



IN THE MOOD

By

Ellen Fisher

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Chapter 1

Norfolk, Virginia

“I didn’t know you were a guy.”

Seated behind a metal table stacked high with copies of his contemporary romance, Jude Patterson looked up at the beautiful woman in front of him and affected an injured look. “Damn. And here I was hoping that was obvious.”

The corners of her mouth turned up with amusement, and he looked at her with more interest. This book signing had been pretty dull up till now, but her appearance was enough to liven the afternoon up. She was more than beautiful... she was gorgeous. Sable-brown hair fell loose in a glorious, wavy cascade around her shoulders, and she possessed an incredibly lush mouth. Her worn jeans clung to her broad, decidedly female hips like a second skin, and her T-shirt had the state motto “Virginia is for lovers” emblazoned right across her damned impressive breasts. The provocative location of those words simply couldn’t help but give a guy ideas.

“You know what I mean,” she answered. Her voice was low and husky, sending a bolt of heat straight to regions better left unheated in

public. He was glad he was seated behind a table. Smiling, she tapped a manicured fingernail on the bright yellow cover. "It says your name is Judy."

"I just changed a letter," he said, forcing himself to look away from her breasts--a real test of his willpower. "Not a very big difference."

"Oh, it's a very big difference. It's an entirely different gender."

He shrugged a shoulder and returned her smile with a wry one of his own. "It's not easy to get a romance published when you're a guy."

"I had no idea you were a man. I love your books, though. I've read most of them." She picked up a copy of his book, *In the Mood*, and flipped through it. "But this is a contemporary romance," she said, wrinkling her forehead. "I thought you wrote historicals."

"I have, up till now. This is my first contemporary."

She paused on a page and read silently for a moment. Her eyebrows went up. "Wow. That's, um, sexy."

He sighed. Writing contemporary love scenes had been the hardest thing for him to accomplish, and he was uncomfortably aware he hadn't done a terrific job with it. "No, it's not," he said honestly. "My sex scenes all suck. And I don't mean that in a good way."

"Oh, they're not that bad."

He shook his head. "They're not that great, either. Writing contemporaries is a little different. The editor wanted me to use, uh, blunt language. I had a hard time with that."

She glanced at the page again. “Yeah, I see what you mean. I’ve never seen anyone use the words ‘creamy orbs’ in a contemporary.”

Just the phrase was enough to make him cringe. “I know that sounds stupid. I just couldn’t figure out how to make it sound more modern.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid,” she said loyally. “Just, you know, not too contemporary.”

“Thanks.” He sighed again. “I’m working on another contemporary now. I wish I could figure out how to make the love scenes better.”

“Want some help?”

His eyebrows shot up so fast they practically parted company with his head. “Excuse me?”

She laughed, a rippling sound that caused an answering ripple deep in his body. “Not what I meant. I mean, maybe I could give you some suggestions. Although I’m not a professional.”

“Not... a professional?” he repeated, his eyebrows lifting even higher.

Amusement brightened her vivid blue-green eyes. “I mean, I’m not an editor or anything, but I read lots of romances. Contemporaries *and* historicals.”

Jude turned that over in his mind for a moment. Actually, he mused, it wasn’t a bad idea. Maybe what he needed was input from someone who loved the genre and who was clearly comfortable with her own sexuality. He shot another glimpse at her and snorted to himself.

Yeah, right. The fact was, he didn't want to let her get away without more conversation.

"Great," he said. "If you've got some suggestions, I'm all ears. I'd love to hear what you'd do differently."

"Uh..." She looked surprised that he'd agreed to the idea, but she gamely started to flip through the pages.

"Not now," he said. "I'm trying to sell some books here. Care to join me for a bite to eat after I'm done?"

"And give you ... suggestions?"

"Sure. The only thing is, you'll have to buy my book."

A wide grin broke over her face. "You've got a deal."

"Terrific," he said. "I'll meet you in the food court at two, okay?"

"That sounds great," she said, and dropped the book in front of him.

"But I want it autographed."

"Um ... okay." He accepted the book, opened it to the title page, and looked up quizzically. "What's your name?"

"Alyssa Stone."

"Pretty name," he answered automatically, but realized almost instantly that the habitual words were true. The combination of graceful, feminine first name and blunt last name suited her perfectly. Scrawling his usual inscription in the book, he handed it back.

She scanned his scribbled words hastily and lifted an eyebrow. "You hope there'll be lots of romance in my life?"

“I put that in all my books.”

“I thought maybe you were hitting on me.”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Shooting him a cheeky wink, she chuckled. “That’s too bad.”

Jude watched as she disappeared into the store to pay for his book, noticing she looked just as fabulous from the rear view as she did from the front. Beneath the worn jeans, her butt was tight and shapely, with a sassy wiggle that reminded him of Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*.

Alyssa Stone was something, all right--gorgeous, funny, and smart. And besides, she liked his books. What more could you want in a woman?

* * * *

“So what exactly is a turgid manhood?”

All over the MacArthur Center food court, heads swiveled to stare at them. Jude nearly choked on his roast beef sandwich. “Could you *please* keep your voice down?” he demanded.

Alyssa’s gorgeously lush lips curved. “I think I might have discovered your problem, Jude. Are you a prude?”

“I’m not a prude,” he answered. “I’m just a little uncomfortable discussing sex in public, that’s all.”

“But you write about sex all the time.”

“My books are more romantic than sexy.”.

“You think so? They sure feature a lot of turgid--”

“Don’t say that again, Alyssa. People are looking at us.”

“Let them look. There aren’t any kids in here. Why do you describe it that way? Does it make you uncomfortable to call it a penis?”

Jude sighed. “Look,” he said, “maybe this is a bad idea.”

“Ah-ha.” She pointed at him with a french fry. “It *does* make you uncomfortable. How come? Did you skip sex education in high school or something?”

Sex education was the *only* place he’d learned about sex in high school, but he wasn’t about to admit that to her. “Of course not,” he answered.

“So how do you refer to yours?”

Jude wished he could pour his Coke over his head to cool off his cheeks. “My what?” he said, deliberately obtuse.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean. What do you call yours? Little Jude?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “There’s nothing little about it.”

“Fine. Enormous Jude? Big Boy? I mean, really, would you ever refer to it in bed as a turgid manhood?” An irreverent grin tilted her lips, and humor lit up her whole face. He couldn’t help but notice that she was even prettier when she smiled. “Please, honey, take my turgid manhood into your--”

Despite himself, he chuckled. “Okay, I guess I wouldn’t.”

“So what do you call it? When you’re in bed with a woman, I mean.”

“Um...” He had to think about it for a moment. The unfortunate truth was that it had been quite a while since he’d been in bed with a woman. “I guess I don’t call it anything. Maybe There. As in, ‘Touch me There.’”

She chuckled. "You really are a prude."

"My dad was a pastor, all right? If I'd used those words, he'd have washed out my mouth with soap." She tilted her head. "I guess he doesn't approve of your career, huh?"

"He's dead," Jude said. "But I'm sure he's rolling over in his grave."

Alyssa flipped through the book, pausing on a page she’d evidently dog eared earlier. “Now, about this oral sex scene--” She looked up.

“You’re blushing!”

“I am not,” he said, blushing.

She didn’t argue, much to his relief, but went on. “Where did you learn your technique? It sounds horrible. I can’t imagine a woman holding still for it, really.”

He blushed again. “I haven’t, uh, actually...”

“Oh. My. God. You’re kidding me.”

“My girlfriends didn’t really like--”

“Your girlfriends were bullshitting you,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Trust me, they would have liked it if you knew how.”

“Thank you so much for shooting a thousand bullet holes through my ego.”

"I'm sorry," she said, reaching out and patting his arm. "I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. But isn't there some kind of writing rule? Write what you know?"

"I've read about every possible position in other romance novels," he said, a little defensively.

"I'm not sure that's enough. Or maybe you've just read too many historicals. I mean..." She flipped pages rapidly. "'The dew-covered flower of her womanhood'?"

"Okay. I'll admit that sounds a little silly."

"It's not contemporary, that's for sure." She scanned down the page a little further. "And her 'love nest'?"

"It's a metaphor."

"No, it's a euphemism. If you're going to write contemporary sex scenes, you have to be blunt. Honest. Straightforward." She studied the page for a moment longer. "Besides, your hero must be a contortionist if he can do this."

She passed the book over to him. Jude read the passage, his forehead crinkling. "I think it could be done."

"I don't think so. Have you tried it to see?"

Jude lifted his eyes and stared at her over the book. "I don't do *research* for my love scenes."

"Why not?"

“Because...” He hesitated, then blurted out, “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Alyssa studied him a moment longer, her aquamarine eyes intense. “Would you like one?” she said at last.

Chapter 2

Alyssa watched with amusement as Jude's cheeks turned three different shades of red. He was a nice-looking guy, she thought, wondering why on earth he didn't have a girlfriend.

He had a pleasant face--not rugged or roughly hewn or any of those romance hero descriptions she'd noticed in his book. Just pleasant, with a nose that was a little too wide, a jaw line that was a little too square, and eyes that were an impossible shade of amber, all topped off with dark red hair. The smattering of freckles across the broad bridge of his nose was kind of cute. He wasn't too tall, or too short. He was lean and muscular, but not to the extent that he looked like he lived in a gym. In fact he looked pretty much like an average guy. But a nice one.

Even so, she wasn't sure where her suggestion had come from. She hadn't had what could really be termed a boyfriend in years. Not that she was celibate--heck, no. Not exactly, anyway. She just hadn't thought long-term in quite a while.

She wasn't sure why she had even briefly thought about this guy as a boyfriend. Particularly since she'd just met him this afternoon. But there

was something about Jude that attracted her. Something about his pitiful love scenes, the painfully awkward descriptions of sex that clearly showed his love life was in the toilet, had stirred her sympathy.

And something about him had stirred her body too. She wasn't sure what it was that attracted her, but she found him oddly fascinating. He wasn't incredibly good-looking, forceful, or magnetic ... but he was damned sexy.

Jude closed his mouth, which had been hanging open, with a snap. "Are you kidding me?"

"No. I'm serious."

"But you--" He looked at her for a long moment. "You're *gorgeous*."

She smiled, flattered by his obvious sincerity. "Thanks."

"I just don't understand why a woman like you would be interested in someone like me."

Alyssa shrugged. She knew guys thought she was beautiful, but she'd grown a little wary of gorgeous guys. Ever since the big mess with Pierce Logan five years before. Pierce had been incredibly handsome, but he'd also turned out to be a grade-A bastard. This guy somehow looked a little more ... approachable.

"You're cute," she said simply.

"Cute?" He sounded surprised.

She nodded. "Yeah, cute. Really cute. So how about dinner?"

“Dinner.” He stared at her for a long moment, like she’d said a word he’d never heard of before, then inclined his head in agreement. “Sure, dinner. That’d be nice. Uh ... you want to go to a restaurant or something?”

“How about your place?”

The rash words were out of her mouth before she realized what she’d said. It was crazy to go to a complete stranger’s house, even one that seemed as harmless as Jude. But she wanted to know more about this guy, and she figured she’d probably learn more about him from seeing how he lived.

Anyway, there was something about this man that made her *feel* reckless.

Jude looked even more stunned than before. “Uh ... okay. Sure.” He scribbled down his address on the inside cover of her copy of *In the Mood* and handed it to her. “Around seven all right with you?”

“Sure,” she said. “And in case you change your mind about dinner, here’s my number.” She handed him her business card, which had the address of her art gallery, as well as her home and business numbers.

He pocketed it without looking at it. His steady gaze held hers.

“Trust me,” he said softly. “I’m not going to change my mind.”

“I’m doomed.”

Jude stalked back and forth across the dark blue Oriental carpet that adorned the living room of his condo. “Doomed,” he repeated. “Doomed, doomed, doomed.”

His companion, seated on the well-stuffed burgundy leather sofa, watched him with sympathetic dark eyes but made no comment. “Yeah, I know it sounds like I’m overreacting,” Jude admitted. “But I’ve never gotten through a first date yet without totally screwing it up.”

His confidant looked quizzical.

“Well, sure,” Jude agreed, “I’ve had some women who went for me anyway, but mostly because I was pitiful and they felt sorry for me. Sympathy sex, you know? But *this* woman has class, and there is no conceivable way I’m going to get through this evening without her running out of here screaming her head off. I’ll probably set the kitchen on fire by accident or something.”

His companion jumped to the floor and began nibbling on the carpet.

“Hey,” Jude said, and scooped up the brown-and-white, lop-eared rabbit. “Knock it off. You’re eating my heirloom carpet there, Cin.”

Cuddled against his chest, the bunny stared at him with soulful dark eyes. “Oh, what the hell,” Jude said, and put the rabbit back on the floor, where she began nibbling again, obviously under the impression that the carpet was made of grass. “You’re right. I’m never going to pass the damn rug down to my children anyway. Guys like me don’t reproduce. We just get old and weird and start talking to our pets like they were our kids.”

The rabbit glanced up at him and twitched her nose.

“See?” Jude said. “I’ve already started. I’m turning into a strange little old man, and I’m not thirty-five yet.” He sighed. “I’m doomed.”

* * * *

Jude's condo was fabulous. Located in downtown Norfolk, in a huge, square building that had once been a beer warehouse, it had a gorgeous view of the Elizabeth River. The lights of Portsmouth, the city across the water, glimmered in the darkness and reflected in the black water.

Alyssa blinked around at the surroundings as Jude ushered her in, thinking that the place was very nicely decorated, but in a very definite guy style. Everything about the condo screamed masculinity, from the comfortable, slightly worn leather furniture to the wide-screen plasma TV that dominated one wall.

As Jude escorted her into the living room, something hopped out from under the couch, and Alyssa yelped, startled.

"It's okay," Jude said hastily. "Just my rabbit."

"Your--" Alyssa looked more carefully at what she'd first taken to be either a humongous mouse or a really small beagle, and saw a brown and white animal with floppy ears and big dark eyes. She stared at the animal, which stared back, twitching its nose rapidly. "You have a *rabbit*?"

"She fits in my condo better than a German shepherd would."

Alyssa chuckled, charmed despite herself. No guy she'd ever known had kept a pet that was so ... adorable. But somehow she wasn't surprised to

find that this gentle man kept a small, fluffy ball of fur underfoot. “I can understand that. Anyway, I think she’s cute.”

She knelt on the carpet and extended her hand. The rabbit hesitated, then hopped across to her, and Alyssa rubbed the soft fur. “What’s her name?”

“Cinnamon Bun. I call her Cin.”

“She’s cute.” Alyssa stroked the rabbit’s head for another moment, then stood up. “I like your place.”

“Thanks.”

She walked over to a huge cherry bookshelf that dominated one wall, seeing a colorful row of spines that belonged to paperback romances. She looked them over, seeing the name “Judy Patterson” on every one of them. “I’ve read almost all these,” she said, running her finger across the spines. “You sure have written a lot of books.”

Jude shrugged. “I sold my first book about eight years ago, when I was twenty-five. I write about two books a year.”

“You must really type fast.”

“Nah. I just don’t have much of a social life.”

She turned around, pasting her most flirtatious smile onto her lips. “Maybe we can do something to change that.”

“I think I’d like that,” he said.

She was surprised to realize part of her liked the idea, too. That was an unnerving discovery. It had been a long time since she’d liked a guy

enough to even think about going out with him. And yet here she was, on a date. An actual date.

Panic reached up and grabbed her by the throat, but she shoved it back and forced a smile to her lips.

“So,” she said lightly. “What’s for dinner?”

* * * *

“The way I see it,” Alyssa said later that evening, “you just need practice.”

“Practice?” Jude bit into a biscuit he’d slathered with butter and quirked an eyebrow. “You mean practice in bed?”

“No. I mean practice saying the words.” She took a good-sized bite of her own biscuit. Jude had noticed she had a healthy appetite. Despite himself, he wondered if that extended to areas of her life other than eating. Alyssa seemed to approach everything with gusto.

“The words?” he repeated dubiously.

“Yeah, the words. Say it after me--penis.”

“Uh...” He felt his cheeks heating, an automatic response from childhood. If he’d said the word as a kid, his dad would have grounded him for a week. “Penis.”

“Without the *uh*. Come on, you can do it.”

Taking a deep breath, he managed to say it without stammering.
“Penis.”

“Good boy.”

“Woof,” he said dryly.

“Okay. Now say vagina.”

He groaned. “Maybe I should just read *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.”

“You just need to get comfortable with your own sexuality. Otherwise you feel awkward about it, and that shines right through your writing. I could tell just by reading it that you were scared to death of writing the sex scenes. The rest of your book was good.” She shot him a saucy grin. “The sex scenes were a little too full of creamy orbs.”

“How much of it did you read?”

“I’m about halfway through it. I like your hero, really. He’s a great guy. I just don’t like his turgid manhood.”

“You mean his penis.”

“There. See?” She waved the last bite of her biscuit at him. “You said it.”

He sighed and took a bite out of his fried chicken. Concerns about setting the kitchen on fire aside, he really wasn’t much of a cook, so he’d let Colonel Sanders do the cooking for him. “I don’t think just saying those words is going to do me a hell of a lot of good. To be perfectly honest, I just don’t feel comfortable with the whole sex thing.”

She frowned. “How long has it been since you had any?”

“Uh ... a while, I guess.”

“Days? Months? Years?”

“A couple of years.” He shrugged at her startled glance. “I’m not really good at meeting women. I mean, I *like* women. I just never know exactly what to say to them.”

“You should talk about dew-covered flowers of womanhood. That would get their attention.”

He chuckled. “They’d think I was a psycho.”

“Nah. Just a little of touch when it comes to sex.” She wiped her greasy fingers on a paper napkin, picked up the copy of his novel she’d bought, and flipped through it again. “Maybe we should start at the beginning. The way your hero kisses. He’s kind of ... brutal, isn’t he?”

“Uh, I’m not sure what you mean. He, well, he kisses her. He touches his lips to hers. I think that’s pretty standard, isn’t it? Are you suggesting there’s some sort of esoteric technique he should be using?”

“Not esoteric, exactly. But you know, he just slams his lips onto hers and sticks his tongue in her mouth. He’s lucky she doesn’t knee him.”

He frowned, and she lifted her eyebrows. “Are you telling me this is how you’d kiss a woman?”

“Um First lips, then tongue. This is how people kiss. Isn’t it?”

“Oh, my *God*,” she said. “Stand up.”

He wiped his hands hastily on a napkin and stood up. She was already heading around the table toward him, and he backed away as she

approached. He was suddenly very aware of her fragrance, a light scent of roses in summer that made his knees weak.

“Kissing is not a laundry list,” she said softly, standing directly in front of him, so that he was painfully conscious of her nearness. “You don’t do A, then B. It’s different every time. And it’s impossible to go too slowly. You *have* to go slowly, or you don’t get anything out of it.”

“Men don’t get much out of it anyway.” At least he never had. Kissing was one of those things he just didn’t get. Women seemed to like it, but he had never understood what the big deal was.

“I’ve known men who get plenty out of it.”

Grinning, he parroted her own words back to her. “Those men were bullshitting you.”

“You think so?” She parted her lips and stretched upward. “Let’s find out. Kiss me, Jude.”

For a long second he hesitated, then bent, put his arms around her waist, and pressed his lips against hers. It was a quick, chaste kiss, and it lasted all of two seconds.

“Not too bad,” she said. “But a little hard. Kind of abrupt. The first time you kiss a woman, you should think of ... butterfly wings.”

“Butterfly wings,” he repeated dubiously.

“Exactly. Your lips should brush hers as lightly as butterfly wings.”

“Uh-huh. Butterfly wings.” “You’re trying to seduce a woman. It isn’t about you, Jude. It’s about her.”

“That’s sort of a one-sided attitude, isn’t it? Shouldn’t it be about both of us?”

“If you want her to fall into bed with you, you’d better make it about her, at least at first. And your hero needs to care about how the heroine feels more than anything, or your readers won’t fall for *him*. Now, kiss me again. And remember, think butterfly wings.”

Sighing, he leaned down and kissed her again. His lips slid over hers, very lightly, and he felt a little shock of electricity jolt through him.

“That was nice,” she whispered.

Suddenly aware of the heavy pounding of his heart, he looked at her, surprised. “It *was* nice, wasn’t it?”

“Told you,” she said smugly. “So what have you learned?”

“Uh...” What he had learned was that she smelled terrific and felt even better, but he had the distinct impression that wasn’t what she was aiming at. He struggled to try to focus his random thoughts. It wasn’t easy, considering his arms were still around her slim waist and her pert breasts were still lightly touching his chest.

“You’ve learned,” she said with a touch of impatience, “that your hero shouldn’t use his tongue like a jackhammer. Right?”

“Oh. Yeah. Right.”

She sighed. “You need to pay better attention, Jude.”

“I’m paying plenty of attention.” He grinned wryly. “Just not to your words.”

Alyssa looked briefly taken aback, then seemed to recognize the compliment and returned his smile. “Well, that’s something, at any rate. I guess that’s enough on that subject. Just let me grab your book again--” She started to pull away from him, but he refused to loosen his hold on her.

“Hold on,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve got the hang of kissing yet.”

“I thought you said men didn’t get much out of kissing?”

“I’ve changed my mind. It seems like it might be a valuable topic to explore further.”

“Fine,” she murmured. Her aquamarine eyes had gone dark and smoky. “So kiss me again.”

He bent to kiss her, and his lips stroked softly over the satin of hers. The tingling sensation rushed through him again, and he went violently hard in an instantaneous response that shocked him. True, it had been a long time for him, but he’d never in his life gotten that hard that fast. Especially not by kissing a woman with his lips closed.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed her abdomen against his, and made a small noise of surrender in the back of her throat, and he swelled even more. Their bodies melded together as he discovered the contours of her lips. He desperately longed to run his tongue over her lower lip, to taste her, to explore her, but didn’t quite dare, given her earlier comments about jackhammers.

At last she drew back. He was pleased to see that she was flushed, and her breath shuddered out in uneven, rough gasps. “That was good,” she said breathlessly. “Very good.”

He grinned. “It was good for me too.”

She uttered a laugh that sounded a bit on the shaky side, which pleased him. He liked knowing that he’d affected her, even if just a little. “So now what?” he inquired.

She hesitated, and he was pleased to see her flush heighten a bit. It was nice to see this assertive, confident woman show an awkward, uncertain side. “Maybe we should stop now.”

“But then I won’t learn anything. I’ll be doomed to write about creamy orbs and throbbing manhoods for the rest of my career.” He did his best to look tragic, and she broke out laughing.

“Keep kissing that way,” she said at last, wryly, “and I can guarantee you’ll be able to find a woman to help educate you.”

“But I don’t want just any woman. I want you.”

He said the words in a light, teasing tone, but he was startled to realize how true they were. Somewhere in the last five minutes he’d discovered he wanted to kiss her, and only her.

In only five minutes, he’d become addicted to the feel and taste and smell of her.

She swallowed. “I really think maybe we ought to stop now.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Afraid, Alyssa?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Just ... well....”

“Let me guess.” He lowered his head and whispered into her ear.

“The flower of your femininity is becoming drenched in dew.”

She jerked back her head, glared at him, then abruptly broke out laughing. “Maybe it is. And what about you? Is your manhood turgid?”

He stared at her, seeing all the humor flee from her expression. Their eyes locked in an intense gaze for a long moment.

“Definitely,” he said softly.

Chapter 3

Everything was getting too serious, too fast. All of Alyssa's old insecurities rose up into her throat, choking her, making her breathless with panic.

Her instincts told her to run like hell. But the incredible intensity in Jude's amber eyes held her pinned helplessly. Her heart fluttered madly, but the rest of her couldn't move.

"What comes next?" he asked in a soft voice.

She blinked at him. "Next?"

"I don't want you comparing me to a jackhammer, but I'd really like to kiss you some more."

Just the thought of his tongue sliding into her mouth sent a rush of moisture and warmth to regions that were already overheated. Some of her nervous tension ebbed away. "Uh, I think that'd be all right," she whispered.

"Are you sure? Because I don't want to do this the wrong way. I need to learn how to do it right so my heroes can do it right. Research, you know."

A flicker of humor danced beneath the serious intensity of his gaze, and she had the distinct impression that he was teasing her. “Jude.”

“What?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

He bent his head and tentatively touched his lips to hers. But the light brush of his lips wasn’t enough for her now. She wanted more. Much more. Burying her hands in the hair at the nape of his neck, she pulled him closer, and her lips parted.

His tongue remained firmly in his own mouth.

She lifted her head and glared at him. “Are you going to stick your tongue in my mouth or what?”

Jude looked puzzled. “You said my hero went too fast. I figured I ought to go slow.”

“That’s *too* slow.”

“I thought you said it was impossible to go too slow.”

“I was wrong, damn it.” She stood on tiptoe, yanked his head toward her again, and pressed her mouth against his fiercely. Her tongue slid across his lips, exploring the contours and taste and texture, and she heard him utter a small, rumbling noise of pleasure. And then his velvety tongue slipped into her mouth and stroked softly, gently, insistently.

Their tongues tangled for long minutes, and he dug his fingers into her hips and pulled her against him until she felt his erection, solid and

demanding. She could feel his heat even through his jeans, could feel him pulsing eagerly against her lower belly.

It made her think of jackhammers again, and not in a bad way. The thought of his body pounding into hers in a hard, relentless rhythm was enough to make her knees go weak. That was something she hadn't craved in a long, long time, and the vivid image frightened her at the same time it aroused her. She tried to put it out of her mind without a whole lot of success.

She moaned against his mouth, and he lifted his head from hers and looked down into her eyes with a glint of amusement. "What about butterfly wings?"

"Believe me, we're way past butterfly wings. Forget about the damn butterfly wings, okay?"

"No problem. I can do that."

He lowered his head toward hers again. At that moment the doorknob rattled. Evidently it was locked, because almost instantly there was a loud pounding on the door. Jude lifted his head with a disgruntled expression. "Hell."

She stepped away from him hastily, although she couldn't quite stop herself from glancing down at his crotch. There was a decided bulge in his jeans. *Very impressive.*

It just went to show, she thought, that hours in the gym didn't have the slightest effect where it really counted. Some things a man either had or he didn't.

Jude definitely did.

"Were you expecting someone?"

Jude's amber eyes narrowed in annoyance. "It's probably my damn brother."

"Your brother?"

"Yeah, my little brother. He lives two floors down." Jude stalked toward the door and flung it open, revealing a stunningly gorgeous guy. His hair was brighter than Jude's, flamingly red, and his face was beautiful, all sharp, striking angles and finely etched lines. The resemblance to Jude was unmistakable, but this guy could have been a movie star. He was a little taller than Jude and a bit broader in the shoulders. Definitely one of the nicer-looking guys she'd ever seen.

The gorgeous guy stood for a minute with his fist in the air, obviously processing the fact that the door had opened suddenly, then flung his arm around Jude's shoulder, nearly knocking him to the floor, and staggered into the room.

"Juuuude," he said, in a slightly slurred voice that made Alyssa suspect he'd been partying more than was good for him. "We gotta talk."

"I'm kind of busy right now, Mark."

Mark wheeled around so abruptly that Jude almost went over again. "I need to talk to you," he said blearily. "I just lost another girlfriend."

"Uh-huh. What is that, the sixth this year? Look, Mark--"

"I loved her," Mark moaned. "I hated to let her go."

Jude shut his eyes, looking as if he were battling for patience. At last he said, "Mark, you do this about once a month. You fall in love with a woman, you make her fall for you, and then you dump her. It happens every time."

"I really loved this one," Mark said. Tears began to trickle down his cheeks, and Jude cast a horrified look of embarrassment in Alyssa's direction. She couldn't help but feel sympathy for him. Dealing with a drunken sibling wasn't most people's idea of a terrific way to spend a first date. It wouldn't have been her preference, either.

Especially when the aforementioned drunken sibling had barged in just when they were getting to the good part.

Jude patted his brother on the shoulder. "Right, buddy. You loved her. I hear ya. Listen, Mark, how about I stop by your place later?"

Mark lifted his head, looking tragic. "Don't you want to talk to me now?" he said plaintively.

"I've kind of got company, buddy."

For the first time, Mark looked around the condo. His head swiveled around on his neck like an owl's, causing him to stagger as if he might fall

over. At last he appeared to notice Alyssa, and his blurry eyes made an effort to focus on her.

“Hey,” he said, with the air of a man imparting a shocking piece of news. “That’s a girl.”

“Uh, hi,” Alyssa said, doing her best to get through the horribly awkward situation by waving in her friendliest manner. “I’m Alyssa Stone.”

Mark stared at her for a long moment as if he were studying her for subtitles. “There’s a girl in your apartment, Jude.”

Alyssa thought longingly of slugging him for calling her a girl--she was twenty-seven years old, for crying out loud--but he was obviously drunk, so she decided she had to overlook it. Behind Mark, Jude’s face was turning a shade of crimson that clashed rather badly with his russet hair.

“I have a date, all right?”

“A date?” Mark contemplated Alyssa for a long moment. “You haven’t had a date in years, Jude.”

“Thanks so much for sharing that, buddy.”

“I was starting to figure you were gay.”

Alyssa tried to strangle the startled giggle that tried to emerge from her throat. She hastily covered her mouth with her hand and coughed instead. Evidently she didn’t quite succeed, because Jude looked mortified. “It’s time to go, Mark. *Now*.”

Mark didn't appear to notice his brother's last statement. He stepped away from Jude, staggering on a weaving, uneven path toward Alyssa.

"She's pretty. Real pretty."

"Gosh, thanks so much," Alyssa said, deciding not to bother to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. It was obvious this guy was too drunk to pick up on it anyway.

"Maybe you can meet her some other time, when you're a little more sober," Jude said. "Right now you're kind of a mess. Go downstairs. I'll be there soon, okay?"

Ignoring him, Mark took another step toward Alyssa, and then swayed. "Hell," he said in a strangled voice. "I think I'm going to hurl."

He bent over and threw up on Alyssa's sandals.

* * * *

"I'm going to fucking kill you."

Jude slammed the door shut behind him. Sprawled on the couch in an untidy heap, his brother moaned, then clutched at his head.

"Jesus, Jude, what are you doing here so early?"

"Early, hell. It's noon, Mark. Time for you to get up so I can murder you."

"Keep your voice down," Mark implored in a whisper.

“Don’t worry, buddy. We’re seven stories up. Your head won’t hurt a bit once I’ve tossed you out the window and you’ve slammed into the pavement.”

“What the hell is your problem?” Mark whined, pulling the orange and purple afghan their grandmother had knitted up over his head.

“My problem is you, asshole.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I guess you don’t remember anything from last night,” Jude snarled.

Mark peered out from beneath the afghan. “I told Angel I loved her but that I wasn’t ready for a serious relationship. She left. I had a few beers.”

“Yeah, right,” Jude scoffed, casting a glance at the kitchen counter, where an impressive quantity of empty bottles was arrayed. “Looks like you had a convenience store’s worth of beers.”

“Maybe it was more than a few,” Mark admitted. “And then I guess I went to sleep.”

“No,” Jude said. “Then you totally fucked up my life.”

Mark’s bloodshot eyes stared blearily at him. “Say what?”

“I had a date.”

“A date? You?” Mark’s eyes widened. “No way.”

“You expressed your disbelief quite clearly last night, too. Right in front of the lady. In fact, you told her it had been years since my last date, and you helpfully added that you thought I was probably gay.”

“Oh, shit.”

“And then you puked on her shoes.”

“Jesus.” Mark clenched his eyes shut, looking mortified. “I deserve to die, don’t I?”

“Absolutely.” Jude stalked across the room and glared down at his little brother. “Listen, Mark, you have got to stop doing this to yourself.”

“I don’t drink that much.”

“I don’t mean the drinking. I mean this womanizing thing. You fall for a woman, romance her, treat her like she’s the only one in the world for you, your true soul mate ... and then you dump her. It isn’t fair to the women, and it isn’t fair to you either. You fall to pieces every time.”

“I can’t be a monk like you are. I’m no good at the celibacy thing.”

“I might not be quite so damn celibate right now if you hadn’t barged in and puked all over my date,” Jude said sharply. He softened his tone. “Look, buddy, you’re screwing up your life. Quit falling for women so fast and so hard, okay?”

“I can’t help it,” Mark said. “You don’t know what it feels like to fall for a girl. You never fall for one.”

“I was in the middle of falling for one pretty damn hard last night.”

Mark looked up at him, his expression stricken. “And I screwed it up, didn’t I?”

“I’m afraid so. I don’t think I’ll be seeing her again any time in the next century. Way to go, Mark. This is a new low for you--you’ve never managed to fuck up both our lives at the same time before.”

“I’m sorry, man. Really sorry.”

Jude glared at him a moment longer, then shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. Something bad was bound to happen, I guess. I’ve never had a date go so well in my life.”

Mark looked up at him. “At least it wasn’t as bad as what happened with you and Mary Sue. At least not quite.”

Jude cringed at the reference to his ill-fated senior prom date. He’d taken Mary Sue Johnson to the prom, and while they were dancing he’d inadvertently stumbled and stepped on her long skirt, which had ripped off right up to her waist. He could still remember her screaming hysterically as she ran from the dance floor.

That was the point in his life when he’d realized he simply had no talent for coping with women. Yeah, it had been fifteen years ago, and he really ought to be over it by now, but there was no avoiding the fact that every time he tried to date a woman, something horrible happened.

Case in point: last night.

“I’m not sure,” he said finally. “Last night was pretty bad.”

“So call her and apologize.”

“She won’t talk to me,” Jude predicted gloomily.

“You never know. She might. It’s worth a shot, bro.”

Jude mentally weighed the painful embarrassment of calling--*Hi, remember me, the jerk with the drunk brother who puked all over your sandals?*--against the thought of never seeing Alyssa again. The irrepressible memory of the way her lips tasted, of the way her soft, yielding body had felt pressed against his, darted through his mind.

Hell. Mark was right.

It was definitely worth a shot.

Chapter 4

“So how did your date go?”

“About like you’d expect,” Alyssa said, rolling her eyes.

“That great, huh?”

Alyssa’s only employee, Sue Morris, was an older, gray-haired woman who reminded her of her grandmother, but who had a social life most twenty-two-year-olds would envy. She also had an avid interest in everyone else’s social life, Alyssa’s included.

Alyssa’s lips twisted wryly. “It actually was going okay till his brother showed up. Unfortunately his brother wasn’t too sober, and things got ... awkward.”

Sue lifted an eyebrow. She knew as well as anyone how much Alyssa loathed awkward situations. “So you’re going to avoid the poor guy for the rest of his life because his brother barged in on your date?”

Alyssa cleared her throat. “It would just be really ... *uncomfortable* ... to see him again.”

She looked around the empty shop. A few months ago she’d rented a space in the recently renovated Selden Arcade, a gracefully arched older

building in downtown Norfolk, and acquired a decent stock of paintings by local artists, including a few of her own. Many of the pictures portrayed historic Virginia landmarks, particularly Norfolk ones--what she considered a sure bet in a city that was currently very enthusiastic about saving and restoring its older buildings. Unfortunately, she hadn't moved many items yet, and it was going to be difficult to pay her rent this month, let alone Sue. She could definitely use something to take her mind off work.

But it didn't look like Jude Patterson was going to be that something.

"I've never met someone who hates awkwardness as much as you do," Sue said, idly moving around the shop and dusting the frames.

"You didn't grow up with my mom," Alyssa said grimly. "Every time she went to a neighborhood party, she got drunk and started hitting on my friends' dads. It was humiliating as hell when I was growing up."

"Ah, yes, the Scandal of the Stones. You know, Lyss, you're not alone. Lots of kids thought their parents were a huge embarrassment growing up."

"Damn few of them had to watch their mom try to do a strip tease on a table every time she went to a party."

Sue snorted. "Your mom sounds like a pistol."

"Yeah, well, I didn't find it real amusing." And she'd sworn to herself to stay out of publicly embarrassing situations for the rest of her life. Jude, with his idiot brother who lived just downstairs, didn't look like a real good prospect.

Sue straightened up suddenly from dusting a small oil painting of the Thoroughgood House, and her nostrils flared like she'd just scented fresh meat. "Hey. I think we have a customer coming this way."

"No kidding?" Alyssa didn't add the obvious, which was, *That'd be an unheard-of occurrence*. She craned her neck but couldn't see past her assistant.

"Yeah. A guy. A good-looking one."

"That'd be a nice change."

The door opened, and sure enough, the guy came in. He stopped at the door, looked at her, and promptly turned crimson. "Hi, Alyssa."

Alyssa felt her cheeks flush in response, and her back straightened instinctively. She knew she wasn't being fair to Jude by reacting like this, but being reminded of last night's humiliation just brought out the bitch in her.

"Hello," she answered coolly.

Jude looked alarmed by her cold tone. "I, uh, just thought maybe we could talk."

Sue's eyes lit with interest at the charged atmosphere. "So this is the young man you went out with last night," she said. "He's hot, Alyssa."

Jude jerked his head around to stare at her, looking like he'd been whacked over the head with a Louisville Slugger. Abruptly his startled expression melted into a grin. "Thanks."

Despite herself, Alyssa was charmed by his amusement. But the memory of last night's embarrassment was still fresh in her mind.

"I don't think we have too much to talk about," she said.

He looked back at her. "Not even considering that I'm hot?"

She knew by the glint of mischief in his amber eyes that he was teasing her. "I'm actually kind of surprised to see you," she admitted.

"Yeah, I guess you figured I'd be in jail for killing my brother by now. I thought about it, but I finally decided against it."

A chuckle rose irresistibly in her throat. "I have to admit, I was tempted by that idea, too."

Jude took a step toward her, letting the door fall shut behind him, and looked at her more seriously. "I really am sorry about last night, Alyssa. I've had a lot of lousy first dates, but that was absolutely the worst. You deserve a whole lot better."

"It's not your fault," she said, avoiding his gaze.

"Not really, no. But you still look pissed."

"It was sort of déjà vu," she said uncomfortably. "My mom drank a lot."

"Oh, hell." He looked unhappy. "I'm sorry, Alyssa. But my brother doesn't do that a whole lot. Just every time he breaks up with a woman. Honest, he's not an alcoholic. Just an idiot."

She snorted, amused despite herself. "I can't argue with you there."

"Can't you give me another chance?"

“You want to go on another date?” She thought about it, weighing the unpleasant memory of humiliation against her awareness of what a nice guy he was. And how sexy he was.

Really, the decision was a no-brainer.

“Okay,” she said at last, “I guess so. But only if we go somewhere your brother can’t find us.”

“Deal.” He flashed his broad grin again. “How about we go shoe shopping? After last night, I think I owe you a pair.”

She broke out laughing. “I have plenty of shoes. Don’t worry about that.”

“Dinner, then?”

“Sure. Dinner’d be great.”

“Awesome. I know this terrific Italian restaurant in Waterside.” He looked at her, his brilliant eyes very intense, and Alyssa felt the room shrink down to just the two of them, as if Sue weren’t there, avidly listening to every word they uttered. “I was sort of hoping maybe you could ... teach me some more.”

“I’d love to,” she said softly, and meant it. Mostly. The fear of getting too close to this guy still lurked beneath the surface, but she pushed it away. He was too nice to let go just because she was a coward.

“Great,” he said. “I’ll drop by and get you a little after six, okay?”

Alyssa nodded, realizing he’d seen the closing hours posted on the door. “Sounds terrific.”

He flashed one last smile--he had a really nice smile, open and friendly--and, turning, made his way out into the arcade. Alyssa turned back to Sue, realizing a fraction of a second too late that she was wearing a goofy grin. She quickly wiped it off, but Sue's white eyebrows had already shot up.

"You weren't planning on avoiding him because your date was uncomfortable," she said, waving a finger at Alyssa. "You were planning on avoiding him because you like him too much, weren't you?"

"That's crazy," Alyssa answered in her most reasonable tone. "Why would I avoid a guy because I like him?"

"It's what you do, Alyssa. I'm not sure why, but it's what you do. You're terrified of commitment."

"I'm not terrified. It's just that..." Alyssa sighed. "My mom had a whole string of boyfriends when I was growing up, and every last one of them was pond scum. A few of them hit us, but most of them were just plain mean."

"You're not your mother, Alyssa. And that guy doesn't strike me as mean."

"Maybe not. Probably not. I just don't want to take the chance."

"So you *are* terrified."

"I prefer to think of it as prudent," Alyssa said, lifting her chin.

"Just because your mom was a royal screw-up doesn't mean you should avoid commitment for the rest of your life, hon."

“I barely know this guy, Sue. Commitment is not an issue right now.”

“You won’t ever let it become an issue,” Sue predicted. “I know how you operate. No matter how much you like him, you won’t let him get close.”

“I think you’re oversimplifying,” Alyssa responded with dignity, moving across the floor to straighten a picture on the wall.

“I don’t think so. This one scares you, Alyssa.”

“Crap. Men don’t scare me.” *Yeah, sure*, said a cynical voice in her head. *You wish.*

She’d never admit it in a million years, but Jude Patterson scared the hell out of her.

* * * *

“So what are you writing?”

Jude yelled, hastily minimized the Word document he’d been working on, and spun in his leather office chair to see his brother leaning against the door of his office and grinning widely.

“Why don’t you ever knock, damn it?”

“I did. You didn’t hear me. Must have been really wrapped up in that sex scene you were typing away on.”

“It’s a *love* scene,” Jude said between his teeth.

“Looked like a lot of sex to me.”

“Don’t ever sneak up behind me and read my stuff, Mark. I mean it. Next time I’ll stuff you into the fax machine, face first.”

Mark grinned, unfazed by the threat. “So how’s it going?”

“Not bad,” Jude admitted, leaning back in his chair and looking up at his brother. “I’m trying something new.”

In fact he was trying to apply Alyssa’s teachings to his latest manuscript. He’d gotten rid of every example of purple prose he could find and replaced the florid words with painfully blunt ones that would have had his dad washing out his word processor with soap. Overall, he had to admit it made the scene better, although his cheeks had been flaming with embarrassment for the past half hour. He was going to hate discussing this book with his editor, that much was for sure.

Cinnamon Bun hopped across the floor and nibbled inquisitively on the leg of Mark’s jeans. He pulled his leg away with a look of disgust.

“Ugh. Can’t you keep your rodent in its cage?”

“She’s not a rodent, she’s a lapomorph. And as long as I’m here, she likes to run loose. She’s house trained, you know, and she keeps herself as clean as any cat.”

“She might be clean, but she looks like a rodent to me.” Mark took another wary step away from the rabbit, then grinned down at his brother.

“So how’d it go?”

“How’d what go?”

“Don’t play dumb, Jude. Did you ask your lady friend out?”

A smile quirked Jude's lips felt a at the thought of Alyssa. "Yeah," he admitted.

"And?"

"She said yes."

Mark whooped, startling the rabbit, who gave a leap and instantly disappeared under the desk. "Way to go, Jude. I didn't think you had the balls."

"Thanks. I think."

"So where are you taking her?"

"La Bella Luna. You know, that Italian place in Waterside."

"Good for a start. But after that, where?"

"Somewhere you can't find us," Jude said grimly. Mark chuckled.

"Don't worry, bro, I promise not to puke on her tonight. I'm over Angel, honest."

"It's truly touching how long you pined for her."

Mark ignored his sarcasm. "Look, Jude ... you've got protection, right?"

Jude lifted his eyebrows and affected his most innocent look. "You mean car insurance?"

"Rubbers, you moron. Have you got some?"

Slightly embarrassed to admit he hadn't really given much thought to the matter, Jude pressed his lips together. "Um..."

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Mark reached into his pocket and flung several small packets onto the desk. “Something told me you wouldn’t have thought that far ahead. You’re pathetic, Jude. If you do have any condoms lying around, I bet they date from the Stone Age. These are new, so they won’t pop like over inflated balloons when you try to use them. I bought them last week.”

“Thanks,” Jude said with honest gratitude, although he really couldn’t imagine himself using them any time soon. Just the thought of kissing Alyssa again was enough to make his gauges swing into the red, let alone the thought of...

But he was getting ahead of himself.

Wasn’t he?

He flipped open his wallet and shoved the condoms inside. What the hell. It couldn’t hurt to have them around. They’d probably just slowly petrify in his wallet over the next decade, a monument to his utter lack of social ability, but it never hurt to be prepared. Just in case.

“It’s damned lucky you have me to look after you,” Mark said.

“Oh, yeah,” Jude agreed dryly. “Damned lucky.”

* * * *

Jude walked over to Selden Arcade and picked up Alyssa at six-fifteen. It was a sultry, hot evening, and the sun still rode high in the sky as

they turned onto Granby Street. In the first half of the twentieth century, Granby had been the major shopping district in Norfolk, but it had fallen on hard times, becoming a disaster area, filled with empty, long-neglected stores, prostitutes, and pawn shops. Twenty-five years ago a man would have had to be suicidal to walk there.

As downtown Norfolk underwent its renaissance, however, Granby had come back to life. Now it was the heart of downtown, filled with bars, restaurants, and theaters. People milled everywhere, waiting for the most popular restaurants.

Jude cast a sideways look at Alyssa as they made their way through the crowds. She was still wearing her work clothes--a short, sassy skirt that displayed an incredible length of dark-stockinged legs, and a dark green silk blouse that was cut low and gave him a tantalizing glimpse of cleavage. She'd apparently freshened her lipstick because her lips were a rich shade of coral that made him think of deep, intimate kisses.

And other, even more intimate activities.

Her dark, glossy hair was pulled back in a ponytail that fell halfway down her back. He remembered how she'd looked in the mall with her hair falling loose around her shoulders in a curly, thick mass, and his body tightened at the memory. He wanted to reach across the space that separated them and loosen her ponytail right now, just to see her hair tumble free and wave in the light breeze that came from the direction of the river.

Naturally he did no such thing. That would have taken guts he didn't possess. He was already so nervous he could barely walk in a straight line.

They walked along without speaking, turning right on Waterside Drive and heading for the blue-roofed building. "So," Jude said, anxious to break the silence. "You own a gallery."

She nodded. "We just opened a couple of months ago."

"How's it going?"

"Not great so far," she admitted with a wry laugh.

"I can't imagine why. You have some terrific paintings in there." As a Virginia native, he'd recognized a lot of the buildings and places portrayed on the walls.

"I think so too. But it takes a while to get noticed. We'll get there. I'm going to participate in a couple of art shows over the next month and see if that doesn't get me some customers."

He heard the steely determination in her voice and liked her even better. It took a lot of guts to start up a business on your own--something he knew well enough from when he'd quit his lucrative accounting job and switched over to writing full time. Alyssa Stone had balls, metaphorically speaking.

The more he learned about this woman, the more he liked her.

And the more he wanted to learn about her.

* * * *

“Food is sensual.”

Jude blinked at Alyssa over his salad. “I beg your pardon?”

“You said you wanted me to teach you some more,” she said. “I’m teaching you, so pay attention. Food is sexy.”

Jude looked at her a moment longer, then glanced down at his salad, confused. “What do you mean? It’s not sexy. It’s a salad.”

“It depends on the food. I noticed in *In the Mood* you never have your characters eat anything together.”

“You mean like oysters?”

She sighed as if disappointed by his tentative suggestion. “Oysters are such a cliché. Almost any food can be sexy, if you use it right. Like...” She shot him a seductive smile. “Chocolate syrup.”

“I never thought of that. I guess I’ve been writing historicals too long. Hershey’s chocolate syrup was not a terribly common food item in Regency England.”

“You’ve probably got a point there. But you’re writing contemporaries now, and anything that can be licked off is sensual.”

He nodded, very seriously. “Yeah, I thought your greasy fingers were a big turn-on last night.”

Obviously aware that he was teasing, she scowled. “Fried chicken’s probably not a terrific example. Uh ... anything sweet is good. Or Italian food. Italian food is very sensual.”

“That’s probably why I like it,” he said. “Just a sensual guy, that’s me.”

The restaurant, La Bella Luna, had a nice view of Portsmouth, the city across the river, which sparkled in the darkness. It was kind of a romantic view, which was why he’d chosen this particular restaurant. It had never occurred to him that the food might be romantic as well. He’d always had a thing for the food here, but he’d be damned if he’d ever thought of it as sensual.

Food was just food, right? A man ate food for the calories, not for some sort of semi-sexual experience.

Although admittedly it might be as close to a sexual experience as he’d come in the past few years. Still, it sounded weird to him.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

“I know you don’t. But think about it, because believe me, it’ll help your love scenes.” She reached for her wineglass. “Even drinking can be sensual.” She lifted her drink, a simple glass of white wine, to her lips. He watched the movement, his gaze drawn inexorably to her full mouth, as she took a sip. She licked her lips and gave a soft, throaty moan of satisfaction, sounding for all the world like a woman being pleased in bed.

He felt the muscles in his lower belly tighten, felt himself rapidly develop a hard-on that could hammer nails. Watching Alyssa enjoy her drink, he thought, was better than having sex with most women. She was an entirely sensual creature, and he could only imagine how exciting it would

be to make love to her, to hear her moaning and sighing as he ran his hands over her.

“Are you trying to make a point?” he demanded, trying to ignore his powerful physical reaction.

She smiled, slowly and seductively. “Am I succeeding?”

Definitely. “I think I kind of see what you mean,” he admitted. “I mean, I guess the way you drink something can be sexy. But I’m still not sure about food.”

“No?”

She poured ranch dressing over her salad, then stabbed a cherry tomato with her fork and lifted it to her lips. She slowly sucked all the ranch dressing off it before finally popping it into her mouth.

He felt his erection swell relentlessly. Damn it. If she did that again he was going to explode.

“I’m pretty sure they didn’t have ranch dressing in the Regency period either,” he croaked.

“Lucky us,” she said, smiling. “We have ranch dressing *and* chocolate syrup.”

Just the mention of chocolate syrup was enough to make his imagination go wild. He envisioned it all over her creamy, pale skin, imagined himself licking it off...

He tried really hard to focus on his salad, but he might as well have been eating sand. His eyes were glued to her coral-painted mouth, watching her lips as she ate her salad.

“Damn,” he said softly. “I’m glad I switched to contemporaries.”

At last the waiter brought their spaghetti, and Jude lifted a forkful to his mouth, grateful for the interruption. He knew he was staring like a moron, but he couldn’t seem to help himself.

She looked at her spaghetti thoughtfully, then stood up. “I’m having trouble hearing in here,” she said. “I think I’ll come around to your side of the table.”

It wasn’t particularly loud in the restaurant, and he’d hardly been able to open his mouth to speak for all the drool anyway. He was slightly bemused by that statement, but he slid over in the booth, against the wall, making enough room for her. She sat down next to him, so close he could smell the subtle, sweet rose fragrance of her perfume. Her short skirt rode up, her thigh pressing up right against his. He could see the lacy top of her black stocking, and above it, a tantalizing inch or two of smooth white flesh.

Most of the women he’d known wore pantyhose. It figured she wouldn’t.

He realized he’d been staring at her thigh as if transfixed and hastily looked up. Immediately he realized she was gazing at his lap--at the erection he was sure was extremely visible--and he felt his cheeks go hot. Hell, he was hot all over. It was embarrassing, and yet oddly ... exciting.

She stared at him, her eyes going dark and sultry, and he felt himself stiffen until he ached with it. He'd never in his life had this kind of reaction to a woman's gaze.

At last she lifted her eyes and looked at him. There was a spark of humor in her gaze. "Very nice," she said in a sultry purr.

He met her eyes. "Thanks," he said.

"I'd like to take a closer look later."

He almost choked on a mouthful of spaghetti. She was so forthright, so blunt, that he felt like a Puritan compared to her. "Um..." he said.

"Unless you don't like that idea."

Oh, I like it. I really, really like it.

"I'm just not sure..." He trailed off again. "Do you want to come back to my condo again?"

Something flickered in the depths of her eyes, something he couldn't quite decipher. She paused a long moment, then said, almost hesitantly, "What about my place?"

It was weird, but he had the peculiar sensation she'd just taken a wild leap of faith. Of course, it was undeniably reckless for a woman to invite a man she barely knew to her house these days, but he had the feeling it was somehow more than that.

Either way, he was pleased she'd decided to trust him, no matter how crazy and reckless it was.

"Sure," he agreed. "That sounds terrific."

* * * *

Since Jude had walked over to the gallery from his nearby condo, he didn't have his car, so they took hers. A cream-colored PT Cruiser with wood paneling, it was a charmingly retro car. Her house was a short drive away in Ghent, a nice area of single homes, condos, and apartments, with stone Victorian houses and 1920s bungalows rubbing shoulders with modern brick ones. There wasn't much lawn, and the houses were set close together, but there was a large green running the length of the street. She was within easy walking distance of the Chrysler Museum and the opera house--a terrific location.

Alyssa's house was a small, neat home, a newer house built in a pseudo-Victorian style, with a square turret and blue wooden siding. She unlocked the leaded glass-paneled door, and Jude followed her inside. She closed the door behind him and turned to face him.

"I'm probably crazy to bring you here," she said.

Jude looked down at her. She looked small and vulnerable in the semidarkness, and he felt a rush of protectiveness, startling in its intensity. "I'm not a stalker, Alyssa."

"I didn't think you were," she said softly, flipping on the foyer light. "It's just that I've never brought a man here before."

“Really?” He looked around, at the pretty, feminine décor, the Victorian balloon-backed chairs and the china vases filled with flowers, and he had to admit it didn’t look like a masculine domain. “How long have you lived here?”

“About five years.”

“And you’ve never had a guy here?”

She shook her head.

Weird, he thought. He’d assumed that with her looks, she’d had a lot of boyfriends, or at least one or two serious ones. And yet it sounded like her past five years had been as solitary as his. “You haven’t dated anyone in all that time?”

“I’ve dated plenty of guys. I just haven’t brought any of them back to my place.”

That was strange. He supposed he should be flattered that she’d brought him here, but he was too puzzled. Alyssa was hard to figure out--all cockiness one minute, all tentative shyness the next.

“Well, thanks,” he said softly, deciding to assume for now that the fact she’d brought him here was a compliment of sorts. “It’s a nice house.”

She flipped on more lights, illuminating the walls, which were a soft peach, and moved further into the house. He caught a glimpse of a white-and-blue kitchen, and then she turned on a lamp in the living room, and he saw a pretty room with wood floors, a needlepoint rug, and a dark green camelback sofa.

He moved toward the sofa, seeing a painting of the beach hanging over it, portraying white dunes against a clear blue sky and the darker waters of the Atlantic. “Nice picture,” he commented.

“Thanks. I did that one myself.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “You’re an artist?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she said with a self-deprecating shrug.

“I would. This is a terrific painting. It looks just like home.”

“Home?”

“Yeah, I grew up on the North End of Virginia Beach. I still love the beach, although I could do without the tourists. You painted it beautifully.”

“I guess you go there a lot,” she said.

Virginia Beach was only about fifteen miles away, a short trip down 264, and he went there practically every weekend during the summer. “All the time, although it’s hell fighting the tourists.”

“So that’s why you’ve got so many freckles.”

“Uh-huh, that’s the reason.” He gave a short, wry laugh. “The heroes in my romances all have bronzed skin. The only way I could get bronzed is if I spray-painted myself.”

“I like your freckles,” she said, sounding almost shy. He frowned at her again, noticing she was back to being hesitant again. He settled onto the sofa, hoping she’d sit down close to him, the way she had in the restaurant.

She didn't. Instead she continued to stand, looking anxious. He actually saw her wring her hands together. "Do you want something to drink?"

He couldn't figure out what was going on here. She'd been so damned aggressive at the restaurant, pressing up against him, teasing him, and now she was acting like she was fifteen. A *virginal* fifteen.

"No," he said gently. "I had plenty to drink at Waterside. Look, Alyssa, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

"Because you're acting like you think I'm going to attack you or something. I told you, I'm not a stalker. I'm not an ax murderer, either."

"That's good to know," she said with a faint quirk of her lips. He was relieved to see a small spark of humor in her eyes, and he went on, hoping to reassure her.

"I'm nervous too. I haven't been with a woman in a while, either."

Wariness filled her gaze. "I didn't say I hadn't been with a man."

I do not want to know about this. "Uh, you kind of implied it."

"I said I hadn't had one come back here. I don't want you to think I'm frigid, though. I've been with plenty of men."

I so do not want to know about this. "That's not a problem, Alyssa. You're a grown woman. I understand. Honest."

"Lots of men," she went on, apparently failing to notice his reassurance. "Dozens of them. Hundreds, maybe."

He held up his hands. “TMI, Alyssa. Too much information. *Way* too much. Okay?”

The corners of her lush coral lips turned downward in a frown. “I just don’t want you thinking I’m some sort of nun.”

“Considering our first discussion was about sex and turgid manhoods, that’s not really the kind of thing I’m likely to think. But I don’t believe you’ve had hundreds of men, either.”

She swallowed. “I may have been exaggerating slightly.”

“Yeah,” he said dryly. “I got that impression. What was that all about? You trying to get rid of me?”

She hesitated, and he knew he’d hit the mark. *Bull’s-eye*. Unfortunately, the bull’s-eye was painted directly on his ego. He winced and stood up. “Okay, Alyssa. I understand. I’ll just get going.”

“No!” she said breathlessly, and took a step toward him. “I don’t want you to go!”

She was confusing the hell out of him, and he was beginning to wish she came equipped with a translation device. “It sounds to me like you do.”

“Maybe ... maybe in a way,” she admitted. “I’m really not sure why I brought you here.”

In the restaurant, she’d been pretty blunt about her reasons for bringing him here, and that halting admission just made him more bewildered than before. “If you’re not sure,” he said, “I still think I should go.”

“No,” she said. “I really like you, Jude.”

He reached out his hand and cupped her cheek. “I like you too,” he told her, his voice gentle. “But I really don’t want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

She closed her eyes. “And that’s exactly why I like you,” she said softly. “You care about how I feel. Most other men don’t seem to give a damn.”

“You must not have been dating the right men,” Jude said, trying to keep his tone light.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her aquamarine eyes were very intense. “I think you’re right. I haven’t been.” Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. “Not until now, anyway.”

His heart started to pound. She couldn’t possibly be implying that he was the right guy ... could she? He ran her statement back through his mind several times, checking for errors, but that was the answer that kept popping up, just like numbers on a calculator.

That was nuts. They hardly knew each other. And anyway, he wasn’t the sort of guy that a gorgeous woman like Alyssa would choose for the long term. Was he?

“Look, Alyssa,” he said at last, carefully, “I’m not sure you know what you want.”

“I’m not sure, either. I mean, I don’t know if I’m interested in any kind of serious relationship. But I do know I want you to stick around. For now.”

She stepped toward him, placed her hands on his chest, and pushed gently, and he fell back onto the couch without too much of a fight. He expected her to sit next to him, or maybe on his lap, and was a little startled when she knelt in front of him instead.

He spread his knees apart, almost involuntarily, and she moved closer to him. Despite himself, the sight of her kneeling between his thighs, her long dark hair tumbling around her lovely face, sent a violent stab of desire through him. An unfamiliar, desperate hunger clawed at his insides.

Down, boy.

Unfortunately, parts of his anatomy weren’t listening to his brain. *Down* was not a command his body wanted to hear right now.

And then she reached for his belt, her long, slender fingers unfastening it deftly, and a torrent of lust roared through him, along with a hefty dose of surprise.

“Uh, Alyssa...”

“Relax,” she said softly, unzipping his fly. She gently pushed down the waistband of his briefs, and his iron-hard flesh sprang free like a pornographic jack-in-the-box.

“Oh, my *God*,” she said, in a reverent voice that made his ego grow two sizes, right along with his erection.

He closed his eyes and tried to muster up some self-control. There was something peculiar about the unexpected way this situation was playing out, and he still wasn't sure this was a good idea or the right thing to do. But his body seemed to have moved right along to the conclusion that it was the best idea it had seen in ages.

From a purely physical standpoint, he couldn't argue. But from a more cautious viewpoint...

And then she wrapped her soft fingers around his erection, and any thoughts of caution or hesitation flew right out the window, along with the pitiful vestiges of his self-control. He sucked in his breath with a hiss, and every muscle in his body went rigid.

"That feels good," she said softly. "Doesn't it?"

It felt better than good. It felt like heaven, or at least the X-rated version thereof. He parted his lips, intending to make some comment along those lines, but she moved her hand, stroking him slowly, deliberately, and all that emerged from his mouth was a long, heartfelt groan.

She slid her hand down to the base of his penis, then gently up to the tip, and he felt himself spasm violently against the smooth softness of her palm. He tilted back his head, squeezed his eyes shut, and gritted his teeth hard to keep from sobbing with pleasure.

"I want you to watch," she said softly.

His eyelids fluttered open, and he looked down at her, frowning in bemusement. “Watch?” he said hoarsely, surprised to find that he could utter a coherent word.

She nodded, a faint smile teasing at the corner of her lips. “That’s right. Watch.”

“But I’ve never--”

“This is part of your education. Watch me.” She began to trace circles around the broad head of his erection with her index finger, and he watched, transfixed, by the sight of her creamy white hand moving across the darker flesh of his erection. His body responded enthusiastically, and he saw his swollen, thick shaft pulse hard, saw the drop of moisture glimmering at the tip.

He watched her trail her finger through the moisture, slowly, almost lazily, spreading dampness across his sensitive flesh with her finger, and he grew even harder. He saw the tracery of blue veins standing out beneath the delicate, thin skin, saw his erection flush a dark pink. Saw it twitching, hard and fast, under her gentle onslaught.

“Alyssa,” he muttered, and reached for her hand. She caught his wrist with her free hand.

“It’s all right, Jude. Just let me do this.”

He didn’t know precisely how to articulate his problem. He didn’t mind what she was doing to him--a man would have to be crazy to mind what she was doing--but he wanted to be a participant, too. He didn’t want

to be ... *serviced* by her, for God's sake. Something about the way she was behaving set off clanging alarm bells in the depths of his mind.

Unfortunately, the bells were almost impossible to hear due to the choir of heavenly voices singing the Hallelujah Chorus.

Unable to argue further, he dropped his hand away and watched as she continued to explore every ridge, every contour of him with her smooth, perfectly manicured fingers. His shaft was so hard and so taut he could barely stand it, and watching her touch him so intimately, so thoroughly, only made the pleasure that much more acute.

It was more than he could bear, and his eyes fluttered shut of their own accord.

And she stopped.

"You have to watch, Jude, or you aren't going to learn a thing."

He was aware she was teasing him, but at this point he was willing to do just about anything for her. He only wished she'd let him do more than just watch. It was like being a bystander at his own seduction--an odd sensation, to say the least.

Although his eyelids felt like lead, he forced them open and looked down at her. "Alyssa," he said hoarsely. "I want..."

"I know what you want."

No, I don't think you do, he started to say, but his attempt at rational discussion fizzled and died when she lowered her mouth toward him. He

saw her tongue flit out, felt it slip gently across his unbearably sensitized flesh, and a low growl of agonized pleasure was ripped from his throat.

The caress of her soft, wet tongue was fiercely erotic, like nothing he'd ever felt before. Fiery heat rolled through him, and he surrendered to her, let her stroke him, explore him, and avidly watched every moment of it. Lust, overpowering and ungovernable, sizzled within him, burning excruciatingly hot.

It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman, and this particular activity was an entirely new experience for him, and a damned good one. He was afraid he'd lose control too fast, but she seemed to possess an intuitive understanding of just how far she could push him.

She brought him to the brink over and over again, then backed off and slowed down, until he was gasping for breath, begging for release, until he craved her more desperately than he'd ever craved anything.

And then she lifted her head slightly. He watched as her parted lips slid over the thick head of his erection, and she took him into her mouth.

The warm suction felt impossibly good, and almost instantly an orgasm slammed into him with violent force, a hard, wrenching explosion of ecstasy so unbelievably intense he couldn't stop himself from crying out. Or maybe *yelling* would have been a better word for it. There was no dignity, no restraint, in the wild noises he made, only the primal sound of a man being pleased relentlessly, endlessly, far beyond his endurance.

His climax went on and on, and she didn't let up until the last spasm had faded. Only then did she lift her head and smile at him.

He stared back at her, awestruck.

"I guess you haven't done that before."

"No," he admitted.

Her cheerfully irreverent grin flashed. "I kind of figured from the way you wrote about it."

She'd figured out way too much about him just by reading his books, and it made him nervous in a way he couldn't quite define. He was a private person, used to keeping his thoughts to himself, and it had never really occurred to him that someone might be able to see something of his life reflected in his books.

He felt like he was the only one giving up his secrets here. It was time for her to be the vulnerable one for a change.

He reached for her shoulders. "Come here."

She sat back on her heels a bit, moving just out of his reach, and her cheerful smile immediately transformed to something more guarded. An edge of wariness settled in her eyes. "I figured you'd be wanting to go home now."

His mouth dropped open. *Home*? She'd figured he'd just leave after that? Leave her without any sort of tenderness, any sort of sharing, after she'd done such incredible things to him?

His gaze shifted to the guardedness reflected in her eyes, and he revised his opinion. She hadn't expected him to leave.

She *wanted* him to leave.

Something inside him froze solid at the thought, then thawed a bit. He still wasn't quite sure what was going on here, exactly what was bothering her, but she obviously had some hang-ups about sex. He'd assumed when they'd met he was the only one with sexual issues, but obviously he'd been wrong.

She used her cocky self-assurance about sex to conceal her anxieties about it. He'd bet his computer on it.

He stood up, yanked up his briefs, and fastened his jeans, then glanced at her. She'd come to her feet too, and there was distinct relief in her eyes. The idea that he was going without argument seemed to please her.

As if he'd do that. What the hell did she take him for?

He pushed back his irritation. Something was going on here, and by the end of the evening he intended to figure out exactly what it was. But the evening wasn't over yet.

Not by a long shot.

Chapter 5

Alyssa watched with relief as Jude tucked his rumpled polo shirt back into his jeans. For a moment she'd been worried he wouldn't go, but naturally he was willing enough to go, now that she'd given him what men wanted. All men ever really wanted--a quick rush of physical pleasure.

Not that she minded, really. She enjoyed going down on guys, enjoyed bringing them mindless pleasure, loved the feeling of power it gave her. Being in charge of a sexual encounter gave her a sensation of control over the situation, a feeling she lost if she let herself get too involved. But the absolute last thing she wanted was to let this brief encounter lead to anything else, anything more complicated.

She'd grown up watching her mother use guys, and seeing them use her in return, and she'd long since come to the conclusion that intimate relationships were best avoided. People were basically selfish, and they always wound up hurting each other. She didn't need that kind of pain. She'd rather avoid dating entirely than get hurt that way again.

She had the uncomfortable certainty that she could grow to like Jude all too well if she spent a lot of time with him. But she didn't want that to

happen. She'd avoided any sort of serious entanglement for the past five years, and she liked her life perfectly well the way it was.

She didn't need Jude changing everything.

But her relief changed to alarm as Jude stepped toward her, and she ducked backward quickly. "What are you doing?" she squeaked as his big hands closed around her upper arms, imprisoning her.

"I want to kiss you," he said softly.

Kissing afterward didn't exactly follow the *wham, bam, thank you ma'am* pattern she had anticipated from such an inexperienced man. But she guessed he just wanted to kiss her goodnight. He was a guy, after all, and he'd already gotten what he wanted.

Her body stiffened in involuntary panic, but she decided she could manage a goodnight kiss without too much trouble. "Okay," she said, and tilted her head up.

She was startled when he didn't simply drop a cool, chaste kiss onto her lips. Instead he lowered his head and brushed his lips over the delicate skin of her throat. Obviously he'd learned quite a lot about kissing last night and was trying to make use of his newfound knowledge. A shiver ran through her, and she tried to back away.

He didn't let her go. His mouth found her most sensitive spots, grazing them gently, then tracing them with his tongue. She shuddered. "Jude!"

She felt the soft exhalation of air against her skin as he chuckled.
“Just thinking of butterfly wings, Alyssa.”

“Well, don’t,” she said irritably. “It’s late and I’m tired.”

He still didn’t lift his head. His lips traced along her jaw line. “Why did you bring me back here?”

Because I had a momentary lapse of reason, she thought, quivering at the touch of his mouth. A heavy sensation of arousal pooled between her thighs, but she spoke as evenly as she could, trying very hard to sound unaffected.

“I figured that was obvious,” she said in her best effort at a cool drawl.

“But you didn’t get anything out of it at all,” Jude pointed out in a reasonable voice.

“I was just ... just trying to teach you something,” she said in a shaky whisper.

“No.” His lips trailed upward, and the soft puff of warm breath against her ear made her knees weak. “You brought me back here for something other than teaching, Alyssa. But then you lost your nerve.”

He understood her a lot better than she wanted him to. Unwilling to acknowledge he might be right, she spoke coldly. “You seem kind of new at this, Jude. I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not the one who’s scared, Alyssa. But intimacy scares the hell out of you, doesn’t it?”

He blew softly in her ear. Fire surged through her, and her hands curled into fists at her sides. She wished she could bury her hands in his hair, press her body against his, let her fingers explore the contoured muscles of his back. She wished she could let him into her body.

The thought of his thick, heavy erection moving inside her made her hungry, *ravenous*, with a longing she hadn't felt in a long, long time. Electricity arced through her, making her body ache for his touch.

But her mind was still too wary to permit it.

"I'm not afraid," she said haughtily. "You're the one who blushes at the word *penis*."

"I might be a little repressed," he admitted, "but that doesn't mean I don't know anything at all about women. I can tell when someone's terrified. When was the last time you were really intimate with a man, Alyssa?"

"Five minutes ago."

He chuckled, a low, soft, rumbling laugh that was so sexy goose bumps prickled on her arms. "I'm asking about *real* intimacy, Alyssa. What you did for me was incredible, but intimacy has to do with connecting. With sharing." He lifted his head and looked into her eyes, a direct, serious gaze that made her even more nervous. "I want to make you feel good, too, Alyssa."

No. That she couldn't permit. In a sudden panic, she tried to break away, but he still had an unbreakable grip on her wrists. "Pleasure scares you," he mused. "Why?"

She lifted her chin. "I have to get to work tomorrow," she said stiffly. "I run my own business, you know. I get there pretty damn early."

He nodded, seriously. "Okay. I don't think this'll take more than an hour or two." He lifted one of his hands and carefully cupped her breast in his long, elegant fingers. His touch was a bit awkward, but extremely gentle, and heat rushed through her in an overpowering wave, turning her knees to water.

"Jude."

"You have gorgeous breasts," he said softly. "The first day we met, you were wearing a 'Virginia is for Lovers' T-shirt, with the slogan stretching from right about here..." He stroked his fingers across her nipple, and she gasped. "To here." He lightly brushed her other nipple, and it promptly hardened into an aching peak.

She gritted her teeth, trying to look disinterested and detached, which wasn't easy when her body was chanting, *More more more*. For the first time she realized how long it had been since a man had touched her there.

For that matter, how long it had been since a man had touched her *anywhere*.

Jude didn't appear to notice her "disinterested and detached" look, probably because it was a dismal failure. His hand stroked her left breast in

gentle circles, and his eyes shone a brilliant gold as he stared avidly at her nipple, diamond-hard and clearly visible through the jade fabric of her blouse.

“You’re beautiful,” he said hoarsely.

For some reason the simple sentence made her throat tighten. She’d lost count of how many men had told her she was beautiful since she was sixteen, but no one had ever said it quite like that, with a simple sincerity that stole her breath away.

Without the slightest intention of doing so, she lifted her free hand and wrapped her arm around his neck.

At her capitulation, he lowered his mouth, brushed his lips over her breast. Even through the fabric, the intimacy of it was stunning, and a soft moan was torn from her lips.

He did it again, moving toward her rigid, swollen nipple, and she buried her hand in the soft, thick hair at the nape of his neck and shut her eyes against the pleasure, letting her body go pliant and meld against his. It had been a long time since she’d found herself pressed against a solid wall of masculinity, and she liked it a great deal more than she wanted to.

His mouth fastened onto her nipple, sucking hard through the fabric of her shirt and bra, and heat zinged through her, a heat she hadn’t let herself experience in years. The warmth seemed to settle between her thighs, along with an ache so intense it almost hurt. Her body hummed with

excitement, as if an electrical current were shooting through her, making her tingle all over.

The feeling of panic rose in her again, but she tamped it down, reminding herself that she could always back away. She was certain Jude wasn't the type to force himself on a woman.

For the first time in a very long time, she let herself melt in a man's arms and enjoy his touch.

A moment later she felt his hands groping beneath her shirt, sliding up her ribcage, then awkwardly fumbling at the back of her lacy, peach-colored bra. Obviously it had been a while since he'd tried this, she thought with amusement as he struggled valiantly to unfasten it. At last he let out a muffled groan of frustration.

"Alyssa..."

She laughed softly, touched by his charming lack of coordination. Most men had mastered the fine art of bra removal by their late teens, at least. Jude, who was well past his teens, was quite possibly the most inept guy, sexually speaking, that she'd encountered.

And yet he was making her feel things no other guy had ever managed.

She reached back and hastily unfastened her bra. A soft sigh of relief hissed through his teeth, and he pushed it up, along with her shirt, and stared wide-eyed at her bare breasts.

Beneath his admiring perusal, her nipples went even harder, aching for his touch, and a startling warmth pooled between her thighs. “They look all right to you?” she inquired shakily, aiming for a light tone and not quite succeeding.

“Better than all right,” he said in a hoarse voice. “You’re incredible, Alyssa.”

The warmth spread higher, into her chest, becoming less physical and more emotional. He was such a nice guy. She swallowed, trying to get rid of the unfamiliar sensation of affection, of tenderness, that had so unexpectedly filled her.

“So are you going to just look all night?”

“I wish I could,” he said, his voice rumbling softly. “But I’m not sure I have that kind of self-control. I can’t look at you without wanting to touch you, Alyssa.”

She swallowed again, this time against a sudden tightness in her throat. The way he looked at her, as if she were something precious, moved her in a way she couldn’t explain. She couldn’t remember the last time a man had looked at her that way. Maybe no man ever had.

His big hand moved up to cup her breast, his thumb stroking her nipple in a soft circle, and she closed her eyes and moaned, utterly ensnared by his gentle touch. She couldn’t have pulled away if she’d wanted to.

And she was surprised to realize she didn’t want to.

He put his arms around her waist, pulled her down on the couch so that she sat in his lap facing him, and took her nipple into his mouth. The sensation of his mouth against her bare breast took her breath away. She gasped, burying her fingers in the dark fire of his hair, holding him so he couldn't escape. Not that he seemed terribly inclined to move away.

His gentle lips drew on her, growing more demanding, pulling relentlessly, endlessly, until her breasts ached with the suction, until heat coiled tightly in the depths of her abdomen, and a devastating pleasure she'd almost forgotten swelled in her body. She moved against him restlessly, her hips pressing against his eagerly.

"Please," she whispered at last.

He raised his head and looked at her, his eyes smoldering with heat. "I'm waiting for instructions."

She blinked, confused. "Huh?"

A slight smile quirked the corners of his mouth. "Tell me what to do next. I'm a little out of practice, remember?"

"Somehow I'd forgotten," she muttered, and was rewarded by his pleased smile. She took his hand and put it against her ribcage, beneath her jade silk blouse. "Touch me, Jude."

His slightly roughened fingers trailed along the edge of her ribs, across her abdomen, and toward the waistband of her short black skirt. He hesitated there, a little tentative. She captured his hand and moved it lower, beneath the hem of her skirt and above the lacy top of her stockings, and his

hand slid slowly up the bare, tender skin of her thigh to where she was hot and damp and knew he could feel it even through the satin of her panties. Despite the heaviness of her eyelids, she opened her eyes slightly and smiled at him.

“Touch me--” She took his hand and moved it. “*There*, Jude.”

He chuckled. “Is that what you call it too?”

Sliding off his lap, she lay back on the sofa, granting him better access. He went over with her, fastening his mouth onto her nipple, suckling and nibbling at her hard, sensitive flesh.

His fingers moved against her, and through the delicate fabric of her panties his gentle touch felt incredible, but slightly clumsy. She reached down and guided him, showing him the rhythm she wanted, the rhythm she *needed*, then let her hand fall away.

Another man might have tried to delve beneath her panties, shoving them impatiently to the side, which would have made her body freeze up instantly. Fortunately for her, Jude wasn’t like most men.

His hand stroked her through the satin, gently but insistently, finding her most sensitive spot and caressing it until her hips rose and fell with the rhythm, until her breath came in short, hard pants, until a low, needy moan escaped her throat.

She let herself surrender to the building sensations, raw, fierce sensations she hadn’t experienced with a man for a very long time. She could feel the weight of his body, pressing her into the cushions, could

smell the warm musky smell of his arousal. Sweat broke out on her skin, and moisture trickled between her thighs, along with a sharp, urgent knot of throbbing tension that craved release. Her back arched, and every muscle in her body quivered, taut and aching with the desperate need for a climax.

Deep within her abdomen she felt the building tension, a sensation that slid down all her nerve endings, tying her into knots. Her breathing was labored, her chest tight, as if she were running up a steep hill. She wasn't sure she could make it to the pinnacle of the hill before her wildly pounding heart gave out. She tried to capture his hand between her thighs, to somehow slow down before she suffocated beneath the weight of the sensations.

"It's all right," he whispered hoarsely against her breast, and moved his hand faster.

Her thighs fell apart as she surrendered to the pleasure, throwing her head back and giving a long, sobbing cry. Ecstasy burst within her, a powerful explosion of incredible heat, so that she thrashed violently against his hand. Yet he still didn't relent, but kept her riding the waves of pleasure until the last wave ebbed.

At last she collapsed back on the couch, inert, exhausted, gasping for breath.

He moved his mouth away from her breast and buried it in her neck. "You're incredible," he said roughly against her throat.

She drew a long, shuddering breath. “You’re the incredible one. You have unbelievably talented fingers.”

“It’s all the typing. Improves my manual dexterity.”

A laugh bubbled up from her throat before she could stop it. He might be awkward and clumsy while unfastening a bra, but manual dexterity was definitely one of his strong points.

“And now what?” he said, his voice still muffled against her throat.

She stiffened. “I guess it’s time for you to go home.”

His head lifted, and he regarded her with a slightly perplexed expression. “That’s fine, if it’s what you really want, Alyssa. Is it what you really want?”

She closed her eyes for a long moment, torn. Part of her wanted intimacy--genuine intimacy--with him, a desire she hadn’t felt for a long while.

Part of her wanted to run like hell.

“I don’t know,” she said at last, in a tremulous whisper.

He sat up and pulled her up with him so that she sat in his lap. She pressed her face against his shoulder, breathing in his masculine scent, a mixture of spicy soap and his own distinctive odor. “Look, Alyssa,” he said into her hair, “I’d be happy to go away tonight and pick up again tomorrow, but I’m not sure that’ll work. Maybe I’m crazy ... but I get the feeling if I walk out of here right now, there won’t *be* a tomorrow. At least as far as you and I are concerned.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Alyssa ... what are you afraid of?”

In that quiet moment of intimacy he slipped under her skin in a way no other man had. He understood her, recognized that she was frightened, and yet her irrational fear didn’t seem to hurt his feelings. He didn’t take her alarm personally--his concern was all for her, rather than for his own ego.

It would be nice to be with this man, to let down her guard a bit, to allow her self-confident persona slide a bit. She had a feeling he wouldn’t mind the insecure woman hiding beneath the cockiness.

“I just can’t,” she said in a shaky whisper. “I’m sorry.”

There was a moment of puzzled silence. “You can’t what, Alyssa?”

“I ... can’t,” she repeated. All her blunt vocabulary seemed to have deserted her; she could only talk about her problem in the most vague terms. “It’s not you, Jude. It’s me. I’m sorry.”

Another moment of silence ensued, while he seemed to process her statement. “You’re telling me you can’t have sex?”

She nodded against his chest, feeling her cheeks warm as his had when he’d mumbled the word *penis*. “Earlier I said I wasn’t frigid, but I lied. I know it sounds stupid, but I just can’t get... in the mood.”

“You seemed to be in the mood a couple of minutes ago,” he pointed out. Not in an accusatory tone, but calmly, almost dispassionately, as if he was trying to figure out the solution to a puzzle.

“That wasn’t the same. Foreplay is fun. But it’s different when I get ... close.”

He tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. “When was the last time you tried, Alyssa?”

“A while ago,” she said faintly. In fact it had been years. She didn’t like to think of the last time she’d tried to actually make love to a man. It had been a horrible, humiliating disaster. She must have been crazy to put herself in this position again.

“Maybe something has changed since then.”

“No.” She shook her head, almost despairingly. “I won’t be able to, Jude. I just ... freeze up.”

“Now that I simply can’t believe,” he said, stroking her hair gently. “You’re not the frigid type, Alyssa.”

The problem was that deep inside she *was* the frigid type, regardless of the false impression she projected to the world. “It’s true,” she said glumly. “I’m a popsicle.”

He gave a low, sexy laugh. “I won’t argue with that,” he said, grinning evilly. “I’d certainly like to lick you all over.”

She sighed. “Jude...”

“Look,” he said in a reasonable tone, “it’s been a while since you tried it. Why don’t you give me a chance? Maybe I can help you thaw a little bit.”

“I don’t think so,” she said unhappily. “I’m frozen solid, and nothing you can do is going to help. A little sex isn’t going to fix the problem.”

“You’re probably right, Alyssa. I don’t think a little sex is what you need.”

“Oh, really? What do you think I need?”

Jude cupped her cheek gently and looked into her eyes.

“I think you need someone to make love to you,” he said.

Chapter 6

Jude watched as panic filled Alyssa's blue-green eyes, and she suddenly scrambled to get off the couch. He caught her forearms lightly in his hands, forcing her to come to a halt.

"Take it easy," he said gently. "We're not going to do anything you don't want to do."

"Good," she spat. "Because I do *not* want to do this."

"I don't think you're being honest with yourself, Alyssa. Part of you really does want to do this, or you wouldn't have invited me back here."

"I invited you back here because I felt sorry for you!"

He refused to let her sharp tongue slice into his ego. "I don't think so." He reached his hand up, buried it in the silken depths of her hair, and pulled her toward him. She sat, stiff and still, in his lap as he put his other arm around her waist and cuddled her.

He didn't touch her in a sexy way, and slowly she started to thaw, to relax a little against him. He felt her cheek press against his shoulder, felt her arm slowly slide up around his neck. She reminded him of a frightened

kitten--all bristling fur and exposed, sharp claws one minute, all purrs the next.

Somewhere along the line, someone had really scared the hell out of her.

“So tell me about your last time,” he said softly, into her hair.

Immediately she went stiff again. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“No kidding. But I think it might help you deal with it. I have to admit, I can’t quite figure out where you’re coming from, Alyssa. Did the guy rape you or what?”

She shook her head against his shoulder. “No. Nothing like that.”

A tight knot of tension in his chest relaxed. Just the thought of someone hurting this woman brought out the uncivilized Neanderthal in him. He couldn’t bear to think of someone roughly forcing her into a sex act, and he was enormously relieved to know she hadn’t gone through something that horrible.

But he was more curious than ever as to exactly what had happened to make this lively, vivacious woman so afraid of intimacy.

“I see,” he said, gently stroking her hair. “But the last time was really bad. Wasn’t it?”

She nodded again. “Because I froze up,” she said in a barely audible whisper.

Okay. So whatever made her freeze up must have happened before the last time. “Was this guy a boyfriend, or was this more of a casual thing?”

“I thought he might become a boyfriend. I liked him. But he thought I was ... cold. Frigid.”

Frigid was the one thing he’d never believe she was capable of, considering her untamed response to his touches just a few minutes ago. Obviously the guy had been a complete moron. “Have you had any boyfriends, Alyssa? Any long-term lovers?”

There was a long pause. At last she snarled against his chest, “Pierce. Pierce Logan.”

The way she said the name made it sound like a dirty word. “So what happened between you and Pierce?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Ah-ha. “Okay,” he said. “That’s fine.”

There was a long silence. Then, as he had hoped, his decision not to put pressure on her helped open the floodgates, and she began to talk. “I started dating him right out of college,” she said. “I was really young. I was still living with my mom.”

He nodded. “I see,” he answered, even though he didn’t. He wasn’t sure where this story was going. He only knew he already disliked Pierce Logan intensely, based on the naked pain in her quavering voice.

“We dated for about six months, and things got really intense,” she said. “We were talking about marriage. I lived at his place about half the time, and sometimes I snuck him into my mom’s house. I thought we were really in love.”

She paused, drew a shuddering breath. “My mom and I had never really gotten along,” she said. “She drank too much, and she was always wrapped up in some guy or other. None of them were any good for her, but she could never see it. They were all losers, and some of them were downright abusive. But she lived for men. She could never be happy without them.”

He stroked her shoulders, feeling the stiff tension in her muscles. “I guess that was hard on you, growing up.”

“I guess it was. I always wanted my mom to be there for me, but she never was. She was always too involved with her latest man. I wanted... I wanted her to love me, but I would have been happy to have anyone. Anyone at all.”

“Like Pierce.”

“I thought he loved me,” she said. “I really thought so. But I guess I was wrong.”

The pain in her quivering voice cut into him like a scythe. “Alyssa,” he said gently. “What happened?”

“One afternoon...” Her voice broke. “One afternoon I came home to my mom’s house. And I found Pierce making love to ... someone else.”

He felt a lump in his throat, thinking how badly that must have hurt a girl right out of college, a girl who'd already felt unloved and unwanted, a girl who'd been looking desperately for love. She must have felt terribly betrayed. No wonder she didn't like sharing her intimate space with men.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It gets worse." She drew a deep, tremulous breath, then burst out, "He was rolling around on the floor with my mom."

Oh, Christ. *I'm sorry* didn't seem adequate, but he couldn't think of anything else to say. At last he said, "How long had this been going on?"

"I don't think it was a long-term thing. Like I said, my mom drank a lot, and I think she just got loaded that afternoon and thought it would be fun to seduce a younger man. But it was obvious that Pierce didn't put up much of a struggle." She lifted her head and looked up at him. "I moved out that day. My mom was so shaken by the whole thing that she quit drinking. As far as I know, she's still sober."

"As far as you know? Do you ever talk to her?"

"Hell, no. She lives here in Norfolk, but I haven't seen her in years."

"Maybe you ought to consider talking to her," he suggested, but she shook her head.

"Would you still be talking to your brother if he did something like that to you?"

"Uh ... probably not."

“Anyway...” She blinked hard a few times. “I moved out, worked as a waitress for four years and saved everything I could till I had the money to open my gallery. In retrospect, I don’t think Pierce meant all that much to me, but for some reason every time I try to get really intimate with a man I freeze. The last time I tried was three years ago, and it was horrible. Really horrible. So the last few times I’ve hooked up with a guy, I’ve just...”

Her voice trailed off, leaving Jude to remember what she’d done to him earlier. “Sounds kind of lonely,” he said gently.

“It’s better than nothing,” she said in a low voice.

He couldn’t say he blamed her. If he’d been betrayed that way he’d be wary of the opposite sex too. “I understand,” he said at last. “But I still wish you’d give me a chance.”

“The thing is...” She hesitated and looked up at him through a curtain of dark hair. “I just don’t think it’s going to work, Jude. I’m sorry.”

A wave of tenderness for this insecure, sensitive woman overwhelmed him, and he wrapped his arms around her again, holding her close.

“There’s only one way to find out,” he said into her hair. “Let’s give it a shot.”

Chapter 7

Jude stood up, bent, and picked up Alyssa in his arms. She squealed with mingled shock and amusement. “What are you doing, Jude?”

“This is the way all my heroes seduce their women,” he answered, grunting slightly as he straightened up. “Ooof. It’s not as easy as they make it appear.”

“Well, no kidding. I’m not exactly a lightweight.”

“I can do this,” he assured her, and staggered away from the sofa. He took a few steps, then hesitated. “Uh, it would help if I knew where your bedroom was.”

A giggle welled up from somewhere deep inside her. Ordinarily heading for her bedroom with a guy would have scared the crap out of her, but Jude’s sense of humor and lack of arrogance managed to keep her a little more relaxed. “Over there,” she said, pointing.

“Please tell me it’s not upstairs.”

She laughed again, a full, deep laugh. “Lucky for you, it’s downstairs.”

“Great,” he said, and stumbled in the direction she had indicated.

“You’re going to hurt yourself, you know.”

He grinned down at her. “You’ll just have to make me feel better, then.”

As he used his shoulder to shove the door to her bedroom open, she noticed with some relief she’d made the bed--*for once in my life*--and had actually put last night’s laundry into the hamper. The place looked almost civilized. He tossed her down on the sky blue quilt, making her squeal again.

“Nice room,” he said, looking around. He gazed at the painting over the bed, a watercolor of a fishing boat. “Another one of your paintings?”

She nodded, suddenly feeling shy. “I hope you don’t think I’m egotistical for hanging up my own paintings. It’s just that--they don’t cost me anything.”

He grinned. “Not egotistical. Just practical.” He studied the painting for a few minutes. “That’s a nice one. I like the way you showed the mist, and the reflections on the water.”

“Thanks,” she said, a little self-consciously. Compliments on her painting ability were the last thing she’d expected. Any other guy would have thrown himself on her the moment he’d stepped into her bedroom.

Then again, she’d already figured out Jude wasn’t like any other guy.

He looked down at her for a long moment, then sat down next to her on the bed. Her breath caught in her throat, and all her muscles stiffened, like a rabbit startled by a fox. She couldn’t help it. The proximity of a man--

an attractive, sexy man--in the most intimate setting in her house terrified her.

“Take my clothes off,” he said at last, in a low voice.

Thinking she must have misunderstood him, she frowned. “Huh?”

“I want you to take my clothes off,” he repeated.

“Uh ... okay. But what about mine?”

“Let’s leave yours on for now,” he said, and she realized he was trying not to cause her distress. Probably smart, since she was painfully aware she’d turn into an icicle the minute she attempted to take off her clothes. Obviously Jude had figured that out as well.

But undressing Jude ... well, that was a whole different story. The tempting notion of seeing him naked was enough to push her nervousness to the back of her mind.

Tentatively, she reached over to him, tugged the tail of his shirt out of his jeans, and pulled it up. He lifted his arms, letting her pull it over his head, and she tossed it to the floor and looked at him. All the breath rushed from her lungs.

He was sexier than she had imagined he would be. Not overly muscular, but powerful, well-toned, and lean, without an ounce of fat anywhere. His pecs were well-defined, with a sprinkling of dark red hair scattered across them, and his abs were tight. A thin trail of hair arched down the flat plane of his stomach, disappearing from sight beneath his jeans in such a suggestive manner that her mouth instantly went dry, and

heat raced through her veins. She remembered well enough where that trail led.

He looked at her, and she saw the shadow of insecurity in his gaze, but he covered it almost instantly with humor. “In my historicals, the heroes all have powerfully muscled chests,” he said. “Sound like a good description?” Standing up, he struck a bodybuilder pose, and she chuckled.

“You look fabulous,” she answered, and some of the uncertainty faded from his eyes. He grinned his wry, self-deprecating smile.

“I know I’m no Arnold.”

Some of her own insecurities ebbed away in the face of his. “I think your chest is gorgeous,” she said softly.

His eyes went wide. “Thanks.” He sat on the edge of the bed, carefully maintaining a respectable distance between them, and grinned. “Want to take a look at the rest of me?”

She could imagine the effort it took for this diffident man to expose himself to her while she was still fully clothed, and she appreciated his efforts not to frighten her. “I got a pretty good look a few minutes ago,” she whispered, reaching out and unfastening his belt. She heard his sharp intake of breath as her fingers lightly grazed his lower abdomen and realized he was remembering what she had done to him earlier.

So was she. The memory of what he had felt like, what he had tasted like, rose up and filled her brain with a sensual haze, almost blotting out her

fear. Her fingers fumbling with eagerness, she unbuttoned his jeans and unzipped his fly, revealing the thick bulge in his plain white briefs.

A carnal hunger more acute than any she'd ever known flooded her, making her body thrum with sexual awareness.

He still hadn't touched her, although she sensed the effort it took for him to hold back. He sat unmoving beneath the gentle touch of her hands and watched her through heavy-lidded eyes that smoldered with the same ravenous hunger that burned in her.

The need to see him, *all* of him, raged like a fire in her blood. She pushed at his briefs with hands gone clumsy with impatience and sucked in her breath as his fully erect shaft, long and hard and eager, was exposed.

She reached out a trembling hand to touch him, but he caught her wrist.

"Not this time, Alyssa."

She nodded acquiescence and dropped her hand away. He stood up, kicked off his shoes, and dropped his jeans and briefs to the floor, standing in front of her fully naked. The view was incredible--long, muscled legs, dusted with dark, fire-tipped hairs, and a rampant erection jutting from dense hair. She wanted to see all of him, to visually feast on him.

"Turn around," she ordered in a hoarse voice.

He lifted an eyebrow, obviously surprised by her command, but obediently turned in a slow circle. Her heart pounded at the sight of his sleekly powerful back, lean and muscled, and the long line of his spine

running down to his taut, finely etched ass. He turned back to face her, and she noticed his cheeks were faintly red.

“You look incredible,” she said.

“Thanks. But I know I’m pretty average.”

She sent a teasingly suggestive look at his rigid penis, standing at attention. “I’d say you’re quite a bit more than average.”

His cheeks went redder. He took a step toward her and knelt on the bed next to her.

“Now I want to look at you,” he whispered harshly.

Her heart pounded, and her muscles all went tense. She felt the throbbing wet warmth between her thighs go cold and dry in an instant, and she shut her eyes and turned her head away.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a muffled voice.

His deep voice was filled with understanding. “It’s all right, Alyssa.”

“You must think I’m an awful tease.”

“No,” he said gently. “I think you’re nervous. I think I would be too, if I were in your shoes.”

“I’m neurotic. I overreacted to the thing with my mom and Pierce. I know it.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think that makes you neurotic. Just human.”

He tugged at her ponytail holder until her hair fell loose, and then his big hands slid through her hair, stroking it, calming her despite herself. He bent nearer her, and she heard him suck in a deep breath.

“You smell like roses.”

At the reverent wonder in his voice, she almost chuckled. *Trust a guy to get turned on by shampoo.* But her laughter fizzled and died as he brushed her forehead with his lips.

Despite the chasteness of the caress, it was a startlingly erotic sensation, sending irresistible waves of heat coursing through her body. She couldn't understand why the light touch of his lips was so sexy, but there was no denying his appeal. She clenched her eyes shut and reveled in the sensations as his lips trailed down her cheek, toward her jaw line, and then brushed softly against her throat.

She shuddered.

If he noticed, he made no comment. But then again, his mouth was occupied. The faint roughness of his jaw line felt good against her delicate skin.

His lips slid down her throat, finding and lingering over the most sensitive spots, and then pausing at the hollow at the base of her throat.

She felt his hand move to her shoulder, and her muscles tightened, but he didn't make a move toward her breasts, simply caressed her shoulder until she relaxed. Then, very slowly, he moved his hand and began to caress the delicate hollow of her throat.

The sensation of his slightly callused hand on her bare skin was more erotic than she could have dreamed. It had been a long, long time since a

man had touched her bare flesh, and white-hot flame rushed through her, flooding her, melting away her reserve.

His fingers stroked her throat gently, and his other hand slowly began to push up her blouse, and her still-loosened bra. The moment she became conscious of what he was doing, she went rigid.

“It’s all right,” he said softly.

“I can’t,” she whispered, sounding plaintive, even to her own ears.

“Yes, you can. Trust me, Alyssa.” He drew the blouse and bra over her head and tossed them to the floor, so that she lay naked and exposed on the bed, more vulnerable than she had allowed herself to be in a very long time. She began to shiver.

He seemed to notice her fear. For a long moment he hesitated, then he gently cradled her breasts in his big hands.

“Do you remember how I described Emily’s breasts in *In the Mood*?”

She couldn’t think. Fear rioted in her mind, the fear of being intimate, of letting herself go with a man. Mutely, she shook her head.

“I think I called them ‘globes of alabaster perfection,’” he said, grinning wryly. “A little overwrought, don’t you think?”

“M-maybe.”

“And not a very good description, either,” he said softly. His hands kneaded her sensitive flesh softly. “Alabaster is a stone, and your breasts don’t make me think of stone. They’re soft. Warm. Full of life.”

A moment ago she *had* felt like alabaster, hard and rigid. But despite herself, she realized she felt a lot less like a stone under his soothing ministrations. His gentle, caressing hands sent warmth rippling through her like a summer breeze.

And then his thumb brushed her nipple, and she froze again.

“I touched you here earlier,” he murmured, reassuringly. “Nothing has changed.”

Everything had changed. He was naked, and she was half nude. And they were lying in bed together. “It’s ... different now,” she said in a bare whisper.

His thumbs continued to trace her nipples, moving in gentle circles, until they tightened and stood erect of their own accord. “How did I describe Emily’s nipples?” he whispered in her ear. “Something about berries, wasn’t it?”

“Uh ... you called them red, ripe strawberries.”

His soft laughter sounded in her ear, his self-deprecating humor charming her despite herself. “That’s not really a terrific description either, is it?” He bent his head to one, traced it with his tongue, and a shudder ran through her, a bolt of pleasure she couldn’t deny, couldn’t resist. She uttered a soft moan, a half-strangled noise of pleasure and anxiety all rolled into one.

“They’re sweet,” he murmured huskily, “but not as red as strawberries. More the color of pink roses.” His tongue slipped over her taut

nipple again, and she heard his voice go husky and rough. “Not as soft as strawberries, either.”

She was surprised to realize it was true. Despite the fears that lurked in the back of her mind, her nipples were as hard as pebbles, and every gentle touch of his tongue sent a wash of ecstasy through her. He teased her for a while, licking first at one nipple, then the other, until her fingers tangled in his hair and her hips moved in an involuntary rhythm she’d almost forgotten.

At last she said into his hair, almost inaudibly, “Please.”

She felt his soft exhalation against her breast. “Remember I’m out of practice, Alyssa. What do you want me to do?”

She only hesitated for a moment. “Take my nipple into your mouth. *Please.*”

He did as she asked, and it felt as good as it had last time. Possibly even better. Her breasts were sensitized now, craving the attention they’d been denied for so long, and liquid heat shot through her arteries, pooling in her stomach and between her thighs. She was aware of a desperate, throbbing ache in her breasts, an ache that his mouth only partially assuaged.

An insistent, probing heat throbbed against her stockinged leg. It should have panicked her to feel his hot erection so near to her own, vulnerable flesh, but she was no longer afraid. Not of him. He was too gentle and understanding for her to fear.

He seemed to recognize her surrender, or perhaps he was simply losing control of his reactions because he pressed harder and more urgently against her, and his breath came in short, hard gasps. She could feel him, hot and demanding, throbbing eagerly against her thigh. His hand trailed down her stomach, then hesitated at the fragile barrier of her panties.

“It’s okay,” she whispered in his ear. “Take them off.”

He buried his face in her shoulder for a moment. “Thank you,” he whispered hoarsely, and she knew he understood the magnitude of what she was permitting him to do.

He managed to pry off her panties a little more readily than he’d managed the bra. Alyssa reached down and wiggled out of her skirt, leaving her clad in absolutely nothing but dark, thigh-high stockings.

He let his fingers drift downward, through the soft triangle of her curls, until he found her soft, moisture-drenched flesh. His fingers circled there, caressing, teasing, delving into her warmth, until she writhed against his hand, sobbing for release.

At last he dropped his hand away, sat up, and moved between her thighs. He looked at her, and his eyes filled with admiration. “You look incredible,” he said softly. “Like a fantasy come to life.”

She stared at him, sitting there, his erection massive, his hair tousled, his eyes glittering with passion. “So do you,” she whispered. “Like a fantasy I didn’t even know I had.”

Chapter 8

Jude had been as patient as he could, and it was killing him. His body ached for the kind of release she'd given him earlier. No, he amended, for the kind of release that could only be had when two people shared it together. A fine film of sweat had broken out all over his body, and he was trembling, breathing as rapidly as if he'd just run a marathon. He couldn't remember ever being this turned on in his life.

He stared at her a moment longer, seeing her ivory skin, pale against the blue quilt, her glorious body clad only in a pair of black, lace-topped stockings. Her long, graceful legs were spread apart, giving him a clear view of her pink, glistening flesh.

He almost lost it then and there, almost erupted like Mt. St. Helens. He gritted his teeth and managed to keep himself together.

This time she was coming along for the ride.

Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to her gently rounded lower belly, just beneath the shallow indentation of her navel. "I want to please you," he murmured against her soft skin. "But I'm not really sure how."

"You can figure it out," she said softly.

He hesitated, overwhelmed by an oppressive sense of inadequacy, and lifted his head. He wasn't the world's greatest lover, that was for sure. And he'd never done this particular act before in his life. "But you remember in my book ... you said..."

Where did you learn your technique? It sounds horrible.

"I trust you, Jude. You have a lot of native talent." She smiled at him. "Just be gentle, okay?"

Gentle. Okay. He could do that. He remembered the way she'd touched him with her tongue. He'd liked that, and figured maybe she would too. He bent his head, moved lower, and brushed his lips over her soft, yielding flesh, then gently probed with his tongue.

She cried out, so sharply he was sure he'd hurt her. *Probably gave her whisker burn or something*, he thought with remorse, whipping his head up. "Are you all right?"

"Oh ... *God.*"

Great. He'd injured her. "I-I'm sorry," he stammered.

But she reached down and clutched at his hair with both hands, so fiercely that it hurt. "*Don't stop.*"

His mouth hung open for a second while he assimilated the notion that he'd actually done it right, then he lowered his head again and did it again. She uttered a sobbing moan of agonized pleasure, and her back arched wildly.

He stroked her with his tongue a few moments longer, listening to the gasping, broken sounds she made, inhaling the spicy fragrance of her arousal. He would have loved to have made love to her all night this way, but he sensed she wasn't going to last long. Neither was he. The wet velvet texture of her tasted incredible, and her obvious excitement was driving him wild.

At last he lifted his head, leaned over the side of the bed, and groped for his discarded jeans.

"What are you *doing*?" she wailed.

He was so relieved he wasn't the only desperate person in this room that a harsh chuckle of amusement escaped him. "Condom," he muttered tersely, finding one in his wallet and fumbling frantically with the packet. Unfortunately, he couldn't quite figure out how to open it.

"Give me that," she growled, huffing with annoyance, sitting up, and opening it with one quick motion. "Honestly, how can someone be so good with his hands and so uncoordinated at the same time?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "If I'm that uncoordinated, maybe you'd better put it on me, too."

She looked startled, then glanced down at his heavy, thick erection. A slow, lascivious smile spread over her face, and she reached over and slowly unrolled the latex over him, inch by inch, caressing and stroking as she went, until he thought he'd explode like a firecracker on the Fourth of July.

He shuddered in near agony at the gentle touch of her fingers, struggling to keep the tattered remnants of his self-control together.

At last, fully sheathed, he pushed her back onto the quilt. “Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

Alyssa hesitated for a long moment, while his heart thundered in his chest and he trembled, half afraid she’d say no. At last the corners of her lips turned up in a smile.

“I’m sure.”

Groaning with relief, he bent to her and pressed his mouth against hers, hungrily, avidly, and without the slightest thought of butterfly wings. Eagerness made him clumsy, and he was uncomfortably certain he was kissing her more like a teenager than a grown man, but she didn’t seem to mind. She returned his ravenous kiss, her tongue tangling eagerly with his.

Unable to resist his intense hunger any longer, he plunged into her hot, wet passage.

She was tight, not tense with fear, but so snug and small he was terribly afraid he’d hurt her. He struggled to hold back, but she gripped his ass hard with her fingers and urged him on, until he was deep inside her, thrusting hard against her womb, moving faster and faster. She was slick and hot and felt so incredible he could hardly bear it.

He utterly forgot about his lack of experience as sheer primitive instinct took over. His body pounded into hers in a violent, relentless

cadence, drawing cries of pleasure from her, driving both of them forcefully toward a deep, shadowy chasm where unimaginable bliss awaited them.

And then he felt the tremors begin deep inside her, felt her body quake, heard her sweet voice sobbing with release, and he knew he was lost. Not just physically, but emotionally as well.

She'd trusted him enough to let him make love to her, after years of emotional isolation, and that was an incredible feeling. He barely knew her, and yet he had fallen for her, damned hard.

His climax slammed into him and rolled over him like a runaway freight train, unrelenting, inexorable, so intensely pleasurable he thought he'd never survive it. His whole body shuddered with ecstasy as wave after rippling wave burst through him, drowning him in an ocean of scorching sensation.

At last he collapsed, gasping for breath, on top of her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. "That was incredible," she whispered.

He thanked God that she thought so. Rolling to the side, he dropped his head weakly onto the pillow and gathered her against his chest. "It was more than incredible," he said softly. "It's never been like that for me before, Alyssa. Never."

He felt her sleepily nuzzle his chest, felt the heavy relaxation that filled her body, and he knew with a warm rush of pleasure that she felt the same way. What had happened between them had been a whole hell of a lot

more than sex. She'd let him make love to her, melting away her fears, and it *had* been more than incredible, for both of them. That was a heady realization for a man who'd thought himself sexually inept until now.

Within moments she was asleep. He heard the soft buzz of her snoring and wondered with a pang of longing what it would be like to listen to her snoring every night for the rest of his life.

He was shocked to realize he was thinking long-term here, but he couldn't help it. Alyssa Stone was something special. And what they'd shared tonight had been unbelievable.

He almost shut his eyes and succumbed to slumber himself, but he was worried Alyssa might freak out in the morning if she found him there. He thought she had worked through her fear and was beyond that now--at least he hoped so--but he still wanted to be cautious.

He extricated his arm from beneath her head, being careful not to awaken her, pulled the quilt up over her, and yanked his clothes on. He scribbled a note, telling her he'd call her tomorrow, and left it on the pillow where she couldn't miss it, then went downstairs and out the door, locking it carefully behind him.

The inky black night was warm and sultry, and it was a long walk back to his condo, but he didn't care. He walked through the summer night, smiling.

Chapter 9

“It’s been a month, Alyssa.”

Alyssa frowned at the painting on the wall, trying very hard to look as if she was focusing on whether or not she’d hung it straight, rather than on Sue’s nagging words. “A month since what?” she answered in her most deliberately absent tone.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, Lyss. What happened to that nice young man?”

Alyssa turned around and found Sue’s gaze on her. “You mean the one that came in here to see me?”

“Uh-huh.” Sue lifted her eyebrows and waggled them suggestively. “The one with the cute butt.”

Alyssa walked back to the counter, avoiding her friend’s eyes. “Nothing really happened.”

“Crap. I saw the way you looked the next morning. And I know he’s called you more than once. You and he hooked up, didn’t you?”

Hooking up wasn’t exactly the phrase she’d use, Alyssa thought miserably. They’d made love feverishly, and he’d touched something so far

inside her she hadn't even known it existed. Which only made her more nervous. She might have gotten past her fear of physical intimacy, but somehow she knew if she started seeing Jude on a regular basis she'd be emotionally intimate with him in no time.

The thought scared her. Jude had called her several times, both at the shop and at home, and she'd avoided taking his calls. She'd half expected him to come into the shop and confront her, but he hadn't, evidently respecting her obvious wish to be left alone.

A little part of her mind wished he'd come into the shop, throw her over his shoulder, carry her out and ... *ravish* her, but that wasn't Jude's way. He simply wasn't the caveman type.

She looked around at the shop with some degree of pride. Over the past few weeks, due to her participation in some local arts shows, and because word of mouth was starting to get around, she'd started acquiring more customers. She wasn't exactly rolling in money yet, but paying the rent was no longer a concern. But she didn't feel quite as proud as she had expected. The shop was still important to her, but something was missing from her life.

She was pretty sure that something was Jude.

"Yeah," she admitted at last, facing Sue. "We hooked up one night."

"So how was he?"

Alyssa almost chuckled at the avidly interested expression on Sue's face, which really didn't go along with her grandmotherly appearance. "He was ... okay."

Sue looked disappointed. "Only okay?"

Alyssa sighed. "Fine. I'll admit it. It was the greatest sex of my life."

"So why haven't you talked to him?"

Alyssa shrugged. "It might have been the greatest sex of my life, but it was just sex."

Sue looked at her shrewdly. "Are you sure?"

The problem was that she wasn't sure, not at all. She was pretty sure it had been a lot more than just sex. She sighed, confused, and thought maybe she should call Jude after all. But it had been over a week since he'd called last. He'd probably forgotten all about her and given up by now.

As she was thinking that gloomy thought, the door opened, and a gorgeous, redheaded guy came in. Alyssa's eyes went wide as she realized it was Jude's brother, Mark.

Sue's eyebrows shot up, and she moved toward Mark like a shark heading for blood in the water. "Hello there," she said, smiling and batting her eyes like an infatuated teenager. "Can I help you?"

Mark grinned at her, a grin that only made his movie-star looks more apparent. Sue visibly melted in the brilliance of that smile. "Actually," he said, "I'm here to talk to Alyssa."

"Damn," Sue grouched. "Alyssa gets all the luck."

Mark flashed another smile, then moved toward Alyssa. Involuntarily, she took a step back.

“Don’t worry,” he said, pausing and giving her an endearing smile. “I’m not going to throw up on you today. I promise.”

Alyssa forced herself to put her professional face on. “What can I help you with?”

“You can help me with my brother.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said stiffly.

“Sure you do. He’s been moping around for the last month. He’s crazy about you, Alyssa. Take pity on him and give him a call, okay?”

“I doubt he really cares that much.”

“Trust me. He cares. He’s been miserable.” Mark hesitated for a minute. “You know, I always think I’m in love, but I never care that much when I break up with a girl. One night and it’s over. I’m starting to think I’ve never really been in love in my life. But Jude--he’s really in love with you, Alyssa. It’s all over his face.”

Her heart began pounding heavily in her chest. “It was only one night,” she said softly. “He can’t possibly be in love with me.”

Mark looked at her, more seriously than usual. “I guess maybe sometimes one night is enough.”

Sometimes one night is enough. The words rang in her mind, and she recognized the truth of them. It was the real reason she hadn’t returned Jude’s calls--simple fear. Fear of intimacy. Fear of love.

Because one night *had* been enough for her. She'd fallen head over heels.

Mark seemed to recognize the thaw in her expression. "Look," he said gently, "just think about it, okay? I'm pretty sure--"

Alyssa didn't hear the rest of what he said because the door opened and Jude strode in.

She stared at him, absorbing in the broad planes of his face, the wiry strength of his body, and wondering how on earth she'd made it a month without seeing him.

Jude paused a few steps beyond the door and glared at Mark, his eyebrows snapping together in a frown. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Mark gave his easy grin. "Just trying to fix your life, big brother."

"I can fix my own damn life, thank you." Jude marched across the room and stopped in front of Alyssa. She noticed he was holding a manila envelope in his hands.

"You didn't call me back," he said.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was scared."

"Yeah, I kind of figured. That's why I didn't push you too hard. But you've had a whole month to think about it, Alyssa. Are you going to give me a chance?"

She swallowed. "I'm not sure. We hardly know each other."

“I know you better than you think, Alyssa.” He pointed to a painting across the room, a watercolor of the MacArthur Memorial. “That’s your work. Isn’t it?”

Alyssa’s eyebrows shot up. The painting was totally different from the other examples he’d seen of her work, and she never signed her art. The fact that he’d managed to pick out an example of her work from among the fifty different paintings on the walls startled her. “Yes,” she admitted. “How did you know?”

“I told you, I know you better than you think. I can see your style in that painting. Your ... your *personality*. It’s all over it.”

She was taken aback, but realized it went both ways. She was pretty sure she could pick up one of his books now and recognize his work, whether or not the book had his name on it. She understood him better than she had thought.

Jude was right. Their night together hadn’t been casual in the least.

He went on, his amber eyes very intense. “You changed my life, Alyssa. And not just because of that one night.” He dropped the manila envelope on the counter in front of her. “My latest manuscript. I rewrote it the way you suggested, and it blew my editor away. She loves it.”

“I’m not surprised,” Alyssa said. She smiled slightly. “You have a way with a love scene, Jude.”

His eyes warmed a bit, became more hopeful. “I’d like to think I changed your life a little, too.”

“You did,” she admitted. “More than a little. I mean, I was able to...” She glanced past his shoulder at Mark and Sue, who were avidly listening, then went on anyway. “I was able to get in the mood for the first time in a long time, and that was a big deal to me. But that wasn’t all. The day after that, I called my mother.”

She saw the surprise in his gaze. “Really? How did that go?”

“Not bad,” she admitted. “She hasn’t had a drink in years, and she was very apologetic about what she did to me. We’re still not exactly the best of friends, but we’re getting to know each other again. We started going to therapy together.”

“Sounds like a start.”

She nodded. “Things aren’t perfect between us by any means, but at least we’re talking, for pretty much the first time in our lives.” She reached out and touched his arm. “And I have you to thank for it

“So are you going to give me a chance?”

Alyssa thought about it a long moment. “No.”

His eyes went wide with pain and hurt, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Mark and Sue’s identically startled expressions. She smiled and wrapped her hand around his.

“I don’t think I need to take a chance on you, Jude. I think you’re a sure thing. For that matter, *we’re* a sure thing.”

A smile of relief spread across his features like the summer sunrise. “So when am I going to see you again?”

“Right now,” Sue said, stepping forward. “Alyssa, get lost. I’ll take care of the shop for the afternoon.” She glanced back at Mark and waggled her eyebrows at him. “Maybe I can sell this young man something.”

Mark flashed his movie-star grin. “Honey, I have a feeling you could sell me just about anything.”

Alyssa rolled her eyes at their ludicrous flirting. “Thanks, Sue,” she said, stepping out from behind the counter. She hooked her arm through Jude’s, and together they walked out of the shop and out into the humid warmth of a sunny summer day.

“So what do you want to do this afternoon?” he asked.

“It’s been a whole month since I’ve seen you, Jude.” She smiled suggestively. “What do you *think* I want to do?”

The long, deep laugh she remembered so clearly rumbled from his chest. “I have a feeling I’ve created a monster,” he said, chuckling. “Are you always going to be in the mood from now on, Alyssa?”

“When it comes to you,” she said softly, “absolutely.”

The End