# Zander -- Chapter One

Five Years Earlier…

“I told you it was too much. I don’t know why you never listen to me,” Zander grumbled.

Emma limped through the doorway of her apartment and he knew she’d pushed it too hard. That was Emma, always seeing how far she could go before she collapsed from sheer exhaustion. “That trail is six miles and a lot of it is uphill.”

She glared over her shoulder at him. “Because not all of us have the metabolism of a triathlete, you big idiot. Some of us have to work at it.”

He fell onto the brown leather couch and propped his feet onto the coffee table. “Hey, I resent that. I go to the gym five days a week and I make every effort to eat right.”

She snorted as she sat on the recliner opposite him and began taking off her sneakers. “You were just telling me about the amazing tacos you made last night. Tacos are not healthy, Z.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, but I burned those calories off when I made mad, passionate love to Joanie afterward.”

“Ah, the flavor of the week,” she replied as she tossed a shoe at him, barely missing his head. “Blonde or brunette this time?”

He chuckled and threw an arm over the back of the couch. “Brunette. I met her at my nephew’s football game last week.”

Her eyes widened. “Your nephew is in seventh grade. How do you meet a woman at a junior high game anyway?”

He shrugged and pulled out his cell phone. Joanie. It was the third text in the last hour. “She was there to support her niece,” he answered Emma, as he shoved the phone back in his pocket. “She cheers.”

“I see,” Emma bit out as she got to her feet. “You seeing her again?”

“Eh, haven’t decided. She’s a bit clingy for my taste.”

She reached over and pushed his feet off the walnut coffee table her parents had bought her as a moving in present and said, “I’m hitting the shower. I stink.”

He stood and headed for the kitchen. “I’ll fix us some lunch.”

“There are chicken breast and romaine lettuce,” she called out.

“Salads it is then,” he muttered, wishing it was anything but.

Zander got out the package of chicken and placed it on the counter, then searched around for the cutting board. Emma usually kept it on the counter, but it wasn’t there. After the third cupboard, he caved and shouted, “Hey, Emmy, where’s your cutting board?” When he didn’t hear a reply, he left the kitchen and searched for her. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the bathroom door slightly ajar. Emma was busy pulling off her sports bra and hanging it on a hook next to the shower so she didn’t notice him. Ah, hell, he never should’ve looked. Damn, she was stacked. As in pin-up girl stacked. Large breasts with puffy brown nipples. He let his gaze travel south over rounded hips and thick thighs. When she turned and faced the shower, Zander got an eyeful of Emma’s ass. *Fuck, that’s a sight I’ll never forget.* His dick stood at attention when she bent to turn on the water. He could see her sex and he started to reach for the doorknob but stopped. What in the holy hell was he doing? This was Emmy, his best bud. The woman he told all his secrets to. The woman who’d held his head when he’d had food poisoning after eating some bad Mexican food. The woman who put up with his shit. Loyal, sweet, and…a virgin if he remembered right. He had no business thinking dirty thoughts about her.

*Just back away. Go to the kitchen. Pretend you didn’t see anything.*

When she stepped into the shower, steam filling the room, water sluicing down her curves, Zander knew the truth. He wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off her. He was an asshole like that. Now that he’d seen all those soft, womanly curves he’d need a taste. A good, long delicious taste.

And it’d ruin her.

Emma was the all-or-nothing kind. She’d fall and he’d break her soft, little heart all to hell. He knew it in his bones. Solution? He didn’t have a solution. He forced his feet to move backward. One step, then two. Soon, he was in the driveway and pulling his helmet on. He took hold of the handgrip on his custom chopper and slung a leg over. Within seconds he was speeding out of the parking lot of her apartment complex and heading for the shop he and Stark Austin owned. He tried to concentrate on the road, but his brain kept conjuring up the image of Emma bent over the tub. Her smooth ass sticking up and begging for his touch. *Jesus*. What was he supposed to do with that visual?

As he pulled into the lot of Silverlake Cycles, a sense of pride hit him. It’d been a dream to start the company with his buddy Stark. A little over a year and so far they’d managed to not only have the company pay for itself, but also turn a decent profit. They had even bigger plans for next year. He shut off the engine and parked, then looked around for Stark’s Harley. He found it near the front. When Zander entered the shop, he caught Stark hunched over the computer and muttering to himself. His shaggy black hair appeared as if he’d been dragging his fingers through it.

“What’s up?” Zander asked as he crossed the room.

Stark shot him a grey-eyed glare. “Damn, it’s about time you got here.”

“I told you I was taking the morning off.”

“Yeah, well, the computer froze again.”

“That’s because you’re shit with electronics,” Zander shot right back as he shoved his buddy’s shoulder. “Get up.”

Stark stood, then headed for the mini-fridge they kept behind the desk and pulled out a bottle of water. “Where you been anyway?”

Zander tapped a few keys then watched as the monitor shut off. “Emmy and I walked Folly’s Trail.”

He whistled low. “Damn, she make it in one piece?”

He drummed his fingers on the desk. “Yeah, but barely.”

“What’s got you so pissy? That cute brunette didn’t satisfy you last night?”

Zander clenched his hand in a tight fist. “It was fine.”

Stark laughed. “Bro, you need some tips if all you can say is fine. No woman wants *fine*.”

He rebooted the computer, then all but lunged at the fridge and pulled out a beer. “Fuck you. I don’t need tips.”

Stark propped a hip on the edge of the desk, then pointed at his longneck bottle. “It’s noon and you’re already tossing them back. What gives?”

He sighed. There would be no stopping Stark now. Once he started the interrogation he wouldn’t let up until he got his answers. He was like a damn Pitbull that way. “I fucked up.”

“With last night’s date?”

Zander rolled his eyes. “No, shit, will you get Joanie out of your head? She’s not the problem here.”

Stark threw his hands in the air. “Then what is it because you’re acting like a cranky toddler. Jesus.”

He drank half the bottle of beer before answering, “Emma. I fucked up with Emma.”

Stark tossed his empty water bottle into the trash then crossed his arms over his chest and glared. “What’d you do?”

“I saw her naked,” he confessed, still reeling from the curvy sight.

Stark’s head snapped back and shock registered on his face. “She freak out?”

“She doesn’t know,” Zander admitted as his face heated to about two hundred degrees. “It was sort of an accident.”

Stark shrugged. “Uh, what’s the problem then?”

Zander finished off the bottle, then slammed it down on the desk. He’d need about a dozen more if he had any hope at all of erasing the sexy sight of Emma in that shower. “I can’t stop thinking about her.” Her large, perfect breasts and the rounded shape of her ass was a playground he could explore for days and not get bored. His dick hardened and he knew it was going to be a long, shitty day.

“No,” Stark bit out as he watched him with no small amount of anger.

Zander slowly stood. “Huh?”

Stark didn’t back down. “Don’t even think about going there with her. Emma is as sweet as honey. You’d fuck up her head big time.”

He’d been thinking along the same lines but having his business partner-slash-friend throw it in his face wasn’t pleasant. “Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Stark relaxed and punched him on the shoulder. “Come on, man, you know I’m right. That’s why you're pissed.”

Hell, Stark had him pegged. “Whatever,” Zander muttered. “We have shit to do anyway.” He started to head into the garage to work on their latest commission when Stark called out his name. Frustrated, Zander turned and shouted, “What now?”

“You need to talk to her.”

He stiffened. “Why? Like I said she never saw me. Forget it. I plan to.”

“But you won’t,” Stark replied as he closed the distance between them. “I know you. Next time you guys get comfy on the couch for your weekly Thursday night movie marathon you’ll take one look at her in her stained sweats and remember her nude body instead. You’ll make a move on her.”

*Asshole*. Stark was right, but he was still an asshole. “So what do you suggest?”

He sighed. “Break it off with her before you wreck that girl.”

Zander went cold inside. A world without Emma? He couldn’t imagine how bland that would be. “You’re talking about our friendship.” At Stark’s nod, Zander grumbled, “And you don’t think that would hurt her too?”

“Yes, but it won’t crush her. She’ll be upset, but she will move on. You both will.”

“Fine, I’ll talk to her.” Even as he said it he knew the truth. He wasn’t strong enough to hear the hurt in Emma’s voice as he cut their friendship to ribbons. “Or I’ll text her.”

Stark slapped him on the back. “It’ll suck, but if you take her to bed and she falls in love with you—”

“Yeah, yeah, Jesus,” he griped. “I get it. I’m a bastard and she deserves better.”

Stark moved around him and opened the door heading into the garage. “You aren’t that bad,” he offered, as he smiled. “I’m just saying you are nowhere near ready to settle down. Can you seriously imagine Emma having sex with you and not getting her heart all tangled up?”

Stark’s assessment of the situation was dead-on. Damn it all. “No,” he answered as he followed him into the large room and flipped on the light. “She’s the forever kind.”

“Come on, let’s get this done and I’ll take you out and get you shitfaced.”

He didn’t respond. The only thing going through his head was Emma. Her sarcastic wit. The weird snort whenever she laughed. The way she always piled her hair on top of her head because it made her hot to wear it down. He’d have to walk away from all of it. Life sucked balls.

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Emma strode out of her bedroom wearing a fresh pair of leggings and an oversized t-shirt that boasted: *Mama Needs Wine* in big bold letters. “Okay, I’m clean and hungry. There better be an amazing salad ready, Z.”

When she entered the living room two things became crystal clear. It was way too quiet and the delicious aroma of grilled chicken was curiously absent. “Z?”

She headed into the kitchen next and found it just as empty. “Z?” she called out again. Had he gone outside? She peeked out the front window and didn’t see his motorcycle. “What one earth?” She found her phone in her purse and pulled up his contact info. She tapped and waited for it to ring. Once, twice. When she got voicemail her stomach sank.

“Uh, hey, where’d you go? I thought you were staying for lunch. Call me back.”

She went to the couch and sat, then stared at the screen on her cell, willing it to ring. *Had he gotten sick?* Something must have happened for him to leave without saying anything. Zander could be impulsive, but he never just ducked out without a word. A chime caught her attention and she looked at her phone.

SORRY, EMMY. HAD TO GET TO WORK. TALK LATER

A sick feeling settled in her stomach. She recognized those words. She’d seen him type the same thing to past girlfriends. Was Zander dumping her? Dumping their friendship? Screw that. Emma clenched her phone in a tight fist, then tapped out a message of her own.

DON’T TREAT ME LIKE THAT. WTF?

A minute, then two. When nothing came back she knew the truth. Zander, her best friend in the world and the one constant in her miserable life, had just ghosted her. She was tempted to type out another message, but she refrained. Barely. A thousand questions bombarded her brain. Was this the handy work of Joanie, Zander’s latest girlfriend? *No, that doesn’t make sense.* Zander would never choose like that. He’d always told the women in his life that if they had a problem with his best friend being a female then they could show themselves to the door. He’d never kick her to the curb for a woman he was sleeping with. Not in such a cold, heartless way.

Had she done something to push him away? She’d always secretly crushed on Zander, but she’d tried to keep it from showing. Had he figured it out somehow? Maybe he’d freaked. Mortification sent a hot-flash to her cheeks. “Please, Lord, tell me he doesn’t know,” she mumbled to the quiet, lonely room.

Maybe he didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She knew she was overweight and couldn’t possibly attract a guy like him. He had the sandy blond hair of a male model and a muscular body that had often found its way into her erotic dreams. She’d fantasized. She’d lusted. But she hadn’t acted on it. After all, she wasn’t blind. Zander’s women came in one size, tiny. The only thing *tiny* on her was her pinky finger.

Emma looked back down at her phone, then dialed the only other number she could think of in times of crisis. Her mom answered on the second ring with a chipper, “Hi, sweetheart, how are you?”

“Kind of terrible,” Emma admitted as she stood and headed into the kitchen.

“Oh, no, what happened?”

“Zander just dumped me.”

Silence met her for a second before her mom asked, “Uh, I don’t understand. Were you two dating?”

“No, nothing like that, but I think he just ended our friendship.”

“That can’t be. You two have been friends forever. Have you talked to him? Maybe it’s a misunderstanding.”

That was Tina Payne. Always looking for the good in people. “I tried to call him and it went to voicemail. He texted me that we’d talk later.”

“See?” she asked, her voice filled with hope. “There you go. I’m sure he’ll call you and clear this all up.”

“Maybe,” Emma offered, but deep down she wasn’t buying it. She knew Zander too well.

A few seconds ticked by before her mom replied, “And if you’re right and he did end the friendship, then maybe it’s for the best.”

Emma grabbed a bottle of wine from the metal rack on the counter and searched her kitchen drawers for an opener. “How do you figure that?”

A heavy sigh came through the line before her mother prodded, “Come one, sweetie, you’ve been in love with Zander for so long.”

“W-what?” she stammered as she nearly dropped the corkscrew.

“You didn’t think I knew?” she prompted.

Emma hit the speaker icon and set the phone on the counter before muttering, “Well, I was hoping no one knew.”

“It was never obvious and I’m pretty sure Zander is oblivious,” she confessed. “But I’m your mom. I could see it whenever you looked at him.”

She grabbed a wine glass from the cabinet near the fridge and placed it on the counter. “Oh, God, this is humiliating.”

She tsked. “Stop it. I didn’t bring it up because I wanted to embarrass you.”

Emma opened the bottle of wine and poured a hefty portion into her glass. “Then why?”

“Listen, I don’t think you’ve let your heart be open to anyone else. Don’t you think it’s time to put yourself out there? There are a lot of great guys that would love to date someone as beautiful and intelligent as you.”

Spoken like a mom. “I suppose you have a point,” she lied. There would never be a man like Zander. No one could ever make her laugh the way he could. Whether she was having a good day or bad, Zander always treated her as if she were special. It’d been the very thing that had made her fall in love with him. And now, she was going to have to figure out a way to live without him.

“Thanks for the pep talk, Mom. I needed it.”

“I love you, sweetie. And I know there’s a guy out there for you. Someone who will see what an amazing young lady you are.”

“Sure,” she hedged. “Love you, too. Talk later.” In the meantime, she planned to get drunk. Day drinking, a new low. Terrific.

After she ended the call, Emma carried the bottle and glass into the living room. She plopped onto the couch and commenced with the pity-party.