

ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*

**J.R.
PATRICK**

SLOW
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ELLORA'S CAVE

Slow Burn

J.R. Patrick

Zach is too hot for words but Marc has no intention of falling for his sexy coworker – no matter how many of Marc’s explicit dreams Zach stars in. With only a few months left of his stay in Germany, Marc doesn’t dare risk his heart with the beautiful man. But a train ride gone wrong changes everything when Zach comes to his rescue, melting Marc’s resistance in the process.

Zach’s patience has paid off. But now that the reserved scientist has turned up the heat from simmer to sizzle, four months won’t cut it. No. Zach wants forever. Will their chemistry be enough?

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Slow Burn

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SLOW BURN

J.R. Patrick

Dedication

For Jambrea. There are not enough nice words to thank you for being all that you are.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Bruker: Bruker-Physik AG.

HBO: Home Box Office, Inc.

Chapter One

“Nächster halt, Hauptbahnhof...”

Marcus Stuart’s head popped up at the unscheduled announcement. He knew that translated to “next stop, Main Station”, which didn’t bode well for him because that meant the train was bypassing his stop entirely.

He didn’t understand a lot of German. And that might have been bragging a little. Pathetic as it may seem, after eight months living in Stuttgart, he barely understood more than “good day” and “thank you”. From taking the train on his regular trips to the grocery store and rare trips downtown, the prerecorded announcements made before each stop had burrowed their way into his brain. Unfortunately, that knowledge didn’t help when the train operator spoke instead.

Marcus sighed in frustration as the man continued. There had been another garbled announcement before the previous stop, *Vaihingen bahnhof*, but since there had been no mass exodus of passengers, he’d figured he was safe. Clearly he’d miscalculated.

He risked a glance at the woman reading in the opposite seat. He usually struggled in silence rather than bother strangers, aware of how atrocious his limited, Boston-accented *Deutsch* must sound to locals. But this was an emergency.

“Uh... Entschuldigen Sie bitte?”

The lady looked up.

He cleared his throat. *“Sprechen Sie Englisch?”*

“Ja, a little.” The woman motioned with her thumb and index finger.

Thank God. “Can you tell me what he just said?” He indicated the speakers.

“There is accident... Train take other track and go to Hauptbahnhof, then Schorndorf.”

Well, shit. If he had understood the first announcement, he would have gotten off at *Vaihingen*. The university was two stops from there and he could have easily hopped another train. Now he had to go all the way downtown and take another train back to *Universität*.

"Danke." He thanked the lady. If only he'd asked her to translate earlier. *Dammit.*

"Bitte," she replied with a sympathetic smile and returned to her paperback.

When they finally arrived at Main Station, Marcus hurried from the car but pulled up when he realized nothing looked familiar. Different track equals different platform. *Duh.* He scanned the overhead screens for the S1, S2 and S3 lines—any would get him home. Platform 101. *Fantastic.* Now he had to find it.

With all manner of local, regional and long-distance lines, Main Station was a sea of travelers. And it was rush hour on the Friday of a holiday weekend. Chaos. Marcus squeezed his way through the crush.

After several minutes of shuffling around like a chicken with its head cut off, he stopped and took a deep breath. Visitors traversed the station every day. It couldn't be that hard. He had to focus, think logically. He was a scientist for heaven's sake. This should be a piece of cake. He hadn't found it on this level, which left downstairs. And the few times he'd been to Main Station, he'd had to go up to get to street level. *Of course.*

He descended the nearest set of stairs and came to the elusive platform 101. *Victory!* Except the display screen read *"Bitte Ansage beachten!"* instead of the direction of the scheduled train. He didn't know what that meant or what the voice coming over the loudspeaker was saying either. *Fuck.* Were the S trains done running altogether for the day? He hoped not. Taking a U train wouldn't get him home and he'd never taken the bus to campus before.

"Argh," he groaned, disgusted with himself and more than a little panicked. If he'd taken a language course back in the States—like any normal person planning to work in a foreign country—he wouldn't be in this position now. But he was only in Stuttgart for

a year-long project and his coworkers in the department all spoke enough English that he had no problems making himself understood or vice versa. He'd made it without incident up until now.

"Need some help, Doc?"

Shoot. Marcus looked up into the silver-gray eyes of the pierced and tattooed slice of sex that was Zachary Fischer. About two inches taller than his own six feet, with sun-kissed skin and a huge cloud of black curly hair, Zachary defined temptation. Temptation he'd managed to resist. So far.

What were the odds Zach would be his savior? He breathed a sigh of relief anyway. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you."

Zach smiled and his tongue peeked out, outlining those plump lips languidly. "Care to show me, Doc?"

The crowd in the station all but melted away. He stroked off to visions of what Zach's mouth might do to various parts of his anatomy. Every night. Those lips left not an inch of his skin untouched. Zach usually started at his forehead with light kisses, increasing in intensity as he worked his way down Marcus' body. There were nips at his neck, suckled nipples, sometimes a tongue dipped into his navel, bites to the sensitive area at the back of his knees, nibbled toes, and finally, that mouth on his uncut cock.

Zach would engulf him with just the right amount of suction. Ever so slowly, he'd work the foreskin down, exposing the ultrasensitive head to his rough tongue, and then continue the suction. Exquisite. Torture. He'd pause, poking the tip of his tongue into the slit before he returned his focus to the bare crown, concentrating on the swelled-to-capacity area until Marcus begged for him to take more. And he would, swallowing Marcus to the root and humming until Marcus shot into his throat. The man would gulp him down and then lick his lips as if he'd had the best drink ever. So hot.

Marcus fought his body's instinctive reaction to Zach's suggestive words combined with his own lurid fantasies. He should have been used to his response to Zach by now but he wasn't. The man got to him every time.

"No," he snapped.

Zach's smile dropped. "*Kein Problem.*" He turned and headed toward the opposite end of the platform.

Dammit. The "no" hadn't been in answer to Zach's question. It had been Marcus' attempt to marshal his dubious control.

He wrestled the inappropriate thoughts into a vault in the recesses of his mind and slammed the door, locking them in securely.

"Zach, wait a sec!" Fucking faulty lock.

Zach doubled back, a wicked grin replacing the hurt look Marcus had glimpsed.

"A sec," Marcus stammered, mortified. "I meant, wait a sec." A blush wouldn't show on his dark skin but he knew his embarrassment was clear all the same. What had he been thinking? Right. *That* was the problem!

"For once, Doc, I suspect you said exactly what you meant."

Rumbling on the tracks signaled the oncoming train. He didn't care if this one skipped his stop too. He had to escape before he made more of an ass of himself. Or shoved his tongue down Zach's throat. The two weren't necessarily mutually exclusive.

When all else fails, avoid like hell. "Do you know if this train will make its regular stops? The S1 came straight here after *Vaihingen.*"

"Yup. We're good to go."

We. Zach must be heading for the university too. No reprieve. *Shit.*

Marcus joined the passengers squeezing into the car. The aisles usually stood empty even at peak times, but maybe others had missed their stop as well. Then again, he was fairly certain he was the only monolingual ass living in a country where the official

language was not his own. It was more likely that the accident the lady mentioned had delayed the trains leaving the station.

He nabbed a spot in a doorway on the right—his exit would be on that side. Zach joined him, his front pressed up to Marcus' back. Marcus closed his eyes and savored the moment.

Had anything ever felt this good?

Marcus took a deep breath. Even in a crowd of end-of-a-long-day-smelling people, Zach's fresh citrus scent suffused his consciousness. The reality of his dream lover touching him filled Marcus with heat.

"We fit, Doc," Zach whispered into his ear.

Marcus couldn't suppress a shiver. And the feel of Zach hardening against his ass provoked another one.

"Why do you keep fighting this when you obviously want me? Hmm?" Zach asked softly, nuzzling his ear.

No way could he respond without someone overhearing. And if he chose to answer, the truth—that he wasn't capable of casual sex—physically, yes but emotionally, hell no—would put off the even most persistent man.

But isn't that what you want?

No, Marcus answered the internal nudge honestly. He had to remind himself constantly why sleeping with Zach was a bad idea. He'd never been able to just hook up. His heart always caught up to the lust and quickly bypassed it. When he and his lover parted ways, he invariably lost a piece of the vital organ. He'd only be in Stuttgart for a year total, so there could be no future with anyone.

Knowing was half the battle.

When Marcus had started at the chemistry institute, Zach—a technician there—had been his go-to person for chemicals, apparatus, instrument issues, well...everything really. The younger man clearly took pride in his job and eagerly assisted anyone who

asked. After the initial settling-in period, Marcus found himself happy when he had a problem so he would have a reason to approach Zach.

He'd tried to hide his attraction, but he must have done a poor job of it because Zach started flirting with him. Marcus pretended to be oblivious, all the while fighting the urge to flirt back. He avoided being alone with Zach and that had helped, but there had been a few instances when he couldn't stop himself.

That's when he'd known losing the war wasn't just possible but highly probable.

Their stop was next. *Yes!*

Marcus practically flew out of the doors when they slid open. They'd been the only ones to get off and the platform was devoid of people. Marcus walked briskly to the escalator but Zach's long legs ensured that he didn't get very far ahead.

"You planning on answering me, Doc?"

Oh, what the hell. He'd been stoking the flame of his own desire, which was threatening to become a bonfire, for too long. While great fuel for his fantasies, flirting back had been unfair to Zach when Marcus knew he wouldn't follow through. He drew to a halt and turned to face Zach.

"I'm not going to have sex with you. Sorry for blowing hot and cold but there, that's it. No."

Zach smiled.

Huh?

"I hear your words, but your eyes are saying, 'Take me back to my room and fuck me, Zach.'"

His cock had never filled so fast. Marcus whirled away from Zach, intent on hiding the damning evidence. He was going home. *Alone.*

Before he could take a step, Zach gripped his arms lightly from behind.

"I see another body part agrees with those gorgeous dark chocolate eyes,"

Marcus sighed. What did he have to do to catch a break today? He pulled out of Zach's grasp and turned to face the taller man.

"Yes. I want you. Is that what you want to hear? I want you to suck me, stroke me, fucking *do* me in all the positions you could imagine, but you know what? I'm not controlled by my dick, so we're not going to do any of that. Why? Because it won't be enough. I'll want more than sex and even if you were willing to give me more, I'll be done here in four months. I'll be going to God knows where, so what would be the point? To get off? I can do that by myself. The no doubt phenomenal sex is not worth the inevitable heartache. So let's continue to be just friends, yeah?"

"No doubt."

"What?" Zach had lost him.

"The sex would be phenomenal," Zach replied before he held Marcus' face and kissed him. And what a kiss. Marcus tasted the citrus he'd smelled before and something else that he couldn't identify. Something uniquely Zachary.

Zach explored his mouth leisurely, and Marcus felt every pass of his tongue down to his toes. *What was wrong with just getting off again?*

Zach ended the kiss and said softly, "My heart would be at risk too, Doc." With that, he hopped another train that Marcus hadn't heard arrive.

Hot. Damn.

* * * * *

Marcus dumped yet another piece of broken glassware into the bin. At this rate, forget four months, he'd exhaust the rest of the project funds in a week. It was Tuesday afternoon and he couldn't concentrate on work worth a damn. His body went through the motions but his mind remained fixed firmly on Zach—as it had all weekend.

He usually relished working on weekends. More often than not, the institute was deserted and he made more headway without the distractions of staff and students. And Zach.

He couldn't stop thinking about their only kiss. How could something so simple affect him so much? Marcus wasn't a cock hound, but he wasn't inexperienced either, so his reaction baffled him. Since his control seemed to have evaporated, he'd confined himself to his lab today—no sense testing his shaky resolve. He planned to use the presence of others to buffer any future contact with Zach.

Yeah, that had worked out so well on the train. Fuck.

He took a seat at his desk and gathered the stack of results he'd been compiling for a while. Now was as good a time as any to update his lab book. Attempting more bench work would lead to disaster.

"I prefer the geometrical shapes. Daisies are so gay," Zach said, his voice rich with laughter.

Marcus looked down at the sheet and realized he'd spent the last hour—two?—doodling Zach's name. Did real men doodle? Jeez. He even had a nice equation—Marcus plus Zach gives Sexathon. He closed the lab book and wondered about the possibility of spontaneous combustion. If ever it were going to happen, now would be the time.

Nope. Nothing doing.

He struggled to find something to say that would salvage the situation, make him look like less of a contrary, sex-starved fool. But the longer the silence, the faster coherent thought deserted him.

"What's the matter, Doc? Dick got your tongue?"

Marcus pushed back his chair and stood. He was going to do this. If he didn't have the smartass technician inside him soon, he'd die.

He reached over the desk and closed the shades on the bank of windows to the campus below. "Are the others gone?" he asked as he walked past where Zach leaned against the counter.

"Uh...yeah." Zach sounded puzzled.

Marcus propped a stool under the door handle—for safety reasons, the rooms couldn't be locked from the inside. He flicked the light switch to off and returned to Zach, who had one pierced eyebrow raised, the tiny barbell winking in the soft glow of the lone security light.

"You got lubrication and protection in that backpack?"

Zach actually blushed. "How do I answer that without sounding like a slut?"

Marcus traced the rings of the atom tat below Zach's ear with his finger. "I don't know, but I'd pick the answer that lets you in me when I bare my ass and bend over that desk."

Chapter Two

No. Way.

No way had Marc said what Zach thought he had. He carried a few packets of lube and condoms in the inner pocket of his backpack on the off chance that someday, *maybe*, the doc would give in to the attraction between them. Not that he'd expected anything to happen at work, but Marc lived on campus. Zach knew the man hadn't been seeing anyone in the time he'd been there, and he'd wanted to be prepared if Marc invited him over.

When Marc hadn't come downstairs to Zach's lab all day, he figured he'd gone too far with the quietly sexy scientist on Friday and Marc was avoiding him. But the opportunity to touch Marc had been impossible to resist. Months of longing for more than friendly conversation and light flirting had snapped the leash that usually kept his desire reined in.

He'd told himself he had to respect Marc's decision and move on. Zach had come upstairs to let Marc know just that when he'd found the man engrossed in work. Or so it had appeared. When Zach had realized *he* was the focus of Marc's thoughts, so much so that Marc hadn't noticed him enter the room, his good intentions had dissolved.

Now that the moment he'd been hoping for was here, he found he didn't want it. Well, not like this.

"You still with me, Zach?"

"Definitely. But let's slow things down a little." He hid a grin at the surprise and frustration on Marc's face. After waiting for the better part of a year, sneaking a fuck in the lab was not good enough. Their first time needed to be...thorough. It had to be so good Marc wouldn't dream of backing away from him after.

"The only way we could have moved slower is if we hadn't met at all," Marc muttered.

"Hey! You were the rate-determining step for that phase of our relationship, Doc. But now that we're to this stage, I'm the limiting reagent."

Marc moaned. "You're talking chemistry to me? Christ, Zach! You *have* to fuck me now. Or switch to physics. I hate physics."

Zach chuckled. He couldn't help it. The horny side of Marc was hilarious. *Who knew?*

He got his laughter under control. That Marc was finally willing to move past friendship sobered him as nothing else could.

"How about we make out instead?" Perching on the edge of the low counter, Zach opened his legs and pulled the slightly shorter man into the V created by his thighs. This way, they lined up perfectly.

"God yes," Marc breathed before he devoured Zach's mouth. Then he worked Zach's button-down shirt out of his jeans and Zach felt hands, broad and warm, creep under the shirt up his back. *Heaven.*

He melted into Marc's kiss, which was so much sweeter than the one at the train station for the simple fact that it wasn't stolen.

Marc caressed his way around to Zach's chest and tugged gently at his nipple rings before breaking the kiss. "Saw the imprint of these through your shirt one day. Been dying to see them, feel them, suck them ever since. Can I?"

"Hell yes. To all of the above."

Marc wasted no time in ridding him of his shirt, but then he paused. Zach looked down to see what had captured Marc's attention.

"I think I'm in love. You've changed your mind about going slow, right?" Marc squeaked.

"Doc—"

"Say yes, Zach. I refuse to be held responsible for my actions if you don't."

"You understand what the tat says?" he asked, incredulous. He always had to explain what it meant to others, probably because unless you were in that field, it looked like gibberish. To be fair, it wasn't exactly obvious. Even his friends at the institute had been clueless when they had seen him shirtless at one of their football games after he'd first had the tat done.

The design stretched across the width of his torso, starting on the left with ^1H and ^{13}C . To the right of those symbols lay two chemical structures of diamond, and the whole thing fit into a six-inch high strip. Zach had gotten it as a master's student when he'd fallen in love with nuclear magnetic resonance and its applications. NMR was his first love, but he didn't get to work with the instrument because the institute already had a tech solely for that purpose.

Marc traced the symbols with his forefinger, almost reverently. "Of course I do. It says 'NMR rocks'."

Zach couldn't hold back his grin. They were perfect for each other.

So it was just a tattoo, but damn if Marc knowing what it read didn't feel as if the last puzzle piece had fit into place. Zach took a deep breath. He was finding it hard to follow his own go-slow edict.

He buttoned his shirt and slid off the counter. "Pack up your stuff, Doc. I'll walk you to your room and maybe we'll both cool down on the way." He gave Marc a quick kiss on the lips. "I know Marcus the chemist, but I want to get to know Marcus the man before we go any further."

Marc sighed. "Nothing wrong with doing both at the same time, is there?"

"Remember when you told me you would want more than sex if we did this?"

"Vaguely."

Zach chuckled. "Behave."

Marc pouted. "Fine. I remember."

"I wasn't kidding when I said my heart would be involved. I don't want a fuck-buddy. I want a relationship with you."

"Why do you sound more American than me?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Fuck-buddy is a universal term."

"Really?" Marc frowned. "I don't think so."

"Stop trying to distract me, Doc. You got everything? Let's walk and talk."

"There! You did it again. And you don't miss words like 'the' and 'a' or mess up subject and verb agreement. What's up with that?" Marc asked as they left the lab.

He'd wanted to take time to get to know Marc better but Marc wanting to learn more about him gave him a thrill. "I was born in *Deutschland* and my dad is German but my mom is African-American. Growing up, my mom spoke to me in English exclusively, while my dad only spoke to me in German. Weird, but it worked to make me not only fluent in both languages, but I also never miss the nuances that someone learning either as a second language would."

He grinned. "I also watch a lot of HBO."

Marc laughed. "I was wondering when fuck-buddy would have come up in conversation with your mom, but I wasn't about to go there. What language do you think in?"

Zach paused in surprise. "I've never been asked that. I guess it depends on who I'm with. If I'm talking to an English-speaker for an extended period, like now, my brain automatically switches to English, but usually it's German."

He resumed walking, but slowly. The block of one-room apartments that included Marc's was coming up way too fast.

"This is fascinating. *You* are fascinating. So what do you want to know about me?" Marc asked.

He smiled. "That's easy. Everything."

"I can't share everything in the two minutes it'll take for us to reach my room. Ask me something that will satisfy the 'get to know Marcus the man' threshold so we can have sex, please. Because I'm jumping you as soon as I open my door."

Zach tripped over his own feet but caught himself before he fell. Why had he thought they'd tabled sex? Talk about single-minded. Marc was a fucking steamroller when he'd decided on a course.

"Doc, I don't only want sex with you. You get that, right?"

"Um-hmm."

Did he imagine it or had Marc sped up?

"Marcus!" Zach tried to sound serious but his body was saying, "Sex! Now!" while his mind was warning him to discuss what they both wanted from this relationship first. Could he even call it a relationship yet?

Marc opened the door to his room and dragged Zach inside. He locked the door before toeing off his boots. Marc's pants and shirt quickly followed.

Smooth skin the color of mocha filled Zach's vision. Well-defined abs topped a beautiful uncut cock. God, the man was hot.

"More than sex. I agree. Do me, now?" Marc pleaded.

"Fuck yeah." Zach dug into his pack for the condoms and the lube. Screw talking.

"On the bed," Zach ordered. His clothes joined Marc's on the floor.

Marc did as instructed but went a step further. He positioned himself on all fours, presenting his ass.

Zach sucked in a breath at the sight of Marc's bare hole exposed. "You get waxed, Doc?" he choked out.

"No, but I shave every day. I like how smooth my skin feels this way." Marc wiggled his ass. "You ready for me?"

Marc couldn't be more appealing. It took everything in Zach for him to pull back. "Turn over." He knew he sounded hoarse, but he needed to sink into Marc like he needed to breathe. Resisting the urge was killing him.

"Oh! You want it that way." Marc complied quickly. Then the doc raised his legs, hands gripping his ankles in the sexiest display Zach had ever seen. "That's fine. I'll take it whatever way you want. Need you in me. Doesn't matter how."

Ohgodohgodohgod.

Zach closed his eyes. He had to hold on to his control. *Thorough, remember?* He could keep his head.

"Slow your roll, Doc. There's this thing called foreplay we're going to do first."

"What?" Marcus wailed and his legs dropped to the bed, bouncing when they landed. "We've been doing that for most of the year. Don't tease me, Zach. Fuck me now or go."

"If that's what you want." Zach turned and bent to retrieve his clothes. They were going to do this his way or not at all. He was not settling for a quickie. "I'll see you at work tom—"

The air rushed from his lungs at the tackle. Zach fell to the floor with Marc clinging to his back.

"You can't leave!"

He heaved the smaller man off him and shifted so he straddled Marc's thighs.

"Make up your mind, Doc."

"You've been pushing me to this point forever! How can you stand to wait now?" Marc asked.

Zach's resolve to draw things out strengthened at the other man's question. Marc had finally admitted to wanting him and Zach was determined to make this encounter unforgettable. "I want this. So fucking much not plunging into your sweet ass now is taking all of my concentration. But I want our first time to be more than a rush to get

off." He leaned down and brushed a kiss over Marc's lips. "So...wanna give me the chance to show you?"

"Yes," Marc answered softly. "What do you want me to do?"

Zach stood and held out his hand to help Marc up. "Lie on the bed, baby. And reach both hands above your head." Marc's brow wrinkled in puzzlement but he did as directed. Zach undid the tiebacks from the drapes at the window above the bed and secured Marc's hands.

"Now let me lov—" he caught himself. Hoping Marc hadn't noticed the slip, he covered, "Let's see if I can make you burn."

* * * * *

Marcus was not going to last.

Earlier, in the lab, he'd concluded that if he was very careful, he could leave his heart out of the equation. It might have been a split-second decision, but there was no reason why this sexual relationship couldn't be different from the few before it. It already was. He wanted Zach more than he'd ever wanted anyone.

Once he'd made up his mind, his—previously undiscovered—inner slut had burst free. He'd tried but he couldn't seem to tamp down the beast. He'd been begging the man to fuck him for chrissake, but a bare-chested Zach had been incredible to see. And the tats and the nipple rings. *Jesus*.

Now Zach was naked and doing things with his tongue that left Marc's fantasies in the dust. The sensation of Zach's mouth on his body had him twitching in pleasure. Had he really been depriving himself of this? *Fuck*. And he'd never imagined being restrained. The inability to touch Zach somehow ramped up the need to do just that.

Zach's tongue grazed Marc's nipple and his balls clenched in response, ecstasy swamping him. He tried not to come—it was far too soon—but there was no holding it back. Marcus shot. He basked in the pleasure for a moment before shame took over.

Marcus opened his eyes to see his cum bathing Zach's chest and his own. He refused to raise his gaze past Zach's torso, his embarrassment a live thing. He needed to escape but there was nowhere to go in the one-room apartment except the bathroom.

"Sorry. Uh...I'll get you a towel," he mumbled. Marcus made to leave the bed but he'd forgotten that his hands were tied. *Shit.*

He mustered a smile even though he wanted to disappear. "So much for going slow, huh? Untie me please?"

"Look at me, Doc."

He couldn't. What must Zach think of him?

The other man held his chin and raised his face. Marc slammed his eyes shut in defense. So what if it was a tactic a child would use? Things couldn't deteriorate more.

Zach sighed and let go of his chin. Marcus felt the ties loosen but Zach gripped his hands.

"Fine. Keep your eyes closed but you have nothing to be embarrassed about. If you would look at me, you would know I'm telling you the truth. I'm flattered I had such an effect on you.

Marcus risked a peek and found Zach staring at him, a pleased expression on his face.

"Really?"

"I wouldn't lie to you. Besides," Zach gave him a wicked grin, "we have all night for you to return the favor. And then I'll make you come again and you'll make me come again and then maybe we'll come together and—" Zach interrupted himself. "See where I'm going with this?"

Marcus released a mental sigh of relief. Zach wasn't turned-off. *Wait a minute. All night?* His eyes popped open. Did he want that? Wouldn't sleeping and waking up together be too intimate?

"If you'll have me. Didn't mean to assume..." Zach hesitated.

"No, it's okay," Marcus rushed to reassure him. Zach must have seen the panic on his face. It would be all right. He could deal. Heart secured behind reinforced steel doors and guard wall? Check.

"All night sounds great. I'll grab you that towel and I should clean up."

"How about we shower together?" Zach's gaze seared him. "Get that pattern I mentioned going?"

Marcus needed a moment to regroup, double-check that the wall was high enough. There was no room for error. "Well, the stall's kinda small..."

Zach's brow furrowed but he answered, "*Alles klar*. I'll shower when you're done."

"Cool."

Marcus slipped into the bathroom and closed the door. Leaning back, he refrained from banging his head against it. *Shit*. Zach must think he was blowing hot and cold again but he wasn't. Okay, he was, but he needed a moment.

Marcus took a deep breath and opened the door. He nearly struck Zach on the knuckles.

"Join—" he started.

"I'm going to—" Zach spoke at the same time.

"Go ahead," Marcus offered. He noticed the other man was dressed.

"You seem to be regretting what's happened so far and that's the last thing I wanted, so I'm going head out," Zach said.

Marcus pulled Zach to him. "Sorry about before." He snuck a kiss. "I really want you to stay the night like you suggested. The stall *is* small but I want you in there with me. What do you say?"

"Are you sure? This thing between us is hard enough without all these mixed signals. I mean, I've been pursuing you for months but only because I was sure you wanted me, too, despite you holding me at arm's length." Zach's eyes widened in horror and he wrenched away. "Fuck! I've been stalking you, haven't I? Projecting my

wants and needs on you. Ohmigod.” Zach backed away and turned, grabbing the doorknob.

Marcus snapped his fingers. “Hey! Come back from wherever you went in your head to give you that idea.” He pulled Zach away from the exit and looked into eyes that broadcast misery. “I’m the man that just came all over you from a few caresses. And you hadn’t even touched my dick. That was from *my* needing, *my* wanting *you*.”

Relief replaced the pain in Zach’s eyes and Marcus breathed easier. Crisis averted.

“Now let’s get nekkid and slippery and I’ll even the score.”

Zach grinned and stripped hurriedly, tossing clothes behind him. He released his thick hair from its bushy ponytail and wove it into a long, fat braid before pinning it up with a pencil he took from the desk. He must have noticed Marcus’ puzzled look because he said, “If this gets wet, I’ll look like a troll for work tomorrow. I can only drag a comb through it if I use a special shampoo.”

“Ah. That’s one of the many reasons my head is bald. I don’t think they’ve invented the shampoo yet that would let me comb my hair if I grew it out.” Marcus chuckled.

“Bald is sexy...especially down here,” Zach added and he smoothed a hand over Marcus’ groin.

Marcus stepped out of reach of those wandering hands. “Nuh-uh. Don’t you get me started again. Didn’t you hear what I told you before? It’s your turn.”

He entered the three-foot-square shower area and Zach followed him. The only thing making their shower duet a possibility was that instead of a glass enclosure, there was a curtain preventing the water from wetting the bathroom floor.

“You weren’t kidding when you said this was small. If we both raise our arms, it’ll take the fire department to extricate us.”

Marcus laughed and turned on the spray. “We’ll manage. Now come here.”

“Yes sir.”

"Turn to the wall," Marcus instructed, taking Zach's cheeky response at face value and assuming control. The water hitting his spine, Marcus shifted so some of the spray fell on Zach as he soaped his hands.

Moving back under the water, he massaged the lather behind Zach's ears and worked his way down the golden skin of the man's back. Marcus bypassed Zach's enticing ass and dropped to his knees.

"Lift your foot." He washed between the toes on Zach's right foot when he complied. "Now the left."

Finished with Zach's feet, Marcus caressed the foam into his calves and up past the back of his thighs to his butt. Again, he ignored it. Standing, he whipped up a generous lather and reached around the man to grip his hard cock. Marcus stroked slowly and then increased the pace, trying to get a feel for what Zach liked.

Zach moaned. "So good. About a hundred times better than when I do this myself."

He established a steady rhythm and Zach's breathing grew labored as he gasped his pleasure. Marcus was finding it hard to catch his breath himself, the noises Zach made turning him on even more.

With his free hand, he probed Zach's hole carefully with one soapy finger. He found what he was looking for and inserted another finger, massaging Zach's prostate. The other man cried out as he fucked himself onto Marcus' fingers, his movements erratic.

Marcus' cock ached he was so hard. Zach's obvious enjoyment electrified him. He was responsible for making this man whimper in ecstasy. God, that felt good.

Zach screamed his name as he painted the tiles with cum. Marcus pressed a kiss to Zach's neck and whispered, "I still have to wash your front." He caught the man when his knees buckled.

Zach got to his feet and rested his hands on the wall, laughing weakly. "Give me the soap and I'll finish up myself or we'll never get out of here. I've got plans for that bed and they don't include sleeping."

Marcus moaned. "I can't wait." He washed quickly and left the bathroom. He pulled on a pair of boxers before slipping back in to leave a towel on the rack for Zach.

Ignoring his throbbing cock, Marcus headed to the kitchenette. His stomach was gnawing at him and it probably had been for a while, but he'd been so completely focused on the sexy man in his shower he hadn't noticed. Zach had to be hungry too. Turkey sandwiches should hit the spot. Light, quick and easy.

He'd finished putting together two sandwiches apiece when Zach came out, towel wrapped around his waist, water droplets clinging to the dusting of hair on his chest. Marcus' mouth dried up. It was all he could do not to jump the delicious-looking man, to hell with the food.

"Oh, thank God. I'm starving."

"Me too."

Zach gripped his bottom lip with his teeth. "Why do I get the feeling you're not talking about food?"

"Because you're smart as well as hot?"

"Nice try but feed me. I need fuel if we're going to fuck like bunnies."

Marcus passed the food and Zach wolfed down his two sandwiches. Marcus managed half of one. Lack of spit made swallowing difficult. God, he wanted this man. He shoved the leftovers in the fridge and made a beeline for the bed.

"No ties this time." Marcus ripped open one of the packets of lube with his teeth and slicked his fingers. Lying on his back, he prepared his hole for Zach's penetration. "I want to hold on to your ass as you pound into me." He wiped his hands on the sheets and tore open a condom wrapper.

Zach groaned and stroked his cock slowly, rubbing pre-cum over the mushroom head. "You are so fucking sexy when you talk dirty, Doc." Zach joined him on the bed and Marcus sheathed the hard dick pointing his way, smoothing the rest of the lube over the latex.

"All you have to do is breathe and I'm hard, Zach. Want you in me so bad." Marcus pushed Zach onto his back. "No more fucking waiting."

Straddling the man, he positioned Zach's cock at his entrance and eased down onto it slowly. He gasped at the pressure. It had been too long since he'd been filled. Marcus rocked carefully until the head popped past his ring and his hole swallowed Zach's dick.

Zach moaned. "Christ, you're tight. Feels so good."

Marcus couldn't talk through the darts of sensation firing his body. He leaned forward and started to ride Zach. But the other man took over, grasping Marcus' hips and guiding his movements, raising and lowering him with increasing speed. Then Zach paused and flipped them, their bodies still joined.

"I seem to remember you promising to hold on to my ass as I pound into you."

"Umm." It was all Marcus could manage as Zach matched words with action. Marcus held on. He tried to reach for his cock but Zach stopped him.

"I've got you, baby." Zach stroked Marcus' dick in time with his thrusts. Marcus was ready to come again and there was no more holding this back than the first time. His back arched as his cock pulsed, cum spraying between them.

Zach followed a moment later, crying out Marcus' name as he jerked in his ass.

Marcus tried to catch his breath. That *had* been phenomenal. And he'd nearly not experienced it. Perish the thought.

After a moment, Zach withdrew, holding on to the condom. Tying it off, he disappeared into the bathroom before he came back with a washcloth. Marcus just lay back as Zach tenderly wiped off his chest. He returned the cloth to the bathroom and crawled onto the bed, settling on his side.

Zach pulled his back to his chest. "That was worth every bit of torture I endured while you made me wait."

Marcus chuckled. "I was an idiot."

Chapter Three

Zach towed most of the water from his hair and caught his reflection grinning in the bathroom mirror. That had been happening a lot, he was so fucking happy. The past three months with Marc had been amazing. They spent every second away from work together, and not always in bed. He and Marc had quite a bit in common and he loved being with him, whether he kept the doc company while he mulled over project data or when they played football with the guys in the department.

Who was he kidding? He loved the man. He had before they'd hooked up and fell a little more in love every day. He saw a future with Marc but he wasn't sure the doc envisioned their relationship past his time at the institute. And things were going so well, asking Marc his intentions seemed silly.

He heard the door to his flat open. "Honey, I'm home."

Zach smiled at Marc's greeting. His place was bigger than Marc's and more importantly, it had a full kitchen—unlike the mini-fridge and two-burner stovetop in Marc's room. The doc loved to cook and Zach wolfed down his efforts happily, so although Marc hadn't technically moved in, they spent more time at Zach's flat.

"Hi." Zach leaned into Marc's kiss, parting his lips and deepening the kiss until his toes curled. God, he was turning into a girl.

Marc pulled away first. "Gonna pop these in the oven to bake while I'm doing your hair."

Another thing to love. Marc cornrowed his hair! The only person who had ever done his hair was his mom, and she and his dad traveled a lot so when she couldn't do it, he dragged the unruly mass into something resembling a ponytail for work but left it flying otherwise.

When Marc had offered to do his hair he'd been skeptical. Actually, he'd been downright disbelieving, but one time—after a particularly long day—he'd fallen asleep with his hair wet and awakened to find his hair in perfect cornrows. Zach had been stunned. He hadn't felt a thing.

"What did you make?"

"Lasagna and cornbread. You still have the fixings for Caesar salad in the fridge, right?" Marc put the dish and pan in the oven and turned it on.

"Yup. Everything is just as you left it."

Marc chuckled and shook his head. "Of course, why did I think you would have been gorging on lettuce and croutons on your day off?"

Zach grinned. "I have no clue."

"I'll put the salad together later. Let me get started on that head of yours."

Zach palmed the rapidly forming bulge in his sweats. The fire that had raged when they finally hooked up had died down to a simmer. Well, more like an active volcano ready to erupt at any moment. "Which head?"

Marc's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "Due south, I'm thinking."

"Your mind is a beautiful thing, Doc." Zach lost his clothes on the way to the bed, anticipation heating his blood. He would never tire of making love to Marc. "And so is your mouth. And your tight ass. Which am I getting?"

Marc joined him, naked. "All? Both? Whatever you want." He lapped at the pre-cum leaking from Zach's cock before taking the full length into his mouth. Zach lay on his back, reveling in the sensations coursing through him, made all the better because it was Marc, the man he loved.

"Turn around, baby."

Marc released his cock with a pop. "Huh?"

Zach scooted up the bed and shoved the pillows out of the way. "Wanna suck you while you suck me."

"Ah." Marc got into position over Zach and resumed pulling Zach's brains out through his slit. *So fucking awesome.*

Zach angled his upper body so he could do the same for Marc. The other man fucked his mouth steadily, never letting up the suction on Zach's cock. Zach enjoyed both rides, absolute pleasure suffusing him. He never wanted to do without this. Hell, without Marc.

He started to come and Marc pulled out of his mouth. His generous lover released his cock after swallowing all he had to offer and licking him clean.

Zach propped a pillow under his head. "Get up here."

Marc's knees bracketed Zach's neck and he reclaimed Zach's mouth. Zach relaxed his throat, taking him deep.

"Oh God. Love your fucking mouth. So good." Marc choked out.

Zach's hands found the jar of skin lotion on the night table one-handed. Thank God he never closed things properly unless Marc reminded him. The cover fell off easily and he slicked his fingers.

He worked a finger into Marc's hole. The man's rhythm stuttered. Zach inserted another finger and plunged them in and out of Marc's ass as Marc plowed his throat wildly.

Marc screamed his release, flooding Zach's throat. Zach drank him down greedily. *I love you*, his mind shouted, but he held it back. *Not yet.*

Marc scooted down Zach's body and rolled onto the bed. They lay there, both trying to catch their breath.

A few minutes later, they moved to the couch. Zach took one of the cushions to the floor to sit on and Marc settled in above him, weaving his magic hands through Zach's still-damp hair.

"So...how was your day?" he asked Marc.

"You mean in addition to the mind-blowing episode just now? It's all a blur."

“Ha-ha. If only I were that potent. Now really, how did it go with the semi-prep HPLC?”

“You’re lethal and you know it. It went fine. I had a talk with her when I got in this morning and she agreed to give me no problems today. I think we’ve bonded.”

Zach laughed even though he understood. Temperamental instruments *were* like people sometimes.

“Glad you two are getting along. I spoke to her yesterday before I left and told her to treat you right in my absence.”

“I’m glad too. This is my last week with her and I should have collected enough of each fraction by next Friday to get the NMR data I need from Saskia. With only a few weeks to go, I’ll have to burn the midnight oil to get it analyzed before I leave, but that’s how it always goes. You think you have so much time and at the last minute, there are a thousand things to be done.”

Now was the perfect opportunity to bring up their relationship in the context of “what next”. Marc hadn’t said the words but he knew the man loved him, so Zach had put the wheels in motion to ensure they wouldn’t have to be apart. At least not for a long period.

“Marc?”

“Umm?”

“What’s going to happen with us when your time’s up?” Marc’s hands slowed in his hair.

“What do you mean?”

“How do you feel about me?” He was glad Marc couldn’t see his face, he was a bit nervous.

“I think you’re awesome. I enjoy being with you, you know that.”

So far so good. “And do you want to continue...being with me when your year is up?”

"Zach, that's impossible. I don't live here and you do. You knew from the beginning that I was leaving."

"But do you *want* to be with me?" he persisted.

Marc released his hair and headed for the kitchen. "Going to check on the pie."

"The lasagna is fine." Zach frowned. Why was Marc avoiding the question? It was simple enough. He got up and followed Marc. "I haven't pushed the issue of what we mean to each other – beyond a willing body to fuck – because I thought we were on the same wavelength."

Marc faced him with a teasing smile. "*Now* you wanna talk physics?"

"*Scheiße*, Marcus! Be serious."

"Okay. No. I haven't thought past my time here, concerning us. This has been great, but my leaving was inevitable."

"Stop fucking saying you're leaving! That's not what I asked."

"What difference does my answer make when I have to leave anyway?" Marc countered, his tone calm.

"Are you for real? Was I deluding myself that this thing between us was more than convenience? Am I the only one who feels like this relationship has grown into something special?" Zach wanted to scream. For a near genius the doc was being suspiciously obtuse.

Marc remained silent and Zach's anger deflated even as his heart shattered. He'd assumed Marc loved him the same way he loved Marc.

The truth hit him. At last. "You never really gave us a chance, did you?"

"A chance for what? I haven't lived in any one place permanently since I got my Ph.D. I'm home for a few weeks and then gone again. What future could we have?" Marc asked.

"None if you're not willing to try for one," he whispered. "I'm going for a walk."

"Zach, your hair –"

"Don't worry about it, Doc."

Zach exited the flat and closed the door. He walked aimlessly, his shoulders slumped as the weight of everything that had happened in the last few minutes came crashing down. He felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. He was *nothing* to Marcus. How could he have been so wrong?

* * * * *

Marcus sat at Zach's desk, staring out the window as dawn broke. His last month in Stuttgart had whizzed by as he tried to tie up all the loose ends on the project while on autopilot. He'd been hoping the pain that was his life without Zach would at least dull.

No such luck.

He should have still seen Zach at least four days a week but the technician had been like mercury. Every time he caught a glimpse of the man, Zach slipped away. Tomorrow was Marcus' last day but it was also Zach's day off. He had to talk to Zach today or he wouldn't get another opportunity.

Zach started work at seven, but he usually arrived earlier than that so Marcus had been staking out his lab since six.

He'd replayed that horrible scene at Zach's apartment at least a thousand times. *Could he have fucked up things more? Was Zach right? Had he doomed them from the beginning?*

No. No. No.

He hadn't hurt Zach on purpose, Marcus had been safeguarding himself. He'd given Zach everything he could afford. Everything except his heart. Well, that's what he'd thought, even when Zach had walked out.

He'd stood stoic while Zach had all but bared his soul, sure that he'd been successful in holding back. He'd been so fucking wrong.

Zach owned him. Down to his core.

He'd been so focused on building stupid walls, he'd been blinded to the fact that Zach loved him, and in the process, he'd crushed that love.

Marcus sighed. There was no coming back from that but he still wanted Zach to know that he loved him and he was sorry.

"Was zum Teufel – ?"

Marcus looked up at the man's curse. Zach probably thought someone had left the door unlocked the day before.

"It's okay. It's me." Marcus stood and moved to lean against the counter behind Zach's chair.

"Oh. Uh...what can I help you with?" Zach propped the door open with a solvent can.

"Could you close the door? I want to talk...about us."

Zach ignored him and strode past Marcus to his desk. "I'm a big boy, Dr. Stuart. A bit slow, but I got that there is no 'us' the last time we talked."

Marcus flinched at the "Dr. Stuart" spoken in such a cold tone from the normally easygoing technician.

"May I be of assistance with anything work-related?" Zach continued politely as he put down his bag. He shrugged on his lab coat before he took a seat.

He deserved that. And anything else Zach threw his way, but he would share his true feelings anyway.

"Zach, I'm sorry for how I treated you. How I treated what we had. I was wrong."

"Apology accepted. Will that be all?" The other man wouldn't look at him and Marcus' stomach clenched in despair, but he forged on.

"I will always treasure what we shared. I'm leaving tomorrow. I wanted to say goodbye and I—" His breath caught and Marcus swallowed hard. The last of his internal locks shattered, the surrounding walls collapsing. "Zach, I love you."

Zach remained silent and Marcus quietly left. He'd known it was too late for his confession.

Upstairs in his lab, Marcus wiped down the counters for the last time. He packed a box with his data folders and lab book to leave for the project co-coordinator. The year had been a productive one and he was pleased with his results.

He'd been offered a tenure-track position at his alma mater in Boston and he'd taken it. His globe-trotting days were over. *So what if he was going home a shell?* Time healed all wounds. His experience the last three weeks leaned toward that being a crock but whatever. There was nothing else he could do, nothing else he could say.

"I applied for a research associate job in NMR at Bruker BioSpin."

Marcus turned to the voice, hope rearing its head.

Zach entered the room and closed the door. "It's in Billerica, Massachusetts. The vacancy was posted soon after we hooked up and I already knew that I loved you and wanted to be with you so I applied."

Oh *fuck*. What had Marcus done? Why hadn't he known Zach was willing to leave Germany? Why hadn't he asked?

"They offered me the position the day of our fight. I was excited that my dreams of our future together could be realized. And I was so sure you wanted what I did, I let that cloud reality."

"Zach—"

"Let me finish."

"Okay."

"I took the job. Initially, it would have been so I could be with you and in a way, I'm glad you kicked me to the curb because I realized it's something I wanted for myself, too—separate from you—and that felt good. Knowing that I'd have the opportunity to work in a field I love is what's kept me going since you broke my heart."

Zach moved farther into the room. "Our relationship has been a bit one-sided. I've been the catalyst from the start and maybe I came on too strong. I didn't pay attention to the signs that we were moving at different speeds and I take full responsibility for that, Doc."

Zach had called him "Doc". That had to be good. Marcus' heart beat faster in his chest, but he couldn't let the man continue to beat himself up.

Marcus closed the distance between them. "You did *nothing* wrong, Zach. I fucked this all up on my own, but I want to fix it." He looked deep into those silver-gray eyes previously filled with resignation, but now, tentative hope.

"I love you, Zach. I'm sorry it took so long for me to admit it but I do love you. I want us to be together, now and for as long as you want me." He took Zach's hand and pressed it over his heart. "You own me."

Zach's eyes lit up and he smiled. "I love you too, Doc."

Marcus resisted jumping up and down like a lunatic. Everything would be all right. They'd work out the future. Whatever happened, they would be together.

"So...can we have lab sex now?" Marcus asked with a grin.

Zach laughed out loud. "Slut!"

About the Author

J.R. Patrick has had a love affair with reading from the very first story she devoured as a child. With her teenage years came romances, and they opened the door to a whole new world—one in which she's still happily immersed. On the other side of the coin, J.R. and writing didn't always get along. To say she is a woman of few words is an understatement and her career as a scientist—where being concise is the order of the day—certainly doesn't help. Thankfully, her characters believe in perseverance and they whisper, scream, mutter, plead...whatever it takes to get their story told. Even if it's one word at a time.

You might not have gotten past the scientist bit, possibly wondering what science and romance have to do with each other. To that J.R. answers—it's all about chemistry.

J.R. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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