

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

*Perfection*

*Summer  
Devon*

PERFECTION

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# PERFECTION

Summer Devon

### *Dedication*

To the inspirational gang, Sooz, Logan and especially Sorrell. Woof.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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

Neon: DaimlerChrysler Corporation

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## **Chapter One**

Allie grabbed her pad and resisted the urge to rub at her face again. Two hours since she'd accidentally sprayed herself with the Grease-Off and her nose still stung—and she suspected she looked like a demented rabbit.

She made her way to the back booth. "Hi, what can I—" she began, and sneezed again.

"God bless you."

She didn't usually notice voices. These three words rose above the buzz of the regulars and spilled through her like warm cream.

He was rolling up his sleeves. She glanced at his hands, long fingers. The thick wrists, the muscular forearm. Whoa. Here was a problem more serious than a sneezing fit.

Something that had lain happily dormant inside Allie stretched and yawned at the sight of that male arm. Oh no. No, no. She'd crossed men off her menu long ago, and this was one spicy dish she'd be a fool to sample. He'd give her heartburn—or heartbreak, and she'd had her fill of that.

She ought to turn around and get back to work. She stood, staring at deft fingers turning the cloth of his plaid shirtsleeve. Just a hand, right? Not a poem.

A long red mark marred the perfection of his arm. A cut.

He glanced up at her.

Even the diner's fluorescent lighting couldn't diminish the nice line of his jaw and golden skin. But the eyes meeting hers provided the final nudge that woke parts of her body that had been just fine asleep, thank you.

Blue-green eyes flecked with gold held her in a gaze that reached right in and stirred her. It brought on that heavy, ticklish ache deep inside. The nearly painful warming of frostbitten hands doused by warm water.

Damn. Even the tips of her breasts woke up and saluted the man who'd played reveille to her body. She crossed her arms over her breasts. As if she didn't look foolish enough already for gawking, her pencil had to clatter to the floor.

She hardly cared about how she looked now because she was too busy inwardly cursing.

Her snoozing libido had awakened. Just friggin' wonderful.

Bryan caught the waitress staring at him. He shouldn't have come into the place, but it had looked crowded enough with men—he'd hoped the curse would have been hidden in the fog of testosterone. But no, she'd found him, poor him. Poor girl. He shifted sideways away from her. "Coffee, please," he said, putting a note of impatience in his voice.

"Uh, yeah. Right." She turned to leave and he released the breath he'd been holding.

As she strode to the counter, he took an automatic inventory of her from the back. Sensible dull shoes, pretty good legs, curling brown hair pulled into a careless ponytail. Work-reddened hands, nice lines to her rear... He breathed in the diner's air of fried food and coffee, and detected another, more intriguing aroma. The waitress. She wasn't half-bad. Or maybe he was finally noticing that he hadn't had sex in months.

Not interested. He was only looking for the one woman. Most men wanted Ms. Perfect, but Bryan needed her.

Ms. Perfect was the only thing could turn off his weird-ass creation of the pheromones that Metcher Corporation loved and that he called "the curse".

Dr. Nathan had let loose with that little secret just a week ago—bedding the perfect woman would cut off Bryan’s “come and take me” chemical. The next day, Bryan had slipped out of town and hit the road.

“Where’d you get that cut?” The waitress was back, sliding a thick mug of coffee onto the table.

Funny, she almost sounded like she was making conversation.

“Accident,” he grunted. An accident named Jill. Or maybe Lill. He hadn’t stuck around long enough to find out. He’d thought someone over seventy might be safe and had struck up friendly chat as he stretched in the parking lot at a rest stop. Who knew an old lady would have such a grip? Or that fake fingernails could be so strong?

Allie reached out to his arm, and the back of his neck prickled. When her fingertips brushed his skin, she gasped and her pupils dilated.

Here we go again. He needed this coffee and he really didn’t want to get another cup to go but... He grabbed his leather jacket.

She snatched back her hand and turned as red as the cut-rate ketchup on the table. “I know how that goes. I had a dumb accident this morning.” She broke off with a laugh, and shoved at her hair, tucked a few loose wisps of hair behind her ear clearly embarrassed. “Sorry. You don’t to hear about it. I’ll get your, ah, I forgot your cream.”

He dropped his jacket onto the bench, but kept his eyes on the waitress as she walked back to the counter. He’d learned to be vigilant; trouble had a habit of ambushing him whenever he let down his guard.

Then he watched her for entertainment purposes and found himself wondering what she’d been about to say. He missed talking to women. Too bad she wasn’t “the One”. Yeah, she was cute but not perfection. Bryan had supposed that must be the stereotype pinup with shining blonde hair, huge breasts, and endless legs. Nothing like this waitress, who couldn’t have been more than five-foot-three and had a rounder-than-photo-perfect figure. But all those soft curves had his hands itching. In the old

days, he'd liked the sensual roundness of a full-figured woman. Back when he liked sex and women.

He'd get a life again soon. It would probably take only that one time in the sack with *the* woman, Dr. Nathan had said.

Of course Nathan had said a lot of things. He left out a lot, too—like how the stupid experiment would make Bryan hyperaware of women's signals, or that he'd become a flame and they'd turned into so many horny moths.

Bryan rubbed his eyes and settled his shoulders against the booth's plastic back. Four-thirty a.m. He'd get some sleep, maybe stay at the shabby hotel that stood behind the diner.

When he opened his eyes, the waitress stood in front of him, clutching her pad to her as if he might try to bite it. "Anything else?" she quavered.

This one had a weird attitude. He risked a smile. Instead of taming her and bringing on a little mew of pleasure the way his smiles usually did, it seemed to make her angry. She cocked an eyebrow and served him with a scowl as if he were taking up her valuable time. That amused him. He knew the symptoms of lust—no one knew them better.

The woman swallowed and her body gave off the deepening aura of awareness. The front pleats of her drab brown uniform peaked over alert nipples. Even if he weren't tuned to those symptoms, he had the curse, so she had no say about her lust. She'd want him no matter what, even if she hated his guts.

The waitress apparently didn't think much of him, the way she avoided coming close to his booth as if he had some kind of weird disorder.

He did, of course, though she didn't know that.

"Excuse me. Would you like anything else? Sir?" She sounded annoyed, but he knew better. Their eyes met and at once she immediately shifted her gaze to the scuffed linoleum floor. How far would he have to push her before she melted and gave him the feral, hungry look?



She hugged herself. Her dilated eyes and deep breaths told him it would take nothing more than a rub or two at the right parts of her body to make her open her legs and beg him.

The scene playing out in his mind roused an interest he thought had been killed off. Maybe he'd say yes to her. After all, Ms. Perfection, if such a person existed, would probably be asleep. No chance to get at her at the moment.

He glanced at the waitress's blue plastic nametag. Allie—a perfect name for a waitress. She gave off the scent that told him she wanted him as much as most women did, but again he was amazed to realize he really didn't mind.

Sex was all she'd want from him, of course, but he'd pretend it was something warmer.

"I was wondering what time you got off of work," he asked.

She plunked the silver creamer down on the table, hard. "I don't."

"What?" He raised his eyebrows, surprised.

"I work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Got it?"

Maybe she was married? Probably not. She wore no ring, and the intensity of her response made him think that she hadn't had any kind of encounter in a long time. Or maybe she was so abused she couldn't suffer her own desire?

"Yeah, got it, Allie," he said, and grinned at her again, this time with real sympathy. For once his pity wasn't for himself, but for this woman who seemed to dislike her own body's response. He could identify with that.

She twitched and drew in an audible breath at his smile, like he'd brushed his fingers over some sensitive part of her body. Hurt or turned on? Might be the same thing to her.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Hey, come on. I'm just being polite," he protested.

She gave a sniff and pushed her hands into her apron pockets. "Oh. Right. I'm fine. Thanks. For asking." She shot him a glance, half-smiled and muttered something like, "Then again sanity isn't in the job description."

She took a step closer and he braced himself, one hand on the table, one on the bench ready to shove away from the booth when she rushed him, but she didn't cause the usual scene. Nor did she leave. She shifted from foot to foot and fiddled in something in her pocket, as her body screamed "take me" at him.

He wasn't sure what to do—damn, he'd forgotten how to make small talk with females. "So. Allie. Why do you work the night shift? You a student or something?"

"I'm a waitress." She wagged the grimy order pad at him. "See? There's a big hint."

Before the delighted Bryan could ask another question, Allie turned and retreated to the safety of her station behind the counter, where most of the diner's few other customers sat.

He leaned back in the booth and studied her as she worked. How come she'd managed to walk away? Perhaps she was a worker in the sex trade? He doubted it. Yeah, prostitutes tended to be immune to him, but despite her attitude, Allie was most definitely was aware of him.

He could feel her awareness of him even as Allie swapped smart remarks and hoots of laughter with the cook. Not a fainthearted woman. The crowd in the diner was all men, but she held her own in the flirty and caustic exchanges that were something like a floor show for the customers.

A burly truck driver got to his feet and tossed down money. Allie came by to collect the bill. "Hope you left a tip this time, Jer. Am I gonna have to stop giving you extra coffee to teach you waitresses deserve our tips?"

The driver leered and wagged his hips. "Hey babe, how about I give you more than just my tip?"

She snorted. "How 'bout I saw the whole thing off with a rusty butter knife?"

The easy grin that lingered on her lush mouth flattened into a hard line only when she looked back at him. And she did that often, turning away quickly when he met her eyes.

Bryan enjoyed the show and idly wondered what she'd say if he told her the truth. Not that the women had given a crap about what came out of his mouth, if it wasn't his tongue, ready to please them, to taste their pussies.

Would Allie believe him? One of the first females who'd hurtled into his bed screamed at him when he said that she felt nothing but a chemical response. "No, I love you," she'd howled.

"But you only met me an hour ago."

She had kissed him, almost clawed at him. "It's love, it's love. I need more," she moaned. When she'd taken his hardening cock into her mouth, he had been obliged to abandon discussion.

Allie wanted him, of course, but for some reason or another she didn't want to want him.

She ventured over, carrying a full pot of coffee.

He risked being obnoxious. That part could be fun. "I know you want me," he said in a low voice, just to see what she'd say. He guessed she'd go for denial or maybe just ignore him.

She started. Her large dark eyes narrowed as she looked him up and down. "Yeah, so?"

"Shit, you know it's fake." He burst into relieved laughter.

"What do you mean? What's fake?" She went pale and rocked back on her sensible black shoes. Oh, damn, she must have thought he mocked her. Too bad she didn't answer with a sharp retort the way she did with her other customers.

He pushed the mug towards her so she could refill it. "Listen, no, sorry. I'm not laughing at you."

"What's so funny then?"

"Hmm. Me, I suppose."

"Uh-huh." Her voice was flat, but the corner of her mouth twitched up a little. She had a gorgeous mouth. Now that she bent close enough for a visual inspection he saw she had freckles under a creamy, smooth complexion. "You're funny enough, but I guess I come in a close second."

When she reached across the table to pour the coffee and the sweet musk of her arousal rose over the scent of bitter coffee. As she drew nearer, her pulse quickened under the delicate skin of her throat. Bryan didn't have the overwhelming need to run. In fact, his own pulse took a jump, and not with fear.

He eyed the coffee and his stomach rumbled with real hunger for food for the first time in a long while. "I've changed my mind about food. What do you have here that won't hurt me?"

She put down the pot and pulled out the order pad and a pencil. "Just stay away from the sausage. We do decent eggs."

"I'll take three eggs," he said. "Scrambled, please." He was suddenly salivating for a midnight breakfast—or maybe for a midnight snack, clad in a mud-brown waitress uniform. He shifted on the seat, tipping his head to follow her stroll across the faded tan tiles. Nicely shaped legs, no doubt about it. They'd be smooth under his hands, and delicious wrapped around him.

The bell over the door jangled, and a man and woman bustled in. The new woman made a beeline for Bryan even before she caught sight of him. She must have had a hell of a lot of animal instincts.

Shit. Bryan knew he couldn't hide, but he slid into the corner of the booth anyway. The middle-aged woman had spotted the source of her attraction and was making her way to the back of the diner.

No fights, Bryan prayed. He felt for his money and pulled out some bills in case he had to get out quickly.

"Do I know you?" The dark-haired woman breathed wine into his face as she eased into his booth and shoved the length of her body against him. Alcohol increased the response.

"Dawn, shag it over here." Her companion sauntered over and gave Bryan a scowl.

"Nice meeting you, ma'am." Bryan gave a slight nod. "Sir."

Dawn's red-nailed fingers were on his knee and then slipping to his crotch. Whoa, she didn't mind moving quickly. He could move faster, though, and caught her wrist. "No ma'am. Sorry, but I'm really not interested."

Her vermilion mouth twisted into a smile. The large, balding companion inched closer, casual, but wired. Bryan couldn't read most men as well as he could women, but it didn't take supernatural powers to see the guy was pissed off.

"What's going on?" The big guy's nostrils flared as if he'd caught scent of fresh skunk.

"I'm just meeting a new friend." Dawn laid a hand on Bryan's thigh again, and her bracelets clinked.

The man's fists clenched. Bryan, who'd grown skilled at brawling lately, looked the guy over and decided that if he had to, he could take him down. He'd be easier than the last jerk who'd gone after him. This one looked more baboon than gorilla.

Bryan eased himself away from the woman's clutches and half rose to his feet, reluctantly ready to give her a push to get her out of the way. His stomach grumbled in protest—real hunger pulled at him—but it didn't look like a meal was in the cards tonight and he didn't want to take the diner apart. He felt like he owed the sour, honest Allie.

"Dawn and Joey!" The waitress strode over to the table and leaned her hip against the table and set the plate of eggs down. Her hesitant, confused manner had evaporated. "I see you're getting to know my boyfriend...um, Bob."

Dawn and the baboon gaped at her. Bryan choked.

Allie ignored him. "Dawn, you scoot out of there. You look too darned good in that new blouse – you're way too tempting."

Dawn giggled but didn't stop staring at Bryan.

Allie pointed to a booth at the front of the restaurant. "G'wan, you two. I got your coffee waiting for you in your usual spot." She turned to Bryan and, without meeting his amused gaze, added in a chatty manner, "Glad you got to meet these two, hon. They are a couple of my favorite regulars."

"Boyfriend?" Bryan muttered after the two wandered off to the front of the diner. She moved even faster than the woman who had trapped him in her apartment by tying him to her bed as he slept.

Allie smiled after the grumbling Dawn, not at him. And her answer had nothing to do with him, either. "I had to say something. She's single-minded when it comes to her, er, pursuits. Bob."

Bryan exhaled and sat down. "I suppose I owe you thanks."

Her gaze met his briefly, and for once her full mouth remained quirked in an easy smile. "Hey, don't strain yourself."

"Okay. I won't. Thanks won't kill me, I think." Almost flirtation. He poured cream into the coffee. She seemed more relaxed. Maybe she wouldn't walk away if he didn't push too hard, so he waited. A normal conversation. And with a woman.

Allie continued, "Dawn's gone after men before, but usually she's a little less obvious about it." She put her fists on her hips and turned her full attention to him. "What *is* it with you?"

He grinned. What a lovely, dispassionate, almost irritated tone she used.

Allie saw the grin spread over the man's face, saw his white teeth, and she stopped breathing as her whole body screamed at her to take Dawn's place next to the stranger.

The picture filled her mind again. She was kissing him, touching him, pulling him down on top of her as she ripped open that shirt of his, begging him to yank up her skirt...

No. She didn't trust bodies, hers or his. Especially not her own.

"You want to know what's wrong with me?" He spoke in a low, intimate tone. "I'll tell you when you have time."

She leaned toward him. She did not seriously flirt with customers. But her next words contradicted that rule. "I get off in two hours. You can tell me then." She wondered at the odd breathless quality in her voice.

The playful gleam in his eyes disappeared to be replaced by a weary look; she'd apparently disappointed him.

"Huh. Don't look so delighted." She straightened up. "You said you wanted to meet me after work and—"

The corner of his mouth hitched as he tugged the plate of eggs closer. "Fine. Good."

Allie wished the place would get busy. The pounding awareness of need touched every step she took, every plate she hefted. She wanted to avoid thinking about the man lurking in the corner. Nightmare or a winning lottery ticket—she didn't know which yet. But nothing else would sway her attention until she found out. She focused on him like lightning to a rod. A thick, driving rod, bet he had one. Her insides clenched just imagining it.

Dawn ignored her pie and craned her neck to watch the stranger as he ate. Allie grew breathless near him. Was he a movie star?

She wiped down the counter, surreptitiously studying him. Long legs, athletic, a muscular but lanky sort of man. A nice body. Wide shoulders, thick dark hair in need of a cut. She supposed his face was handsome enough, thin and angular. Oh, and the eyes, oh God... He glanced up at her and when their gazes locked, her fingers curled with the need to stroke the man's skin, discover the texture of his hair, the rough stubble darkening his cheeks... *Stop it right there.* He made it clear he knew all about his appeal

and she didn't need a vain twit in her life. She'd already been down that road more than once.

Dawn stood and stretched, pushing out her large chest provocatively in the man's direction. He tensed, his fork paused halfway to his mouth. Allie managed to ignore her own body's clamor as she watched wariness transform his eyes and tighten his body. Dawn swayed toward his booth, but he'd already gotten to his feet, too, and threw down money fast. He turned to leave as if he knew something was in the air.

Sure enough, dopey Joey followed Dawn. Joey grabbed at the man's shoulder and his voice rang out through the nearly empty diner. "All she's talking about is you, mister. I'm sick of it, and you."

The stranger didn't look confused—or surprised.

Joey tried to give him a shove, but the man just bent a shoulder so Joey's push lost its power. He easily slipped past Joey, and continued toward the door. When Joey's swing came, Allie shrieked, but "Bob" twisted again and kept walking, barely speeding up. He'd apparently known that was coming, too.

"Hey, watch it," she shouted, but even as she called out, she saw that the stranger knew what he was doing. He'd lived through this before—other women, other places. The man had said she wanted him. She thought he was just being an asshole, but... Who was he?

Tagge burst from the kitchen.

"What the hell you doing now, Joey?" he bellowed.

"Why you always blaming me," Joey shouted back.

Allie dropped her rag onto the counter. "A dustup with another customer," she told Tagge. "It's okay now."

Tagge ignored her reassurance. "Joey, what is it with you?"

"Never mind," Allie patted him as she pushed past, but she didn't pause or worry. The two men didn't feel like a night was complete without a good bellow at each other.



She ran to the front door. "Bob" was striding away, heading toward a dusty blue car that had the anonymous look of a rental.

"Wait," she called and then crunched across the gravel toward him.

He froze, but when he turned to her, the weariness was etched in the fine lines around his mouth and eyes. He was more than just tired—the look of wary sorrow pierced her, as potent as the lust he inspired. She had been about to say goodbye, but she changed her mind.

He spoke gently. "I'm sorry. I gotta go."

"No, no, don't go," she begged. She put out a hand to touch him, but at his frown, she moved her hand up to hug her own arms. She hoped he'd think that she was warming herself up against the cool predawn air rather than struggling against the instinct to touch him. She didn't think the guy was fooled.

He was taller than she'd guessed. She squeezed her eyes shut so she wouldn't see all that gorgeous guy in front of her. Still she wasn't entirely surprised to feel she'd instinctively stepped closer. She waited for him to gather her close and kiss her face and mouth and...

The car door squeaked as he yanked it open. "Bye, Allie."

"Hey. You-you were going to tell me something," she babbled to stop him. "Don't leave until you explain. If you go now, you might leave something worthwhile."

The door slammed and she opened her eyes. His brows were drawn into an impatient vee. To her disgust, even the lines of his crooked frown made her hot for the man.

"What do you mean? Damn, are you talking about just sex?" He put his hands on his hips, legs apart, a posture of indignation.

"Since when does a guy get angry about being offered 'just sex'?" She laughed—and his frown relaxed, maybe because of her amusement.

She shrugged and admitted, "I don't know what I meant. I was just talking to keep you from leaving."

"Why do you want me to stay?" he pressed.

A good question, but she gave the only answer she could. "Why not?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm the one who's taking the risk, right? Everyone around here knows me. I'm Allie Hamden. You're the stranger. Heck, I'm the one who should be suspicious and asking a million questions."

"Go ahead. Ask them."

Their breath formed light clouds in the chilled silent air. The early light gilded the lines of his face, the heavy eyebrows over those eyes. When he rubbed his chin she heard the rasp of unshaven male skin. As if in response, her own skin prickled.

She shrugged. "Well, um, it's okay. I can ask later. If you want to come back in. We can talk after I get off work soon."

"Do you have a place I might sleep?" he asked at last, and she was surprised to hear an apologetic note. "I'm really beat. I was thinking of checking in here but—"

"Yeah. Sure. There's a suite we waitresses can use." She waved at the hotel. "I'm off soon. Just, just wait a bit. Please?"

*Don't beg.* She put her hands behind her back and twisted her fingers together. *For God's sake show a little dignity.*

He gave a single nod. "Sure. Thanks."

"Hey, you're getting better at that gratitude thing."

His smile made him look younger and even more of a heart-stopper. She could feel her own teeth grow dry as she grinned back like a fool.

Allie forced herself inside to finish off her work. She hauled the garbage to the rear, grateful for the quiet time. In the cool air of a brand-new morning, she pulled in a deep breath. At least she couldn't smell the garbage, thanks to the thorough cleaning her nose had gotten earlier.

The man. Suddenly she understood he had done her a favor.

Hang time was over. Somehow this succulent stranger had awakened more than her libido. He'd jolted her to the dull reality of her life. *Time to wake up, Ally*. Feeling and sensation opened to her like a menu of potential delights. Sex was a dish best served hot, boiling hot, and Ally felt a throbbing hunger rise with every moment she fantasized about the man. If tonight was a one-night stand, she'd live with it.

Once she got back in the diner, she'd make an effort to be as friendly to him as she was to any customer. No more bad mood because the sight of a stranger in blue jeans and flannel shirt had jerked her from a comfortable sleep.

What if he'd walked away while she was cleaning up? Dang, in the songs they usually did, right? She emptied the garbage cans and beamed at nothing in particular. Even then, she'd have had the few minutes to savor the return her body's hunger. Not resent it.

But when she swung through the door to the dining area, her heart thudding with fear or anticipation, he still sat wedged into the corner of the bench as if he was hiding. He stared out the window, studying the passing cars.

Was he some sort of fugitive? Based on her past record with men she'd trusted, he might well be a mass murderer.

Tagge came out from the kitchen and locked the front door. He apparently didn't notice the last customer, the stranger.

Allie followed Tagge to the kitchen. "Why'd you lock up?"

"Mary called to say she's gonna be an hour late. She'll open at seven for breakfast, but I'm outta here. You go on out the back way when you're done with clean-up."

He pulled off his apron and tucked his shirt in, before yanking on a jacket.

"See ya, hon. But listen, don't be too bad." He winked at her and she knew he'd seen the dark-haired man after all – probably watched her drag him back into the diner.

She rolled her eyes—Tagge whistled “Strangers in the Night” as he went out the back door to his pickup.

An hour. She’d sit with the man, talk to him, before she let him into the apartment. She wasn’t the fool she’d been once upon a time. She hoped.

She set up the coffeemakers for Mary, poured out the last of the old coffee into two cups, carried them over to his table.

After drawing the venetian blinds to show the diner was closed—only for that reason, she told herself—she dropped down into the booth across from him. “So. What’s your real name, Bob?”

“Bryan.” His fingertips tapped a steady beat on the scarred tabletop and he occasionally leaned back to lift a blade of the blinds and peer out. Uh-oh.

“What are you running from?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

She managed to hide the gasp. It wasn’t her imagination—he was some kind of fugitive. Damn, damn, damn. But she didn’t jump up, unlock the door and heave him out. Not stupid old Allie.

Instead she said, “Try me.”

The tapping stopped. He picked up the coffee and she felt the seat next to her dip slightly. He’d stretched his long legs under the table and now his beat-up sneakers rested next to her thigh. She fought the urge to move closer and rub her hands over his calves, see if they were as muscular as they looked under the jeans.

“Ever heard of Metcher Products?” he asked.

“Sure. They make deodorant, right?”

He nodded. “I worked for them. In their Maryland lab.”

“You some sort of scientist?”

He laughed. “Not hardly. I was in construction and got laid-off. A friend got me a temporary job as a lab rat. A guinea pig.”

He tipped back his mug and she had time to admire the strong golden column of his throat. And wonder what kind of trouble a lab rat could get into – gnawing on the supplies? “Go on,” she prompted.

He cupped the coffee mug in both hands as if drawing comfort from it. Long tapering fingers she imagined stroking her, clutching her in passion. A hard jab of longing surprised a tiny moan from her. The quick raise of a dark eyebrow showed that he’d heard and maybe even understood it. Embarrassed, she forced her attention back to his words.

“They’re messing around with cologne. Stuff that’s more than just scent. But,” he hesitated, “the point is they screwed up with me.”

“Why are you in trouble because they screwed up?”

He took a long drink before answering. “You know the answer.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I meant you feel the answer.” His unearthly, gorgeous eyes studied her. “Why are you bothering with me? Huh? Because of Metcher. Aw hell, I’d explain but I bet Metcher Corporation would sue, get me thrown in jail.” He snorted. “Hell, they’d love to have that much access to me.”

Allie’s insides dipped. Great, a conspiracy nut. Was he telling her she trusted him because he wore some kind of perfume he’d stolen? Maybe the man was nuts after all. “What is it that I’m supposed to be feeling? Go ahead and tell me.”

“Lust,” he grunted.

Her skin grew hot with her blush. That was true enough, but he could probably see it in the way she gawked at him. She’d never been good at hiding her feelings.

That didn’t mean she wouldn’t make the attempt. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hell,” he snapped. “I can almost taste your...desire.”

She drew away, annoyed at herself for her surge of fear, tinged with even more nonsensical lust. But she was more annoyed at his lunatic annoyance. "What are you getting all bent about, Bryan? I don't understand."

He rubbed his unshaved chin with a large palm and his mouth quirked into the trace of a grin. "Yeah, and I don't suppose I can explain."

She should have marched him to the door and ordered him out, but the return of humorous despair in his voice and face made her say, "Might as well try. I've got nothing planned today 'til noon."

Allie pressed her shoulders against the back of the booth and rested her clasped hands on the table, clearly clamping down on the surges of desire Bryan could taste in the air. "Go on. Tell me why Metcher deodorant is why I'm lusting after you."

Bryan stared into her cocoa-brown eyes. Maybe she was interested, and not just putting on a show to get him into the sack.

Not that the thought of sex seemed so appalling just now. Five months. That was how long he'd gone without a woman. A month after the curse took over his life.

Faced with almost the first woman who didn't crawl all over him, moaning—and he took out his anger at Metcher on her?

"Allie." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm acting like a jerk."

She smiled and widened her eyes. "You mean you're not always a conceited jackass?" She tilted her head. "What's wrong with you?"

He opened his mouth to tell her details, but stopped. Could she get in trouble with the corporate sharks if she knew too much about the damn project? He wanted to stay here, for at least a day or two. He sure didn't want to risk losing his temporary safe harbor or hurt the person offering him shelter.

"I contracted some kind of, um, condition. No, nothing contagious. They've paid me plenty to recompense me. It-it's why women come on to me."

In the silence, she rested her chin on her hand and her solemn dark eyes stared into his.

"Okay, Mr. I'm-Too-Sexy-for-My-Pants, I admit I'm attracted to you. I feel something," she said at last. "But I think you feel something, as well."

He drew in a sharp breath. Jesus, it was true. For the first time in weeks he felt like a regular human again, and she could see it, too. Hell, weirder still was that she had noticed he was something more than an object to relieve the fierce ache between her legs.

Her dark eyes sparkled with amusement. "Ha. You look like you opened one of those fake cans of peanuts and a bunch of springy snakes jumped out at you."

"Damn, I feel like that." He gave a sudden laugh that surprised him almost as much as his increasing desire. "I loved those stupid things."

She nodded. "Yeah, no one was ever fooled by 'em. Or by the plastic spiders you could freeze in the ice cubes."

"Or—" he laughed so hard he could barely get out the words "—or dribble glasses." For some reason this dumb conversation struck him as the funniest damn thing he'd ever heard. When he managed to get his inane laughter under control, he noticed her staring at him, the hunger for him obvious in her heavy-lidded eyes, the heat practically shimmering from her skin. Good, smooth skin, he noticed. Would it taste like rich butter and cream? Or sweet maple syrup? Either way, he could lick her all up from her button nose to her sensibly shod toes and everywhere in between. Especially everywhere in between.

Time to pay the piper. She'd come after him now. But instead of revulsion, he felt his pulse quicken and his belly swoop with interest as her lips parted and her tongue flicked over her teeth.

He waited to hear the inevitable commands. *Kiss me. Take me. Screw me.*

"You have the greatest laugh," she said instead. "A belly laugh."

He got up, walked around the table, and slid in next to her, the vinyl still warm from her body heat. Her back went straight, pushing out those appealing rounded breasts. Ah, she was so tightly strung. He'd help her relax.

His cock stirred, just a little, at the thought of touching her and he wanted to sing with relief. She'd helped him already, giving him back the thrum of desire. He'd give her a gift in return.

"Now what are you doing?" Her voice hitched with desire—or maybe frustration. Escaped strands of curling hair framed her heart-shaped face. "You get all bent out of shape when...well, about, um, sex. And now you're... I don't understand what you want."

He propped an elbow on the table and rested his cheek on his hand so he could watch her gulp deep breaths and her eyes darken with lust. Very nice. "Okay, that makes two of us who don't know. I'm clueless. Maybe we should worry about what you want."

"Me?" Her surprise, bordering on indignation, made him smile.

"Sure. You, Allie, my fine waitress. What do you want?"



## **Chapter Two**

Bryan wasn't sure why he had such a strong urge to give Allie the gift of whatever she wanted from him.

Serving the server for a change.

Maybe because she'd made him laugh. She was no ravishing beauty, but her round features looked damned cute when she grinned or glowered at him and her dark eyes brimmed with an in-your-face determination.

She reminded him that females were more than panting, grabbing animals. Still, he automatically flinched when her hand tentatively brushed his shoulder.

She hadn't been captured by the chemical pull of him yet, for she drew back at once. "What's the matter?"

"Bad memories," he said.

Her back straightened and she scooted a couple of inches away. He didn't feel the heat rising from the side of her body. Surprising—he had a twinge of regret that she didn't try to touch him again. When the spicy moss scent of her interest reached him, for once he didn't suffocate. Under that scent was another more elusive fragrance he didn't recognize.

He wished she'd put her hand on his shoulder again. His body tightened and he grew harder. He wanted to explore the source of that scent. Hell, he wanted her.

Astonishing to realize that more than sleep, he craved burying himself in this woman's body.

Well, well. Bryan had the urge to touch a woman again. He'd experiment, see if he could take her to the edge without feeling like he had to cut and run. He couldn't allow

himself to go too far or it would turn her lust into craziness. That had happened to another woman on a couple of memorable occasions.

He'd manage their hunger, allow them both to taste pleasure. The challenge intrigued him. "So, go on, Allie the waitress. Tell me what you want."

She shrugged and flushed. He liked the way her pale skin showed all of her emotions. "Um. Why don't you tell me about Metcher? Or about bad memories?"

The delectable aroma of carnal longing abated slightly and he could taste more of the underlying scent. Fear? That was new for him. He'd never been able to sense anything but sex from women.

He wondered if the symptoms of awareness were going to keep getting worse. Maybe he'd start reading minds next. Tapping into women's thoughts and not just emotions? Frightening. But...

Might as well use the signals. "Nah. Let's skip them. Tell me, are you afraid of me, or afraid of wanting me?"

She glowered at him. Annoyance evidently evaporated her fear, as he'd hoped it would. "You really are something, you know?" she said, "I don't think I've ever met a man so full of himself."

"It's a fact, ma'am. Nothing but."

"Huh." She wrinkled her nose in a smirk of disgusted amusement and picked up her coffee.

He was almost glad she didn't believe him—and he was thoroughly glad she seemed able to control herself around him. "Never mind, Allie. Tell me why you're scared. It's because of sex?"

"No, not scared," she murmured and shoved at her hair. "More like... About the time I get my act together, when I manage to get on my feet, my life falls apart. The reason is always a man. Stupid, huh."

"Tell me," he coaxed.

Allie didn't want to talk about herself. She examined his face with its strong angles. Even if he wasn't too thin, he'd be a striking man rather than a pretty boy. "You know, you don't eat enough."

Her hand had tingled so alarmingly when she'd touched his shoulder; she risked tracing a small, fresh scar on his cheek. Sure enough, the sensation ripped through her body. Her stomach clenched tight with lust.

"I eat plenty. Tell me about the men who've hurt you." His tone informed her that he wasn't going to drop the subject.

The losers weren't important right at the moment, after all. When she opened her mouth, she discovered it was easy to talk about the first one. "There was this teacher in high school. I told my best friend about him and she told someone. You know how it goes. It turned ugly. He was real popular and the kids hated me when he got in trouble. He claimed I'd been pursuing him and that I was sick, pretending that we were lovers. I remember he said he only felt sorry for me. I didn't want any more crap from him or anyone else. I just...left."

She could barely remember what Mr. P. looked like, though she vividly recalled the sounds he'd made on top of her in the backseat of his red compact.

"Shit. You mean he got away with hurting you?"

She shrugged. "No big deal. I didn't miss school."

"Poor Allie," he murmured.

She shrugged again, more dismissive. She didn't want pity. What she wanted to do was jump this man, a total stranger, and force him to help her completely forget the rotten apples. A tall order. She wondered how she'd phrase the request. "I got my GED. Anyway, the teacher wasn't the worst."

"You're kidding. Who was?"

She'd had enough of the conversation. "He's long gone. But listen, you said whatever I wanted? I don't want to make a laundry list of losers."

“Okay. Fair enough.” He drew in a deep breath, as if testing the air. “Mmm. You’re less frightened. Can I help get rid of more fear?”

She was lifting her mug to swallow the last of the coffee, but at those words, she put it down, almost dropped it. The man might be a mind reader. “Why do you think I’m still frightened?”

Astoundingly gentle, he put his hands on her shoulders to twist her to him. “I can read you, Allie.”

She snorted. “Yeah, some book.”

“A page-turner.”

He leaned toward her and his ragged breath fanned her cheek. She grew so dizzy with his presence, the signs of his own interest that she had to close her eyes. “Oh, yes,” she murmured, “please, yes.”

His lips brushed hers, teasing, too soft and gentle for her sanity. She groaned and tilted sideways to gain access to the intoxicating taste of him.

“Easy.” He spoke against her mouth. “We have all day.”

She didn’t mean to ask, but the words slipped out. “Is that as long as you can stay?”

He pulled back, but his square strong hands gripped her shoulders harder. “Yes. I’m sorry. I have to leave because—”

She reached up and pressed her finger against his warm mouth. “I’ll take it.”

She’d take what he could give without more questions. Once again she was trusting a man—giving herself to him—and this time she didn’t even know the guy.

He leaned in, slow and cautious, almost as if he understood how bewildered she felt. Or maybe he was holding back for a reason of his own. As the tip of his tongue lightly traced her lips and teased her, she closed her eyes and moaned.

The first intimate touch drew heat from her mouth to her belly, all the way to her fingers. Her toes curled with a sharp jolt of longing. Just from a kiss. His firm mouth on hers was skillful and practiced, nothing tentative—yet entirely new.

She broke away and nuzzled at his neck, trying to breathe him in, but her nose was still stunned from the face full of cleaner she'd gotten. Perhaps she caught the hint of night air and musk on his skin.

She slid her hands up the wall of his chest and savored the light groan she drew from him. He pulled her closer and her heart sped up.

The kisses grew deeper and more urgent; his hand pushed through her hair and cupped her head. She heard the sound of her own moan. *More, more, more.* The hungry slide of his mouth on hers drove her crazy.

His other hand reached for her breast and caressed her through the thin nylon uniform. The big hand almost covered her full breasts, once her bane in high school, now her glory as the pad of his thumb made teasing circles over her nipples. Even through the layers of cloth the sensation of his touch was raw and vivid.

"It's gonna be fine," he spoke gruffly, sounding almost surprised. "This will work. Yeah. It'll be very good."

He pressed her down gently on the seat and knelt above her.

"Take off your shoes," he ordered.

She toed them off and even as they thumped to the floor, he slipped his hands up her legs, under her skirt. Befuddled by a heavy fog of desire, she would let him do whatever he wanted—as long as he touched her. Only a few moments ago, she'd been frightened that he'd push too far too fast, but now he moved deliberately, far too slow. She twisted on the seat, needing more. *Touch me everywhere*, she wanted to moan. Where had this frantic craving come from?

She reached out her arms to him. "Please."

"Wait," he said. "Hush." With a twitch and a yank, he expertly pulled down her pantyhose and her plain white cotton bikini briefs. As if she were a child unable to do the job herself, he bent her legs and gently disentangled them. He looked at the haphazard bundle in his hands and then grinned into her face. "I'd guessed silk."

From her lust-soaked daze she blinked at him. "What?"

"I had decided you wore silk under that uniform."

"I'm not a silk kind of person," she said, and squeaked with pleasure as his warm palms glided up her thighs.

"Oh, yes you are," he whispered. "All silk. I know these things."

His smile was as cocky as his attitude. Cocky. *Whoa*. She looked down at the bulge in his jeans. He was ready and so, astoundingly, was she. Usually she heated slowly. Now she could set damp wood on fire. The air touching her seemed to stoke rather than cool her skin.

He yanked at her dress. "Let's get this brown thing off."

She nearly lifted her arms so he could pull it off, but a flash of good sense penetrated the fog. "No, not here." Her sane self had awakened again.

*Not anywhere*, she reminded herself. She wasn't the sort to go too far with a stranger. But maybe some more kisses. Yes. They could be necessary. If he didn't put his mouth on hers, she might expire.

"No sex. Just kiss me," she panted.

"Sounds good to me. Wonderful plan, in fact." How could he speak so easily? She could barely form coherent thoughts, much less words.

He leaned over her and angled his mouth against hers. He didn't shove his full weight on her, but through his jeans she could feel his erection, hard and long, wedged between her legs. She pressed up and wiggled, impatient for more. Had she really settled for kisses? Was she nuts? This man offered a feast of new feelings, rich, delicious desire. Goodbye again, sane self.

He gasped and rocked rhythmically against her. He wasn't so calm after all.

He reared back, pushed her uniform up around her hips and stared down at her naked lower body. She closed her eyes; the sight of his heavy-lidded admiration embarrassed and aroused her. "Lovely," he muttered. "You're gorgeous."

His gaze was too intense, yet she felt gorgeous—ripe and ready. Reaching for his strong shoulders, she pulled him to her and wrapped her legs around his hips, hiding from him and feeling his potency at the same time. The rough cloth, his arousal rubbing against her bare, tenderly swollen crotch brought her to the edge of frenzy. But he was drawing away from where she needed him.

“No,” she gasped and her hands scrabbled at his sides as she attempted to pull him to her.

The cool air brushing over her thighs and between her legs didn’t calm her. She arched her back in frustration. The fake leather seat squeaked as he slid down. His hands grasped her hips firmly. He kissed her belly, her thighs.

Her eyes snapped open when his warm tongue swirled over her clit.

“God.” She hauled herself up on her elbows to stare down at him. “Bryan,” she panted. “I don’t even know your last name.”

The blue-green eyes looked back, amused and heavy-lidded with arousal. What a sight—that glorious man between *her* legs.

“Hartigan,” he muttered, and his tongue glided over the tender skin at the crook at her thigh.

“Hey,” she protested, even more breathless.

He looked at her, his eyebrows raised in mock surprise. “You said only kissing. It’s kissing. Don’t you like it?” He dipped his head and planted a noisy smack on her curls.

She shivered with eagerness and a tinge of embarrassment. “Oh, yeah, I-I do. But I mean, um, for you. I haven’t had a shower since yes—”

“Hush,” he commanded, his voice husky, and he slid back down so she looked at the crooked part in the top of his silky dark hair.

The sudden, gentle onslaught of his lips and tongue took her by surprise. Almost at once her body flew back into alarming and complete arousal. A five-alarm fire. No one had ever lavished such attention on her before. Heck, even *she* hadn’t. Brand-new

sensations rushed through, overpowering her and washing away any embarrassment. She could not escape the waves of her response even if she'd wanted to.

"Oh, no," she whimpered over and over, "that feels so good. That's so good."

She was dimly aware that she sounded like an idiot, but he only hummed his approval. The sound vibrated through her, added to her frenzy.

She touched his soft hair, wove her fingers through it. She twisted under his touch, needing more. He didn't unzip his jeans, the way she'd feared, hoped and expected. Instead he slipped his fingers high up into her and she felt rather than heard herself cry out. Only a few hard thrusts of his hand and pleasure threatened to flood her body beyond endurance. She arched up to meet him. A sudden explosion—waves of an enormous orgasm shook her body.

Perhaps she blacked out, for she didn't remember him moving up to return to her mouth. He kissed her, heat in his plunging tongue. His own desire reached through her languid post-orgasmic stupor. Another spasm of eagerness gripped her belly and she woke entirely.

"God, I'm turning into a crazy woman," she gasped against his neck as she ran her fingers over the broad muscles of his back over his belt to his hard butt. "I can't get enough of you."

He froze. A second later, he pulled away. The seat squeaked as he sat back on his heels, breathing hard.

"Oh, no, shit. I'm sorry," he said softly. She was surprised to see that he looked unhappy, even appalled. *Great way to kill a mood, Allie.*

"No, what I meant was thank you. I haven't felt this good in..." Her voice trailed off.

When was the last time she'd felt so alive, filled with tingles of excitement and drowsy relief at the same time? Never.



"Bryan," she whispered. She reached up and touched a lock of the black hair curling over his forehead. "Please, come back here. If I'm a sex-crazed lunatic, at least I'm a happy one."

He grinned at her—not his self-satisfied smirk. This was a shy, goofy grin. He asked, "So you're not going to scream if I get up and walk away?"

"Scream? No, of course not. But, um, do you want to go?" She glanced at the erection pressing against his jeans—still very pronounced and tempting. She ran her tongue across her kiss-swollen lower lip. Maybe she shouldn't have been so hasty when she'd turned down his initial offer. Suddenly sex felt...necessary.

He carefully lay back down, next to her now. For the first time, she noticed how narrow the booth was. Amazing neither of them had slipped onto the floor. Dang, if both of them had dropped to the ground without drawing apart, Allie doubted she would have noticed.

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his mouth to her forehead and then her lips. "No. I don't want to go," he murmured. "Thank God."

"After all it's your turn, isn't it?"

He frowned but didn't pull away as her hand found the snap to his trousers. She unzipped him and slipped her hands into the jeans. Her fingers explored the silken skin of his cock, and she squeezed the heavy, hard thickness. A perfect combination.

He groaned. "Allie. Thank you, but I-I can't lose control. When I'm with a woman...oh-h-h. That feels so. Good."

"You can. I'll help. Ummm," she hummed appreciatively as he thrust against her fingers.

His breath hissed through clenched teeth. "No. I'm afraid it'll make it worse for you when—"

Someone thumped at the door, banging angrily at the glass. Bryan jerked away and sat up quickly. He looked fatigued rather than alarmed. Almost as if he'd been expecting it.

Allie slipped out of the booth and picked up the bundle of underwear and hose on the floor. She should have felt tawdry, being caught necking in the diner. Instead she felt a frisson of fear because of the way Brian pushed himself up against the wall to peer through the cracks in the blinds. He was experienced at life on the run. Icy trepidation chilled her. This man might be dangerous, an escaped prisoner perhaps, and she'd eagerly offered him her body.

"Damn." He winced as he zipped up his jeans. "They've got Elsie."

Bewilderment replaced her fear. "Who is Elsie?"

"A dog." He ran his hands over his face. Even in the darkened dining room, the circles under his eyes showed his tiredness. "I'm gonna go to the kitchen. If you want the reward, you can lead them there. Otherwise, well... I'll see you later either way."

"Reward?" she said, but he'd already disappeared through the swinging door. She pulled on her underwear, grimacing as it touched her sensitive, extremely damp crotch. She pushed the pantyhose into her apron pocket, slipped on her shoes and went to the door. Parting the blinds, she looked out at three men in dark, nondescript suits. FBI? Something official. After Bryan. God, what had he done?

At the back of the group stood a pale, thin man with a golden retriever. The dog. Didn't police usually use nasty, snarling breeds?

"We're closed," she shouted through the door.

"We only need a minute of your time." The gray-haired buzz cut one in the front held up an identification of some sort. Not FBI, she was relieved to see. She studied the badge. Some kind of private security agency perhaps—they couldn't really arrest Bryan could they?

They stood watching her, waiting. Clearly they wouldn't take no for an answer.

She sighed, leaned against the door and unlocked it. The men surged forward, but they weren't nearly as excited as the golden that wore an excited happy dog smile and panted as it pulled against its collar.

It yanked past the men in suits and went straight for Allie and pawed at her feet.

"Hey, no dogs allowed in here."

"This is a drug-sniffing dog, ma'am." The thin dog handler narrowed his eyes at her.

"Drug-sniffing?"

The dog stood in front of her and gave a few frenzied sharp barks.

All the humans turned to face her.

"Excuse me, ma'am." The dog handler cleared his throat. "But do you know a man named Bryan Hartigan?"

She made a show of glancing at her watch. "Look, we have to open in a half an hour and —"

The gray buzz cut interrupted. Despite the suit he had a military bearing and looked like the type who had major tattoos somewhere on his body. "There's a ten thousand dollar reward for him."

She managed not to gawk. "Who is this guy? Is he a murderer?"

She must have looked alarmed because the buzz cut one hastened to reassure her. "No ma'am. He is not a danger to the public. But he has stolen valuable research material."

The cologne? Her belly turned over with dismay. He must have taken a flask of the stuff or something. The dog was lunging at her. It planted its paws on her chest and licked her chin.

At least the dog was nice. "Hi sweetie." Allie automatically scratched its ears and let the dog pant into her face before the thin man pulled it down.

She'd always been a fool for rambunctious golden retrievers. Not nearly as dangerous as good-looking, rotten thieves. For an instant she was tempted to toss these guys Bryan, apparently her latest turkey. She almost opened her mouth to say, "He's waiting in the kitchen." But no matter who he was, he'd done nothing to her—other than give her a few of the most memorable moments of her life.

Instead she rubbed the dog's head and stalled for time. "What's this guy look like?"

"She knows," the dog handler said and Allie thought he was talking about the dog, until he added, "No way Elsie would have this kind of response unless there's been some physical contact. He's got to—"

"Excuse me, mister," Allie interrupted, narrowing her eyes. Her heart thumped hard, as if she was afraid, but she wasn't aware of any emotion other than annoyance. "If you're accusing me of consorting with a thief or drug dealer or whatever, you and your dog can go back outside. And, hey, do you have a search warrant? Don't you need one of those?"

Buzz cut guy shifted uncomfortably and folded his arms. "Well, you see ma'am, we're from a corporation. It's a private matter that hasn't been handed over to the law as yet."

Something in the way he avoided her puzzled stare made her ask, "So this guy hasn't broken any laws?"

"We didn't say that," Buzz cut said. "You gonna cooperate with us, ma'am, or will we have to talk to the manager?"

She twitched her shoulder into a shrug. Bryan would be able to hear this conversation if he stood near the door and she hoped he'd take off. She hadn't liked that look on his face—defeated. Maybe she didn't want to hand over her heart to the man, but she wanted him to get away from these weird semi-law types.

"What do you want from me?" she said.

Buzz cut whipped out a photo. A happier Bryan leaned against porch and squinted at the camera. He was dressed in jeans, maybe even the same faded close-fitting pair he

had on, but there were no circles under his eyes, no shadow of a beard. His arms were folded and he wore a tool belt. He looked tanned. And delicious. Her mouth suddenly flooded with longing for the taste of him again, her body yearned for the erotic rasp of his unshaven cheek against her breast —

One of the three spoke. “Ma’am?” and she realized she’d been staring at the photo hungrily.

“So you recognize him?”

“Yeah, maybe he came through here, but if he did, it was hours ago.”

There, she wasn’t entirely lying.

She handed back the photo, wondering if she’d ever see that face again. No more losers, she reminded herself. *Please, save me from my stupid need for losers.*

The man with the dog circled the room. Elsie jumped up on the seat of Bryan’s booth and started barking happily.

“Did he sit there?”

“Maybe. Probably.” She crossed her arms over her chest as her breasts prickled at the memory of what else he’d done in that booth. The dog looked over at them, puffing and delighted, her tail waving. The coffee cups. But Allie had automatically moved them to the counter where they didn’t look out of place.

The dog jumped from the booth. It trotted to the kitchen door and scrabbled at it, whining. The handler opened the door and the dog went to work at once, sniffing around the doorway.

Allie hoped Bryan had come to his senses and left, but she didn’t want to look. She sat down at the counter and rested her chin on her unsteady hand.

The dog and handler disappeared into the kitchen.

The two other men stood in a semicircle. One of them, the young blond one, tried unsuccessfully to hide a yawn. His tie hung crookedly, there were circles under his eyes and he needed a shave. Bryan had led them on a good chase.

She swallowed. What they would do to him? "So what is this guy guilty of, exactly?" Her voice trembled. She feigned a yawn so they'd chalk it up to tiredness.

Buzz cut sniffed. "He took off with some top-secret formula or something."

The washed-out blond, laughed and spoke up the first time. "He *is* the top-secret formula."

"Watkins," Buzz cut said in a warning growl.

Allie ignored him and looked at the pale guy. "What the heck does that mean—he's the formula?"

"You got any coffee?" the blond guy said, nervous now.

Allie drew on her two years of rousting drunks from the diner. "We're not open. If you're gonna bug me and keep me here after my shift is over, tell me about the man you're looking for."

"He's got some kind of thing going on. His perspiration. It's valua—"

Buzz cut interrupted. "That's enough."

Allie ignored him. "His sweat?" She tried to remember what Bryan had said about being a lab rat. Something about the tests they'd done on him had made a change.

"Yeah. That's all I know." The blond shot a nervous glance at the tough buzz cut and Allie could see he knew plenty more, but wasn't going to say another word.

The dog and handler came back out of the kitchen. "Elsie lost the scent." The dog gave a large sneeze. She still wagged her tail, but with less enthusiasm.

Elsie clicked across the linoleum floor. She whined and nosed at Allie's side until Allie absently scratched the dog's ears. The dog handler leaned over and spoke to Buzz cut. They stared in her direction. No wonder Bryan ran. She hated the sensation of being studied like a bug under a microscope. Why didn't they leave? Had he done something to her? No good orgasm goes unpunished, she glumly thought.

Allie drifted to a stool. She sat down and brushed a hand over the counter, swiping at imaginary crumbs.

"Miss...um." Buzzcut squinted at her nametag. "What's your last name, Allie?"

She considered lying, but figured she had nothing to lose. "Hamden."

The three men had moved close. The cold threat of their impersonal smiles drove her to her feet.

"Miss Hamden," Buzz cut said. "We just want to ask a few questions."

Allie managed to force an answering smile onto her face. She inched away. Sure enough, the two larger of them shuffled closer. "Sure, ask them. But I gotta go home soon and —"

He rested a beefy mitt on her shoulder. "We'd like you to accompany us to a facility."

She twitched away. "What kind of 'facility'?"

"A laboratory. It's not far away and we'd be happy to give you a ride there." He spoke in a friendly casual manner, but Allie's heart shot straight into her throat.

"Why?"

"We'd like to ask a few questions, maybe perform a noninvasive test." He pointed a stubby finger at her arm. "On your skin. And of course we'd compensate you for your time."

The same skin that Bryan had kissed. "And if I say no?"

She shouldn't have used such a belligerent tone. His hand clamped onto her shoulder again and Mr. Personality swiftly gave way to Mr. Tough Guy. "Miss Hamden. We have evidence that you are in possession of stolen research material. I assure you that if you don't cooperate, we could make life...difficult."

Stolen research material? What the hell had Bryan done to her? She pulled away from Buzz cut and smoothed the front of her dress. Had Bryan slipped something inside her while she was in the throes of an orgasm? Yes, he'd shoved in those amazing fingers.

She almost laughed. Big bad guys giving her a hard time and she could still wander into a haze of lust thinking about Bryan's hands. No wonder he was such hot property.

Buzz cut spoke up. "There is no need to worry, Miss Hamden, I can assure you that it will well be worth your while to come with us."

Oh, no. "Um..." She ignored the panic rising in her. She needed a plan. "Sure. I have to go get my purse. Okay? It's out back." She waved at the kitchen.

What had that overly attractive bastard done to her when he touched her? She was going to find out, and not from this scary group.

"Be right back," she called and pushed into the kitchen before they had a chance to protest. Silence met her. Someone had turned out the lights. She ran through the kitchen and shoved open the door.

Behind her she heard the squeak of the other door. Panicked, she took off and sprinted away, aiming for the back of the hotel.

Footsteps thudded up behind her and hard fingers grabbed her arm. She opened her mouth to scream. Fingers clamped over her lips and she tasted...him.



## **Chapter Three**

Bryan pulled Allie to a halt. His whisper was fierce. "What's going on? Why do you look like you're under attack? Did those bastards frighten you?"

Two large plastic containers of spices, cayenne and garlic powder, dangled from his other hand. Only a half-inch or less of spice remained in them.

Out of breath, she gasped, "The men. With Elsie. They want me. To go with them. They say they want to do tests on me and —"

His grip on her arm tightened. "Allie, damn. Come on."

"Hey, but wh—"

He yanked her hard, and she broke into a run again to keep up with him. At the shadowy edge of the parking lot that curved behind the hotel, Bryan stopped abruptly and slid his hand around her belly to stop her. His touch started a swirl of heat in the pit of her stomach, which only grew with his warm whisper in her ear. "Wait a sec."

Leaning against the wall, he eased around the corner for a look. He cursed. "Elsie found my rental car. They're all over it. I'm just gonna leave it. Do you have a car?"

"At the service station. I'm-I was going to stay here, sleep until about noon when they said it would be ready."

"Damn. A couple of them are heading back inside." He turned, and resting his hands firmly on her hips, pushed her in front of him. "Run. To the woods."

She wanted to stop and argue, but the grim straight line of his mouth convinced her to run now, ask questions later. When she looked over her shoulder, she saw him jogging close behind, sprinkling the grass with the spices.

A small muddy stream ran through the woods.

"Into the water," he ordered.

"What?"

"Just run for a few yards. To the other side."

She would have demanded answers, but she was almost out of breath. He ran along easily behind her, splashing through the murky water.

"Only a little farther," he urged.

Thorny underbrush scratched at her bare shins and grabbed at the hem of her uniform. Allie muttered a curse. No one-night stand was worth this. Well... She glanced at him and grimaced. Okay, so she'd still swap scratched shins for that tongue on her clit, but much more of this and he wouldn't get her phone number for a second date. He pushed her to scrabble through the trees until they couldn't see any evidence of the road or hotel. He called a halt in a small clearing lit by the pale sunlight. An old beer can and the sound of distant traffic was the only signs of nearby human habitation.

Allie folded her arms over her stomach and leaned over, panting. Her legs were covered with scratches. "Right, why did we just do that cross-country run?"

He didn't even look winded, damn him. "I wanted to keep you away from the Metcher types."

"Why? You already knew I wasn't going to turn you in." She leaned against a tree trunk, fearing his answer.

"I was worried about you."

"Why?" She tossed her hands in the air, the panic ringing through her. "Why did they want me? What have you done to me? What did you put in me?"

His mouth tightened. "I don't have a clue why they want you. They told me that I wouldn't have any effect on the people I...er...touched. And I didn't put anything in you." The grim look passed and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Not entirely true. I put my fingers inside you." He examined her, up and down. "Very nice indeed, too. Tight and lovely."

She made a strangled sound as her insides dipped in agreement. It had been lovely.

He must have interpreted her gasp as impatience for he said. "Okay, okay, I dragged you away because—well, it was just instinct. When you said that phrase, 'Run some tests'—I went into some kind of overdrive."

Protective overdrive, she reflected. She believed him. "You scared me to death."

Damn, she wasn't certain the fear was gone. Letting him pull her into the woods couldn't be a good idea. He was so large and he made her lose her control so entirely. She'd already forgotten his last name. And there was a matter of the guys in suits wanting to haul her into a lab because of him.

He gave her a sheepish look. "Sorry, I just reacted." He shoved his hands into his pockets and backed away from her. Mind reading again, she supposed.

"I guess I don't blame you. I didn't like them." She rested her hip against the tree. "How long should I wait?"

"If you want to avoid them, you'll have to stay away for hours. They'll keep an eye on the hotel." He sat down on a large flat rock. "They came in two cars. I know Watkins, he's the younger guy, from the lab. They'll take my precious dirty laundry from my car and send it off. The enforcer and Elsie's guy—I never met them—will slip the desk clerk an enormous bribe so they can wait for me to appear."

"Precious dirty laundry?"

He snorted. "You heard Watkins. My sweat is more valuable than diamonds."

"You're kidding." But it was an automatic response. "Wow. Damn. Bryan. Have you been running a long time?"

"Only a week." He rolled his broad shoulders. The weariness in his voice told her it felt much longer. "But it didn't take long to figure out these guys. Or I should say I know their modus operandi. That's the expression I want, right? Their MO?"

She frowned. "The day manager won't put up with them hanging around."

"They have deep pockets and really want me back."

She remembered Buzz cut's menacing face. "God, I'm glad they didn't get you."

"Or you. Shit, I'm sorry. If you somehow got some of this stuff, believe me, they won't make your life easy."

His words echoed the threat made by Buzz cut. The one Bryan had called the enforcer. She was suddenly very glad they had left the diner behind. Even if her feet were soaking wet.

He shook the nearly empty container of cayenne. "I'd never tried covering my tracks before but it seems to have worked." He turned his head and squinted at her speculatively. "Thanks for not sending them into the kitchen after me."

"Well, after all..." She blushed and didn't continue. Her body tightened and swooped when she remembered his touch.

He gave a wolf's grin. "Hey. I promised whatever you wanted, remember?"

Golly, she half-hoped he'd forgotten. No, more like a quarter-hoped he had. The other three-quarters of her cheered at his words, but she said, "I can't believe you'd think about that when you've got those lunatics chasing you into woods. Heck they're chasing me and sex is the last thing I'm thinking about. You have a one-track mind."

The grin softened but didn't vanish. "Yeah, you're not kidding. I haven't for a long time."

Something in his gaze made her push away from the tree, and walked over to stand next to him. Touching him had moved up on her agenda.

He held out a hand to her. She grabbed it, thinking he wanted her to help haul him to his feet.

Instead, the large calloused fingers gave a yank downward and she lost her balance, landing across his thighs.

For a moment his delicious warmth enveloped her, then he easily turned her around and placed her between his legs and pulled her back against him. Cozy. No, not quite that. The breeze and the tickling underbrush grazed her bare legs and she felt

almost naked. She couldn't relax. She was too aware of his strength and the temptation of his overwhelming male presence.

Boy howdy, she didn't want to lose it with him again, not with a man on the run, a stranger who could make her drop into a swoon just with a smile. And who'd apparently pulled her into his peculiar adventures. She cleared her throat. "If you didn't steal anything, do they really have the right to chase after you?"

She felt his shrug against her back and then his voice rumbled against the length of her. "I signed a contract that gave them rights to my, er...bodily products, until such time that there was no more evidence I'm producing the magic elixir."

She twisted around so she could watch his face, though it was hard to read his expression in the dappled early light of the clearing. "Why'd you sign that contract?"

"I knew they hadn't succeeded in getting anyone to produce the pheromones. I figured I'd pick up some easy cash. It was a lot of money. A hell of a lot more, once I started showing signs of what they wanted. That was six months ago." He reached up and brushed a curl from her face. "Mmm soft. About two seconds after I spotted you, I wanted to bury my face in your hair. The urge is getting stronger."

Her heart sped up, but she managed to twist her head away from him. "Bryan, come on. What are you going to do now?" she gasped.

He tucked back her hair and she tried to ignore the stroke of his finger gently outlining her ear. "I have a plan."

"What is it?"

He didn't answer the question. Instead he said, "Good thing they've paid well, since they've nearly caught up with me twice in the last week and keep stealing my dirty laundry. I'll have to get more clothes and get another car."

Valuable sweat. She thought about Dawn's response and her own aching fever for the man.

He had to be right about the chemicals rousing females. His presence was too potent. She had trouble drawing a steady breath. Leaning back against his chest, she slid her palms along his thighs. Being aroused didn't seem like such a bad deal. Chemical or no, the sweet languor sweeping through her veins overwhelmed any lingering caution.

He gave a shuddering jerk and hugged her, enfolding her in heat, his swollen interest pressing against her back. She rubbed herself against it, just a bit, struggling to pretend she wasn't interested. Ha, as if she could fool him. Her nipples tightened beneath her dress. "What are you gonna do? Wait until they give up on you? Doesn't sound like that's going to happen anytime soon."

"I found out there might be a way to stop my body from making the stupid pheromones."

"Pheromones? That's what they want?"

"Yep."

"What's your plan?"

He nuzzled the nape of her neck. The brush of his face tickled her skin and made shivers run down her spine. His hands traveled up her arms, rubbing heat into every pore. "You had a long night at work and then I drag you into the woods." His voice deep and low rumbled in her ear. "I at least owe you a backrub."

His fingers worked at her shoulders, pressing, kneading the tight muscles. She stifled a groan, but not of relaxation. The large warm hands worked their deft way down her arms, chafing her skin into tingling awareness.

Back rub, front rub, bottom, top, she wanted his hands everywhere they could reach. She wiggled against him trying to turn around so she could touch him.

"Shh," he whispered and he wrapped one arm around her to hold her still, while his other hand covered a breast captured her aching nipple through the dress and bra. The hand left her breast. He slid his fingers languorously over her belly, hitched up her dress and moved between her legs.

Yes, there! Maybe those pheromones made him a mind reader, too, because he seemed to know exactly what she craved. She yelped and redoubled her efforts to turn and reach his mouth with hers. But he had her pulled hard against him. No mercy.

His strength overwhelmed her even as desire shot through her. For a moment her fear was real—he could do anything he wanted to her. He trapped her so thoroughly, she couldn't even move her arms, which were pinned to her sides.

At once his large hand stopped pushing under the elastic band of her panties. "Say the word. I'll let go."

The rasp of his voice sent yet another uncontrollable tremor of desire through her. She didn't speak, only pressed her head back on his shoulder. He chuckled and tightened his hold. With one hand he stopped her, and with the other he made her frantic.

"You're already slick," he breathed. He circled her still sensitive clit and then suddenly he plunged two blunt fingers into her.

She groaned and rocked against his hand, shocked at her own eagerness. More, more. She wanted more, she wanted him... She pressed her mouth to the rock-hard arm that held her in place. She kissed it, tasted the surprisingly silken skin, strained her body against the enticing restraint, in frantic need to get at him.

"It's okay. Go on." His heated breath in her ear was enough to send her over.

"Now!" she shouted, meaning she needed him now. Or that she was coming...now. The arm across her tensed, the fingers caressed her. And she shouted again. For a moment she could not breathe, his touch brought the spasms crashing through her and banished everything else.

When the world reasserted itself, she slumped back against Bryan's solid body, annoyed and grateful. Bossy man, thinking he could control her like that. Mmmm, yes, indeed he could.

She sat for a moment, listening to the distant drone of cars, the occasional birdcall, something pattering on the leaves.

Allie gave a shaky laugh. "Thank you for the...backrub."

A drop of water landed on Bryan's neck.

Uh-oh.

He shifted, trying to find a comfortable spot on the rock. He allowed the arm holding Allie still to relax.

When Allie had writhed against him, eagerly whimpering, the small animal cry sounded too close to noises he'd heard another woman make. Panic had hit him but he couldn't stop stroking the lush wetness, bringing more of that response. And he remained aroused, painfully so.

He'd held on to more than her body as she'd climaxed – he'd had to restrain himself from pushing her down and thrusting into her slick, tight heat. At that instant he'd almost turned into an animal – as crazed with lust as any of the women who'd jumped him. He couldn't help himself with Allie – amazing, since self-preservation should have sent him running at the first signal of her overwhelming excitement, or at least banished his erection.

He gathered her onto his aching lap and eyed a nearby tree. Would she mind being shoved up against the rough bark while he pushed into her over and over until he exploded? Yeah, probably.

Or maybe he could lie on his back, with her on top?

Another drop of water landed on him. She didn't appear to notice. Her sweet mocha eyes were half-closed in drowsy repletion and her breath came evenly now. In a soft bed on a rainy afternoon, he'd like to loop her into a lazy embrace and watch her sleep after he'd loved her long and hard. But the rough rock digging into his legs and the distant woof that might have been that damned Elsie brought him back to reality. Looked like he'd have his rainy afternoon, at any rate. He certainly hadn't seen the clouds coming.



The other woman, the perfect one, might make him normal to the rest of the world again, but Allie was the one who gave him the gift of savoring life again. Damn, he did enjoy savoring her, especially.

He'd keep her warm in a chilly shower. Steam would rise from him, enough to heat them both.

"S raining," she murmured, not sounding as if she much cared.

"Yup." He shifted her delicious weight. "Sorry."

"It's okay." She opened her eyes and stroked his jaw with gentle fingers. "Don't care just now."

He'd succeeded in avoiding talking about his plan for the moment, but had driven himself into an almost intolerable state of arousal. He dipped his head and inhaled her sweet perfume. The scent of the diner food, soap and under that, Allie. He held his fingers near his face; they were coated with the scent of her excitement and pleasure. A dizzying sweetness that made him hungry to taste her again.

The drops were falling more purposefully. They'd soon be soaked. Bryan stretched out his legs and flexed the arm which ached slightly from holding the bucking, frantic Allie. He was aroused, but some other elusive sensation warmed him as well.

Happiness. Despite a long list of reasons it was a stupid reaction—still running away from Metcher idiots, without his clothes or a car again—Bryan felt happy.

The only part of the equation that seriously bothered him at the moment was his search for that perfect woman and how to explain that little hitch to Allie? Because he had to if he wanted more than a day with this waitress.

If he had his way, he'd keep her safe from the Metcher gang at least until he knew she wouldn't get hassled.

At his side. Or even closer. He stroked the silk skin of her arm. Was his appetite for her really why they sat in this grubby little clearing?

Damn. She wasn't really in danger from Metcher. He had to face the fact that if she kept hanging around with him she was going to get more unwelcome attention. His appetite for her had to be the reason he'd dragged her away.

She hadn't signed a contract. They couldn't force her into anything.

He was fooling himself about the danger to her, and probably had been since he'd grabbed her arm outside the diner and forced her to run away.

He heaved a sigh, less happy now. "Allie. Metcher doesn't have a hold on you. Christ, they can't arrest you. Go on back to the hotel and maybe they can help you somehow."

"Nope." She tilted her head back and stuck out her curling tongue to catch faster-falling raindrops. "I don't trust them. You said you have some sort of plan. Maybe I can help you."

She wiggled excitedly in the shelter of his lap bringing up a groan from him. "Oh, I can help! I just remembered. My friend Kim lives less than a mile from the restaurant. She's away. I know she wouldn't mind if we...um...borrowed her place."

"I don't know if it's such a good idea," he began.

"It's a fine idea." Without looking behind her to make sure he followed, Allie jumped up and set off toward the small bungalow. "Let's go."

Kim would be delighted to know Allie used the Love Shack.

Allie, on the other hand, grew less sure about the idea once she started tramping through the damp woods. Alone in a house with Bryan. Sinking deeper and deeper into his bizarre problems, or deeper into his arms, and that soft mattress in Kim's Love Shack. Oh, heck, life was short. Tomorrow she'd go back to being plain Allie the waitress. Allie's back tightened with the awareness of his presence just behind her.

## **Chapter Four**

Allie found the key behind the propane tank and shoved her shoulder at the door. As Bryan brushed past her in the doorway, she saw he held the empty spice canisters. He underhanded them into the trash can in the corner.

She tossed the keys on the coffee table and flopped onto the junky green couch, hoping he didn't notice her nervousness. "Your elixir. Essence of Bryan. What is it again? Pheromones?"

"Yeah, a kind of signal to the world that announces I'm here for you females. I have no way to control it."

"Oh really?" She rubbed at the goose bumps forming on her arms. Her skin prickled simply in response to his nearness. The man was like a magnet, and she wanted nothing more than to cling to him. He must have noticed because he smirked at her. "Hey. I told you. I exude sex."

She folded her arms over her chest. "You don't just exude it. From what I've experienced you're pretty good at the follow-through. You enjoy your gift."

"I do right now. With you. C'mere."

Allie shook her head. "It's weird, Bryan. What I feel around you, I mean. It's a little scary. It's good, but I feel... It's like I'm caught in an undertow." She didn't add that the sensation he created was addictive, and she couldn't afford to become an addict to a man who was just passing through. Her body protested with a stab of desire that made her even more aware of the heavy throb between her legs.

He held open his arms. "Just a hug, okay? I've missed hugs."

"I don't know, Bryan. I guess I ought to show you the bed, okay? You said you needed rest."

Bryan almost laughed. For months women had literally thrown themselves at him. Here was the first woman he wanted, and she was trying to get him to go to sleep. Alone.

"I'm no longer so tired. How about you?" Instead of pointing to a bedroom and telling him to get away she cursed softly. Staring into his face, she stood and walked straight into his arms. Allie laughed, a throaty, sensual chuckle. "I guess we could rest together," she said, in a tone that made it clear she knew they'd be doing more than resting. At least at first. She let him draw her in, snuggled against his chest.

He wished more than chemicals pulled her to him, but he loved the feel of her. And at least she knew the score with Metcher.

Bryan pulled her tight against him and her soft curvy body fit as if she'd been made to tuck into the crook under his arm. He took in a deep breath and willed away the world—everything outside the small dark room where they stood, slightly damp and out of breath, clinging to each other. He palmed her bottom and gave it a soft squeeze. The sensation of Allie pressing against him was just too perfect to complicate with any other nonsense.

Perfect?

He pulled away to examine her face for flaws. Even a cursory inspection revealed quite a few—a slightly crooked tooth on one side that gave her smile personality. A generous sprinkling of freckles that made her nose adorable. That lush, rounded body would exclude her from the standard pattern of beauty—not that he had any complaints. Her hair was not gilded gold or raven, just soft and brown. She was a far cry from perfection, but he wanted her with a desperation he hadn't felt in years. Perhaps ever.

Ms. Perfection sounded like chilled marble compared to this armful of warm and wriggling Allie.

Oh, hell, it didn't matter for now. The months of despising his body and the touch of others didn't exist when Allie pressed her lips to his throat.

*You can't fall in love an hour after meeting someone*, he'd told more than one woman since the curse had hit him.

What about three hours?

Until he got his life back, he wasn't going to worry about it.

In fact he wasn't going to think about anything but the welcome sensation of Allie standing on tiptoe now, and filling his mouth with her kisses and pressing her curves against him. Purely sex for her, perhaps, but he'd give her pleasure she'd never forget.

She groaned and burrowed against him. Her hands clawed his back as she restlessly rubbed her body against him. He tensed. Another echo from the past. Guilt and need did battle inside him. If only he could forget about the chemicals and believe her response was real. He cradled her face in his hands and tilted her up. "Allie," he whispered.

She came out of the trance. A slow smile spread across her face. "You're worried." She reached up and grazed his forehead with two fingers, maybe smoothing away the alarm she saw.

Tenderness. How long since he'd had a gentle touch on his skin. He brought his mouth down on hers for a light kiss that blossomed into lush moist urgency. Allie fever.

"Mmm." Now her breathy moan only increased his appetite, so he blinked at her when she pulled away to search his face.

"It's the whole funky pheromone thing, isn't it," she murmured. "The scratches on your arm and face. And you flinch sometimes. What happened?"

He didn't want to talk. He wanted to kiss and stroke her. His own mounting excitement meant he could press her to the floor, the bed, the couch or the wall and forget. Thrust up into the slick heat he knew waited for him. Lose himself inside her soft body.

She sucked in a breath when he nipped at her earlobe but she whispered, "It's my turn to pry. Tell me."

Bryan sighed, seeing he wasn't going to sway her this time. "All right. Come here. At least we can be comfortable." He pulled her to the couch and sat down, then arranged her spread-legged across his lap, facing him. Yeah, almost perfect, though fewer clothes keeping him from the paradise between her legs would be better. He closed his eyes to picture the fine pink flesh, the silky legs, the lovely belly. The heat and promise of her distracted him.

He rubbed his palms over the dip above her rear end then slid his hands down to squeeze the good handful of her.

"Bryan. It's so good." Under his fingers, her hips rotated against him and she gasped. "It's-it's not just the pheromones, is it?"

He sighed and let his hands go limp and rest on her lower back.

"Maybe. I don't know anything. Except I want you." He arched up to demonstrate, and swore he could feel the heat and dampness of her through the layers of cloth. "Allie. I want you so much I'm in pain."

Her fingers rubbed across his cheek and he sucked at her forefinger as it dipped into his mouth. Her sigh brought him shoving up against her, demanding entrance, but she was pulling her tasty little finger from his mouth and saying, "Tell me why you had to run."

He nibbled lightly at her neck, frustrated and relieved—she wouldn't let him get away with avoidance. "You're a stubborn woman."

"I've heard." She tilted to one side and started to climb off his lap.

He gripped her wonderful derriere. "No, no, don't stop the torture, Ms. Interrogator. Stay. I'll talk."

He closed his eyes and adjusted her warmth to fit over his throbbing cock. Might as well be blissfully uncomfortable—he only hoped he could still form sentences.

Apparently he didn't start soon enough because she pushed away from their embrace. She inched away to straddle his thighs, and look steadily into his face.

He sighed and, reaching up, tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "Right. When the pheromones first showed up, I thought I had it made. I loved it for three whole days. Oh, shit, yeah, when the first woman grabbed me I thought I'd gone to some kind of heaven. She was a neighbor in my apartment building who hadn't given me the time of day before. And then, after I managed to get away from her apartment while she was asleep, another one stopped me in the elevator. Who knew so many women walked around with condoms in their handbags? I sure didn't."

She rolled her eyes.

He chuckled and said, "Now don't get your optic nerve in a bunch."

She grinned at him. "Good one, your own?"

"My friend Eric's." He paused. "My ex-friend."

She gently touched his brow and again smoothed the frown. "Why ex?"

"I went to their house for dinner that first week. His wife pushed me into a closet and stripped off her clothes."

"Oh, I think I understand."

He nodded and absently ran his fingertips over the silk of the backs of her knees. His hunger for her still jangled through him, only slightly quieted by the memories.

"By then I knew it was more trouble than I'd bargained for. I had to stop going into crowds. Had to stay away from places women go so I usually only went out at night. More men than women out really late."

"Any men want you too?"

He closed his eyes and nodded. "But for some reason it doesn't hit gay guys as hard. Females tend to focus more on that particular chemical response, I guess. Some of them couldn't take no for an answer."

Did Bryan sound angry?

Allie felt too muzzy with lust to explain why she needed to make him talk about the whole thing. Couldn't exactly recall why—something to do with sleeping with

strangers. She was too befuddled to keep on urging him, at least with something other than her body.

His mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. "One woman pulled a gun on me. Another hired a guy to kidnap me for her."

Ah, it was the memory of the past that brought the shadows to his face and made him angry.

Allie whistled under her breath. "Holy crap."

"Yeah, well I got away from them both. They and the neighbor showed up at my door, naked. Twice." He snorted. "Some of it's pretty damn funny. Wasn't at the time. Anyway, when I came into the lab on the fifth day beaten up and looking like shit, Metcher offered to put me up in their facilities. Temporarily, they said.

"They would have loved access to me twenty-four seven. After the first few of weeks, the contract said they could only demand a couple hours now and then. I was sick of that, too. Sick of the lab, the poking and tests. Huh. I'd heard the amount they'd offered and signed before I knew what the hell I'd sold to them. I thought it was my time. Didn't know it would be my life." He heard his bitterness and shook his head. "Okay. Right. Enough self-pitying bullshit."

Easy to distract himself, Bryan opened his eyes to watch his fingers skim the softest, finest skin he'd sampled. He shoved up her skirt so he could get better access.

She shivered. "Amazing you'd ever want to...well, you know...ahhh, be with a woman again."

"Mmm, yeah," he murmured, "amazing." He traced the lovely crook at the top of her inner thigh as it angled into her body. He followed it down and pressed his thumb to the thoroughly hot, damp panties. She shivered again.

He gathered her up and pulled her back to where she belonged, hard up against his hardness. She groaned in response.



"The thing is." He swallowed and grimaced. There wasn't a good way to explain. "I can't come if you're really excited."

"Why not?"

"I think it could be bad if you were close to orgasm at the same time as me. It might do one of us damage." He frowned. "Nathan warned me about it. He didn't know for certain and I sure as hell don't want to find out."

He thought back to the women. It had been a problem at first. He'd had to hold himself back. More than once he'd had to roll away from a bucking, excited woman.

"Not a problem lately since I haven't wanted sex," he whispered in her ear. "But I want you so much. You think we should push this?"

*Oh my.* Allie's body could just about take some good pushes now. Right up and into her. Hard thrusts that would hit her center. She twisted against him. "Yeah. We can manage it. And later. We'll talk later."

"Ah, so now we dine?" He kissed her neck, her face, as his fingers worked the buttons of the brown dress.

She rose to her feet and he followed her. She intended to go to the bedroom, but he stopped her and tugged gently at the dress.

"This has got to go," he announced.

Standing in the middle of the small living room, she let him pull the uniform up and off her. A brief thought skimmed her consciousness—if only she'd known she was going to indulge in sex for the first time in years she would have worn her good black lace bra. But at least he didn't get a good look at what she was wearing. It was unclipped and tossed away before she'd even reached behind for the hooks. The man knew his way around feminine garments.

Then he lowered his head to her breast.

A scrape of his teeth and then a tug of his sucking mouth on her nipple. The piercing awakening churned through her body again. She sobbed encouragement, not entirely certain which words she used.

His touch brought such a powerful response it bordered on pain. Expertly, he yanked down her panties. Dazed by the sensations caused by his fingers circling over her sensitive flesh, she stepped out of the last of her clothes. She gasped and pressed against him, rolling her hips impatiently. Her body was too demanding, the excitement coming on too fast. She wanted to enjoy the swelling sensation—but her body's prickling awareness built, rose to thick need and then, without warning, tumbled into a full orgasm that washed over her in uncontrollable waves. She panted, marveling. Three times. In one day. Huge, mind-blowing orgasms.

"Holy shit." Not exactly poetry, but all of her blood had drained from her brain. Didn't just happen to men after all. She leaned against his chest, her legs slightly bent and trembling.

She pressed her face to his neck and kissed the rapid pulse at his throat, delighted by his harsh excited inhalation. He didn't seize her, though. Instead he wrapped his arm around her, and solicitously walked her to the couch. She collapsed flat on her back. Resting for a moment, she sighed with the happy afterglow.

"You're all right, aren't you?" He gave a low breathy laugh. "No wait, I can see you're way better than all right. I meant how do you feel?" He stood over her, fully dressed, looking down at her naked body. The look on his face, pure, heavy-lidded sexual avarice, made her want to whoop with joy. She swallowed and knew she wanted even more. Greedy, greedy woman. Only next time those spasms rolled through her, she wanted to feel her muscles squeeze tight around him, large and hard and inside her.

"I feel wonderful. But now," she croaked, and reaching up, hooked her finger through his belt loop and yanked. "Right now. Take off your clothes."

He didn't move and the tiny furrow appeared between his brows. Oh, she'd forgotten. She pushed herself up and steadied her own rasping breath. "Please, take

them off. I won't get too turned on. I won't touch you until you tell me to." She swallowed, thinking of how difficult it would be to keep her hands off him. "I promise."

He snorted. "You make it sound like I'm some sort of shy virgin."

That seemed about right to her. From what he'd told her, that's how he ought to be treated, with care. Did it insult him somehow? Perhaps her suggestion was somehow demeaning to his masculinity. Such peculiar creatures, men, but she realized her she must have said the right thing because he was unbuttoning his shirt, ripping it off and tossing it aside.

"Oh, you are wonderful," she whispered, trying not to sound too aroused.

She hoped he'd let her taste the skin on his shoulders, the flat nipples. She wanted to know if she was right in guessing the hair swirling over his chest down to the vee in his jeans was soft rather than crisp.

He pulled off his shoes, climbed out of his jeans and underwear and she gave an involuntary breathy moan of appreciation. She had trouble looking up from those sturdy long legs, flat belly and very erect cock.

He took a step closer. She wedged her hands tight between her thighs to keep from grabbing him. He dropped to a crouch by the sofa so their faces were level.

"It will be fine," she whispered staring into the ocean of his eyes.

His eyes sparkled with boyish mischief—no, that was definitely something more adult. "Yeah, I'm glad I told you and, hell, you actually paid attention. It's gonna better than fine, I think."

He rose to his feet and held out a hand. "Show me the bed."

## **Chapter Five**

As they walked hand in hand to the bedroom, Allie marveled at the enfolding grasp of his fingers. Talented fingers. Strong hand—the hands of a dexterous man who worked with his body.

She pulled up their intertwined fingers and kissed each of his knuckles, gently.

He growled and without warning, turned and pressed her against a wall for a long mind-blowing kiss. His tongue sought hers, glided over her lips the way she knew he would circle and tease her swelling clit. She craved sex...but oh, this was so nice, too. When he stepped away, she tried to hold him to her for more kisses, but he put his hands firmly on her waist and guided her toward the bed.

“A traditionalist,” she laughed over her shoulder. Maybe if she talked, she wouldn’t pant and moan like a hungry animal and scare him away. “Probably never did it in outrageous places. Like in public.”

“Have you?”

“Naw. Unless you count some, um, oral sex in a diner booth.” She shivered at the memory.

He kissed the back of her neck. “Mmm. I certainly do count that.”

The fine hairs on her nape rose at the sensation of his solid presence just behind her. Naked presence. With a tentative step backward, she brushed against him—his cock—with the small of her back.

“Allie,” he breathed, and pressed the rest of himself to her. So much bare warm flesh sliding on her skin.

Her legs bumped the edge of the bed and she landed face-first with a happy groan. His hands stroked her rear, the insides of her thighs then pressed her knees open. She didn't need any urging to expose herself to the cool air and his molten touch.

"Yes," she encouraged him trying for a casual voice. "Fine. Good." She gave her rear a wiggle in case he didn't understand.

He bent and pressed his warm mouth to her left cheek. He nuzzled it and his large hands kneaded her rear end. *Now, now, more, more,* she chanted silently.

"Protection," he growled.

The drawer. She crawled up the bed and yanked it open. Sure enough Kim had some condoms, bless her, even though they were neon colors.

Allie resisted the urge to help roll the fluorescent orange rubber over him. Only what he asked, she reminded herself. Let him be the aggressor. Tamping down her impatience, she tossed him the condom and lay down on her back to watch. She concentrated on the feel of the cool sheets against her back and shoulders to keep from grabbing at him.

At last he was next to her, kissing her, his hands on her already tender breasts, again coaxing her sensitive pussy to swelling tension. She lay as still as she could, hoping he'd at last press inside her before she let loose with a howl and jumped on top of him.

"Allie," he murmured and knelt between her legs. His hot blunt head nudged at her opening and she couldn't contain her moan.

He drew back slightly and brushed his lips across her throat. "We shouldn't do this if you think you might come," he whispered. "Because I'm gonna. I might just looking at you." He drew a knuckle between her breasts. "Jesus, you're wonderful."

"I'm not close," she told him. "I won't. I swear. It's your turn."

He slowly pushed into her, then, and she gasped, unsure if that was discomfort at such a large and hard man filling her after so much time. Propped on his elbows, he

eased in, watching her face. Just when she arched away, instinctively protecting herself from pain, he stopped. He kissed the side of her face. "You're hot. Such tight heat around me."

Oh, he was all the way inside her. A perfect fit after all.

She gave an experimental squirm and the near discomfort of too much gave way to something more astounding.

She arched up again, now unable to keep motionless, she wanted to feel that thick hard heat invade her again.

Bryan sucked in a long, shallow breath. He pulled out and drove into her. The intoxication of her body drove him close to the edge. He gritted his teeth and tried to get himself under control. "Damn."

"Don't worry about me," she gasped.

He kissed the sweet hollow of her neck again and shifted. She ran her hands over his back.

It had been too long and she felt too damn good. Bryan groaned as his testicles tightened, ready. "No, God no. Don't wiggle like that. Talk to me, ahhhh, talk about sports."

"Red Sox. Yankees. Dodgers." With each team name, she twisted around him, swirling up. He was going to come without moving a muscle if she didn't stop.

"Shhh." He grabbed her lovely rear end and held her still. Skin to skin—close to inhabiting another body—he could feel her heart pounding, her breath coming fast, and taste the remnants of old arousal, the sweet scent of her body's fresh excitement.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Her deep laugh shook them both. "Thank *you*."

He waited until he could move again without exploding. Smooth, slow pumping at first, feeling her body squirm to accommodate him.

She raised her legs around his waist and moaned deep in her throat, an animal sound, but it only made him push harder in response. She wanted more and he could give it without fear for them both. Yet. Her breath came in faster pants, and her hands pressed him, demanding deeper thrusts.

Triumphant lust without a trace of fear filled him as he pounded hard into the sweet, ravenous Allie.

"Oh, God, I lied." She pressed her face to his neck, muffling her astonished shout. "I-I'm coming. Again?"

Her hands clenched at him, her slick body squeezed him.

Shit. When her body spasmed and clutched his cock, he had to force himself to go completely still.

Not at the same time. Her body grew less rigid, he could feel the waves of her orgasm ebbing.

Now. Fast, before her excitement returned. Before he exploded with frustrated need. *Now*. He increased his rhythm, pounding, sliding, until his own release rolled over and through him as fierce and out of control as a thunderstorm. He muffled his shout in the wild mass of Allie's curling, damp hair.

Her cool fingers trailed over his back and brought him back to full awareness. Would she be all right? Had he done something stupid allowing himself to come at all?

Carefully withdrawing, he settled beside her. He got rid of the condom all the while keeping watch on her half-closed eyes and the quick rise and fall of her breasts. She turned her head and smiled at him. Relief flooded him. What had he imagined? She'd die of some kind of sexual seizure if he let himself go? The others had all survived after the temporary frenzy of sexual insanity. Maybe Nathan meant he was the one who was in danger.

Bryan sucked in a deep breath of relief. The air was musky with scent of sex.

Damned if that rich aroma and the sight of Allie, sprawled flat on her back with flushed skin and fluffy hair, didn't begin to rouse him.

She lifted her hand a few inches and let it flop back to the bed. "See? I have no bones left."

He lay down behind her and gathered her into his arms. Fantastically, instead of crawling all over him, she let him spoon, another forgotten time with a woman. Calm, with the leftover twinges of a first-class bout of sex buzzing through him. He nuzzled her hair trying to memorize the details. Another moment he'd store, an image of tenderness.

She stirred slightly, twisting toward him. Now she'd be at him. He froze then almost fearfully asked, "What are you thinking about?"

She didn't give the answer he dreaded. Instead she burst into laughter. "I'm the woman. I'm supposed to ask that. And then you answer something about sports like 'I'm thinking of how much I still hate that instant replay review in football'."

He joined in her laughter then said, "I notice you didn't answer the question."

Allie hesitated. "Okay. Yeah, I was thinking about you and I guess it won't hurt to ask."

Hey, she was actually nice about it and he might even be able to accommodate her too, he reflected, as he waited for her hand to grab at him and demand more. His cock twitched with interest at the thought.

Instead she said, "Tell me about your plan. Can I help?"

Allie tried to keep her tone casual. She didn't want to pressure Bryan, but the thought of him walking away in less than twenty-four hours made her open her mouth. Just another day. Long enough to build up some memories of passion inside her for the future that might include another long winter's sleep.

"That's your question?" He sounded almost shocked.



"Okay, so you don't like that one. Um...okay. So what's your sign?"

He laughed. "Aquarius. I was surprised but not annoyed by the question."

She pushed up onto one elbow. "What did you think I'd ask?"

He traced the line of her breast with his forefinger. "I thought you'd want more."

"More?" She gave a hoot of laughter. "Sex? You mean?"

He grimaced. "Women usually do."

"Sure, I'd love to." In fact, the suggestion seemed like a fascinating proposition. "But right away? Those-the women want it right away?"

He kissed her puckering nipple. "Yep. Some kind of craziness, huh." He sounded almost amused. "Until they pass out."

She whistled. "You make one heck of a pheromone."

He didn't answer at once, and all trace of amusement had vanished when he spoke again, low and determined. "I have to get rid of it."

"I'll say," she retorted. "I'd hate to be, well..." She clamped her mouth shut. She'd been about to say something stupid, like *I'd hate to be with a guy that had other women crawling all over him.*

For a second or two, she'd let herself daydream. Bye diner, hello front seat of a blue sedan. Sure, chuck it all to run away with a stranger. A man she knew nothing about, other than he was wanted by some set of authorities—didn't drug companies have deep pockets? It would be hard to get away from that bunch of corporate goons.

All for a stranger who has to fight off women. Not such a hot plan, perhaps.

He had a very peculiar plan of his own, as it turned out. He was talking, describing a way he could turn off the chemical signals. The method he described involved sleeping with Miss America or some female like her. A perfect woman? Did such a person exist?

Allie stopped daydreaming and fretting so she could concentrate on his explanation.

"Dr. Nathan was the one who talked the most," Bryan said. "So one night I brought some Coronas to the lab. I figured the good doctor drunk would be even chattier. And that's when he told me that a roll in the hay with the flawless female would do it. 'You've already demonstrated that normal females don't have an effect on your generation of the pheromones,' he told me. So she'd have to be a pinup or something. He told me that they already figured out from other experiments that the perfect female would kind of act like a light switch turning the production off, it'd be that fast. That was a week ago. I hightailed it outta there."

She chewed on her lower lip and stared at her hands, trying to hide her dismay. So that was why he'd been heading south. He wasn't just driving aimlessly. He was on his way to the Miss North America competition. "Sure," she managed to croak, "you have to do it. I understand."

She did, too. She just didn't like it.

He moved closer, smoothed the tips of his fingers over her hip and her skin still seemed charged by his touch, as if every inch of her was permanently responsive to Bryan.

He watched her—unnerving to have those eyes focused on her. That intent gaze as if nothing else mattered to this gorgeous man, nothing could be as fascinating as Allie Hamden.

He wore a grave frown. Maybe he wanted to tell her it was time for him to leave. "Go on," she said. "You want to say something else. I can tell."

The brooding expression diminished as he shook his head. "I was just wondering if you'd give me the time of day once the stupid curse is lifted."

She wanted to laugh at the absurd thought. Funny to hear that from the sexiest man she'd ever seen—the only man she'd ever met who could drive her to maddening arousal and over the brink again and again—and rarest of all, a man who seemed to give a damn about what she was thinking. He was worried about her attraction to him?

"Hey, you'll have Ms. Perfection. You won't need me."

“Oh hell, she’ll probably hate me the moment the curse ends. Probably boot me out of bed.” He traced a loop over her shoulder and followed it with a kiss.

“Damn.” He briefly rubbed his forehead on her upper arm and sighed. “I justified it to myself, saying I’d stay grateful to her, whoever she was. Told myself it was my turn to use someone else.”

“Yeah? What’s changed?”

“Now I remember what sex is supposed to be like.”

Oh, the warmth that rushed through her at those words. And then he worried that she might hate him – well, now, that could mean something important.

Something along the lines of...he wanted more than a day with her. He wanted to see her again. She rolled over and hugged him. He responded with only a tiny flinch this time and he pulled her close rather than hold her off.

She whispered reassurance. “I’m happy, that’s all. I’m not gonna try to start anything.”

“Hey, but maybe I am.”

She realized that her belly pressed against his hardening cock.

“Whoa.” She kissed his shoulder and tasted her way along the impressive line of his collarbone. Her cunt throbbed with overuse; the delicate skin seemed far too sensitive. When he shifted so that his leg pressed between hers, the light touch on her swollen flesh made her jump.

He forked his fingers through her hair, and gently tilted her head back. “You okay?”

“Mmm.” Those ocean-colored eyes—a woman could drown in them. She leaned forward and kissed the skin below his ear, and gave in to his silent urging for a lovely rich kiss on the mouth.

She broke away. "You taste wonderful," she whispered. It occurred to her that all of him would be yummy and though she'd never particularly enjoyed fellatio, she had a serious craving now. Developed a yen to taste him everywhere.

She disentangled her limbs from his and sat up.

"Do you mind if I ah..." She licked her lips and examined his impressive cock.

"Nope. No." He rolled onto his back. "Be my guest."

His skin was delicious salty satin. She loved the solid heaviness in her mouth. He didn't grab her head and try to ram her down farther, and so for the first time with a man, she indulged in playtime. She sucked and experimented with her tongue and lightly drew her teeth along the length of him.

He gave a deep guttural moan.

She pulled away and frowned up at him. "Oops, sorry."

"That was. Not. Pain."

She gave a happy evil chuckle and went back to play. He'd lain still but now he pushed up into her hands and mouth and he tangled his hands in her hair. Instead of worrying about being suffocated, she caught his excitement.

She pulled away, out of breath. "Bryan, do you mind if we—"

"Yes, yes, please." He'd ripped open a condom package and rolled it onto himself before she even finished her sentence.

Allie slid slowly up his body, her breasts brushing along his legs, his cock. She was about to climb onto him but she feared that haunted look of his. A man under attack. She cleared her throat. "Do you mind if I'm on top?"

He gripped her bottom and dragged her up. "Honey, we'll do whatever you want. I just want to do it. Now."

So much for his worry about sex, she thought, smug and delighted.

She positioned herself and began to gingerly sink down on him—but the slow motion ended when he gave a firm thrust up, all the way into her. The feel of him was

more exciting and less painful than she'd feared. Oh, especially when he twisted deep inside her.

She'd planned to do all the work, but he put his hands on her hips to hold her steady. As he pressed up into her again and again, she didn't mind. She went along for the ride and what a ride he was.

Sliding into pure sensation she left thought and words behind; never before had she allowed herself to travel so far. The raw uncontrolled sensation whipped through her.

A few moments later someone screamed.

"Omigod," she whispered as she collapsed on him. "I made a lot of noise, didn't I?"

"Oh. Yes."

"I'm sorry. I never scream." Maybe the pheromones had caused her to lose control. Sex had never pushed her to abandon herself. She felt transformed, like she was one of those snow globes turned upside down and shaken and slowly settled back into place, only she was all rearranged.

His hands made circles from her shoulder blades to her lower back. "You screamed my name. I like that."

"But I thought you...hate that kind of thing. You said it made you feel like an animal."

He shrugged causing her to slide against his sweaty skin. "Oh, I liked everything about that, Allie."

He gathered her hair into his hands. "Abandon fear, all who enter here." He gave a thrust of his pelvis at the word "enter".

She snorted. "I think I remember that from high school and it goes, 'abandon hope, all ye who enter here'. *Dante's Inferno*."

He swept his hands over her body as if marking her as his territory and then gripped her upper thighs with both hands. "This is not hell. I don't mind being an animal with you."

*We're both animals abandoning fear together.* She noticed the tension in his hands and the greedy way he eyed her. When he pushed up into her a few times, and groaned, she got the picture. "You're not done, are you."

He shook his head. "Remember? I have to be careful."

"Ah, well then." She chuckled at his indignant yelp when she pulled off and rolled to the side.

"Come on." She held her arms wide. "Inside, now."

He must have been controlling himself up until then, for his arms trembled as he supported himself above her and pressed into her. He groaned "Allie", and her name was a plea that stirred her like a caress. His turn. But even as she decided to hold still, she wiggled, excited by his wild eagerness.

His control must have snapped. She saw the change as his eyes widened. He was like a wild animal as he drove into her body. He clutched her as if she were the food and he a starved man. If it hadn't been such a turn-on, she might have been frightened by the ferocity of his passion. His intent eyes bored into her even as he did going so deep inside her she wondered if anyone had touched the places his rock-hard cock reached.

His hoarse wordless cry shook her.

She wrapped her arms around him and their bodies twined. He touched his forehead to hers.

"Jesus," he panted. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you? I..." He shifted, rested on his elbows, still firmly embedded inside her. "I lost control."

She gave a breathless laugh. "You let yourself go all right. Impressive."

She didn't want to pull away, wishing they could remain joined for hours.

He rolled onto his back, dropped the condom into the trash then urged her onto his chest. For a while she felt and heard the steady thump of his heart, waiting, wondering if she were brave enough to take the risk. Worth a try, at any rate.

She climbed onto him, as if she could pin him down and get him to agree. "Here's a plan. At noon, we'll go get my car," Allie said at last. "And I'll drive you to the competition."

His deep, even breaths pushed her relaxed body up and down. She wondered if he had fallen asleep.

Apparently not, for he answered after a few seconds. "Thanks, but I'd be grateful if you just dropped me at a used car dealer or rental place. I don't want to risk you losing your job."

But she didn't want to risk losing him. "That's okay. If Tagge tells me to take a hike, I can always get a job at Ducky and Elsie's Diner in town."

"Huh." He sounded wary. "Is that what you want?"

She blew a wisp of hair from her face and considered his question. Maybe he'd only been polite before when he implied he wanted to spend time with her. She knew she had to ask. "Sure, I hope you don't mind if I go with you?"

"Hell, I admit it, I'd love your company. But that's not what I was asking. I meant would you want to get another job as a waitress?"

She rested her head on his chest, relieved, but also ready to be defensive. "I like working with people."

"Yeah, I watched you in the diner. You're great. Do you suppose you want to do that with your life?"

She burrowed down and pressed her face against his firm belly. Her life. When was the last time she'd thought further than her next paycheck? He'd awakened more than her libido.

She wouldn't lie to try to pass herself off as a go-getter, so she answered slowly and examined the truth of the words as she said them. "I guess maybe I'd like my own little restaurant some day. I'm not ambitious. I'm pretty ordinary."

"Excuse me? You're something special."

She snorted and mumbled a polite, though nearly incoherent thank you, her lips pressed his skin.

Bryan pulled her tight against him, waiting for the moment he knew was coming too soon. She might think that she wanted to stay with him, but this might be the last time he'd get to hold her strong, round little body. He couldn't guess what she'd do or feel about him when he managed to turn back to a regular guy. Ordinary, again—that word, again.

Allie had seemed such an ordinary woman when he first caught sight of her. Had he ever been so blind before? He saw nothing commonplace about the delectable Allie Hamden.

At last another sort of hunger drove them to abandon the rumpled sheets. Allie found a package of crackers and he rummaged in the refrigerator emerging with a chunk of cheddar cheese. Plain cheese and slightly stale crackers washed down by water, the meal tasted rich—better than any restaurant's haute cuisine.

Allie borrowed one of Kim's dresses, a plain flowered cotton number that ended above her knees. It must have been loose on Kim because it clung to Allie's larger frame. When was the last time she'd worn a dress without pantyhose? Usually she wore jeans when she wasn't at work. The openness of her naked legs made her self-conscious. She pressed them together and resisted the urge to rub her hands over her own raw skin. As she moved around the kitchen, she could feel the dampness between her legs. He hadn't come in her so all the moisture was hers alone. From her and his mouth. Oh, my. The memory was strong enough to halt her hand as she rummaged through a junk drawer for a pen.

She found a pen and paper and wrote an apologetic note.

"Ready to go?" he said, and shoved the last of the cheese back in a drawer.

"I hope I can get back here before Kim does," she said, putting a magnet on the note to the fridge. "I'll replace the food."



"We'll leave the woman a lobster dinner."

She liked the sound of that "we". "Yeah, good idea."

At the front door she paused to look around. Her friend's plain little cabin had been transformed. The couch was comfortable, not shabby. The dark walls that had seemed gloomy now made the room cozy. Bryan had a dramatic influence on her perception.

The garage was close to the hotel but they skirted the area so the walk took twice as long. They might have been on a stroll through a park rather than the no-man's-land of junkyards and industrial parks near the auto shop.

Gino's was a gas station that had seen better days but Bryan could see that the garage bays were well-maintained and the three mechanics looked like men who cared about cars.

"Here." He pulled a roll of money from his pocket and peeled some off. "Pay with cash. Let me."

She stared at the thick wad he jammed back into his jeans. "How much do you have?"

"Not sure. Enough I hope." He'd withdrawn over ten thousand in cash and had been reasonably careful with the money. "Don't want to use credit cards," he explained.

She wrinkled her nose but took the money. "Yeah, makes sense." With a distasteful glance at the cash in her hand, she strode into the mechanic's office.

Bryan stayed outside and watched her laugh with the lanky dark man who gave her a wink. Bryan felt a flash of jealousy—something he hadn't experienced since high school. Stupid. He jammed his hands into his jeans and told himself he just wanted to be on the road, and his impatience had nothing to do with Allie's glowing smile at the other man.

At last she came out waving over her shoulder and jingling keys.

She tried to give him the wad of dough. "Don't worry, Gino won't tell anyone I had my car here. I used my credit card."

Bryan scowled and gently pushed her hand away. "Hey, you're saving my ass. Let me pay for the car."

She returned his frown with interest. "Nope. I had to get the tune-up anyway, and do something about the brakes. You don't owe me a cent."

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Save it for later then. You're doing me a favor; I'm not letting you pay expenses."

He had no intention of losing that fight. She grumbled something about stubborn men, and located her Neon in a far corner of the parking lot.

They set off on small back roads that curved through the edges of towns. Stopping only for gas, they ate at a drive-through.

"I know a great seafood shack just outside Ocean Springs," she said. "Maybe we can get supper there." Supper, such a banal word. Would they be eating together once he'd finished screwing another woman?

He took a bite of his burger and deftly steered the car back into the heavy traffic. He must have had a lot of practice eating and driving. "Don't need to attract attention to ourselves."

"Yeah, I bet women remember you when you pass through town," she teased.

His grimace quickly turned into a crooked smile so she risked pushing some more. "Don't they know where you're going? Wouldn't that Dr. Nathan tell them what he told you about the perfect woman?"

He shrugged his strong shoulders. "I guess he hasn't said anything. Anyway, they can't *legally* stop me."

She missed the feel of him and reached to rest her hand on his warm solid thigh. Under her fingers he flinched. The car seat squeaked under his tensing body. He relaxed almost at once and shook his head ruefully. "Sorry. I'm still jumpy."

"Jeez, Bryan, they've done a number on you. But why are they after you if they can't stop you? Why are you running like a fugitive?"

"They're going to keep offering me more and more money." He swallowed the last bite of his sandwich before adding, "Okay, yeah, they don't always stick to the strictly legal. They tried to get me arrested a couple of days ago. Idiots."

He glanced over and must have seen the horror on her face. "Nah, they're not going to deliberately kill the golden goose."

"They don't seem to mind the fact that you're pretty hostile." She sighed and glanced out the window and realized they'd covered more than one hundred fifty miles. "We'll make it to Ocean Springs by four. Amazing."

"How's that?"

All of it, she wanted to say. The way he'd taken her plain existence and turned it into an adventure. "This whole thing, like those guys chasing you."

He chuckled and crumpled the bag that had held his food. "Amazing? More like a pain in the ass. Until you." He painstakingly licked his fingers, glancing over at her with a lively spark in his eyes.

She gave his leg a squeeze of appreciation. The set of his broad shoulders had relaxed—maybe it was safe to ask the question that had been nagging at her. "And when you're done with this? When it's over?"

"I'm gonna have more than enough money to start my own business," he said.

"What do you have in mind?"

He scratched at his bristly chin. "I've been building cabinets for years. I like doing that. I'm good at it, too. Maybe that. Maybe something more..." He looked at her sideways. "More for people."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

He made a rude noise. "Anything but deodorant?" He waved a hand at the green highway sign. "I take this exit, don't I?"

"I think so... Listen, that reminds me. Now that we're almost to the city we're going to need to keep better track of the streets and I'm a really rotten navigator. Mind letting me drive?"

He glanced at her, bemused. "Yeah, well, last time I checked it was your car."

A man who didn't feel threatened by a woman who drove. She didn't know many of that rare species.

He pulled into a parking lot so they could get out, stretch, exchange a few lazy kisses which threatened to grow heavier.

Back in the car, they soon drove through the ramshackle suburb that turned into a line of posh hotels pressed up against the beaches. The edge of Ocean Springs, the resort town that had died, come back and was fading again.

He yawned and stretched, taking up even more space—he filled the small car with his presence. "Any particular hotel you like?"

"I've always been partial to that famous place that's supposed to be so posh. What's it called? The Springleaf maybe?" she joked.

He flipped open a guide to Ocean Springs she'd grabbed at a gas station.

"Okay, it's on Fourth Avenue."

She slapped the steering wheel. "Come on. I was kidding. That place is way too expensive. Where should we go? Really."

"The Springleaf. Really."

"Jeez, I've heard it's got a whole arboretum in the lobby complete with a pond and exotic birds. It's way too much money—" she started.

He ran a finger along her jaw to her mouth. "What do you care? I'm paying. It's near The Beachway where I, um...where the beauty pageant is. The place you like is only a couple of high-rises away. Turn left here."

She nipped at his finger, but didn't argue.

"I bet they won't like cash. Here." He pulled out the stash of money and shoved a few bills into the ashtray. "That should take care of it. Mind using your credit card again?"

She shook her head.

"I'm grateful, Allie." He brushed her hand. "With you along this is more like a vacation. You're a fine surprise. A treat in a a box of Crackerjacks. A diamond in the ashes."

"A snake in the can."

"Speaking of snakes, ask for the Jungle room." He waved a brochure. "This says it's a once in a lifetime experience that can't be missed."

Once in a lifetime sounded like this whole weird day. "But what if they can trace my credit card."

"They will but by the time Metcher catch up with us, I should be...cured."

Cured. Funny how they both danced around the reason they were in this city.

They pulled into the wide arches of the Springleaf. Her faded sundress got a look from the clerk but her card went through.

Back at the car he rested in the passenger seat, head tilted back, eyes closed. Her heart tightened – that's how he'd look asleep next to her in bed.

"We're in," she said and handed him the small magnetic key. "Room 302."

He nodded and stared through the plate glass windows. "I guess the stairs are off the lobby. Yeah, they're gonna be easy to find."

He got out of the car.

"Stairs? You claustrophobic about elevators?"

He adjusted his sunglasses and scanned the area. "Naw, just don't want to risk getting trapped with women."

"Huh. So what are you going to do? Run through the place?"

He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead that made her toes curl.

“Exactly. I’ll meet you up there.”

He took off at a jog, looking unperturbed but moving fast.

She wanted to laugh, but noticed through the plate glass windows how the women in the lobby stared after him. One or two even took a step in his direction.

She followed slowly and took the gleaming elevator, feeling frumpy and out of place compared to the other passengers. The three silent, well-dressed businesswomen on the elevator looked incapable of sexual frenzy. What would it have been like if Bryan had been aboard? Would the women have clustered around him, howling and groaning, stripping off their clothes and his? Hard to imagine the polished gray-haired woman with the pinstriped suit launching herself at Bryan, but she remembered Dawn in the diner. And herself, oh, just about every moment she’d been in his presence.

## **Chapter Six**

Allie knocked on the door before she slipped the cardkey into the slot. Thick pale green carpeting muffled her steps and even muted her startled exclamation. Every inch of the jungle room had been painted with huge plants that had animals lurking in their shadows. Fiberglass trunks rose from the floor and fake vines hanging from the tall ceiling, all formed into swings. A fake zebra skin covered the round bed.

Bryan chuckled at her surprise. "Pretty amazing." He leaned against a huge pot of bromeliads and ferns.

"I have never seen anything this awesomely tacky in my whole life."

She turned away from examining a leopard carving and her eyes widened. Now that was definitely not a tacky sight. He was unbuttoning his shirt.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said. "The concierge is sending someone out to get some new clothes for me. You're going to have to add that to my tab."

She'd skirted the huge toadstool chair to get to him but at those words she collapsed on the bed, getting the hint. He wasn't shedding his clothes to get her to jump him. Oh, but she longed to. She'd gone too many hours without touching that delicious skin.

"So you're going to stay naked until you get the new clothes?"

He shot her an evil grin. "They said they'd hurry."

She managed to keep her voice casual. "It would never occur to me to call out for clothes."

He grunted. "Yeah, I'm too used to throwing around money, aren't I. I'll stop soon."

He tossed his flannel shirt on a toadstool, turned and headed through the flower-painted doorway.

She couldn't help calling after him, "So, you want company for the shower?"

He reappeared in the doorway. "Yeah. Please. I was hoping you'd ask."

Hot damn. She jumped off the bed.

A fountain stood in the middle of the bathroom. Glass bricks semi-enclosed a walk-in shower that was painted with hippos and— "Hey, is that an alligator?" she squeaked. "Why would anyone want to share a shower with one of those?"

He'd shucked his jeans and she forgot the alligator.

Within minutes the three showerheads splashed over their entangled bodies.

"Ever made it up against an alligator?" he growled in her ear.

Her giggles turned to groans as he pressed her back to the cool tiles.

Afterwards they moved to the round bed. Exhausted, she fell asleep while her hair was still damp.

He dozed for a time and woke at six.

Time to get the show on the road before the Metcher bunch caught up with them. He yanked on a bathrobe to fetch the neatly piled new clothes, a stiff pair of brand-new jeans, underwear and a red plain T-shirt just outside the door. Dressed and ready as he'd ever be, he went to the bed to say goodbye.

"I'm off," he whispered.

"Oh." She rolled over and sat up. "I want to come too. I don't mean a threesome..." She blushed. "Well. I mean. I..."

A heavy weight of fear rolled off his stomach. She didn't despise him for leaving a bed they'd shared so he could look for some other female.

"No. Bad idea."

"But I—"



He leaned over and kissed her into silence. He straightened and looked down into her sleepy face. "I'll be back the moment I can."

What if she came to her senses when the chemicals were gone? Just in case she wouldn't let him back in when he was through, he hauled out his roll of money. He left a few hundred dollars on top of the polished sawed-off tree trunk that served as a table.

The Beachway might have been a luxury hotel years ago. In the lobby the carpet edges peeled back where duct tape didn't hold it down, and dust coated the fake plants.

But gorgeous young women milled around the lobby like exotic flowers and with beauties like them adorning the place, few people would notice the shabby atmosphere.

Bryan noticed and he felt as seedy as the hotel. Seedier. He paused at the entrance looking over the women—girls, really. They had to be at least ten years younger than his thirty. Damn.

And they were perky.

Why the hell would anyone want perky?

Was any one of the girls more gorgeous than the others? Not that he could see. They might have all been cast from the same lovely mold.

Pick one, he reminded himself and tried to guess which of the women wouldn't let anything get in her way. He had to do this but he sure as hell didn't want to hurt anyone.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and walked over to the group.

They faced him expectantly with automatic smiles in place.

"Hi," a redhead said. She tossed back her hair, thrust out her breasts and aimed a thousand-watt smile at him. "I'm Melanie," she told him in what sounded like a deliberately husky voice. Okay, he didn't care. She'd be fine. He braced himself.

But to his amazement, instead of pushing away from the other women to claim him, she gestured to the blonde at her side and said, "This is Tiffany." Melanie went around the circle and introduced her smiling friends.

He stepped closer to Melanie and waited. And nothing happened. Ten seconds. Thirty seconds. He moved even closer, his arm almost brushing against hers. She tossed back her hair again and gave him a sultry tip of the chin. Yet her hands remained at her side, and her breasts didn't heave with panting desperation.

He tested the air, drawing in a long, slow breath. No trace of the female hunger reached him. Just perfume and hairspray, tinged with sweat. Not one of them was switched on by him. In a group of five women, not one?

His heart swooped with joy. He was the one to gasp with pleasure.

These women liked the look of him. They'd flirt with him, let him buy them drinks. Maybe Melanie would even go further, but he wasn't going to stick around to find out.

He breathed in one last sample and still smelled nothing. No tendrils of desire curled up from their bodies.

His little pheromone factory had been shut down.

He grinned so maniacally that even Melanie's smile wavered uncertainly.

"Ladies, you are the most perfect women I have ever seen in my life. It's a privilege to meet you, but I must be going. Goodbye."

Tiffany rolled her eyes and directed an exaggerated pout at him. "Come on, girls," she said, and walked off in the direction of the bar.

The other women followed. Melanie stopped to look back. He spread his hands and shrugged his regret. She giggled, winked, and to his delighted relief, followed her friends to the bar.

Whistling, he pushed through the big glass doors into the sultry summer night. When had it happened? Maybe that first time they'd made love? Actually he didn't give a shit when she broke the spell for him. The nightmare was over, and he got to wake up with some fine company at his side. Did she still want him?

He broke into a jog. Allie, the perfect woman, waited for him. He hoped.

## **Chapter Seven**

Allie lay in the bed, too paralyzed to move. Bryan said he'd come back, but when he walked out the door, the silence filled the room and her heart.

She had never avoided hard facts and now examined this one. The strange journey had come to an end.

Mortification flooded her. No, she wouldn't let herself feel bad. Dagnabit, it had been a good ride, the best she'd ever had.

No matter what happened, however long it took her to recover from this wild day, she would not feel regret. Her crotch—actually her entire body—was happily achy from overuse.

She reckoned the external damage wasn't severe. She probably hadn't even lost her job. Which was too bad, because one of the gifts she'd gotten from Bryan was that it might be time to move on. Time to stop creeping through life at a night job. She'd feel sun on her face again. She ran her hands over her hips, tired from a long night of work and a long day of pleasure.

No, she didn't really have any real internal damage either, unless she counted getting a taste of something she might starve for in the future.

She climbed out of bed and found the shabby sundress. No underwear, no bra, so the sea breeze would flow against her skin. Now that her body was alive she'd be damned if she'd miss a single sensation again.

She found a pad and pen in a drawer embedded in the carved python climbing the wall next to the bed. What could she write that didn't sound defensive or needy?

She settled on, "Gone to the beach. Be back soon," and left the note on the pillow.

When she opened the door, she gave a startled gasp. Bryan filled the doorway, towering over her.

Without a word, he folded his arms around her and surged forward, forcing her to walk backwards until they reached the bed.

She squawked in surprise but any protest died away as he tilted his head and his eager mouth found hers. He ran his hands down her spine. Oh, no. The way her sensitive pussy immediately swelled and her whole body tingled told her he hadn't been successful. The pheromones trapped her.

Besides, he hadn't been gone long enough.

The image of him thrusting into another woman once again made her stomach flip and sink.

"You're back so soon," she croaked.

He kissed her face, nuzzled her neck and whispered. "You did it. We did it."

In a dramatic gesture, he spun away and sprawled backward on the bed, arms and legs outstretched. "I'm cured."

"But... No, no. I'm still..." She examined him. A delicious buffet laid out just for her. Just looking at him made her weak with excitement. She climbed on top of him and, kneeling over him, found his mouth again. As she kissed him, she moaned with pleasure and dismay. "No. I want you too much. How can that be unless you're filled with that stuff?"

He brushed her hair from her face and explored her mouth with a thorough kiss. "Shit, and I can still taste your desire." He heaved a sigh that she felt shiver through him. "You saying you don't feel any difference?"

"None. I'm ready for you just thinking about you. And then when you touch me..." She felt close to tears. The hours of excitement were breaking her down, driving her just a tad crazy. Maybe this is what happened to those other women, the ones who'd tied him to their beds.

"Shh." He wrapped his arms around her torso, drawing her into a comforting hug. Too bad the feel of his heat seemed to reach in and twist her — until his words distracted her at last.

"Dammit! There has to be a change, I'm telling you. I went out in public, went near a group of women. Nothing happened. Nada."

She at last allowed herself to collapse her weight on him and lay very still. "What does it mean?"

"Honey, you're perfect. That's what I think it means."

She groaned. "No, really."

His hands went to her bottom and he rubbed her in slow circles. "Yes, really. Oh, my. Better than perfect — you forgot your panties."

He pressed up and his erection nudged her tender clitoris. She shivered, her nerve endings melting into desire. "Bryan, I'm out of control. Again. I can't believe it's gone. But, God, I hope you're right."

She shifted so her fingers could stroke the length of his cock through the blue jeans. Realizing his reaction was genuine and that her tumult of need wasn't a byproduct of pheromones added a new dimension to her desire. She needed more than Bryan's body. She needed *him*, his smile, his playful gaze, his strength beside her.

Husky and breathless, he asked. "Aren't you sore?"

She nodded, her hair rustling against his neck. She drew in a deep breath of his already familiar scent. "Yeah, oh yes but not impossibly."

"Impossibly?"

She touched her fingertips to his cheek, feeling suddenly, oddly shy. Easy enough to hide with a bit of humor. "Well, we have to make sure you're really cured."

They set out to love carefully.

"Let's go back to kissing," he said. "Only kisses, everywhere."

He licked his way to her stomach and then the inside of her thighs. One moment tender, the next relentless, his tongue quickened her anticipation. Clearly he enjoyed teasing her as much as she relished his talents. They were good together, so good. Spearing her fingers through his thick hair, she dared imagine weeks of this, months, years...

Lovely, but within minutes, she knew she'd want more. All of her skin was tenderized, charged with awareness, as if she had a fever. She burned from the inside out for him. "Now." She arched up.

"Not yet." He suckled one breast and lightly stroked her between her legs. Sensation jangled through her overly aroused body. A slight intimation of pain only intensified the growing fever that took over her body again. Goose bumps rose on her skin.

"Damn it! I need you inside me," she informed him. "Now!"

He gently nipped her nipple and licked it, the warmth of his marvelous mouth replaced by cool air. "What a nice invitation. Yep, I accept."

She lay as still as possible, watching as he rolled on a condom. He knelt above her and nudged her swollen slit with his cock.

"Go on," she gasped.

He teased her with careful slow and shallow strokes.

"Allie," he whispered. "I need this. God, I need to make love. Do you understand?"

She almost sobbed with the tenderness of his kiss.

Oh, but even as she raised her legs higher, she yearned for more heat.

She planted her heels on the sheets and pushed up. "I can take more," she gasped. "If you can. Give it to me."

"Yes." He thrust into her, hitting that sweet center no one else had ever touched. Yet he moved carefully, until she impatiently wriggled up. *Harder*. He got the message.

As gentleness gave way to pounding passion she writhed and twisted beneath him, aching for more, getting lost in sensation but not letting her gaze leave his face. He wanted to make love, not fuck mindlessly. But oh...

"It's okay," she said, hoping that he knew what she meant. "You can. I'm not going to lose it."

"Yes. You will. I'm gonna make you lose control." He was demanding more now, more heated kisses, deeper thrusts. He licked the inside of her mouth. "Together. Both."

She hazily wondered which both. Fucking and making love? Or both of them coming at once?

It couldn't be true that he was cured. They were thoroughly entangled, and her body screamed for him to pound harder, faster. Oh, the thick heaviness tightened in her until she had to press her mouth to his shoulder to muffle the cry of surprised joy as jolts of pleasure shuddered through her.

"Yes, oh, thank you," she babbled. "Oh please you, too. I don't care."

Bryan knew that he had no need to think. He could let himself fly out and meet Allie, go as deep as each thrust would let him and lose himself in their lovemaking. He let go even as the first of her spasms gripped him. The powerful orgasm hit him at the same moment as hers; the explosion of pleasure ripped through his whole body.

They both survived.

Maybe.

They panted into the silence for a few moments until she scooted her legs into a more comfortable position and allowed herself to settle on him.

"That's it. I'm dead," she informed his shoulder.

The phone perched on the python trilled.

They looked at it. It stopped, and then a minute later, began chirping again.

Bryan sighed. He eased out of Allie and rolled over. God, even the backs of his legs felt as if they'd melted in the heat of their passion.

"Yeah?" he barked.

He'd suspected Metcher, and yet was surprised to hear a familiar, nervous voice. "Ah, Bryan? This is Dr. Nathan. They, um, had me get a plane... And now. We're downstairs."

Before Bryan could speak there was a thud, some rustling and angry voices as another man grabbed the phone. Someone, probably the one he called the enforcer, bellowed into Bryan's ear. "We're coming up if you if you don't come down here." Another muffled angry exchange followed and Nathan was back on the line.

Nathan sounded even more nervous. "We, um, we don't mean to intrude, Bryan, but I'm sure you understand that Metcher is rather eager for your cooperation."

Bryan held back a groan. He rested a hand on Allie's hip and slid closer to her. There. That was better. He could manage a light tone. "You must have finally spilled the beans about spilling the beans to me."

"Listen, Bryan, you have to —"

He interrupted. "I don't have to do a damn thing, Nathan, but I will. Ten minutes. I'll meet you in the bar."

He slammed the phone back on the python.

Allie was propped on an elbow and blew a ringlet of hair from her forehead.

He reached over and pushed her hair from her face with the side of his thumb. "I've always liked women with wild hair."

She wouldn't be distracted. "That doctor is here? With those men?"

"Yeah, those men."

"Oh no! What will we do?"

He kissed the side of her chin. "No sweat. I'm going to go meet them. Make them buy me a beer even. They found me, but there isn't a damned thing they could do anymore."



"Oh. Right." Not convinced, but not willing to argue, Allie brushed her lips across to Bryan's mouth in search of a succulent kiss.

At last he got out of bed to get dressed. He was tucking the T-shirt into the jeans when she decided.

"I'm coming too."

He looked up sharply. "I want to talk to them alone."

She considered feeling hurt, but was too exhausted and too worried about what might happen. "How about a compromise? I'll stay out of sight for ten minutes."

Bryan squinted at her. "You always this bossy?"

She pursed her lips. "Probably."

"I'd better get used to it then."

Allie thought about doing a cartwheel or bursting into song. Instead she nodded vigorously. "Yeah, you better."

He kissed her forehead and left, strutting like a man who'd won the lottery. She sighed with joy and fear. After the door closed she jumped out of bed, determined to make it five minutes instead of ten.

## **Chapter Eight**

Bryan took the elevator just like any other regular slob. His heart pounded as he covertly watched the only other passenger, a thin woman with a Red Sox T-shirt. She must have noticed his examination, for she gave him a tentative smile. And then—hallelujah —she got off on the next floor.

He wanted to go after her to thank her, shake her hand, invite her out for pizza and beer. A fellow human.

He was humming as he walked into the wide marble-floored lobby and caught sight of the four men huddled under a banana tree. The desk clerk watched them with a malignant eye. Perhaps they'd tried to slip past and he'd proved too honest to bribe because the hotel provided actual security for its guests. Damn, he should have bypassed the rat-holes and gone for first-class accommodations before now. He might have actually gotten some sleep during his week on the road. But then he wouldn't have Allie. Did he have her? Just watch her try to get away.

Smiling, Bryan sauntered over to the disheveled group of Metcher men.

"You," snarled the large one. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Hello." He wagged his fingers at them cheerily. "Bad news. You're wasting your time. I'm not worth a thing to you anymore."

They gaped at him. "What?"

Bryan jerked his head to point out two middle-aged women—cosmetic saleswomen, judging from the cases they carried—waiting in a corner of the lobby. "Come on. I'll demonstrate."

He walked towards the two women, who watched curiously as the group of Metcher men stalked after Bryan. They must have made a strange sight.

"Hello, ladies," Bryan said. "How are you this evening? May my friends and I buy you a drink?"

"Well, I don't know." One of the women touched the elaborate curls of her hairdo and giggled uncertainly.

Bryan sauntered over. He stood right next to her. The Metchers tensed, probably ready to jump in, the way guards once had to in the lab when Bryan accidentally walked too near an unsuspecting lab technician and she'd tackled him.

The other woman clicked her tongue impatiently, and nudged her friend with an elbow. "No, thanks anyway gentlemen. We have to get going. Thanks, anyway."

The pair strolled away, leaving Bryan grinning and the Metchers slack-jawed.

"Shit. You did it." The pale one breathed.

"Get the dog to make sure." The enforcer ordered. The dog handler almost saluted before he took off across the lobby.

Bryan had had enough. He strolled around the knot of men and headed to the elevator.

"See you later," he said.

At that moment, and Allie in her faded little sundress stepped out of the little café next to the lobby. She showed way too much of her silky bare legs to the Metcher idiots.

"The waitress," the enforcer snarled. "Miss Hamden, what do you think you're doing?"

"Taking a vacation," she said. "I was tired of smart-ass customers bothering me after-hours."

Bryan relaxed and considered applauding. He'd wondered if she was going to be cowed by the Metchers. Nope, she might be vulnerable in bed, but he should have expected courage from the woman who could face down grouchy truck drivers all night long.

From the front desk someone shouted, "Excuse me sir, dogs are not allowed."

Elsie's claws clicked across the marble floor as she yanked her handler towards them. Bryan braced himself for the happy onslaught, but she bypassed him and went straight for Allie.

The dog panted and rubbed her head against Allie's legs. Bryan's heart plummeted.

"Hey, pup," Allie leaned over and scratched Elsie's ears.

Bryan tensed. Could he have somehow transferred the pheromones to her? Would men be all over her? He glanced at the Metcher men who inched toward Allie. If any of them so much as touched her... Bryan reached for the huge brass vase on the display, ready to brain the first who laid a finger on Allie.

But Elsie moved on and the handler didn't give the signal that Elsie had found anything. The dog strolled past each person, sniffing. She got to Bryan where he stood still not allowing himself to show so much as a twitch. He forgot to breathe.

Nothing. No pawing or barking.

Bryan crowed and dropped to a crouch to rub the ecstatic dog's ears. "Oh, Elsie," he intoned with mock sorrow. "You're yet another female who's lost interest in me."

The frowning desk clerk hurried over, protesting. "The dog must go." No one paid any attention.

The dog handler clicked his tongue and Elsie gave Bryan's hand an apologetic lick and left.

The handler fed Elsie a treat and eyed Bryan who'd straightened up. "So I'm betting we've been wasting our time for a while. You must have stopped production of the pheromones back at that diner," the handler remarked conversationally as he stroked Elsie. He yawned and checked his watch.

Bryan shook his head. "Naw. I used cayenne pepper to throw poor Elsie off."

The thin dog handler scowled and at last looked upset. "You kidding me? That wouldn't put a dog like her off. She can handle anything."

Interesting. Bryan considered the implications until he was distracted by the Enforcer. Unlike the dog handler, he seemed a trifle annoyed that Bryan had lost the curse. Bryan wondered if he would actually have a fit there in the lobby. The big guy spun around to Nathan. "This is your fault."

Under his scraggly beard, Nathan paled and took a step backward.

The Enforcer followed, and stabbed a finger into Nathan's skinny chest. "If you hadn't been such a —"

"Hey, it had to happen sometime." Bryan gently shoved Nathan out of the way and stepped between them. He was at least six inches taller than the Enforcer, and he'd had more than enough of these Metcher fools. "I wasn't going to put up with being your pheromone factory forever. What the hell did you plan to do? Shove me in a lab cage?"

The Enforcer's hand dropped to his side. "You had a contract and —"

"Get over it, huh? It's not so bad. Metcher's got baskets of my dirty laundry to play with."

The Enforcer lapsed into an angry silence.

Bryan glanced at Allie. She flushed with embarrassment but she wore a thoroughly pleased smirk. Yeah, that smirk told him she knew what the dog handler's words meant—she was so perfect it hadn't taken a full session in bed.

Maybe he'd lost the "hunting for a mate" pheromones the moment he'd kissed her mouth or perhaps when he'd kissed her body and tasted her delicious essence.

The Metchers didn't hang around long after that. Negotiations went quickly. Bryan agreed to another, final battery of tests in exchange for a last, obscenely high sum.

They cleared out. Nathan stayed behind and followed Bryan and Allie into the bar to moan over his lost career at Metcher. "I was sick of the corporate life," he admitted. "But I don't have any interest in switching to academia."

Bryan drank his Corona, most of his attention focused on Allie as she dipped her finger into the exotic strawberry thing she'd ordered and daintily licked the pink droplet off her finger. Clueless Nathan didn't appear to notice—how the hell could the man ignore an erotic demonstration like that?

Nathan rambled on about the research he wanted to do, something about nasal receptors and pheromones again.

Allie put down her drink and wiped her mouth. She interrupted Nathan's lecture. "Hey, if the receptors are here—" she tapped her nose, "—how come I could pick up these pheromones? I'd pretty well blasted my nose with cleanser. I still don't have much of a sense of smell back yet."

Nathan swirled the ice in his Coke. "If the receptors are damaged you would have less response, perhaps even no arousal."

"Must be why you could resist me long enough to be rude," Bryan said.

She apparently ignored him, though the corner of her mouth twitched up. "So if my receptors were blasted, there were other reasons I was so interested in Bryan?"

Bryan leaned over and inhaled her sweet mix of sex and Allie. "Was?" he whispered. "You got that wrong. You are interested."

She leaned her cheek against his. "I am. Still so...very..." She flicked and nibbled the edge of his ear. "Very interested."

He tried without success to hold back the answering shudder and groan.

Nathan didn't notice. He rubbed at his beard and stared absently into space. "Intriguing question. If your receptors were damaged would you be drawn to him? In most cases of arousal there are more than pheromones involved. For instance if you were not attracted to men, even if you'd inhaled a pure concentration of PGH3, you would have experienced a far milder responses. And the fact is that once he stopped producing PGH3, your own response is what carries the day in terms of—"

Bryan couldn't resist the outline of Allie's hip under the skimpy sundress. He traced her from the dip of her waist to the top of her thigh with his fingers, then decided to squeeze the delectable firm flesh. She gave a breathless gasp and twisted her chair to face him.

Nathan's voice faded. Even a man as dense as Nathan must have seen their attention lay elsewhere.

He cleared his throat and the barstool groaned as he got to his feet. "You know you two ought to go somewhere else. Somewhere private."

"You're right." Bryan reached into his back pocket, pulled out a clip of cash. "I'll get this."

Nathan tugged at his beard. "Seems like I ought to pay. I helped make your life miserable."

"Nah, thanks to Metcher..." He didn't finish the sentence but slid his hand over Allie's thigh. She stood and leaned against him. He had trouble concentrating enough to wedge out a bill.

"Well," Nathan began again.

Bryan slapped a fifty onto the bar. "I can afford this place. Hell, because of those pheromones I'm rich enough to invest in a restaurant. A chain of restaurants."

Allie, who had been trying to burrow under his arm, froze.

"A restaurant?" she asked faintly.

"Hmmm." He nuzzled her mouth with his lips and settled in for another delicious kiss. She pulled back and studied him, her face aglow. She had the delighted smile of a woman up for immediate fun and the glow of someone looking forward to longer-term plans, too.

"Restaurant?" Nathan perked up. "An interesting investment if you have the right—"

“We’ll talk.” Bryan didn’t even glance at him as he tucked away the rest of the money and reached for Allie. “Right now, I’m busy. Yeah. Now. And for a very, very long time.” He tightened his arm around Allie’s torso so she couldn’t escape, and they waved goodbye to Nathan.



## Epilogue

Cupping the glass holder, Allie leaned over the flame and blew. One candle down, six to go. She straightened and, stretching her arms over her head, took a moment to let the breeze touch her skin and listen to the quiet *shush* of the surf. They'd had a good crowd that evening and she loved the chatter of people having fun, but after the restaurant closed the silence was heaven. So far, so good. A month after opening, The Genuine Article was thriving under Bryan's management and her culinary skills.

"Kind of dark out here."

She gasped. "You startled me."

The sea breeze ruffled his hair and she itched to brush the locks back into place. Bryan chuckled. "I've been watching you for a while. Good thing my intentions are honorable."

"Are they?"

"Depends. Are you done?"

The kitchen and dining room had already been cleaned and readied for the next day. Their staff had gone home.

She lowered her arms and crossed them over her breasts, which already tingled in anticipation. "Yeah, I'm done."

His smile glinted in the light of the remaining candles as he ambled toward her. "Okay, I've changed my mind about the honorable bit. We haven't done anything out here yet, have we?"

"But we're outside. Anyone walking by on the beach could see us."

He leaned down and blew out one of the remaining candles. "The gazebo."

"Oh." He'd put cushions on the benches that morning and now she knew why. Clever man. One more reason to love him.

She considered going to him, winding her arm around his waist as they walked across the flagstone patio to the small garden and the gazebo. No, she wanted the first contact to be in the sheltering darkness so she could lose herself the instant they touched.

"Anticipation is wonderful," she informed him as he reached for her shoulders and drew her to him.

He bent and thoroughly kissed her. "I can think of better things."

Their long, lazy kiss grew more passionate. He pulled away and she gave a complaining little whimper.

"Wait," he said.

Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness and she saw a wine bucket with a bottle of champagne resting in ice. Two flutes stood on the flagstones next to it.

"What's that for?"

He poured and handed her a glass. "We're celebrating."

She sipped. The cold crisp wine tasted perfect. "Great. I love parties." Stepping closer she trailed her fingers down the row of buttons on his crisp white shirt. She whispered, "Is this going to be one of those wild get naked blowouts? Those are my favorites."

"Don't you want to know why we're celebrating?"

"You mean we have to have a reason?"

He laughed. "Metcher."

"Ha. Those ingrates. Corporate headquarters didn't even RSVP the invitation to the restaurant's opening I sent."

He swallowed his champagne, put down the glass and enfolded her in his arms. She pressed her face to his shoulder and breathed in his sweet scent of fresh wood and pure Bryan. At last. She'd been waiting for this moment for hours.

He kissed her hair. "Maybe you shouldn't have included the special invitation to their 'goon squad, intimidators and Elsie'."

"Picky, picky. So why are we celebrating Metcher?"

"You remember the lawyer that contacted me? He said he represented the auditors."

She snuggled closer. "You get mail from those bozos every few days. What's new?"

"What's new is another five million. According to the terms of their own contract, they underestimated my extra payment by a bit."

She didn't drop her glass but some wine spilled. "Five million? Dollars?"

"Yep. And from what the lawyer says, Metcher is so worried I'll sue them, they're going out of their way to make sure I get the money as soon as possible." He laughed. "If only they knew how grateful I am to them."

"Those fools? They hounded you and put you in danger. I don't know why you're not—"

He interrupted. "They chased me straight into your arms. How could I not be grateful?"

A remark like that deserved a reward. She began by unbuttoning his shirt.

## **About the Author**

Summer Devon is the alter ego of Kate Rothwell. Until she met Summer, Kate was a mild-mannered writer with kids, a husband and a dog. To channel this new identity, Kate has to recall her wild younger days – okay, not that wild, though she did stints as a bartender and an artist model.

They share a few similarities, yet Kate and Summer are very different. Kate went to art school. Maybe Summer did too, but she certainly never smelled like turpentine. Summer cares about her appearance, can dance and walk for miles in high-heeled shoes, has a rich melodic laugh and naturally beautiful fingernails. Her advanced degree is in something very exotic that led to a well-paid career in a field she'd like to discuss, but regretfully, can't. She can pop bonbons and type at the same time and never gets chocolate on the keyboard or her blouse. Though her clothes are generally shapehugging, she never suffers from static cling.

Summer welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Ave., Akron OH 44310.



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