



# Heart

FAILURE

CHRIS ZETT



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Blurb:

Dr. Jess Riley's life is perfect, ticking all the boxes—successful cardiologist, newborn daughter, and a luxurious condo. That is, until she suddenly collapses from acute heart failure. Her entire world crumples along with her exhausted body.

Jess is forced to face facts—she can't keep working endless hours, and she'll have to move back home to recover.

To her shock, her mother has already taken in Lena Surname, a struggling artist who isn't a stranger to heartbreak either.

At first, an unimpressed Jess resents Lena's what kind? presence. Gradually, though, the two women form a tentative friendship over tai chi, picking fruit, and evening walks. A sexy massage leads to a friends-with-benefits fun. But is it all too soon? Or should two barely mended souls try to risk a future together?

An enemies-to-lovers lesbian romance about daring to lower your defenses and open your heart.

This is a standalone novel set in the same universe as medical romance *Irregular Heartbeat*.

## Chapter Four

Lena plucked the mint leaves from her tea and stirred a dollop of honey into it. She cradled her favorite ceramic mug against her chest and breathed in deeply. Nothing was as good as fresh herbs. Some days she couldn't believe how lucky she was to live in Maggie's garden.

The door swung open and nearly hit her in the face.

Lena jumped back, and tea splashed all over her front and soaked her top. Hot, burning tea. Ouch. She pulled the thin cotton from her skin and looked up.

The disheveled woman with dark circles beneath her eyes looked familiar. She glared at Lena from beneath unkempt hair. "What are you doing in my house?"

Wait? Her house? Oh. Was that Jess? Nothing of the beautiful afterglow of giving birth remained.

"Shouldn't I ask you that?" The skin on Lena's chest burned, and she tried to cool it by flapping her top, but it was too tight to give real comfort.

"I don't have to explain anything to you. This is my family's house. What are you doing here?" Jess stepped closer and towered over Lena by at least a couple of inches.

"I live here." Lena snarled right back. She wanted to kick the intruder out, but then it clicked. Jess obviously didn't know she had been living in the garden house for the last ten months. Lena's anger deflated. "You're Jess, right? I'm Lena. Maggie rented the house to me." She held out her hand.

"Dr. Riley." Jess ignored her hand and stepped past Lena, looking around the room with a frown. "My name is Dr. Riley, as is my mother's."

"Um...come in." Lena didn't know how to react, so she went with her default setting: politeness. Even if Jess had already entered the house. "If you insist, I'll call you by your last name, but how I address Maggie is between her and me. Can I help you?"

"I don't remember the furniture, so it must be yours. It'll take a bit of time to move

all that, so you can take until the end of tomorrow to remove everything.”

Lena blinked. Was she joking? But the tone didn't hold even a trace of humor. “There must be a misunderstanding. Let's go talk to Maggie and clear everything up. I'll change my top, and then we can go to the main house.”

Jess's icy blue eyes moved up and down as she studied her. “What are you doing with your top?”

“I burned myself when you stormed inside.” Lena held up the empty mug.

“Oh, um, I'm sorry.” Red spots bloomed on Jess's cheeks. “You don't need to come. You can start packing.” Without waiting for Lena's reply, Jess stalked off.

Lena followed her to the door. “Hey, wait a minute...”

Either Jess didn't hear or didn't care as she stormed away. The dramatic effect of her exit was diminished by the fact that she stopped halfway to the house, clutched her side, and gasped for air.

Shaking her head, Lena closed the door and went into her bathroom to change. As she peeled off her bra, the cotton brushed her skin, and she winced. A glance in the mirror confirmed what she had suspected. An angry stripe ran down her chest, as if she'd smeared herself with raspberries, from the valley between her breasts to her navel. Fortunately, she didn't detect any blisters. She rinsed the stained top, then pressed the cold, wet cloth to her skin.

The relief was instant, and she sat on the toilet seat as her knees grew weak. *What happens now?* Maggie had promised her the use of the garden house for at least the next year, but now her daughter intended to live here. They hadn't signed a lease because she had trusted Maggie when she'd said her word was worth more than any paper. Just as Lena's own word was worth more than a credit report. Maybe that had been foolish. When would she learn not to trust anymore?

With a sigh, she placed the top back into the sink and stood. Time to find out if she would be living in her car tomorrow. Quickly, she spread some aloe lotion on the burn and went into her bedroom to dress in a loose shirt.

As she got closer to the main house, she hesitated.

Jess's voice drifted through the half-open French doors, and the tone suggested she wasn't happy with whatever her mother answered.

Instead of interrupting them, Lena took a seat on a chair on the far side of the patio. The large wooden structure spanned the length of the house and extended into the garden with a curved edge. Terra-cotta planters filled with plants in all sizes and shapes, from evergreens to herbs to exotic blooms, lined the edge and blurred the border to the garden. She would miss this peaceful oasis, not only the calming design but her daily contact with Maggie. She'd thought the older woman had become her friend, not just her landlady, but maybe that had been wishful thinking. The burn on her breast started again, this time from within, not just skin deep.

A shrill cry interrupted the fight. The baby didn't seem to like the raised voices either.

The door opened fully, and Lena jumped up, afraid she wasn't welcome.

Maggie stepped out onto the deck, a frown carving deep lines into her face. But when she looked up at Lena, the lines softened. Smiling, she walked over.

That smile promised everything would work out fine, but Lena had been disappointed too often to relax now. "Would you...?" She swallowed. "Would you like me to leave?"

"No, honey, not at all." Maggie shook her head. "I don't know what Jess said, but this is a misunderstanding. The house is yours for as long as you want it."

"Thank you." The pain that had gripped Lena the moment she feared she might be on her own again slowly abated. "Are you sure? She is your daughter, after all."

Maggie reached over and took Lena's hand. "I've told her you live here now and if she wants to stay, she is welcome to live in the main house. I've already converted Jess's childhood room into a nursery for Ella, and she can stay in the guest room next to it." She glanced back at the house; the baby's crying had subsided. "To be honest, even if you didn't live in the garden house, I'd like her to stay close. She's..." She

opened and closed her hands a few times, letting go of Lena's. "She's not as fit as she should be. She needs help, whether she wants to admit it or not."

Lena nodded. Jess had looked pale and tired. "Is she sick?"

"Yes. It was quite a scare. It's all very new and..." Maggie's shoulders slumped. "But she's optimistic she'll be fine soon." The smile that accompanied the last words was weak.

That sounded serious. Lena didn't want to pry, but it was difficult to hold back the half dozen questions tumbling in her mind. "I'm sorry to hear that. Can I do anything to help?"

"Please be patient. She shouldn't stress herself. That's bad for her condition. Maybe give her some time to get adjusted? My daughter has always had difficulty being spontaneous." Maggie shrugged apologetically. "She'll come around to you. I'm sure by this time next week, she'll be embarrassed about her behavior and apologize."

An illness wasn't an excuse to be rude in Lena's book, but she was willing to give Jess a second chance for Maggie's sake. "I hope you're right." Lena stood. "I'll leave you to it and head back to the garden house. I have to work soon." And she wanted to put an ice pack on her chest, but Maggie didn't need to know that.