

# NO ONE BUT YOU

**An Exclusive Short Story By Francis Ray**

St. Martin's Press

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“NO ONE BUT YOU”

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For information address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.  
St. Martin's Paperbacks are published by St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

## NO ONE BUT YOU

Eyes closed, Zachary Wilder Albright sat in an easy chair in the upstairs guest bedroom of his mother's home in Atlanta and listened to the last haunting note of Laurel Raineau's violin concerto. He was tempted to replay the CD. Her music soothed him, beckoned to him. It had helped get him through one of the most difficult times of his life, the death of his father.

He'd always thought there would be time for he and his estranged father to come to terms, but he'd been wrong. Now it was too late.

His father had always disapproved of Zach's interest in music and certainly hadn't wanted Zachary to go into the music business. Even after Zach's success as a producer in L.A., his father had never forgiven him for disobeying his wishes.

Zach's eyes opened. He pushed out of the chair, just as he was determined to push the unhappy memories of his relationship with his father away. You couldn't change the past, you could only learn from it.

He'd come from L.A. for the Christmas holidays to spend time with his mother, his younger sister, Paige, and her new husband, Shane. Zach planned to enjoy every moment before he went back to L.A., and into the studio to produce the next album.

It was good to be with his family again. His mother had moved into her parents' house shortly after his father's death. He supposed the memories of the house they'd shared were too hard on her. Here, in her parents' house where she'd been loved and cherished as the only child, she continued to love and cherish her children the same way. He and Paige couldn't have asked for a better mother. Whenever it counted, she had always been there for them.

On a nearby table was a three-foot Christmas tree loaded with miniature musical

ornaments. The spruce, a gift from his mother, had been waiting for him when he'd arrived that morning from the airport. She'd given Paige and Shane a tree as well. Theirs was decorated with gold and silver hearts.

There was a brief knock on his door. He smiled and went to answer it. "Hi, Mother." She looked incredible and happy in a long silver gown. "You're beautiful."

"Thank you. I just wanted to tell you that Betty should be here to pick me up any moment for the charity ball," she reminded him.

"Have fun." He smiled. "It's quite a role reversal. I used to be the one telling you I was going out."

Smiling, she palmed his cheek. "It's good having you home. Tomorrow night, Christmas Eve, we're all staying in."

"We" meant his sister and her husband. "It's still hard to believe my little sister is married."

"She's happier than I've ever seen her," his mother said. "You might think of following in her footsteps."

He hugged his mother and laughed. "I'm too busy to think about marriage." He took her arm. "I'll walk you down. I should be leaving myself."

"You're going to Arthur's Christmas party?"

"Yes," Zach answered as they went down the stairs. The banisters were looped with garland and berries. "It'll be good to see some of the old gang. I can't believe Arthur's a minister after all the crazy things he got into while we were in high school."

"Neither can his parents." His mother laughed.

The doorbell rang just as they reached the bottom stairs. "Perfect timing." His mother reached for her coat. Zach helped her into it and walked her to the double doors framed with matching garland and berries.

He opened the door and the chauffeur stood there waiting. The door of the limousine parked at the end of the walk suddenly opened. An elegant, middle-aged, woman in a long black wrap trimmed in fur, rushed up the walk before the chauffeur could retrace his steps.

“Hello, Mrs. Brown,” Zach said, hugging the woman he’d known for as long as he could remember.

“Hello. It’s good to see you, Zach,” Betty Brown said. “Meredith will be unhappy she missed you. She flew back this morning with the boys to Ohio. It’s their turn to spend Christmas with the in-laws.”

“It’s hard to believe the tomboy who chased me is married with three children,” Zach said of Betty’s youngest daughter as he escorted the two women back to the limo. “Give her a hug for me.”

“Zach is going to stay through Christmas,” his mother said happily.

“Don’t rub it in,” Betty said. “I don’t get Meredith and her family until next Christmas. Good night, Zach. Don’t wait up for us.”

Giving his mother a kiss, he closed the car door. It was nice seeing her light-hearted and playful. For a brief moment, he wondered if it was because of Paige’s happiness. Whatever it was, she genuinely seemed pleased with life, unlike the days and weeks before his father’s death. Perhaps she’d had some type of premonition.

Going back inside, he went upstairs for his car keys, then to the garage and got into his rental. The moment the car started, violin music drifted through the speakers. He carried Laurel Raineau’s music everywhere.

He frowned as the other string and percussion instruments nearly drowned out the violin instead of complementing it. His frown remained as he stopped briefly at the end of the winding driveway before turning onto the road. Deep in thought, he

continued to listen. This wasn't the first time he'd heard her violin competing with the other instruments or heard places where she should have used more bow.

A crazy thought struck. Zach had produced many of the top musical artists in the country, including, rap, hip-hop, pop and country artists. So why not produce Laurel Raineau's next album? He started to reach into his pocket for his Blackberry and call his agent, but sanity returned. He couldn't possibly plan anything with her without knowing her schedule or when she planned to do her next album. It might have been fun though.

Smiling at the prospect, he pulled into Arthur's long driveway. There was a line of cars in front of Zach and more behind him. Zach inched up to the waiting red-coated valet, then got out and went up the steps of the brightly lit Georgian mansion that had twenty-five rooms.

Christmas wreaths hung in each window and on the doors. The eight topiaries on each side of the walkway had tiny white lights, as did every eave of the house. Arthur always did things in a big way. Entering the house as directed, Zach saw a thirty-foot Christmas tree.

"Rolling Deep!"

Grinning, Zach turned at the sound of the nickname he was known by in L.A. to see Arthur coming toward him. He'd played linebacker in high school and still had the brawny build. Grinning, he opened his arms wide to give Zach a bear hug.

"I bet you thought one of those crazy autograph seekers had found you," Arthur teased.

"Bite your tongue," Zach said. "Without those fans, I'd still be tending bar."

"Come on. People have been asking about you." Arthur smiled. "Don't be surprised if you leave with several CDs in your pocket. Thank goodness my little

sister, Selma, knows she can't sing or play an instrument, so all she wants is an autograph."

"She's got it."

Used to people trying to interest him in their musical talent, Zach circulated and saw people he hadn't seen since he'd left after he'd graduated from college. Some he recognized, others he didn't. In less than thirty minutes, he had five CDs in his jacket pocket.

"Man, I have to go meet guests." Arthur leaned over and whispered, "Carmen is here. You down with that?"

Zach didn't even have to think about his answer. "What happened between us was a long time ago. We've both moved on," he said truthfully.

Arthur slapped Zach jovially on the back. "That's the Zach I know. Nothing keeps you down for long, including a woman. The food is through there. Gotta circulate, but we'll catch up later."

Zach moved to the hot and cold buffet with three carving stations, and a chocolate fountain. He hadn't eaten since an early lunch with his mother, Paige, and Shane. He reached toward a stack of red plates, but someone else took the top one first. He glanced up.

"R.D., let me do that for you."

Arthur might have called Zach by his nickname, but his friends in Atlanta called him Zach. He didn't recognize the woman who appeared to be in her mid-twenties. She was attractive enough even if the make-up was a bit heavy. The plunging neckline of her tight red dress left little to the imagination.

"Do I know you?"

"No, but I'd like to know you," she said suggestively.

“Perhaps another time.” He picked up another plate and moved through the buffet line. He was used to forward women, but he didn’t do one-night stands. When his plate was full, he looked around for a seat.

“Hello, Zach.” This voice he knew.

Carmen Simpson-Harris stared back at him. After all these years, she was still beautiful. And as he’d imagined, there wasn’t even an ember remaining of the burning love he’d once had for her. He had no doubt the black and silver gown that revealed her long legs, svelte figure, and generous breasts was a designer original. Carmen liked the good life. The possibility that he wouldn’t be able to give it to her was the reason she had stomped on his pride and tossed his engagement ring back in his face.

“Zachary, I hoped I’d see you.” She swallowed, bit her ruby red lips. “I wanted, needed to talk to you.”

Seeing that she was upset, he handed his plate to passing waiter. “Carmen, are you all right?”

“I...” She bit her lip again and looked around as if nervous or unsure. The Carmen he knew had never been either.

Zach saw an empty window seat and steered her in that direction. He felt her tremble. He looked up at her. This wasn’t the strong, confident woman he had thought he loved and had asked to marry him. He urged her to sit down. “Stay here. I’ll get you something to drink.”

He plucked a glass of sparkling water from a passing waiter and returned. “Here.”

She took the flute, but her hand trembled so badly he had to curve his hand over hers to help her. She sipped, made a face. Carmen liked the strong stuff. Placing the glass on the window ledge, he faced her.

“What is it?” he asked.

She clutched her hands. The large diamond on her ring finger glittered, as did the diamonds at her throat and on her ears. "I don't want to bother you with my problems." She swallowed. "I-I just wanted you to know how badly I feel about what I did. I was stupid and immature."

His hand covered hers. At the time, he'd thought his world had ended, but it had been just the opposite. "It was a long time ago. We've both moved on."

Her head lowered, then she looked up. "You've become very successful."

"Yes." She hadn't thought he would succeed. Neither had his father. Their lack of faith had kept Zach going when he wasn't sure himself. "And you're married."

Her eyelids blinked rapidly. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Concerned, he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to her. He'd once thought her eyes were the most beautiful he'd ever seen. Now he couldn't imagine why.

She daintily dabbed each eye with his monogrammed handkerchief. "He-he's not the man I thought he was."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said and meant it. "Marriages sometimes hit rough spots."

She shook her head and brought her hand to her generous breasts. Although they'd been lovers for six months before she'd broken up with him, he didn't feel the slightest twinge of passion for her at the sight of the naked skin.

"I wish things had turned out differently between us," she said, leaning toward him.

Zach stood. She might have just been looking for someone to talk to, but he wasn't taking that chance. He didn't mess with married women. "I'm sorry, Carmen. I really hope things turn out well for you and your husband."

She stood, dabbed her eyes again. “Thank you. I-I know it’s asking a lot, but do you think I could have your phone number?”

He hesitated. Whatever problems Carmen and her husband were going through, he didn’t want to become involved.

“Please, Zach. I don’t have many people I can trust to talk to and I really need someone. You know how people gossip. I couldn’t stand that.” She briefly lowered her head and, when she lifted it, tears glittered in her eyes again.

Zachary pulled out his business card, wrote down his Blackberry number, and handed it to her. He’d moved on and really wished her well. “Goodbye, Carmen.” He walked away.

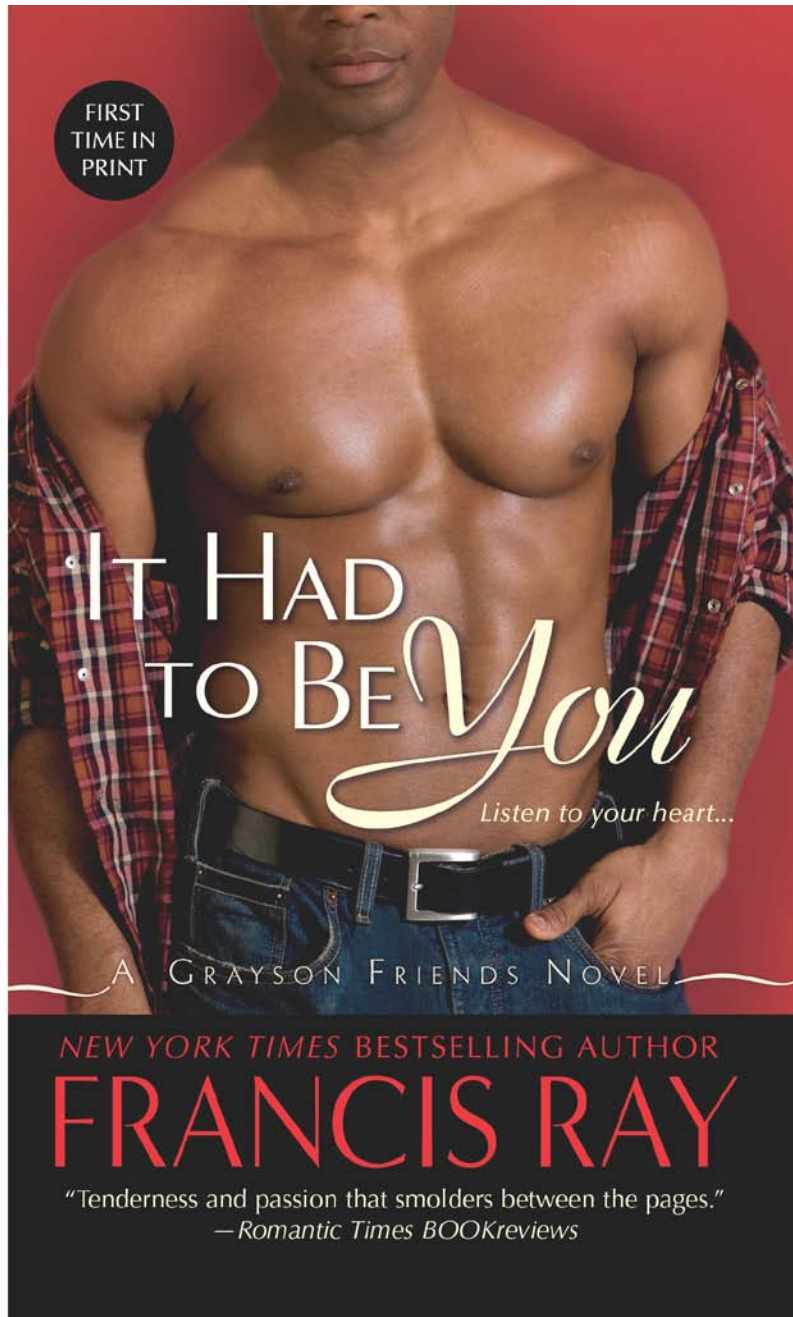
Behind him, Carmen wiped the tears from her cheeks as she watched Zach’s retreating back. Slowly she grinned. “Goodbye? Not by a long shot, Zachary Albright.”

To be continued in...

## **IT HAD TO BE YOU**

**Available wherever books are sold on April 27, 2010**

AVAILABLE APRIL 2010



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