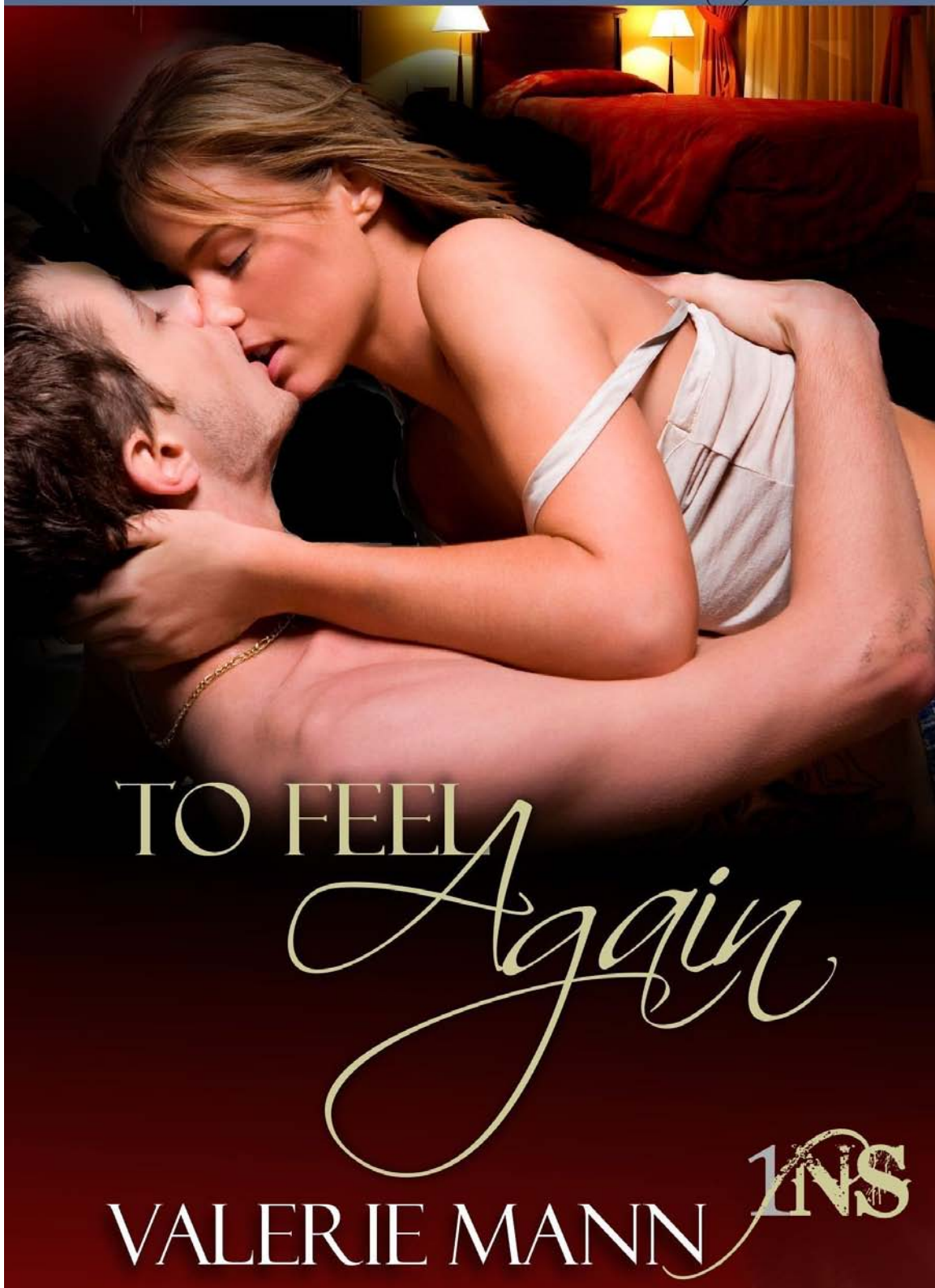


*Decadent Publishing*



TO FEEL  
*Again*

VALERIE MANN *1NS*

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**To Feel Again**

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# *To Feel Again*

*A 1Night Stand Story*

*Valerie Mann*

## *~DEDICATION~*

*To my besties, KR, OS, BD and the rest. You know who you are.*

## Prologue

“I need a favor, my dear.” Eve paused as the nonstop tapping of a keyboard on the other end of the line echoed in her ear.

*Such a driven man. He needs to find an outlet.* Some relief, or at the very least, a distraction from his relentless, busy schedule.

A deep voice finally resonated with resigned impatience. “What can I do for you, Eve?”

“I have a client with a very...special request. I’d like your help.” She paused, already knowing what the man’s response would be. A big, fat *no fucking way*. Not that the reply would deter her in the slightest. Once she set her sights on satisfying her clients, nothing kept her from that goal. Which made her the very best at what she did.

He didn’t bother to hide a sarcastic snort. “I’m afraid to ask. Last time you called with a ‘special request,’ I had to pay my maintenance guys overtime to reinforce hooks in the ceiling. I still don’t want to know what that was about.”

“Not that I’d tell you anyway. But, I promise no hooks this time.” She hesitated, aware of the need to tread carefully. “Jackson, this woman’s profile is very sad. She lost her fiancé in Afghanistan nearly a year ago. She misses him desperately and has had a difficult time moving on.”

More tapping. Obviously distracted, Jack grunted a non-committal, “Uh, huh.”

“She feels a one-night stand with a man similar to her fiancé would bring her some closure.”

The rapid tapping paused. “Hasn’t she heard of counseling?” What sounded like the scraping shuffle of a phone being readjusted filtered over the line. “And how does fucking a stranger help with the grieving process?”

Eve tsked. “Honestly, Jackson, you Americans and your blunt vulgarities. Of course she’s had counseling. I wouldn’t consider honoring her request otherwise.”

He tapped some more. “Your point, Eve? I’m busy. What’s the favor?”

She laughed. This was going to be so much fun. “I’m looking for her perfect one-night lover. She emailed her fiancé’s picture along with her profile. He was tall, with short black hair, dark eyes, Mediterranean coloring...very handsome.” *And a dead ringer for someone else we know.*

Silence curled in the airwaves between them for several, long seconds. Jackson was a smart man, it wouldn’t take him long to—

“No. Fucking. Way.”

“Jackson, this would be a huge favor.”

“You’re out of your mind, Evangeline. I let you use my hotel for your matchmaking business, but that agreement did not include my participation.”

“I brought over a million dollars in revenue to your hotel last year,” she reminded him. “Actually, closer to a million five.” *And I can take that money elsewhere* hung unspoken between them. She hated to pull the financial card, but business was business as her mentor and partner, Simon, always reminded her.

Jackson didn’t make a sound for several moments. But, money talks, savvy businessmen listen, and she could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. A chair creaked, and she pictured him swiveling around to stare out his office window at the Las Vegas panorama and desert beyond.

Finally, he sighed, a mixture of frustration and defeat. “That’s dirty pool, even for you, Eve. You know the economy sucks right now.”

*Bingo.* She wanted to clap her hands with delight. “Yes, it does.”

“I won’t sleep with her.”

Evangeline ignored the protest and scrolled down the computer screen to the young woman’s file picture. Crystal blue eyes, natural blonde hair past her shoulders, healthy tan, and a toned but curvaceous figure screamed *California girl*. Eve had searched for the perfect woman for lonely, overworked Jackson for a very long time, and this one would look gorgeous on his arm. And, in his bed.

“She’s very lovely.”

“She’d better be.” His voice dropped an octave. “And, I’m still not sleeping with her. Eve tried to interrupt. “But, for the sake of our business relationship, I will do this favor for you. Once.”

“But of course, my dear.” She tipped back in her chair, trying to keep the Cheshire-cat grin out of her voice. “That’s all I’m asking.”

The keyboard tapped on the other side of town again in earnest, Jackson’s mind obviously moving on to other, more important things. Madame Evangeline understood his drive, and accepted the unspoken dismissal. She and the overworked man were very similar people, both driven by the businesses they loved. “I’ll email you with the details.”

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Jesus, what had he just agreed to? Jack Castillo tossed the phone back on his desk and leaned back in his chair with a curse. The last thing he needed was a *date* with one of Evangeline’s prospects. He didn’t care how beautiful the woman might be, he led a complicated, busy life and didn’t have time to spend the evening, not to mention an entire night, with a stranger. And he liked to find his own women, thank you very much.

But Eve maneuvered him right into agreement, quite handily, in fact. It was one thing that she’d charmed him into agreeing to allow her to use his hotels for her 1NightStand dating service’s rendezvous. Not that he actually minded. She provided his hotels with a steady stream of income in return for a safe place for her clients to meet for their dates. What they chose to do once they got there was no different than what thousands of couples did every year in Las Vegas. What happens in Vegas....

He simply couldn’t figure out how he’d *become* a client. In his own hotel.

*Damn.*

## Chapter One

Leah slipped the plastic card in the lock, entered the hotel room, and blew out an impressed little whistle. She ran a hand along the watered silk wallpaper near the door. Luxury and Castillo Hotels were synonymous, and this room didn't disappoint, all part of the expensive-and-hopefully-worth-it 1NightStand experience. Madame Eve promised only the best for her clients.

A one-night stand...not something Leah ever contemplated she'd experience, let alone pay for.

"You can do this," she whispered, fighting the intense urge to make a run for the elevator and ditch the whole rendezvous.

Tossing the key card on the nearby secretary desk, she took stock of the large suite. Cream, beige and chocolate browns dominated, both warm and inviting. She spied an enormous bathroom through an open door off to her left and wandered over to peer in. Heavens, the Jacuzzi was big enough to swim laps in. Turning back, she found the heavy drapes open to reveal the entire city of Las Vegas glittering below. Underneath the gigantic flat screen TV on the far wall sat a fully-equipped wet bar. *Perfect*. Maybe a cocktail or two could persuade the butterflies in her stomach to land. What had she been thinking, signing up for a night of sex with a stranger? If her therapist knew what she'd arranged for the evening, he'd probably fire *her*.

Did therapists even do such a thing?

What she couldn't ignore any longer was the room's focal point, a California-king, three foot high bed. As big as the room was, the bed dwarfed it—in spades. And, at some point in the next few hours, she'd be on that bed, in that bed, rolling around having hot, sweaty sex with a man she didn't know.

Bending down, she stepped out of one of the stilettos she'd earlier thought were such a great idea to wear. Easing the other one off, she groaned and wiggled her toes in the plush carpet. The evil things weren't touching her feet again before she left. Not even four-inch stilettos hid her short stature—*vertically challenged*



as the women in her family liked to call their common genetics. And what did it matter when you spent the evening horizontal? That's how the evening would end anyway...horizontally. She shivered.

Eyeing the bed again, she approached it and frowned. How on earth would she gracefully get on that thing? Easing the oversize purse off her shoulder, she laid it on the ocean of mattress and climbed up. Her legs dangled over the edge and she resisted the urge to swing them like a kid. Instead, she pulled the bag closer and unzipped it, staring in at the contents. Wallet, cell phone, breath mints, passport.

Condoms.

*Lucky Stiff brand—when opportunity strikes, we've got you covered!*

Leah winced at the gift from her sister. Leaning over, she yanked the nightstand drawer open and tossed the box in where it landed next to the Gideon bible.

Oh, the irony.

*You Sexy Thing* sang from the bottom of her handbag, piercing the quiet. She jumped, fumbled for her cell phone then jabbed the talk button.

"Since you answered, I'm assuming you're alone and still dressed."

Leah had to laugh. If anyone could find the humor in this ludicrous and completely out-of-character-for-Leah situation, it would be her sister, Lana. "Yes, on both counts."

"No sign of Prince Charming yet?"

Leah laid back on the thick coverlet and stared at the ceiling. "No. But, I got here early."

Lana's hesitation echoed over the airwaves. "It's not too late to call this off, you know."

Leah shook her head. "Not happening. I need to let Mark go and move on with my life. This is how I choose to do it."

Lana sighed. "Sleeping with a stranger isn't the most ideal way, honey."

God, how many times would she and her little sister have this conversation? Leah tuned out the same-shit-different-day dialogue and began to count the number of tiles in the ceiling. Wondered why there were steel hooks up there.

"...afraid this will hurt more than it helps," Lana droned.

A firm knock on the door jolted Leah out of her distracted state. Bolting upright in alarm, she dropped the phone before tumbling gracelessly off the gargantuan bed.

“Damn.” She tried to breathe around the sudden hammering of her heart. Lana’s voice continued somewhere under the bed and Leah fished around past the dust ruffle for the phone before locating it near the wall. She clutched it to her ear like a lifeline, and cut her sister off mid-sentence. “Oh, my God, Lannie—he’s here.”

Lana waited a beat before replying in a rush, “It’s not too late. Tell him you’ve changed your mind.”

Another knock sounded and Leah jumped again. Pressing a hand to her heart, she whispered, “No. I need to do this.”

“Don’t be silly! He’ll understand if you don’t—”

“I’ve got to go, Lannie. I’ll call you tomorrow.” Flipping the phone shut, she muted the volume and set it on the nightstand. Then, on auto-pilot, she crossed the room and unlocked the door.

## Chapter Two

*Holy shit.*

Evangeline had promised a lovely woman—but she never hinted she'd be sending Malibu Barbie. In a split second, Jackson's brain registered every perfect detail of the living doll—from the long, blonde hair, perky breasts and hour-glass waist, to the tanned legs he had no problem picturing wrapped around his ass while he...yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

But damn, the image couldn't be more pleasant.

Robin's-egg blue eyes, open so wide the whites showed, stared up at him. Way up at him—hell, the woman took petite to a whole new level. Typically, he preferred his woman tall enough so a stepladder wasn't necessary to kiss him...but what did it matter when you were horizontal...not that *horizontal* was going to happen. But still....

He cleared his throat. "Hello, Leah."

She nodded and backed up to let him pass. "You must be Jackson. Please come in."

Entering the room, he scanned it, noting the amenities with approval. Per his request, housekeeping had taken extra care with it, and made certain Juan, his club manager, stocked the mini-bar to his exact specifications. Or rather, Jackson had noted Leah's preferences on the profile Eve had emailed him—crisp Argentinean Riesling—served chilled.

Stopping in the middle of the room, he watched while Leah locked the door and flipped the security bar. Used to making lightning-quick observations in his business dealings, he noted the slight tremble of her fingers. *Interesting*. She'd initiated this one-night stand, paid for the privilege, so she obviously didn't have a problem with the idea of screwing a stranger. But when she turned toward him, her expression of both determination and fragility surprised him.

Her gaze traveled over him, brief but thorough, and he didn't miss the extra millisecond of consideration she'd given his crotch. Too bad she wouldn't be

getting up close and personal with it. His cock hardened in hopeful response anyway.

She met his eyes and blushed, the pink spreading in a lovely rush across her cheekbones. “Thank you for coming.” A dainty, nervous hand toyed with a single strand of tiny pearls resting at the base of her neck.

Jackson gestured toward the small sitting area near the window. “Why don’t we sit down?”

It was then he noticed her bare feet, small like the rest of her, with cotton-candy-pink toenails. She glided gracefully to the chair and once settled, perched on the edge of it, as if poised to take flight. He frowned, and an uncharacteristic, protective urge took over. As much as he didn’t agree with her reason for taking advantage of Madame Eve’s services, he also didn’t want Leah to regret it—or worse, be frightened of him. If what Eve told him was true, Leah’s last year had been nothing short of tragic. Worse—she wore loneliness like a badge.

\*\*\*

*Dear God.*

The man possessed the same hot-as-sin sensuality Mark had. Tall frame, jet black hair, smooth olive skin, even the same almond-shaped, dark brown eyes. But the similarities ended there. Mark’s aura always carried a certain level of passive, yet attractively sensual boy-next-door. With that sweet but sexy aura, women gravitated toward him.

Without a doubt, women gravitated toward Jackson as well. But he exuded dangerous, bad-boy virility and a touch of anger. *He doesn’t want to be here.* How puzzling. All suave and sophisticated, he definitely didn’t strike her as a man easily forced or persuaded to do something he didn’t want to do. So why had he agreed?

With her blood pressure rising into the red zone, she forced a bland expression and inched until her butt met the cushioned back of the chair.

“Thanks for coming,” she said, her tongue suddenly too large for her mouth.

“You already thanked me.” He grinned, the sincere smile reaching his eyes, and causing her heart to do a funny pitter-pat. “But, you’re welcome.”

Instead of sitting down in the chair across from her, he strode over to the bar, pulled a bottle of wine out of a sterling silver ice bucket, and poured two glasses. He handed her one, then lifted his in a toast. “To new friends.”

In a daze, she lifted the goblet to his and the crystal sang a lovely, rich chime. The first sip of the fragrant, chilled wine surprised her. “This is wonderful. I love a good Riesling.”

“I know.” The corner of his mouth lifted as he admitted, “You mentioned it in your profile.”

It impressed her more than she cared to admit that he’d noticed, let alone bothered to plan ahead and arrange to have hotel management place the wine in their room. The idea never would’ve occurred to Mark to be so organized, or thoughtful of oth—

*Put him out of your head, Leah. Tonight is about moving ahead, not dwelling on the past.*

She cleared her throat, and peeled her tongue from the roof of her mouth. “It’s been so long since I filled out that profile, I don’t really recall much of what I wrote.” *Liar. You agonized over every word. And you looked it over again this morning.*

Jackson met her eyes over the rim of his glass, and for a split second, she had the very real sensation he’d read her thoughts, and concluded she’d lied. “I remember it well. You said you liked to travel, and you’ve been all over the world. You were the only girl on the boys’ surf team in high school.” He swirled the wine in his glass for a moment, watching the movement of the liquid. “You eat your vegetables, and you like your steak rare. And, if I recall, you have a particular fondness for cats, but you travel too much for business so you can’t have one right now.”

Wow. He’d paid attention, almost memorized the personal information in her profile. Madame Eve required an extremely detailed questionnaire, as well as a background check to protect both clients she brought together. But while she used that information to find the best matches for the clients, she also kept most

of the information on the questionnaire confidential, revealing only the basics to the couple, including interesting tidbits giving insight into the individual personalities of the partners. Beyond those basics, according to 1NightStand's FAQ page, what partners chose to divulge to each other was up to them.

"You know, Leah..." began the very handsome Jackson as he settled across from her, "Madame Evangeline explained the reason for your...desire for an evening like this."

*So much for putting my dead fiancé out of my head.* Leah lifted the fine crystal stemware to her lips, buying time before she replied. "Really. What did she say, exactly?" Oh, God. Here comes the pitying glance and soft apology over her loss. She didn't think she could stomach even one more condescending mention of Mark's death. Nobody felt comfortable discussing it, but that never stopped them from trying, which usually compelled her to try and make *them* feel better instead.

Jackson's steady gaze locked on hers. "Your fiancé is dead. You need some closure in order to move on, and you think sleeping with a look-alike will do the trick."

She froze. And suddenly missed the pity, apologies and condescension she'd expected. Where did he get off, putting her need to move on in such crass terms? And what did he care anyway? He knew what her deal was, it still hadn't stopped him from showing up. Opening her mouth to tell him to shove the evening up his undeniably attractive ass, she stopped short when he slid to the edge of his seat.

"Losing someone you love is never easy, but it does get easier to bear. With time."

The sincerity in his voice wasn't feigned and though she'd heard the same words a hundred times or more since Mark's death, hearing them from a stranger who had no reason to say them other than he actually meant them took the wind out of her sails. Especially when his dark eyes conveyed more than mere sympathy. He understood exactly what she'd experienced.

"You've been through it, too."

He nodded. "I lost someone important to me a few years ago." That was it, no further explanation forthcoming and no more words needed. He'd experienced the denial, the anger, the struggle to accept what was out of his control.

"Then maybe you can understand that people need to come to terms with their loss in their own way." His eyes narrowed at the words but he didn't look away. The butterflies took flight again. "This is how I choose to do it, Jackson. Moving on requires me to leave everything I had with Mark behind. And in order to do that, I need to make new memories to replace the old."

Jackson reached across and took the glass from her hand, setting it on the table beside her chair. Leaning in, he cupped her nape and drew her forward until his lips hovered a fraction from hers. "You're certain this is what you want?"

He had the most incredible eyes, long black lashes framing them, but not too long. His smooth skin had the merest hint of stubble and up close, the scent of an expensive cologne lingered. He'd shaved very recently and the thought made her curiously happy knowing he'd probably prepared for their date as much as she had. Well, maybe not as much. She doubted he had eight different items of discarded clothing strewn across his bed at home.

Regardless, this stranger stirred emotions in her she hadn't experienced in a long time—excitement and lust. It felt marvelous. And so normal.

She stared at his sensual lips, the lower being a bit fuller. Tipping her head a fraction, she leaned in to touch her lips to his. He allowed her to take control of the kiss, and she appreciated his sensitivity. Lord, he smelled good and tasted even better. Reaching up, she placed a palm on his shoulder. Staring into his dark eyes, she smiled. "Yes, Jackson. This is definitely what I want."

## Chapter Three

His cock wasn't going to take *no* for an answer. It swelled and strained against his zipper, and stifling a groan of frustration, Jackson shifted to ease the painful pressure. He never anticipated the favor he'd promised Evangeline would cause blue balls.

"Are you okay?"

Leah's soft voice pulled him back to the present. Leaning away to put some distance between them, he ran a hand through his hair and nodded. She watched him, her blue eyes filled with uncertainty, and his protective instinct flared again. Jesus, he never got involved with needy women—that was the surest path to hell. He damn well wasn't going to start now, even if he did feel sorry for her. Misery may love company, but he liked being alone, thanks.

He stood abruptly, catching the chair when it threatened to topple backward. Shrugging out of his constricting suit jacket, he threw it over the back and asked, "You hungry?" Not waiting for a reply, he strode to the desk to call room service. The last thing he wanted was food, but he needed to get away from her scent and warmth, her total femininity. Eating could be just the distraction necessary to clear his head and tame his libido. He hoped.

Wide-eyed, she gripped the arms of her chair and watched him stab the numbers for the kitchen. The kitchen manager answered on the first ring.

"Hey, Marcus. Let me speak to Gina." When the head chef picked up, Jackson didn't bother with a greeting. "How long will it take to get a meal sent up here?"

The chef chuckled. "I'm doing well, thank you."

He scratched his chin and glanced over his shoulder at Leah. She'd moved to stand in front of the window, her back stiff. His fingers groped at the knot of his tie and he worked it loose until it hung like a noose around his neck. *What the hell is wrong with me?* He never lost his cool, not with his staff and definitely not with women.



"I apologize, Gina." He attempted contrition though the woman on the other end of the line knew him better than that. "What's on your menu tonight?"

"Steak, those mashed potatoes you like, and...." She paused. "Where are you?"

*Shit.* Nobody at the hotel knew he had a date. The most they knew was he'd asked them to get the best suite ready for a special guest, not an unheard of request in Vegas. But, he'd forgotten the staff had the ability to know which room a call originated from.

"Upstairs." He peeked over his shoulder again and found Leah clutching the drapes with both hands and continuing to take great interest in the traffic on the Strip below.

"What are you doing in a guest room? Why aren't you in your office?"

Jackson narrowed his eyes. He was so not answering that question—the whole freaking hotel would know about Leah and 1NightStand and his stand-in routine to fill a dead guy's shoes...nope, not answering.

"I need two meals. You know where to send them." There. The boss had spoken. He hung up before she could ask anything else.

He turned back toward Leah and his breath hitched. Golden light from the desert sunset shone in, creating a halo around her blond hair and diminutive form...giving her an almost fairy-like appeal...a very sexy little fairy. And when she glanced over at him with a look both questioning and timid, his heart tripped.

*Damn.* She was utterly, vulnerably beautiful.

He joined her at the window, standing behind but not touching her. Staring out over her shoulder, he viewed the skyline, one he'd seen so many times without ever really noticing it. Wondered what her thoughts were and tried not to think about where his own thoughts kept heading.

"Do you want to hear something funny?" She spoke in a soft voice.

Their images reflected back at them from the window and he caught her gaze in the glass. Even in the dim reflection, her eyes were a stunning blue.

"What's that?"

"It's ironic that I've been to Las Vegas so many times, but I've never gambled in my entire life."

“Never? Not even a bet?” He wondered where she was going with the declaration.

“No.”

He tilted his head. Contacting Evangeline had been risky behavior for her then. “Something tells me you haven’t always followed the rules though.”

“Well, obviously not.” She caught his eye in the window again and laughed. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Oh yes, she was definitely *here*. He ached to touch her, to feel her again. Shifting forward, he put his hands on her waist and drew her back against his chest. She surprised him by molding into him naturally, as though she’d done it a thousand times. Without thinking, he wrapped his arms around her waist. She fit perfectly.

*Ah, hell.*

\*\*\*

It felt so good to be held by a man. It’d been so long, *too long*. Strong arms locked her tight against a hard, muscular body. She wondered if the unexpected embrace was for pity’s sake...until Jackson pulled her hair away from her neck and ran a tender trail of kisses up the side, zeroing in on the wildly erogenous zone behind her ear. Goose bumps rose over her entire body in a rush. Any notion it was a pity embrace fled when an insistent erection pressed against her through the thin fabric of her skirt.

*Hello.*

Jackson surprised her though, when he didn’t continue the seduction but seemed content to hold her. She glanced down. His hands were large, with long fingers and just a slight sprinkling of dark hair peeking from the cuffs of his dress shirt, so stark white in contrast to his tanned skin.

“What do you do, Jackson?” She angled her head to look at him.

“For a living?” His deep voice vibrated against her back and he quirked a black eyebrow. “Or for fun?”

Oh, man. That look, both teasing and erotic, had her stomach somersaulting as the most delicious images of the things Jackson probably did for fun flipped like flashcards through her mind.

“Let’s start with your job.” *We’ll explore the fun stuff in much greater detail later.*

He frowned. “What did Eve tell you about me?”

Looking back, Leah realized Madame Eve hadn’t revealed a whole lot about Jackson. In fact, he knew a lot more about Leah than she knew about him, right down to her pet preferences and how she liked her steaks cooked. Leah, on the other hand, didn’t even know his last name. “Not enough, evidently.”

“Well, for starters, I own a business.”

No big surprise there. She’d heard him on the phone, he knew how to order people around. “Small or large?”

“Started out as a small, family-run business.” He rested his chin on her hair and tightened his hold. “The family still owns it, but now it’s huge. More than I can handle most days.”

She heard the pride in his voice. “But you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“It’s my life.” He shrugged behind her, the motion reminding her of his evident, pressing desire.

He’d come to meet her still dressed for work, straight business attire all the way, right down to his red tie. She’d always been a sucker for a man in a suit—it spelled *power*. And there was nothing sexier than a powerful man. “Is your business local?”

He chuckled. “About as local as you’re going to get. You’re standing in it.”

Her mind raced. What was he talking ab—

*Dear God.* Slowly, she turned in his grasp. “You’re *Jack* Castillo? *The* Jack Castillo who owns the Castillo Hotel chain?” She didn’t know much about his personal life, he’d always kept a low profile, never showing up in the tabloid rags, never having any sort of gossip attached to his name. But anyone who followed the hotel business world knew who the Castillos were, and the enormous amount of money the company made providing top-notch, impeccable lodging and

service. And suddenly, Madame Eve's discretion for not revealing Jackson's last name prior to their meeting made sense.

It did, however, raise another question. With his wealth and incredible good looks, he sure as hell didn't need the services of a company like 1NightStand to get a date. Or get laid for that matter. Then another thought struck her—maybe guaranteed anonymity was the only way he kept the gold diggers away. Or maybe he was into some kink. Or both. "What are you doing here?"

"Evangeline and I are friends. I owed her a favor."

Leah laughed. "That must have been one big favor." Like someone as busy as Jack Castillo had the time for blind dates.

She gasped when he pushed her back until she bumped into the window. Desert heat radiated through the thick glass and warmed her from behind. Sensual, all-male body heat warmed the front of her. Her pulse spiked.

"So far, it hasn't been a hardship." He grinned. "But don't tell her I said so."

He had her completely tongue-tied. All she'd hoped for the evening was some consensual sex and the opportunity to put Mark in the past on the anniversary of his death. She'd never in her wildest dreams expected to spend the night with one of the wealthiest hoteliers on the planet. One who seemed to be enjoying it.

A discreet knock interrupted her jumbled thoughts and Jackson dropped his hands from her waist with a fleeting look of regret. "That was quick."

She watched him stride the few steps to the door, enjoying the view. He had an animal grace, confident and somewhat predatory, which made sense. A wimp didn't run a hotel empire.

Jackson murmured a few words to the room service delivery staff then rolled a dinner cart into the room. Lifting the domed lid from one of two plates, he inspected the meal with what Leah assumed was the same critical eye he used for all things Castillo. He appeared satisfied and nodded. "I hope you like things spicy."

A heady aroma of beef filled the room. She hadn't eaten much in two days, in nervous anticipation of the evening ahead. Her stomach growled and embarrassed, she laid a hand over it. "It smells delicious."

He nodded toward the fare. "I'm sure it will be." Pulling two hidden panels out from under the linen cloth covering the cart, it became a table for two. After placing the chairs they'd sat in earlier across from each other at the little table, he held out a hand to her. "Come on. My sister prepared my favorite meal for us."

Leah approached him, ignoring the flutter in her belly when she took his hand. "Your sister is the chef?"

"One of the best." He grinned. "If she weren't, I'd let the Bellagio have her." He pushed in her chair as she sat down.

*Mark never would have done that.* Leah bit her lip in penance for thinking poorly of him. No matter what, he didn't deserve thoughts like that. Even if they were true.

Jackson waited until she lifted a fork and took a bite before he began eating. She closed her eyes in bliss as the heavenly taste and scent of the exquisitely prepared meat filled her head. "Oh, this is...." She took another bite, unable to finish the thought around the delicious perfection.

He nodded. "I told you, I only have the best chefs working for me."

"You were right." Leah sipped her wine. "But please don't mention to them I licked the plate clean when I was done."

His burst of laughter surprised her. Glancing up, she flushed at the amusement in his eyes as he watched her. "Knowing my sister, Gina, she'd be flattered."

They ate for several moments, comfortable in the silence before Leah finally pushed her plate away. "Now that I can't finish another bite, tell me what that was." She sat back and watched him eat, European style. The economy of movement fascinated her. Or maybe it was simply watching his strong hands handle the utensils with precision and grace. She cleared her throat and tried to ignore another mental flash of those hands, stroking her sensitive flesh.

"Cuban fusion. My sister studied with Chef Emilio Diaz in Miami for several years before returning home."

Impressive. Chef Emilio, the gifted, arrogant Cuban who made even Oprah swoon. "Home being Las Vegas, and not Miami?"

“This is our flagship hotel, so yes, Vegas is home. Most of the family is here, although a couple of my brothers and a cousin manage resorts elsewhere.”

Jackson leaned back in the chair and crossed an ankle over one knee.

His intense gaze never left hers. She searched for something to say. “Is your family Cuban?”

“My parents emigrated from Cuba prior to the revolution. Our heritage plays a role in nearly every aspect of our lives.” He reached over and lifted the lid from a small bowl on the table. “Including dessert.”

The scent of cinnamon and vanilla wafted between them. Leah’s mouth watered, even after the delicious meal they’d shared. “What is it?”

“Proof my sister loves me.” He dipped a spoon in and lifted it toward her. “*Natilla Cubana*.” The lovely Latin words rolled over his tongue. “Cuban custard, my mother’s recipe. Try it.”

But, he held the spoon too far away. Leah glanced up at him, waiting for him to reach in and let her have a taste, but he didn’t move. She licked her lips and he caught the movement before his dark eyes rose slowly to meet hers. He stretched forward and she met him halfway, her lips closing over the metal, their gazes never separating. Sexual tension flared between them, hot and fast and she barely tasted the sweet dessert. When she started to sit back down, he shook his head.

“Come here, Leah.”

The heat in his voice immobilized her, causing her to forget about food and small talk, and focus solely on him. The sudden shift from light dinner conversation to spontaneous desire both confused and thrilled her. He set the spoon down and stood, holding out his hand to her. When she took it, he pulled her up and kissed her, his lips soft but determined.

When he ended the kiss, she sighed. “I guess dinner is over.”

“Very over,” he muttered against her mouth, his tongue seeking entry. The invasion ramped up her heart rate until he had to feel the pounding against his chest. His hands gripped her bottom through her dress and pulled gently until she stood on her tiptoes and his very insistent erection pressed squarely against her mound. She shuddered and pushed into him, seeking more.

His fingers wandered to the back of her dress and he ran them up her spine. Pulling back, he frowned. "Where the hell is the zipper on this thing?"

She laughed at his frustration. "There isn't one."

Ignoring her amusement, he walked her backward until she bumped into the bed. Lifting her up, he laid her back and braced his hands on either side of her head and leaned in for a quick kiss before standing upright. Running his palms up the sides of her thighs and under the dress, he lifted the hem, his lips skimming along the path of the fabric. Cool air followed behind the hot trail of his hands, and goose bumps rose on her skin. In the next breath, he'd exposed her panties. Bending down, he kissed the sensitive skin above the elastic. Heat flooded her core at the simple but erotic gesture and she sighed.

She'd missed the caresses, the seduction of a man, more than she'd realized. Having Jackson touch her awakened the sexuality she'd thought died with Mark. But her body remembered how long she'd gone without intimacy—sex—she didn't want to waste any more time.

Jackson's hands crept up the inside of her dress and eased it over her head to toss it aside. Then he stared down at her, his expression dark and serious. "Tell me this is what you want." When she nodded but didn't reply, he said, "I need to hear you say it, Leah. Tell me you want this."

"I want this." She tugged at his dress shirt until she'd freed it from his pants. "I want you to do this."

That seemed to be all he needed to hear. With a groan, he began to undress, yanking the tie over his head before fumbling with the little buttons at his cuffs and shirt front. She leaned back on her elbows, watching him struggle, knowing he wanted her as much as she needed him. Her panties were soaked with her desire and anticipation. When her gaze traveled down to linger on the tent in his trousers, his hands jerked and a button popped.

"Let me." She pushed his hands away, her small fingers working the rest of the buttons through the holes then peeked up at him through her hair and smiled.

In a rush, he shrugged out of the shirt, gripped her hands and laid her back on the bed again, settling over her. His weight another reminder of how much she'd missed sex and the feel of a man pressing her into the mattress. He nuzzled her

neck with his lips, and lifted their joined hands over her head. Hard and huge, his erection rubbed against the thin barrier of his pants and her underwear and she spread her legs and arched again. Her obvious neediness should have embarrassed her but she didn't stop.

"Wrap your legs around me." He punctuated the demand with a searing kiss and ground his cock against her. The beginning of release pooled in her core and she dragged her mouth from his with a moan.

He lifted his head and looked down at her. Her breath hitched at the desire and lust etched on his face. He shifted his hips again and her eyes drifted closed. She bit her lip. So close. One more motion of his cock and she'd come.

When he didn't move, she opened her eyes. In a ragged voice, he said, "Condom?"

"Top drawer."

He rolled off the bed, ditched his pants in record time and yanked the nightstand drawer open. Pulling the Lucky Stiff box out, he read it and frowned but made no comment. A moment later, he gathered her in his arms and gave her a soft kiss. "Last chance to reconsider."

While she appreciated *his* consideration, she'd paid for the one-night stand. Backing out this late in their date wasn't an option, especially when her only desire was having him fill her and drive her over the edge.

Instead of answering, she guided his hand to the top of her panties. "Can you help me with these?"

Without a word, he inched them down and over her feet then unhooked her bra. Her heart thundered and her nipples hardened in response. Straddling her, he pulled the bra free and lowered his head, capturing a nipple between his lips. His warm tongue caressed it, rolling it gently, shooting sparks of desire straight to her clitoris. She strained upward for more and he chuckled, giving her other breast equal attention. Clutching his biceps, she moaned. "Please, Jackson."

His hot mouth inched its way up her chest and nibbled her neck, making her writhe beneath him in anticipation. He shifted to settle between her legs, his cock touching her intimately and she opened for him, so ready for his invasion.



Inch by agonizing inch, he penetrated her, retreating and pushing, until he filled her. He stopped. "Okay?"

She couldn't speak and nodded instead. Having him inside, feeling his weight above her, nearly overwhelmed her. She'd forgotten how wondrous lovemaking could be, how lovely the joining. Without a doubt, arranging this evening had been the right thing to do. Leaving Mark behind didn't mean forgetting him. But time and new experiences helped to ease the loss.

And Jackson Castillo definitely knew how to ease a loss.

He moved then, his strokes slow and easy. He was a big man, in every way, and she appreciated his gentleness, but she wanted more. His foreplay alone had nearly driven her over the edge and she craved the completion his touch promised.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, his weight pushing his cock deeper. His satisfied grunt of pleasure matched hers and he responded by rotating his hips, rubbing her clit. He braced himself on one arm and slipped the other hand under her back to lift her, bending his head to bring his lips to her breast. Sucking the taut nipple, he never stopped moving slow and sure between her legs.

The combined pleasure of his mouth and cock scored a direct hit, much quicker than she'd expected and she flew over the edge, the orgasm gripping her, raging through her, tearing the breath from her lungs. He never stopped stroking her over and over and she peaked again, the pleasure more intense, even more exhilarating.

Coherent thought returned slowly.

*Well, that never happened before.*

She couldn't wait to do it again.

## Chapter Four

Forget stamina and performance and all the things a man took pride in. Leah coming beneath him was Jackson's undoing. Having her legs wrapped around his ass while he drove into her, hearing her cries, feeling her tighten with pleasure around his cock—she'd pulled the trigger and he blew.

It wasn't until after she'd rocked his world and he free-fell right along with her that he remembered his promise to Evangeline—the one about not sleeping with Leah. And called himself a selfish bastard, but as soon as he'd had an appropriate period of recovery time, he intended to break that promise all over again.

He propped up on his elbows, and found her looking up at him with the same dazed expression he knew had to be on his face. He fought the urge to grin. Tried to think of something romantic or sexy or witty to say but nothing came to mind.

She reached up and cupped his face with her hands. "That was great. Can I take you home with me?" Then she laughed.

He laughed with her. Damn, that *was* great. *She* was great. He felt like a damned rock star. Giving her a quick kiss, he rolled away and made a quick trip to the bathroom.

She'd gotten under the covers and he slid between the sheets, turning on his side to face her. As though they'd been lovers for years instead of minutes, she relaxed next to him. He put his arm around her, and she fit like a glove...a warm, feminine, sexy-as-hell glove.

He wasn't a huge fan of pillow talk, but when she didn't speak, he did. "You never told me what you do for a living."

She shifted under his arm and yawned. "I'm a flight attendant for Vista Airlines."

He knew the CEO of Vista, Bobby Murphy, from the Las Vegas business community, since its headquarters was at McCarran International. "I know your boss."

She rubbed her hand in a lazy pattern on his chest. “Everyone knows Bobby.” Another yawn and a muttered apology. “I have to be at the airport by five. I’m scheduled for the six AM flight to Newark.”

“I’ll drive you.” Ah, hell. Where had that offer come from? He didn’t drive anyone anywhere, that’s what the chauffeurs and limousines downstairs were for. “Just let me know when you want to leave.”

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A warm, wet tongue slid up the side of his cock and down the other, while a soft hand kneaded his balls. He arched his hips, hoping she’d take him into her mouth, and she did, working her tongue around the slit, scraping gently with her teeth. He groaned and forced himself deeper into her hot mouth, his hands knotting in her hair, holding tight. Wrapping her lips around the head, she worked erotic magic, teasing the glans with her tongue and stroking the base of his shaft. The inevitable tightening of his sac began and he groaned with the pending pleasure.

Jerking awake, he glanced around, disoriented and out of breath. Thin light from the Strip below filtered through the crack in the hotel drapes, just enough for him to realize exactly where he was—flat on his back, getting blown by an angel with an unbelievable mouth and even better skills—and seconds away from a mind-blowing orgasm.

*Jesus, this is no dream.*

His hands rested on her head, the blonde hair tickling his stomach and obscuring Leah’s face until she sat back and tilted her head toward him. When she smiled, his heart lodged in his throat and he didn’t dare consider what that meant. Instead, he grasped her wrists and pulled her up until she sprawled on top of him.

She pouted. “I wasn’t done.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You have no idea how close you were to *being done*.” She wiggled against his straining cock, and he gripped her ass to hold her still.

The last thing he wanted was a mess without the benefits. “Not kidding here, babe.”

Sitting upright, she stretched across the bed and pulled a condom off the nightstand. She held it out of reach when he tried to take it. Scooting down, she sat on his thighs and sheathed him, her delicate fingers easing the latex down the shaft. Then she crawled her way back up his body, kissing his stomach, then his chest, her sex slippery with her need as it slid along his length. Muttering an oath, he gripped her hips and plunged, filling her. Her hiss of pleasure matched his own.

## Chapter Five

She arched her back and rode him. Hard. Bruising fingers dug into her skin as he moved with her, a bit of pain to add to the pleasure, something she never thought she'd enjoy. She fell forward and their mouths fused, tongues mating in unison with their bodies.

He tore his lips from hers and moaned. "Come with me."

The command, gritty and sexy as hell, pushed her over the top. With a shout, he surged a final time and her own climax slammed through her, shutting everything out, consuming her. She melted over him, laid her cheek against his chest, felt the pounding of his heart, listened to his ragged breathing...glad he was no less affected by their lovemaking.

He ran an absent hand on her back. "Doing okay?"

She nodded. And squeezed her eyes shut against inexplicable and unwanted tears.

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She woke before dawn, registering the fact a large, naked man spooned her, his hand grazing her breast. Wanting nothing more than to lie there, and knowing it would be both satisfying and dangerous for her heart, she eased away and slipped over the edge of the bed.

Sheets rustled and she glanced up from picking her dress off the floor. His eyes, dark and watchful, tracked her movements as she gathered up her bra and panties and searched for her shoes under the bed. Standing upright, she looked over when he lifted a hand.

"Come here, Leah."

The last time he'd demanded that, they'd...what? Had sex...made love...fucked? Not that the correct term truly mattered. The night was over, morning had come and she'd gotten what she'd paid for. A one-night stand.

“I have to get ready for work.” Turning away before she changed her mind and joined him in the warm bed, she entered the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

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Jackson listened to the patter of water as Leah showered, heard the shampoo bottle snap open and shut. Pictured her long hair flowing down her back as the water ran over her tanned skin. Wondered if her dainty hands cupped her breasts and she turned her face up toward the spray, her expression the same as the one she'd worn when she came....

“Shit.” Rock hard, he had to force his legs to stay still and not swing over the side of the bed, march his horny self right into that bathroom and join her in the shower. After a few deep breaths, he got up and snagged his pants off the floor. Yanking them up over his hips, he forced the raging erection into submission and zipped the pants shut. He'd just hung up the phone with room service when the bathroom door opened. Steamy air and the scent of hotel soap and shampoo followed Leah out. She smiled as she towel-dried her hair.

“It's all yours.” She unfastened the towel she'd wrapped herself in and he stifled a groan. Pink nipples puckered in protest in the air-conditioned room, but were quickly hidden again by the lacy bra she put on.

Before he made a complete gawking fool of himself, he said, “I wasn't sure what you liked, so ordered both coffee and tea sent up.”

She nodded her thanks and continued to dress. Not knowing what else to say to break the uncomfortable silence, he gave her a quick kiss and headed for the shower.

He wasn't surprised to find the bedroom empty when he came out. He stared at the door for several moments before crossing the room and digging through the inside pocket of his suit jacket for his cell. Stabbing a familiar number, he waited until a sleepy voice answered and wasted no time issuing the order.

“It's me. Get Bobby Murphy on the phone. Tell him I need a reservation.”

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“The high roller in three B wants more champagne.”

Leah made a face. “Seriously? It’s five-thirty in the morning.”

“Sweetie, the night is still young for this guy.” The other flight attendant pulled a bottle of bubbly out of the cooler and poured a flute. He glanced over at her and raised an eyebrow. “You know you can tell me to MMOB, but you look like a woman who was up all night getting screwed silly. And details would be nice, if you care to share.”

Glad her back was to him so he couldn’t see the blush creeping up her neck and face, she nevertheless couldn’t keep the tremor out of her voice. “Nice, Eddie. Say it a little louder so the entire cabin hears you.”

The little man peered around her shoulder, and gasped. “Oh, my gawd! I’m right!”

Punching the start button on a coffee pot, she cringed. “Don’t you have something to do?” *Besides reminding me of an amazing man and the best sex of my life that was over almost before it got started?*

Eddie snickered and left with the champagne, humming annoyingly. The coffee pot popped and stopped its perky gurgling. Turning it on and off didn’t fix the issue and she frowned. Hearing Eddie return, she said, “The coffeemaker is broken again.” When he didn’t reply, she glanced over her shoulder and froze.

“Hello, Leah.” Jackson stood in the galley entrance, carrying a boarding pass and a major attitude.

She turned away, every muscle group turning to jelly. With shaky fingers, she made busy work, clueless to anything but the unexpected presence of the very big, very angry man behind her.

She jerked when a warm breath feathered her ear. “Didn’t your mother teach you it’s rude to leave without saying goodbye?”

Her eyes closed. His body pressed against hers in the tiny space, his hands resting on the counter in front of her, anchoring her in place. His scent, already familiar, filled her head. Exhausted from the stressful anticipation of the one-

night stand and then the erotic fulfillment of the night itself, she couldn't stop the tears. But she'd be damned if she let him see them. "Go away, Jackson."

He gripped her waist and spun her to face him. The fire died in his eyes, replaced by concern. She bent her head, not wanting him to know how undone seeing him again made her. He tipped her chin up to meet his eyes. "Why did you leave that way?"

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. "At some point, we had to go our separate ways."

He shook his head. "So you just left."

Too tired to be anything other than honest, she said, "I never should have done it. Sleeping with you didn't do what I'd hoped it would."

He was quiet for a moment. Finally, he lifted a hand and touched her cheek. "What did it do, Leah?"

Damn it, the tears fell then, and he saw every one of them. "It made me feel alive again. And it frightens me."

"Don't be afraid."

Did he have to look so sincere? He couldn't actually be suggesting they should see each other again. "Why wouldn't I be afraid?" She glanced around him to make sure they were alone then lowered her voice to a whisper. "We had a one-night stand. Not exactly the foundation for a solid relationship."

He scowled. "It may have started out that way, but it ended as more than that."

"It was only sex." God, she wished he'd leave before she started crying again. Which she promptly did anyway. "Please go away. You're making this so much more difficult than it has to be."

"Running away is more difficult than being with me?" He shook his head as though he knew better. "Don't run from me, Leah."

Her heart leapt at the sweet words. He was right. Running away was useless and exhausting. After a year of loneliness, she'd be a fool to deny his offer. He'd proven to be kind, intelligent and sexy. Maybe not such a bad foundation after all. When he continued to stroke her cheek, she leaned into his strong hand. "What do you want?"



To Feel Again

“I want to see where this takes us.” He bent his head and gently kissed her.  
“Let me help you feel again.”

## ~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

*Valerie Mann has lived from sea to shining sea and currently resides in Raleigh, North Carolina. She has her own romance hero husband, five children, and two lazy cats. She has more fun than is proper as the promotion director for an online bookseller, owning a romance review site and editing for an electronic publisher. She loves to hear from her readers!*  
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