



Portrait of Seduction

By Madison Chase © 2006

[www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

## **Portrait of Seduction**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## **Portrait of Seduction**

Copyright© 2006 Madison Chase

ISBN: 978-1-60088-062-9

Cover Artist: Croco Designs

Editor: Melissa Darnell

Excerpt from Slow Burn by Madison Chase

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

[www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

**Madison Chase**

**Dedication**

To my wonderful husband for his constant support, fabulous ideas, and last minute editing sessions that help me out more than he'll ever know. Also, to my wonderful critique partner Mia Romano. And lastly, to my terrific parents for their never-ending love, guidance, and support.

## Portrait of Seduction

### Prologue

*The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity - designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man.*

~ Ernest Becker

Today was the worst day of her life.

Fat tears rolled down her cheeks as Viki Aragon stared down at her sister's lifeless body. She clutched the phone to her chest, needing something to cling to. In the distance, she heard the wail of the siren. Police bound for her sister's glamorous townhouse.

Veronica lay crumpled on the hardwood at the base of the stairs. Viki could hardly stand to look at the blood and bruises marring her sister's beautiful face.

The pounding at the door shook her from her pain, and she tripped over the phone cord when she tried to get up. Untangling herself, she pushed to her feet, then made it to the door.

On the doorstep were two officers, both in crisp uniforms, but she hardly noticed as she threw herself into the arms of the nearest man. Her emotions finally got the better of her, and her tears flowed in earnest. Blood pounded furiously in her ears and her head throbbed. The pressure in her heart was a real ache, a pain so acute she wanted to rub it, find some way to ease it.

Yet she knew that nothing, no medicine, would take the pain away.

## Madison Chase

She'd never get her sister back. And that made her cry harder.

The officer hugged her gingerly, not saying anything for a few moments.

"Ma'am? Can you tell us what happened?" he finally asked. She wasn't sure how long she'd been standing there making a fool out of herself flooding the front of his shirt. But when she pulled back and looked up, she saw compassion and understanding in his eyes. He was older than she; fine lines etched in his face.

"I-I don't know."

"Come on, why don't you start at the beginning?" He put an arm around her shoulders and directed her to the living room.

"I was supposed to have dinner here. With my—" Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks as she thought of the simple dinner they'd planned and how she'd never share another one again with Veronica.

"Take your time."

She glimpsed her sister's body through the wide doorway. The other officer stood over her, talking into his radio.

"I was supposed to have dinner with my sister tonight. When I rang the doorbell, there was no answer. I looked through the window and saw her lying th-there, so I used my key," she said in a rush before she broke down again.

"What's her name?"

"Veronica. Veronica Walton."

"Was anyone else in the house when you got here?" he asked.

"No. Paul, her husband, is out with friends." Viki looked up at their portrait on the wall. Her sister looked so happy. The artist had matched the color of her blue eyes perfectly and captured the smile that had always reminded Viki of a cherub.

"Was she alive when you found her?"

"No." She bit her knuckles, a sob catching in her throat. "I-I checked."

"You checked her pulse?"

Viki nodded.

"Did you touch anything else?"

## Portrait of Seduction

She shook her head. "Should I have?"

"No. You did good."

The other officer brought her a tissue, and she thanked him.

"What did you do after that?"

"I called the police. 911. And then I just sat there. Staring at her. Crying."

"Which phone did you use?"

Viki stared up at him. Phone? What did it matter?

"The one there," she pointed. "On the entry table." It was on the floor now. "I guess I did touch something. I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Miss—"

"Aragon. Victoria Aragon."

Viki watched numbly as more people crowded the entry way.

"Is there anyone I can call for you, Miss Aragon? Your husband? Boyfriend?"

"No." She was perpetually single.

"How about your parents?"

"They're dead." And now Veronica was dead. And Viki was alone. Save for her grandmother. And Viki would never call on her. Ever.

"Friends?"

Viki nodded. She did have friends. Lots of friends. But only a few close ones. She dug through her purse and found her cell phone. Handing it to him, she gave him three names that were at the top of her speed dial.

The crime scene investigators were still snooping around Veronica's house when the detective told her to go home and get some rest. She didn't want to. Brookton Manor was where Viki lived, but it wasn't home. It was her grandmother's home, and she reminded Viki of that often. An hour later, her three closest friends, Celeste, Cassidy and James, were rallied around her. So they camped out at Celeste's apartment.

Celeste cooked up a storm. James held her close, and Cassidy kept the tissues stocked.

Her life would never be the same. Not her Saturday shopping sprees with Veronica, or the late night calls just when she needed to talk.

## **Madison Chase**

How could the Fates be so cruel? How could they leave her here without her family, all alone?

How would she ever be happy again?

## Portrait of Seduction

### Chapter One

*To accomplish much you must first lose everything.*  
~ Che Guavara

*9 months later*

Nothing was what it seemed. In life. And in death.

But the one thing that Victoria Aragon had learned to believe in was the mirror. It never lied.

Like everything else at the Winston Atlas hotel, the ladies' bathroom was large, luxurious, and lit by an array of twinkling lights and crystal chandeliers. Viki strode toward the floor to ceiling mirror, her high heels clicking against the marble floor. The annual Masquerade Ball was set to begin in a few minutes, so she had just enough time to finish getting ready. She slipped the red satin mask onto her face and tied the matching straps behind her head. Staring back from the mirror was an incredibly mysterious woman. Sexy even. The mask hugged the top half of her face, making her blue eyes seem even brighter. She looked away from her reflection long enough to pull a tube of Cherry Red out of her purse and leaned toward the mirror to touch up her lipstick.

Just like the designer gown she wore, the mask was simple and elegant, yet it demanded attention. Small red sequins framed her eyes, and a vast array of brilliant red plumes splayed along the crown. With her golden blonde hair piled high on her head and the mask hiding much of her face, her grandmother wouldn't even recognize her.



## Madison Chase

Hopefully.

Happy with her appearance, she took a deep, fortifying breath and headed for the door. Stacia Emersen was just entering, a sleek, silver cell phone attached to her ear. When she saw Viki, she snapped the phone shut and pinned on a fake smile. Stacia reminded Viki of a doll, perfectly cut, perfectly coiffed, perfectly plastic. Her expression changed as easily as that of Mr. Potato Head.

"Viki, is that you?" Stacia's Swiss accent was as fake as her smile. Viki knew that she'd grown up in a suburb in Virginia, not Switzerland.

"Hello Stacia." Somehow her tone was civil.

"Wow. Is that a Franz Tinklitz design?"

Viki wasn't surprised that Stacia had named New York's all time tackiest and most undesired designer. The only thing that even made his name known was that he had the perseverance of a Pitt Bull, talked like a gay Australian, and his tacky designs were loud enough to scare even the most extroverted clown.

"Valentino," Viki corrected smoothly, relying on the manners that came automatically after having them shoved down her throat for the last twenty years. It had been at her grandmother's insistence that she and Veronica attend etiquette lessons. Ironically, her grandmother showed no signs of manners or proper etiquette herself. Neither did Stacia. It hadn't been two months after her sister's death when the woman in front of her had started dating Paul, Veronica's husband.

It had nearly killed Viki again to see how easily he'd disregarded his wife's sudden death. How easily and quickly he'd moved on. She shouldn't have been surprised, but at the time she'd been floored. When the initial shock of her sister's death had passed, she'd thought back over her sister's marriage and had seen that something hadn't been right. It wasn't until Veronica's death that everything became clear.

Her sister had been the victim of spousal abuse and had never said a word. Gentle as she'd been, caring and sweet, she'd never tried to get away from him. Never filed charges. It pained her that it wasn't until Veronica's death that Viki had put all the pieces together. And it was too late to do anything.

## Portrait of Seduction

She'd warned Stacia about Paul and the type of man he was. But like the woman she was, Stacia had laughed off Viki's warning.

Viki had dwelled on Veronica's death, and its surrounding circumstances, for far too long. Only in the past few months had she begun to socialize and come to parties again. The unjust truth was there was nothing she could do. No way to prove foul play in her sister's death. No way to bring her back. She had to move on with her life, helping those she could. Right now, if she dwelled on it any longer, she'd be late for the ball.

But Stacia was still in her way.

"Knock off?" One of Stacia's dark eyebrows curved up like the St. Louis arch. It was just the kind of catty comment Viki had learned to expect from the socialite. Her father was one of the vice presidents of a fashion empire, therefore Stacia always found others' attire lacking somehow. In fact, Viki was certain they could be wearing the same dress, and somehow Stacia would still find a way to put it down. But then her hostility was always boiling just below her perfectly designed surface.

"Hardly," Viki replied. "It's custom."

"Of course. Only the best for Martha's granddaughter."

Viki smiled and stepped around the other woman.

"See you on the auction block, Viki."

She gave a little wave as she stepped out into the grand hall, ready to put some distance between herself and the life sucking socialite. Over the years, Viki had been to the Winston Atlas numerous times. But the enchanting hotel never looking as lovely as when her friend Celeste was running the show. This year, the masquerade ball fell five nights before Halloween, and everyone seemed to be filled with the spirit. Eerily enough, it was said that Halloween was one of the times of year when spirits could make contact with the physical world. Or so her grandfather had said. But he'd always been a good story teller.

Tonight she wished he were right, that she could indeed contact her sister. But that was just a pipe dream.

The pathway to the Grand Ballroom was lined with large Ficus trees, each in an enormous pot and decorated with glowing lights. Guests

## Madison Chase

were already lining up on the black carpet lined in rose petals. Viki recognized most of them. They were all wealthy or hoping to be. Some of them were her friends. Some she'd rather not know...like John Harrison who strode into the lobby as if he owned the place and everything in it. His tuxedo was perfectly pressed and exquisitely tailored. Though he wore a lion mask, she'd recognize him anywhere. He had the coldest eyes she'd ever seen. No wonder her grandmother wanted him as a grandson-in-law. They were two peas in a pod. If Martha Aragon were thirty years younger, Viki had no doubt that she'd marry John herself.

The Ficus provided the perfect shield, and he didn't notice her. Through the open doors, she could hear soft music playing as the guests began to file in. From her position, she could see her friend, Celeste Black, along with an array of beautifully decorated tables and the stage for tonight's main event, the bachelorette auction.

It was all for a good cause. Each year at the Masquerade Ball, there was a bachelorette auction, and men paid handsomely for a date with the lovely ladies on the stage. Tonight, Viki was being auctioned off. She just hoped that she would be able to raise a decent amount for the local orphanage. After all, she was known for being very picky about men. And on the off chance that things did progress past a few dates, what man in his right mind would risk having to spend more time with Martha Aragon or consider the possibility of having her as an in-law?

No, Viki was going to stay single until she'd gotten her inheritance and was on her own. Away from the meddling old witch. For now, Viki was happy to give up one evening of her time if it'd help Celeste's cause.

Inside the ball room, her friend welcomed the distinguished guests. Celeste was the event organizer, and she worked extra hard every year to make sure the ball was successful. As an orphan herself, Celeste knew what it was like to grow up without a family. Viki could almost imagine what that felt like. Her own parents had often been too busy with their work to pay attention to her. But her grandfather had always shown her love and kindness. And she'd had her sister.

Now it was her chance to give back.

She set her sights on Celeste and entered the ballroom. The

## Portrait of Seduction

Masquerade was held here each year because of the mysticism associated with the grand hotel. It was said to be haunted by a bride who'd jumped from the roof on her wedding night after her new husband had admitted to loving another woman. The story said that she still walked the halls looking for the pieces of her heart.

Viki thought it was a fabulous ghost story, though not one she believed — she'd never seen the brokenhearted bride, but it definitely added to the ambiance of the event. The Gothic architectural style was just one more reason the Winston Atlas was so popular around Halloween.

Viki glanced around the room, admiring the glow of the tall golden candles and the sheer silk fabrics draping the room. Votives dotted every surface, causing the cavernous room to sparkle and dance as if it had a life of its own.

There was a light flutter of discussion over the soft jazz music. Her friend greeted the mayor and his wife. Behind them stood the governor and his daughter. Viki wasn't surprised to see so many politicians. Celeste had a way about her that made people interested in her cause; she inspired their generosity. The soft-spoken southerner had quickly worked her magic on Viki, and they'd become fast friends. They were both in the business of helping people.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you."

She recognized the voice even before she looked over her shoulder. Standing right behind her was John Harrison, a high ball full of amber liquid in his hand. Behind the gold feathers of his mask, his eyes raked over her from toe to head. Lust turned them from steely gray to light blue. He obviously didn't recognize her. Inwardly, she laughed to herself.

"I don't believe so. I never forget a mane," she murmured, running a finger over the speckled feathers that made up his lion's mane. She'd always been a fan of plays on words.

His lips curved up into a cocky smile. Now was her chance to hook him in. She gave him her most alluring smile. Playing hard to get would do the trick. Hopefully by the time the auction started, he'd be willing to make a generous donation to the orphanage.

"Please excuse me. I need to say hello to a friend."

## Madison Chase

Before he could reply, she sauntered over to Celeste, leaving him to ponder her identity.

"My heavens, that gown is positively gorgeous," her friend cooed.

"I couldn't agree more. Valentino is a genius." She smoothed her hand down the soft fabric.

"He certainly is. Every eye is on you." Viki looked around the room and saw that Celeste was right.

"Well, I just hope I can help you raise lots of money tonight."

"You are such a peach. What would I do without you?" Celeste's face glowed. She was blessed with a peaches and cream complexion. Tonight her hair was a riot of curls piled atop her head with peacock feathers tucked into the bun. Her dress was an incredible concoction of emerald green and royal blue. With the fine detail and embroidery, the dress shimmered and the colors melted to form an electrifying blue-green.

"Let's pray you never have to find out." She gave her friend a gentle smile and squeezed her arm.

"Is your grandmother here yet?"

Viki shook her head. "I haven't seen her yet. I did run into John the Swan though. He's wearing a lion's mask, believe it or not." Viki and her friends had given John Harrison the nickname "John the Swan" because he was always preening and strutting his stuff.

"Yes. I saw him too."

"What are you two whispering about?" They turned to find James Brody sipping a ghoulishly green martini. Veronica and James had gone to elementary school together, then middle school before his parents had sent him off to some prep school. But somehow they'd always kept in touch. Over the years, he and Viki had become friends as well. And after her sister's death, he'd become a rock for her to lean on.

"Grandmother and her latest leech." Viki rolled her eyes.

"Well, don't look now, but the old bat just walked in," James said, nodding toward a point behind her.

"I'm not looking," Viki muttered.

"Viki, Mr. Brody, please excuse me. I see a few people I need to say hello to."

## Portrait of Seduction

"K. Let me know if you need any help," Viki told her.

Celeste gave an anxious smile and rushed off to welcome Thomas Riley, a Manhattan billionaire.

"Why does she always call me Mr. Brody?" James mused.

"Because she likes you." Viki gave him a knowing smile and linked her arm through his.

"You think so?"

"I do. She's from Savannah, Georgia, though. I doubt it'll ever cross her mind to make the first move."

James turned thoughtful and quiet while he finished his martini. Waiters in penguin suits circulated throughout the room, and he flagged one over, quickly replacing his empty glass with a full one.

"Where's your mask?"

He patted his pocket.

"Give it here. You've got to put it on."

He grumbled but complied. Just like James, the mask was simple but colorful. A harlequin pattern adorned the paper mache. She slipped it into place, then fixed his hair.

"Better. Have you heard anything about Elizabeth Foster yet?" She was anxious for news of the woman they'd helped escape spousal abuse. Viki was no longer a stranger to abuse. She hadn't been able to help her sister, but there were many men and women still out there who needed her. Elizabeth Foster was one such person. Viki, along with a group of trusted friends, had formed a network that helped battered women and men escape their relationships. When they had no other way out, Viki helped them disappear and start over. With her inheritance, she'd be able to do more. Right now, she depended on her friends and trusted acquaintances.

"She's on her way. I wonder how long it'll take that scumbag to realize she's missing," James said.

"Or if he'll even care."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll miss his punching bag," James said, his tone dry and repulsed.

Elizabeth Foster was married to a corporate lawyer. On the outside,

## Madison Chase

she seemed like a typical trophy wife, but inside she was battered. It was at a charity event very much like tonight's that Viki had met her. No amount of concealer could hide the nasty bruise under Elizabeth's eye. And her story about falling in the shower had obviously been fabricated.

But later that night when Viki went to get into her car, she saw a drunken Larry Foster dragging Elizabeth from the elevator. She'd acted on instinct, pasting on a smile and approaching the couple as if they were long time friends. A quick lie about going out for dessert had gotten Elizabeth away from her husband. Later that night in the safety of a hotel room, the other woman had spilled out her heart wrenching story. And Viki had vowed to help her.

A quick call to James and a few other allies had produced a plan to get Elizabeth out of New York. They'd waited for just the right time to act. Today had been D-Day, the day of departure from her old life. Some of the people they helped referred to it as D-Day, the day they took back their destiny.

Either way, by now she was on her way out of the state. Viki prayed that she'd find the life she deserved.

"Thank you, James." She looked up at him, wishing she could put her appreciation into words.

"No thanks necessary. Now tell me, do you know that guy over there, because he's been staring at you since I walked in."

Viki turned slowly, her gaze sweeping the room until it fell on a gorgeous hunk of a man in a stunning black and silver mask. He sat at the far end of the bar, but hadn't touched his drink. She let her eyes roam over him, taking in each glorious detail. His tux looked expensive and custom made. It hugged him in all the right places. His shoulders could have been chiseled from marble, along with his strong jaw.

Her breath squeezed from her lungs and blood rushed to her head as he stared at her with dark eyes. Were they green or brown? Or maybe a smoky gray. Golden locks of hair peaked out from behind the mask, and she was reminded of the Greek God Adonis. And she would gladly fight both Aphrodite and Persephone for him.

The rest of the world disappeared, and she found herself being

## Portrait of Seduction

drawn to him against her will. Without even moving, they seemed to be closer.

Somewhere behind her, she heard James say "guess not," but his voice barely registered. *He* was the center of her universe. His eyes drifted downward very slowly. Her skin flushed under his gaze, and her nipples tightened painfully. She must be going mad because she had the crazy thought that she would give up her whole fortune for one night with him, to know what it felt like to have his lips on hers, his hands on her skin, his fingers caressing her curves. To know his complete possession of her body.

When his gaze met hers again, she knew he could tell what she'd been thinking. His eyes turned darker, telling her he knew everything, wanted everything about her. She took a tentative step toward him. But Celeste's voice came over the speakers, and Viki's passion filled fog evaporated.

Turning to listen to her friend's welcome speech, she mentally shook herself. Her head ached. So did her breasts. And her knees felt like mush. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought he had some sort of magical power. Or she was under the influence of a powerful aphrodisiac.

But she did know better. Didn't she?

What if Grandfather had been right? What if Halloween did bring out the magic? The spirits?

"I want to thank everyone for coming tonight."

Viki tried to concentrate on what Celeste was saying, but it was really hard. She could feel *his* eyes on her, but she fought the urge to sneak a peek.

"We've got several lovely ladies on the auction block tonight, gentlemen. I hope you brought your checkbooks." Celeste gave one of her infectious smiles, and the room rumbled with a soft laughter. "I'll introduce them later. Right now, I've got a special treat for everyone. Chef Bach has prepared us a wonderful meal. If you'll take your seats..."

She felt a hand cup her elbow and turned to see James.

"Shall we?"

Viki's gaze swerved back to the Adonis at the bar. He was still



## Madison Chase

watching her.

She nodded, unable to form intelligible words.

James escorted her to their table, and she was happy to be able to sit down. She'd gone weak-in-the-knees before, but never like this. She'd never felt such an overwhelming desire. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she found equal parts of panic and curiosity. It was a new experience, to say the least.

Another glance at the bar, and Viki found the man's eyes shooting daggers at James. She glanced over at her friend who was happily chatting with the woman who'd just taken the seat next to him. Glancing back at Adonis, she shook her head slightly. His eyes seemed to glow, and she pulled a sharp breath into her lungs.

Both terrified and excited by the connection, the energy, she glanced away. Hyperventilating in public over a man would be so embarrassing.

She turned to James and tried to concentrate on the conversation as the salad was served. The delicious combination of lettuce, nuts and red wine vinaigrette barely managed to distract her from the excited butterflies doing somersaults in her stomach.

"Viki here is participating in the bachelorette auction tonight," James told the couple to his right. The woman had placed her mask in front of her plate, so Viki was able to recognize her. She knew Mr. and Mrs. Lark from various events, so she gave them a nod and a smile.

They seemed to be good natured people, laid back and not without a sense of humor. Tonight, that was evident from their matching theater masks. Mr. Lark wore the tragedy and Mrs. Lark the comedy. The pained expression on his mask was extra funny when his wife held up the gilded gold of her own with its joyous and somewhat mysterious smile.

It was as if she knew something the others didn't.

Viki didn't doubt the air of mystery tonight. The way the hair at the nape of her neck stood on end had her believing in ghosts. Almost.

Glancing up from her plate, her gaze connected with his. The fire behind the Adonis's mask was golden green. She'd never seen eyes such a beautiful color. She was definitely starting to believe in magic. A chill

## **Portrait of Seduction**

swept over her skin, but it was quickly replaced by a prickly heat. The foreign sensation alarmed her. And aroused her.

He sat a table away, facing her. The rest of the room seemed to melt away until it was just her, him, and a soft melody from the band.

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Two

*Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take,  
but by the moments that take our breath away.*

~ Anonymous

By the time the meal was over, Viki couldn't wait a second longer to meet him. Face to face. To find out if he was as solid and strong as he looked. Find out who he was and why he affected her this way.

The floor in front of the stage was filled with dancers swaying to a slow beat. She figured she had thirty minutes or so before the auction started. That was plenty of time to get to know her mystery man a little better. But when she looked for him, his chair was empty.

The butterflies in her stomach turned into an angry mob. Quickly, she rose from her chair and excused herself from those at her table. She turned and prepared to search the room, but Adonis was headed right for her. He strode toward her slowly, his gait something between a sexy swagger and a head turning stroll. He seemed in no hurry to reach her, as if she'd wait for him forever.

How right he was.

There was something about him that intoxicated her. And Viki was happy to be drunk with it. She wasn't about to fight it. Perhaps it was her mask that made her bold. Or perhaps it was just her nature taking over.

He stopped in front of her. They were toe to toe. She had to look up at him even as she squared her shoulders and stood at her full height.

## Portrait of Seduction

"Dance with me," he ordered softly.

God help her, this man was breath stealing gorgeous. Mind numbingly handsome. She barely managed a nod before his hand slid to the small of her back and propelled her toward the dance floor. The heat from his fingertips branded her skin.

Masterfully he pulled her into his arms, and she went willingly. Her hand fit perfectly in his, and she was surprised to find how easily he moved. His large frame didn't make him clumsy or awkward. If anything, he was masculine grace personified.

His tuxedo was soft beneath her fingertips, but the muscles beneath the jacket were rock hard. She couldn't stop the small smile from forming at her discovery.

One song became another and then another. She wasn't sure how long they'd been dancing, but she was enjoying every second, every sway of her hips, every step.

*So this is paradise.* Together they glided over the floor, and all the while he pulled her closer until she was flush against him. She wanted to burrow closer, but etiquette dictated she keep some semblance of decorum. But oh, how she longed to just pull his head towards hers and kiss the hell out of him, right here in front of everyone.

He was not a man of many words, she noted as she stared up, memorizing his face, his mask. It was black with a very intricate design painted in silver covering much of his face.

"You're a wonderful dancer," she said.

"As are you."

"I'm just following your lead."

He smiled, and her knees gave way. He caught her easily against him, his arm wrapping around her waist.

"Careful."

"Sorry...I—"

"Your knees gave out?" She'd be willing to bet that, behind his beautiful mask, a golden eyebrow was raised high. His voice was suggestive and amused.

"Yes, actually. I bet you have that effect on women all the time."

## Madison Chase

"I wouldn't know." He glanced over her shoulder, and then slowly spun her around until she was back in his arms. The music slowed and her chin tipped up. She willed him to kiss her.

Time seemed to stand still, and he looked like he was considering more than kissing her. Again, his eyes glowed a brilliant gold.

She felt a shiver of fear race down her spine. But as quickly as it came, he blinked and the odd light and the tremor running through her veins was gone.

"That man you were with," he said quietly as the orchestra began another classic piece.

"Is just a long time friend," she said before he could continue.

"You have no interest in him." He stated it as a fact, but she knew it was a question.

*Now or never*, the little voice whispered. Perhaps it was her true nature coming out, because she heard herself say, "I'm only interested in you."

"Good." The word came out like a growl. Possessive and delicious. He pressed her against him until she felt his arousal nestled between them.

Her nipples were embarrassingly tight, so tight she was sure he could feel the hard peaks even through the layers of clothing separating them.

In the back of her mind, she heard Celeste saying that the auction was getting ready to start, but her words barely registered. Slowly he stepped away from her.

"Thank you for the dance," he said in that quiet way of his.

"Thank you." She glanced up at the stage to see the bachelorettes getting ready. She'd promised Celeste, but every ounce of her being insisted she stay right here. Their connection was tangible. She honestly didn't know how she could stand up on that stage by herself without her knees giving way again. Much less auction herself off to the highest bidder.

But she'd promised. And Celeste's charity was one she couldn't turn her back on. She only prayed that he'd understand.

## Portrait of Seduction

"I, uh, I had a really great time," she said, the words sounding lame to her own ears. But her brain, along with the rest of her, had turned to mush. Just looking at him...it was enough to confuse the most brilliant of scholars.

"You have to go?" His tone was as dark as his gaze.

"I really wish I didn't. But I'm in the auction." She nodded toward the stage. "Celeste is a good friend of mine, and, well, I promised to help out." She placed a tentative hand on his chest. "Perhaps we can meet afterward."

He nodded tersely, then gave the palm of her hand a lingering kiss that ignited her insides.

She started toward the stage and groaned when she saw John the Swan was on a collision course with her.

"We meet again."

"So it seems," she replied easily. It really was a hell of a lot of fun toying with him.

"I saw you dancing."

"Did you?"

"Is he your boyfriend?"

If only. Viki bit back a laugh.

"Not yet."

"John, darling," Viki glanced up to see her grandmother sliding up next to John. She linked her arm through his, using the other hand to hold her mask in place. "Have you seen Victoria? She should have been here by now. I seem to have misplaced my glasses," she whispered, but not low enough to escape Viki's ears.

Amazing how her grandmother didn't even glance her way. Glasses missing or not. Amazing. The question was if she should tell them who she was now or just wait until she was on stage.

"I haven't, I'm afraid." He seemed to tense up as if he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. In a way he had. Flirting with "another woman." Or at least that's how her grandmother would see it.

Viki propped one hand on her hip, drawing John's attention. He smiled. The leech. That's when her grandmother gave her a cursory

## Madison Chase

glance.

"Who is this?" she asked, sounding both bitter and astonished.

"I was just getting ready to introduce myself. John Harrison." He put his hand out. "And you are?"

"It doesn't matter who she is," her grandmother practically hissed. "I'm sorry, dear, he's dating my granddaughter. I'm afraid he's off the market."

Over her dead body. She'd never been on a date with the man and never would. No matter how hard her grandmother pushed. She'd seen the damage that her grandmother had done to Veronica. How Veronica's marriage, her life, had ended. No way would she let her grandmother have that much control over her life.

Viki gave a secretive smile. Over her grandmother's shoulder, she saw Celeste stepping up to the microphone.

"And now for our bachelorette auction. Remember, guys, this money goes to a very worthy cause. And the women in our auction are all delightful. Each date is sponsored by a generous local restaurant. You'll be able to dine at a fabulous and exclusive location on the house. Now I'll call the ladies up, and we'll get the bidding started. First up is Viki Aragon."

"Victoria?" her grandmother groaned, her head swiveling around.

Viki stepped toward the stage.

"Surprise," she said.

"Victoria?" Her grandmother stared at her in disbelief, her jaw slack. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Raising money for children. Just think how great you'll look at bridge club, Grandmother."

"I'll be surprised if anyone bids for you," she heard her grandmother say as Viki climbed the stairs and started across the stage. Celeste was reading off a blurb about Viki, but she didn't even hear it. The whole time, her gaze scanned the crowd for her green eyed Adonis. Good heavens, she hadn't even gotten his name. What an idiot she was!

She saw her friend Cassidy dragging a huge man toward the exit. No doubt she'd be having her way with him before the bidding was even underway.

## Portrait of Seduction

"Our next bachelorette is Miss Stacia Emersen," Celeste continued.

Viki looked out over the faces in the audience. Her grandmother and John had scurried toward the back and were glaring at her. When Celeste finished introducing the bachelorettes, the bidding began. The first girl bid for nine thousand, the second for seven and a half. Stacia was all smiles and finger wiggles at the men. The winning bid for a date with her was fifteen thousand. Viki could tell Celeste was excited. But she was amazed that the bids weren't higher.

Now it was her turn. She smiled at the crowd, trying to make eye contact with every man under forty. These bids were crucial to the new wing the orphanage so badly needed.

"We'll start the bidding at one thousand dollars," the announcer said.

"Five thousand." Viki searched out the voice and found John raising his hand. Her stomach rolled.

"Six thousand." Another hand went up.

"Six thousand, do I hear seven?"

"Seven thousand," John countered. Viki was starting to feel like a hunk of meat. Not just because she was on the auction block, but from the way John looked at her.

"Do I hear eight thousand?"

Another hand went up in the back. Viki strained to see who the hand belonged to. In the pit of her stomach, she felt disappointed. She'd have thought her mystery man would have at least bid something for her. Not that she'd danced with him to secure a donation. No, she'd danced with him of her own free will.

"Do I hear nine? Nine thousand for a date with Miss Viki Aragon? Wait, we've got a phone bid for ten thousand."

There was a murmur rushing through the crowd.

"Fifteen thousand," John shouted. Viki gave him an encouraging smile.

"Twenty thousand," came the shout from the back.

"I've got a phone bid for twenty-five thousand dollars. Do I hear thirty? This is for a great cause, gentlemen."



## Madison Chase

The room fell quiet like Halloween night in an old cemetery before the ghosts came out to play. Viki cocked her head at John. She knew he was stubborn. And wealthy. Just how far would he go? Her grandmother prodded him with her elbow.

"Fifty thousand," he said through tight lips. The room broke out in applause.

"Fifty thousand. We have a bid for fifty thousand. Do I hear sixty?"

Viki's breath caught in her throat again. Fifty thousand? For one date with her. Were they crazy?

The announcer touched his ear. "I've got another phone bid." A familiar chill raced over Viki's skin. She searched the crowd again for Adonis.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I've asked for clarification on this. We've certified that this is an actual bet. I have a bet for one million dollars."

Viki's knees gave again, but some invisible force held her up. It was almost as if she had two hands on her, steadying her, holding her up by the waist. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

"Oh. My. God." Viki turned to her right to see Celeste covering her mouth with her hand. She could hear the shocked murmurs of the crowd.

Everything after that was a blur. She looked for her mystery man, but he seemed to have disappeared. The announcer sounded far away as he orchestrated the bids for the remaining bachelorette. She didn't even notice the final amount. She could only concentrate on breathing in and out slowly. And not falling on her head.

The invisible force holding her up loosened. But the sensation of being touched continued, expanded. She felt as if she was wrapped with a warm blanket.

She had to be imagining things. It must be a combination of her drink and the fact that it was Halloween time. She searched frantically for Cassidy; her friend was always good for giving reality checks. She was a straight shooter and as honest as they came. But the raven haired florist was nowhere in sight. Probably still ravishing that linebacker.

Finally they were able to exit the stage. Viki rushed into the hall, pulling deep breaths into her lungs. She didn't know what disturbed her

## Portrait of Seduction

more. The fact that someone was paying one million dollars for a date with her. Or the eerie feeling of an invisible touch.

She'd almost convinced herself that it was just some generous soul donating to a good cause when she heard raised voices. They were coming closer. She recognized her grandmother's tone first. Then Celeste's sweet southern drawl.

"Listen here, you little southern hick, tell me who bid on Victoria."

Viki had always wondered where the term "seeing red" came from. But at that moment, she understood.

The stilettos on her feet marched forward of their own will.

"Don't you dare talk to her like that."

Her grandmother looked over Celeste's shoulder, her gaze narrowed.

"Victoria, darling."

"Don't you 'Victoria darling' me." Viki's hand sliced through the air. "You can say whatever the hell you please to me because you know I put up with you. But don't you dare treat my friends that way." Viki put herself between Celeste and her grandmother. John skidded to a halt behind her grandmother, his mouth open in shock. "John, would you please see my grandmother safely home. I'd appreciate it."

Viki could see that her grandmother was stewing. But damn it, it felt good to really stand up to her. The stress of the last year seemed to disappear.

"Come on, Celeste, let's go wind down the party." She linked arms with her friend and started toward the ballroom.

"We'll talk about this later," her grandmother's voice carried after her.

She'd just bet they would.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh my God, what a night," Cassidy said, sitting down in the empty chair next to Viki. The party was over, and most of the guests had gone home. Only a few stragglers remained. Like Cassidy and Viki.

## Madison Chase

"Tell me about it." Viki nursed her glass of merlot.

"Okay, so I met this gorgeous guy at the bar. But then I started getting this weird feeling in my stomach."

"Lust?"

"No. Not exactly. I mean, at first, yeah. But it was different. He was different. He said he had this vision. That I need to be careful." Her hand fluttered in the air.

"Be careful? How?"

"I don't know. But the stubborn man wouldn't give me any."

"He tells you he had a vision. That you need to be careful. And you still tried to sleep with him."

"Of course."

The way her friend liked adventure and sex, you'd think she'd be doing something dangerous like police work or CIA stuff. But no. Cassidy Sinclair was the most sought after florist in all of New York. Born to privilege, she now designed world renowned floral creations and left the dirty work to her assistants so she could stay on the party circuit.

"Weird." The word described her friend perfectly, from her need for sex to her fetish for black leather and corsets. Not to mention heels so high it should be illegal.

"You think that's weird, you haven't even heard about the rest of my day."

"It gets weirder?" Viki's head was throbbing. What she wouldn't give to lay down on some Egyptian cotton sheets right this minute. But she wasn't looking forward to going home.

"Oh yeah." Cassidy's perfectly sculpted eyebrows rose. "So I was checking on the flowers this afternoon. Good thing, too. They'd brought red orchids instead of black. Anyway...hey, you look tired. Everything okay?"

Viki set her glass on the table and tugged the mask off. "I'm exhausted."

"Oh, well, go home. My story will keep."

"You sure?"

"Of course. I'll help Celeste clean up. You go home. Can you drive?"

## **Portrait of Seduction**

Never mind, here comes James. We'll get him to take you."

"Okay. But I expect you to tell me all about your weird day tomorrow."

"Promise. Just tell me one thing. Do you believe in witches?"

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Three

*Vanity keeps persons in favor with themselves who are out of favor with all others.*

~ Anonymous

Witches. Viki mulled the word over as she curled up in bed. Cassidy must have had too much to drink. Or maybe her mind was muddled because she hadn't gotten any sex tonight.

Tomorrow she'd have to call Celeste and find out who her mystery man was. If she hadn't been so spellbound, she'd have remembered to ask his name. There was no way she was going to let him get away. He was under her skin. At the very least, she wanted to explore the incredible connection they shared.

Her body still zinged from where he'd touched her, from where his gaze had roamed over her.

He was touching her again. She recognized it in the haziness of a dream, a blissful dream. She stood at the bar of the hotel, a glass of wine in hand. He sat on the stool next to her, his thigh brushing hers. That simple touch caught her skin on fire, starting at the nape of her neck and moving south. She took another sip of her wine, but the crisp chardonnay did little to cool the blaze that was overtaking her body inch by inch.

She let her gaze roam over his long, lean legs and up the exquisite plains of his chest. The man had no right to look that good in a tux.

His eyes met hers, and she could see the desire there. Clear as day,

## Portrait of Seduction

almost as if he'd spoken the words out loud. *I want you.* She shifted her weight to the hip nearest him, drawing his attention steadily down her body. His gaze scorched her. If she didn't know better, she'd think his eyes had the power of sunlight, burning her.

But she'd be happy with a sunburn from this man any day. He was so strong, watchful, intense. Three things that turned her on more than a little.

The excitement in her stomach buzzed through her body, settling between her thighs. It took every ounce of control not to reach out and grab him. But who was she kidding, this was a dream. She could do what she wanted in her dreams. Right?

She reached out and cupped his cheek in her hand.

"Victoria!" Her grandmother's voice was like a bucket of cold water, jerking her out of her dream.

She propped her eyes open and glared.

"Wake up, girl. You're going to be late," her grandmother snapped.

Viki pushed up into a sitting position and leaned back against the plush pillows. One of the servants breezed into the room carrying a silver tray. That had never happened before, and Viki felt her eyebrows rise in confusion.

"Dear girl, do get moving. You've got an appointment at ten, and it's already seven thirty."

She had to be in the twilight zone. First breakfast in bed, and now her grandmother was calling her 'dear girl'?

"What's wrong with you?" Viki asked.

"Nothing. Whatever do you mean?"

"Never mind. What appointment?" Viki distinctly remembered her calendar being clear this morning as well as for the rest of the day.

"To have your portrait painted, of course. I've gotten you a sitting with the city's hottest new artist." Her grandmother's voice rose with excitement as it often did when she spent an obscene amount of money or had gotten her way.

Viki just stared at her.

"Now, tell me. Who bid for you last night? I must know." Viki

## Madison Chase

should have known that's what this was about. Now that some lunatic had paid a ridiculous sum for a date with her, she was finally a success in her grandmother's eyes.

Some people might long for that kind of approval. In fact, many of her peers worked tirelessly to earn their parents' good graces. They did everything in their power to please, yet it was often for nothing. Some tried their whole life, and still it didn't matter.

The pain must be unfathomable.

But Viki didn't care for her grandmother's approval. She had never been in her grandmother's good graces, and she never would be. She'd resigned herself to that fact years ago. Now she merely tried to stay out of the old woman's way.

"I'm afraid I don't know his name," she said finally. It was the truth. She didn't know who'd placed the enormous bid, and she didn't want to know. He'd asked to remain anonymous until the date, and that was fine by her. Such a ballsy bid must mean he was arrogant, ugly, or trying to make up for something. Perhaps all three.

No, she wasn't looking forward to the date. The pressure of it seemed like a large lead weight on her shoulders. What if he had...expectations?

She took a deep breath. The date was in a public place. If he'd made any presumptions, she was happy to set him straight.

"How can that be?" Martha Aragon strode across the room, then turned back to stare at Viki. "Did the bid fall through? I knew no man would pay that much for—"

"No," Viki cut her off, not in the mood to hear more of her put-downs, "I was told the check is being delivered this morning to the orphanage."

"Then who is he?" her grandmother insisted, marching to the end of the bed. The old woman's blue-gray eyes bore down on Viki, but she hardly noticed. She was too busy looking at the tray of food on the table in her sitting room. Fruit. Toast. Coffee.

Her stomach growled.

"He wanted to remain anonymous until the date," Viki replied. It

## Portrait of Seduction

was the truth. She slid to the edge of the bed, then crossed the room to the tray of food. Plucking a handful of grapes, she sank into the oversized chair next to the antique table.

Her bedroom was her one solace from her grandmother. The older woman seemed to take pleasure in breaching Viki's sanctuary. But then again, she seemed to take pleasure in all of her belittling activities.

"Well, we must find out his name. Any man who's willing to pay that kind of money for one date with you is—"

"Let me guess. Grandson-in-law material?"

"Don't sass me."

"I'm just stating a fact. Admit that you'd love to have that kind of money in the family."

"Young lady, I already have that kind of money."

*But you always want more,* Viki thought as she grabbed a piece of toast and slathered on a rich grape jelly.

"Sylvia's already pulled your dress for the sitting. But you'll need something suitable to wear to the Laraby's party on the ninth. And then something for your birthday party."

"Birthday party?" Viki choked on a bread crumb. She grabbed the glass of juice to wash it down and pounded on her chest as she coughed.

This had to be some bad 60's TV show.

"Of course. Did you'd think I'd forgotten?" She touched her silver gray hair as if to see that it was still in place. The chunky golden bracelet at her wrist jangled with the motion. No doubt it cost thousands.

You've forgotten my birthday every year since I was born, so why should this year be any different, she mused and finished off her juice.

"Don't eat too much. We want to make sure you look good for your portrait."

Viki frowned at that. Why in the world did she need another portrait painted?

"Now, about the party on the ninth..."

Viki tried not to yawn as her grandmother strode back and forth in front of her, dictating ever so succinctly whom she should and shouldn't cling to at the Laraby's party.



## Madison Chase

It was hard not to yawn. Honestly it was. This lecture had been going on for nearly thirty minutes. This party would be just like any other. Viki would be pinned, plucked and prodded, then introduced to all the eligible bachelors. But her grandmother would have an A list and a B list ready before Viki even stepped into the ballroom.

Men on the A list were "must-cling-to's", and men on the B list were "dance-with-only-if-they-ask".

"Mr. Yardbrough is a dear friend of the family, and he has a gorgeous grandson that we must get you introduced to. Sylvia, see if Yardbrough the Third is coming. And do make it quick."

Viki's grandmother was known around Brookton Manor as the Lord and Dictator. Viki herself used the term frequently. And at her grandmother's beck and call were dozens of staff who did as they were asked as quickly and perfectly as possible. Just like now. Sylvia, the overworked, underpaid, always yelled at personal assistant ran to do the Lord and Dictator's bidding.

Viki studied her nails as if they were actually interesting. Her grandmother fawned over appearances almost as much as she fawned over money. And men.

Not for the first time, she wished that her sister was still alive. But what she really wished was that she didn't have to live under her grandmother's roof until her 21st birthday just so she could secure her trust fund. But the money she would inherit was worth the wait. And the trouble.

"Listen when I'm talking to you, girl." That was Viki's cue to look up and look interested.

"Didn't I meet Devon Yardbrough at that polo match last summer?" she asked, having no clue if the man in question had been one of the fifty or so she'd been introduced to that day. She didn't really care one way or the other. "Honestly, Grandmother, I'm not going to be ready for the portrait if you don't give me time to get ready."

The one card Viki could always play was the ugly card. Her grandmother told her repeatedly how "unfortunate looking" she was.

"You're quite right. Let's see if Maneual can do something with that

## Portrait of Seduction

spaghetti you call hair. Why you couldn't have gorgeous hair like your sister, I'll never know. Don't let him put your hair up. I don't want you looking like the family tramp."

What in the world?

"Of course, Grandmother," Viki murmured, dutifully trying to hide the smile on her face. The family tramp?

"Que the weird sci-fi music," she muttered under her breath.

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Four

*The function of art is to renew our perception. What we are familiar with we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and, as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.*

~ Anais Nin

“Evil witch,” Viki muttered as she pulled into a parking space beneath the ancient loft building. The last thing she wanted to do today was have her picture painted. Unfortunately, she had to do what her grandmother asked. But only for a few more days. Then she’d be out from under the old crow’s claw.

She got out of her car and smoothed the hideous green velvet material of the dress her grandmother had insisted she wear.

“It will bring out the green in your eyes. And Lord knows the only thing you’ve got going for you is your eyes,” she’d said.

Muttering beneath her breath, Viki strode toward the old building. Sick to death of hearing her grandmother’s nagging, she’d finally agreed to have the stupid portrait painted. She didn’t see what the big deal was. So what if she was twelve the last time she’d had a portrait painted? Big freakin’ deal.

Not to mention she’d burst in on the best dream Viki’d had in a year. She felt a tightening deep inside at the thought of the man she’d met last night. She felt like Cinderella, except that she hadn’t been the one to leave the shoe and no name behind. The odd sensations he created had

## Portrait of Seduction

overwhelmed her, and she'd completely forgotten to ask. But she knew his face. His touch. His lips and those incredible green eyes.

Celeste would know his name. She hoped.

She marched into the dimly lit lobby, the ugly dress rustling around her legs. Looking at the ancient elevator with disdain, she gingerly raised the gate, climbed in and then pressed the button for the fifth floor. At least she hoped it was the button for the fifth floor. The light bulb beneath the button had gone out, and the paint of the number was chipped away.

The elevator chugged upward, and Viki found herself chanting, "I think I can, I think I can."

She knew all her frustration didn't stem from her grandmother, but that was a large portion of it. She was achingly tired of the dull and boring men her grandmother lined up in front of her. John Harrison was the latest in the long line. She was pretty sure that if her grandmother could legally marry her off, she'd have done it already.

Even the men who were good looking and only interested in the horizontal mambo did little to rouse Viki's libido.

God she was pathetic. She wouldn't sleep with just anyone, and that's what bothered her. The lack of decent men in her life. Honest, caring, and good looking men. While some of the "hot prospects", as her grandmother called them, might be good looking, they turned her off like a light switch.

The mystery man from the ball last night on the other hand... Viki's groan was louder than the creaking elevator as it shook like a box full of Jell-O, slowly climbing upward. At this rate, she could probably solve world hunger by the time it reached its destination. She looked at her watch. Two minutes until her official appointment time.

She wasn't going to think about the lack of companionship in her life either. A mean old woman did not count as companionship. But who said you needed companionship?

*I do*, a small voice whispered inside her. Viki shook off the thought and tapped her toe impatiently.

An eternity later, the elevator ground to a halt, tossing her forward.

## Madison Chase

Pushing the gait skyward again, she decided a can of WD-40 would come in handy. She walked down the hall looking for the correct number on the door. Evidently her grandmother had gotten wind of New York's hottest new artist and had convinced him to do Viki's portrait.

Most likely, the convincing had occurred when her grandmother had pulled out her checkbook. The old bat always got her way. It made Viki sick.

Here she was a grown adult, and her grandmother still ordered her around. But her grandmother could be very convincing. And if that didn't work, she wasn't above arm-twisting and perhaps more nefarious means.

And what was worse was that Viki let her.

But only because she had to and not for very much longer, she reminded herself. Two weeks and she'd be free.

She found the correct door and knocked. Several minutes went by, and she leaned against the door frame. She knocked again. More waiting. Maybe the great artist had forgotten the appointment and was out for the day. She knocked one more time. This time it swung open.

In the doorway stood a gorgeous hunk of male with dark, intense eyes glittering with green flecks. Blond hair hung down past his ears, touching the nape of his neck. His full lips were set in a pensive line.

She pasted on her friendliest smile and pushed away from the wall.

"Viki Aragon. I'm here to have my portrait painted."

Something inside her stirred, and she met his gaze. The green depths were icy. He looked half irritated, half asleep.

That familiar, delicious chill rushed over her.

He backed out of the doorway, his movements surprisingly graceful since he looked so tense. He held the door open wider and waited. She crossed the threshold and looked around at the large loft. It was messy, to say the least. But then so was every artist she'd ever met.

They spent all their energy on creating and little on cleaning. But she didn't mind. The harsh concrete floors splattered with paint and brick walls were a wonderful change from Brookton Manor. Everything there was dark wood and sparkling chandeliers with every knickknack perfectly in place, and heaven forbid anyone touch anything or make the

## Portrait of Seduction

place look lived in. It seemed so sterile...almost like a photograph.

This place looked lived and worked in, she decided as she walked past rows of canvases propped against one another. Buckets, brushes and little jars of paint crowded the floor.

She turned to him, waiting for further instruction. He said nothing, just stood studying her. She felt butterflies take flight in her stomach. She'd never been so closely scrutinized in her entire life. She felt almost naked, raw under his gaze. Heat scorched her neck and crept down her back.

As he watched her, she stared right back. Taking in his tall, muscular frame, her blood began to heat. Then her heartbeat picked up speed, beating faster, louder, to the point she was sure he could hear.

The soft fabric hugging her body felt like a noose, growing tighter and tighter around her body.

She knew it was him. Her Adonis. Had the Fates finally decided to be kind?

Without the mask and tux, with his hair down, she couldn't be sure. But by the way her body reacted, lit up was more like it, it was definitely him. Did he recognize her?

Surely he must. He'd held her in his arms for endless songs. And he'd studied her so thoroughly.

Yet he gave no indication that he knew who she was. Why didn't he say something?

"Where do you want me?" she asked, astonished that her voice was so husky. There was no other way to describe it. Who knew she had a husky voice?

He twisted his mouth, crossing his arms over his chest. The movement only drew attention to the fact that his chest was large, strong, and pure muscle. Her breath caught in her throat. The knit sweater he wore accentuated every ripple, every dip and rise, every bulging muscle.

Feeling weak with undeniable desire, she forced her gaze away and took in the rest of the room, the high ceiling and the tall windows overlooking the city. Across from all the chaos was a large bed. It sat squarely in the room, pulled away from all the walls. While the size

## Madison Chase

caused her blood to rush south, it was the fact that there were black satin sheets covering the bed that brought her blood to a boil.

At last, he moved. He strode across the room and fiddled with a large sheet. Then he placed an uncomfortable looking chair in front of it.

"Sit."

She raised an eyebrow in his direction, but did as he asked. He was not one of many words, that was for sure. The chair was more uncomfortable than it looked. She sat straight as an arrow and watched as he busied himself with setting up a canvas.

He strode about the room grabbing jars and tubes of paint, then slapped globs of colors onto the wooden pallet.

Seemingly content with the paint, he swirled several brushes in a bucket. Viki watched the intense concentration on his face; unable to help but wonder what it would be like if he concentrated that hard on her. Concentrated on pleasuring her with those incredible hands, those long, strong fingers.

His head jerked up as if she'd said something terrible, but she hadn't made a sound. Under his watchful gaze, she felt her breathing begin to grow shallow and her nipples harden. Damn it. Maybe she had made a sound. A moan or a gasp or a sigh. Who knew? All she could think about was her body's acute reaction to this man. This man whose name she didn't even know.

He walked toward her like a predator, a big jungle cat stalking his prey. In this room near this man, she felt like prey, very small, very helpless. She wasn't afraid of him, but she did feel a tremor in her stomach. And below. That feeling gave her a rush deep inside. This man had definition. And a passion that caused her to pause blazed in his eyes now.

Standing inches away, his gaze roamed her entire body; everywhere his eyes looked, she felt her skin heat. In a quick movement, he grabbed her legs and twisted her around slightly so she sat off center. Okay, good choice, maybe she'd look thinner. He took her wrists and arranged her hands gently in her lap. He readjusted her shoulders. Everywhere his hands touched, her skin screamed for him to keep

## Portrait of Seduction

touching her. She could feel the silk of her panties getting wetter by the second. Anticipation surged through her.

He tucked a strand of his blond hair behind his ear, and the air squeezed from her lungs. Her Adonis.

She felt her insides turn to mush, moisture pooling between her thighs. What if he was attached? Maybe that's why he'd disappeared last night. His ring finger was bare, she noticed, her heart feeling hopeful.

As he adjusted the fabric of her dress, his fingers brushed her ankle, and the desire that had been pooling low in her belly exploded. Her breath escaped between her lips, and again he positioned her shoulders. His lips were drawn in a pensive line, and yet he was still utterly gorgeous. Surely she wasn't intending to seduce him...was she?

He cupped her chin and turned it just so.

Yes. She definitely meant to seduce him. Unless he was attached. If only he was more responsive to her.

How could he have held her so closely last night, danced with her, stared at her with such passion and not recognize her in the light of day? Didn't he feel that magnetic force pulling them together?

As it was, he treated her like a piece of clay, pulling and prodding, shifting slight details. He seemed more passionate about sculpting her than the idea of bedding her. And she was sure she was sending all the signals.

She was probably stupid for even entertaining the idea, especially without knowing anything about the man. But she got a good idea about him just by being in the same room. By looking into his eyes. Dancing with him.

"Don't move," he told her.

So she froze, but was half tempted to move just so he'd have to come and touch her. But with his mood, she doubted that was a good idea.

Carter Vaggio cursed himself for the thousandth time in less than twenty-four hours. He'd been called to attend the Masquerade Ball last night, and against his better judgment, he had gone and hated every second of the lavish party until he'd seen *her*.



## Madison Chase

The gorgeous woman in red had sent his pulse racing like a Thoroughbred. She was the loveliest thing he'd ever seen. Slim, refined, yet with a dip of the waist and a curve of the hip. High breasts that made his mouth water and his palms itch to cup them. Elegant shoulders and a delicate neck just waiting for his bite. Delectable ruby red lips and eyes the color of the Mediterranean.

God, he'd wanted her. In every way a man could have a woman...and more.

He'd settled for a dance. But holding her that close had nearly driven him insane. Her scent had filled his lungs over and over until his fangs had started to descend. She'd moved effortlessly with him with a grace he hadn't seen in a century. Then she'd looked up at him as if he was her entire world. He'd wanted to kiss her, taste her. He'd bent his head, taking a deep breath, relishing her warm feminine fragrance, and he'd known.

She was the one who'd been made for him. Just for him.

Her body fit his like the other half of a puzzle. As did her blood. He could smell it. He was dying to taste it.

But then he'd learned her name.

Victoria Aragon. His newest model. A wealthy socialite. A human.

He looked at her now, still feeling that burn of desire deep in his gut. And at the same time, his blood ran cold.

His life was just one big cosmic joke.

A human.

And one so beneath him at that. It would be different if she were intelligent. Innocent. Knew what pain was. What it was like to work her way out of a hole. Knew what it was like to lose...no. He wasn't going there. That part of his life was over. Forever.

But a socialite? What use did he have for a socialite? He had more money than he could ever use. He didn't throw parties. Hell, he didn't even like to go to parties.

He'd worked his whole life. Painting for the wealthy. The church. Gods and Goddesses alike. He'd known pain that still hurt. He'd died, not just once, but a thousand times.

## Portrait of Seduction

And she...

He glared at her, and the chalk slipped from his fingers. She was watching him. Her eyes held all sorts of secrets. Her beautiful brow was creased in concentration. Or was it confusion? What was she thinking? It would be so easy to...

He reached out with his mind and found hers completely open to him. And her thoughts were not what he'd expected.

Two weeks, Vik. Two weeks. Then you're out of here.

Carter felt a wave of unease wash over him. She was leaving? She couldn't. Didn't she know? He was her other half. If she left, if they were apart, the headaches would start. Then the heartache.

What the hell was he thinking? She couldn't be his other half. She was human. He was a Daywalker. They had no future together.

Without Veronica, everything is different. I could move out of the city, far out of the city. Celeste and Cassidy could still visit. But there's nothing keeping me here. Not my life. Not Grandmother. I have no family.

She was making plans, he realized. Going over a mental checklist. He felt, as much as heard, the sigh that escaped her lips. It sounded tortured and helpless. She was glancing around the room now, but he could see a sheen of tears in her eyes. He pushed into her mind a little harder. What was making her so sad?

"Veronica?" Viki rang the fancy doorbell again and then peeked through the window next to the door. Her breath caught. Her sister lay there on the floor, blood pooled around her.

Carter cursed, shamed by her memory and his assumptions about her. Her gaze snapped back to his, but she didn't say a word.

"I'm sorry about your sister."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Thank you."

He turned back to the canvas and continued painting the first layer that would ultimately become a masterpiece. If there was one thing he counted on in this life, it was his ability to create his art. He thanked the Gods every day for providing him that much solace. Today he threw himself into the piece with a renewed vigor he hadn't felt in ages. It had

## Madison Chase

everything to do with his subject, that he was sure of.

She was so young. Though he didn't know her exact age, she no doubt was, at the very least, four centuries younger than he. Damn his abnormally long life, his Pure Heart that kept him alive. Even now, when he wanted to be cynical, wanted to give into the pessimism and ire...he couldn't. There were still rays of light in his life. He knew it and could not ignore it. And for those, he thanked the Gods as well.

The woman across the room with the golden hair and creamy skin should have been a ray of light. The one he'd spent four centuries searching for. But just thinking of her position, her wealth...it was enough to take him to the past where he'd been a struggling artist.

It was his own fault really. In those days he'd been volatile. Reckless. An idiot of mountainous proportions. Hindsight was, as they say, 20/20. He'd picked one too many fights, had too many enemies, and a price on his head. He'd bounced from town to town, always painting. Or drinking.

He remembered that night like he was reliving it. The night he'd died. The night his precious sister had died. She'd been laughing at something he'd said, a rarity indeed. He remembered feeling a spark of hope. Needing absolution for his sins, forgiveness for his past. Her forgiveness would be a start. He should have forced his father to recognize her as his own years ago. But he'd never had the courage. And so his sister had lived a bastard's life, never really belonging anywhere. Never connected to the family. Never with a family of her own.

The shadows had moved, morphing into tall figures. And they'd taken her. Carter knew now that they'd been vampires. Had he known such evil existed, he'd have grabbed his sister's hand and run as far and fast as they could. But he hadn't known. And she had died because of him. Because of his past. Because he couldn't protect her.

The pain ran fresh through him, and his paint brush paused, poised above the canvas. A drop of crimson paint slid from his brush and trailed down the slick surface.

Just like the blood that had run from his sister's neck. When the men had grabbed her, he'd fought them like crazy. But he too had paid the

## Portrait of Seduction

price. As he lay dying from his own wounds, he'd stared at his sister's body. Drained of life, passion, and blood.

It was all his fault. He'd known it even as he was taking his last breath, and he'd begged the Gods to let him fix it. Fix what he'd messed up. To give him another chance. To start fresh.

A different shadow had emerged from the dark alley. A woman. Her eyes had glowed a brilliant blue. Had he not been suffering, bleeding to death, he would have been scared. But as it was, he'd laid there, unable to move. Unable to speak.

She'd touched him so gently that he could still feel it deep in his soul. And then she'd spoken the most beautiful words he'd ever heard.

"You will get your second chance, Michelangelo Merisi of Caravaggio." She'd bent down to his neck, her fangs piercing his skin. Even through the throbbing pain, he could feel the pin pricks. Feel his blood coursing through his veins, surging toward the mouth at his neck.

When she was done drinking from him, she'd bitten her own wrist and let her blood drip into his mouth.

That night he'd changed, become the one thing he truly hated. He'd become a vampire.

He had a second chance. A chance to change. A chance to fix the things he'd wronged. But the irony consumed him.

Yes, the fates loved to play with him.

What seemed like hours later, he finally paused behind the canvas. Viki yearned to take a break. To get up off this godforsaken chair and stretch. To let her muscles move. Maybe then she could feel her butt again.

"You can go now," he said as if he'd read her thoughts.

She narrowed her gaze on him. What a dictator. She noticed his accent then. It was almost hidden. But it came out strongly on certain words. It sounded Spanish or Italian. Some sexy language.

"Does it look good?"

"Of course it does," he replied as if there were no other possible way for one of his paintings to look. That arrogance turned her on slightly because he was right. She looked around the room at his various works in all stages of completion. His work was excellent.

## Madison Chase

"Can I see it?"

"No."

She stood up slowly, letting the blood seep back into her numb limbs. Fine. If he was going to be like that. She forced another smile into place and regarded him as he cleaned his brushes.

"Make sure you take ten pounds off me," she said, hoping to tease a smile out of him.

"Why would I do that?" He raised an eyebrow, which told her he found the idea ridiculous. But the look in his eyes told her other things. That he wasn't as unaffected by her as he seemed. And even if he didn't recognize her, he did find her attractive. The feeling was entirely mutual.

"So I'll look thinner, of course."

"You're perfect as you are."

His comment heated her blood further. She smiled, exhilarated, excited, anxious.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she turned and left him hiding behind the canvas. She'd bide her time. It would take several more sittings before the portrait would be complete. She'd wear him down and get under his skin slowly.

## Portrait of Seduction

### Chapter Five

*That's the thing with magic. You've got to know it's still here, all around us,  
or it just stays invisible for you.*

~ Charles de Lint

Viki called Cassidy on the way back from having her portrait painted. She desperately needed to talk to someone about this whole situation, and she had a feeling that if anyone would understand — and be able to give good advice — it would be Cassidy.

She and Cassidy swam in similar circles. They hadn't had any classes together in school. Cassidy was several years older. But outside of school, they'd seen each other often. Cassidy was a rebel, and she didn't care who knew it. Viki had always played it safe except where her grandmother was concerned. And just look where that had gotten her.

Cassidy's father was big on Wall Street, making his fortune with risky investments. Her mom was a high powered lawyer and not overly motherly. They had three children, Cassidy and her two older brothers. Her brothers were happy to follow in her parents' footsteps.

But Cassidy was different. She marched to her own beat. In fact, she flaunted it. She was from one of the wealthiest families around, yet she'd decided to become a florist. The contacts her parents had made over the years came in handy. Her crazy style was evident in her floral creations, and the elite flocked to her shop to have the newest, hottest styles grace their tables.

## Madison Chase

Her use of wild color and unusual materials made her just as famous as her last name. And now she spent most of her time coming up with shocking new designs and then letting her assistants put them all together. She oversaw her company with an iron fist and a pointy stiletto, and somehow was able to keep up her rapid social life at the same time.

Viki didn't know how she did it. Parties were wearing. Fake smiles, painful shoes, tasteless appetizers... She'd been on the party circuit for as long as she could remember. She'd danced with more partners than she could count, had her toes stepped on far more often than she cared to remember, and don't get her started about all the snobs who'd tried to steal kisses.

Carter was definitely not a snob who'd try to steal kisses. He would take them. And she'd willingly give them.

"Cass? Viki."

"Hey, what's up?"

"Grandmother just made me sit for a portrait. Why she wants another portrait of her least favorite grandchild, I don't know. But you'll never believe who the artist is."

"Who?"

"Remember Adonis from last night?"

"Of course," her friend's tone was warm and gooey.

"Him. He's the artist. I'm not sure he recognized me, though, but I definitely knew who he was. It's not like those green eyes are forgettable. Or that butt."

"I hear you."

"So I'm in my car. I've got to change out of this dress before I break out in hives. Want to have lunch?"

"Yeah. Let's do it out your way. I've got to get out of the city. Tor's driving me nuts."

"Tor?"

"The guy from last night? I'll explain later. I'm heading out. Give me a call on my cell when you're changed and tell me where you want to meet."

"Will do. Drive safe."

## Portrait of Seduction

Over an hour later, Viki and Cassidy were seated at a small, wrought iron table on the patio of a cute little bistro well outside of the city. It was perhaps their last day warm enough to eat outside before Old Man Winter set in. Taking a deep breath, she relished the crisp fall air and the fact that she could really breathe here. Think here. And that was good, because she had a lot of thinking to do.

"So, you have a story you were going to tell me," Viki prompted, trying to figure out how she was going to explain her own problems. Her Adonis was a complete mystery. Hot one minute, ice cold the next.

"Story? Oh, about Celeste, right. You're never going to believe this. I still don't." Cassidy sat back in her chair and stretched her long, jean clad legs in front of her. Today's corset of choice was black with a fine red embroidery detail. Viki didn't understand why Cassidy loved corsets so much, except that her friend had the body for it and had an incredible collection of them. It was almost a shame that the black leather jacket her friend wore concealed much of the artwork beneath.

"So I'm walking into the ballroom checking on the flowers. And here comes this waiter with a tray of glasses. I mean piled high. He was an idiot, if you ask me. There had to be a hundred glasses stacked on this thing. And so he trips, and I'm standing there watching him fall." Cassidy paused, probably to add drama. She did that a lot. "But the glasses never hit the ground." She tapped her hand against the arm of her chair, emphasizing each word.

"What do you mean?"

"She froze him. Celeste froze him. Well, him and the glasses. I saw her across the room. She turned and flicked her hands like this," she said and demonstrated. "And he just stopped. In mid air. And the glasses just froze. They were just hanging there in space. I'm so not kidding. I'm telling you, she's a witch."

"Have you been drinking?"

Cassidy shot her a hurt look.

"Sorry. That just seems unbelievable."

"I agree. But I'm telling you, that's what I saw. With my own eyes." She pointed at each of her eyes with her index fingers. "And yes, I had my



## Madison Chase

contacts in. And no, I hadn't been drinking."

"So what happened?"

"Well, she rushed over and plucked the glasses and the tray out of the air. Stacked them on the table. And then she snapped her fingers, and he fell into her arms. And it was like he didn't even know what happened, what he'd been doing, or that he'd been free falling with a mountain of Waterford crystal like five seconds earlier."

The problem wasn't that Viki didn't believe Cassidy. She'd never known Cassidy to lie. Exaggerate about her escapades, yes. But lie? No. She believed what her friend had seen. But if it was true, then that meant all the stories her grandfather had told her had been true. And that scared the ever living crap out of her.

## Portrait of Seduction

### Chapter Six

*All human wisdom is summed up in two words - wait and hope.*

~ Alexandre Dumas Père

Viki arrived home to find her grandmother in one of her moods. That wasn't entirely right, though. Martha Aragon had two moods. Bad and worse. She was a mean old bitch, everyone agreed, but Viki would never say it to her face.

"How did the sitting go?" The old woman looked up from her cross stitch.

"Well. I think."

"Make sure I get my money's worth."

"I'm sure you will, Grandmother."

"Hah. You never know with these artists. But then again, he can only paint what's in front of him, and you're not much to look at, are you?"

Viki shook her head from side to side even though she knew she was indeed beautiful. Elite didn't offer modeling contracts to ugly people. And while she never let her beauty go to her head, her grandmother always treated her like an ugly duckling. Like she was a disgrace to the family.

"Of course you're not. Speaking of which, you need to hold off on the wine. You're filling that dress out far too much these days."

Right. She was really filling out a size six dress. At least she looked

## Madison Chase

healthy.

"Whatever you say, Grandmother."

Viki had learned long ago to say whatever would appease her grandmother, but it was getting old. And this "event" Cassidy had seen had thrown her into a world of confusion.

She remembered how her grandfather used to tell her all sorts of stories about magic and creatures of the night. Her father didn't want him telling her such things. But it was inevitable around Halloween when everyone was talking about spirits, magic, and mystical creatures.

She'd thought they were just stories. Fiction.

"Do you remember how Grandfather used to tell Veronica and me stories about magic?" she asked her grandmother.

The old woman's fingers paused over the piece she was working on.

"I remember."

"And spirits. Legends. He had such a flair for storytelling."

"Yes. He did. God rest his soul."

"Do you suppose there was any truth to them?" she mused.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was just wondering. Halloween time and all," she said as she pulled back the lacy curtain and looked out over the yard. Magic. Did it exist outside of stories? If so, could she bring Veronica back?

Hope exploded through her, but she knew it was a foolish wish.

"Your grandfather was a storyteller. That's all. Your father and I didn't want him telling you girls such nonsense. It's ridiculous, and there was no reason to scare you. Now, I don't want to talk about this anymore."

Her grandfather's stories had never scared her. Intrigued her maybe. He'd always made it sound fascinating and wonderful.

"John called again," her grandmother continued.

"Did he?"

"Yes. And he said that he'd like to see you again. I told him you'd go out with him Thursday night at seven. I hope you have something suitable to wear."

Viki could stock an entire department store. Her closet was half the

## **Portrait of Seduction**

size of one. Her grandmother always insisted that she have the proper clothes to wear to anything and everything. Not that Viki minded shopping or wasting the old woman's money. Served her right for being such a snob.

"I'll have to check my calendar."

"Check your closet. Your calendar is clear."

Fury boiled inside her, but she kept it carefully in check. It was only a few more days until her birthday. Then she'd inherit her trust fund, and she could move out and live happily. Of course, Viki was smart enough to know that nothing in life was that simple, but she was hoping for the best.

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Seven

*Where there is woman there is magic.*  
~Ntozake Shange

Viki arrived the next day dressed in the same green velvet dress. It really was a hideous dress, but Carter was willing to bet his fortune that it was not a dress of her choosing. True, it complemented her brilliant blue eyes, but it also made her look much too old. Too plain. Too dull. Her gorgeous blonde hair was natural. He'd seen enough bottled blondes in New York City to know the real thing when he saw it. And Victoria Aragon was nothing if not the real thing. Her smile as she greeted him was genuine, her eyes bright.

He'd dreamed of her last night. Of the eyes that haunted him. The blood he craved. The body he wanted to hold. Her neck tortured him, calling for his lips. Her hips taunted him. They were the kind of hips a man could get lost in, the kind he could hold onto. The kind that would bear a man gorgeous children. Every time she walked, he couldn't help but notice her legs hiding behind the fabric of her dress. They may not have been mile long legs, but from what he could tell, they were perfect and trim. The kind of legs that would wrap perfectly around a man as he slid home inside her. The kind of legs that would tighten around him as she came beneath him.

He'd felt the spark of electricity when he'd fixed her position on the chair. And he could tell she'd felt it too. He could see the shallow breaths

## Portrait of Seduction

beneath her breasts. And her nipples beaded beneath the heavy fabric. He'd double his bet and wager that the apex of her thighs was moist and yearning. Just as he was yearning. He'd felt himself stiffen the moment she stepped inside his loft.

Too bad she was all wrong for him. Completely wrong for him.

Viki watched him as he brooded behind the canvas. Her lips curved into a smile. She knew he wasn't as cold as he seemed. The whole room zinged with the electricity zapping between them.

"No smiling."

"What?"

"No smiling."

"Why?"

"Your grandmother said no smiling."

Her breath escaped on a very unladylike curse as she jumped to her feet.

"This is my portrait. And I'll smile if I want to."

He threw his head back with a disgruntled sigh.

"Get back into position, woman."

"Woman?" She could feel her eyes go as wide as dinner plates. "My name is Viki."

"Your name is Victoria. Much more you. Now have a seat."

"What's your name?" she asked.

"You don't know my name?" He cocked that eyebrow again.

"No. I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention when my grandmother began badgering me to get this stupid portrait painted."

"Then why do you care if you're smiling or not?"

Could she really tell this man her reason for wanting to appear smiling in her portrait? Would he think her crazy? It didn't really matter.

"Because. If I'm smiling in this portrait, it will be the only portrait in Brookton Manor where the person is smiling. And trust me, there are a lot of portraits!"

To her disbelief, a small smile cracked through his stone exterior. Her heart skipped five beats and then jump started.

"So you think that by smiling, you're going to leave your legacy as

## Madison Chase

the happy woman in the midst of unhappiness?"

"Something like that."

"Have a seat." He walked over and stood next to the chair. Giving a frustrated sigh, she sat down and did her best to sit in the correct position. Heaven knew what she might do if he touched her again. Spontaneously combust was one possibility. Jerk him into her lap and kiss him senseless was the other.

"Where are you from?" she asked, mesmerized. "Italy?"

"Originally."

He tipped her chin ever so slightly. Their gazes met and locked. He stared at her, his finger still tipping her chin. Her tongue snaked out and licked her lips.

She watched desire flicker in his eyes. Slowly, he dropped his hand and backed up. The desire went out and the ice returned. Feeling a chill, she redirected her gaze to a brilliant painting across the room.

So he didn't want to give in so easily. That was a first. Most men jumped at the opportunity to be in the same room with her. But she knew that was just because of her pretty face and her bank account.

He took his place behind the canvas, palette in hand as if it were a shield and his brush were his sword. She could easily envision him in the Roman army, standing proud. Or maybe as a gladiator. She felt his gaze caressing her skin and fought off the tingling sensation to no avail. Goose bumps skittered across her flesh.

"Cold?"

"No." She would be if she looked into his eyes again, though. How eyes could be so hot one minute and so cold the next, she didn't know. But she was positive that his eyes weren't a degree above glacial now.

As the hours ticked by, she found herself wondering about him. Why had he become an artist? Did it seem romantic at the time or was it in his blood, something that drove him night and day? Such passion fascinated her because there was nothing in life that wasn't handed to her on a silver platter. She lived a very boring life, going from one party to another. In some ways, she supposed she was a servant in her grandmother's house. Her job, as her grandmother constantly nagged,

## Portrait of Seduction

was to impress people. To improve her station in society. To improve the family's wealth and keep up their good name.

What family, was what Viki wanted to know.

It was no more than a name. And Martha Aragon was not her family.

She'd never treated her like family. Never hugged her. Never loved her.

The only thing her grandmother cared about was money and prestige. Viki thought she had plenty of both. But it was always one more dress, one more party, one more dance, one more person to impress. The clothes meant nothing to her, designer or not. Certainly many of them were beautiful and luxurious. And honestly, she did love wearing some of them. But clothes didn't make a person.

She'd learned that the hard way. And she'd given up her dreams long ago.

The money didn't interest her the way it did her grandmother, either. For her it was a means to an end. A way to get away from here. Out of this city. To start her own life. Or salvage what was left of it. She would use the fortune from her trust fund to help others. To hopefully save them before it was too late, like her sister.

"We're done for the day," he announced.

Relief coursed through her body as she slumped into the chair, resting her weary bones. She stretched her arms above her head and then reluctantly got to her feet.

"Can I see?" she taunted.

"No."

"Why on earth not?" She offered him a teasing smile. She really didn't care what the portrait looked like. Well, she hoped she'd look better than a bad Picasso, but it wouldn't be hanging in her room, and it wasn't her money.

"It's not time."

"Time?"

His gaze dropped to her lips. "You have a lovely mouth." It was on her lips to thank him when he continued. "But you ask too many



## Madison Chase

questions."

He went about cleaning up without giving her another look. A part of her wanted to tell him she'd stop asking questions if he'd kiss her. The other half wanted to demand if he recognized her or not. He made no indication that he remembered her, that he'd danced with her. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit that it hurt her pride. But she was too keyed up and frustrated to want to reflect on that. She wasn't leaving until she'd had her answer.

But as she turned from the door to confront him, her cell phone rang. She dug it out of her purse and looked at the number. Cassidy.

She flipped the phone open and strode out of the door. Her friend had probably just saved her from making a horrible mistake. What if he didn't recognize her? What if the dance had meant nothing to him? She shivered at the thought.

"Hey girl. You left lunch in kind of a hurry yesterday. Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Everything's great," she lied. Everything but that gorgeous man who held me in his arms like I was the most precious thing in the world, and now he won't even—

"You don't sound like everything's all right."

"You're right. I lied. I'm frustrated out of my mind. Remember the Adonis from the ball?"

"Of course. The one painting your portrait. How's that going?"

"It's going," Viki practically growled. The elevator clunked its way downward. She was sure her friend was getting an earful of the racket.

"That's the problem. He still doesn't recognize me. Or at least he doesn't act like he does. How could he have looked at me like that, danced with me like that, and then not recognize me in the light of day?"

"Maybe he doesn't recognize you. Your hair was up and you were wearing a mask. And well, honey, that dress was killer, so maybe he wasn't looking at your face."

Viki sighed. Her friend knew men too well.

"And sorry, but if that dress you were wearing yesterday was any indication...well, let's just say it's not in the same universe as the red

## Portrait of Seduction

Valentino. Maybe he really doesn't recognize you. Why don't you ask him?"

Because she was scared that she'd built all this up in her mind. And then she'd ask him and he'd say "sorry, I don't know you". And then she'd be crushed. Beyond belief. What the hell was wrong with her? Yes, there was this crazy connection between them, enough electricity to start a power plant and enough chemistry to start a lab. But maybe it was one sided.

"Do you think he's still attracted to you?"

"I think so. Though one minute he's looking at me like he could just eat me up, and the next he looks like he hates the very sight of me. I have no idea what's going on." Viki stepped out into the sunlight and strode to her car.

"Well, concentrate on the 'eating you up part' and forget about the rest. If he doesn't recognize you, he's a fool. If he isn't attracted to you, he's a bigger fool. And if he doesn't want you...well, he's an idiot and not worth your time. You're beautiful and smart and have the biggest heart in the world. You deserve a man who recognizes that."

Wow. What had gotten into her friend? She wasn't usually the coddling type. But she sure did know how to make Viki feel better.

"Thanks, Cassidy. I feel better already."

"Good."

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Eight

*Dreams are like stars...you may never touch them,  
but if you follow them they will lead you to your destiny.*

~Anonymous

Viki must have lain in bed for hours. Sleep just wouldn't come. There were too many thoughts flowing through her mind, and she couldn't relax long enough for sleep to claim her.

Her grandmother was still pestering her about the mystery man who'd bought a date with her at auction. No doubt her grandmother was desperate to find out who he was so she could suck up to him and pick his pockets. But then she was also pressing a relationship with John the Swan. Viki's headache grew.

She couldn't stand the man. He probably spent more time in front of the mirror than she did. Maybe he was gay.

Turning on her side to look out the window, she thought about that. He didn't seem like the gay type. He wasn't overly masculine, but he just didn't strike her as the type that swung that way. And he was like a leech on her grandmother's hip. No doubt he wanted Viki for her money. Or the money she would be getting very soon.

That was just too bad for him. She had no intention of marrying. And if she did, it would definitely be for love. Never money.

Moonlight filtered through the gauzy curtains, casting a cool blue glow about the room. Her thoughts drifted to her portrait and the artist.

## Portrait of Seduction

Why didn't he recognize her? And why did he look at her so coldly? Even now under warm blankets, a chill ran up her spine as she remembered the look.

John's eyes always reminded her of a zombie. Dead and devoid of emotion. Adonis' eyes were very lively indeed. And they swarmed with emotion. Sometimes hot desire and sometimes a cold hatred. But what had she done to bring that upon him?

The wind outside her window picked up, and the old tree in the garden dropped more of its leaves. Halloween was right around the corner, and the trick-or-treaters would be out in full force. Her grandmother never liked the fact that they came knocking on her door. But Viki and the servants loved to spoil the kids. Each year she'd drop by the orphanage at Halloween and Christmas to bring candy and small toys to the kids.

God, how she missed her family. How she longed for one of her own.

With that thought, she was finally so emotionally worn out that she drifted to sleep. *He* was waiting for her there. Gorgeous as always.

She was at the bar ordering a drink, escaping her grandmother and the knuckleheads she called suitors.

The bartender returned with a glass of wine, and she dug into her purse for money.

"I've got it." Her head down, she recognized the voice immediately. It was thick as that damn green velvet dress.

He slid onto the stool next to hers and pushed a bill across the counter. The cologne he wore intoxicated her, and she leaned toward him. He trailed a finger over her collarbone and down her arm, exciting each nerve ending along the way.

A strange ache gripped her stomach.

"I need to taste you," he whispered only inches away. She licked her lips and placed a hand on his chest. Solid and warm.

A groan rumbled from his throat a millisecond before he dropped his lips to hers. He pulled her off her stool until she was standing between his legs. She wrapped her arms around his neck, not caring that they were

## Madison Chase

in a bar and the bartender might be watching. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Only this man. This moment. This kiss.

He was gentle and rough at the same time. He coaxed her lips with his own and then took what he wanted. His tongue swept into her mouth, and she felt as if electricity was running through her veins instead of blood. Like she'd suddenly come alive.

And she did come alive. His hands clasped around her waist, holding her right where he wanted her. She kissed him back, letting her tongue mate with his until she was panting.

He pulled away just long enough to catch his breath, but his eyes stared deeply into hers. The corner of his mouth pulled up into a devastating smile that she felt to her very core.

My God, how could a smile affect her like that? It wasn't normal. But she didn't have time to reflect or ponder on it before he leaned forward and rained kisses across her face.

His gentleness astonished her just as much as his passion. She loved how he took what he wanted, as if he knew exactly what she wanted and was happy to give it to her.

He kissed the corners of her mouth and then trailed his lips down her throat. She moaned and ran her fingers through his hair. The sound must have brought him back from his daze because he straightened and pushed away from her, but only an inch she noticed.

Her arms were still looped around his shoulders, and every part of her ached to march upstairs to finish what they'd started. To see if this connection would continue in the bedroom.

"You're trembling." She nodded. "For me," he said quietly as if the idea astonished and pleased him.

He took her hand and pulled her with him. They exited the hotel, and excitement rushed through her. He was taking her home with him. The ache in her stomach grew stronger.

"Victoria!" She turned, not recognizing the voice. A man stood a few yards away, a shiny black gun in his hand. It was aimed straight at her chest.

## **Portrait of Seduction**

She felt her Adonis move to step in front of her, but it was too late. A bullet flashed from the gun and slammed into her chest. The pain was worse than anything she'd ever felt, and she passed out before she even hit the ground.

The oddest sensation passed over her as she watched the gunman runaway. She wasn't watching from the ground where she lay; she was standing above her body. And the man at her feet was gathering her body in his arms. He wept like he would die without her.

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Nine

The human heart feels things the eyes cannot see, and knows what the mind cannot understand.

~ Robert Valett

"I have to know one thing," Victoria said as soon as she walked through his door.

"Okay," he replied, closing the door behind her.

"Do you recognize me?" She turned and pinned him with a look while her hands twisted the strap of her purse as if she were nervous. Anxiousness creased her beautiful face.

"I'd recognize you anywhere, *il mio amore*." He slipped his hand to the small of her back and escorted her back to the chair he knew she hated so much. Each time he'd entered her mind, it was the one thing she complained about.

He kept his smile in check and murmured, "Shall we get started?"

She chewed her lower lip, but nodded and did her best to get into the correct position for her portrait.

He made a few adjustments to the drape of the fabric and then moved behind the canvas to get started. The look on her face, her smile was enough to light up the room. And he felt like her champion. Surely she must have known he recognized her. How could he not? But then he remembered his initial coldness. How he'd misjudged her.

Sometime later, Carter noticed how still she'd been. How pensive

## Portrait of Seduction

she looked. He sniffed the air, wondering what was wrong. Her emotions swirled around him, and he could smell...fear. Her blood was laced with it. And yet...

Back and forth, her eyes darted constantly between him and his bed. If he didn't know better, he'd think she had ulterior motives. He smiled at the thought. Her eyes met his and a blush crept into her cheeks. She did something on her mind and it wasn't his painting. He could tell. And he could tell she was not what she seemed on the surface.

He'd watched her sit in that chair each day, and although they'd discussed nothing, he felt he knew everything about her. He often felt that way when he painted something. The origin, the history, the culture came alive. It was as if each line, edge, or curve told a story, and he was starting to put the pieces of Victoria's story together.

He'd misjudged her twice now. She wasn't the rich little princess he'd originally thought her to be. His research had shown she wasn't allowed to work. Hadn't been allowed to study outside of the books she bought. She was a Barbie doll, dressed and made up to fill a role. And though she was young, she was tough. Years of loss and pain had strengthened her. She rebelled against her grandmother's iron fist and was most eager to learn anything. And help anyone. Especially those who suffered as her sister had.

And dear God. That was the biggest misjudgment he'd made. She knew pain just as deep as his own.

This was a woman with maturity and wisdom beyond her years. It astonished him. And pleased him.

But was she just looking for a little romp? And afterwards, would she leave and never return?

He couldn't let her do that now that he'd found her. He'd hold on, like the last leaf on the tree before winter.

He put the finishing touch on her dress and stood back to inspect his work. Maybe one more sitting to touch up the skin tone and her hands.

She had lovely hands. Slim fingers and short, perfectly kept nails. And damn it if that wasn't the only thing wonderful about her.

"I'm done."



## Madison Chase

"Can I see?" She smiled at him from the chair where she lounged, relaxing.

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" She rose from the chair and walked toward him slowly. Each step caused the material of her dress to swish and swirl around her legs. Each step brought her closer to him. And he didn't know if he had enough control left to not snatch her into his arms and kiss her like her eyes commanded.

There was too much heat in his blood. And too much passion in her eyes.

"Better be careful or I'll think you're beginning to like me," she murmured.

"What if I am?" He saw the flame of desire in her eyes turn up a notch.

"Well, are you?"

He picked up an old rag as he stepped toward her. Wiping his hands, he stared deep into her eyes. "Could be."

She took a step closer, her lips inches from his. "I still don't know your name."

"Carter. Vaggio."

"I like that name."

"And I like you." He let his eyes trail over her body in a way that let her know what was on his mind. "All of you."

She knew he was going to kiss her. She could feel it in every bone in her body. But he took his time cleaning his hands. She'd watched them while he'd worked, had been turned on by them, and now she wanted them all over her body.

Slowly, in the typical jungle cat fashion she'd come to expect from him, he moved the few inches to close the distance between them. Oxygen stalled in her lungs as she looked up into his incredible green eyes.

She didn't understand why she felt such a connection to him. It wasn't as if they'd engaged in lots of conversation. But she'd picked up on things, subtle things about him besides his good looks, and they turned her on just as much as his melt-in-your-mouth body.

## Portrait of Seduction

The fact that he was slow and steady, sure about himself, that underneath it all he had a sense of humor and seemed genuine and kind – all were things that turned her on and made her want to camp out on his doorstep until he agreed to a date or two.

But who was she kidding? The way he was looking at her now didn't imply a date. It implied something much more.

"You do too much thinking," he murmured. She smiled. So he'd noticed the thoughtful expression on her face. Not surprising, yet very pleasing.

"And you're doing too much talking, Mr. Artist."

Very slowly, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. His touch ignited her skin as usual, and she wanted to lean into him. But his gaze held her. It was almost as if she were floating. Suspended in mid air.

He caressed her neck and down across her collarbone before cupping her shoulder. No doubt he was trying to kill her. Tension knotted inside her as he stared down at her lazily.

She let out a frustrated sigh, and he chuckled. His head dipped closer and she waited. And waited.

"I take it you want me to kiss you," he murmured.

"I might die if you don't. Hurry up already."

"Why rush it? I enjoy watching you. I can read every thought in your mind just by looking into your eyes."

She narrowed her gaze. "Oh really? And just what am I thinking right now?"

"You're thinking you wish I'd shut up and kiss you."

That's exactly what she'd been thinking. Spooky.

Hearing him say the words caused the fire burning inside her to pool like molten lava between her thighs. Perhaps she wouldn't stop with just a kiss.

"You're right. I'm also thinking...now look who's talking too much."

He smiled then, showing perfect white teeth, promptly tipping the earth and knocking her into orbit. She swayed toward him, and he caught her face between his hands before lowering his lips to her own.

## Madison Chase

They were warm and slow and gentle. She wound her arms around his neck and pulled herself closer until her body was pressed against his. Their lips mated lazily, roaming, searching. She opened her mouth beneath his, letting his tongue slip inside, and felt the tension explode between them.

Her nipples harden into peaks, pressing against the heavy fabric of her dress. His hands slid to her waist and pulled her hard against him. She felt his desire nudge her belly.

Her fingers brushed through his hair, her nails gently scraping his scalp. Soft. His hair was very soft.

*Those satin sheets would be soft,* she thought, smiling against his lips.

He tilted his head back slightly. She opened her eyes and stared up at him, not releasing her hold on his silken locks.

"You're delicious," he murmured in that low, husky voice that melted her bones.

"You're pretty divine yourself," she whispered.

She licked her lips, which solicited a groan from deep inside him.

"You vixen." He kissed her lips roughly before trailing kisses along her jaw and down her neck. She felt lethargic with pleasure, almost drugged, incapable of moving or feeling anything but his lips on her skin. His touch was teasing, exciting. It nearly tickled her, but the pleasure swirled into the mix and her head tipped back to give him better access.

His grip around her waist tightened, and she felt his erection grow. There was a quiet strength about him that he kept hidden just below the surface. She knew he's only use that strength to pleasure her, never to hurt her. The heady mixture made her feel wicked and wanton, and she didn't mind in the slightest.

She let her hands roam over his shoulders and down the solid plain of his chest. She flexed her fingers into the hard muscle, relishing the feel of him. The simmering power. Just the thought of his powerful frame underneath her, in her, made her wet.

His hold on her waist loosened. She didn't have time to question him before he scooped her up and carried her toward his enormous bed. High in his arms, she felt warm and safe.

## Portrait of Seduction

"This is your last chance, woman. Tell me no and I'll stop, but I can't wait for you much longer."

"Yes."

With what sounded an awful lot like a growl, he tossed her into the middle of the bed.

She giggled as she bounced. Her giggle turned to a purr as he stripped his shirt over his head and tossed it behind him. She'd thought a lot about what he'd look like without clothes. But her thoughts hadn't done him justice. His muscles were perfectly sculpted and yet not grossly overbuilt. They rippled beneath golden skin. She licked her lips again and put on a seductive smile.

"Stop it."

"Stop what?" she asked innocently. But she knew she was driving him crazy. It was exactly what she wanted.

"Stop smiling."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to come in my pants if you don't."

His bald honesty brought a blush to her cheeks. She was a modern woman. But it still amazed her that she could cause such a...condition.

Her eyes grew wide as he shrugged out of his jeans and boxers. *Oh my*. His erection was hard, long and perfect. She suppressed the need to fan herself.

Reaching out, she took his erection in one hand and skimmed a fingernail down his length with the other.

"You're quite...impressive."

He joined her on the bed, his strong arms wrapping around her like a cocoon. Their eyes locked and held as their hands explored.

His fingertips grazed up her hip to the curve of her waist and then up farther to cup her breasts. Her nipples were hard as stones against his palms, and she eagerly pressed herself into his talented hands. His fingers whispered across the sensitive peaks, driving her crazy. His touches were feather light, tormenting. She groaned in frustration, wanting nothing more than to wrap her arms around him and rub against him.

And rub against him she did. Her arms snaked around his neck,

## Madison Chase

and his hands cupped her ass, pulling her hard against him. Every inch from their knees upward touched. His cock poked her, and she giggled.

"You think that's funny?" he murmured against her throat.

"I think you're wonderful," she said on a sigh.

One of his hands dipped between her legs, and she knew the instant that his fingers felt her heat, her wetness. He made a soft moan and pulled her down onto the mattress next to him. His fingers sought and probed into her heat.

His gentle touch made her want to cry. Never in her life had a man treated her so carefully as if she were a prized jewel and at the same time someone he desired more than anyone else.

Their lips found each other as the sun dipped into the sky, casting a warm glow and dark shadows across his loft.

"I've wanted you since I first saw you."

"Me too," she whispered, rolling toward him, trying to get closer.

"I had to stay behind the bloody bar because I had a damn hard on."

"Really?" Viki's face lit up.

"Yes, really."

"I'm safe," she whispered. He nodded, understanding her meaning.

"As am I."

"Then I insist you put me out of my misery," she whispered.

He didn't need further prompting. Bracing himself over her, he trapped her face between his hands. He stared down at her for a long time, his cock poised at her entrance. He'd be the death of her yet. Was it possible to die from sexual frustration? She'd find out soon if he didn't... She gave a frustrated sigh and squirmed against him.

"Please..."

"Shh." He kissed the corner of her mouth, then his tongue slid along the seam of her lips. Just as he thrust forward, his tongue speared between her lips, consuming her. She gasped at the wonderful invasion and the feeling of being whole, complete. They fit together so perfectly she wanted to cry out as his length stroked in and out of her slowly. He was so big. And her nerve endings felt every breath of his touch both inside

## Portrait of Seduction

and out.

She was going to pass out. In fact, she could almost feel her eyes rolling back in her head. The pleasure was just too great. He slid a hand along the outside of her thigh, leaving a trail of goose bumps in its wake. Curling a single finger around the back of her knee, he pulled her leg up until it was wrapped around his waist.

He slid deeper even as he broke their kiss.

If she weren't such a bliss filled idiot, Viki knew she should consider self preservation. This was supposed to be *her* seduction. He was supposed to be *her* catch.

So why did she suddenly feel as if she was the one who'd been caught? As if she was the one who'd been seduced?

His gaze was so intense, it caused another degree of heat to pour through her all the way to her toes. No, she really didn't remember who was supposed to seduce whom. And she didn't care.

The corner of his mouth hitched up into a devastating grin. Her breath caught in her throat. Gracious, the man was gorgeous. She wrapped her arms tightly around him and hid her face against his neck. He stilled inside her.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, a smile touching her own lips. Somehow she should have known. Carter Vaggio was a masterful lover. Warm and giving.

He gathered her to him and rolled until she was on top. His hands immediately slid up to cup her breasts. She adjusted the tilt of her hips to accommodate him, but she was feeling him in places she didn't know existed. She almost giggled at that clichéd thought, but he picked that split second to rotate his hips just so, and the wonderful twisting motion brought a new height of pleasure. Her toes actually curled.

"See, this is where I think you should be. On a pedestal where I can worship you."

Viki laughed to cover the tinge of embarrassment that flooded her. Her quiet artist was turning out to be quite the Casanova. Who knew?

"You're making me blush."

"It's a good color on you." He traced a finger over her collarbone

## Madison Chase

and down between her breasts to circle her belly button. "Something between a juicy watermelon and a blushing peach ripe off the tree."

He pushed himself into a sitting position and wrapped one arm around her waist while the other cupped the back of her head.

"And I bet you taste just as good," he whispered before claiming her lips.

The friction inside and out increased as they began to move together, both fighting to be as close as possible while seeking that wonderful release. Viki ground her hips against him and felt like something inside her clicked. As if she were a lock and he were the key. The world exploded around her, and they clung to each other, arms and legs tangled, torsos glued together, their breath coming in and out as one.

They stayed like that for endless minutes. When they finally pulled apart and lay down, he turned toward her, lacing his fingers with hers.

"I was right. You do taste good." Her insides were already warm and mushy, but his smile melted her even more.

"You're pretty yummy yourself," she said, letting her fingers walk up his chest. "Can I see my portrait now?" she asked with a teasing smile.

He laughed.

"Not yet."

"Come on," she said, doing her best to sound whiney but innocent.

"So you were just seducing me so you could see your portrait, is that it?"

Viki thought about it for a moment, putting on an expression of mock thoughtfulness.

"No. But that'd be a bonus," she said, not the least bit serious.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait."

"So how long have you been a painter?"

He sighed. Her eyes roamed over his handsome face and perfectly sculpted torso, and she had trouble believing she was here, in bed, with this man.

"For a long time. As long as I can remember." His hair tumbled over his forehead, making him look even more sexy and dangerous.

He slid a hand over her hip to the curve of her waist, and she

## Portrait of Seduction

instinctively moved closer. But he made no move to kiss her or pull her closer still. In fact, he just stared at her as if he were trying to pick out just the right words.

"Did you always want to be a painter?"

He nodded.

"Well you're good at it...from what I can see," she teased.

"It's about the only thing I was ever good at."

"Not the only thing," she murmured, feeling a blush coming on.

He smiled slightly and then leaned forward to kiss her lips. Before she could begin to return his kiss, he pulled back and snuggled into his pillow.

"So tell me about yourself, Victoria Aragon. What secrets are you hiding in those beautiful eyes of yours?"

"I'm not hiding any secrets," she said with a smile.

He raised an eyebrow, clearly waiting for her to answer him.

"Well, you know my grandmother."

"Interesting woman."

"That's not what I'd call her. More like a witch really."

"Do you believe in witches?" he asked.

"You're the second person who's asked me that this week," she murmured, lacing her fingers with his. She told him about her grandfather and his talk of spirits and magic.

"I'm not really sure what I believe any more."

"What about your parents?"

"They died, years ago. Then my grandfather died. And then Veronica died. And now I'm alone." But as she said the words, she didn't feel alone. And tonight didn't feel like just sex. It was starting to feel like more.

"Veronica?"

The sincerity in his beautiful green eyes was her undoing. Before she could stop herself, she'd turned into his arms and told him everything. About Veronica's death, Paul and her suspicions. But she didn't cry nearly as much as she thought she would.

"You don't believe she fell?"



## Madison Chase

"No."

He cuddled her closer and whispered beautiful words in a language she didn't understand. But it didn't matter. His words soothed her soul, and she realized that the most wonderful thing happened. Carter had opened his heart to her. And she to him. She'd never known how wonderful pillow talk could be, she thought as she drifted to sleep happy for the first time in months.

## Portrait of Seduction

### Chapter Ten

*An idea can turn to dust or magic, depending on the talent that rubs against it.*  
~ William Bernbach

The next morning, Viki awoke very slowly. The satin of the sheets was like a warm cocoon around her, but cool air chilled her skin. Several smells assaulted her nose as she took a deep breath and started to stretch. Paint. Sex. Coffee. Carter. What a delicious blend.

She propped one eyelid open as her toes curled and her fingers twisted into the soft fabric. She was alone in bed. A wave of disappointment brought her awake with a start. She sat up in bed and luckily had the foresight to pull the sheet around her.

Carter was pouring coffee into a gray cup. As if sensing her gaze on him, he turned toward her, and she got her first good view of him in nothing but those close fitting jeans of his.

"Morning, beautiful."

"Morning, handsome." The smile hovering on his lips and the way he looked at her settled her unease. He wasn't regretting their night together.

"Coffee?"

She nodded, her mouth as dry as toast.

"How would you like it?"

"A cream and two sugars."

He turned back to the counter, giving her a few moments to collect

## Madison Chase

herself. Furiously, she combed her hair with her fingers. But she couldn't take her eyes off the stunning man across the room. She cocked her head to the side, wondering how any man could look that fabulous from the side. What a profile. Strong and solid, perfect features.

Her muscles and nerves reminded her of how talented he was. Images of the two of them flashed through her mind, and she found herself getting warm and tingly all over again.

"A cream and two sugars," he said as he handed her a mug.

"Just the way I like it." She inhaled deeply, her eyes closing as the rich aroma teased her nose. Normally she let her coffee sit for a few minutes to cool down. It gave her a chance to catch up with Sylvia and think of excuses to get out of the Manor. But this smelled exotic, and she dared a sip. Her taste buds were rewarded if somewhat singed.

"It's from Peru."

"It's good. A bit stronger than my normal cup, but good. Who knew you were a coffee snob." She gave him a warm smile over the top of her cup.

"I'm afraid I don't have anything for breakfast, but I could run down the street."

"I'm not hungry." Well, she was. But it was a different kind of hunger. He leaned forward to give her a slow, lingering kiss. It melted her insides faster than the steaming coffee.

"Finish your coffee," he murmured, pulling away. "I started a new painting this morning." He got up, walked over to his easel, then studied the canvas.

"What are you painting?"

"You." His glance told her all she needed to know. He was painting her again, but this time she wasn't wearing the hideous velvet dress.

"Well," she said, taking a deep breath. "Where do you want me?"

"Right where you are. Finish your coffee."

So she did. But with each sip, she watched him and slowly lost a little more of her heart.

"Put your right arm here, under your pillow," Carter directed. Viki had finished her coffee and was now watching him with bedroom eyes.

## Portrait of Seduction

This morning he'd awoken early just as the sun started to touch the sky. He'd laid there watching the beauty in his bed.

She was the first human he'd slept with since...well, for a long time. But he'd done more than sleep. Much more. A chord in his heart had been plucked like a guitar string when he'd first laid eyes on her, and the melody had only increased the more time he spent with her.

She had no idea he'd been watching. And when she'd stretched just so and the black satin had pulled tightly across her breasts, tucked around her curves and a tantalizing leg had peaked out, he knew he had to paint her like that. She reminded him of a Greek goddess.

"And your leg...perfect." He strode back to the canvas and looked at her again. Her position was perfect, but now that she was awake, she watched him with an invitation in her eyes.

Control yourself.

He stared at the canvas, not really seeing it as he fought for self control. Having already prepped the canvas and painted a thin layer of ocher, he continued sketching his subject. That was it. He'd keep his mind on the forms, just as he had for the last several hundred years.

*Shapes. Concentrate on the shapes.*

He glanced back at the bed where Victoria lay. Shapes like the perfect roundness of her breasts and the flare of her hip, the curve of her waist. Damn.

Snapping his attention back to the canvas, he continued sketching. He found if he glanced at her for half a second and then back at the board in front of him, he could hold on to his concentration. But it was like rolling a giant snowball up a hill. Hard as hell. When all he could think of was her legs wrapped around him. The way she tasted and smelled, sweet and sultry with a hint of danger. Her blood, piping hot and rich, called out to him even now.

He was losing the battle.

"How are you doing?" he asked, needing a diversion from his thoughts.

"I'm fine. I like watching you work," she said. The smile she gave him made him drop the charcoal. It shattered on the floor.

## Madison Chase

Enough sketching. He went about fixing his palette, ignoring the looks she was giving him. He'd never in his life had such a poor ability to concentrate on his work. But then he'd barely been able to work at all since Friday night when he'd met Victoria for the first time.

"I can't believe you don't have a pumpkin." Her words surprised him, but he knew they shouldn't have. The more he studied her, delved into her mind, the more he saw how wonderfully unique she was. And how wrong he'd been about her.

She cared about people she didn't even know and felt emotions more acutely than any person he'd ever met — human or Other.

She was quick to smile and laughed easily, even at herself. He found her eager to defend not just herself, but those around her. She wasn't afraid to press or ask questions.

When she was nervous, she chewed her lower lip. And when she was thinking hard, she twisted a lock of her hair around her fingers.

He'd realized that she worked very hard at helping others. And there was something to be said for being able to host a banquet with ease or charm the socks off of the most hardened of hearts. Would she be able to charm Others as easily? Would she want to?

"A pumpkin?" he asked, then picked up a flat brush and began mixing colors. Blacks and grays for the sheets. Pinks and peach for the skin tones.

"To carve. For Halloween?" she said as if he'd forgotten Halloween was two days away.

"I've never carved a pumpkin."

"Never?"

He shook his head.

"Wow. Well, we should get one. Carving is fun." Her eyes lit up like a child's. He loved to see her smile, for her to look at him like that.

He still hadn't figured out what had caused her so much fear yesterday. It couldn't be him, could it? Surely not. She'd given herself to him so willingly. And as far as he knew, she didn't know his kind existed.

Gently he reached out with his mind to read hers and found it cloudy with emotions. She was thinking of him, of them. Of last night. He

## Portrait of Seduction

needed to find her fear. It was there, swirling among the other emotions, but he couldn't pinpoint it. Couldn't trap it, expose it.

"I think I'm getting 'hungry' now," she said, her voice soft.

His gaze snapped to hers, and he dropped his brush into the bucket. Her tongue slipped between her lips to wet them, and he watched as her skin flushed with desire.

"I think I'll always be hungry for you," he murmured as he lay down next to her and pulled her close.

Madison Chase

## Chapter Eleven

*What if all the myths were true...*

~ Liu Kang

After a fabulous afternoon of love making, Carter knew she must be craving food. He needed to feed as well.

"Ready to eat?"

"Starving."

"Why don't I call Freddie and have him pack us a picnic, and then we'll head to the park?" He knew he was being too greedy, but he wanted her to himself.

"That sounds great," she said, marching her fingers up his chest. "But I didn't bring a change of clothes." The corner of her mouth pulled down in disappointment.

"So we'll camp out here then. Or on the balcony."

"Sounds wonderful. Do you have something I might, uh, wear?" Her nose scrunched up as she smiled, and he felt that now-familiar pang in the region of his heart.

"You mean you don't want to stay in this glorious state all day?" he murmured, running a hand over her naked hip.

"Might get drafty."

Grinning, he went to grab a T-shirt and some sweats.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Portrait of Seduction

Viki checked her voice mail while Carter went down to the deli. She was starving. This morning, the coffee had been fine, but now she needed something more.

There were six messages from her grandmother. She skipped past each one. And nine messages from Celeste. The urgency in Celeste's last message had Viki sitting up in the bed.

"Viki. Celeste again. Look, I really need to talk to you. It's important. It's about Veronica." The mention of her sister's name was like having a bucket of ice water dumped over her head.

She tried Celeste's number, but there was no answer. Frowning, she debated what she should do. It sounded really urgent. She could come back to Carter's later.

She gathered her things and left a note for Carter. Wondering how to sign it, she finally settled on what felt most natural. "Love, Victoria."

Funny how she'd always hated the name Victoria because of the way her grandmother sneered the name. From an early age, she'd preferred to go by Viki. But the way Carter said her name made her enjoy the sound for the first time. She couldn't hear him say it enough. His slight accent and the emphasis he put on the syllables made it sound exotic.

The sweat pants and T-shirt he'd given her were too big, but she was glad she didn't have to wear the green dress. Luckily she'd worn sensible flats that didn't look totally ridiculous. But no one would have time to notice her as she rushed to her car.

There on the front window was a ticket, flapping in the gentle breeze from the passing cars.

She muttered an unladylike curse under her breath as she tore the slip of paper from under her windshield wiper blade. Just what she needed.

Opening the door, she tossed the dress into the far seat and hopped in. What did Celeste have to say about Veronica?

There were still days where Viki missed her sister desperately. But now, more and more, she was just plain mad about the loss. Her sister had died far too young.



## Madison Chase

Viki had never gotten over her suspicions about Paul. After the “wedding made in heaven”, her once vibrant sister had become more and more closed off. She’d worn dowdy clothes, long sleeves and pants. And she’d never gone to the beach again. Viki was almost positive she knew why, but at the time could prove nothing. And Veronica would admit to nothing.

Now, after all this time, she was doing what she thought she could. What she should have done a long time ago. But she’d been too young. Heck, she was probably too young still. Too bad.

Celeste answered the door as soon as Viki knocked.

“Hey. Come on in.” Celeste’s place was warm and homey. Small but well furnished and decorated in a casual but sophisticated country decor. Viki had always loved her visits because she found peace here.

But not today.

“Hi.” As Viki stepped into the living room, she found Cassidy and the huge man she’d seen her friend with at Friday night’s party already seated. They looked up at her expectantly. “Hello.”

Cassidy crossed the off-white rug and hugged Viki close. She rarely displayed this kind of affection to her friends. Something must be really wrong. Confusion and panic set in as the hair at the nape of her neck tingled.

“Sit down. We have to talk.”

Celeste was unusually quiet. Viki watched her puttering in the kitchen. She was fixing coffee. Viki’s stomach grumbled.

“Anyone hungry?” Celeste called in her sweet, southern accent.

“Starving. I was about to have lunch when you called.”

“Sorry. I’ll fix us something.”

“Lunch can wait, Celeste. You need to tell Viki what’s going on.” the man said, his voice deep. He too had an accent, but she couldn’t place it.

“What about Veronica?” Viki asked. Celeste stared at a point across the room.

“Come on, Celeste,” he prompted.

“Okay, what’s going on? You guys are freaking me out.” The air in

## Portrait of Seduction

the room seemed amazingly still. Almost somber. And if it was possible, the room seemed to have lost some of its cheer since she'd last sat on this sofa. "Hello. Anyone? You called me here. And I was in the middle of something really important."

"This is more important," Cassidy began.

"I doubt that," Viki said, her uneasiness taking over.

"Remember the other day when I told you I saw Celeste freeze some things? And how I had some, uh...suspensions?" Viki nodded, not liking where this conversation was going. And not understanding what it had to do with her sister.

Celeste crossed to the living room with a tray of finger foods and sandwiches. She gave Viki a hesitant smile and sat in the white, straight back chair on the other side of the coffee table.

"Oh, for heaven sakes. Jumping around the truth isn't going to get us anywhere, is it?" Celeste leaned forward and fixed a cup of coffee, then handed it and a matching saucer to Viki. The woman had nothing if not charm. Even with Viki feeling uneasy and confused, Celeste managed to ease her.

She fixed another cup and handed it to Cassidy. Viki was amazed that she remembered exactly how they took their coffee.

"Black?" she asked the man who was sitting in the overstuffed chair at the head of the coffee table. He nodded.

"Like I was saying to Cassidy...I have a message from your sister."

Viki stared at her for what must have been half a minute. Celeste didn't look up as she continued fixing coffee and passing out food. But her motions were a complete blur to Viki. She could not have heard her friend correctly. A message...from Veronica!

"What? Let me see it," Viki said, suddenly finding her voice. After all this time. After her sister's sudden death. Viki had never had the chance to say goodbye.

"It's not written down, I'm afraid," Celeste said, her gaze meeting Viki's.

"I don't understand."

"She's a witch. A real, live, freaking witch," Cassidy said, her hand

## Madison Chase

waving in Celeste's direction as if everything was now perfectly clear.

Viki felt her eyebrows draw up. "Did you guys have a party last night or something?"

"No. Cassidy is telling the truth," the man confirmed.

"So you haven't been drinking?" Viki looked at each of them.

"No," Cassidy said, her voice raised.

"Playing on the ouiji board?"

Cassidy gave one of her signature sighs that said her time was being wasted.

"They're not lying. They haven't been drinking. And Celeste doesn't have a ouiji board," the man said.

"I'm sorry," Viki said, her head whipping in his direction as she pinned him with a stare. He didn't shrink back or look the least bit uncomfortable. In fact, the ape had the nerve to smile at her. "Who are you?"

"Viki, this is Viktor. The man I was telling you about at lunch—"

"The one who said he had a vision?" she muttered fiercely. Her friend nodded.

"He goes by Tor. Tor, this is Viki Aragon."

"Okay. I think Halloween has gone to your head," she told Celeste.

"Viki, this isn't a joke. I have a message from Veronica. She contacted me."

"Before she died," Viki supplied, as if saying it would make it true. But she had a feeling in her stomach that said that's not what Celeste meant.

"No. Yesterday."

Her friend was insane. Certifiable. Maybe she should call a doctor.

"No doctors needed, lass." Tor said.

Viki looked at each of them. They looked sincere. Normal.

"Okay," she said, feeling the pain washing through her. Tears threatened. "I don't know why you think you heard from Veronica. But she's dead. She's been dead for nine months. I've accepted that. I just can't believe you guys would be so cruel—" She set the cup and saucer on the table, then stood up. "I'm sorry. I need to go."

## Portrait of Seduction

"Viki." Celeste called in a warning voice as she walked to the door.

"What?" Viki cried, spinning back to look at them. Her elbow connected with the vase on the entry table and sent it flying.

But it didn't crash. Celeste's hand hovered in the air. Viki glanced from her friend to the floor to her right. The vase was suspended, unmoving. Frozen in time. Frozen in the air.

Viki stared in disbelief, her stomach souring. She shook her head back and forth over and over.

Some invisible force righted the vase, and it looked just as it had when she'd entered the apartment.

"D-did you do that?"

"I stopped it from falling. Your sister put it back."

"My sister?"

"She's here, Viki. She's right next to you."

"You can see her?" She searched Celeste's face, then Cassidy's and Tor's.

"Yes."

"She's a—" Viki swallowed hard, unable to finish the sentence. She had the odd sensation of someone touching her hair.

"Ghost. Yes. Come have a seat." Celeste took Viki by the arm.

Viki had a splitting headache, but she took her seat on the sofa. Her sister was a ghost. Did ghosts go to Heaven? Shouldn't she be in Heaven? No one was sweeter, more deserving of Heaven than Veronica. She'd been the perfect big sister.

Responsible. Kind. Protective. Funny. All the things Viki had needed while growing up. The support she'd needed when their grandfather had died, and then their parents' mysterious death.

"Veronica sought me out. She says she has—" Celeste paused, looking to her right.

"She's there?"

Celeste nodded.

Viki felt like her heart was being ripped in two. To think of her beloved sister so close, but invisible. Now more than ever before, she needed her sister's arms around her.

## Madison Chase

And then they were. Invisible, yes, but solid as well. Viki closed her eyes, unable to deny the truth. She felt it. She felt her sister's arms around her.

"Veronica says to tell you that she was a coward."

"What? No."

"Yes. She was a coward because she didn't believe you. And she didn't listen to you. Paul did beat her. She didn't fall down the stairs. She didn't commit suicide."

"He pushed her," Viki whispered, feeling the truth in her bones.

"Yes. She's tried all this time to find a way to prove it."

Tears seeped from her eyes. Her poor sister. She'd been stubborn to a fault.

"The CSI on the case retired the day after he closed her case. There are things he missed. Things that will prove she didn't fall. As her family, you'll need to go to the police. Get them to reopen the case."

There was a loud knock at the door. Viki flinched at the sound.

"I'll get it," Cassidy offered and headed for the door.

"Where's Victoria?" an angry voice demanded.

"Who are you?" Cassidy asked.

Viki didn't need to see who was at the door to know the answer to that question. She knew his voice instantly and just as quickly went into his arms.

"If it isn't Caravaggio," Tor said. In the back of her mind, she recognized Tor's accent as Scottish. But all she could concentrate on was the warm embrace as Carter's arms closed around her.

"I found the note you left. I wish you had waited. I would have come with you."

"Is this what was more important?" Tor asked. She turned slightly to stare at the man. He was about as subtle as a hurricane. But he seemed caring in his own way.

"Tor!" Cassidy scolded. "Don't be rude. Viki, come introduce us to your friend."

"Carter, this is my friend, Cassidy. Her friend, Tor. And my other friend, Celeste."

## Portrait of Seduction

"We've met," Tor and Celeste said in unison.

Viki frowned. "You've met?"

"Haven't told her about the ole' chompers, have you, mate?"

"Shut up, mutt." The tension in the room was as thick as Celeste's tomato soup. Viki's confusion returned.

"How do you know each other?" Cassidy asked.

"Good question," Viki said.

The five of them stood there for endless seconds staring at each other. Viki was waiting for someone to pounce. Celeste's small living room seemed even tinier. She brought a chair from the dining nook and set it opposite Tor's seat.

There seemed to be a bit of hostility between the men, and Celeste watched Carter out of the corner of her eye as if she didn't trust him.

"Tor and I go way back." Carter's hand at her back was warm and reassuring. Just what she needed right now. When her sister had died, she'd been alone. Her friends had tried to comfort her, but it just wasn't the same. Right now, she just wanted to turn into his chest and have a good cry.

"Why don't we have a seat?" Celeste went into the kitchen and came out with another pot of coffee. Viki wanted to ask how she could think of coffee at a time like this, the weirdest day of her life. But then she recognized that this was how Celeste was dealing with the turn of events. She was true southern hospitality, even if she was a witch and transplanted to New York.

In a small way, the gesture touched her. Her friend was trying to keep the peace. Some sense of normalcy. Even if Tor and Carter were eying each other like rabid dogs.

Viki and Cassidy returned to their spots on the couch, and Celeste handed them a small plate of finger sandwiches. She gave Tor a sharp look, and he quickly took his seat. Carter followed his lead and took the chair to Viki's right in front of the TV.

"Let's finish one bushel of peaches before we start on the next bunch, how about it?" Celeste said.

Tor laughed, and the sound was rich and lyrical. It brought a smile

## Madison Chase

to Viki's lips, for which she was thankful.

"We were talking about Veronica. She feels like you're in danger." Celeste gave Viki a pointed stare even as she handed Tor a plate. "Carter, would you care for a plate?" He shook his head.

Viki thought it odd that she asked Carter if he wanted a plate. Maybe she presumed he'd already eaten.

"You know bloody well he doesn't," Tor said.

Celeste wasn't much on the way of height or build, but the look she gave the big man would have stopped a T-Rex in its tracks.

"One roll in the hay ride, and you think you're the Alpha dog, do you? Hush up before I take you to the pound."

"The pound?" Viki choked on her sandwich.

Tor sat back in his chair and shoved half a sandwich into his mouth. Viki could have sworn he swallowed the thing whole. She glanced between him and Cassidy who was blushing. In all the time she'd known her, Cassidy had never blushed. What had gone on between her friend and the big Scot?

"As I was saying, Veronica has reason to believe you're in danger," Celeste continued.

"From who?" Viki asked.

"Your grandmother."

"I knew that old bitch was mean," Cassidy muttered. Celeste cut her a look as well.

"She says that your grandmother would like you—" She looked over at the empty space on the wall again. "She'd like you out of the way."

"She wants the money," Viki surmised.

"Yes. She's hired an assassin."

"An assassin?" Viki and Cassidy echoed. Her dream came flooding back.

"Okay, rewind. Where is Veronica? How do you know Carter doesn't want a sandwich? And what do you mean she's hired an assassin? As in to kill me?"

Celeste turned her head as if she was listening to someone, then she pinned Viki with her gaze again.

## Portrait of Seduction

"Veronica says this would have been much easier if you'd paid attention to your grandfather all those years ago."

"Paid attention how?"

"When he talked about the magic. Halloween. Spirits."

"I'm so confused," Cassidy said, tucking her feet beneath her.

"You're not the only one."

"Okay. Paranormal 101. This world you live in. Humans aren't the only species that walk on two legs, talk with an accent and drive mini vans," Tor said, frustration lacing through his voice. "There are werewolves. Not the kind that Hollywood dreamed up, but real ones who look like you, and well...me, but they can change form at will. There are vampires like—"

"Don't scare her," Carter bit out.

"There are also shape shifters," Celeste said. "And ghosts." She pulled another chair from the dining table and set it next to her own. She paused for a moment, then watched as if waiting for someone take a seat. "And witches. To name a few."

"Okay. I think that's my cue to leave," Cassidy said, standing up.

"Sit down. You are not leaving me here," Viki ordered.

"Don't you get it, Vik? We're a little outnumbered here. I'm not sure I believe it, but either way, I think it's time to hightail it," she whispered.

"What?" Viki whispered back.

"There. In that chair. I'm willing to bet your dead sister is sitting there in that chair. Celeste is a witch. Hell, Tor just admitted to being a werewolf. What are you?" Cassidy asked Carter.

He gave her a look of mild surprise.

"Tell her, or I will," Celeste said.

"You don't scare me, witch."

"Okay, I don't know why you guys are telling me this, but could we please get back to my grandmother?"

"We are. She's a shape shifter."

Viki couldn't have been more surprised than if she'd just sprouted an extra pair of feet. Her grandmother was evil...but demonic? Paranormal? Supernatural?



## Madison Chase

"Not demonic. Demons are a whole different breed of animal," Tor said.

"So you're a mind reader?"

He nodded.

"You can freeze things?" She looked at Celeste.

"Yes."

"So what can you do?" she asked Carter. With the way her luck was going and all the weird stuff happening, he had to be supernatural too. He was supernatural in bed.

Tor snorted.

She shot him a look. "Stay out of my head, Fido."

"He's a DayWalker," Celeste supplied.

"What is that?"

There was a long pause, but then Carter answered her himself.

"A vampire who walks in the daylight."

And she'd just made love to him. Twice.

Oh. My. God.

## Portrait of Seduction

### Chapter Twelve

*Myths which are believed in tend to become true.*  
~ George Orwell

It had been two days since Viki had fled Celeste's apartment. Since she'd run away from the man she'd grown to love more than life itself.

Tor's words played in her head over and over.

"A vampire who walks in the daylight..."

Her self preservation had picked that moment to kick in. She'd grabbed Cassidy's hand, and they'd hightailed it all right.

But not before she'd seen the devastated look on Carter's face.

The truth had sunk in now. She'd been right. Nothing was as it seemed. Her grandfather had been right too. Magic did exist, and legends weren't myths. And if it was all true, that meant her grandmother really was a shape shifter.

And the man she loved was a vampire. Albeit a very special vampire.

But she needed time to think and adjust. To get used to the idea that he wasn't human. He would live forever. And she would die.

Today was Halloween, but she found no joy at the idea of watching the children in their costumes, oozing happiness and sugar. She could find no joy at all. Between the fact that she was majorly freaked out, she still had to have dinner with her auction date, and her grandmother kept pestering her about details for her birthday party, she just wanted to crawl

## Madison Chase

under the covers and never come out again.

There was a knock at the door. Her grandmother never knocked.

"Come in."

Sylvia stepped into the room with a huge arrangement of sunflowers in her arms.

"Lordy, girl. This man must love you to death. This is the fifteenth arrangement today. Just call him and forgive him already!"

She placed the flowers on the table next to the window, gave Viki a stern look, then left.

Since she'd walked out of Celeste's apartment, the flowers had been arriving every waking hour on the hour. Roses. Lilies. Mums.

Viki wondered if Carter knew what each of the flowers meant. If he knew that sunflowers stood for adoration, pride and sunshine.

She supposed he did. After all, he'd had centuries to learn. And it seemed like just the kind of thing he'd know.

Suddenly that fascinating and exciting world her grandfather had always described didn't seem quite so wonderful. There were so many things she didn't know. So many things that scared the hell out of her. And that was half the problem. The things she'd heard scared her. And the things she didn't know scared her more.

Crossing the room, she looked at the sunflowers. They had to be the happiest flower ever. They grew, they bloomed, and then they died. But if a flower could have a happy life, Viki would bet they did.

Her birthday was the day after tomorrow. She'd finally inherit her trust fund.

*And then what*, the little voice inside her wanted to know.

She'd finally be able to move away and yet...she'd just found Carter. Her friends were here. And though the big wolf got on her nerves, she almost considered him to be a big brother. If that was the case, that meant she had family here too.

Dear God...she'd just thought of a creature — half man, half wolf — as a brother. And she hadn't puked!

Why hadn't she seen it sooner? Love, friendship, family. It was all hers for the taking.

## Portrait of Seduction

"You're right. It is. If you can get over the fear." The voice belonged to her sister. Viki spun around. But the room was empty.

"Veronica?"

"I'm here. You just can't see me."

"Then how can I hear you?" Viki wasn't so much freaked out as curious. Trying to understand the details of the supernatural was hard for a human, she mused.

"Oh, I'm channeling. You'll figure it out one day. You're right about family. There's a whole family here just waiting for you. You just have to get over your fear."

"How the heck do I do that, Miss Know It All?" Viki used the pet name she'd always called her sister. Her sister laughed, and Viki felt the sound down to her marrow.

"In Grandfather's study. The bookcase next to the fire place opens. His documents are behind it. Some you'll want to take to the police."

"I miss you."

"I miss you too, sis. Grandfather and Mom and Dad say hello. I'm afraid I have to go."

"Wait! Will I ever get to...see you again?" Viki felt utter panic. This couldn't be the last time. All this magic floating about had to be good for something.

"I can't say. But never give up hope sweetie."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun had set ages ago, yet Viki was still in her grandfather's study. He had detailed information on the supernatural creatures he'd told her about. Seeing his hand writing again, reading his words...it was like having him in the room with her.

She read about the werewolves and how they'd evolved over the years. Most were able to control when they changed. The pictures had scared her at first, but she'd pushed right through the fear.

She came to a passage marked DayWalker and her breath caught. Carter. Her heart ached for him. It was almost unbearable. Certainly

## Madison Chase

unbelievable. She'd only known him a handful of days. Yet as crazy as it was, she couldn't imagine her life or a single day of it without him.

Curling up on the old leather couch her grandfather had loved so much, she started reading.

...Caravaggio's sister was killed by demonic vampires in 1600. Vowing to change his ways, begging for forgiveness, the Gods sent Freida to turn him into a vampire so that he might have a second chance. It was no surprise that Caravaggio hated vampires above all else. And so for years he loathed himself and stalked through the night looking for his revenge.

*When he killed the vamps who'd murdered his sister, the Gods sentenced him to one thousand days in the sunlight. The werewolf known as Viktor Holt carried out the sentence and snapped the lock on Caravaggio's metal prison, opening him to the elements. And the sunlight. No vampire had ever lived though something like that...*

Carter had, her heart cried. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She ached for him, his loss and suffering. No wonder he'd been so hostile towards Tor. He'd been doing his job, but no one should have to suffer like that. Human or Other. But she kept reading.

*...Caravaggio survived it and became immune to sunlight, though he'd died a thousand deaths, only to have his heart come back to life each morning. They call him the DayWalker. He's said to be Pure of Heart, a protector of the innocent. And anyone he turns will be just like him...*

When the sun came up again, Viki closed the last book on her grandfather's shelf. Slowly, memories of him and the stories he'd told had come back to her, and she'd discovered more and more about the magic. Things she'd never imagined, and things she'd feared.

But in a way, she no longer feared. Because it was her past too. And her future.

She had a lot to do.

She would keep her date from the auction out of respect for Celeste. But she was also going to pack and get the hell out of this house. Even if she had to forfeit her inheritance, it was worth it. She didn't need it to fulfill her dreams now.

## Portrait of Seduction

Though she hadn't heard him say the words, she was stepping on faith and trusting that Carter loved her as much as she loved him. That he would always love her and take care of her.

She also had to take some papers to Tor, who was part lawyer and part executioner for the Alliance of Others, and to the police.

Her muscles protested as she climbed off of the leather sofa. This room still smelled like her grandfather even after all these years. She strode to the door, her hand grazing the polished wood on the wall. Looking over her shoulder, she could swear he was sitting behind his desk smiling at her.

A believer now, she smiled back and then stepped into the hall, closing the door behind her. Down the hall, Sylvia emerged from her grandmother's bedroom. No doubt she'd been running errands and fetching coffee.

"Where've you been?" Sylvia asked, a smile on her face.

"Reading."

"There's already been a delivery for you this morning."

Viki's heart leapt. Carter. Oh how she loved him. His gentleness. His caring nature and sweet words. The way he took control of her body and brought her such exquisite pleasure. She was no longer scared of him or what he was.

"Earth to Viki," Sylvia called, waving her hand in front of Viki's face.

Viki let out a lovesick giggle and grabbed Sylvia's hand. She squeezed, realizing that the very things she'd been searching for her whole life had been right in front of her the whole time. Sylvia, though her grandmother's assistant, had always treated Viki like a sister.

"Come on, it's on the table in the entryway."

Together they strode down the wide hallway amidst the sound of Sylvia's shoes clicking on the marble floor. As they turned the corner, the formal entry came into view. The room was large, round, and very elegant. The spiral staircase that hugged one side of the room had been a lot of fun as a child. But Viki's eyes were drawn to the round mahogany table in the center of the floor. And the perfect pumpkin sitting on top of

## Madison Chase

it.

Her heart squeezed in her chest. She didn't have to look at the note tied to the stem to know who it was from, but she did anyway.

"You carved your way into my heart. Please let me into yours.

Love, Carter"

"Oh, he's a keeper," Sylvia gushed, reading over Viki's shoulder.

He was indeed.

## Portrait of Seduction

### Chapter Thirteen

*We cannot be sure of having something to live for unless we are willing to die for it.*

~ Che Guavara

That night as she strode into the restaurant called The Vines to meet her date from the auction, Viki felt in control of her life for the first time in years. Last night she'd put some ghosts to rest and discovered that duty wasn't such a bad thing. Her legacy was not her grandmother's. Her grandmother was an Aragon by marriage. By deception. Viki was an Aragon by birth.

Her duty was to her grandfather, a wonderful man and magician. And even to her father, who'd loved her and protected her from the magic as long as he could. She'd discovered that he feared his mother would corrupt Viki and Veronica with her hatred.

And though the magic didn't pass through the women in her family, Viki felt very much responsible for the family name. It was her duty to protect the legacy.

Today she'd taken several documents to Tor so that he could work with the detective and the Alliance of Others. She prayed that the evidence would be enough to find Paul guilty of murder. And that the Alliance would take action against her grandmother. Then the nightmare would be over.

Tonight she would fulfill her promise to Celeste and the man



## Madison Chase

who'd paid so handsomely for a date with her. And then she would follow her heart, right to Carter's doorstep.

The dimly lit restaurant was packed, and the lounge was standing room only. The rooms were shaped like wine barrels, and the tables were made from sealed corks. She'd never been here before, but it was immensely popular. Luckily, they had reservations. She made her way to the maitre de and gave him her name. The balding man gave her a bright smile.

"So you're the one he paid all that money for," he beamed.

*He?* Did he know who her mystery date was? She wanted to ask, but she heard the paparazzi outside, so instead she nodded, hoping he'd go ahead and seat her.

"Right this way, Miss Aragon." He led her through the main seating area down three steps to a table that overlooked the dance floor. She was surprised to find the table empty. But at on one of the plates rested a perfect pink rose. She stared at it for several moments.

"Is something wrong, Miss?"

"No," she said, embarrassed. "Thank you."

She took her seat and lifted the rose so she could smell it. Pink...she thought back to when her grandmother had discussed flowers and how to select the perfect one for each occasion. She and Veronica had poured over the book of flowers, oohing and aahing over the pictures and giggling over the meanings.

Her date had sent her a pink rose. That seemed odd.

Perfect happiness, grace, gentility. Just like Carter.

Her cell phone buzzed. Hoping it was Tor with news, she pulled it out of her purse and whispered hello.

"Evening, gorgeous." Carter's rich voice melted her in her seat.

"Carter," she sighed.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting. My date from the auction hasn't shown up yet," she ground out.

"Right. The one who paid, what was it? A million dollars for a date." He sounded amused.

## Portrait of Seduction

"I don't care about the money. I promised Celeste, and I'm keeping my promise." She twirled her hair around her finger and crouched lower in her seat. She started to tell him that she'd gotten the flowers. The pumpkin. That she'd be at his door as soon as this date was over, but he cut her off.

"And I bet you're bored stiff. Probably twirling your hair and wondering how long until you get to leave."

That delicious, familiar chill raced over her skin, and the delicate hairs at the back of her neck stood on end like they always did when Carter was near. Her stomach did a little flip-flop, and her heart started bouncing around in her chest like a ping pong ball.

"Carter, where are you?"

There was no answer. Viki turned and looked around the dance floor. And just as she started to look the other way, the dancers parted just enough and she saw him. He was standing at the top of the stairs and looking right at her. If she'd thought her desire for him had been overwhelming before, she didn't know how to describe it now. She could barely breathe as he made his way to her table.

"Hi," he whispered in that sexy way of his after he was at last standing next to her.

"Hi," she managed to say.

"May I have this dance?"

Viki looked at the dancers and then at the pink rose.

"It was you?" she asked, finally putting the pieces together. No wonder he'd never mentioned the auction again.

"Well, I couldn't let that other man win you, could I?" He looked down at her, the edge of his mouth pulling up into self assured smile that made her blood pound through her veins.

She shook her head, touched to her soul.

"Now, how about that dance?"

She shook her head again, but put her hand in his.

"Take me home, Carter. I think your million buys you a lot more than a dance," she whispered.

"The money was for a date, nothing more."

## Madison Chase

"You don't want more?"

"I want forever." She understood everything now. Him, his past, who he was. And she was getting used to the truth. But she wasn't sure how she was going to deal with getting old and dying while he lived on without her.

"I'll give you as long as I have."

Her thoughts must have shown in her eyes because he brushed his lips against hers and then wrapped his arm protectively around her waist. She decided she'd worry about all that later. Much later.

Happiness flooded her as they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Your chariot, princess," he murmured as the limo driver opened the back door of the sleek black car.

"Victoria!"

She turned, de ja vu flooding her senses. Just like in her dream, a man stood a few yards away, a shiny black gun in his hand. It was aimed straight at her chest. Even in the dim light she could see the cold grey of his eyes. A color she recognized all too well. But the face was...different, somehow.

She felt Carter's hand tense up as he turned back.

"No!" he roared, the sound almost animal like. But it was too late. A bullet flashed from the gun and slammed into her chest. Pain ripped through her, every nerve ending screaming with it.

She fell into Carter's arms and stared up into eyes the color of golden fire. She should have been used to death by now. Used to loss and pain. But the idea of dying here on a wet sidewalk, never seeing Carter again, never telling him how much she loved him...it hurt more than being shot. It hurt worse than any pain she'd ever known.

And yet she couldn't speak. She couldn't hear anything over her own ragged breathing. And then blackness took her.

## Portrait of Seduction

### Chapter Fourteen

*I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge — myth is more potent than history — dreams are more powerful than facts — hope always triumphs over experience — laughter is the cure for grief — love is stronger than death.*

~ Robert Fulghum

He didn't have any choice. He had to turn her. His fangs lengthened and he felt a sharp energy running through him. Pure rage, stronger than he'd ever known. More potent than when he'd lost his sister. He didn't care if he attracted attention or if the whole damn world found out what he was, his pain was so strong that it threatened to bring him to his knees. He couldn't lose her now. He'd just found her.

When Marcus got back from running down the assassin, he helped Carter into the back of the limo. They pulled away just as the flashing lights and sirens turned onto the street.

Carter cradled Victoria in his lap, his own pain drifting away as he stared at her ashen face. Fear overtook him and made it difficult to breathe. It was probably good that he didn't need to breathe to survive. He bit his wrist and held it over her open mouth, letting the blood seep into her.

He cried her name over and over as he rocked her in his lap, feeding her his blood.

When dizziness threatened to overtake him, he leaned over her and let his fangs sink into the delicate skin of her neck.

## Madison Chase

Marcus drove like a devil, winding his way through the late night traffic. He had to get her to his loft where she'd be safe. Where he could protect her.

He'd died before. It hurt like hell. But this hurt so much worse. Not only might he lose her, he'd have to live with the knowledge that he'd failed to protect her. To protect the one woman who meant more to him than his own life.

Carter had never been thankful before to have Tor on his side. But tonight he was. His heart beat wildly in his chest. He wanted revenge. He wanted blood. But that wasn't what he wanted most of all. He looked down at the woman in his arms. He wanted her to live.

To live and spend eternity with him.

Damn, he was selfish. He'd turned her because he couldn't live without her. Pure Heart indeed.

They made it to his loft in record time. Like a caged lion guarding his cub, he held her throughout the night, running his fingers through her golden hair. Feeding her his blood. And praying.

\* \* \* \* \*

Viki woke with a start and clutched her chest. He'd shot her. Her dream had come true. She looked down at her chest where the hole had been.

"Victoria?" Carter sprang from the chair next to the bed and all but tackled her.

"I'm alive," she whispered, astonished and at the same time wondering why she didn't have any pain. Wondering why she was so hungry.

"I'm so sorry. Forgive me, *il mio amore*. Please forgive me." He feathered kisses across her face and then tipped his forehead against hers.

"What for?" she asked, clinging to him. God it felt good.

"I turned you. I didn't think you were going to make it. Forgive me, darling. I can't live without you."

He didn't have to elaborate. She knew what he meant and was

## Portrait of Seduction

surprised to realize that the hunger she felt was not for food. Viki's heart, or what was left with it, burst with love. What a man he was.

"There's nothing to forgive. I love you. And I'd rather live with you as a vampire than not live with you at all."

He pulled back and gave her such a joyous look that she almost cried.

*"Ti amo piu tutto nel mondo."* He crushed her to his chest, cupping her face between his hands, and kissed her with a tender passion that made her yearn for millions more just like it. "It means 'I love you more than anything in the world'."

"Thank the Gods," she whispered. "I feel the same way." He hugged her close, and when she looked over his shoulder, she was surprised to see her portrait staring back at her. It was finished. The secretive smile on her lips brought tears to her eyes. It wasn't the smile of a seductress...but of a woman in love.

## **Madison Chase**

### **Author's Bio**

Madison Chase read her first romance novel in high school, and she's been hooked ever since. After several years of writing for herself and her friends, she's ready to share her stories with you. When she's not writing, she loves spending time with her family (including her dog and cat who keep her entertained), reading, and spending time in the garden. Write to her at: [madisonchase@madison-chase.com](mailto:madisonchase@madison-chase.com) or visit her online at: <http://www.madison-chase.com>. Make sure to spend your Monday with Madison at her journal: <http://journal.madison-chase.com>.

## Portrait of Seduction

Also Available from Cobblestone Press, LLC

Slow Burn by Madison Chase © 2006

### Chapter One

"We're here with Crystal Reed, librarian, author and stripper. Welcome to the show, Crystal."

Crystal gave Garrett Vartan a quick once over. Despite wearing headphones that gave him elephant ears the man was simply...stunning.

"Thanks for having me, Garrett."

She hoped her voice didn't sound too breathless or husky, but she could feel her breath catch in the back of her throat as she watched his gorgeous lips move. The rich timbre of his voice as he said her name pulled her forward in her seat. She didn't want to miss anything about him.

*Focus, Crystal.* This was the last stop on her tour to promote her new book, and she had to make a good impression. She'd been all over the country in the past two months, and now she was back home in Miami. Well, as home as the sweltering south Florida city could be. As soon as this interview was over she could head back to her condo for some much needed R&R.

"Let's talk a little about your background. You've got a degree in



## Madison Chase

library sciences.”

“It’s actually a Masters in Library and Information Science. A great program at University of Illinois.”

“Why did you want to become a librarian?”

Hadn’t she heard that exact same question at least sixty times in that last two months? Forcing a smile, because a smile could always be heard in someone’s voice, she gave her carefully crafted answer.

“I love books. I love learning. Books and knowledge are our future. Not many people in this day in age realize that. I did, so I wanted to be a part of that future. Build the foundation, if you will.”

“So you went to school, moved south and became a librarian. When did you become a stripper?”

She was surprised he didn’t sound condescending or horny, like so many of the other male interviewers had been.

“While I was finding a job as a librarian, actually. As you can imagine there aren’t a terrible amount of librarian positions open around here, so I had to wait until a job opened up. I needed to pay the bills. Stripping does that.”

“Now, how did you make the jump between reading books to stripping? For those who haven’t seen Ms. Reed’s picture on our website, let me describe her for you. She’s got incredible white blonde hair. It looks natural—”

“It is,” she injected smoothly, her lips curving into a smile. Her confidence boosted north a bit.

“Blue eyes the color of the waters just off of Key West. Glossy lips the color of raspberries. Tall, lean figure and a killer tan. If you want more details than that, you’ll have to visit our Web site.”

“Interesting description Garrett. My lip-gloss is actually called Wet Raspberry.”

She could have sworn she heard him groan.

“So tell us, how did you make the jump? Because honestly, you don’t look like any librarian I’ve ever seen.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” And she did, because he sounded so sincere. “Actually, a comment just like that started it all. I needed a job.

## Portrait of Seduction

One of my friends—she knows who she is—said that I don't look like a librarian but I could make lots of money as a stripper. I laughed at it for a while, but like most everything I do, I researched it."

"You researched stripping?" He raised an eyebrow.

She nodded. "Yes. As an occupation. I discovered that a great many strippers are actually housewives, elementary school teachers, and students putting themselves through college or med school. Such quote, unquote, respectable jobs."

This was about the point when most of the radio interviews went south. Most show hosts didn't believe her research and they were more interested in asking her out than educating the public or promoting her book.

But Garrett Vartan simply stared at her and nodded.

"We've got to cut to a commercial, but we'll be right back with more about Crystal and her research. Don't touch that dial."

The On Air sign flicked off and Garrett tore off his headphones. Crystal slowly removed hers and then smoothed her hair, trying not to stare at the gorgeous man across the table. Why on earth was he in radio? He had a fabulous voice, but he had movie star good looks.

For the first time in years, her confidence failed her. Sweat moistened her palms even after she smoothed them down the pale pink silk of her pencil skirt. There was something about him that set off warning bells in her head. While she had a thousand retorts ready to go against a chauvinist swine, she was completely unprepared for a genuine male whose smile could melt the rubber off her tires.

What was worse, she knew there had to be a catch. He couldn't really be that perfect. That dreamy. So potently male. So understanding. Could he?

He spoke to the producer for a few moments and then turned his dark gaze back to her. She actually felt her temperature rise.

"You really *don't* look like any librarian I've ever seen."

"Have you spent much time in libraries?"

He clasped his hands together and leaned across the table in a conspiratorial manner. "Believe it or not, yes. I have a Bachelor's in

## Madison Chase

Journalism and a Masters in Philosophy."

"Interesting combination." She tilted her head to the side and regarded him. The corner of his handsome mouth hitched up in an arrogant smile.

An image of her kissing that mouth slammed into her, so real and intense that she forced her gaze away from his.

"Do you want me to put on my reading glasses?" she asked, getting back on topic. "Would that make me look more like a librarian?"

This time it was his gaze that roamed over her. He looked at her so long, so slowly, she could imagine molasses pouring out of a jar faster than it took him to look his fill.

"No. You look just fine." That disarming smile hovered over his lips, threatening to melt her insides all over again. Instead, he sat back in his chair and looked over at the producer.

"We're back on in ten..." the producer said. "Nine. Eight..."

"Good. Because I don't have any reading glasses," she said with a smile of her own.

They put the ear crushing headphones back on and stared at the On Air sign.

"We're back with Crystal Reed. Librarian, Author, and Stripper. Crystal is telling us about her decision to become a stripper. Crystal?"

"I did research on the work environment and take-home pay. I even looked into the different types of stripping and regulations."

"You sound very analytical."

"I try to be."

"Did it interest you at that point?"

"Yes."

"You don't mind taking your clothes off...in front of an audience?"

"No. Not really."

"Crystal, you probably just caused half a dozen traffic accidents across Dade County. Can you tell us why you don't mind taking your clothes off for the audience?"

She managed not to laugh at the eagerness in his voice. Most of the men she'd met on her tour had wondered and gotten excited about her

## Portrait of Seduction

unabashed nature.

"I think the human form is beautiful. Otherwise why would it be the model for so many sculptures, paintings and photos throughout history? No, there's nothing to be ashamed of by being in the nude."

"But what about stripping? You come out on stage, with clothes on, right?"

"Clothes or lingerie. Correct."

"And you take it off."

"To music. Yes."

"And you dance."

"Very seductively, I'm told."

She waited for his next comment, his next question, but he merely stared at her with his mouth hanging open slightly. Perhaps she'd short-circuited his brain.

His reactions were amusing. "So after a few months of stripping, I got a job as a librarian. Things went really well for a few years. My library was far enough away from the club that I didn't really think anything of it."

"But you were fired, correct? From the library?"

"Right. One Friday night one of the other librarian's husbands came in. We'd met a couple of times. Anyway, he reported, anonymously, to the library that I was seen dancing at a strip club and the rest, as they say, is history."

"So they fired you for being a stripper?"

"Correct."

"How do you know who reported you?"

"Well, he was at the club, he gave me a twenty-dollar tip, and the next day I was fired, so I'd say those facts pretty much lead to one person. Him."

"Not to sound like a shrink, but how did you feel about that?"

Was she mistaken, or were his eyes beginning to glitter? His jet-black hair fell in unruly waves across his forehead giving him the ultimate bad-boy surfer look. If he was playing doctor, she'd love to lay down on his black leather couch for his professional, and not-so-professional,

## Madison Chase

observation. And exploration. Her nipples hardened at the thought.

*Focus.*

"Bad, obviously. At the time it really hurt, but now it almost seems like a blessing in disguise."

"How so?"

Crystal uncrossed and re-crossed her legs and leaned back toward the mike. His eyes followed the movement.

"Well, it gave me the opportunity and the drive to write, which I'd never done before. It also made me take a look at my morals. The switch led me down a different path, an unexpected one. One that I'm glad I'm on."

"All righty, folks. We'll be right back to hear about Crystal Reed's debut book, *The Sex Life of a Stripper*."

This time when the On Air sign went off, Crystal leaned forward. "So how long have you been in Miami?" she asked.

"Two years. Why do you ask?"

"Your accent."

A pitch-black eyebrow shot up.

"You're from Texas, right?"

That arrogant smile returned, and he nodded. "Where are you from?"

"I'm a Miami girl."

It didn't take a lot of imagination to envision him in cowboy boots atop a big horse. His jet-black hair would glint in the sunlight and blow in the breeze. He kept it a little on the long side, a few unruly locks curled over his ears.

"So why does a Miami girl go to Illinois for school?"

"To get away for a while," she said.

"Why do I get the feeling there's more to it than that?"

Crystal just smiled and waited, as the producer began his countdown.

"Afternoon, everyone. We're talking with Crystal Reed today. Crystal's new book, *The Sex Life of a Stripper*, is on shelves now. Crystal, I was really surprised that the title has nothing to do with the book's

## Portrait of Seduction

content.”

“Yeah, most guys are disappointed by that. But you have to admit it’s a catchy title.”

She glanced over at him and felt her heart falter. He was smiling at her again. An honest-to-God, melt-in-your-seat-smile. Heaven help her.

“Indeed.”

“The book is actually about discovering myself. About finding confidence, grace, acceptance.”

“Chapter nine is titled, ‘Have Him Eating Out Of Your Hand In No Time.’ Can you tell us about it?”

She felt her eyebrows arch. He’d actually read the book? No way. Most likely he’d just skimmed the table of contents.

“That was a fun chapter to write. It’s kind of like a crash course in being confident as a woman—not really about making men your love slave or anything. There are so many things that can just kill your confidence. Things that make you feel undesirable. Society’s image of what’s beautiful, for instance.”

“You mean the push to be super thin?”

“Exactly. Super thin. Super beautiful. Suddenly normal size average women are made to feel like ugly ducklings, and it’s just not true. But because the attitude is deemed acceptable, it kills the confidence of some women. And that stinks. So chapter nine is my tribute to normal women everywhere who need to take back their confidence.”

“No offense, Crystal, but you sound like you’re speaking from the heart—”

“I am.”

“—yet, you’re a knockout.”

“Ahh, but Mr. Vartan, you’ve just judged a book by its cover. I didn’t always look this way. It was after I decided, ‘to hell with Hollywood I like my curves’ and started paying attention to myself, my body, my appearance, that things changed for me.”

“It’s Hollywood’s loss that they don’t like curvy women.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“You actually have pictures of yourself from when you were

## Madison Chase

younger in your book."

Of course he would have looked at the pictures. The picture section was on extra glossy paper right in the middle of the book.

"Yes."

"Why did you include them?"

"So people can see that I'm real. I'm not some bimbo Barbie. I'm not super thin. I'm not super beautiful. And I don't wear a D-cup."

Crystal saw the producer out of the corner of her eye. He appeared to be choking.

"Inquiring minds want to know more..." Garrett said, his dreamy brown eyes getting impossibly darker.

"I'll bet they would." She gave him a little smirk.

"Well, put us out of our misery, Crystal. Every single man in Miami has one question on their mind right now. Ok, two. Number one, do you have a boyfriend? And Number two, what's your phone number?"

"Answer one, no. I don't have a boyfriend. And answer two, I'm not telling."

"Well, there you have it fellas. Crystal, it's been a pleasure. We're wrapping up our show. We'll be back Monday, same place. Same time."

Garrett ripped off his headphones with renewed vigor and tossed them onto the desk. Crystal did the same, glad to be able to stretch. She picked up her purse and stood.

"Thanks so much for the interview," they said at the same time. Then they shared a laugh.

"I'll walk you out."

"Thanks." She felt both shy and incredibly aware under his intense gaze.