

Soulmates



Carolyn Faulkner

Soulmates
Chapter 1 - Prelude
by Carolyn Faulkner

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After brailling her way to her front door in the darkness, cursing herself roundly for not having remembered to leave the light on, Lainie barely crawled in the door, dragging her overnight bag behind her like a vestigial appendage. As it was, she piled crap in the middle of the living room floor – purse, bag, a few meager groceries, briefcase, laptop, and coat - to be dealt with later by someone who cared, definitely not her and not now. Not after four hours on the road one-way and two seventeen-hour days in a row. Nope. Not gonna worry about a little mess, especially not one that was just an insignificant little pile in the bigger mess that was her condo.

The milk and the yogurt ended up in the fridge only by sheer force of will, then she made her way to the warm sanctity of her bedroom with her eyelids already at half-mast. She sunk into her favorite fuzzy pink pjs and dove under the covers, arranging them fastidiously around her and burrowing her face into her pillow until she was only a breath or two away from sleep.

The phone rang shrilly next to her, and Lainie congratulated herself on not picking up the blasted thing and throwing it across the room. She punched the talk button as if it were a particularly nasty bug that needed squashing. “Yeah, what?”

A deep, derisive snort greeted her ear. “Well, good evening to you, too, sunshine!”

Short and snappish, she returned, “What do you want?”

Silence.

If she had taken the time to think instead of just blurting out the first thing that came to her tired mind, she would have recognized that Maj. Zack Hardy didn’t react well to terseness. Not well at all.

When he spoke, his voice was level and controlled, which was warning enough to anyone who knew him. “I want you not to talk to me in that tone of voice, young lady.”

Tears that never seemed to be too far below the surface lately flooded her eyes, constricting her throat tightly, and it was a few long seconds before she was able to make her voice sound relatively normal. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I just got into bed – “
Oops. Crap! Exactly the wrong thing to say.

And, damn him; he never missed a beat. “Lainie Stewart, did you let yourself get roped into working today after we’d already discussed the fact that you needed some time

away from that place to recover from working eighty hour weeks for the past month?” The censure in his voice made her stomach twist painfully.

Lainie rolled onto her back on the big bed while holding the phone tightly to her ear. She would have preferred holding onto him than the phone, even if he was upset with her . . . “Stop scolding me, Zack,” she couldn’t keep the edge of annoyance from creeping into her words. “They were short handed in the Oak Ridge store – “

“You drove all the way to Oak Ridge when you were already dead on your feet, woman?” he roared without raising the volume of his voice one decibel.

She didn’t say anything. How could she defend her behavior when they both knew he was right?

His exasperated sigh was audible even over the phone line. “Well, we’ll discuss this further when I get up there, and I’ll be there for the weekend to make sure you don’t do anything more strenuous than eat and sleep.”

Lainie squirmed on the bed, twisting a curl of blonde hair with her index finger. “Would you be mad at me if I asked you if we can postpone this weekend?”

Zack’s response was immediate and sharp. “I’m already angry with you for working yourself into the ground.” Lainie humphed loudly at that, but wisely held her tongue. “Why don’t you want me to come up?” he asked, then added sarcastically, “Other than the fact that if I do, I won’t let you answer the phone all weekend so that you can’t be talked into working, to say nothing of the paddling I’m going to give you?”

He always threatened to spank her, but never did. He would be just exactly that autocratic, though, she knew. Zack wouldn’t hesitate one millisecond to come in here and lay down the law – his law – for the whole time he was here. Lainie rolled onto her tummy, tucking a pillow under her arms. God, she wished she could just let him come up here, take over and take care of her. He would make her sleep late, put her to bed for naps in the afternoon and to bed early in the evening, feed her outrageously of his own cooking and take her out to dinner a couple times, too.

And when she wasn’t sleeping or eating, she’d be beneath him, or on top of him, or spread open for his delectation . . . there was no telling how many ways that man would come up with to take her in one long weekend, but she knew he’d also be scrupulously careful not to exhaust her.

She loved how he bullied his way, gently but inexorably, through any objections she might have if the matter was in her best interests. Despite the fact that he was barely into his thirties, he was a natural dominant, being a military officer. He was used to barking orders and having people jump. Zack didn’t bark at her – much – and Lainie didn’t jump – she was more likely to argue – but she was so tired at this point that all she wanted to do was to surrender to his tender, if strict, care.

Lainie bit her lip. “Oh, Zack, you don’t want to be up here with me, believe me.” The tears were back, full force, and pretty much uncontrollable. “I’m exhausted and bitchy

and whiney and nasty . . . “

“And I’m supposed to tell the difference how?” he quipped, expecting a teasing comeback from her.

But it was a measure of how horrible she felt at that moment that all he heard in response was a big gulp, as if she was swallowing back tears. Her voice was tremulous and soft with them. “I’m not usually like that,” the last two words were barely above a whisper, “am I?”

The little hairs stood up on the back of his neck in alarm. Apparently, he hadn’t realized how truly exhausted she was. Lainie was one of the strongest women Zack knew – smart, confident, sarcastic . . . self-doubt was not in her vocabulary; she always knew what she was about. If you liked her, you liked her. If you didn’t, you didn’t. It wasn’t something she worried about one way or the other. Her damn-the-torpedoes attitude and tendency to say anything to get a laugh or a rise out of someone accounted for her popularity – and was one of the contributing factors to her recent atrociously long workweeks.

Zack leaned his big forearms on his desk, crooning soothingly, “No, sweetie, you’re not at all.” He heard her ragged breathing and it worried him. “Listen, baby, the exercise is over and we did so well the Base Commander is giving us Monday and Tuesday as down days. Why don’t I come up like we’d planned and I’ll make it all better?”

She gave a watery chuckle. “Because I’m likely to bite your head off as soon as you walk in the door, that’s why.”

He smiled into the phone. “I’ll pick up some armor somewhere on the way up. Not that I’ll need it, highly trained military officer that I am . . .Hooo-ahh!” His grunt got him the soft giggle he’d been trying for.

“Sounds like you’re trying to cough up a furball to me . . .” she teased in only a slightly watery voice.

“Lainie Marie,” he teased in a warning tone. “Don’t you cast aspersions on decades of military tradition!”

Not surprisingly with him, she found herself smiling. “Is that what it is? I thought all you guys needed was a good dose of cat-lax!”

Now that sounded more like his Lainie. “So, I’ll be up there tomorrow morning,” he said again, reinforcing the idea.

“No, Zack, I really thing we ought to reschedule for next weekend, okay?” She sounded as disappointed as he felt, but a germ of an idea was already forming in his mind.

His answer was deliberately vague. “I’m easy.”

He could almost hear her sigh of relief that he wasn’t pressing the issue, then she shot

back with their usual routined response, “I know, but I thought this was your week to be cheap?”

“Nah,” he replied, shuffling through the papers in his desk looking for his car keys. “I’m only cheap and easy with you, hon.”

Lainie yawned loudly in his ear. “That’s so sweet.” She waited the required beat. “I think.”

“I know.”

“And you’re modest, too.”

“Oh, extremely.”

“Uh-huh,” she returned doubtfully, yawning again.

“Somebody’s little girl needs to get to bed.” He always used such a wonderful, almost paternal tone when he called her a little girl, and Lainie adored it, despite the fact that she was actually older than Zack.

He heard a tired, unhappy sigh before she answered in a whiney tone, “I am in bed. Then someone called me and kept me up.”

“Good girl. At least you’re headed in the right direction. I’m going to sign off now and I want you to go straight to sleep. No computer, no TV, no radio, nothing. Sleep.”

He knew her too damned well, that man! But Lainie liked to fall asleep to the TV or the radio. The computer was out of the question. She was too damned tired to even turn the thing on. “Yeah, uh-huh, right, sure,” she answered by rote.

“You best be doing what I say, little girl, or you’ll get yourself spanked.”

A fissure of purely sexual electricity crept down her spine. The man was a tyrant who threatened a lot, but never followed his threats through to their ultimate conclusion. Lainie wasn’t sure whether that was good or bad, considering his size and strength. “I’m scared,” she yawned in a deliberately bored tone.

“Uh-huh. Sleep well, baby. And I do mean, sleep.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Oh, God, she must’ve been exhausted. That “yessir” didn’t sound anywhere near as sarcastic as it usually did. He grinned. “That’s my girl. G’night, baby. Sleep tight.”

“Night, Zack.” Lainie hung up the phone and rolled over, wrapping herself in her fluffy duvet as well as the warm comfort of being his girl.

She was sound asleep when she felt herself going airborne, and then she couldn’t decide it maybe it was part of a dream . . . “Lainie, honey, do you need to go to the bathroom?”

She must've been dreaming, because that was Zack's voice. But what kind of weird question was that? She wasn't at all sure she wanted to see the rest of this dream . . . All of a sudden, she felt something cold and hard under her bottom when she awoke just as he was pushing her pajama pants down to her ankles and placing her on the pot.

"Zack?" Lainie knew that if she opened her eyes, she would wake up, and she didn't want to wake up, so she sat there with her eyes carefully shut.

He had one hand steadying her at her shoulder. "It's me, baby. Just tinkle for me and then you can go back to sleep."

Lainie knew she should be asking more questions, but somehow, she was just too darned tired to do it. She did what she needed to do entirely on autopilot but when she would have wandered back into bed, Zack headed her off, wrapping a blanket around her and lifting her into his arms. Lainie's head fell onto the rough fabric at his shoulder where it belonged, and just before she drifted back to sleep, she wiggled a little until his strong, sure arms closed more tightly around her. "Zack?" She could feel the easy rhythm of his steps, even with the added weight of her boneless body.

"Yes, hon?"

In her little-girl-asleep voice, she asked, "What are you doing?"

Zack shook his head in wonder. That was it. She didn't throw a fit, hell, she barely even woke up. Her submissive behavior only cemented his opinion that he was doing the exactly right thing for her – hell, for both of them. Lord knows he wouldn't get any relaxing done if he spent the weekend worrying about his woman. "I'm kidnapping you," he explained quietly, not wanting her to truly wake up enough to start asking questions as he gently deposited her into the passenger's seat of his big Grand Cherokee, then fastened the seatbelt and went around to the driver's side just in time to hear her sleepy reply.

"Oh. Ok." And she settled back into sleep without another word.

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Chapter 2 - R and R
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Major Zack Hardy and Elaine “Lainie” Stewart had been dating for more than a year and a half. Although with most couples one would expect to see the usual movement towards engagement and marriage, the same was not true for them. They were having much too much fun with each other to spoil it with the formalities. Each was a survivor of if not a nasty, then at least an extremely painful divorce, and neither was in a hurry to step into that particular fire again.

Zack’s much too eager sister had introduced him to her co-worker in the middle of a move she’d rounded people up to help with. He came up from Warner-Robbins AFB to Knoxville for a visit. Much to Charlotte’s delight, the two seemed to hit it off, spending most of the evening chatting together.

Several days later, Zack had called and asked Lainie out to dinner, and so the rather odd pairing had begun and continued to this very day, when Zack pulled the Jeep into the dirt driveway of the Hardy family’s remote cabin on the beach. Lainie had opened an eye – just one, cautiously – about a half an hour ago, and was awake enough that once he’d slipped a pair of beat up old LL Bean clogs onto her bare tootsies, he let her walk into the house herself in favor of bringing in as much in the first trip as possible. He almost got it all.

Zack watched his woman as she moved slowly into the living room, grimacing as he took in her lack of energy, the dark circles down to her knees, and her generally run down demeanor. This weekend away from everything was just what they both needed, and he intended to see that she did nothing more strenuous than eating and sleeping . . . well, almost nothing more strenuous, anyway. A big, stupid grin settled over his face. That was okay. For what he had in mind, all she’d have to do was lie there. He’d gladly do all the work. He snorted quietly under his breath. As if she’d ever just tolerated sex. Not likely. Not his Lainie.

And she was his. She was no less his for the lack of a ring on her finger, or undying declarations of love between them. He wasn’t even sure that what they had could be confined or defined by that word; somehow it seemed too small to convey the depth of their feelings and connection. Within weeks of meeting, they were completing each other’s sentences. Their intellects were high and neither felt the need to define for the other every polysyllabic word used in the course of a conversation. They made each other laugh, and they made each other very, very, very hot. Almost unbearably so - every touch, every kiss between them was highly explosive.

They were an odd couple; Zack looked like a big bruiser – and he certainly had the

fighting prowess necessary to back up his size, if necessary. He was six-three if he was an inch, with fists the size of sledgehammers, legs like tree trunks and a big, muscled chest, but anyone who expected that he couldn't put a coherent sentence together was rudely awakened by a man who had skipped several grades in school and had a Mensa level IQ.

Since his looks meant absolutely nothing to him, he kept his unruly brown curls ruthlessly tamed in a quarter inch buzz cut. Sometimes, he went completely bald. The military told him what to wear, and that was the way he liked it – blue went with blue, green with green, and cammie with cammie. The idea of having to coordinate colors was enough to send his masculine sensibilities into a tailspin.

He had a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and was a retread that had worked his way through college and gone from a Staff Sergeant who worked on planes to a Second Lt. who helped fly them. Zack was a man in control of his life and his career. He rarely experienced a moment of self-doubt, and exuded an air of self-confidence that some mistook for arrogance. Those were the people he could do without.

In some ways, they were very alike, Lainie and Zack, especially when it came to their careers. They were both workaholics, and Zack was always amazed that he had to put his foot down with Lainie or she'd literally work herself into the hospital. He knew this from personal experience, sitting by her side as she lay paper-white in a hospital bed, practically dead of pneumonia.

Now he backed up his edicts to her about taking care of herself with actions – like kidnapping her for the weekend. If she kept pushing him, he was going to back them up on her bare backside.

Lainie loved her job as a district manager for a major retail chain of bookstores at least as much as he loved the military. Her degree in Library Sciences and a lifelong love of books got her started in the field, but it was her ability to get the more impossible jobs done that had gotten her where she was, having moved up the ranks from cashier into management easily.

Unlike most women, Lainie's looks were about as important to her as Zack's were to him, although color coordination didn't give her an apoplectic fit like it did Zack. She knew she was not gorgeous, and indeed had to work harder than she was frankly willing to just to pass for pretty.

Her best feature was her long, curly sable-colored hair, and it was only one of two features she might be considered vain about, her big, clear hazel eyes being the second. She disdained makeup, barely remembering foundation half of the time, wore pretty clothes because she liked them, but would have much preferred to be able to do her job in jeans, Reeboks, and a comfortable old sweatshirt. And high heels, as far as she was concerned, were the work of the devil. A male devil that designed them but never had to wear them. Despite the fact that, at five-five, she could have used some added height, especially when she went nose to nose with Zack about something, she wore either unremarkable leather flats or sneakers year round.

It was late morning, and, although she had slept almost all of the way, they were both exhausted after the three-hour drive. Zack stowed their suitcases, taking Lainie's out of her hand just when she was going to go store her clothes neatly in the big oak dresser in the master bedroom. She tsked at him, but he ignored her as usual, returning to cup her face in his big tanned hands.

"Hungry, babygirl?" He'd meant the comment to be light, but her nearness and sweet, complete availability had his already stiffened member swelling to uncomfortable proportions, making the question come out hoarse.

It was a measure of just how exhausted she was that she made no comment on his unintentional double-entendre. Instead, she leaned her forehead against his broad chest and sighed contentedly when two arms wrapped themselves protectively around her. Lainie snuggled closer, holding him tight and burrowing her face against the warm and surprisingly welcoming rock hard muscles. "No, I'm not hungry," she answered in that high-pitched, tired voice that meant that she'd had just about all she could take of the world.

As a precaution, and Lord knew when it came to her he was a cautious man, Zack felt her forehead with his lips, and was relieved to find her skin cool and dry. So he bent and matter-of-factly lifted her into his arms for the second time that morning, carrying her the few steps to the bed to lay her down on the comforter and begin to unbutton her blouse. Having long since lost any feelings of embarrassment about letting him undress her – since Zack refused to tolerate such a thing anyway – Lainie lay back docilely as he quickly divested her of her clothes, right down to her soft, pink skin. She paid no attention to where he put her clothing, knowing that he was too much of a Felix Unger to tolerate much of a mess. Hell, he was neater than she was by a long shot!

Zack appeared with a glass of cold water; he always seemed to know exactly what she needed without even having to ask. Lainie knew it would be water because he was trying – unsuccessfully – to wean her off of Diet Coke. She drained the glass gratefully, and he put it on the nightstand beside her, helping her lay back down and covering her with the blankets. Zack brushed the waves of soft brown hair back from her sleepy eyes. "Jeez, sweetheart, you look so tired!" He leaned forward and kissed her lips softly. "You go to sleep, now, hon, and I'll be in a little later."

He tried to get up, but Lainie put a delicate hand on his wrist and Zack turned back to her immediately. Her touch was deliberately light; she was not trying to hold him there because she had long since recognized the fact that it was highly unlikely that she would ever be able to use physical force to impose her will on him. "Stay with me." Again in that heartbreakingly young voice that proved just how exhausted she was.

Zack gently tucked her hand beneath the covers again and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "No, baby. If I get in bed with you now, you know I'll be on you and in you in a heartbeat. You need to sleep and recover a little."

Lainie frowned unhappily and reached after him as he walked away from her. He turned around just as she was throwing the covers back, her legs already over the side of the bed and her feet inches from the floor, obviously ready to run after him and drag him

back to her.

Stubborn wench, he thought, barely fighting back a smile at her tenacity. Calmly, in his low-pitched “command-voice”, he warned, “Lainie Marie, if those beautiful feet touch the floor for any reason except for you to go to the bathroom tonight I will take you over my knee and give you a good, hard spanking. I can guarantee you’ll be crying yourself to sleep afterwards.”

The bare feet in question were hastily pulled back into bed as she glared tiredly at him from under the covers, her lips pursed tightly in displeasure at the unflinching imposition of his will. She knew that this man did not make idle threats, and that, some day soon, she might push him too far and would find herself face down over his lap, getting what Lainie knew for sure would be an extremely unpleasant, painful spanking.

He listened to her huff and puff angrily as she turned on her side away from him, finding a comfortable spot in the big king-sized bed. “Sleep,” he ordered, closing the door behind him and shaking his head with a wry smile. What a handful that woman was!

When Lainie awoke, she rolled onto her back and indulged in a full body stretch, yawning and growling low. Eyes still closed, she felt rather than saw the covers lift, and the side of the bed depressed. In seconds, her vision was filled with Zack’s craggy, masculine face as he parted her legs gently and pressed himself into her in one swift motion. The fit was tight, as always, a little tighter than usual because there had been no foreplay, but his inexorable invasion set off intimate fires in every pressured inch of her most private area as she submitted to his claim and consciously relaxed to welcome him into her body.

Zack’s eyes closed for a second and his big body shuddered at the bliss of being buried deep within her moist heat. His voice was a gravelly bass when he asked, “Feeling better?”

Lainie raised her face for his kiss, rubbing her hands teasingly up his arms to settle on his shoulders. “I was better as soon as you crawled into bed with me, sweetie.” She tilted and lifted her hips slightly, deliberately deepening their contact and making him draw a quick breath.

Zack literally couldn’t control the moan that escaped his lips in a long hiss. She was that damned good. His body had a mind of its own when it came to her, as it had with no other. “Mmmm, God, Lainie, I don’t know if I can – “

Her fingers caressed the fine hairs at the back of his neck, tickling him gently, then delved into what there was of his bristly hair as she pulled his mouth down to hers. “Don’t worry about me.” She felt him begin to move, slowly, reluctantly, and knew that he was trying to hold back for her sake. Zack was scrupulous about making sure she enjoyed their lovemaking as much – she sometimes thought more – than he did.

Lainie knew he just needed a little encouragement, and was only too happy to provide it, bringing her slim legs up to wrap around his hips as her tongue dueled with his. Her hands framed his face, and then moved down her own body, cupping her almost too-full

breasts to offer the tightly peaked nipples to his eager mouth. Suckling at her breasts made him drive into her faster and faster as he grasped the creamy rounded globes in his callused hands, worrying the lonely nipple with his strong, sun-browned fingers. Lainie arched her back, presenting those wonderful charms to him even more prominently. Despite his fast approaching end, Zack managed a tight smile. She was so responsive to his every move. Already she was slick where he plunged; her body responding naturally to its mate and easing the way for his possession.

When he came, Zack groaned long and low, nipping at the swollen bud in his mouth, making her whimper softly. Lainie held him close, her small hands stroking up and down the broad, tanned back as he slammed into her hard in the throes of the ultimate pleasure.

In the end, he collapsed on top of her for a second, then tried to get up. As expected, she tried to keep him there by locking her arms and legs around him, though she knew there was no hope. It had become a routine with them. Zack worried about the differences in their sizes – he dwarfed her five foot five, hundred and whatever pounds in bed and out, and didn't want to crush her. Lainie absolutely loved having his weight on her, whether they were making love or not, and had told him in no uncertain terms that if she had a hard time breathing or he was hurting her, she'd scream bloody murder. He had no doubts she'd do exactly that.

Still, when it came to her comfort and health, he felt he knew best and always moved off of her a little, disentangling himself as carefully as possible as she actively resisted letting him go, even if it was just a few inches away. Out came that stern tone of voice he used when he wasn't going to have any more of her nonsense. "Lainie Marie, let me go."

A huge pouting sigh escaped her pursed lips as she obeyed him reluctantly, but he only moved a little to her right, then pulled her back into his arms, holding her there effortlessly with his big hands splayed at her lower back.

Experimentally, he threatened as he nuzzled her neck, "You know, puddin', some day you're going to be just a little too bratty to me and I really am going to spank your delicious little bottom."

A fissure of excitement danced along her spine where his hand lay mere inches from its possible target. She had been thinking almost exactly that just before she went to sleep! Elaine had never mentioned anything to him about her love of spanking, and honestly wasn't certain how to broach the subject, or even whether or not she wanted to get into that type of relationship with Zack. She instinctively knew that if he spanked her once, he would never hesitate to do it in the future. And God forbid he should find out how much the idea turned her on . . . she'd never sit down comfortably again!

Afraid her eyes might give her away, she rolled over, facing away from him. His hard arm around her middle didn't allow her to go very far, but at least she'd have a modicum of leeway. Hopefully he wouldn't be able to read much into her tone of voice. And she could be a pretty good actress, if need be. "Oh, I'm really scared now," she simpered sarcastically.

Zack plastered his body up against her back, and she could feel that he was fully aroused again. Hmmmmmm. The hand around her middle snaked its way unerringly down to cup her womanhood possessively, as his free hand arranged her top leg up and back some, so that it rested on his thigh, exposing her intimate secrets to the insistent probing of thick, callused fingers.

Lainie sucked in her breath then emitted in a high-pitched keen as the broad, roughened tip of his middle finger found her most sensitive spot and rubbed it with a mixture of their love juices; the rest of his hand held her nether lips apart, exposing that little bundle of nerves to his relentless, loving attentions.

Zack's free hand was far from idle as it cupped and milked her breasts firmly, tweaking each nipple just hard enough to make her writhe while his lips and tongue strolled leisurely up and down the curve of her neck where her familiar sexy perfume mixed with her own scent to drive him absolutely wild.

Fully erect again, as always around her, Zack pressed himself inside her almost as an afterthought, but Lainie couldn't have stopped him even if she'd wanted to. He knew he would come again in a while, but this time – these next several times, if he knew his Lainie – would be for her. Zack knew she loved him to be inside her, stretching her, filling her with himself. For several long moments, he expertly read every response and kept her pleased but deliberately teased, bringing her close but not allowing her to go over the edge. His control of her release intensified the experience for both of them; he adored her responsiveness to his every touch, every kiss.

A rough command was whispered into her ear. "Put your hands on me."

Although she resisted for a few long seconds, writhing and wiggling against his edict and the storm of pleasure he was creating with his lips and hands that would multiply exponentially when she did as she was told, Zack waited her out. Those two little hands finally reached back behind her to settle on his body wherever they landed, and she was caught, immobilized by his weight and her vulnerable position, open to him, back arched to present her breasts to their best advantage, her mound open and sopping wet and penetrated by him, being pleased relentlessly, inexorably by those rough, ruthless fingers as his hard, unyielding cock buried itself deep inside her.

As he knew would happen, it all became too much for her – the pleasure of his hands, the helplessness of her position, almost all of her pleasure centers being stimulated at once. Zack could feel the orgasm building within her and increased the pistoning rhythm of his thick, hard member in and out of her slick passage. One set of fingers pulled a little harder at her nipple, twisting more than before, making it hurt just a little as he knew she liked, while the other set of fingers flicked that vulnerable, swollen, aching little bud between her legs until it burst inside her and she bucked violently within the confines of his arms; the moaning and crying and writhing was a part of a tremendously precious gift to him – his mastery of her complete, unadulterated pleasure.

His lips at her ear told her how beautiful she was and how hot she made him as he held

her fast and forced her to ride it out; made her ride him out, not releasing her until he had wrung three more orgasms from her ultimately exhausted body, taking her finally for his own pleasure just as she was convulsing for the last time with her own completion.

They lay there, limp and breathing heavily for the longest time, neither interested in moving an iota – neither sure they could move, even if they had wanted to. Finally, the hand that had been teasing her womanhood strolled up to lay claim to her lower belly as warm lips pressed to the sweaty back of her neck.

Lainie turned slowly onto her back, nipples stiffly peaked as her body still clenched in the rhythmic aftermath of their loving. She could feel every cell she owned, and just the air itself was seemed too rough on her swollen tips and pussy.

Zack reached out and blindly hauled her against his side; her head automatically fit onto his hard, hairy left pec as he lazily kissed the top of her head. “Go to sleep,” he ordered, and that was about as coherent as he could get at this point. Sex with Lainie drove every intelligent thought from his usually calm, unemotional head, and he became almost animalistic – possessive, jealous . . . sexually overheated. Those were not the usual words anyone would come up with to describe him, except when he was around her. Although he was a very sexual man, he kept that part of himself under ruthless control. Lainie destroyed that control merely by existing within a hundred mile radius of him. He lost himself in her, every time.

“But – “

“Lainie.” Without thinking, just reacting automatically, he smacked his hand down hard on her bare butt. “Do as you’re told, for once.”

“Ow!” she squealed. Cripes, that hurt! She hated to hear him say her name that way, as if warning her that she was inches away from a spanking that she knew she’d probably never get. And, hell, if he was going to spank her that hard, she wasn’t less and less sure she really wanted him to spank her. Ouch!

But being cuddled next to his big warm body, completely sated and exhausted, she obeyed him more by default than action, and was asleep within minutes.

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Chapter 3 - The Introduction
by Carolyn Faulkner

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Lainie Stewart bent down slowly to reach under the huge box of books and heft it up to her waist while her thirty-seven year old back gave her a sharp reminder to lift with her legs. As she hugged the heavy box to her, she took a quick look around the floor of the van, noting that this was probably going to be the last load.

Suddenly, the weight in her arms disappeared and she uttered a startled cry, turning back around to stare someone straight in the chest. The broad, muscular, probably hairy chest at that. And uniformed, to boot. Looking up, she met the eyes of a man who could easily have been on an Air Force recruitment poster; he wasn't classically gorgeous, but he had those dangerous, rough hewn warrior features that would draw women to sign away four or six years of their lives in hopes of meeting someone just like him.

He was almost a foot taller than her five-five, with a head of bristly dark stubble. His face was calm and unlined, but there was a remote watchfulness in his eyes that made her somewhat wary. Lainie thought he might be a few years younger than she was chronologically, but those eyes made him seem world-weary and at least a decade older.

Momentarily disconcerted, she mumbled a patent "thank you" and automatically moved away from him, shutting the side door and walking towards the back. The silent stranger jumped agilely down, shifted the box, and offered his hand, but she pretended she didn't see it and jumped out on her own. She heard him shut the hatch door behind her so Lainie took the opportunity to walk ahead of him into the house.

"Zack!" Charlotte greeted the man with open arms, hugging him close to her and rocking back and forth. Everyone who had been drafted into helping Charlotte and her family move into their gorgeous new home began to drift into the kitchen to see what the commotion was about – and to meet her fabled older brother. Everyone, that is, except for Lainie, who was surreptitiously moving towards the back of the pack and hopefully a clean getaway to a room where she could avoid meeting him like the plague.

But the introductions had already started when she heard her name being taken in vain just seconds before she would have been out of sight and out of mind – safe.

"And the one who's trying desperately to sneak away over there by the hall is my boss, Lainie Stewart."

For the benefit of those around her, she rolled her eyes dramatically at having been caught in the act of trying to disappear, snapping her fingers and muttering sotto voce,

“Damn! Almost made it!” When she rounded to face the two of them, her smile was rueful and broad.

“This is my brother, Zack.” Charlotte introduced proudly.

Although she would have given nearly anything to stay where she was, Lainie forced herself forward to shake hands with the newcomer, acknowledging confidently, “Major Hardy.”

His handshake was perfect – like the rest of him, apparently – neither too long nor too hard, proving that although he was a big bruiser he was well aware of his own strength.

There were chuckles behind her and someone teased, “Of course she knows his rank . . . “

Someone else added, “Lainie knows everything.”

When she turned back to join the crowd, she commented wryly, “Please bow a little lower when you say that.” Her comment elicited the sniggers and giggles she wanted, although she was not allowed to just melt into the crowd, as she would have preferred.

A voice she recognized as Ashley’s piped up with, “Yeah but how did she know what his rank was?”

Lainie rolled her eyes from safely behind several people. “Hello, Ash – former military wife . . . !”

“But what ranks are what?”

Her long-suffering sigh had the officer in question teasing with a smile, “Yeah, I’ve always wondered how do you tell?”

“One gold bar – ‘butter bar’ – second louey,” she recited as if she were repeating a catechism. “One silver bar – first lieutenant. Two silver bars – railroad tracks – Captain, O-3. Gold oak leaves, Major. Silver oak leaves, Lieutenant Colonel. Eagles – O-6 – full-bird Colonel. Anything above that is a star – a General.”

Her response got her a hand from the crowd, as well as Zack the Sexy. Lainie bowed low, then polished her fingernails on the non-existent lapel of her t-shirt.

After a few minutes, the crowd dispersed, and Lainie was able to make her escape unnoticed. The initial moving had been done and the only thing left was the putting away, which Charlotte and her family would accomplish on their own. From the screened porch, she could hear her friend ordering pizzas for the hungry crew, and the adult beverages were already flowing, but Lainie was very content where she was, curled up on a comfortable lounge chair breathing the clean early evening air, well away from the crowd.

No one who knew her could ever be convinced of the fact, but she was a quiet, solitary

person when she didn't have to be the one that everyone came to with a problem. After her disastrous marriage, she withdrew from personal contact for a very long time; work became her only outlet, which was why she was as close to her employees as she was. Eventually, she was no longer able to remain remote, and found she no longer wanted to be completely distanced from people. As she spent seventy to eighty hours a week with them, the people she worked with were a natural to turn to – she already really liked all of them and, luckily, they seemed to like her.

But, despite the solid friendships that developed, there were no romantic involvements whatsoever, not that she would ever look for them at work. Charlotte had had some success in pairing people up with various friends – several marriages had resulted which had only served to bolster the budding yenta's ego. Although they had become fast friends, Lainie had warned Charlotte not to even consider trying to set her up with anyone. Charlotte had demurred but Lainie knew that she was merely biding her time.

She had an awful feeling that if she could have gotten Zack to hold an apple in his mouth, Charlotte would have presented him to her trussed up on a silver platter instead of casually introducing him as she had.

A deep voice startled her out of her reverie and the amusing picture of Zack Hardy laid out on a platter like a Sunday roast. "May I intrude?"

It was the roast himself. Lainie cocked an eyebrow. "Be my guest. I was just going to wade back into the fray, but I needed a few minutes to recoup."

Zack stepped down into the room and deliberately chose the comfortable-looking seat next to hers, sinking down into it and crossing his now sneakered foot over his denim-clad knee with a tired sigh. "Me, too. They're an –" he had to search for a word that wouldn't sound insulting – "energetic bunch." He took a deep swallow of the Mountain Dew he'd brought with him, and she started to feel faint while she watched him covertly – damn, he wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, but every female nerve she owned rose to attention and saluted his unapologetic masculinity. When you ooze testosterone, you don't have to be an Adonis.

Lainie's smile lit her face from within at his comment. "Ooooooooooh. How polite!! I can certainly think of a lot of choice words with which to describe that group, and 'energetic' is among the most courteous," she chuckled. Crap, crap, crap! He was just as attractive to her out of uniform as he had been in his blues. Son of a gun! The worn denim of his faded jeans clung to every muscular curve, and the plain, sky blue t-shirt only served to emphasize the breadth of his chest. Short-sleeved, it left most of his tanned, bulging arms bare for any appreciative female admirers, which would pretty much be 100 percent of the female population of the world, including his current audience of one.

Lainie snapped her jaw shut, afraid the drool would form an unsightly puddle at her feet. Drawing a steadying breath, she consciously relaxed herself back into her chair, trying with limited success to gather her wits about her and appear less like an infatuated schoolgirl and more like the mature woman she was. Heck, she was probably close to a decade older than he was, but somehow, she felt like she was twelve again

and he was David Cassidy . . . perish the thought! David Cassidy had never looked so good!

She did not feel obligated to chatter at him. After all, he had interrupted her, not the other way around.

Zack watched her casually out of the corner of his eye. She was not babbling at him, indeed he almost felt like an unwelcome intrusion on her solitude. He was inclined to be relatively quiet himself, so he let his head drop back and rest on the thick cushion of the chair. Thankfully, his peripheral vision was excellent, and he kept a casual eye on his new acquaintance.

So this was the woman that Charlotte had quietly raved about. He had to admit, his curiosity had been piqued, but then, he had been planning to come up and help Char with the move anyway. She had not so subtly hinted that, if he did, he would probably have the opportunity to meet her boss.

Lainie Stewart was everything his sister had promised, and more. She wasn't a beauty, but then Zack had his own standards where that was concerned. She was older than he was, he knew, by a margin that he considered to be negligible – seven or so years. Zack knew that she had been married before – mostly unhappily, and that she was divorced, and, if his sister wasn't overstating the situation, living a life that was considerably less exciting than that of a cloistered nun.

Zack didn't tend to live the high-life much himself. He didn't frequent bars, or for that matter, drink very much, even on special occasions. Work was extremely important to him, and he enjoyed his career as an Air Force navigator immensely. He hadn't been able to become a pilot because of depth perception problems, but had jumped at the chance to become a navigator. He loved airplanes – any airplane – and he didn't much care what he was doing on them as long as it wasn't jumping out of them.

If he had to describe himself, he would say that he was a homebody – on the infrequent times he was actually not working, he liked to be there. Zack had been able to pick up a small cape-style house in a small, quiet town near the Base, and he found he liked owning the place where he lived – he set the rules, not the Air Force, or some unseen landlord. He puttered outside and in, fixing this and that, painting a room at a time until every room had a fresh coat. When he'd finally gotten it set up the way he wanted it, and all of the little things sorted out, he spent his days off there quietly and comfortably.

He was a young Major, having skipped a grade in grammar school and another grade in high school. He'd graduated at the ripe old age of sixteen and his parents had signed him into the service at his incessant goading. Zack had gone into the Air Force as an Airman Basic because, despite his straight A's; his family had a lot of love but absolutely no money. But he had never lost sight of what he wanted to do: fly airplanes. While working full time as an airplane mechanic and sending an allotment back home to help out the family, he'd gone to night school to earn his degree and appointment to OTS, after which he flew on the planes he had previously been fixing. Granted, he wasn't piloting them as he'd wanted, but he'd take what he could get.

In between work and school and more work and more school, he'd gotten himself married to a woman who started out as one person but ended up to be entirely different by the time they got around to divorcing. She tried to take him for everything she could, although they were married for less than a year – Heather wanted it all: alimony and a piece of his military retirement, and all after she'd screwed most of the men on the Base because, according to her, he was never home. No way was he going to let that happen.

His body tensed reflexively when he thought of Heather, and Zack had to work to relax again. He turned his head, letting his eyes slide over her. Lainie's head was back, eyes closed, her slender neck flexed, arms crossed over a belly that was more rounded than current female beauty standards dictated, but then he'd never wanted to make love to a stick. Zack's personal tastes in woman leaned much more towards the Rubenesque than Twiggy-esque. Her breathing was slow and steady, and she looked completely relaxed.

Hell, he realized, she looked asleep!

When he spoke, his voice was low and slow. "You know, Char really loves you."

She never opened her eyes or moved a muscle. "And I really love Charlotte."

"She's been talking you up pretty good."

That got a big, big grin, but that was the only physical response. "Lies. All lies."

Zack snorted at her self-deprecating comment. "She says you're a good cook, that you work too much, and that you're lonely."

It was Lainie's turn to snort. "That's an interesting description of me."

"But accurate?"

A shoulder shrug and a pause. "Two outta three ain't bad." One hazel eye opened as she grinned at him, and threatened, "Be happy I don't sing it at you. Be very happy."

He smiled, and her heart stopped. This man was dangerous, with a capital DANGEROUS. "I'll count my blessings."

The eye fluttered closed again.

"Which two?"

She didn't try to pretend she didn't know what he meant. "The first two."

"But not the third?" he prodded persistently.

This time, both of those soulful eyes opened and fairly glared at him. "Since when are Air Force navigators shrinks?"

Another smile, another cardiac arrest. At this rate, she was going to be dead within the next few minutes. “How do you know what I do?”

Lainie relaxed again, closing her eyes to try to regain some of the tranquility she’d had before he came in and rudely disrupted her heart rhythm. “Your sister’s been doing a pretty good selling job on you, too.”

“Ahhhh.”

Although she really didn’t know him well enough to needle him, she couldn’t stop herself from saying, “Yeah, she kinda took the ‘swampland in Florida’ approach.”

When he laughed out loud, she knew, she just knew, that this man was going to touch her in a way she hadn’t allowed anyone to touch her in a very, very long time – and not just physically, either. “I get it. Hard sell, all the way, huh?”

“You ain’t kiddin’. Your sister’s like a steamroller when she gets her teeth into something.” Well, at least she was looking at him for a change, Zack realized. “She decided all on her own that I was ‘lonely’, and she’s been throwing you at me ever since.” That soft, wry grin was terribly endearing. “I’ve always managed to duck, until today.”

Another chuckle melted her just that much further. “Yeah, I have no idea where she would have gotten that stubbornness from . . .” Zack looked around innocently, but couldn’t quite achieve the necessary effect.

“Yeah, right. And I suppose you’re just a big ole’ affable pussycat.”

Zack stretched and scratched his stomach like he had fleas. “Yep. That’s me, easygoing, non-threatening sweetheart of a guy that I am.”

Lainie snorted. “Sorry. I’ve only known you for ten minutes and even I can smell the bullshit in that statement.”

He looked sufficiently stricken. “Me?”

“I never met an officer who wasn’t the take-charge type. You’d have to be. How can you sign up to lead men into battle and be an indecisive wimp?”

“You can’t,” Zack agreed.

“I thought as much.” Lainie sat back again, satisfied at her assessment of the man next to her. “Besides, all Charlotte would have had to do to get me interested in you was show me a picture of you in uniform.”

“Oh, really?”

“Ohhhhhhhh yyyeeaaaaahhh. Uniforms are unbearably . . .” she was going to say sexy, but decided against going there with him, “intriguing.”

Zack laugh. "Intriguing? I always thought women thought they were sexy."

Her glare seared him. "I was trying to be decorous," she chided.

"Why start now?" he teased, which earned him a hearty raspberry. "That was an articulate rebuttal."

Lainie sighed in exasperation, then pointedly ignored him. "BDUs."

"BDUs?"

"Yeah. They're unbearably sexy."

"They are, huh?"

She nodded.

His deep, sexy voice floated into her ear with a gentle threat. "I'll have to remember that."

Silence descended for several minutes, but it was surprisingly comfortable.

"So. When are we going out?"

Lainie slowly sat upright in her chair and turned to face him. "We're not. You're only asking me out because of your sense of obligation to your sister. I hereby relieve you of that obligation."

"Thank you," he said gravely, barely suppressing a smile as he watched her settle back down. "So. When are we going out?"

This time he only got an aggravated clearing of her throat, so he continued. "I'm here for ten days or so, but I wanna spend some time with Char and the family. How does Saturday night sound?"

"You know, you're just like your sister."

"Thank you," came the smug reply.

"That was not a compliment."

"Sure it was."

"Believe me, it wasn't." Trying to avoid an uncomfortable confrontation, because she did not intend to go out with this man, regardless of her body's instantaneous attraction to him, Lainie got up and started towards the kitchen.

"Is seven okay to pick you up?"

She stopped in her tracks, angling just her head back to glare at him. “You don’t take ‘no’ for an answer very well, do you?”

An unrepentant grin spread over his face. “I don’t take ‘no’ for an answer much at all.”

Lainie frowned, thinking she essentially was obligated to at least one date with the tyrant so that she could get Charlotte off her back once and for all.

“I’ll even wear my uniform, if you like – but it’ll have to be my blues because I left my cammies at home.”

“Yeah, seven is all right, I guess.”

It was the least enthusiastic, least gracious acceptance of a date he’d ever experience. The lady needed to be taught some manners! “I’ll pick you up.”

“I’d rather take my own car.”

“I’ll pick you up,” he said again, and Lainie noticed that “command tone” creeping into his voice.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Ok. What are we doing so I’ll know how to dress?”

“Dinner, maybe a movie?”

Again with a dismissive shrug of her shoulders. “Fine. See you then.”

Soulmates

Chapter 4 - The Courtship of Charlotte's Brother

by Carolyn Faulkner

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Lainie stood in the middle of a gargantuan pile of clothes, trying to decide what to wear for their date. If she didn't decide quickly she was going to end up going in her pretty pink bra and panties set. She realized ruefully that Zack probably wouldn't mind that idea, but as far as she was concerned, it was not an option.

There was a loud rap on the door just as she had settled on a chocolate velour skirt that was stamped with a cream paisley print and a fluffy cream cashmere sweater that was a little too clingy, really, but it would have to do. Damn the man for being exactly on time! She thought as she hurriedly pulled the sweater down over her too generous breasts and slightly rounded tummy.

Zack was looking as mouth-watering and self-contained as ever in a sport coat, dress shirt and dress slacks. Lainie wished she'd brought a drool towel with her, but it was too late now; the puddle was already deepening at her feet. What the hell was it about this guy, anyway? He was no George Clooney, but somehow she found him almost unbelievably sexy! A little belatedly, she rolled her lolling tongue back into her mouth and stepped aside. "C'mon in."

Zack stepped inside, turning to press a soft peck on her cheek.

Lainie couldn't prevent herself from rubbing that tingling spot. "What was that for?"

"Oh, for putting up with my sister's machinations in trying to get us together."

She laughed. "She is persistent; I'll say that for her." Lainie motioned to a big, comfortable recliner. "Please, sit. I'm pretty much ready. Just give me a sec to brush my teeth and we'll go"

Just as she walked into the bathroom, her big longhaired marmalade brushed past her leg, carrying his favorite prey in his mouth. Although she made a lunge for him, she missed badly and the overly friendly cat jumped up on Zack, dropping a packaged tampon into his lap and waiting for the lavish praise he knew was his due.

It was unusual for such a big man to giggle, but Zack did. He stroked the preening cat while examining the "dead" tampon.

Although she was far from a prude, Lainie was having a very hard time not blushing. "Oh my God! I must've forgotten to shut the door to the cabinet! Max thinks that that's his private game preserve."

Zack was still chuckling as he handed it back to her. "The mighty tampon hunter, huh?" Max puffed his chest out with pride at his kill as Zack continued to pet him.

"How embarrassing! That's right up there with the time my last dog greeted my guests at the door with a pair of my underwear in her mouth!"

She finally got to brush her teeth, then soon found herself bundled carefully into his SUV. His manners were impeccable, even old fashioned, and, despite her feminist tendencies, Lainie realized that she could get used to being treated that way.

After folding his impressive bulk behind the steering wheel, he turned his intense concentration on her. "So, where's a good place for dinner?"

They settled on a small down-home barbecue restaurant that he hadn't been too before. The waitress took their orders and left, as a somewhat uncomfortable silence descended.

Lainie cleared her throat. "So, this should get Charlotte off our backs, anyway."

Zack's slow smile was a tad bit wolfish. "Yes, or she could actually be right and this will be only the first date of many."

She had not allowed herself to explore that very tempting possibility. "So. You're a navigator."

The endearingly boyish grin deepened, making him appear only somewhat less threatening. "Yeeeeeees."

"Does that mean that when you're flying an F-15 and you can't find where you need to go, you're the one who has to stop and get directions?"

Zack burst out laughing. "Not quite. If we have to stop and get directions in the first place then I haven't done my job very well."

"And I bet you're as intolerant of that as I am."

She had him pegged all right.

They fell into an easy, funny conversation that lasted through the meal, until Lainie leaned back and sighed contentedly. The attentive waitress appeared again, always at Zack's elbow. "Anyone for dessert?" she asked, her eyes devouring Zack like he was a pint of Ben and Jerry's and she was the only girl in town with a spoon.

Zack raised an eyebrow at Lainie. "Split a dessert with me?"

Lainie groaned, patting her bursting stomach. "No, I definitely don't need it."

But Zack was not going to be denied. "Sure you do. You're skin and bones. How about

we split an apple crisp?"

Apple crisp was one of her favorites. She bit her lip, weakening. Skin and bones my foot! She thought. Her doctor was always after her to lose at least ten pounds, preferably twenty.

Zack took the choice away from her, handing the dessert menu back to their server. "One apple crisp, two spoons, please, Ma'am."

A groan drifted to his ears from the other side of the table. "You're going to have to roll me out of this place!" She gave him the evil eye. "And you are a bad influence! I need dessert like I need another hole in my head."

Zack cleared his throat and made a big production out of restraining himself, while Lainie brandished a fork at him, promising dire consequences if he uttered a peep.

But Zack couldn't resist pushing her fork-wielding hand away from him, saying, "Now, now. No forking in public."

"Oh, God!" Impulsively, Lainie reached over and smacked his hand sharply. "That was horrible!"

A look of utter innocence descended over his face. "Uh-oh, I think it's time to leave . . ."

If Lainie had rolled her eyes any further around they would have fallen out of her head. In self-defense, she grabbed a dinner knife. "Be knife to me, or else."

"Oh, I don't want to hear it from you then!"

They punned their way through the rest of the dinner and talked easily until the movie began. Zack kept to himself throughout it, except to hand her a hankie when the heroine was close to death. He didn't try to cop a feel, and he didn't even lay his arm behind her head along the top of her seat. He was the perfect gentleman, dammit!

Zack left her at her door with a swift, hard kiss, even though she invited him in for coffee. "I've gotta flight at oh-dark-thirty, or I'd stay."

Lainie grinned. "'Oh-dark-thirty', huh?"

"Yeah, like oh-four-hundred or so."

A shudder ran through her. "Doesn't bear thinking of."

He did end up coming in, but just for a second so that they could exchange phone numbers and email addresses, then he planted another hard, hot kiss on her lips and left with ill-concealed reluctance.

The next morning she found a bouquet of virtual roses in her email box, along with a nice note:

I really enjoyed myself last night. Maybe we can do it again some time,... like next weekend?

Zack

Lainie chuckled. There was nothing remotely shy or reticent about that man!

When she arrived home late that night, the real thing was sitting on her stoop, as well as about eight more emails in her inbox, each one asking her out again. When she signed into Messenger he was there, as she'd hoped, and they chatted for a while. Zack prodded her for an answer about when he would see her again, and while she was perseverating about whether or not it would be a good idea to do that, he was already onto their second date, and mentioning that he wanted her to come down to the Base sometime.

Jeez, the man was a bulldozer in persona!

When she mentioned that she was going to sign off and crawl into bed, one of his last lines was, "So, when is the best time for me to pick you up Saturday night? I need some fashion advice and I figured we could hit a mall after supper."

She typed back, "You missed your calling. You should be a used-car salesman! You're relentless! <g>"

"I know how to get what I want. J I'm relatively harmless as long as things go my way."

Lainie raised an eyebrow at the screen. "That's a stalker thing to say!"

"No," he countered. "It's a type-A thing to say, and you should know, Miss Type-A 2002."

"Guilty as charged," she admitted.

"Besides, how can you resist the idea of shopping, even if it isn't for you?"

Lainie used the raspberry emoticon back at him. "But I do like spending other people's money . . ."

"I have to buy a new suit to go to a friend's wedding," he revealed.

"Oh."

"To which I intend to drag you."

"Thanks, I think."

“You’re welcome! Is five too early?”

Lainie typed <sigh>. “You’re not going to let me off the hook, are you?”

“Now, why would I do that?”

“Because we’ve had our mercy date, and there’s no need to carry it any further.”

No response. Nothing.

Somewhat anxiously, she typed, “Zack?” then a few minutes later, “Are you there?”

When it became apparent that he was not going to respond, Lainie turned the computer off in a huff, crawling into bed just before the phone rang. Usually, she didn’t answer it that late, preferring to let the machine pick up. But, out of habit, she did. “Hello?”

An angry, raspy voice growled in her ear, “You are not now, nor have you ever been a mercy date.”

“Yes, dear.”

“I like you and I want to date you – forget all about that meddling Charlotte.”

“Yes, dear.” Her tone became progressively more patronizing. “Anything you say, dear.”

Zack was not amused in the least, but he knew how to deal with brattiness. “Lainie Marie, you watch your tone of voice with me.”

Her shoulders straightened involuntarily at the sharp words. “Yes, Zack,” she replied with considerably more sincerity. Sheesh, if she ever saw a “dom-in-the-rough”, it was him. He was already saying just the right things in just the right way.

“That’s better. I’ll see you Saturday at five.”

“Ok.”

“Good night, Lainie.”

“Good night, Zack.”

Lainie hung up the phone and rolled over to burrow under the covers, wondering if Zack knew what a talent he had for bringing naughty little girls back into line.

Soulmates

Chapter 5 - The First Time

by Carolyn Faulkner

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She and Zack became a regular item, although she stalled him physically, and knew that it was driving him crazy. He was never grabby or pushy about it, though, when she called a halt. He visited her and she visited him, and Lainie remembered one of the things she didn't like about the military was that they couldn't hold hands if they were outside and he was in uniform. She had always believed that such strictures were unnecessary, and she let him know it. He gave her an amused grin after she wound down from her rant, then pulled her into his living room and his arms.

Zack tried to keep it very light; they saw each other when they could, which was somewhat infrequently because it was a long distance relationship, but they both heartily enjoyed the time they spent together, laughing and needling each other mercilessly. They spent a lot of time on the phone, sent innumerable emails and IM'd each other every chance they could. He learned that she didn't much want to talk about herself, and, despite his tendency to want to throw her down on the nearest flat surface and ravish her, she seemed somehow removed from him, emotionally and physically, and that distance was becoming intolerable to him. Zack consciously moved very slowly in the physical department, but then he wasn't a hot-under-the-collar teenager, although you'd never have known it around her. He'd never met anyone quite like Lainie; she was smart and funny and she drove him crazy, just like Charlotte had warned him she would. Only Charlotte wouldn't have had any idea that the way she drove him crazy the most was physically.

He'd been almost neutered with her for a couple of dates, but then the good night kisses he'd been getting weren't getting him anywhere, and he was spending the evening in a haze of frustration. Lainie never seemed to be feeling the same volcanic blood-flow to her genitals that he got every time he laid eyes on her, but when they kissed, it was like he'd flipped a switch and she melted against him.

Gradually, Zack started to be more physically affectionate with her and she never objected to the possessive touch of his hand on her arm, or that he always reached across the table and held her hand when they weren't eating. The goodnight kisses became "hello" kisses and "let me help you out of the car" kisses, and "damn, you look so good I'm going out of my mind" kisses.

Lainie was drowning in the potent sexuality of Zack's intense attentions. She was a very sexual person, but she tried desperately to keep that part of her personality under wraps; she controlled it, not the other way around. But she'd forgotten how marvelous it was to feel calloused fingertips trailing down the nearly-virgin insides of her forearms . . . how wonderful it was when a man reaches across the small space in his car and

laces his thick fingers with yours, then takes his captive back to rest on a rock-hard upper-thigh.

Oh, man, this guy was good! Lainie groaned inwardly, leaning her head back against the headrest before it flopped there on its own. They were driving home from a night of junk food and bowling at a nearby alley, and Lainie was full of food and laughter and the luscious sight of his jean-clad butt as he got yet another strike. Normally competitive to the end, she didn't even care that her highest score was somewhere in the early sixties, and her low score was an eleven. It was the first time she'd ever bowled, and she had been more than willing to call herself a "Gutter Gussie".

Ever gallant, Zack had spent more than enough time cradling her pliant body with his solid one, his hand engulfing hers as he tried to show her the right way to roll the ball towards the pins. He'd even offered to have them put those inflated gutter guards up so she had more of a fighting chance. But, even losing very, very badly, Lainie was having too much fun laughing at herself and her pitiful attempts to master the sport.

When the stars aligned and she finally got a strike, he whooped and hollered like she'd just hit a Grand Slam in the World Series, swinging her around in the air as if she weighed no more than a rag doll and kissing the breath out of her. If this was going to be his reaction every time she knocked down all the pins, Lainie knew she was going to have to find a way to learn how to do that on a much more consistent basis.

He heard her yawn. "Tired?"

To his pleasant surprise, she snuggled deeper into her seat and closer to him. "Nope. Just pleasantly relaxed."

Later, as they cuddled on the couch, Zack wrapped his arms around her. Usually at about this point, she got fidgety and suggested that they ought to call it a night. Zack was a gentleman and always took the hint with grace, although he knew that she knew he didn't really want to leave. His mouth against her ear as he took a deep breath filled with her light perfume and the marvelously exciting scent of woman, he asked, "Are you comfortable with me?"

Lainie tried to turn her head to look back at him, but he was too close. She supposed she should pull away from him a little, assert her independence and let him know that she didn't want to be held that closely, that tightly. But she couldn't quite get her body to respond to the commands of her brain; it was much more interested in obeying Zack's casual, sensual dictates. "Pretty much."

A few minutes later, "Are you attracted to me?" She stiffened, which was exactly what he didn't want.

"Yeeeesss." Lainie tried unsuccessfully to squirm away, but Zack held her to him, scrupulously careful not to hurt her in any way, but not giving her much room to maneuver either.

In two seconds flat, she found herself beneath him, and Zack saw fear flash over her

face. The backs of his fingers caressed her cheek. “Did someone hurt you sexually?”

“No,” came the impatient reply. “Where are you going with this, Zachary?”

He caught her eyes with his. “I want you, too.”

“Let me up.”

“In a second.”

Dear God, she was drowning in those eyes!

“I want to make love to you tonight.”

Her eyes skittered away from his. “Let me up.”

Zack levered himself off her, then helped her onto her feet, watching her carefully the whole time. She took several steps away, hugging herself when he would gladly have done it for her. Zack sat back down on the couch, adopting a casual pose that he didn’t feel in hopes that it would help her relax.

He watched Lainie collect herself and straighten her back. When she finally answered him, her voice was flat, and the response was wholly unexpected. “Not tonight, but why don’t you plan on coming up next weekend?”

His eyebrow met his hairline. “Why do I have the feeling that I’m pushing you?”

A deep breath blew out of her mouth explosively. “Because you are. Your handprints are all over my back.”

He frowned fiercely. “I do want you, but that’s the last thing I want to do, really .”

Lainie came back to sit on the coffee table in front of him, taking his hands in one of the few times he could recall when she’d initiated physical contact with him. “No, it’s not. If left to my own devices, we’d end up two very frustrated people – good friends, but very, very frustrated.”

“Don’t you like sex?”

The question – from his side – was a legitimate one, but Lainie couldn’t keep herself from blushing. “Yeah, I like sex.”

Zack leaned forward, capturing one of her knees with both of his. His curled fingers lifted her chin, making her look at him. “Is it me? Have I done something to make you feel afraid of me?”

That was the last thing she wanted him to worry about. “No, no, no. You’ve been an officer and a gentleman,” she teased gently, but he didn’t really smile back.

“But you’re reluctant. You’re hesitant. I can feel it. You’re one of the strongest women I’ve ever known. What am I missing here?”

Lainie’s voice was small and quiet. “It’s nothing about you, Zack. It’s me. I’m not afraid of you, I’m afraid of me!”

Zack was stunned. “Tell me.”

She laughed softly. “There’s not much to it. It’s not that I don’t like sex – it’s that I like it a little too much.”

Like it a little too much? Zack ran the phrase through his head. Is there such a thing? He was prepared to hear that she’d never really enjoyed sex or that she thought it was only ok. “Run that one by me again, please?” He shook his head as if to clear it.

But Lainie was already up and holding his coat out to help him into it.

“I take it you don’t want to talk about this?” he asked, shrugging into it.

“Got it in one.” She handed him his gloves, then turned to walk towards the door, but two strong arms whirled her around and pulled her up against him.

“Woman, you are going to drive me out of my mind.”

“Short putt.” The collar of his coat was suddenly very intriguing.

Zack leaned forward to whisper a warning in her ear. “I want to know more, Lainie Stewart. I want to know everything about you – most especially what turns you on.”

“Zack!”

He remained entirely unrepentant. “And I intend to pry every little secret out of you, eventually.”

Lainie gave him a level stare. “Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s a promise. I intend to find out what you meant by that cryptic little comment, but I also want to hear what you like in bed.”

Lainie squirmed in his arms as if physically protesting the imposition of his will.

Zack remained still as she brushed up against his arousal. “Lainie!”

The strain in his voice made her stop more quickly than anything else. She knew what had happened to him – hell, it was impossible to miss the insistent presence of his masculinity. “Sorry.” She was sorry, but she was also just a little bit proud that he would respond to her so overtly.

His goodnight kiss was harder and more aggressive than it had been in the past, but Lainie met his passion with her own, making him groan and squeeze her tightly to him.

Zack called her when he got home several hours later, but she was relieved when he didn't push any further that night. He left her alone for a couple of nights, and then, just after she'd turned off the lights and rolled over to go to sleep, the phone rang.

"Hullo?"

"Did I wake you?" came the familiar deep rumble.

Lainie rolled onto her back. "Nuh-uh."

"What are you doing?"

"Lying in bed."

A low growl vibrated in her ear. "I wish I was there with you."

"You will be this weekend, won't you?"

"I'll be up there Friday night about seven or so."

"Okay."

"Don't plan on us doing anything else, honey."

Lainie had to grin at his eagerness. "You mean no visiting Charlotte?"

"No."

"No shopping?"

"No."

"No bowling?"

"Grrrrrr. No, no, no, no. Once I get you into that bed, you'll be lucky if I let you out of it at all."

A shiver ran up her spine. He sounded deadly serious. One thing she'd learned about him in the short time she'd known him; Zack never bragged or said anything he couldn't live up to.

He continued softly, "Except maybe to go make me something to eat." That was sure to get a rise out of her.

"Tttttttthhhhhhhhhhhpppppppppttttt!"

"That is, after I've had my fill of you."

The shiver became a chill. "Zaaaaa-aaaaccckkk!"

He let her off the hook momentarily and asked her about her work, and she reciprocated. But then he just jumped right in. "So why would you say that you like sex too much, Lainie?"

"Wonderful weather we're having . . ." she threw out airily, with little real hope of diverting his attention.

"Lainie." A wealth of warning lay in the way he said her name sometimes. It was just the way she would want him to say it if he was going to threaten a spanking next. But he was never going to find out about that particular preference. "Answer me." She could imagine him ending that sentence with "little girl".

"Because I just do," she said in one breath.

"Well, you're certainly not loose at all since it's taken me practically a year to get you to go to bed with me."

She heard the annoyance and exasperation behind that sentence. "Three months, Zack. Three whole months."

"Isn't that what I said? And stop changing the subject."

"What subject?" Innocence was about as believable from her as it was from him. His ragged sigh made her relent just a tad. "I like sex, Zack. A lot."

"Good. So do I. Then why do you avoid it so strenuously?"

Lainie giggled at his wry choice of words. "I don't avoid it. I just am extremely selective about who I sleep with. Being a fussy budget about that has made my sexual experiences pretty darned good. I don't have sex with every Tom, Dick, or Clinton."

Zack snorted. "Whew. I'm glad I made the cut."

"Frankly, despite my considerable libido, there are very few men I'm attracted to."

She could tell he was fairly preening at that last remark. "Again, I'm glad I'm one of the few."

"I thought that was the Marines? Aren't you in the Air Force?"

Tap. Tap. Tap. He was drumming his fingers impatiently on something. "Do you know how much of a brat you are?"

"You can't call me a brat. I'm older than you are."

"That's not working, as far as you're concerned."

"That's another thing to worry about, though."

“What is?”

Lainie sat straight up in bed. “That being older than you are, I won’t measure up – body-wise – to some young, skinny twenty-two year old with perky breasts . . .”

“Don’t go there, Lainie Stewart.”

“I’m way ahead of you, you young whippersnapper.”

“You make it sound like you’re ready for social security!”

“Not quite. Oil of Ole-Lady, yes. Giant industrial-sized bottles of it. I wonder who makes that stuff? I ought to buy stock in the company . . .” she wondered out loud.

“You aren’t really worried about that, are you?”

“Oh, a little, I suppose.”

“There’s no need, you know.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You turn me on incredibly with your clothes on – “

“Sure I do. Yep. Uh-huh,” she agreed as if he hadn’t spoken.

“Lainie.”

“Yes?”

“When I get up there the first thing I’m going to do is spank your butt for being such an incorrigible brat.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, sure.” She yawned in his ear. “I’m really, really worried about that, let me tell you.”

She could hear the smile in his words. “You should be, because some day I’m actually going to do it. I’m going to grab you and put you over my knee and spank you until you can’t sit down for a week at least.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But this weekend, it’s going to be my solemn duty to make sure that you’re totally satisfied.”

“You’re solemn duty, huh?”

“And you know how big I am on duty.”

And honor. And family. And country. She knew by now that they were all biggies with him. “Freud would have a field day with that one . . . And what a lovely way to classify sex with me, Zack.”

This time he actually did growl. “You know what I mean, brat.”

Silence.

“Have I ever told you how much you turn me on?”

Lainie smiled. “I do believe you’ve shown me on at least one occasion . . .”

“Hell, I’m so hard when I’m around you I could cut glass.”

“Ew. I have one word for that mental image: ow, but I would pay money to see it!”

Zack laughed out loud. That was one of the best things about Lainie. She could make him laugh more easily than any other person on Earth.

When he finally made it up to her condo, it was Sunday instead of Friday. Unfortunately duty called and he had to go elsewhere on a moment’s notice. It wasn’t the way he wanted it, but all he could do was leave a short message on her machine saying that he had to go and hope she understood. He didn’t figure it would be a big problem, but this would also be a good test of how she would handle his job in the future. Some women couldn’t. Zack wasn’t a player and, although he probably could have had any woman he cared to pursue, he didn’t make the effort very often. He was almost as picky as Lainie was.

But his job was important to him and anyone he saw on a regular basis would have to deal with the fact that he could be there one moment and several continents away in the blink of an eye. Heather hadn’t been able to put up with it – at all.

When they finally landed very early Sunday morning, he debriefed, showered and changed and all but sprinted to his Jeep. He pulled up in front of her house ninety minutes later and it was still barely a decent hour – seven-thirty. Zack debated about whether to go grab himself some breakfast and come back, but he opted to ring the doorbell instead.

It took her so long to make it to the door that if he hadn’t heard vulgar expressions coming from inside that were fit to make a sailor blush, he might have wondered if something was wrong.

He saw the knob jiggle, then her sleepy voice said, “Whoever it is, you better have a good fucking excuse for waking me up at seven-thirty on a Sunday morning.”

“It’s me.”

The door opened, but only a few inches – hardly an overwhelming welcome - and by the time he was in the living room she had already shuffled down the hall. He looked up in

time to see the tail end of two fuzzy pink slippers rounding the corner into her bedroom.

Zack followed quietly behind her, shutting the bedroom door as she crawled back into bed, robe and all. She looked so cute – all soft and sleepy, with a terminal case of bed-head. He wanted her now more than ever; it must be love, he thought, then frowned. Hmmmmmmmm.

She let him remove the robe with no protests, and what she wore beneath it raised his blood pressure to the stroke stage: it was a sheer, sky blue baby doll nightie with matching thong panties that split her enticing bottom into two healthily rounded globes. When she rolled onto her back the nightie road up to bare her tummy and cling enticingly to those wonderfully full breasts. Zack's mouth literally watered as he watched those raspberry nipples plump out in the cool room.

"Lainie, honey, are you awake?" he whispered while struggling to divest himself of his own clothes.

The only response was a muttered, "Mmmmmmmmmmm. Where've you been?"

With a big grin, Zack repeated that off used phrase. "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you." Only in his case, it was true.

Naked and fully capable, he found he could no longer deny himself. Climbing up from the bottom of the bed, Zack knelt between her legs and bent over Lainie to take a taut nipple in his mouth, lingerie and all, as his right hand slid under the nightie to work its way up to gently pinch the orphaned nipple.

As soon as his fingers and mouth touched her breasts, Lainie awoke. Her body was already preparing itself for him, but her mind hadn't dealt with the idea yet. But the pleasure . . . Oh, Lord, his skillful mouth and his fingers were torturing her with it.

When she tried to yell his name, it came out in a guttural plea as she writhed beneath him. "Za-aaaa-aaaa-ckkkkkk!"

A broad, feral smile interrupted his avid suckling, which he then abandoned to claim her mouth, adding his second hand to the fray by capturing the swollen wet nipple he'd left. Zack adored kissing her; it was one way she always responded to him, but he was beginning to think that her breasts were incredibly sensitive, also. She moaned and arched beneath his tender touch, and Zack heard her breathing increase audibly as her breasts swelled into his welcoming hands. He kissed his way down her throat, never letting go of those tempting captives.

"Zack – no – stop!" she breathed jerkily. Her hands pulled at his, but her strength was no match for his.

Zack's head snapped up from perusing the tempting globes in his hands. "You don't like this?" If she said no, she would be lying through her teeth, he knew. Instead of stopping, he increased the pressure of his fingertips a little, pulling just a little harder, and twisting the ends just a little.

Lainie went off like a rocket, writhing and moaning and arching beneath him as she screamed his name like a mantra. Zack was completely enthralled by her response, holding her tightly while the storm raged within her and she tried to ride the strong thigh that held her legs apart. He could feel the trail of wetness she was leaving on his skin as her aroused scent filled the air.

When she relaxed back against the pillows, Zack whistled long and low. “You weren’t kidding, were you – about liking sex. I can’t believe you came just by having your breasts touched!”

She watched him silently, with a guarded expression, then her eyelids closed slowly as she stretched languorously. Zack’s tongue just about lolled out of his mouth as those wonderful curves arched and undulated before him, as if she was deliberately trying to entice him. While she was involved in her stretch, he managed to divest her of the barely-there thong panties, then pulled the matching top off over her head in an instant.

Zack couldn’t believe how much she turned him on, and despite the fact that he could usually draw things out to enhance the pleasure of his lady, he didn’t think he had much time before he exploded himself. Her orgasm had totally awed him, and he vowed that, at a later date when things were not so urgent, he would take his time and explore every inch of her. But, for now, he had to be inside her.

Still between her legs, he planted his hands on the bed and, for the first time let his swollen erection prod her moist secrets. The tip was already glistening with fluid, which mixed eagerly with her love juices when he placed himself at the entrance to her body.

She was still lying there with her eyes closed, shutting him out, keeping him at bay, retaining a fragile hold on the last threads of her control by ignoring him. That he could not allow.

Full, masculine lips claimed hers, shocking Lainie with the force of her attraction. Her orgasm hadn’t dulled her passion one bit. Quite the contrary, it had encouraged and fed it until it became a ravening beast that she knew she couldn’t tame. She struggled a little, half-heartedly, knowing he would never let her go. Zack stilled her effortlessly, painlessly until she could no longer move any way but towards him.

His member nudged her most sensitive spot boldly. “Open your eyes, Lainie Marie.” When she didn’t show any signs of obeying him, his mouth captured a swollen nipple to suckle and worry with the edges of his teeth. She not only snapped her eyes open, she arched up against him with the savage ache.

Huskily, he asked, “Let me in, honey. I want all of you!” With that warning he pressed forward, advancing into her millimeter by millimeter, hindered by the girth of his penis and her nervous tightening, despite the presence of the ample natural lubricant that flowed over him.

“Zack – oh – pleeaassee!”

He leaned a little bit further over her, flexing his butt and pressing firmly, inexorably, forcing her body to accept his invasion, stretching her unbearably and rasping the most sensitive nerves she owned as he slid slowly into her, to the hilt.

When he was finally buried within her warm slickness, it was his turn to throw his head back and close his eyes. He had to fight himself for control, too, and he wasn't getting any sort of a grip on it. The dictates of his body won out when he would have liked to have taken more time, to revel in her sweet surrender. But instead he withdrew his entire length then plunged into that sweet cavern again in a hot, hard rhythm that dared her to respond or be overwhelmed, conjuring high-pitched cries as she clung to him. He demanded more and more of her, reaching down mindlessly to pull her legs up around his waist, forcing her to give him deeper access which he instantly claimed with all the finesse of a marauding barbarian.

Gone were all the smooth moves, the unusually gentle touch that marked him as a man aware of his own strength, the single-minded concentration on his lady's pleasure over his own until the very end. The only edicts Zack was following were those most primitive, that had to do with claiming his woman and not letting her forget who it was that made her feel like this. Bare-bones possessiveness tempered only slightly with the twenty-first century knowledge that, despite his roughness, her whimpering moans let him know she was with him all the way. Hell, as far as he could tell, she was using him for her own ends, riding him back just as fiercely and pounding on his back to demand even more of him.

When she stiffened beneath him and rammed her hips up against his with a strangled moan, Zack was hard put not to throw his head back and howl with pride that he had brought her to her pleasure, but instead he felt the tingle that meant his own end was fast approaching, encouraged by the strength of her internal spasms.

Unwilling to be denied any longer, ecstasy crept up his spine and knocked his head back, scraping a long, unintelligible scream from him that started at his curled toes. He pinned her much smaller body to the mattress, gripping her hips in a hold so tight that he'd have cause to regret it later, slamming into her in the mindless, primitive pursuit of the little death.

With a final groan, Zack fell face first into the pillow beside her. He was breathing so hard he was almost hyperventilating, and had probably lost a gallon of body fluid just in sweat. Their physical connection was still in tact, if diminishing, as he raised himself up on his elbow to look down at her. She looked disgustingly self-contained and unruffled, except for some messy hunks of hair she was untouched, pristine . . . worse than that, remote and withdrawn.

He rolled onto his side and caught her to him, adjusting her body like a doll's so that she fit against him spoon fashioned. "Lainie Marie, you are magnificent. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. You're not so bad yourself there, for a young 'un."

In retaliation Zack pinched a pouting nipple, grunting in satisfaction at her outraged

squeal. “Are you seeing anyone else?”

“Where did that come from?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Noooooooooooo, not that it’s really any business of yours.”

She was flat on her back beneath him before she knew what he was going to do. “This just made it my business, honey.”

“Are you saying that you want this to be an exclusive relationship?”

Zack’s smile couldn’t rightly be called that by any stretch of the imagination. “I’m saying that it had better be from this point on if you value the health of whoever else you might have been seeing. I find myself entirely unwilling to share you, Miss Stewart. You’re mine now.”

“How very chauvinistic of you, Major Hardy.”

“That’s just too damned bad.” A possessive male hand cupped one full, female breast, the rough thumb rasping over and over a shy tip, gently pinching and pulling it to tautness. When he added a second hand to worry her other breast, Lainie moaned slightly, then more loudly as his touch stopped asking and began demanding a response that she could no more deny him than she could decide to stop breathing.

Zack marveled at the way her body reacted to his demands, her back arching to press those firm globes into his warm palms. He rewarded her by dipping his mouth to each eager tip, swirling, heating, caressing wetly until he could hear those wonderful little uncontrollable cries.

“Stop Zack!”

His fingers halted their sensual torture immediately. “I’m hurting you?”

“No, no, you’re not hurting me.” They started up again right where they left off, making her writhe against him, making her body literally weep for his possession.

“Are you sick?” The words came out almost intelligible because he was busily decorating her waistline with butterfly kisses.

Lainie couldn’t quite catch her breath. Damn this man for being so blasted good in bed! “N- no, I’m n-not sssiiiccckkk – aaaiiiee, Zzzzzzzzzack!”

His right hand had a mind of its own, trailing down her rounded tummy before she could catch it, heading unerringly towards the heart of her desire, and no amount of pulling on his arm was going to deter him.

As Lainie had known she would be, she was lost the moment two big fingers parted her

lower lips gently but firmly, then massaged their way down to the entrance of her body as if they had all the time in the world. There was no sense struggling; her body had already declared a total surrender.

“P-please?”

The word was uttered so softly he barely caught it, but Zack was attuned to every cell in her body. His fingers poised to lay claim to the same area he had conquered not a half an hour before, Zack looked up at her to find that her eyes were screwed shut and her body was tense, as if she expected that he was going to hurt her. “Please what, honey?”

The answer was in her tear-filled eyes when she opened them to him at the same time she reached down and pressed his hand between her legs instead of trying to pull it away. Zack’s heart nearly burst out of his chest. His whole hand covered her most intimate spot, the heel resting near that soft patch of reddish-brown curls while his thumb sought out her shy soft nub, worrying it with the slickness from her own juices. He drowns in the sensual music of her whimpers and moans for a few moments, then crossed his middle finger over his index finger and pressed the combination of the two against that excruciatingly tight, wet opening.

A sweat broke out on his forehead as he entered her as carefully as he could – she had not accommodated the other part of him easily and this would apparently be no different. There were no sounds of distress just panicked cries of arousal. An unbearably warm mouth settled on her nipple, suckling fervently as he advanced and retreated those thick, hard fingers, making her hips rise to his rhythm.

“Zack, Zack, please!” she pleaded, writhing to the tune of his hands and his mouth.

His head lifted and he caught her eye. “Do you ache, baby?”

Lainie nodded her head.

“Do you want me to make the ache go away?”

Lainie’s mind was filled with the tortured pleasure his mouth and fingers were creating mercilessly within her body. Her head whipped from side to side as his fingers were finally seated fully within her, spreading her, forcing her with pleasure to accept his intimate invasion. “Yessssssssss, plleeaassee!”

Those damned fingers began to move relentlessly, rasping in and rasping out, stretching her delicate tissues . . . in and out. “With my fingers or with my mouth?” He granted her the choice, but if she didn’t choose quickly he would make it for her.

“I – don’t – care!”

“Fingers now, mouth later,” Zack declared, suiting actions to words. As he set about deliberately bringing her to ecstasy, he spoke to her in a hoarse whisper when he didn’t have an eager nipple between his lips. “Before I let you come – “

Lainie almost died at those words – she didn't think she'd live if he delayed her gratification for one more second.

"I just wanted to say that you are the most passionate woman I've ever know. You make me feel like there's nothing I can't to, like I can go out and conquer the world, as long as I have you to come back to."

She wasn't coherent enough to get out that it was just the sex talking, but he probably wouldn't have appreciated that response, either.

His fingers never lost a beat of the relentless rhythm he'd set, thumb flicking away, teasing, rubbing, encouraging, demanding. "I love watching you, sweetheart. And the idea that I'm making you squirm and writhe and moan because of what I'm doing to you gets me so hot I can barely stand it."

Her breathing became heavier and heavier.

"I want you to tell me when you're coming, honey, okay?"

"I'm ccoooooommmiinnnnngg!" was all the warning he got as she convulsed violently around his fingers with a loud scream that just got louder as Zack forced every last contraction out of her body before setting himself onto and into her to attain the same ecstasy for himself moments later.

Are you on the pill?

Just like a man, Zack'd asked the question several intense lovemaking sessions too late to do any good. She'd been on the pill for a while to straighten out her periods, thank God. Some how, Lainie knew that, with him, she'd be incredibly fertile – even if she was perimenopausal. Zack's little troopers would always get their egg, given the chance.

He was right that she barely got out of the bed all weekend. He barely let her out of it. Zack was totally insatiable and his hands and mouth had a mind of their own – not to mention various other body parts. When it sunk in that she was multi-orgasmic he got a wild gleam in his eye and reached for her.

Lainie dodged away from his grasping arms, saying, "No, Zack," like she was speaking to a naughty puppy. "Back on your papers!"

"But, Lainie, honey, I just want to bring you off a few thousand times."

His woman slid off the opposite side of the bed from him, standing there with her hands on her hips. "I don't want to come a thousand times."

He was agreeable. "Okay, a few hundred times."

"No," she pouted. "Hand me my robe, please." It was on the floor on his side of the room.

“No,” he echoed back at her, still wearing nothing but an evil grin as he rounded the end of the bed in an entirely unhurried fashion. Naked as she was, she wouldn’t get very far even if she did manage to get out of the room. Zack had decided that naked was his favorite state of dress for her, although she tended to be endearingly self-conscious about her body. Eventually, after a few decades or so, maybe he’d get her convinced that he loved her body the way it was, whatever age. But they had time to work on that.

Right now, he wanted to pleasure her, to make her scream and cry and plead before claiming her warm, wet pussy with his mouth and his fingers and holding her while she convulsed and moaned with the ecstasy that he brought her to.

Then he would do the whole thing again. And again. And again.

“This is not a dare, Zack,” she said, trying to be firm but ruining the effect as she took one step backwards for his every step forward. Eventually, her legs hit the bed frame and she collapsed backwards, intending to tuck and roll away from him.

But she only got to tuck, pulling her legs to her chest, before he was on her, literally, holding her captive, arranging her in the most sexually vulnerable position possible – her arms trapped at her sides, legs spread wide by the breadth of his chest but held up and back as they draped naturally over his shoulders.

“Gotcha,” he crowed, sliding his wet lips down from her ear, over her collarbone then a nipple, then down over her warm, round tummy to her vulnerable sensual delicacies.

Lainie pulled experimentally at her arms, only to find out that he wasn’t going to let her go. The idea of being helpless and spread while her big, strong lover dedicated himself to bringing her to ecstasy was unbearably exciting, so much so that when he engulfed her swollen, sensitive love button in his warm wet mouth, she came before he had time to do anything more elaborate.

She was still trying to recover and he hadn’t moved a muscle, hadn’t even released her wrists. When Lainie opened her eyes again, it was to stare directly into his, which were alight with a new discovery about his woman.

“You like this.”

Lainie pulled and tugged and wiggled and gave herself a cramp in her calf that he had to massage away, but she never got away from him.

“Talk to me, Lainie.”

“No. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Zack couldn’t believe this. Every woman he’d ever known lived to discuss things, to persevere over the state of the relationship, to agonize and commiserate about it, and preferably drag her mate through the same unfortunate ritual. But not his Lainie.

On one of their early dates, she had warned him that she had no use for the usual

male/female dating, engagement, wedding type of relationship. She'd flat out told him that she'd date him, and she might even sleep with him. But any form of matrimony was off the table.

Since Zack wasn't necessarily looking to tie himself down yet, he'd agreed wholeheartedly, without a second's hesitation. He'd had the feeling that if he'd balked at that particular conversational bone, it was goodbye, Charlie.

He chose his battles carefully before pushing, but this was something he wanted to know the answer to.

"But you liked it – you definitely liked me holding you down."

Her eyes were closed; she was trying to shut him out, and he wasn't going to let her. She remained spread before him in that marvelously vulnerable position, and Zack the Warrior was not gentleman enough to stop himself from taking every possible advantage he could. Before she had a chance to notice, he'd slipped a finger inside her, then another one joined it. She was so tight she was practically virginal, and he loved it, loved feeling her pulsating efforts to accommodate him. "Answer me, darlin'."

He had had to release her left arm, but she was very strongly right-handed and there was very little she could do with just one hand, especially in the face of his muscled strength.

"Don't you do this, Zack, you sonofabitch bastard!" she yelled, but the holler turned to a moan of ecstasy as he rocked those fingers deeply within her.

When Zack chuckled in a situation like this, it was never a good thing. He scolded her while his mouth was directly on top of her most sensitive bundle of flesh, his tongue flicking out occasionally to tease and torture her. "You watch your language, young lady."

Her lusty moan as he suckled at her clit ended in a snort. "You're younger than – than –" she swallowed breathlessly. "Than I am. You c-can't call me y-young lady."

"I certainly can when you're acting like a brat." He went back to his thoroughly enjoyable task. "Answer me, Lainie Marie. Answer me and I'll let you come."

"Nooooooooo, Zack, please let me go!"

Pulse, pulse, pulse, deeper and deeper inside her. Those fingers of his were going to drive her crazy, along with his ravenous mouth.

"No, Lainie, my girl. I won't let you come or go until you've given me your answer."

He withdrew his fingers and she screamed in frustration, but he easily controlled her feeble attempts to struggle free. Zack leaned over her, letting those two wet fingertips rest lightly atop her swollen bud. "Why is this so hard for you? Why wouldn't you want to tell your lover what you like in bed?" They were restless, those two digits, and they

began to rub teasingly over and over – slowly. Very, very slowly. His voice was a seduction in itself. “Does the idea of being helpless with me turn you on? Does this position make you hot because you’re so spread for me, and you can’t do anything to stop me from having you?”

She was breathing so heavily she was practically hyperventilating, wailing long and high as he worked his excruciatingly slow magic, then stopped. Tears burst from her eyes as she screamed the answer he was looking for. “Yeesss! Oh, God, Zack, plllllleeassssssse!”

Satisfied, Zack still moved slowly, gently insinuating his fingers back into the warmth of her home, her legs still well back and firmly in place over his shoulders while his mouth licked her clit greedily. A few seconds later, he began pumping his hand in and out, carefully at first, then less so. Her body was so tense she was practically clenching him in place. When she came, she screamed and cried uncontrollably for a long while after.

While lying shaking in his arms, she shuddered, “You are never to do that to me again.”

Zack kissed the top of his head. God, she was fantastic! “Oh, I think I can and I will. Didn’t you say you have an infinite capacity for pleasure?”

Lainie sank her teeth into his nipple, making him yelp. “Allow me to introduce you to the concept of ‘quality’ as opposed to ‘quantity’.”

“Believe me, honey, I’ll give you plenty of both,” Zack promised, sinking into her.

Their first sexual experience set the tone for the next nine or so months, during which they both literally drowned in the force of their explosive sensualities. Zack marveled at her sexual capacity; she never turned him away, and her resolve to pleasure him was at least as strong as his own towards her own ecstasy. When he stole her away to the family’s ocean hideaway, he knew that it would be just what she needed – rest, relaxation, and recreation. It ended up being a little more than he’d bargained for.

Soulmates
Chapter 6 - The Other First
by Carolyn Faulkner

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With Zack being so overprotective all weekend, Lainie was so overslept that they merely lay there the last night of her “kidnapping” with the windows wide open to invite the fresh ocean breezes to waft over them, cooling them both off after the usual fantastic sex. It was very late at night, actually very early in the morning, and Lainie was lying in Zack’s arms, surrounded by the warm scent of him, protected by his ever-aroused body.

For some reason, that night was almost like magic, and Lainie began to talk to him, telling Zack things she never would have under usual circumstances. Usually he was the one who kept or woke her up to discuss whatever was running through his mind at the time. She couldn’t even blame alcohol, because she didn’t drink. Zack had had a couple of beers, but that was hours and hours ago, before they started to make love. When she began to speak, even if he’d been three sheets to the wind, what she was saying would have put all his senses on alert.

It was so rare for her to open up to him like this that he was afraid to say anything, not wanting to disrupt or disturb the spell she’d been put under. There were a few things he asked very pointed, direct questions about, but in general he just let her ramble. It was a damned informative monologue – he learned more about her in that one enchanted night than he had in dating her seriously for the past eighteen months, seeing her every chance he could. The idea of kidnapping her to this remote ocean setting every once in a while if this was the result was rapidly becoming a possibility.

When she wound down, he held her close and made tender, fierce love to her, unwilling to disrupt the intimacy of the night with something as trivial as sleep. They did sleep late the next morning, and Zack realized by the guarded look in her eye that she was embarrassed and concerned about what she’d said. He desperately wanted to wipe that look away, but wasn’t exactly sure how to go about it.

To his surprise, several days later, he got an email:

From: LMS (majzackzgirl@yahoo.com)

To: ohdarkthirty@hotmail.com

Subject: Last weekendI just wanted to write you and tell you how fantastic last weekend was - I was definitely surprised by the way you'd planned everything especially on such a spur of the moment kidnapping <g>, and bringing me to the cottage at the beach for a weekend was a true stroke of genius. You know how much I adore the sea.

And you, of course. The combination of the two was . . . sizzling.

But it was more than just your famous spaghetti sauce and the quiet time on the screened porch listening to the waves as the sun set. It was the true intimacy of the time we spent together. You made it a wonderful safe haven, cocooning the two of us off from the rest of the world and making me feel like I could completely be myself and do or say anything to you without fear of rejection or censure.

We both know that my problem has never been in the "doing" . . . there's very little I wouldn't do to please you, very little that doesn't turn me on. But unlike 99.9% of the rest of the female population of the United States, my problem has always been in the "talking about it" area. In that, my love, the

two of us take the opposite roles from what we're supposed to, gender-wise. I know that you would like nothing better than for me to roll over in the middle of the night some time, wake you out of a sound sleep, and spill my guts to you about life in general and our relationship in particular. I've spent many a

sleepless night with you in the course of the past nearly two years or so, hashing and re-re-hashing exactly those things with you.

All I can say is, don't hold your breath. That's not my style. I've always said that if I'm here, then I'm happy. You know my feelings on marriage. We consciously have no legal obligations to each other. I don't want to dissect why I'm here, I honestly don't want to hear why you think I'm with you, and, frankly, I don't much give a damn why you're in this relationship. It is what it is. Don't question things too closely or you might not like what you see. When I start looking longingly at the door, then you can worry.

It is a major compliment to you that, this weekend, surrounded by you and all of the creature comforts you provided, I, in essence, spilled my guts to you. I know you think that this should have happened long ago, but you should take heart that it happened at all. Sunday night, in that big king-sized bed, with all the windows open and the cool sea air washing over us, drying the sweat on our bodies after yet another bout of mindless pleasure, I lay between your legs. Your back was propped up against the headboard, cushioned by three or so pillows, and you maneuvered me so that I was leaning back against you, enveloped in your comforting presence, still throbbing from completion and so relaxed I lost my natural reserve about these situations.

You asked me if I was all right, as you always do. I don't know whether the question stems from the distinct differences in our sizes - although I'm no stick figure by any stretch of the imagination - or the fact that my tears after an intense orgasm still bother you, and I suppose the reason behind the question

doesn't matter, anyway. It's a very gentlemanly thing to ask - although I'm always all right when I'm with you - and it makes me feel very cared for.

But this lovemaking session was different from the rest - in a "change-your-whole-relationship" way. This was the first time you've ever taken me over your lap and

spanked me prior to pressing yourself inside me by inches. Oh, it was a playful spanking, and with my high pain tolerance (for spankings

only) it didn't hurt much (although I can certainly see a lot of potential for that, considering your hand is the size of a platter and at least as hard as your head :)), but it did surprise the hell out of me, and there must've been no mistaking my considerable . . . interest.

You knew all the right things to do, what to say and how to say it, scolding me for getting sassy with you, telling me to watch my tone of voice when I speak to you, calling me a naughty girl who needs to spend more time over your lap getting her bottom blistered. Man, you must've been taking lessons, for crying out loud! Your voice had just the right "I'm disappointed in you" tone, and you had me wet well before your palm ever cracked down on my bottom! I've always thought, being a military officer, that you'd be a natural dom. This is one situation where I've definitely been proven right!

You're used to giving orders and being obeyed. You're so serious sometimes, and I'm so giggly, especially when I'm tired, that I know I've gone a step too far. Or I've had a distinct potty mouth, although rarely. Hell, there have been multiple times in the past that you gave me "that look" from under a drawn brow as you frowned down at me. That look itself was enough to send a jolt of

fearful anticipation up my spine. But you would just say my name in warning, or haul me into your arms to kiss me out of my bad mood, or give me a "good talking to", when what I truly needed but never admitted was to be taken to our bedroom, had my pants and panties taken down - or my skirt flipped up - and been pulled over your hard thighs for a long, painful spanking to get me back in line. Or

keep me in line.

The reason doesn't matter. The action does.

As I said that night, I don't know why I didn't tell you that I liked spanking. I guess it was being afraid of rejection, or being thought a freak. Your opinion of me matters to me. Not everyone likes what I like, and although we have been disgustingly compatible in the bedroom, spanking is not something I

would just assume you would want to do. Hell, you're always so conscious of your size - which I appreciate although sometimes I think you go overboard; better overprotective than under, as far as I'm concerned - and whether or not you've hurt me accidentally during sex or when we wrestle sometimes . . . I guess you've noticed I don't do that much any more: I hate losing, and I would never want you to let me win, so I've given up on trying to physically subdue you. For now. ;)

Yes, I'm a total wimp about pain. You know that probably better than any person on Earth what a baby I am. I don't do pain, it hurts me. Yes, I know this is a dichotomy. Deal with it. Spanking pain is just different, and I honestly have a fairly high tolerance, depending on the implement used. I can see you reading this with your eyebrow raised.

Your wimpy lover, who puts her back out and spends three weeks in bed moaning and groaning and making you dance attendance on her, has a high pain tolerance. Sure, right.

Yes. But only in that very specific area.

Honestly, it is a pain I crave. But it's not just the pain by any means . . .

I want the whole relationship culture that goes with it. The ritual aspects of that type of relationship appeal to me enormously, and I think what it offers is a sense of consistency, of safety. Action and consequence is missing from my life, but not if you're there with a paddle at the ready. Being scolded,

spending time in the corner with my panties down and my hands on my head, lying over your lap, the spanking itself, the corner time afterwards (maybe), and the comfort and forgiveness afterwards. I'm a greedy cuss; I want the whole package.

I would love to know that I could look to you to guide me (I know, I know. How completely out of character for an opinionated, stubborn, lead-or-get-the-hell-out-of-the-way women's libber like me. Yup. I never said I was going to be logical, did I? Quite the contrary, as you know:). I cannot think of anything that would make me feel safer with you. Loads safer than any ring you could put on my finger or words you could say in front of a J.O.P.

If I could have anything I wanted, it would be us in a "domestic discipline" type of relationship, where we love and support each other exactly as we do now, where each of us works and contributes to the relationship financially, emotionally, and sexually. We're there for each other now, and I would expect

that that would continue . . . But you would be in charge. If I did something that you didn't like (who me? Never!), like say . . . swearing. Or forgetting to give you the ATM slips until the end of the month when you're bravely trying to balance my account for me . . . or being cranky and snotty (which we both know I never am!), then you would have the option of hauling me over your lap (or making me bend over the back of the loveseat, etc, etc, etc) and giving me a good spanking. Now, deciding whether or not you're interested in this is a big decision for you. I'm already there. Waaaaaaaaaay there. But I have the easy part, being the brat that I am :). I can't help it, it just comes naturally to me, the way your dominance comes naturally to you. Your role, as disciplinarian, is the

responsible one, and boy, if I've ever met a person who defined "responsible", it's you. The question, then, is: are you willing to assume that type of tremendous responsibility? And it is a responsibility. It's also the highest compliment I can give any man; to trust him enough that I would allow him to discipline me. Especially someone your size. If I trust you and I'm wrong, I could end up maimed, or worse.

But hear me now and believe me later, I have absolutely no doubts about you and your innate ability to succeed in this role. You are the most disgustingly honorable, forthright, upstanding citizen on the face of the planet, and if I have any concerns,

they're about my abilities to rise to your standards. Especially if you make any rules about neatness. You know I'm sunk right there, slob that I am. I'd have to kiss sitting down comfortably goodbye for quite some time in that case.

Hmmmmmmmm. That brings something up. Yes, you'd be responsible for disciplining me. But I would be responsible for learning from that discipline. I don't want you to be envisioning decades of spanking me for the same things; I will certainly do my best to learn what you're taking the time to try and teach me. No, my potty mouth and speeding and appalling bookkeeping tendencies won't go away like magic after my first spanking. Or maybe even my fifth. But I will show progress, especially if you make the spankings memorable enough . . .

Back to the pain. Like credit, there is good pain and there is bad pain. Bad pain is back pain. Pure and simple. Ain't nothin' remotely loving, caring, sexual, or even interesting about having to crawl to the bathroom on your hands and knees because you can't straighten up. Spanking - caning, hair brushing,

paddling, strapping . . . you get the idea - however, is good pain. There's a reason for it, and it's an agreed upon reason, whether or not I agree. Get it? Well, I can't see you making stupid rules. It's not like my language couldn't stand to be a little more civilized, I suppose. And Lord knows, at thirty bucks a pop for overdrafting my checking account, I could have practically paid for that new laptop I'm looking at, so there's room for improvement there, too.

And I know you love me, never more so than if you take the time and energy to correct me. I know it goes directly against your grain to hurt someone - trained warrior be damned - especially a woman. You certainly could hurt people very easily, but you consciously don't. I've seen you with Charlotte's baby. If ever there was a picture of a man melting, it was you when you held her in your arms. Your whole gruff, unapproachable, in-charge demeanor changed, and my heart swelled as I watched you rock her and hold her close, stroking that tiny head and letting her suck on the tip of your pinky. I could never see you inflicting pain gratuitously.

Basically, I guess it comes down to the fact that I trust you. Facedown, bare-bottomed, hairbrush-in- your-hand TRUST YOU. I trust you not to cause any permanent physical damage, but I trust you to cause a whole lot of temporary bruising, which you should expect since I'm so fair skinned. I trust you not to listen to my begging and pleading before or during a spanking, but to do what you think needs to be done. To take care of business . . . to take care of me in this way. I trust you not to hold back because my bottom is getting red and swollen, or because you've already spanked me once that day. I trust you to spank me hard enough to make me cry, then sob, until I have no tears left and

you're still paddling. I trust you to discipline me through my moans to my screams, then through those until I have no voice left . . . if you feel that it's the severity of the correction I need.

But I also trust you not to inflict a long hard paddling on me when one is not justified by my misbehavior. I trust you to generally adhere to the rituals that make this situation

feel safe for me. I trust you to respond to whatever safe word we choose, not because I intend to cry wolf, but because it's a

responsible thing to have, especially considering my asthma, but then I also expect you to be aware enough of me and my condition that I shouldn't have to use it unless something's going on with me that you couldn't see. I trust that you won't let your emotions get the better of you when you're truly angry at me and that when it's over, it's over, and you'll welcome me with open arms and give me the forgiveness and comfort that is the reason I submit to your discipline. I want to be good and I do want you to be proud of me. It hurts me worse on the inside than any spanking you could apply to my outside

if you are disappointed in me.

So, I might not have run off at the mouth about this to you, but we both know I always write better than I speak, and these are things I felt needed to be addressed. You have a lot of serious thinking to do, but then, unlike me, that's what you do best :).

Regardless, and I do mean regardless, I remain forever yours, Love,

LainieTo which Zack replied: From: Zack Hardy (ohdarkthirty@hotmail.com)

Subject: Last weekend Darlin'

Yes, last weekend was fantastic, and I'm looking forward to more of the same this weekend. I'm glad you enjoyed the surprise. Yes, I know how much you love the ocean, and you know how much I love you. I've never much been one for just sitting and watching the waves, but I'll stay out there on that screened porch until I freeze to death, as long as you're in my arms.

I was as amazed to read your letter as I was to hear what you said Sunday night. For now, I figured I'd let you off the hook a little and take a page out of your book and respond to you in a manner you seem more at ease with than the occasional knock-down, drag-it-out-of-you heart-to-heart I subject you to every once in a while, just to make sure we're both still on the same page. I know you hate those sessions, and I know you know why I pick three in the morning, too. You're such a sleepyhead and all of your defenses are down. It's almost as good as getting you sloshed, but with no nasty hangover.

If I know the way you think (and I do), you must've figured that after Saturday night when you finally came clean to me about your quote "kinky desires" unquote, I'd throw you over for someone who was more . . . how did you put it? Bland? No. It had a food reference in it. Vanilla. That's it. Our favorite flavor. And no, I'm not about to do that. I just wish you felt more comfortable telling me things; anything, not necessarily something sexual, but just what's on that convoluted mind of yours. Obviously, this spanking thing is a very important part of your life, and we've been together for how long now and you haven't seen fit to share it with me? Makes me wonder, frankly, if we're truly as close as I think we are, or if I'm the only one paddling this canoe. No pun intended, although a paddle sounds

like a wonderful Christmas present for you . . . with your name on it and everything . . .
HMMMMMMMM.

Well, I'm still here. You haven't scared me off. And I'm definitely curious (not to mention fully aroused, as usual when I'm thinking of you :) about this idea, and I must admit that I'm a little concerned, too, about what all else you might be waiting to spring on me. But we'll deal with this right now and with whatever else later. And you know me, honey, I will get all the other stuff out of you, eventually . . . Ve haff our vays of may-kink you talk . . .

You mentioned that you were surprised at how naturally that spanking "patter" came to me. Why wouldn't it? I was finally doing to you what I had wanted to do for some time. Yup. It's true. You, my

dear, are the original brat, and sometimes you go too far. Not very often, granted, but sometimes. I've swatted your luscious behind occasionally, but only one good smack. And usually my "look", as you

so charmingly put it, is enough to get you back into line.

In case you haven't gotten the gist of what I'm saying yet, I'll spell it out for you in blatant terms: that certainly wasn't the first time I'd considered putting you over my lap. And, since we seem to be much

in agreement about it, I'm sure it's not going to be the last, given your smart mouth and sassy tendencies. Am I interested in a domestic discipline type of relationship? Hell, yes! I'm beginning to think it might be a method of saving my sanity . . .

Yes, my dominance is as natural to me as your sometimes flighty, irresponsible ways are to you. It seems to me that we might just have stumbled into something that is absolutely perfect for us: you get to

learn act more your age and less your shoe size, and I get to take out my frustrations on your bottom when I'm inches from throttling you for taking too much money out of the ATM . . .

And you're ABSOLUTELY right that I could never do you harm. I would never consider a spanking to be harm; I consider it to be something you sorely missed while growing up, something that can help you to curb your impulsiveness, and keep me from succumbing to premature baldness as I pull my hair out when you blithely buy your fifty-fifth pair of black flats . . . But I won't go there, Imelda, honey. I've learned better. :)

If you get to your fifth spanking before I see any improvement in whatever behavior, though, you'd better be prepared to sit on a pillow for a month, I'm warning you! I have no problems being responsible

for the both of us . . . to a point. But, no, I don't want to get to the point where I have to

tell you when to breathe, either. Been there, done that, too many times with you in the ER as it is. How long have you been breathing? Eventually, you'll learn how to get it right (maybe :)) . . .

You have no idea what a compliment it is to hear that you trust me - particularly that you trust me to discipline you fairly. I know you've always felt a little overwhelmed by me - my size and the force

of my personality (although I still maintain that I'm shy and quiet <grin>), although you're certainly no wimp yourself. And I will do my best to be completely fair.

You mentioned spanking you to tears. I don't know about that. You know how I hate to see you cry. It makes me crazy, and always makes me want to do something, ANYTHING within my power to alleviate them. I don't know how I'll be able to reconcile the idea that I'm the one deliberately causing them. But, I know that old saw holds true – as you already seem to realize, also - it would be for your own good. And I would never spank you gratuitously, just to hurt you. I think you know I could never do that. I'd much, much, much rather pleasure you. Long and hard and loud. I'm sure that would be easily accomplished, too, judging by your copious reaction to being over my lap . . .

I certainly hope you don't think you have to let me spank you to make me proud of you. Every time I look at you, puddin', I nearly bust my buttons at the idea that you're with me: you're smart and funny and

warm and everyone loves you to death. No one would ever say that about me. You're a people person. I'm a loner. Sometimes, I feel like I'm riding on your coattails a little, because everyone kind of considers that if you like me, I must not be as awful and intimidating and serious as I seem, or something like that. I know the folks in your office adore you, and my team does, too, because I'm a lot mellower since I've met you. And, contrary to what you're probably saying about now, it's NOT just the sex. So there.

So. This is something we both seem to want, and it could probably stand some more discussion. I do appreciate the fact that you wrote out what you were thinking instead of bottling it up.

I know I need to spend some more time online reading some of those websites you mentioned, and you need to really think about whether or not you want to - or whether you even can - submit to being

disciplined by a man you once called "anal to the max". You thought I'd forgotten that little gem, didn't you?

Regardless, we're not going to jump into anything without having a good, long FACE TO FACE talk.

Do you understand me, young lady?

Love ya'

Zack

They arranged to get together the next weekend after exchanging a lot of emails in which Zack made the monumental suggestion that if they were going to engage in a “domestic discipline” type of relationship, that it might be a novel concept if there were something domestic about them. He was pushing for them to live together. He knew that Lainie wasn't very happy with the condo she was in, and his suggestion was that they find another and buy it together. He knew how much she valued her independence, and they would be joint owners, with the stipulation that if something pulled them apart in the future, whoever wanted to keep the house would buy the other out of the mortgage. Zack was surprised to realize that he had no problems with the idea of selling his house and buying one with her. They would look in an area north of Atlanta, somewhere central to her district but not so far from Warner-Robbins that he couldn't make the commute. He also made sure that, of the two of them, he had the longer commute, since he was the one with the four-wheel drive vehicle.

He, for one, looked forward to the idea of being able to have her in his arms every evening, and over his lap whenever he deemed that she needed it. Zack hadn't quite made that jump to considering the idea of marriage, but he knew he would be quite content living with her – she'd certainly keep him on his toes, and he'd be able to keep tabs on her to make sure she didn't work herself into an early grave.

They found a marvelous condo that was just right, and Lainie was absolutely in love with, Zack or no Zack, she quipped. He didn't much care one way or the other, but he was very grateful when the whole moving process was over and they were finally settled in their new home. Zack – who truly was “anal to the max” - tried to impose some order on Lainie's scattered home life. For a woman who was organized to within an inch of her life at work, Lainie's personal affairs were a complete shambles, and she was the messiest person he'd ever met. When she had the time – which wasn't often – she was a great cook, but the kitchen looked like a bomb had gone off in it when she was through – every cupboard door hung open, flour was dusted over everything like snow, and the sink was a science experiment waiting to happen.

Zack tried gentle reminders, which she shrugged off. He had to appreciate the irony of their situation – again, they were taking the wrong roles for their genders; the woman was supposed to be the neatnik nag, not the man. But he had always been a fairly neat person, and his military training had only emphasized his natural tendencies. Lainie, however, had apparently never heard the expression “a place for everything and everything in its place.” The place for her clothes, however gorgeous they were, was either over the computer chair in the bedroom or on the floor. She left her slipper socks all over the house, and when Zack mentioned that he kept tripping over them, she sweetly suggested that he might want to try opening his eyes while he was walking. That got her “the look”, and, for about three days, she actually did pick them up instead of leaving them where they landed. Zack didn't want to spank her for everything, but he was coming to the end of his rope. Rapidly.

The straw that broke the Major's back was when he came home from being T*D*Y* for about five days. He came into the house late one night and didn't bother to look

around. His one-track mind was honing in on one thing and one thing only – his woman. She wasn't in the living room, or the den, the kitchen or the bathroom. Zack wasn't turning lights on as he went; he was in stealth mode and didn't paying attention to the condition the rooms were in. He found her in their bedroom, surgically attached to her computer, as usual.

Something made Lainie look up at the exact moment he entered the room, but as she jumped up, her big welcoming smile faded when she saw his expression of raw lust. Those eyes pinned her where she stood, showing such a fierce look of sensual promise, it was almost a threat. She had to stop herself from taking a step back as he stalked purposefully towards her, never once looking away. Instead her fingers convulsively clutched the lapel of her flowered terrycloth robe over her breastbone. It was frumpiness personified and hardly what she would have been wearing had she known he was going to be home. But then Zack had never needed any help in that area, and it didn't look like he was going to need any now, either.

He was in cammies, and what she had told him when they first met was definitely true: they were unbearably sexy, especially on him, and especially knowing without a doubt in her mind that she was going to end up beneath him on their big bed, helplessly full of him, body and mind.

Their lips met first in a hot, hard kiss while his hands loosened the belt of her robe, then slipped it off her shoulders. Her little baby dolls were no protection from him, not that she needed it, but he was looking so intense . . . each bold caress screamed possessiveness although he hadn't said a word to her.

Seconds later, she found herself on her back against the flowered comforter, staring up at him as he moved between her legs, the rough material of his BDUs scraping against her tender skin as his five o'clock shadow rasped over the erect tips of her breasts just before his mouth descended to suckle and soothe away one ache while creating another.

"Zack!" Oh, God, this man was too much for her to take! Even a year and a half later, all he had to do was walk through the door and she became no better than a cat in heat. Her body automatically readied itself for his intimate possession whenever he was within a twenty-mile radius. When he set his mouth anywhere on her body, she flew apart; not a coherent thought remained in her brain. All she could do is feel and moan and cry and plead with each hot, wet caress.

He arched back a little, reaching down to unbutton his fly and free himself from his underwear. Wrists caught next to her head, Lainie was helpless to stop him when Zack nestled the already weeping tip of his erection against her opening and drove himself home with a loud groan that was the first sound he'd made. Not that she wanted to prevent him from having her, far from it. But she did want to touch him and that made her struggle unsuccessfully against his hold. She realized quickly, though, that she wasn't going anywhere until he allowed it. He didn't seem to be much in the mood to indulge her.

Accepting him into her body gave her a moment's concern, wondering at her body's ability to accommodate his size. He still stretched her in an unbearably pleasant way

that made her catch her breath each and every time, and having her hands held out of the way only amplified the feelings of surrender and helplessness. Zack couldn't keep himself from plunging deep and hard immediately, pounding his hips into hers, demanding all of her and then some.

Still, he could feel her inner muscles gradually tensing around him, and he knew that, despite the strength of his thrusts, she was nearing her own peak. Tantalizing breasts bobbed with each movement until he captured a swollen tip, licking and suckling as Lainie arched beneath him and screamed, hips plunging so wildly that she sent him to his own reward.

While they remained connected, he rolled them onto their sides, holding her close and kissing the top of her head.

"Is this your way of saying you're not speaking to me?" Lainie asked. "You haven't said a word since you came storming through that door."

"Why wouldn't I be talking to you?"

"Who can tell; you're a man." Lainie shrugged as if his gender explained everything. "So, where'd you go?"

He gave the response that had become routine for them. "I can't tell you or I'd have to kill you."

"Oh."

"Have you been good while I was gone?" Zack inquired lazily.

She squirmed, and Zack tightened his arms to still her. "Define good."

"Didn't overdraw your account, didn't work too hard, stay up too late . . . you know the rules I set for you."

Lainie frowned. She knew them, every annoying, autocratic, unfair, impossible-not-to-break one of them, because he'd made her memorize them and recite them to him every night before bed for a week.

- 1) Reasonable bedtimes – no more than a half an hour later than he went to bed.
- 2) Clean up after yourself – that includes slipper socks.
- 3) Keep track of your checking account – no overdrawing.
- 4) No vulgarity.
- 5) No excessive overtime – no more than 10 hours a week.
- 6) Eat right – leftover cold pizza is not a decent breakfast

She also knew that if she didn't get up either now or before he woke up tomorrow morning and do some major cleaning up, she was going to get her first spanking. Damn him for being romantic enough to surprise her by coming home early!

"Uhhhhhhhhhh, mostly," she stalled, but, as she feared, he wasn't going to let her get away with that.

Zack would give her no more leeway, and would listen to no excuses regarding whatever she had done or not done. She knew what the consequences would be; she knew the rules. It was past time he started enforcing them.

"Lainie Marie." Soft but firm, making her squirm with guilt within the confines of his arms.

This accountability stuff was a lot harder than she expected! If she confessed to him, she knew she'd be getting a spanking. Chances are that he would discover the mess tomorrow morning, anyway, though. "Wellllllllllllllllllllll, the house could be a little neater, I suppose, if you're a Felix Unger like yourself," she sniffed.

The nightstand light snapped on, and he was out of the bed within second, taking a tour of the house while unconcernedly stark naked. Lainie was left feeling anxious and abandoned, and not a little scared when he returned looking like a pissed off thundercloud. "That kitchen is a disgrace, and the living room is not much better, Lainie Marie! There are slipper socks on the floor everywhere, and I could see a green overdrawn notice from your bank when I shuffled through the mail to see if there was anything important."

Zack sat down on the side of the bed, his lips a thin, angry line when he reached for her and took her over his lap with no preamble. She was naked; there were no pants or panties to remove, so he got right to the spanking, and didn't spare her one iota because it was her first time. Zack laid down the law like he knew he had to while delivering a scathing lecture throughout.

"The rules I made for you are not only to be obeyed while I'm here to enforce them, little girl, and you know that. Didn't I remind you of that just before I left?"

Lainie hoped that that was a rhetorical question, because she was too busy wiggling and squirming, trying to get away from the hot brand of his palm as it smacked her virgin bottom relentlessly.

"But you disregarded my rules, didn't you? You disobeyed me, and I will not tolerate it. Tomorrow morning, I am going to spank you again, and then you are going to clean up everything. You're going to give me all of the information regarding your checking account, and I'm going to balance it for you, again. And you are going to spend another week reciting your rules, with special emphasis on the bedtime rule, since you should have been in bed when I got home this evening, but you weren't, were you?"

He was going to spank her again tomorrow morning? She didn't think she was going to

be able to live through this spanking, much less another one tomorrow, on an already sore bottom! He was cruel and heartless, and she knew that she was going to be doubly humiliated – tears were already leaking out of her eyes and down onto the pretty pastel comforter, and he was showing no signs of stopping or even slowing.

Zack knew she was crying, and it tugged at his heart that he had to do this, that he had to punish her. But he knew this was what she needed, and he had to be strong enough to give her what she needed, even if she didn't want it at the time. Her naughty hand crept back in a vain attempt to protect herself, but he merely caught her wrist in his left hand and held it trapped against her back, never missing a beat.

And so he continued to blister her bottom while she cried and moaned with each searing stroke, until both lovely mounds were an even, angry shade of very bright red. When he finished, she was breathing ragged, choked sobs and breathless moans. He laid his hand deliberately over that hot, throbbing flesh. "Tomorrow morning, you will wake me up at seven, and you will be punished again. When that punishment is over, you will go and clean up that atrocious mess. If you do a half-hearted job of cleaning, I will spank you as many times as are necessary until it is clean."

Sonofabitch, he was way too damned good at this! Lainie thought. And strict! Dammit! Seven in the morning on a day off? That was almost worse than the spanking . . . she reconsidered that immediately. The pain in her bottom was not dissipating a bit, even though he was no longer spanking her.

"Do you understand me, Lainie?"

"Y-yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, S-sir."

"Good." Zack lifted her gently and tucked her into bed on her tummy, folding the sheet down so that it only reached the middle of her thighs. He couldn't seem to stop touching her, rubbing her back and stroking her hair. In truth, he was hard as a spike, but didn't figure she would be any too receptive. But Zack did understand – from his talks with Lainie and some research he'd conducted on his own on the Internet – the importance that forgiveness and comfort had in the whole process.

He soothed her with his hands and his voice, hearing her breathing slow and become more even.

"I-I'm sorry, Zack," she hiccupped, tearing up again.

Zack read the returning tenseness in her shoulders correctly and leaned over to kiss the top of her head. "I know you are, hon. Go to sleep now. It's way past your bedtime, and you have a lot to do tomorrow morning."

That first incident set the tone for their relationship; Zack took firm hand in dealing with Lainie and her workaholic, messy tendencies, and she spent many a night crying

herself to sleep, her nether cheeks red-hot and roasting well after her punishment was over. Zack comforted her, sometimes loving her through her tears to wring sobs of pleasure from her where moments earlier there had been moans of pain and frantic, futile struggles to avoid the searing caress of his harsh palm.

His consistency and dominant protectiveness seemed to settle her noticeably. Zack couldn't get enough of her; he'd never before been resentful of his job, but all of the time away from her annoyed him. Lainie tended to slip back into her old, naughty ways when not under his watchful, loving eye. He could feel himself falling in love, and found he didn't want to fight against it. It was the most natural thing in the world to love her; Lainie was everything he could ever want in a woman . . . however stubborn and sassy she could be sometimes. Zack was blessed to have a woman who was his match in every way, and he wanted badly to make it formal that she was his.

But he knew better than to even ask.

Lainie's girlfriends were all either already hitched or engaged, as were his friends. It seemed that every week a new invitation came in the mail, or someone was flashing a diamond ring under his nose. He had made the mistake once of asking her if she liked a mutual friend's three-stone, platinum set engagement ring, and was rewarded with the monotone statement, "I don't." Her face had gone completely blank, her back suddenly held in a rigid line.

"What do you like in an engagement ring?" he prompted, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind, but ready to duck if she took a swing at him, which she was likely to do.

Lainie started visibly, then wiggled away from him, repeating, "I don't."

Zack watched her walk into the kitchen, taking in her stiff, defensive stance. He wandered casually into the room behind her, leaning his shoulder against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. His eyebrow rose. "All of those rings in that jewelry armoire of yours and you don't like engagement rings?"

She was going about the business of making coffee – badly. Her hands were shaking so much she got more grounds on the counter than in the blasted basket. Why, all of a sudden, was he asking these questions? Had he forgotten that they were both just in this for the fun of it? "I have an engagement ring," Lainie ground out.

Zack frowned. He'd seen the big solitaire in platinum once when he was leaning over her shoulder and teasing her about how much jewelry she had. "Did you pick that out?"

"No," her voice was small. "He did."

"I know you don't have anything else that's platinum. Don't I remember you saying once that you don't like white gold or platinum – you prefer 14 karat yellow gold?"

Lainie swung around, settling her narrowed gaze on his carefully angelic features. "What I like or don't like in jewelry is none of your concern, Zachary. I buy my own

jewelry.”

Zack threw his hands up in the air. “Don’t shoot me, I’m just the insignificant other.”

“You’re a significant other who’s asking too many uncomfortable questions,” she said sharply. Lainie came to stand directly in front of him. “I don’t want an engagement ring, Zack, and you’re not supposed to want to buy me one, either, so don’t. You wouldn’t like the answer to the question it implies, so don’t ask it in the first place.”

Well, she had not softened in regards to the idea of marriage one iota. He concealed his disappointment and pulled her into his arms, holding and rocking her tightly, rubbing the tense muscles of her back. “Sh-sh-sh, baby. Don’t get all het up over nothing.” Zack grinned. “You’re acting like you’re worried that I’m going to pull a ring box out of my pocket and get down on one knee.”

Craning her head back to look up at him, Lainie gave him a considering look. “You mean you’re not going to?”

In answer, Zack turned his pants pockets inside out, then pushed his sleeves up his forearms. “Nothing up my sleeves, either,” he winked then reclaimed her. “You can relax, I promise.”

“Why does that not comfort me in the least?” she asked wryly, sinking into the heaven of his embrace.

Soulmates

Chapter 7 - Love Lost and Found

by Carolyn Faulkner

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Zack awoke early one Sunday and stretched from head to toe before rolling over to collect his woman back into his arms. Lainie was a very independent sleeper, and although they would fall asleep spoon-fashioned, she was always curled up on her own side of the bed by the morning. He was a naturally early-riser, and enjoyed needling Lainie about being a sleepyheaded nightowl. She could barely form a coherent thought until after ten, and he loved how soft and malleable she could be; Zack took full advantage of her vulnerability any time he could. Long Sunday mornings spent in each others arms were a favorite ritual.

But not this Sunday.

His lips settled on the exposed pulse in her neck, as if he was a vampire who intended to drain her body of its life-blood. Zack cuddled her closer, fitting every inch of her exposed skin to his as his greedy hands claimed her most intimate spots.

“Go ‘way,” Lainie mumbled, batting ineffectually at him, desperately trying to cling to the last vestiges of sleep as her lover just as desperately and inexorably drew her to consciousness with the promise of sensual delights.

In the cool pre-dawn air, a vulnerable, ripe pink nipple found itself encased between two soft wet lips that tugged avidly, building ache upon instantaneous ache.

“Never, Lainie hon.” The whispered vow was torn from deep in Zack’s heart as he slipped between her parted legs and presented his full morning erection at the entrance to her body. Lainie’s legs drew up and back, and that was all the invitation he needed to claim her by excruciating inches, teasing in and out, controlling the inevitable pleasure he knew she felt when his body stretched hers open to accommodate him.

Impatient as usual she reached up to him, catching her hands around the back of his neck, trying to pull him down onto and into her, to soothe that precious ache using his own rampant desire. But Zack would not allow it. Instead, he grabbed her hands and held them down next to her head as he adjusted his position to force her legs further apart, then stroked shallowly back and forth, over and over, making sure to rub against her clit before his inward descent, reveling in the uncontrolled responses of the writhing, panting woman beneath him.

Lainie was dying from the pleasure of it . . . and he was showing no signs of stopping. He hadn’t even claimed her fully yet, preferring to torment her into a frenzy. Zack knew exactly what turned her on the most, and used his knowledge to devastating effect.

“Zack, please!” she breathed on a long moan, arching mindlessly up to him like a fevered suppliant.

A deep, husky voice vibrated in her ear, making even the nerve endings there tingle. “What do you want, sweetheart?”

“You!” Lainie’s agonized pleasure forced her to draw out the syllable into a low growl.

A big self-satisfied smile spread over his sweat-dampened face. “Me?”

She could only find a small amount of satisfaction in the realization that he was panting almost as hard as she was. Struggling against his superior strength got her nowhere; she was helpless, forced to submit to her own pleasure at his pace.

Zack leaned forward to attack a nipple with his tongue, making Lainie arch so acutely that she nearly unseated him. “What do you want, Lainie Marie? Tell me.”

Impossibly, she blushed. It would never be easy for her to say the words he wanted the way he wanted them said. “Please, please, please, Zack!”

The other nipple felt the sharp sting of his incisors, then the warm comfort of his lips and tongue. “Tell me, and I’ll let you come.” He accented the offer with a hard thrust of his hips, keeping her at that unbearable edge.

Lainie renewed her efforts to free her hands, wanting to wreak the same pleasurable havoc on him as he was inflicting so evilly on her. But Zack merely waited her out, letting her exhaust herself while he kept her trapped beneath him.

Another sizzling foray into the wonderful, elusive heat that gave way and stretched with his advance then back out again. “Don’t you want to come, baby?” Zack cajoled, drinking in the heart-stopping sight of her on the edge of completion. Her eyes were wild, her body taut but helpless beneath him as her head whipped back and forth.

“Yessssssssss!”

In, in, in, in, almost but not quite all the way . . . only to withdraw seconds later and leave her still cruelly unsatisfied. “Tell me. What do you want me to do? Just ask, honey, and I’ll do it. The wait’ll be over.”

Oh, God, she couldn’t say it . . . but she had to say it to save her own sanity!

Finally, her body took over, giving her mind no choice but to surrender completely to him. “Fuck me, Zack, please!”

That first, frighteningly hard thrust hurled her into sensual oblivion, where he followed seconds later. Zack could feel her contracting around him, which extended his own pleasure. Finally, he collapsed onto her, releasing her arms so that he could cup her cheek in one hand as he buried his face in her neck, practically hyperventilating.

When he had recovered somewhat, he lifted his head and kissed her lips very, very gently. “Good morning, sunshine.”

For once, she didn’t grumble back at him. A small smile curved across her mouth. “Morning, Zack.”

“How do you feel?”

Lainie wiggled her rump, as if she were trying to burrow it further into the mattress, and yawned loudly. “After that? Sleepy.”

Zack kissed her on the forehead, then rolled off the bed. “Well, that little bit’ll have to hold you for a while. I’m leaving for a while and I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

She pulled the covers up over her, already missing his furnace-like warmth and rolled onto her side to face him. Comforters and blankets were nowhere near as much fun as cuddling within Zack’s strong arms and letting him warm her in his usual way.

Lainie watched him while he dressed; he was so routined, her man. Did everything the same way, every time . . . well, almost everything, she recanted with a satisfied shiver. Showered, shaved, combed what there was of his hair, dressed and out in under fifteen minutes.

For some reason, she couldn’t stop herself from whining, “Do you have to go?” hating herself all the while for even asking. Although she liked to think that her job was as important as his, making sure that enough of the latest best seller was on the shelves didn’t quite compare to defending the Free World.

Dressed except for his high black boots, Zack leaned over her, curving his arm around her head and playing absently with a curl. “You know I do,” his tone admonished lightly.

Lainie took a deep breath of spicy aftershave and man-scent that made the flesh between her legs clench. The sight of him in cammies always went right through her. He was so blasted masculine that it was impossible for the female in her not to respond to him. Her fingers trailed absently over the pocket flaps of his shirt. “I know, but you’re going away more and more lately . . .” she all but pouted.

Zack sighed heavily and sat on the edge of the bed, gathering her small body up against his. The rough material of his BDUs chafed her sensitive skin, but she pressed herself closer anyway, wanting to be close to him any way, any time she could. “Yeah, I am.” He sounded almost as reluctant as she felt. “But we’re at war, Lainie. My country calls and I’m gone. No questions asked. It’s what I do for a living.”

“And you can’t tell me where you’re going, of course,” resentfully. “Or when you’ll be back.”

Although his tone was flat and firm, he held her close. “No, I can’t.”

Lainie put her eyes against his neck and whispered, "Be safe." She hugged him with all of her strength.

Zack kissed the top of her head, then tilted her chin back and claimed her lips for a deep, lingering kiss, then levered himself off the bed. "I will. You keep the home fires burning, punkin'."

"Where? We don't own a fireplace," she returned smartly, fighting back tears for some reason and feeling that much sillier for it.

"You know what I mean," Zack frowned playfully down at her and gave her bottom a casual swat.

"Yes, Sir."

"That's my girl." He turned and walked out of the room, leaving the door open.

"Call me when you can!" Lainie yelled as an afterthought, already knowing that, if he could, he would.

"I will!" Zack yelled back, already stomped into his boots and tromping towards the door. "Love you! Bye!"

Lainie sat straight up in bed. Had he just said "I love you", the sneak?! She sprinted down the hall to the garage door, forcing her way into a babydoll nightie in case the nosey neighbors were around, but by the time she got there, he'd already backed out and driven away.

The melancholy that had begun when he'd announced he was going TDY again settled with a vengeance on her heart, weighing her lower lip down and making it tremble.

She never got the chance to tell him she loved him, too.

It was five days later when Charlotte came busting into the stock room, tears rolling down her cheeks, looking like she'd just met the end of the world. Lainie put down the inventory sheets she'd been going over and rushed up to hold the older woman. "Char, what's wrong?"

Charlotte could barely get it out around the force of her tears. "It's Zack."

Lainie's world stilled, along with her heart and her higher brain functions. "What about Zack?"

"His plane – it's disappeared."

She swallowed, forcing her stiff white lips to whisper the next words. "Is he dead?"

"We don't know; they won't tell us. All they'll say is that they were on a top secret mission and now they're gone."

The two women clung to each other as their safe, cozy world shattered around them.

Charlotte kept Lainie up-to-date about the information that the military was feeding family members, but, as she was not married to Zack, they would not be contacting her directly. “Significant others” didn’t count, as far as the government was concerned.

The plane had dropped out of sight over very rugged, Siberian terrain, in the middle of one of the worst blizzards in Russian history. Although the powers that be tried not to be too negative, they did not hold out a lot of hope to the relatives of the downed crew.

Lainie was shellshocked; she couldn’t imagine what Zack’s family must’ve been feeling – to say nothing of Zack himself. They all staunchly refused to admit to the fact that he was probably not alive. Lainie stayed somewhat sane by pushing that possibility way into the back of her mind. She only took it out and turned it over and over in her mind in the middle of the night, when she was alone and lonely in their big bed, in the stiflingly empty house that screamed of his touch everywhere, where his clothes still hung with that disgusting military neatness, and she could still roll over and smell his scent on the sheets. With a big, painful gulp she thought to herself one night in the midst of a crying jag that – if the worst did come true and he was forever beyond her reach – that she would never, ever, ever wash the sheets, because she would never be able to bear losing another part of him . . . his voice on the answering machine sounding all precise and intimidating . . . his handwriting on the compulsive lists he made and left all over the house . . .

It was nearly forty-eight hours after they were first notified that the plane had gone down when Charlotte got a call at home. Lainie had practically moved in with her, wanting to be there when and if word came in. Life had narrowed to a solemn vigil around the phone. Charlotte answered the call with all eyes on her.

“Yes, Col. Jenkins?” Although she appeared calm and collected, she couldn’t quite keep a tremulous note of hope from entering her voice.

Lainie rose instantly and walked over to stand next to her friend, silently taking her hand in comfort – as much for herself as for Charlotte.

Suddenly, Charlotte doubled over and began to sob uncontrollably. The rest of the family crowded around her, fearing the worst. Zack’s father, Carelton, took the phone from his daughter’s limp hand. “Col, this is Carelton Hardy, Zack’s father – “ The strong voice almost died out and tears welled in the faded blue eyes as he asked in a faint, disbelieving tone, “He’s alright? He’s okay?”

Finally, Charlotte drew a long, ragged breath and started shaking her head vehemently, as if she were afraid to believe what she’d heard. “They found the plane! They found it! He’s coming home!”

Pandemonium reigned for several long minutes after that wonderful announcement, with everyone in the family hugging everyone else, including Lainie. Feeling a little overwhelmed, she broke away and went to sit in the living room, her head in her hands, tears of agonizing relief streaming unheeded down her cheeks, but she wouldn’t truly believe it until she had him in her arms again. And although it couldn’t be soon enough

for her, she also knew that she likely would not be invited to the huge homecoming the military would throw for its returning soldiers. Charlotte and Carelton had already made mention of the fact that – if it had come to that – only immediate family members would be allowed to meet the coffin on whatever military base it returned to. Lainie – with her previous experience of things military – couldn't think that just because he was coming back alive that the guest list was going to be any different.

She felt a firm pat on her knee as Carelton flopped down onto the cushion next to her, red-eyed but busting with happiness, and pulled her into a big bear hug. "Buck up, Lainie-girl", he teased, sounding eerily like Zack. "This is a cause for celebration."

"I know."

Champagne was passed all around, and toasts were made to Zack, the Air Force, the good ole' US of A, and the Hardy family.

"Well, I guess we'd better get packing – he's coming into Dover AFB day after tomorrow." Carelton and Charlotte got up, then he looked back at a forlorn Lainie. "Get a move on, girl, you're coming with us!"

Lainie lifted her eyes to his, trying not to hope that she'd heard him correctly. "I didn't figure I would invited."

Charlotte stopped in the act of walking down the hall and turned to snort. "Did you really think Dad would let them exclude you? He's not Zack's father for nothin', you know!"

Lainie jumped up and whooped loudly, throwing her arms around the man who was, for all intents and purposes, the closest thing she had to a father-in-law. The older man hugged her back, then set her away from him, scolding, "You'd better save some of that for your man, honey."

"Don't you worry! When he comes back I don't intend to ever let him out of my sight!"

Two days later, the three of them were in a huge crush of military families waiting in a special area out on the tarmac of Dover AFB for the plane carrying their loved ones to arrive. All of the men were alive, some with minor injuries, some with more major problems, but everyone had and would survive. They had all been checked over at a base in Germany before the flight home. The media was there in droves, and there was a tent behind them for the more formal welcome home ceremonies, as well as a crowd of the top brass eager to shake everyone's hand, and hoards of well-wishers from the Base and the surrounding community.

When the plane actually landed, a huge cry arose from the anxious spectators. Hundreds of pairs of eyes watched every inch of its progress towards them, and everyone seemed to be holding their breath until the door of the plane burst open as a mobile staircase was rolled up to it.

An announcer blared the names of the crew, in order of rank, as they made their way down the steps to salute smartly and shake hands with the Base Commander, their Wing Commander from Warner-Robbins, the Secretary of the Air Force and the Secretary of Defense.

The formalities having been dispensed with, the crew members were then free to walk the short distance away to accept the enthusiastic, overwhelming greetings of their families, who, forgetting all decorum entirely, much less staunch military policy, ran to embrace the men and women they had almost accepted as lost forever.

Zack's name was called fifth. Overcome by a sudden, uncharacteristic shyness, Lainie hung back just enough to let Charlotte and Carelton run ahead of her. She had to grin, though, when Charlotte launched herself unselfconsciously at her younger brother and clung like a watery limpet while kissing his cheek affectionately. Zack clutched her tightly to him, then set her down gently to hug his father with the same unabashed affection.

The two of them fell back as he looked past them and took several steps towards his woman. Zack held his arms out to her, and she ran stumbling towards him, blinded by tears and so full of love for this man that it was a painful lump in her chest that just kept expanding until she thought she would die of it. But then his arms closed around her, comfortingly, protectively, tightening and lifting until she was lifted off her feet, leaning securely against his welcoming bulk, and all was right in their world.

Lainie pressed her face into the side of his neck, inhaling the warm, spicy, dearly familiar scent of him, wanting to burrow into him and never let go.

Zack sighed, loving the feel of her up against him where she belonged. "Ah, Sunshine, I missed you!"

Lainie was so overcome she couldn't speak for sobbing, but he felt her head nodding enthusiastically back and forth. With an indulgent chuckle, Zack put her back on her feet but Lainie wasn't having any of it; she didn't want to let him go and kept trying to crawl back into his arms. He finally caught one of her hands in his and kissed her, hard, then drew back only enough to fish his right hand into the pocket of his flight suit.

She couldn't seem to get enough of him – Lainie wanted to touch him and devour him with her eyes and her hands . . . But Zack grabbed ahold of her shoulders to get her attention. "Lainie?"

Tears still streaming down her face, she answered anxiously, "Yes?"

At first she couldn't understand why he was suddenly three feet shorter; Lainie thought he might have been injured and his leg couldn't hold him up, but then he put a gray velvet ring box under her nose and popped it open and she realized that he was down on one knee.

"Lainie Stewart, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

Those eleven words, spoken in his deep, husky voice, drifted into her mind and floated around for weightless seconds, long enough that she could feel hundreds of pairs of eyes focusing on her.

In answer, she bent and kissed him gently, sweetly, leaving him wanting more – much more – as usual. Lainie made Zack get up, then took the ring out of the box and handed it to him, so that he could put it on her finger.

When they embraced, a huge roar rose up from the crowd as everyone applauded her decision. Zack bent and lifted her into his arms, kissing her the whole way back to the grandstand in front of his family, the top brass, God, and everyone.