



A PERFECT FIT

...Joel wore dark trousers and a button-down oxford shirt with a tie. His dark hair had been slicked back beneath a ball cap. He looked like a Catholic schoolboy, utterly forbidden, which made it all the more delicious. He swaggered around the room greeting the women, while his cohorts contorted themselves on and off the pole.

The music ebbed and flowed, inviting hips to wiggle and pelvises to thrust. The boys in the middle of the stage traded out with the two who'd been working the room. Joel, perhaps because he'd arrived late, didn't go to the center and start taking off his clothes, but Audrey knew it would only be a matter of minutes before he took his turn. She had to get out of here before then. *How embarrassing!* Joel was her classmate, a friend, her study buddy...

And he was standing right in front of her. She looked up, with what she knew had to be an idiotic smile pasted on her face. Joel was grinning, too. He didn't look embarrassed, but then he probably dealt with shell-shocked women on a regular basis.

The song changed from a harsh rap song to a smoother, sexier dance tune. A fucksong, they'd called it in college. Slow, sensual, with lyrics to match. Audrey leaned against the back of the loveseat. Joel, body moving slightly to the beat, looked at her again, and she thought for sure he was going to move away. She hoped he would. She hoped he wouldn't.

He didn't...

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BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

A PERFECT FIT
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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ISBN 1-59279-539-0
Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To “Lance” and “Kira”
who made my birthday so much fun in 2005.*

*And to DPF, who watches
Nip/Tuck with me as much as I want.*

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A shadow fell across Audrey Winsom's textbook, and she looked up, shading her eyes against the early May sunshine. She smiled when she saw the man interrupting her studies. "Joel, hi. Have a seat."

He grinned down at her, his dark hair falling over his chocolate-brown eyes in the way that always had her itching to brush it away. "Audrey, my favorite head shrinker in training. How's it going?"

Audrey moved over so he could slide into the seat next to hers. She gestured at the book. "Just me and *Advanced Developmental Psychology*."

Joel made a face and reached across her to close the book with a solid thud. "Bor-rrring."

Audrey laughed, but opened the book again. "Maybe. But the final's in two weeks. C'mon, Joel, you need to study for it, too. Why not come over tonight? I know it's Friday, but we can order pizza, buckle down, crack open the books. Lauren's going with her dad until

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Sunday, and I plan to study all weekend.”

Joel shook his head. “Can’t.”

“Ah.” Audrey nodded. She studied his face, the high line of his cheekbones and the perfect curve of his mouth. Of course he wouldn’t want to hang out with her on a Friday night. “Hot date? Who’s it with this time? The cute blonde from Counseling Procedures? No...let me guess. It’s the brunette who giggles at you in the café.”

Joel laughed. “Jennifer is the blonde, and she’s got a new boyfriend. Marianne’s the brunette and no, it’s not her, either.”

Audrey pretended to study him thoroughly before saying, “Aha! I have it! Secret agent stuff, right?”

It was a well-worn joke between them. Secret agent or a gigolo, two careers that would suit him should he decide not to become a psychologist.

“Something like that. Not,” he added, “that anything could be more exciting than a night with you, going over human development.”

“Riiiiight.” Audrey rolled her eyes at his non-subtle flirting, which she’d steeled herself not to take seriously about two seconds after meeting him the first time.

They laughed together. Joel nudged her shoulder. Audrey turned to look at him.

“What?”

“Is that all you ever do?” he asked her, for once the teasing gone. “Study?”

Audrey closed her book to look at him. She sat silent for a moment, thinking. “It’s important I get good grades, Joel. My future and Lauren’s future depend on me being able to support us.”

He nodded and did something unexpected. He leaned forward to brush a strand of hair that had come undone from her ponytail away from her face and tuck it behind her ear. The simple gesture, far less outrageous than some of the flirtatious things he’d said to her in the

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past, nevertheless made her catch her breath. She looked into his eyes.

“I admire you,” Joel said.

She couldn’t ignore the sincerity in his voice, but Audrey ducked her head, looking away. “Joel...”

He leaned back, effectively breaking the moment. “Maybe next week instead? There’s plenty of time before the final. You can even cook me dinner. I’ll bring a movie for Lauren, she’ll veg out in front of the tube and we’ll make a night of it.”

It had become safe to look at him again, and she gave him a raised brow. “Sounds fine, except for that me making you dinner part.”

Joel winked as he got up from the table. “I could make dinner for you instead. I’m not just a pretty face. I make a mean omelet, Audrey.”

“Oh, yeah?” She laughed and threw a balled-up napkin at him. “Such modesty. Fine, I’ll make dinner.”

Laughing, Joel ducked the napkin and gave her a little wave as he walked away. Audrey stared after him a moment, admiring his long, lean form, the bag slung with such casual fashion sense over one shoulder, the confidence in his stride. She knew he was more than a pretty face. He had a great sense of humor and a real brain, too, beneath the perfect features and golden smile. They’d been paired off by chance in the first class they’d had together, and the easy way he broke down and absorbed even difficult concepts had impressed her from the start. Studying with Joel made her push herself, and they often vied for top position in their classes.

He was gorgeous, smart, funny...and an outrageous flirt. The sort of guy she’d avoided in college, setting her sights instead on the nice guy, the reliable one—Ted.

And where had that left her? Nice, reliable Ted had discovered the pleasures of constant one-night stands while on the road, the joys of corporate success that outweighed the quieter joy of domestic bliss. He’d left her for his secretary, a cliché so overdone Audrey had

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laughed when he told her. When she finally cried, it wasn't for herself, but for the dreams they'd shared. For her child, Lauren, who now saw her daddy every other weekend, which turned out to be more often than when he'd actually lived with them.

The divorce had been swift and equitable. It had left her with enough money to go back to school and get her Masters in Psychology, keep food on the table, clothes on their backs. She wasn't interested in much more, right now.

Not even if it came packaged in a six-foot-two, dark-haired, dark-eyed, swaggering bad boy who made her laugh.

* * *

Joel wheeled the cart of magazines and games into the social room. "Hey, Morty, my main man."

"Joely," answered the older man with a grin that showed his straight white dentures. "How they hanging?"

"High and dry," Joel answered without missing a beat. Morty was his favorite resident at Country Breezes. The octogenarian had a wicked sense of humor and a weakness for butterscotch pudding, but along with that, he never seemed to assume that, because Joel was young, he didn't know what end was up. Morty never patronized him.

"Young fella like you? That's a shame." Morty chuckled, wheeling his chair closer to Joel's cart. "I don't suppose you have any girly mags in that pile?"

"Sorry, man. Nurse Ratchett checks 'em out before I bring them in. I've got some the same old celebrity rags and the home decorating stuff. But I did manage to snag you a couple *Weekly News of the Weird*."

Morty laughed. "Oy, just what this old man needs, more news of the weird. As if living next door to Sasquatch Frank's not weird enough."

Joel laughed. "I haven't seen Frank in a while. How's he doing?"

Morty sobered a bit. "Failing. Been in bed with a cold that won't

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quit.”

He didn't say more, but he didn't have to. Being constrained to bed was never a good sign in Country Breezes. Joel nodded and passed Morty a copy of the black and white pulp paper.

“Sorry, man.”

Morty waved a hand. “It's what happens, right? You get old, you get sick...feh. Enough of that. What're you doing here? I thought you worked your second gig tonight.”

“I do, but that's not until later. I need the cash, man.” Joel shrugged. “School's not cheap, you know?”

Morty nodded. “Tell me about it. But working on a Friday night...no fun. No dates? No girls in your life? What's going on? I thought you were the Don Juan of Millersville University.”

Joel shrugged. “There's a girl. But...she's not really into me. We're study buddies.”

Morty looked so astounded Joel had to laugh again.

“Study buddies? What's that, some newfangled slang for...something?”

“No. It means we have class together. We study together. That's it.”

“She invites you to her house?”

“Well...yeah.” They usually studied a couple of times a week.

“She likes you,” Morty said with an old man's self-righteous confidence.

Joel shook his head. “Nah, man...she's...different.”

“Trust me, sonny, she's not that different.” Morty shook a gnarled finger. “She's a woman, right?”

“Definitely.”

“She makes you food?”

Joel laughed. “Sometimes.”

“She likes you. Ask her out.”

“I can't do that, man.” Joel started tidying up the chair cushions

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someone had tossed about. “If I ask her out and she says no, it’ll ruin our friendship.”

Morty started to gasp, a hand over his heart, and Joel dropped the cushions and ran to his side. The old man grabbed his wrist. “Get me a magnifying glass, quick!”

Joel was already reaching for the button on the wall to call a nurse, but he hesitated. “What do you need a magnifying glass for?”

“To look for your balls, sonny!” Morty cackled, and Joel stepped back. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Not funny, man.” Joel put his hands on his hips and glared at Morty, who looked unrepentant. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Morty waved a hand again. “Feh. This is not the Joely I know and love. What’s different about this girl from all the others?”

Joel leaned against the window seat. “For starters, she’s not a girl, she’s a woman.”

Morty nodded eagerly. “Oh, yeah? Older woman, huh?”

“She’s not that much older. But she’s not some silly kid either. She’s...” He shrugged, not sure how to describe Audrey without sounding like a sap. “She’s a hard worker. And smart...man, is she smart. And beautiful. She’s just...”

“Sonny, you’ve got it bad.” Morty sighed, shoulders hunching. “And you can’t ask her out?”

“She’s divorced,” Joel said, like that explained it.

Morty wasn’t appeased by such a throwaway answer. “So?”

“So, she’s a little shy of dating. And she’s got a daughter, a great kid named Lauren.”

“So you’ve met the daughter?”

Joel shrugged. “Well...yeah. When I go over to study, she’s usually there. And we’ve gone out for dinner or ice cream a couple of times after class.”

“But those weren’t dates?” Morty looked astounded, shaking his

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head.

“No, that’s just hanging out.”

“Times change, times change,” Morty muttered, almost to himself. “Listen, sonny, she likes you. She invites you to her house, she lets you meet her kid, that means she likes you.”

“She likes me,” Joel countered. “That doesn’t mean she, you know, likes me.”

Morty laughed and set his chair in motion toward the door. “Only one way to find out, sonny. Ask her out.”

“I can’t do that, man!” Joel called after him.

“What a wimp!” came the old man’s retort from down the hall, and Joel laughed, though the words had the ring of truth.

Yeah, he was a wimp. At least when it came to Audrey. Morty hadn’t been far wrong, calling him the Don Juan of Millersville. Joel knew how the rumors had started. Date a professor, even one who taught classes you’d never taken, and you had to expect there to be talk. That he and Marlene had only gone to dinner and a movie hadn’t seemed to matter, not when they’d been spotted by Suze Pennypacker, the girl with the biggest mouth and wildest imagination Joel had ever met. Suze had been the one start the rumor that Joel supplemented his income as a paid escort, and since he refused to give her the satisfaction even of denying it, the story had passed around and around until it became legend. It had followed up him from undergrad days until now.

It hadn’t seemed to hurt him. Joel had his share of admirers. He went on dates. He wasn’t proud of his reputation as a flirt, but he wasn’t exactly ashamed of it either. He had fun with girls, and he liked to think they had fun with him. He didn’t give them any reason to believe it was ever anything other than dinner and dancing or a movie. It wasn’t like he took them out, seduced them into bed and then dumped them. Being labeled a man-for-hire had probably earned him more action than anything else...at least while he’d been looking for it.

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The truth was, he hadn't been to bed with anyone in a little over a year—not since meeting Audrey. He'd had plenty of opportunities, but the appeal of the casual sex he'd once found so much a part of student life had palled greatly. He wasn't an undergrad anymore. But a reputation, once earned, is hard to shake, and even the professors knew him as Joel Goodman, the flirt. The guy with the golden grin.

It could be frustrating. Could he help it if he liked women? If he knew how to talk to them better than most guys his age? If it just came easy to him? What was he supposed to do, turn into the sort of doofus a lot of his buddies seemed to be around girls, when compliments came easier to his lips than playing it cool?

In high school, his best friend Gary had once asked how he managed to get even the hottest girls to talk to him, the ones who wouldn't blink an eye for anything less than a star football player or prom king.

To Joel, it had seemed simple enough. "Tell them the truth."

"But girls like that hear the truth all the time," Gary said.

"So find something true about them they haven't heard," was Joel's response.

"But you don't just flirt with the pretty girls," Gary had persisted. "You flirt with all of them. They all love you, man."

"Every girl has something pretty about her," Joel had told his friend, who never seemed to get it.

He'd meant it then and it still held true today. All women had something about them to enjoy. Was it his fault if he liked putting smiles on their faces? It had never seemed like a bad thing before.

Until now. Until meeting Audrey and having her think he was just one more smooth operator. Yeah, she liked him as a study friend, but it was always clear she kept him at arm's distance, and he supposed he couldn't really blame her.

Joel Goodman, the guy with the golden grin.

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Sometimes, that really sucked.

* * *

“Daddy’ll drop you off on Sunday evening, okay?” Audrey stuffed the last of Lauren’s clothes into her overnight bag and ran her hands over her daughter’s smooth blonde hair. “You have everything?”

Lauren nodded. “Daddy and Tammy are taking me to the zoo!”

Audrey smiled. “That sounds like fun.”

Lauren squeezed her mom around the waist. “I wish you could come, Mommy.”

“Oh, honey –”

“I know, I know.” Lauren rolled her eyes. “You and daddy are divorced. I got it. But you’d like the zoo, Mommy. And you won’t have any fun here alone.”

Audrey kissed the top of Lauren’s head and hugged her tight. “I’ll be fine, sweetie.”

Those words stayed with her, though, as she put Lauren in the back seat of Ted’s expensive car and waved as they drove away. *No fun.* Was that what her life had become?

Studying, cleaning, taking care of her child. It left little room for much else, which had been fine for her. But no fun?

She’d just settled down at the kitchen table with her books and a pot of tea when the phone jangled.

“Audrey.”

“Hi, Karen.” Audrey poured steaming Earl Grey into her mug and added sugar. “What’s up?”

“*Cinco de Mayo*, baby, that’s what’s up. Tonight.”

Audrey capped her highlighter and tapped it against the thick book in front of her. She’d only made it through half the chapter so far. “What about it?”

On the other end of the phone, Karen snorted. “We’re going out. You’re coming with us. No excuses. I know Lauren went to Ted’s this

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weekend. You're coming out with us."

"Okay."

"No ifs, ands or buts. It's time you got out and took advantage of being a single mom." Karen had been divorced for three years. She liked to say she was a serial monogamist with attention deficit disorder. One guy at a time, just a different one every month.

"I said all right." Audrey stuck her bookmark back in the chapter. "Where are we going?"

"Wait a minute. You said okay?"

"Yeah." Audrey frowned at her friend's assumption she'd resist. "You're right. It's Friday night, Lauren's gone for the weekend, and I can study all day tomorrow. Where are we going?"

Karen let out a little whoop. "*Muy caliente!*"

Audrey laughed. "I see your Spanish lessons are paying off."

"No, hon. *Muy Caliente*. It's a show."

"What kind of show?" Audrey closed the book and leaned back in her chair to sip her tea.

"All male revue."

"Oh, Karen." Audrey laughed. "Good Lord."

"It'll be fun," Karen said. "C'mon. It'll be a blast."

"Is this like...Chippendales? Or what?" Audrey tried to think of the last time she'd been out anywhere, much less at a nudie show. "Do they get completely naked?"

"I don't know," Karen said with a little squeal. "But apparently they do this once a month, and it's always themed. This month it's *Cinco de Mayo*. Latin lovers. That sort of thing."

"*Muy Caliente*," Audrey murmured with a shake of her head. "What should I wear?"

"Nothing that has be dry-cleaned," was Karen's advice before she hung up.

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“Hey,” Karen said. “Great jeans! Are they new?”

Audrey looked down at the faded blue denim. “No. Old, actually. I just haven’t worn them in a long time. But you said nothing that had to be dry cleaned...”

They both laughed as they entered the club. The last time Audrey had been to the Chili Pepper, it had been called Spanky’s Sports Bar. Now it featured a Latin decorating scheme, including drinks with names like “Red Hot Mama” and “Chili Chiller.”

“*Muy Caliente!*” cried Karen as they entered.

The music’s heavy, thumping beat reverberated in the pit of Audrey’s stomach. “I should’ve brought ear plugs!”

“Hello, ladies.” The smiling young man who greeted them carried a handful of plastic necklaces with blinking chili pepper pendants. “Are you here for *Muy Caliente*?”

“Hell, yeah!” Karen shook her ass. “We’re ready.”

The host smiled. “Right this way.”

Audrey shared a look with her friend as he led them through the main bar section and down a short flight of stairs to another, much smaller room with black-painted walls and blue lighting.

“Omigod,” said Karen, “there’s a pole!”

“Have a seat,” offered their host. “The show will start soon.”

Karen gripped Audrey’s arm in a death grip. “Omigod, omigod...!”

“Karen! You’re the one who wanted to come here!” Audrey laughed and headed for a small couch toward the back of the room. “C’mon, it’ll be fun. That’s what you said. Right? Are you nervous?”

They sat. Karen refused to let go of Audrey’s arm. “Omigod. Look at this place!”

Audrey looked the room over. Mirrors on the walls and ceiling, blue neon lighting, a nice, shiny pole on a platform in the middle of the floor. Yep. It looked like a nudie bar, all right. Not that she’d ever been in one before. “This is some set up. You say they do this every month?”

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What do they do with the space the rest of the time?"

"Private parties," said a low, rumbling voice, and Audrey looked up at the young man standing in front of them. "Hi. I'm Vance."

"Hi, Vance. I'm Audrey. This is Karen." Audrey nudged Karen, who seemed incapable of speech. "How are you?"

Vance, clearly used to shy and wilting flowers, looked at Karen with a gleam in his eyes. "Great. You ladies up for some fun?"

"We sure are," said Audrey firmly.

"Good," said Vance. "We've got five guys here tonight. Any preference for music?"

Karen, apparently, had been struck dumb. "Whatever works," Audrey said generously, having no idea what sort of music would be good for men to strip to.

"Great!" If nothing else, Vance seemed full of enthusiasm. "Give us a couple minutes to get ready, okay?"

As the waitress carrying a small tray and rack of shooters headed toward them, Vance added, "Oh, and by the way, because state law says that if we serve alcohol we can't be completely naked, we'll have to leave our g-strings on. Hope that'll be okay."

Karen whimpered.

Audrey smiled. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Great!" Vance nodded and disappeared into a back room.

"Omigod," Karen muttered.

"Karen!" Audrey shook her. "C'mon, we're here to have a good time, remember? It'll be fine! What are you worried about?"

"Can I get you ladies a drink from the bar?" The chipper waitress smiled. "I also make change, if you need some dollar bills."

"Dollar bills!" Karen squeaked, falling back onto the couch in a paroxysm of trembling something-or-other. Audrey couldn't figure out if it was agony or ecstasy.

"I'll take twenty," Audrey said, laughing at her friend. "That should

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be enough, right?”

“For the first fifteen minutes.” The waitress took the twenty-dollar bill and gave Audrey a handful of ones with a grin. “These guys are hot with two t’s.”

Karen fanned her face and handed over a twenty, too. “I’d better get mine then.”

“Is it usually this crowded?” Audrey looked around as another group of ladies, giggling, followed the host with the blinking necklaces, and took seats at a table on the other side of the room.

The waitress nodded. “This place gets crazy on *Muy Caliente* night, let me tell you. Our boys really know how to show the ladies a good time, too. You’ll see.”

Karen hooted and clapped her hands.

“We’ll take two shooters to start,” Audrey said. “My treat.”

Karen let out another hysterical giggle. “Omigod!”

“You let me know if you need anything else,” the waitress said, and Audrey assured her they would.

“I don’t understand you, Karen.” Audrey drank her shooter. “You’re usually the one leading the pack.”

“I’m all talk,” Karen admitted and tossed back her shooter with a grimace. “Not like you, Audrey.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Audrey turned toward her friend, surprised.

“Oh, you know, you’re so good with guys. How to talk to them and stuff.”

“Believe me, Karen, I’m not that good at it. You’re the one who’s had all the dates. Not me.”

Karen rolled her eyes. “You could have dates, if you wanted them.”

Audrey didn’t have time to answer because the curtain hiding the doorway to the back room shook. Three young men, casually dressed like they were just out for a night on the town appeared and split up,

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working the room's other tables. Audrey could hear them giving the same sort of rap Vance had given her and Karen.

"Wow. I was expecting...you know, construction workers and cops," said Karen. She watched the boys across the room. "A show! An act!"

"Maybe they'll do that, too," Audrey assured her with a pat on the hand. "We'll see."

Karen giggled again. "Omigod...they're so cute!"

They were cute, too. Young and cute. "I feel like a perv," Audrey murmured, watching the boys charm the group of ladies across the way. "They can't be more than twenty-one."

More women filed in, and music began pumping from the loudspeakers. Audrey didn't know the song, but then she hadn't been out to a club in number of years. She listened to the racy lyrics with some surprise, then a giggle. So that was the sort of song men took off their clothes to.

"Oooh, I love this song!" The shooter seemed to have loosened Karen up a little bit because she started dancing in her chair.

When the waitress came back around, they ordered a couple more drinks, and Audrey sat back against the couch, watching as the show began. Vance introduced himself and the other three guys, Armando, Brick and Julian.

"Think those are their real names?" Karen asked as the four young men gyrated.

"Heck, no!" Audrey watched them work the crowd and head in their direction. "But who would you rather flirt with—an Armando or a Harold?"

"Good point," Karen said, and then her attention was taken up by dark-haired Brick, who had his eyebrow pierced and wore a braided leather choker.

Armando had set his sights on Audrey, and she sat back and

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prepared to enjoy the display. She'd seen male revues before, and Karen was right. They were usually stereotypical fantasy cops or construction workers, who did some sort of cheesy dance routine to predictable dance tunes. Not these boys. They shimmied and strutted to the bass-heavy tune as they stripped out of their clothes to the whoops and hollers of the now-packed room.

"Omigod!" Karen wriggled beside now-giggling Audrey.

This was fun. She whooped, too, when Julian strutted over with a grin on his face. He dropped in front of her in a truly impressive move, doing a set of one-handed pushups that emphasized the muscles in his toned back. When he got to his feet, Audrey clapped and waved a dollar bill.

Julian leaned over and said into her ear, "You get to put it in my pants."

She felt a bit ridiculous, but she did it anyway, tucking the bill into the waistband of his low-slung jeans.

"Thanks, doll," he said with a saucy wink, and began grooving in front of Karen.

"I thought Vance said there were going to be five guys," Karen shouted over the music as Julian and Brick took turns doing truly impressive gymnastic feats on the silver pole and Armando and Vance danced around the tables.

"What, these four aren't enough for you?" Audrey hollered back. She sipped her margarita, enjoying the play of light on toned, tanned bodies. By this time, the men in the center of the room had stripped down to boxer briefs.

"Omigod," said Karen. "Would you look at them? How do they do that?"

Brick had grabbed the pole, leaped into the air and held his entire body out straight, like a flag.

"Maybe they're gymnasts." Audrey clapped and whistled. "Wow!"

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Some women there sat and watched without doing anything, not even when the dancers wriggled and writhed in front of them. Audrey didn't get it. If someone was willing to strip off his clothes in front of her for a dollar bill, she was going to do her best to make sure she was appreciative.

"Having fun, ladies?" Vance, bare chest shining with sweat and the glitter he'd just shaken all over himself to cheers from most of the crowd, sat in the chair next to Audrey.

"Yes." She smiled. "But I have to ask—are you?"

Vance grinned, looking around. "Hey, where else could I get paid to dance and drink all night with ladies screaming and hollering?"

His honest answer made her laugh. "True."

He looked her over with frank appreciation in his eyes. "We like it when the women have a good time, you know?"

She tucked a couple of bills into the waistband of his boxers and he thanked her, moving on to Karen, who at least seemed to have gotten over her initial anxiety and was rubbing her hands all over Vance's glittery chest.

"Sparkles," Karen said when he'd moved on to seduce the next group of women out of their dollars. She held up her hands, which gleamed in the blue lighting. "From his body! Whee!"

Audrey laughed, her equilibrium returning. They were here to have fun, and she was. It was all a game. Cute boys shaking their asses in front of screaming women in order to earn a couple hundred bucks. She was glad she could relax and enjoy it.

"Hey, looks like the last one showed up!" Karen nudged Audrey and pointed. "Oooh, he's a hottie!"

"They're all—" She stopped at the sight of the fifth young man, who'd just come out of the back room.

It was Joel.

"Oh, mama," Karen said. "Catholic schoolboy."

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Audrey was pretty sure Joel wasn't Catholic, but the schoolboy description was dead on. He wore dark trousers and a button-down oxford shirt with a tie. His dark hair had been slicked back beneath a ball cap. He looked utterly forbidden, which made it all the more delicious. He swaggered around the room greeting the women, while his cohorts contorted themselves on and off the pole.

Should she go before he made his way to where she sat? Joel was between her and the exit. He'd see her leaving. Should she hide in the bathroom?

"Where are you going?" Karen's question made her realize she'd already gotten to her feet.

The music ebbed and flowed, inviting hips to wiggle and pelvises to thrust. The boys in the middle of the stage traded out with the two who'd been working the room. Joel, perhaps because he'd arrived late, didn't go to the center and start taking off his clothes, but Audrey knew it would only be a matter of minutes before he took his turn. She had to get out of here before then. *How embarrassing!* Joel was her classmate, a friend, her study buddy...

And he was standing right in front of her. She looked up, with what she knew had to be an idiotic smile pasted on her face. Joel was grinning, too. He didn't look embarrassed, but then he probably dealt with shell-shocked women on a regular basis.

"Woo-hoo!" Karen, apparently, had dispensed with the last of her anxiety and was now waving a handful of dollar bills at him.

Joel looked into Audrey's eyes, the neon lighting making the dark depths of his gaze impenetrable. Then he grinned, his teeth flashing supernaturally white, and turned his attention to Karen. Vance, however, had already insinuated himself into Karen's lap and was dry-humping her while she giggled hysterically and shoved dollars into the back of his g-string.

The song changed from a harsh rap song to a smoother, sexier

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dance tune. A fucksong, they'd called it in college. Slow, sensual, with lyrics to match. Audrey leaned against the back of the loveseat. Joel, body moving slightly to the beat, looked at her again, and she thought for sure he was going to move away. She hoped he would. She hoped he wouldn't.

He didn't.

He grinned, cocky, then flipped around and settled his ass on her lap. He wiggled to the music, looking over his shoulder at her with a wink that set her laughing. He turned again, took her hand, tugged her to her feet and into his arms. He began moving her to the music, his hands on her hips, but moving a little lower with every second.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, finally, awkward about where to put her hands and finally resting them on his shoulders in a parody of junior high dances.

"Working," he told her, snugging her up tighter against him, his thigh between hers.

Audrey let out a little yelp, embarrassed, and tried to pull away, but Joel held her fast. "I thought you worked at the retirement home."

"I do." Joel moved them in time to the song, bumping and grinding. "Shut up now, though, because you're ruining my *mojo*."

"Your *mojo*, huh?"

He nodded and dipped her to the appreciative and perhaps envious cries of the watching women. His nose slid along the line of her throat, his breath hot on the exposed skin before he moved them both upright again and grabbed her ass with both hands.

He'd been flirting with her since the first time they'd met. Over time it had translated into a friendship comfortable enough to allow the occasional hug, a squeeze of the shoulder, playful nudges. This, however, was something else entirely, and looking into Joel's eyes Audrey knew they both knew it.

He turned her so her back was against his chest and moved his

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hands around the front of her, linking his fingers through hers. The music rocked them as he tucked his chin against her shoulder, his cheek pressing her jaw. Heat filled her and she closed her eyes for a moment against the rush of alcohol and music and his scent, against the feeling of him pressed along her body, their hands linked tight in a gesture more intimate than if he'd put his tongue in her mouth.

Joel smoothed their linked hands up and down her thighs, over her belly and down again. When was the last time someone had touched her this way, with such intimacy and sensuality? A long, long time, and it was too tempting to refuse it. Tempting and yet safe, for this was Joel, her friend, not a stranger, and he was playing a role. Doing a job. It was okay for him to nuzzle the side of her neck and turn her to face him, to put her hands on his ass and pull their bodies close together so she could feel every line and muscle of his body along hers. It was flirting kicked up a notch, that's all. A dance for a dollar, a bump for a buck.

A quick glance told her the other dancers had chosen partners, too. Karen was shimmying with Vance in front of her and Armando in the back, both men bumping and grinding her in a way that managed to be sexy and non-threatening at the same time. Karen seemed to be enjoying it anyway, shaking her groove thang like a champ, face alight with laughter.

Audrey looked down at her fingers, linked with Joel's on her thighs. He moved their hands up and down along the soft, faded fabric of her jeans, her favorite pair. She'd searched forever for those jeans, the ones that made her feel sexy and confident, made her butt look good and never pinched. A perfect fit. Yet she hadn't worn them in months and months, even though they'd been right there in her closet all this time. She'd just been ignoring them.

The way she'd been pretending not to notice Joel?

It was impossible not to notice him now, not with his breath hot on

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the side of her face as he moved them to the music, but before she had time to react, the song ended. He turned her and led her gently back to her seat, easing her into it, holding both her hands and leaned over her.

It was the same move the other boys had, putting a hand on the back of the couch by her head and sliding up her body with his until he reached her ear with his mouth. The other dancers had usually mouthed the song lyrics, or just panted, but Joel surprised her.

“You look beautiful,” he told her, and she turned her head to look at his face, a mere inch from hers. Kissing distance.

The moment seemed to call for something, but Audrey faltered. “That’s sure worth a dollar,” she quipped, and stuffed one in his shirt pocket.

Something flickered in his eyes, or perhaps it was the shifting light as the music changed once again, became faster. It passed in a moment, replaced by his broad grin. Then he gave her neck so swift a nuzzle she was convinced she’d imagined it, and he pushed away from her and took his turn in the center of the room.

That boy could dance. He moved like he was making love to the world, stripping off his tie, unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it off his broad shoulders, undoing his belt and easing open the button and zip on his trousers. He teased. He flirted. He worked the room like he owned it, Audrey included, and the women in there ate it up like ice cream on a spoon.

The song slid into another without a break and Joel, clad in tight black boxer briefs, made his way around the room accepting admiration and compensation from the crowd.

It was her chance to escape before he came back around, and she leaned over to Karen. “I’m going to head out.”

“What?” Karen looked dismayed. “Nooooooo!”

Audrey shot a glance toward Joel, now bouncing on another woman’s lap, and knew she couldn’t afford to still be here the next time

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he made it around to her. “I have a lot of studying to do tomorrow.”

The lame excuse didn’t fool Karen, who rolled her eyes. “On a Saturday?”

Audrey shrugged. “I have finals.”

“All right.” Karen sighed, with a longing look back toward the room, where whoops and hollers suddenly rose in a cacophony indicating something big had just happened. “I’m out of dollars anyway.”

* * *

For once he didn’t have to be up early to work at Country Breezes, but though he’d planned to sleep late, Joel was wide awake and staring at his ceiling. He turned his head to look at the pile of money on his nightstand. Seven hundred dollars—a great night’s take. It would pay for his books next semester and leave something to jingle in his pockets, too.

Nope, he couldn’t complain about six hundred and ninety-nine of those dollars. Only one of them he wished he hadn’t received. The one from Audrey.

She’d been smiling as she tucked it into his waistband, and smiling when they danced. The next thing he knew, she’d up and vanished. She hadn’t even said goodbye.

Sighing, he slid an arm beneath his head and went back to staring at the ceiling. Maybe Morty was right. Maybe he should just ask her out. She’d seemed to be having a good time while they were dancing. But then she’d left.

Damn it.

Joel sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. There was only one thing to do about it. Go see her.

* * *

Books. Notepad. Pens. Pencils. Pot of coffee. Audrey had

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everything she needed set out on the table in front of her. Classical music warbled softly from the CD player. She picked up her highlighter and opened the book, but set down the pen a moment later. She poured a mug of coffee and blew on it before she sipped.

“C’mon,” she muttered. “Get to work.”

She couldn’t concentrate. She’d never really believed the rumors about Joel, had always thought they’d sprung from jealousy and his casual confession to the truth of them his way of dismissing them. A secret agent had seemed as ridiculous an idea as him actually being a male escort—only last night had proven her wrong. Sort of. There wasn’t any reason to believe any of the boys in *Muy Caliente* had done more than dance for dollar bills. No reason to think the whispers about Joel being paid by the orgasm were true.

“Of course they’re not true,” she said aloud. “That’s ridiculous. Absolutely...”

But was it? Was it really? Joel was handsome. Charming. Generous. Kind, smart, funny... Audrey groaned. Joel was a damn-near perfect guy, a fact she tried constantly to ignore because they were study partners and friends, nothing more.

She rubbed her eyes and tried to focus on the text in front of her, but couldn’t seem to manage. What Joel did in his spare time wasn’t any of her business. Nor was how he paid for school or anything else. She forced herself to uncap her highlighter again and go over the words in the chapter she was unsuccessfully trying to commit to memory.

The trouble was, all she could seem to think about was the way his fingers had linked with hers, that touch as erotic as if he’d thumbed a nipple or stroked between her legs. The way he’d moved with her, the way he’d stared into her eyes when he told her she looked beautiful.

Audrey groaned aloud. How on earth was she going to face him again after seeing him that way? How was she going to go back to being his pal, when all she could think about was how his body had felt

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along hers?

That's it. She was a pervert, plain and simple. This was Joel, the same man who'd gone mini-golfing with her and Lauren and lost graciously to the eight-year-old on every hole. The man who passed her notes in class that made her laugh. *Joel...*

"The perfect guy," she said aloud. "Who happens to be either a secret agent or a gigolo."

A rap-tap-tap on the kitchen door made her look up, and a moment later the reason for her inability to study appeared when she opened the door.

"Joel!"

"Hi ya, Audrey." He waited, expectantly, for her to move aside to let him in, and soon she did.

"What are you doing here?" She closed the door behind him, glad for the action that gave her an excuse not to look at him right away.

"Studying for finals, right?" He set down his backpack on one of the chairs, but paused in unzipping it. He turned to look at her, a brow raised. "Isn't that okay?"

"Oh...oh, sure. I didn't think...sure, it's fine."

She waved a hand and grabbed another mug for him. She busied herself with pouring coffee, rustling in the cupboard for sugar and creamer and pulling out a package of cookies that she arranged on a plate before setting it on the table.

Joel watched her do all that, his expression bemused, and finally reached out to grab her wrist as she sidled by the table to fuss with the music.

"Audrey, sit down. Why are you fussing so much?"

She looked down to where his hand gripped her. Last night his fingers had linked with hers and their bodies had aligned. He'd told her she looked beautiful. Now, remembering, heat crept up her cheeks and words fled, leaving her with only a shrug to explain herself.

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Joel let go of her wrist. "It's about last night. Isn't it?"

Audrey sat and gripped her mug. "Don't be silly."

"Audrey."

She looked up.

"Are things going to be weird between us now?"

"No, of course not." She couldn't lie to him. She sighed. "I feel stupid."

Joel sat back in his seat. "For last night?"

She nodded, toying with her highlighter. "That's not really my thing."

"Didn't you have a good time?"

She couldn't read his face, usually so open. Now his brow furrowed. The full mouth, so often tipped into a smile, now curved down.

"Well...yes. I did."

"Until I showed up?"

Audrey wasn't sure what to say, so she shrugged. Nodded.

"Never mind," he said. "Let's just get to studying. Okay?"

Joel flipped open his book and grabbed a pen. He hunched over the table and scribbled a note or two on his notepad. This wasn't the way they'd studied in the past, silence a barrier between them, but Audrey wasn't quite sure what to do.

"I was surprised," she said at last, not looking at him.

He looked up, dark eyes not glinting with his usual glee. "How do you think I felt?"

They stared at each other for another long moment.

"You must see women there who you know," she said finally. "Lancaster's not that big a city."

"Women," Joel said. "But not you."

The line of ever-present and always ignored tension snapped taut between them. The pen dropped from her fingers and rolled off the

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table. Neither of them bent to retrieve it.

“It’s your job,” she said at last, voice faint and a bit hoarse. “It’s how you pay for school...”

“Is that what you think?” he asked, voice gone as low as hers. “That it was just a job...with you?”

Audrey got up from the table and took her mug to the breakfast bar to pour more coffee into her still-full mug. “Wasn’t it?”

She heard the scrape of the chair legs on the hardwood floor and in an instant felt him behind her. She put the mug down hard enough to slop hot liquid onto the breakfast bar and over her hand. She hissed at the sting.

“Did you burn yourself?” Joel’s hands turned her to face him, and he lifted her hand in his to inspect it.

“It’s fine,” she tried to say, but he’d lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the pink spot, and her voice died.

Joel looked up and moved closer in the same motion. The hand he’d kissed went to the front of his shirt, over his heart, which thump-thumped beneath her palm. His went to her hip, fingers splayed.

“I meant what I said last night, Audrey. About you being beautiful. I’ve always thought so, from the first time I met you.”

She swallowed. The bar behind her back prevented her from moving away. This close, she had to tip her head back to look into his eyes.

“I don’t have any dollars with me,” she whispered.

Joel frowned. The hand on her hip gripped tighter. He moved closer. “I’m not working right now.”

His mouth stopped her from replying. Her arms went around his neck in automatic response to his taste and the way he pushed against her. Her lips parted beneath his, and when his tongue swept inside, she let out throaty gasp that disappeared into his kiss.

The heat that had earlier stained her face spread like arcs of

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sparking electricity through her entire body. The fringes of his hair tickled the backs of her hands. He slid a thigh between hers, pressing upward as he pushed her back against the edge of the bar.

Audrey murmured a small protest at the discomfort, and Joel lifted her without breaking their kiss. Her rear slid on the smooth Formica. He caught her startled gasp with another kiss and pushed her thighs apart to move between them, his hands on her hips sliding her forward until their bodies joined again. His belt buckle rubbed her, and Audrey wrapped her legs around his waist.

Everything had become automatic, give and take, push and pull. She didn't think about it, because to think would be to realize this was insane.

He murmured her name against her mouth and dipped his tongue inside again. He tasted liked mint, which was often the way he smelled, too, and the familiarity of it sent a shiver through her.

Joel broke the kiss to pull away and look into her eyes. His mouth glistened and his cheeks had flushed. Somehow his hair had rumbled, and she wanted to smooth it off his forehead.

"Bedroom?" His voice, hoarse with desire, fanned the flames already kindled from his kiss.

"Upstairs," she breathed.

He nodded and lifted her off the breakfast bar without hesitating. Audrey yelped and clung to his broad shoulders, her heart thudding as Joel scooped an arm under her legs and headed through the kitchen toward the stairs.

"Joel, put me down. You'll drop me—"

"I won't drop you."

All at once she believed him, had no doubts he could carry her up the stairs as Rhett had done to Scarlett, kissing her all the while. Fortunately, the staircase in her house was far less grand than the one from *Gone With The Wind* because, by the time he got to the top, Joel

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had begun panting with something other than passion. He made it the half dozen steps to her bedroom, kicked open the door and took her to the bed, where he managed to lay her down without dropping her. His body followed hers, and the bed dipped and creaked.

“You didn’t drop me.”

Joel buried his face in her shoulder. “I didn’t.”

He nuzzled her skin, and she shivered again. His hand slid up her side to cup her breast, then his mouth found hers again. He kissed like a dream come true, the right amount of nibbling pecks and soft, slow strokes of his tongue in the perfect combination to make her respond.

“May I?” His fingers skated along the row of buttons on the front of her blouse, then tracked the line of her hem and the bare patch of belly.

Audrey nodded. He moved without fumbling, slowly, easing each button from its slot with as much care and concentration as a burglar cracking a safe. He parted the material of her blouse as he worked, and kissed the line of her throat to the swell of her breasts as he finished opening her shirt. He put a palm flat on her belly, while his lips traced the curve of her breasts above the lacy edges of her bra.

Audrey held her breath, back arching slightly as his mouth teased her skin. Joel slid both hands up to cup her breasts, bringing them together so he could kiss the mounded flesh before he found the front hook of her bra and released it. He smoothed the lace over her skin, his breath hitching when her breasts, the nipples taut, were revealed.

The sound he made sent a spear of desire straight between her legs. Her clit pulsed in response, and slick arousal made her shift beneath him. Her breath lodged in her throat until she made the conscious effort to let it out.

When he closed his lips over one tight nipple, Audrey cried out and lifted her hips. Joel’s hand cupped between her legs, the heel of his hand pressing her sweetly throbbing clit. As she moved, he moved, easing his fingers beneath the waistband of her jeans and then the lace

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edge of her panties. Joel suckled her nipple gently while his finger dipped between her folds. Audrey knew she was already wet for him, and when he brought some of her slickness up to coat her clit as he circled it, she let out low, shuddering breath.

“You’re so hot,” Joel murmured against her skin. Still suckling one nipple and the next, back and forth, he withdrew his hand from her panties and worked open the button and zipper of her jeans.

This was no time for slow and easy seduction, Audrey decided. This was a time for urgency. She pushed off her jeans as Joel sat up to pull his t-shirt over his head, and she reached for his belt. It was fast and insistent, but easy too. When at last he lay down naked on top of her, she didn’t want to have time to worry about stretch marks or dimpled thighs.

His skin was warm on hers as he kissed her, belly to belly, their legs tangled. His cock rose between them, as hot and throbbing as her own center, and Audrey reached a hand between them to touch him. Joel moaned and gave a little shudder, his teeth closing on the base of her throat, nipping.

She gasped, and he soothed the sting with a kiss the way he’d done downstairs to her scalded hand. They moved together like they’d been choreographed, no awkward shifting or inadvertent tangling of hair, no accidental pinching. He kissed her mouth again, rolling her a bit so they lay on their sides, facing each other.

Again, something unreadable flashed in his eyes, something almost vulnerable, but it disappeared before she could be sure of it. He grinned and bent to kiss her again. He put his hand between her legs once more, one finger parting her curls and finding, without effort, the spot she most wanted him to touch.

He had a gentle, sure touch, a steady pace that didn’t stutter. In moments she was shifting her hips in time to his motions. Her body strained, her sense of time shifted. The world centered on the places his

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body touched hers, and she could think of nothing else.

“Like this?” Joel asked, his hand moving against her.

“Yes...”

He sucked on her throat, just over her pulse. His tongue stroked her skin while his lips tugged in time to the smooth circles of his fingertip. His mouth slid lower, over her nipple to suckle briefly before moving lower still, over her belly.

Then his mouth had replaced his hand and she bit down on her hand to stifle the cry of pure pleasure that welled up in her throat. Joel settled between her thighs. His breath caressed her as his tongue flicked against her swollen flesh. The pressure and pace were different than they’d been seconds before, but her body embraced the change.

She’d never had trouble reaching climax and considered herself blessed because of it, but it had been two years since she’d last slept with a man. She wasn’t just going to come. She was going to explode.

His tongue fluttered against her. She drew in a breath, held it, closed her eyes. Every muscle tensed and tightened. She stood knee-deep in the ocean as the waves got higher and higher, each covering more of her until at last, it happened, that glorious release, and the final wave of pleasure broke over her and tumbled her head over heels and tossed her up on the sand, panting and breathless, feeling slightly bruised and shaking, but utterly sated.

She blinked, coming back to reality. Joel pressed his lips to the twitch and throb of her clit, then cupped his hand there instead and moved up her body to settle next to her, his face in the curve of her shoulder.

Silence hung between them, but it wasn’t awkward this time. Audrey sighed and turned her face to his. He was smiling. So was she.

“Mmm,” she told him. “Wow.”

He kissed her, and she put her hand to his face again. When he pulled back a little, she rolled onto her side and put her hand on his rear

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to tug him against her.

“I have condoms in the nightstand,” she murmured, and he nodded.

“In a minute.”

His answer surprised her, a little, and she reached out to stroke his cheek again. “Joel? You all right?”

He nodded. The look was there again, a flash in his eyes that passed so fast she’d have been able to convince herself she’d imagined it, if it hadn’t been the third time. She studied him, her heartbeat slowing. His cheek was bristly beneath her fingers. He turned his head to kiss her palm.

Audrey leaned to kiss his mouth, taking her time. Tasting him. Urging his lips to part and accept her tongue. She explored him, and his cock lengthened between them as she did. She ran her hand down the line of his spine to caress the firm mounds of his buttocks, then a bit further down to feel the backs of his strong thighs. He shifted and laughed when her fingertips traced his skin.

“Ticklish?” she asked.

Joel nodded. He pulled her closer, his eyes searching hers, but for what, she wasn’t sure. She kissed him again and then pushed him to roll onto his back.

It’d been long enough since she’d gone to bed with anyone, but longer still since she’d gone down on a man. Even so, Audrey didn’t hesitate. She wanted to see him, all of him. He groaned when she licked the base of his throat and moved her mouth to cover his nipple, then down lower over the perfectly sculpted abs. She traced the muscled ridges with her tongue, the salty, musky taste of him sending new threads of pleasure weaving through her body. She nipped the jut of his hipbone, earning another groan.

She let her breath ghost along his erection, but didn’t touch him. His hips lifted and she put a hand on each thigh to keep him steady as she studied his cock.

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It was perfect, too.

“Audrey?”

She looked up, having no trouble understanding his expression this time. That he was as worried about his length and width and girth as she had been about her thighs and stretch marks touched her once more, and she reminded herself he was a flirt, but naked and therefore vulnerable, nonetheless.

She kissed the head of his penis, and smiled when he shivered. He lay back on the pillows. She took him into her mouth with slow precision, wanting to give him the same pleasure he'd given her. Joel moaned when she did, then again when she took him deeper. He pushed upward and she opened for him.

There'd been many times when she'd performed this act while thinking of a grocery list, or with one ear cocked for the sound of a baby's cry. This time, she had no such distractions. Nothing to do but make love to him with her mouth, nothing to think of but how good she could make him feel.

It was power, and she reveled in it, the ability to urge sighs and moans from him. To make his body react to her touch. She slid a hand down to cup his balls, her thumb finding the sweet spot just below them. His heartbeat rose as she sucked and stroked him.

Her hair came free from its loose bun and fell over her shoulders, covering them both, and Joel reached a hand to pull it away from her face and hold it back. The simple act of consideration stopped her only briefly before she bent back to using her tongue and lips.

He said her name again, his voice low and husky, and she paused. She gave his cock a last, gentle suckle and replaced her mouth with her hand. She stroked him slowly as she moved up his body to find his mouth and kiss him there.

“Now?” she whispered, and he nodded.

She reached for the nightstand and tugged open the drawer to find

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the box, praying the condoms hadn't expired. It had been a long time since she'd thought about needing them, after all. The date on the package was for next year and she gave a prayer of thanks to the gods who watched out for single, sex-craved women everywhere. She tore open the foil and moved back to Joel. She sheathed him, admiring his erection as she did, but her courage failed her at the last moment and she looked at his face.

"Yes?" Joel whispered, and she nodded.

"Yes."

He reached for her and pulled her close. Slow, sweet kisses joined them as he rolled her under him and guided himself inside her. Joel paused when he'd filled her, his weight resting on his arms.

Joel shifted upward. The tiny change of position brought his pelvis in direct contact with hers with every thrust, and though she hadn't expected it to, Audrey's body responded again. When he moved, she sighed and arched, moving with him. There was no resistance. Her body accepted and welcomed him, embraced him, a perfect fit.

Joel slid a hand under the back of her neck, supporting her as they kissed. She held him, hooking her legs over the back of his thighs. In and out, slow and smooth, their bodies coming together and drawing apart, but always remaining joined.

They kissed. Pleasure filled her, the ripples of a pond rather than the crash of ocean waves, but somehow even better. She was looking into his eyes when she came the second time, and he followed her a bare half-minute later. His body tensed and he pushed inside her, shuddering.

After a moment he rolled off her, onto his side, a hand still splayed protectively on her waist. She sighed, sated and content, and waited for him to say something flirty that would allow her to dismiss what had just happened as a fluke.

"You are beautiful, Audrey," was what he told her instead, and

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kissed her again. “I mean it.”

She wished she could believe him.

* * *

Joel had been a guest for dinner enough times to know the layout of Audrey’s kitchen, so finding the pan and the spatula had been easy enough. Eggs and cheese from her fridge, onions and potatoes from the pantry, some olive oil and butter, and he’d made omelets and hash browns. He’d come up empty-handed when it came to the toast, though. A noise from the doorway behind him made him turn, and he smiled.

“Morning. Do you have any bread?”

Audrey padded into the kitchen on bare feet, her over-sized t-shirt hanging to her thighs. She tied up her hair as she looked around, expression surprised.

“You made breakfast?”

“We sort of forgot about dinner.” Joel turned off the burner. “But I couldn’t find bread to make toast.”

She still looked a little taken aback.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Was this all right?”

Maybe she had an issue about a man in her kitchen?

Audrey nodded. “Of course it’s all right. Oh, you made coffee, too? Joel, you didn’t need to do all this.”

He grinned at her. “Sure I did. Told you I wasn’t just a pretty face.”

He watched her pour a mug of coffee, sweeten it, and take a long drink before she looked up at him again. She looked gorgeous in the morning. Hell, she looked fantastic any time. But especially gorgeous in the morning, after spending the night in his arms.

“I slept so late,” she said. “Lauren’s going to be home in just a few hours. And I didn’t get any studying done!”

He slid the eggs and hash browns onto plates and carried them to the breakfast bar. She stepped aside to let him, and he guided her to a

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stool. "Sit."

She did, taking the fork he handed her as he sat next to her. Joel dug in, his stomach refusing to be ignored any longer, not even in favor of satisfying his body's other urges. Audrey cut into her omelet, but didn't eat right away.

"Is it all right?" he asked. He washed down a mouthful with a swig of orange juice.

She nodded and took the bite. "It's great."

He speared a potato and chewed it, his growling stomach subsiding its complaints. "What time's Lauren due home?"

She looked up. "Ted's bringing her back at two."

"Great." He'd had time to flip through the Sunday paper while the coffee brewed. "There's a matinee showing of *The Wizard of Oz* today at the Allen Theater. I thought maybe we could take her to see it."

Audrey laughed. "You like *The Wizard of Oz*?"

Joel grinned and winked. "Sure. Who doesn't?"

She didn't say anything to that. Her smile faded and she looked at her plate. She toyed with the food on it, the set down her fork. When she looked up again, Joel put down his own fork. Her eyes told him there was bad news.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm not so sure that would be the best idea," Audrey said slowly.

He said nothing. His gaze traced the shape of her brows, the line of her nose and the curve of lip and jaw. He could have drawn them all, he'd so well memorized her face. He didn't want to look away, but he did, not wanting to see her tell him this wasn't going to work.

"Joel..."

"She doesn't like *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"She does."

He looked up then, hoping she'd meet his gaze and disappointed when she couldn't. "You don't?"

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“I do, too. I just think it would be a bad idea for us to go to a movie together today.”

“We’ve gone to the movies lots of times,” he told her. “Lauren knows me.”

“That was before,” Audrey replied.

“Before we slept together.” His voice came out flat and devoid of emotion, though Joel felt anything but. He took his plate and scraped the rest of it into the trash, then put it in the dishwasher.

“Yes.”

He turned to face her again. “I thought you wanted this, too.”

She looked up at him. “It was wonderful, Joel, it was really great. But...”

“But what?” He wanted to understand.

“Joel,” she cried, “we’re friends! Study buddies! Right? This was a one-time thing. It has to be.”

Coldness filled him. “Why does it have to be?”

She sighed, running a hand over her hair. “Because I’m not ready for it to be anything else.”

He nodded, reaching for her. She let him take her hand, which was something, at least. “We’ll go slow. I promise.”

She laughed and squeezed his hand. “Too late, Joel.”

He pulled his hand back, frustrated. “I don’t understand.”

“Joel...” She sighed again, this time the one to reach for him. “You’re a great guy, and I know you’re not used to being turned down...”

He gaped at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Audrey looked uncomfortable. “You know what it means. You’re a flirt. You go out with lots of girls—”

“Only because I’ve been too much of a chicken to ask you out,” he retorted. “Which I’ve been wanting to do since we met.”

She laughed, scoffing. “You’re a charmer, Joel. I’ve always known

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it. A flirt. You flirt with me, you flirt with the other girls in our class...you flirt with the professor, for God's sake! Friday night you were taking off your clothes in front of a room full of women waiting to shove dollar bills down your crotch! How am I supposed to believe I'm different? I can't risk it, Joel. Not for me and not for Lauren."

"You seem to have it figured out why I slept with you," Joel said through gritted teeth. "But why did you go to bed with me?"

Her apologetic answer didn't make him feel any better. "Joel, I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I should've been smarter about this. I should've been more responsible—"

"Why?" he interrupted. "Because I'm not?"

She didn't say anything, which was answer enough, and Joel tossed up his hands in frustration and anger, and headed for the living room to grab his things. She followed, her tone pleading as she said his name. He ignored her.

"Don't go like this," Audrey said. "Please."

He grabbed up his jacket and stuffed his books into his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Audrey. Forget it."

"Joel, don't be like that."

He faced her, hating himself for still noticing how lovely her hair looked curling around her face, and how the light from behind silhouetted her body. She looked as though she meant to reach for him, but then clutched her hands together.

"I can't believe that's what you think of me," he said, sounding helpless and despairing, and hating himself for that, too. "That I'm just some playboy who goes around telling women what they want to hear so I can get them into bed."

"I don't think that."

"But you think I'm a flirt."

"You are a flirt!" She laughed, but stopped when she saw he wasn't joining her. "Joel...you are."

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“So, does that mean I’m insincere, too? That I can’t possibly mean what I say to you when I tell you you’re beautiful and smart and special, and I want to spend all my time with you?”

For once he didn’t seem to be hitting on the right words to say. Audrey looked puzzled, and a little embarrassed, and Joel scowled.

“Joel...” She sighed. “I just don’t want to take the chance of ruining what we have. A great friendship.”

“Oh, you’re not giving me the ‘I like you as a friend’ speech, are you?” He put his hands on his hips. “Not after last night.”

“But I do like you as a friend!” she cried. “I like you a lot, and I don’t want to lose that! I don’t want to end up just another—”

“What? Notch on my bedpost?”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, then nodded.

“I thought we were friends,” he told her, and took some small pleasure in the way his words made her flinch.

“We are.” Her voice was small and sad.

“But that’s it?” He watched her, hoping to the end she’d change her mind. Give them a chance. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. “You think I’m just some kid with ants in his pants, don’t you?”

“Oh, Joel.”

He turned to look at her. “Before last night, I hadn’t been to bed with anyone in over a year. Since meeting you.”

“But...you’re always talking about going on dates...”

“I went on dates. But I haven’t had a girlfriend, a real girlfriend, since you sat down next to me in Intro To Psych and lent me your pen.”

Audrey seemed stunned. “I didn’t know. You’ve always been—”

“The guy with the golden grin.” He nodded grimly. “I know. But it doesn’t ever mean anything, Audrey.”

He wasn’t helping his case, he could tell by the way her mouth turned down.

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“Then how am I supposed to believe you when you say it to me?” she asked, and he was mortified to see tears glimmering. He hadn’t meant to make her cry. “You say all you’ve thought about is me since we met, but all I’ve ever seen you do is move from one woman to another.”

“Why did you let me make love to you?” He asked the same question she hadn’t answered earlier.

“I shouldn’t have,” she said quietly. “I knew it would be a mistake.”

“Why, Audrey?”

She shook her head a little, which was no answer at all.

“You wanted to find out for yourself if I was as good as my reputation?” The words stuck in his throat, but he forced them out. “Figured you might as well get a piece, too?”

Something that looked suspiciously like guilt flashed across her face, and her protest sounded false. “Of course not.”

“I’m not a secret agent.”

“I know that, Joel.”

“Well, if you can believe I’m not a secret agent, can’t you believe I’m not a gigolo either?” he asked, voice more defiant than he’d meant it to sound. “Audrey, sometimes I dance for *Muy Caliente* because the money’s good and I need it. And, yeah, I’m a flirt, I admit it, but that’s it. I don’t make love to women for money.”

She blinked. “I didn’t know, Joel. You never said anything.”

“I guess I never thought I needed to. I guess I never thought I had to explain myself to you. I thought we were friends.” He slung his backpack over his shoulder. “I’m outta here.”

“Joel, please—”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out two quarters, which he tossed at her feet.. “Here’s your change,” he said. “I give my ‘friends’ a discounted rate.”

Then, before he could say anything else or listen to her say

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anything, he was out the door and gone.

* * *

The quarters were warm from being in her hand for so many hours. Audrey hadn't let go of them since picking them up from the floor. She'd probably memorized every whorl on Washington's face with her fingertips.

"Mommy, can we have pizza for dinner?" Lauren plopped into the chair next to Audrey's and rested her elbows on the table. "Watcha studying?"

"Same old stuff, honey." The truth was, Audrey had been staring at the same page for the past twenty minutes without seeing a word.

"Oh." Lauren swung her feet. "Pizza?"

Audrey smiled. "Did you have pizza at Daddy's?"

"Yes," Lauren admitted, "but it was the frozen kind. Can't we order some?"

Audrey looked at her daughter's sweet face and couldn't resist. "Sure. Pizza it is."

"Yay! You're the best mom ever!" Lauren hopped up and gave her mom a squeeze and a kiss. "Hey, Mom, how come Joel's not helping you study?"

"I guess he's busy, honey." Audrey sighed and closed her book, knowing it would be useless to bother with any more work today.

"Aw, too bad." Lauren shrugged. "He told me we could go see *The Wizard of Oz*."

"Did he? When?"

"Last time he came over." Lauren grabbed Audrey's pen and started doodling on a piece of paper.

"Maybe another time, honey."

"Mommy?" Lauren drew curly hair on her stick figure. "Is Joel your boyfriend like Tammy's Daddy's girlfriend?"

Audrey shook her head. "No, honey."

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“How come? I like Joel a lot. He’s nice.” Lauren held up her masterpiece for Audrey to admire. “And he really likes you.”

“Does he?” Audrey studied her daughter. “How do you know?”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “He doesn’t need to come over here all the time just to study, does he? He’s smart enough to study at home, right?”

“Yes, well, Mommy’s smart enough to study alone, too, but it makes it better sometimes to have someone to do it with.”

“Like eating ice cream.” The leap of eight-year-old logic made a twisted sort of sense. “It always tastes better when you’re eating it with a friend.”

“Right. And Joel’s my friend.”

“Well,” said Lauren, “I don’t see what the big deal is then. If he’s your friend and you like him, why you guys can’t just kiss and stuff.”

“Lauren,” said Audrey, “that’s not any of your business.”

Lauren giggled. “Okay. Can I go watch cartoons?”

“Yes. I’ll order the pizza.”

“Yay!” Another squeeze and kiss, and Lauren ran off to the living room to turn on the television.

She stared at the text, thinking of Joel. Lauren had made it all sound so simple.

So...why couldn’t it be?

* * *

“Hi ya, Morty.” Joel pushed the window in the conservatory wider to let in the warm spring breeze. “How’re you doing today?”

Morty grunted from his spot by the bougainvillea. “Doing, doing. How’s you, kid? You look low.”

Joel shrugged. “Nah.”

Morty raised both straggly brows. “What? You’re gonna lie to an old man like that? For shame!”

Joel laughed. “Girl troubles.”

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“Still? I thought you was gonna tell her how you felt!” Morty shook a gnarled finger at him. “What are ya waiting for?”

“I told her,” Joel said. “She didn’t believe me.”

“How’d ya do it, kiddo? You come right out and tell her ya love her, ya buy her flowers, what?”

“I told her I thought she was beautiful,” Joel admitted. “And I kissed her.”

He wasn’t going to admit to Morty he’d done it at the club, or that he’d gone to her house and made love to her the next day.

Morty sighed. “Oy, you just kissed her? That’s it? You didn’t make the sweet love to her?”

Joel rubbed his eyes. He should have known better than to keep anything from Morty. “You’ve got a dirty mind, old man.”

Morty blew a raspberry. “Listen, kid, I’m old, not dead. So, you told her she was beautiful, and you kissed her. And she did what? Laughed? Nothing? Kissed you back? Slapped your face?”

“She kissed me back, but the next day...” He scowled.

“The next day she gave you the ‘we’re good friends’ speech?”

The old man really was amazing. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“Women,” Morty said. “Most confusing and ornery creatures on this planet. Lemme ask you something, sonny. How long you known this girl?”

“A year. We met at the end of last spring semester, and this year we had two classes together.”

“She got another fella?”

Morty looked expectant.

Joel sighed. “Yesterday, after we’d...kissed...all of sudden she didn’t want anything to do with me. Said it would be a bad idea for me to be around her daughter since we’d...kissed.”

Morty laughed his raspy chuckle. “Sounds to me like she’s got it as bad for you as you got it for her, sonny.”

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Joel frowned. “Yeah, right. Turns out she thinks I’m some sort of charming flirt who was safe to...kiss...because I go through women like...like...”

“Like shit through a goose?” Morty guffawed. “Reputation bit you on your ass, did it?”

It sure had. Joel shrugged, still stung. “Let’s just forget it, Morty, okay? I thought she felt the same way about me, but she doesn’t. I just made an idiot of myself, that’s all.”

“Well, sonny, I’m sure it wasn’t the first time, and it won’t be the last.”

Joel had to laugh at that. “Yeah, man, you’re probably right on that one.”

“Listen, sonny, if you really like that girl, if you really got your heart set on her, then you got to go after her. Don’t take no for an answer.”

“And if she really doesn’t want a relationship with me? If she really did only want it to be once? What then?”

“You don’t have a very high opinion of yourself, if you think she could settle for only once,” said Morty with a wink and a grin, and wheeled himself out of the conservatory, leaving Joel alone among the Boston ferns.

* * *

“All right, class. Time’s up.” Professor Beadle got up from her desk in front of the auditorium. “Pass your test booklets to the front, please.”

Audrey closed her booklet with a sigh and passed it down the row. Her last final, and an entire summer off to look forward to. Days by the pool with Lauren, sleeping in late, catching fireflies.

And no Joel.

Her eyes searched the class for him, but no familiar grin, no flashing dark eyes leaped into her gaze. Had he skipped it? Missed the final? Was he sick?

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“Ms. Winsom? Everything all right?” The professor had paused at the end of her row, and Audrey looked up, startled.

“Oh, yes, professor, fine. Sorry.”

“Relieved to be finished?” The older woman smiled. “I’m sure you did very well. You’re one of the best students in the class, Ms. Windom. You and Mr. Goldman.”

Audrey nodded at Joel’s name. “Thanks, professor. I enjoyed the class very much.”

“See you in September,” said Professor Beadle and kept moving up the stairs toward the doors at the back of the auditorium.

Outside in the bright May sunshine, Audrey took the time to stop next to one of the large metal trashcans to clean out her backpack of the months’ worth of scraps, chewed pencils and other garbage.

She saw him in the distance, recognizing him even from the back. He’d stopped to read one of the message boards. The breeze lifted his hair, and she all too clearly remembered how it felt against her fingers and against her face. Her feet were moving before she knew it.

“Joel!”

He turned, his easy expression going tight when he saw her, and that nearly broke her heart. “Hi.”

“That was some final, huh? I didn’t see you inside.” She smiled at him, but he didn’t return it.

“I was in the back.”

He met her eyes for a moment, then looked away, and fresh shame filled her at how callously she’d treated his feelings. The feelings she’d been too afraid to believe were real.

“Any big plans for the summer?”

“Working full time at Country Breezes. They’ve guaranteed me extra hours. I’ll be able to afford school again in the fall anyway.”

“Good.” She nodded. Awkward silence fell between them. “What about...the other?”

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“The other job?” He looked up. “Quit.”

“You did? Why?” She took a step toward him.

Joel looked at her. “Because the money was good, but it wasn’t the right job for me. Gives people the wrong impression.”

“Joel, I’m sorry.” She was too. “The past couple weeks...have been...”

“What?” he asked her.

“Lauren’s been asking about you.”

“Has she?” A smile hinted at brightening his face before fading. “Tell her I said hi.”

“You could tell her, if you wanted.”

He said nothing at first. “I thought you said that wouldn’t be a good idea.”

Audrey reached for his hand, certain he’d pull away and relieved when he didn’t. “Joel, I was wrong to judge you.”

He looked down at their hands. His fingers tightened on hers. He met her gaze.

“I don’t blame you. It’s my own fault for not discouraging the rumors. But, hey, what guy can resist being thought of as a secret agent, right?”

She squeezed his hand in return. “I just didn’t want to risk our friendship, and what happened? I ruined it anyway. I’m sorry.”

Joel tugged her hand a little bit and she moved toward him. “Audrey, I would never lie to you. Do you believe that?”

She did. Completely. “Yes, I do.”

He smiled, finally, like the sun returning from behind the clouds. He slung his arm around her shoulder pulling her close. “So I heard a rumor you were going to make me dinner.”

“Oh? Funny, because I thought I heard it was you who was going to make me some dinner.” She looked up at him.

He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. Then he kissed her, and

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she stood on her tiptoes to kiss him back. It was a sweet kiss, full of promise and anticipation. When Joel pulled away, Audrey's heart had started thump-thumping.

"Audrey," he said, "I want to do this right this time. I want to take you out. On real dates. And spend time with you, and Lauren...but if you'd rather not have me around Lauren, that's cool too. I understand. I just don't want to let this ruin our friendship, but I also don't want our friendship to ruin...this. I just need to know if you trust me."

He kissed her again, a little harder this time, and she slid her arms up around his neck to hold his mouth to hers.

"I do," she told him.

"Can I take you home?" he asked her when he stopped kissing her.

"Yeah," Audrey said. "I'd like that."

This time he lifted her as he kissed her, and they laughed together in the bright May sunshine, two good friends who'd finally decided to take the chance at something more. Joel had his arms around her and hers were around him as he twirled her on the sidewalk, but Audrey had no fear he'd drop her. After all, in his arms she had found a perfect fit.

MEGAN HART

Megan Hart began her writing career in grammar school when she plagiarized a short story by Ray Bradbury. She soon realized that making up her own stories was better than copying other people's, and she's been writing ever since.

Megan began writing short fantasy, horror and science fiction before graduating to novel-length romances. She's published in almost every genre of romantic fiction, including historical, contemporary, romantic suspense, romantic comedy, futuristic, fantasy and perhaps most notably, erotic. She also writes non-erotic fantasy and science fiction, as well as continuing to occasionally dabble in horror.

Megan's goal is to continue writing spicy, thrilling love stories with a twist. Her dream is to have a movie made of every one of her novels, starring herself as the heroine and Keanu Reeves as the hero. Megan lives in the deep, dark woods with her husband and two monsters...er...children.

Learn more about Megan by visiting her website...

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* * *

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