



PLAYING THE GAME
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DEDICATION

To Vin Diesel for the inspiration

For anyone who's ever found their lover in a best friend And as always, to my best friend and husband, David Frank—none of this would be possible without you.

PLAYING THE GAME

Josie took the bottle of beer from the cute bartender, ensuring she made eye contact. "Thanks."

He smiled and gave her a nod. She read the gleam of interest in his eyes. "No problem. Any time."

She could have continued the flirtation, but her heart just wasn't in it. She gave him another smile anyway and shoved her lime down to the bottom of the bottle. She took a swig, relishing the tang of the cool liquid on the back of her throat. It was her third beer tonight, when her normal limit was two. She was feeling bored, and a little reckless.

The bar was getting crowded. The thump of dance music reverberated in her belly and at the base of her throat. She scanned the row of low benches against the railing that separated the bar area from the dance floor. Her heart jumped, as it always did lately, when she saw the tall, broad-shouldered man clad in the tight, gray t-shirt and jeans. She finished her beer in four gulps, and to her own surprise, called for

another.

The man sitting almost directly across from her had a wide mouth with full lips that looked like they could drive a woman to her knees with one kiss. Dark, laughing eyes. Smooth, perfectly shaped ears boasting a gold hoop in each lobe. He'd shaved his dark hair close to his scalp, and though it wasn't a look she normally liked in her men, on him it worked.

He saw her looking, and his lips curved into a slow, sexy smile that made her shift against the bar and take another

drink. He ran his tongue over his lips in an exaggerated swipe and blew her a kiss. Josie couldn't help it. She laughed. Shaking her head, she left the bar and crossed to the bench.

"Jack, you're insane."

Jack took Josie's hand and pulled her down to his lap as she tried to edge by him. His breath whispered on her ear as he said, "Which one did you pick out for yourself tonight?"

Josie ducked her head away from his tickling mouth and elbowed him until he let her slide from his lap to the seat beside him. "None. But I'm sure you have half a dozen picked out already."

His low, deep chuckle was loud enough to turn the head of the pretty blonde standing across from them at the bar. Her eyes took in Jack from head to toe, and the woman practically licked her lips. Jack slid his arm across Josie's shoulder and lifted his chin toward the blonde, who returned the gesture with a smirk of her own. Her gaze flickered over Josie, apparently dismissing her as no threat, and then she earned ten points for Jack with her next move.

"There it is," Jack murmured. He bent close to Josie's ear again. His voice was so deep it sounded like thunder, even when he whispered. "The hair toss. I get ten points."

Josie had to lift the bottle to her mouth to hide the grin. "I'll bet you those ten her next move is the buckle adjustment."

"I'll take that bet." Jack's fingers ran slowly along Josie's arm, along the back of her neck and rested there. "I think she's going for the olive suck."

Josie and Jack had been coming to The Vault for years to play The Game. The rules were simple. They each got points for predicting which tactics members of the opposite sex would use to flirt with them. Additional points were gained by being given phone numbers, being asked to dance, being bought a drink, being asked to go home—all *without* using any of the common flirting moves. They'd started The Game because Josie had become so adept at being able to tell how far women would go to gain Jack's attention. Jack, who since childhood had never allowed Josie to best him in anything, had taken up the challenge.

They usually arrived together, but they didn't always leave together. There'd been many times Jack had won The Game simply by default—he'd chosen to take some hottie's offer of breakfast in the morning, while Josie had preferred to head home by herself, wash the smoke out of her hair and slip into her quiet bed, alone.

The Game had seen them through high school, college, heartaches, and lost jobs. Tonight was the first time they'd played in about a year—since before Josie began dating Barry. The relationship had soured, as they always seemed to do, and had put a bad taste in her mouth toward men. Jack had insisted playing The Game would cheer her up. She wasn't convinced.

Now Jack's thigh pressed intimately against Josie. His hand still cupped her neck. They watched together as the blonde at the bar set down her drink, then, with a discreet glance to make certain she still had Jack's attention, she bent to toy with the

buckle of her stiletto heeled shoe. The move caused

her mini-skirt to ride even further up her tanned thigh, exposing just the hint of lacy underwear. She straightened, apparently satisfied with her shoe, and turned her back on Jack and Josie.

Jack threw back his head and groaned. Josie poked his chest. "That's your cue to go up to her. And that's my ten points."

As Josie spoke, the blonde turned, drink in hand, and lifted the toothpick-speared olive from her martini to her perfectly glossed lips. She closed her mouth around the olive and pulled it slowly off the pick in a gesture so seductive it was almost a parody of itself.

"There!" Jack said.

"Too late," Josie countered. "She did the shoe thing first. Go get her."

Jack leaned back and put his arm over Josie's shoulder again. His fingers stroked the wispy hairs at the back of her neck. He shrugged. "Nah."

After a few minutes, the blonde gave Jack another sultry look, which he didn't catch because he was too busy checking out the dance floor. Josie watched the blonde frown, then glance over her again. The woman's gaze took in Jack's casually draped hand, and the way it toyed now and then with one of Josie's dangling earrings. She arched her eyebrows and said something to her companion, an equally predatory looking brunette. Both women turned to stare at Josie, who by now had shivers running up and down her spine from Jack's hand playing with her earring.

"Stop it." She slapped at his hand. "You're driving me nuts."

He stopped touching the dangling silver chain at her ear and moved his arm. The blonde and her friend had moved off toward the dance floor. "Hey, we lost her."

"*You* lost her." Josie inched over on the crowded bench, ignoring the way the guy next to her seemed to take it as an excuse to fix a beer-bleary smile on her. "You took too long. She lost interest."

Jack looked behind her to the dance floor again. One of his large hands splayed unconsciously against the chest of his tight gray t-shirt. His fingers tapped in time to the beat.

"Yeah, I guess," he said absent-mindedly. "Hey, Josie, let's go dance."

"Yeah?" she asked, surprised. "You're tired of *The Game* already?"

Jack's grin was hot enough to melt butter. He leaned forward so close she smelled the mint of his gum mixed with the spicy, musky scent of his cologne. "Why? You got somebody picked out?"

His smell had suddenly become more intoxicating than the beer she'd been sipping. Josie swallowed against a dry throat. She pulled away, again bumping the man beside her.

"Not really," she said.

Jack gave her a puzzled look. "You all right?"

She wasn't all right, but Josie didn't tell him that. "Fine. Let's dance."

"Let me hit the John, and I'll be right back."

He tugged a strand of her hair, then headed off through the crowd. Josie watched him go, the view from behind as delightful as that from the front. His dark pants clung just right to his tight ass, and the gray t-shirt fit him like a second skin across his muscled shoulders and back. Jack dodged the crowd with a liquid grace that melted her insides.

Stop it! She tossed back the last few swigs of beer and got up to set it back on the bar. She refused the bartender's offer of another and ran her hands over her hair to smooth it from the tangling Jack had given it.

He's just a friend. Your best friend. You used to bet each other you'd eat worms, for God's sake!

With a shudder, Josie gripped the bar's leather edge. Something was wrong with her tonight, and she couldn't blame it on the extra beer she'd consumed. She'd been feeling this way for the past few months ... Hell, since she was being honest with herself, the past few years.

The thudding of her heart seemed to move in time with the throbbing dance music. The colored lights on the dance floor flickered in her vision, and Josie had to close her eyes for a minute, disoriented.

She felt him behind her before he said anything. She'd always been in tune with Jack, ever since they were kids playing hide and seek. Lately, though, her body was reacting to Jack's presence a lot differently. Her nipples peaked, her belly dropped, her center tingled. She found herself imagining what it would be like to see him naked—and she'd seen him naked many times without bothering to notice it. Now she wished she'd paid closer attention.

"Ready?"

She turned. "Yep. Let's tear it up!"

He took her hand to lead her to the dance floor. He was a large man, standing six feet tall and solid with muscle. He made an easy path for them through the throng to the crowded dance floor.

Dancing was a sure-fire way to get the attention which would gain them points in The Game, but that wasn't the only reason Jack and Josie danced together. Jack really loved to dance and he was very good at it. Despite being a large, muscular man with a tough-guy appearance, Jack could cut a rug to rival Fred Astaire. They had little opportunity to foxtrot at places like this, but Jack was as skilled in all styles of dancing as he was at everything else.

Josie loved to dance with Jack. It was comfortable, and safe, but also a hell of a good time. She didn't have to worry that a little pelvic thrust would end up with her being tongue-kissed by some idiot with a booze-soaked brain and breath that could knock over an elephant. Josie could dance with Jack and be uninhibited—and she'd had more offers for dates based on what men had seen her do with Jack on the dance floor than anything else. She felt guilty about that, sometimes, like it was false advertising. Then again, it was all just part of The Game.

Jack was already bobbing his close-shaved head. He grinned, his teeth glowing supernaturally white in the dance floor's weird lighting. He made a space for them on the floor by nudging people out of the way.

They bounced to the rhythm for a while. Josie had to return Jack's grin. The fourth beer she'd had was making her feel giddier than she normally did, and besides that, she was having fun for the first night in the three months since she'd caught Barry in bed with the girl who worked in the dry cleaner's. Hell, she was having more fun than she'd had the entire time she dated Barry.

One song blended seamlessly into the next, and became a popular new club hit featuring a sexy salsa beat interspersed with the lyrics to a rap song.

"Let's rip it up."

Jack's voice rumbled in her ear and vibrated in her stomach. His grin made her want to grab him and kiss him, but that was just ridiculous—wasn't it? She wasn't here tonight to make out with Jack.

Josie stepped into Jack's arms with the familiarity she could never seem to find with any other man. One hand went to his shoulder; the other disappeared into his much larger palm. Jack's other hand pressed low down on her back, just below the

edge of her soft cotton shirt. *Oh, mercy.* Against her bare skin.

Josie took a deep, shuddering breath, then forced herself to meet Jack's eyes. She couldn't let him know how his touch affected her. He wouldn't understand. She didn't understand. When had she stopped thinking of him as a buddy and started wanting him as a lover?

Jack led her effortlessly into a fast, modified cha-cha. Josie was a decent dancer, but under Jack's lead she moved like a dream. The crowd didn't allow them much movement, so

while the dance normally kept partners several inches apart, she and Jack moved like they were one person. Her thighs were snugged against his, and her belly pressed into his groin.

Slowly, the people around them seemed to notice something hot was going on and they moved apart to allow Jack and Josie more room to move. The song turned out to be some sort of extended-edit remix and it seemed to go on forever. Jack stopped smiling. His eyes bore into Josie's. The fingers against her back traced light circles on her bare skin, even as he guided her into an increasingly sensuous series of steps.

Josie hadn't dressed for seduction tonight. Short dresses and high heels weren't part of The Game; the goal was to encourage interest without overt measures. Tonight she wore boot-cut jeans, tight on her ass to show off the curve of her hips. Now, with every movement, the snug denim rubbed between her legs in a way that made her want to clench her fists or moan.

She took another deep breath and stared at Jack, who wore a look of deep concentration. Faster, they danced, keeping up with the beat, making up their own moves. He pulled her close enough so her breasts, unfettered beneath her white cotton baby doll t-shirt, rubbed against his muscled chest. His thigh moved between hers, leading her into moves straight out of Dirty Dancing.

He was playing, but with whom? The blonde from the bar? Some other woman who would gladly trade places with Josie on the dance floor? Jack was really putting his all into the

dance, and for the first time, Josie felt out of control in Jack's arms.

She was helpless against the sensations rocketing through her as he slid his hand from her back to the curve of her ass. His hand was large enough to cover most of her rear. After a minute, he let go of her hand to put his other hand on her rear, too.

The song changed, and the crowd, no longer impressed with fancy footwork, moved in again. Over Jack's shoulder, Josie saw the blonde from the bar. Envy was clearly stamped on her pretty face, and her eyes were riveted to the way Jack's ass moved to the beat of a new song.

Josie was used to seeing looks of such hunger when women, and sometimes men, looked at Jack. This time, though, the sight didn't make her want to laugh. She wanted to slap the bitch's face, or she wanted to cry, because she knew how the other woman felt.

Josie closed her eyes as Jack pulled her even closer. She touched her forehead to his shoulder briefly. He wasn't doing anything he hadn't done a hundred times before. In fact, some nights when The Game was in full swing, he'd done far racier things with her to gain the attention of some hapless victim.

Those other nights, Josie hadn't minded. It had all been a part of The Game. Tonight was different. Tonight, when he pulled her close and nuzzled her neck, she had to fight not to check and see if his eyes were closed or looking over her shoulder to attract someone else. And was that the nip of his teeth on her skin? The slick wetness of the tip of his tongue?

Josie's nipples stretched the fabric of her thin shirt. Jack's mouth pressed the

spot where her pulse pounded fast, and not only from exertion.

She stepped out of Jack's arms and turned her back to him. Lots of other couples and even trios were doing the same move; the move had become very popular in the clubs. Jack, without missing a beat, put his hands on her hips and snugged her ass tight against his crotch.

Her every nerve pulled taut at the sensation of his hard bulge.

Josie cursed herself as she let Jack rock her back against him. She searched the crowd in front of them. *Who's he hard for? The blonde, or the sexy, older woman with upswept gray hair that reflected purple under the strobe lights? It can't be the redhead, even though her tits are the size of melons.* Jack had always joked with Josie that redheads didn't turn him on.

His hands slid from her hips to her waist. The song became another, impossibly faster. The crowd moved as one entity, crushing, grinding and rocking with the rhythm. She had no room to move away from Jack; no room to breathe.

She'd drunk too much. That had to be the explanation. One beer too many, and she was horny as hell, too. That might have something to do with it. She hadn't slept with a man in three months, and hadn't come with a man for nearly a year. Drunk and horny and dancing with Jack—not a good combination, but as the crowd dipped and bounced around them, Josie couldn't bring herself to leave.

She arched her back, just a little, to rest the back of her head on Jack's chest. His lips found her temple, and the ridge

of her cheek. Josie slid her hands down the bulge of his forearms to place them over Jack's hands on her waist. The dark, crisp hair tickled her fingertips, and she shivered. Her mouth parted, like she was trying to gasp, but there was no air to take in.

Drowning. She was drowning in a sea of sexual tension. It rolled across the dance floor and hovered in the air thicker than the haze of cigarette smoke. It smelled like the tang of sweat, the musk of cologne, the sweet bite of alcohol.

Her clit rubbed mercilessly against the silk of her panties. Slickness coated her. She rocked her hips upward, and the tug of her denim jeans against her aroused flesh sent shocks of pleasure rippling through her.

Josie could, if the mood was right, get herself off merely by squeezing her thighs together. The mood was definitely right, even if she didn't want it to be. This was no active choice; no furtive movement at her desk designed to relieve the boredom of a long afternoon at work. She had no control over this. Everything was the music, the beer, Jack's hands on her and his breath on her face.

Josie arched against him again, ashamed of the intensity of her arousal, and afraid of what he'd do if he knew. The temptation of climax was too powerful a motivation to deny, especially since she hadn't had an orgasm in so long. Sex with Barry had been lackluster, and finally nonexistent, but she'd been so depressed after yet another failed relationship that she hadn't even touched herself since they'd broken up.

Her body needed release, and craved it. If she kept dancing with Jack, Josie had no doubt she would achieve it.

Guilt forced her to move away from him as much as she could with the crowd as dense as it was. She would be using him, and he wouldn't even know it. He was too good of a friend for her to do that.

Just as she decided to step away from him altogether and go to the bathroom for a cold splash of water, another new song came on. This one was currently tearing up the airwaves and was all over the clubs. Not only did it have a driving rhythm, the lyrics were suggestive and sexy. The song had become an anthem of sorts for the

singles looking for lust in Harrisburg's hot spots.

"Down on your knees, baby please." The men in the crowd shouted the words to the women they pursued. The women answered along with the female vocalist. "Let your tongue give me, give me what I need."

The song's popularity sent people who hadn't been dancing onto the floor. The crowd swelled and surged. Josie was tossed with it, her butt pressed even further against Jack, who curved his fingers on her waist to protect her from the crush. He pulled her with him, back toward the wall where there was a little more space. Two steps, three, and Jack hit the black-painted boards, Josie's back still snug against his chest.

Instantly, people filled the space they'd left behind. The song pounded on, words of lust and love, degradation and devotion, a paean to sex and sin.

"Down on your knees!"

Josie's hands clenched on top of Jack's.

"Give me what I need!"

The crowd roared.

"Slide it in me, baby, please!"

Josie reached up and behind her to touch Jack's neck and the back of his smoothly shaved head as she arched her back again. He took his hands from her waist, slid them up her sides and cupped her breasts.

"I wanna fuck you, baby! Wanna make you come!"

Each hand covered her completely. His palms caressed her nipples. Josie tried to breathe and couldn't, then had to close her eyes when the flashing lights made her head spin.

She caressed the line of his jaw and drew his mouth back to her temple. He kissed her, his lips hot on her skin. The floor vibrated with the stomps of a hundred pairs of feet moving at the same time. Josie stood on her toes to push herself back further, to let Jack's mouth find the corner of her own.

The song was reaching its climax, and oh mercy, so was she. Josie fought it, hated herself for it, but it felt so good, too damn good. She couldn't fight it, couldn't resist. She was on the edge, nearly there...

Oh, please...

As the song reached its final throbbing notes, Jack put one hand between her legs. His hand cupped her groin; the heel of his palm pressed just where she needed it most. Separated from his touch by a layer of denim and silk, nonetheless Josie was so close she needed only the slightest pressure to explode.

She splintered into a myriad of shining pieces. The world closed down until all she saw was the blue, the red, the

flashing purple and green. All she felt was Jack against her. She smelled him, and dear God, tasted him as his mouth found hers again and he slipped his tongue inside her open lips. She was flying.

With the aftershocks still rippling through her, Josie slammed back into herself. The music had changed to something less popular, and many people had forsaken the dance floor for the solace of the bar. She had space to move again.

She didn't imagine the hungry looks on them. It *had* been quite a performance. She stepped out of Jack's arms so quickly his hand tugged for a moment between her legs and sent another slow ripple of pleasure through her.

Heat seared her cheeks. *Did he know? How could he not?* Josie pressed her fingers to her mouth lightly as she started to push her way through the crowd. She'd kissed Jack lots of time before, but never like that. Never really kissed him as a lover

would, not even when they were playing The Game.

Guilt assailed her again, even as her body still rocked from the orgasm. She didn't speak as she moved through the crowd, but she sensed him following her.

"Water," she said to the bartender, who nodded solemnly. Had he seen them? Josie looked around. People spoke to each other, their eyes trained on her. She must really have made a spectacle of herself.

She tossed back a gulp of ice water. Jack ordered a Corona. He nudged his way next to her at the bar and took a long swig of his beer.

"Wow." Even speaking only one word, his deep voice rumbled.

Josie couldn't meet his eyes, afraid of what she might see. "I have to go."

Jack put his beer on the bar. "What? Why? Josie, it's still early..."

"I don't feel like playing The Game anymore tonight," she snapped. She sounded angry, and she was angry, but not at him.

She pushed away from the bar and headed for the door. Jack followed a step behind. In the hallway, much emptier than the bar itself, he grabbed her arm hard enough to turn her around.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

Josie forced herself to look at him. Her mouth felt stretched, frowning, and she bit at her lip. "Nothing. I'm tired. I want to go home."

Jack's sexy grin and cocky laugh made her stomach drop. "I'll come with you."

She put her hand on his chest to stop him from moving toward her. Beneath the gray cotton, she felt the rapid pulse of his heart. Her fingers touched the sharp point of his nipple before she pulled away like she'd been burned.

"No, Jack!" She'd yelled without realizing it.

He stepped back, clearly surprised. "C'mon, Josie, what the hell?"

"Go back inside. Go find some hottie bimbo to take home. You win The Game tonight. I'm done."

He reached for her again, but she danced away from his grasp. "I can't play The Game if you're not here."

For an endless moment, his eyes locked on hers. The hall was lit with a black light that turned Jack's dark eyes into glimmering, shimmering pools. He wasn't grinning any more.

She couldn't speak. For the first time in all their years of friendship, Josie couldn't find the words to tell him how she felt. For the first time, she lied to him. "Leave me alone, damn it! I don't want you to come home with me!"

Without waiting for him to reply, she stalked down the hall and out the door to the street. A light rain had started, and it felt good. Cool on her hot face. It soaked her thin t-shirt, and she crossed her arms around herself, expecting a chill, but the night was warm and the rain gentle.

The door opened behind her and Jack came out. The beat of club music filled the space between them for a second until the door swung closed again. A man and woman, clearly drunk by their laughter and stagger, passed her on their way down the street.

"Josie!"

She started walking. She lived only a few blocks away. Her boots hit the pavement and splashed in the puddles.

"Damn it, Josie, wait up!"

She walked faster.

"Don't walk home by yourself!"

Even now, he was looking out for her. Self-loathing filled her. She'd used him for her own selfish desires, and now her shame wouldn't let her admit it to him.

"I'll be fine," she shot over her shoulder.

There was no getting away from him, of course. He could take one stride for every two of hers and catch up to her in a minute. He grabbed her arm again to stop her.

The glow of the streetlamp highlighted his features. The rain had smoothed the fabric of his t-shirt over the curves of his muscular chest. Water dripped from his eyebrows and chin, and he licked away some drops.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Josie, what did I do?"

"Nothing, Jack." Josie yanked her arm from his grasp. "Forget it."

"I won't forget it! One minute you're all over me, and the next you're running away!"

Josie slapped her wet hair from her eyes. "Me, all over you? You were the one putting your hands on me!"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You didn't tell me no."

Anger reared up in her as a way to combat her guilt. "Did I have to? I'm not one of your conquests, Jack! I'm not some bar floozy impressed with the size of your muscles or your cock!"

He actually flinched, as though she'd struck him. "No, Josie. You're not."

Silence hung between them, and again she felt like she couldn't breathe. There was more to be said, but Josie was afraid to say it. Even more afraid to hear it. Jack was the best friend she had. Conversations like this ruined friendships, and she refused to lose him. Not like this.

"I'm going home," she said.

This time, when she turned and walked away he didn't follow her.

"What happened on the dance floor, Josie?" he hollered after her, but she didn't answer.

^^ ^^ ^^ ^^

By the time she got home, she was shivering with delayed reaction. The fourth beer she wanted to blame for her mistakes churned in her gut. A headache had begun to throb in her temples. Worst of all, tears stung her eyes and, as hard as she tried to fight them, they fell to burn her cheeks.

She stripped off her sodden jeans and tossed them over a chair. Her skin hunched into gooseflesh in her apartment's air conditioning, and she turned the thermostat up. The hot shower beckoned her, but she couldn't even take comfort in its spray. She stepped out after the briefest of soapings and dried herself. Naked, she padded to the kitchen and pulled out the first shirt she found in the basket of clean laundry on her kitchen table, and slipped it over her head. When the hem hit her just above the knees, she clutched the soft fabric with a slight moan. The shirt was one of Jack's.

"Shit," Josie swore under her breath.

She heard a knock at the front door and her heart thudded in surprise. She hadn't locked it. Just as she moved into the narrow front hall, the door banged open hard enough to hit the wall.

Jack, dripping, strode into the hall and kicked the door shut behind him. He nearly filled the hall from side to side. Water puddled on the hardwood floor beneath his boots.

Josie stepped back, breathless, and hit the wall behind her. She couldn't move. In seconds, Jack crossed the space

between them and put his hands on the wall, one on each side of her head. She'd never seen him look so fierce.

Fear and anticipation filled her, but she had no place to go.

"I think—" Jack said, his voice deeper than she'd ever heard it. "—we need to talk."

She might have spoken, maybe only moaned, but before she could make a sound, Jack crushed his mouth down on hers. She opened beneath the onslaught, still trying to protest, but his tongue swept inside and stole her words away. A moan burst in her throat and became embarrassingly loud as he pulled away.

"Put your hands on me," Jack ordered. "Now."

With a whimper, Josie spread both her hands on his chest. His shirt was cold with the rain, and so tight she felt every ripple of his muscles. His nipples were like iron beneath her fingers. When she touched them, he muttered a curse.

"Jack..."

"Shut up, Josie."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. Jack was the only man who could talk to her like that without a punch in the gut for his efforts. Even so, she opened her mouth to tell him off. He stopped her with another kiss.

Her arms slid around his neck. His mouth molded to hers. Their tongues twined and twisted, dancing. After a minute, she felt him shivering against her and she became aware that her dry t-shirt had become damp.

She broke the kiss and heard the click of his teeth as they chattered.

"Jack, you're freezing!"

He didn't answer with words, just another kiss. His mouth was hot if nothing else was. Josie put her hands to his waist and tugged his wet shirt from his pants. Their mouths remained locked as she lifted the shirt up his belly and over his chest. He lifted his arms to allow her to pull it over his head. They broke apart and rejoined, mouths meeting greedily. She dropped the shirt, forgotten, to the floor.

Josie put her hands on Jack's bare skin and felt the gooseflesh there. He shivered again when she made circles on his skin with her fingers. His skin warmed under her touch.

Jack put his hands to her waist and lifted her. The strength of his arms left her dizzy with arousal as he urged her, with a touch, to wrap her legs around him. Now her head was higher than his. She put her hands on his head, and the bristly stubble along his jaw scratched at her fingers.

The movement pushed her shirt above her thighs. She was bare beneath it. Jack groaned against her mouth as her pubic hair brushed his belly.

His hands slid down to cup her ass and hold her up. The wall was hard on her back, and Jack was even harder on her front. He pushed against her, and her clit rubbed the bare skin of his chest. She thought she might faint. His hands kneaded her ass, pulling her infinitesimally closer then pushing her back, just enough to keep the pressure building in her clit.

She didn't want to stop kissing. But lost in the sensations, Josie had to leave his mouth so she could gasp a breath. His mouth found her throat, and she let her head touch the wall behind her. His tongue swirled on her skin. He let her slip

down a fraction of an inch, so now she pressed against the cold metal of his belt buckle. The new sensation on her heated flesh made her groan aloud.

One hand left her butt, but he was so strong he didn't let her drop any further. She felt his hands working at his belt. His pants clung to him from the wetness. Her senses reeling, Josie had time to think that they had reached the point of no return, only to be hampered by a stubborn pair of trousers that refused to be shucked.

She ought to have known better. Jack was too persistent to give up so easily. He pulled her against him so she was totally supported on his hands. He carried her from the hall, across the living room and into her bedroom.

Despite their mutual urgency, Jack didn't throw Josie onto the bed. Instead, with one hand beneath her ass and the other cradling her head, he laid her down as gently as if he were placing fine china. The subtle, tender gesture took her breath away without lessening her need.

This is crazy.

He crawled up the bed over her, and as he lifted his hips she helped him push down the wet and clinging material. The pants, briefs inside them, stuck on the smoothness of his buttocks, but Josie pushed and Jack pulled. The fabric bunched and caught on his boots, and he bent to unlace them with impatient fingers. The string knotted, and with a curse, he tore the laces open. With a kick of one foot against the other, he finally rid himself of his pants and slid back over her to kiss her again.

He lay between her thighs as they kissed. Josie's legs parted to accommodate him. She waited, aching for him to enter her. Jack pulled away. Startled, Josie opened her eyes.

Jack moved his mouth down to the pulse beating in her throat. His tongue traced circles on her skin. He nipped along the edge of her shoulder, exposed by the neckline of her too-large shirt. He continued over the curve of her breast, pausing to suckle a moment through the damp fabric. Josie pushed upward to allow him greater access, but Jack had already moved down over the slope of her belly, across her naked hip, bared by the lifted hem of her shirt. His lips traveled down her thigh, nuzzling the soft downy hairs she didn't bother to shave. Then over where she needed him to be, where she'd dreamed of him being.

She was suddenly overjoyed she'd taken the time to shower.

Jack put one hand on each of her inner thighs and supported himself on his elbows between her legs. He dipped his head to lick her with a finesse she'd always known he'd have. Back and forth, up and down, then settling into a small, circular pattern that took her to the edge within moments.

As if he were completely attuned to her body, Jack backed off. Josie sighed a protest. He touched her, lightly, with one hand. Her clit pulsed beneath his touch.

She looked down to see him watching her, a question in his eyes. Josie nodded almost imperceptibly, giving him permission. Her heart swelled as he bent to love her with his tongue again. This was Jack between her legs, her Jack, her friend and now, at last, her lover.

There was no guilt, no shame. She'd loved him for years as a man she could count on for anything. He'd been there through tears and laughter, held her hand through times of trouble, sent her flowers on her birthday when nobody else remembered. Tomorrow might bring regret, but at this moment, Josie gave herself up to the feelings she'd been hiding for too damn long.

Jack's breath sent a shiver crawling up her. She was going to come again. So soon after her orgasm on the dance floor, she didn't think she'd have been able, but her body knew better than her mind. Her orgasm fluttered within her, and she fought it, wanted to make this last and last.

Barry had always refused to go down on her. He said he didn't like the smell, the taste, and the way her pubic hair felt on his tongue. He'd been insistent about blowjobs, though. In the last month of their six-month relationship, Josie giving Barry head was the only sex they'd had.

Now she pressed herself into the softness of the bed and gave herself up to the feeling of Jack's mouth and hands on her. He was as skilled at cunnilingus as he was at dancing. He knew how to lead her, how to bring her close, then soften the touch so she didn't go over. Her mind-blowing climax on the dance floor hadn't totally relieved her frustration, but it had decreased it to manageability. Now she was content to ride

the waves of sensation flooding her without urging herself to immediate climax.

Jack slipped a finger inside her, then two. He slid in and out in perfect rhythm with the slow, steady pressure of his tongue. She let out a cry and lifted her hips, asking without

words for more. He gave it to her. He curved his fingers inside her to press against the spot just behind her pubic bone. She felt a pressure, almost a burning, then he flicked her clit lightly with her tongue.

Josie's entire body clenched. She felt her inner muscles contract around his fingers. Her clit pulsed and throbbed ... but she didn't come. Not yet. It would take only the slightest amount of pressure and she'd go over the edge, but Jack had stopped moving.

He pulled his fingers free, slowly, then kissed his way back up her belly, her breasts, then to her throat and finally her mouth again. His body covered her, and she felt him nudge at her opening.

"Wait," Josie breathed.

In the dim light of her bedroom, she couldn't see the flecks of gold she knew were in Jack's eyes. She pushed his shoulder gently until he rolled off her and onto his back. She'd waited too long for this to happen for it to be over so soon. Besides, she'd longed for Jack's cock in her mouth as much as she'd wanted to make love to him.

He stretched one arm behind his head to support it as he looked at her. The lines of his body flowed like sculpture. He was pure perfection.

Josie let her eyes feast hungrily on him. She knew every inch of Jack's body already, but she'd never allowed herself to look on it like this.

Josie reached to touch the smooth, hard contours of his chest, and her fingers brushed the soft, scattered dark hairs there. Down her fingers trailed on the fine line of black hair

along the muscled lines of his belly to join the thick curly pelt of his pubic region. She stopped there, unable to look away from his erection.

Josie had shared a bed and a bathroom with Jack more times than she could count. They'd vacationed together, crashed on each other's couches, even lived together briefly for a time when Jack had been between jobs. Even so, she'd never seen him like this.

Jack's cock was something of a private joke between them. The monster, the beast, the drill. Josie had no illusions about Jack's proportions. Unlike a lot of men whose muscles outstripped their equipment, Jack's cock was as large as everything else about him.

"The beast," she murmured, and stroked a finger along his length. "The drill. Mercy, Jack, I'm surprised you haven't killed anyone with this yet."

To her surprise, he didn't respond with a witty comeback. His dick pulsed under her fingers. She stroked him again, and the low, soft sigh that escaped him echoed in the throb of her clit.

"How long has it been?" she asked him.

"A year."

His answer so shocked her she involuntarily squeezed his erection. "The hell you say!"

With a wry grin that was a mere shadow of his normal thigh-spreading smile, Jack put his hand over hers. "Not so hard, Josie."

"Sorry." She loosened her fingers and bent to kiss the tip of his penis.

Jack cursed and covered his eyes with his arm. Josie let her fingers slide down to cup the weight of his balls. His reaction endeared him to her even more.

"A whole year?" She asked. "Jack, why?"

He scrubbed at his face before looking at her. "Because I couldn't find anyone I wanted to be with more than I wanted to be with you."

Now her shock made her scoot back on the bed. "What?"

Jack sat up and took her hands in his. Naked, he faced her across the bed, his expression more serious than she'd ever seen it. "Josie, don't you know how long it's been you?"

She shook her head, tears sparking at her eyes and burning in her throat. Jack lifted one hand to cup her cheek. She swiped at her face, embarrassed by her show of emotion.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she asked.

"You were with Barry. And before that ... Hell, Josie, you know me. I'd never wanted to get tied down before. I didn't want you to think it was just part of The Game. I didn't want to lose you."

Josie blinked and looked at Jack's face. His hand slid from her cheek to her shoulder. She put her hand on his arm to pull him closer.

They kissed, softly, then harder. He captured her neck with his hand and rocked her toward him. Josie splayed her hands on the bare heat of his chest.

This time, spurred by Jack's admittance of how long it had been since he'd been with anyone, she took charge. Josie slid her tongue along the curve of his jaw, down his throat, to his shoulder. She pushed him back onto the pillows again then let

her lips make a trail to the hard point of his nipple. Her tongue swirled around the tip, and she suckled lightly. Jack's hips jerked, and she curled her fingers around his shaft again. Lightly, softly, she stroked his cock in time to the gentle sucking of his nipple.

He tangled his hand in her hair, loosening it from the ponytail she'd put it in. The strands fell across her face and shoulders, along the neckline of her borrowed tee shirt. Impatiently, Josie sat up to tug off the shirt then bent back to her task.

From one nipple to the other, she concentrated on pleasing him. After a moment, without ceasing her teasing strokes, she kissed the ridges of his six-pack abs. She followed the slightly jutting edge of his hipbone, and paused to sink her teeth into his skin just enough to make him mutter another curse. He pushed himself into her hand, urging for her to stroke him harder. She didn't. She had Jack at her mercy now, and she wasn't about to let him take control.

Josie left his hip and went down to the perfection of his ankle. She kissed it. Licked it. Let her mouth slide up the bulge of his calf, then to his knee. She kissed the top of his thigh and ran her tongue along it, all the while stroking him firmly, but slowly.

He strained upward into her hand, but she refused to quicken the pace. She relished the way the thin skin of his cock slipped beneath her fingers, and the heat it gave off. She stopped to toy gently with the head of his penis, finding the first slippery drops of pre-come and smoothing them down to lubricate him.

Her own hand slipped between her legs to caress her still-aroused clit and vagina. She didn't stroke herself, afraid she'd send herself into another orgasm, but the light touch kept her close to the edge. She moved her hips against the cup of her palm, teasing herself as she teased him.

At last, she took pity on him. She didn't bother with teasing anymore, simply lowered her mouth on his cock all the way to its root. Her lips enclosed him. She relaxed her throat to take him in all the way, and his low oath of surprise was worth the effort.

Jack's cock nudged the back of her throat and she slid out, adding a little extra suction at the tip. Josie had never been fond of monstrous cocks with veins and ugly purple heads. Jack's penis was as lovely and perfect as the rest of his body—large,

but not grotesque. She slid her mouth again along his entire length, her saliva leaving a glistening trail.

She added the use of her hand at the base of his erection. She sucked and stroked in tandem. Josie moved between Jack's legs to give herself better access to his balls, which she stroked with her other hand. She stroked her thumb down the small ridge of flesh on the underside of his testicles, then found the smooth spot at the base of his scrotum. She pressed gently, in counterpoint to sliding him in and out of her mouth. As she did, he surged beneath her and bucked so fiercely she lost her grip.

"Josie!"

For a moment, she thought she'd hurt him. Then she realized, by the way his balls tightened and his cock lengthened, that she'd aroused him instead.

"Nobody," he managed to say. "Damn. Nobody ever..."

"Poor Jack," Josie murmured. She swirled her tongue on only the head of his penis. "You've been wasting your time with the wrong girls."

The ocean-like taste of his pre-come slipped on her tongue. The taste made her belly clench. Josie rubbed her thighs together as she continued sucking him, building her own tension.

"You have to stop."

She paused to shake her head. "No."

"Please, Josie. I want to make love to you."

Josie looked up at him. His eyes glittered in the light from the street lamp outside the bedroom window. He licked his lips, no sign of teasing on his face.

"I'm going to come," Jack said. "It's been too long. You feel too good."

She stroked his balls again, and his cock twitched under her palm. She thought of how they'd danced, and how good that first orgasm had felt, after so long without one. They'd have time to make love together later. For now, this was her gift to him.

She stroked again with both hands. Jack said nothing, maybe unable to speak. He'd raised both hands to grab the pillow behind his head, and now his forearm shadowed his face again.

Without a second thought, Josie bent and slid him into her mouth again. This time, she moved faster, sucked harder, until he thrust urgently into her mouth.

His cock swelled impossibly huge, nearly enough to choke her. Josie pressed her thumb again to the sweet spot, felt the answering throb deep inside him, and Jack came.

He'd reached down to hold her head, and now his fingers clutched so hard in her hair she almost cried out. He thrust upward and she took him in as far as she could. The taste of him so aroused her that her clit pulsed in a mini-climax that had her not-quite-coming.

As if he realized he was pulling her hair hard enough to hurt, Jack untangled his fingers. "Oh, my God."

Josie couldn't help it. She laughed. She'd never laughed in bed before, not with a lover, anyway, but it felt so good to do so she laughed even harder. She kissed Jack's semi-erect penis through her giggles, then crawled up the bed to lie beside him.

He rolled onto his side to look at her. "You laughing at me?"

She touched his mouth. "Not at you, baby. With you."

She'd called him baby. Heat crept up her throat to paint her cheeks. Jack grinned widely.

"Baby?"

Josie ducked her head and pushed at his chest. "Shut up..."

"Baby?" Jack asked again. His fingers found the ticklish spot just under her ribs, and she writhed beneath his touch. "Josephine Levine, you called me baby."

"Shut up!" Josie managed to gasp from between her giggles, as he tickled her some more.

Jack rolled on top of her and pinned her arms above her head. "I like it."

Then he was kissing her again, and her laughter turned to a moan of pleasure.

For such a large man, he should have crushed her into the bed. Josie didn't mind Jack's weight on her at all. She parted her legs, and her slickness rubbed his lower stomach. Her clitoris, burgeoning with arousal, rubbed on his skin. Jack let go of one of her hands and slipped his hand beneath her rear to press her harder against him.

He kissed her without stopping, but she had no trouble breathing. He breathed in, and she breathed out. Like snorkeling, like dreaming, like flying. How could she have ever breathed without Jack beside her to help her along?

He lifted her, urging her to move her hips in small circles that pressed her clit against him. With a move she wouldn't have believed if she hadn't felt it, he lifted his hips just enough to bring his returning erection against her center. Jack met her languid thrusts and rubbed his dick along her folds. Not in her, just on her, coating his shaft with her wetness until he slid along her without friction. His balls pressed lightly against her with every thrust.

She wanted him inside her. She didn't think she could stand it if he didn't slide into her, now, hard. Jack wasn't done teasing her though. Still capturing her mouth with his, he stroked against her until she shuddered on the edge of orgasm.

Then he stopped. Josie opened her eyes when he took his mouth from hers. Jack looked uncomfortable for a moment, and Josie read his mind.

"In the night stand," she said.

He smiled and reached over to pull open the small drawer. He rifled around in its contents and pulled out a foil-wrapped condom. Ribbed for her pleasure.

Jack got to his knees and tore at the foil. Josie sat up to help him, every movement sending ripples of pleasure shooting through her. She took the condom from him and slipped it over his cock. She rolled the thin latex all the way down then rested her head for a moment on his shoulder.

Jack lifted her chin with his finger so she had to meet his eyes. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'm more sure about this than I've been about anything."

Jack pulled her to him for another kiss. His arm went around her back, his hand cupped her head, and he lowered her gently to the pillow. He covered her body with his. The heat of his erection pushed at her opening, and Josie lifted her hips to help him in.

He pushed himself into her all the way. He stretched her, filled her. Completed her. Jack kissed her as he moved, slowly at first, then into a steady rhythm that had her lifting her hips to meet his thrusts. Everything about being with Jack just felt right.

He rolled slowly to one side, pulling her with him until she was on top. She rocked against him, loving the way her clit rubbed his hard stomach as he thrust inside her. The position

gave her the freedom to control the movements. She rose on her knees and put one hand on each side of his head. Now she could bend to kiss him, while moving herself along his entire length.

Jack ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass. He didn't force the pace, but let her go as fast or slowly as she wanted. He arched upward, into her, as she slid down then let hips roll back when she lifted up. They moved in perfect tandem, just like when they danced.

"It might take me a while," he confided, as she moved her hips in a circular motion.

Josie grinned and sank down on him completely, holding him inside her warmth. "You have someplace you have to be?"

Jack shook his head. "Hell, no."

"Me neither. We have all night." Josie sat up straight and braced herself on her heels next to Jack's thighs.

"Josie, you can't last all night," Jack teased. He slipped one hand from her ass to press his thumb against her clitoris. "I'm going to get you off in about another minute."

Josie's only reply was a soft sigh. She let her head fall back, reeling with the sensation of his thumb pressing in counterpoint to her long, slow strokes. He was probably right, but did she care? She felt like she could come a hundred times tonight. Set some sort of world record.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, bringing her back to reality.

"About you," Josie said, and leaned to kiss him fully. "About how glad I am I have you."

Jack put his hands to her waist and stopped her from moving. She looked at him curiously as he pulled her off his cock and pushed her gently to the bed.

"Get on your hands and knees," he told her.

The words sent a bolt of fire shooting through her. She did as he told her. The pillow was soft beneath her cheek, and she clutched it.

Behind her, Jack put one hand to his cock and guided himself into the entrance she offered. At this angle, he filled her so deeply she didn't think she'd be able to stand it. He waited for her to move against him, and when she did, he set up a steady pace that had her gasping in minutes.

She was so close to the edge, but still not quite there. She needed some more direct stimulation on her clit, but Jack seemed determined to tease her. Josie pushed back against him, letting him fill her. She'd never come in this position before, usually because it didn't provide the kind of pressure she needed on her clit.

Now she concentrated on the feeling of him sliding into her. The way he gave his cock a little twist with each thrust. The way he gave a series of short, swift strokes followed by a pattern of deep, slow thrusts. His cock swelled within her, stretching her further.

Her clitoris ached to be touched. Josie arched her back to push herself onto Jack harder. With every thrust, her clit throbbed harder and she got closer to coming, but it wasn't ... quite ... enough...

Then Jack did it. He slipped one hand around to put his first two fingers directly on her swollen bud. Josie cried out

and shuddered. She was so wet his fingers slid over and around her engorged clit like he'd covered them in oil. She clutched the pillow harder and pushed herself up on her hands.

Jack took her clit between his thumb and finger, and pinched gently. The sensation was so new and so unaccustomed it shocked her into an orgasm unlike any other she'd ever had. A fierce, sharp burst of pleasure jabbed her directly beneath his tweaking fingers, then built again into another, fiercer burst. She had no aftershocks, no rippling contractions, and no sense of the pleasure fading, as she usually did. Just one burst after another, like a series of fireworks.

"Jack!"

She shuddered and wriggled beneath him. He slipped out of her, and she cried in protest, even as his fingers still kept up their gentle pressure. Another burst of orgasm built and crested. He took his hand away and pushed her onto her back.

Jack slid into her again, to the hilt. She slipped her arms around his back to

hold him closer then hooked her feet around his calves. He put his hands under her ass to tilt her further onto his cock. The angle opened her more and sent her spiraling into a final orgasm.

Waves of climax rolled over her. Her nipples tightened. She felt as though everything in her body, blood and air, was pulling inward, downward, into the tiny button of her clitoris. Tighter, tighter, drawing together like a fist clenching. She let out a low, small cry, and said his name over and over.

All at once, she opened like a flower beneath the springtime sun. Ecstasy shot from her center and radiated through her entire body. She rose, she flew, she fell apart, and came back together.

Josie lost her breath with the intensity of her climax. Stars sparkled in her vision. She gasped and writhed, and pulled Jack against her harder. He dipped his head to fasten his mouth where her neck met her shoulder. The sting of his bite sent another wave of pleasure rocketing through her. The aftershocks built until she came again, less intensely but no less pleasurable than the first.

He kissed the bite he'd made. His thrusts became faster and more ragged. His fingers gripped the softness of her buttocks and he pulled her against him tighter.

Josie, still flying, clutched his back and nuzzled his neck. Jack moaned. She replied with a small, encouraging noise of her own.

"Josie." He panted her name, and the end of it trailed into another groan.

He shuddered. She felt him beat beside inside of her, rapidly, like the flutter of a moth on a windowpane. She held him tighter as he gave one final thrust and fully buried himself inside her.

They stayed without moving for a few long moments, until he rolled to her side. He pulled her close, so she pillowed her head on his chest. Josie put her hand over his heart, which slowly ceased its rampant thumping and returned to a normal pace.

There seemed to be so much to say, but no words adequate to say it. She contented herself with silence and the sound of his heart in her ear. He stroked her hair and held her close.

"I thought you didn't like redheads," she said drowsily, as sleep began to overtake her.

"You should know me better than that. I love a redhead." Jack toyed with a strand of her auburn hair, then squeezed her. He gave a low, throaty chuckle and another of his heart-stopping, thigh-spreading grins. "Baby."

Megan Hart

Megan Hart began her writing career in grammar school when she plagiarized a short story by Ray Bradbury. She soon realized that making up her own stories was better than copying other people's, and she's been writing ever since.

Megan's short fiction has appeared in such diverse publications as *Hustler*, *Playgirl* and *The Reaper*. Her short story "More Than Dreams" recently won second place in *Tapestry Magazine's* reader's choice contest. Her historical romances, *Lonesome Bride* and *Riverboat Bride*, are coming soon from Amber Quill Press.

Additionally, Amber Quill Press has also contracted Megan's romantic suspense, *Convicted*, which will appear in early 2004, as well as *Passion Model*, a steamy sci-fi erotica for the Amber Heat imprint.

Megan's current projects include a fantasy series, a futuristic trilogy and a dramatic suspense novel. Her dream is to have a movie made of every one of her novels, starring herself as the heroine and Keanu Reeves as the hero. Megan lives in

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