

# Turnabout

Steven Carlton

She sat at the bar alone, although she hadn't arrived that way, nursing her drink. It was yellow and icy, in a tall glass with a slice of lime on the rim. She didn't like lime, but hadn't ordered the drink. Her eyes were like smoldering coals when she cut them to the man responsible.

Her husband was leaning against the wall at the opposite end of the lounge he'd brought her to, a beer in one hand and a pool cue in the other. He glanced her way. She quickly turned her head. "I'm not apologizing," she muttered. "Not this time."

"What was that?" said the man on her right. He swiveled on his stool to face her. "Apologize for what?"

For a moment she lost her voice. The man had the chiseled good looks of an Adonis, and the physique to match. Broad shoulders and bunched muscles were barely contained inside the white silk shirt he was wearing. His hair, once brown but long since faded blonde by too much sunlight, was slightly disheveled, the way a man might let it get when he didn't have to worry about impressing anyone. His eyes, they were hypnotic. Almost slate with flecks of green. He was, in a word, delicious.

"Nothing," she managed to blurt. "Just talking to myself. Bad habit."

"As long as you don't answer yourself you're still sane," the blonde god said. He held out a wide hand. "My names Zackary. Friends call me Zack, or just Zee."

She started to extend her hand then hesitated. "I'm married," she said.

He glanced down at her hand, hovering close to her body, then at the other hand still on the bar. "You don't have any rings," he commented.

*Because they keep falling off*, she nearly said. "Long story," was all she said, not wanting to launch into the tale of her recent weight loss. She was sure that was one of the things that had sparked the fight with her husband earlier.

Zack nodded. "Sure," he said, evidently pretending to understand. "Your husband here tonight?"

"Yeah," she said. She looked at her husband again. His back was to her this time, the beer sitting on a table near his elbow as he lined up a shot. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Not at all." And it irked her that he actually didn't sound disappointed. He added, "To tell the truth, I saw some of the fireworks earlier."

She felt herself blushing. “Really? You saw that?”

“Hard to miss. I thought he was going to hit you for a moment.” He was smiling. It made his eyes sparkle.

“Seth wouldn’t ever hit me,” Zack said. “I could see you weren’t afraid of him. Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” But she did. She sighed and held out her hand. “I’m Natalie,” she told him.

“Pleased to meet you, Natalie,” he said. His hand was warm and dry, and it nearly swallowed hers. “Let me get you something else to drink.”

“No, I’m fine,” Natalie insisted. He ignored her and waved to the bartender.

Natalie nearly growled when she spoke. “I *said* I’m *fine*.” Her small hands clenched into fists. “If I wanted a different drink I’d get one myself.”

Zack gave her a half smile, a kind of uncondescending smirk. “Are you sure?” he asked. “It doesn’t look like you’re enjoying that one.”

“I’m not.”

“Then...” he began. She held up her hand, palm to his face, cutting him off.

“Let it go,” she said softly. He looked momentarily surprised then burst into gentle laughter. It was infectious and after a moment she began laughing too. When she glanced Seth’s way he was glaring at her. And at Zack. Seeing the shadow of uncertain jealousy on her husband’s face made her feel wicked.

“How long have you been married?” Zack asked when the mirth ran out of steam.

“Two years,” she said. “Wouldn’t you rather be talking to a single woman?”

“No,” he replied. “Any kids?”

“Getting kinda personal, Zack,” she admonished playfully. “No. No kids yet.”

“Yet?”

“I want them,” she explained, “he doesn’t.”

“Is that what you were fighting about?” He took a sip from his drink. She was surprised to see it was just club soda. She wasn’t surprised that she hadn’t noticed it before. It was impossible to pay attention to details when a man looked that good. One glance at his face reminded her why.

“Maybe,” she admitted, remembering some of the words she and Seth had hurled at each other. “It started at home. I think we started arguing over what to fix for supper.”

“Marriage is a wonderful thing,” Zack said. “The ultimate partnership.” She snickered. He turned that half-smile on her again. “You don’t think so?”

“No. My mother always told me a woman’s place is to serve her husband. It’s the way I was raised.” She took a large gulp of her drink, wincing at the flavor.

Zack nodded, looking down at his hands. “How long have your parents been divorced?” he asked.

“Since just after I got married,” she said, then looked at him in surprise. “How’d you know?”

He shrugged. “Your voice. You’re bitter. Mom told you how to be a good wife, but she bailed. Tell me, this servitude thing, is that the way your husband feels?”

Natalie turned her gaze on Seth again. “I don’t know,” she said. “He keeps telling me to think for myself. ‘What do you want for supper?’ I ask. ‘You decide,’ he tells me. ‘How can I know what you want unless you tell me?’ And he says, ‘Quit worrying about what I want.’ How am I supposed to do that? I love him.”

She jerked around and stared at Zack. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to dump all that on you.”

“It’s okay,” he told her. He reached out and patted her hand. “I know how it is. Believe me. You put so much energy into trying to make sure the relationship is working because you’re so much in love you feel like you were only half a person before.”

Natalie gazed at Zack with new perspective. “You’re married?” then she laughed. “You dog. And I thought you were hitting on me.”

Zack smiled, but it was different, not quite mirthful. He pulled out his wallet and held it open for her. “This is her,” he said simply, showing Natalie a photo of a thin woman, dark skinned like a Latino, freckles bridging her cheeks over her nose, a few acne scars, and thick black hair framing a slightly chubby face. She was smiling at the camera with eyes that brimmed over with joy.

“She’s lovely,” Natalie commented. “Is she here with you tonight?” Zack flipped the wallet closed.

“No,” he said. He pushed the wallet into his coat pocket. “She’s in heaven.”

“Oh,” Natalie said. It felt like a trapdoor had opened beneath her. “I’m so sorry.” It seemed like the thing to say, though it didn’t feel right.

“Thanks,” Zack said. “It was a long time ago. And she’s not in pain anymore.” He lifted his soda and stared at it as if he really wanted something stronger. His voice became distant.

“Sometimes a man just doesn’t realize how strong a woman can be. We think we’re strong, that we *should* be stronger. Man the provider, man the protector, man the builder. Yet we’re nothing without them. The purpose of our lives is locked up in their mystery. And no matter how strong you think you are, you can’t hold onto them when it’s their time to leave.”

He lapsed into silence, staring at his wide hands, at the glass, the bar, seeing nothing. Natalie placed her hand on his arm. She wanted to cry for him, but couldn’t. Not here. He looked up from his reverie and the light was back in his eyes. “Thanks,” he said acknowledging her kindness.

“Let me buy *you* a drink,” she said, giving him back his lopsided grin. “Something stronger than club soda.”

“I can’t,” he said. He pointed to a group across the bar laughing loudly. “I’m supposed to be their designated driver.”

“They can take a cab,” she told him. She waved to the bartender. Beside her, Zack laughed. “What?” she asked.

“You,” he said. “A minute ago you were going to swill that fruity concoction because your husband bought it for you and you were worried about offending him. You came here because you were trying to be meek and got pissed when your husband didn’t want it. Now you’re telling me I have to drink when I’ve told you I can’t.” He shook his head in wonder.

“Well, I’m not really all that subservient,” she said.

“Glad to hear it.”

The bartender arrived. “What’ll it be?”

“Jack Daniel’s, neat,” Zack said. He handed the yellow drink to him. “And take this away.”

“Sure. And you miss?”

“Beer,” Natalie answered promptly. “Draft is fine, but it better be domestic. None of that imported swill.”

“Gotcha,” the bartender said with a wink and got busy.

“See,” Zack said, “that’s what I’m talking about. Your husband wants you to be stronger, but he still thinks of you as demure. Or else he’d have bought you the drink he knows you like.”

“He knows I like beer,” she protested.

“But he doesn’t know you prefer it. And why?”

Natalie pursed her lips. “Because I’ve never made it clear,” she said.

“You need to show him. Show him how strong you can be. Let him know he doesn’t have to work so hard protecting you from yourself.”

“Well, Doctor,” Natalie said leaning on the bar and fixing Zack with a steely gaze. “Just what do you suggest?”

Zack smirked. “I have an idea,” he said, and told her.

By the time the bartender returned with their drinks she was wearing the widest smile possible. “It sounds *perfect*,” she gushed. “You sure it’ll work?”

He shrugged. “You’d know better than me. He’s your husband.”

“Yeah, it’ll work. Let’s do it.” She took a long pull at her beer then wiped suds from her lips with the back of her hand. “Where can we go to do it?”

“I know just the spot.” He slugged down his drink in one swallow and slid off the stool. He tossed money onto the counter as Natalie quickly took another couple of gulps. She stood as well. “Come on,” he said as he turned away. Natalie glanced at the pool table. Seth looked up just in time to see his wife slip into the crowd close on the heels of the large man he’d seen her talking to.

She could only imagine what Seth was thinking at that moment.

Seth put down his beer and started after her almost right away. “Hey,” the tattooed man by the pool table called out. “We got a game going on here.” Seth hesitated, looking between the table and the crowd by the bar. He couldn’t see Natalie anymore, but he could see the big man’s head above the others. “You going to play or what?” the tattooed man asked.

“Not,” Seth decided. He pulled a ten dollar bill from his pocket and dropped it on the table on his way past. The crowd was thicker than it had looked. Drunk men and women, laughing raucously and eager to hang on each other in their bid to find a partner, lolled against him and parted only reluctantly for him. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, the odor of alcohol, and the scent of aroused bodies. A stage by the wall was covered with musical instruments. A sign announced that the band would be there on Friday. A man and a woman were at the back of the stage, their bodies entwined, heads together kissing passionately. Seth stopped to stare, then moved on. It wasn’t Natalie.

When he found them, Natalie was leaning against a table laughing. The big man stood beside her. He saw Seth approaching and bent over to speak into Natalie’s ear. She turned to look at her husband, her smile widening. “Hey, Baby,” she called out, sounding tipsy. “Where’ve you been?”

Seth slowed. He could feel eyes on them. The big man, the smaller man, and the even smaller woman between them. “You know where I was,” he said. “I thought you were going to sit at the bar.”

“I changed my mind,” she said. Her eyes twinkled playfully. “It’s a woman’s prerogative.”

“Come on, it’s time to go.” He reached out to take her arm. She pulled away and shook off his grip.

“I think she wants to stay,” Zack said, seeming to get even taller as he stepped closer to Seth.

“Look buddy, this is my wife,” Seth responded. “Did she tell you she was married? Natalie, what are you doing?”

Natalie shrugged. “Just having a drink,” she said. She looked down at her hands and furrowed her brow as if just realizing she’d left her beer at the bar. “What does it matter to you anyway? I think you made it clear I was a disappointment to you.”

Seth heard a few people gasp. There were even more eyes on them then. He shifted his weight, feeling uncomfortable. “I never said that,” he protested. “I’m sorry if I gave you that impression. Let’s go home and talk about it.”

For a moment she wavered. Then, “No, I don’t think you mean it.”

“Natalie you don’t know what you’re saying,” he told her. “You’re drunk.”

“I am not. I’ve only had one beer.”

“Beer?” He looked at Zack nervously as the big man edged a little closer. “I thought you wanted that tropical thing.”

Natalie turned a hostile glare on him. “Why would you think that, Seth? When have I ever said I wanted stuff like that? You don’t know what I want.”

Seth flushed with anger. “I don’t think *you* know what you want. You never have an opinion on anything, you make me make all the decisions.”

Her face was a mask of shock. “Are you kidding?” she asked. “When have you ever really cared about what I want? We do everything your way. We watch what you want on television, we eat the meals you like, we go on vacation to the places you want to go to. I do everything for you, Seth. Everything.”

“I thought we were doing things together,” he argued. “I ask what you want....”

“You tell me what you want and ask if I’m okay with it,” she interjected. “Of course I say I’m okay with it. I love you, Seth. That’s what you do when you’re in love. You sacrifice.”

He paled. “You think I don’t love you?” he asked weakly. “You think because I believe you when you say you’re happy that I’m not trying hard enough to love you? Christ, Natalie. All I ever want is for you to be happy. I love you.”

He could see the anger melting in her eyes. Was that it, then? Was that the reason for their fighting? “I don’t tell you enough, do I?” he asked. “That I love you. That you’re the reason I exist. That there’s nothing in this world that I desire more than to be by your side. I don’t blame you for going off with this guy. I’m sorry we fought.”

A single tear rolled over her cheek. “Is that it?” she asked. “You say sorry and we’re supposed to just kiss, go home, and pretend it’s all okay?”

“Something like that.”

Natalie shook her head. “Who am I, Seth? Tell me what you see when you look at me.”

He was taken aback. “You’re my wife, Natalie.” He could see that wasn’t what she wanted. “You’re a beautiful woman. You’re smart, and funny, and a great cook...” He stopped. Zack was laughing.

“You just don’t get it, do you?” the big man said. He clapped a beefy hand on Seth’s shoulder. “The woman don’t want you anymore. Just go home. Seems to me you won’t even miss her.”

Seth turned a wounded look on his wife. “Is this true?” he asked. “Do you want out?”

“Are you really asking?” she replied. “I mean, are you *really* asking?”

“Of course.”

“You want to know how I really feel?”

Seth nodded.

“Fine,” she sighed. “Seth, I have always loved you more than anything, even myself. But I’ve held back, I’ve lied to you. I’ve let you believe I was someone I’m not. I’m not the kind of woman who enjoys being led. I don’t like having my decisions second-guessed. I hate it when I’m left out of decisions. I know you were raised in an old fashioned home, where your dad made all the money and your mom took care of the house. I grew up the same way. But we’re supposed to be better than that. We’re supposed to have our own values, not carry the reflections of people we thought we were supposed to be.”

Seth was keenly aware that the conversation around them had stopped. They had become the center attraction in an unfolding soap opera. “I had no idea,” he said.

Natalie smiled and reached out to clasp his hand. “I know,” she said. “We just need to talk more. To really talk. And not be afraid of saying what we really think and feel. If it’s going to work for us, it has to be that way, and if it isn’t then we need to find out before we waste years of our lives with someone we weren’t meant to be with.”

She felt him stiffen. He held up his head and looked into her eyes. “I was meant to be with you,” he said. “I know it. I could never love anyone more than I love you.”

“Hey,” Zack said. “You said you were done with him. You said you were going to come with me. We had a deal.”

“A deal?” Seth repeated.

“It was the alcohol talking,” Natalie said. “I wasn’t thinking clearly.” She gazed at Seth. “I’m less confused now.”

“I don’t care,” Zack said. He took Natalie’s shoulder and tried to pull her away from Seth. “Don’t be stupid. He doesn’t care what you really want. You said so yourself.”

“Hey man, back off,” Seth warned. “There’s plenty of single women here. Hit on one of them.”

“You telling me what to do little man?” Zack growled. He moved closer until his chest nearly touched Seth’s. “You’re the one going home alone.”

“Seth,” Natalie said. “I love you.”

Seth was looking up at Zack’s face. His wife’s words seemed to set steel into his spine. “I don’t want to fight you,” he said in a calm voice. “You’re bigger and obviously stronger. I won’t pretend that I think I’ll win. But I’m not backing down. She’s my wife.”

Zack smiled broadly, then began to laugh. He put his hands on Seth’s shoulders and shoved him hard. Seth toppled back and sprawled onto his backside. The crowd rushed to part for him, spreading out in a big ring to give them room as if the violence was a disease that might be contagious. “Who’s is she again?”

He was about to set forward when Natalie shouted, “Hey!” Zack turned his head toward her and caught her fist in his face. He stumbled, surprised. Natalie stepped off the chair she’d been standing on. She planted her feet wide and put her hands on her hips.

“I’m *his*,” she said. Seth was scrambling to get to his feet as Zack drew back as if to slap her. Natalie swung her foot up into Zack’s crotch. The big man grunted and bent over, clutching between his legs. “And he’s *mine*,” Natalie added before she struck her small fist against Zack’s jaw. He twisted around and fell to the floor, groaning. Natalie brushed her hands together and stepped over his prone form.

Seth accepted her hand and let her pull him to his feet. "Wow," he said, looking down at Zack. It was a sentiment the crowd around them seemed to share as the brief silence was filled suddenly with excited whispers and catcalls.

"Can we start over?" she asked. Seth grinned and pulled her close.

"What ever you want, tiger," he answered. The crowd cheered when they kissed. They hooked their arms together and headed for the exit, the crowd parting for them.

"I'm really sorry about the fight," he told her. "I hate it when we fight."

"Me, too," she agreed. "But it's good, in a way. We get it out in the open."

He chuckled. "I can't believe you kicked that guy's butt like that."

"You can't?"

"I believe it," he added quickly. "I saw it happen. I mean I can't believe you did that for me." He chuckled. "You fought for me."

"Wouldn't you fight for me?" she asked. "Yeah, you would. You were about to."

"That's what love is all about," he said. "Not sacrifice. It's fighting for what you love and forgiving the rest."

She smiled and snuggled closer to him. "Agreed. Now let's go home and make up."

They were nearly at the exit when she stopped. "My jacket," she said. "I left my jacket."

"I'll get it for you," he said promptly.

She laughed and held him back. "I'll get it," she told him. "You get the car." He started to protest then stopped himself. He nodded then kissed her quickly.

"Be right back," he said and stepped out into the night. Natalie waited a beat before heading back to the bar. The crowd was still watching her, conversation buzzing more loudly than before. She smiled. She'd given them quite a show.

Zack was waiting for her at the bar, a fresh whisky in his hand and an ice pack on his jaw. "Did it work?" he asked.

"Only time will tell," she replied. "Thank you, Zack."

"That's what friends are for."

"Does it hurt much?" She pointed to his jaw, but she looked at his lap. He laughed.

“Not a lot,” he said. “Don’t worry about it. It was worth it.”

“I hope so.”

He put down the ice pack. “Listen,” he said. “You’re both right, you know. Love is about sacrifice, it’s about fighting to keep what you have, it’s about talking, and forgiveness, and a million other things. It’s about two people finding something in each other that they were missing in themselves. It won’t be a perfect fit, it never is. Heaven is supposed to be out of reach, after all. That’s what makes it heavenly when you get there.”

Natalie began to answer but found she had nothing to respond with. She stroked his cheek once then turned away. Seth was waiting for her at the door, the car at the curb. She molded herself into his arms knowing that they’d taken the first steps down a long road, that they’d make it. And when he kissed her, she swore she heard angels sing.

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