her hand, and bid her a good night.

Yet the whole time during their date, she'd found herself wondering what Jack was doing and if he was angry that she and Lane were together. The expression on his face when he learned of their afternoon outing had been tough for her to figure out. A flash of anger preceded something akin to one of forced acceptance. He'd been curt with Lane when he invited him to watch a game the next day, yet when he'd extended the invitation to her, his voice had softened. Zarah enjoyed the way the color of his eyes changed with his emotions. The gray deepened with anger, brightened with excitement, and sparkled with something she equated to the heat of desire when they settled on her.

She could feel that the guard she'd spent the past week building was lowering where Jack and Lane were concerned. There was something about them that made her feel good about herself and life in general. But despite what her body thought, her wounds were too fresh. She wasn't interested in anything more than making a couple of friends. A part of her thought her body might be looking for more, but Zarah silenced that piece of her quickly.

Once the mug was emptied and she felt human once again, Zarah entered her apartment, set the cup on the kitchen counter, and headed for the bathroom. Excitement ricocheted through her body when she remembered Jack had invited her to watch baseball. She was looking forward to the day more than she probably should.

After a warm shower, she pulled on a pair of comfortable blue jeans and a baggy T-shirt. Standing at the kitchen counter waiting for her toast to pop up, Zarah found herself looking forward to spending time with Jack.

* * * * *

The soft knock on Jack's door around noon on Sunday sent his pulse through the roof. Zarah. Reaching for the handle, Jack took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He decided to keep his childish antics from the day before to himself, though he still felt like a giant ass.

His heart thumped so loudly in his chest as he opened the door, Jack was sure Zarah could hear it. The smile on her face made him instantly hard.

"Hi," she said. Holding up a grocery store bag, she grinned. "I brought snacks."

"Great," Jack replied and continued to stare at her. She was so gorgeous. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Uh, may I come in?"

"Shit. I'm sorry," he croaked, realizing he'd left her standing in the hall. "Of course, honey, come in. Come in."

Zarah entered the living room and smiled. "This is nice," she commented as she looked around.

The apartment, while clean, was plain and masculine, and Jack figured though she sounded sincere, Zarah was simply being polite. He caught himself grinning as he followed her gaze. As a single guy with no familial responsibilities, Jack kept his furnishings minimal. More necessity than anything else: leather couch, recliner, and big-screen television. In fact, the TV was too big for his living room. A selfish indulgence, of course, but he was a man. And men liked big TVs. No pictures decorated the walls. Not because Jack didn't have any, he'd just never been inclined to hang them. Most were taken of excursions he and Lane had been on or sporting events they'd been to. A handful of car magazines littered the surface of the coffee table.

"Thanks," he said. "Please, make yourself at home."

He was thinking maybe one day very soon Zarah would consider this apartment home, and she'd be free to add her own touches of femininity around. Jack could get used to the frills of girly stuff, so long as Zarah was the woman behind them.

"So, do you have a favorite team?" Jack asked as he carried the bag she'd brought to the kitchen.

"I like the Nationals," Zarah replied, following him.

"Are you serious?" Jack asked. He turned and frowned at her. "They suck this year."

Zarah shrugged, unperturbed by the tone of his comment. "I like the color of their uniforms."

Jack laughed aloud. "Do you know anything about baseball?"

"Hey, don't underestimate me just because I have ovaries, Masters. I'm willing to make a little wager that I'm more knowledgeable than you when it comes to baseball," she challenged.

Jack laughed even harder. Baseball was Jack's hobby. He'd been an avid fan since the first time he'd thrown a ball.

"Oh, baby, you are on," Jack said and offered her his hand. "So what are the stakes?"

Zarah stuck her hand in his to shake on their deal. "Well, how about—"

"Dinner," Jack said before she could answer. "And not at the Davises'. Somewhere nice, just you and me."

A soft gasp slipped past her lips, and Zarah's eyes flickered briefly with unease.

"Loser's treat." Jack grinned. There was no way she was going to get out of this.

A knock at the apartment door made Zarah jump.

"Dinner," Jack repeated.

Zarah nodded. "All right. Dinner."

"Come on in, Lane," Jack called out, still holding Zarah's hand. "Door's open."

"Hey, Jack," Lane said when he entered the living room.

"In here, man," Jack replied and reluctantly released Zarah's hand.

"Thanks for the invite, buddy. I thought you'd still be pissed about yes—"

Lane fell silent as he entered the kitchen and spotted Zarah. "Hi, Zarah. I-I didn't realize you were here already," Lane stammered.

"Hello, Lane," she replied.

"Well, let's settle in for some ball, shall we?" Jack said and placed his hand at the small of Zarah's back. He escorted her into the living room.

For the afternoon, Zarah, Jack, and Lane sat glued to a few different games on several channels. Zarah rambled off stat after stat for player after player, leaving Jack and Lane stunned and speechless.

"Well, guys, this has been fun," Zarah said with a smile that lit up her face.

It was the first smile he had seen that reached her eyes. It made her golden eyes sparkle. Jack wanted to gather her in his arms and kiss her inviting lips.

"I have an early morning, so I think I'm going to call it a night," she said.

"Okay, let me walk you down," Jack replied.

"That's not necessary."

"Come on," he said and pulled the door open for her. "Be right back, Lane."

In the stairwell, Jack couldn't contain his curiosity. What man wasn't turned on by a woman who knew her sports?

"So how do you know all that?"

"What? The stats?"

"Yeah. Father, brothers? I've never met a woman who enjoys sports like you seem to."

"Love it. No dad and no siblings, though." Zarah shrugged. "Closet sports junkie, I suppose." She giggled. "Okay, seriously? My position at the office is research. And I've been blessed with excellent memory retention. Whether it's legal jargon, numbers, or trivia, it doesn't really matter. I'm a sponge when it comes to stats and stuff like that. Hazard of my job, perhaps, but I'm an information fanatic. I just can't get enough."

"Very impressive."

"It's nothing, really. But for fun sometime, you should try and test out my hockey knowledge. Or maybe basketball. Now, I don't tell many people this, but I even follow curling."

"Now that is just sad, Zarah." Jack laughed.

Zarah did too. "Yeah, I know. Now I expect you to keep my dark and dirty secret, Jack," she said, smiling.

Jack crossed an imaginary X over his heart and winked.

When they reached Zarah's door, Jack took her hand in his and placed a kiss on the back of it.

"I enjoyed spending the day with you," he said.

"Me too."

As he held her gaze, her eyes sparkled and the tops of her cheeks darkened as she blushed. Jack couldn't resist. He lowered his head and brushed his lips along hers. She sighed against his mouth, and her lips parted to allow his venturing tongue access. The fingers he held entwined with his tightened. She tasted like heaven. Her full lips pressed and worked against his with

urgency. Against his chest, Jack felt her breath grow labored. Her free hand gripped the hem of his T-shirt and pulled him to her.

As her tongue ran over his lower lip in a slow stroke, Jack felt himself on the brink of climax. He forced himself to pull away first. If he hadn't, he would have backed Zarah into her apartment and had his way with her in the entryway. "Good night, baby," he whispered. "Sweet dreams."

"G-good night, Jack," she stammered.

Releasing her hold on his shirt, Zarah smoothed the wrinkles she'd created with the palm of her hand. After that, she remained frozen in place.

"Go on inside and lock the door, Zarah," Jack said.

As she was about to close the door, Jack stuck his foot in the frame to stop her.

"Remember, baby, I owe you a dinner. Good night."

Pushing the door closed, Zarah secured the dead bolt and became weak in the knees. She leaned against the steel surface for support and pressed her cheek to the coolness of the metal. Though several seconds passed, she still felt Jack's presence on the other side. To satisfy her curiosity and to get one final peek of him before she crawled into bed, she glanced out the peephole. He stood a couple of feet from the door. The smile curling his full lips sent her pulse skyrocketing through the stratosphere.

Zarah's breath caught as he reached out and pressed his hand against the door. "Good night," she heard him say again before he turned and walked toward the staircase.

She let out a long breath. The warmth of his mouth against hers had been electric. His kiss was confident, with a hint of possession. It had made her feel sexy.

The afternoon spent with Jack and Lane had been fun and casual. Zarah couldn't recall an occasion when she'd had such a good time. They'd talked, teased, ate and drank, and carried on like friends. Both men had made her feel so comfortable.

Despite the great afternoon and the amazing kiss, Zarah found herself more anxious than before. Both men had an effect on her, and that alarmed her. It wasn't right she found herself attracted to two men. Two men who were best friends.

She shook her head and blew out another breath.

"Stop torturing yourself. Today was nothing more than a ball game with the boys," she said, turning and walking to the bathroom. Wasn't it? "And yesterday was classified as a going to a Saturday matinee with a friend." Wasn't it? After shedding her clothing, she reached into the shower and turned on the tap. "And there is no way in hell Jack is taking you to dinner. It was a stupid wager made in the hype of the game," she insisted, trying to keep herself from building up her hopes.

But standing in the down spray of water and reflecting on the day and Jack's kiss, Zarah realized she hadn't felt like this in... Wow. Had it really been that long since she'd felt good about herself?

Several minutes later, she turned the shower off, stepped out of the tub, and dried off.

After turning out her bedroom light, Zarah climbed into her bed and pulled the covers up to her neck. Her mind raced with thoughts of Jack. And of Lane. And of how ridiculous it was of her to hope for anything other than a friendship with either man. Story of her life.

She yawned. Good old Zarah, best buddy and friend, but never cherished lover. Never girlfriend.

Chapter Nine

Wednesday was a day from hell for Jack. For the first time since starting his business eight years earlier, he had been late for work. Though Freddie and the boys were relentless in their teasing, he wasn't late for the reason they thought. Not exactly.

Yes, it was because of a woman. But it wasn't because he'd been up all night tossing the sheets with her. Since the kiss he shared with Zarah on Sunday, Jack had been on a high. He'd barely slept a wink in three nights. Exhaustion had finally caught up with him, and he remembered glancing over at the clock at a quarter to four. Then, the next thing Jack knew, Freddie was on the phone asking if he was planning to come into work.

He hadn't seen Zarah since he'd kissed her good night. He knew she'd been working hard to gather information for the lead attorney she was assisting, and he suspected she'd been putting in overtime. His heart ached to see her, his body to touch her. He was becoming a desperate man.

When he arrived at work, and following the ribbing about his being late, all hell had broken loose. There was a multicar pileup on one of the freeways, and he, along with several of his men, responded to the call. To top it all off, Jack had been in such a rush to get into the office that morning, he'd left home without his usual fruit and now he was starving.

On the drive through the downtown core toward a popular burger joint, Jack was stopped at a red light. He glanced around taking in the busy street and was thankful his office was nowhere near the downtown. He would shoot someone if he had to fight this traffic day in and day out just to get to and from work.

Looking out the driver's-side window, Jack spotted Zarah's beat-up Corolla in the parking lot of Starbucks. A loud honk from behind told Jack the light had changed and he was holding up traffic. Jack hit his turn signal to indicate he wanted over and, when someone let him in, pulled a U-turn in the middle of the intersection. After waving to the old man who flipped him off, Jack pulled his tow truck into the coffee-shop parking lot.

Stepping inside the shop, Jack surveyed the customers and spied Zarah sitting alone at a table, reading a book. Jack joined the line and, keeping his eye on Zarah, waited his turn.

"May I help you, sir?"

Jack glanced up at the menu board and frowned. Not being a coffee drinker, the language on the board was foreign to him.

Someone behind him cleared their throat impatiently.

"Give me a couple of muffins," Jack finally said.

"What varieties, sir?"

Who cares? "I don't know. Something with chocolate," he replied. The sugar would tie him over until he got a burger.

"And a beverage?"

Jack pointed toward Zarah. "What is that woman drinking?" he asked, noting the paper cup sitting in front of her on top of the table.

"She ordered an herbal tea."

"Fine, fine. Just give me one of those, then," Jack said, waving his hand dismissively.

After paying for his order, he strolled over to Zarah's table.

"Hey there," he said.

She glanced up from her book. "Jack," she said in the breathless tone she always used when she said his name.

Jack's body reacted, as did Zarah's. Her nipples pressed against the soft, thin fabric of her blouse, taunting him. The blush tinting her cheeks had him gripping the edge of the table for support. He needed to sit down, if for no other reason than to hide his erection.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Of course not, please."

"How's work?"

"We're getting down to the wire with the case I'm working on," she replied.

"I'll be glad when this is done. And I think I'm going to take a few vacation days after this one."

"Oh. Do you have something in mind?" Jack made a mental note. It was high time he, too, took a holiday.

"Do you stop in here for lunch often?" Zarah asked.

"Sure, all the time," he lied as he tipped his cup to his lips.

When the hot liquid touched his tongue, Jack hissed and fought the burn trying to swallow. "Fuck!" he managed to gasp once his mouth was empty. His mouth and throat felt like they were on fire. And then the shit hit his belly.

"Jack, Jesus. Are you okay?" Zarah asked, handing him some napkins.

"Here, Jack." He heard someone say as a glass bottle was shoved into his hand.

"Cold fruit juice." Though tears of agony blurred his vision, Jack had no trouble recognizing Eric's voice.

"Thanks," Jack croaked after taking a couple of swallows of juice.

"What are you doing here? Never mind. I just answered my own question," Eric said and smiled at Zarah. "What's with the tea? You don't drink tea or coffee."

"I thought maybe I'd try something different," Jack answered through clenched teeth. "Besides, I was hungry and you guys carry the best"—Jack had to glance into the top of the bag to remember what he'd bought—"muffins."

Eric shook his head in disbelief. "Whatever. Do you want another tea to take with you, Zarah?"

"That would be nice. Thanks," she replied.

"Here," Jack offered, sliding the one he'd purchased in front of her. "Take this one."

"I don't want to take your tea, Jack."

"I'll get Zarah one that she likes," Eric said.

"It's the same kind she already has. Please, Zarah, take it. I'm not going to drink it. I don't know why people drink that crap."

Zarah chuckled. "It's relaxing, soothing," she said. "Thanks. How did you know how I drink my tea?"

"Don't ask," Eric said before he turned and walked away.

"Listen, I'd like to make good on our bet," Jack began. "How about Friday?"

"I would have loved to..." Zarah answered, and her brow creased.

"But?"

"Well, Eric invited me to go clubbing with him and his friend Scott," Zarah said.

"Oh, okay," Jack said and groaned inside. His timing was impeccable.

"Yeah, Jack. You should come along too," Eric said as he passed the table to clean off the one behind Zarah. Once the table was cleared, Eric stood beside Zarah and grinned at Jack. "We're going to Cravings. We'd love it if you joined us."

Jack returned Eric's grin, knowing damn well what the other man was doing. Knowing how much Jack detested the club and bar scene, Eric was baiting him. But Jack had no intention of allowing Eric to get to him. He had presented Jack with a gift. One Jack fully intended to accept.

"Sounds like a great evening," Jack replied. "I'll be there."

"Excellent," Zarah said, giving him broad smile. She glanced at her watch.

"Damn, I've got to go."

"Yeah, I should get going too," Jack said, standing.

"Okay, well, you two have a nice afternoon," Eric said. "Hey, if you're going to be around for dinner, Aunt Rita was stuffing a pork loin when I checked in on her this morning."

"I'm there," Jack replied.

"I'll really try, but I may have to work late," Zarah said with a frown.

"Well, if you don't make it, I'll bring you some leftovers," Jack told her.

Jack cornered Eric on his way out the door. "You're a smug little shit sometimes, you know that?" He smiled.

"Yeah, but I got you that date you've been having trouble making for yourself, didn't I?"

Jack gave Eric a nod and a grin.

"See you at dinner," Jack said.

* * * * *

On her drive back to the office, Zarah replayed the encounter with Jack at the coffee shop. It wasn't unusual to see all sorts of different people patronizing the store, from professionals to laymen, but Jack had seemed out of place. And though Jack said he frequented the establishment, Eric's comments led her to believe differently. She found the interaction between him and Eric somewhat comical.

The playful challenge in Eric's voice brought a soft tint of pink to Jack's cheeks. She thought it was sweet. It was cute to see that big, rough-and-tumble Jack was a little sensitive just like everyone else.

When he took a sip of his hot beverage and spit it out, she had nearly worn it. Poor Jack. It was clear he wasn't an addict of hot beverages.

When Eric invited him to join them, the expression that crossed Jack's face was one Zarah couldn't quite name. It had been a combination of surprise, acceptance, and amusement.

He accepted Eric's invitation without hesitation, which surprised her. Days earlier Jack had been adamant not to accompany her and Lane, yet he now seemed

eager to join her and Eric.

Unable to control the excitement bubbling inside her, Zarah realized she couldn't wait for Friday night.

Chapter Ten

Friday night couldn't come soon enough for Jack. Never in his life had he wished time away as he had the last two days. Jack offered to drive to the club, where they would meet up with Scott.

He left work early and stopped to get his hair trimmed. He even treated himself to a shave. Before he got home, he popped into the store and grabbed a bottle of red wine as a thank-you for Eric.

At seven, he opened the door to the second-floor corridor and found Eric about to knock on Zarah's door.

"Here," Jack said, holding out the bag containing the bottle of wine. "Thank you."

"You should be thanking me, Jack." Eric took the bag and grinned. "You're crashing my date."

Jack chuckled.

"You must be completely smitten, Jack."

Jack raised a brow in a question or warning that he left up to Eric to decipher.

Eric waved his hand in defense. "I think Zarah is a really nice girl. I think the two of you would make a handsome couple. That's all I'm going to say. Knock. Let's go."

When Zarah opened the door, Jack stifled a groan as his cock stiffened and caused great discomfort behind the snug confines of his jeans. A deep frown creased her forehead. Jack fought the urge to gather her in his arms and kiss that wrinkle away.

"Do I look okay?" she asked, gnawing her lower lip and glancing between him and Eric.

She wore a pair of black jeans and a soft, lightweight, rose-colored sweater, both of which hugged her curves in a teasing manner.

"You look incredible," Jack blurted out.

Up until that moment, every stitch of clothing he'd seen her in had been at least two sizes too big for her. What he wouldn't have given to be that damn pair of jeans. Or better yet, the panties underneath.

A shimmering gloss accentuated her full, tantalizing lips. The layer of mascara swiped across lengthy lashes gave her eyes a sensual glint. And then there was her hair. Jack adored the tousled appearance of her dark curls. It made him envision how sated Zarah would look after he spent hours ravishing her body, mind, and soul.

"You are hot, babe," Eric declared with a waggle of his brows.

A soft giggle burst from Zarah's lips, and she blushed a deep crimson. Jack couldn't restrain giving Eric an elbow to the ribs.

"Oomph," Eric grunted. "Jackass."

"Sorry," Jack murmured unconvincingly.

"Yeah, right. You ready, Zarah?"

"Yes, let me grab my handbag."

* * * * *

As they rode to the club, Zarah couldn't help but steal sideways glances at Jack. His mere presence turned her insides out and had her struggling for breath.

The faded blue jeans he wore hugged him in all the right places. His ass and thighs teased and taunted her when he walked. A white button-down shirt with thin navy stripes caressed the muscles of Jack's upper body. He'd opted to leave the top two buttons unfastened, and a light smattering of soft curls called to her from beneath the shirt. The subtle, clean fragrance of his cologne complemented his natural masculine scent.

Jack must have known that she kept glancing at him, because every time her eyes settled on him, he turned his heated gaze on her.

There was something fun and nonthreatening about Eric, so she hadn't hesitated when he invited her out. But after Jack agreed to join them, her nervous excitement grew. He was so far out of her league that she felt nervous and anxious when he was around. She felt other things as well. Like hot and bothered. When he looked at her, she felt as though she was the only thing on his menu. More than once she'd seen the heat of desire in his eyes, and she didn't know what to make of it. She'd seen that look in the eyes of men looking at other women, but no one had ever looked at her that way before.

Was she reading too much into things?

Just enjoy yourself tonight.

The Sunday before had been a lot of fun, especially the kiss they shared.

Despite knowing there wouldn't ever be anything more than maybe a friendship between her and Jack, she wanted to spend time with him. There was a pull between them Zarah couldn't deny.

"We're here," Jack announced, his voice interrupting her thoughts.

There was a line out in front of the building and a doorman on duty. Eric ushered them past the crowd to the head of the line.

"Hey, Doug," Eric said in greeting to the large man at the door. "Going to be a busy night, huh?"

"Friday usually is," the man answered. "Scott's already here. Probably working the room."

"Thanks," Eric said as Doug held the door open for them.

Inside, dance music thumped through the sound system, and the entire room pulsed with energy. Red, blue, green, and yellow beams cast dim light over the vast open space, and a strobe hanging from the center of the ceiling flickered in time to the bass. A multitude of odors scented the room: colognes, perfumes, alcohol, and sex.

The club wasn't full, but it was hopping. Bodies were bumping and grinding, arms and legs intertwining, lips battling for purchase.

Eric led them through the crowd over to a table in a moderately quieter corner of the room. At the table sat a man with blond, shoulder-length hair and a model-type smile.

"Hi, guys. You made it," he said above the music when they arrived at the table.

"Yeah, sorry we're late," Eric said, leaning in to the man. "Jack drove."

Jack flipped Eric the bird and offered his hand to the blond man. "Hey, Scott. How are you?"

"Great, Jack. It's always nice to see you." Turning his attention to Zarah,

Scott leaned toward her and took her hand in his. "And you must be Zarah. It's a pleasure to meet you. Eric's told me so much about you. I'm Scott."

Zarah shook his hand and smiled. "It's nice to meet you."

* * * * *

For at least an hour, Eric and Scott kept Zarah on the dance floor while Jack remained seated at the table. She could feel his eyes following her every movement as she danced between Scott and Eric.

Zarah was having the time of her life, letting loose, feeling free and easy. And a little sexy. She really wanted to spend some time chatting with Jack, but the noise level in the club didn't make it the ideal setting to get to know someone. After a while, she started to head for the table. She waved Eric and Scott off when they tried to keep her dancing. She sat down next to Jack.

"Are you having a good time?" Jack asked over the music.

Zarah nodded. "Yes. But I must be getting old, because the music's kind of loud and these shoes are killing my feet."

At the table, Zarah continued to move to the music but was relieved to be sitting for a spell. Their table seemed to have the view of the club. The section of four tables was elevated by a couple of feet, where they could look out over the dance floor and bar area.

Overhead, several banks of multicolored spotlights flickered in time to the bass pulsing through the sound system. Right smack above the middle of the wooden-lacquered dance floor, a single strobe light twinkled. Zarah suspected if she spent more than a couple of hours among all the flashing lights, she'd surely go home with a headache.

A multitude of fragrances scented the air. The club no doubt operated with a ventilation system, but the thing couldn't keep up with the various aromas. The chemical attributes of the different varieties of colognes and perfumes did little to mask the pungent odor of sweat. It wasn't stomach turning, but it was thick.

A scantily clad, petite waitress breezed up to their table carrying a serving tray filled with beverages. She blatantly pressed herself against Jack as she set the tray on the table. The foam head from several glasses sloshed over the rims.

Zarah watched through narrowed eyes as the waitress leaned into Jack and slid a frosty bottle in front of him. The woman giggled as her breast brushed along his forearm. Jack pulled his arm off the table and leaned away from the woman as Zarah heard her utter a flirtatious, "gee, sorry about that, handsome," and flashed him a come-hither smile.

Zarah's blood pressure soared. The woman was openly flirting with Jack, not caring that he was sitting at the table with her. How in the hell did she know they weren't together? Or had she just got it in her head that someone as gorgeous as Jack couldn't possibly be with someone as fat and ordinary as Zarah? Wait a minute, a voice in the back of her mind called, you're not looking for serious, remember? Just friends. In her mind's eye, she scowled at the voice. She knew it was right, but it still hurt to have it thrown back at her.

Without returning the woman's smile, Jack reached for the tray and helped himself to two more bottles of beer and a glass of white wine, setting the latter in front of Zarah. He handed the waitress money for their drinks and

dismissed her with nary a glance.

Clearly annoyed with Jack's disregard at her advances, the waitress hoisted her tray with a frown, shot Zarah a distasteful glare, and moved along to the next table.

Tempted to stick her foot out as the woman passed, Zarah caught herself. That would be childish. It was enough Jack had disregarded the waitress's blatant advances. When she realized she was knitting her brows in consternation, she looked over at Jack, who was smiling at her. She was surprised that he seemed to have eyes only for her. And a little flattered too. Feeling her cheeks heating, she went back to scanning the club.

For many minutes, she watched Eric and Scott laughing and carrying on while dancing on the dance floor and thought of Jack and Lane. It wasn't anything specific about them. She knew Eric and Scott were best friends by just how familiar they were with one another. They were very much in tune with each other.

Sensing Jack watching her, Zarah turned her head toward him.

"What are you thinking?" he asked with a curious grin.

"I was thinking that Eric and Scott seem very close," she said, and Jack nodded.

"They remind me of you and Lane."

Jack choked on the mouthful of beer. When he caught his breath, he leaned close to her ear.

"You do know they're lovers, right?"

Zarah's mouth gaped open, and she stared at Jack in disbelief.

Jack narrowed his eyes, a playful smirk on his lips. "You didn't know?"

Zarah shook her head.

"We're in a gay nightclub. You didn't even suspect it?"

It was then that Zarah glanced around to really look at the club's clientele.

Men danced with men, women with women. Mixed groups danced together.

"You seemed to be having a good time before I said that. Are you uncomfortable being here now?" he asked.

Again, she shook her head. "No. I'm feeling like an idiot for a totally different reason."

"What's that?"

"I thought...I thought Eric invited me out, because..." She didn't really know what she thought. "I don't really know," she admitted. "And then he invited you to join us"—And I'm glad he did, because despite Eric's invitation, I really wanted to go out with you—"and now here you are. You must be uncomfortable, Jack." Zarah was beyond embarrassed. She now suspected Eric invited her out of pity. God, she was such an ass.

Glancing around the club, her gaze came back to Jack and she realized he stuck out like a sore thumb. He had to be feeling out of place. Why in the world had he agreed to come knowing the club's clientele? she wondered. An answer tickled her mind. To be with you.

She found herself hoping it was true.

Jack chuckled low. The sound made Zarah's lower belly quiver.

"No, I'm secure enough in my masculinity to be comfortable here. Though I have to tell you, the first time I came here with Eric and Scott about three years ago, the cheeks of my ass were bruised from being pinched so much. Hence the

reason I've kept it glued to this chair tonight."

Zarah laughed. Warmth filled her body as she thought of Jack's firm ass. Hell, he'd be lucky if all she did was pinch those globes. She wanted to sink her teeth into those taut cheeks.

"Why did they bring you here if this is a gay club?"

"They thought I could use a night out. Straight folks come in here too, but Cravings is popular with the gay community." Jack shrugged and took a swallow from his beer bottle. "Here people are just people. They're all the same, just out looking for a good time."

Several minutes passed before Jack leaned back over to her.

"Would you like to take me up on my dinner invitation?" he asked with a knowing gleam in his eyes. "We could head out to someplace a little quieter if you want."

Goose bumps danced on her skin at the thought of being alone with Jack. She nodded.

Jack raised his hand, gaining Eric's attention. He and Scott vacated the dance floor and approached the table. Eric stood between Jack and Zarah and draped his arm over her shoulder.

"What's up?" he asked over the bass.

"Zarah and I are going to head out," Jack told him.

Eric glanced at Zarah and raised his brow. He leaned in close. "Are you okay?" he asked close to her ear.

"Yes," she replied, feeling a tad uneasy about ditching Eric. "Jack and I are going to go for dinner," she told him and then bit her lower lip, squirming in her seat. "Do you mind?"

Eric laughed and shook his head. "No, girl. You go and have a great time. We'll catch up tomorrow. All right?"

"You are a great friend, Eric," she said and pressed a light kiss to his cheek.

"Yeah, the gay guys usually are," he replied.

* * * * *

During the drive to the Chinese buffet Jack recommended, Zarah's insides fluttered with excitement. Getting Jack alone was what she'd wanted, but now she was more nervous than a young girl on her first date. There were no buffers between them now. No Davises, no Eric, no Lane. Only her and Jack—the man who turned her insides to mush with just a glance.

What would they talk about? What if she became tongue-tied and said something incredibly stupid? What had she been thinking agreeing to this? Jack was hot, gorgeous, and way out of her league.

"Hey there?" Jack's deep voice snagged her attention. "Are you coming?"

Zarah had been so lost in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed they'd arrived and parked. Jack now stood beside the truck, holding the door open for her.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Not a chance," she blurted out.

Jack laughed.

"I'm sorry. Just daydreaming," she admitted.

"No need to apologize if it was about me," he said with a lopsided smirk.

Zarah smiled up at him, refusing to say anything that might incriminate her.

"No worries," Jack assured her and helped her down from the cab.

After finding a table and giving the waitress their drink orders, Jack led Zarah up to the buffet and handed her a plate.

"I love Chinese," he confessed with a grin and placed his hand against the small of her back.

"Me too," Zarah admitted and began eyeing the available dishes.

Jack followed closely and spooned out some of the various dishes onto Zarah's plate as they made their way around several hot tables.

Throughout dinner, their conversation remained casual, light, and centered around the familiar. When the waiter came along to clear their plates, Jack took the liberty of ordering another glass of wine for Zarah and a beer for himself. Once their beverages were refreshed, the conversation took a more personal direction. Jack inquired about Zarah's childhood and her family and answered her questions regarding the same.

Having felt as though they'd exhausted the preliminaries, Zarah wanted to delve into the hard core. It wasn't that she was tired of learning about Jack, but there was something more serious eating at her.

"So, uh, I know this is going to sound really personal, but I'm having a hard time understanding why a guy like you is single, Jack," she said.

She was immediately tempted to retract the statement but decided against it. At first it sounded as if she was trying to figure Jack out, learn what made him tick. But to ease her discontent, she opted on a more placating answer—they were going to be friends, and friends talk. And since they'd just met, sort of, they needed to begin somewhere.

"I'm not sure how to take that, Zarah," he chided with a brow quirked up in question and a playful grin curling his lips. "A guy like me?"

"Well, yeah. You run a successful business. You are hot, and from what I've experienced you have an inviting personality. You have to be the nicest guy I think I've ever met," she said and then wondered if she'd had too much wine.

"Women must throw themselves at you all the time, and yet you're single."

Zarah felt her cheeks warm and was undecided if it was the effects of the wine or a newfound boldness. It wasn't like her to voice her opinions and observations aloud. Yet here she was, sitting across the table from the star of her nightly naughty dreams, asking the incredibly hot stranger why he was single. Damn straight, it was the wine.

Oh hell, why stop now? she thought. You're on a roll.

"You know," she began and then stopped to take another sip of liquid courage.

"If I had the opportunity—" The rest of her words went unspoken when Zarah made eye contact with Jack. A sexy smile crossed his handsome face, and his gray eyes darkened like raging storm clouds. Desire and interest were clear when she stared into his face.

"You'd what?" he asked in a deep, husky voice.

Zarah was certain if her nipples grew any harder, they would actually explode from her breasts. Every time she was in Jack's presence, or he popped into her thoughts, the tiny buds sprang right to attention. The damn things were beginning to hurt because they were distended all the time. She'd also taken to wearing panty liners in the event she ran into Jack somewhere around the building. At the moment, she was thankful for the protection, because she knew damn well her arousal would have soaked her panties.

"I'd, uh..."

When Jack licked his lips, she nearly blew apart.

"I'm not ashamed to admit this to you, Zarah," Jack began. The huskiness of his voice made the fine hairs all over her arms stand up in anticipation. "But I've wondered and thought the same thing. If I was offered the chance, with you."

The intense look in his eyes told Zarah he wasn't lying.

"All right, listen. Here's the whole sordid story. I was married," he said.

Zarah's heart plunged to the pit of her stomach. She clasped her hands together in her lap in an attempt to stop their trembling. That was not what she expected to hear.

"Qwin and I married right out of high school," he continued. "We were eighteen and knew everything. I only wish I knew then what I know now."

Her brow furrowed with the questions running through her mind.

"After I came home and found her in a rather, uh, compromising position shortly after we were married, I immediately sought a divorce."

"I'm so sorry, Jack," Zarah expressed.

Having just gone through the same damn thing, Zarah's heart broke for Jack for the pain and sorrow he'd endured. How in the hell could a woman do that to someone like Jack? Zarah would love to give the skank a piece of her mind. Once a cheater, always a cheater, Zarah thought. And Zarah felt confident that the time Jack caught his wife, er, ex-wife, it probably wasn't her first time engaging in infidelity.

Yet Zarah realized she was secretly glad Jack found out his wife was a cheat.

How despicable was that? But it was true. If Jack's wife hadn't been a tramp, and if he hadn't found out and left her, Zarah may never have met him.

The teeny-tiny, minuscule, malicious part of her genetic makeup decided to utter a whisper of thanks to the tactless woman. Because if it weren't for her blatant indiscretion, Zarah wouldn't be sitting across the table from Jack now.

Still, Zarah felt terrible for the pain and humiliation Jack had been subjected to.

"I'm not," Jack said as a matter of fact. "We were young. And so very stupid."

"Do you think if you'd waited a few years before marriage, you'd still be together now?" she asked.

He smiled and reached for her hand. "No. We never should have married. Not then, not now, not ever. Our relationship was doomed before it ever got started. We were high school sweethearts sharing a juvenile crush. Nothing more. Honestly, the two of us should have just parted ways after graduation. But hey, live and learn, right?"

"Do you ever, you know, see her?"

He gave a small nod.

A streak of jealousy bit Zarah in the ass, and anger licked at her insides.

After what that woman, or rather, girl, did to Jack, why in the fuck would he ever give her the time of day?

"We have run into one another a handful of times over the past ten or eleven years, yes. We do not travel in the same social circles or share the same friends. Perhaps in a restaurant, or the grocery store, places like that."

Zarah wondered how awkward it was for Jack running into his ex after what she'd done to him. Though it didn't sound like it, Zarah wondered if Jack still

harbored some sort of feelings toward Qwin. After all, she had been his first love.

The pad of his thumb continued to rub the back of Zarah's hand, and she found herself drawing comfort from his touch.

"It took me some time to come to the realization that I wasn't in love with her," he told Zarah.

Several silent moments passed between them before Jack's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Want to share a little about you and your ex?" he asked in a soft, nonthreatening tone.

Zarah chuckled. "No. Not particularly."

Jack laughed. "It's okay, honey. You don't have to tell me anything," he assured her. "I just thought it might help you to sort through your thoughts and feelings. I, uh, get the impression your parting of ways is fresh."

"It is," she admitted and reached for her wineglass, only to find it empty.

"Would you like another?" he asked.

She nodded. "Sure, that would be nice."

Jack signaled for the waiter and ordered another round.

Zarah gave Jack's words some consideration. Sure, talking about it would help.

But did she really want to share with Jack that her weight had always been an issue for Marcus and only contributed to her anxieties with her body image?

"No, you're right," she told Jack. "And as it turns out, we weren't really engaged in a relationship. It was all one-sided. On my side. I met Marcus through a friend of a friend of a friend. That should have been the first red flag for me, huh?"

Jack said nothing as she gathered her courage to move on.

"We only dated, if you can even call it that, for a few weeks before he invited me to move in to his place. He went on about it being a great idea for both of us, but most of all for financial reasons. There was no reason for the two of us paying two rents, two sets of utilities, blah, blah, blah."

Zarah shifted uncomfortably in her chair and blew out a sigh. Jack was right. It sort of felt good to say it out loud, but what bothered her was sharing all this with a man who she was lusting after. Though she knew she should stop, she couldn't. She'd kept it pent up long enough, and things were ready to spill free.

"You know, he never said it, but the connotation was always there. Maybe not in the beginning, but as our time together went on and I look back now, it was clear. I was never really good enough, never fit his requirements of what a girlfriend of his should be," she told him.

Well, there was no turning back now. She was on a verbal roll, airing her dirty laundry to a handsome, make-your-mouth-water stranger.

"I've always struggled with my weight, so, I was too fat. And because my father was African American, my hair is the wrong color, wrong texture. Too frizzy when the humidity is high. My skin tone too dark. Especially after I've been in the sun. I didn't attend the proper schools or hold the right job."

How pathetic Jack must think her. He still held her hand in his, seeming to will her his strength to continue.

"Whoa. Stop right there. You are an incredibly sexy and attractive woman, Zarah, and if your ex failed to see that, then he's a damn idiot. Christ, I've been a

walking hard—" He stopped himself.

Wide-eyed and mouth gaping, Zarah stared across the table at Jack. What exactly did he see when he looked at her? Certainly not the same person she saw when she looked in the mirror. In silence, she willed him to finish his sentence. If Jack was about to say what she was thought he was, they were going to be in trouble, because Zarah was close to leaping across the table and straddling his lap.

Clearing his throat, Jack left his statement unfinished. "Anyway, this Marcus sounds like a fucking moron if you ask me."

She shrugged and lowered her head. "Well, he knew what he wanted, and it just wasn't me. It was a petite little blonde."

"The man is a fool for allowing you to walk away from him."

"Oh, I didn't walk away, Jack. I was tossed aside. Asked—no, told—to leave."

"So are you telling me you'd still be with that sack of shit, knowing he didn't respect you as an equal or acknowledge you as his lover?" Jack's pissed-off tone vibrated through Zarah.

"No, I wouldn't," she replied with a shake of her head. "Three weeks ago," Zarah continued and then stopped. Could she really say this aloud? What would Jack think of her knowing what happened?

"Three weeks ago, I'd gone home from work early. I picked up some steaks to grill and a bottle of wine. I thought it would be nice to enjoy dinner together, settle in for a quiet evening alone. I walked through the front door to find some tiny little blonde, barely out of her teens, on her knees—"

"Stop, honey," he said, interrupting her. "I don't need to hear any more. I get the picture. As I said, the man is a fucking moron."

Zarah chuckled again. "Thanks, Jack. But I don't know if Marcus can be held totally responsible. The signs it was over were popping up all around me. Looking back, I see that now. We'd become roommates with benefits, as he so cruelly told me. I suppose I just didn't want to see it."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Zarah. Relationships work both ways, and I know firsthand how it hurts to find out when the one you're in is one-sided."

"I know our parting is for the best, I truly do. It's just once again my self-esteem has taken a serious shit kicking."

"Well, I can't say I'm sorry things turned out the way they did," Jack stated, and Zarah shot him a look.

"Excuse me?" she huffed in irritation. What did he mean by that?

"If you hadn't found out for yourself about the worthless fuck you were living with, we might not be here right now."

"Oh," she said and felt her face flush.

"And I've got to tell you, after spending time alone with you, I'd be pissed to think I may never have had the opportunity." Jack picked up his beer bottle and held it up in the middle of the table. "Here's to Marcus and Qwin for showing us their true colors."

"You're right, Jack," she said and lifted her glass.

She'd been so caught up in feeling sorry for herself at being dumped, she didn't see the upside of what Marcus had done. The acceptance didn't ease all the hurt, but if he hadn't been a cheating fuck, she wouldn't be having dinner with Jack now.

And making a new friend, the tiny voice in her mind pointing out.

"Our exes did us a favor," she said. "I am looking forward to my new life."

"That's my girl," Jack said with a grin and a wink of his eye.

Zarah chuckled and clinked her wineglass against Jack's brown bottle. In that moment, she realized she was falling, and she didn't know what to make of it.

Jack said all the right things at all the right times.

"Come on," he said after finishing his beer. "Let's get out of here."

* * * * *

Back at the building, Zarah accepted Jack's invitation to come up to his apartment for a nightcap. Though she had drunk more than her fair share during dinner and should have just gone home, she wasn't about to pass up spending a little more time with him.

In the kitchen, they stood and conversed while Jack poured them each a glass of juice. As he handed her one, he stopped and studied her face.

"I make you uncomfortable," he stated with a knowing grin.

Zarah lifted her glass to her mouth and took a swallow of the juice, attempting to calm her nerves. Easing the glass away, she licked her lips before answering.

"No," she lied, turning away from the heat of his gaze. "Yes," she then admitted quietly. "Sort of," she finished, squirming under the intensity of his stare.

Jack's deep chuckle tickled its way up the length of her spine. "How so?"

Clearing her throat nervously, Zarah lifted her eyes to meet his and then dropped them again when she spied the fierce hunger reflecting back at her.

"You make me feel..." She stopped. She couldn't tell him. She wouldn't embarrass herself by confessing what his presence did to her body.

"Tell me, Zarah." Jack's voice flowed over her like silk. "Tell me what it is I do to you. Does your being near me make your belly quiver and your pussy damp?"

Zarah gasped at Jack's boldness yet wanted him to continue.

"I know your nipples grow tight and hard when I'm around. I've seen them pressing against your shirt, calling out to me. Teasing me. Do you want me to—no, need me to—put my mouth on you? To taste you? Tell me, my beautiful Zarah. Tell me what you feel."

Zarah blew out a shaky breath and set her glass on the counter before she dropped it. She figured it was the wine she'd consumed making her feel less inhibited, but she didn't care. She wanted Jack to know what he did to her insides and her panties.

"You make me feel... I don't know because I'm not sure I've ever felt it before... But sexy, Jack," she whispered. "Desirable. Like you might actually want to be with me."

"You are sexy. You are desirable. And I do want to be with you, Zarah."

Stunned by his admission, Zarah stared at him.

"You don't believe me," he stated.

Try as she might, Zarah couldn't stop herself from shaking her head. Without a word, Jack closed the distance between them. She felt defenseless as he drew near, and found herself unable to turn away.

"Well then, I guess I'll just have to show you," he said. His strong hands gently held her head, long fingers threading through her dark tresses. He tipped her head to the left, providing him a better angle of access to her mouth.

Dipping his head, Jack pressed his lips to hers in a tender yet determined caress.

Her lips parted to utter a protest, and he took the opportunity to move in. His tongue slid slowly against hers, mimicking the art of lovemaking.

"Jack," Zarah whimpered when his mouth ceased its assault.

"Stay," he whispered against her lips.

Zarah realized she was nodding her head and clutching the sides of his shirt in her hands. She found herself afraid to let go, terrified if she did, she would wake up from this dream and find herself all alone.

Jack's mouth crushed against hers once again, and Zarah felt herself floating across the floor. The room around her blurred and went from light to dark and then light again. When his left hand released her arm, Zarah opened her eyes. He clicked on the small lamp on his bedside table. She was in his bedroom.

Glancing up, she met Jack's gaze. His eyes held hers spellbound. Jack took both her hands in his, and after placing a kiss into both palms, he settled them on his chest. Zarah took the invitation and with unsteady fingers began pushing the tiny buttons of his shirt through the holes until she met the waist of his jeans.

Closing her eyes, Zarah leaned in and inhaled his scent, losing herself in him. She pressed her lips to Jack's chest and smattered kisses and love bites across the broad expanse of muscle as her hands caressed each and every dip and ripple. From his abdomen up to his neck, she explored and then pushed his shirt over his shoulders. It fell to the floor.

Zarah felt Jack lift her sweater. She raised her arms above her head to aid in his removal of the garment. The feel of his strong, callused hands smoothing down her shoulders and arms made her shiver with anticipation. She wanted to feel his fingers, his breath, his mouth on her breasts, between her thighs. His mouth found hers again, and this time his kiss was more urgent. He tasted of man and of need, hot and strong. He peppered kisses and nips along her jawline, behind her ear, down her neck, over the heaving swells of her breasts, and lower still. The wetness of his tongue dipped in and swirled around her navel, and then his fingers gripped the button of her jeans and gave it a flick.

Zarah's fingers threaded through Jack's soft, silky waves, and she held on to him for dear life. His mouth never left her body as he slid the zipper low. He worked her pants over her hips and down her legs to the floor. He motioned for her to step out of them, and she heard the soft sound of them hitting the floor as Jack tossed them across the room.

It wasn't until Zarah felt the warm caress of Jack's breath against her pussy that she realized he'd taken the scrap of her pink panties off along with her jeans. His strong hands cupped her buttocks and pulled her forward. He pressed his face against her mound and inhaled deeply. Zarah groaned.

"Jesus," she heard him sigh.

His fingers spread her lips, and the wet heat of his mouth closed around her. Zarah felt the pounding of her heart stop for several moments. She struggled to draw breath. He alternated between gently suckling the ultrasensitive nub and working his tongue in a furious rhythm inside her pussy.

"Jack...Jack...Jack..." Zarah heard herself chanting.

Just when she thought she would lose her mind, Jack's talented mouth and lips worked their way up her trembling body until he stood before her once again. His long fingers fisted in her hair at the base of her neck and pulled her mouth to

his. His other arm wrapped around her, stroking possessively over her back and ass.

He pressed against her, urging her to step backward. When the backs of her legs made contact with the bed, he lowered them down onto the mattress. On the way down, Zarah gripped the waistband of Jack's jeans and fought with the button and zipper, whimpering when she finally undid them.

The flash of a foil wrapper caught her eye for a split second. Jack's hand ventured between their bodies, and he struggled to work his jeans over his hips. Zarah felt him grab his cock with one hand and fumble for a moment as he rolled the condom on. He then rubbed the smooth, rounded head along her opening. He hesitated and pulled his mouth away from hers. Zarah cried out in protest.

"I'm sorry," Jack's voice rasped.

"Jack?" she pleaded.

"I wanted to take things slow our first time," Jack panted. "But Christ, baby, I can't wait any fucking longer to be inside you."

"Then don't, Jack, please," she said, on the verge of tears. Her frustration was going to kill her if he didn't hurry. She wanted him inside her.

"I promise," his strained voice grunted. "I'll make it up to you."

With that, Jack pressed forward, slipping inside her. Her body tensed around his intrusion. He pulled back, leaving the crown of his cock inside. Again, he pushed forward, seeking deeper purchase. Still he met with resistance.

"Fuck, you are so tight," he groaned and forced himself deeper.

Zarah squirmed, trying to ease his entrance. She wondered if he was going to fit at all. The intimate tissues between her legs screamed yet refused to give up. Her muscles convulsed around Jack's cock as he pressed on, gaining an inch at a time.

The sensations of him simply entering her had Zarah on the brink of climax.

When he had completely and deeply penetrated her, Jack cried out, "Goddamn it, woman! Do you have any idea what you fucking do to me?"

Beneath him, Zarah struggled to draw breath from the exquisite pleasure surging through her body. Her pussy gripped Jack tight, holding him inside her. She never wanted him to leave.

Jack began to thrust into her with desperate strokes. His mouth again clamped onto hers, stealing her breath and her cries of pleasure. He reached to cup her breast. He slipped his fingers beneath the lace of her bra and pulled down, ripping the delicate fabric.

"Jesus, sorry," he moaned between thrusts. "I'll buy you a new one."

Zarah moaned, wrapping her legs around Jack's waist. When his mouth latched onto her aching nipple, she exploded. Her cries filled the bedroom as she dug her fingernails into Jack's shoulders. Jack continued to pound himself into her. A moment later, his body stiffened. He squeezed his eyes shut as a valiant call burst from his lips. His cock jerked inside her.

Many moments passed before he lifted his weight from her. Her body was soaked with perspiration, both hers and his. The fragrance of their lovemaking scented the air around them. In that moment, all five of her senses seemed more attuned. She felt like a whole new woman. And then she heard herself crying.

"Honey," Jack said, his voice heavy with concern. "Did I hurt you?" He smoothed the damp, matted curls away from her face.

Zarah shook her head.

"Then what is it?" he asked, slipping his shaft from her body.

She continued to shake her head and cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand.

"I'm feeling a lot of things at this very moment, Jack, but physical pain isn't one of them."

Jack lowered his head and sipped at her tears. Gathering her in his arms, he eased the two of them up to the head of the bed, where they rested against the pillows.

"Well, then, you go right ahead and cry, my love, and I'll just hold you."

In Jack's embrace, Zarah lost track of the time. And she realized she didn't particularly care. In silence, he held her.

* * * * *

Startled from sleep hours later, Zarah awoke disoriented. Something heavy rested across her legs and around her chest. Her back was pressed tight against warmth and firmness. Her gaze darted around the dark room. Suddenly remembering she'd fallen asleep in Jack's arms, in his bed, she drew several slow breaths to calm herself. The digital clock on the bedside table read three in the morning. Zarah lay awake for another hour, listening to the soft sounds of Jack's slumber.

It didn't matter that it felt so damn good with Jack's body and scent surrounding her, Zarah was furious with herself. She'd been so determined not to let anyone too close, to just be friends. But while trying to establish a friendship with Jack, she'd let him in. No, Zarah corrected herself, rather she'd readily given in to her wants and his confident persuasion. With eagerness.

In the light of day, Jack would probably regret taking her to his bed. They'd had several drinks last night, and therefore their judgment had been impaired. Jack would realize in the morning, which was only a couple of hours away, that what they'd done had been a mistake. And where would that leave her? Jesus, what had she done? Now he'd think she was an easy lay. How could she have allowed it to happen? She was the new Zarah. Where the old Zarah was weak, the new Zarah was building her strength. How could she let herself be so vulnerable where Jack Masters was concerned?

Despite having a terrific evening all the way around, especially the latter part, Zarah needed to put some distance between her and the handsome Jack Masters. It didn't matter that he made her feel alive and sexy and opened her eyes to the person he claimed to see her as; a onetime thing was all there could ever be.

She hoped they could still maintain some type of friendship, considering once Jack recalled they'd had sex, he probably wouldn't want to speak with her again. Hell, he'd probably avoid her like the plague. It wouldn't be the first time Zarah had experienced that.

No, by her leaving now, she was taking control of the inevitable outcome. If she walked away now, it would hurt less when Jack gave her the brush-off tomorrow. As gingerly as she could, Zarah managed to untangle herself from Jack's arms and legs and slid from the warm comfort of his embrace and his bed. Snatching her jeans from the pile of clothes littering the floor, Zarah stepped into them and pulled her sweater over her head. Stuffing her panties and her bra in her

pocket, she crept on tiptoes from Jack's room, pulling the door closed behind her. After finding her small purse abandoned beside the door, Zarah stepped out into the bright lights of the corridor.

Careful not to make a sound, she pulled the steel door closed and pressed her forehead against the cool surface. Several minutes ticked by as she stood thinking about where she was to go from here.

You're a big girl, a voice in the back of her mind told her. You have your memories.

"But those memories aren't going to warm my bed," she whispered back. "Or make me feel good."

With a kiss to her fingers, Zarah pressed her hand against the door and then turned and walked away.

Chapter Eleven

A week had passed since Zarah had spent most of the night in his arms, and Jack hadn't seen her for any longer than it took to eat dinner at the Davises'. When she showed up, that was.

When he woke to find Zarah gone the morning after their lovemaking, Jack's world crumbled around him. She had simply walked away while he slept, and he didn't know why. Jack thought of little else all week except her and what they had shared.

His knocks on her door and calls to her apartment had gone unanswered. Jack knew she was putting in longer hours at the office, but he was far from content with that reasoning. He suspected she was avoiding him, and he intended to find out why. Had making love with him meant nothing to her?

Outside Zarah's door, Jack was about to knock when he heard her laughter coming from Eric's apartment across the hall. Over his shoulder, he glared at the closed door, willing his anger to seep through the cracks. He spun on his heel and crossed the hall.

Jack knocked on Eric's door and anxiously awaited an answer. A moment later the door swung open.

"Hey, Jack," Eric offered in greeting. "What's up?"

Glancing past Eric, Jack spied Zarah sitting in the corner of the sofa with her legs tucked underneath her. Seated on the floor a few feet away, Scott leaned back on his hands.

Her laughter made Jack's balls pulse with need.

"I'm, uh, just wondering, what, ah, you're up to," Jack stammered.

Eric smirked at him.

"Scott and I are visiting with Zarah," Eric said.

"Oh, Zarah's here?" Jack feigned surprise and tried to slip past Eric, who was blocking the entry. Eric pressed his hand to Jack's chest and pushed him farther into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind him.

"Hey!"

"She was looking for an ear. And Scott and I are offering her that. You know, like friends do."

"Well, I want her to use my ear," Jack growled.

"Relax, big guy. You're safe as far as Scott and I are concerned. The thought of engaging in intimate relations with a woman gives me hives, quite frankly," Eric

quipped. "Don't get me wrong. I care for Zarah. I don't want to see her hurt."

"Why in the hell does everyone think I'm out to hurt her?"

Eric quirked his brow. Jack silently fumed.

"Relax. We're her friends. We're safe, and I think she needs to feel that right now."

"I can keep her safe," Jack growled.

Eric shook his head. "No, we don't keep her safe. We just are safe."

Jack didn't understand the difference.

"Around Scott and me, Zarah can be herself, completely, because we aren't a threat to her."

"I'm no threat to her either. Why don't you get the cock out of your mouth and tell me what the fuck it is you are trying to say?"

Eric ignored Jack's crudeness.

"I'm thinking all the alpha testosterone coursing through your veins is poisoning your brain. It's like you've lost the ability to formulate logical thoughts."

"Why, you little—"

Again, Eric shook his head, this time in warning.

"Do not underestimate my ability to beat the fuck out of you based on my sexual orientation, Jack. I'm a little guy next to you, and I may not win, but you'll damn well know who hit you."

"I don't give a shit that you're gay," Jack snapped.

"I know."

Jack blew out an exasperated breath and then inhaled slowly.

"Better?" Eric asked.

"I'm sorry, man. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me these days."

"You're falling. Hell, if I were straight, I'd be all over her."

Jack growled again—a feral, possessive sound.

"Back off, he-man. I'm into Scott. Remember?"

Jack nodded.

"Zarah never has to worry that Scott or I could jump her bones at a moment's notice. We're her friends. We don't ask anything of her, nor her of us. But with you and Lane—"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Eric laughed again. "You and Lane get this possessive gleam in your eye, even if it's just Zarah's name that's mentioned. It's no secret the two of you are prepared to pounce on her if she'd give you the opportunity. She needs friends as well as companionship."

"I'll be her friend."

"What aren't you understanding, Jack?"

"I. Want. Her." Jack growled.

Eric laughed harder. "I know that, Jack. The whole fucking building knows that. All I'm saying is, stop pushing her. Zarah is fragile, emotionally speaking. Give her a little time and some space."

Jack knew Eric was right. He had been coming on too strong, too fast. Christ, in trying to make Zarah see how much he wanted her, would protect her, he was probably pushing her away.

"Now, get your ass in here and join us. Show Zarah you can be the man she needs

you to be, without being a barbaric caveman out to conquer his woman.”

“Thanks, Eric.”

“No sweat. One more thing.”

“What's that?”

“Don't hurt her.”

The expression on Eric's face reminded Jack just how much he, too, cared for Zarah. It was the same look most of the men in the building had when it came to her.

“I won't, Eric.”

Jack followed Eric into his apartment and took a seat in a chair opposite Zarah on the sofa.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he said. The deep blush that colored her cheeks, combined with a glimmer of uncertainty in her eyes, sent a bolt of pain through Jack's heart.

“Hi, Jack,” she replied.

“I've missed you,” he admitted, saddened by the look of doubt on her face. Most of what Eric had just said in the hallway leaped off the balcony. Jack needed to be with her, alone. Though he wanted her in his bed, the need to simply be near her, just the two of them, was all he could think about. “Can we go across to your place and talk, please?”

Zarah glanced between Eric and Scott before nodding.

“Can I get a rain check on the movie?” she asked.

“For sure,” Scott replied. “But you'll have to bring the wine.”

A nervous giggle slipped past her lips. “I will.”

Jack was out of his chair before Zarah stood, and offered her his hand. She grasped it and rose to her feet.

“Thank you,” he whispered and motioned toward the door.

When the heat of his hand settled against the small of her back, Zarah's knees weakened.

Jack was going to want to know why she'd been avoiding him. The intensity of his pursuit was puzzling. The constant phone calls seemed excessive for someone interested in nothing more than a casual fling...

The glint of desire she read in his eyes definitely stoked her libido, which led her to spending the night in his arms. Though she'd been nervous, under Jack's magical touch, she'd relaxed and allowed herself to enjoy the experience of being with him.

And what an experience it had been. No matter what she did, she couldn't stop thinking about their decadent encounter. The sensation of his hands caressing her body had singed her flesh. She still felt his teeth nipping the sensitive patch of skin on her neck. When she closed her eyes, she felt his lips on her breasts, her belly, her sex.

The muscles between her thighs pulsed with arousal, remembering the mind-shattering sensations of Jack's cock stretching her open. The attentiveness in his caress was foreign to her. Yet it seemed the more he touched her, the more Zarah craved it.

Once inside her apartment, Jack turned her, gathered her in his arms, and pressed a kiss to her lips. It was a firm, nonthreatening act of familiarity.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" he asked. "I thought what we shared the other night was special and meaningful. It was for me."

Zarah searched his face. The words seemed sincere, as did his expression.

Jack held her face in the palms of his hands. "Why is it so hard to believe that I am attracted to you?"

There was no way she would ever confess her insecurities. Never again would she allow herself to be so vulnerable.

"I'm not him, Zarah," he continued. "Or any man you've ever been with."

When she got her hands on Eric, she was going to choke the living shit out of him for saying anything to Jack about her emotional state.

"I-I know, Jack," she stammered, biting back tears.

"Sweetheart, I admit I'm no saint, but I'm also going to confess that no other woman has ever made me feel like you do."

The silence around them grew deafening.

"And why do you always look at me like you doubt what I'm saying?"

Why, indeed.

"Listen to me. I love the silkiness of your hair as I run my fingers through it.

I can't get enough of those soft feminine sounds you make when I make love to you. I want to pleasure you morning, noon, and night. I love everything about you, baby," he said, staring at her with an intensity that had her squirming.

The last comment pained her. She was certain the only thing she successfully demonstrated since meeting Jack was that if he said the right things, she'd put out.

"You are perfect in my eyes," he said.

Having had a few lovers in her past, all nothing to write home about, Zarah knew it wasn't in her best interest to believe that. To do so would split the last thread of self-esteem she held on to when he eventually broke her heart. And it would happen. It always did.

"I will never hurt you." His voice was near pleading with her to understand.

"Why can't you allow yourself to believe that?"

"I just can't, Jack," she admitted. "Not right now. Too soon, maybe. I'm sorry."

Jack sighed as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling Zarah against his chest.

"You're being honest. I appreciate that. We'll take things one day at a time. I'm a patient man."

His warmth and strength made her want to believe what he said. Since he'd made a confession of sorts, she had one of her own. Well, she had many, but only one she wished to share right now.

"Jack?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know what to make of the look in your eyes when you look at me," she said.

"That's love, Zarah," Jack said without any hesitation. "I look at you with love."

Several moments passed as they stood holding each other. As Jack's strong, protective hands rubbed soothing strokes up and down her back, Zarah's body tripped to life with newfound sexual tension. When his lips pressed against the top of her head, sparks ignited under her skin from the contact point, ricocheting throughout her body, all the way to the tips of her toes.

The swelling of her breasts caused them to ache. A delightful throb began between her thighs. At that moment, Zarah wanted to again experience the magic that was Jack Masters. With a startling desperation, the need to feel his firm, muscled flesh press against hers, pinning her beneath him, was overwhelming. Zarah realized she now sat between a rock and a hard place. What she wanted to ask of Jack would contradict everything she said to him moments before. She couldn't believe his claim of love. It was too soon, the wounds too fresh. But she wanted to feel.

In Jack's arms when he made love to her, she wasn't fat, frumpy, pathetic Zarah Elliott. When Jack made love to her, she became someone else. Someone who felt desired, sexy, cherished. At that moment, she needed to feel those things.

"Jack," she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Will you make love to me?"

His grip on her loosened, but he didn't let her go as he stepped back and looked into her eyes. Zarah held her breath as the barrage of emotions crossed his face. She didn't want to give a second of consideration as to what was going through his mind.

"No strings," she said before he gave a response. "For either of us, if that makes it easier. You make me feel, Jack. I-I just need to—"

"Shh." Jack pressed a finger to her quivering lips. "You make me feel too, baby. But are you sure?"

Zarah nodded, afraid if she tried to speak, she'd throw herself in his arms and beg him.

With his hand in hers, Zarah led Jack down the short hall to her bedroom.

As Zarah allowed him a slight view at her insecurity, Jack couldn't help but recognize the shame and uncertainty that flickered across her face. Her words twisted his gut. She'd been so hurt, and he desperately wanted to take that away from her.

And then she shocked him.

"Will you make love to me?" she asked.

Jack had to fight the urge to take her to the floor right there and show her just how much she meant to him. He didn't know how else to convince her he wanted her, now and always. Nothing would change that for him.

He knew Zarah was struggling emotionally. It was clear in her eyes, in her half smile. He knew she was attracted to him; he felt it in her gentle touch. When her lips met his, she kissed him back with the same urgency he attempted to keep at bay.

Jack desired nothing more than to fulfill her request, but he didn't want her to regret their lovemaking when they were finished. She wanted to feel, and he wanted her to feel. To feel him emotionally, as well as physically, because that's how he'd enjoyed her the week before.

Inside Zarah's bedroom, Jack patiently waited for her to make the first move. He would make love to her with everything in him, but Zarah would be in complete control. She would lead and show him what it was she needed from him.

Without words, Zarah reached for the hem of his T-shirt and worked it up and over his head. Dropping the garment to the floor, the warmth of her hands

grabbed his, squeezing at first as if seeking his reassurance before shifting to a caress along his forearms, biceps, shoulders, and across his chest.

Jack inhaled a much-needed breath. He kept his arms at his sides. Beneath the soft touch of her exploring fingertips, his nipples tightened and jumped to attention. Jack watched in silence as her eyes followed the path of her fingers as they stroked over his firm, tensing muscles. Her touch singed his flesh with every pass.

Zarah's breath grew rough as her hands stroked lower over his abs to rest at the waist of his blue jeans. Jack was certain he'd drop dead if she changed her mind and didn't continue. His body was on fire for her. Just when he was about to encourage her to keep going, her fingers slipped inside the waistband, and she flicked the copper button through the hole.

Lifting her chin, Zarah met his gaze. The gold of her eyes grew dark with desire and curiosity. She seemed to be waiting for his approval.

Jack gave her a grin and a wink, which must have been what she sought. Still holding his gaze, she lowered his zipper. When her hands slid along his hips beneath the denim, Jack's knees threatened to buckle. As she worked his jeans and boxers over his ass and erection, the sac between his legs nearly unloaded. When his cock sprung free, Jack groaned in relief. If his tool had to spend one more minute behind the uncomfortable confines of material, he was sure it would shatter into dust.

"Do you see what you do to me?" he asked.

Her gaze dropped to his crotch. Her breath became even more labored as she studied his hardened shaft. Jack cupped her face in his hands, tipping her head back to look at him.

"It's all for you," he said. He dipped his head and pressed a kiss to her lips.

When he pulled back, Zarah struggled to draw breath. "Now it's my turn. Okay?" After a moment, she nodded.

Jack took her hands in his and, after placing a kiss in the palm of each, raised her arms above her head. Taking a second to shuck his jeans, underwear, and socks and shoes, he settled his hands on her hips and slid them under the shirt that hid her body from him. She shivered as the pads of his fingers caressed her torso, brushing along the sides of her breasts as he worked the fabric over her head.

After dropping her shirt to the floor, Jack reached forward and flicked the front closure of her pink bra, causing her large breasts to spring free. Pushing the straps over her shoulders and down her arms, Jack fought his need to back her up the bed and rip her pants from her body.

Jack dropped to his knees and wasted no time in pulling the loose-fitting lounging pants she wore to the floor after she kicked off her sandals. He left her matching pink panties in place but encouraged her to step out of her pants. Using a slow, gentle caress, his hands started at her feet and roamed up the length of her legs to cup the cheeks of her ass. He squeezed and massaged the globes with purpose and need.

The scent of Zarah's arousal tickled his nose, and he inhaled deeply, pulling her fragrance into his body. Leaning into her, Jack pressed kisses along the elastic band of her panties and then retraced the path with his tongue.

A throaty feminine growl escaped Zarah's mouth, which made his balls scream for

release.

Zarah's fingers threaded through his hair, and when he slid his tongue over the covered lips of her pussy, they tightened and her body swayed.

"B-bed," she gasped.

Jack kissed his way up the length of her voluptuous body. When he reached her trembling lips and gazed into her eyes, Jack nearly came. Her eyes sparkled with heat, need, and desire. Her harsh breath was sweet blowing across his chest and throat. Jack took her hand in his and allowed her to lead him to her bed.

As she knelt on the bed, Jack followed her and gently lowered her against the mattress. He stretched out alongside her, dragging the back of his fingers across her abdomen.

"You are so incredibly sexy," he told her.

Zarah reached for him, urging him on top of her.

As Jack moved, Zarah's thighs parted for him, and he nestled his hips against hers.

His eager cock rubbed against the silk crotch of her panties. The warm wetness of her arousal fed his hunger.

"Please, Jack," she whispered.

"You're still wearing these very pretty panties, baby," he said and slid two of his fingers inside the crotch of the garment in question. The backs of his fingers brushed along the plump, damp lips of her sweet pussy.

"I need you, Jack," she pleaded, digging the tips of her fingers into the muscles of his biceps.

"Are these your favorite panties?" Jack grinned.

A glimmer of confusion flickered in her eyes. "They're just undies," she replied.

Jack gave a sharp tug, and the seam rended.

"I'll buy you a new pair."

Zarah laughed. "Now I have a matching pair to go with the bra from last week. You're pretty hard on lingerie."

"Stop wearing it, and I won't have to rip it off you."

Jack pushed his hips forward, entering her. She moaned, arching her back off the bed, mashing her breasts against his chest. Jack Masters had found the promised land. Her fingertips dug into his arms, but Jack didn't care. She could bruise his entire body. It didn't matter, so long as she touched him.

He took his time, slowly sliding in and out of the hot depths of Zarah's body, savoring the clasp of her wet flesh clenching around him.

"Mmm, Jack," Zarah purred.

Her hips thrust against him faster, meeting his strokes with an urgency that rivaled his own. Feeling her body tighten around his cock, Jack suspected she was close, and intended to join her as she fell into euphoric bliss. Jack buried his face against her neck and inhaled her scent.

"Jack," she cried.

"I'll catch you, honey."

With that, her body shuddered. Jack pulled back to watch her passion play across her face. Zarah's eyes were squeezed shut, and she appeared to be holding her breath. Whereas his body was slick with sweat, a light sheen of perspiration glistened teasingly on hers.

Between his legs, a fire raged, but he refused to allow himself gratification until Zarah reached hers. Her pussy gripped tighter, milking him to the point that Jack thought perhaps his stick would break off.

"Christ," he growled.

A moment later, the waves of her release began to weaken. Only then did Jack stroke himself within her beautiful body toward climax. He uttered a victorious howl as his balls erupted violently. His body stiffened and then trembled as the velocity of his orgasm curled his toes.

Feeling his arms quake under his weight, Jack rolled onto his back and pulled Zarah's spent body atop his. Neither said a word as they struggled to draw breath. Silent moments passed while they recovered from mind-blowing orgasms.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked and stroked a hand along the damp skin of her back.

"Never better," she mumbled against his still-heaving chest.

"Well, rest up," Jack said. His shaft was still buried inside her and coming back to life. "I feel round two coming on."

After bringing them to climax a second time, Jack held Zarah in his arms as she drifted off to sleep. Jack shifted her body beside him, causing his shaft to slip free. As he reached to remove the condom, he found his groin soaked and realized he'd neglected to don a rubber. He cursed his thoughtlessness. He'd been so caught up in the moment, the thought had never even crossed his mind. How angry would Zarah be when she woke?

Careful not to disturb his Sleeping Beauty, Jack left the bed for the bathroom to fetch a damp cloth. When he returned, he cleaned up the evidence of their lovemaking from between Zarah's smooth thighs.

At least she wouldn't be uncomfortable or left sleeping in the wet spot. His thoughtfulness on that front had to earn him some brownie points.

As Jack crawled back in beside Zarah, he pulled her warm, sleeping form snug to his body. What was the worst that could happen? They might have created a life. When Zarah snuggled in closer, Jack thought to himself, that wouldn't be such a bad thing at all.

Chapter Twelve

A few weeks later, Zarah still lay in her bed, snuggled under a lightweight down comforter and gazing out the window. Her back was to the clock on the nightstand on the other side of her bed, and she didn't have a clue what time it was. And she didn't care. It was Saturday, and she had nowhere to be.

Morning was well under way. Stems of warm sunlight shined through the window across the bed. She'd left the window open when she crawled into bed the night before, and the happy chirps of birds carried in on the gentle breeze.

A couple of weeks had passed since she and Jack were together. Zarah had come to a startling realization that night: she'd never been made love to before.

Fucked, yes. Loved, no. And that's just what she'd felt like leaving Jack's apartment that first time. They'd made love. But despite the exquisiteness of the encounter, Zarah vowed it would not happen again. She couldn't allow herself to deepen the emotional attachment she was feeling for him. When he decided to move on and the bottom fell out of her world, and it would, then she'd be left to pick up the pieces. She would not allow her self-esteem to be battered around anymore.

Yet every night he came to her in her dreams.

Though she hadn't attempted to avoid Jack this time around, he seemed to take her unspoken hint and maintained a respectable distance. They still saw each other nearly every day, and Zarah sometimes wondered why she kept sending Jack mixed messages. It wasn't her intention. She wanted to spend time with him because being around him made her feel like she was someone special, but she didn't want to get too close and risk the devastation of loss when he found someone else to enjoy and she found herself tossed aside like yesterday's news—again.

Throwing back the blankets, she swung her legs over the side of the bed. She stood and stretched before walking across the cool floor to the bathroom. Dressed after a shower, Zarah stood towel drying her hair when her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hello, pet. How are you this morning?"

"Fine, Mrs. Davis. You?"

"Fine, fine. I hope this isn't an imposition, but it's such a beautiful day, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind spending some time together?"

Zarah smiled. "I'd love to. What do you have in mind?"

"Well, Mack and the boys are going to do some work around here, and I thought maybe you and I could take a trip to the new outdoor market on Brisbane. You know, for a little girl time."

"I'd love to," Zarah repeated. "I'll be down in half an hour. Does that work for you?"

"Yes, pet, I'll be ready."

Zarah disconnected the call and finished getting ready.

After meeting Rita in the lobby, the two women ventured outside and were greeted by Mack, Eric, Lane, and Jack. When Jack's eyes met hers, her nipples tightened like they always did when he looked at her, and a delightful tingle began between her thighs.

"Well, you boys have fun," Rita said, stopping long enough for Mack to press a kiss to her forehead.

A heated glance from Lane sent a shiver racing through Zarah's aroused body. It was useless to continue to deny how drawn to him she still was, despite what she and Jack had shared.

"Off to spend my pension money, are you, woman?" Mack asked gruffly, but the smile in his eyes gave away his teasing.

"Of course. You're going to have to feed these young men after working them all day. I thought we'd have a barbecue tonight. How does that sound?"

"Too bad you're already married, Mrs. D," Lane said, walking by Zarah. The brush of his forearm along hers made her shiver.

"Go away with you," Mrs. Davis replied.

"So where are you lovely ladies off to?" Jack asked, holding Zarah's attention.

"We're going to start at the new market. Then lunch at the adorable little French caf   in Westdale," Rita said. "Then, if I haven't bored Zarah to death spending the day with an old woman, I thought we'd finish up with a walk along the boardwalk by the lake."

"I am not going to be bored, Mrs. Davis. I'm looking forward to spending the day with you. We need more girls' days out."

"You ladies have a nice day," Jack said.

When he reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, Zarah's knees threatened to buckle. It was the first time he'd touched her in two weeks. It startled her just how much she missed his touch, even if only a friendly gesture.

* * * * *

After helping Rita in with her purchases, Zarah made her way up to her apartment to freshen up before dinner. She'd had a wonderful afternoon with Rita, and the two already made plans to do it again the next weekend.

Following a quick shower, she tugged on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and pulled her mass of curls back with a scrunchie.

A dozen people were already mingling on the patio behind the building, the usual place for a Davises' cookout. The smell of the grill warming scented the air.

"There you are," Jack said as he approached carrying a bottle of beer in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. Handing her the wine, he grinned. "I was about to come looking for you." The huskiness of his voice moved through her, stimulating her erogenous zones.

"How was your day?" he asked, motioning for her to sit at one of the tables that had been set up to accommodate everyone for dinner.

"Really nice," she replied, taking a sip of wine. "Mrs. Davis is a terrific lady. We're going to go to the market again next week. I've never seen such beautiful fresh fruit as the vendors were selling there."

They continued to make small talk for a few minutes, and then Lane joined them.

Dropping into the chair beside her, Lane gave her wink and a smile as he draped his arm across the back of her chair. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"No." Zarah's cheeks caught fire despite the teasing tone in his voice. The back of his finger slid up the back of her arm. She shivered.

"Listen," Jack said on her left. "I picked up a couple of movies last night.

What do you say the three of us go up to my place when things wrap up here and watch one?"

"Sounds great. I'm game," Lane replied.

She hesitated for a moment. She wanted nothing more than to spend some time with both men. Something as innocent as a movie sounded perfect. It would be the ideal complement to a wonderful evening. Three friends settled in to watch movies together on a Saturday night. Surely Lane's presence would keep her from acting on her attraction to Jack. Help her keep the distance she'd deliberately put between them.

"Sure, I'd really like that," Zarah said.

After helping tidy up the mess from dinner, Zarah, Lane, and Jack climbed the stairs to the fourth floor and settled into Jack's apartment to watch a movie.

Chapter Thirteen

"Not bad," Lane commented as the credits began to roll across the television screen. Reaching beside him, he clicked on the lamp sitting on the end table, casting soft light around the living room. "Good choice in movie tonight, Jack." The single glass of white wine Zarah had nursed since coming upstairs now sat empty atop the coffee table.

"Yeah, I agree," she said, stretching between Jack and Lane. "I haven't laughed

so hard in ages.”

Jack was pleased Zarah had reached a higher level of comfort around him and Lane. He knew after making love with Zarah a few weeks earlier, he'd pushed her too fast. Her immediate attempt to put distance between them again had been painful. It had never been his intention to rush Zarah into a committed relationship, but he couldn't bear being without her any longer.

All he wanted to do was love her, but Eric's words remained in the forefront of his mind. Though they'd made love twice now, Jack wasn't going to pressure Zarah into something more. Not yet anyway. Eric was right. She needed time to heal emotionally. It wouldn't be fair to her for Jack to move in so fast.

“Thanks, guys. This was fun,” Zarah said, inching forward on the sofa as if getting ready to stand.

“It doesn't have to end yet,” Lane said. Stretching his long legs out in front of him and crossing one ankle over the other, he leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. “Come on, sit back and relax.”

“Lane's right. It's still relatively early,” Jack added, prepared to do anything to keep her from leaving so soon.

With a nod and a smile, she settled back into a comfortable position on the sofa.

Though reluctant to leave Zarah's side, Jack pushed himself to his feet. For two hours he'd sat beside her as they watched a movie, inhaling her scent. It had taunted him. The ache in his fingers to touch her was great, and he had to fight his desire to run his fingers through her soft curls. Instead, he reached for the half dozen empty beer bottles and Zarah's wineglass that littered the surface of the coffee table and headed toward the kitchen.

“Besides,” Lane continued, “it's Saturday night.”

Time, Jack reminded himself. He was going to give her some time and space. He'd told her he was a patient man, and although it might just kill him, that's what he was going to do. Be patient.

In the kitchen, Jack dropped the empty bottles back into the cardboard case.

Turning to the fridge, he pulled the door open, reached in, and grabbed two more and the bottle of wine to refill Zarah's glass. They could sit together and watch the news with a nightcap before calling it a night.

Scooping the bottles up by their longnecks with the fingers of one hand, Jack picked up the wineglass in the other and walked back toward the living room. The sound of a soft feminine moan stopped him cold as he strode through the doorway. Zarah's soft feminine moan. The same sexy sound she made for him when they made love.

Jack's body went rigid and his blood surged when his eyes found his best friend locking lips with his woman. The roar of blood pumping through his system kept time with the anger pulsating under his skin.

Lane's hand squeezed her thigh as his mouth stayed fused to Zarah's. Her chest heaved against Lane with labored breaths. She held Lane's T-shirt with her hands in a death grip. From his position in the doorway, Jack could see her hands trembling.

He seethed. How in the hell could his best friend do this to him? Jack wanted to shout yet couldn't find his voice. With his feet rooted to the floor, he stared, stunned at the action taking place on his couch.

As if sensing his presence, they parted. Both turned toward him.

As she sucked in several quick gulps of air, Zarah's eyes widened. Her mouth then worked as if attempting to speak, but no words came out. Mortification crossed her beautiful face.

Lane's blue eyes flickered with what Jack interpreted as shame. Jack grew more enraged. Was Lane ashamed because he was touching another man's woman—his best friend's woman? Or was he ashamed because he had been caught?

Then something flashed in both Zarah's and Lane's eyes—yearning and need. Jack's anger slowly faded, replaced by an emotion that confused him—arousal. He didn't know how to process the stirrings of desire that suddenly began to surge through him, or how to react.

A handful of seconds passed in silence as the tension crackled in the air around them.

"J-Jack," Lane began to stammer at the same moment Jack stepped forward.

The rigidness of his body made his steps awkward and unbalanced. As he approached, he watched Zarah's and Lane's eyes widen more. They shifted on the sofa, as if hoping the cushions would swallow them up.

Rounding the coffee table, he slammed the beer bottles down with a crash; he didn't bother to even look to see if they shattered. He didn't care. To free up his other hand, he more or less tossed the wineglass onto the tabletop. It tipped, sending the contents washing across the polished wooden surface and over the edge to dribble onto the carpet.

"Jack." This time Lane's voice carried a heavy protective tone, and he reached out for Zarah.

Jack pushed Lane's hand away as he dropped to one knee on the sofa beside Zarah. He grabbed her head in his hands. He studied her face for a fraction of a second before capturing her mouth with his.

For a moment, her body was stiff as he pushed himself against her. The tight expression on his face, matched with his aggressive approach, had no doubt startled her. For that, he was sorry.

Then she welcomed him in. Her whimpers fired his blood. Their tongues fought one another to dominate their oral exploration. Jack forced himself to take a mental step back and allowed Zarah to control the kiss. The feel of her clutching his T-shirt in her trembling fist brought a savage, throaty groan from deep within him.

Dangerously close to the edge, he pulled away to give each of them a little breathing room. Zarah struggled to draw harsh breaths. Jack wasn't in any better shape. He found himself rock hard in an instant when he watched Zarah's golden eyes darken, first with confusion, then with curiosity and desire. Glancing a little lower, he spied her erect nipples and nearly came unglued.

Jack was aware of Lane in the room, on the sofa beside them. He felt his friend's eyes burning into them. Jack couldn't remember a time when he'd been so turned on. He tore his gaze away from Zarah for a split second to glance at Lane. The flicker of arousal Jack saw in Lane's eyes mirrored his own.

Curiosity along with uncertainty furrowed Lane's brow.

For a split second, Jack wondered if he could actually go through with sharing Zarah with Lane. The thought vanished from his mind as fast as it had entered.

Lane was his best friend, and Jack knew how he felt about Zarah.

And if being with the two of them was what Zarah wanted, he would damn well swallow any jealousy he might feel to give that experience to her. All that mattered to him was Zarah's happiness, and nothing else.

Jack offered Lane a half nod—an invitation.

After a moment's hesitation, Lane moved close and nuzzled her neck. At the same time, Jack and Lane reached for the hem of Zarah's knit top. Together, they worked it up and over her head.

Jack pulled away from Zarah's mouth long enough to rid her of the material, before fastening his lips to hers again. Immediately, his right hand settled on the softness of her belly, his fingers feathering over the quivering flesh. He couldn't get enough of touching her.

Zarah moaned against his mouth, her body wriggling under his touch.

With deft fingers, Jack unfastened the front closure of her red lace bra, freeing her breasts. Reaching up to cup her, Jack bumped Lane's hand, which was already massaging her left breast.

The sensation of brushing Lane's hand at any other time would have been dismissed. It was strange to feel Lane's strong hand against his own. For a fleeting moment, Jack considered releasing Zarah's breast but stopped himself. Hell, by the time the evening ended, he and Lane would have probably brushed more than hands. Zarah's reaction to their combined caresses far outweighed the moment of awkwardness.

Zarah's hands weren't idle. Her jerky movements seemed desperate as she gripped Jack's T-shirt, fighting to tug it upward.

With a growl of reluctance, Jack withdrew from her kiss to yank his shirt over his head.

"Let me taste your mouth again, baby." Lane's voice was husky as he leaned in to capture Zarah's lips.

The fragrance of feminine arousal scented the air around them.

Needing to taste her flesh, Jack dipped his head and drew her right nipple between his teeth. He bit down, eliciting a muffled cry to slip from Zarah's lips as Lane continued to feast on her mouth.

"Let's get those pants off," Lane growled against her as he slid off the sofa, pulling his T-shirt over his head. He tossed it aside and settled between her thighs.

After stroking his tongue over her nipple to soothe the sting of his bite, Jack sat up and continued to cup her breast in his hand.

"Wait," Zarah gasped and brought her hands up to cover her breasts, knocking Jack's hand away. Uncertainty flickered in her eyes, but Jack also saw interest and the smoldering heat of desire.

"What is it?" Jack asked. He placed his hand over hers, covering her right breast. "What's the matter?"

Between Zarah's legs, Lane's hands stilled, but his fingers remained curled at the waist of her jeans.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she whispered so low that Jack barely heard the words. With harsh, labored breaths, Zarah looked shyly between him and Lane.

"What you must be thinking," she groaned.

Pressing a kiss against her abdomen, Lane met her anxious expression. "I'm thinking you're beautiful," he said and then gave her a wink.

Her gaze then shot to Jack, and the worry and uncertainty he saw briefly flicker in her eyes ripped at his insides.

"And I want you so fucking bad, I ache," he said.

Until that moment, Zarah had been totally consumed by their combined touch. Everything else around her had ceased to exist. She lost herself when Lane leaned over and kissed her. And then Jack kissed her. Then the fiery looks of desire in both of their eyes set her body ablaze.

"But I'm sitting here between the two of you like some two-bit trollop," she whispered. The shame she felt made her squirm. The fact neither man spoke to confirm or deny her statement only fed her insecurities. She continued, "If I go through with this like I want to, you're going to think I'm a whore. And I don't think I can live with either of you thinking that."

Jack took her face in his hands, tipping her head so she had no choice but to look at him. She cast her eyes toward the wall behind the sofa in an attempt to avoid his gaze.

"Look at me, Zarah," he said. "Listen. There isn't anything you could possibly do to make me think badly of you. Nothing."

"I second that," Lane said.

Zarah wanted to believe that so badly, but...

"If sharing yourself with both Lane and me is something you want to do, the two of us would be honored to participate in the experience with you," Jack told her.

"Baby, I have never been as hard in my life as I am right now. This is a first for me and Jack, but I can tell you I want to be with you. To be buried deep inside you. But this is your call, Zarah," Lane said.

"But this is wrong," she groaned in a soft voice.

"Why is it wrong?" Jack asked close to her ear.

Zarah shrugged, unable to continue. It wasn't right to be attracted to two men. It was definitely not okay to want to have sex with two men at the same time.

"What would be wrong is you not going after and taking what it is you want and need," Jack continued. "To deny yourself, sweetheart, that would be wrong."

Could it be that simple? Was she strong enough, self-confident enough, to ask them to fulfill her needs? She'd been with Jack and knew firsthand what a wild ride that was. But could she give herself to his best friend, while Jack watched? How would this change the relationship they shared when the experience was over? And what sort of shape would she be in when things ended?

"What do you want?" Lane asked. He leaned down and lazily dipped his tongue in the tiny crevice of her navel.

Goose bumps popped out all over Zarah's body. She gasped. She wanted this more than she thought she'd ever wanted anything before. Was she prepared to take what she wanted, even if it meant she might regret it later?

"Tell us," Jack's deep voice encouraged. The warmth of his breath tickled across her cheek and neck.

Certain this would be her one and only opportunity, with a sudden burst of self-confidence, Zarah seized the moment.

"I want you. Both of you," she blurted out breathlessly. "I want to be sandwiched between you and feel nothing but the heat and strength of your bodies

pressing against me. I only want to think about how good you make me feel.” The moment was perfect. The air seemed to be electrically charged, heightening the surge that already ricocheted around the room.

“Then let's get this party started, because I want nothing more than to give you what you want,” Jack told her.

All that mattered was tonight. Tonight she would belong to both Jack and Lane, and they would belong to her. She would deal with the fallout tomorrow.

“Fucking right, baby,” Lane said in agreement. He flicked the button of Zarah's jeans open and slowly slid the zipper down. “Lift that sexy ass up,” he said as he gripped the waist of the denim and worked it over the curves of Zarah's hips, down her thighs, and off her body.

Soon she sat before them in nothing but a pair of red lace panties, still covering her breasts with her hands. Her body trembled with need.

“Don't be nervous, honey.” Jack leaned into Zarah and pressed his lips to her temple. “This is going to be an incredible experience for you. For us. Kiss me,” he commanded in a whisper. “I can't get enough of your taste.”

Her throaty moan echoed in her chest as she turned her head to meet his mouth.

“Now for these pretty panties,” Lane growled low. “They're keeping me away from your sweet-smelling pussy.” His thumbs ventured under the elastic waistband, and then with excruciating slowness, he slid her panties over her hips and down her thighs and off her body.

Zarah groaned low and pulled away from Jack's mouth. Together, they looked down and watched Lane part her with his fingers and then dip his head to feast between her splayed thighs.

Over and over his tongue flicked against her sensitive clit, and Zarah quickly lost the ability to control the movement of her hips.

“Does Lane's mouth feel good on you?” Jack asked, pulling her hands away from her breasts and replacing them with his own.

“Oh God,” she gasped. Never before had anyone tongue fucked her with such expertise. Well, no one except Jack.

“He can make it feel even better,” Jack said. “Push your finger inside Zarah's pussy, Lane. Her cunt is so fucking tight.”

Lane moved his mouth away and looked up, making eye contact with Zarah. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. Her voice escaped her at the feral look Lane set on her. Then his gaze dropped to her pussy and stayed fixed on her intimate flesh for several moments.

“Is Jack right, baby?” he asked with a grin. “Is your cunt nice and tight? And do you want me to push my finger up inside you?”

“Y-yes, Lane,” she pleaded with a forced, ragged whisper.

With his left hand, Lane spread her folds wider and stroked a single digit the length of her inner lips before sliding his finger inside. Zarah's head fell against the back of the sofa, and her eyes squeezed shut. The sensations of Lane's finger stroking inside her while Jack plucked at her nipples shot Zarah's arousal to the edge of overload.

In that moment, it didn't matter that her head told her it was wrong to want them both fucking her at the same time. This might be the only opportunity she would ever have to enjoy Jack and Lane together, and, damn it, she was going to savor the experience.

"Push another finger inside her, Lane. Stretch her for your taking, buddy." The rasp in Jack's voice sent shivers down Zarah's spine, while his fingers continued to work their magic at her breasts. "Open your eyes and watch him, baby. Watch as Lane sticks another finger in your cunt."

"J-Jack," Zarah moaned and opened her eyes. Her body was close to peaking as Lane added a second finger and began to thrust in a demanding rhythm that had Zarah seeing stars.

"Oh God," Zarah croaked, feeling her body coil even tighter.

When the wet tip of Lane's tongue touched her clit, Zarah exploded. Her body, mind, and soul splintered into a zillion shards shooting in a million different directions. She came harder than she ever had before, blacking out momentarily as tremors racked her.

"Fuck!" Zarah heard in the distance long before her body began to descend. Lifting her head and opening her eyes, she saw the reason for Lane's sudden outburst. Clear liquid trickled down the taut muscles of his chest. Zarah cringed.

"Oh Jesus, no," she whimpered when she spied the evidence of her release. As she attempted to scramble away from Lane, his fingers gripped her hips and held her in place.

The look in his eyes sent a tremor through her. Was he angry? Appalled? The surprise in his voice left her wondering.

"You squirt," Lane announced.

Like she didn't know that. How humiliating. Zarah closed her eyes, praying for God to strike her dead right where she lay.

"Do you do that every time?" he asked.

Her head shook of its own free will. "No. Yes. Sort of. Look, I'm so sorry," she moaned in embarrassment and reached for something to cover herself.

Unfortunately, all her clothes were in a pile on the floor behind Lane.

Jesus, why hadn't she tried to control it? Why hadn't she stopped herself before coming?

Simple. She couldn't. Lane's and Jack's touch was electric, demanding, possessive, determined. Her body had no choice but to succumb to their combined ministrations. They played her like she'd been made only for them. There was no way she could have gained control over her climb to release. Their actions, their touch, demanded she come for them, and she had.

Yet Zarah wished that hadn't happened. She was filled with mortification.

Silently, she begged for the earth to open up and swallow her.

"I knew you got real wet when you came," Jack said. Zarah shuddered. "But I had no idea you ejaculated."

"I'm so sorry," Zarah repeated. "I'll try not to ever do it again," she promised in a pleading tone.

"Oh, baby, you don't have to apologize," Jack's husky voice crooned beside her.

"That was fucking hot."

His statement stunned her.

"No shit. That was awesome," Lane said in agreement. His eyes burned with hunger.

"Can you do it again?" Jack asked before licking his lower lip in suggestion.

Zarah's eyes widened. She cast him a look of confusion. "It...it doesn't disgust

you?"

In a flash, Zarah remembered the one and only time she'd ejaculated with Marcus. He had leaped from the bed, appalled, and raced to the bathroom like someone had lit him on fire. Zarah had never been more humiliated than at that moment. The subsequent encounters had Marcus racing to the finish line, leaving Zarah to take matters into her own hands to find her release.

It wasn't something Zarah had a hell of a lot of control over. The harder her orgasm, the more she ejaculated. She knew she shouldn't be ashamed, but with her past experience, she simply couldn't help it.

Jack shook his head. His grin made her toes curl. "Seeing you explode like that is such a fucking turn-on. I blew my load just watching you."

Zarah glanced down to see the telltale wet spot on the front of Jack's jeans.

Zarah was overcome with emotion at Jack's admission. In fact, everything about Jack overwhelmed her.

Suddenly, his strong hands cupped her breasts, and the rough pads of his fingers tweaked her stiffening nipples. Lane's finger stroked the swollen, wet lips of her pussy. Her body jumped and instantly caught fire again.

"I want to see you do that again," Lane said and pushed his finger back inside her.

Zarah sucked in a breath and exhaled a hiss at the intrusion against the quivering walls of her pussy. After a hard climax, her pussy was always more sensitive.

"Oh yeah," Jack growled in her ear. "Come all over Lane again."

Several minutes later, Zarah cried out. She threw her head back and closed her eyes.

"Open your eyes, baby," Lane said. When she obeyed, he met her gaze. "Watch yourself shoot all over me."

With one hand thrust between her legs, Lane's fingers ventured deeper with each stroke. His other hand left her body to fight with the button and zipper of his denim jeans. Once they were unzipped, Lane reached into the front of his pants and pulled out his cock.

Zarah moaned in need as Lane began fisting his length and continued to finger fuck her pussy. The sight was almost enough to finish her off. When her eyes grew heavy again, Jack twisted her nipples as her body started to peak.

"Open your eyes," he said.

Zarah watched her body explode. The liquid heat of her release hit Lane square in the chest. The look in his eyes was fierce, hungry. While her body continued to convulse, Lane rose up onto his knees and ripped a foil packet open with his teeth. Rolling the rubber over his length, he thrust forward, burying himself balls deep inside her.

"Oh yeah, Zarah, squeeze my cock," Lane growled through gritted teeth. He stilled for a moment, allowing her body time to adjust before he withdrew and plunged back in.

Unable to hold on any longer, Zarah grabbed Lane's forearm with one hand and Jack's with the other as her body splintered again. For the love of God, how much more of this pleasurable torment could her body sustain?

"Good girl," Lane praised as he pulled himself from her body.

Zarah struggled for air. "But you didn't—"

Lane and Jack chuckled.

"Oh, we're hardly finished. Jack, get that cock of yours out so our baby can climb up on top of it," Lane said.

"Gladly," Jack said and worked his jeans and boxers down to the floor and kicked them aside along with his socks and shoes. "I want to be inside your body so fucking badly, Zarah."

Jack settled himself on the sofa with his butt near the edge of the cushion.

"Climb on," he directed and gripped Zarah's hips to support her as she straddled his powerful thighs. "Lift up a little," he said and reached between their bodies, wrapping his fingers around his cock to align himself with her body. As the broad head of Jack's shaft breached her opening, he hissed through his teeth. "Fuck, you are so tight, even after having Lane's cock inside you. Come on, lower yourself on my stick. Take me all the way."

The room began to spin as Zarah settled over Jack. He felt so good deep inside her, like her body was made for his. From the corner of her eye, she saw Lane shedding the rest of his clothes. The heat of his bare chest then pressed against her back. He reached around to cup her breasts in his hands.

"You have the most beautiful tits, Zarah, and the sweetest-tasting pussy. Your sexy body is driving me out of my fucking mind," Lane whispered in her ear. "And now do you know what I'm going to do?"

Zarah continued to ride Jack beneath her as Lane's fingers tugged on her nipples.

"W-what?" she gasped out.

"Now, our sweet Zarah, I'm going to shove my dick in your ass."

She sucked in a sharp breath as his words caused a shudder to course through her.

Jack chuckled. "Her cunt just squeezed me so tight when you said that, Lane. You're making my balls ache, baby."

"Well, my friend," Lane said, returning Jack's chuckle. "Her cunt is gonna get even tighter when I stick my cock in her snug ass."

Through the sexual haze clouding her mind, she heard a squirt sound, and a few seconds passed before she felt the coolness of lube as it was smeared over the rosette of her ass. Then a single finger penetrated her.

The sensation of Lane's finger invading her back door made Zarah's head spin.

The pinpricks of pain at being stretched just that tiny bit had her craving more. Sensing her need, Lane gave it to her.

"What do you think?" Lane asked, adding a second finger. "Are you ready to take us both on?"

Totally consumed in the erotic sensations of their words, their hands, and Jack's cock thrusting into her from beneath, Zarah collapsed against Jack. In a moment of silence, she made peace with God, certain she was going to die from sexual overload. At least she would go out a happy woman.

"You better hurry, Lane," Jack groaned. "She's going to come, man. Hold on, honey. Don't come just yet."

Zarah felt the head of Lane's cock press against her anus, and her body tensed.

"Deep breath," Jack told her.

As she did, Lane pushed forward, slipping the crown of his cock past the tight ring of her muscles.

"Push out," Lane growled. "Let me in all the way. I've got to feel your ass gripping my cock just like your pussy did."

"Oh God, it hurts," Zarah cried out. "It burns."

Lane stilled his entrance. He rubbed his big hands up and down her back, urging her muscles to relax.

"Are you all right, baby?" he and Jack asked in unison.

After a minute of consideration, Zarah nodded. It burned, but the pleasurable sensations soon began to override the temporary unpleasantness.

"Good girl," Jack praised. "Reach for the pleasure. It's there. Push aside the discomfort and reach for it."

Zarah didn't need to. Blowing out a breath, she willed her body to relax and pushed out as Jack directed her to. In that instant, she felt all the tension leave her muscles.

"Oh yeah, that's it. Open up for me," Lane groaned. Cupping her buttocks, Lane spread her open and pressed in another inch. "Just a little bit more," he continued, surging forward. "I've got to get it all inside you."

Once Lane and Jack were both buried deep, all time stood still. Then the men thrust and stroked in tandem, driving Zarah toward another climax. This time when her body blew apart, bright, colorful lights flickered behind her eyelids and her body numbed. Zarah was positive she'd died and gone to heaven. Jack's hands held her waist as he drove his hips upward. Behind her, Lane's fingers dug into her hips as his thrusts became more urgent. Between the two men, Zarah could do nothing but hold on for dear life.

A moment later, Jack cried out and Lane growled as they simultaneously met release. Eventually, the pressure in her backside ebbed as Lane withdrew his shaft. She shivered at the sudden loss of his body heat. As Jack's cock softened, he too slipped free from her body. A soft snap in the air reminded her that Lane had worn a condom, and since she didn't feel the flood of Jack's release flow from between her legs, she realized at some point he'd slipped one on as well.

How in the hell did she miss that?

"I'm going to jump in the shower," Lane said and placed a kiss between Zarah's shoulder blades. "You were incredible, baby."

"You too," she murmured.

Slow rivulets of perspiration trickled over Zarah's skin. She felt completely zapped of energy.

"I didn't even think about protection," she confessed in a whisper against Jack's chest. "What kind of person does that make me?"

Jack's arms tightened around her, and he placed a kiss on the top of her head. Zarah smiled.

"Lane and me took care of it, and you are a sexy, desirable woman, who went after something you wanted. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that. And I can't begin to tell you, Zarah, just how good it makes me feel to be a part of it with you."

"I'm clean and on the Pill," she mumbled against Jack's chest. "It's a low dose, but I'm on it. I just wanted you to know that."

"Lane and I are too. Clean, that is."

Zarah chuckled.

"Listen, neither of us doubted that. But until you are comfortable with our relationship, using rubbers is the responsible thing to do."

What Jack said was true. They should exercise responsibility. And was he saying he wanted a relationship with her? Something more than sex?

Zarah remained straddled on Jack's lap with his arms wrapped around her as he held her against him. They stayed like that until the water turned off, signaling the end of Lane's shower.

"Come on. Let's have a shower, together," Jack said.

"Jack?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"I don't want tonight to end."

"What we have together doesn't ever have to."

* * * * *

For several hours, Jack and Lane made love to Zarah, individually and together.

Around three thirty in the morning, Zarah was exhausted and threatened to cut their balls off with a rusty knife if either of them touched her again.

"Just give me twenty minutes," she mumbled before falling asleep between the two men.

After watching her sleep for a few minutes, Jack lifted his head to look at his best friend.

"I want Zarah. And I'm prepared to fight for her."

Over the weeks, Jack had thought he'd made his intentions clear. But just in case he hadn't, he was laying things right out there for Lane, where there would be no room for misunderstanding.

Lane smiled. Not his playful, I'm-up-to-shit smile, it was one of understanding.

"Ease up, pal. I see the way Zarah looks at you, and I won't stand in the way."

"Thank you," Jack said.

"I never had sex with Zarah before tonight. I won't lie to you. I'd hoped she'd look at me the way she does you. And I want to apologize for stepping on your toes, if you feel I have."

"I don't, Lane. I—"

"Please, hear me out."

Jack closed his mouth and nodded.

Lane reached over and stroked the back of a finger down Zarah's cheek. He took a breath before continuing.

"When Zarah looked over at me earlier tonight, I just couldn't help myself. It was like her lips were teasing me, inviting me, and I had to taste her."

"I understand."

"I know how you feel about Zarah, and I think the two of you are good together. So I promise you, Jack, this won't happen again."

"Wait a minute, buddy. Tonight was for Zarah. Together, you and I gave her something she wanted, something she needed. And I would do it again in a heartbeat, if it was what she asked and wanted."

Lane was speechless.

"Zarah cares about you, as well, otherwise she wouldn't have given herself over to the both of us."

"There's no denying there's an attraction between us, but it's not as strong as the one you and Zarah share. Sure, she responds to my touch, and I can't get

enough of her, but her heart belongs to you.”

If that was the case, why was Jack having such a hard time convincing Zarah that she held his heart? “I have to confess something.”

“Yeah, what's that?”

“That first night, when we ate dinner at the Davises and you threw down the gauntlet...”

Lane smiled. “Yeah.”

“I was pissed. Beyond pissed, I was ready to lay a beating on you for muscling in on my girl.”

“I'll bet.”

“But, after tonight, there isn't anyone I'd want to share this experience with other than you.”

“Are you coming on to me, Jack?” Lane teased.

“Hardly, jackass.”

A comfortable silence hung between them for several moments.

“I feel the same way. And for the record, this wasn't some casual fuck for me. I think a hell of a lot more of Zarah than that.”

“I know you do.”

“I'm not going to lie to you. I love her. But my friendship with her and you is more important to me than trying to come between the two of you.”

Jack nodded. Lane was a bigger man than Jack at that moment, and he tipped his hat to his friend. There was no way in hell Jack would have taken a step back, and he suspected the sacrifice Lane was making was great.

“But hear this, my friend. I care for Zarah. Deeply. And I don't ever want to see her hurt again. She's been through more than her share.”

“I won't hurt her,” Jack said defensively. “I just want to love her. Protect her. Keep her safe.”

“Yeah, well, if you're just screwing around with her, I'll fuck you up within an inch of your life.”

“Are you threatening me?” Jack asked and straightened himself.

“Ah, Jack, you know me better than that. I don't make threats. I will take you so close to death you'll be begging for it, if you cause Zarah any pain.”

The two men stared silently at one another for several tense moments.

Between them, Zarah uttered a soft feminine whimper and changed positions. Her movements brought the two friends back to civility.

Once she settled and her breathing again deepened, Jack turned his attention back to the man on the other side of his bed.

“I'll never hurt her.”

Lane nodded. “I'll hold you to that.”

After placing a kiss to Zarah's forehead, Lane rose from the bed and tugged on his jeans.

“I've got to go and grab a couple hours of sleep. I told one of the guys I'd pick up his shift for him tomorrow. Today. But I'd really rather crawl right back in there with the two of you,” he finished with a chuckle.

“Want to meet up for dinner?” Jack asked. “I was thinking of surprising Zarah by taking her to the new Italian place on Raleigh.”

“I've heard the food is great. You sure you want me tagging along?”

Jack raised his brow and gave Lane a frown.

"All right, sounds good," he said, before walking out the bedroom door. "I'll see the two of you later."

The closing of his apartment door, and the click of the dead bolt as Lane used the key he had to lock them in, told Jack he and Zarah were alone.

Gathering her against his chest, he settled in and allowed sleep to take him.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, Jack detangled himself from Zarah's soft, warm body as gently as he could and slipped from his bed. After tucking the cotton sheet around her, he pulled on a pair of boxers and watched her sleep for a few minutes. Her soft snores brought a grin to his lips. He and Lane hadn't been the least bit gentle with her last night, but Zarah had been an eager and willing participant to their demands.

Last night had been a first for Jack. He'd never shared a woman with another man before. Yet knowing how Lane felt toward Zarah and seeing the way he looked at her, with a hunger not unlike Jack's, sharing her seemed like the most natural thing to do.

The way her body responded to the two of them had Jack truly believing in destiny. The woman in his bed had been made for him. She fit so perfectly in his arms. Her body was made for loving him. She was so tight around him, and no matter how often she climaxed, it seemed she just couldn't get enough of him. But neither could he of her. He could spend the rest of his days making love to her and never be able to get his fill.

As he watched Zarah sleep, she gave a soft whimper and began to fuss. The intensity of his gaze must affect her even in her sleep. Leaning over, Jack placed a kiss to the crease in her forehead, and she settled back into peace.

"Sleep, my beauty," he whispered. "We have our whole lives ahead of us."

Jack left his room, closing the door behind him. After relieving himself in the bathroom, he made his way to the kitchen to work on some breakfast. Once the counter was covered with food from the fridge, Jack frowned. He was disastrous in the kitchen. Jack didn't mind eating the slop he concocted for himself, but he couldn't inflict that horror on Zarah.

What the hell was he thinking? He stared at the food on the counter for several moments, before a lightbulb went off in his head. Jack went into the living room, snatched the cordless phone from the coffee table, and pressed a sequence of numbers.

"Hello?" Mrs. Davis answered.

"Good morning."

"Jackson. Good morning, pet. How are you?"

"I'm beyond incredible this morning, Mrs. Davis," Jack said as his mind pictured Zarah naked and asleep in his bed.

"That's nice. You sound cheerier than you have in a very long time."

"Thanks. Listen, I'm, uh, calling because I need a little help," he said, scanning the countertop as if willing the food to prepare itself.

"Mmm hmm. What with?"

"I, uh, need some directions on how to make breakfast," Jack said.

"Well, why don't you just come downstairs?" Rita offered. "Mack and I are about to sit down ourselves."

"I'd, uh, really like to make it, um, myself."

"Oh, Jackson, it's no trouble at all. Just come on down—"

"I have company this morning, Mrs. Davis," Jack blurted into the receiver before he could stop himself.

As silence answered him on the other end, Jack smacked the palm of his hand against his forehead. Ah shit, what Rita must be thinking, he groaned silently.

In seven years, he'd never brought a woman up to his apartment.

"Um, well, uh," Rita eventually stammered.

Now what was he supposed to do? Jack certainly didn't want to broadcast the fact that Zarah had spent the night. Though Jack was ready to stand out on his balcony and shout it to the world, he wasn't so sure the woman in his bed would be impressed. Hell, Jack didn't have to tell Rita that Zarah had spent the night.

"Zarah is with me this morning, and I wanted to make us a little something to eat." Jack beamed at his ingenious effort to skirt around telling Rita anything more.

"Oh, that's nice," she said. Jack could hear the smile in her voice. "Well, then, the two of you should just come down, pet. It's no trouble at all."

Nice, Jack thought. Backed into the proverbial corner he thought he'd just worked his way out of.

"Okay, here it is, Mrs. Davis. Zarah spent the night," Jack confessed and squeezed his eyes closed. "She's still asleep, and I really just want to make breakfast for when she wakes up."

"I see," Rita said. "Little rough on her, were you?"

Being embarrassed at admitting to Rita that Zarah had spent the night with him was one thing, but Rita's comment had Jack ready to hide under a rock. He looked at Rita as the mother figure he had never had. He slumped against the door frame between the kitchen and the dining area. Hell, he told himself, this was ridiculous. He was an adult, for Christ's sake.

"Rita," Jack began in a quiet voice. Not once in seven years had he used Mrs. Davis's first name. "I am a man in love. I know, I know, we haven't known each other very long. I never believed in love at first sight before her, but I am head over heels." Jack heard sniffing in his ear and grinned. Mrs. Davis was such a romantic. If anyone understood what Jack was going through, it was her. "Zarah is what's missing in my life. I've never felt so alive as when I'm with her."

"Oh, Jackson, that is beautiful. Zarah is such a sweet girl."

"Will you help me? I'm desperate. You know I'm an accident waiting to happen in the kitchen."

"Of course I will help you, pet," Rita told him. "Now just give me a few minutes, and I'll put something together for the two of you and bring it right up."

"No, no, I want to do it myself."

"Are you trying to kill the poor girl, Jackson?" Rita asked and laughed into the phone. "You just said you love her."

Jackson laughed as well. "No, it's just important I do it myself. So lay it on me. What's the fastest, easiest, and safest way for me to make breakfast and impress the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with?"

“By letting me do it for you.”

The seriousness in Rita's voice brought a frown to Jack's face. He could do this. He could make breakfast. After disconnecting from Rita, Jack stared between the piece of paper with the detailed notes he'd taken and the food on the counter.

“Ah hell, how badly can I fuck up eggs and toast?”

When he finished cooking the meal, Jack realized he had surprised himself. As he loaded up the tray with his creations, he smiled. It wasn't much, but it was something.

The scrambled eggs were a little—okay, a lot—brown around the edges. He'd had to scrape the burned bits from the toast before he buttered it, and the bacon was way past the well-done stage. At least he hadn't fucked up the juice—it came fresh squeezed right out of a glass bottle. Jack was even impressed that he hadn't taken off the end of a finger while cutting the oranges and melon into sections.

He walked down the hall toward his bedroom, with tray in hand. Maybe Zarah would be so starved she wouldn't notice how bad it was. After all, it was the effort that counted.

Jack nearly dropped the tray when he pushed the door open and walked into the room. Zarah still slept atop his bed, but sometime in his absence, she had tossed the lightweight cotton sheet aside and was now completely exposed to his gaze.

The soft, dark curls atop her head were fanned across the pillow. Her right arm was raised above her head, and her left hand rested on her lower belly just above the thin strip of tight curls that pointed to her delicious pussy. Her right leg was bent at the knee against the mattress, and Jack could see her pink inner lips peeking out, as if bidding him a good morning.

He wanted nothing more than to crawl between her thighs, spread her folds farther, and feast on her. The swells of her breasts rose and fell with her steady breathing, beckoning Jack to have a taste. Setting the tray with their breakfast on the bedside table, Jack climbed onto the bed to watch her more closely.

After a few short moments, Zarah's eyes began to flutter as she struggled toward consciousness. With a yawn and a stretch, she opened her eyes and turned her head toward him. A sexy grin curled her full lips, and Jack lowered his head, pressing his lips to hers. When he pulled away, the sparkle in her eyes made his toes curl.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” he replied and stroked a fingertip between her breasts. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are when you wake up?” he asked and dipped his head to capture her right nipple between his teeth.

Zarah's back arched up off the bed, and a moan caught in her throat.

He released the erect tip, and she again settled against the mattress. “Your body is soft and warm from sleep.”

A frown suddenly creased Zarah's brow, and her left hand stroked over her abdomen. As she moved her hand lower, realization seemed to dawn on her.

“Oh God,” she gasped and reached for the sheet.

Jack chuckled as she fumbled with the fabric in an attempt to cover herself. She

didn't get very far. He was lying on the sheet, and there was no way he was going to move to allow her to hide her body from him.

"Jack," she whispered her plea.

"Uh-uh." He simply shook his head. "I want to look at you."

A deep red stained the tops of her cheekbones, and Jack waggled his eyebrows at her. When she tried to cover herself with her hands, Jack grabbed them in his and moved his body over hers. Before she could utter a protest, Jack settled his hips between her splayed thighs and dipped his head. He pressed his lips against the warmth of her shoulder. Smattering kisses and gentle loves bites, Jack's lips made their way along her flesh to her neck. Inhaling deeply, he savored the smell of her. His scent mixed with hers and Lane's and stoked his arousal. Her body shivered against his as he plucked at the sensitive skin of her neck.

A sultry feminine moan called to him as Zarah arched her back, crushing her breasts against his chest. Jack's mouth moved lower, over the swell of one breast to capture the tip between his teeth. With her hands secured by his, all she could do was wriggle under him as he suckled the berry-sized nub, before lavishing attention on its twin.

"Jack," she murmured.

Between them, her arousal scented the air. The wet warmth of her need coated his groin. She hooked her heels over his legs, pulling him to her, holding him. The rub of her pussy along his cock made his sac pulse as his own need accelerated. With the shuddering of her body, the sexy sounds of desire she uttered, her wetness soaking him, Jack found himself on the cusp of finishing before her. That will never do, Jack.

He slowly pushed himself inside her. Zarah whimpered and thrust her hips against him. He took pleasure in the way her muscles gripped tightly around him as he slid in and out, as if she was trying her damndest to hold him inside. With slow, determined strokes, Jack made love to Zarah until her body trembled beneath him. The sound of his name whispered from her lips as she edged closer to release made his heart hammer in his chest. Only when he felt the moisture of her climax coat his belly, groin, and thighs did he allow himself his own release.

"Mmm, now that's quite a wake-up call," he said before placing a light kiss on her lips. "Hungry?" he asked as he withdrew from Zarah's body.

She nodded and bit her lower lip. "Can I cover up?" she asked.

Jack felt his heart plummet. Had what they'd shared just then, as well as last night, not shown her that he loved to look at her? Zarah was beautiful in his eyes. Hell, if Jack had his way, she'd never wear clothes in his presence. Something flickered in Zarah's eyes before she turned and lowered them. Jack thought his heart would burst.

"I'd rather you didn't," he admitted and pulled the sheet up and over her. "But if it'll make you more comfortable, of course."

"Thank you," she said, sitting up and tucking the sheet under her arms, effectively hiding her body from him. "Uh, Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"You didn't wear a condom."

Oh hell, Jack cursed himself. What the hell was wrong with him? After telling her last night it was the responsible thing to do, he'd fucked up once again and

forgot.

"Zarah, I'm sorry. I needed you—"

Zarah shook her head. "It's okay. I'm on the Pill."

"I told you last night, honey, I'm clean. I've been tested, and I've never, ever not used protection, except with you. This time and one other."

"Me too," she said. She paused. "Pardon?"

"When we were together a couple of weeks ago, I was caught up in the moment and I—"

She gave him a smile. "It's okay, Jack. Really."

Jack gave her a wink and turned to grab the tray from the nightstand.

"I'm sorry," he heard her whisper.

"For what?" Jack turned back to her, just short of panic, wondering if Zarah was suddenly struck with regret.

"The sheet."

Jack tucked a curl behind her ear and smiled. "You don't need to apologize, Zarah. Never do you need to apologize to me."

After they'd eaten, they took a shower together.

Once she was dressed, Zarah said, "I, uh, should be going."

Her sudden announcement put a kink into Jack's plans for the rest of the morning. He had been looking forward to some more nooky with his beauty. He hadn't expected her to leave, not so soon anyway.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Zarah nodded, but Jack couldn't help but be concerned with the look of uncertainty he saw on her face. He wondered what she was thinking. He wondered if she was stewing about what had happened the night before. Jack knew sharing herself with two men wasn't something Zarah had ever considered doing before last night. He needed her to understand that what the three of them had shared was special. More importantly, Jack needed Zarah to know that watching Lane make love to her didn't make Jack think less of her.

In fact, Jack found himself even more in love with her. The gift she'd presented Jack and Lane by giving them her complete trust made Jack feel ten times the man he was. Zarah had given her trust freely and allowed him and Lane to see to and fulfill her needs and desires.

Words had not been necessary between them the previous night. Together, Jack and Lane had anticipated Zarah's needs and pushed her beyond her comfort zone, eager to help her reach a higher state of sexual completion. Then they had made her climax for them over and over.

He had witnessed firsthand the intense pleasure Zarah derived from both him and Lane. In Jack's opinion, her pleasure meant everything. Between them, he and Lane had thoroughly satisfied her. She had been uninhibited as she readily participated in every request either man made.

The sensations he felt when he and Lane had taken Zarah at the same time were indescribable. At first, the feel of his cock sliding along Lane's while they both were buried deep inside Zarah's body had made Jack uncomfortable. But after several strokes, he began to rethink his discomfort. Within the warm, wet depths of Zarah's beautiful body, the feel of Lane's hard flesh bumping and sliding against his own had been a turn-on for him.

Jack had no desire to engage in sexual relations with Lane, but he couldn't deny

that the sensations he'd encountered while sharing Zarah had been mind-blowing. The entire evening had been an exhilarating experience, one he would not be opposed to participating in again should Zarah want it.

"What are you thinking about?" Jack asked her.

The sincere concern in his voice made Zarah's belly flutter with excitement. In silence, she simply shook her head. She just couldn't bring herself to tell Jack what was on her mind. How could she possibly tell him that last night had been incredible and that she wanted to experience the two of them together again? Surely Jack would be devastated to learn that she enjoyed being taken by both of them at the same time. Though Zarah was falling for both men, she knew in her heart the affection she felt for Jack was more intense. The attraction between them was more keenly shared. While she was attracted to Lane, she couldn't imagine spending her life with him. But that didn't mean she didn't want him in her life. What kind of woman did that make her? How could she be falling in love with one man, yet want both him and his best friend to fuck her senseless? Again.

The lovemaking she and Jack shared that morning had been the most wonderful thing she'd ever experienced. To confess that to him would make her sound like a simpering schoolgirl, which would surely send Jack hightailing it in the other direction.

But the way Jack made love to her a short time earlier, between just the two of them, had opened a floodgate of emotions that Zarah refused to face. He made her feel loved, cherished, but there was no way she believed for one minute he felt those same things. Yes, he'd been gentle and rough, attentive and demanding, giving her pleasure first before seeking his own.

She'd crossed a line. The line. That fine divide between friend and lover, and there was no going back. It would be senseless to continue to convince herself what had been shared between her and Jack, and now with Lane, was nothing more than sex. It was much, much more.

Last night cemented the emotional investment she'd attempted to ignore was building. In a matter of a few pleasurable hours, what she'd tried to keep as a platonic relationship turned serious. No longer could she deny what had been right in front of her from the start. Jack had been honest about his intentions from the beginning.

Part of her was thrilled at the realization, but another part of her feared now that she'd taken the leap, the potential for greater hurt down the road skyrocketed.

"Are you having regrets about last night?" he asked.

The night before had been beyond incredible. Lane and Jack had worshipped her while awakening something very primal inside her. It had been liberating at the time, but now Zarah had to face what they'd done in the light of day.

"I have no regrets, Zarah," Jack told her and placed a soft kiss to her lips.

"I've wanted you from the first moment I laid eyes on you."

"I don't regret spending last night with you and Lane, Jack," she whispered honestly. She pulled away from him.

Despite the barrage of emotions and feelings surging through her, Zarah didn't feel used. Not like she had in the past. What little she knew about Jack and

Lane, she believed in her heart that both men were sincere. She believed that on some level they cared about her and her well-being.

There certainly was an attraction between them, that couldn't be denied. And it wasn't just Jack Masters who was interested now, it was his best friend too.

Zarah decided not to question it anymore. She realized resisting their persuasions was futile, but she couldn't help but worry what would happen when, in the middle of their serious relationship, they'd realize they wanted some hot little blonde, like Marcus had. When all was said and done, she was still fat, frumpy Zarah Elliott.

"I need to get going," she mumbled, feeling her self-control slipping a little further out of her reach.

"All right, if you need to. But I've got to tell you, I really hate to let you out of my arms and my sight right now," Jack said.

They're just words, Zarah told herself, but she found herself believing them. And that was frightening. If she let him in, let herself fall for him, she'd end up hurt.

"Will you join me for dinner tonight?" he asked as she reached for the door.

"Uh." Zarah hesitated and studied his face. She shouldn't. She should start to put some distance between them. It would be easier to walk away now rather than pick up the pieces weeks or months from now.

"Well, Lane and me." Hunger flickered in Jack's eyes. A feral, possessive grin curled his lips.

It was all too much. She wanted to throw herself in his arms and beg him to take her back to his bed. In Jack's arms, the rest of the world melted away. Nothing else mattered except the two of them.

She'd already crossed the line. Jack and Lane had broken through her defenses, and there was no turning back now. What did she have to lose by allowing herself a little happiness with Jack? The last thread holding your self-esteem intact, a little voice in the back her mind told her.

Maybe some time to herself would help her sort out the barrage of confusion she felt. Although, how horrible a person did it make her to spend the night with two men and in the morning make love to the one who could curl her toes with just a glance, and then simply dismiss what they'd shared by walking away?

To do such a thing would put her in a class alongside her ex.

Surely Jack would understand her needing time to think. Knowing what he did of her last miserable relationship, he would be receptive to taking things slow.

Well, slower. Hell, they'd already shared sex, could they now take a step backward?

Before she could open her mouth to decline Jack's dinner invitation, he grinned.

"I'll pick you up around six. How does Italian sound?" he asked.

Zarah found herself nodding. She couldn't bring herself to say no to him.

"Sounds great, Jack. I'll see you at six."

Chapter Fifteen

The next afternoon, Jack and Lane prepared for a baseball marathon, getting their snacks and beverages ready and fixing to settle in for the long haul. Any minute, Zarah would sashay her sexy ass through his apartment door and walk into his waiting embrace.

Jack chuckled. "If I have my way, we might not get to any TV today."

Despite the incredible experience the three of them shared, Jack wasn't terribly offended when Zarah didn't invite him in. He and Lane attempted to make assurances that things were cool between them, but Jack suspected there was a lot going on in Zarah's mind. The experience of a marriage had been a first for all three, and though it pained him, he knew he needed to allow Zarah to process it in her own way.

When he'd kissed her good night, he reminded her to come up as early as she wanted. After spending the night away from her, all alone in his own bed, Jack couldn't wait to see her. To touch her.

As Jack handed Lane a beer, a knock came to Jack's door. Jack swung the door open, and

expecting the caller to be Zarah, he was about to tease her about knocking.

Tenants rarely locked their apartment doors except during the night, and Jack always made certain the door was unlocked when he expected Zarah. Disappointment streaked through him when he saw who it was.

"Hiya, Jackie," Qwin said, giving him a wink.

"How did you get in?" he asked, keeping his tone even. Jesus, he hadn't seen her in what, three years? What the hell was she doing bothering him now?

"Some old guy let me in when I told him you were expecting me," she said and then giggled.

"Well, I wasn't," Jack told her.

Qwin shrugged. Tossing her long blonde hair over her shoulder, she batted her eyelashes.

Jack sighed with annoyance and leaned against the frame. "What do you want, Qwin?"

"May I come in?" she asked, taking a step forward.

Jack countered her step by entering the hall and pulling the door closed behind him. "No. What are you doing here?"

As her lower lip jutted out in a pout, Jack brought his beer bottle to his lips and took a swallow. Once upon a time, that pout would have gotten her anything she wanted, but those days were long gone. He continued to eye her with suspicion, knowing her presence on his doorstep was only going to irritate him. He raised his brow, hoping she'd pick up on his lack of patience where she was concerned.

The door opened behind him, and Jack felt Lane glance over his shoulder.

"Oh," Lane said, not bothering to hide his disgust. "It's you."

"It's nice to see you too, Lane," Qwin said.

"I didn't say it was nice to see you," Lane corrected her. "Game's starting, Jack."

"I'll be right there," Jack told him, not taking his eyes off his ex. "What do you want, Qwin? I've got things to do."

Once Lane closed the door, Qwin cleared her throat. "Okay, I'm here to ask you to be my escort to a friend's wedding next weekend," she said.

"No," Jack replied without hesitation. "I'm sure you've got a flavor of the week who'll go with you."

"Well, you see, that's the thing," she said, taking a step closer to him. "I sort of told my family and friends that you and I were sort of seeing each other

again.”

“You, what?” Jack growled, pulling himself from the door frame.

“Well, I was sort of hoping that maybe, you know, we're more mature now, we've experienced a little of what life has to offer. Well, maybe we could—”

“No, Qwin. Not again in this lifetime. Or the next, for that matter.”

“Oh come on, Jack,” Qwin purred, running her hands across Jack's chest.

He raised his brow in warning. Then, before he could respond, she grabbed the front of his T-shirt. Her sudden pull made Jack stumble and grip her arms for balance.

His lips parted to object to her handling him, and Qwin seized the opportunity by fastening her mouth to his and thrusting her tongue inside.

* * * * *

Zarah froze in place as she walked through the door to the fourth floor. The sight of Jack lip-locked with a blonde woman made bile rise in her throat. The two weren't exchanging a platonic kiss. Simpering little moans came from the woman, who was standing on her tiptoes, indicating this was an act of familiarity.

Zarah wanted to scream from her toes at the sudden feeling of betrayal that coursed through her, but she couldn't find her voice. Her body felt numb.

“Oh, Jack,” the petite blonde cooed as she pulled back and tipped her head to look up at him. “You're as delicious as I remember.”

Suddenly, Jack's head snapped to the side and his wide eyes met Zarah's stunned expression. As he opened his mouth to speak, Zarah turned and burst through the closed door behind her.

“Zarah!” Jack hollered. “Zarah, wait!”

I am such a fool!

Zarah struggled to keep her balance as she raced down the stairs toward her apartment. She was furious for giving in to Jack, going to dinner, and then making love with him and Lane again, falling a little more in love with them each moment even though she knew this would happen. From behind, she heard him thundering after her and tried to step up her pace without pitching herself forward.

Never again!

Mortified and heartbroken, Zarah reached for the handle on the second floor.

“Zarah, please—”

Strong fingers wrapped around her upper right arm before she could open the door.

“Don't touch me,” she snarled, trying to pull free from Jack's grasp.

“That wasn't what you think it was, baby,” he began.

Zarah flinched at him calling her “baby.” That was an endearing term saved for lovers. And from what she just witnessed, he was directing it at the wrong woman.

“It never is, Jack,” she replied.

“That's Qwin, baby, my ex, who means nothing to me,” he said, pulling away from the door.

In an endeavor to get away, Zarah squirmed and wrenched her body. Exerting little effort, Jack grabbed her other forearm with his free hand. His grip was firm, but it didn't cause her pain. Backing her against the cement wall, he

closed in on her personal space so she had no choice but to focus on him. When she attempted to turn her head to avoid looking at him, Jack brought his face in close to hers. Their noses nearly touched.

"I didn't kiss her. I swear to you," he said, looking into her eyes.

Zarah scoffed. "Yeah, Jack, that's exactly what it looked like to me."

"It's true." The sound of a female voice drew both of their attention to the landing beside them.

Jack dropped his gaze and growled. "Why the fuck are you still here?" he snarled at the woman.

"I owe you and your lady friend an apology," Qwin said as she walked down the steps. "Lane and I spoke upstairs, and he indicated you are in a great place now, Jack. I instigated the whole kissing thing," she admitted with a nonchalant shrug, looking between Jack and Zarah.

"Will you please just leave?" Jack spat at Qwin with a glare.

"Believe it or not, I've grown up. I don't want to come between you and your friend, Jack. You're very pretty," Qwin said to Zarah and smiled. "It's quite obvious you are the one holding Jack's attention. You are a lucky woman, Zarah, is it? You know, the entire time that Jack and I were together, he never looked at me the way he does you."

Lane raced down the steps and stopped beside Qwin. "You okay, honey?" he asked Zarah.

Zarah nodded but didn't speak.

"Well, my best to you both," Qwin said. "I mean that."

Without another word, she excused herself and continued down the stairs. Once the door on the first floor closed, Jack spoke. "Come back upstairs with us, honey, please. Allow me a chance to explain."

The anguish in Jack's voice and the desperation in his gray eyes ripped through her. In silence, she replayed the scene she'd come upon moments before. After several tense moments, Zarah reached up and placed her hands on either side of Jack's face, pulling his lips to hers.

"I'm sorry too, Jack," she began. "I jumped to the wrong conclusion, and you didn't deserve that."

Relief washed over his face. He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Thank you," he whispered.

"But you're far from being off the hook," she informed him with a slight grin.

"I'll take your punishment. Happily," he said. He let out a heavy sigh and pulled her against him.

Chapter Sixteen

Zarah sat in the basement library of the office, conducting research for a new case. With her chin in her palm, she stared absently at the full bookshelf across the room, daydreaming.

Despite vowing to herself after the last time that it would never happen again, she'd spent the night before with Jack and Lane. And once again, the experience had been beyond spectacular.

She loved the freedom she felt when with them. Between their hard, muscular bodies, she threw caution into the wind, allowing herself to savor every delicious nuance.

Jack's touch was gentle but confident and carried possession. The look in his eyes when he watched her, studied her, became heated, like she was the only woman he had eyes for. And when he made love to her, he did so with his soul. Lane was the flip side of the coin. Though confident and possessive, his touch was firm, a little rougher, more demanding. His eyes shone with the feral, hungry look of a predator, scoping out his prey. His gaze curled her toes. When he made love to her, he did so like it was the last time he ever would. She had tried hard not to read too much into what they were sharing when they had sex together, but the bud of hope inside her that she'd spent weeks refusing to acknowledge blossomed. It no longer mattered that she was attracted to both of them and was losing her heart, or that she would be devastated when it was over. Zarah decided all that mattered was the here and now. Having taken on that new attitude, she realized she was even more confused than ever. Did she want a relationship with one of them?

Yes, she did.

With both of them?

If for one moment she thought it would even be a possibility, she would be first in line to make it happen.

As her mind began to replay the erotic scenes from the night before, the door of the dungeon creaked as it opened, the sound drawing Zarah's attention.

"Hi, Stephen," she said as her boss walked in.

"Zarah, may we have a moment?" Stephen Webster, assistant district attorney, asked upon entering.

"Sure, of course. You have your serious face on. Are you pink-slipping me?"

His expression remained stoic as he took a seat opposite her at the table. "No way, lady. You're an asset to me and my team. And one that I will not give up without a fight."

"Really?" she asked, giving him a tiny smile. "Sounds like a good time for me to hit the boss up for a raise."

That brought a grin to Stephen's face. "We'll talk."

"I'll pencil you in, then. Okay, boss, what's up?"

"We're taking on a new case," he said.

"Oh yeah?" she asked and leaned back in her chair.

He tapped the corner of the file folder on the cracked surface of the table, studying her.

"Embezzlement," he replied after several moments of silence passed between them.

"And we're also looking into adding extortion to the docket."

"Is that the preliminary?" Zarah asked, gesturing to the folder.

He nodded yet refrained from handing her the file.

"What's it about? Big corporate takedown?" She frowned when he didn't answer and narrowed her eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that?" Was that pity on his face? What the hell was going? Zarah reached out for the manila file folder.

"You're here for a reason, Stephen. May I take a look?"

Again, he nodded and handed it to her. "You're not going to work this with the team, Zarah. I'm sorry."

Her jaw dropped in confusion. This was the first time she'd ever been removed from a case. She was outraged. "Why?" she snapped at her boss.

"Just look inside," he instructed.

She did. When she read the name on the indictment, blood rushed to her feet and her head began to spin. "Oh good God," she croaked.

"You understand it's a conflict of interest, right?"

Zarah simply nodded and handed the file back. "I understand. Are you sure it's him?"

"Yes. I'm going to want to sit down with you. We're adding you to the witness list."

"I don't know how much help I can be. It seems I didn't know Marcus as well as I thought," she replied. "But, of course, Stephen. I'll do my best."

"I know you will." With that, he rose and left Zarah alone in the library.

* * * * *

Zarah was numb when she left the office for the day and walked across the parking lot to her car. Though the air around her blew warm, she shivered. Her knees were barely keeping her upright.

How could he have done such a thing? she wondered. The lying. The betrayal. The manipulation. How could he? And why in the hell hadn't she noticed or realized? Had she been living with her head so far up her ass that she'd grown oblivious to the world outside her own? She was glad she wouldn't be working the case, because there was no way in hell she wanted to face him. Or ever see him again. The scenery blurred by as her thoughts raced.

Her car traveled faster, weaving in and out of traffic, as if the Corolla had a mind of its own. She merged onto the open road of the highway.

By the time Zarah noticed the large trunk of an old oak tree, it was too late. A piercing scream hurt her ears a split second before splinters of pain tore through her body.

Then there was nothing.

* * * * *

It had been a long day for Jack.

Fortunately, drivers seemed to have held their own on the streets. The only calls Jack had been dispatched to were for folks who couldn't get their cars started. And two women, separately, who'd locked the keys in their cars. The highlight of his day had been the little boy of no more than three years of age who flagged him down to pull a rock out of the plastic tire of his Big Wheel.

"Is it gonna go flat?" the tyke asked, on the verge of tears.

"Nope. Looks like we got it just in time, buddy," Jack told him.

"I don't got any money to pay you," the little boy said when they were all done. "But my mommy made cookies this morning. Want one?"

"Nah, there's no charge for digging out a rock," Jack told him, ruffling the blond curls on the top of his head.

Jack was about to turn his truck around and head back to the shop when the CB mounted on the dash tripped to life.

"Base to Jack," Freddie's voice called.

Jack picked up the mic, pressing the tab on the side. "Go ahead, Freddie."

"What's your ten-twenty?"

"Baker and Dresden. Just finished fueling the truck. What's up?"

"There's a single-car accident on the 209 westbound near Snider's Pass. Full gamut of fire and rescue is on-site."

"I'm five minutes out, Freddie," Jack said. From out of the blue, the hair at the base of his skull stood on end. "Call it a day, my friend. It's after six."

"Ten-four, Jack. Have a good one."

"You too," Jack replied, trying to shake the uncomfortable sensations he suddenly felt.

As he approached the accident scene, blue, red, and white lights from the emergency vehicles flashed like beacons. Parking his tow truck behind a highway patrol car, he began to walk toward the activity to offer his assistance. That's when he recognized the familiar tan-colored Toyota wrapped around a tree. The heap of twisted metal no longer resembled a vehicle.

"Zarah!" he hollered and ran for the car.

Before reaching the driver's side, a strong hand wrapped around his forearm, stopping him short. "Whoa, pal. Hold up."

Spinning around, Jack was about to haul off and deck the son of a bitch who held him. He dropped his free arm to his side when he spotted the uniform.

"That's my girl's car. Where is she?"

The trooper nodded toward a nearby ambulance. "She was unconscious when we arrived on the scene. The EMT said he knew her."

Jack tore off like a shot.

Rounding the back of the ambulance, he saw her. A lump formed in his throat.

Inside the vehicle, Zarah lay strapped down to a stretcher. Her eyes were closed, and the left one was darkening by the second. The right side of her mouth was swollen and bruised. Dried blood crusted around her nose.

At her side, Lane fiddled with some stuff hooked up to her. "We're just about ready to go, babe," he said softly.

"Zarah," Jack heard himself groan in anguish.

Opening her eyes halfway, she winced as she tried to smile. "Jack," her voice croaked.

Lane glanced over, and a look of concern Jack had never seen before crossed his friend's face. "She'll be okay, Jack. It looks a lot worse than it is. Nothing's broken, but she's going to be pretty fucking sore for a few days. She was disoriented when she came to. She was wearing her seat belt. The passenger side sustained the majority of the damage."

Jack stepped up into the ambulance and reached out, touching Zarah's outstretched legs.

"Thank God for air bags," Lane said. "I don't even want to think of what could have happened to our girl."

"I'm fine," Zarah moaned and closed her eyes again. "Just a few bumps. Stop fussing over me." When she shifted her position, she winced. "Who would have thought those air bags would be so damn hard?"

Lane chuckled, yet the cheeriness he feigned didn't reach his worried eyes.

"Yeah, they aren't filled with Jiffy Pop, sweetheart."

"What happened, honey?" Jack asked. Reaching forward, he took her hand in his. The feel of her flesh in his hand helped assure him she would be okay, but what he really needed was to gather her in his arms.

"It was my fault. I wasn't paying attention to the road," she said without elaborating. "Can I go home now?"

"After a trip to the hospital," Lane said. "You're getting checked out by a

doctor. No arguments.”

Zarah rolled her eyes and again winced. “Come on, Lane. I’m fine. Honestly. Just a headache.”

“Okay, we’re ready to roll,” Lane said, ignoring her plea.

“Fuck,” Jack snapped with frustration. “I want to go with you.”

“I’m fine. Will you please stop fussing?”

“Okay, okay,” Jack said. “I’ll load up your car and meet you guys at the hospital. I’ll have one of my guys pick the truck up from home and deliver your car to the wreckers.”

“The wreckers? My car can’t be saved?”

“Sweetheart, it doesn’t even look like a car anymore,” Lane said.

“Great. What am I going to do for wheels?”

“You won’t be driving for a few days at least,” Jack replied. “When you’re ready to, you can use one of ours.”

“At some point we’ll get you another car,” Lane continued. “We’re just thankful you’re safe.”

“All right, I’ll be right behind you,” Jack said and dropped a kiss against the back of Zarah’s hand. Slapping his free hand against Lane’s shoulder, Jack added, “Take care of her.”

“With my life,” Lane said. “Let’s roll, Danny. I’m riding back here,” he said to the man seated behind the wheel of the ambulance. “Jack, shut those doors.”

Chapter Seventeen

Close to a week had passed since she cracked up her car and herself, and Zarah felt a little bit better every day. She’d been lucky that she’d sustained only bumps and bruises, and fortunate not to have broken any bones. Though the doctor in the emergency room that night prescribed painkillers, she used them sparingly, opting to walk around her apartment to help work the stiffness out of her muscles.

Since the accident, neither Jack nor Lane had left her side. They’d practically moved in with her. It surprised her a little. Their attentions were nice, and appreciated, especially during the first couple of days when it hurt just to breathe, but their constant doting was beginning to grate on her nerves. The hovering around the bathroom while she used the toilet was too much. Today, she demanded a few minutes—actually, begged for at least thirty—to herself. Conceding to her request—with grumbling, though minimal—Lane pressed a kiss to her forehead and offered to pick up something for dinner. When she asked for burgers from across town, knowing the distance would buy her an extra ten minutes, Lane grinned.

“I know what you’re up to, baby.” He chuckled. “And it ain’t gonna work. I can be there and back in half an hour.”

Getting Jack out posed a more difficult challenge.

“I’m not going anywhere until Lane gets back,” he said, raising his chin and crossing his arms over his chest when she turned her attention to him. “And batting those lashes won’t change my mind.”

Zarah took a step toward him and wrapped her arms around his frame. “I need a few minutes to myself,” she said. “Please, Jack.”

“Forget it.”

She tried another tactic. "I'd like some juice, and there isn't any more in the fridge."

"I have a couple of bottles upstairs," he replied, unfolding his arms and gently gathering her against him.

"You have orange juice," she argued playfully with a pout. "I feel like apple, or maybe grape." It wasn't like she was asking for the Hope Diamond. All she wanted was to steal a handful of minutes to herself.

Jack bitched, none too quietly, as he stomped through the apartment and snatched his keys from the hook hanging beside the door. Before he left, he turned toward her and gave her a wink.

"You've got ten, maybe fifteen minutes if I hit the light at the corner," he said and disappeared.

Once alone, Zarah inhaled a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Silence surrounded her, and she savored it.

She loved them and welcomed their concern, but she was ready to kill them. With a chuckle to the emptiness of her apartment, she trudged down the hall to her bathroom. After taking a moment to tend to her needs—unaccompanied, which was a pleasant change—Zarah pulled a brush through her curls and took a look at the faded bruise under her eye. She'd been lucky the other day. She was also fortunate now to have Jack and Lane helping her, but she was getting too damn used to them being around full-time.

As she shuffled back toward the living room from the bathroom, she heard a knock at the door. Jack just left and she'd watched him grab his keys, so she wondered what he'd forgotten. It was also curious as to why he knocked.

Pulling the door open, Zarah froze in place. She stared at her visitor.

"What do you want?" she asked, flatly.

"Yeah, and it's nice to see you too," Marcus said.

"How did you find me? Why did you find me?"

He shrugged. "I followed you home one day last week."

"You're stalking me?"

"That's some guard dog you got downstairs," he continued, ignoring her. "I told him I was your brother here to surprise you, and he let me in. Dumb old goat. We don't even look alike. You're black, I'm white."

"You're an ass." Zarah's blood began to boil. "What do you want?" she repeated.

"I just want to talk. Let me in."

When he endeavored to push past her to gain entrance into her apartment, she dug in her heels. Attempting to exert strength she didn't have to spare sent pain shooting through her muscles.

"No. Look, I'm trying to rest after the accident you made me have."

"Me? How in the hell is you wrapping your car around a tree my fault? You were the tool behind the wheel."

"How did you know I hit a tree?"

"I was following you."

"You've got to be kidding me. And you didn't help me?"

"When you didn't get out of your car, I called nine-one-one," he answered. "So how was it my fault?"

"I was distracted because my boss just shared with me that you had been arrested and why. Why, Marcus? Why'd you do something so stupid?"

Again he shrugged, and a smug grin curled his thin lips. "I figured I could get away with it. I still can with your help."

Zarah shook her head. "I'm not discussing anything about the case with you," she said. "By the way, what are you doing out? How did you make bond?"

"Had some money stashed away," he said.

"Stolen money, no doubt." Stolen money. Zarah then thought about the money she'd plucked out of Marcus's hand weeks earlier. With it, she'd furnished her apartment and socked some away for a rainy day. First thing Monday morning, she'd report it to Stephen. She'd have to turn the cash over and wondered what would happen to her furniture. "The money I took was stolen, wasn't it?" she asked, but she already knew the answer.

He nodded, his smug smirk still in place.

"Unbelievable," she snarled. "Why in the hell would you drag me into the middle of this?"

"Me? You stole that money from me."

"You stole it from your employer, Marcus!"

"Duh, and that's why I'm here. You're gonna help me."

"Sorry, I'm not working the case. Conflict of interest. Remember, we were involved at the time you were embezzling."

"Come on, don't give me that shit. I need to know what the state has on me. And you can get it."

"You know, you are such a pompous jackass. You've got a defense lawyer, ask him. The state will make the evidence available to your defense team. Surely you've heard of full disclosure."

"Oh, you're gonna help me because you owe me."

Was he fucking serious?

"I owe you?" she scoffed. "For what? Wait, don't even answer that. Just go. You need to leave. My boyfriend will be back any minute, and I want you gone."

Zarah didn't know where that came from, but since Marcus's face blanched, she decided to run with it.

"Boyfriend?" he retorted with a snort after composing himself. "That's a good one."

Zarah sighed in frustration. She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of a fight. She backed into her apartment and tried to close the door. "I'm not doing anything for you. Leave, or I'm going to call the police."

Marcus pushed against the door with enough force to knock Zarah off balance. She staggered backward, banging against the wall behind her. Pain shot through her tender shoulder, and her head instantly began to pound. Stepping inside her apartment, he gripped her arms tight. Zarah winced from the pain.

Leaning into her, Marcus snarled, "Listen, you fat fucking cow. You owe me for all that money you stole from me."

"The hell she does," Zarah heard an angry male voice roar. Marcus was suddenly wrenched away from her.

"Jack! Please!" Zarah called out, straightening herself with the help of the wall.

"Hey, asshole, let go of me," Marcus yelled.

Jack glanced at Zarah as he set a grocery bag containing the juice she'd asked for at her feet. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?" he asked, reaching for the

doorknob.

"I'm okay," she replied in a shaky voice. Her pride was wounded, but physically Marcus hadn't really hurt her.

"Stay right there," he said as he hauled Marcus out and pulled the door closed behind them.

Frozen where she stood, Zarah heard flesh strike flesh. Marcus howled in pain.

"You bastard," he snapped. "How dare you?"

"If you ever come near Zarah again, I'll choke the living shit out of you."

Though Jack's voice was low, she could hear his words clearly. "Do you hear me, you worthless son of a bitch?" A moment later, the door opened and Jack walked in shaking his left hand. "I need some ice." He grinned sheepishly.

"Jack, what did you do?" Zarah asked, following him into her kitchen.

"I wasn't going to stand idle while that prick put his hands on you."

"I'm not some insipid little twit, Jack, a fragile waif who can't handle her business."

"I know that. He put his hands on you. The bastard is lucky he walked away under his own power."

"Oh, Jack," she said, pulling two ice cube trays from the freezer and dumping the little frozen squares into a baggie. "If he presses charges—"

"He isn't going to press charges, because I'll hunt the little fucker down, rip his dick off, and shove it down his throat. What the hell was he doing here?"

Zarah took Jack's hand in hers and set the baggie atop the swelling knuckles.

"Thanks." He sighed and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"He's up on charges for embezzlement. Our office is prosecuting, and Marcus thought I'd give him what we've got on him."

"And you told him to go fuck himself, right?"

"Yes, though not in those words. And Jack, he's the reason I had the accident. I'd just learned of the charges before I left the office. My mind was racing, and I wasn't paying attention."

"I'll kill him," Jack stated.

"He isn't worth it. And I'm okay. Just a little banged up is all."

"If he comes near you again," Jack said as a knock sounded on the door. Taking the baggie of ice in his hand, he walked toward the door. "Or if he tries to contact you, I want to know about it."

Pulling the door open, he stepped back and Lane entered.

"What do you want to know about?" he asked, strolling past Jack, heading straight for Zarah. "See that, babe, less than thirty."

A chill coursed through Zarah at the feral gleam in Lane's eyes. She shivered when he dropped a kiss on her forehead. "How ya feeling, honey? You look a little peaked."

"Peaked?" she asked, cocking a brow.

"Zarah had an unwanted and uninvited guest just leave," Jack said and took the bag of takeout from Lane's hand.

"And I'm fine," she threw in.

"Who was here?" Lane directed his question to Jack as he followed him into the kitchen.

"Him," Jack said simply.

"Left here sporting a bloody nose, along with a blackening eye?"

"That's the one," Jack added.

"You do that?"

Jack nodded.

"Very nice work," Lane said with an approving nod. "Think you broke the nose?"

"That was my aim. But despite the crunching sound, I can't be sure."

"Neanderthals," Zarah said, rolling her eyes. "Didn't you take some oath to offer medical attention to someone in need?" she asked Lane.

"I announced I was an EMT and offered him service, and he told me to go fuck myself. If he ever comes near you—"

"Yeah, yeah," Zarah cut Lane off and reached between the two men for her burger and fries. "I already got that speech. You guys are making way too much of it."

After dinner, Zarah announced she was going to stand in a hot shower in hopes of soothing her tight, sore muscles. The pulsating showerhead worked wonders on the resistant kinks.

A half an hour later, she pushed the curtain aside after turning off the water and froze. Leaning against the door frame with his arms folded across his chest, Lane looked her over with a grin curling his full lips.

"Wanna use my muscle?" he asked, and Zarah's eyes dropped to a telltale bulge in the front of his jeans.

"Lane!"

"My arm muscles, sweetheart. Get your mind out of the gutter," he teased as he stepped into the bathroom and reached for a towel. "Let me help you dry off."

"I think I can manage," she replied, taking the towel from his hands.

"Okay, baby. Jack's pulling out some comfy sweats for you to put on."

Zarah began to dry herself as Lane resumed his position against the door frame.

"You guys need to stop doting on me," she said. "I'm fine."

Jack appeared behind Lane, his eyes flashing with desire as she wrapped the towel around her body.

"You ready to get dressed?" he asked.

Zarah nodded and walked past the two of them and into her room. As she strolled toward the edge of the bed, the weight of their combined stares was heavy. When she turned toward the two men, her body caught fire. Jack and Lane looked at her with burning desire in their eyes. Their breathing was shallow and raspy. The bulges in both their jeans stoked the smoldering embers in her belly.

It had been over a week since they'd last had sex together, and recently Zarah had thought of little else. Sandwiched between Jack and Lane was an incredible place to be. Within their combined embrace, she felt safe, protected.

Her libido wanted them. She wanted them.

"What's it going to take to convince you two I'm feeling better?" she asked. Her voice dropped to a sultry tone.

"Zarah?" Jack's tone carried his concern.

When she was with Jack and Lane, nothing else around her mattered. She surprised herself when the three of them were together. She explored her inhibitions and allowed herself to relax and enjoy the experience.

Right now she needed to feel safe. And Jack and Lane could do that. They made her feel safe and sexy. They always knew exactly what she needed.

"What do you have in mind, sunshine?" Lane asked with a broad, knowing smile.

Right now all that mattered was the three of them. Everything else could be

handled later.

"Well," she said, loosening the towel tucked between her breasts. "I sort of thought we'd get naked"—Zarah dropped the towel to the floor—"and then see where things went from there."

Lane chuckled. "Mmm, I love the way you think," he said, taking a step forward. Jack's arm shot out. His hand gripped Lane's forearm, stopping him in his tracks. His eyes narrowed. "You're still sore," he said to her before releasing his hold on Lane.

Through the concern she saw there, Zarah zeroed in on the heat glittering within.

Reaching up, she cupped her breasts in her hands, squeezing them together. "Not that sore," she purred. Lifting one breast, she flicked the tip of her tongue across the rigid peak.

"Oh fuck me," Lane groaned, his eyes riveted on her chest. "Do that again."

Zarah smiled and then fulfilled his request on the other breast. She loved the way their eyes followed the path of her hands as she touched herself. Taking on the role of seductress was a new endeavor for her, but the look of hunger on their faces told her she was seducing just right.

In silence, both men stared back at her, flames of need burning in their eyes.

Confirmation of their arousals bulged at the fronts of their jeans. Mirrored expressions of near pain had her stifling a laugh. The evidence was obvious both men wanted her, yet neither one made a move toward her.

"I'm waiting," she cooed, pinching her aching nipples and sinking her teeth into her lower lip.

"W-we don't want to hurt you," Jack said in a hoarse voice.

It warmed her how Jack's concern for her well-being was paramount to his own desire.

"I won't break," she returned, backing up until her legs touched her bed.

Sitting on the mattress, Zarah wiggled across the surface to the middle and leaned back on one elbow. She spread her legs wide. Stroking her other hand down her belly to her sex, she rubbed the damp outer lips before slipping a finger between her plump folds.

"Mmm," she hummed. "I know you won't hurt me."

Jack's darkened gray eyes and Lane's twinkling baby blues focused between her legs as her finger disappeared. The control she possessed over the men in that moment awed her. Never before had she felt so empowered, so in control. So desirable.

Lane took a step toward the bed, his fingers fumbling with the button and zipper of his jeans. "I'll be careful," he said, shoving his pants down his hips and releasing his raging hard-on.

The bed dipped as he crawled atop it and settled his broad shoulders between her thighs.

"Open up for me," he requested, licking his lips.

Zarah spread the wet petals apart with her fingers.

"That's my girl," he said. He dipped his head and dragged his tongue along the length of her pussy.

A moan caught in her throat.

Zarah's eyes lifted to Jack, who had begun to fist the hard length of his cock

with his hand. She smiled at him. His smoldering gaze made the muscles in her pussy grip around Lane's talented tongue.

"What are you waiting for?" she purred to Jack.

His eyes sparkled with need and encouragement. He seemed to be relishing her newfound assertiveness as his eyes took in every inch of her displayed before him.

Lane's teeth nipped at the flesh of her inner thigh. A gasp of surprise slipped through her parted lips at the brief splinter of pain he created. Lane's deep chuckle against her vibrated throughout her body. His mouth felt so good. Jack's heated glance dropped to watch Lane between her legs. "Just enjoying the show," he said before again lifting his gaze to hers. His tongue ran over his lips, and then he smiled. "You are so sexy."

"Why don't you bring that cock over here and let me have a taste?" she said. The boldness in her voice surprised her.

"As you wish," he replied, his voice harsh with desire.

From her splayed position on the bed, Zarah watched Jack shed his jeans and underwear, along with his socks and shoes, pull his T-shirt over his head, and toss it on the floor.

Jack held her gaze as Lane's tongue flicked across her clit, and her arousal gained momentum. For several moments, Jack simply watched Lane go down on her, need burning in his eyes. Zarah was so far beyond being turned on when Jack began to move. He strolled past the foot of the bed, once again stroking his penis. His body was incredible. Ripped pectoral muscles tensed as he walked. And right now, he belonged to her. He stopped behind her, and she sighed as his hand settled on her shoulder.

"Lie down," he instructed.

When she lay back, his hand supported her neck as her head hung off the side of the bed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she moaned, both in need and from Lane's mouth concentrating on the throbbing button between her legs.

"Open up, then," he said, brushing the angry purple head of his cock across her lips.

She parted her lips, and Jack slid inside.

The musky scent of him swirled under her nostrils, pushing her arousal higher. She couldn't get enough of his scent. The taste of his flesh as it stroked along her tongue sent her pulse racing. She moaned around him in appreciation.

"That's it," he praised hoarsely. "Take it all."

Between her thighs, Lane's mouth worked magic on her pussy, nibbling, licking, sucking. Her body soared at an alarming pace. Her arousal climbed higher.

One of Jack's callused hands manipulated one of her breasts and then the other. The rough pads of his fingers plucked at her swollen nipples, which were standing erect and craving the warmth of his mouth.

In addition to Lane's oral assault, Zarah felt the slide of a finger pressing inside her and then a second. With her mouth full of Jack's delicious cock, all Zarah could do was moan.

"Feel good?" Jack asked, tugging on her aching nipples.

A groan erupted from her chest.

When a third finger stretched her farther, Zarah blew apart at the seams. She gripped the comforter in her fists on either side of her body, crying out her release around Jack's shaft as it slid easily between her lips.

As her body went limp, Jack pulled his member free of her mouth. His fingers continued to tweak at her breasts.

"Hell, you taste good, babe," Lane crooned from between her legs. He tapped her right thigh as he leveled his body over hers. "Come on. Time to ride my stick, doll," he added, sucking her free nipple into his mouth.

With the waves of her orgasm subsiding, Zarah struggled to sit up. She studied Lane as he settled with his back against the wooden headboard. After rolling a condom over his cock, he spread his legs and gave her a sexy grin. "Climb aboard," he said, offering her his hand.

The sight of him offering himself to her made her heart race.

To her right, Zarah glanced up at Jack. Despite everything the three of them had shared in the past and right now, she needed... Desire and need glinted in Jack's eyes. With a wink, he gave her what she sought. His approval.

They exchanged smiles.

Zarah crawled on her hands and knees across the bed toward Lane. She leaned over and dragged her tongue from his navel up over the puckered tip of his left nipple. Lane groaned, grabbing a fistful of her curls. Continuing upward, she licked his neck, savoring the rapid pulse in his throat. When she met his lips, he pulled her mouth tight to his, his tongue pummeling her depths.

The bed dipped as Jack climbed atop. His hands gripped her waist from behind and helped her position herself over Lane's cock. The soft smattering of hairs covering his chest tickled across her back as he moved in close.

"You heard Lane, honey," he whispered in her ear. "Get comfortable on his cock, so I can slide mine in your snug ass."

A shiver of need rippled through her. All she needed was to be with the two of them. With them she felt safe, secure, protected. Between them she felt desired, needed, and, more importantly, wanted.

With reluctance, she pulled away from Lane's kiss. Over her shoulder, Zarah met Jack's hungry gaze as he pushed her down onto Lane's lap. She whimpered as Lane's cock stretched her. He surged deep, and she strained to keep her eyes open and hold Jack's gaze.

"Ah damn!" Lane groaned. "You are so hot and tight."

Lane's hands joined Jack's at her hips, urging her to move. Controlling her movements, Lane encouraged her to ride him vigorously up and down several strokes, before slowing her to a gentle gyration against him.

"Yeah," he said. "Just like that."

The mattress moved as Jack shifted behind her, and his hands left her hips. He leaned over to the nightstand. She watched him as he tugged the drawer open, reached inside, and withdrew a tube of lubricant. Seconds later, his lips brushed along her right shoulder. A tremor moved through her.

"Wait for me, sweetheart," he whispered in her ear.

His finger caressed over the sensitive pucker of her anus. The cool smear of lube along the warmth of her body made her stiffen.

"Then you'd better hurry, buddy." Lane chuckled.

A single thick digit entered her backside, coating the snug channel with the

slippery gel. The muscles in her lower body gripped around the pleasurable intrusions in both holes.

"Oh Lord," she whimpered.

Another slick finger joined the first, stretching the tight ring between her cheeks.

"Hold on," Jack said. "Gotta make sure you're nice and wet and ready for me. I don't want to hurt you."

Squeezing her eyes shut, Zarah took several deep breaths as Jack pressed a third digit inside. Several moments passed before he withdrew his probing fingers. She felt the smooth crown of his cock rub along the seam of her ass.

"Here it comes," he warned, pressing the fat head inside.

Despite loving the feel of both men filling her at the same time, the initial pressure as Jack entered her ass made her tense.

Her eyes popped open to see Lane watching her with a sexy grin curling his full lips.

"Relax, angel," Jack encouraged behind her.

The world exploded around her as Jack cupped her right breast and squeezed the nipple between his fingers. Lane leaned forward and suckled her left nipple hungrily. His hands held her hips in place as Jack continued to feed his cock inside. Blowing out a breath, Zarah pushed against the pressure in her rectum, easing Jack's entry.

"That's it," he said. Pressed against her back, his body trembled. "Almost there."

Once Jack was fully seated in her ass, the three sat still, shuddering only when a tremor of pleasure vibrated through one of them.

Sandwiched between her two lovers, Zarah found nirvana. She reveled in the pleasant throb of her intimate muscles as they yielded to accommodate the girth and weight of both men. The combined scents of their arousal fragrancd the air in her bedroom. Heavy, labored breathing was music to her ears.

Then they moved.

Jack pulled back while Lane's hands urged Zarah to rotate her hips in a figure-eight motion.

"Y-you're...killing m-me," she whimpered, reaching with one hand to grasp the headboard for support. The fingers of her other hand gripped Lane's left bicep as they rocked as one.

Simultaneously, their cocks stroked a delightful rhythm. Pushing. Pulling.

Demanding. She suspected it took them great pains to continue being gentle with her recovering, bruised-up frame.

Sweat peppered Lane's upper lip. Liquid trickled from his hairline, down his temples and cheeks, to drip onto his chest.

Heat burned deep in her core with each advance and retreat of the hard flesh inside her.

Jack's damp chest pressed against her back. Droplets of sweat splashed against her shoulder as he nuzzled the crook of her neck.

Perspiration glistened on her flesh. Tiny rivulets tickled her skin as they ran down her body.

Every cell in her body tingled. Every fine hair on her body stood on end.

Zarah's senses met overload. "Fuck," she croaked, reaching for zenith.

"Let go," Jack said against her neck.

She began bouncing a jerky rhythm between them, thankful Lane held her hips steady. Her need wiped out what remained of her coordination as she struggled to meet release.

"S-so c-close," she sobbed. "C-can't..."

The warmth of a hand settled against the V between her splayed thighs.

"Jack," she sighed, recognizing his touch.

He tugged on her aching, swollen clit with his thumb and forefinger.

"We've got you, sweetheart," he assured her.

At his words, the world around her shattered. Splinters of bright colors flickered behind the eyelids she'd slammed shut as the waves of climax tore through her. The harder her body trembled, the tighter Jack and Lane held her in the safety of their combined embrace.

"That's our girl," Lane said, pressing his lips to her cheek. "Hell!" he groaned as the muscles in her pussy continued to spasm. "That's it, give us all you got."

"Yeah, baby," Jack praised.

The room spiraled as they kept up their stroking. Faster. Slower. They were unrelenting as they worked to push her over again.

"Oh God." Her voice was a hoarse croak.

"Oh yeah, sweetheart. Do it again," Lane said. "I'm right behind you."

The tips of Lane's fingers dug into her hips, sure to leave bruises. She didn't care. All that mattered was that he held her. Touched her. He rocked her against his groin faster, his cock thrusting deeper with each pull on her body.

The muscles in her ass and pussy had grown sensitive after the first orgasm.

Each pass of their hard flesh along her tenderness sent jolts of painful pleasure ricocheting throughout her frame.

Jack's body tensed the same moment his cock jerked in her backside. He cried out his release against her shoulder.

Beneath her, Lane captured a nipple between his teeth and bit down, sending Zarah over the edge a second time. His tongue stroked twice over the aching tip to soothe the sting from his bite before his body stiffened and his cock danced inside her.

Wrapped in each other's arms, the trio struggled to draw much-needed air into their lungs. Whereas Jack's and Lane's bodies were still as they held her, Zarah's continued to tremble.

Silent moments passed as she lay in contentment against Lane's broad chest with Jack pressed snug to her back. As Jack began to pull his penis from her ass, Zarah squeezed with what little energy she had left. His chuckle echoed Lane's, both vibrating through her.

"Let us go, honey," Jack said.

Shaking her head, she emitted a slight giggle. "Never," she whispered.

"Just our cocks, sweetheart," Lane added. "And only for a little while. Jack and I promise we'll give them to you again."

"Yeah, as much as you want," Jack said.

In the wee hours of the morning, Zarah awoke. Her body ached—pleasurably in some places, agonizingly in others. Beneath the weight of Jack's and Lane's limbs,

she lay trapped. Atop each of her outstretched legs laid one of theirs. They'd each slung an arm across her belly.

It was still dark outside, and a cool breeze drifted in through the open window.

Her bladder began protesting its being ignored now that she was awake.

Oh hell, she grumbled silently.

After freeing her right arm, she carefully lifted Lane's arm off her and then Jack's. With her upper body freed, she pushed herself upright. Sliding her legs out from under the weight of the ones pinning hers, Zarah tugged the sheet up as high as she could to cover both men as she wiggled to the foot of the bed. Jack's fingers gripped her forearm before she had an opportunity to right herself.

"Where are you going?" he croaked in a sleepy voice.

"I need to pee."

"I'll come—"

"Oh no you won't," she whispered, patting his thigh when he attempted to move.

"I'll only be a minute."

"All right," he said and settled back into sleep.

The man on the other side of her bed stirred.

"What's wrong?" Lane asked.

Zarah glanced over her shoulder. Giving his calf a rub, she answered, "Nothing. Go back to sleep."

A snore was his reply.

After relieving herself, Zarah slowly made her way up the hallway toward the kitchen. With a glass of juice in hand, she snatched the quilt balled up in the corner of the sofa and walked across the living room to the sliding glass door leading to the balcony.

Setting the glass on the small plastic table, she wrapped the blanket around her and sat in one of the chairs. In the quiet of the night air, she reflected on evening. The experience the three of them shared was by far the most intense. Even more so than the first night they'd been together.

Tonight, she'd shed her inhibitions, took control, and expressed a side of herself she hadn't even known existed. She wasn't sure what to make of it. Jack and Lane had enjoyed themselves, as had she, but just what the hell was going on between the three of them?

They had fun, and sexually speaking, the two men together were dynamic. But in reality, could what the three of them shared stand the test of time? Was she deluding herself to think otherwise? And how would she cope with the pain if all it fell apart?

Each and every day, and with each and every encounter with Jack and Lane, Zarah lost a little more of herself to them. And that scared her.

Chapter Eighteen

Three days after the last time Jack, Zarah, and Lane spend the night together, Zarah went MIA once again. Jack was beyond pissed.

The numerous messages he left on her answering machine went unacknowledged. The knocks to her door unanswered. On day two of her avoidance, he placed several calls to her office, to no avail.

Earlier that morning, Jack had called in to advise Freddie he'd be late, and

took up position in the hall outside Zarah's apartment door. Sure, ambushing her was an immature measure, but damn it, he wasn't going to allow her to avoid him any longer. Come hell or high water, he was going to force her if necessary to face what was building between them.

A half hour before she would normally leave for work, Zarah's door opened. Jack stepped in front of the opening. "Good morning."

"Shit, Jack," she gasped, slamming her palm to her chest. "You scared the hell out of me."

Jack noticed that, along with the look of surprise on her face, her eyes were red and swollen. She appeared to have been crying.

"What's with the avoidance games again?" he demanded.

"Please, Jack, I can't do this right now," she replied, dropping her gaze.

"Too damn bad." Jack placed his hands on her hips and turned her body, urging her back into the apartment.

"Jack, please, I'm going to be late for work. We can do this later."

"Again, too damn bad. I want answers. And neither one of us is going anywhere until I get them."

"Fine," she answered softly. "Go ahead."

"What the hell is going on? Why aren't you taking my calls? Answering the door? What happened? Things were going so well between us. What the hell did I do for you to ignore me for three fucking days?"

Zarah began shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other, staring at him. Several moments passed in silence, which angered him further. Though he could see she wanted to, she refused to speak. A mixture of emotions flitted across her face as she held his gaze. Anger flickered in her eyes, along with confusion and uncertainty.

The uncertainty twisted Jack's gut. After all they'd shared over the past couple of months, why was she still doubtful of his interest and intentions? This is what he needed answered.

In the beginning he'd backed off because it was what Zarah needed. She'd wanted to take things slow, and despite him wanting to take things at a faster pace, Jack had conceded. He knew what he wanted, what he needed, but the last thing he had wanted to do was push Zarah before she was ready. She had needed some time, and he'd given it to her. But that was in the beginning, and now it had to stop. Hell, they'd been building something for almost two months now. It wasn't like he was under her feet every waking moment of the day and night; he was content to allow Zarah to set the pace, and they were still moving along as she wanted. When she still hadn't spoken, Jack tried a different tactic.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

Before dropping her head again, she exhaled a long breath. Jack caught the glint of hurt in her gaze. Where in the hell did it come from? Hadn't he been clear enough in his feelings for her? She stood silent, now refusing to look him in the eye.

"Please, Zarah, tell me what you're thinking," he said. His tone was near-pleading. "Zarah, look at me." When she refused, he cupped her chin and lifted her head until she had no choice but to look at him. "Are you content to live the rest of your life alone? Is that truly what you want?" Her silence angered him. "I don't believe for one minute that you do. We have chemistry, you

and me, and I know damn well you feel it," he told her, trying to keep his voice even and calm. "What happened to you looking forward to a new life, the new Zarah, living the life you want, huh? Tell me, does that new life include me, or doesn't it?"

"It's not that simple," she finally said.

Jack was losing his patience. He wanted to grab hold of her and shake her until she saw reason.

"I think it is. I think it is that simple. You either want me, want to be with me, or you don't. I love you. I've made no secret of that. Why do you still refuse to acknowledge what we share? I don't understand why after my laying everything out on the line for you, you can't give me one good goddamn reason why we can't build a future together. Why, Zarah? Why?"

"I don't want to be hurt again."

"Ah hell, no one wants to be hurt, baby." Jack felt terrible for pushing her. He knew she was still fragile, and he swore he'd never add to that anxiety. "I've never hurt you, Zarah, and I never will. Take a chance on me, honey, on us."

"I took a chance once, Jack, on Marcus," she snapped. "And look where that got me."

"Look where it got you?" he repeated and took a step back. "For the love of Christ, Zarah, it brought you to me. Our pasts brought us together. Do you have any idea how often I've thanked God for Marcus being a fucked-up asshole? As shitty as what he did to you was, I thank God that he did it."

She narrowed her eyes. That pissed her off. Maybe they'd make some headway now. Jack wasn't certain how much longer he could maintain his composure. Well, what was left of it.

"I'm not him," he said with a raised voice.

"I know you're not! But what you're doing is no different than what he did."

Jack took a step back, stunned by her statement. "Excuse me?"

Zarah lifted her chin. The quivering of her lower lip ripped at Jack's insides.

"You're using me. Just like he did."

"What!"

"Not for money or my work contacts. What you're doing is much worse. Robbing me of a piece of my soul." Tears welled up in her eyes.

Jack's mind began to race. What in the hell was she talking about? She was the one calling all the shots. How in the hell was he using her?

"Uh, care to explain? Because I'm confused as hell by that comment."

"I'm just some fuck toy for you, Jack. You and Lane." Anger and frustration burned in her eyes. Her full, luscious lips were pulled into a thin line.

"Whoa! Just a minute, sweetheart. Besides that first night together, you have been the one to initiate any intimacy between us. And it sure as shit appeared to me like you were enjoying yourself."

Then it hit him. She was running scared. She'd faced her feelings, and what she found frightened her. There was no question she was attracted to him. And to Lane.

And that's what had her running scared.

Well, damn it, she wasn't going to run from him or what they could be. "Do you get some sick thrill out of toying with my emotions? Punishing me, Zarah?"

She stared up at him, as if uncertain of what she should say. "I'm not punishing

you.”

“Yeah, well, from where I’m standing, that’s exactly how it feels to me.”

Zarah dropped her shoulders. Jack didn’t know if the gesture was made in defeat, or because he’d worn her down.

“Jack,” she said softly. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” he asked and waited for a reply. “You keep me at arm’s length—when it suits you—punishing me on behalf of all mankind for what that stupid fuck you used to live with did.”

The look in her eyes told him the fight in her was almost gone, and he still didn’t know where he stood. Where they stood.

Blowing out a heavy sigh, Zarah squared her shoulders. “What is it you think you want, Jack?”

“I. Want. You,” he growled through gritted teeth.

“But why? Look at me.”

He did and fought the urge to gather her in his arms and take her to the ground where they stood to prove he loved what he saw.

“And?” he asked.

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

That question confused him.

“I’m fat, Jack. F-A-T. And I just can’t see you being happy with a fat, frumpy girlfriend at your side.”

“Wow. Do you really think so little of me?”

“I’ve played this game before, Jack. Been there, done that, got a drawer full of T-shirts.” She sucked in a deep breath before continuing. “This has to stop. My self-esteem can’t take another hit. I just want to love and to be loved—”

“And I’m standing right here in front of you, claiming the same damn thing, sweetheart.” His heart split in two.

She stared back at him, her body tense and trembling.

He couldn’t do it anymore. Try as he might, he just couldn’t fight her any longer. No matter how much he loved her, how much he assured her the extra weight she carried didn’t take away from her beauty as far as he was concerned. For the life of him he just didn’t know what else to do.

“I love you,” he said.

Zarah choked back a sob, her beautiful eyes brimming with tears.

“Well, there is one thing we agree on, doll.”

“What’s that?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“My self-esteem can’t take another hit either.”

Jack stepped forward and placed his hands on either side of Zarah’s face, tipping her head up to look at him. The unshed tears in her eyes tore at his gut. Dipping his head, he placed a soft kiss against her trembling lips. Drawing away from the taste of her, he expelled a sigh to calm himself.

“Listen to me, lady,” he said in a soft voice, still holding her face and her attention. “I love you, and I want you. It is that simple for me. I want you to wear my ring. To bear my children. I want to share my dreams, my goals, my successes, and even my failures with you, Zarah. I want us to tackle the future, our future, together. Because you were meant for me, baby, just as I was meant for you.”

A tear trickled from the corner of her left eye, and as badly as Jack wanted to

kiss it away, he denied himself.

"I've told you what I want, my beauty, but I just can't fight you anymore. When you decide what it is you want, you know where to find me."

Having finished pouring his heart out to her, Jack dipped his head and captured Zarah's mouth as her lips parted to speak words he wasn't certain he wanted to hear. With a final kiss to her forehead, Jack released her and then did the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

He turned and walked away.

Chapter Nineteen

As Jack's work boots slapped against the concrete stairs, Zarah's knees gave out. With the support of the wall behind her, she slid down to the floor. What in the hell is wrong with me? She'd said nothing and just let him walk away.

Across the hall, Eric's door opened, and he stepped into the opening, looking at her sitting on the floor.

"How much did you hear?" she asked through a hiccup.

"Most of it. Jack's not quiet when he's pissed. You okay?"

Fearing she'd burst into tears and sob like a baby, she simply shook her head.

Eric crossed the hall and entered her apartment. Squatting, he reached out and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Come here, sweetheart," he said, gathering her in his arms.

Pressing her face into Eric's chest, Zarah lost it.

"What have I done?" she sobbed.

"Shh," he whispered against the top of her head. "It's okay." Eric held her tight as she cried.

"Hey." Scott's voice was soft as it carried from the hallway to her ears. "Do you need me to stay, because I will?"

Eric didn't speak, but she felt his head shake from side to side.

"Okay. Slide your feet over and let me close the door. Give you two some privacy."

She felt Eric shift slightly.

"I really fucked up," she whimpered when the door closed.

"It'll be all right," Eric said.

After several moments, he urged her to stand. "Come on, let's move to the couch," he said.

Once she was seated on the sofa, Eric disappeared toward the bathroom and returned with a damp washcloth. Taking the cold cloth, she pressed it to her face. The coolness calmed some of the fire burning just below the surface of her skin. After removing the washcloth, she found him standing in front of her holding a glass of water in one hand and two Tylenol in the other.

"Thanks," she said after swallowing the pills.

"You bet."

On the sofa, Zarah's body trembled, and she had no energy to stop it. Eric, the ever-great friend, sensed her distress and held his hand out to her.

"Come on. You're going to jump in a warm shower; it'll help you relax. Then we'll talk."

Zarah nodded and allowed him to lead her to the bathroom at the end of the hall.

Pushing her inside, he pulled the door closed, leaving her alone. After turning on the water, she shed her clothes and stepped over the side of the tub. For fifteen minutes, she stood under the hot spray and cried. When she shut the water off and stepped out, she found her robe lying on the counter and realized that Eric must have come in at some point to leave it.

After drying off and wrapping her robe around her, she opened the door to find Eric leaning against the archway leading to her bedroom.

"Feel a little better?" he asked.

Zarah nodded. "I suppose a little," she replied.

"That's better than not at all. Come on, I made us a pot of tea," he said, taking her hand and leading her back into the living room.

When she took a seat on the couch, he tossed a lightweight blanket over her lap. Though she was shivering, she was far from cold, but the gesture was comforting.

"So," Eric began, handing her a steaming cup of herbal tea. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," she replied, lifting the cup to her lips.

"Well, I think you should just throw in the towel and cut your losses," Eric said, sitting back into the overstuffed cushions. "He's hardly worth it after his behavior this morning."

Zarah nearly spat out her tea. "Excuse me? What sort of friendly advice is that?"

"Well, you said you didn't know what you were going to do, so I was just throwing out a suggestion."

She scowled at him and took another drink from her cup.

"I don't want to be hurt," she snapped.

"Uh, can't use that one," Eric said. "Try again."

"Pardon?"

"No one purposely puts themselves out there to be hurt, babe. Therefore, you can't use it, because no one wants to get hurt." Eric shrugged. "Can't use it."

Zarah worried her lower lip for several moments before continuing. Gritting her teeth, she elaborated. "One day Jack is going to realize the mistake he made by being with me."

"And how is being with you a mistake?"

"Look at me, Eric. There will come a time, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but there will come a day when he wakes up and sees me as the overweight, ordinary, nothing-special woman that I am, and leave me. Just like Marcus did. And I will be hurt."

"Yeah, okay. Let me tell you a story about a young man named Eric."

"Eric, please."

He raised a hand to silence her. "Eric had been struggling with his sexuality since adolescence and one day made the decision it was time to come out. He wasn't worried about how his family would react. You see, his Aunt Rita and Uncle Mack thought the world of him and had promised him early on in his life that they believed in him and were proud of him. Eric's greatest concern was how his friends would react. He knew some of his friendships would change, and possibly end, but he had to be true to himself."

"Eric, you don't need to tell me—"

He ignored her and continued. "So, after telling his friends and family of his

decision to live openly as a gay man, a couple of guys who he thought were friends took him out for drinks. That night, Eric had the supreme shit kicked out of him by his so-called friends, and they left his battered and bleeding body in a bush outside the apartment where he lived. In the wee hours of the morning, two men were stumbling home after a night out on the town and came across Eric's unconscious body. Jack and Lane—I mean, the two strangers—called an ambulance and sat by Eric's bedside at the hospital until he regained consciousness. When he did, Eric was prepared to call it quits. He'd risked everything, and look where it got him. The two strangers reminded Eric, sure, he could sit back and continue to be a punching bag for homophobes in the neighborhood, or he could nurse his hurts, embrace and learn from the experience, and move on with his life. Now, Eric's physical wounds healed, and in time, so did the emotional ones. That being said, if Eric had decided to give up on life and spend the rest of his days shielding himself from the possibility of being hurt again, he never would have met the love of his life a couple of years later, and for now, be living happily ever after."

Zarah sat speechless.

"Now, what's stopping you from believing in Jack, and what the two of you can be together? And don't give me that bullshit about being afraid of getting hurt. Unfortunately, sweetheart, getting hurt is a part of life, so that excuse ain't going to work on me."

Now was the time to get it all out in the open. She knew Eric wouldn't judge her, but she was still having trouble bringing herself to say the words out loud.

"It isn't just Jack. It's Lane as well," she said.

"Okay. How does he fit in, besides the obvious?"

Zarah sighed and studied Eric for a moment. "I've been with both of them," she said. "Sexually."

"Together? Like all three of you at the same time?"

She nodded.

"All right," he replied with a shrug, not seeming the least bit disturbed by her declaration.

"Do you know what that makes me?"

"Adventurous?"

When she narrowed her eyes at him, he raised a brow in question.

"What? Isn't that every woman's fantasy?" he asked. "Listen, sweetheart, I'm a man. My being gay buys me a little leeway when it comes to emotions and sensitivity, but I am still a guy. You're going to have to spell it out for me. Oh, and use little words, if you don't mind."

"I feel something for the both of them, Eric, and it scares the hell out of me."

"What is it you feel? Start there for me."

"I care for them both. I love them both."

"Okay. So what's the problem?"

"I just don't know that it's reciprocated," she said, knowing that was a damn lie.

And Eric saw right through it.

"Are you kidding me? Are you fucking blind, woman? Or just stupid?"

"Hey! Listen, you flaming queen, you don't have to be like that," she snapped.

Eric grinned at her. "Actually, Scott's the bottom, so technically he's the queen."

Zarah couldn't help but laugh. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Do you know what I see when Jack looks at you? Devotion.

Unconditional love and acceptance. It's the same with Lane too. It's a look most women wish for from their man. And it's yours, honey, times two. I see my Uncle Mack and Aunt Rita in their younger years when you and Jack are together. To this day, my uncle would move heaven and earth for Aunt Rita if she asked him to, and Jack and Lane would do the same for you."

"But it isn't fair to either of them that I'm attracted to both of them. What kind of person does that make me? And if you say adventurous again, I'll throttle you."

"It makes you a very extraordinary woman to have enough love in your heart for two men, and incredibly special that they are willing to share in that love."

She didn't feel extraordinary or special. She felt confused and unworthy.

"How many times have the three of you been together?" he asked and reached for the teapot to top them both up.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Humor me."

Her cheeks warmed at the numerous erotic memories flickering in her mind.

"Several."

"Who suggests it, or initiates?"

"I do," she admitted, shifting uncomfortably.

"And both Jack and Lane are willing participants?"

"Yes."

"Then there's your answer as to if it's fair to them. If either of them had a problem with your loving both of them, neither would participate in a ménage with the other one. Most men don't share real well when it comes to other men having sex with their woman."

From her perch on the sofa, Zarah glanced over and read the digital clock on the stove in the kitchen.

"Oh Jesus, it's after nine!"

"Don't panic," Eric said. "While you were in the shower, I called Paulette and told her you were under the weather and wouldn't be in. She said to take care of yourself."

"Thanks. You're too good to me, Eric, you know that?"

"Yes, I am. And what thanks do I get? You calling me nasty names." He blew out a woof when she smacked him with an accent pillow she had resting on her lap.

Chapter Twenty

Zarah didn't realize just how much the silent treatment and avoidance hurt until it was happening to her. A couple of weeks earlier when Jack walked away, her heart broke. Shattered, to be more precise.

Pouring her soul out to Eric had felt good and had been a necessary step in forcing her to face her fears. From behind the closed blinds of her bedroom window later that night after their argument, she'd watched Jack pull into the parking lot after work and expected, even hoped, he'd come knocking. The knock never came. The phone didn't ring either. Nor the next day and night.

The calls she'd made went unanswered and unacknowledged. What hurt the most was that he even ignored the knocks to his apartment door.

She knew she deserved the treatment because it was the same damn thing she'd done to him.

For days, Zarah had sat in the silence of her apartment and finally acknowledged what she'd been feeling all along. She'd fallen in love. Head over heels. After spending time sorting through her insecurities, she realized that as long as she had Jack in her corner, she could tackle anything.

So, tonight, she planned to take a page from Jack's book and was prepared to camp outside his door until morning if necessary. Setting a case of beer at her feet, Zarah adjusted her grip on the casserole dish Rita had packed up earlier. She stared at the door for several heartbeats, drumming up her courage. Taking a deep breath, she held it and reached out and knocked.

What seemed like an eternity passed before the door swung open and Jack's muscular frame filled the entrance. Though it was nearing nine in the evening, he was still dressed in his uniform. For a split second, Zarah thought Jack's expression flashed happiness at seeing her, but if it had, it was gone just as quickly. The stoic look he gave her sliced through her heart like a knife.

"H-hi," she stammered.

"Hello," he replied coolly.

Her lower lip quivered as she fought the urge to race to the stairs and back to the safety of her apartment. Jack's eyes dropped to her mouth, but his expression never changed.

"Missed you at dinner," she managed with a wavering voice.

"Long day."

"Are you just getting in?" she asked, already knowing he had. She'd been watching the parking lot all evening, anxious for him to come home.

He nodded.

Zarah took his not inviting her in as a bad sign, but she wasn't about to be deterred. It didn't matter that she felt as though she was close to tossing her cookies due to nerves, she owed Jack an explanation, and she wasn't leaving until she gave it.

"Rita prepared spaghetti and meatballs tonight," she offered, holding out the casserole dish. "Your favorite. She wanted me to tell you she used all beef because that's how you like it."

He gave a half nod as he took the dish from her outstretched hands.

"Sorry, there wasn't any garlic bread left over. But it doesn't really reheat very well anyway."

The tension between them grew even thicker as they stood in silence. She had no one to blame but herself. It seemed to her that with the anger radiating off Jack, maybe now wasn't the time to talk. His expression still hadn't changed from the moment he opened the door, and if possible, he appeared to be wound even tighter in those few passing moments.

It was a cop-out, but she didn't particularly want to have this conversation standing in the corridor. She was so fucking weak. She didn't merit a man like Jack in her life.

"Well, it looks like you've had a tough day, so I'll just, uh, let you—"

"Why are you here, Zarah?"

His cold stare, combined with his stiff tone, brought the sting of tears to her eyes. However, she knew she deserved no less after their encounter a couple of weeks earlier.

"I owe you an apology, Jack," she said with as much confidence as she could muster. "And you deserve an explanation. I don't like what happened between us the other day, and I was hoping you'd allow me a few minutes of your time."

The silent treatment he gave her was infuriating. Blowing out a sigh of defeat, she was about to turn on her heel when his voice stopped her.

"Have you eaten?" he asked in a tone more like the Jack she'd come to know. Come to love.

Unsure if her voice would be there, she shook her head no. The only reason she went down to the Davises' tonight was in hopes of seeing Jack. But he'd been a no-show.

Taking a step back into his apartment, Jack stepped aside and with a wave of his arm gestured her inside.

For a moment, Zarah's feet were frozen in place. Her heart raced, and her head began to spin. Get your ass in there! a voice in the back of her mind screamed. She reached down to pick up the case of beer and crossed the threshold.

"Thank you," she said, glancing up at him as she passed.

Though his eyes had softened, his lips remained tight, his body tense. They walked through the apartment toward the kitchen.

"I'll put these in the fridge," she said, setting the case on the floor and reaching for the refrigerator door. "Would you like one?"

Jack set the casserole dish on the counter and, without looking at her, said,

"No, thanks. If you don't mind, I was just about to jump in the shower when you knocked, so I'm going to go and do that."

"No, of course not," she replied. There was clearly annoyance in his voice.

Though it was important for her to get things off her chest as soon as possible, she considered her options and offered Jack an out. "Listen, Jack, if this is a bad time, I can go and come back later."

Jack seemed to give that some thought. Then he shrugged and said as he left the kitchen, "Do whatever you want."

The words stung. But not as much as the tone they were said in.

When the door to the bathroom closed, Zarah contemplated leaving. Jack's tone was clear, her visit wasn't welcomed. And why would it be after the other morning? He'd been so hurt. But Zarah swallowed her pride, squared her shoulders, and finished loading the beer in the fridge. She was not leaving until she'd said what came here to say.

Reaching over the stove, she turned the dial for the oven and slid the casserole dish inside. Pulling the door on the fridge open again, she spied a half a loaf of bread and a tub of margarine. She took them out and set them on the counter. After covering several slices in spread, she stacked them on a plate.

Ten minutes passed, and Zarah found herself standing in the doorway of the kitchen staring up the hall at the closed bathroom door. She thought Jack would have been done by now. Was he staying in there to avoid her?

Half an hour later, the water finally shut off in the bathroom. From her seat on the sofa, Zarah heard the curtain being pushed aside. It took another fifteen minutes for Jack to make his way into the living room.

A look of surprise crossed his face when he saw her.

"Wow," she commented lightly, rising to her feet. "I was getting ready to send a search party in for you."

"You're still here?"

Did she hear disappointment in his voice, or was he just surprised?

Managing a weak smile, she nodded.

"The spaghetti smells good," he said and proceeded toward the kitchen.

"No," she blurted and stepped in front of Jack. He took a step backward when she raised her hand to touch him. Disappointed at his pulling away, Zarah lowered her arm. "Have a seat. Let me get it for you."

Jack shrugged and walked around her to sit in the corner of the sofa.

A moment later, Zarah came back into the living room with a heaping plate of pasta in one hand and bread in the other. Setting it on the coffee table in front of Jack, she excused herself again to return with a bottle of beer.

"You aren't eating?" he asked, picking the bottle up off the table and taking a long pull from it.

Zarah shook her head. With her nerves wreaking havoc with her insides, she was afraid to put anything in her belly until after she got things off her chest.

"I'm not sure I could keep it down right now," she replied, taking a seat in the chair opposite the sofa.

Another shrug. "Suit yourself," he said and dug in. "So, what's on your mind?"

"Us," she replied.

The fork Jack was lifting to his mouth stopped, and he cocked a single brow in her direction.

"Jack, it was wrong of me to avoid you. But I have done some serious thinking and soul searching, and I want to share it with you. In the beginning, I doubted your attraction, Jack. I had to. It was safer for me to think you were shooting me shit than it was to open myself up to being hurt. I'd just come out of a relationship that ended badly, and I wasn't looking for a new one. I know it may sound lame, but two months ago that was my thought process. Keeping myself safe. "But you pursued me. Fast and furiously. Your attentions knocked the wind out of me. Your self-assurance and unwavering certainty about your attraction was overwhelming. I didn't know how to process it. The things you made me feel—make me feel—believe it or not are new for me, and very foreign. You make me feel beautiful, sexy, loved—"

"That's because you are," he growled through gritted teeth and reached for his beer bottle again.

"And that scared the shit out of me." Zarah took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, attempting to hold back tears. "No one has ever told me I was beautiful until I moved in here. First Eric, then Rita, and then you and Lane. No one, Jack. I'm not telling you this because I'm looking for sympathy, I'm just trying to explain a bit about why I'm the way I am."

Jack set the bottle down with a loud thunk and went back to his dinner.

"Surely you can understand how a woman nearing thirty years of age and never having heard the words 'you're beautiful,' would find it difficult to accept it's sincere when she does.

Marcus was just the latest on the list—a short list—of failed relationships of Zarah Elliott. He is the first man I lived with, and during that time, I thought

with all my heart he was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. And then I met you.”

With a corner of bread, Jack sopped up the last bit of marinara sauce from his plate, popped the bread in his mouth, and set the plate on the coffee table.

After a swallow of beer, he sat back in the corner of the sofa, crossed his ankle over one knee, and settled his gaze on her.

“And you turned my world upside down, Jack. The moment I first saw you and felt the way you looked at me, I realized for the first time in my life that that was what love at first sight meant. I fell in love that night. Head over heels.

There was no turning back. Yet despite you making your intentions crystal clear, I still couldn't allow myself to believe them.

“I have issues with my body; that's no secret. I read the magazines, watch the movies, and my plus-size frame isn't what the media portrays as beautiful.”

“Beauty is—”

“In the eye of the beholder,” she finished his sentence. “You know what, Jack? Though you've been pampering me with that for the last two months, I only just learned to believe it. Then, on top of everything else I was struggling with emotionally, in strolled Lane and what appeared to be a little friendly rivalry between the two of you turned serious. In addition to already being overwhelmed by what an incredible man you are, I found myself attracted to Lane as well.”

Jack rose to his feet in the middle of her talk, taking Zarah by surprise.

“I'm going to get another beer. Would you like something now? Think your stomach can handle it?”

Jack's expression still gave nothing away, and Zarah had no idea if he was even listening. Though his eyes never stopped watching her, he'd barely spoken.

“There's still some white wine in the fridge,” Jack said as he crossed the living room.

“Sure, please,” she replied.

Zarah absently toyed with her hands in her lap, taking several deep, calming breaths until Jack returned.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile, taking the wine goblet he offered her.

When he again dropped into the corner of the couch, she continued. “Being with the two of you is like nothing I could have ever imagined, and it scares the hell out of me. Every time the three of us were together, I promised myself it had to be the last, because it wasn't fair to either of you that I loved you both. But I couldn't stop myself from being with the two of you again and again.”

“Do you know why neither Lane nor I stopped it?”

“Stopped what?” she asked.

“The marriage.”

She shook her head.

“Because being with Lane and me together brought you out of your protective shell. We made you feel good about yourself, made you feel as beautiful as we saw you. It was for you, Zarah. Because I loved you, I was willing to share you with Lane, because you loved him as well.” Jack's voice remained clipped and cool as he spoke, his eyes flickering between anger and hurt.

“Oh...I didn't know. I never thought of it that way.”

Jack shrugged and lifted his beer bottle to his lips.

"I was afraid to acknowledge my feelings before, but I'm not anymore. I know my timing is the shits, but I need you to know that I love you, Jack. I realize now, that I'd never known love before I met you, and that was something that frightened me. I'm so deeply in love with you, I physically ache when we're apart. That might make me sound weak, but I don't care. I love you."

"And where does that leave Lane?"

"I won't lie to you, Jack. I care very deeply for Lane. But my heart belongs to you. I know I'll never be able to offer it to anyone else."

Several moments passed in silence. Zarah was close to begging Jack to tell her what he was thinking. Jack tipped his bottle again, and for the first time since they sat down across from each other, he turned his attention to the darkness outside the sliding glass door that led to the balcony.

Taking that as an indication her time was up, Zarah set her untouched wine goblet on the coffee table. "Well," she said, her wavering voice slicing through the silence.

Jack's gaze came back to her.

"That's what I came here to say, what I needed you to know. I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you from the beginning. You have no idea how sorry I am I hurt you. That is what's most painful for me, that I caused you pain."

There. She'd done it. Zarah sniffed in an unladylike manner and gave a cursory swipe at the tears trickling from her eyes. She hadn't been able to stop them, but at least she had managed to keep the urge to burst into sobbing at bay.

And Jack still sat in relative silence. His expression wasn't as harsh as it had been when they first sat down, but Zarah couldn't gauge anything as she studied him. She wondered what he was thinking after hearing her out.

Maybe it was too late, she thought. He'd been right. She had kept him at arm's length when it suited her. And after their argument, maybe he'd come to the conclusion he didn't want to bother with a woman who didn't seem to know her own ass from a hole in the ground.

It was important to her for Jack to know why she'd been so unsure. But now that she'd shared with him that piece of her soul, perhaps he decided he just didn't have the room in his life or any tolerance for a woman so emotionally unsettled. It saddened Zarah to suspect she'd realized what she wanted and who she needed too late.

Across the coffee table, Jack looked exhausted. She determined that she'd taken up enough of his time. It had been a very difficult day for both of them, she suspected, though he hadn't even said a word about his day. She couldn't blame him.

Emotionally, Zarah felt totally drained. Jack had done what she'd asked him to do. He'd listened while she explained her position. The entire time he'd remained virtually silent. It seemed clear he wasn't going to say anything else. Zarah stood up from the chair and stuffed her hands in her pockets.

"It's late," she said, pointing out the obvious and feeling like a turd for doing so. "You need some sleep. You look exhausted. Listen, I'm not asking for your forgiveness, because quite honestly, I'm not so sure I deserve it. It is my hope, however, that when the dust settles and the hurt subsides, maybe we can be friends, because I can't imagine my life without you in it, Jack. I want so much more, but I know it's a lot to ask of you after what's happened."

As she watched Jack for any sign he wanted her to stay, wanted to talk more, she found herself disappointed. He didn't move. The threat of tears burned in her eyes. Before turning to leave, she added, "Thank you for allowing me an opportunity to explain to you what I was feeling."

"That's it?" he asked. "You've said what you have to, and I'm not given a chance to respond? Maybe after all that there's some things I'd like to get off my chest."

Zarah turned back to face him, her pulse racing. She wiped at a tear threatening to burst free from the corner of her eye. Jack was on his feet now but made no move to approach her.

"Of c-course," she stammered, unsure she wanted to hear what he had to say. She wasn't prepared to find herself on the receiving end of another one of his tongue lashings. "I'm sorry. Please, go ahead."

They held each other's gaze for several heartbeats before Jack dropped his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. Zarah felt as though she were going to die if didn't say something soon. More silence passed between them before he lifted his head and finally spoke.

"I just have one question for you," he said.

The tight expression on his face and the rigidness of his body kept her from throwing herself into his arms and begging him for a second chance.

"Anything, Jack."

Chapter Twenty-one

A warm breeze swirled around the room through several openings in the three outside walls. The smell of an approaching storm scented the air. As much as she loved a good thunderstorm, she hoped the rain held off just a little longer. Zarah studied herself in the full-length mirror before her. She smiled at her reflection.

"You've come a long way, baby." She chuckled.

Since moving into the Davises' apartment building, her life had been a roller-coaster ride, one of personal growth and self-exploration, and one she was glad to have taken. It had been frightening but equally exciting, and she had learned so much about herself.

A soft knock came at the door and she walked barefoot to answer it. A gasp of surprise slipped past her lips as she swung the door open. "What are you doing here!" she squealed. "It's bad luck!"

"You are so beautiful," Jack growled low after giving her a once-over and dipped his head to steal a kiss.

As she stood before Jack, she truly felt beautiful. The dress she'd chosen was cream in color, formfitting to accentuate the curves she knew drove Jack crazy. The hem of the front came to just below Zarah's knees, where the back dipped lower, to about an inch above her ankles. The hairdresser had worked a miracle with Zarah's unruly curls, pinning her tresses back and threading baby's breath throughout. Behind Zarah's ear, she'd clipped in place a violet hibiscus blossom.

"And you are the most incredibly handsome man I have ever seen," she said in a breathless tone.

Jack, too, was barefoot, which Zarah found unbelievably sexy. Lightweight tan

trousers did little to hide the effect her appearance had on him. A pale cream-colored button-down shirt hung loose on his muscular frame. Jack had fastened only two buttons midabdomen, and the peaks of his pectorals, combined with a dusting of dark curls that disappeared under the waist of his pants, taunted Zarah. Oh how badly she wanted to lick her way through those curls to the thick flesh hidden behind the zipper of his offending pants.

"Come on, Miss Elliott. Let's make you my Mrs. Masters," Jack said and kissed her again.

"I can hardly wait. Where's Mack?" Zarah asked, linking her arm through Jack's as he urged her into the corridor, pulling the door closed behind her. "He's supposed to give me away."

"I think the heat's been a little tough on him today," Jack told her as they walked down the hall.

"No!" She stopped and stepped in front of him. Zarah was concerned. She knew the humidity and the Caribbean sun might be tough on the Davises, yet she hadn't wanted to celebrate her marriage to Jack without them. "Is he all right?"

Jack cupped her cheek and winked. "Yeah, baby, he's fine. He was flushed, that's all. So I told him to join the others and relax. He and Rita are here, and that's what's important."

"Yes, that's what's important," Zarah agreed. "Now, make me yours, Mr. Masters." Jack growled and bent down to scoop Zarah up in his arms.

"You are already mine, baby," he said and stepped onto the warm, soft sands of Montego Bay, Jamaica. He walked toward a bamboo archway on the beach, overlooking the ocean. "But damn it, I need to get you to sign on the dotted line before you change your mind."

"Put me down, Jack!" Zarah squealed. "I'm too heavy to be carrying around! Besides, this part comes later when you carry me over the threshold to your bed!" She giggled and buried her face in the crook of Jack's neck and inhaled the scent belonging to him alone.

Once they arrived at the archway, Jack set Zarah on her feet and again cupped her face and leaned in again for a kiss.

"I love you," he whispered. "More than you can possibly know."

"Mmm, I love you too," Zarah replied.

Surrounded by the people they loved, Zarah and Jack stood face-to-face as the minister began the service. Beside Jack, Lane stood proudly with a sexy grin curling his luscious lips as he took her in. Despite the three of them spending the night before together, today Zarah only had eyes for Jack. Together, the three of them had decided that as long as all parties were comfortable in the marriage relationship they shared, nothing would change between them. As they held each other's gaze, Jack repeated for all to hear the words of love and devotion the minister spoke, confirming his commitment to their coming together.

"I will," Jack said. "With everything I am."

Zarah had never been happier in her life. Until she met Jackson Masters, she hadn't believed she would ever find happiness. As the officiator turned to ask her to pledge her vows, Zarah stopped him.

"If it's all right, I've written my own," she declared.

"By all means, my dear. The sand is yours."

Tightening the grip she had on Jack's hands, Zarah took a deep breath. As she stared into the eyes of the man who loved her unconditionally, the man who had changed her life, Zarah silently thanked three beings—the man upstairs and both of their exes.

"Jackson Masters, today, I give you my heart and my soul—all of me. I love you, and I want you. It is that simple for me. I want you to wear my ring. I want to share my dreams, my goals, my successes, and even my failures with you, Jack. I want us to tackle the future, our future, together. Because you were meant for me, baby, just as I was meant for you."

The glimmer in his eye as she recited the words he'd spoken to her one month earlier brought tears to her eyes. Zarah allowed a single drop to streak down her cheek. The pad of Jack's thumb brushed across her skin, wiping away the moisture.

This was the man she loved with all her heart. She trusted him with everything she was and everything she would be. Drawing his left hand, which she'd been holding tight, to her abdomen, Zarah took a moment to study Jack's face before she continued.

"And there is no one else I will ever want or ever need to be the father of my children."

A gasp of surprise from their guests sounded over the crashing of the surf. From the corner of her eye, Zarah watched Rita draw her hands up to cover her mouth. Several moments passed before the realization of her words flickered in Jack's eyes.

A single tear formed in the corner of his eye. Zarah bit her lower lip and offered him a small nod.

"You... I... We made a baby?" he asked in a whisper.

The sound of the crashing surf filled the silence that had fallen over the beach.

"Jack," Zarah whispered.

"Yeah?"

"The doctor says we made two."

THE END

Jennifer Cole

By day, Jennifer Cole is a mild-mannered administrative assistant in a bustling office. By night, she shuts out the world of reality, and enters...the realm of erotic romance and fantasy. Living for an exhilarating plot and wickedly delicious sex scenes, she says there is nothing too outrageous or off limits for this slave to eroticism; in fact, the naughtier the encounter, the better.

* * * * *

Hey, fellow reading junkies! I'm a 'reader-aholic', addicted to so many different genres my bookshelves are busting apart at the screws! Werewolves are my biggest weakness...and if only I could get my hubby to growl, I'd have it made! My hero and I have been deliriously happy for nineteen years, married twelve, and are the very proud parents of an Australian Shepherd named Elmo. I reside in a small city in South-western Ontario and just simply enjoy life!

After reading a ton of erotic romances, I got the bright idea one day that it might be fun to write one! I was right, it was a blast! Then I wrote another, and then another, and...

When I'm not sweating over my laptop, feverishly tapping to keep up with my brain, I've got my nose buried in a book. I also enjoy cycling, shooting pool, and spending quality time with my family and friends.