

# Foreplay

by Tammy Valentine

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Way too much detail, Izzy thought. You've got to hold a little mystery back. But as the girl's eyes shone with the vitality of youth and the long mane of sleek, dark hair tossed occasionally in the telling of the story, Izzy had to admit she was enthralled. Amy was in full flow, and Izzy was hooked. She watched the younger girl—little more than a teenager, really—caught up in the magic of reminiscence. She thought she could make out tiny flickers of edgy excitement behind the eyes as Amy's mind drifted dreamily off to the location of her tale. And Izzy willingly followed every delicious step of Amy's journey into the unknown, each blissful tingle and tantalizing surge echoing in her own body as she listened. She couldn't deny the twinge of envy she felt at her friend's wide-eyed delight: here was a bright, innocent flower swept away by the joy of new discovery, and she was savoring the rapture.

"I couldn't believe how keen he was," Amy was saying, although Izzy barely heard the actual words. In her head, she was picturing the setting—rumpled red sheets and candlelight—and placing herself in the central role that Amy was describing.

She conjured up the feeling of the soft bed against her back and beneath her bare shoulders, her naked breasts exposed to the night, her nipples erect and yearning. She could almost feel the firm but gentle hands caressing her skin with a touch that left her gasping—now gripping one breast with a sense of urgency, now sliding deliciously across the smooth plain of her belly. She imagined the form of this taut boy, unblemished and eager, his torso framed between her willing thighs. She allowed herself the briefest of glimpses of his quivering prick as he rose and fell against her, his lips and fingers and hair all electrifying against her body.

With a flush of excitement and mild guilt, she forced her mind back to reality and tried to concentrate on what Amy was saying.

"I was so nervous—well, it's hardly surprising, is it? I'd been lusting after him at work for the longest time, but I never really expected to have him in my bed. I thought he was seeing someone. Anyway, I had his head in my hands by this point, and I was gripping his hair, but to be honest, I can't really be sure if it was out of terror or just sheer desperation for him to get on with it. You know what I mean? When you get that feeling of wanting it to go on forever, but then you can't wait any longer? He was kissing me all over my breasts and nipples, and I've never had them feel like that, and I was screaming inside for him to keep going farther down, and eventually he did. But by that time I was so worked up, I was ready to go at a moment's notice."

Izzy found herself wondering how such an apparently naive girl could talk so openly about the intimacies of cunnilingus like this. But then she told herself she didn't care—she loved the frankness and the exquisite feeling it was giving her deep inside.

"I've got to tell you, he's got the most incredible tongue," Amy went on. "You know how some boys just shove it straight into your mouth and wiggle it about, and they think that's French kissing? Not him. Soft and squidgy, then suddenly hard and hot—and I'm not talking about French kissing here. This was all for my benefit. I just lay there and surrendered to the sensation. He licked and teased around the outside for a bit—just to push me right to the edge—but I couldn't stand that for long. That's when the long hair came in handy. I just grabbed a handful and rammed him down onto me, getting that lovely tongue right inside."

Amy let out a deep, languorous sigh as she remembered.

"My God, can he tongue-fuck!"

Izzy winced and excused herself from the table. This was the point where she and Amy parted company. While Izzy relished the luxuries

of description, the notion of atmosphere, Amy took her frankness to new levels of plain speaking—far too plain for Izzy's liking.

In the elegant surroundings of the ladies' bathroom, she blew out a long breath and looked at herself in the mirror above the basin. Her cool green eyes gazed back, and she realized she looked more than a little flushed. That pale complexion never let her get away with even the slightest embarrassment, and the pink in her cheeks was still giving her away. If only she'd taken the time to put on some makeup. But then, this was just coffee with the girls.

She leaned forward, turning the tap, and splashed her face with cold water.

She pumped the hand cream dispenser and teased the lotion between her long, slender fingers before glancing sideways to catch sight of herself in the full-length mirror that ran the width of the bathroom. At the age of twenty-seven, she was finally beginning to appreciate what she saw: the naturally slim figure, the classical proportions, and that tumbling mass of Titian hair. And then of course, the piercing eyes.

When Izzy reached the table again, she found the others laughing. "Oh Iz," Sarah said with a friendly smile, leaning across the table and prodding her playfully on the arm. "You're such a prude sometimes, you know."

Amy threw her a look of mock surprise. "And I thought I was the young and inexperienced one."

Izzy bristled and was about to reply when Jessica cut in, the look on her face suggesting she was sorry to have lost the end of the story.

"Well, what do you expect from a Scorpio? Everyone knows they're the sexiest men on the planet."

"Excuse me?" said Amy. "What makes you think he's a Scorpio?"

"Well he is, isn't he?" demanded Jessica, her big brown eyes flashing confidently behind the designer frames. Izzy had always thought she was the brassiest of them all, and the tailored business suits could never contain the overflowing woman within, no matter how hard she tried to disguise it.

Amy smiled coyly. "He might be."

Izzy stared at Jessica in amazement. "How the hell did you know that?"

"What?"

"That Amy's bloke was a Scorpio."

Jessica looked surprised. "It's obvious, isn't it? From everything she's told us about him, I sussed it pretty much straight away."

Izzy considered it for a moment. As she recalled Amy's narrative, she tried to pin down the details that might have pointed Jessica toward that conclusion. But aside from Amy's in-depth description of her young lover's powerful physique, his surprising tenderness when it came to undressing her at her apartment one night last week after they'd both worked late at the office, and the climactic revelations about his versatile tongue, she could think of nothing that Jessica might be able to construe as astrologically significant.

"Well, I think I heard the same story as you, but if you'd asked me what star sign he was, I wouldn't have had a clue."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong," replied Jessica, leaning toward her across the table and lowering her voice conspiratorially. She looked around the coffee bar as if searching for spies from the opposite sex before apparently deciding their booth was safe for this feminine discussion. "There were plenty of clues in what she told us."

This time it was Amy who interrupted, tossing her hair again in bewilderment. "Clues? What are you talking about? I was simply telling you all the gory details of my night of passion. I didn't mention anything about his birthday or star sign."

"You didn't have to," Jessica said simply. "It was all there in your details—everything you needed to know to work out he was a sexy Scorpio. It wasn't exactly difficult."

"Hang on a minute," argued Sarah, her sharp, blue-gray eyes fixed keenly on Jessica. "Are you telling us you can deduce a man's star sign just from listening to someone talk about the way he makes love?"

Jessica smiled triumphantly and sat back on her padded bench, the authoritative businesswoman at home in control of her domain. "You bet I can."

There was a slight pause around the table as the others took in what Jessica said. Izzy glanced across at Sarah, whose jaw was still half open as if she was about to speak but didn't quite know what to say. Beside Izzy, Amy blinked, and a frown puckered her pristine, unfringed forehead. Izzy switched her gaze between the two of them, waiting for someone to challenge the extraordinary claim. When no one else volunteered, she did it herself.

"That's impossible. You couldn't have known he was a Scorpio just from Amy's description. It was a lucky guess. That's all."

Jessica's smile broadened, and she folded her arms across her chest in defiance.

"Try me."

The others hesitated, exchanging glances across the cups of cappuccino that were going cold, unnoticed on the table.

"Oh, come on," urged Jessica, obviously warming to her theme and enjoying holding the reins of the conversation. "Somebody tell me about a lover you've had, and I'll try to guess his star sign. I'm not making any promises, and I certainly wouldn't want to put my life savings on it, but I'll give it a go."

"All right," volunteered Sarah, finding her voice at last. Izzy had known her since university, and it wasn't like her to be lost for words, so Izzy was intrigued to hear who she would offer up for Jessica's detective game. "Try this one. You remember I told you about my one-night stand after Elaine's hen party?"

Jessica nodded.

"I'd only just met him—I didn't even know his name—but he was all over me the whole night. You know the type—he kept on about how he loved my curves, how the best things come in small packages. Wore me down. Not that I minded. I'd never known anyone so passionate. But then the next morning, I made some casual remark about how hunky his mate was, and he just went completely cold, like flicking a—"

"Easy," interrupted Jessica. "Aries. Has to be the center of your attention." She paused. "Well?"

"I don't know," admitted Sarah. "I never got to find out."

"Oh, for God's sake, Sarah." Izzy laughed. "Take it a bit seriously, will you? I want to know if Jess can actually do this."

"Okay, here we go," said Amy, looking suddenly keen and alert. "I've got one for you—this boy I had in college. I wasn't particularly interested at first, but he had such a cute smile, and he practically talked me into bed. That smile...I couldn't resist it. Every time he'd just turn it on, I'd fall for it."

"Stop there," said Jessica. "That's probably enough. Let me guess. A bit of a romantic, but you couldn't get him to commit?"

Amy looked stunned. "Precisely. He was lovely in the early stages, and I've got to confess, it didn't take him long to get me into bed—not that I'm particularly proud of that. But then he turned all indecisive. It was weird. In the end, I dropped him because I just felt he was messing me around."

"Libra," announced Jessica. "No question. When was his birthday?"

"October the ninth," replied Amy, her eyes wide in amazement. "That's Libra, isn't it?"

"Certainly is," said Jessica with a satisfied look. "Smack bang in the middle. Want to try another?"

Izzy broke in. "I'm impressed. That's some party trick."

"Oh, it's nothing really. Not if you know what to look out for."

"And how do you know?" asked Izzy.

Jessica smiled and picked up the cup in front of her. "Let's get a fresh round of these, and I'll let you in on some of my secrets."

### XXX

By the time she left the other girls more than an hour later, Izzy felt like a schoolgirl again, only this was a subject she'd never learned in any classroom. Jessica was an absolute treasury of knowledge on astrology and what it could mean for a girl's love life. For half an hour, while the rest of them had sat mesmerized, she had expounded her theories on how the movement of the stars governed romance and sex.

Izzy had learned about the pragmatism of the Virgo male, the complexity of the Aquarian, and the sentimental affection of the Leo. She had discovered that every woman could enhance her romantic prospects by getting to know what the different star signs signified and how their traits could be interpreted for the best possible results.

Of course, Jessica had explained, everyone was different, and you couldn't hope to predict the course of any relationship based purely on the birthdates of the two participants. But if you were prepared to spend some time on research and had worked out what you might be looking for, then there were huge potential benefits to be gained in terms of understanding your partner a little better.

As she lay in the tub that evening, relishing the golden candle-light and warm vanilla scent from the bubbles, Izzy turned over the newfound information in her mind. She was fascinated by the notion that she could enjoy a man so much more by knowing which buttons to push—predetermined buttons based on his star sign. She had never had much luck with men, but equipped with Jessica's astrological handbook for seduction, might she not learn to discover the real pleasures of romance?

Closing her eyes, she let her hand drift lazily through the water to her mound and teased the wet, dark hair gently with her fingers. She felt the familiar tingle in her skin as she woke the sleeping creature deep inside, and she arched her back involuntarily as the first wave of pleasure lurched through her. Opening her legs a little wider, she then slipped a finger into the crevice, moist with bubble bath and anticipation, and began to play.

Behind her closed eyes, she watched a parade of male models, each one naked but for a fig leaf covering his modesty, engraved with his star sign. Starting with Aries, she made the men line up in front of her in her head, then gazed appreciatively as one by one they shed their leaves to reveal the astrological promise beneath. She got as far as Cancer, the fourth sign, before she came, her clitoris convulsing deliciously under the pressure of her finger.

Could it be genuine? she wondered as she allowed the warmth of the water to bring her round from her daydream. Was there anything more than sheer hokum to the concept of compatibility based on astrology? And if there was, what did it mean for her in her continuing search for the perfect partner, who had so far proved dramatically elusive?

Maybe Jessica held the solution to the puzzle, the answer to the riddle that had plagued her all her adult life: why could she not find the right man?

### xxx

Izzy instigated another get-together with the girls much sooner than they would normally have met. She was eager to pick up the threads of Jessica's tutorial on sex and the stars.

Amy was first to arrive, and Izzy again found herself suppressing a pang of jealousy at her friend's easy confidence. Amy's natural energy drew admiring glances from the few men in the coffee bar as she flounced in through the glass swing door and sashayed coolly across to the booth where Izzy waited.

"Hi, Iz," she trilled, flicking her dark brown tresses behind her as she sat down opposite her.

"Hiya, kid," replied Izzy, taunting herself as much as Amy with the playful reference to her tender youth. "How're things at work?"

"Oh, you know how it is when the mushroom principle's in operation."

Izzy was bemused. "The mushroom principle?"

"Mmm. You know, they keep you in the dark and feed you shit?" Izzy burst out laughing. This girl's innocent nature was a welcome relief from the cynicism she had come to expect from the world. Too many men with hidden agendas—or hidden wives—had taken

the edge off Izzy's innate optimism, and she knew she was becoming increasingly suspicious of the opposite sex. Maybe Jessica's astrological take on men would give her a fresh outlook. In fact, if she was honest with herself, it was worth trying anything at this point to revive her flagging fortunes in the bedroom.

Right on cue, Jessica made her entrance.

Although she was not as effortlessly sexy as Amy, Jessica could still turn heads. She had height on her side, of course, standing almost six feet tall in bare feet and well over in her favored high heels. Some tall women learned to stoop a little, Izzy knew, to minimize the effects of their height. Not Jessica. She stood proudly elevated among her peers—even using fashion to exaggerate the proportions—and made the most of the resulting fact that her breasts stood pretty much at everyone else's eye level. It was the first thing anyone noticed about Jessica. She wore her dyed, blonde hair short and tied back so as not to distract, and she kept neck jewelry plain and understated to enhance the treasures beneath. She was a one-issue girl, and the one issue was her cleavage.

"Girls!" she called after the rest of her had entered behind her chest. She hurried over to the booth and kissed each of them once on the cheek. After dumping several shopping bags beside her on the bench seat, she settled in next to Izzy.

"Nice top," offered Amy, transfixed by the peachy orbs staring at her from across the table. "Is it new?"

"Bought it this morning," replied Jessica with a grin. "I know it's a bit revealing, but I couldn't resist the fabric. Have a feel."

Izzy hesitated, but Amy jumped right in, stretching a hand across the table and eagerly stroking the luscious curve of Jessica's left breast.

"Ooh, that's lovely," she enthused.

"You're telling me," said Jessica, her eyes dreamily vacant for a moment.

"Anybody know where Sarah's got to?" interrupted Izzy, keen to change the subject before she was trapped into feeling up one of her closest friends. She wasn't so much embarrassed at the idea as acutely aware of their very public situation. The last thing she wanted was for them to get thrown out of the coffee shop before she'd had a chance to quiz Jessica further on the star sign thing.

"Yeah, she was right behind me," said Jessica, looking a little disappointedly at Izzy. "Blimey, you're keen, aren't you? What is it? Got something to tell us?"

Izzy shook her head. "Not at all. It's just that I was really interested in what you were talking about the last time we got together, and I wanted to find out more."

Jessica began fishing in her handbag and eventually came up with a compact and the brightest red lipstick Izzy had ever seen. As she spoke, she conducted a precise little ceremony, flicking open the compact to reveal a mirror, then swiveling the lipstick and applying it flamboyantly, not allowing the process to interrupt her conversation for a second.

"You mean how astrology can affect your love life? Yes, I thought you were looking a little too interested for your own good. To be honest, Izzy, I was doing all that for your benefit, mainly. I don't mean to be rude or anything, but you've got to admit, your sex life could do with a bit of spicing up, and you might as well try to give yourself a foot up in any way you can. Maybe the stars could be your guide."

Izzy did her best to look offended, but the truth was, she'd been opened up like a fresh oyster in the hands of a Michelin chef.

"Oh, come on, sweetie," Jessica teased. "Don't look so mortified. You know it, and we know it. If you fell in a barrel of pricks, you'd come out sucking your thumb."

"All right, all right," Izzy mumbled through gritted teeth, flapping her hands at Jessica to get her to lower her voice. "You're right, of course. I don't have anything like the hit rate with men the rest of you do, but I've always put it down to bad luck."

Jessica snorted. "Bad judgment, more like," she retorted, rather uncharitably.

"Okay, so what do you suggest?" demanded Izzy, bridling somewhat at the candidness of her forthright friend.

Jessica paused for a moment and turned to look her squarely in the face. She sized up her companion for a few seconds, as if trying to assess her readiness for what she was about to propose, then snapped her compact shut and dropped it nonchalantly with the lipstick into her handbag.

"I suggest a course of education, my dear Izzy. An education in the art of astrological seduction." She let the phrase hang in the air. "I'm going to lead you on a journey through the zodiac with one simple aim: to find the right guy for you."

Izzy couldn't believe what she was hearing. Like a bell chiming in exact synchronicity with her own, Jessica verbalized the very thought she had hardly dared to express—even to herself. She'd fantasized,

of course, alone in her bath with the steam and suds softening up her clit, but she hadn't really believed Jessica might take on such a deeply personal project, let alone make the suggestion in the first place. With the realization that the offer had been spoken aloud, Izzy felt a shiver of alarm at the implications. Dreaming about a bunch of men with different astrological traits while fingering herself in the tub was one thing; actually going out and finding them was quite another. And that was without taking into consideration the prospect of any sort of sexual research into their star signs.

What the hell had she let herself in for?

"Relax," said the would-be tutor, leaning back and resting her hand on Izzy's arm. "I won't be asking you to do anything I wouldn't do myself."

Izzy spluttered and stared at Jessica. "That's what worries me," she replied.

By the time a disheveled Sarah finally made it to their table, clutching a broken-heeled shoe in one hand and a mud-spattered coat in the other, the plan was already drafted.

"What happened to you?" asked Jessica accusingly. "You were right behind me."

Sarah flung the shoe onto the table, rattling the teaspoons in their saucers. "Bloody shoe got caught in a grating. But never mind that. What's going on here?"

She waved her free arm at the napkins strewn across the table, each labeled with a star sign and a list of characteristics. Three intent faces stared back at her.

"Sex education lessons," announced Jessica simply.

#### XXX

It took a while to work out the rules of engagement for Izzy's experiment. The first topic of debate was whether the whole exercise rested on the ability of the stars to forecast merely sexual compatibility or, more complicatedly, longer-term romantic involvement. After much to-ing and fro-ing around the booth, Izzy eventually declared that, as it was she who would be putting her love life on the table, as it were, she would be the one to make the final decision.

With more than a hint of melodramatic finality, she announced to her expectant audience that she would be opting for purely physical coupling as the benchmark, and felt a thrill of wantonness as she did so. The next issue was how success should be judged. As it was Jessica's astrological abilities that were in question, she argued for a system of secret predictions—one for each star sign—that would be sealed in envelopes until after Izzy's encounter with that sign. Izzy would rate her partners on a variety of qualities before the group made a subsequent comparison with Jessica's predictions. Although there was always going to be a strong element of subjectivity about Izzy's observations, everyone agreed this structure offered the best chance of a fair analysis of Jessica's talents.

The matter that prompted the toughest debate was timescales. Jessica pleaded for as much time as possible so that each experimental subject could be allowed to show his natural qualities. After all, she claimed, the better Izzy got to know them, the more she would be able to accurately assess their characters. Sarah and Amy both took strong exception to this line of reasoning, arguing that if the experiment was one of purely sexual compatibility, as Izzy had now determined, then a one-night stand should be the sole method of judging each partner's attributes.

In the end, Izzy again intervened, demanding that her sex life should ultimately remain under her control—as far as the experiment permitted—and that she would take each case on its merits and allow time for further investigation if the partner in question warranted it. Secretly she harbored severe concerns about putting herself through a series of one-night stands for her friends' amusement, but she didn't let on to the others.

When at last the terms had been hammered out and roughly sketched out on more napkins by Sarah, the four women sat back in their seats and exchanged silent looks across the table. Eventually all the focus fell on Izzy, who bore the brunt of the responsibility for the experiment. She shifted nervously on the bench and swept a hand through her long, red curls.

"So," she offered quietly. "How do I go about finding all these different star signs, then? I can't exactly go trawling bars, asking men their birthdays, can I?"

Amy jumped forward in her seat, bubbling with excitement. "Oh, I know. Let's sign you up with an online dating service. I've always wanted to try one of those."

Izzy pulled a face. "You've got to be joking. I wouldn't go near anything like that with a bargepole."

"Why not?" asked Amy. "It's a ready-made meat market for you to go window-shopping. And what's more, I bet they have to give

their date of birth, so you'll be able to identify their star signs when you pick them. It's perfect."

"Oh, come on, Amy. That kind of Web site is a natural haven for perverts and no-hopers. You haven't got a clue who's really behind the fake photos they put up. And even if the photos are real, they're probably all just married blokes looking for a bit on the side."

Sarah frowned. "I think you're being a little unfair there, Iz. I'm sure there must be some genuine sites, and there have got to be some honest men looking for romance. Not everyone's a hardened cynic like you, you know, and this is the twenty-first century. Online dating's a perfectly respectable way to go."

Izzy shook her head decisively. "No way," she announced. "I'm not putting my personal details on the Internet for any Tom, Harry, or Dick to wank over, thank you very much. And that's nonnegotiable."

Amy and Sarah looked at each other, apparently stumped by Izzy's finality. Jessica stepped into the breach.

"I think I may have the answer," she said. "But before I tell you, you've got to promise not to interrupt me until I've finished explaining."

She glanced expectantly at the others, taking in nods from Amy and Sarah and a resigned shrug from Izzy.

"Okay, I think we should use a good old-fashioned introduction agency—"  $\!\!\!\!$ 

Izzy jolted upright, about to object vociferously, but Jessica placed a firm hand on her shoulder and continued speaking.

"I thought you agreed not to interrupt until I'd finished."

Izzy subsided in reluctant silence, but her frown was almost audible.

"Look, I know you hate the thought of it, Iz, but it's a much better option than doing it online. These days, with the competition from the Internet, dating agencies have had to become much more sophisticated. With a face-to-face service, you're guaranteed a level of safety you couldn't get from a Web site, because the guys have been vetted in person. You get all the advantages of Amy's window-shopping without the drawbacks of the Internet."

"She could be right, you know, Iz," said Sarah. "If you're bothered about using an online service, this could be the ideal solution, especially if you know their birthdays before choosing them. I mean, you said it yourself—how else are you going to find a man of a particular sign?"

Izzy felt deflated. "I can see what you're saying, but it all seems so...well, clinical. And besides, I wouldn't know where to begin to find a dating agency."

"That's easy," said Jessica, smiling. "You can leave that bit to me. I've got an old friend who runs a very nice establishment that will be ideal for our purposes. I can get you signed up in no time. And as for clinical...well, we *are* conducting an experiment, aren't we? Short of wearing a white coat and sleeping with lab rats, you'd be hard-pushed to get much more clinical than this."

Izzy shuddered and wondered if she was going to regret agreeing to the whole zodiac project. She studied each of her friends' faces in turn and tried to read them. Jessica, with her pillar-box red slash for a mouth, looked a tad more smug than she had a right to, while Amy's expression was a mixture of youthful delight and expectation. Ever the professional executive assistant, Sarah had fallen into administrative mode and was busy gathering up the scrappy notes from the table. She'd already assumed the role of invigilator. Izzy gave a sigh and let her head drop.

"Come on, Iz, don't be like that," said Jessica, a warm note of encouragement in her voice. "This could be just the boost you need to liven up your sex life."

The others were supportive too. Amy smiled eagerly and chipped in, "Think of all the new experiences you're going to have. I've got to admit, I'm a little bit jealous."

Sarah clutched the napkins in her fist and waved them happily in Izzy's direction. "You've got nothing to worry about, kid. We're going to get it all sorted for you. And we'll be right here waiting when you've got your first report to file."

She offered Izzy a knowing look and winked across the table at her. Izzy couldn't help feeling a buzz of electricity around the booth and realized with a jolt that among this troupe of firm friends, her best interests were never in doubt.

Yes, it would be an eye-opening experience, trying to sleep her way around the zodiac. There was certainly an element of sluttishness about it that she was surprised to find excited her. There might even be some tears among the laughter they were all anticipating. But hell, that was what life was about, wasn't it? Things would be very dull if everything was routine and gray. Besides, whatever happened, she would always have these three crazy pals to come back to. And boy, would she have some stories to tell them.

## Foreplay

"All right," she agreed, allowing an enthusiastic smile to spread across her face.

"It's time to let the fun begin."

# Biography

When Tammy Valentine settles down to write one of her stories, she likes to get herself in the mood. She begins with a stroll in the garden, cutting some fresh roses for her writing desk, then lights some beautiful scented candles, pours a nice chilled glass of chardonnay, and lets her imagination run wild. She loves allowing readers into her secret world, and you can find out more about her at www. tammyvalentine.com.

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