

*Ellen Fisher*

# I'll Be There For You



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# I'll Be There for You

*By Ellen Fisher*

# Dedication

For Don, who's always there for me.

## Acknowledgement

Thanks to my father, who helped me get Norfolk's details right.

## Chapter One

“God, he is so *hot*.”

Alexander Frost looked up from his Budweiser to see his girl friend Jeri Winston drooling over another man. *Girl friend*, as in two words, not one. She’d been his best friend since high school, but he didn’t have any claim on Jeri and never had. They were just friends. Even so, he felt himself bristle a bit at her blatant admiration of another guy.

“I don’t really see what’s so hot about him,” he answered.

“Are you kidding, Xander?” Jeri turned dark blue eyes gone dreamy with lust in his direction for a second. He couldn’t help but wish the lust was aimed at him, but it obviously wasn’t, since her gaze drifted back to the other guy almost instantly. “His shoulders, his chest, his face...oh my God!” she yelped as the object of her affection turned slightly. “Check out that ass!”

“I’d rather not, thank you.”

She ignored the comment. “*That* is exactly what I’ve been looking for,” she said in a reverent tone that suggested she’d spotted a Michelangelo sculpture in the crowded bar.

“What, an ass? Hell, you can find one of those anywhere.”

“No, you jerk. Pay attention, will you? I’ve been looking for the perfect man.”

Alexander took a swig of his beer. “What am I, chopped liver?”

"Oh, of course you're perfect," she said, absentmindedly reaching over and ruffling his overlong hair. He noticed she didn't take her eyes off the other guy's buns of steel. "That's exactly why you're my best friend, Xander, because you're perfect. But it's a different *kind* of perfect."

"Ah. So I'm perfect in an imperfect kind of way."

She was so focused on Mr. Universe that she didn't seem to hear. "Geez. Look at his forearms. They're like tree trunks. And check out his muscles."

Against his better judgment, Alexander glanced toward Mr. Perfect, seeing the muscles in the guy's forearms ripple as he picked up a mug off the mahogany-and-brass bar. Alexander had to admit the muscles in his forearms didn't ripple that way. Hell, he wasn't sure he *had* muscles in his forearms.

"He looks like he lives in a gym."

"And this is a problem...how?"

"Oh, come on, Jeri. You're not really interested in a guy that self-centered, are you?"

"If he lived in a gym, he wouldn't be here, would he?" She picked up her apple martini and took a ladylike sip. Alexander's gut tightened as she licked a drop of liquid off her upper lip. "He looks terrific and he knows how to have a good time. What more could you want in a lover?"

"Are you asking me? Because what I want in a lover is for her to be *female*. But that's just me."

She didn't seem to hear him. "God, he's perfect. And he's absolutely surrounded by drooling women. Xander!" She spun toward him, as if he'd suddenly become visible again. He could practically feel himself pop into existence. "You have to help me out here. It's been a while since I was on the market. How can I get his attention?"

"Maybe drooling would help. He seems to like that."

She made an impatient sound. “Don’t mock me, Xander. You don’t want to make me mad. You’re looking at a woman who hasn’t been laid in months.”

“I haven’t been laid in months either. So what? You don’t see me salivating over every woman in the bar, do you?”

Of course, that was because he was drooling over Jeri, but that was beside the point. *She* didn’t know that, after all.

“I’m not salivating over every man in the bar,” she said in the slightly condescending tone of voice that made his molars grind together. He hated it when she talked to him like she was a grownup and he was five. He supposed it was a natural consequence of her teaching job, but it drove him nuts. “Just Mr. Incredible over there.”

Alexander took another look at Mr. Incredible, trying to figure out exactly what she saw in the guy. Okay, so his face did look a lot like a young Harrison Ford, and his build reminded Alexander of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his glory days—but so what if he looked like an amalgamation of a couple of different movie stars? A guy who looked like that probably had the personality of vanilla pudding, because he didn’t have to work to develop his personality the way a regular guy did. Right? That made sense, didn’t it?

But he had a feeling the twenty or so women clustered around the other man didn’t care all that much about his personality.

“Look,” he said at last, “you at least ought to talk to the guy before you decide to marry him.”

“I haven’t decided to marry him. Just sleep with him.”

“Yeah, well, it looks like you might have some competition. Anyway, don’t you want to make sure he can speak in complete sentences before you have sex with him?”

“Complete sentences aren’t necessary for what I have in mind.”



“Jesus. When did you become so shallow?”

“I’ve always been shallow, deep down.” She flashed a self-deprecating grin at him over the rim of her martini glass, and his stomach dropped to the floor. Because if there was one thing he knew about Jeri, it was that she wasn’t shallow. He knew her better than anyone else on the planet, after all. He knew the way her mom had driven her to the edge of sanity in high school. He knew her every dream and the details of her plans for the future. And *shallow* was the last word he’d ever think of to describe her. Except maybe when she was slobbering over hunky guys in bars.

“Look,” she said in a more reasonable tone, still eyeing her target, “I haven’t had any in months, and he looks as yummy as Krispy Kremes look when I’m on a diet. What would *you* do? And don’t tell me you’ve decided to embrace celibacy, because I know better.”

Alexander sighed. “No, I haven’t decided to embrace celibacy. But I don’t usually pick up complete strangers in bars, either. I like to go out with the woman a couple of times, get to know her a bit, before we sleep together.” He grinned. “Just an old-fashioned guy, that’s me.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty old school.” She put her eyes back in their sockets, turned her head toward him, and made a show of wiping away drool. “But you’re right. I ought to talk to him before I sleep with him.”

*Way to go, Frost,* Alexander thought in disgust. Now she was planning to get to know the guy before she slept with him. Instead of a one-night stand, this could become a *relationship*. That’d be even worse.

Of course, that shouldn’t be a problem for him, since he and Jeri had never had any sort of romantic entanglement. They’d known each other for a decade, but the first and only date they’d ever gone on together was their senior prom, and that hadn’t exactly turned out to be a magical night. He’d entertained late-night thoughts of making a move on her for

years, but it always seemed that whenever she was free, he was involved with someone, and vice versa.

They'd both been free for the past few months, though, and more and more often he'd found himself thinking about asking her out. She'd stepped out of his nightly fantasies and into his every waking thought. But as usual, it looked like he'd waited too long to make a move.

Damn it. He was a moron.

In desperation, he looked at the object of her desire one more time, looking for something overt he could point out to discourage her, like a missing front tooth or a huge wart on the end of the guy's nose. He didn't find anything. God help him, the other man was perfect. He couldn't be more perfect if he'd just been unwrapped from bubble wrap and stepped out of a cardboard shipping container.

But then he noticed something else.

"Holy shit," he said. "Do you realize who that guy *is*?"



Jeri studied the hunk who'd caught her attention more closely. There was something about him that had made every female part of her body jump to attention, and now that she looked more closely, she realized exactly what it was. He bore a striking resemblance to a boy she'd had a huge crush on in high school, one Connor Addison. He'd been the tall, dark-haired, incredibly good-looking star of the football team, and she'd been an unpopular pudge. He'd never looked twice at her.

The summer after graduation, she'd worn a hole through his picture in the yearbook from kissing it so often.

She threw off the memory with a shudder. God, she'd been pathetic in high school, just as her mom had told her, over and over again. Even

now, ten years later, she couldn't think about the sheer awfulness of her senior year without feeling nauseated. She'd been so fat, so totally uncool, and her mom's constant reminders of how desperately she needed to lose weight had utterly shredded her self-esteem. If it hadn't been for Xander's staunch friendship, she wasn't sure she would have survived high school at all.

"Are you going to tell me he's an actor?" she said. "Because he does look a lot like Harrison Ford in *Star Wars*. But unless Harrison had a face lift recently—"

"No. It's Connor Addison."

Her knees went weak, and a hot flush spread across her cheeks. "Can't be."

"Trust me. It's Connor."

*Oh, God.* This wasn't fair. The gorgeous crush of her youth had grown into an even more gorgeous man. But the last thing she wanted was to be reminded of high school, and all the myriad humiliations she'd experienced there.

And despite the way she'd worn through the photo of Connor Addison, she very definitely didn't have good memories of him.

"It can't be," she said again. She wanted this gorgeous guy to be someone she'd never met before in her life, someone who wouldn't make her think of her painfully unpopular self in high school. True, she'd known Xander since high school too, but he'd stood by her when even her own mother hadn't, when other kids laughed and pointed fingers. He'd even squired her to the prom. Her memories of Xander were all good ones.

Her memories of Connor Addison sucked.

"It's him," Xander insisted. "It's Connor."

"I thought he was in—I don't know, out west somewhere."

She was lying, of course. She hadn't forgotten a single scrap of gossip she'd ever heard about Connor Addison. She'd committed it all to memory. He'd gone to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, then headed out to Seattle and done his residency at a pediatric practice there.

Small wonder all those women were hanging off him. Not only was he gorgeous, but it was widely known he was loaded, thanks to the mountain of money he'd inherited when his parents died. And he probably loved kids, since he was in pediatrics. He might as well have "Marriage Material" written across his T-shirt in big, bold letters.

But if she dared to approach him, he'd probably see the dumpy girl she'd been in high school when he looked at her, instead of the woman she'd become. Jesus. Life just wasn't fair.

How come Connor Addison couldn't have grown up into a fat, balding guy who'd fall at *her* feet for a change?

"I guess he's back for a visit," Xander said. He slid a sideways look at her, concern evident in the dark brown eyes behind the glasses. "You okay with that?"

A smile of genuine affection curled her mouth. Good old Xander. He always knew when something was bothering her, even if she tried to hide it. And he'd known her long enough to remember precisely what Connor Addison had meant to her in high school. And what she hadn't meant to him.

"I'm just fine," she answered, tossing her long blonde hair back over her shoulder in a practiced, flirty gesture. She might have been a loser in high school, but she could attract men the way flowers attracted bees now...when she wanted to.

Admittedly she'd had a long dry spell recently, but that had been by choice. She'd been taking a break. But break time was over, and it was

time to get back in the game. "It's been a long time, Xander. I didn't even recognize him."

Xander scowled. "Yeah. He's changed a lot."

Mentally, she agreed. Connor had changed a lot. His face had become more rugged, with a few laugh lines, visible even from here, etched at the corners of his eyes, and his body had realized its adolescent potential and become truly magnificent. Not like Xander, who really hadn't changed much since high school. He still had the same open, honest face and the same lean body he'd had back then.

It was nice to know some guys never changed. But it was even nicer to know that some guys changed for the better.

Who the hell was she kidding, anyway? She was damned glad he hadn't aged into a balding, fat guy. It would be a horrible loss to the world's women.

"I want to talk to him," she said at last, deciding she might as well try. Maybe he wouldn't remember her at all. That'd be kind of painful, considering how much mental effort she'd spent fantasizing about him for years after high school. Even so, it might be preferable to the alternative, which was that he'd remember her as a pudge, coloring his perceptions of the woman she was now.

Xander leaned back on his wooden stool, lifted his mug, and took another long gulp of Bud. She got the feeling he was annoyed with her, but she wasn't sure why. She'd known Xander so long she could read him like a book, and something about the way his eyes narrowed behind the wire-rimmed glasses and his mouth compressed slightly sent a clear signal that he was irritated.

"Fine," he said shortly. "Go talk to him."

"But there are all those other women around him."

Xander glanced at the gaggle of women, then lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "So? None of them hold a candle to you, Jer."

The offhand compliment warmed her heart. Xander had always been able to do wonders for her self-confidence. She'd never felt ugly and unattractive around him, even clear back in high school.

"Thanks. But I'm still not sure he'll notice me as an individual. I don't want him to see me as a member of a slaver wolf pack, you know?"

"So what do you want me to do?"

"You remember him from school, Xander. Why don't you offer to buy him a drink, ask him to catch up for old time's sake? And then you can kind of, you know, introduce me to him."

Xander ran his hand through his light brown hair, rumpling it till it stood on end. "Let me get this straight. You want me to cut him out of the herd like a sheepdog?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"I'm not a Border collie, Jeri. I'm not that smart."

She laughed at that. Xander was one of the smartest guys she knew, if not the cutest. They'd been in chess club together in high school, and he'd beaten her almost every time they played. For that matter, he still beat her every time they dragged out her chess set. "Oh, come on, Xander," she wheedled, using the nickname that no one else used. "Please?"

Xander sighed. "If you really want me to, I can try it. But you know, Connor and I weren't exactly best buds back in high school. He was a jock, and I was a nerd. I'm not even sure he'll remember me."

"I bet he remembers you more than he remembered me," she said softly. She was surprised to hear bitterness in her own voice, and tried to cover it by laughing again in an effort to make it sound like a joke. But Xander looked at her with sympathy evident in his eyes.

“Okay, Jeri. I’ll try to get him over here. What you do with him then is up to you.”

She chuckled and gave him another affectionate pat on the head.  
“I’ve got an idea or two on that, Xander. Trust me.”

## Chapter Two

Alexander managed to shove his way through the crowd of savage, drooling Rottweiler women, despite the not-so-subtle use of spike heels as defensive weapons aimed at his feet. He somehow reached Connor without losing any of his toes, smiled, and shoved his hand out. “Hey there, Connor. Remember me?”

Connor looked briefly blank, and Alexander smothered an irritated sigh. Naturally a jock like Connor wouldn’t remember a nerd like him. He’d been invisible in high school. Hell, he thought, noticing the women hadn’t spared him a glance, he was still invisible. They hadn’t seen him as an attractive guy, but as an unwanted invader. Sometimes people recognized his voice, but despite his status as a local celebrity, his face just wasn’t that memorable.

“Alexander Frost,” he said, keeping the look of cheerful friendliness glued onto his face. “We went to high school together.”

Connor’s features immediately reshaped themselves into a look of dawning comprehension, whether real or fake Alexander couldn’t quite tell. “Sure, I remember you,” he said, reaching out and grabbing Alexander’s hand in a friendly manner. “Nice to see you again, dude.”

“Didn’t know you were back in town,” Alexander said, wincing as the big guy’s fingers all but crushed his own. “You visiting family?”

Connor winced. “Nah. My parents died about six years ago, actually.”



Alexander would have smacked his forehead with his palm if he'd still had the use of his hand at this point. Hell. He was a jerk. He'd totally forgotten about the car crash that had taken Connor's parents, even though it had been talked about a lot at the time. And Connor had been an only child, as he recalled. That sucked.

"Sorry, man," he said roughly.

Connor shrugged in a gesture that said, *Hey, it's been six years and I'm one hell of a tough guy*. "Anyway," he said, "I'm back to stay."

"No kidding?" Alexander searched his memory. Jeri had mentioned Connor had been out West—where the hell had the guy wound up again? "I thought you were out in Seattle?"

"Rained too much. Never liked it much there."

Alexander could understand that. Virginia had one of the best climates in the world, in his opinion. It rained enough to keep things green, but not so much that you got sick of it. Not like the Pacific Northwest, where rain was practically a daily occurrence. Virginia was cold enough in the winter that it did have four seasons, but it was rarely cold enough to snow. Snow was a rare and lovely occurrence here, not the big pain in the ass it was up North. And sure, it got pretty hot in the summer, but that was just a great excuse to go to the beach.

"Want to sit down?" he invited. "I'll buy you a drink. We can catch up on old times."

Connor hesitated. "I don't want to horn in on your date."

"My date?" Obviously Connor had seen him sitting at the bar with Jeri. Not that it surprised him that Connor had noticed Jeri already. In a roomful of beautiful women, Jeri stood out like a rose amongst weeds.

Alexander glanced over his shoulder and saw Jeri's slate-blue eyes watching them over the rim of her martini glass. She probably thought she was being subtle, but Jeri on the prowl had all the subtlety of a

nuclear bomb. *Ka-boom*. “She’s not my date,” he said. “She’s just a friend.”

Connor looked Jeri over, from the perfectly styled golden hair falling straight to her shoulders, to the tips of her ridiculously high-heeled sandals, and shook his head. “You must be out of your mind, dude. She’s gorgeous.”

The hell of it was, she *was* gorgeous, her incredible body poured into a form-fitting, fire-red dress that displayed her long legs and showed a tantalizing flash of well-toned midriff. She was also brilliant, kind, and funny.

And here he was trying to get another guy to look at her.

Maybe Connor was right and he was out of his mind. Or maybe he was just realistic enough to realize she’d never think of him that way. She’d known him for ten years, and had never treated him as anything other than a beloved brother. Making a move on her, even though they were both between romances right now, would just be a sure way to get his ego flattened into roadkill.

Sighing, he headed for a table with Connor in his wake, earning glares from a number of irritated women who were not pleased to see their prey slipping from their manicured fingers. Sitting down at the table, he shot a smile at Jeri, who was still sitting at the bar, observing them with the single-minded intensity of a Cold War spy. *Mission accomplished*, he thought. Maybe he was smarter than a Border collie, after all.

Or maybe not. He was obviously a complete moron, introducing the one woman he lusted after to a man she thought was hotter than mid-July.

Sliding off the stool in a way that displayed the long stretch of her incredible legs, Jeri sauntered toward them. “Hey, Xander,” she said in a

low, husky voice, pausing next to the table. "Are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Connor came to his feet. Alexander felt a little sick at his stunned expression. God help him, they hadn't even met and already the man was in love.

But of course, this was Jeri. What wasn't to love?

He made the introductions quickly, noticing that Connor held Jeri's hand a lot longer than necessary. Their eyes met, and he could practically see the sparks fly. Christ. If they touched each other again, the bar would burn to the ground.

Connor frowned as he sat down. "Jeri Winston. That name sounds familiar for some reason. Have we met?"

"Oh, I don't think so," she said.

Alexander blinked. What the hell? He knew better than anyone how Jeri had followed Connor around school their senior year. The jerk had never noticed her, but that hadn't stopped her from going wherever he was, even if it meant she was continually late for her next class. She'd practically stalked the guy, and he didn't even remember her?

Of course, he had to admit she did look a bit different now. But still...this was *Jeri*. How could the guy not remember Jeri? And why was Jeri going along with it?

And then he saw the insecurity shining from her blue eyes, and he knew why. Somewhere in her heart, Jeri was still an unattractive, pudgy teenager, just as he was still a pimpled, skinny adolescent deep inside.

The difference was, she'd changed a whole hell of a lot.

He had to admit he didn't have pimples anymore, but aside from that he hadn't changed much. He was still pretty thin, physically unimpressive, and he still wore glasses. Fashionable wire-framed glasses rather than the big, thick tortoiseshell frames his mom had made him

wear in high school, but even so, he wasn't the kind of guy women looked twice at.

Whereas Jeri had grown into the kind of woman men melted for like chocolate in the sun. Not that she'd ever believe that, thanks to the way her mom had messed with her head back in high school.

Connor gazed at her, captivated. "So where are you from, Jeri?"

"Virginia Beach," she said promptly. The truth, but not all of it. Alexander knew she'd been born there, but moved with her family to Norfolk when she was ten.

"Nice town," Connor said. "I'm thinking about buying a beach cottage on the North End."

"You haven't got a place to live yet?"

"No. I'm staying at the Sheraton." The Sheraton was right downtown, with a terrific view of the Elizabeth River. Alexander couldn't feel too sorry for the guy. There were worse places to live.

Jeri's next words threw him for a loop.

"Well, a hotel room's no way to live," she said. "You ought to move in with Alexander while you look for a place. He just happens to be looking for a roommate."

She smiled and calmly ignored Alexander's wide-eyed look, the look he shot her to say, *What the hell are you doing? And why are you dragging me into this?* He had a nice condo downtown, and he'd just gotten rid of the Mooching Roommate From Hell a few months ago. Now that he'd gotten his DJ career going well, he had plenty of money to make his mortgage. He didn't need another roommate—and after a year of Mooch, he didn't *want* another roommate.

But Connor lit up.

"No kidding," he said, looking toward Alexander. "Where do you live, dude?"

"Downtown," Alexander said shortly.

"He has a fabulous condo in Freemason Harbor," Jeri put in, sounding like an overeager real estate agent. "High ceilings, lots of space, great furniture, and close to Nauticus and the *USS Wisconsin*. And practically on top of the mall. You'd love it, Connor."

"Sounds awesome," Connor said. "How much a month, Alexander?"

Alexander told him.

"I can swing that," Connor said.

*No kidding*, Alexander thought. The guy had inherited a ton of money, and he was a doctor besides. He wasn't sure what pediatricians made, but he was pretty sure it was a lot more than what he brought home as a DJ. Besides, if Connor could consider buying a house on the North End of Virginia Beach, where prices were going through the stratosphere, he could sure as hell afford half of Alexander's relatively measly mortgage payment for a while.

But Alexander didn't really want the help. He wondered frantically how he was going to get out of this. "I'm kind of a slob," he said at last.

"Oh, you are not," Jeri retorted, whacking him gently on the shoulder. "You know you're a terrific housekeeper. Connor, he'd make a great roommate. Trust me."

Alexander glared at her, sending her a subliminal message, the kind he knew she understood from their long years of friendship. *You're a manipulative little bitch.*

She shot him a Mona Lisa smile, an expression that said plainly, *I know.*

*Hell.* He admitted to himself that he wasn't going to wiggle his way out of this one. Jeri had trapped him like the crabs he used to net off his granddad's dock. He just hoped Connor hadn't turned into a serial killer since high school.

Of course, he didn't have to let her manipulate him. He could just refuse, and he knew Jeri wouldn't sulk or hold it against him. Their friendship was too solid, too longstanding, for anything to come between them. But part of him wanted her gratitude more than he wanted his privacy.

"Sounds great," he said to Connor. "You want to come on by my place tomorrow morning? You can look it over and decide then."

"Awesome, man."

*Yeah*, Alexander thought glumly. *Just awesome.*



At the stroke of midnight, someone knocked on Alexander's door as he was getting ready for bed. He spat out the toothpaste into the sink, wiped his mouth hastily, and headed for the door.

He slid back the bolt and opened the door, and a honeysuckle-scented tornado swept in and wrapped itself around him.

"Oh, Xander," Jeri said against his shoulder—his bare shoulder. He suddenly remembered he'd stripped to the waist in preparation for bed. Good thing he'd left his jeans on. "I just love you. You're the greatest."

He cleared his throat and put his arms gingerly around her slim waist, more aware than he wanted of the satin warmth of her cheek pressing against his shoulder, and the softness of her golden hair brushing against his chest. Her five-foot-seven frame fit nicely against his six-foot-two body, almost like they'd been made to fit together. It was a *damned* good thing he'd left his jeans on. Even so, he was in danger of a seriously embarrassing situation here.

He shoved her away and looked down at her, trying to look severe, rather than glazed with lust. "You shouldn't have done that to me, Jeri."

"I couldn't help it," she said, bouncing energetically into his living room. "It was a golden opportunity."

Cool night air drifted into the room, and he closed the door behind her. "Look, maybe you want to marry the guy, but I don't. I've kind of grown accustomed to my privacy lately."

"You have no privacy with me around anyway," she pointed out.

"True. But I like you. Connor seems okay, but I may hate him when I get to know him. Besides, for all we know Connor is an ax murderer. What if you come over here looking for Rocky Road ice cream some evening and find me chopped up in little bits in the freezer?"

"Yuck. That would seriously depress my appetite."

"Yeah, well, I don't think I'd like it either."

She settled onto his couch and grinned up at him. "Connor's okay, Xander. I've heard plenty of gossip about him, and none of it has suggested he's a psycho killer. He's a doctor, and he's been doing his residency with a thriving practice."

"Which he left behind, even though he doesn't have family here anymore. That's kind of weird, don't you think?"

"There's nothing weird about it. He probably completed his residency and didn't want to stay in Seattle any more. I bet he just wanted to return to his roots."

"Maybe," Alexander said doubtfully. He sat down next to her on the black leather couch, the same as he always did. It was a mistake. The flowery fragrance of her hair, warm and sweet like summer honeysuckle, floated up to him, and he felt himself go hard. *Really* hard.

He was shocked by his reaction. Yes, he'd secretly lusted for Jeri for a long time, but something was different tonight. There was an undercurrent of electricity he'd never before felt in her presence.

Maybe it was the fact that he was sitting here half naked. Or maybe it was the fact that she'd found a man who interested her, after he'd come to think of her as his over the course of the past four months or so, and he was jealous as hell. Either way, his hormones were charged up and racing through his veins like unruly Thoroughbreds in the Kentucky Derby.

She was totally oblivious to the bulge in his jeans. It was a damned good thing he was sitting down, he thought grimly, or she wouldn't have been so oblivious. There was no way she could have missed the Eiffel Tower if he were standing. "So are you going to do this for me?"

"You mean am I going to sacrifice my privacy and general happiness for you? Why should I?"

She blinked and turned her enormous blue eyes up to his. "You always have before."

Okay, so he was a big softie. "Maybe I'm getting a little tired of always letting you have your own way," he grumbled, as gruffly as he could manage. "Maybe I figure you owe me something this time."

"Like what?"

*Like a night of hot sex.*

He managed to prevent himself from blurting out the words, aware that they were crazy. She'd never shown any sexual interest in him, and now that she was obsessed with Connor Addison this sure as hell wasn't the time to bring up the subject.

A little voice inside his head pointed out that this might be the last chance he'd get to broach the subject. What the hell was he waiting for? He didn't want to blurt out an objection at her wedding, for God's sake. Now might be his final opportunity.



But a glance at her glowing eyes and flushed cheeks convinced him it would be fruitless. She was in love. Okay, maybe not in love, but seriously infatuated.

And the object of her infatuation wasn't him, but Connor Addison.

It wasn't the first time he'd seen her go for another guy, of course. She'd had quite a few boyfriends over the years, and he'd seen that happy glow in her eyes before. It drove him crazy that he'd never seen it aimed at him, though.

The funny thing was, up till recently he hadn't cared that much. Yeah, he'd always had a bit of a thing for her, but he'd been able to tolerate her seeing other guys. But a few months ago everything had changed, and he wasn't sure why.

No, he was lying to himself. He knew exactly why. It was because she'd kissed him.

Jeri was a touchy-feely kind of girl, and she hugged him and kissed his cheek all the time. A few months ago, though, she'd stood up on tiptoes and tried to plant a friendly good night kiss on his cheek.

He'd happened to turn his head a little, and their lips had brushed together.

Electricity had rushed through him, and it had been all he could do not to grab her, yank her against him, and kiss her senseless. The incident had completely freaked him out, the more so because she hardly seemed to have noticed it.

For days afterward, all he'd been able to think about was the gentle brush of her lips against his. It had totally altered his feelings for her, from friendly, indulgent older brother to seriously turned-on male.

He'd thought maybe the feelings would fade with time, but that had been three months ago, and he still couldn't get near her without feeling his heart pound.

And without getting a major hard-on.

Which was damned embarrassing.

“So,” she said, stretching out her long legs and propping them on his mission oak coffee table. She had changed out of the red dress, but in denim shorts her legs were still smooth, muscled, and totally sexy. He stifled a groan, feeling the Eiffel Tower grow stiffer and taller than before. “What do I owe you?”

With a violent effort, he managed to drag his mind back onto the conversation. “I’m not sure yet,” he said at last. “But I’ll think of something. Trust me.”

She grinned. “Anything you want, Xander. Anything at all.”

Heat slid through his veins, and he shut his eyes and gritted his teeth together for a long moment, trying to get himself under control.

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said at last.

## Chapter Three

"I am in love."

Jeri spun around in her own living room the next morning, feeling like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. Only by a huge effort did she stop herself from bursting into song. Her singing was very much off-key, and she figured that would annoy the hell out of her roommate, Emma Green, who was extremely far from a morning person.

Sure enough, Emma looked irritated just by the twirling. "Sit down before you get dizzy and pass out."

"I'm not going to get dizzy from this," Jeri said, still spinning. "I'm dizzy in love."

Emma's short, brown hair stood straight up all over her head because she hadn't combed it yet, and she still wore her rumpled pajamas. She was barely able to move before her first cup of coffee, let alone do anything complicated like pulling on clothes. "Jer, I'm going to have to kill you if you don't stop being so perky before breakfast. Or maybe you could fall down and hit your head on the coffee table and save me the trouble. At least then the twirling would do one of us some good. One less perky person in the world would be a good thing."

Jeri came to a standstill, less because of her roommate's irritation than because she was in fact getting dizzy. She had stopped, but the room kept going. She grinned drunkenly.

“I’m seriously happy, Emma. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this way about a guy.”

“So you’ve finally fallen for Alexander? About time.”

“Fallen for Xander?” Jeri repeated, shocked by the very notion. “Are you kidding?”

Emma took a big sip of black coffee. “No, of course I’m not kidding. It’s obvious you two are crazy about each other.”

Xander had been the most important guy in her life for a long time, and she adored him. That was undeniable. “Well, sure, in that brother-and-sister kind of way. But I couldn’t possibly kiss him or anything. It’d be gross.”

As she spoke, she was aware of a little quiver in the pit of her stomach. She vividly remembered the way he’d looked last night without a shirt on. She’d seen him that way before, of course, when they swam or went to the beach together, and yet somehow she’d never really noticed his chest before.

Of course, he had an incredible voice, or he wouldn’t be in radio. His voice had grown deeper and more magnetic since high school, like a sexy Darth Vader, but she was surprised to realize the rest of him had grown up since high school, too. He might not be a mass of muscles, but he looked pretty damn good.

She recalled the broad, tawny expanse of his chest, well toned but not bulging with muscles, lightly sprinkled with golden brown hairs, and an insistent heat settled between her thighs. She tried to ignore it, but it just made her think about the night they’d kissed by accident a few months ago. She’d felt the same heat then.

But of course that kiss had been totally accidental, and Xander hadn’t even reacted to it. Obviously he didn’t see her as female, and that was okay. If he did, that would be just too weird.

Because after all, she didn't see him as a male at all. Really.

"I don't see what's gross about it. He's a guy, and a damned nice-looking one."

"He's like my brother," Jeri explained, trying to forget that the brief moment when she'd been in his arms last night hadn't felt at all like being embraced by a brother. She squeezed her thighs together, trying to cool the heat that sparked there. Damn it, where was a fan when she needed one?

Emma didn't look convinced. "Uh-huh. Sure. So if it's not Alexander, who's this guy you've fallen for?"

Jeri felt a dreamy smile cross her face. "His name is Connor Addison."

"Sounds familiar," Emma said, wrinkling her forehead and taking another swallow of coffee as if it might help jog her memory.

"I knew him in high school," Jeri admitted. Emma was originally from North Carolina, and they'd only met a couple of years ago, when Emma had moved to Virginia. But Jeri had obviously blathered about Connor a time or two when they'd gotten drunk and loose-tongued together, because Emma's gray eyes grew dark and ominous, like summer storm clouds.

"You mean the bastard who ignored you your whole senior year?"

"Well, yeah. But he's not like that now. He's grown into a really nice guy, Emma."

"Huh. Maybe he has, or maybe he's a superficial son of a bitch who just wants you now because you're hot."

"I'm not all that hot."

"Please. I wish I had your boobs. You claim you were overweight in high school, but you look pretty damn awesome now. How do you know

the guy isn't just attracted to you because of the way you look? Maybe he's the kind of guy who'd dump you if you gained a pound or two."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"But how will you ever really know for sure, Jer?"

"I'm going to get to know him better," Jeri said with determination.

"Might be easier said than done if you met him in a bar."

Emma sounded scornful, and Jeri laughed. Her friend wasn't really a social butterfly, and she didn't really enjoy trying to meet guys in bars—or anywhere else, for that matter. Emma was a bit on the shy side. "Just because you've had a bad experience or two in bars, Em, doesn't mean they're filled with guys trying to get an easy lay."

Emma looked dubious. "Where does he live? Did he give you his number?"

Jeri grinned triumphantly. "He's Xander's new roommate."

"Oh, God, Jeri, what did you do to that poor man?"

"Who, Xander? I just found a roommate for him. He's been lonely since Mooch left."

"He's been perfectly happy since Mooch left and you know it. You are the most manipulative little—"

"You shouldn't say things you'll regret before your first cup of coffee."

Emma drained the rest of her coffee. "Fine. I'll say it now. The way you lead poor Alexander around by the nose is totally shameless, Jeri. He'd do anything for you, absolutely anything, and you repay him by manipulating him into letting a complete stranger move into his condo?"

Jeri sat down and gave her friend her most wide-eyed, innocent look. "He really doesn't mind, you know."

"Yeah, I realize that. You know why he doesn't mind? Because he'd do anything for you. He's nuts about you, you silly girl."

"Oh, he is not," Jeri said lightly, but a traitorous warmth bloomed in her stomach at the thought. A stray memory of their lips brushing together flashed through her mind, and she consciously tried to blank it out. Xander didn't feel that way about her. They'd been friends for years, after all, and he'd never given the slightest indication he saw her as female. As far as he was concerned, she was just...a buddy.

"Trust me. He is. He's got to be crazy to go along with this scheme. And he is. Crazy for you."



"Nice place," Connor said, turning around as he stood in the center of Alexander's spacious living room, with its exposed brick walls, built-in oak bookshelves, and enormous fireplace. "I can definitely see myself here."

*Oh, great,* Alexander thought. He'd had a vague hope Connor wouldn't care for his condo, but it had a very masculine feel to it, so he wasn't particularly surprised to learn it appealed to Testosterone Guy. Aloud, he said, "Glad you like it. So are you going to move in?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so."

"Where are you keeping your stuff? A storage place?"

"My stuff?" Connor lifted his eyebrows, then shrugged ruefully. "All I've got is some clothes. They're in my car."

Alexander had spotted Connor's silver BMW parked on the old cobblestone road, left over from the nineteenth century, in front of his condo. A block away, black-headed laughing gulls swooped and dove over the Elizabeth River. Alexander had the irrational hope that one would fly this way and take a dump on the shining silver surface of Connor's Bimmer.

It was one hell of a nice car, but it was kind of weird that Connor didn't seem to have any other significant possessions. Twenty-eight and a doctor, yet the guy didn't own any furniture. What was up with that?

"I guess it won't take you very long to move in, then."

Connor flashed his white grin. The guy must brush with whitening toothpaste every day to get his teeth that shiny. They practically glittered in the late morning sunlight streaming in through the windows. "I guess not. I need to go buy a mattress, though."

*What happened to your other mattress? Or have you been sleeping on the floor for the past ten years?* It was on the tip of Alexander's tongue to ask, but just then someone rapped at the door. He bit back a groan.

He had a pretty damned good idea who it was.

"Come on in," he called, and sure enough, Jeri bounded into the room, accompanied by a gust of warm summer air and a flash of bright June sunshine, her hair loose around her shoulders in a lush golden cascade.

Today she was dressed to impress in a pair of tight, short denim jeans and a purple tank top made out of that clingy fabric that stuck to every curve. Alexander wasn't sure what you called the stuff, but he was definitely sure he liked it.

Connor apparently did, too. His eyes lit up as she entered, and he grinned broadly, showing every one of those excruciatingly white teeth.

"Hey, Jeri."

Alexander noticed with annoyance that he didn't have any trouble remembering her name now that she was svelte. He'd never taken the slightest note of her in high school. He tried to squelch the idea as unfair—at Judgment Day he sure hoped God wouldn't be judging people for how they'd behaved in high school, because everyone was headed



straight for Hell if He did—but he didn't quite succeed. He'd seen Jeri cry over this guy too many times.

"Hi, Connor," she said brightly. "How's it going?"

Alexander felt annoyance well up within him at the fact that she didn't acknowledge his presence, or even seem aware that he was in the room. Geez, now he was invisible to her too. Life sucked.

"Pretty good," Connor said. "We've agreed I'm going to move in for a while."

"That's fabulous," she crooned. "I come over here a lot."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah," Alexander said, trying to make himself visible by forcing himself into the conversation, and maybe in some masculine way trying to stake his claim. "Jeri and I hang out together all the time."

She uttered her light laugh and waved her manicured hand in the air, managing to convey that their relationship was casual, maybe even unimportant. "Neither of us has a significant other right now, so we've been killing time together. We watch a lot of movies, talk, boring stuff like that."

*Twist the knife, why don't you?* Alexander thought numbly. She was very obviously trying to make it clear to Connor that he wasn't a threat. And she was succeeding. Jesus, she made him sound...neutered.

"Yeah," he said. "We watch a lot of football." Football sounded manly, didn't it?

He was a manly man, damn it. To prove it he'd beat his chest and swing from vines if he had to.

Unfortunately, his words made Connor look at Jeri with even more interest. "No kidding. Are you a Skins fan?"

"Of course. You have to be a Skins fan around here. The fact that they never win is totally irrelevant."

Connor flashed his pearly whites. "That's the real reason I moved back, you know. I missed being in Skins country."

"Too bad it's not football season," she answered, returning his grin. "But maybe we can find something else to watch this afternoon."

Alexander felt himself turning to mist, insubstantial and transparent. Feeling a bit like a sulky child, he turned and stalked from the room, hoping Jeri would notice and say something along the lines of, "Oh, Xander, where are you going? Stay and talk with us."

But she didn't.

Just as well, he decided as he headed out the door. He had some shopping to do. He didn't really need to hang around with Jeri anyway. Chatting with her could be a real time waster, since she talked so damn much. He was really better off getting his shopping done.

Dropping into the driver's seat of his classic 280Z, he leaned his head back and sighed, then turned the key. He only used the dark red car once or twice a week, since he was able to get around Norfolk's downtown quite easily by walking and biking, but despite its age the car usually started without difficulty. It roared to life, then its engine noise dropped to a grumble. He tried to keep himself from grumbling along with it.

After all, he thought glumly, there was absolutely nothing he enjoyed better on a Sunday afternoon than going shopping.



"Thank God for arena football," Jeri said. "Otherwise there wouldn't be anything to watch on weekends at all right now."

Connor smiled. She saw his gaze briefly stray away from Xander's humongous TV and to her legs, propped casually on the mission oak

coffee table. If there was one thing she prided herself on, it was her legs. There had been a time when her thighs were wide and flabby, but several hours on a Stairmaster every week ensured that her thunder thighs were a thing of the past. Not that she wasn't occasionally self-conscious about them, even so. But his admiring glance did a lot to help build up her ego.

"I guess," he said. "But the Nashville Kats aren't the Redskins."

"I bet they're happy about that, too."

His grin grew wider. The Skins' ability to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory was legendary. He looked back at the TV, away from her legs, and changed the subject. "So," he said. "How long have you known Alexander?"

Jeri blinked warily, guessing that he was fishing for information on her availability. She often had a hard time convincing guys that Xander wasn't her boyfriend, probably because it was so damn obvious that she loved him. She'd had to make a special effort this morning to focus totally on Connor, because she knew if she and Xander started talking they'd wind up inadvertently cutting Connor out of the conversation. It happened every time. She and Xander sometimes seemed to exist in their own little world, a world they'd built together over long years of hanging out and talking together, and it was often hard to share that world with other people.

"A long time," she said. She couldn't admit she'd known him since high school, since that'd blow her cover. "We're just friends, though."

"He seems like a nice guy."

"He's a great guy," Jeri said, aware that some of the pride and love she had for Xander glowed in her voice. She couldn't talk about Xander without sounding like an adoring sister. "He's a DJ for the local Mix station, you know."

"He likes music, then. That explains all the CDs."

Jeri nodded. Xander's CD collection—everything from classical to hip-hop—filled a large section of the oak bookcases, and his DVDs took up quite a bit of space, too. The rest of the bookshelves were loaded with books. "Yeah, he loves music. He likes to read, too. Those books aren't just for show. I think he's read every one of them."

Connor looked away from the TV and squinted at the bookcase dubiously. "He reads Charles Dickens?"

She bristled at the masculine scorn in his voice. "He reads everything," she answered, a little defensively. "He reads Tom Clancy too. He's read all the *Star Wars* novels. And mysteries. He's big into mysteries."

"Sounds like an interesting guy."

"He is. You'll like living with him. He's smart, and fun to talk to."

She became aware that Connor was studying her, an eyebrow cocked and a faint smile on his lips, and she flushed. She'd forgotten the first rule of dating: *Don't talk about another guy.*

Time to change the subject to Connor, she decided. "So what do you like to read?" she said hastily.

He shrugged a big shoulder. "I don't read for fun a whole lot. I'm too busy."

"What about music?"

"I don't listen to a lot of music, either."

She reminded herself firmly that everyone else didn't like to read and listen to music as much as she and Xander did. It didn't mean Connor was boring, just that he had other interests. "I guess doctors work a lot of weird hours."

He nodded, and his beautiful lips curved in a wry smile. "I'm in pediatrics, you know, and kids have a lot of emergencies. You wouldn't believe the horrible things they manage to do to themselves."

"Actually, I would. I'm a kindergarten teacher."

He lifted his eyebrows. "No kidding? I bet that's fun."

"It's a load of fun. I love my kids. They're all so sweet. And incredibly smart."

"I bet they love you, too."

Her mouth quirked. "Most of the time."

"You're lucky, then. When I walk into an examining room, they're usually screaming and hanging on to their moms for all they're worth. They don't like me much."

"But you like them?"

"Yeah," he said with a sigh. "I like kids a lot."

She was surprised by the rough despair in his voice. It sounded almost like he thought he was never going to have kids or something. Weird. She opened her mouth to ask him more, but he turned toward the TV, and his face went blank, as if he was deliberately trying to drag the subject away from kids and onto a nice, safe, neutral subject.

"Check it out," he said in a tone that put an end to any questions she might have had. "The game's starting."

Sighing, Jeri turned toward the TV. The game had started, all right. The problem, she decided, was that the game wasn't unfolding exactly the way she had expected it to.

## Chapter Four

On Monday morning, Jeri woke up to the sound of Xander's deep, resonant voice murmuring her name in her ear. She rolled over, cracked an eye open, and squinted at the clock.

Yep, it was time to get up, all right.

Xander—or “Alex in the morning,” as he was known on Mix 107.5—finished dedicating the song to her and started the music. Norah Jones' husky voice, singing “Come Away With Me,” filled the room.

Jeri sat up with a smile. Good old Xander. He knew exactly what music she loved best, and during the workweek he invariably played one of her favorites precisely at seven, when her alarm was set to go off. He only mentioned her name occasionally, but when he did it gave her a warm little thrill to hear his voice saying her name as she woke up.

Not that she'd ever tell him that. It seemed a little weird to enjoy hearing your best friend whisper your name in your ear, and it wasn't something she was about to confess to him. There was something oddly intimate about it, and she just didn't want to go there.

She turned her mind deliberately to Connor as she got up, tossed her black satin nightie in a careless heap on the floor, and headed for the shower. Connor was the guy she wanted to be thinking about this morning. They'd had a nice afternoon yesterday hanging out in Xander's living room and watching arena football. Not as much fun as watching the Skins, but a lot better than NASCAR or golf, in her opinion.

Xander, tactful guy that he was, had made himself scarce, coming back late in the afternoon with about a thousand grocery bags, so she'd gotten to spend several hours alone with Connor. She hadn't felt a whole lot of chemistry zinging between them, but Connor was easy on the eyes, and she enjoyed looking at him, even if he didn't make her pulse race quite the way she'd expected.

She had to admit it had been kind of difficult to get a conversation going with Connor, and she hadn't tried really hard after that first effort. Something about his manner had been just a bit repressive. It simply wasn't quite as easy to talk to him as it was to Xander.

She grumbled at herself, annoyed by the direction of her thoughts, as she lathered up her long hair and the fragrance of honeysuckles began to fill her glass-enclosed shower. Of course it wasn't as easy to talk to Connor as it was to talk to Xander. She and Xander had known each other forever. They loved all the same movies and they laughed at each other's musical tastes. Naturally it was easier to talk to Xander.

But before long she'd know Connor inside and out, with that special intimacy that could only be had by making love, and then she'd definitely prefer his company to Xander's. She had taken Xander's suggestion of getting to know him to heart, and she planned on spending a whole lot of time with him and learning everything there was to know about him.

Xander was right—she wasn't really a love 'em and leave 'em kind of girl. But she was tired of being celibate. She needed a relationship, and Connor was just the ticket, even if he was the strong and silent type.

She rinsed her hair, then began to lather her body with honeysuckle-scented gel—she was nothing if not consistent. As she ran her hands over her body, she tried to imagine what it would feel like to have Connor's big hands touching her skin, stroking her everywhere.

Hell, who was she kidding? She'd been trying to imagine that since high school.

She leaned back against the tile and let her hands drift dreamily across her breasts, imagining Connor touching her there, caressing her belly...and lower. Thinking of Connor's rugged face and his incredibly wide chest. Her nipples pebbled under her palms, and she stroked them, remembering how they'd hardened to the point of pain when she'd flung herself against Xander's naked chest two nights ago.

No, damn it. *No*. She was supposed to be fantasizing about Connor, not Xander. So how come Xander's face kept flickering into her mind?

She swore lividly and began scrubbing. Damn it, couldn't a girl even indulge in a few fantasies in the shower without Xander intruding? He was her *best friend*, not a boyfriend. He was more like one of the girls, except he just happened to have a penis. Not that she'd ever checked or anything. But she supposed he had one, same as any other guy.

The point was, she didn't even think of him as a guy at all.

But if that was the case, a sly little voice at the back of her mind queried insistently, why did the memory of his bare chest keep flashing into her mind?



"She doesn't know I exist, Joe," Alexander said between bites of his hamburger. "She was so wrapped up in talking to this guy, I left the room and she didn't even notice. I swear, I might as well have been invisible."

His brother looked at him with sympathy. Two years older than Alexander, Joe had just passed the big three-oh, and a glimmer of silver threaded through the hair at his temples. He had an extremely annoying



tendency to address Alexander's problems as if he were a Biblical patriarch, rich in years and wisdom, rather than an only slightly older brother whose own life was perpetually screwed up. "Jeri knows you exist, Alex. You two have been best buds since high school."

Alexander picked up a french fry and stabbed it into his ketchup with more force than necessary. He'd wrapped up his shift at the radio station an hour ago and decided to join his brother for lunch at a nice sandwich shop on Granby Street, simply because he felt the need to talk to someone. Even if the someone was his irritating older brother. "Well, maybe I'm tired of being best buds. Maybe I want a little more. Did you ever think of that?"

Joe put down his own sandwich, a Reuben, and stared at his brother. "So," he said. "You're finally admitting it?"

"Admitting what?"

"That you're in love with Jeri."

"I didn't say that." Alexander put his hand up, palm forward, in a *Stop right there!* gesture. "I did *not* say that, okay? Yeah, okay, so maybe lately I've realized she's female."

"You realized she was female clear back in high school, buddy. You just chose not to do anything about it."

"Because she was obsessed with this Connor guy. I mean, she followed him all over the school. It was really pitiful."

"But he wasn't interested in her. So why didn't you make a move?"

Joe had missed a lot of the angst of Alexander's senior year of high school because he'd been at the University of Virginia, downing kegs and occasionally studying. "I did," Alex said glumly. "Toward the end of the year, I got my nerve up and asked her to the prom."

"And she went with you, right? So why didn't you sweep her off her feet then?"

"I tried. I rented a limo, took her to a great restaurant, bought her a nice corsage, the works. She spent the whole night yanking me around the dance floor, trying to keep Connor and his date in sight."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, ouch. It put a hell of a damper on the romance, I can tell you."

"Okay," his brother said. "Fine. I can understand why things didn't work out then. But you've had ten years to make a move on the girl, and this Connor guy's been out of the picture the whole time. So what exactly was stopping you?"

"After we went to that damned prom together, I realized she was never going to see me as anything other than a friend. If I put pressure on her to go out with me, I was afraid I'd lose her for good. I figured it was better to be there for her as a friend than never have her in my life at all."

"That's either really romantic, or really stupid. I can't quite figure out which."

"My money's on stupid." Alexander took another enormous bite of his hamburger. Troubles with his love life notwithstanding, he'd just come off six hours at the radio station, and he was starving. "Honestly, I've thought about making a move a thousand times since then, but either she's had a boyfriend or I've been seeing someone."

"For ten years? That's an excuse, and you know it."

Alexander glared at him over his burger. "So I'm a wimp. So sue me."

"But now you've finally gotten your nerve up. After ten years."

Alexander sighed. "Something happened a few months ago that made me realize how much I like her, Joe. We kind of kissed."

Joe's eyebrows shot up. "You kissed her? Isn't that like incest or something?"

Alexander groaned. "I would have thought so. But it didn't feel like kissing a sister, trust me. I never realized just how sexy Jeri was till then."

"So now you want to start dating her?"

"*Dating* might be too strong a word, Joe. Don't make more of it than it is. We're not talking about Cinderella and Prince Charming marrying under a rainbow, riding off into the sunset, and living happily ever after in the magic kingdom. I've got the hots for her, that's all."

"Uh-huh," Joe said in a tone that suggested he was not convinced. "Well, whether you want her for a night or forever, you're going to have to change your approach, or she's never going to notice anything's changed. People get kind of used to the status quo after a while. So here's a radical idea for you. What if you *make* her see you as something besides a friend?"

"What, like grab her, plant my lips on her, and stick my tongue down her throat?" He was appalled to realize how much the idea appealed to him.

"I was thinking of something a little more subtle. Women like to be courted, you know."

Alexander snorted. "*Courted?* Jesus, no wonder you don't have a girlfriend, Joe. This isn't the nineteenth century."

"You're a fine one to talk, buddy. When's the last time you got any?"

"Uh..."

"My point exactly. You don't know a damn thing about women."

"My best friend is a woman, Joe. Obviously I know something about women."

"Fine. Let me correct that. You don't know a damn thing about romancing women."

Alexander sighed. "Guilty as charged."

“So let’s put our heads together and come up with a plan.”

“Okay,” Alexander said dubiously. “But is it just me, or is this a little like the blind leading the blind?”

“Would you rather blunder around in the dark by yourself for the rest of your life?”

“No.” Alexander ate the last bite of his burger. Behind Joe, a woman got up, dropped a tip on the table, and started in their direction, toward the door. “I guess you can’t screw my life up worse than I already have.”

“Great, Alex. Positive thinking. You know, a little optimism wouldn’t kill you. Think positive.”

“I am thinking positive,” Alexander said.

The woman walking past their booth suddenly halted, looked down at him, and squealed. “Oh, my *God*. Are you Alex in the morning?”

Alexander grabbed his napkin. It never failed. Fans always figured out who he was right when he had a big glob of ketchup on his face, or spinach between his teeth. Wiping his lips hastily, he smiled up at the woman. “Guilty as charged.”

“Oh, my *God*. I listen to your show every morning on my drive to work. It’s the only thing that stops me from going crazy in the traffic.”

“Glad to hear it,” Alexander said. Part of him, the part that admittedly wasn’t thinking positive, wondered why Jeri was never around when one of his fans noticed him. He was a celebrity, damn it. Okay, so no one ever recognized his face, despite the fact that he did live broadcasts from various local events almost every weekend, but they sure as hell knew his voice when they heard it. He wasn’t totally invisible.

“Can I have your autograph?”

Alexander smiled politely and signed the only piece of paper the woman could find in her purse, the back of a shopping list. As she flipped the paper over he noticed the first item on the list was

Preparation H. *Yeah, she's going to cherish that for the rest of her life*, he thought wryly as the woman beamed and headed out the door.

He looked back at Joe to see his brother looking at him with annoyance.

"How come that happens every time we have lunch together?"

"I can't help it," Alexander said. "It's my voice. They recognize it."

"You'd think Jeri would be impressed by the fact that you're a celebrity."

"She's not. She's known me too long. She just thinks of me as her friend from high school."

"And that's what we've got to change." Joe shook a finger at him. "When she thinks of you, she needs to think romance."

"I rented the woman a friggin' limo. She still didn't think of me as romantic. How can I outdo a limousine?"

"That was a long time ago, Alex. Quit living in the past."

"I will if she will," Alexander grumbled, but Joe ignored him.

"Listen carefully," Joe said. "Here's your first step."



Jeri trudged up her brick steps at four-thirty that afternoon, tired to the bone. Teaching twenty-five kindergartners could have that effect on a woman. She knew Emma wouldn't be home yet, and she looked forward to a few peaceful minutes of just lounging on the couch with a Diet Coke and watching *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*. After teaching her kids to write and read all day long, she needed a bit of rest and relaxation.

She paused on the top step. Someone had left a bunch of flowers leaning against the door. Picking them up, she saw white, long-stemmed roses and honeysuckle, of all things. Someone must have picked the

honeysuckle himself, because she was pretty sure you couldn't get such a lowly weed from a florist.

The card read simply, *To Jeri*.

She'd never gotten roses before, and she was thrilled. It was a beautiful bouquet, made more lovely by the fact that the sender had gone to the trouble of finding honeysuckle and adding it to the roses before delivering it. That showed real effort to please on his part.

*Score another one for Connor*, she thought as she carried them into the blue-and-white kitchen and found a Lenox vase to put them in. He might have been a jerk in high school, but he was showing he had what it took to be a contender.

She put the flowers in the middle of the kitchen table, where Emma couldn't help but see them, and then settled down in the big, comfortable chair in front of the TV to watch *Oprah*. Around five, the door opened, and Emma came in. She patted Jeri on the head, as she always did—Emma claimed she had originally wanted a dog, but that Jeri was a less high-maintenance pet—and went out to the kitchen. A moment later, there was a shriek.

"Oh, my *God*! Who sent you roses?"

Jeri tried unsuccessfully to suppress a grin. "That guy I told you about. Connor."

"Wow. Look at them. And honeysuckle, too. I guess he figured out you like honeysuckle, huh? I take back everything I said, Jer. The man is a prince."

"Told you."

Emma came into the living room holding the card, her forehead furrowed. "Why are you so sure they're from him, Jer? The card doesn't have a signature."

"Of course they're from him. I spent yesterday afternoon with the man. Who else would they be from?"

"Uh...I don't know. Maybe Alexander?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Xander has never sent me flowers." Of course, he'd brought her a corsage for the prom, but that was what a guy had to do when he asked someone to the prom, even on a pity date. Anyway, that had been ten years ago. Any flowers she'd ever received from Xander were ancient history and had turned to dust long since.

"So why do you think Connor didn't sign the card?"

"He obviously figured I'd know who sent it," Jeri said with an airiness she didn't quite feel. She had to admit that it was a little odd Connor hadn't signed his name.

Emma didn't look convinced either, but she shrugged. "I guess you could be right." She looked up from the card with an expression of envy. "No one ever brings me flowers. I think I hate you."

Jeri smiled serenely. "You should. I've really gotten lucky this time."

"No kidding. The guy is gorgeous, sweet, and he sends flowers. What more could any woman want?"

"Not much, I guess."

"Although," Emma said, "I guess the jury's still out on the most important thing of all. Is he good in bed, do you think?"

"I don't know." Jeri grinned. "But I intend to find out."

## Chapter Five

“Thanks so much for the flowers.”

Jeri followed up on her enthusiastic words with a warm hug. Alexander stood to the side and watched her fling her arms around Connor, feeling like he’d been struck in the stomach.

He was a moron. He’d stupidly listened to his brother’s advice—listened to a man who clearly had absolutely no clue about women—and he’d totally screwed himself over.

“Women love secret admirers,” Joe had told him. “They love the romance of looking at every man they meet and wondering if he could be the one. She’ll love to get roses from a secret admirer, trust me. She’ll forget all about this Connor guy.”

He’d obviously been dumb as a stump to listen to Joe. Because she wasn’t looking at every man she met and wondering if he was the one. Like an inept Nancy Drew, she’d leapt to an entirely wrong conclusion. And Connor was getting *his* hug as a result.

He stiffened his spine and picked his jaw up off the floor, realizing this wasn’t that big a deal. Naturally Connor would announce he hadn’t sent any flowers, and she’d be left to wonder who her secret admirer was.

Connor blinked. “The flowers?”

“The roses and honeysuckle!” she said, patting him on the arm. “They’re gorgeous!”



Connor looked blank for a moment longer, then flashed his blinding white smile. "I'm glad you liked them."

*Son of a bitch.* Alexander hadn't liked Connor from the moment he'd seen him, mostly because he remembered how he'd ignored Jeri in the past. Okay, he admitted, it might partially be because the guy looked like a male model, too. But now he felt the utmost distaste for the guy. Taking credit for another guy's flowers was just...*low*. His jaw tightened with determination.

"Hey," he said, stepping toward Jeri.

She barely glanced at him. "Oh, hi, Xander. How's it going?"

"Listen," Alexander said, "I'm the one—"

"Maybe we can talk later," she said, speaking right over his words. "Connor asked me out to see that new *Farthest Space* movie, and if we don't get going we're going to be late."

Abruptly he realized Jeri hadn't just dropped in, the way she usually did. She was dressed to go out, in a sexy white sundress with a plunging neckline that showed a hell of a lot of smooth skin. Long, gold earrings glittering against her neck, and her pink-manicured toenails peeped from white, strappy sandals. She looked irresistible. But he backed away, feeling like she'd clobbered him in the head with an iron skillet. He'd spent ten years being there for her when she needed him, through bad relationships and good, and she'd never blown him off this way.

At first he'd put her behavior down to her infatuation with Connor, but now he was beginning to wonder just why she was so fixated on him. Granted, the guy was decent-looking. But he'd never seen her so obsessed with a guy before, no matter how handsome he was.

He was beginning to suspect she was somehow revising her high school experience in her head, not unlike remaking a movie with a sad

ending so that the girl got the guy in the end. And proving to herself that she was gorgeous and sexy enough to get the most popular boy in school.

In which case he wasn't competing against another man. He was competing against her past. And he was doomed, because no man could compete against the most popular boy in school and come out on top.

"Okay," he said with a sigh. "Enjoy the movie, guys."

"Oh, believe me," Connor said with a wink, "we will."

They walked out together, Connor's hand very low on her waist, almost on the curve of her hip. For long moments after they left, Alexander stalked restlessly around his condo. He was surprised to realize he felt edgy, irritated, even *threatened* by their growing relationship.

What the hell had Connor meant by that remark, anyway? He could just envision them making out in the back row of the theater, or even imagine her in the dark, down on her knees in front of Connor...*ugh*. He cut off the thought before it could go any further.

There was an image he definitely didn't want in his mind. Bleah.

It wasn't fair, he thought savagely. He'd softened her up with long-stemmed roses and hand-picked honeysuckle, and now Connor was taking unfair advantage of it. Unfair advantage of *her*.

Clearly the man couldn't be trusted. Alexander had pegged him as a decent type, but he'd obviously been very wrong in his judgment. Maybe the guy *was* a serial killer, after all. A man who'd lie about sending flowers might do anything, up to and including keeping little chopped-up body parts in the freezer hidden beneath the ice cream. Alexander was halfway inclined to head out after them, just to protect Jeri.

Now that he thought about it, that wasn't a bad idea. Jeri was out on the town with a guy she hardly knew, and that wasn't the safest situation, was it?

After all, he reasoned, he had wanted to go see *Farthest Space* for a while himself. It was playing over at the MacArthur Center, which was almost certainly where they were heading. The big mall was the nearest place to see movies, if you didn't count the Naro, which showed the arty kind of film Jeri didn't much care for. So it was a good bet they were at the mall.

He figured he could wander into the theater once the lights went down, and Jeri would never spot him. Secret Agent Man, that was him.

Not that he was following them, exactly. No. He'd just found himself alone, with time on his hands, and decided to go take in a movie.

It really had nothing to do with Jeri.



Jeri let her hand brush against Connor's as she reached into the bucket of popcorn he'd bought. She was dismayed to discover she didn't feel the hot rush of lust she'd expected. She'd obviously been out of the dating circuit too long if she could sit next to a movie-star handsome guy, could even touch his hand, without feeling even as much lustful anticipation as her vibrator could inspire.

Not a good sign, really. Maybe she was approaching menopause.

He obviously noticed her hand touching his, because he leaned over, so close his lips almost touched her ear, and whispered, "Great start to the movie, huh?"

The warm brush of his breath in her ear should have inspired lust, too, but it didn't. Hell, forget menopause. Maybe she was dead and just hadn't noticed.

"It's all right," she whispered back. "I've seen better."

Like last weekend, when she'd watched the original *Star Wars* trilogy with Alexander for the thirtieth time. Now there was a classic bit of filmmaking, and they'd wound up staging a mock lightsaber duel in his living room, using yardsticks. And back in March they'd watched *Jaws* and laughed their heads off at the shark. For the next two months, every time Xander had called her he'd started off the conversation with "duh-DUM, duh-DUM..." Okay, *Jaws* wasn't the greatest movie in the world, but she'd had a great time watching it anyway.

*Because I was with Xander.*

She crossed the thought out of her mind almost as soon as it occurred. Yes, she was used to watching movies with Xander, and yes, she was accustomed to his goofy sense of humor, and the way he couldn't watch the *Star Wars* trilogy without intoning in his deep voice, "I am your faaaaaather, Luke!" and sounding scarily like James Earl Jones, only sexier.

But just because she enjoyed watching movies with Xander didn't mean she couldn't enjoy watching them with another man, right? He hadn't ruined her for other men or anything. Watching movies with a guy wasn't like having sex with him.

And where the hell had that thought come from? She'd never had sex with Xander, and even if she had, she had no reason to imagine it would ruin her for other men. In fact, just the thought was creepy. Xander was like a brother to her, even if her heart did beat a little faster when she heard his voice on her radio in the morning.

She was sure sex with Connor would be fabulous, despite the fact that she felt about as much excitement touching his hand as she did when she shopped for vegetables and found a really ripe tomato. It wasn't Connor's fault. Touching a guy's fingers wasn't all that exciting, anyhow. Now, touching other parts of that gorgeous, sculpted body...

The sad thing was, even that idea didn't do much for her. Sighing, she went back to watching the movie.

A couple of minutes later, someone walked down the aisle, catching her wandering attention. Despite the darkness, she instantly recognized the smooth, relaxed stride.

It was Xander.

She frowned. That was weird. She'd mentioned they were going to see *Farthest Space*, but he hadn't remarked that he was too. It was a little hard to believe this was a coincidence. Odds were he'd followed them to the theater.

And yet she couldn't figure why he'd have come. Not for companionship—that was obvious from the fact that he sat quite some distance away from them. Had he come just to keep an eye on her, because he didn't trust Connor for some reason? Sort of a big brother thing, to make sure she didn't get hurt?

That might have made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside, except big brothers usually followed along on dates to make sure their sisters didn't get any action, too.

That would definitely put a damper on her plans.

She decided she'd have to beat the hell out of Xander right after the movie.

## Chapter Six

Alexander thought he'd been pretty clever to arrive ten minutes into the movie, so Jeri wouldn't spot him in the darkness. Not that he could have gotten there before the movie started anyway. He'd walked over to the MacArthur Center from his condo, which was conveniently only a few blocks from the mall. Although it was filled with upscale stores, MacArthur Center wasn't unlike a suburban mall, except that its design echoed downtown's historic architecture, and given its location right in the middle of the city, it wasn't surrounded by acres and acres of parking spaces. But it was an enormous building, and hiking through the mall to the movie theaters took some time.

He'd spotted Jeri right away, but she hadn't seen him. Or at least he thought she hadn't, till the credits started to roll and she stalked right toward him, Connor in tow.

"Hi, Xander."

"Oh," he said, trying hard to sound surprised. He had a bad feeling he hadn't succeeded. He tried a big, amiable smile instead. "How's it going, guys?"

Jeri wasn't impressed by his friendly-and-stupid act. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared down at him, disapproval etched onto her features. He imagined the kindergartners in her class wanted to crawl under their desk when she looked at them that way. At least her expression had that effect on him.

"What are you doing here, Xander?"

"Umm..." He wished he were better at lying under pressure. "You mentioned going to see a movie, and I suddenly remembered I'd been wanting to come see *Farthest Space*. I didn't realize you were headed over here too."

"Oh, really," she said, in the same voice she might have used on a student who announced his goldfish had eaten his homework. Alexander squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. God, she was scary in teacher mode. Just terrifying.

"Uh, yeah."

"I'm pretty sure I mentioned the name of the movie."

Alexander gave serious thought to crawling under his seat, no matter how revoltingly sticky the floor was. "Uh, maybe you did. But I didn't mean to horn in on your date or anything."

"I'm sure."

The hostility emanating from Jeri evidently made Connor uncomfortable, because he looked down at Alexander with sympathy. "Do you want to go to dinner with us, dude?"

Doubtless the suggestion was intended to make Alexander feel better, but he cringed anyway. Great. Connor thought he was so pathetic and lonely he was willing to let him tag along, like a little brother they couldn't get rid of. Evidently Connor was a nicer guy than he'd thought, but there was no way he was going to intrude on their date.

Secret Agent Man, yes. A third wheel, no.

"Uh, no," he said miserably, wishing he'd never gotten himself into this. He was stupid as well as pathetic. "I'm fine, thanks."

"Just to be on the safe side," Jeri said, still in her sternest teacher mode, "we're not going to tell you where we're going. And we're picking someplace totally at random, so don't try to guess."

She spun on her high heel and stalked away from him. Connor shot him an apologetic look and followed.

Drowning in humiliation, Alexander sank down in his seat and watched the remaining fifteen minutes of credits.



“That guy has it bad for you.”

Jeri looked up from the menu of the Japanese restaurant they’d agreed on, after some debate. Granby Street in downtown Norfolk was crowded with good restaurants, and it could be hard to make a decision. “Who?”

“Alexander. He must really like you if he’d follow you out on a date with another guy.”

Jeri practically growled at Alexander’s name and dropped her eyes back to the menu, trying to decide if she wanted miso-shiru or osuimono soup. Anything to keep her mind off how annoyed she was with her best friend. “He doesn’t like me the way you’re thinking. Trust me.”

“I think maybe he does. When he’s around, I kind of get this vibe, like I’m intruding on his territory, you know?”

“We’ve been friends for a long time,” Jeri explained, taking a sip of her saki. “That’s all. He’s a little...overprotective. Kind of like a big brother.”

“I don’t think he looks at you like a big brother, Jeri.”

Jeri frowned. Odd, but Emma had said almost the same thing, had suggested she and Xander belonged together. *So you’ve finally fallen for Alexander? About time.*



And yet she knew perfectly well Xander didn't care for her in the way Connor was suggesting. God knew she didn't think of *him* that way. In fact, right now she was ready to kill him.

"And there's another thing," Connor said slowly, as if confessing some dreadful wrongdoing. "I didn't send you any flowers."

She jerked her head up to stare at him, forgetting all about the misoshiru. "Excuse me?"

"Those flowers you thanked me for. They didn't come from me."

"Well, then, who—"

"I don't know. But I think I can guess."

She pulled out her stern teacher face, which always made the kids in her class cringe, and put it on. "You let me think you sent them, Connor."

He shrugged, looking almost as uncomfortable under her glare as her kids did. "I'm an asshole, okay? I guess I figured if you thought I'd sent them you'd be more willing to, you know—"

"Put out?"

At the ice in her voice he looked even more unhappy. "It was stupid. I know. But you're a beautiful woman, and I... Anyway, you should have seen the look on your friend's face. He looked like he wanted to kill me."

"Maybe that's why he followed us," Jeri said dubiously. "He knew you didn't send the flowers, so he figured he couldn't trust you." Although that meant Xander must have sent the flowers, and she still wasn't sure that was the case. She couldn't quite wrap her mind around the idea of Xander sending her a gorgeous bouquet.

"He's probably right." Connor reached across the table and took her hand, stroking his thumb across the palm. "You're not the kind of woman I can trust myself around, Jeri."

Bitterness welled up in her, totally unexpectedly, and she shut her eyes. "You seemed able to trust yourself around me in high school."

He tilted his head. "Say what?"

"As long as we're confessing our little white lies here, Connor, I should tell you we went to high school together."

"No kidding?" He squinted at her thoughtfully. "I don't remember you."

"Well, of course you don't," she said, more tartly than she intended. "You never noticed me."

He grinned. "I can't imagine not noticing someone like you, babe."

"I was different back then." She looked down at his thumb, still trailing across her palm, and wondered why she didn't feel a damn thing when he touched her. She hesitated a moment, then burst out, "I was fat and ugly in high school."

He looked at her a long moment. "I don't believe it."

She remembered her mom's voice, acidic and bitter. *You need to lose some weight, or no man will ever want you, Jeri.* And her mother must have been right, because she was only asked out once in high school. She remembered her excitement at finally being asked out in December of her senior year, only to be stood up at the last minute. She remembered the agony of waiting for someone to ask her to prom, and finally having to go with Xander. High school, she thought ruefully, must be one of the nine circles of hell.

"Trust me," she said. "I was huge."

He shrugged. "You might have been overweight, for all I know, Jeri. But I don't believe you were ever ugly."

"You never noticed me," she said in a miserable voice. "I had an enormous crush on you. I followed you all over the school. And you never noticed."

"I was an asshole in high school, Jeri. I think most of us were. I'm sorry I don't remember you, though. Did we talk a lot?"

"I don't think we ever talked."

He looked at her for a long moment, his jade-green eyes filled with sympathy. "You've been walking around feeling bitter for ten years because I never noticed you, when you never even walked up to me and tried to start a conversation with me? You know that's kind of irrational, right?"

She swallowed. "I guess it is," she admitted. "I never really thought of it like that." Which wasn't totally true, because Xander had pointed it out to her more than once, but she'd ignored him. Maybe she hadn't wanted to admit she was at least partially at fault for the awful train wreck that had been her senior year.

"If you liked me that much, how come you never asked *me* out?"

"You were always surrounded by these perfect, thin cheerleaders. You know, like Mindy Pendergrast."

"Oh, yeah, Mindy," he said, nodding. "God, she used to drive me crazy."

"I know."

"I don't mean crazy like that," he said, and laughed. "She was always trying to get me to do her papers for her at the last minute. The girl had absolutely no brain. I think she must have done a flip wrong and hit her head, because she couldn't get an assignment finished to save her life."

"She was so pretty."

"Yeah, she was. I think all the male teachers gave her better grades than she earned because she was so good at that weird eyelash-fluttering thing. Maybe she figured out how to make it through life trading on her face and body, instead of ever using her brain. But if she did, that's kind of sad, don't you think?"

“You almost make me glad I wasn’t pretty in high school. I had to work for my grades.”

“You’re a smart woman. I bet you didn’t have to work too hard.” He looked down at the menu again. “So you’ve thought I was a superficial jerk for the past ten years?”

“Uh...” She tried to find a better way to cast that and couldn’t. “Sort of, I guess. I suppose that wasn’t really fair, now that I think about it. But eighteen-year-old girls aren’t the most rational creatures in the world.”

“No kidding. Thank God those days are behind us.”

“Thank God,” she agreed in a heartfelt voice.

“Are you telling me no one asked you out? Ever?”

“Tom Braden asked me out once. But he called and stood me up.” She still remembered the awfulness of sitting in the living room, waiting and waiting, while her mother looked critically at the fit of her jeans and lectured her on the need to lose weight. At last the phone had rung—Tom with a flimsy excuse—and she’d escaped to her room to avoid the barrage of “I told you so’s” from her mother.

“And then there was the prom,” she said. “It was horrible.”

“Who’d you go with?”

“Xander. But it was a pity date. He asked me out because...”

“Because I didn’t.”

“Um. Yeah. Pretty much. Although he didn’t have anyone to go with either, so I guess it was a pity date on both sides.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” he said, “I had the prom date from hell, too. The girl practically tried to rape me in the car.”

Jeri lifted an eyebrow. “That’s not really the kind of thing adolescent males usually complain about.”

"I didn't know her at all. It was our first date. And I was actually kind of a Boy Scout, believe it or not. She was wearing this really low-cut dress, and when she yanked it down and waved a boob at me, I just about had a heart attack."

Jeri snorted. She couldn't help it. "She sounds like she had a more forthright approach than I did. You have to give her credit for that, at least."

"That's a little too forthright for my personal comfort level. Even nowadays." The amusement faded from his green eyes. "Look, Jeri, I'm sorry if I hurt you in high school."

She shook her head. "I'm starting to think maybe I'm the one who hurt me in high school, Connor."

"Yeah, maybe. But you know, even if you'd asked me out I can't guarantee I'd have said yes. I just don't know. I really was kind of a jerk back then."

"I guess I didn't want to give you the chance to reject me," she said softly. After the horrible night she'd been stood up, she hadn't been able to bring herself to try again. "It was easier to moon around wanting you but telling myself you'd never want me."

"Sort of like what your friend Alexander is doing now."

*Great.* They were back to that. She rolled her eyes, wondering why lately she couldn't have a conversation with anyone without it eventually turning to Xander. "Look, I'm telling you, Xander is not interested in me that way."

The night they'd kissed a few months ago ran through her mind like a sexy movie, but she tried to ignore it. That had been an aberration. And Xander hadn't ever tried to kiss her again, which was clear proof that he wasn't into her.

“You could be right. Maybe I’m wrong, and he’s not the one who sent the flowers. But do me a favor, will you? Give him a call tonight and talk to him about it. I really like the guy, and besides, I owe him one. He let me move into his place when he hardly knows me—and I noticed how you manipulated him into that, by the way.”

Jeri blushed.

“So I want you to talk about it with him tonight. If he’s absolutely certain he isn’t interested in you, then maybe you and I can move forward. But until then, let’s just keep it light, okay?”

She raised her chin. “I don’t know why you’re so worried about what Xander thinks. You hardly know him.”

He toyed with the edge of the menu. “You remember how you felt when you had a huge crush on me and I never noticed you?”

She remembered all too well. Even now, when he’d pointed out how irrational she’d been, the memory still cut into her like a knife whenever she thought about it.

“Yeah. I remember.”

“Well,” he said softly, “I’m figuring maybe your friend Alexander is feeling the same way right now.”



When Jeri walked into her house, she wasn’t terribly surprised to find Xander stretched out in front of the television, casually dressed in jeans and a Mix 107.5 T-shirt, his long, denim-clad legs propped on the antique pine bench she used as a coffee table.

“Stalking me again?”

He turned his head away from *Die Hard* and grinned ruefully. “Trying to stay out of your way, actually. I figured you and Connor might want to

go back to my condo. I mean Connor's condo. Mine and Connor's condo. Whatever." He shrugged. "I knew you wouldn't come here because Emma was here. I called to find out."

"Where's Emma now? Upstairs?"

Pressing the "off" button on the remote control, he shook his head and spoke into the sudden silence. "She went out for a while. Said she couldn't stand watching me mope around."

"Good, because we need to talk." She walked around his chair, so that she stood directly in front of him, and looked down at him. He met her gaze, and she was surprised to see what looked like sorrow in his eyes. "What's going on, Xander?"

He looked perplexed. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure."

"You followed me to the movie theater, right? How come?"

"I don't know, Jer."

She hissed through her teeth with exasperation. "You must have had some sort of mental process, Xander. Your brain couldn't have been totally disengaged when you walked out the door. You followed me for a reason, and I'd like to know what it was."

Regardless of what Connor had said, she didn't expect him to confess undying love for her. This was Xander, after all. A friend, but never a lover. She just couldn't wrap her mind around the concept.

She half expected him to bring up the flowers and to tell her he'd sent them. Instead, he said, "Connor seems like a pretty decent guy, Jer. But I'm having a hard time getting past what he did to you in high school."

"He didn't do anything to me in high school."

"Exactly. He didn't know you were alive. You were absolutely crazy about him, and he didn't have a clue you existed."

Jeri winced. It seemed like she was doomed to relive her unpleasant high school experiences over and over again tonight. "Thank you so much for bringing that up."

"I think we need to talk about it, Jer."

She swallowed. "I don't think it was really his fault, Xander. It was me. You know what my mom was like that year."

"That was right after your dad left, right?"

"Yeah. She was convinced he'd dumped her because she was fat. She started dieting like a crazy woman, and she kept telling me I needed to lose weight, too."

"You weren't fat, you know."

She knew perfectly well she'd been fat, so she ignored his remark. "Anyway, she kept telling me I'd never get a boyfriend if I didn't lose some weight. I was afraid she was right, and I just didn't have the nerve to approach Connor, because I was afraid he'd reject me."

"The same way your dad rejected your mom."

She shrugged. "Maybe. Anyway, the point is it wasn't Connor's fault. It was mine."

He heaved a long sigh. "You could be right," he admitted. "But that's not all that's bothering me, Jer. It's weird, but over the last couple of days I feel like I've entered the Twilight Zone, and we're all in high school again. Except you two are the popular kids, and I'm still the nerd."

All of a sudden she understood the sorrow in his dark eyes, and remorse smacked her in the head like an errant football. "I've been ignoring you."

"Yeah, pretty much. You know, I understand if you want to go out with someone. You've had boyfriends in the past, and I know when you get involved with a guy you aren't going to hang out with me so much. But you know, I let him move in with me, just because you wanted me



to, and now every time you come by you act like I'm invisible. It's like you two are in a clique." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "And I'm on the outside."

The very real pain in his voice cut her to the quick. She knew how it felt to be excluded and ignored. Kneeling down, she took his hand and stroked his hair, the way she consoled her kindergartners when they skinned their knees. "I'm so sorry, Xander," she said softly. "I'm a jerk."

"Yeah, you definitely are," he agreed with a ghost of a smile that didn't touch the sorrow in his eyes. "But I know you didn't intend to be. It's just...it's like seeing this guy again, all these years later, suddenly made you determined to prove that you're sexy and attractive."

"You know how I felt about him in high school. Can you blame me?"

"But you don't need his approval, Jer. You *are* gorgeous. You were gorgeous before he came along, and you'll be gorgeous after he leaves. And what's more—" His voice lowered to the rumbling purr that had made him locally famous. "You were gorgeous in high school, too."

"Oh, I was not. I was a pudge."

"You were not," he insisted. "I've told you before that you weren't fat back then. You were beautiful. I thought so, anyway. I still do."

"You're my best friend. You're biased."

"Maybe I am. So do a survey. Stop ten men on the sidewalk and ask them if you're beautiful. I guarantee all ten of them will agree."

She laughed softly. "Don't be silly, Xander."

Xander looked down at her with serious eyes. "Look," he said, "if you want to date Connor, go ahead. He's a nice guy. But quit acting like I'm the Invisible Man, all right?"

"I'm really sorry," she said, and meant it.

"Great. So we're okay?"

She tilted her head to the side and studied him. "Are you sure you don't have a problem with my dating him?"

"A problem? Why would I have a problem?"

She looked up into his dark, forthright eyes and saw nothing there but the usual affection. Okay, she thought. Connor's assertion that Xander had it bad for her was obviously way off base. If she brought it up she'd just make a fool of herself. He hadn't mentioned the flowers, either, which made it likely that he hadn't been the one to send them. Maybe she actually had a secret admirer. Like George Hindesmith, one of the other teachers. True, he was fifty, but he blushed scarlet whenever she was around. Anyway, the card hadn't been signed, so who knew?

"You followed us to the movie theater. I figured maybe you had a problem."

Xander shrugged. "I was jealous, I guess." Her heart leaped suddenly, then fell at his next words. "I mean, we've been friends for a long time, and it's been a while since you had a boyfriend. I've kind of gotten used to doing stuff with you."

Nope, he definitely didn't have a thing for her. "Kind of gotten used to doing stuff" was a far cry from proclaiming his undying love.

"We can still do things together," she said.

At the thought of doing "things" together, she suddenly remembered the feel of his lips against hers, and heat sizzled along her nerve endings. She drew in a startled breath, and for a second she thought she saw a response in his face, something dark and sensual in his gaze. But then he blinked and looked away.

"Sure, Jer," he answered coolly. "But I understand if you're going to be busy with Connor."

"I'll make some space in my schedule for you."

"I'll hold you to that," he said, looking back at her again. Their eyes locked, and suddenly she couldn't move. She couldn't even breathe. All the air seemed to have been sucked out of the room, leaving her feeling like she needed to gasp for breath.

Xander stared at her for a long moment, then looked away, glancing at his watch. His voice was perfectly even and unmoved. "I guess I better get going. I have to get up early, you know."

"Okay," she said, oddly reluctant to let him go. But he stood up, stretched, and walked to the door.

"See you later," he said, and disappeared through the door with his usual lack of ceremony.

She stood motionless, staring at the closed door, puzzled by the mixture of emotions rioting in her chest. Xander's lack of interest was a good thing. And yet she remembered the way she'd reacted when their gazes had met, and it made her heart pound.

Impatiently, she shoved the memory away. Connor had said they could move forward if Xander didn't have any romantic interest in her. So now they could move forward with their relationship. And that was terrific. Wasn't it?

Sighing, she headed for her bedroom, wondering why she didn't feel more pleasure at the prospect.



It was a long walk from Jeri's house to his condo, but Alexander didn't mind. The walk through the cool darkness gave him a chance to try to calm himself down.

God, he wanted Jeri. He'd never wanted a woman so much in his life. When she'd looked into his eyes, all he could think about was kissing

her. The memory of the way it had felt to brush his lips over hers had filled his mind.

And then his mind had jumped right on into more explicit visions.

He really wasn't sure how he'd managed to stop himself from grabbing her and planting a kiss on her. The long years of practicing self-restraint had obviously paid off. But it had taken every ounce of control he had.

He reminded himself that she was dating Connor now. She'd *chosen* Connor. Not him. And if he tried to kiss her now, he'd just be setting himself up for a very embarrassing situation, because she wasn't interested in him that way.

But try as he might, he couldn't stop thinking about her.

The cool night breeze whipped up as he drew closer to the river. It brushed across his face and his body like a lover's caress, and he walked alone through the night, imagining Jeri touching him in the very same way.

## Chapter Seven

“So what are you and Connor doing tonight?”

Jeri leaned back in her chair in the teacher's lounge, holding her cell phone between her shoulder and ear, and listened to Xander's deep voice in her ear. “I'm not sure,” she answered. “He said something about Thai food.”

“You guys are really going for the international experience. What have you had so far? Japanese, Italian, and now Thai?”

“Uh-huh,” she said absently. “I think so.”

“You think so? You've eaten out three times in the past week, and you can't remember?”

Jeri sighed. The truth was that her dates with Connor were surprisingly...unmemorable. Bland, even. Despite the fact that the guy looked fabulous, seemed like a great person, and was well-educated and articulate, something about him simply didn't stir her emotions. She didn't get as much out of eating pricey Japanese food with him as she did eating at McDonald's with Xander.

She pushed that thought back into the dark recesses of her mind, where it belonged. She must be nuts. Connor was a terrific guy, the very guy she'd fantasized about for years, and now that he'd so conveniently dropped practically into her lap, she was damned if she was going to blow a shot at a relationship with him. She'd wasted all these years because she hadn't had the nerve to approach him in high school, and she was damned if she'd waste any more time.

“Japanese, Italian, and Thai,” she agreed, more firmly. She generally preferred hamburger places to fancy restaurants, but she was willing enough to change her ways for Connor. It occurred to her that she never

had to try to impress Xander by eating fancier food, but she shoved that thought away. "I'm having a terrific time with him, Xander."

"Great," Xander said, sounding genuinely pleased for her. That was one thing she could always count on—Xander's support. "So have you guys, uh—"

"Geez, Xander, this is only our third date. What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

"The same girl who was talking about having meaningless sex with this guy a week ago."

He had her there. She sighed. "I was talking through my hat, Xander. In a way, I guess a night of meaningless sex would be fun, but I don't really think I'm the love 'em and leave 'em type. I think I'd pine after the guy afterwards."

"I'm glad you've finally realized that."

Curiosity pricked her. "Have you ever had a meaningless night of sex?"

There was a long pause. "No," Xander said at last. "I can't say that I have."

"I thought all guys did that kind of thing occasionally."

"Not me," he said with quiet conviction. "Sex has to be part of a relationship for me, or it really isn't worth it."

"Yeah. Me too." She chuckled softly. "I guess this is why neither of us gets it that often."

"That's the downside to committed sex," he admitted. "So, if tonight is the third date, are you two going to, uh..."

"I don't know," she answered honestly. She tried to imagine herself in bed with Connor, running her hands all over that hard, sculpted muscle and bone, but nothing stirred in her body. Damn. It was like she was made of marble or something.

“Well,” he said, and cleared his throat. “Good luck deciding.”



*Oh, God.* They were already up to the third date. She was going to sleep with Connor for sure—why wouldn’t she? She was a sensuous woman who was comfortable with her own sexuality, after all—and then they would officially be A Couple. And he’d have lost her.

*Okay, Frost,* he said sternly to himself as he hit the disconnect button on the mobile phone. *It’s time to make a decision. Do you want her or don’t you?*

The thing was, he knew he wanted her. The question was more a matter of whether she wanted him. And he knew perfectly well the answer was no. The way she looked at him, with warm affection in her eyes, was totally different from the way she stared lustfully at Testosterone Guy. He wasn’t even a man in her eyes; he was just a friend.

But if she became part of A Couple with Connor, if she became Connor-and-Jeri instead of just plain Jeri, he wasn’t sure he could bear to keep seeing her. There was a time when he’d been able to deal with it, even though it had always felt a little uncomfortable, but on the night her lips had brushed against his, everything had changed.

Now the thought of seeing her holding hands with another guy, kissing him, wrapping her arms around him, sent a knife right to his heart.

Either way he was going to lose her. And that sucked. Because a life without Jeri wasn’t worth living.

So he had to do something. But what?

He decided to drown his sorrows in his favorite vice...blueberry Pop-Tarts. He grabbed a packet from the pantry, then collapsed back down at the table, still staring at the phone.

"You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Alexander turned around and saw Connor looking at him. He was dressed to impress little kids in a white shirt, khaki slacks, and a Bugs Bunny tie, so he'd probably come home from his practice for lunch and had overheard part of Alexander's phone conversation.

Great. That was all he needed. Now Testosterone Guy had figured out what he felt for Jeri and would most likely pound him into the ground. And wouldn't that just put the capper on a lovely week?

Connor stopped next to the table and looked down at him, and Alexander was struck all over again by how damn big the guy was. It was like having a brick wall looming over him.

"What makes you say that?" he said warily.

Connor shrugged. "Pop-Tarts are the only thing I know of that can cure a broken heart. Got any more?"

Abruptly Alexander remembered the pastries, sitting uneaten in front of him. "Yeah. They're in the pantry."

Connor turned in the direction of the pantry. "Listen," he said over his shoulder, "about Jeri..."

Alexander remembered the pity in the guy's eyes when he'd offered to let him come to dinner with them. He wasn't going to horn in on their relationship, damn it, no matter how much it hurt to be excluded. He didn't want to be that pitiful ever again. "Forget it," he said harshly.

"Look, Jeri and I have talked about you quite a lot. Somehow the conversation keeps coming around to you. I think she likes you, kind of."

Oh, great. She liked him, *kind of*. "Gee, thanks," he said dryly. "That's so nice to hear."



"And I told her I didn't think we ought to get, you know, involved unless she talked to you." He turned around, a silver packet in his hand, and headed back for the table. "So did she, you know, talk to you?"

"Yeah. We talked."

Connor sat down and looked at him expectantly. "And?"

"And...none of your damned business."

Connor blinked, then flashed his preternaturally white teeth in amusement. He ripped open the packet and bit into a Pop-Tart like a wolf devouring its prey.

"That's what I figured. You have it bad for her, don't you?"

Alexander wanted to lie, but he could tell Connor could see straight through him. Lying seemed pretty pointless. "Yeah," he admitted. "I guess I do."

"She's nice," Connor said. "I don't blame you."

He thought he heard wistfulness in Connor's voice, but when he looked up the guy was still chomping Pop-Tarts, looking so stolid he figured he must have imagined it.

"She *is* nice. Too bad you didn't figure that out in high school."

Connor sighed. "Look, Jeri and I talked about that too, okay? I wish you wouldn't blame me for ignoring her when she never approached me. How the hell was I supposed to know she existed if she never tried to talk to me?"

Alexander scowled at the table. He didn't like to admit it, but the guy had a good point. Besides, he knew what Jeri had gone through in high school with her mom. Her mom had gone on to remarry and had become perfectly sane again, but she'd definitely been whacked out that year, and her obsession with dieting, not to mention the way she'd loathed men, had seriously screwed up Jeri's self-confidence.

Connor went on. "I'm not like, you know, a mind reader. I don't remember everybody I went to school with, especially if they never talked to me."

"She followed you all over the place."

"Yeah, well, I never really noticed her. But she never even said hi to me, so why would I have? Not my fault, okay?"

Alexander nodded, unable to argue the logic. "Okay."

"The truth is, I don't really remember you either."

"I'm not surprised. I was in chess club and you were a football star. You were cool and I wasn't."

"Yeah, I know. It's weird, isn't it? You can think you're so different from someone in high school, think you're so much cooler than they are, then you grow up and discover they're actually a lot cooler than you thought."

"I hadn't really thought of it that way, but I guess you're right."

"I mean, in high school, we were the jock, the nerd, and the fat chick. And now we're all just people."

"Yeah." Alexander smiled. "But you're still pretty cool."

Connor smiled back. "So are you, dude." He poked at the crumbs on the table. "So, you know, I don't really want to come between you and her."

"There is no me and her, Connor."

"Crap. You're in love with her."

"What makes you say that?"

"Don't be stupid, dude. She might not be able to tell, but I can."

Alexander sighed. "Okay. Fine. I'm in love with her."

Connor quit shoving the crumbs around and looked at him. "So what are you going to do about it?"

Alexander blinked. "I kind of figured it's too late to do much. I mean, you and she—"

"I told you, I am not getting between the two of you, man. Don't worry about it."

Alexander frowned. "I thought you liked her."

"I do like her. I like her a lot. But I figure you were here first. See—" He took a deep breath. "I just lost my wife to another guy out in Seattle."

*Ah-ha.* That explained a lot. "That must have sucked."

"It just about fucking killed me," Connor said. "I was planning on having a bunch of kids with her. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her." He sighed. "The point is, I do know what it's like to lose the woman you love to another guy. I am not going to be that other guy here. I'm not getting between the two of you."

"I didn't know you were married. I hadn't heard." He didn't mention that he'd thought Jeri knew everything there was to know about Connor, and she obviously didn't have a clue he was married.

"We'd only been married a couple of months. Pathetic, huh?"

"Not pathetic," Alexander said, feeling a stab of empathy for the other man. "But sad."

"I met her at a party one night. I fell for her like *that*." Connor snapped his fingers. "I thought she fell for me too, but I guess that was stupid. There's no such thing as love at first sight. Hell, maybe there's no such thing as love."

Alexander winced at the bitterness in the guy's voice. "When did she leave you?"

"About a month ago. And Kay didn't leave me, not exactly. I just found her in our bed with another guy."

Alexander flinched in sympathy. It was a bit startling to realize that a guy who looked like this could have a screwed-up love life, same as him. "Ow."

"Yeah. It shocked the hell out of me. We were planning on moving back here anyway, so I just left everything I owned with her, jumped in the Bimmer the next morning, and started driving." He sighed. "Maybe it was my fault. Maybe in retrospect she wasn't happy about leaving her home to come to Virginia, I don't know. Or maybe she just never loved me at all." The corners of his mouth turned down. "Anyway, all things considered, I guess I shouldn't have gone out with Jeri, but I didn't know she had a thing for me, you know? I thought it was pretty casual on both our sides. To tell you the truth, I was sort of thinking maybe if I screwed another woman, it'd help me get over Kay."

Alexander swallowed back the rage that clogged his throat, recognizing that it was a totally unwarranted reaction. He had no business wanting to jump out of his seat and pound Connor into the tile floor. Jeri wasn't his to protect.

"So you were planning on using Jeri?" he said, his voice tight.

Connor looked shamefaced. "I know her better now, dude. I wouldn't do that to her. She's too nice. If I wanted to get into a real relationship with anyone, she'd be tops on the list."

"Sounds like you still love your wife right now," Alexander suggested.

"No." Connor shook his head, then grinned ruefully. "Okay, maybe I do at that. I mean, I hate her guts, but I still kind of love her, too, you know? At least, I can't just walk away and get over her so fast. I figured once I moved back here, I could start over, but I guess you can't make your heart come back to life once it's dead. I like Jeri a lot, but not that way, you know what I mean?"

Alexander nodded. "I know what you mean. You can't make yourself feel something you don't."

"Right. Just like you've been trying to convince yourself she's just a friend. But that doesn't work either, does it?"

Alexander smiled wryly. "No," he admitted. "It doesn't."

"And you know what's funny? I don't think Jeri cares that much about me, either. So go for it."

Alexander heaved a sigh. "I might do that, Connor. Except you guys have a date set up for tonight. Don't you?"

"I'll back off, don't worry." Connor smiled, although his eyes still looked a little wistful. "She's all yours, dude."



Jeri looked at herself dubiously in the mirror. It was five-thirty, Connor would be here any minute, and the outfit she'd picked out made her look like a slut. Yep, she thought, eyeing the too-short skirt and the too-tight top. Definitely a slut outfit. She looked like she was silently shouting, *Tonight I plan to get laid!*

"Do I look like a whore?" she asked.

Emma looked up from the *Time* magazine she was reading and frowned. "No. You look sexy, just like you always do. Why?"

"I think this skirt's too short," Jeri said, tugging at the black material.

"You wore one shorter than that last time you went out."

"Then I must have looked like a whore then, too."

Emma closed *Time* and sat up, wrinkling her forehead with concern. "Looking sexy is not the same as looking like a whore, Jer. You always look sexy, and you never worry about it. What's wrong with you tonight, anyway?"

Jeri sighed and met her friend's eyes in the mirror. "It's our third date."

"Ah. And you're afraid you look like you're expecting sex."

"Kind of, yeah."

"So are you planning to have sex with him tonight?"

"No. Yes. I mean, I'm not sure."

"You don't look like a slut, Jer. You look just fine."

Jeri frowned at herself in the mirror. "I think maybe I put on too much eyeshadow."

"No, no, no. You have on exactly the same amount of eyeshadow you always do when you go out. You've worn that exact outfit on dates before and never worried you look slutty. You're fine. Sit down and relax."

Jeri shrugged, tugged at the hem of her skirt self-consciously, and stepped away from the mirror. At that moment the phone rang. Jeri moved across the room and saw the number displayed on caller ID.

"Oh, God," she said, having a sudden flashback to a dreadful night in high school, when a boy she liked had called at the last minute to cancel and never spoke to her again. "He's going to stand me up."

"Don't be stupid. He's not going to stand you up. Pick up the phone."

Steeling herself, Jeri picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hey there," said a familiar deep voice.

She let out the breath she hadn't been aware she was holding. "Oh, it's just you."

"Yeah," Xander said wryly. "Just me."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," she said hastily, remembering their conversation a few nights earlier. "I just figured you were Connor."

"Didn't he call you?"

Her throat constricted. "No."

"Connor was held up at the office," Xander said. "An emergency."

*Stood up, stood up* began clanging in her brain. She shoved back the words impatiently. Connor was a doctor, after all, and emergencies happened. "Did he say how late he was going to be?"

"Pretty late, I think. I don't think he was going to be available tonight. So I was wondering, you want to go grab a burger with me instead?"

She looked down at herself, seeing her stomach pooch out and her hips expand, feeling her thighs blow up to massive proportions under her skirt, as if she'd magically become fat in the past five minutes. Feeling just as she had in high school. Fat and ugly, and going out on a pity date with Xander.

Her mother's voice echoed in her mind: *You need to lose some weight, Jeri. You're so fat you can't even get a date for the prom.*

She let out her breath in a long sigh. "Sure," she said dispiritedly. "I guess."

"Don't injure yourself jumping up and down, Jer."

"I'm sorry, Xander. I don't mean to hurt your feelings. I can't help but feel a little disappointed, that's all."

"I understand. So let's go out and have a burger. That always cheers you up."

She sighed. "Okay. You want me to meet you someplace?"

"No," he said. "I'll pick you up in half an hour."



When Xander knocked on the door thirty minutes later, Jeri walked across the living room and flung open the door.

And stared in shock.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

He grinned. "Like it?"

She narrowed her eyes at the tuxedo he wore. Unlike the rented one he'd worn to the prom all those years ago, it looked like it had been tailored for him. Probably it had—as a DJ he sometimes worked wedding receptions, and needed to dress to the nines. It looked damn good on him, but she couldn't bring herself to say so. "You look like a penguin."

"Words to make any man's heart soar."

"Why are you wearing a tux?"

"GQ says tuxes are very in right now."

"Maybe they are. But I don't think guys usually wear them to burger places. You'll get grease on it, or mustard, or something."

"Actually, we're not going to a burger joint," he said. "Here, this is for you."

And he held out a corsage.

She gaped at it. "What the fuck?"

"That's what I admire about you. Your ladylike language."

She blinked. "Sorry. But no one's given me a corsage since..."

"Since prom night. Right."

She stared blankly at the white rosebuds as he slipped them over her wrist. "Come on," he said, placing a proprietary hand at her waist and steering her down the steps. She paused, appalled, at the huge black car parked at the curb.

"Why did you rent a limo?"

"My Z's in the shop," he said lightly.

She dug in her high heels. "Don't be silly, Xander. I'm not getting in that thing till you tell me what's going on."

He looked down at her. Behind the glasses his eyes looked very serious. "I just wanted to make this a good evening for you, Jer."



*You need to lose some weight, Jeri. You're so fat you can't even get a date for the prom.*

Humiliation exploded in her stomach, sending bile into her mouth. It was just like prom night. She couldn't get a date, and he thought she was pitiful. He was trying to make things right for her, like a big brother.

He couldn't have hurt her worse if he'd called her names.

Furious, she ripped off the corsage and threw it to the lawn. Xander looked stunned.

"Screw you," she said tightly. She turned, stalked back into the house with dignity, and slammed the door.

## Chapter Eight

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Jeri ignored the angry words and the loud pounding on her bedroom door. She’d been ignoring them for the last fifteen minutes. But the banging continued, and finally she couldn’t take it any more. She yanked the door open so abruptly that Emma almost fell into the room.

Her friend righted herself and glared at her. “What on earth was all that about?”

Jeri was so angry, so embarrassed, that she could hardly speak. “Pity date. Xander. Damn him to hell.”

“Pity date?” Emma stared at her as blankly if she’d uttered the words in a foreign language. “Pity date? The guy shows up in a limo with flowers, dressed like he’s headed for the country club, and you think it’s a *pity* date?”

“Of course it’s a pity date. He knew I was stood up by Connor.”

“So? How come you assume it was a pity date? Maybe he’s just trying to move in on you while Connor’s back is turned.”

“Please. He’s not interested in me that way. He was trying to relive our prom date. And that was a pity date, too.”

“How do you know that? When he asked you out to the prom, did he tell you he was taking you out because Connor wouldn’t?”

"Of course not. But it was obvious. I waited and waited for Connor to ask me out, but he never noticed me. Finally Xander took pity on me because I was moping so much."

"Are you *sure*?"

Jeri hesitated. The fact was that Xander hadn't had a date either. It had been a pity date on both sides. At least, she thought it had been, although she had to admit she'd never asked Xander exactly why he'd asked her out for the prom. Their prom had been an uncomfortable night they'd tacitly avoided discussing afterwards.

"I wasn't exactly a great date," she said at last. "I spent the whole time trying to see what Connor was doing."

"So maybe Alexander's trying to rewrite the past, the same way you are."

"What do you mean by that? I'm not trying to rewrite the past."

"Of course you are. The cutest guy in school is back. He never noticed you in high school, but you're making sure he wants you now, aren't you?"

Jeri felt a little spasm of pain. Xander, she remembered, had said something very similar.

"I'm not trying to rewrite anything," she said, with as much dignity as she could muster. "I've always had a thing for Connor."

"Girlfriend, you hardly *know* Connor. You decided you were in love with him the same day you saw him in the bar, and you've been trying to convince yourself of it for the past week. But it isn't working. You know why? Because you don't really want him. You just want *him* to want *you*."

Jeri stirred uncomfortably, remembering the way her mother had worked to change her physical appearance for months, losing weight, dying her hair, and buying a whole new wardrobe in an effort to rewrite

her own life. But in the end Dad had married someone else anyway. "I do so want him."

"Crap. Remember all that stressing out you did about the way you were dressed? You don't really want to sleep with him. You just want him to fall at your feet and acknowledge that you're the most beautiful woman he's ever known, and that he was a fool not to have recognized it in high school."

"He's a great guy."

"He might be. He might not be. The fact is, you don't really know him well enough to tell. Now Alexander...you know *him* well enough, don't you?"

"I don't want to have sex with Xander."

"Damn good thing, too. After you slammed the door in his face you'll be lucky if he ever speaks to you again."

With a pang, she remembered the stricken look on Xander's face when she'd thrown the little corsage to the ground. She'd been too angry to pay it any mind at the time, but abruptly she realized that when a man went to all that trouble for a woman, regardless of his motives, he was likely to be a trifle hurt if she threw his flowers into the dirt and gave him the cold shoulder. With one impulsive act, she might have slammed the door on ten years of friendship.

What a night. Not only had Connor stood her up, but through her own stupidity, she'd probably lost Xander.

And of the two of them, she abruptly realized, Xander mattered a great deal more.

"I'm a moron," she said.

"No. You're pond scum."

Jeri held up her hands in mock surrender. "Call off the hounds, Emma. You're right. I'm wrong. I admit it."

“So what are you going to do about it?”

Jeri shook her head. “Beg Xander’s pardon on bended knee, I guess.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Emma grinned wickedly. “Most guys will forgive a woman almost anything if she kneels in front of him.”

“Xander isn’t most guys, Em. And he doesn’t think of me that way.”

Emma’s grin grew wider. “Want to bet?”



No one answered the door at Xander’s condo, probably because the TV was blasting so loud Xander couldn’t possibly have heard her knock. Jeri thought about it for a minute, then decided she was stupid to stand on ceremony at this point in their relationship. After all, she’d been wandering in and out of Xander’s condo like she owned it for years. Why should tonight be any different, just because she’d been insufferably rude to the guy?

She pushed open the door, wincing as the applause from *America’s Funniest Home Videos* washed over her in a wave. She waited till the clapping died down a bit, then said, “Hey.”

Xander whipped around so fast in his chair that she was amazed he didn’t snap his neck in two. He’d changed out of the tux, into ragged jeans shorts and an ancient Virginia Beach T-shirt with a faded picture of the old brick lighthouse, and he looked more like his usual self. His dark eyes went wide with surprise behind the glasses, then rapidly filled with something very like distaste.

She felt her heart contract. Xander had never looked at her like that in his life.

He said something, but she couldn’t hear it over the TV. “Could you turn it down?” she yelled, waving at the television.

She very much doubted he could hear her, but he got the general idea and pressed mute. In the silence that fell, he looked at her through narrowed eyes.

“Did you come over here to slam more doors?” he said at last.

She winced at the unfamiliar acid in his tone. “I’m really sorry, Xander. I was a jerk.”

“No. Do you really think so?”

“I’m *sorry*,” she said again. “I just didn’t want to feel like you pitied me.”

“Pitied you?” He blinked. “Where did that come from?”

She lowered her gaze and spoke to the floor. “You know,” she said in a low voice. “You asked me to the prom because you felt sorry for me.”

“Because I—” He stared at her, then shook his head, causing a lock of his sandy brown hair to fall into his eyes. He shoved it back. “You thought I asked you to the prom because I pitied you? All this time, you’ve thought that?”

“Well, I know you didn’t have a date either, Xander.” She sighed. “But I was so pathetic. I know it. All that chasing after Connor, trying to get him to notice me, when I was so fat. I know I was pitiful.”

“I’ve told you this a million times. You were not fat in high school.”

“Yes, I was.” She groaned, remembering. “I was huge. Like a pregnant hippo.”

Something lit in Xander’s eyes, something that looked suspiciously like amusement. She didn’t find it in the least amusing.

“Wait here,” he said. Standing up, he strode from the room. She heard his bare feet padding against the wood flooring as he stalked away. Moments later he reappeared and shoved a large open book at her. “Take a look,” he said.

"Oh, God. Is that our yearbook?" She hadn't looked at the yearbook since her freshman year of college, when she'd gotten in shape, decided to quit moping over Connor, and in a wild moment of rebellion against the sorrows of the past had tossed her yearbook in a dumpster.

"Yeah. Look at that page."

She quailed. "No. God, no. Don't torture me by making me look at myself back then."

"I was just sitting around moping earlier," he said, "and I thought I'd take a look at us when we were kids. I don't know why. I guess I felt like reliving the past a bit, considering everything that's happened over the past few days."

"I didn't even know you had a yearbook anymore."

"I had it stashed in a box in my closet. I really had to dig to find it, and I'm almost sorry I did. Jesus, the picture of me is horrendous. All those pimples. If it'd been up to me, I would have airbrushed the hell out of that picture."

"At least you can airbrush over pimples," Jeri said. "You can't airbrush away three or four chins."

He snorted. "Take a look. Go ahead. I dare you."

She didn't want to look. But it was like seeing a horrific traffic accident—the compulsion to look was irresistible. She looked down at the page, labeled "Chess Club". Just below the title, she noticed, she'd written "Jeri + Xander—Friends 4-Ever" in curly, girlish script.

Geez, she thought, faintly embarrassed. Had she ever been that young? She looked further down, at the picture, and saw a number of faces she faintly recognized. One of them was a younger edition of Xander.

"You did have an awful lot of pimples," she said, smiling.

"No kidding. I think a chain of mountains was trying to erupt on my face. But never mind me. Take a good, long look at yourself."

"Me?" She studied the picture. "I don't see me anywhere. I must not have been there that day."

He tapped a big, square fingertip on the page. "You're right next to me."

She frowned at the page, seeing a smiling girl with long hair pulled back in a straggly ponytail. "That's not me. I don't have any extra chins."

"That's you, all right. Although I have to admit it's not a very good picture. Doesn't look much like you. There aren't any pictures of our prom in there, but I kept the photo from our prom. I found that in the box, too." He took the yearbook from her and flipped back through the pages, yanking out a manila envelope. "Here it is. Take a look."

She took the five by seven photo, seeing herself clad in a pink, lacy dress. It was hard to believe she'd ever dressed like Barbie voluntarily, but she clearly remembered picking the fluffy monstrosity out. The girl in the photo was smiling up at Xander, although there was a faintly wistful look in her eyes, as if she was looking beyond Xander and toward someone else. But Xander's arm was around her waist. She was surprised to see that she had actually *had* a waist.

"Are you sure that's me?"

"Of course it's you," he said impatiently. "Do you think I took two girls in frilly pink dresses to the prom?"

"But I'm not—I'm not—"

"You're not fat. Right. That's my point." He lifted a finger and pointed it at her. "You might have had a little baby fat, Jer, but you were never what anybody would call obese. I've told you this before, but you've never believed me. So take a good long look at the proof."



She looked for a long while at the girl in the photo. Her hair wasn't very stylish, her makeup was poorly done, and the dress was a fashion catastrophe from the ninth circle of hell...but there wasn't an extra chin to be seen.

She hadn't been fat. A trifle overweight, maybe. But not fat. Silently she stood there, letting the realization sink into her brain.

"My mom kept telling me I needed to lose weight," she said at last, in a whisper. "And the other girls always teased me about being fat."

Xander made a derisive sound. "Your mom was nuts that year, Jer. She totally lost it for a while after your dad left, and you know it. And girls in high school are predators. They seek out your weaknesses and use them to try and destroy you. Don't you remember how they were? How they'd pick on you constantly for any little thing? It doesn't mean you were really fat. It just means they knew that teasing you about your weight was the sure way to get under your skin and really irritate you."

"I exercised and dieted like a fiend in college."

"It showed, too. You got in much better shape. But that doesn't mean you were fat before. Just not really athletic."

She looked up at him, bewildered, as he took the book out of her hands. He met her eyes with his steady gaze.

"You see what I'm trying to tell you, Jer? Since you saw Connor again, it's like you've been trying to rewrite high school. Only most of what you remember about high school is wrong. You weren't fat. You were pretty and smart, and any guy in his right mind would have been happy to go out with you, if you'd just had the nerve to talk to anyone besides me. And I didn't ask you out to the prom out of pity. I didn't know you thought that. If I had, I would have told you that pity had absolutely nothing to do with it."

"Why did you, then?"

“Because I had a huge crush on you, Jer.”

His softly spoken words slammed into her like a sledgehammer. She wanted to ask the obvious question—*what about now?*—but couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

“I didn’t know,” she whispered at last.

“No kidding,” he said with a sigh, putting the yearbook carefully on a table and dropping into his leather armchair. “You never really looked at me. I was just your nerdy friend. Exactly like I am now.”

She knelt next to him and stroked his thick brown hair, a gesture meant to convey apology as well as affection. “You’re not a nerd anymore,” she said, an automatic, comforting reassurance.

“And you’re full of crap,” he answered bluntly. “You still think of me as a nerd, don’t you? You look at me, and you see an unattractive, scrawny geek.”

His dark eyes looked at her seriously through his glasses, and she sighed. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings again, but she couldn’t pretend he looked like a movie star, either. She tried to sidestep the question. “Honestly, Xander? The truth is I don’t think I’ve really looked at you in years.”

“So look at me now,” he challenged softly. “What do you think?”

She looked him over, trying to figure out what she could say that wouldn’t hurt his feelings. Well, he had a nice face, really, sweet and honest, with big, dark eyes that reflected his every thought. Gold-rimmed glasses perched on a straight, narrow nose. His jaw was square, and his cheekbones were high. In fact, just considering his facial features, he was actually a damned nice-looking guy. She wondered why she hadn’t noticed. Probably because he didn’t have a great body to go with the face.

She let her gaze drift downward to his shoulders and felt a jolt of surprise. They weren’t massive, certainly, but they were very nice, and a

lot broader than she'd thought. His arms, stretching out beneath his T-shirt sleeves, weren't too bad either, long and well-muscled—a lot better muscled than she had thought. He had nice, big hands, the backs dusted with hairs, the fingers long and blunt. She was a sucker for big strong hands, and his certainly were.

The way he lounged back in his chair made the T-shirt's fabric stretch across his chest, and it looked like the fabric concealed a decent set of pecs, too. She flashed suddenly on the night she'd seen him without his shirt last week, and heat curled in her stomach. Oh, yeah, he did have a nice set of pecs.

His shirt rode up slightly, displaying a firm, flat stomach with a narrow trail of light brown hair arrowing down the center. He wore an old, worn pair of denim shorts, and his long legs stretched out comfortably, showing a bulge of well-sculpted muscles in the thighs and calves she'd never before noticed.

Her mouth dropped open.

"Wow," she said.

## Chapter Nine

Seeing Jeri kneeling in front of him did something to Alexander's insides, turning them into Jell-O. Maybe he had a dirty mind. Okay, he definitely had a dirty mind, because having a beautiful woman—this particular beautiful woman—kneel in front of him sent his brain reeling down some interesting paths. And the admiring expression on her face made him melt even more. He'd never had any woman look at him that way, let alone Jeri.

It was the first time she'd ever looked at him like he was a man.

He liked it.

"You are...*gorgeous*," she said. Her hand was still in his hair, and she continued to stroke it, but the motion felt less comforting and more overtly sexual. Who knew that having your hair touched could be so sexy? He'd sure as hell never realized it.

But here he was getting the biggest hard-on of all time, just from having his hair stroked.

"I'm not gorgeous," he said, trying to regain some normalcy. He was the same guy he'd been five minutes ago, dressed in ratty denim shorts and a holey T-shirt, slouching in front of an *America's Funniest Home Videos* rerun. Just a regular guy she'd never taken a serious look at before, the same ol' guy she'd taken for granted all these years. He hadn't suddenly transformed into Mel Gibson just because she was looking at him with open lust in her eyes.

He sure felt like he'd been transformed, though.

"Yes, you are," she said softly. "You know how they say some people look at the world through rose-colored glasses? You're right. I've been looking at you through glasses from high school. It's like I took them off for the first time and suddenly saw you're not the same guy I've been seeing all these years."

He swallowed hard as warmth blossomed in his chest.

"I mean..." She dropped her hand to his thigh. "Geez. Check out these legs."

She traced the muscle in his thighs—he had to admit he did have a few muscles in his legs as a consequence of all the riding and walking he did to get around downtown—and the warmth spread to another location, somewhat south of his chest.

"Jeri," he said hoarsely. "You're killing me here."

She lifted her hand to his biceps and traced her fingertip along his arm, just beneath the sleeve of his T-shirt.

"And your arms. I always thought they were twigs, but they're not skinny anymore. When did you get muscles here?"

"I don't..." His voice cracked like he was a teenager, instead of a DJ famed for his smooth, deep voice, and he cleared his throat. "Um. I don't have muscles in my arms. Not to speak of."

"Are you kidding? Look at this."

He dropped his gaze, drawn irresistibly to the sight of her pink-manicured fingernail tracing along his biceps. Okay, so he did have a bit of muscle tone there. He wasn't exactly bulging with muscles like Connor, but he didn't have wet noodles for muscles, either.

"And look at your abs," she said, pushing up his T-shirt gently.

*Christ.* He was going to melt into a puddle in his chair, like a Popsicle left out in the sun. She pressed her palm against his abdomen, splaying out her fingers, and his skin burned beneath her gentle touch.

Her hand slid higher, across his ribs and up to his chest, and he drew in a sharp breath.

“Are you ticklish there?” she whispered.

“A little bit.”

“Do you want me to stop touching you?”

“Hell, no.”

“I don’t want to stop either,” she confessed in a low tone. “I never realized I wanted to touch you so much.”

He grinned wryly. “I never realized I wanted you to touch me so much.”

“You know what’s weird? I touched Connor in the movie theater.”

His unpleasant vision of her kneeling in front of Connor flashed back into his mind, and he winced. Jealousy flooded over him in a green tidal wave. “I don’t really want to know about this, Jeri.”

She frowned in puzzlement, then understanding dawned, and her eyes brightened with amusement. “Not that kind of touching, doofus. I mean, my hand brushed against his.”

“Oh.” Cool. Hand touching he could live with. “And?”

“And it didn’t feel like anything. I mean, I didn’t feel any kind of...electricity.”

That was a relief. “And now?”

She grinned and splayed her hands over his chest. “Zap.”



Jeri hadn't touched a guy this way in a long time, but she didn't think her lengthy celibacy accounted for the heat swirling around inside her.

The reason she was melting was Xander.

Being close to Xander, touching him in a way she'd never touched him before, made her insides dissolve, sending a molten warmth between her thighs. She actually throbbed there, throbbed with an urgent need she hadn't felt in a long time, just from touching him. Ordinarily it took a lot to get her warmed up for sex. But just touching Xander was making her seriously wet.

She hadn't lied when she'd told him she hadn't really seen him before. Sure, she saw him almost every day, but she'd never really *seen* him. Eagerly, she pushed his shirt up, admiring the overlay of muscles that covered his ribcage. He was still lean, like he'd been in school, but he had an athlete's body. Not the overly heavy muscles of a weight lifter, but the muscles of a guy who actually used his body for biking and swimming and walking, the way his body was intended to be used.

She had some other intriguing ideas about how his body was intended to be used, too.

Leaning forward, she inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of his skin and the spicy soap he used. Her questing fingertips slid across the small pebble of his nipple, and he jerked suddenly.

"Ticklish again?"

He shook his head and looked at her, his eyes hot behind his glasses. "You didn't tickle me. Trust me."

Interesting. Her last boyfriend hadn't much cared for being touched there. She ran her finger back and forth, slowly, over his nipple. Xander shuddered, and breath hissed between his teeth.

A moment later he caught her hand. “Stop,” he said harshly. “Stop, or I’m going to embarrass myself.”

The realization that she’d turned him on so thoroughly with just a few light touches was enough to turn her insides to flame. She leaned forward and ran her tongue over his nipple, tasting the salty, masculine flavor of his skin.

He leaned his head back against the chair and closed his eyes as if in pain. “*Jeri.*”

The raw agony in his tone inflamed her further. She drew his nipple into her mouth, sucking hard, and her palm slid down his abdomen, and lower. She ran her hand over the proof that he was aroused—hard and hot, even through his jeans—and squeezed gently.

He groaned and caught her hand. “Stop, or I’m going to lose it.”

She let him capture her hand, stunned that she’d made him so hard with so little effort. The realization that he was so close to losing control sent a naughty thrill through her. She’d never had a man want her so much.

He kept his eyes closed until his breathing steadied. At last he opened his eyes and looked at her.

“I’m really sorry, Jer.”

She frowned. “Sorry?”

“Yeah, sorry. I...” He swallowed. “Maybe you were right when you thought I hadn’t changed much since high school. I mean, now I feel like I’m eighteen again. You got me all hot and bothered in just a couple of minutes. I swear, I usually have a whole lot more control than this.”

“I don’t really mind that you were about to lose control over me,” she whispered.

“Well, I do. I—” He leaned forward and cradled her face in his palms. “You deserve better, Jeri. You deserve to be made love to for hours.”



An irresistible grin of amusement tugged at her mouth. "I think I could live with that."

He looked shocked. "You do? You mean..."

She took a deep breath. "I mean, let's give it a try and see what happens."

He made a big show of looking around the room. "Are you really talking to me?"

She giggled. "Yeah, I'm talking to you. I don't know exactly where this is going, Xander, but I don't feel like fighting it. I don't think I *can* fight it."

Behind the glasses, his eyes glittered with masculine awareness. He reached for her, but suddenly hesitated as he glanced at his watch. "Damn. I shouldn't have let things get so out of control, Jer. Connor's going to be home soon. We don't have hours right now."

"How about my place? Emma's over there, but she had her last boyfriend over all the time. She wouldn't mind."

"Yeah, but I would." He flashed an evil grin. "For what I have in mind, we need total privacy." His voice dropped to its sexiest rumble. "I intend to make you scream, Jer."

Heat arrowed through her. Screaming with pleasure sounded good to her right about now. Just what her overheated body needed. "How about tomorrow night?"

He made a show of considering the matter. "Uh, let me think. Do I have anything on my schedule that would take precedence over hot sex with a hot woman? Gee, that's a toughie."

She chuckled. "I take it that's a yes."

"Uh, yeah."

"Okay," she said. "I'll ask Emma to stay out late. She won't mind."

“Great,” he said. Standing up, he took her hands in his and pulled her to her feet. His hands, big and warm and slightly rough, held hers imprisoned.

He bent, slowly, and brushed his lips over hers. The memory of their kiss three months before flashed through her mind, but this was better, hotter, because there could be no doubt that it was deliberate. Xander wanted her, and that was an incredibly exciting thought.

The light touch of his lips was enough to turn her to liquid. She sighed and opened her lips, and his tongue slid into her mouth, tangling gently with hers, stroking and teasing and sending shivers through her, until her knees could barely support her.

When at last he lifted his head, she blinked at him. Who would have imagined Xander was such a great kisser? Not her, that was for damned sure.

“See you tomorrow?” he said.

“Uh-huh,” she said in a dazed tone, rendered almost totally inarticulate by his kiss. “Tomorrow.”

He brushed his hand over her cheek and looked deep into her eyes.

“It’s a date,” he said.

## Chapter Ten

It wasn't a date, though. That was the problem, Alexander mused as he sat in the glass-enclosed booth and read the weather forecast for early morning commuters. He wasn't sure exactly what Jeri had in mind, but what he wanted was to give in to the attraction that he'd recently developed for her. Okay, he admitted, the attraction hadn't exactly recently developed, unless you considered ten years ago to be recent. But he'd managed to put it on the back burner to simmer for a long time.

All of a sudden it had burst into flame.

But that didn't necessarily mean they should start dating, in the usual sense. Suppose it didn't work out, and they parted on less-than-friendly terms? What was he going to do without her?

Then again, he wasn't sure she'd accept a one-night stand, either. That might make things so awkward between them that she'd start avoiding him, and that would be bad.

Overall, he mused, it would probably be best to forget last night ever happened.

But that he couldn't do. The memory of the way her gentle fingers had felt brushing over his thigh, the memory of her warm lips closing over his nipple—he couldn't forget that. It was burned into his memory for all time, and trying to pretend it hadn't happened was fruitless.



"Xander knows I hate this song," Jeri grumbled over her bowl of cornflakes as Will Smith's "Switch" blasted out of the kitchen radio. "That's why he plays it."

Emma grinned. "So he's trying to annoy you? I bet it's because he's jealous of Mr. Perfect."

"Actually..." Jeri looked down at her cornflakes and idly stirred them with her spoon. "I'm not sure Mr. Perfect is the guy for me."

"Can I have him?"

Jeri chuckled. "Sure, but you should be aware he's not the one who sent me the flowers."

"Damn." Emma's eyes went wide. "Holy shit. Does that mean they came from Alexander?"

"I think so, yeah."

"So you and Alex..."

Jeri hesitated. "We're kind of planning on sleeping together tonight," she blurted at last.

"Holy *shit*."

"I take it from your tone of admiration that you approve."

"Are you kidding? Alex is hot."

Jeri blinked. "How come everyone has noticed this besides me? Why am I always the last to get the memo?"

"You've been ignoring the memo, Jer. It's been sitting in front of you all this time. It's not my fault you never looked at it."

Jeri sighed. "Okay, so I'm a moron. I figured that out last night."

"So you're going to give him a test run, huh?"

"That's a good description, I guess," Jeri said. "We have all this sexual energy that's built up between us. We need to clear out the air."

This doesn't mean we're going to establish some sort of permanent relationship, though."

"But it could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"Or the end of one," Jeri said glumly. Looking down, she discovered her cornflakes had gone soggy. She shoved the bowl away and looked at her friend. "Suppose this is a huge mistake?"

"Suppose it is? Deciding to sleep with a guy for the first time is always kind of a gamble, isn't it?"

"But there's more at stake here. Xander's not just some guy. He's my best friend."

"Ow. Hit me again, why dontcha?"

Jeri grinned ruefully. "Okay, *one* of my best friends. But definitely my oldest friend. What am I supposed to do if things between us go to hell?"

"I can see how that might be a big problem," Emma said seriously. "You might never be able to watch *Star Wars* again. Like you haven't memorized it already."

"It's not just movies. It's everything. We do all sorts of stuff together. If I never saw him again, there'd be this huge hole in my life."

Emma reached across the table and patted her hand. "Can you go back to the way things were? I mean, after whatever happened last night?"

Jeri thought about it, remembering her mouth on his nipple and her hand on his...

"I take it that blush means no."

"I guess not," she admitted.

"Well, Jer, it seems to me that if you can't go back, the only way to go is forward."

Jeri stood up, went to the sink, and rinsed out her bowl. “You’re a very wise woman, you know that?” she said over her shoulder as she put it in the dishwasher.

“Only about other people’s relationships,” Emma said with a rueful grin. “Not my own. But you know, if Mr. Wonderful is up for grabs...”

Jeri turned around and smiled. “I’m not interested in Connor, Emma. You can have him if you want him.”

“Awesome,” Emma said.

## Chapter Eleven

“So what are we doing tonight?”

Seated in the teacher’s lounge, Jeri pressed the cell phone against her ear and grinned. Alexander had asked her that question a couple of times a week for the past ten years, and the question had never made her blush. Until now.

Knowing she was alone in the lounge, with no kids in hearing distance, she spoke in her most professional voice. “I thought we’d start with deep kissing,” she said primly, “and from there move on to fellatio. After that, perhaps we could dabble in cunnilingus before moving on to more traditional forms of sexual intercourse.”

“Whoa. Hot looks *and* a big vocabulary. No wonder I want you.”

“A big sexual vocabulary, anyway. Is that a plus?”

“Absolutely. I like a well-educated woman.”

She laughed. “I’m looking forward to this evening, Xander.”

His voice dropped into its lowest, most intimate register.

“Me too,” he said.



By the time Alexander showed up at Jeri’s doorstep, he was surprised to realize he was nervous. At least he thought that was what a pounding

heart, heavy breathing, and sweaty palms meant. It might just be anticipation, but he suspected there was a little more to it than that.

Jumping into a night of hot sex with his best friend felt a little like stepping off a cliff—he wasn't sure where he was headed, and he was pretty certain a map wouldn't help anyway. The whole thing scared the hell out of him. And yet, having taken the first step off the cliff, it was really too late to change his mind now.

Feeling himself plummeting through the air in free fall, he reached out and rang the doorbell.

A few seconds later, the door opened a crack, and she peeked out. "My goodness, aren't we formal tonight?"

He rarely rang or knocked, just wandered in, except on those occasions when she had a boyfriend. "I heard a rumor you had a guy around," he said with a crooked grin. "Didn't want to walk in on anything."

She returned his smile. "Come on in," she said, pulling the door back so she was still behind it. A little puzzled, he stepped inside. She closed the door, and the breath rushed out of his lungs.

She was entirely naked.

He stood there stunned for a long moment, aware that his mouth was hanging open but unable to shut it. At last he said, "Am I too early? Maybe you didn't have a chance to get changed after work?"

She shot him a sexy smile, although he thought he saw a hint of a flush on her cheekbones. He knew her well enough to know she wasn't an exhibitionist, and that this hadn't been easy for her. She'd stepped off a cliff for him, too.

"I was afraid you were going to come over here and tell me you'd changed your mind. I thought I'd give you an incentive not to."



"That's a hell of an incentive, all right. A man would have to be out of his mind to say no to you."

She stepped out of the shadows and into the golden light cast by the lamp, and he let his gaze roam admiringly over her, lingering with special care on her lovely round breasts, her narrow waist, and the sweet curve of her hips. Amber hair shadowed the crevice at the juncture of her thighs. An aching need filled him, the compelling desire to fall to his knees in front of her and discover for himself what was concealed there.

But for some reason he couldn't move. He stood and stared.

She took another step toward him. "Don't you like what you see?" she asked softly.

He jerked his gaze from her curves up to her face, and saw the insecurity shadowing her eyes again.

"Are you kidding? You're incredible."

She swallowed and glanced down. "I know I'm still a little...fleshy."

It amazed him that such a gorgeous woman could be so insecure about her looks. Somewhere deep in her heart lurked a slightly overweight teenager, who couldn't think of herself as anything other than fat. She was shapely and toned but somehow simply couldn't believe it, somewhere deep inside. "There can't be a woman on earth more beautiful than you are," he said with absolute conviction. "You're a goddess."

Amusement flared in her eyes, drowning the insecurity in humor. "I bet you say that to all the naked girls."

"No, only the goddess-like ones." He shook off his shock and closed the gap between them, putting his hands lightly on the warm, smooth skin of her waist and pulling her toward him with gentle urgency. "So," he said softly, bending his head and inhaling the warm fragrance of honeysuckle. "Where were we planning to start? Deep kissing, right?"

"I think that's always a good place to start," she whispered. He felt the warm puff of her breath against his throat and shivered.

The fact of the matter was, kissing—deep or otherwise—wasn't high on his list of priorities just now. He was more inclined to start by ripping his clothes off, throwing her on the bed—hell, the couch would do just fine—and plunging into her. But he was aware women usually considered that bad form. So...deep kissing it was.

He put a finger under her chin, tilted her head up, and brushed his lips over hers.

Her lips felt like satin under his, sleek and smooth, and fierce hunger stabbed through him. He'd never in his life wanted a woman the way he wanted this one. He ached with the desire to thrust into her body, needing her more than he'd ever needed anything, but he controlled himself and thrust his tongue into her mouth instead.

Her tongue met his, and they swirled and stroked together for long moments, until his knees went weak, until she was moaning softly against his mouth. He felt a shiver go through her and lifted his head.

"Are you cold?"

"Are you kidding? It's hot in here."

"Because if you're cold, we could build a fire and make love in front of it. That'd be romantic."

"It'd also be hot as hell," she said with a chuckle. "It's June, Xander. We'd both be sweating like pigs."

"I intend to make you sweat anyway."

"I'm totally in favor of that," she said softly.

He couldn't limit himself to her mouth anymore. He was too turned on. His mouth traced down the fine line of her jaw, then down the long column of her graceful throat. He could feel her pulse beating wildly

beneath the skin, and the knowledge that he could excite her thrilled him.

He continued downward, past her collarbone, and finally brushed his lips across the soft swell of her breast.

She dug her fingers into his hair and clutched him, so hard it almost hurt. "Xander," she whispered. "*Xander.*"

Her breasts were perfect, shapely and firm, not too big but definitely a nice handful. Exactly the kind of breasts he liked best. He wondered how he'd been able to keep his hands off them this long. Obviously he'd been a moron.

He was through with being a moron now, though. From now on he was going to grab onto life with both hands.

But first he was going to grab onto her *breasts* with both hands.

He kissed every inch of her soft, yielding breast, then slowly stroked his tongue across her erect nipple. She uttered a small noise, somewhere between a whimper and a sob, and clenched his hair even more firmly.

"Ow," he said without lifting his head. "I need that, Jer."

"Need what?" she moaned.

"My hair. I don't want to go bald at least till I'm thirty."

She gave a startled giggle, then released his hair and slid her hands down to his neck instead. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was pulling it so hard."

"That's okay. But when I take my clothes off, be gentle with me, okay? There are certain areas of my body I'd rather not have you yank on that hard."

She uttered a breathless laugh. "I'll try to remember."

He licked her nipple again, then drew it into his mouth. She gave a long cry of pleasure, and her knees gave way. He caught her before she fell, then eased her down to the floor.

“Good thing you have a nice soft rug here,” he said against her breast. “I’m not sure we’re going to make it to the bedroom.”

“That’s why I bought this Oriental carpet,” she said breathlessly. “You never know when a good carpet might come in handy.”

“Very prudent of you.” He suckled her nipple for a moment longer, then released it. “I admire a prudent woman.”

Her skin was pale and perfect against the deep wine color of the rug. She looked lovely, her long hair spread out around her in a golden fan, her body stretched languorously across the carpet, his for the taking.

He couldn’t stop himself from moving lower. His lips slid across her abdomen to the triangle of hair.

“You are not proceeding according to the plan,” she informed him shakily.

“Don’t worry,” he said, inhaling her fragrance. She smelled hot and spicy and totally turned on, and he felt a rush of blood to his groin. “I think deviations from the plan are okay.”

“Deviations? Are you deviant?”

“What do you think?” he asked, and brushed his lips over her soft flesh.

She gave a sobbing cry and arched back on the carpet.

God, she was so responsive, so easily aroused. He’d never been with a woman who responded so readily. Blood pounded in his groin, and he became aware his jeans felt too tight. For that matter, his *skin* felt too tight. He was pretty sure he was going to explode before long.

But he was going to make sure she exploded first.

He stroked her flesh with his tongue, finding the most sensitive spot and lavishing care on it until she was sobbing brokenly, her body twisting on the carpet. He slowed the rhythm, refusing to give her what she wanted, and she moaned in frustration.

"Please, Xander."

"There's no hurry," he said softly, although he felt the same urgency she did. "We have all night."

"I am going to *die* if you don't hurry."

"I'm pretty sure no one's ever died of this."

He lowered his head again, stroked her with his tongue, and slid a finger inside of her. She was wet and tight, and so hot that he couldn't help but imagine how good it was going to feel when he finally entered her. His finger slipped into her easily, and he thrust it deep, stroked her with his tongue, and let her slide over the edge. He felt her convulsing around him in hard, fast spasms, heard her voice crying out, and he kept her riding the waves until she collapsed back against the carpet, spent.

"God," he said, his voice hoarse. "You are incredible."

"Me? I didn't do anything. I just lay back and thought of England."

"Yeah, I could tell England was at the top of your mind." He sat up, pulled her into a sitting position, and pulled her into his lap. "So would you like to head for your bed now?"

"I don't think so." She lifted her face, flushed and lovely, to his, then raised her arms and pushed him over on the carpet. She straddled him and grinned down at him.

"Now it's my turn."

## Chapter Twelve

Jeri slid Xander's shirt over his head and studied him. Emma was right—he *was* hot. One look at him and her mouth watered to see more.

She let her hands roam over his chest, exploring the planes and curves of his muscles. He reached up to catch her hands, and she captured his wrists and pinned them back on the carpet, fixing him with a stern glare.

"I told you, it's my turn now."

"I don't want to take turns," he grumbled.

"Even my kindergartners know how to take turns, Xander. They also know better than to talk while class is in session." She bent over, inhaling his spicy, masculine smell, and flicked lightly at a nipple with her tongue. He jolted under her, and she felt his erection jump against her despite its denim confinement.

"Much more of that and your turn will be over," he said through his teeth.

She ignored him and kept stroking the hard bud of flesh. He dropped his head back, so that the tendons stood out in his neck, and the breath hissed through his teeth. His hips surged against hers in an involuntary rhythm. The rasp of rough denim against her wet, sensitive flesh felt incredible.

She moved downward, kissing her way across his abdomen, and reached to unbutton his jeans.

"Not right now," he pleaded, catching at her hair. "I want to make love to you, Jer."

"I want to make love to you, too, Xander. Aren't you the one who said we weren't in a hurry?"

"I changed my mind. I'm in a hell of a hurry."

She chuckled as she unbuttoned the metal closure of his jeans and unzipped them. It didn't surprise her to discover that he wore plain white briefs—Xander wasn't really the leopard-print type.

Pushing down his briefs, she found his enormous erection, pink and etched with veins, and ran her finger around the tip.

He gasped. "You're killing me, Jer. I'm dying here."

"I thought you said no one ever died of this."

"I'm about to be the first."

She leaned down and let her tongue slip over his velvety, hard flesh. He yelped in surprise, then flipped her over and loomed over her.

"I mean it, Jer. That's it."

She didn't feel much like arguing. There was an inferno burning between her thighs, and she wanted his big, solid erection there, quenching the flames, more than she'd ever wanted anything. She *needed* him. She wasn't sure how she'd made it all these years without him.

He shoved at his jeans and briefs, and she helped, tossing them carelessly aside. Seconds later he was leaning over her, clad in absolutely nothing.

"God, you're gorgeous," he said harshly.

"So are you," she whispered, and meant it. She was an idiot to have never seen how gorgeous he was before.

She'd been blind, but now her eyes were wide open.

He let his erection nudge at her thighs, and she sucked in a breath at the feel of it, hot and huge, against her sensitive flesh. "You're on the pill, right?"

She nodded.

"Good. Because I don't even want a condom between us. I don't want anything between us, Jer. I want to feel every inch of you when I come deep inside you."

Liquid warmth surged between her thighs at his bluntly explicit words, and she moved restlessly against him, wanting him, needing him so much it hurt. "Do you have to talk so much?"

He grinned down at her. "You used to like talking to me."

"I've decided to use you for other purposes. Now shut the hell up and kiss me."

He bent over and pressed his lips to hers with demanding force, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. At the same moment his body slammed into hers, right to the hilt. She cried out against his mouth, and he stilled, shaking with the effort.

"Sorry," he ground out haltingly. "Didn't mean to hurt you...you're so tight..."

"It doesn't hurt," she whispered.

"Are you sure?"

"Give me more, damn it."

He laughed against her mouth and began to move, hard and fast, until she clutched his hair again and sobbed. Pleasure unfurled within her like a rose opening to the first rays of daylight, and radiant heat spread through her in wave after wave. She felt the liquid spurt of his own pleasure, deep inside her, heard him yell her name hoarsely, felt his body go rigid, then slowly collapse on her.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close.



"That was incredible," she whispered in his ear.

"No kidding," he said in a strained voice. "I've never felt anything like that before, Jer. Never."

"Me neither," she said in all honesty.

"Jesus. We've wasted ten years."

"I think we just made up for it."

He laughed softly.

"Not yet. We have a whole hell of a lot of making up for lost time ahead of us."

She grinned up at him.

"Then we'd better get started."



"Joe told me I needed to sweep you off your feet," Alexander said as they sprawled together in her bed later that evening. "That's what the roses were supposed to do. To impress you."

"They did impress me. I just attributed them to the wrong guy."

"Yeah, I was pretty pissed when I figured that out. I should have known you would, though. It's like I was invisible to you."

"You were never invisible to me," she said, gently laying a hand on his biceps. "You've been the most important person in my life for years now."

"Yeah, but I was like white noise, you know? I was there all the time but you never really noticed me."

"I would have noticed if you went away, though. Just like white noise."

"You don't have to agree with me all the time, you know. Feel free to disagree on the white noise thing."

She laughed ruefully. "The truth is, Xander, I've been taking you for granted. It was horrible of me, and I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"Well, sure, now that you know how terrific I am in bed."

"If I'd realized before how great you were in bed," she said, stretching languorously, "I would have seduced you a long time ago. But now I know, and you've ruined me for other men."

He knew from her light tone that she was joking, but her words sent a jolt through him anyway. He *wanted* to ruin her for other men. He never wanted her to look at a man other than himself again.

"I hope so," he said, trying to match her light tone and totally failing. There was a serious note in his voice that made her look up instantly.

"Look, Xander, about us—"

"We don't have to make any decisions about where we want to go from here tonight," he said, deliberately drowning out whatever it was she had been about to say. "Let's just enjoy tonight and not worry about tomorrow, okay?"

She hesitated, looking as if she were about to argue, then shrugged. "Sounds good to me."

"Okay." He rolled her over, so that she was on her back, and leaned over her, framing her face with his hands. "You are so beautiful," he said softly. "Did you know that?"

Jeri blinked hard as her throat constricted at the solemn tone of his voice. She did her best to conceal her reaction beneath her flippant sense of humor. "I notice you aren't wearing your glasses."

"From this close, I don't need them. But if you think I can't see how gorgeous you are..." He leaned close and blew into her ear. "You look even better close up."

"So I have a gorgeous ear? Is that what you're saying?"

"One of your best features," he agreed gravely. He moved down the bed, cupped her breasts in his hands, and studied them thoughtfully.

"Actually," he said, "these are pretty damn good features too."

"Are you sure you're close enough to make that determination?"

He leaned forward, so that his nose was an inch from her nipple, and squinted. Then he drew the nipple into his mouth and sucked. She gasped and squirmed against him.

At last he released her and lifted his head.

"Definitely one of your best features," he pronounced. He moved further down her body. "Your stomach is nice, too."

"Um," she said. The touch of his lips across her abdomen sent a shiver through her. He was kissing her so lightly it almost tickled. Almost...but not quite. "I know I'm a little—"

"If you say *fleshy* one more time I'm going to tie you down and force-feed you a gallon of chocolate ice cream."

"Oooh, you pervert. I think I could live with that."

"Because you're not fleshy, damn it." His mouth traveled lower.

"What's that bump you're kissing, then?"

"Women," he said against her skin, "are not supposed to be perfectly flat. You're supposed to have a little belly here, Jer. You just don't realize it because you've been reading too many fashion magazines."

He slid his lips across the slight jut of her hipbone. "And before you start getting all self-conscious on me, you're supposed to have a curve to your hips, too. And you've got fabulous hips, don't think I haven't noticed."

She sighed. "Could you at least stay away from my thighs?"

"Not a chance. They're gorgeous too."

"I definitely think you need your glasses on. Although maybe it's better if you leave them off."

He growled against the inner skin of her thigh, and she felt the vibration zing through her body. "Do I need to tie you down after all?"

"It's a tempting thought."

He moved his mouth upward a bit, and she wiggled self-consciously and caught at his hair. "Xander. Don't."

He lifted his head reluctantly. "You seemed to like that earlier."

"Yes, but earlier I was clean. We just..." She broke off, oddly embarrassed. "You know."

"Your vast sexual vocabulary seems to have deserted you."

"So I'm a little prissy. I want to be clean when you, um..."

"When I go down on you?"

She was amazed to feel her cheeks heat. Ordinarily she was as frank about sex as any character on *Sex and the City*, but somehow talking about it with Xander was a little different now. "Uh, yeah."

"Fine," he said softly. "If you have to be clean, then maybe we better take a shower."

He let her up, and she rolled off the bed, aware of him putting on his glasses so he could watch her ass as she headed toward the bathroom. He stood up and followed her into the bathroom, wearing absolutely nothing but his glasses.

"This is a great room," he said, looking around at the ivy-covered wallpaper, the green tile floor, and the big glass-enclosed shower. "I've only been in it a few times, but it's had a starring role in some of my fantasies."

"I hoped *I'd* had a starring role in some of your fantasies," she retorted, turning on the water.

"More than some of them, Jer. You've starred in every fantasy I've had since I was seventeen. But I've dreamed about making love to you all

sorts of places.” He nodded his head approvingly at the shower. “That’s definitely high on the list.”

“You’d better take off your glasses. They’ll steam up.”

“They steam up just from looking at you,” he said, but obligingly removed them and dropped them on the marble countertop.

She tested the water, which wasn’t quite hot enough yet, and turned back to study him. He looked good enough to eat with a spoon. A girl didn’t need chocolate ice cream when he was around.

“Quit looking at me that way,” he said in a low voice, “or we’re not going to make it into the shower.”

“I can’t help it. I’ve never gotten the chance to see you naked before.”

“You could have seen me naked any time you wanted.”

“I think we already established I’ve been an idiot. For years and years.” Turning, she stuck a hand into the water. “Ouch. That’s pretty hot. Come on in.”

She stepped into the water, and Xander stepped in right behind her. All of a sudden her shower, which had always seemed very spacious, seemed crowded. His six-foot-two frame seemed to take up most of the available space. She’d never really thought of him as a big guy, but up close he was plenty big enough, in more ways than one.

He groped around in the soap dish, found the soap, and lathered his hands, then began to run them over her body. It still felt really odd to have him touch her so intimately, when they’d been friends for so many years and never touched in more than an incidental fashion. And yet she wanted him to touch her more. Over and over again.

He knelt at her feet and began lathering them, then her legs, as the smell of honeysuckle began to lift through the air with the steam. She realized she’d never be able to smell her favorite fragrance again without

thinking of Xander, kneeling at her feet, his tanned back and shoulders glistening with droplets from the shower.

A quiver of anticipation ran through her as his hands traveled up her thighs, but he slid around her most intimate flesh and ran his hands over her hips and butt instead. She moaned softly, and his hands slipped higher, across her belly, and finally across her breasts. Her nipples were tight and hard against his palms, and a sharp gasp of pleasure escaped her.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, his low, harsh voice barely audible over the splashing of the water.

She *felt* beautiful. The insecurity that always lurked beneath the surface, the worry that she wasn’t pretty enough, or thin enough, seemed to have disappeared. For the first time in her life, she really believed she was attractive. Sexy. Irresistible.

Somehow she’d never felt that way with any other man.

His soapy hands slid lower, between her thighs, and she felt his finger probing her slick flesh, seeking and finding her most sensitive spot. Shuddering, she leaned back against the shower wall, reveling in his touch in a way she never would have believed she could. The touch of his hands was the sexiest sensation she’d ever known. She was utterly, completely wet, in a way that had nothing to do with the shower water.

His fingers moved against her, in her, sliding into her slick channel and moving in a steady, slow rhythm that made her ache for more. She strained against his hand, her back arching with a will all its own, and a strangled cry escaped from her throat.

“Faster,” she pleaded.

He moved slightly faster, just enough to bring her to a higher level, not fast enough to give her what she craved. “*Faster*,” she whispered again.

His fingers slid into her harder, faster, and exquisite pleasure bloomed within her like the sun rising over the ocean in a brilliantly hued explosion of light. He continued the motion, keeping the sensation going, until every last quiver of pleasure had gone. Then, slowly, he removed his fingers.

“Do you feel clean enough now?” he asked.

Shakily, she nodded.

“Then let’s get dirty,” he whispered, and knelt at her feet.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she was done, that she couldn’t do it again, but then she was on the tip of *his* tongue, and the words died in her mouth. Water sluiced over both of them, raining down on them, as he made love to her with his mouth, bringing her to new heights she’d never imagined. By the time he was done, she was gasping for breath, shuddering, sobbing with pleasure.

He scrubbed her off with a washcloth, then scrubbed himself, while she watched the play of muscles beneath soap-slick skin. It was a good view, she thought with feline pleasure. He shut the water off, turned to her, and hesitated. A wary look glinted in his eyes. “What are you thinking?”

She looked over his body, seeing the water beading on his golden skin, the hard muscle beneath it. She was thinking that she could look at him every day for the rest of her life and not get tired of it. But she shied away from saying so. She wasn’t ready to think long-term yet. It was difficult enough to think of Xander as a lover, rather than a friend.

Her gaze slid down his flat abs, to his heavy, thick erection, and heat swirled in her belly. If she was perfectly honest with herself, it was getting easier all the time to think of him as a lover.

“I’m thinking,” she said, “that I’m ready to take you back to bed.”

An answering glimmer of lust appeared in his eyes. "The bed's too far away," he said in his deep voice. "What about the floor?"

"Sounds like a plan," she answered, and wrapped her arms around his neck.



## Chapter Thirteen

The radio turned on at precisely seven o'clock, as always, and Jeri rolled over, hearing Xander's voice in her ear.

"It's seven o'clock," he said in his pleasant baritone. "Time to get out of bed, Jeri."

She rolled over and squinted at the pillow next to her. It was empty. Xander's voice was coming from the radio. Clearly he'd gotten up sometime during the night and left. She was surprised to realize she felt bereft with him gone.

"And speaking of Jeri..." Xander's voice hesitated. "Jeri, I never admitted to myself what I felt for you before this week. But I've recently come to realize that I've loved you for a long, long time. I don't plan on letting you go ever again."

She blinked in shock at the radio as it began to play the Rembrandts' "I'll Be There for You". Xander's words made it sound an awful lot like he was proposing a permanent relationship. She wasn't sure she was ready for that. After all, it was only a couple of days ago that she'd been thinking about sleeping with Connor.

But she was beginning to realize that she didn't care that much about Connor, and never had. What she had really wanted from him was what he represented—the desire to belong to someone. The desire to be thought beautiful, to be found worthy by a popular boy.

That was a juvenile impulse she really should have gotten over in high school. An impulse, she'd grown to recognize lately, that had come more from her mother's angry rantings in her senior year than from her own desires.

She stared at the ceiling, lost in thought. She'd been blind as well as stupid not to realize what a great guy Xander was. He'd been in front of her all along, and she hadn't noticed. For that, at least, she was grateful to Connor. He'd made her confront her demons, and forced her to realize what Xander meant to her.

And he meant a whole hell of a lot to her. Of that she had no doubt. But was she really ready for this to become a long-term relationship?

Then again, their friendship was already a long-term relationship in a manner of speaking, wasn't it? She thought of what she'd written in Xander's yearbook a decade ago.

*Jeri + Xander—Friends 4-Ever.*

Befuddled, she got out of bed, slipped on a robe, and staggered out to the kitchen, where Emma met her with a stifled shriek of delight.

"Did you hear that? Alex practically proposed to you!"

"I heard it. I don't believe it."

"Why not? I told you he had it bad for you."

"It's just..." Jeri sat down heavily at the table. "It's kind of soon to be talking about forever, isn't it?"

"Soon?" Emma hooted. "You've known him for ten years, girlfriend. How is this *soon*?"

Jeri bit her lip. "I just need some time to get adjusted to the idea of Xander as more than a friend, that's all."

Emma grinned evilly. "I kind of got the impression you got adjusted to that idea last night."

"How do you know?" Jeri looked up, feeling her cheeks flush. "Were we too loud?"

"Not at all." Emma's grin grew wider. "It's just that you left Alex's underwear hanging over a lamp in the living room."



"So what's the plan for tonight?"

Alexander sighed as he looked at his brother over a roast beef sandwich. "I'm not sure, Joe."

"I heard your show this morning. You practically proposed to Jeri."

"That wasn't a proposal. It was a statement of intent."

"Ah. Is that what you call it? Either way, you need to follow it up with something big so she knows you're serious."

"I'm not taking advice from you," Alexander said. "Last time you practically ruined everything."

"Oh, I did not. It sounds like it all worked out for the best. All because of my wisdom."

Alexander snorted. "Believe what you want, Joe. But I can assure you, if anything has gone right between me and Jeri, your wisdom had absolutely nothing to do with it."

Joe stuffed several french fries into his mouth. "Regardless," he said, somewhat indistinctly, "you need a plan."

"I don't have a plan," Alexander said. "I don't have a clue. I have absolutely no idea what to do next."

Joe swallowed and grinned. "So you're admitting you need my wisdom?"

Alexander groaned. "I must be out of my mind to say this," he grumbled. "But yeah, I guess I need your wisdom."

“Great,” Joe said. “Listen carefully. Here’s your first step.”

Recognizing the exact same words Joe had uttered just before he’d dispensed the lousy advice about the flowers, Alexander cringed. “I can’t afford to screw this up, Joe.”

“You won’t, Alex. She loves you, right?”

“Uh...I think so.”

“And you love her, right?”

“Definitely.”

“So what’s the worst that could happen?”

Alexander considered the question for a moment. “She could decide never to talk to me again.”

“Jesus, Alex. Think positive, will you?”

“I’m trying.”

“You’re not trying very hard.”

Alexander shut his eyes and groaned again. “Fine. I’m thinking positive. Now tell me what I need to do.”



“Thanks for not throwing my flowers in the dirt this time.”

Jeri sat, stiff and awkward, on the luxurious leather seats of the limo.

“They’re very pretty,” she said, looking at the corsage on her wrist.

“The last ones were pretty too. But you tossed them anyway.”

“I already apologized for that,” she said defensively.

Alexander looked at her, sitting stiffly, almost primly. She wore a beautiful dress, although nothing like the frilly, pastel pink confection she’d worn to prom ten years ago. This dress was hot pink, sexy and low-cut and said plainly that she was a full-grown, sensual creature, comfortable with her own sexuality.

Except she wasn't comfortable. She was nervous as hell. Any idiot could see that, even him.

"I screwed up, didn't I?" he said into the silence.

She looked up hastily. "I don't know what you mean."

He sighed. "Asking you to consider a permanent relationship with me on air. Like most things I've done, I meant it to be romantic, but it was just plain stupid. I put you on the spot, and I didn't mean to."

"I just..." She fiddled with the roses. "I love you, Xander. But I've never had a serious, long-term relationship before. Not with anyone."

The casual way she stated she was in love with him, as though it was self-evident, raised his flagging spirits a notch. "Me neither," he admitted. "It's never seemed important to me. But now I realize that's because I was only interested in you."

She looked away from him, into the night, as the lights of the city flashed past. "I talked to Connor on the phone this afternoon."

His heart stilled in his chest. "And?"

"He's married. He says you and he talked about it."

"Yeah. We did." Curiosity got the better of him. "How do you feel about that?"

She shrugged. "I don't think I feel much of anything about it. I'm beginning to realize I never felt that much for him. I think he could use a friend or two, though."

His heart started beating again. "He's got us," he said.

She nodded. "I thought maybe I'd introduce him to Emma, too. I think they'd get along pretty well."

Alexander frowned. "Are you matchmaking, Jeri?"

"I wouldn't do that," she said, looking back toward him and blinking innocently in a way that didn't fool him in the least. "I just think they could be good friends, that's all."

"I don't know, Jer. Sometimes good friends can turn into a lot more than that."

"Occasionally," she said, her lips curving.

Feeling his heart lift at her smile, he took her hand in his and decided to go for it. He'd already opened his big mouth in front of all of Southeastern Virginia, so it was probably a little late to save face now.

"Last night meant a lot to me, Jeri."

"Me too," she whispered.

"I can't see this being a casual fling, Jer. You mean too much to me."

"You're not the love 'em and leave 'em type either, huh?"

Despite the seriousness of the moment, his lips curved upward at the phrase. "Not where you're concerned, Jer. If you leave me now, you're taking my heart with you."

She looked up, into his eyes, and he felt himself sinking into the dark depths of her gaze. "I really can't imagine a life without you," she whispered. "I never could. I think that's why I never let myself get too close to another man, because I knew that would mean the end of our friendship. And I didn't want to lose you."

"You're not going to lose me," he said, clasping her hand firmly in his own. "We're friends forever, Jeri. Just like you wrote in my yearbook all those years ago."

"Friends forever," she repeated. "Not a bad foundation for a relationship, is it?"

"No. Not a bad foundation at all."

As the limo drew to a stop, she pulled her gaze away from his and looked around. "So exactly where are we going on this fancy date?"

"I thought we'd recreate our prom date the way it should have been," Alexander said. "No looking for other men, no thinking about what could have been, no thinking either of us is pitiful. Just you and me, together."

The way things should have been ten years ago. But with certain...alterations.”

“Alterations?” she repeated. The door opened, and Alexander took her hand, assisting her out.

“Yeah. For example, the fancy restaurant I took you to. That’s not really us, is it? Never was, never will be. We’re not fancy restaurant types. So I figured we’d go to a burger joint.”

The odor of charbroiled burgers wafted through the air, making his mouth water. She sniffed the air appreciatively. “Sounds great.”

“And after that,” he said, “maybe we’ll go back to my place and watch a sophisticated piece of cinematography.”

She brightened. “*Star Wars*?”

“Or *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Your pick.”

“Sounds like the perfect date,” she said. “But why the limo? And the corsage? And the tux?”

“Because even a woman who loves burger joints and action movies deserves to travel in style.”

Her blue eyes warmed as the corners of her mouth tilted upward. “You know,” she said softly, “I just realized I’ll never meet another man who knows me as well as you do.”

“I’m glad you’ve figured that out.”

She stood up on tiptoe and brushed her lips over his. “So a permanent, long-term relationship would seem to be in order.”

Joy rushed over him in a wave, and his heart swelled in his chest. “That’s terrific,” he answered, astonished to hear his voice shaking slightly. Damned if he wasn’t near tears at the thought of this woman being his for the rest of his life.

“I’m glad you think so.”

“I do. Because I’m not letting you go. Not ever. We can get married, we can move in together, or we can just have wild, passionate sex every night. It doesn’t matter. Because I’ll always be there for you. Friends forever. And lovers forever.”

She wrapped her fingers around his as they walked into the restaurant. “Forever,” she echoed softly. “I like the sound of that.”



## Ellen Fisher

Ellen Fisher is a native Virginian who attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg (and managed to squeak by with a degree in history, even though she spent most of those four years writing a romance novel when she should have been writing term papers). Ellen spends a lot of time staring into space and calling this “writing,” but she does manage to transfer some of her scattered thoughts onto the computer, and her published romances rank among her proudest achievements. Her even prouder achievements are four brilliant and beautiful kids (two girls and two boys), ranging from ten years to eleven months old, plus a fabulous husband who’s true hero material, slaying dragons (well, big ugly bugs) on a regular basis. He even reads her books, although the love scenes make him blush.

You can find out more about Ellen and her work at [www.ellenfisher.com](http://www.ellenfisher.com), and visit her blog at <http://ellenfisher.blogspot.com>.

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