NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Jill SHALVIS

Out of The Blue

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Аннотация

HE'D GET MORE THAN A MINT ON HIS PILLOW!For Hannah Novak, running a bed-and-breakfast with her two best friends was adventure enough. But they didn't feel that way. They wanted to devote the summer to serious manhunting – loser cleans toilets! Fine for them, but Hannah was, uh…inexperienced. How could she seduce anyone?Then out of the blue came Zach Thomas, looking for a bed… and breakfast. Hannah had always thought the rugged cop was the sexiest man alive, and, bet or no bet, she wanted him. So she checked him in – to her own room – with every intention of checking him out!

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The right bet…and the wrong bed! Don't miss this fun and sexy classic romance from New York Times bestselling author Jill Shalvis!

For Hannah Novak, running a bed-and-breakfast with her two best friends was adventure enough. But they didn't feel that way. They wanted to devote the summer to serious man hunting—loser cleans toilets! Fine for them, but Hannah was, uh, inexperienced. How could she seduce anyone?

Then out of the blue came Zach Thomas, looking for a bed… and breakfast. Hannah had always thought the rugged cop was the sexiest man alive, and, bet or no bet, she wanted him. So she checked him in—to her own room—with every intention of checking him out!

A sexy contemporary romance.

Previously published.

“Why are you in my bed?” Zach demanded

“It’s...my bed,” Hannah responded breathlessly.

“No...this is my bed.” He spoke slowly, thickly, as if he wasn’t quite awake. “Or at least it’s the one you gave me. I think. Am I in the wrong bed?”

No, he was in exactly the right bed. And now that her initial nervousness had worn off, Hannah was becoming aware of several things.

One, he smelled good. *Really* good.

Two, he felt good. *Really, really* good.

And oh yeah, as far as she could tell, he was nearly naked.

To test, she arched up, just a little, because wow, he felt incredible. She wasn’t really trying to take advantage of him, at least not until he woke all the way up—okay, maybe she was, just a little. She encountered...yep, more sleek skin and tough muscle.

No clothes.

At her movement, he’d gone completely still. And she could feel him become ever more...*awake!*

Dear Reader,

Ever fantasize? Okay, silly question. Well, in *Out of the Blue,* three best friends run a B and B and share a simple fantasy—to find a man. Any man, as long as he’s smart, funny and *sexy.* In

fact, they make a bet to see who can be the first to get one.

But my heroine, Hannah Novak, has a little problem. How is she to go about getting a man when she has absolutely *no* experience in the matter? But then Zach Thomas shows up, the town's sexiest bad boy, and she figures he'll know what to do. Only, he has no intention of letting Hannah seduce him to win a bet!

This story is my first for the *Wrong Bed* miniseries in Temptation. These books—with their sexy, sassy heroines and unique story lines—have always been some of my most favorite reads. And don't forget to watch for other *Wrong Bed* books in the coming months!

Happy reading,

Jill Shalvis

Out of the Blue

Jill Shalvis

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PROLOGUE

ZACHARY THOMAS PLANNED to spend the entire next week in a prone position. Either on the sand with the warm sun over his face, in a hammock with the warm breeze brushing his limbs, or in a bed with a warm body beside him, it didn't matter.

Better yet, give him all of the above.

But he had to get there first, to Avila, before the exhaustion claimed him.

Ten years ago he'd left that town as the wild rebel. Today he was going home, still a rebel at heart, but now he was a cop as well.

He'd never thought it would happen, but after so long, he was really going back.

Home.

More figuratively than literally, since his childhood house no longer belonged in the family. It'd been sold long ago, his elderly parents having retired to Arizona. But in his mind, the popular beach town of Avila would always be the place to come home to. The place of sun and surf, fun and laughter.

God, he was exhausted, his body aching, and in the tight confines of his Jeep he stretched his travel-weary limbs the best he could. Every inch of him protested the four-hour drive north.

No doubt, working undercover all year, tracking a drug ring in the armpits of Los Angeles, had been tough on his body.

So had getting shot.

But thankfully he was healing, more and more every day, and the case was over. Bad guys in jail, lawyers' pockets full, and his Chief one very happy man.

Off to his left, the Pacific Ocean sparkled a deep jade as the sun touched the horizon. With all the windows down, he could smell the salt air, could almost hear each individual wave as it hit the shore.

Home, he thought again with a rueful smile. Once upon a time, he hadn't been able to get out of the small, sleepy town fast enough. There hadn't been enough excitement and thrills to be had, but for now, while he was healing, slow and lazy was exactly the speed he craved.

Maybe after he'd slept for a few days he'd test his still-sore side and go surfing, something he hadn't done in years.

One thing he *didn't* have to do was work, not for one more week, when his leave time would be up. He'd already had nearly two months off, but he could drag it out even longer if he needed; everyone would understand. Being shot took a lot out of a cop.

But Zach loved his work, and wanted to get back to it. It was his life. His *only* life, he admitted ruefully, given the hours and energy he put into it. Besides, the wild, hustling, packed L.A. still gave him a rush.

At the moment though, even his bones hurt, and he had to wonder if he'd really be ready to go back so soon. A ruptured liver and two shattered ribs were harder to get over than he'd

even imagined.

Maybe he was just tired. In fact, his eyes were so gritty he could hardly see, and just concentrating on driving was almost more than he could handle. All he wanted right now was a good meal and a bed.

Actually, skip the food, he'd head straight for the sheets, with or without the warm female body.

The Norfolk Woods Inn sign finally came into view, just seconds before the quaint, character-ridden old lodge did. At the sight, a burst of pride went through Zach for what his baby sister and her friends had created. The log cabin itself was beautiful, warm and inviting and cozy—the very thing he'd run from so many years ago.

Alexi. He missed her. They visited too infrequently, and only when she made the trip to Los Angeles around his work schedule. It'd be good to see her. She'd give him a room and let him sleep around the clock, the entire week if he felt like it. He could contemplate the cosmos, catch up on television.

Hell, he could watch the grass grow.

After the life he'd led for the past year, it sounded decadent. Slow. Leisurely. That it was the opposite of everything he'd ever wanted didn't escape him, but for now it was perfect.

As he pulled up, half dead on his feet, he realized that things were not going to go quite as planned.

The No Vacancy sign was lit.

CHAPTER 1

BUSINESS AMONG FRIENDS was rumored to be a bad idea. Before today, Hannah Novak would have denied this, but now, in her third attempt to bring order to a very important goal-setting meeting, she had to wonder. “Come on, guys. Let’s do this.”

Alexi, her best friend and business partner, nodded and bit back her laughter. “You’re right, let’s get serious.”

“Only if we have to.” Tara, second-best friend and also business partner, sighed dramatically.

“We have to.” Hannah was their voice of reason. She had been since childhood. She couldn’t help herself. She liked order, liked a good plan. She had one for every aspect of her life...well, except for the romantic part.

Much to her private vexation, she’d failed miserably there.

“Okay, then.” Alexi sent her an innocent smile, which should have immediately raised Hannah’s suspicions. “The goal for this summer is to lose our single status.” Grinning, she held her pen poised above the pad balanced on her knees. “Correct?”

Tara laughed. “Oh, definitely correct.”

Hannah groaned. Lose her single status? In twenty-four years she hadn’t managed to lose so much as her virginity. “No. This is not our goal—”

“At least get one really good date,” Tara decided. “With a *rich*

guy. Yeah, now *there* would be a nice change."

"I'd settle for him being employed," Alexi muttered.

Hannah would settle for having any other conversation. She loved her friends, loved them as if they were sisters, but she didn't want to talk about her pathetic lack of dates. "Hey, what happened to our *business* goals? You remember, the Norfolk Woods Inn? The lodge we run?" It was their pride and joy. It'd been their dream ever since Tara had inherited it right out of high school. "We're going to maybe add on a room, buy new dishes for the kitchen, give the staff a raise...that sort of thing?"

"Nah, catching a man is far more important." Tara fluffed her perfectly sculptured chin-length blond hair. "Three of them to be exact, one for each of us."

"Absolutely." Alexi shoved her own darker, longer, unruly curls out of her eyes and grinned, reminding Hannah that she wasn't nicknamed Rebel Junior—her brother was the original rebel—for nothing. "Men. Pronto."

Hannah tried again, because honestly, catching a man was completely out of her realm of expertise, and they really needed to have this business meeting. "Look, the lodge is completely full, *more* than full, and we only have a little while here. We really need to—"

"I know. *I know,*" Tara said mournfully. "It's just that I'm in the mood for a good romance, that's all." If Alexi was the rebel, then the willowy and elegant Tara was easily the sophisticate of the group.

Which left the goody two-shoes position for herself, and Hannah filled it all too well. “No thanks on the romance. It’s too...complicated.”

The understatement of the year.

“Complicated, yes. But lots of fun.” Alexi looked to Tara for support. “Right?”

Wrong.

For Hannah, romance was too much work to be anything other than agonizing. From the beginning she’d been hopeless at it. Maybe it had been her home life, so different from all her mostly upper-class fellow students. Maybe it had been her own shyness. Whatever the reason, it had started in sixth grade, when she first became truly aware of boys. Fool that she was, she’d fallen hard for Alexi’s older brother, Zach, and it had been nothing but humiliating because he thought she was the dreaded “cute.”

No boy her age had compared to him, but she’d given it a try. In seventh grade she’d nearly drowned Eddie Bachman in the pool during swimming class because he’d tried to kiss her and she’d panicked.

In eighth grade she’d given Peter Horn a black eye when she accidentally fell on him as he tried to maneuver her beneath the mistletoe during a Christmas dance.

By the time she’d *wanted* a boy to make a move on her, she’d garnered the reputation of hurting any male unfortunate enough to give her a second glance.

The bad rap had stuck.

She'd had dates since then, but exactly one per guy. Just enough to warn them their life was in dire danger if they dared ask her out a second time.

She'd never figured out why she was such a big klutz around men. Her brother Michael said it was because she spent too much of her time worrying about things other kids didn't have to, things like having enough money to eat that week. Or was their mother depressed again. Michael said as a result of those worries, Hannah spent too much time caring about everyone other than herself. But she couldn't help it, it was a habit years in the making.

Hannah believed her brother. She just didn't know what to do about it. Rather than face the humiliation of continuing to try, she'd taken a break from actively pursuing a dating life.

But her heart had never gotten the message. It continued to yearn and burn to know what she was missing.

Which had nothing to do with this meeting, darn it. "Guys, come on now, we—"

"Romance..." Tara said dreamily. "Sweet nothings, slow dancing, and long-stemmed roses. I want the whole enchilada."

"Try a good steamy novel then," Hannah suggested, determined to move on. "They have guaranteed happy endings." She leaned over to tap her pencil on their supposed list of goals, which at the moment included only one—*Lose Single Status.* "We have to get serious here."

But really, who was she to begrudge her friends needing more,

just because she'd always failed at it? Just because her whole life was the Norfolk Inn, that didn't mean it had to be the same way for them. Yes, it was a dream come true for all of them to work together at their own business, but neither Alexi nor Tara ever put work ahead of their own personal lives.

Hannah did. She just didn't know how to do anything else.

Maybe they were right. Maybe it was time for a change. A new attitude. She was older, wiser too. Certainly she could do anything she set her mind to.

After this meeting.

"So...it's settled?" Alexi asked them. "We're all going for it? Most important goal for the summer, lose single status?"

"Count me in," Tara said. "Hannah?"

"Well—"

"Just third the motion, would you?"

All she had to do was say the words. Put voice to the need deep inside her, that she'd love to find someone to go out with, someone she could trust enough to lose more than her "single" status to.

Besides, Alexi and Tara looked so excited about the prospect of summer, and of finding someone.... How could she disappoint them? She could just agree, and then forget about it. "I give," she said. "Can we finish discussing the business now?"

"How about we up the ante first?" Alexi suggested. "Whoever gets unsingle doesn't have to clean toilets all summer. Seeing as how I'm going to win and all."

“Maybe our goal should be to hire the maid we’ve been promising ourselves,” Hannah suggested instead, but both Tara and Alexi shook their heads.

“We’re doing good, but not *that* good, not yet,” Tara reminded her. “It’s not in the budget until *next* spring.”

“So...” Alexi’s eyes sparkled. “What do you guys think about the toilet challenge?”

“It’s sort of high-school, isn’t it?” Tara asked.

Which had Alexi laughing again. “So naturally, you’re in.”

“Are you kidding?” Tara grinned. “And miss this? Of course I’m in. Like I have to worry about losing anyway.”

“Not when we have Hannah in the mix for the handicap.”

They both looked at her with warm, loving amusement and she cast a glance heavenward. “Just because I don’t date a lot—”

“Honey, you don’t date *at all.*”

“Well you wouldn’t if you had my bad luck.”

“Yes, I would,” Alexi said, her face suddenly serious. “I’d try. You just haven’t found the right one yet, someone who makes you feel special.”

“Absolutely,” Tara agreed. “You can’t give up.”

But Hannah *had* given up. It was far easier on both her heart and ego. “In today’s day and age,” she said as primly as she could, “we have to be careful.”

“Careful yes,” Tara corrected. “Alone, no.”

“I said I’d do it.” And she would, just so they could get on with their work stuff. She didn’t want a relationship; she didn’t have

the time or inclination. And anyway, if she was going to set a goal for herself, it would be something easier.

Something personal.

She wanted to lose her virginity.

"To us then." Alexi held out her hand. Tara placed hers in it, and with reluctance, so did Hannah.

"Good luck, ladies," Alexi said as they shook.

"I declare this meeting concluded. May the best woman win."

"Okay, great." Hannah raised her pad of paper. "Now back to business."

Alexi and Tara sighed but settled in, mostly to humor her. It didn't matter; Hannah was glad to be back on track.

And yet for the next hour, while they discussed finances and services, all she could think about was...what if she'd been too hasty in assuming she would lose their challenge?

What if she could really do it, really actually manage to meet her personal goal of losing her virginity? She could just dip her toe into romance, so to speak, then get back to her life.

Nice dream, but impossible, given reality.

There was no man in sight begging for her body.

* * *

HANNAH STOOD ALONE in front of the freshly scrubbed kitchen sink, having just happily run herself ragged cleaning up the evening's meal for their very full house.

Out the window to the right, the sun slowly disappeared over the Pacific Ocean. The colors exploded, and she stood there

riveted by the sight.

She loved it here. It was calm, peaceful. Perfect.

To the left, she could see the quaint main street of Avila. All the galleries and specialty shops had their lights on, welcoming. Inviting. Tourists were hustling down the street, shopping, eating, enjoying themselves.

As were their own guests. Their land was only an acre, but it was a fabulous acre, complete with the lodge, a small restaurant, an ice-cream and gift shop, spa, barbecue area, wildflower gardens and eight suites—though they only used five for visiting guests. The other three belonged to Tara, Alexi and herself.

Alexi ran the restaurant with amazing talent for both cooking and charming the guests out of huge tips. Tara handled the books with the fierceness of Attila The Hun, and since Hannah had a way with both greenery and sweetness—or so she'd been told—she worked the wildflower gardens and ran the ice-cream and gift shop.

She could think of nowhere else she'd rather be, and was looking forward to the wonderful summer months ahead...unless of course, she was on toilet duty.

Oh God, she'd almost forgotten.

She'd agreed to the unsingle challenge.

A half-hysterical laugh escaped her. It was so out of her league she might as well wish for a trip to the moon. And anyway, how bad could it be cleaning the bathrooms every single day, for three entire months?

Pretty bad.

Darn, she needed a man. Not just any man either, she wanted him to be kind and sensitive. Passionate. She wanted him to desire her.

That she also wanted him to be an incredible lover went without saying.

Oh, and then she wanted him to go away.

She laughed at herself, and then shrieked in surprise at the shadow of a man behind her.

"Excuse me," he said, coming into the kitchen. "I—"

He broke off abruptly and stared at her in surprise.

She understood perfectly. Her heart was inexplicably in her throat, she could hardly breathe, because she *recognized* that voice, recognized the boy who was now a man. It'd been ten years, but that low, husky tone was indelibly printed in her mind.

Alexi's older brother, Zach Thomas.

The first boy she'd ever had a crush on.

He'd changed, was her first thought. Lord, he'd changed.

Then a grin broke across his face, and she had her second thought—she hadn't realized her toes could really curl.

"Hannah? Is that you?"

"What—what are you doing here?" *Oh gee, wonder why she couldn't catch a man.* But she was truly stunned to see him since only six weeks ago he'd nearly been killed in the line of duty, shot down by some gangbanger.

Alexi had taken the news very hard, and it had been Hannah

who held her best friend while she cried during that first agonizing telephone call. “I thought you were still recuperating,” she added. “Are you okay? Should you be up and about?”

“Yep to both, especially since I’ve only one week left on my first vacation in ten years.” He grinned again, and it quite simply took her breath.

It was all coming back to her, the horribly humiliating teenage infatuation—which had absolutely *not* been reciprocated. He’d been kind to her, yes, and as she was a friend of his baby sister, he’d also been indulgent and protective.

But other than that, Zach had been far, far out of her reach; too wild, too gorgeous, too everything. Avila had smothered him, he’d hated the tight confines, the lack of adventure.

Which had been everything she loved about the peaceful, sedate town.

Then he’d left her world to become a cop of all things, and they hadn’t seen each other since.

Why should they?

He lived the wild, exciting life he’d always wanted and she...she lived hers the way she’d always wanted, with a few exceptions. Okay, one exception—her lack of a love life, which of course brought all sorts of erotic images to mind, images best not thought about at the moment.

Why? Because Zach was standing right in front of her looking a bit wicked, definitely gorgeous, and just a tad dangerous. He was back and her tummy had gone all tight, her toes were still

curled and all sorts of currents were racing through erogenous zones she hadn't even known existed.

Because of one simple smile.

Damn Alexi and Tara for putting thoughts of wild sex in her mind.

Toilets, she reminded herself. Eleven of them in the inn. They were hers.

"Who knows when I'll have a whole week to myself again," he said, leaning back against the doorjamb and studying her in an openly assessing way. "I've been promising Alexi I'd come ever since the three of you opened this place."

And he'd finally come.

Right now, tonight. Just as she'd decided maybe she should lose her virginity once and for all. At the thought of losing it with this tall, leanly muscled, rugged man she'd once known, she nearly slid to the floor in a boneless mass of jelly.

"It's nice to be here," he said, still smiling, still gorgeous.

Darn him.

"Well, it's nice to have you," she said, meaning it more than he could know. Alexi had been so worried about him, they'd all been. He'd nearly died, yet it seemed so surreal to think of that when he was standing there in the flesh, looking so...so alive. "Are you really okay?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, I'm really okay...or I will be after I sleep for a week." He shook his head as he studied her. "It's hard to believe how long it's been. You've..." His gaze dipped downward slowly, past the

ever-so-lovely apron she wore—not!—all the way to her sandals, then slowly back up again. “You’ve gone and grown up on me, Hannah.”

Oh boy. So had he.

He was still big, still powerfully built, standing there with the casualness of someone totally at ease anywhere. There was a toughness to him that reminded her of what he did for a living, an edge that hadn’t been there before, a dangerous one, tempered with restraint.

But it was just Zach. She knew him. Or she had. He dressed the same, in a simple polo shirt and faded, soft-looking jeans.

Nothing else looked soft though, not those long, powerful legs or—

A warm flush stole over her and she guiltily jerked her gaze up to meet his, and found herself just as fascinated by what she found there.

His mouth might still be curved in that sexy, slow, lazy smile, but he wasn’t amused, not really. In fact, Hannah would have bet her next paycheck that those fine lines fanning out from his baby blues were from exhaustion, maybe even pain. So was the slight slump to his mile-wide shoulders. His dark, silky-looking hair was on the wrong side of long, curling over his collar, and disheveled, as if he’d run his fingers through it often.

But it was the faint shadows beneath his eyes that grabbed her, and the tense way he held himself in spite of his smile, as if he were close to keeling over. He didn’t look like the decorated

cop she knew he was. He looked tired, almost brooding, and unsettled.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

Confirming her suspicions, he yawned. "I'm just really beat," he said simply, rubbing a hand over his face. "Long drive, long day. Six weeks out of commission and I'm out of shape."

He didn't look out of shape to her, not then, and not now when he stretched, the movement slow and unconsciously sensual. Hannah found her gaze glued to all those long limbs and fabulous muscles, her mouth suddenly dry.

"I really need a bed," he told her.

Unbidden images flashed through her mind; silk sheets, bare, hot skin pressed against more bare, hot skin; long, drugging kisses... Oh my.

Could she really do it? Could she really make love with him?

As he stretched again, he let out a low, rough sound from deep in his throat.

Oh yeah. She could. Definitely. "Um... Does Alexi know you're here?" An idea stirred, formed. "Never mind," she said. "Just sit." Gently, she pressed him into a chair, her hands burning from just touching his broad, exhausted shoulders, her mind racing with the possibilities. "I'll go get you a room."

"Sounds good."

She hoped he still felt that way in a few moments, because no matter whose brother he was, there wasn't a room to be had.

Which brought her to her plan. Her crazy plan.

Her how-to-get-un-virginal plan.

CHAPTER 2

SO BONE-WEARY he could hardly climb the stairs, Zach shouldered his duffel bag and headed toward the room Hannah had just given him.

Hannah.

It'd been ten years since he'd set sight on her, a very long time given she'd been fourteen when he'd left. Fourteen and gangly and awkward, terribly self-conscious in a way that to his own nineteen years had seemed...well, very young.

Still, whenever he'd thought of Avila, a small part of him had always wondered if she'd kept that sweet smile, if she still had freckles dancing across her nose, if she'd ever grown into her long, skinny legs.

If he wasn't so tired, he might have acknowledged that he now had the answers to those burning questions.

Yes, she still had that sweet, contagious smile, the one that made her green eyes shine like jade.

Yes, she still had a scattering of freckles dancing across her nose.

And most definitely yes, she'd grown into those long, long legs—legs that now could be registered as a lethal weapon, for she'd nearly stopped him in his tracks when he'd stumbled across her in the kitchen.

If he hadn't been about to fall asleep on his feet, he might have

been able to fully appreciate those unexpected, and delightful, changes.

He might have even enjoyed the décor of the lodge, knowing his sister and her friends were far more talented than he could have imagined. He might have wondered who Hannah had kicked out of the clearly full lodge in order to give him a place to crash.

But his mind had gone fuzzy, and amazing as it seemed for a man who hadn't been with a woman for far too long, he couldn't even think about it.

He needed sleep.

Beyond that, he probably needed some good food, too, and some serious brain rest, but if he didn't take care of the sleep first, he was going to fall down on the spot.

Again, his job's fault. Portraying someone else for an entire year on the undercover sting, then living on the edge for that long, always on guard and never being able to relax, was incredibly hard on the body.

Oh yes, and being shot.

That hadn't helped, either.

He'd assumed he'd fully recuperate, but suddenly he had his doubts, and it scared him.

His job was his life. He hadn't set out for it to be so, but he'd always wanted to be the best, and to do that, sacrifices had been made. His personal life, for one. He'd been so busy being a cop, being a *good* cop, he'd lost a part of himself. Strange how he'd

been perfectly happy that way, until he couldn't do his job.

Now, that life seemed...empty. No, that wasn't right.

Maybe it was just exhaustion.

On the second-floor landing he came to a small sitting area. There was a fireplace, and several couches were nicely arranged for easy gathering.

Seated there was an older couple sharing a pot of tea. *Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz,* they were all too happy to tell him, when he made the mistake of pausing one second too long and they introduced themselves.

Mr. Schwartz gave him a sly smile. "You're here to pick up babes, I bet. Saw a bunch on the beach today."

Mrs. Schwartz turned on him. "You said you didn't notice!"

"Only helping out the young man, dear."

"Did he ask you for help? No!" Mrs. Schwartz took her husband's cup of tea right out of his hands and placed it on the tray in front of them. "Always butting in, you are. I'm sure this nice young man doesn't need any help finding a woman to keep his bed warm at night, especially from you. Isn't that right?"

She looked at Zach questioningly, and under different circumstances, such as when he wasn't literally ready to fall on his face, he might have laughed. "I'm just here to rest," he said, earning a smirk from the older man.

"Well, just 'rest' on the east end," Mr. Schwartz suggested. "That beach is a hot spot. A regular babe magnet."

Mrs. Schwartz smacked her husband.

"Uh...thanks." Zach backed away just in time to see the older man lay the charm on his wife, who cackled her surrender and kissed him.

Shaking his head at the mysteries of a relationship that old, yet still together no matter how rocky, Zach kept walking. His room was at the very far end, down a hallway and away from any activity.

A Good Thing.

He let himself in. Without bothering to turn on the lights, he dropped his bag to the floor and kicked off his shoes. Hannah had told him there was one bedroom, a bathroom and a small sitting room. All he needed at the moment was the bed, so that's where he headed.

The bedroom windows were open to the night air and moon. He'd showered in his condo in Los Angeles before he'd started the drive, so he simply pulled off his shirt, kicked off his jeans, sighed deeply, and slid under the covers.

Before his head settled on the pillow—which held an oddly arousing scent of some sort of flower he couldn't quite place—he was fast and deeply asleep.

* * *

HANNAH COULDN'T CONCENTRATE on work, and was it any wonder? Zach was here. *Here.*

It had to be Fate.

Now all she had to do was get him to want to sleep with her. Maybe not a problem for most women, but Hannah knew it would

be a task. Never in her life had she been able to make a man want to sleep with her, so she had no idea what made her think she could do it now, but she was up for the challenge.

She had to be. The timing was right, she could feel it. It would help if she knew exactly how to do it, but if she knew what she was doing, then she wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

Seduce him. That's all.

Zach didn't have to know all her problems. That she scared men off more quickly than she could blink. That she wanted, *needed,* to know what she was missing. No, he could remain oblivious.

It was all perfect, Zach was perfect. Yes, he'd been a wild rebel in his day, but he'd turned out okay. He was a cop, for God's sake. She knew beneath his tough exterior that he was kind. Sensitive.

And as for the passionate part, one look in his eyes and her knees had trembled. That was passion, right? She was fairly certain.

Just do it. The slogan worked for running shoes and it would work here. Which was why she'd taken such drastic measures. She'd actually put him in *her* room for the night.

Oh, and one minor detail—she hadn't told him. How else to get him into her bed? How she'd gotten the nerve, she'd never know, but the wheels were in motion now. Zach was in her room, her bed, hopefully exhausted enough to not question it.

To combat the nerves, and to give herself some time to relax, she threw herself into work. She decided to take the late evening

shift at the icecream and gift shop, and if she was distracted, it was no wonder.

There was a man in her bed.

"Hey, Boss," Karrie called out when she walked in.

Karrie was one of their four part-time employees. She had green hair, green eye shadow and matching green fingernails. She had a silver tongue stud and a pierced eyebrow. And she was absolutely great with the guests.

"I came to help with the crowd," Hannah told her, moving behind the counter.

Karrie looked around her at the nearly empty shop—there was only one young couple in a booth sharing pie—tucked her tongue in her cheek and nodded gamely. "Yeah, I'm pretty overwhelmed here."

Hannah ignored her and used the excuse of being there to devour a triple-decker chocolate cone.

"Ah, you've got *man* trouble." Karrie, all of nineteen, nodded again, as if she knew all about such things.

"I do not have man trouble. This..." Hannah gestured to her nearly eaten cone. "This has nothing to do with a man." *Not much anyway.* She helped herself to another scoop.

"Whatever you say, boss."

"It really doesn't."

"Uh-huh." Karrie calmly sponged down the counter. "Is he at least cute?"

Gorgeous. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“That means yes.”

Hannah stopped eating and looked at Karrie with renewed interest. Desperate times, desperate measures, she thought. “Do you...know a lot about men?”

That got a good laugh. “I know about as much as it’s possible to know about an alien species.”

“So...you know how to...” Oh, this was ridiculous. Embarrassing. Stupid. “Never mind.”

“You can’t stop there! Do I know how to...what? Snag a guy?”

“No. Um, seduce one.”

Karrie grinned. “That’s simple.”

“It is?”

“Sure. All men are really just one big walking hormone. If they even so much as sense they’re going to get lucky, your job is as good as done.”

It had never worked that way for Hannah before, but then again, maybe she’d never made a man feel lucky. “It can’t be that simple.”

At the giggle behind her, Hannah turned around. The young couple sharing pie were listening with avid curiosity. They were in their midtwenties and were both so pretty they could have walked right out of the pages of *Cosmopolitan.*

“It’s really that simple,” the young woman said to Hannah.

The young man blushed from chin to roots, and that had his girlfriend giggling again. “Honest.”

Hannah shook her head. “Maybe for you. But I’ve never turned

a man into a...hormone before."

"No, it isn't about beauty," the young woman insisted. "It's about how you make *them* feel."

"I can't believe it's that simple."

Karrie looked at her pityingly. "Trust me, it is. Look, flash some skin. Then kiss him, anywhere. Mouth, neck, ear, you pick."

"Then what?"

"Then flash some more skin. It's as good as done, guarantee it."

Hannah turned to the young woman. "Really?"

She nodded emphatically while her boyfriend blushed all the more.

Hmm. It was worth a shot. She grabbed a tablet from the counter and started writing.

Step one: flash skin.

Step two: kiss him. Anywhere.

Step three: more skin.

Sounded easy.

Contemplating her strategy, Hannah spent the rest of the shift working on their stock, even getting her replacement order ready for the following week. She scrubbed the floors. She dusted. *Dusted,* for God's sake.

But she drew the line at cleaning the bathroom. It was Tara's turn. If she failed at this unsingle thing, it would be her turn soon enough.

Flash skin. Kiss. More skin.

How difficult was that? From beneath her nerves came something else, something more base. Her insides tingled, heated. The shock wasn't her excitement, but that she felt it at all. For years she'd made sure she was too busy for this romance stuff, mostly to save her pride, but also out of a fear of the unknown. She'd stifled and ignored her own sexuality.

She couldn't any longer. Fact was, Zach Thomas had turned out pretty darned amazing. And he was in her bed, maybe not waiting for her exactly, but he was there nevertheless.

Studying her notes, she went back to the lodge and climbed the stairs. Anticipation raced through her as each footstep brought her closer.

Men are all one big walking hormone.

She could only hope that was true, though the mental image of that nearly made her laugh out loud.

She let herself into her little suite. No lights. Good. Not being able to see might help her nerves.

Zach was there, in her bed, fast asleep if his even, deep breathing was any indication. In the dark, she moved closer, peering at him. She could see his head, and one bare shoulder as it gleamed in the moonlight.

Her heart raced, and she promptly forgot everything she was supposed to do.

What first? Squinting in the dark, she reread her notes.

Flash some skin.

Okay, easy enough.

She stripped, trying not to think about the actual technicalities of what she was about to do. Blessing the dark, she dropped shoes, pants, blouse...oh darn. She paused, her hands ready to remove the thin camisole she'd worn beneath her blouse.

Laundry.

She'd forgotten to do it—again.

Knowing she had no nightie in her drawer, not even a clean T-shirt thanks to her forgetfulness, she left on the little silk camisole and hoped it looked sexy enough. To ensure that, she removed the bra she'd worn beneath it. Then she drew a deep, very shaky breath and glanced through the dark at her faint reflection in the mirror over her dresser.

She'd never been one to sleep in the nude, she'd never even slept in just a little chemise and panties before. She felt...sexy. She even *looked* sexy, if the hardly-there reflection told the truth.

She'd always been fairly curvy. Blessed with breasts, as Alexi was fond of saying. But her chestnut-colored hair had always been difficult. Wild at best. At least it fell past her shoulders, which made it easy to pull back when she wanted. For now she left it down, because guys liked long hair.

Or so she'd heard.

Hoping that was true, she attempted to tame it, but it refused to be browbeaten. She couldn't see her eyes in the faint light, but that only added to the strange allure of standing there half nude staring at herself.

In spite of her hair, she really did look good! It was a horribly embarrassing thing to admit, even to herself, but she couldn't tear her gaze away.

An achiness filled her, especially in those erogenous spots that had been tingling ever since she'd first seen Zach again. Now goose bumps rose on her skin as well, and she shivered, though she wasn't cold. The opposite actually.

This was the new millennium. The age of the woman. She was perfectly capable of sleeping with someone, even making the first move if she had to. There certainly didn't have to be any *commitment* involved.

She could do this. She *wanted* to do this. And it had nothing to do with any silly challenge, and everything to do with what she wanted for herself.

Standing there in the dark, she ran her hands down her arms, soothing away the slight tremor that had danced through her with all the racy thoughts. Even that simple touch seemed sensual, and her body tightened. Her nipples puckered.

And she laughed silently at herself. There was a man in her bed; a warm, hard-bodied, sexy man and she was standing here wasting good time.

Zach was utterly still, completely asleep, on his side facing her. So exhausted. A flash of guilt hit her. Should she let him sleep awhile longer?

No. She'd lose her nerve.

It was too dark to see him clearly. Probably a good thing.

Dragging in a deep breath of courage, she lifted the covers and slid in. Oh...my, he felt so absolutely wonderful—

All thought deserted her as two large hands caught her, hands which hauled her close, then rolled her, so that she was pinned beneath him and rendered completely immobile.

CHAPTER 3

A GROAN RUMBLED from Zach's chest, in the region of Hannah's ear.

"What the—" Towering over her, his hands now flat on either side of her head, the length of him became flush with the length of her. Then one of his hands smoothed back the hair from her face. Bending close, he struggled to see in the dark. *"Hannah?"*

Oh God, what now? At the first feel of him, her plan had escaped her. Oh yes, *flash skin.* Thinking she needed to remove her camisole, she started to wiggle, but he held her utterly captive.

One of his hands tipped her face up. "Why are you in my bed?"

"It's...my bed."

"No...this is my bed." He spoke slowly, thickly, as if he wasn't quite awake. "Or at least the one that you gave me. I think. Am I in the wrong bed?"

No, he was in the exactly right bed. And now that her initial nerves had worn off, Hannah was becoming aware of several things.

One, he smelled good. *Really* good, like soap and sleepy warm, male skin.

Two, he felt good. Really, *really* good. All sleek skin and tough muscle.

And oh yeah, as far as she could tell, he was nearly naked. To test, she arched up, just a little, because wow, he felt incredible. She wasn't really trying to take advantage of him, at least not until he woke all the way up—okay, maybe she was, just a little—and when she did, she encountered...yep, more sleek skin and tough muscle.

No clothes.

At her movement, he'd gone completely still. She could feel him becoming more...*awake.*

Abruptly, he rolled off her.

Shoot! She hadn't moved to step two quick enough! *Flash skin, then kiss him.*

She needed to kiss him in order to render him a walking, talking sex hormone!

But then she was suddenly blinking at the lamp he flipped on.

He was glaring at her. *"Hannah?"*

Hadn't they already established that it was indeed her?

She opened her mouth to say yes, it was *still* her, but then she realized he was holding his side. "Oh God, did I hurt you?" Horrified, and angry that she could have forgotten about his side, even for a second, she rolled toward him.

"No, I just moved wrong," he said, straightening gingerly, giving her a good look at his scar, which was at least six inches long, red and angry.

Her heart squeezed. "Oh, Zach. I'm so sorry."

"I'm fine," he said roughly.

Yeah, he was fine. Actually, *amazing* was a better word. And still nude. The sheet had fallen away from his chest, pooling low in his lap. Those shoulders she'd admired earlier were no longer slightly slumped with exhaustion, they were straight and quite frankly, mighty impressive.

Not that she'd seen many to compare by, but she had a good imagination.

His arms were long, tanned and solid muscle.

But it was his stomach that really grabbed her. Solid as a rock and rippled, all the way down to...

With a low, inarticulate sound, he hauled the sheets closer to himself and frowned at her.

Blushing, she looked away quickly. Nope, she wouldn't have trouble finding a spot to kiss. If she even got a chance, that is. Seems her bad luck streak hadn't changed much since high school.

Zach blinked at the clock and let out a soft oath as he ran a hand over his face. "What's going on here?"

"I'm..." *Trying to seduce you, darn it!* "Actually, this is my room."

He was still confused. "Because you were sold out and you didn't want to turn me away?"

No, because I wanted to jump your bones. "Um...not exactly."

"The No Vacancy sign was blinking when I drove up, but I didn't think—" He swore. "I'm sorry." With a disgusted shake of his head, he rose from the bed.

Hannah, who just a moment ago had been ogling him, squeaked in shock and covered her eyes. He was *very* naked.

"Hannah?"

She kept her eyes firmly covered as he rustled about. "Yes?"

"It's safe."

Oh, some seducer she was. From between her fingers, she stole a peek. Indeed, he'd pulled on his jeans, though he hadn't snapped them yet. He was standing there, looking rumpled, tired, edgy and deeply annoyed.

Not to mention so stunning she could hardly breathe.

It occurred to her that he was now staring at her, *really* staring at her, in a way that made her start tingling all over again.

In all the excitement, she'd completely forgotten her own state of undress. He sounded a little unraveled when he said, "You'd better get covered, too."

Laughing nervously, she grabbed the sheet and wrapped herself in it, wondering if it was too late to get back on task, wondering how to get close enough to kiss him.

"I'll gather my things," he said. "I'll sleep downstairs somewhere until morning."

"No, that's—"

"Yes." His voice was suspiciously husky. His eyes were dark, his mouth grim, and he purposely avoided looking at her. "I'd better go now. Um...Hannah?" He sounded hard pressed for air as she got out of the bed. "The sheet, it's not quite covering..."

She craned her neck and saw that he was right, she hadn't

managed to cover her backside. She was giving him quite a show of panties, which never seemed to stay in place. “Oh!” Grace under pressure. She had no choice. She jerked the sheet around her and took a step toward the bathroom where she would hopefully disappear into thin air.

But true to form, she tripped and fell flat on her face.

Zach rushed around the bed, and before she could so much as take a breath, she was scooped against that wonderfully hard, sleek chest she’d so admired.

“You okay?”

Aside from being a bumbling idiot...yeah, she was just dandy. “I’m fine.”

“Okay, then.” And he withdrew those arms, though his gaze lingered a bit where the sheet dipped down, revealing the top of her lacy chemise. “I’m sorry about intruding,” he said.

“It’s not your fault.” She stared at his jaw which was almost within reach of her mouth. If she could just lean in and connect...

But he turned his head away so that he was no longer looking at her. “I was really asleep,” he said. “Really out of it.”

She could see that was true, his exhaustion was palpable, and guilt filled her. “I know.” She felt a twinge of shame at her deception, and at not being totally honest with him. “This isn’t the way our guests are usually treated.”

He looked at her then, his gaze filled with all the heat and longing she’d hoped for.

She’d done it!

Then he let her go and stood. “I don’t exactly feel mistreated.” With a tight smile, he walked out of the bedroom.

* * *

“BE HOME, BE HOME,” Hannah prayed silently, huddling on the edge of her bathtub, gripping her cordless phone close to her ear.

Her other ear strained for any hint of movement beyond the bathroom door, which she’d shut herself behind for a moment of privacy.

She had no idea what Zach was doing out there, but she certainly didn’t want him to hear this.

“What?” came the very welcome, very irritated sound of her brother’s voice.

“Thank God you’re there,” she whispered into the phone.

“Of course I’m here, it’s three in the morning on this side of the country. “What’s the matter? You okay?”

“I’m fine. I need...information.”

“Now?”

She glanced at the closed door, behind which was Zach, sexiest man on earth, wearing nothing but jeans and attitude. “Right now.”

“Okay, make it good. I have to work at six. As in three hours.”

“It’s...about...” She let out a long breath. “This is difficult.”

Michael was a few years older than her. He’d gone to school with Zach. They’d been fast friends, and together had caused more than a few mothers to bite their nails to the quick. If anyone

knew how to create a seduction, it would be Michael. “Listen, I need to know how to...” *Just say it.* “Seduce a man.”

Utter silence.

“Michael?”

“I couldn’t possibly have heard you correctly.”

“I think you probably did.”

He swore. “Okay, let’s pretend it’s perfectly normal for you to ask that of me, I’d like to know *why* you want to seduce someone. Now. After snubbing your nose at men for years.”

“Because I’ve matured?”

“You’ve always been mature.”

“Okay, then because I just realized what I was missing.”

“Hannah. Seriously. Why?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“Humor me.”

She sighed and took another glance at the closed door, hoping Zach couldn’t hear her. “I don’t want to be a virgin anymore,” she whispered.

There. She’d said it. “Now will you help me or not?”

“Hannah—” He swore again, and she imagined him sitting up in bed, hair as wild as hers, frustrated because he couldn’t strangle her. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“So you don’t know how to do it either.” Disappointment hit her like a wave. Now what?

A choked sound came over the phone. “Oh, I know how to seduce someone,” Michael assured her. “I’m just not sure I want

you to know."

"Karrie told me all I have to do is flash skin, then kiss him, then flash more skin. That's all. But it didn't quite work, and now I'm wondering if—"

"Wait a second. Back the train up. You flashed some guy skin?"

"I tried," she admitted miserably.

"Who, Hannah?" He sounded tense. "Who is this you're attempting to seduce? And why now, all of a sudden, are you tired of being a...a—"

"A *virgin,*" she hissed. "See? You can't even say it, you must understand why I don't want to *be* it!"

"Okay, look. I've got some time coming. I'll fly in for the weekend, we can talk—"

"No!" God, that was the last thing she needed right now, her big brother going all big brother on her. "Can't you just tell me where I went wrong?"

"Hannah—"

"*Please,* Michael," she whispered, suddenly, ridiculously close to tears. "I have to do this. I *want* to do this. I just need a...a tip. That's all."

He let out a long, slow breath. "I can be there in a few days—"

"No."

"I want to discuss this with you—"

"No. Either give me a tip or go back to bed."

"Use a condom," he said through his teeth. "Promise me."

“Done.”

“Okay. What Karrie said.” He sounded strained. “It should work. God. I can’t believe I’m telling you this, but despite what women think, we...men like a little romance too. Music, candles... Dammit, this is so stupid—”

“No, it isn’t!” Excitement and renewed hope filled her. “I have candles—” She broke off at the knock at the bathroom door.

Then came Zach’s low, unbearably sexy voice. “Hannah?”

“Thanks, Michael,” she said quickly. “I’ve got to go.”

“Hannah, wait—”

“Love you.” She disconnected, stared at the door, chewing on her bottom lip.

Romance. Music. Candles.

She could do that.

CHAPTER 4

"I CAN'T LET YOU sleep on your own couch," Zach said firmly, for the third time. "Take your bed. I'll be fine downstairs."

"Oh, Zach. No. Not when this is all my fault. But it's only because I—" Hannah looked at him, her eyes half closed, with soft shadows beneath them. She held herself in a way that told him she was every bit as tired as he was.

No wonder. It was well past midnight and she'd probably been on her feet since early that morning, serving people, running around and taking care of the inn.

"Come on," he said quietly. "Time for sleep."

"Only if you stay here."

"On your couch."

"Yes," she whispered.

Both of them stood in her bedroom, staring at the bed in question, which was still a little mussed from Zach's first attempt at sleeping.

It was a vivid reminder of how Hannah had slid into it with him, how he'd come fully awake with her sprawled beneath him, locked in his arms.

She was dressed now, having hastily thrown her clothes back on, but she hadn't been dressed then, and he knew he'd never forget how she'd looked wearing nothing but a few scraps of silk. Or the way she'd looked at *him,* devouring him with her eyes as

if she'd never seen anything like him.

It'd been a long time since he'd felt that hard, fast shock of arousal, but he'd certainly felt it then, even as out of it as he'd been.

Hell, he *still* felt it.

Quickly, he glanced at her, wondering if she had any of the same thoughts racing through her mind.

It was hard to tell, since she wouldn't meet his gaze no matter how he craned his neck.

Unfortunately, he wasn't very in tune to women, at least at the moment. Living undercover as he had, within a tough crowd of gangbangers and basically the scum of the earth, he hadn't even been in close proximity to a woman in a long time.

Too long to possibly guess how to handle this.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I don't mind going downstairs."

"I'm positive." She flashed him a shaky smile, and moved over to her dresser. With a smile still pasted on her face, she lit a match and held it to the first of three candles she had there. "I mean we're both adults, right?" She lit the second candle, then shot him another smile. "There's no reason we can't both— Ouch!" She dropped the now burned-out match and brought her fingers to her mouth. "It's nothing," she said before he could move toward her. "Do you like candles, Zach?"

Zach figured he must have missed something in his exhaustion, because he definitely hadn't followed her train of thought from the bed to candles. But there was no missing her

nervousness. He lifted her chin with his fingers, planning on gently telling her to relax, that he would take the couch, and she the bed, and they could both get some desperately needed sleep.

But at the feel of her soft skin, the strangest thing happened. Something close to an electric current jolted him, only it wasn't painful. No, it was much worse than that, it was...nice. Warm.

Which made it very dangerous.

He wasn't looking for nice and warm. He wasn't looking for a woman to stare up at him as Hannah was, with wonder and awareness.

Hell, all he'd been looking for was a bed. Okay, and maybe a woman, but someone else, someone...temporary. Hannah wasn't a temporary woman, she was his sister's friend, a woman who would always be around in some form or another because of that. That didn't equal temporary, not in his book.

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