



**Two Doors Down**

Lisa Marie

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## Chapter One

“Come on, kiddo. This stuff isn’t going to move by itself.” With a grunt, Melanie Taylor yanked the first of the big suitcases out of the back of her car. Her son, Billy, was still in the backseat, presumably cleaning up his Nintendo games from all over the back seat. She wasn’t holding her breath.

“I’m coming, Mom,” Billy called back, his voice a muffled echo from the car.

“Sure you are. After I get all this upstairs.” Her muscles bunched unhappily as she pulled another case free. How is it possible for two people to have so much stuff? Especially since she’d left most of it behind in their old house for her ex-husband to deal with. He’d wanted the house and gave her more than what her share was worth. And all she took was her clothes and a few sentimental items. Her wedding albums weren’t one of those things.

“Jeez, mom.” Billy emerged from the back seat, his ten-year-old self decked out in Pokémon and Nintendo gear. His dark hair was hidden beneath a Bowie Bay Sox baseball cap and she eyed a smear of bubblegum on his cheek. A bubble gone awry she supposed. “Why didn’t you let the movers take this stuff?”

A question she had been asking herself for the better part of an hour. From the time she’d had to stuff it all into what she once thought was the plentiful trunk of her Oldsmobile. One of the last ever made. She loved this car. The Eighty Eight could go from zero to sixty in nothing flat and it had more bells and whistles than a space shuttle. She dreaded the day when all those bells and whistles decided to go kerplewie on her. All at once. Because then she’d have to say goodbye to her beloved car and get something more practical for a newly single mom and her precocious ten year old.

“Because,” was all she could come with as a box emerged this time.

“Hey, can I give you some help?” To her credit, Mel managed not to bang her head on the trunk lid when the voice startled her. She turned around with a smile and thanks. Her breath caught for an instant when she saw the owner of the voice. Standing there, with a big smile, a backpack and a motorcycle helmet was probably one of the best looking men—boy, really—she’d ever seen in her thirty-one years of life.

He was taller than her, with long legs and a lean build encased in a pair of faded jeans, white t-shirt and a leather jacket. His hair was thick and black and wet, swept back from his face like he’d just gotten out of the shower. Some of the damp strands had fallen across his forehead. Her fingers itched to brush them back.

His eyes were dark blue and stared out at her from under thick, black eyebrows. His skin was olive, his cheekbones sharp and his mouth wide and full. He had that just-gotten-out-of-bed look to him, rumpled and sexy. And she really shouldn’t be thinking that about a boy a good decade younger than herself.

“You look like you’re in a hurry. Thanks anyway.”

“No, I got a minute. You must be the new tenants. I’m Zack Conrad.” He walked over with a thud of his book bag hitting the ground next to his helmet. She took the hand he offered and ignored the zing that sped up her arm. She noticed he had nice hands, long fingered and wide palmed. She could feel the hint of calluses and wondered what he did to put them there.

He smiled again, a slow easy smile that probably had all the girls he knew panting after him. It wasn't doing much for Mel's blood pressure either. This guy was good, she decided. Casual sexiness wrapped up in a young, blue-eyed package. *Oh to be ten years younger again.*

"Hi, I'm Melanie Taylor. You can call me Mel. And this is my son, Billy." She reached over and draped a hand on Billy's shoulder and gave him a little shake. The boy smiled immediately and held out his hand.

"Hey, Billy. Welcome to the neighborhood." Zack shook the boy's hand. "What do you say we get these upstairs for your mom?"

"I guess," Billy replied with a shrug and absolutely no enthusiasm. Mel rolled her eyes and chuckled.

"Way to help there, champ," she said with a grin. Billy was a good boy. He'd handled the divorce better than she'd expected. But one night he'd let her know that she and Todd hadn't exactly been good at hiding their unhappiness. It had almost been a relief for all of them when Todd finally asked for a divorce. The fact that the reason behind that was a nineteen-year-old intern at his office only bruised Mel's pride, not her heart.

"Here, I'll take these and you can show me where they go." Zack reached down and in a show of strength that impressed even Mel, he hefted two of the overstuffed cases and a box. How he balanced it all, Mel wasn't sure. He handled the weight easily as he followed Billy around the pool to the stairs on the opposite side and up.

"Welcome home, Mel. It's certainly a step down." Mel looked around the complex, the open layout with the doors facing a railing over the pool like a hotel. There were palm trees in the parking lot and a sign that proudly declared the name of the apartments, Harbor Pines, and a playground. Mel decided she liked it a hell of a lot better than the five-bedroom, three-bath monstrosity that she'd been living in for the past eight years. And now it was Todd's problem. And Mitzy, or Trixie, or whatever the hell her name was.

Mel closed all the doors of the car, picked up the final two cases herself and hauled them around the pool with a lot less grace than Zack had. By the time she'd gotten them upstairs she was huffing and sweat had broken out on her skin.

"I would have brought those up." Zack emerged from her apartment; not looking like he'd just hauled half her wardrobe up in one go.

"It's okay," she gasped, but she thankfully let the suitcases go when he walked over to take them. She leaned against the rail to catch her breath and watched him walk back down the terrace. *Nice butt*, her highly inappropriate inner voice said. Of course, Mel was inclined to agree.

"Mom, there's no room to move in here." Billy came out and looked at her.

"What do you mean? We don't have *that* much stuff." Mel pushed away from the rail and walked into the apartment, her eyes going wide and her mouth dropping open at the sight that greeted her. *Shit.*

"You, ah, certainly have a lot of stuff," Zack observed, looking around the room.

Mel couldn't even nod. The movers were only supposed to bring Billy's bedroom furniture, some boxes from the kitchen and one of the bathrooms and the new bed she'd bought and had kept in the garage until moving day. She was planning on buying new furniture for the living and dining room when they got settled. It seemed, however, that

much more had come. She saw the ugly couch she never wanted in the first place shoved up against a wall by the kitchen. The dining room table that sat six, plus the matching buffet and china cabinet were crowded in the tiny dining room. Coffee tables, end tables and that damn bedroom set she'd shared with Todd for twelve years were crammed in there as well. Other odds and ends and things she'd purposely left behind were all transplanted to her new home. All kinds of reminders that she had been a failure at her past life. Now they were here to remind her of that every day.

"Damn him."

Zack turned puzzled eyes on her but wisely didn't comment.

"My ex-husband. He must have had the movers bring all this stuff." He'd dealt with it all right. He'd sent it with her to clean up. Typical. "Billy, go make sure all your stuff made it here safe." As he disappeared down the hall, Mel pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and stabbed her ex-husband's number. "Todd, what the hell is all this stuff doing here?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Zack standing in the middle of the mess, looking around in an interested way. "You don't have to stay," Mel hissed over Todd's lame answer. "I don't care if whatsurface doesn't want it in the house. *I* don't want it either. That's why I told the movers *only* what was in the garage. What do you mean you moved it all to the garage?"

Zack didn't leave. He settled himself against a stack of boxes and crossed his arms over his chest. Great. Now she was going to have an audience for telling Todd to fuck off.

"I don't care if you think I needed furniture. None of this shit is practical for a two bedroom *apartment*." Todd's drone in her ear had her rubbing her temples in aggravation. "Fine. I'll deal with it. I always do." With a snap, the phone closed and Mel had to count to ten ... twenty ... fifty before the urge to scream went away.

"I don't mean to be nosy, but are you okay?"

*If you didn't mean to be nosy, you would have left*, Mel thought nastily. Then she sighed. Taking her bad mood out on her new neighbor wasn't fair. "Yes. I am. Thanks for your help, but you looked to be in a hurry a few minutes ago."

"I can help you with this stuff. I mean, I don't see you and your son getting much of it moved." He fixed her with those ridiculously blue eyes and Mel felt a strange pull somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach.

"No, thanks. Really. You're probably already late for school."

"I was late when I got up. I've only missed one lit class this semester. I think my grade can take the hit." He smiled, a casual lifting of one side of his mouth that held Mel's gaze for a moment. Then, mentally slapping herself, she shook her head.

"Thanks, but—"

"Look, you can keep saying no thanks. But I really don't see how you're going to get any of this stuff out to the dumpster by yourself. I can leave, and you can spend the rest of the night just trying to get that couch across the room."

"Well, when you put it that way." Mel had felt pretty good out in the parking lot. Now, looking at all the rejects from her former life, she felt very, very tired. Zack snickered and pushed away from his stack of boxes.

"I'll just go get my stuff off the pavement before the trash men come and run it over. I'll drop it off in my apartment and be right back. I'm in the unit two doors down."

“Okay. Thanks.” She attempted a smile.

“Sure.” When he disappeared through her still open door, Mel dropped her face into her hands and fought the urge to cry. There was so much work to do now. Instead of just being able to come in, unpack the few things she and Billy had brought with them then assess what they would need; now she’d have to get rid of the junk Todd had sent. *Then* she could get the stuff she really needed. Not to mention she was going to have to find some time to go to work in there.

“Mom, I’ve got all my stuff.” Billy came out, sans his Game Boy and looked around. “Sheesh.”

“You can say that again. Zack is going to come back and help us get some of this stuff out of here.”

“What are we going to do with it?”

“Put it down by the dumpster,” Mel answered him with a shrug. “Maybe someone else will need a toile couch.” In general, she liked toile. In small, throw pillow-like doses. Not all over a whole couch. Just looking at the couch was making her eyes hurt.

“Twall?”

“That’s the name of the pattern, dear. Your father loved it.” Billy looked at the couch like he was wondering when Todd had bumped his head so hard.

“So why didn’t he keep it?”

“Ask Trixie.”

“Carly,” Billy corrected automatically. Mel resisted rolling her eyes. What was it about men and midlife crises? It seemed they always picked girls with stripper names.

Mel rubbed her hands on her jeans then clapped them together. “All right. Let’s get started.”

\* \* \* \*

Billy was out cold on his sheetless bed and Zack was draped across the only chair Mel wanted to keep. It wasn’t very late, thank god, but late enough that Mel’s forgotten stomach was screaming at her.

“Hey, want some pizza? It’s the least I can do for you helping out today.”

“Sure. Don’t suppose you have a beer to go with that?”

“Are you old enough?” Mel asked dubiously. She was standing in the door of the kitchen, a warm bottle of Coke in her hand. Zack had been lounging with his eyes closed, his handsome face appearing even younger in relaxation. She had a hard time believing he was any older than eighteen.

“I’m twenty two,” he answered, opening his eyes to look at her. She wondered if he practiced that look in a mirror. The way his eyes settled on her made her feel twitchy, like he was imagining her with her clothes off or something. And the problem was, she was learning quickly, that idea didn’t bother her as much as it should have.

“You’re kidding.”

“Do you want to see my license?” She almost said yes. She figured he’d guessed that since he started to reach for his wallet.

“No. No. That’s all right.” She turned and went into the tiny kitchen, taking two beers out of the fridge. She ordered the pizza then picked the beers up and walked back into the living room. “Thanks for your help. And I’m sorry you missed your class.”

Zack took the beer and shrugged. “My grades will survive. It’s not like I’m going

into literature after I graduate anyway.”

“What will you do? Or what are you studying?” Mel sank to the floor and leaned up against a box. They’d gotten all the furniture out that she didn’t want. She’d wait to do the boxes herself over the next few days.

“Theater. Music.” Zack took a long pull from the beer and Mel found herself fascinated by the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

*Get a grip on yourself, girl.*

“Looking to be on Broadway?”

Zack chuckled and shook his head. “Not really. I can’t decide if I want to be a rock star or an actor.”

“Oh. That is a tough choice.” Mel laughed with him for a minute, savoring the taste of her beer and the company of another person that wasn’t obsessed with Pokémon. “Do you live with your parents?”

“Uh uh. All by myself.” He sang that last part, and Mel was surprised that he was a good singer. His voice was melodious, not rough or shrieky like some men’s voices could be. It sent a chill down her spine. “I get some help from the school for housing and I work to cover the rest.”

“Sounds like a busy life.”

“Yeah. I find time for myself.”

“Unless of course, you’re coming to the aid of a woman and her kid that are suddenly swamped with furniture. I feel bad. You probably don’t have a lot of down time. Skipping class to haul a bunch of junk around doesn’t seem right.”

“I don’t do what I don’t want to.” Those damn eyes were on her again and it seemed to Mel that the temperature in the apartment suddenly jumped.

“Well, as a token of my appreciation, whenever you find yourself free around six o’clock, you’re welcome for dinner.”

“This starving college student gives thanks.” Zack had placed a hand over his heart and inclined his head in thanks, his smile wide and doing strange, trippy things to Mel’s heart rate. God, she must really be tired.

“You’re welcome. I better go get Billy up. Poor guy.”

“Was it rough on him? The divorce?” His question surprised her more than annoyed her at its forwardness and Mel considered him for a moment before answering.

“I think on some level it was. Moving out of the only home he remembers to a place that’s much smaller. Not having his dad around all the time. That kind of stuff can be hard on a kid. But I think he knew that our marriage was over. Adults have a tendency not to realize just how much kid’s notice. He wasn’t even surprised when I told him. I think his father’s new girlfriend kind of bothered him. But in all, he did really well. He’s a good kid.”

“I can tell.”

“Of course, he hasn’t hit puberty yet.”

Zack snickered. “Yeah. My mom tells me she’d rather get bit by a rabid squirrel than deal with that again.”

Now Mel smiled. She really liked him. He was funny, easy going and strong. That last was very much appreciated when they hauled the furniture down the steps. Mel was sure she’d wake up the next day feeling all sorts of pains in places she didn’t know she had.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.”

A few minutes later, Mel led a sleepy Billy out into the living room just as the pizza guy showed up. She dug in her purse as Zack answered the door. The smell of pizza made her mouth water and the three dropped down to the floor and dug in. No plates, although Mel did get up and get some napkins.

When the pizza was nothing more than a few discarded crusts in the bottom of the box, Zack stood and stretched. Again, Mel found her gaze drawn to him. She caught a hint of a well-defined stomach beneath the t-shirt he wore and she had to jerk her eyes away.

*You are a perverted old woman and you are going to hell.*

Old? She was only thirty-one. And it wasn’t like he was a child, she reminded herself. Still, there was an age difference there and it was much too soon to be thinking about any man in that way, much less a younger one.

“Thanks for the pizza. And I’ll take you up on that dinner offer.”

“Please do. Thanks for your help. I’ll write a note for your professor if you need me too.” He let out a bark of laughter and nodded.

“Thanks. I’ll let you know if I need it. Night, Billy. I’ll come over and whoop your butt at Grand Turismo sometime soon.”

“Yeah, right. Night.” Billy yawned as the door closed.

“Come on, kiddo. It’s a school night for you too.” Mel got up and made sure the door was locked. Then she reached down and pulled her son to his feet. “Come on.”

“Ah, mom. Do I have to go to school tomorrow? I don’t even get a day off for moving? I mean, this was a very traumatic experience for me.”

“Yeah, right.” Mel echoed his words to Zack. “You didn’t even have to switch schools. Get your butt to bed. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Billy said grudgingly. He tromped down the hall to brush his teeth while Mel finished closing up.

She looked around the room in the light of the lone lamp. She hoped that she hadn’t made a mistake, choosing an apartment in the same school district instead of finding a house in another. But Billy had had enough upheavals; she hadn’t wanted to add another.

The money Todd had given her would last a while. But she was going back to work to make sure it lasted even longer than that.

Things would be okay, she decided. They had to be.



## Chapter Two

Somewhere around two o'clock in the morning, Mel's eyes popped open and refused to shut again.

"Shit." She huffed at the ceiling. She was so tired that sleeping should have been easy. But no, here she was, eyes wide open. She felt edgy, restless, like there was something she should be doing but she wasn't quite sure what it was. "Jesus Christ. I just can't win." With a sigh, Mel threw the sheet back and got out of bed. She walked quietly through the apartment to the kitchen where she found a clean glass and got some water.

The house was dark except for the range light she'd left burning for just such emergencies. She swallowed her water, cooling her throat and clearing her mind as she just stood. She couldn't count the times she'd been up and about in the middle of the night during her marriage to Todd. She figured her insomnia had been brought on by stress due to not knowing exactly where her husband was. He'd been absent from the marriage for a long time, starting with the classics—working late, important deadline, blah, blah.

Mel wasn't a fool. She knew that Bambie ... *Carly*, she corrected herself, wasn't the first. She'd just been the straw that broke the camel's back; for both Mel and Todd.

Mel put her glass in the sink and pushed those thoughts away. She was tired of letting Todd and his dalliances control any aspect of her life, so it was time to put it out of her mind. This was a new start for her, a new time in her life. She'd married Todd right out of high school, when she was eighteen and he was a twenty-five-year old intern at a stockbroker's.

She hadn't really had much of a chance to be young, to have any of the experiences that her friends had been having at the time. Not that she wanted to go back or anything, but it was kind of nice to be the ruler of her own destiny. To not have to worry about how Todd was going to take something she said or did. He'd always thought she was just this side of inappropriate from the way she dressed to her taste in furnishings. Obviously they didn't get along there. And she'd always deferred to him, thinking he was so much more sophisticated than her.

That had lasted about five years. Then she'd had Billy and she hadn't cared what Todd did. It wasn't until Billy was school age that Mel started noticing that Todd was absent more and more.

Mel sighed and ran a hand through her hair. When her hand came back to rest on the counter, it bumped one of the beer bottles she and Zack had used the night before. As she looked at it, her imagination took over her sleep-deprived mind and her edginess veered into a completely different direction.

Arousal slammed into her so hard and fast she had to grip the counter to hold on. She could see him in her mind's eye, black hair mussed from their work, his skin glowing with a slight sheen of sweat. The way his lips had wrapped around the bottle, his long fingers caressing the glass and making her shake.

The images in her head morphed, shifting and changing until she saw herself draped across her bed in some gauzy nightgown she'd never own, her breasts heaving and nipples so hard she could feel them ache.

“Oh Jesus,” she hissed once Zack made his reappearance in her fantasy. He was wearing just his jeans; her mind’s eye happily filling in what he looked like without his shirt on. Blue, blue eyes burned her as they devoured the sight of her. They were so dark they seemed almost black in the dim light of her bedroom.

She was already writhing with anticipation, her panties damp from her arousal, her breath a ragged hitch in her chest. The bed dipped when he placed a knee on the mattress and it was all she could do not to jump up and tackle him. She wanted him to touch her, *needed* him to touch her. She thought she just might explode if he didn’t.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, his voice like liquid silk in the night. He reached out, his long fingered hand sliding from her throat to her breast, his touch searing her skin and making her whimper. He palmed the mound, rubbing the center of his hand over the nipple and making it harden impossibly more. Her fingers clutched at the sheets and her thighs rubbed together in an attempt to alleviate the pressure building there with his gentle caress. He didn’t rush. She knew he must be able to feel her heart thudding under his hand.

Her eyes drifted closed as sensation took her over. His mouth replaced his hand, his tongue wet and hot through her gown. She nearly shot off the bed when he nipped the stiff peak with his teeth. Somehow he’d moved between her thighs, his hips nestled perfectly like they were made to be there. She could feel his erection through the thick denim of his jeans and it sent her blood racing.

She thrust against him, desperate to relieve the ache that was building to almost painful proportions.

He moved leisurely against her, his lips still working their magic on her breasts. His hips thrust lazily against her, the stiffness of his erection and the roughness of the denim sending shockwaves through her clit. He moved like he had all the time in the world. His weight pinned her to the mattress, effectively hindering her attempts to speed things along.

“Please,” she gasped, her voice thick with arousal. “Please, Zack. Fuck me.”

He looked up at her then, the grin he gave her stripping the youth from his face and turning him into one hundred percent predatory male.

When he plunged inside of her, the orgasm ripped through her with violent intensity. Her eyes snapped open and she tried to breathe as the shockwaves coursed over her body.

“Holy shit.” Slowly she came back to awareness. She was in her room, one hand cupping a breast, the other inside her panties, two fingers thrust deep inside her pussy. Her vaginal walls fluttered as her breathing returned to normal. She glanced at the door to make sure she’d closed it when she’d come in, which she didn’t remember doing. Thankfully she had.

After a minute, her heart rate slowed enough for her to start functioning again. She pulled her fingers free from her body, resituated her clothes then got out of bed. She went to the bathroom to wash her hands and splash some water on her overheated face. When she was done, she looked at her reflection and shook her head.

“That was some fantasy,” she told her image. Embarrassment flamed her cheeks and she wondered how the hell she was supposed to face Zack again. And why had her subconscious picked him in the first place? Why not someone safer? Someone she’d never see in real life.

*Calm down. It was just your imagination.* Everybody had fantasies about friends,

neighbors. Incredibly hot younger men that just happen to live in the same apartment complex.

Mel let out a groan and stared at the woman in the mirror. That person looked decidedly like she'd just had some really great sex. And she was flying solo. Granted, she'd had one hell of an inspiration.

The woman in the mirror looked back at her with a touch of shock in her hazel eyes. Her bottom lip was swollen where she'd clamped it between her teeth to keep from screaming. It gave her mouth the appearance of having been kissed. Her shoulder-length chestnut hair was a mess around her face and her rounded cheeks were flushed.

As her surprise at fantasizing about Zack faded, she realized her edginess had subsided as well. She actually felt like she could go back to sleep. She stifled a yawn behind her fist, and after one last glance at herself in the mirror, flipped the light off. She went back to bed and fell back to sleep almost immediately. Her last thought was a silent thank you to her unknowing dream man for helping her get back to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

It really was true, Mel decided the next day, that no matter how much things change, they really did stay the same.

When she woke up that morning everything went as it had since Billy started school. She'd wake him up, make sure he was eating then go to take a quick shower while the coffee brewed. By the time she came out, dressed, Billy was ready to get in there and get himself together. Before the move, she'd check her email while she sipped her first cup of coffee. But since she didn't have the cable hooked up yet, that wouldn't happen this morning.

Not like there would have been anything worth reading anyway. Probably just another email from her mother moaning about her shame at having a divorcee for a daughter; that or a nice pharmaceutical company offering to enlarge her penis.

Yeah.

So she made Billy's lunch then made sure that she had everything she needed for her job interview later that morning, mainly the directions on how to get there.

She hadn't worked since Billy was born. And when she had, she'd waitressed. She was pretty good at it, and with no other real skills, she was happy to go back to it. Mel had researched this place before applying. Smack in the middle of the College district, it was kitschy and hip and had a steady run of people in the door. It was called The Purple Pit. A charming name, but it looked funky and fun and the food was good.

Hopefully that meant that the tips would be generous and plentiful; at least plentiful, anyway.

"Let's go, kiddo." Mel rinsed out her cup, cut the pot off then grabbed her purse as Billy came out of the back hefting his backpack.

"Ready," he grumbled. Never the best in the morning, Mel just smiled and followed him out. She locked the door and caught up with him at the bottom of the stairs. She drove him to school then headed out through town to the diner. Morning traffic was thankfully light and it didn't take Mel as long as she'd expected to get there.

Tucked between a used bookstore and a t-shirt shop, The Purple Pit could only be distinguished by the sign outside the door. It was inside that really set the place apart.

Vintage movie posters, dancing hula girls and other assorted kitsch adorned any and

all surfaces. The walls were painted a surprisingly soothing purple. The tables and chairs were a hodgepodge of yard sale and thrift store finds. Clear Christmas lights draped over the exposed beams overhead. It was just the sort of place that Mel would like going to. So working there wasn't too far of a stretch.

"You must be Melanie. I'm Edna." A middle aged woman with brassy blond hair and bright red nails made her way across the dining room. She was shorter than Mel, with a few extra pounds on her frame filling out her jeans. Tucked into those jeans was a purple shirt emblazoned with the diner's name in tiny silver stars. A black apron, sensible sneakers and a pair of silver star earrings completed the woman's outfit.

"Mel, please. Only my grandmother calls me Melanie."

"Mel, then, let's go have a seat." Mel followed Edna to an empty booth in the back and settled in. "Want some coffee?"

"Sure." Edna motioned to one of the waitresses making her way back to the kitchen then turned to Mel.

"So, Mel, tell me about yourself."

"Not much to tell. I just moved into the Harbor Pines apartments with my son and now I need a job."

"No husband?"

*That was blunt.* She managed to keep her smile in place.

"I'm divorced." She said in a way that blocked any further questions.

Edna nodded then looked down at Mel's application. "You haven't worked in a while. Don't worry, that won't keep me from hiring you." She flipped through the pages to find Mel's availability. "I don't have a lot of day shifts available. Maybe two during the week, four hour shifts during the lunch rush. Always need extra hands on the weekends. Some may be nights, though. Gotta put you where I need you."

"That's okay. I can work Friday and Saturday nights if needed. That's when Billy, my son, goes to his father's."

Edna made a noise that might have been an affirmative and scanned the rest of the application. "All right then. I'll get the paperwork you'll need to fill out and get you a couple of shirts and an apron. You can start tomorrow. I've got a girl out with the flu."

"Okay. Thank you." Edna slid out of the booth as the other waitress approached with their coffee.

"Lacey, this is Mel. She's the new girl."

"Hi," Mel said, smiling at the young blonde.

"Hi. Don't let her bother you," Lacey said as Edna moved away. "She looks mean, but she's pretty cool. Wish I could say the same about some of the customers."

Mel laughed in understanding and added sugar to her coffee. "Yeah. I get that."

"Just watch out for the frat boys on the weekends. They get drunk and seem to forget what personal space means."

"I've come across a few of those in my time."

"Well nice meeting you." Lacey smiled and walked away to check on her tables. Mel stirred her coffee and waited for Edna to return. There was a nice crowd in the place and a steady stream of people coming through the door. It looked like, even with the minimal hours she was getting, she might not do too badly monetarily. And as long as Todd didn't get stupid about the child support, she and Billy might do just fine.

"Penny for your thoughts." For the second time in as many days, Zack scared the shit

out of her.

"I'm going to get you a bell," she grumbled. He laughed, the sound bringing back memories of her ... episode during the night. She mustered up the nerve to turn her head to look at him. As soon as she did she felt the bottom of her stomach drop out as her gaze locked with his.

"Sorry. I just came in and saw you here all by yourself."

"I'm waiting for Edna to come back. I'm going to be working here."

"Cool."

"Do you come here a lot?" Because if he did, she wasn't sure how she would function. She was surprised she was actually coherent right now. Her face felt like it was on fire and her mouth was dry as her imagined memory of this boy danced through her head. It was all she could do not to squirm in her seat.

"No," he was saying as she struggled to act normal, "Can't afford to eat out often."

"Starving college student, right?"

"Exactly." He flashed her a smile that struck her dumb for a second. "I'll see you later, Mel."

"See you." Mel watched him walk over to a table full of other college kids. He looked over his shoulder and she'd be damned if he didn't smirk at her. It was like he knew she was looking. She immediately dropped her eyes and studied her fingernails with sudden interest.

This had to stop. He made her feel like a lovesick, teenage girl. And she hadn't been either of those in quite some time. He was younger than her; his life was so much different. Yes, he was gorgeous and he filled out his jeans in a way that begged a woman to look. She wasn't blind and appreciating a good looking man wasn't a sin. But she was a thirty-one-year-old mother. Single mother. She had no business ogling Zack.

It had simply been too long since she'd been with a man. She and Todd hadn't exactly been lighting up the sheets towards the end there. Like, not at all. And that had been going on for some time. So of course her libido was kicking into overdrive and her subconscious was latching onto the only man that had made her look twice in the last six months.

She'd just have to stay away from him until she was over this ... infatuation, Mel decided. They lived in the same building, sure. Hell on the same floor. But they had different schedules. It shouldn't be *that* hard to avoid him.

With that decision made, Mel made a point of ignoring him the rest of the time she was in the diner.

By the time she got home that afternoon, after picking up something for dinner and curtains for the bedroom windows, she had forced herself to forget about Zack. Then Billy got home and the battle for TV over homework started and she had to get dinner on. By the time the knock sounded on the door a few minutes before six, Mel had forgotten all about her open invitation to the very person she was trying to avoid.

Unbelievably, she didn't even blink when she saw him.

"Hi, Zack. Come on in."

### Chapter Three

Zack walked in, hands in his pockets, swagger in his steps. He'd been practicing cool since he was twelve. When he was younger, the smooth walk, casual smile and almost bored expression made the girls swoon. When he got to college, he just didn't care enough anymore to consciously act cool. Somewhere along the line it had just become part of him. He would have been surprised if someone pointed it out to him.

He swung the door closed behind him, a smile playing around his mouth. The tension rolling off Mel when she answered the door was palpable. He'd felt it that morning and to a lesser degree the night before. The fact that he might be the cause intrigued him enough that he'd blown off a study group to take her up on her offer of dinner.

"So what's cooking?" He looked around the room. He noticed a few boxes had been opened and gone through, but there was no furniture to replace the storeful she'd gotten rid of the day before. Being a starving college student, he would have saved what he needed. He barely had money for food, much less new furniture. In fact, he kind of hoped she didn't ever come to his place. There was now a coffee table, two bedside tables and a recliner that wasn't there before.

There was no way he was taking that couch though, even if he could have gotten it back up the stairs by himself.

"Nothing glamorous," she was saying as she went back into the kitchen. "I haven't had a chance to do a full shopping trip. Hot dogs and French fries." She looked over her shoulder, a casual look anyone would have given someone they were talking too. It made Zack's stomach do a little flip.

"And broccoli," Billy said with a level of disgust reserved for green veggies and girls. Zack could commiserate, but he did actually like broccoli.

"Broccoli's good," he said with a smile. Billy looked at him with such a level of betrayal, Zack actually felt a little guilty.

"See?" Mel said in a tone that indicated she'd won some battle with Zack's declaration. Zack gave the still hurt-looking Billy a smile.

"Sorry kid. Can't go against the mom."

"Fine." Zack had an idea that the kid would have pouted if he thought it wouldn't make him look like a baby in front of him.

"Go wash. Dinner's almost ready." Billy tromped down the hall, resigned to the fact that broccoli would be gracing his plate.

"Can I help?" Zack leaned a hip against the kitchen door and crossed his arms over his chest. The room was postage stamp size with a small island in the middle for eating. His kitchen had one as well, but his was covered with music sheets, unopened bills, playbooks and guitar strings. Hers had placemats and a small vase of flowers. A distinct difference.

"No, go ahead and sit. Help yourself to a drink first, if you like."

Zack bypassed the island when she said that and opened the fridge. He had to smile that in the general disarray of the apartment, and her supposedly not being able to get to the store, the fridge was pretty well stocked. Soda, beer, milk, juice, eggs and other

assorted things filled the small appliance pretty well. It reminded him of something his own mother might do and he reminded himself it had been a while since he'd called home.

He took a soda instead of a beer. He could blow off a study group, but he had to work later.

"So, Zack." He turned at the sound of her voice and settled himself against the counter. He watched her move easily around the small space. She was wearing a pair of army green pants rolled up to the knee and a tank top with thin straps. Both hugged her curves in a way that had Zack's imagination kicking in overtime.

"Yeah?" he prompted when she didn't continue. She turned her head to look at him, her eyes meeting his as the silence stretched between them. Zack had the urge to walk over and bury his hands in her silky hair. To see the surprise fill her eyes as she realized his intent then kissing that soft mouth until she melted.

Mel blinked once, twice while Zack mentally nailed his feet to the floor. Tension crackled between them, making it hard to breathe as the temperature of the room seemed to spike higher. He kept his eyes on her and set the can of soda down on the counter with a soft clink. The sound made her jerk but other than that she didn't move.

A slightly panicked look filled her gaze when Zack took the first step towards her. Two more and he'd have her pinned against the opposite counter. He could imagine her pressed tight against him, her warm supple body trembling with desire.

God knew his was, and he hadn't even touched her yet.

"Dinner ready?" Billy's question snapped the tension in the room like a rubber band. Zack jumped back guiltily, snatching up his soda once more and taking a long pull to cool his suddenly dry throat. Mel turned away from him completely and began struggling with the paper plate package. She finally hacked at it with a knife, and he could see her hands shaking.

"Right now, baby," Mel said, her voice thick. Somehow, Zack managed to make it to a stool and drop onto it without making a complete ass out of himself. Billy jumped on the stool next to him and pulled out a massive pile of cards, seemingly oblivious to the plight of the adults in the room.

"Lookit what mom bought me today; more Pokémon cards." Dutifully, and for a way to quit staring at Mel's back, Zack turned and looked at the cards. The craze over the little mutant animals started back when Zack was in middle school. He'd never personally gotten into it, but Billy's enthusiasm was infectious and before he knew it he was listening intently to the difference between metal Pokémon and water. There was also some discussion on the best defense against a Legendary. There apparently wasn't much of one.

"Hey, put 'em away." Mel's 'mom' voice broke into their conversation, effectively ending it. She softened her words with a smile for Billy. It faltered when she looked over at Zack. She set a plate down in front of him and pulled her hand away quickly as if afraid to touch him.

He made her nervous. Good.

He'd spent a sleepless night daydreaming about her. It was a credit to his skill as a performer that he wasn't acting as jittery around her as she was around him.

Zack had never had a woman affect him like she did. Not almost instantly. When he'd seen her leaning into the trunk of her car, lust had punched him hard in the stomach.

The sight of her struggling with the cases had tempered his initial reaction and his long ingrained manners kicked in.

Her age wasn't an issue to him. He didn't think she was that much older than him. She certainly didn't look it. Her son had given him pause, but not because he didn't like kids. That was more because kids had a tendency to control a relationship. Making or breaking it with a well-placed tantrum. Billy seemed like a good kid though, polite and generally happy to have another male around to talk too.

Of course, Zack wasn't dating his mom. Yet.

However, something about the way she'd assumed he was under twenty one the night before had him thinking she might have a problem with his age.

Zack might have been younger, but his experience with women wasn't small. In high school, the time he fondly thought of as his shallow days, he hadn't been above using his looks, his smile, his well practiced charm to get dates. Since he was fourteen, those same looks and charm had gotten him the leads in plays, another nail in the coffin of the eligible—and some not so eligible—young ladies of the school. None had been immune and he really hadn't been discriminatory. There had been enough of him to go around.

By the time he'd left for college, however, his tastes had become more discerning. Between classes, rehearsals and work he didn't really have time to be on the prowl. And he hadn't really wanted to anyway. He'd grown up somewhere along the line and realized there was more to life than how many notches he had in his bedpost. Not that it hadn't been fun, but that part of his life was over. He'd never treated a woman badly and he'd always made it a priority to not have a bad goodbye with any of them. Sometimes it didn't work. But he'd tried.

In four years of college, he'd only had a handful of dates, one real relationship and a friend with benefits. The relationship faded away and the friend had graduated. A few of those dates had been with older women. Older than Mel. So age definitely wasn't an issue with him. The fact those women had treated him like some kind of trophy was.

A couple of his friends thought he was nuts for breaking things off. He could have had a free ride through school—through life—if he'd played his cards right.

They didn't understand he couldn't deal with the way he felt when they shoved money in his pocket and their hands down his pants.

Through all of that, there had never been a girl that had invaded his senses and made it hard to think. Not like Mel. Besides the attraction, he *liked* her. In the short time he'd spent with her, he just ... liked her. She handled her son with an ease that only a few women possessed, giving the illusion that motherhood was easy. When she saw what her ex-husband had done with the furniture, she'd hopped right on the phone to deal with it, blasting the man then just taking care of it herself.

As far as first impressions went, she'd knocked him out.

After he'd left, he'd spent the better part of the night with a hard-on, imagining her writhing beneath him on his bed as he thrust into her, his name falling from her lips in a scream. Needless to say he didn't sleep real well.

When he'd seen her in the diner that morning, he'd had to talk to her. She looked lost in thought and not too happy when he'd interrupted her. She had been polite, but he had definitely gotten a vibe that she wasn't interested in talking to him. It had been a surprise, but he played it off. Then he'd felt her eyes on him as he walked away and when he turned to look at her he saw for a quick second a mirror of the lust he felt for her on her



pretty face. It was quickly covered up when their gazes caught. Suddenly, her attitude had made sense.

“So, where are your parents, Zack?” Mel’s question pulled him back to the present and he twirled a French fry in ketchup as he considered his answer. He had a feeling she mentioned his parents to remind her of their age difference. Silly.

“They live in Baltimore.”

“That’s not very far away. Why don’t you live with them while you finish college? Would sure save the expense of rent.” She was trying to be cheerful, to ignore whatever the hell was going on between them. On some level he guessed he could understand. A newly divorced mother of one just starting out might find an attraction to *any* man frightening, or at the least, inconvenient.

Zack liked being inconvenient. Especially if it gave Mel that flushed, slightly panicked look whenever she looked at him. She was still avoiding his eyes as she ate. She cut her hot dog with a knife and fork, dipped it in ketchup, and then ate it. Why did he think that was cute?

“My dad...” Zack started, his mouth screwing up as the image of his old man, the spitting image of himself, sprang up into his mind. He struggled with the bitterness that always accompanied it and he took a heavy breath.

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business,” Mel said quickly, her voice full of concern. He looked up at her and saw that concern mirrored in her eyes. She had amazing eyes. Forest green with flecks of brown and gold throughout, reminding him of a picture of the hills in Ireland he’d seen once. They were almond shaped and long lidded, fringed by thick dark lashes.

Beautiful.

“It’s okay,” he told her, forcing himself to relax again. “My dad didn’t approve of my career choice. Singing and dancing and acting are for...” *blacks and homosexuals* he finished silently when he remembered Billy’s presence next to him. Even his mind couldn’t repeat the words his father had actually used.

“Not for you, right?” Mel saved him, chewing carefully as she watched him. He saw a flare of something in her eyes, something that could have been anger. He smiled and nodded.

“Yeah.” He finished his own hotdog before continuing. “He never went to any of the plays or music shows I was in. My mom did.” Zack had to smile, remembering his mother in the front row, clapping like a mad woman. His biggest fan, his greatest love. “She was there every night. When I graduated, dad said that if I didn’t study business or accounting, anything practical, he wouldn’t pay for school.”

“That sucks,” Billy chimed in, chewing the hated broccoli loudly.

“Language, William. And close your mouth when you chew.” Billy’s mouth snapped shut dutifully. “So, four years later and he still hasn’t come around?”

Zack shook his head and pushed his empty plate away. “I don’t even go home for holidays.”

“That’s awful,” Mel declared sounding horrified. Zack just shrugged, silently saying *that’s the way it is*.

“What about your mother?”

Zack’s face softened and he smiled as her face swam in his memory. Huge smile, rounded cheeks and the same blue eyes he had. She was gorgeous.

"She sends money when she can. She doesn't work, so she has to save up from what dad gives her. I tell her not to, but she doesn't listen."

"I wouldn't either," Mel told him with an indulgent smile for her son. Billy rolled his eyes, his skin pinking with pleasure despite his embarrassment. Zack laughed and couldn't resist the urge to ruffle the boy's hair, an act that could have him high on the uncool list. Luckily, Billy didn't seem too bothered by it.

"Trust me, you'll be thankful for her someday."

"She keeps telling me that."

"She's right," Zack confirmed with a wink. He was still smiling when he looked back at Mel. She was looking at her son with raw devotion written clearly on her face. Zack felt his stomach drop and his usual half smile half smirk freeze on his face. She was stunning.

"My mother doesn't really approve of me," she said, breaking the moment without realizing there had been one to break. She slid off her stool and started to gather up the dishes, not looking at him as she worked. "Go finish your homework, kiddo."

"Aw, Mom. I've got lots of time before bed."

"If you want dessert you'll go now," Mel told him pointedly, steel flashing in her eyes.

"Man." Billy flopped more than slid off his stool and stalked out of the kitchen.

"Tell him now that he'll appreciate me later," Mel suggested with an amused shake of her head. Thankfully for Zack, the mother and son exchange had given him time to collect himself.

"He will." Zack watched her for a minute as she put food away. She moved with a simple grace, smooth and sensual without trying. He wondered what it would be like to dance with her, to feel those muscles moving fluidly under his hands as he moved with her around the floor. Something about that affected him more than the idea of sleeping with her.

Well, almost.

"Why doesn't your mom approve of you?"

"What?" she asked, sounding as if she'd forgotten what she'd said, or maybe she hadn't realized she'd said it out loud. "Oh, well, I got a divorce."

Zack quirked a brow and jerked a shoulder. "So? Lots of people do."

"Not me. Not a Samson." Mel rolled her eyes and made a face that would have made him laugh if he hadn't glimpsed the pain in her eyes. "I'm the first woman in my family to get a d-i-v-o-r-c-e. The rest of my aunts, grandmothers, mother ... all of them stand by their man." Another roll of the eyes and she put the last container in the fridge, then she started to work on the pots, washing them quickly under running water and soap. "Even when I told her that Todd asked for the divorce, in some lame attempt to take the blame off of me, of course, it was my fault. I should have just dealt with his dalliances and reminded him why he'd married me in the first place. Since I didn't really know why he'd married me in the first place, I didn't see how I was supposed to remind him of it."

When she was done drying the second pot she turned to face him, leaning against the counter and crossing her arms over her chest. The hurt was more evident now and Zack felt the urge to do *something* to take it away. "I guess it's a good thing my name is Taylor now. Apparently divorce is all right with them and my mother can pretend I don't exist."

"I'm sorry," he said, the words sounding empty to his own ears. Mel lifted a shoulder

in a shrug much like his from earlier. That's the way it was, for both of them it seemed.

They stayed like that for a long moment, eyes connected and silent, the air starting to thicken around them. Mel's fingers tightened on her arms, as if she were trying to fight it off. Zack pushed off his stool and walked around the island to her. He saw her tense and knew that he didn't like it. He'd never had a woman do that before. It both intrigued and irritated him.

"Thanks for dinner." He took a risk, leaning over to press a kiss on her temple. He let the smell of her hair invade his senses, the soft, flowery scent imbedding itself in his memory. She leaned into him, just a little and he thought he felt her tremble. "Bye." His voice had faded to a whisper and it took all his willpower to step away.

"Don't you have a girlfriend, or something?" Her question rang out after him, causing him to pause right outside the kitchen door. He looked back at her, one dark brow arched as he regarded her. She was still standing against the counter, her arms crossed even tighter in front of her like a shield. She'd sounded like she wanted his answer to be 'yes'. Like she *needed* it to be.

Zack met her gaze full on, his smirk just starting to lift his lip.

"No," he said, making damn good and sure his answer sunk in before finally turning away.

## Chapter Four

"I need a special, two western omelets with hash and a side of biscuits," Mel called to the kitchen. She put her ticket up on the rack and gave it a spin.

"Don't go far. Here's table two."

"Thanks, Tick." Mel slid the plates of French toast and eggs onto a tray, grabbed the maple syrup and skirted around the counter. Three days in and she'd already gotten over the fact that the food they served to the public was made by a short, round, balding man named Tick.

"Kim just sat you another table," Lacey told her as she passed.

"Thanks." *So much for taking it easy on the new girl.* Mel weaved through the diner with ease, avoiding bumping any arms of customers or the unexpected child darting out from their chairs. She'd forgotten how much like an obstacle course serving was.

With a smile, she delivered her table, taking care of their requests before heading to the new one. Day three and aside from the first she'd been running steady. She liked the people that came in, enjoyed her coworkers and liked that the place was busy enough that it kept her from thinking about anything too much. About anything. Or anyone. And it helped that she hadn't seen that anyone in the past trio of days. Something she was supremely grateful for.

She was busy pulling out her book and flipping to a new page, so she wasn't looking at the table. "Hi, my name is Mel. What can I ... shit." Mel stopped at the table and glared at the pretty young redhead smiling smugly back at her. With a sigh, she picked up her pen and stuck a brittle smile on her face. "Hi, Kiki, what can I get for you?"

Mel had the satisfaction of seeing the younger woman's smile falter. There were two other girls with her, both young, both ridiculously pretty. Their eyes were busy darting back and forth between Mel and their friend like they were at a tennis match. Only in this game, the balls were covered in spikes.

"It's Carly, *Melanie*." The other woman sneered. Mel didn't let her smile drop even as her hated name left Carly's lips.

"Right," Mel replied, dragging the word out a beat with a quirked brow. She tapped her pencil on her order pad and looked at Carly. "Can I start you off with a drink?"

"Todd wanted to call and tell you we'd pick Billy up from school today." Carly went on as if Mel hadn't spoken. "We're taking him to Kings Dominion for the weekend. Todd wants to get an early start." *Billy will enjoy that*, Mel thought at the mention of the amusement park. She started comparing Carly's voice to oil. Slick and overpriced. "I told him that would be silly since I was going down to the District today. I'd just pop in and tell you myself." The District was what the locals called the college area. Why, Mel didn't know, but it seemed easier than calling it the "college area."

Carly's friends trilled with giggles when Carly did. Mel fought to not grind her teeth. She certainly hoped that Carly was a whore in bed, because otherwise, she had no idea what Todd saw in her. Maybe it was the breasts that were currently fighting to stay inside the bright red halter-top the girl was wearing. Someone should have really told her it clashed with her hair.

"Gee, thanks for coming into my place of business, taking up a table and not

ordering anything just to tell me that you're picking up Billy. Wait, it's Friday already?" Mel blinked then shook her head. How time flies. She was working the day shift because one of the other girls was sick. "That's fine. He doesn't have any clothes with him." She hated Carly with every fiber of her being, but she didn't bring Billy into that. As long as the other woman was good to her son, she would never cause a stink about Carly being around him. Billy seemed okay with her, if not overly thrilled. Mel didn't expect him to be much more.

"Oh, we'll take care of that." Carly waved her hand dismissively, the light overhead catching the huge diamond on her finger like fire. Carly must have seen Mel notice it. Hell, the Russian space station could have noticed it. She waved her fingers in Mel's direction to send it flashing. "Do you like it? Todd just bought it for me." The hand and finger it was on made it obvious why she was so eager to show it off.

"Christ, Carly. Is that why you came in here? To show off that tacky ring? Did you think I was going to run away sobbing? Sorry to disappoint, but I couldn't care less." Mel rolled her eyes and secretly enjoyed the gaped mouth expression the other women had taken on at her icy words. "Now, are you going to order something? Otherwise, quit wasting my time and the table."

Carly's face had gone completely slack. Obviously Mel's reaction had not been the one she'd wanted. Why she had felt the need to come here and try to hurt Mel, to make her feel weak, unwanted or worse yet *discarded* was a mystery. Mel had never done or said anything to this woman, even when she'd come in, parading around the house like she already owned it, ticking off items that Mel could take with her or leave. Well, Mel had left most of it and Todd had sent it on. She had been so tired then, so ready for it all to be over that she'd let it go. Let Carly's bad manners and appalling behavior go. But this, this was ridiculous.

Mel watched with some satisfaction as the younger woman's lips pulled into a thin, angry line. It was funny that her plan backfired and all Mel felt was a strange sense of pity. Her friends had fallen into a stunned silence at Mel's remarks and they were looking like they didn't have a clue what to do.

"Come on, girls. I think we can find better service at the McDonalds across the street," Carly said loud enough to turn some heads. Looking happy to have some direction, her friends stood up and followed her out.

*Bitch.* Mel thought, turning away in disgust. She wasn't expecting to find Edna staring down at her.

"What happened?" Mel arched a brow at the tone.

"That's my ex-husband's new girlfriend. She came in to show off her engagement ring. She didn't get the reaction she wanted." Mel lifted a shoulder and waited. If this woman was going to fire her for that, then she didn't want to work here.

Edna considered this for a minute then nodded, sending her crazy star earrings flying.

"All right. Your orders are up." And that was apparently that. Edna walked away without another word.

"Thanks," Mel muttered, before heading back towards the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

"You didn't slap the silly bitch?"

"Come on, Vicki. That would have suggested that I give a shit what Todd does. Or worse, that she can hurt me. Not happening." Vicki Morgan, Mel's best friend since high school, snorted quite indelicately on her side of the cell phone.

"You're much more restrained than me. I'd have knocked the little slut out."

Now it was Mel's turn to snort. But hers was decidedly more painful since she'd just taken a sip of water. "Jesus, Vic, you can be so violent."

"Yeah, well. I would have cut Todd's dick off too. Bet she wouldn't want him anymore."

"She would as long as his wallet was still attached. Man, you should have *seen* that ring. It had its own orbit." Mel was standing outside the diner; her back leaning against the brick walled building as the sun chased the shadows around the employee parking lot.

She heard Vicki tisk in her ear with disgust. "A ring should never be big enough to influence the tides," she said with authority.

Mel laughed and pushed her hair out of her face. She'd just gotten off work, and she'd needed to vent since the incident with Carly *had* left her a bit more upset than she'd let on. Vicki had been there through it all. The wedding, the other women, the divorce. She'd witnessed every heartbreak Mel had had on the way and had never once told her 'I told you so,' which she would have had every right. After all, she had told her so. More than once.

"I love you," Mel said with a laugh. "Why didn't we just say to hell with the men and get together?" Vicki, while never married, was just as much a casualty of love as Mel.

"Hell if I know. I think the power of the penis is too strong for us to resist. We are weak."

"Yeah, that must be it."

"So." She heard Vicki move, the phone fading out briefly as she got herself settled into a new position. "First night alone in the new apartment?"

"Yeah. I'm not really looking forward to it." Mel was surprised to find it true. There had been many a time during her marriage that she had longed for just five minutes alone. Since then, Billy had been the only thing holding her together. Sad, but true. Without him there, she wasn't sure what she was going to do.

"So, meet me at Jade's. We haven't had a girls' night out in ... forever."

"Since before the divorce was final, I think."

"Damn, you have been neglecting me," Vicki said with an indignant huff. Mel couldn't help but laugh. "Go home, get girlified, and I'll meet you there at eight."

"Okay." Mel didn't really need to think about it. "Sounds good." They chatted for another minute before saying goodbye. With a snap, the cell phone closed and disappeared into her purse.

"You've been doing well. I'm glad I hired you." Edna's voice made Mel jump and she turned to look at the older woman. She was standing a little off from the kitchen door, a cigarette smoking in her hand.

"Thanks. I'm glad you did, too," Mel replied slowly, wondering what Edna would say next. One could never be sure. As she waited, instinctively knowing the older woman wasn't done, she fished her keys out of her purse.

"You're off tomorrow. Have a good night," Edna declared suddenly. Mel blinked then narrowed her eyes.

"The schedule says I'm on."

"I know. I'm taking you off." No other explanation came and Mel huffed.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Did I just tell you I was glad I hired you?"

Confusion had Mel staring at the older woman with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Is that just tobacco?" she asked, pointing to the glowing tip of the cigarette.

Edna laughed. No, it was more of a bark than a laugh. She took a last drag then tossed the butt into the bucket of sand waiting for just such things.

"Look, I couldn't help but overhear you talking. Not going to apologize. If you wanted privacy, shoulda gotten in your car."

Any indignation Mel had felt at being eavesdropped on fell away with that.

"Seems you've had a rough time and could use a night out just to be a woman. Go. Have fun. Find a pretty boy and flirt a little. Just be here first thing Sunday. Better business then, anyway; people wantin' a pile of eggs with their weekly dose of forgiveness." Then, having said what she wanted, Edna started back to the restaurant, leaving Mel to gape after her. "Oh, but don't expect this again. I don't want a reputation of being soft."

"Well, okay." Mel watched the older woman disappear with bewildered amusement. "Okay." She walked over to her car and started it, a chuckle escaping her lips and her night with Vicki shining like a beacon.

\* \* \* \*

The house was deathly quiet when she walked inside. Piles of boxes still littered the furniture-less living room and dining room. Unattractive blinds covered the windows in both rooms and she was currently using a plastic bin to house her laptop. It was a depressing sight, but there wasn't much she could do about it. Maybe tomorrow she'd finally get around to dealing with the unpacking and finding some furniture for the apartment.

She dropped her purse by the front door after it swung shut, making sure it was locked before making a beeline for the back. She didn't even pause in front of Billy's door. He'd called as she'd driven home, sounding excited and hyped up on sugar. She'd listened with a smile to his chatter about what they were going to ride and how he and his dad would win prizes at the games and how he'd go down the highest slide. The conversation had ended with a hurried love you and a click. She didn't want to look in the bedroom and remind herself that her baby wasn't home.

Mel stopped in her room and realized that it was just as haphazard as the front of the apartment. Her clothes were still in boxes, except for the one box she'd unpacked. Her dresser was full of panties, bras, socks and her jeans, but the rest of her stuff was still packed up tight. What the hell was she going to wear?

With a disgusted sigh for herself, she hauled the nearest box up onto the bed and started rooting through it. It took her two more boxes and half an hour more to find something. A simple, halter dress in the subtlest shade of rose Mel had ever seen. The flirty skirt hit mid thigh and swung out gently when she turned. A pair of strappy, low healed sandals in gold completed the look.

Satisfied with her clothes for the evening, she stripped on her way to the shower, tossing the clothes in the hamper in the bathroom. Mel thanked her luck that the Water

Pressure Gods had smiled on her when she rented this place. The spray hit her tired muscles, the heat steaming the room and easing her fatigue away. She took care getting herself ready. An extra few minutes with the conditioner on her hair would make it sleek and silky. She shaved her legs, used a loofah on her skin and made sure she slathered herself generously with her favorite shower gel.

When she got out, her skin was pink and warm. Perfect for soaking in the matching body lotion. Smelling like wild honeysuckle, she wiped the condensation off the bathroom mirror and got out her hair dryer. Several minutes later—twenty actually—her hair was pin straight and shiny. Perfect. A quick dab of gel and a spritz of hair spray had the long tresses locked in place. A few seconds later, she slid it into a hair band, deciding that a sleek ponytail would look better with the outfit she'd chosen.

Padding back into her room, she dropped the towel and walked naked around the room. She unearthed her make up mirror and set it on the cluttered surface of her dresser. She really did need to clean up in here. Tomorrow was soon enough.

It took a ridiculously short amount of time to get herself finished. Her make-up was gold and rose, a delicate balance to the dark kohl lining her eyes. It made her look dramatic. It made her look awake.

Mel gave a little chuckle at that thought and painted on her lipstick. With a pop she scrutinized her reflection.

“Not bad, Mel. Not bad at all.” It took her no time to get dressed and soon she was wrapping the straps of her sandals around her ankles and tying them. She slid a set of five burnished gold bangles on her arm and a pair of matching hoops were clipped into her ears. She decided to leave her neck bare, deciding she liked the way the dress accented the long slope of her throat.

With one last look in the mirror, a smile curved her lip and for the first time in too long to remember, she felt sexy. She liked it. Mel walked out to the living room, her cell phone out calling a cab. She didn't drive when she went out and might be drinking.

Time to go find that pretty boy Edna had advised her to find, she thought as she stepped out into the night. Why did a flashing pair of blue eyes and a sexy smirk haunt her all the way down to the cab?



## Chapter Five

“Va va va voom. Look at you, my little hottie friend,” Vicki declared when Mel emerged from the cab. Mel laughed as Vicki grabbed her hand and threw their arms out wide to inspect. “That’s some dress.”

“Why thank you. You’re not looking too bad yourself.” Vicki was a tall, leggy brunette with fine bones and china skin. She was currently wearing a vivid red mini dress that skimmed over her like water. It shone in the streetlights, accentuating her hips and disguised the smallness of her breasts. Her make up was a dramatic palette of reds and bronzes.

Vicki was an editor at a local fashion magazine. Not New York, but she’d done New York and had been burned. So, she’d hoofed it back to Maryland and started up her own. It was a moderate success, using models from the area as well as designers, photographers and editors. And best of all, it made her happy.

“Is that the newest design from Paris?” Mel spoke loudly, to be heard over the talking and music coming from the nightclub not twenty yards away.

“You know it. Paris, Texas.” The two friends shared a laugh and then a tight hug. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“All right. Let’s go gossip and get drunk.” Vicki smiled as she pulled away and grabbed Mel’s hand.

“Sounds good,” Mel replied with a laugh and let the other woman pull her towards the club, past the waiting line with a smile to the guard at the door who waved them through, and into the club.

Jade was a popular club situated in the middle of Baltimore. It wasn’t far from the harbor and way too close to the Block. Mel used to chuckle that the hookers stood closer to the club to hit the unsuspecting drunks as they left the bar. Inside was dark, smoky and crowded. Green laser lights shot out from various angles across the dance floor, zipping past the dancers and bouncing off the walls in strange arcs. There was minimal space to walk around the upper level, but she and Vicki wound their way through easy enough. It had been years since they’d been here, and Mel was actually happy to note that not much had changed.

The music was still loud, the men were still pretty hot and the energy surged into her blood like a drug. It was fantastic.

“Two Jell-O shooters.” Vicki and Mel muscled their way up to the bar and shouted their orders. “And run a tab.”

The bartender, tall, muscled and dark as the club around them, gave her a grin and nodded. Vicki’s smile sharpened and she dragged her gaze happily over the man.

“Down girl,” Mel said with a grin when their drinks were lined up. “God, I haven’t eaten today.” She stared down at the drink.

“Hey, order us a sushi appetizer plate,” Vicki called over her shoulder, and then she clinked glasses with Mel. “Cheers.”

The women tossed their drinks back, each grimacing a bit at the slow burn cascading down their throats. Strawberries and vodka soothed away the tension Mel seemed to be

living with constantly lately and she turned to order another.

"So, you've been dating?" Vicki yelled over the din. Mel snorted and shook her head.

"God, no. I've been too busy." Her movements sent her ponytail twitching, the ends tickling her bare back. "There is this guy..." with a snap, Mel closed her mouth and avoided Vicki's curious gaze. *Why had she mentioned him?*

"Oh no you don't. You better talk, Taylor."

"Or what?"

"Don't challenge me, little girl. I have a magazine and I'm not afraid to use it."

"You wouldn't dare." Mel's eyes narrowed and she practically snarled at her friend.

"Oh, I would. Now, unless you want those pictures you took in that white lacy thong and teddy set to wind up on the cover of my magazine, you better talk."

"I took those for Todd."

"Who doesn't deserve them. The world does."

Mel let out a sound that was close to a scream. It was barely audible in the bar.

"Fine. Even though it's pointless."

"Why?"

"He's twenty two," Mel said as if that explained it all.

"So?" Vicki picked up their next set of shots and handed one to Mel.

"Uhm, I'm thirty one. Two different decades."

Vicki made a face and waved her hand dismissively. The bartender put their appetizer up, smiling at Vicki again. Mel had an idea where the brunette was going to wind up tonight if the look in her eye was any indication.

"So what, Mel? Age is just a number and the difference isn't really that bad." Vicki snatched a piece of sushi off the plate and popped it into her mouth.

"It's Billy's lifetime."

"Yeah, there's a thought." Vicki gave her a 'what am I going to do with you' look.

"What's he look like?"

"Jesus Christ, Vic, he's gorgeous," Mel surrendered with a laugh. "Black hair, crazy blue eyes, tall, lean, killer smile. It should be illegal how good looking this kid is. He should come with a warning label."

Vicki's low whistle was lost in the heavy beat of the music. "Wow. If you don't want him I'll gladly take him for a test drive. Teach him what it's like to be with a real woman."

An ugly feeling unfurled in the pit of her stomach when Vicki said that and Mel didn't like it. Something must have shown on her face because the good humor slipped from Vicki's.

"Hey, I was just kidding, sweetie."

"I know." Mel shot her drink, but it didn't taste as good as the first. She didn't think it had anything to do with how it was made. What the hell was wrong with her?

"You've got it bad," Vicki said as if she'd read her friend's mind.

Mel didn't say anything. She stuck a piece of sushi in her mouth instead and chewed. It tasted like sawdust.

"Enough talk of men. This is ladies' night. Bartender, two more!" Vicki declared, wrapping her arm around Mel. "Let's dance, sweetie."

Mel glanced over at Vicki, saw that she was really worried that she'd angered Mel.

Feeling foolish and bitchy, Mel put on a smile and nodded.

“You bet.” Vicki gave her a squeeze and a smile.

“To us.” They lifted the third drink, clinked their glasses than shot it back. Mel was starting to feel the affects of the liquor.

“Let’s go, darling. We are too hot to be wallflowers tonight.”

With a genuine laugh, Mel allowed herself to be pulled out onto the dance floor, the beat of the music filling her mind and pushing everything else away.

\* \* \* \*

Zack sighed and took a sip of his beer. His eyes were closed and he was enjoying the warm, late September night and listening to the pool water lap gently against the sides. He liked sitting here after all the little kids had disappeared into their apartments for dinner and the teenagers had taken their activities to more private locations.

His presence deterred the skinny dippers and the delinquents so the management didn’t mind if he sat out there after the pool was supposed to be closed for the night. Even if he drank a couple of beers while doing it.

Zack had learned a long time ago that he needed to make himself slow down sometimes. His mind always seemed to be going. Song lyrics, dance steps, scripts, work and homework. Everything would pile up on him, jumble in his brain and make him feel like he was being pulled in twenty different directions at once.

A professor in his sophomore year had seen the stress taking its toll on Zack. He’d pulled Zack aside and told him, without mincing words, that if he didn’t slow down he’d have a nervous breakdown by the time he was twenty-five.

That didn’t sound like a hell of a lot of fun to Zack.

He didn’t swim. But the smell of the chlorine and the sound of the water seemed to calm him, to give him something other than work, work, and work to worry about. The first time he’d come out to sit, it had been hard. Why he’d decided on the pool in the first place he didn’t know. But it was close, quiet after hours and usually meant he could be alone. His apartment was a constant reminder of everything he was trying to get a few minutes peace from, so staying there had been impossible.

Wandering around the building, trying to take a walk hadn’t worked either. The sound of traffic, the lights from the apartments and the general chatter of the city after dark had poked at him, making him notice it and not his ever-slipping sanity.

He’d seen the pool. Its inviting beach chairs and even the harsh overhead security light seemed to soothe him. The first night, he’d had to climb the fence. By the end of the month, he’d had the keys from the building supervisor.

Zack even came out here when it was cold. He only drew the line at snow.

Today had been a monster. Auditions were starting for the winter play, he had a test in Musical Theory—he was pretty sure he passed, but still it worried him—and he had to work an early shift at the warehouse to get the night off to be at the auditions. Top that off with a couple of night’s worth of restless sleep and an ever-growing infatuation with his new neighbor and he definitely needed this time to regroup.

The sound of a car pulling up invaded his quiet and one eye popped open in irritation. The sight that met his gaze had the other eye popping open and a steady thrum started in his blood.

Mel had just emerged from a cab, wearing an outfit that forced all the blood in his

body south. Her hair was in a lopsided ponytail, like she'd tried to pull it out and failed. She slammed the cab door, took a step forward and the toe of her sandal caught on the curb. She stumbled forward, somehow managing to keep herself upright and he heard her giggle.

*She's drunk*, Zack realized, setting his beer aside. He stood and quickly made his way around the pool and through the gate to stand beside her.

"Hey, Mel. Coming home a little late from the ball?" he asked with a grin. She peered at him blearily, her body gently swaying.

"Zack?" Her voice slurred a bit and she took a step towards him. Again, she started forward, but her feet twisted together. Zack caught her easily and swung her up into his arms without thinking. The first thing he noticed was her weight. She wasn't dainty, like some girls, especially the girls he knew. It seemed to him that none of them ate even close to enough. He didn't like seeing all the angles and bones the women he knew seemed to prefer. Not Mel. She was warm and soft and just the perfect fit for his arms.

The second thing he noticed was how good she smelled. His body reacted eagerly to her softness being pressed against him. Mel's breath was hot on his chest, as her face was turned towards that direction. Her arms rested on her stomach, cradling her purse. Her eyes had closed when he picked her up and he felt her sigh.

"You smell good," she said, echoing his own observation about her. "You feel good, too."

*Uh oh*, Zack thought at the almost purr sound of her voice. He started across the lot to the stairs, hoping he didn't make an idiot out of himself. Mel burrowed deeper into his arms, twisting until he felt a breast pressed against his chest and an arm around his neck. Somehow, with all her twisting and turning, he'd managed to keep a grip on her. Even if his one hand was now dangerously close to her nearly bare derriere.

"Mel, I need your keys." God, he was glad she was too drunk to notice the pitch of his voice. It had gotten somewhat higher in the last couple of seconds.

"Pocket."

*There's pockets in that thing?* Zack thought incredulously. His body, however, had reacted to the brush of her lips against the pulse point in his throat. *Shit, shit, shit*. His cock surged to life with her innocent manipulation of the sensitive area.

"I can't reach them," he said through clenched teeth as he struggled for control. She didn't seem inclined to help him, however. "Mel?"

"Hrm?" Bad idea, he realized, when her breath hit his overheated skin. His entire body was on fire and it was all he could do to hold onto her. Then he realized maybe he shouldn't, if he wanted to get her into the apartment without dumping her on her head.

"Okay. On your feet." He dropped her legs, keeping his arm behind her back to hold her steady as she landed. Her eyes snapped open and an indignant 'Hey' came out of her mouth. "Keys, Mel."

"Fine." She reached into a hidden pocket in the skirt and pulled out them out, glaring at him the whole time. He took them from her and managed to unlock the door one handed then maneuvered her inside.

"Where's Billy?" he asked, not wanting the boy to see his mother like this.

"Dad's." She slumped heavily against him, a thigh brushing intimately against the erection he was trying desperately to ignore. "Mmm. Is that for me?" Surprisingly nimble fingers reached up and ran over the stiffness. Zack damn near whimpered.

“Stop, Mel.” He grabbed her hand and held it as he led her carefully down the short hall. She pouted and tried to yank her hand free, to no avail. “Here you go.” He half-walked, half-dragged her into her bedroom. There were still boxes and a suitcase flung open with clothes hanging out of it all over the place. A light glared brightly from across the room, making them both blink. He moved carefully through the mess to the bed. “All right, sweetheart, into the bed with you.”

“You too.” He had a split second before he realized what she was going to do. With surprising grace, she turned into him, hooked her ankle behind his knee and pulled. They landed on the bed with an ‘oomph’ Then she was kissing him, her fingers buried in his hair and her tongue gliding over his lips, seeking entrance. A groan caught in his throat and his mouth opened, allowing her to slip greedily inside.

Her taste assaulted his senses as their tongues tangled in a silky dance. Strawberries, vodka and something completely Mel washed over his palate and had him craving more.

God, he couldn’t do this, even as his body responded to hers, his hands coasting over her body, looking for skin. His hips moved of their own accord, pushing hers into the mattress, the action making the most amazing noises come from her. Blood rushed in his ears, the roar of it blocking out most coherent thoughts. Most, but not the important one.

*She’s drunk, you can’t take advantage.*

She was warm and pliant and *begging* him for Christ’s sake. He was just a man and could only be noble for so long.

With a Herculean effort that he decided he deserved a medal for, Zack started to disentangle her arms from around his neck and pull away.

“Mel, come on, sweetheart. You’re drunk. We can’t do this.”

A sound that resembled a growl ripped from her throat at his words. Before he could anticipate what she was doing, Mel reached behind her neck and undid the clasp holding the halter up. She yanked it down, freeing those spectacular breasts, much to his delight. She cupped one as if in invitation and brushed a thumb over the nipple, making it harden.

“Shit,” he moaned, knowing without a doubt that he was lost.

Her grin turned cat like, because she knew he was too.

## Chapter Six

Zack's mouth crashed down over her smiling lips, his hunger and desire set free and pouring out to ravage the sweet cavern. She battled him back, her own arousal bringing her teeth into play. Pain and pleasure hazed his mind when she bit down on his lip, then soothed it with her tongue.

He broke away, retaliating for the bite by nipping the pulse point in her throat. She jerked against him, her hands digging into his shoulders as her hips moved restlessly under his.

Zack buried a hand in her hair, dislodging the ponytail completely. He fisted his hand in the silky mass and pulled her head back, exposing the soft skin of her throat to his attentions. She made kitten noises, her body arching into his as he kissed and licked his way down the smooth, pale line. He released his hold long enough to yank his shirt one handed over his head. They both hissed in pleasure when their bare skin finally touched.

He cupped her breast, testing its weight in the palm of his hand. He could feel her heart racing under his touch. She had perfect breasts, full and heavy, the shade of sun kissed peaches with large, dusky nipples.

He leaned over and curled a tongue around one of those nipples, making her groan low with pleasure. She cradled his head with one hand as he licked and nipped the stiff nub. The other hand touched everywhere she could, his shoulder, neck and face. Everywhere her fingers coasted sent shivers down his spine.

Zack wanted to taste every inch of her, to drown in her scent. She was so soft, her curves full and welcoming. Her thighs fit around his hips perfectly, the heels of her sandals digging into his calves as she writhed under him. His erection throbbed painfully with each movement, his jeans uncomfortable around the stiffness.

She moaned in protest, her hands clutching at him to keep him from moving away from her.

"Hold on, darlin'. I'm coming back." The look she gave him had a fresh shot of lust clutching his belly. Heat spread hot and thick through his blood. With clumsy fingers he yanked on his fly, his cock springing free with a twitch. He kicked his jeans aside and let her look, his pride causing a smirk to curl his lip.

He didn't like to think he was conceited, but he knew he looked good. He had been cursed with a slender build, borderline skinny, and he'd worked hard for the muscle rippling under his skin. He enjoyed the naked look of hunger on Mel's face as she looked at him, her arousal-darkened eyes taking in every inch.

"C'mere." Mel raised a hand and held it out to him, her soft fingers clinging around his larger ones.

"Hold on," he said again, not releasing her hand as he fumbled with his jeans. After a second he managed to pull his wallet out. Like a boy scout, Zack believed in always being prepared. With the silver packet in hand, he returned to her, releasing her hand only to graze his fingertips lightly up the insides of her thighs. He paused after he hooked his thumbs in her panties. He was so close, he could smell her arousal and it threatened to drive him wild.

“Are you sure about this?” His voice was barely a whisper. Tension pulled through him, preparing him for her to say no. His eyes drifted closed and he had to concentrate on breathing.

“Zack, look at me,” she said, her voice just as soft as his had been. He took one long steadying breath before he opened his eyes.

She looked so beautiful lying there, her hair a wild toss around her head, her eyes heavy and glazed with desire. Her breasts moved gently with her breathing and her skin was flushed. She had placed a hand over his on the elastic leg of her simple, white panties.

“I’m sure,” she breathed, her eyes boring into his. He couldn’t detect even a hint of intoxication now. Slowly, he pulled her panties down over the hips she’d raised. As he dragged them over her legs, he kissed the smooth, peachy flesh of her thighs and calves. She was still wearing her sandals and her dress was twisted around her waist. Otherwise, she was completely exposed to his heated gaze.

In this moment, Zack couldn’t remember ever wanting a woman more.

He realized he was shaking when he lifted a finger to the cleft between her thighs. She sucked in a ragged breath when he slid one finger into her moist heat, teasing her until she was clenching the sheets underneath her. Her hips twitched when he circled her clit, keeping his touch almost ghost like. Sweat broke out on her skin, frustration made her bite her lip hard between her teeth.

She screamed, her thighs clamping around his head when he finally gave in and buried his lips in her pussy. She was hot and sweet, her juices flowing over his tongue like honey. He slid his tongue into her quivering hole, gathering more of her sweetness. Then he licked up her slit to her clit, applying enough pressure to have her squirming and gasping, his name falling from her lips in an insistent mantra.

“Oh God, oh god Zack, please, please ... *Zack!*” she begged, her hands fisting in his dark hair. She exploded around him, her orgasm shaking over her as her hips thrust hard against his face.

Zack wasted no time in ripping open the condom packet and rolling it over his cock. She was still riding the aftershocks of her climax as he buried himself deep into her heat.

“Christ, yes,” he growled into her shoulder as her slick channel clenched around him. He wasn’t going to last long. She’d been tying him in knots since the second he met her and he was already half way there. Never far from his mind, he seemed to be in a haze of arousal all week. He gripped her hip with one hand, angling her so he could thrust deep, filling her as completely as he could before thrusting again.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, changing the angle again. He hit that sweet spot deep inside. Her hands ran over his sweat slicked back to cup his buttocks, her nails piercing flesh and making him shudder.

Tension coiled through him again, but this time it wasn’t from his fear of her wanting him to stop. It was liquid and hot, pulling tighter and tighter in his belly until he didn’t think he could take anymore. With a final thrust, the coil broke, spreading that silky heat through his body and ripping a cry from his throat. His body pulsed, his orgasm emptying him of everything. He heard her answering cry of his name, her body mercilessly milking him of everything he had. They collapsed together in a tangle of arms, legs and ragged breaths.

He had a vague thought, somewhere in the deep, secret recesses of his mind—What

if the condom failed? What if—and he'd never had any thought of children before, save one of those distant future type thoughts—this night had one of his children nesting in her womb? Then, almost as quick as it had come, he pushed that thought away. That was a complication neither he nor Mel needed. He had a feeling this was already complicated enough.

Mel came back to awareness first. Her eyes focused on the ceiling as she waited for that 'oh my god, what have I done' feeling to kick in. A few heartbeats later, she realized that she felt nothing but a deep sense of relief. She noticed things—the way his body fit against her, the heaviness of his lean frame surprising, but not uncomfortable. She trailed a hand down his back, learning the dips and curves and relishing the power she felt coasting just under his skin.

It had been so long since she'd been with a man. Her marital bed had been cold for quite a while *before* Todd left. If she did the math, it was nearly two years since she'd felt a man's skin against her own. And if she were very truthful, it had been even longer since the sex had actually been satisfying. Both of those thoughts were depressing.

This ... this had been more than satisfying. God was she glad she had been drinking tonight. When she saw him after she got out of the cab, she knew she had to get her hands on him. Had to know if he could live up to the promise in his eyes. And thank God he had.

"Am I too heavy?" His voice was a muffled purr against her neck.

"No," she managed, finding her voice hoarse. Mel felt him shift and she almost protested until she realized he was reaching between them. He held the condom in place then slipped out of her, the action making them both groan with the loss.

She didn't move when he got up. She just wasn't ready to. She appreciated the view, though, as he left the room. She heard him move into the bathroom, heard the water come on and the toilet flush. When he walked in a few seconds later, she still hadn't moved.

"Are you all right?" he asked, sounding amused.

"Hmm?" she murmured. She felt a smile forming and she nodded. "I'm fine." He gave her a grin that made her think he'd start strutting around any second. She chuckled and stretched, the action reminding her that she still had a dress bunched around her waist. "Help me?"

The booze and the sex made her feel slightly boneless. Now that the adrenaline wasn't rushing through her, she felt like she might float away.

Mel sighed when she felt his long, warm fingers brush her stomach as he grasped the material. Somehow, she found the energy to lift her hips, so he could draw the garment down.

"You're gorgeous," Zack said, his hand encircling her ankle and bringing her foot to rest against his bare chest. She arched a brow when he ran one hand along her calf while the fingers of his other untied the straps of her sandal.

"You're not bad yourself." Hell, if she'd had to pick who was prettier between the two of them, he'd have won.

"This isn't going to get weird, is it?" he asked suddenly, his hands resting on her ankle.

"Right now?" Zack chuckled and scraped his teeth along the inside of her ankle. Pleasure slid down her leg to settle comfortably in her abdomen. He was so sexy standing there, confident in his nudity. And really, why shouldn't he be? His dark hair fell over his



head and those blue, blue eyes of his darkened as he waited for her to answer.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. Who knew what the morning would bring? The harsh light of day had a way of shattering the illusions night allowed.

Zack drew her other foot up and repeated his administrations. Her sandals hit the floor with a dull thud. Mel smiled and pointed the toes of the foot he wasn't holding and traced odd patterns on his chest. She felt his muscles shift under her touch, whistled low in appreciation when she teased his rock hard abs. She felt a thrill when he growled softly as her toes found his half erect penis. A few slow strokes teased him into full attention.

With a smile she pulled her foot free from his hands and sat up, sliding to the edge of the bed to inspect the situation that just arose. She looked up at him and he arched a brow at her, want turning his eyes nearly black. Mel gave him a wink then took his full length into her mouth, effectively wiping the smirk off his face.

He hissed in a breath and she felt his fingers tangle in the ends of her hair as she took her time on his cock. He was a bit longer than average with a girth that fit perfectly in her hand. She sucked him in as far as she could, breathing in his musky scent before sliding back, her tongue swirling around the smooth flesh like a lollipop. He let out a choked groan and thrust his hips forward, the hand resting on her shoulder tightening a fraction.

Mel reached up and cupped his balls, massaging them gently in her fist. The action earned another one of those groans. Intrigued, she experimented with her touch and mouth, eliciting more delicious noises of pleasure from him.

She loved the taste of him; salty and male, his scent mixing in to make her own arousal spike.

"God, Mel. I'm going to come if you keep that up."

She released him from her lips with a *pop* and looked up into his smoky blue eyes.

"That's the idea," she told him with a saucy grin. Then she swallowed him whole, her nose brushing the curly thatch of hair at the base before pulling back. Her actions sped up with the help of her hand. She reached around to stroke his firm ass, a finger teasing the cleft between the cheeks to make him gasp in surprise. When she pressed the pad of her finger against the flesh between his testicles and anus, he exploded in her mouth with a surprised cry of her name. She released him from her mouth and let the thick semen drop to her breasts, her hand pumping him to extend his pleasure.

Zack trembled in her hands as she milked him dry. His knees threatened to collapse and he grabbed her wrist to still her movements. Carefully, he sat down next to her on the bed.

"Are you okay?" It was her turn to ask. He tried to chuckle, but it came out sounding more like a huff then shoved a hand through his black locks.

"Yeah," he said after he'd found his voice again. "But it looks like I made a mess." He traced the path his cum traveled down her breast and circled her nipple with the tip of his finger. It felt like he'd drawn a line of fire on her skin.

"Guess I need to clean up." Mel shrugged, and then let out a yelp when Zack abruptly stood and swung her up in his arms for the second time that night.

"How about I help you with that?" he said, the look in his eyes taking her breath. He flashed her a smile straight out of her fantasy and carried her to the bathroom. Mel didn't think there would be much cleaning going on.

\* \* \* \*

With a lazy stretch and a vague sense of being sore all over, Mel opened her eyes to the day. She had a mild throb between her eyes thanks to the alcohol, but nothing unmanageable. She stretched again, arching her back hard to work out the kinks then turned and reached for the person that should have been in bed with her. When all her eyes and hands encountered was empty space, she frowned.

Pushing herself up on an elbow, she listened carefully, wondering if Zack might be in the bathroom or kitchen. Hearing nothing, she looked around the room, but didn't see his clothes.

"Well" was all she could say. Something caught her eye when she looked over towards the window. On her bedside table were a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin. She laughed out loud and rolled to grab the aspirin. She'd just popped two into her mouth when she heard a muffled beep. She paused and waited, swallowing the bitter tablets with a grimace.

Just when she thought she'd imagined it, she heard it again. She looked around and grabbed her purse off the floor. She rooted around inside, looking for her cell phone. The next beep told her it wasn't in there.

Mel tossed the purse aside with a sigh, and then slid off the bed. Her knees were a little wobbly and her thighs screamed in protest, but she managed to look through the clothes on the floor. It wasn't anywhere. Then she realized she was looking in the wrong direction.

Grumbling for getting out of bed for nothing, Mel climbed *back* into bed and shoved her hand under the pillow Zack had used.

"Aha!" she said victoriously, pulling the cell phone out and flipping it open. As she looked at her one missed call, she caught a whiff of Zack's scent still clinging to the pillow. She didn't let herself think too much about why she'd laid her head down on his pillow, she dialed voice mail instead.

"Hey, gorgeous. Sorry I ran out this morning, but I have to work. I didn't want to wake you up. I'll see you later. Oh, I used your cell to call mine to get your number. Hope you don't mind."

Mel could practically *hear* the unrepentant grin she was sure he was wearing.

She flipped it closed and tossed it aside, looking around her room without really seeing it. As much as she hated waking up alone, she was relieved to be saved the awkward morning after. She stretched again, reveling in the tired, satisfied feeling in her body. She was sore and could feel the alcohol headache that was being held at bay by the aspirin, but all in all, she felt great.

Fantastic, really. And so far, a barrage of regrets hadn't hit her. Great.

So now Mel found herself alone, with an unexpected day off. What to do?

Shower first. Then she could get some severely neglected unpacking done, maybe go buy some furniture. Sitting on the floor was getting old. The grocery store was a good idea too.

Mel ticked off all the things she needed to do and slid out of bed. Her foot kicked the wastebasket next to her bed, making her curse at the throb that caused in her big toe. She snatched the basket to move it when her eyes fell on the only contents inside.

Four condoms. *Four*. Her eyes widened when she remembered there was another in the bathroom. Every sore muscle seemed to throb at once as memories of the night before pushed past the laundry lists of chores in her mind. Her already shaky knees gave out and

she sank back to the edge of the bed.

Mel couldn't remember a time ... *ever* ... when she'd had sex more than once a night. Not even when she and Todd had been newlyweds.

Damn.

And the condoms didn't count for all the activities they'd participated in. Her heart fluttered and heat swelled outward from her chest to make the room suddenly stifling. She remembered how his tongue and fingers had sent her to the moon. And how he sounded when she explored him with her own mouth and hands. He was beautiful and energetic and she couldn't believe she had spent *all night* loving him.

No wonder she hadn't woken up when he'd left. She was exhausted.

A thrill went through her with the knowledge and she felt a silly grin pull at her lips. A little giggle came next. God, she felt practically giddy. She wanted him back here, to prove it wasn't just a fluke. She ... Melanie Anne Taylor ... had given as good as she got and she felt *great*.

Take *that* Todd. For all the times he'd not so subtly indicated it was her own lacking in the bedroom that made him need to look elsewhere for comfort. Zack had moaned her name, twisted on the bed uncontrollably as she tasted him, tested what ways he liked being touched best. The way he'd dragged her up his body to kiss her hard as he struggled to get a condom on. The way he plunged into her with desperate abandon, driving her over the edge.

God, she'd get nothing done if she sat here all day daydreaming about the night before.

Which she still found herself doing ten minutes later when her cell phone rang. She jumped up and grabbed it, her heart smacking guiltily behind her breast and gasped a breathless "hello" into the phone.

The stream of Spanish that greeted her let her know it was a wrong number. "Er ... sorry. Wrong number." Mel made a face and tossed the phone on the bed with a laugh.

*Okay, Mel. Quit daydreaming and get up.* Finally, she managed to walk—albeit a bit shakily—into the bathroom. Ten minutes later, she emerged from a steamy hot shower, still shaky but feeling more human. Maybe after a cup, or a gallon, of coffee, she might do okay. A few minutes after that, she walked out into the kitchen wearing jean shorts, a pink baby doll t-shirt and her hair was braided loosely to hang between her shoulder blades.

Mel stood in the kitchen, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. As she waited, doubt finally started to work its way into her conscious. Ruthlessly, she tried to shut it down, but it came so fast it was hard to do.

She'd known him one week and she was already sleeping with him. Either that meant she was a slut, or a modern woman who didn't hold herself up to other people's morality.

Mel chewed on her lip and pondered for a minute. She really hoped she wasn't a slut.

She worried her lip between her teeth a bit more and poured a cup of coffee as another round of doubts scurried through her mind. Would this be it? One night of amazing, fantastic, *incredible* sex. He was so young, still in college, he probably didn't want a long-term commitment. Especially with a woman that had a child and a cargo hold full of baggage.

*Oh God.* What had she done? And there it was. All her insecurities rose to the

surface to clutch her throat in an iron grip. And once they started, each and every one just screamed in her mind. She shouldn't have gotten drunk last night. She always acted stupid when she drank and she never thought things through. If she'd been sober, she never would have allowed it.

*Bullshit.* A voice broke through the chorus of self-doubt and loathing in her head. *You two were headed that way and you know it. So what if you got there a little sooner than later?*

That voice trying to get out was the one Mel had always considered to be her inner troublemaker. It was the voice that had her marrying Todd to get away from her mother at the ridiculous age of eighteen. There were other, more varying activities it had talked her into, but that one was the worst. She'd stopped listening a long time ago.

But, she did have to admit. This time it had a point.

*Just stop it, Mel.* Finally, good sense seemed to cut through all the noise in her head and put a stop to the threat to her sanity. *Quit freaking out and just enjoy yourself for once.*

Okay, good, sound advice she decided as she sipped her coffee. Her mind, almost as if it decided to help, conjured up an image of him right before she drifted off to sleep. He was stretched out next to her, looking entirely too satisfied with himself. One hand rested on his chest, his fingers splayed out over his heart. The other had been playing with her fingers. His head was turned to her, eyes blue slits as he looked at her. It was a quiet moment, neither feeling the need to talk.

Her last thought before her eyes finally gave up and closed was how right he looked lying there next to her.

Abruptly, her stomach fluttered restlessly and she wondered if maybe she was getting in over her head.

"Enough," she said out loud, tired of her inner voices having all the say. She slapped the counter with a frustrated hand. "Enough of this." Mel forced all 'what ifs' away and turned to put her cup in the sink. A glance at the clock told her it was late morning and she better get a move on if she wanted to beat the majority of the crowds.

Without allowing more thought about the night before, Mel slipped on a pair of flip-flops and spent a couple of minutes searching for her purse before she remembered it was still in her room. With a sigh she went back to retrieve it and her cell phone.

The smell of a long night of sex hit her and she felt dazed for a moment. Every sore muscle she had throbbed instantly, reminding her of just how she got that sore.

Shaking her head to clear it, she opened the window a crack and flipped on the ceiling fan. Hoping no one used the open window to break in, she started to walk out. Her eyes landed on the wastebasket again. With a disgusted sigh, she yanked the bag out and finally left the apartment. She flung the bag into the dumpster before walking to her car.

## Chapter Seven

“Zack? Zack!”

With a jerk, Zack snapped out of his daydream about Mel’s curvy little body and turned to his boss. Tom Jackson was standing close enough to Zack that he was surprised he hadn’t heard him come up. Old Tom, as he was called, which wasn’t politically correct on many levels, but stood because he’d been around longer than anybody else that worked at the Price Club, was staring at him with a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

“Yeah?”

“Boy, what is going on with you? I’ve been standing here the better part of a minute and you ain’t even flinched at the smell of my cologne.” The man’s dark face, creased with wrinkles, scrunched up into a scowl. He was shorter than Zack, but he was built like a bulldog. He had the personality of one, too.

“Nothing. And maybe your cologne only stinks to you,” Zack shot back with a grin.

“Pshaw. Damn stench of that shit my oldest gave me for my birthday last week. Gotta wear it so’s she don’t tear me a new one. Too much like her mama, that one,” Old Tom said with a chuckle. The mirth was gone quickly, however, as he waved a meaty hand in the general direction of the pallet of baked beans Zack was supposed to be unloading. It was still mostly full. “Last I checked, it don’t take damn near an hour to clear off a pallet.”

“Sorry, Tom,” Zack said with a grin. “I’ll get it together.”

“Good idea.” Tom started away, and then stopped. Zack picked up a stack of six-can packages and started putting them on the shelf.

“You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you had that look about you,” Tom said, looking hard.

“Look?” Zack glanced up, but he didn’t pause in his work. Tom was leaning against a shelf, the light above dancing off his baldhead. He was staring at Zack like he was under a microscope and it made him uneasy.

“Yeah. Like you got a girl on the brain.” Zack smiled. He couldn’t help it. Tom’s eyes sharpened and the creases in his face deepened as he grinned. “Uh huh. Thought so. ‘Bout time, too. I was startin’ to wonder about you.”

“What’s that mean?” Zack stopped working this time, afraid he knew just what Tom meant and not liking it too much.

“In all the time you worked here, I ain’t never heard you even whisper about a girl. Enough to make me think you might be a fairy or something.” Talk about not politically correct.

A stack of beans Zack had just picked up hit the pallet with a thud as he dropped them. Stuck somewhere between shock and amusement, Zack just shook his head.

“Thanks, Tom.” Sarcasm dripped from Zack’s words.

“Don’t go getting all bent out of shape. I said it was enough to. Didn’t say I did. You know my oldest goes to that school over there. She came in once and saw you. I found out then you wasn’t.”

“Okay.” Zack didn’t know where this line of conversation was going, but he was

starting to feel a little uneasy.

“Yeah. Neicey said you had yourself a bit of a reputation.”

That surprised him. He hadn’t thought he’d done anything to deserve one.

“She said you went through women pretty quick. Said you never seemed interested in whether or not they were hurtin’ when you walked away,” Tom said carefully, watching Zack for his reaction. Neicey had been so ... specific about her accusations, Tom had had the thought that she’d been interested in the boy herself. And she might have been, but his reputation put her off that track quick. Tom didn’t see it in the person he worked with, but that didn’t mean anything.

“That’s not true.” Zack denied, feeling a flash of anger at Tom’s daughter. He always did his best to make sure he *didn’t* hurt the ladies he stopped seeing. Didn’t he?

And anyway, he hadn’t dated that much since his freshman year.

“Well, I’m just sayin’ what she said. You know how girls are.” Tom considered him for a minute. He took in the anger obvious in Zack’s face and the set of his shoulders. He wondered if he should tell the boy the rest. It wasn’t earth shattering or nothing, but Tom figured the boy had a right to know what was being said about him.

“Yeah, thanks.” Zack reached down and grabbed the beans, practically throwing them on the shelf in irritation.

“She said you broke a few hearts.” This news staggered Zack.

“I never meant to.”

Or thought he had, Tom realized. Conceit could be a blinding thing. Even as mild a case of it Zack seemed to have.

“Few people mean too,” Tom told him. “Good luck with your girl.”

Zack watched him go, all thoughts of Mel soured by Tom’s words.

\* \* \* \*

“Who is it?” Mel’s voice drifted out to him, muffled by the door and space.

“Zack,” he called back. There was a hesitation before she told him to come in. He was surprised to find her sitting on the floor, surrounded by wood slats and a partially constructed frame. She was hunched over the instructions, a screwdriver clutched in one hand. Her eyes flicked up to his briefly before settling back on the paper in her lap.

“Hey,” she said, nothing more. Nothing less.

“Hey,” he repeated back to her, pausing just inside the door to watch her. He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and stared. He was still feeling annoyed—a lot—by his conversation with Tom. And he didn’t need to be a rocket scientist to know that Mel wasn’t looking at him on purpose. Great.

“Someone told me today that I’ve broken a few hearts.” He hadn’t meant to say that, or any thing about it all. It had just sort of come out when he opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong.

She looked up at him then, her brows knit together and causing wrinkles to mar her forehead. He wisely kept his mouth shut about them.

“You sound surprised,” she observed.

“You don’t,” he countered, fighting the urge to pout. The fact that someone he had just spent the most incredible night of his life with thought that of him hurt. Mel studied him a second longer than shrugged.

“Sorry,” she said, not sounding very sorry at all. Anger and hurt pricked at Zack.

“Do you think I make a habit of hurting people?” he asked. He heard the hurt in his voice. Mel either didn’t seem to notice or care much. And that made him think maybe he’d misjudged the type of person she was.

“Come on, Zack. Everything about you screams heartbreaker.” Mel looked at him, looking almost amused. She lost that look when she realized that he was not.

“What?” His eyes widened at her assessment and he felt in a strange way like she’d just betrayed him. “Look, do you want an honest answer? What I thought when I first met you?”

“Yeah,” he said with a flutter of apprehension. His first impression of Mel had been a good one. Apparently, hers of him was not. She set down her screwdriver and looked at him fully now, her green eyes giving him the once-over like a judge might a prize cow. It was a little unsettling.

“Once I got over your staggering good looks, or at least stopped being blinded by them long enough to notice you were speaking, I thought ‘This guy’s good.’” Any pleasure he’d felt by her sardonic description of her first sight of him was short lived. “You had the right amount of charm in the smile, right amount of interest in the eyes. I could practically see you wondering if you could get me into bed while we talked. You ooze sex appeal as easy as you breathe. You’re a shameless flirt and I wonder if you practice that smile in the mirror. That one that says ‘I’m sexy and I know it’” He felt his face heat at that. He hadn’t practiced it, not in a long time. But the face that he had and she *knew* he had embarrassed him.

“Now,” she said, her mouth softening into a smile and a look coming across her face that suggested she was realizing something for the first time as she stared up at him. “My second, more fully informed opinion of you was you’re a nice guy. You helped me when you didn’t have to. You stuck around when I needed even more help because of the stunt my stupid ex pulled. You’re nice to my son. And not that over bright, condescending nice most adults are to kids. You listen when he talks, take him into consideration when his mother comes home drunk.” She flashed a quick, grateful smile at that. “You don’t know how much that means to a little boy. You listen when *I* talk. The lust was there, from the beginning. I know that. But you never made it all about getting me into bed, like I had expected from the start. You’re smart, funny and you help people just because it’s the right thing to do.

“And most and best of all, you love your mother.”

“None of that sounds like I’m a heartbreaker,” he pointed out, ridiculously pleased with her words.

“No. It doesn’t.” She agreed with a slight nod. “I don’t think you set out to hurt people.”

“I don’t. I always thought I ended things pretty well with girls. Left them happy.” He realized, for the first time as he said that, it was either the most naïve statement he’d ever made, or the most arrogant. He didn’t like either possibility.

“Uh huh,” she said, making him feel foolish. Mel picked up a slat, a screw and her screwdriver. “You’ve never been in love?” She glanced up at him as she turned a screw.

“I don’t know,” Zack answered with a shrug. “What’s it feel like?”

Mel arched a brow and looked up at him for a long minute. He just looked back, apparently waiting for an answer.

“You wouldn’t ask if you ever had been,” she answered finally, finishing off the

screw.

"Then I guess not."

"Have you ever said it?" She looked at him again. She was smiling like she understood that he had and to what end.

"Once or twice," he admitted grudgingly.

"I bet you were a terror in high school," she said with a chuckle. Zack didn't know what that had to do with anything. "I'm sure that women have said it to you."

"Yeah."

"So, did you think that just because you didn't really feel it, they didn't either?"

Okay, so he hadn't actually thought about it like that. Mel smiled again and shook her head. He was seriously starting to think he was a deluded son of a bitch.

"Don't worry so much about it, Zack. Just accept that you have probably broken a few hearts and that there are a couple of girls out there that hate you. It's part of life." She said this with a touch of sadness and her smile wavered a bit.

It occurred to him that maybe she was wondering if he was going to break her heart. Zack couldn't think of anything he wanted to do less.

"How'd you get this up here?" he asked, waving a hand in the general direction of the ... mess she was working on. He was changing the subject, something Mel gracefully allowed.

"Mr. Shaughnessy downstairs."

"Really?" There was a healthy dose of surprise in his voice.

"Yeah. He was all 'Now, lass. Where is that strappin' boy that's been sniffin' around you lately?'" Mel said in an exaggerated, and bad, Irish brogue. Zack snickered and could just picture the old Irishman with more hair coming out of his ears than his head, watching Mel try to get the box up the stairs. "I told him you were at work. So he says 'Well then, I'll be guessin' you might need a hand getting that thing up to your flat.' I almost said no, sarcastically of course. Something told me he'd have taken me seriously."

"Probably."

"Of course, this conversation happened while he was watching me lug it up the first flight of stairs. But at least he helped me get it up the rest of the way."

"Sorry I wasn't here to help," he said seriously. Mel waved his apology off.

"Don't be silly. You have a life. I don't expect you to be here at my beck and call."

"Well, I'm here now. Want some help?" She looked up at him dubiously and he could tell she was wondering if he'd ever even looked at a screwdriver. "You know, I've built a few sets in my time. And look, I still have all my fingers." He waved them at her with a nod, making her chuckle.

"All right. All right. Pull up a screwdriver and have a seat."

"What is this thing, anyway?" He couldn't tell if it was a coffee table or a reproduction of Noah's Arc.

"A futon," she said, sounding a little disgusted. "I don't really like them. But it was the only couch type thing I could find that I could take home today. The pads are over there." She waved an absent hand towards the dining room to a large, plastic wrapped object. It almost looked like a body. "You should have seen me getting this into the car."

Zack folded his long frame to the floor and snatched the instructions off her lap. His fingers brushed her inner thigh, the warm smoothness of her skin reminding him of the night before. Her eyes flew up to his, a look of surprise on her face.



“You’ve been busy.” Zack looked down at the instructions, not really seeing the words as he settled himself. They hadn’t talked about the night before. Hadn’t even *hinted* at it. That little jolt he felt when he touched her was a vivid reminder, to both of them. And suddenly, inexplicably, he was nervous.

“I’ve tried. There’s still a lot to do. But hey, I bought a TV.” Another wave indicated the thin box leaning against the living room wall. “Flat screen.”

“Sweet.” He took a deep breath and forced himself to look at the paper in his hands. He did a quick take on what she’d already accomplished and what was left to do. “I’ll finish this…” he started, never finishing as Mel slid easily onto his lap. Her hands caressed his jaw and her eyes looked into his.

“Why don’t we deal with the 300 pound gorilla in the room?” she said before rubbing her lips over his. They both sighed in relief before diving in. Heat spread between them like a warm breeze, slow and soft but intense as anything they’d shared before. They explored slowly, tongues tasting and teasing, lips clinging. Other than her hands on his face and his on her hips, they didn’t touch. This wasn’t about inciting passion, although the kiss was doing that. This was about connecting, learning each other now that the initial lightning bolt of lust was slaked.

“Yeah. A definite heartbreaker.” Mel pulled away with a smile on her lips to take a breath. Zack scowled at the amusement in her eyes and dumped her none too gently off his lap. Instead of getting mad, though, she giggled. And the darker his scowl got, the more she giggled.

Zack’s lips quirked at her antics and he couldn’t help the smile that spread. “You’re a witch, you know that?”

“I try,” she said, still giggling. “Don’t take yourself so seriously, Zack. It’s really not worth it.” Mel looked up at him, mirth shining in her green eyes, but her laughter stilled. She looked beautiful sitting there.

“I think,” Zack started as he reached out and rubbed a hand over her arm. He delighted in the goose bumps his touch raised. “I want you.”

“You think?” she replied, quirked a brow.

“I know.”

“I have a futon to put together.” She tossed her hair off her shoulder and tried to look bored. The anticipation in her eyes ruined the effect.

“It’ll wait.”

She laughed as he launched at her, taking them both down to the narrow space of empty floor. Mouths came together as clothes were quickly discarded or pushed aside. A condom slid over the silky steel of his cock and her thighs parted to fit him between. He broke the kiss, his blue eyes darkened to almost midnight as he entered her. Slowly he filled her, the slick heat of her pussy fitting him better than a glove.

Her eyes dilated with pleasure, her hips thrusting up to meet him.

“Oh, God.” Her voice was a husky whisper, let out on a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Her nails dug into his shoulder, her teeth bit into his lip and her hands came up to pull him deeper. Their pelvises met, his hips thrusting shallow to gently tap her clit.

He thrust deeper, harder and incoherent words started to bubble out of her lips. She met his movements, grinding against him to race towards her climax. She could feel it spooling in her belly, tightening the chord in her womb.

Zack let go, let her control the movement and just held on for the ride. When she pushed, he rolled with her, the stab of pain he felt as he rolled onto a slat barely registering through his pleasure haze. Mel rose above him like some kind of goddess, her soft hands resting on his chest for balance. With her eyes on his and her lip caught between her teeth, she sat up, letting him almost fall from her body before sliding back down. She readjusted, experimented then found a rhythm she liked, her breasts swinging in an enticing way with her movements. Reverently, Zack reached up and cupped them, testing their weight in his palms and teasing her nipples until they hardened impossibly further.

Mel threw her head back, her moans filling the air to join his as they moved toward oblivion. Her inner walls clenched tight around him and he could feel the beginnings of his orgasm.

"Oh, oh, oh," she gasped, her movements becoming faster, more erratic. Her skin was flushed, her face a picture of ecstasy. Her body pulsed when she came apart, her inner walls clamping hard around him and making him cry out as he came with her.

She fell against him, her head resting on his chest, his heart an erratic beat in her ear. She felt his hand smooth over her back; a gentle, possessive stroke that made her already skipping heart stutter.

"Melanie." The sound of her full name, a name she usually hated, sounded too right coming from him. He made it sound like a wish, his voice caressing the letters like he'd just done her back. It was heady.

"Yeah?" she answered, deciding to ignore the feeling trying to bubble up inside of her.

"There's a piece of wood making a permanent dent in my ass." At least he sounded amused by it.

"Oh. Sorry." They disentangled themselves and Zack trekked back to the bathroom to clean up. By the time he came back, Mel was already half dressed. She smiled at him and started to put on her bra. "I have to get this put together."

"It'll wait." Zack replied, sliding close and wrapping his arms around her waist. She let him pull her into a kiss, savoring it until the sparks started to burn.

"I think it's going to be very hard to get anything done while you're around," she decided, stepping away. "Go home." He pouted. Standing there, as naked as the day he was born, his dark hair a crazy tousle around his head and his blue eyes looking as pitiful as any puppy's, he actually pouted. God, he was adorable.

"I'll be good," he said on a sigh, dropping his head like the aforementioned puppy and shuffled around looking for his clothes. Mel, being just a woman after all, enjoyed the view. After all, such a beautiful sight demanded to be appreciated.

"Any funny business and you're outta here," she warned, pulling her shirt over her head as he stepped into his pants. She turned away once she was sure he was indeed following through with the getting dressed thing and went in search of the forgotten instructions.

"Yes ma'am." She scowled at that, but he didn't see as he had his t-shirt over his head. "All right. Let's get this thing put together. Than maybe we can break it in?" He smoothed his shirt over his chest and wiggled his brows at her. Mel couldn't help but laugh.

"How about this? I'll get us a couple of drinks and *when* this damn futon is all pretty

and put together, we'll go get some dinner."

"Can't we eat dinner here? In bed?"

"Jeez. You're insatiable."

"I'm a guy," he responded with a shrug.

And he looked like a really young one right then, Mel noticed. His hair was falling into his face and his clothes were rumpled. For some reason, their age difference seemed huge to her all of a sudden.

"What's wrong?" Zack asked, his brows drawn together in concern.

"Nothing," Mel told him with a smile that felt only slightly forced. She shook her head and shoved the feeling away. "I'll get our drinks. Why don't you be manly and work on that?"

With a flex of his arm muscles and a crazy grin, Zack settled himself back on the floor, located the now mangled instructions and started studying them. Mel watched him for a minute, smiling a little at just how cute he looked. She felt her heart thump hard once or twice before settling back into its normal pace. Then she turned away and went to get their drinks.

## Chapter Eight

Three hours later, they finally sat together on the completed futon. The TV was also mounted on the wall and the trash was collected up and waiting to be hauled down to the dumpster.

Much to Zack's disappointment, they didn't test out the futon. But since he was sitting next to her, his blue eyes stuck on the flat screen she figured the lack of sex was okay. In fact, his obvious TV envy made her think she might never get sex from him again.

That was enough to consider taking the damn thing back.

"Come on. I'm hungry." She turned off the set and the glazed look snapped out of his eyes.

"Can I watch the football game here tomorrow?" he asked, looking like an eager boy begging for a treat.

"Only if it's Baltimore."

"There's anybody else?"

"Ha. Good boy. Sure, Billy will be home tomorrow night..." Mel stopped as her son's image flashed through her mind. "Shit."

"What's wrong?"

"Look, Zack. I can't tell him about ... this." She faced him, her eyes staring into his as she wavered between them.

"Why?" She could hear the hurt in his voice, see it in his eyes and it made her feel like shit.

"Because, I just got divorced, his dad is dating a girl half his age and I don't know if Billy could handle me doing the same thing."

"I'm *not* half your age, Melanie." Zack said exasperated. Mel blinked at the second use of her full name that day. She was really starting to like the way he said it, even when he was annoyed with her.

"You know what I mean."

"I'm not going away." He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at her, looking very much like an immovable object to her.

"I'm not asking you too. He likes you. You come over for dinner, which will get him used to you being around. I just can't say it's more. Not right now. And dammit, we haven't exactly determined what this," Mel waved her hand between them once more, "is. We have only known each other a week." This came out sounding kind of horrified and she saw a flash of irritation in his eyes.

"Is it my age or how long we've known each other that's bothering you?"

"I don't know. Both I guess," Mel admitted. She felt miserable, stupid and waited for him to decide she was nuts and leave. She looked down at the floor so she didn't have to watch him go. She heard him move and she braced herself for the sound of the door closing. She was surprised when a couple of seconds later she found herself staring at his shoes. He tucked a finger under her chin and raised her head until their eyes met.

"Melanie," he started, searching her face.

"What?" She didn't know why she wasn't telling him not to call her that.

“Chill out,” Zack said, looking entirely too amused about the whole situation for her tastes.

“Easy for you to say.”

“Yeah,” he conceded with a shrug and a smirk. “But we don’t have to define everything. If you don’t want to tell Billy right now, that’s fine. But don’t take too long. I think I’m addicted to you. So I’m not going anywhere.” The blue of his eyes bored into hers, the emotion in them counteracting the amusement on his face.

“Okay,” she said simply, pushing up on her toes to press a kiss to his lips. She pulled away before he could deepen it. “I’m hungry.”

“Fine,” Zack huffed in a suffering kind of way. She giggled at his put upon look. “I get to drive.”

“My car? In your dreams college boy.”

“Pfht, please. Your car? Sorry, the mom mobile isn’t what I was talking about.”

“I certainly hope you aren’t talking about that death trap you ride around on.”

“Don’t dis my baby.” He looked so offended she couldn’t resist giving him another kiss.

“I’m very sorry,” she said in all seriousness.

“So come on. I’ve got an extra helmet in my apartment.”

“What?” she squeaked as the realization dawned on her that he was *serious*. “Zack, no.” She shook her head and dug her heels in when he tried to pull her along.

“Why not?”

“Because motorcycles are dangerous,” she said as if that were all the excuse she needed.

“So’s breathing these days. Come on, Mel. It’ll be fun.” He turned those blue eyes on her, the look in them having an immediate effect on her. She made a frustrated noise and scowled at him.

“Fine. But if I die, I’m going to kill you.”

Zack chuckled and pulled her out of the apartment.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh my God.” Mel squealed as the wind whipped around her. She was sitting behind Zack on his bike, her front pressed against his back and her hands linked together around his waist. She’d wanted to hold on for dear life, but quickly realized that would inhibit his control of the motorcycle. And that would be a bad, bad thing.

For the first five minutes, she had been terrified. Her heart thudded almost painfully in her chest and her breathing hitched in her throat. Her hands were clammy as the scenery whizzed by. There was nothing between her and the hard road. She missed the safe confines of her car. Or any car at all.

Then, as Zack’s scent rushed over her in the wind and she felt the solid feel of him under her hands she started to relax. He controlled the machine with the ease and skill of someone who’d been riding for a while. She finally let herself trust him and the last of her nerves fell away.

The original plan had been to go eat. But then Zack turned away from the District and took them out toward the more rural area of Howard County. They sped along the roads, enjoying the lingering warmth of the late afternoon, no words exchanged between them.

The radio played, a novelty that Mel had always thought a waste on a motorcycle. To her surprise, she could hear the music easily over the whip of the wind in her ears. They rode and rode in no general direction until the sun waned in the horizon. It was only then that Zack turned the bike back towards home.

They stopped only once when the gas tank and nature called. They found a little Mexican restaurant along the way and shared an entrée of fish tacos and fried ice cream for dessert.

Mel couldn't remember having a better time with a man. So it seemed only natural that he followed her into her apartment then sank into her and her bed like he belonged there. Afterwards, tired and sated, they fell asleep. Zack cradled Mel against him like he was afraid to let her go.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next few weeks, time slid by quickly for Mel. Work, Billy and Zack kept her pretty busy. So when she looked at the calendar one random day and saw that September had melted into October, she was surprised.

The days were still warm, but the nights were dipping enough in temperature that she had to wear a jacket. As it got cooler, she found out that Zack rode his motorcycle until the temps got too cold, or it snowed. Then he took the bus. The idea of him freezing his butt off while battling winter weather on the seat of a two-wheeled death trap didn't settle well with her. She had to figure something else out.

During that time, Mel felt almost like she'd been living in a bubble. A safe, cozy bubble of happiness. The job was going well, Billy seemed to be flourishing. He'd always been a happy kid, but the divorce was hard on him. But he had friends in the apartment complex and the security of being able to stay at his old school helped a lot.

That and the regular attention he got from the men in his life. Todd always picked him up, not once shirking out of it. He called every night and made sure Mel knew he'd be available for teacher meetings or talent shows. There were a lot of things she could have said about her ex-husband. But she was willing to let it all go for how well he treated Billy.

And then Zack. At first, Mel could admit, to herself anyway, that she suspected Zack was only paying attention to Billy to get on her good side. It quickly became apparent he liked Billy and Mel had been ashamed of herself.

She thought it was sweet that Zack would take the time out of his crazy schedule to play a round of golf on the PlayStation, or throw a football with Billy in the field behind the complex. Even though he was busy with school and rehearsals, he made time to stop by a couple of days a week just to see them.

And then there were the weekends.

Mel hadn't had a Saturday off since that first one Edna had given her, but she didn't mind. Zack would usually show up after rehearsal Friday night, after Billy had been picked up and take her out for a late dinner. Or, more often, she'd cook something quick, then they'd spend the night in bed, usually doing things she'd only read about in books.

She'd go to work the next day tired, but not caring. Then they'd repeat the pattern Saturday night, although they sometimes squeezed in a movie before spending the whole night in bed. Zack usually worked later on Sunday, but he would come by afterwards just to say goodnight.

Mel had managed to all but forget about his age and how unlikely their relationship really was. She hadn't told Billy yet, either. Every time she thought it was time, she realized she'd have to tell Todd. Then, worst of all, she'd have to tell her mother. So, she'd put it off and avoided Zack's questioning gaze every time Billy came in the room.

So far, he didn't seem willing to press it.

Mel should have known who the person that would burst her delusional bubble would be. Todd.

"Hi, baby." Mel wrapped her arms around Billy as he came bounding through the door. Zack was there, having gotten off work a little early, sitting at the dining room table, a hot pizza in front of him. This was a first for him. He'd never been there when Todd dropped Billy off.

"Hi, Mom." Billy pulled away as quickly as possible and made him way over to the table. "Hi, Zack. Cool, everything!" he exclaimed lifting the pizza box top.

"We did feed him." Todd quietly closed the door and shoved his hands into the pockets of his gray slacks.

"I know. But we haven't eaten yet." Mel told her ex-husband. The words were out of her mouth before she realized how intimate they sounded. And by the way Todd quirked a sandy brow, he thought so too. He looked like he wanted to say something, but a glance towards their son told her why he hadn't yet. "Hey, Billy. Why don't you go put your stuff away and show Zack the new game I bought you last week?"

Billy sighed in a way of a child knowing he was being sent away so that the 'grown-ups' could talk.

"Okay. Come on, Zack."

"Right behind you, buddy." Zack unfolded his long frame from the chair and followed Billy back to his room. As he walked past Mel, she felt his fingers brush against her back. She appreciated the sign of support, if not the timing. Todd saw it and if possible his eyebrow rose even further.

"What?" she challenged as soon as her son was out of earshot.

"So, is that your new boyfriend? A little young, isn't he?"

Mel shook her head and gave a bitter snort at his audacity. "He's a friend. But it's none of your business anyway."

"What about Billy?"

"What about him? He likes Zack."

"Yeah, as a neighbor."

"Okay." Mel shot a hand up to still his next comment. Her temper was threatening to bubble up and scald them both. "You know what? I don't recall you thinking about Billy when you started screwing around with Trixie, or Barbie. Or whatever the hell her name is."

"It's Carly. And you know damn well it is."

Mel rolled her eyes at that. "Of course it is. Go home, Todd. I'm done here." Todd looked like he wanted to argue but she gave him a look that had him thinking better of it.

"Goodnight, Mel."

"Yeah" was all she said in response as the door closed. Mel rubbed at the sudden headache in her temple and wondered what the hell she had ever seen in Todd Taylor.

She jerked when she felt strong fingers curved around her shoulders. Those same fingers that had spent hours giving her pleasure now worked at the tension in her neck

and made her want to purr like a cat.

“Stop, Zack.” Regret laced her words and she had to force herself not to lean back into the warm comfort of his embrace. She felt his fingers falter in their movements. God help her, she almost whimpered.

“Why?” His voice was close to her ear, his warm breath sending shivers down her spine.

“Because Billy’s in the back and I don’t want him to get the wrong idea.”

“Okay.” His hands dropped immediately and she had to fight the frustrated sigh. He hadn’t sounded very happy when he answered her. “You know, if you just told him, we wouldn’t have to hide.”

Mel heard the hurt in his voice and she felt bad for it. But she just wasn’t ready. Why couldn’t he understand that?

“I will, but can we talk about this later? I don’t want him to find out by hearing us argue about it.”

Zack shook his head and let out an unamused chuckle. He raked a hand through his dark hair and sent it into crazy spikes.

“Sure, Mel. Whatever you say.” Sarcasm laced his words heavily and he stalked over to the couch to grab his jacket.

“Don’t you want some pizza?” Mel asked, wringing her hands together. She sounded pathetic to her own ears, but she didn’t want him to leave like this. She’d never seen him like this. Irritated and frustrated maybe. But never angry or hurt. And he looked both right then.

“No, thanks. I’ve lost my appetite.” Then, with the firm click of the door closing once more, he was gone. Mel stared at the door, stunned for a few seconds. She couldn’t believe he left. He just ... left.

Mel huffed, annoyed and threw up her hands in frustration. Men!

“Billy?” Mel called, deciding to put Zack out of her mind for the night and concentrate on her son. “Billy, do you want some pizza?” She went back to her son’s room and pushed open the partially closed door.

She laughed softly when she saw her ten-year-old Pokémon fanatic sprawled across his bed, his hat still on and a sock half off. His eyes were closed and soft snores were coming out of his open mouth.

“Well,” she said to herself, moving into the room. She shut off the TV, threw a blanket over him and pulled his hat off. She smoothed a hand over his dark hair and pressed a kiss to his forehead. She looked at him for a minute, feeling that familiar ache in her stomach. He was her angel, her world and it made her heart hurt sometimes when she thought of everything his life could or couldn’t be.

With a sigh, she reached up and clicked off his light then left the room. She went back to the dining room and looked at the unassuming pizza box.

It seemed her appetite left when Zack did and she snatched the box off the table. She shoved it into the fridge and grabbed a soda then walked into the living room. A few seconds later she was sitting on the futon with the TV on. Sunday night football screamed out from the screen, but Mel couldn’t get into the game.

As the offense set up for third and long, Mel let her mind wander to Zack. She regretted that he was angry. More so that he was hurt, but she didn’t appreciate him trying to pressure her into telling Billy. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of their



relationship ... was she?

After all, whenever they went out, they held hands and linked arms. Gentle kisses were had and they often leaned together close to talk. There was no mistaking they were a couple to anybody watching.

*But those are strangers*, she reminded herself, people who had no impact on her life or any right to judge her.

Mel stretched out on the futon and propped a pillow behind her head. She stared at the game, not seeing it as she wondered if she was just being silly. She knew right now, she missed him. She wanted to go after him, to try to talk to him. But what she'd say she didn't know.

Maybe she'd just let him cool down. Then, when he showed back up, they could talk and maybe she could get him to understand.

*Yes*, she decided as her eyes drifted closed. That was a good idea. After all, how long could he stay mad?

## Chapter Nine

At least five days, she realized.

When Zack hadn't shown up the next day for dinner, or later after rehearsal, she didn't think much of it. He could stew a little more if he needed to. By Wednesday, she found herself looking for his motorcycle to see if he was home when she came home from work. Then again, after dinner. And once more at midnight when she couldn't sleep. She saw it then, but she couldn't go see him in the middle of the night.

By Friday, she was mad. And maybe feeling just a touch guilty, which made her even madder. So, after Todd picked up Billy, she went in search of his bike one more time. If it wasn't there, she had half a mind to storm the theater on campus and make him listen to her.

Luckily, his bike was sitting there in the parking lot.

Mel grabbed her keys and her cell phone, gave her reflection a quick glance then walked out of the apartment. Her bravado slipped a little as she walked the short distance to his place. She steeled herself and raised her hand to pound indelicately on the door.

A few seconds later, the door swung open and Zack looked down at her. Mel felt her breath rush out of her lungs as she stared up at him. He was ... unkempt was the best way to put it, she thought. His jeans were slung low on his hips, the button undone to show the waistband of his boxers. His black button down shirt hung open to expose the sleek skin and sinewy muscle of his abdomen and chest. His hair was a disheveled mess of spikes sticking out in odd angles from his head. She'd never seen him looking less put together or more delicious.

"Hi," she managed, her throat tightening, making her sound hoarse. She cleared it as he continued to just stare, his expression unreadable. "Can we talk?"

He looked her up and down, a dark brow arching over a smoky blue eye and his teeth gnawed on his bottom lip, considering. When she was sure he was going to turn her away, he sighed and pushed the door open further.

"Sure," he said, stepping out of her way to let her in. He was still angry, if his attitude was any indication.

*Well, this is starting on an excellent note,* she thought. At least he hadn't slammed the door in her face. As she moved into his space, she looked around, a smile tugging her lips at how much it looked like a college student's apartment. And then she realized half the furniture in the living room was her own. Since she'd just intended to throw it away, she decided not to say anything. The walls were still white, but there were framed pictures displayed. She caught a glimpse of a picture of a woman in a simple blue dress with the same blue eyes as Zack. Must be his mother, she decided.

But, unlike any other college student's apartment she'd ever seen—hell, any *man's* apartment for that matter—it was clean. That told her something about him.

As she scrutinized his apartment, she became very aware that he was scrutinizing *her*. And she could almost feel his unhappiness in the weight of his stare.

"Billy's missed seeing you," she blurted out with a nervous twitter. Billy hadn't said anything of the sort, but that didn't matter apparently.

"Really?" A dark brow arched high at that. "He didn't say anything when I played

football with him yesterday.” Zack smirked and sank into the beat up old recliner by the kitchen door. The look he gave her practically screamed ‘gotcha!’

*Dammit.* So much for that. She ignored the hurt she felt that he’d seen fit to see Billy but not her over the last week. That was petty and she knew it. It actually made her happy that he wasn’t ignoring her son because he was angry with her. She just felt even more foolish now. Not to mention Billy hadn’t said anything to her about seeing Zack and she hadn’t asked. There went her mother of the year award.

Zack didn’t say anything more. He just sat in his recliner and waited while she searched for something else to say to hang herself with. She took a deep breath and charged in. No point in beating around the bush anymore.

“I don’t think you’re being fair about my telling Billy. He’s a little boy who’s been through a lot in the last year and he doesn’t need any added stress in his life.”

“I’m sorry that you think I’m stressful,” he said tightly.

“What? No, no. That’s not what I meant,” Mel said quickly, glaring at him for taking her so literally.

“Oh? Then why don’t you tell me what you mean?”

Yeah, he was still pissed. His blue eyes snapped at her across the room, belying the calmness of his face. She felt her nerves jump like she was witnessing the final calm seconds before a tornado ripped across the land.

“Look, I do get that you want him to know. I don’t understand the all fire hurry to do it, though. I mean, Todd knows, or suspects, and that’s bad enough. What if Billy hates the idea? What if he gets angry and sullen? Then his grades start to fall, he gets in with the wrong crowd and starts doing drugs. The next thing we know he winds up doing life because he kills someone in a robbery trying to feed his habit.”

Zack blinked when she fell silent, the anger in his eyes dimmed by the utter confusion taking its place.

“Okay. No more *Lifetime Television* for you,” he said, shoving a hand through his hair. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“Not entirely,” she admitted with a tiny smile. “But what if he *does* hate the idea? He’s my baby.” And causing him pain wasn’t an option, especially if that pain was avoidable.

“He won’t hate it,” Zack said with a confidence that Mel could only envy. “What he will hate is us hiding it from him. He’s a smart kid, Melanie.”

“I know.” She dipped her head as emotion seized her. She didn’t know what was right anymore. Their relationship was unorthodox to begin with, thanks to their age difference. Then a kid gets added into the mix and everything just gets more complicated. “What if he doesn’t hate it? What if he loves it, gets attached to you and we break up?”

It was quiet for a few seconds and Mel assumed he didn’t have an answer for that. Because Mel knew, sooner or later, he’d noticed how old she was, realized he could get any young thing he wanted and leave. And maybe, deep down, he knew that.

“Melanie.” He was in front of her, hand reaching up to cup her cheek, his voice as soft as that caress. She looked up at him; scared she’d see the beginning of goodbye in his eyes. But his gaze was gentle, the blue swirling with an emotion she was both happy for and terrified of. “I’ve never felt the way I feel about you for anyone else. I’m not going to run off without a damn good reason first. Or without a hell of a fight.”

He said that now. But he didn’t realize how fragile relationships could be. She

opened her mouth to tell him that, but his lips covered her, effectively silencing her.

She moaned into his mouth, sinking in him as sensation took over. His hands slid over her arms, the heat of his palms chasing goose bumps on her flesh.

"You know," he whispered, pulling back just a bit to look into her eyes. "I've had this recurring fantasy of what you'd look like in my bed."

"Oh?" she breathed, a slow smile curving her mouth. His eyes really were amazing she noticed not for the first time as she looked up at him. Alive with humor and desire, they searched hers before continuing.

"Yeah."

"Well then." She slid impossibly closer to him, linking her arms loosely around his waist. "Let's see what we can do about making that come true."

Zack flashed a wolfish grin that had her heart thumping hard in her chest. She yelped in surprise when he released her and leaned down to scoop her over his shoulder.

"What the..."

"Come into my lair said the spider to the fly."

"That's not how it goes," she told him, smacking his ass.

"Same difference." He walked into his room and dropped her onto the unmade bed with an 'oomph'. She pushed herself up onto her elbows and glared up at him. He smirked in response and started to pull his shirt off.

"And just what do you think you're doing?" Mel asked primly.

"I think," Zack said, dropping the shirt onto the floor, exposing his cut chest to her appreciative gaze. "I'm going to make love to my girlfriend."

Girlfriend. Mel hadn't been called someone's girlfriend in a hell of a long time. It was strange to hear it now. But she had to admit she kind of liked it.

"After carting me around like a sack of potatoes? I don't think so." She sniffed, tossing her hair.

"Oh really?" The flash of white teeth grew feral and Mel knew a moment's panic.

"Eep," she squeaked when he literally pounced, pinning her to the mattress. "That's not fair," she complained when she managed to get her breath back.

"Neither is this," Zack told her as he dipped his head. Her eyes drifted closed and her lips parted in anticipation of his kiss. She let out a shriek of laughter when those long, clever fingers dug mercilessly into her sides.

"Stop, stop, stop," she gasped, struggling under his lean frame. Her fists pounded ineffectively against his back as she laughed. "God, Zack! Stop," she pleaded only to suck in a breath when his mouth sucked gently on her throat and those nimble fingers closed around the soft globes of her breasts.

She was breathless, giddy and more turned on than she could remember. With a low groan she fisted her hands in his hair.

"You make me crazy," she told him, before yanking his smiling mouth to hers. He was still smiling when he pulled away, his eyes sparkling like two sapphires.

"That's the plan." He dipped his head and took her lips, slowly building the flame of want that left them both panting when he pulled away.

"You have entirely too many clothes on," he said, his voice a husky whisper.

"So why don't you do something about it?"

And that's just what he did.

\* \* \* \*

A little while later, they were sitting on his ancient couch, eating take out pasta and watching a remake of a horror movie that Mel thought was better the first time around. She was laying across the couch, wearing his shirt, her head resting in the curve of his arm. He was wearing only his jeans, his legs stretched across the floor in front of him.

"I wish I had boobs like that." Mel pointed at the now naked blond starlet who was surely next on the serial killer's list. Didn't the twit know not to have sex when a nut case with a machete was running around? It's like putting a giant target on your back and saying 'Please kill me.'

"Your boobs are gorgeous," Zack countered, reaching onto her plate and stealing a piece of pasta. In fact, he'd say her boobs were damn near perfect. The blonde's were perky, yes, but they didn't move either. They stayed in the middle of her chest as she bounced up and down on her lover, oblivious to the masked killer stalking up behind them. That was a sure sign they were fake.

"Yeah, if you like fleshy bags of fat that just hang there," Mel said flippantly. She studied a piece of chicken for a second before popping it into her mouth. "Oh, and don't forget the stretch marks."

It took her a minute for her to feel the weight of his stare on her face. When she looked up at him, his expression was incredulous, like she'd just told him that aliens had abducted her and used her for their sex slave.

Well, maybe he would have been a bit more surprised by that.

"What?"

"Is that really how you see yourself?" he asked his brow knitted in confusion. Suddenly uncomfortable, she shrugged and looked back down at her plate. "Melanie?"

"Zachary," she shot back, irritated.

"Come on. Answer."

"I don't know. I guess. You have to admit, I don't look like *her*." Especially now that the blonde was all eviscerated and stuff. But that wasn't the point she was trying to make. "I just don't have one of those perfect skinny bodies that you see all over the media."

"Nobody does."

"You do," Mel told him. He rolled his eyes in response. "What? You do. Look at you. All young and hard muscled. You're like a freaking sculpture, Zack. I'm ... not." She had pulled away from him and turned to face him, her hands splayed out in front of her. Zack stared at her, looking surprised. He didn't acknowledge what she'd said about his body; instead he grabbed her hand and started to pull her up.

"Come on." Somehow Mel managed to deposit her plate on the coffee table without spilling it everywhere. She followed him down the short hall to the bathroom and moved to close the door behind them. Then, he faced her, gripped her shoulders and turned her around to face the back of the door.

"Zack, I don't even have a full length mirror in my apartment." Mel arched a brow at him in the mirror.

"It's not mine. The last tenant was a drag queen. He left it behind."

"Well, okay then."

"Tell me what you see." Zack's hands reached around the front of her and swiftly undid the buttons of her shirt. He pulled it open to expose her body, but he didn't pull it completely off.

“I thought we just went over this.” Note to self; *never* rag on self when Zack’s around.

“Come on. Just tell me. Then I’ll tell you what I see.”

Mel sighed deeply and shook her head. “All right, fine.” She looked at her reflection and tried to be objective. She failed miserably. Well, he wanted to know what she saw, so here it goes. “Okay, flesh bags that are often mistaken for breasts. Stretch marks left over from having Billy both here,” she moved the shirt a bit to show the faint white lines marring the skin of her breasts and further down on her hips. “And here. Cellulite, yay. Oh not to mention the extra fifteen,” *twenty*, “pounds I’m carrying. I could probably stand a bikini wax. But I don’t like pain. That’s why I only have one kid.”

Actually, that wasn’t entirely true. Todd had been the one that hadn’t wanted another. She just hadn’t argued the point.

“Let’s see,” she sighed again and turned her harsh eyes to her face. “Laugh lines around the lips, crow’s feet around the eyes. Bags under the eyes. And just for the record, this is not exactly my natural hair color.” Only Mel and her hairdresser knew just how much gray lurked under there.

“Oh, and did I mention I’m thirty one?” Logically, Mel knew that shouldn’t bother her so much. She’d breezed through thirty without noticing much, but something about thirty one just bugged the hell out of her. Maybe because at thirty, she was out of her twenties, but not entirely immersed in her thirties. But once that one had been added to her age, forty suddenly didn’t seem that far away any more.

Her eyes met his in the mirror and she could see disbelief in his.

“Now it’s my turn.” Zack slid his hands over her stomach to cup her breasts. “You have beautiful breasts. Full, soft. *Real*.” He ran his thumbs over her nipples, making them pebble. “I don’t feel like I’m touching a plastic doll when I touch you.” She caught her breath as she watched him knead the pale globes. They seemed to fit perfectly in his large hands.

“Your waist, your hips... You might have that extra fifteen pounds, but all it does is make you soft, touchable. I love the way your skin feels when I run my hands over it. You’re right. You’re not one of those stick figure women that I’m afraid to even bump against for fear they might break. I can’t see your ribs and you don’t look like your last meal was sometime last year. You’ve had a child and your body shows it. There is no shame and a hell of a lot of beauty in that.”

His hands slid ghost-like over her flesh, trailing fire. His voice was as soft as his hands, the words not eloquent or poetic, but the effect was what he desired.

“You’re *beautiful*, Melanie.” And with those softly whispered words, Mel felt her heart trip and fall. She was in love with Zack Conrad, and now she didn’t know what to do.

Mel turned and kissed him, the weight of this new development making her throat close and tears prick her eyes. She let him back her against the wall, raised her legs when his hands gripped her thighs and held on as he took her.

Zack pulled away to watch her face as his hips thrust against her, his pelvis hitting her clit and making her spiral. Closer and closer her orgasm crept, the feel of him filling her, his cock thrusting thick and hard inside of her, shutting her emotions down. All she could do was feel him, surrounding her, fulfilling her. She surrendered to him when her climax broke over her, the waves of pleasure cascading gently through her. She felt like

she was floating, taken away by sensation.

A few thrusts later, Zack pressed himself against her, burying his face against her neck as his body shuddered. She cradled him against her, her fingers lacing through his silky hair.

"And as for that bikini wax," he started, raising his head to look at her, blue eyes sparkling with humor. "I don't need a landing strip to point me in the right direction. I think I know what I'm doing."

Mel snorted and wrapped her arms and legs around him in a tight hug. His chest vibrated against hers as he chuckled.

"Yeah, I think you have a wonderful sense of direction."

"Damn straight." She squealed and held on as he moved away from the wall. His strong hands steadied her.

"What about the movie?" she asked when they somehow made it out of the bathroom and headed towards his room.

"Let me tell you how it ends. They all die."

"Huh. Original."

"Yeah." Then his lips closed over her laughing mouth.

\* \* \* \*

"Well, you sound happy." Vicki's voice filtered through the cell phone and Mel laughed at the observation.

"Yeah? I guess I am." It was a beautiful fall day, Tuesday, her day off and she was the object of the affection of a very wonderful man. What's there not to be happy about?

"This wouldn't have anything to do with a certain younger man you were talking about, would it?"

"Maybe," Mel said with a laugh. It had been a hectic couple of months for the friends, so other than a couple of hastily shot off emails, there had been no real time to catch up.

"Fantastic. So when do I get to meet him?"

"Uhm, how about this weekend? You can bring your bartender with you."

"What makes you think I'm dating a bartender?" Vicki asked coyly. Mel rolled her eyes.

"Uh huh. What's his name?" Mel asked, resting a hip against the island in her kitchen.

"James," Vicki said immediately, huffing a bit when she realized she was caught. "Bitch," she said without heat.

"Now, now."

"Why don't you guys come over tonight? I'll make sure to lose the daily book and not put that little magnifier glass anywhere near a row of negatives. I'll take a night off to embarrass you properly. Oh and of course Billy can bond with my horse."

Vicki lived on a cute little horse ranch in Laurel, just this close to Clarksville. She only owned one horse, but she boarded horses as a way to help offset expenses. After all, the magazine was still new enough to make her finances a bit shaky.

"Hrm. Well, as nice as an evening of abject humiliation sounds, we'll have to pass. I think Zack has rehearsal." She wasn't worried about going to Vicki's with him and Billy. She thought it would be fun. But she still needed to have her sit down with her son.

Maybe she'd do that tonight, and they could head over to Vicki's that weekend.

"Oh? What play are they doing?"

"I think it's *Grease*."

"Who's he playing?"

"Nobody, actually. He's just an extra. One of the T-birds. He's taking more of a behind the scenes role with this production. Helping out the director and some choreography and stuff."

"Wow. That's so ... odd. Every theater major I ever knew, especially the seniors, had to have the lead or nothing. God, remember Greg?" Vicki laughed as the memory filled both of their brains.

"How could I forget? You all spent the better part of twelfth grade pawing each other backstage." Vicki just sighed as if she were remembering good times. And really, even back then Greg was gorgeous, so they probably *were* good times. "I just saw him on the cover of *Movie View*." Greg Chapman had just won an Oscar the year before for playing a corrupt Wall Street broker that loses everything only to rise back up as the founder of a homeless organization.

"Yeah. Maybe I should have stayed with him."

"Uhm no. You would have killed each other by now." If the couple hadn't been kissing, they were yelling. Volatile was a polite word to describe Vicki's relationship with the temperamental actor.

"Yeah, but I would have had all that lovely community property." Vicki heaved an exaggerated sigh at the fortune lost. "Back to Zack, hey I rhymed. Hee. Anyway, a theater major that let the lead go when he could have used it to be seen by the right people? Pretty cool of him."

"He's minoring in film. A lot of behind the scenes stuff."

"Because what he really wants to do is direct," Vicki deadpanned.

"Naturally."

"All right. Well, if you and Billy just want to come hang out, come on over. I miss the little guy."

"Okay. We'll see." That would be nice. Billy loved the horses. And the only thing they had to look forward to was homework and leftovers. Woo hoo. A knock on the door drew her attention and she moved to answer it. "Will James be there?"

"Maybe."

"Oh good. I can tell him all *your* secrets," Mel said with an evil laugh. She seized the doorknob and pulled it open without looking. Her smile froze on her face and Vicki's voice faded away as she took in the person standing on the landing outside her door.

"Mother."

"Oh shit. Don't listen to anything she says, Mel. Call me," Vicki demanded right before Mel cut the connection without a goodbye.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Of course." Nerves jumped in her stomach as she stepped aside to let her mother in. She did a quick scan of the place, to make sure it was clean before focusing on the woman before her. Gloria Samson stood in the middle of the room, looking as regal as ever.

She was wearing a deep blue silk blouse over a pair of crisp, linen pants in misty gray. Her low heeled pumps matched her top and bag perfectly. A matching jacket draped



over her arm. Diamonds glittered on her fingers and ears and a pendant around her throat. Her hair was a sleek, short cap of auburn, expertly cut to frame a face that still looked young.

Mel always suspected that was a testament to Botox, since her mother detested the idea of surgery. Funny thing for a plastic surgeon's wife.

"How's dad?" Mel asked, wiping suddenly sweaty palms on the thighs of her faded jeans. Gloria arched a delicate brow at the action and leveled her green-eyed gaze on her daughter. Mel tried very hard not to squirm.

"If you called him once in a while, you might know." *Point, Mother.* She had a hand on her slim hips as she surveyed Mel's apartment. Anger and resentment prickled the back of Mel's neck and she straightened her spine in an unconscious sign of rebellion.

"Would you like some coffee, Mother?" She crossed the room and entered her tiny kitchen without waiting for an answer. She busied herself with getting cups, sugar and creamer on a tray. Her mother hadn't answered but she carried the tray into the main room anyway. Gloria hadn't moved far from where she had been.

Mel put the tray down and took the cups off the tray. By the time she was done, Gloria had finally moved to the table to join her.

"I don't understand why you didn't just buy a house in your neighborhood," Gloria said with some distaste. Mel rolled her eyes and sat down. She *so* wanted to have this conversation again.

"One, there are no houses for sale around there. It's a very desirable neighborhood, and nothing stays on the market long. Two, couldn't afford it anyway, even with the money Todd gave me, my child support, and my job. Prices have escalated too much around there. Three, why would I want to run the risk of seeing Todd and his new Barbie Doll on a regular basis?" Mel ticked off the reasons in a tone that suggested maybe her mother should listen this time.

Gloria just looked at her like none of those were reasonable excuses as she added a drop of cream to her cup.

"I never wanted you to marry him to begin with. But you shouldn't have let your foolishness get in the way of making your marriage work. If you'd stayed, you might still have a marriage to speak of."

"You know what, Mother? Stop right there." Mel held up a hand and scowled darkly at the woman that gave her life, but didn't know one damn thing about her. Gloria just scowled back, her disapproval written in her posture. "Todd cheated on me. Most people would find that a reasonable excuse to end a marriage."

Gloria took a sip of her coffee, almost as if she were pondering her daughter's words. Then her face pinched in distaste. For the coffee or Mel, she wasn't sure.

"Was there any reason you came over?" she asked wearily. She was so tired of this tug of war with Gloria. Push, pull and neither ever won.

"I can't just want to see my daughter and her new ... home?"

Mel might have bought that if there had been hugs and kisses when she'd opened the door, or maybe a shoulder to cry on when her marriage fell apart. Her whole life her mother punished her for being born without a penis. It might not have been so bad if Mel had had a brother or two. But in a cruel twist, Gloria couldn't ever conceive again. So she'd barely tolerated the girl she'd been given, instead giving all the love she had to Billy. And Mel could only partially resent her for it. After all, Billy was her baby.

"Of course, Billy won't be home for a couple of more hours," Mel reminded her. Gloria shifted a shoulder in a nonchalant shrug, but Mel did see a flash of disappointment cross the older woman's face.

"I won't be staying long. I have to meet Katherine for lunch. But we would like to see him," Gloria told her, for the first time no animosity on her features. Mel sighed and nodded.

"I'll bring him by soon." She'd have to ask Todd to pick Billy up on Saturday instead of Friday night and finagle a Saturday morning off, but she'd work it out. No matter what her relationship with her mother, she couldn't punish Billy for that.

A knock on the door ended the awkward moment stretching between them and Mel happily moved to answer it. When she saw Zack, she felt a moment's panic. Her eyes darted quickly to her mother before she smiled brightly at him.

"Hi," she breathed, leaning against the door. "What are you doing here?"

"I had a break between classes. Thought I'd see if you wanted lunch." He looked confused that she didn't look happier to see him.

"Oh, I'd love too. But my mother's here." She tried to inject as much cheer into that statement as she possibly could. The dark brow he arched let her know she might have sounded a bit forced.

"Melanie? Who's your friend?" Gloria's cool voice cut in, causing Mel to briefly close her eyes. She took a deep breath and moved aside, swinging the door open wider to let him inside.

"Zack Conrad, this is my mother, Gloria Sampson."

The smile that had made Mel's heart stutter that first day spread on his face and she could practically see him flip his 'charm button' on.

"Hello, Mrs. Sampson. Nice to meet you."

"Mr. Conrad," Gloria said with a slight incline of her head. Her shrewd eyes took in every detail of the couple and Mel tried hard not to fidget.

"Zack, please," Zack was saying as he gripped her hand carefully.

"Want some coffee?" Mel asked him, moving to get a cup when he nodded.

"How do you know my daughter ... Zack?" Mel could hear the agitation in her mother's voice at using the shortening of his name. For whatever reason, she hated to do it. Mel was always Melanie, her father was always Nathan, never Nate like everyone else called him and Billy was always William. She only used nicknames if that's how she had been introduced, just as she had been with Zack. That didn't mean she had to like it.

"I helped her move in," Zack answered, flashing Mel a more natural smile when she handed him his mug.

"Really? And now you're friendly enough to come here for coffee? How nice."

"Well, I had been on my way out when I saw her and Billy. Looked like they needed help. Let me tell you, hauling out an entire house worth of furniture is enough to make people bond pretty quickly." Mel was amazed at the complete lack of innuendo in his words. Zack fixed his coffee as he spoke, a good amount of sugar and a huge dollop of cream. Mel saw her mother shudder at the college student cocktail of sweet and caffeine. The woman never used processed sugar.

Ever.

"Are you lovers?"

Zack nearly choked on his first sip of coffee and Mel let out an appalled "Mother!"

Gloria just watched them with unblinking, piercing eyes as Zack looked to Mel for a clue as to how to handle that question.

"Mother, really. I think you better go. You don't want to miss your lunch date with Katherine, do you? I'll let Billy know you were here." *And that old woman wonders why I never call.* Mel grabbed her mother's jacket off the back of the chair she'd dropped it on, heedless of crushing the fine fabric in her grip.

Gloria stared at them for a long moment, before standing up with a grace Mel could only envy.

"I'll send you the dry cleaning bill," she said, taking the jacket from her daughter's hands.

"Of course you will," Mel conceded with another roll of her eyes.

"Walk with me, Melanie. A pleasure to meet you, Zack."

"I'll be right back." Mel sighed, following Gloria out. They were silent on the walk to her mother's silver Lexus, but she could feel the disapproval rolling off Gloria in waves. When they got to the car, her mother took out her keys and tapped them against her palm.

"Do you have any idea how foolish you're being?"

"Well, Mother, don't beat around the bush or anything," Mel snapped. She crossed her arms over her chest and felt her anger rising swiftly to the surface.

"You're having an affair with that ... that *child*. How do you expect to get Todd back?"

"I don't." Mel managed not to yell with her frustration. Her mother certainly could beat a dead horse. She didn't want to admit that her assessment of Zack being a child bothered her. Instead, she forged on with finally putting the Todd subject to rest. "I wish you would stop suggesting I try. He left *me*, Mother. For a woman that's younger than Zack."

"I'm very disappointed in you, Melanie," Gloria said in answer. Mel was surprised how much those words hurt, especially since she'd always known them to be true. She looked at her mother and tried to calm herself before she spoke.

"What else is new?" she hissed, cursing the hint of pain that made her voice tremor. She looked away from the hard mask that was her mother's face.

"He's too young, Melanie. What will people think?" If Mel thought her mother was capable of theatrics, she would have thought she saw a tear glistening in her mother's eye.

"I don't know. And frankly, I don't really care." She only wished that statement were one hundred percent true. After all, the seed of doubt her mother had planted was already starting to germinate, fertilized by her own fears. "Goodbye, Mother. Tell Dad I said hi."

Then, without another word or look back, Mel walked away.

\* \* \* \*

Later that evening, after Billy got home from school, mother and son made their way over to Vicki's.

After her mother had left, she'd gone back to her apartment. Zack had been funny, telling her that they should introduce Gloria to his father. They'd probably get along great.

His comment had made her smile, but it hadn't done anything to erase her mother's

words, or the feelings that had been stirred by them. Maybe Gloria was right. Maybe she did look like a fool. And what about Zack? Sure, he said he wouldn't go away easily. But she'd heard that before and she had a shattered marriage to prove it.

Thankfully, Zack hadn't been put out by her silence. He must have guessed her mother's visit upset her, but just not how much. They'd just sat together for a while, holding each other in the quiet apartment until it was time for him to leave for class.

She took his kiss, lingering over it with an ache forming in her heart. She watched him go, a nagging sense of foreboding telling her if they kept going, someone was going to get hurt. And that someone was probably going to be her.

By the time Billy got home, Mel was sick of her own company. Her mind just wouldn't stop going around in circles. And all of those circles kept leading back to one conclusion. That one conclusion made her heart hurt and her stomach twist.

So, she'd given Billy an hour to get his homework done, then piled them into the car to head to Vicki's. In less than an hour, she turned her car onto the long gravel drive that led up to Vicki's pretty little two story white house. There was a huge front porch, complete with porch swing and fat, tabby cat curled up on the rail.

Behind the house was the stable and a handful of other outbuildings that Mel didn't even pretend to know what they were for. She could just see the smoke from the fireplace of the two-bedroom house the ranch foreman lived in.

Vicki really wasn't much of a farmer. And if it weren't for Mac and his wife, well, Mel could guess what this place might look like.

Mel parked the car next to an unfamiliar black Honda and got out. No sooner had they climbed from the car when the front door flung open and Vicki descended the steps.

"Hey, you're here," she cried, smiling like they hadn't seen each other in years. Billy laughed despite himself when she enveloped him in her arms, a cloud of Chanel and kisses surrounding him.

"Aunt Vicki!" Billy pleaded through a fit of giggles.

"Sorry, kid. I've missed you," Vicki said happily. "Go on inside while I grab your mother."

"Okay." Billy ran up the porch steps, pausing long enough to pet the cat then disappearing inside. Mel figured she'd find him happily ensconced in front of the big screen TV when they finally made it through the door. Vicki turned to face her when the little boy was gone, her happy smile fading as she studied Mel's face.

"Oh my god, you listened to her, didn't you?" Vicki pulled her friend into a hug, pulling back far enough to look at Mel. "What happened?"

"The usual. Digs about my marriage. A huge dose of guilt. And that was before Zack got there," Mel answered, pulling back.

"Oh, your mother has met Zack before me? I think I'm irritated."

"Trust me. It wasn't intentional." Mel smiled a little as the women linked arms and headed toward the house. "He came by between classes to have lunch with me. Got force fed a serving of Gloria instead."

"Nice. Did he run screaming from the apartment never to be seen again?"

"No. He actually stayed until he had to go back to school."

"Well, he gets points just for that. What did she say about him?" Vicki asked quietly, sending Mel a knowing look. They walked slowly up the steps, ignoring the chill that was creeping into the air as the sun started to set.

"Just that I was making a fool of myself. She called Zack a child and told me how disappointed she was."

"You don't believe any of it, do you?" Vicki asked with a critical eye on her friend.

"Only a little," Mel admitted with a half-hearted laugh.

"Mel, hon. Don't let her rattle you."

"He is younger than me. Hell, he's never even been in love, Vicki." Mel didn't know why this held so much importance, but it seemed legitimate to her.

"So what?" Vicki tossed that aside with a wave of her hand. "What does that have to do with the way you feel about him?"

"A lot. What if he's just ... I don't know." She finished on a growl. Because she did know, she just didn't want to say it out loud.

"What? Playing with you? Devising a grand scheme to rip your heart out? Don't you think that's a bit paranoid *and* selfish?"

"Paranoid I'll give you. But how is it selfish?" Mel asked with a hint of hurt anger in her voice. Vicki sighed and turned to face her friend, arms crossed over breasts and the light filtering through the open door making her hair glow.

"So far, all I've heard is what this is going to do to you. What about him? You've condemned him before he's even done anything. He's younger than you. Big deal. Why is it okay for Todd to shack up with a girl half his age? Come on. Talk about double standards. And you're perpetuating it by obsessing about Zack's age." Vicki shook her head in frustration, sending her hair bouncing around her shoulders. "I think I might do a spread on this in next month's issue."

"Glad I could help you make deadline," Mel drawled. Vicki smiled and rubbed her hands down Mel's arms.

"All I'm saying is don't be so quick to toss him aside as just a fling. When I talked to you on the phone today, you sounded so happy. Happier than I can ever remember you sounding, aside from the day Billy was born of course. Then Gloria breezes in and sucks the life right out of it. Quit letting her have that power over you."

"Maybe" was all Mel was willing to say?

"Definitely," Vicki corrected.

"I thought you invited us over for dinner. Not psychoanalyzing," Mel said testily. But a slight smile crept onto her lips.

"Both actually. But if I'd told you about the analyzing part, you wouldn't have come."

"Good point."

"All right. Let's go in so you can meet James. I promise I'll lay off. For now."

"Oh, thank you." Sarcasm dripped heavily from Mel's words. They walked into the house, firmly closing the door against the chill outside, but not Mel's doubts.

## Chapter Ten

Zack was tired.

After he'd left Mel's earlier that day, he'd worried about her all day. That made it hard to concentrate on anything else, so it seemed he was working double to try to get his work done. Then he had rehearsals and the day just seemed to stretch on and on and on.

He figured it was all that that contributed to his current predicament.

"I told you, Stacey, I'm dating someone." Zack had been too tired to ride his motorcycle home. Normally, he would have just ridden it home anyway, but he'd made a promise to Mel that he would be careful. So, he'd scrounged for a ride from the rest of the cast and crew. Stacey had piped up immediately.

A few short years ago, Stacey probably would have been on Zack's short list of girls to go out with. Tiny, brunette with large brown, doe eyes, a shapely, slim body and a set of hands that could be several places at once. Many men at school and otherwise would love to go out with her. But she always said she had discerning tastes.

And right now, her tastes seemed to be running in Zack's direction.

"Then how come we've never seen her? Not even at one rehearsal," Stacey asked shrewdly. They had just pulled into the apartment complex parking lot and before he could say thanks and escape, she laid a gentle hand on his thigh. On the top part of his thigh. Very, very close to his ... parts.

"I told you," he said slowly, as if he were explaining a particularly tricky set staging. "She doesn't go to the U." Zack pulled her hand away and put his own on the door handle. "Good night."

He slid out of the car, grabbing his backpack on the way out. He slammed the door and started across the lot. He didn't look back until he heard another door slam and turned to see her walking towards him.

"Stacey..."

"Relax. I'm just walking you to your door," she said with a smile designed to melt hearts. He was starting to get the feeling she didn't like to hear the word 'No'.

"Whatever," he replied with a shrug. All he wanted was a shower, a beer and a few minutes on the phone with Mel before going to bed. Was that too much to ask?

*Apparently*, he thought as Stacey slid her small hand into the crook of his elbow. He tried to jostle her loose as he jogged up the steps, but she had a firm grip. It was becoming obvious she wasn't going to give up. He was going to have to get nasty.

When they got to his door, he dropped his bag, fished for his keys in his jacket pocket, and then turned to face her.

"Look, Stacey..." and that was as far as he got. For a small woman, she had no difficulty with the height difference as she latched onto him. Her hands buried in his hair and her lips fused to his. He managed to clamp his lips closed before she could slide her tongue inside. That didn't seem to deter her though.

Zack was still, hoping his lack of involvement would make her stop. He counted to ten, and then reached for her when she didn't seem inclined to abandon her pursuit of his kiss.

"What the hell?" Mel's voice cut cleanly through the air to slice a cold ribbon out of

his soul. She sounded so angry, so *hurt*. Zack pushed Stacey away with little finesse and faced his girlfriend, his explanation already forming. The slap she offered him caught him off guard and had him staggering into Stacey.

“Mel, it’s not—”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me it’s not what I think,” she said, her voice deadly low and her eyes shining in the moonlight.

“Well, it’s not,” he shot back, taking a step forward. His cheek stung like hell and the pain of it licked the embers of his temper to life. “She kissed me.”

“I didn’t see you fighting her off.”

“I was getting ready to.”

“Like hell. Looked to me like you were pulling her closer.”

Stacey watched the exchange in stunned silence. Her eyes volleyed between him and Mel, who was staring daggers at both of them.

“Jesus, Mel. Listen!” Anger was starting to swell in his voice. His frustration peaked as he tried to get Mel to listen. “She gave me a ride home. I told her I have a girlfriend. Didn’t I?” This was directed at Stacey, who stared wide-eyed at Zack for a beat before nodding emphatically. The eyes Mel turned on her would have frozen lava.

“Leave.” The word was hissed at Stacey and she decided to take the better part of valor and get the hell out of Dodge without giving an answer.

Zack barely even glanced at Stacey as she took off. Anger had completely replaced any guilt he might have felt for being kissed against his will. Mel wasn’t even trying to listen to him.

“You don’t trust me at all, do you?” he asked looking down at her.

“Not when I catch you kissing other girls.”

“God dammit! *She* kissed *me*.” He jerked a finger in the direction of where Stacey had been standing and then slapped his palm against his chest in punctuation. “I didn’t kiss back and I was getting ready to push her away. I’m starting to get the feeling this has nothing to do with a kiss. What the hell’s going on, Mel?” There was no little fear in that question. He had a feeling he wasn’t going to like the answer.

Mel looked at him for a long moment, a parade of emotions floating across her face. The only one that seemed too important was the absolute misery that settled there last.

“Mel...”

“My mother was right. I am making a fool of myself.” Tears glistened in her eyes and she pressed pale fingers to her forehead.

“Mel, don’t.” He was begging. He knew it. Panic seized his heart and squeezed when he saw the finality of her decision in her eyes. “God, please...”

“I’m sorry, Zack. I just don’t think I can do this.”

He was stunned silent for a full minute. She looked at him as he gaped at her, her face tragic in its beauty for him now. “Why?” Zack reached out and seized her arm to keep her from turning away. “Answer me. I deserve that much.”

His words hit her like a slap and she jerked with the force of them. He hadn’t raised his voice but she obviously felt them, felt his pain and she wanted to run from it.

“You’re so young. And I’m ... not.”

“Jesus, I thought we were past that. Why do you keep hiding behind our ages? Just say it, Mel. You’re afraid. At least be fucking honest for once.”

“I am being honest. Mother pointed it out quite clearly. You need someone like that

girl.” A general wave indicated that she meant Stacey. “Someone your own age that’s just starting out. I’m a mother, a newly divorced mother. What am I supposed to do?”

“*Love me!*” It came out before he realized the words were there. She looked stricken, like that demand was everything she did and didn’t want to hear.

“I do. And that’s why I’m doing this. You deserve more.” She pulled her arm out of his grip and went inside her apartment, leaving him to watch after her. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t think.

He wanted to follow her, to swear and yell and shake her. To tell her he loved her and it would work out. But even as he thought it, he knew it wouldn’t work out. Mel had made up her mind. He’d told her he wouldn’t go away easily. It didn’t look like he’d have a choice either way.

Zack felt like a hole had opened up in his heart and all the feeling just seeped out of him. Numbness came over him and it took a great effort to turn away from her closed door to face his own.

Each step he took away from her door had bile burning his throat. He’d never felt this before, this numbness that was seeping into him with every movement. His mind couldn’t wrap itself around the fact that just like that she’d made the decision to end their relationship. She didn’t consider how he felt, she assumed she knew.

*Just like you did with all those girls you dated.*

Cold realization flowed over him and he felt ashamed. If the way he was feeling right then was even a portion of what any of the women he’d dated felt when he ended things with him, then he deserved everything that was coming.

Who knew his own heart would have to break for him to understand what he’d done to the women in his past?

Finally, Zack made it to his apartment. Funny how far away a couple of feet could be. His hands were shaking as he turned the knob, his keys still jingling in the lock. Or tried to. His palms were slick and he couldn’t get a grip on it. His eyes burned and went blurry making it difficult to see. He barely felt the heat of the tears as they streaked down his cheeks.

He felt like he was sleepwalking. He couldn’t understand why he couldn’t get the door open. After several tries, the door finally swung open and he stumbled inside. A pain shot through his chest, a dark, crushing pain that made his breath stop. Somehow, he got inside. Somehow he got the door closed. He fumbled through the apartment, not focusing where he was going until his knees hit the edge of his bed. As the white covered pillow that still smelled like her rose up to meet him, he wondered if this was what it felt like when a heart broke.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn’t supposed to hurt this much, Mel was sure of that. She wasn’t supposed to feel like she couldn’t breathe, or be fighting tears past that first, bitter breakdown. She wasn’t supposed to be sleepwalking through work or avoiding looking her son in the eye so he couldn’t see the devastation on her face. She wasn’t supposed to be forcing smiles and shrill laughter that made her feel brittle.

Halloween was just around the corner. She and Zack hadn’t even been together a full two months yet. Why had breaking up with him hurt more than her marriage falling apart after twelve years?



“Hey, Mel! Your order’s up.”

Mel jolted back to reality at the sound of Tick’s irritated voice. She offered him a thin smile in apology before taking the plate. She stared at it for a full five seconds before she remembered where it was supposed to go. Table two, professor, right.

“Thanks, Tick,” she mumbled, darting out from behind the counter. She barely noticed Edna’s silent appraisal or the way the other waitresses were staring at her. She was too caught up in her self-imposed misery to care.

“Here you go. Can I get you anything else?” As she set the plate down, she misjudged and nicked the side of his glass with the edge of the plate. The water tipped over and to her horror, soaked everything in its path, including the Professor’s lap.

“Oh no, oh no. I’m so sorry.” She didn’t hear if he said anything or notice if anyone else saw. She tried to stem the flow of the water, using first her rag for wiping tables then yanking a multitude of napkins from the dispenser. Not an easy task when your eyes are blurred with tears. She felt like she was breaking apart and the pain was excruciating.

“Mel!” Edna’s voice cut through her haze and made her jerk back to awareness once more. “Go on and settle down. We’ll get this cleaned up.”

If she’d been thinking straight, Mel might have taken offense that Edna was watching her warily, like someone might a person coming unhinged before them.

“I’m sorry,” Mel whispered. The burning in her eyes increased until everything in her vision looked like she was swimming under water. She backed away and barely managed not to knock over anyone or anything on her way to the back.

*Get a grip*, Mel demanded of herself as she slid into the break table. She willed herself not to cry, but she could still feel their heat on her skin. Her throat burned, her nose clogged and her eyes swam. Pain that had nothing to do with her tears sliced through her as Zack’s image came to mind once more.

“Oh Jesus,” she moaned, pressing her hands against her face. She hadn’t slept in two days, the visions of Zack’s face when she’d walked away keeping her up. The whole scene continued to play in her mind like some futuristic torture device and it was all she could do not to scream.

*Like a fool*. Seeing that girl, that young, perky-boobed girl who had wrapped herself around him like a bow had brought her mother’s words back to her with a shout.

She’d known, even as the anger flowed through her that he wasn’t kissing that girl. And, unconsciously, she knew that she was using that girl to end it. The coward’s way, she knew. Despite everything she knew, everything Vicki had said, as soon as her mother had shown up, the timer on her and Zack had started to count down.

*Why* did her mother still have that kind of pull with her? Especially since she’d spent the major part of her young life doing the exact opposite of what her mother wanted. Trying to get her approval had been too difficult. Much easier to disappoint her. How was it now that she was finally happy, her mother could swoop in and take it all away?

*She didn’t take it away. You handed it to her.* That voice piped up. That damn voice that had so often gotten her into trouble with her mother.

Jesus, when did she get so screwed up?

Maybe it was the first day of kindergarten when her mother barely even glanced at the finger painted masterpiece she’d brought home. Or the first test she got an A on that was met with barely even a smile. Or any of the other small or large achievements Mel had accomplished over the years that had been met with veiled criticism, or worse.

Silence.

Her father did his best to compensate, but by the time high school had rolled around, Mel had had enough. That's when 'the voice' appeared and things got worse between her and her mother.

The first real act of defiance was when she started dating Todd. She was sixteen, he was older. Zack's age, to be exact. She'd lied about her age and by the time he found out, he was already too in love with her to back out. Once her mother found out, Mel was already eighteen.

She had forbidden Mel to marry Todd, which was just as good as telling her to go ahead with her blessing. It was that reaction that still confused Mel, considering Gloria's polar opposite reaction to their divorce.

With a sigh, Mel dropped a hand to the table and idly picked at a chip in the surface.

If she were truly, one hundred percent honest with herself, it wasn't her mother that caused Mel to break up with Zack. She knew it. She just liked blaming Gloria. Normally, whenever her mother didn't like a boyfriend, she went out with him anyway, even if she didn't like him as well. Rebellion, it seemed, she never outgrew. Why now? Why Zack?

*Because you're scared of him.*

Huh?

*Because he makes you feel things Todd never did.*

Well, that was true enough.

In all her time with Todd, she couldn't ever remember feeling the instant punch in her stomach when she looked at him. The way he looked at her never made her burn and sometimes she just wasn't that into their lovemaking.

Shame closed tighter around her as she realized that maybe, just maybe, Todd wasn't the only one that had a hand in the end of their marriage. Mel had used him to get away, used him to live a life she thought she wanted. And when she couldn't give him what he needed, he went elsewhere.

Mel was surprised it took him twelve years to ask for the divorce.

She'd cooked for him, bore him a child, cleaned house and did his laundry. She got him up on time in the morning, made sure he had his notes in his briefcase and that his cell phone was charged. Bills were paid, oil changes done, every little day-to-day thing was taken care of by her. But the one thing Mel couldn't do, or wouldn't do, was love him.

She was a beautiful train wreck, wasn't she?

Now, she'd found, aside from her child, her insecurities had robbed her of the little bit of happiness. Gloria's words had raised her guilt about her marriage, which made her think, on some level, that she shouldn't be with Zack. It wasn't about his age or his status in life. It was all about her own bullshit.

Mel had hurt him because she felt she needed to be punished over the failure of a marriage she hadn't really participated in. Damn, who said you needed a shrink to realize how fucked up you were?

She'd let her mother's words cut deep, let them take root and fester, feeding her own guilt and insecurity until it oozed out all over Zack. Fool was too nice a word for her.

The look on his face when he demanded she love him; the absolute desperation in his eyes making him look so young, so lost. She'd done that and she'd never been so ashamed in her life.

"Are you okay?" Edna's question brought Mel's eyes up from the table. The older

woman's gaze was so full of concern; Mel felt the tears threatening once more.

"No. I'm not. I think I just made the worst mistake of my life."

"Your ex?"

Mel actually laughed at that, although it sounded a bit hysterical. "No, no. *That* mistake took care of itself about a year ago. I'm sorry, Edna, for bringing my personal drama to work. This isn't like me."

"As much as we all would like to think there's some switch we can flip to turn off our emotions for work, that just ain't the case. A heartbreak's gonna hurt whether you're at work or not." For the first time since Mel had met Edna, there was gentleness to the woman's voice. All Mel could do was nod and press her lips together to try to stem the emotion trying to burst through. "Want to tell me what happened?"

Mel realized she did. It was so unusual to have someone other than Vicki concerned about her, willing to really listen to her. This woman was about her mother's age and as different as night to day. Maybe she could tell Edna, and get some real advice and not a biased judgment. As fast as she could, in an effort to get it out before the waterworks started again, she told Edna everything. When she finished, she took a deep breath and blinked against the stinging in her eyes.

"I am so stupid," she moaned, rubbing a hand against her forehead as the other hand rubbed her heart to try to ease the ache.

"At least you said it."

"Gee, thanks."

Edna shrugged and rested her chin in a palm. The silence stretched, but not uncomfortably.

"Have you ever dated a younger man?"

Edna snorted and dropped her hand. "At my age, they're *all* younger."

"You're not that old."

"I'm not that young, either."

"Don't put that much thought into it, Mel. You either want him, or you don't. Everything else is just an excuse." Then, like every other conversation Mel had had with Edna, the older woman stood to leave now that she'd said her piece. "You wanna go home?"

"No." Mel took a deep breath and wiped the last bit of wet away from her cheeks. In four short sentences, Edna had just summarized everything Mel had been thinking. Hearing it from another person made it all seem real. "I think you've catered to my neurosis long enough, thanks."

"Suit yourself. You've got five minutes."

"Okay." Mel got up and followed Edna out into the dining room to make her way to the ladies room. Splashed some cold water on her face then took a good, hard look in the mirror. The woman staring back at her was tired and pale, her eyes red rimmed and shadowed from her lack of sleep. The fact that she'd managed to get through the last couple of days without Billy asking a million questions was a miracle.

She felt hollow inside, empty. She knew she'd fucked up. Now she just had to decide what to do about it, and hope Zack would listen once she figured it out.

Mel took a deep breath and ran a hand over her hair to smooth it. Feeling a little calmer, she went to finish her shift, the day ending much smoother than it had started.

## Chapter Eleven

Mel was barely through her door and directing Billy to do his homework before a knock sounded on it. She felt an irrational surge of hope as she hurried to answer it, the thought that maybe Zack had come to talk to her making a bright smile break out across her face.

To see her ex husband was such a disappointment, she nearly wept ... Again.

"I know we're divorced but I didn't think you disliked me that much," Todd said, his sandy brows drawn up in surprise. Mel shook her head as if to shake away the look and offered him another smile, albeit a slightly dimmer one.

"No, I'm sorry. I was..."

"Expecting someone else?"

"Hoping," Mel countered, leaving it at that. "What's up? It's not Friday." It was Thursday, to be exact.

"I know. I wanted to let you know I was going to be a little late tomorrow. I have a meeting with a client that had to be rescheduled. I can't reschedule again."

"You could have called," she reminded him as she moved to let him in.

"I know. I just wanted to see you."

"Oh?" She walked into the kitchen to start dinner, and immediately turned on a pot of coffee. "Why?"

Todd sighed, a deep sigh that told her he was about to fess up to something. Suppressing an unexpected smile, she waited.

"Billy told me you'd been crying."

Okay, so maybe she hadn't gotten anything by the kid after all.

"He did?"

"Yeah. He also said he hadn't seen Zack in a couple of days." He left the question unsaid, but she heard it just the same.

"When did he say this?" She wasn't mad. After all, she was glad that Billy could talk to his father. She wasn't sure she liked him talking to his dad about *her*, but there wasn't a whole lot she could do about that. And it did have to do with him as well. She couldn't believe that she had underestimated her son again.

"He called me after school. He's worried about you."

"I'm sorry for that. It's nothing to worry about, Todd. I'll talk to him." Mel turned away and pulled out some pasta to boil and took out the sauce she'd defrosted in the fridge.

"Are you okay, Mel?" She stopped. Just completely stopped moving when that question slipped out of Todd's mouth. How many times had he asked that during their years together? How many times had she brushed him off?

With a sigh, she turned around and looked at him, leaning casually against the doorframe. She'd spent a lot of years with this man, most of her youth. She'd cared about him, still did if she were honest. And today seemed to be the day she was honest with herself. So, instead of brushing him off again, she crossed her arms over her breasts and told him.

"My mother came to see me the other day."

Those words were enough to have understanding dawning across his face and he took a step into the kitchen. When his hands closed around her shoulders, the warm comfort in those hands familiar and gentle, she nearly broke down again. Despite everything, they'd always been friends. That had been the hardest thing to lose when the fighting started. Maybe, just maybe they could get that back.

"When are you going to stop letting her get to you?"

"Maybe when I'm dead. I dunno." At least she could still joke. No matter how lame it was. Todd gave her a look that told her she wasn't funny. Oh well. "It wasn't entirely her fault. She plucked a sore spot and I used it to do something really, really stupid."

Todd waited, knowing she would tell him. "I broke up with Zack. She gave me grief about our marriage ending, then how much I looked like a fool for dating a man so young. And I just ... got crazy for a minute. Okay for a day. Thing is now I don't know how to fix it."

"You said you weren't dating Zack," Todd accused, although there was no heat in the words. Mel arched a brow and gave him a 'Come on' look. He smirked and gave her shoulders a squeeze before dropping his hands away.

"Just talk to him, Mel. All he can do is tell you to go away. Claim insanity. It always worked with me." So he was teasing her now. When had they gotten that comfortable?

"Funny man. Now I remember why I divorced you." But he was right. There was no trick, no great act of love that she could do to make Zack see she'd been so wrong, and was willing to see it now. All she could do was talk to him. And hope.

"Does it ever bother you?"

"What?" Todd asked, his eyes questioning at the abrupt change.

"The age difference between you and Carly. Does it ever get to you?" He looked at her as if gauging whether or not she was serious or trying to get a dig in on him. He took another deep breath and propped a hip against her island as he considered his answer.

"No. Not really. It bothers me that my mother doesn't like her. Or even tries to. But Carly's not you, so that's probably a lost cause."

Mel smiled at that. His mother was so different than her own. The epitome of a devoted parent, she'd intimidated the hell out of Mel when she first met her. It didn't take long to relax in Trudy's presence, however. She was the warmest and most caring person Mel had ever met, and she had been the model that Mel used when raising Billy. She'd been furious when she and Todd split, but for different reasons. She'd nearly been beside herself that Todd had had an affair. And as far as Mel knew, she was still mad.

"Don't let it worry you so much, Mel. What matters is whether or not he's good to you. Because after me, you deserve that." There was sadness to his voice then and Mel looked up at him quizzically.

"You weren't completely to blame Todd."

"I know," he told her, the simplicity cutting her straight to the heart. "But that didn't give me the right to sleep around. I loved you, no matter how you felt about me and I'd made a vow. I didn't live up to it."

She couldn't have been more shocked than if he'd jumped up and started singing a chorus from the Jell-O commercial.

"Wow. You've forgiven me already?" It was unfathomable to her.

"I never blamed you." And it was then that Mel realized how much he must have loved her. Shame flared brightly once more. With that little parting shot, Todd leaned

forward and planted a soft, lingering kiss on her mouth that brought tears to her eyes.  
“Goodbye, Mel.”

“Goodbye, Todd.” He gave her hand a squeeze then moved to go say hi to Billy before leaving. She stood in the kitchen, her mind turning over his words as a smile tugged at her lips. He’d meant what he said, she knew. Somehow, he didn’t blame her. Now if she could just work on not blaming herself, maybe she’d stop making such a mess out of her life.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Mel was making dinner when Billy slid onto one of the stools and looked at her. She turned to look at him, the weight of his stare almost physical on her shoulders.

“What’s up, spud? Your dad will be here soon, all packed?” She set a cookie down in front of him, the pre-negotiated one chocolate chip before dinner treat. He looked down at it and started to crumble the edges with his thumb. Nothing puts a mother’s radar up like an un-scarfed cookie.

“Yeah.”

“Hey?” Mel leaned on the island and looked at him, her head tilted to see him better. She waited until he looked up, his dark eyes troubled. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“Are you okay? You’ve been sad.”

“Yes, honey. I’m okay. I’m sorry if I’ve worried you. I wanted to talk to you about it, but I was going to wait until you got back from your dad’s.” She reached out and placed a hand over one of his, effectively halting his destruction of the cookie.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” She smiled at him, his concern for her making her heart hurt. She reached out and stroked his cheek with one finger, an action she did a lot when he was a baby. It was like she had to constantly touch, to believe the wonder that was her child. Just like she did now.

“Okay. Do you think I can go see if Zack wants to play some football before dinner?”

Billy looked up at her, the concern in his eyes still there, but he seemed satisfied with her answer for now. His question had her heart stuttering in her chest as she tried to figure out how to handle this.

“Well, you know, Zack’s been busy with rehearsals and stuff. And your dad’s going to be here soon.” She sounded lame even to herself.

“Did you two have a fight?”

Damn if that kid didn’t miss a trick.

“Sort of,” she admitted. Then, she took a deep breath and plunged ahead. She wouldn’t lie to him anymore. “We had been ... seeing each other. And I kind of broke things off with him.”

“You were?” Billy’s face scrunched up with confusion and he didn’t seem to know how to process that.

“Yes,” she answered and waited for whatever might come.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Here’s where she wasn’t sure what to say. She knew that her reasoning could make him think she thought he was a baby. She also knew this could just be the calm before the

storm.

"Because I was afraid you wouldn't like it. And I thought it wouldn't get serious so I wouldn't have to tell you." Honesty was always the best policy.

"I like Zack," he said, as if that shot down both of those arguments.

"I know you do, honey."

"But you don't anymore?"

"Actually, I do. I like him a lot."

"So why did you break up with him?" Mel sighed at this. She didn't want to explain it again, especially to her ten-year-old son. So she just smiled and stroked his cheek again.

"Because I was scared. But I'm not scared anymore. And I think I'd like to start seeing him again if he wants to. Does that bother you?"

Billy shrugged then broke off a piece of the cookie that wasn't mangled beyond recognition. "No."

And it seemed it was as simple as that.

"Okay then. Dinner's almost ready. Go wash up." Billy shoved the last remnants of his cookie into his mouth and slid off the stool.

"I love you, Mom." By the time Mel turned, Billy had already disappeared down the hall. She didn't have a chance to tell him how that was the best thing to make her feel better.

\* \* \* \*

"Zack?" Stacey rushed up to him as he loped down the steps in front of the theater building an apology ready on her lips. When he turned to her, the apology died and she couldn't remember ever feeling more wretched in her life.

"What, Stacey?" He didn't sound mad, or annoyed or even a little ticked at her. In fact, he sounded kind of empty. She hadn't seen him over the last few days, and she was worried. More so than the others in the production, because she had an idea of what was going on with him. And she felt more than a little bit responsible. If she had only listened when he'd told her he was in a relationship.

But she'd never been able to give up a challenge. She'd just never seen the effects of what her actions could do. And she was getting an eyeful of it right now. He was pale, his jaw covered with stubble and his eyes shadowed like he hadn't slept. His hair was a mess and his clothes were rumpled. Zack was usually put together pretty well. It was a surprise to see him like this.

He wasn't carrying any books so she wondered just what he was doing on campus. He certainly didn't look like he was there to work.

"I," she started when she finally found her voice. "I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry, for the other night." She wrung her hands in front of her and tried not to squirm under the weight of his blue-eyed gaze.

"Yeah," was all he said and he turned away.

"Aren't you going to rehearsal?" she called, not ready to let him leave yet, although she could tell that's all he wanted to do.

Zack paused and turned around to look at her once more.

"I quit." Shock widened her eyes and Stacey wasn't entirely sure she heard him right.

“Why?”

“I’m too fucked up right now, Stacey,” he told her, his words hitting her like a physical force. She’d heard rumors about him. How he wasn’t about lasting relationships or commitment. He was a heartbreaker according to other girls. That was part of the reason she had been interested. There was a kind of power in turning the local bad boy good. Apparently, by the look of him and the sound of anguish in his voice, she’d been too late. Someone else had gotten there first.

“You can’t stop living your life because you broke up with your girlfriend.” She wondered why she thought she could say these things to him, especially after the other night. But she figured someone had too.

“No. I can’t. But I can take a break for a little while. I just can’t...” He shook his head, as if losing the words to try to explain. Then he turned and walked away. This time, she didn’t stop him.

\* \* \* \*

Later that evening, after Billy had left with his father and the dinner dishes were done, Mel found herself pacing the apartment. Considering how small the place was, she started making loops, down the hall, into her room, through Billy’s then back out to the kitchen, dining room to circle the living room once more. Her mind was circling with her body and she wondered if she was going to go nuts.

Finally, without allowing herself to think, or at least letting a solid thought form, Mel grabbed her keys and walked out of the apartment. It took a ridiculously short time for her to make it to his door and once she got there she had to force herself not to turn around and walk back.

She knew she looked the fool, just standing there staring at the door in the middle of the night. Okay, not the middle of the night, but it was somewhere close to ten and that was bad enough. Finally, after a deep breath Mel raised her hand and knocked, then waited. When all she heard was the sound of deaf Mr. Howard’s TV downstairs and the traffic whizzing by behind her, she knocked again, louder.

“Go the fuck away.” His voice drifted out to her through the door, the words making her eyes widen. Mel reached out and tried the knob, letting out a whoosh of breath when it turned easily in her hand. As the door swung open, Mel took another deep breath and stepped inside.

His apartment was dark, the only light shining in from the flickering screen on the TV. The sound was turned down so she heard the gentle strum of his guitar clearly. The inside was no different than the last time she was there, save for one glaring difference. All the beer bottles littering the coffee table and floor.

“What do you want, Melanie?” His voice was rough and thick, the sound of her name more like a curse than a caress. It still sent a shiver down her spine.

“I wanted to see you.” Lame, but true. Selfish, but true.

“Well.” He didn’t look up, but he gave her a grin. It reminded her of picture she’d once seen of a vampire getting ready to rip the throat out of his victim. And not in that nice, pleasant way they usually did. “Take a good, long look. I’m moving out next week.”

He was sitting on a wooden crate, bare-chested, his guitar on his lap. His shoulders were hunched over protectively, his long fingers stroking the neck like a long lost lover. She willed him to look up, longed to go to him and take his stubble rough face in her



hands and beg him to forgive her.

Neither happened.

She just stood there as he picked out a tune, his smooth voice softly singing. It took a second for her to recognize the tune. It was a country song that was popular when she was in high school. The singer had lost his girl somehow and he was trying to get over her. The last line of the chorus told her it would take dying to get it done.

"Oh God, Zack. I'm so sorry." Tears streaked down her face as the words poured out of her mouth. She took a step forward, her hand instinctively reaching for him. The guitar hit the floor with a noisy thud and the crate turned over in his haste to get up.

"Don't, Mel." He was looking at her now and her breath caught at what she saw in the light from the television. He hadn't shaved, that much she'd seen already. But it appeared he hadn't slept either. Even in the dimness of the room, she could see the shadows surrounding his eyes and the way the blue seemed faded and haunted.

"Zack."

"You can't do this. You can't come in here and say you're sorry." He shoved a hand in his hair, making it stick up at odd angles on his head. "I'll believe you. I'm weak enough when it comes to you, I'll believe you. Then someone will come along and say some stupid comment about our ages and you'll run again." She saw him swallow hard and the glistening of tears in his eyes that were suddenly alive with anguish. "I love you, Mel."

This last part was said as a desperate plea, the sound of them harsh with this unwanted emotion.

Mel crossed the room, her heart breaking as he backed away like he was afraid of her. His back hit the wall and he looked a little panicked when he realized he had nowhere to go.

"Zack, please ... *please* listen." Her own voice wavered with the force of her feelings, rising up and seizing her throat. She cleared them away and went on. "I love you too. I was such an idiot for letting my mother get to me. For letting my own fear of getting hurt push you away."

"I'm younger than you, Mel. That's never going to change." His hands fisted at his sides like he wanted to keep from touching her.

"I know that. And I don't care. I never really did. It was just an excuse and I'm so, so sorry. I need you, Zack. Please believe me."

Mel waited, her heart beating so hard she thought it might skip out of her chest any second. He didn't move from the wall. He just stared at her, his face a mixture of wanting to believe her, pain and fear. He was tense, his curled fists tapping the wall behind him. She gave into her need to touch him, carefully flattening her palms against his chest. He didn't run, but he didn't reach for her either. She took a step forward, their bodies brushing. Mel felt him shudder and heard his quick intake of breath.

Another step and her elbows were flush against his torso. She could feel his heart racing under her hand, the jump of muscle and sinew as she invaded his space.

"I don't deserve a chance. I don't have the right to come in here and turn your world upside down again, but I just can't ... I can't *be* without you." She spoke in a bare whisper since her heart had lodged itself firmly in her throat. After what seemed like forever, he looked at her and she got the full impact of what she'd done to him. His jaw was clenched tight, the dark shadow of his stubble making him look haggard but no less

handsome. The brilliant blue eyes that always seemed to be filled with confidence and passion, now were awash with pain and doubt, red-rimmed and tired.

He looked nothing like the slightly arrogant, easy-going charmed man with a quick smile she'd first met. She'd broken him with her selfishness. That's when Mel truly hated herself.

She reached up and trailed her fingers along his jaw and over the hollow of his cheeks. His eyes drifted closed but that was his only reaction. Risking everything, she pushed up to her toes and brushed her lips against his.

Something that sounded horribly close to a sob ripped from his throat. She suddenly found her breath stolen from her when he seized her arms and spun them around. Her back hit the wall and all she could do was hold on as his mouth brutalized hers. His hands slid to her hips, bruising the soft flesh underneath but she didn't care. She drank his pain, took his bitterness and swallowed his anger.

His tongue ravaged her mouth, his teeth nipped her lips, his hands tore at her clothes. She kicked off her shoes and helped him get her jeans off. She heard a rip as her panties played victim to his hand. A thrill of dark excitement washed over her when his hands pushed her shirt and bra out of the way so his teeth and tongue could feast on her skin.

His mouth crushed back on hers as he thrust deep into her, thick and hard. She cried out, the sound lost in his mouth. She held on as he drove into her, all his anger and hurt pouring out with each hard thrust. He laid claim to her body in the most primal way possible, the pleasure and pain swirling together until neither was distinguishable from the other.

Pressure built in her center with each plunge until she came apart in a shuddering, gasping climax. She tasted his tears as he came with her, his shoulders shaking with so much more than sexual gratification.

They sank to the floor in a tangle of limbs, his face buried in the crook of her neck as they came back to themselves. She held him, relishing the feel of him in her arms again, her fingers stroking his hair in a soothing motion.

It took everything in Zack to pull away. His conscience had him straightening her shirt so she was covered, but he had to get away from her to be able to think. As soon as she'd touched him, he'd lost it. The feeble dam he'd built on his emotions over the last couple of days had come apart and he'd given in to his need. He knew she'd bear the marks of his demand and he felt sorry for it.

Once she was settled in front of him, the temptation of her nakedness at least somewhat covered, he got up, pulling his jeans up as he went. Anger and hurt, but most of all the love he felt for her were warring for dominance in his soul and he felt like he was being ripped apart. He wanted, so badly, to just forgive her. To forget the way she'd just tossed him aside.

But the more stubborn part of him, the part that had kept him from falling for any woman before her wouldn't let him.

"You hurt me, Mel." There was no room for mincing words. Not anymore. He saw her flinch but she didn't respond. Her teeth worried her lip and her fingers twisted in her lap, but she seemed willing to let him have his say. "I know there's a lot of women out there that would say I deserve it. And they'd be right." If anything, that had been a hard pill to swallow. His callousness towards those women, well, his mother should have been ashamed of him. Maybe there was more of his father in him than he cared to admit.

"That's not true, Zack," Mel told him, her anguish that he felt that way shining in her eyes. He shook his head and held up a hand to stop her.

"Yeah, it is." He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair, trying to find the right words. "But, you didn't break up with me because you didn't love me. If that had been it, I might have taken this a little better. You broke up with me because of whatever preconceived notions you'd cooked up about me. Whatever way you thought I should feel, or not feel, whatever way you could think of for me to hurt you, expected. So, you kicked me to the side before letting me prove you wrong."

His anger had started to coat his words, making each one stab the air between them. He saw her flinch, but she didn't deny anything, didn't try to tell him he was wrong or excuse herself in anyway. "For the first time in my life, I know what it means to be in love."

She looked up, her hazel eyes showing the first signs of hope, her kiss-bruised lips trembling with the force of her own emotion.

"But your cracks about my age, your determination that I deserved something other than you ... you made decisions about *my* life. You hate your mother for doing the same damn thing, but you did it to me without even thinking. You didn't let me even try to explain what happened. You just jumped the gun. Then you tell me you love me and walk away. How the fuck is that supposed to make this better? How the fuck am I supposed to forgive you for that?"

"You're not," she all but whispered. Her eyes had dropped to her hands, her knuckles white from her clutching them together so hard. He didn't have to see her face to know she was crying. He didn't know how to feel about it. Part of him hated himself for making those tears slide down her face. The other part of him felt a perverse pleasure that she wasn't coming out of this unscathed. "I'm sorry, Zack. I never meant to hurt you. I just thought ... I convinced myself that this was a game to you, and sooner or later you'd figure out just what a drag I was. I'm sorry, for not giving you more credit as a man. I'm sorry I forced myself to see you as anything less."

Mel didn't look at him as she spoke and when she was done, she reached for her jeans and slid them on, not bothering to try for false modesty as she stood up. Zack swallowed against the lump in his throat. He knew that if she made it out that door, this was it. There was no more them. His heart thudded painfully in his chest even as his mind wondered if that wouldn't be for the best. They'd obviously screwed up pretty good. Why prolong the pain?

Then she stopped in front of him, her eyes taking in his face like she knew it was the last time. She gave him a sad smile, her eyes shining in the dim light. She reached out a hand and squeezed his arm, before pushing up on tiptoes to brush a soft kiss across his cheek.

"Goodbye, Zack." Then, with one final brush of her fingers on his skin, she turned away.

He let her get as far as the door.

"Wait." The sounds from outside filtered in as she paused, the look on her face guarded when she turned back to face him. She kept her hand on the knob but she didn't open it further.

In two strides he was in front of her, his heart pounding as his mind scrambled to catch up with it. Yes, she'd hurt him. Yes, there was a chance she might do it again. Hell,

there was a chance he might do it to her. He had no intention of it, but life was funny that way. He just knew that if he let her walk out that door, he'd always wonder if maybe, *maybe* they could have made it work. And Zack really needed to know if they could.

"I can't..." He pulled the door from her grasp and shut it, closing out the world. His long fingered hands closed around her shoulders, holding her steady as he looked into her eyes. "Please don't leave me again."

He watched her face as the realization spread over her face. Shock had her features going slack, her hazel eyes searching his face and the first shimmers of hope shining in them. Tears glistened in the dark and a smile followed by a jerky giggle exploded from her.

"Are you..." She took a deep, shuddering breath, her hands coming up to grip his wrists as if she were afraid he'd let go. Or worse, push her away. "Are you sure?"

He smiled now, a slow, easy smile that reminded them both of the first day they met.

"Yeah. I don't think I've ever been more sure of anything in my life."

"Me neither." Then she was in his arms, hers wrapping around his neck as her warm, hungry mouth sought his. After a desire-drugging minute, Zack pulled back as something occurred to him. "Shit. I don't have a place to live anymore."

Mel laughed and rested her head against his chin. "I guess we'll have to talk to the super and see if he'll let you back into your lease."

He smiled and nodded. Neither made the obvious suggestion. It was too soon for that. "You know, I think I want to take you to bed."

"I think I want you to." He swooped her up into his arms, making her laugh out loud. The sound was wild and joyous, two things she'd never felt before in her life. Then he carried her down the hall, and he showed her many more things she'd never felt before.

## Epilogue

### Two months later

"If you want to eat, Billy, get a move on," Mel called down the hall. With one more check of her watch, she snorted. Billy wasn't the only one running late.

"Hey." As if on cue, Zack slid inside the apartment, his key ring disappearing into his pocket almost as soon as he was through. Mel shook her head at his jean jacket, scarf and hat.

"How the hell do you manage not to freeze?" she asked, shivering as he pressed his cold lips to hers.

"I have you to warm me up," he countered with a lewd grin. She just snickered.

"Billy! Your grandmother is going to have a cow at this stage. I don't want to miss it."

"I can't believe you're taking me over there."

It was Christmas Eve, and Mel was taking the ultimate step in proving her relationship with Zack was for real. She was taking him to dinner at her parents.

"Well, you have to get it over with sooner or later. At least at Christmas she's a little ... less tense. I think it's the eggnog," Mel said with a snort. She smoothed a hand over her long, brown skirt and straightened the hem of her cream sweater. Her boots clicked smartly on the kitchen floor as she checked to make sure the coffee pot was turned off. She didn't show any of the nerves that were jumping inside her. Her mother was still a little put out with her, and that always made for an interesting evening.

Mel glanced over at Zack, saw that he had wandered over to the tiny tree they'd put up the day after Thanksgiving. That was a good day. They'd popped popcorn to string around it, and wound up eating most of it. Ornaments were taken out and the stories behind them were told. They'd somehow, all three of them, gotten into a tinsel throwing fight and Mel was *still* finding it when she vacuumed.

"How do you know shaking the present won't break what's inside? Then you'll be disappointed tomorrow when you open a busted gift," she asked, leaning against the doorjamb and watching him turn red from being caught manhandling a package. She knew, because she bought it, that the gift inside wouldn't break from a little jostling. But still. He didn't know that.

"Well, then, you'll just have to buy me another one," he said with a wink, straightening to his full height. She felt her heart trip at the sight of him. He was so beautiful and sweet and he was all hers. In the two months since that awful, horrible week, everything had been golden. Billy hadn't even blinked an eyelid when they announced they were together. Zack had managed to convince the super to let him stay in his apartment until after the new year, but it looked like he'd be staying with them soon enough. He already spent more nights with Mel and Billy than he did at home.

Zack had gone back to the director of the play and begged, threatened and if Mel wasn't mistaken, tried to blackmail the man into letting him back in the cast. The most he'd gotten was a paint brush and a hammer, and told that the next time he bailed on a production three weeks prior to its opening he'd lose his chance at starring in the final

play of the year. The play that a great deal of agents came too. As a senior, that wasn't something Zack could mess up.

"What makes you think I would?" she asked in response to his comment. He shot her a grin that made her stomach curl and her blood heat. She merely smirked, however, when his arms closed around her waist.

"Because you love me," he sing-songed, making her roll her eyes.

"Ewww. Can't you guys get a room?" Billy finally appeared just then, making the two adults chuckle with his expected response.

"Come on, you two. Let's get this over with." Mel did sneak a kiss from Zack before sliding out of his grip. "If we don't get home and in bed in enough time, Santa won't stop."

"Oh whatever, Mom. You know there's no such thing as Santa," Billy said with an eye roll that suggested adults were just so stupid.

"I know no such thing," Mel said, indignant. "And neither do you. Just because your friends say there isn't, do you really want to risk it?"

She crossed her arms and watched as her son slowly put on his coat, his face scrunched up in thought.

"Fine," he said after a minute, making Mel's face break into a triumphant grin.

"All right, the sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can all get home and wait for Santa. Although, I think I've got all I want for Christmas." Zack said this last quietly in her ear, the heat of his breath making her shiver.

"Me too."

"Come *on*, you guys. Weren't you just rushing me?" Billy asked with a huff, shoving his hat on his unruly curls.

"Okay, okay. Let's go, squirt."

"I am not a squirt."

"Oh yeah? Well, you're definitely short."

"I'm still growing."

"Uh huh. You'll never be as tall as me."

Mel chuckled as her men bickered with each other on their way out of the apartment. She paused to lock the door. As she turned to follow them, she caught a glimpse of white drift in front of her. Then another, and another.

She smiled again as the snow settled on her eyelashes. A white Christmas, a healthy, happy child and a man to love.

Yeah, this just might be the best Christmas ever.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Lisa Marie lives in Maryland with her husband, two kids, mom and assorted animals. Lisa worked for two years in an online writing community, honing her skills until she felt confident enough to try her hand at getting published. When she's not writing or working at her day job, Lisa likes to read, play video games and has an unapologetic addiction to CSI.

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