



Slow Burn

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## **Slow Burn**

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## **Slow Burn**

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**Madison Chase**

**Dedication**

To my wonderful husband, who always supports and loves me no matter what. I love you.

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### 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 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

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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. 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

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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 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

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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 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,

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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, 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?"



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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 début 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 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.

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"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 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?"

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"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.

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### Chapter Two

Garrett was almost a foot taller than her, she noticed as they started down the hallway toward the bank of elevators. And a whole lot wider. Not grossly muscular, but she'd bet he wouldn't have any problem sweeping her off her feet. Literally.

*Forget about it, Crystal. It's just business. And besides... What if he's attached? What if he's another asshole in disguise?*

Either way, stealing another woman's man was something she would never, ever do.

They stepped onto the elevator and Garrett pushed the button for the ground floor.

"I really enjoyed your book."

She looked over at him, her jaw dropping slightly. Butterflies took flight in her stomach. "You really read it?"

"Of course. I thought it was going to be about sex, but..."

She laughed. "Did you not read the caption on the back?"

"You mean the one under your picture?" He put his hands on his hips and watched the glowing numbers count down over the doors.

"Yeah. That's the one."

"Sorry to say I didn't make it past the picture," he teased, disarming her once more with his wide smile.

She started to give him a playful punch in the shoulder, but the elevator jerked to a halt and she pitched forward into his arms.

"Thanks..." she said softly and righted herself. He was so

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warm...solid. The material of his T-shirt soft to the touch. Her insides turned to mush, even as she resisted the urge to throw herself back against his hard body.

She smoothed her hands down her skirt to keep from reaching out.

"So...no boyfriend, huh?"

"Nope." She stared up into his eyes, willing him to kiss her.

"Girlfriend?" she queried.

"Nope."

She nodded.

"Does the elevator...do this often?" she asked, her hand fluttering toward the paused numbers overhead, but she never took her gaze from his.

She felt like a delicate little moth being drawn against her will to a big bad flame. Okay, so not totally against her will. Her overactive imagination—not to mention libido—was totally willing. And that was scary, because she was sure her libido had died years ago, never to be resurrected. She'd definitely not been interested, much less felt this delicious fluttering in her stomach, since then. And that was probably a warning sign. One she'd do good to pay attention to.

"Not since I've been working here."

"This is typical," she murmured, glancing at the numbers, and then at the emergency phone symbol on the wall. Not that she was eager to call for help and get out of here.

"How so?"

She smiled. "Seems like a scene from a novel. You know, they get stuck in the elevator, and—" She didn't have the courage to finish *that* sentence.

"And?" he asked, tilting his head to the side as he regarded her.

"Just and. But there could be a dot dot dot after it."

He laughed and leaned closer.

"So, how would I do as a hero?"

"Oh, I think you'd get an A-plus." He puffed out his chest and flexed a bicep. She laughed, but it came out more like a breathless giggle. Taking a step back, she wondered if anyone knew the elevator was stuck.

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The temperature was starting to climb.

The thought was quickly replaced as he stepped closer, propped a hand against the wall over her shoulder and stared down at her. The warm light above seemed to ignite a golden fire to his hair, his eyes. He looked even more handsome up close. Breath-stealing gorgeous. Heart-pounding, stomach-flopping, knees-shaking gorgeous.

Gracious girl, snap out of it. Take the lead. But that was easier, far easier, said—thought—than done. It was hard to take control when all she could think about was the fact that God had created Garrett's lips for kissing. Full and oh so soft. She would bet her favorite stilettos that he was a man who knew how to use those lips, too. Who'd take control, gently at first until a fire overtook them both. And when they both burned up with it, he'd be just the kind of guy to slow down before he turned the heat up even higher.

Right now that heat burned in the dark recesses of his eyes. He looked her over slowly, intensely, taking in every last detail. She felt naked, raw. Once again her nipples beaded against the soft fabric of her jacket. It was as if he could read her; her mind, heart, soul. And yet he didn't budge. Hardly moved except for the steady rise and fall of his hard chest. He didn't look away. Didn't break eye contact. Didn't say a word.

Crystal realized that she was definitely not in control here and had no hope of doing so. There was a pull in the small space stronger than her confidence, her control, her pride.

It scared the hell out of her.

Garrett stared down at Crystal and wondered if she was for real. He had never met a more engaging, charming, sexy woman. She was not what he'd expected.

He wanted her. Desperately. To unravel that cool façade she'd weaved around herself while she flirted and teased. To learn everything she hadn't included in her book. How could she be so subtle and yet so in-your-face at the same time?

Like her outfit. Pale pink in a soft looking fabric. Probably silk or something equally expensive. In a conservative cut no less. The skirt fell right below her knees, and he was dying to catch a glimpse of what was

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beneath. He had never in his life been more turned on. Pink wasn't a color he considered sexy. Normally. On the contrary, it was for babies and little girls. It reeked of innocence. But on Crystal it was a mix of innocence and seduction, a hint of mystery that had driven him wild since she'd walked in the door an hour ago. Pink would forever remind him of this woman, this moment, her subtle fragrance swirling around him as her clear blue eyes shined up at him full of her secrets. Secrets he found himself wanting to know more about.

"Are you going to kiss me?" she asked, her voice breathless with a hint of uncertainty.

That threw him for a loop. Her book, her interview, had shown her to be completely certain and in control. In fact, her book had a whole chapter on confidence and another on *taking* control.

Was that what he'd expected? For her to take control and jump into his arms?

He looked at her lips. With a little added gloss and sparkle, they were a shade or two darker than her suit. He wondered if they'd taste like raspberries...or something just as delicious and feminine.

"I might just die if I don't," he admitted.

The uncertainty in her eyes was replaced by surprise. She had to know how she affected him, to know how she affected men in general. The thought of her with other men, of them staring at her, touching her, kissing her... He didn't want to examine that too closely. The feeling was frighteningly akin to possessiveness.

She tilted her head back a little, showing the column of her neck, offering her lips.

He didn't suppress the groan that rumbled from deep inside.

She whispered his name as she ran a hand up his chest, behind his neck, pulling him closer. His name on her lips sounded like a mating call. Something you'd hear on the breeze of a spring day in the Sahara. Hot. Spicy. Inviting. And yet, dangerous.

Even though he was caught in the brilliant blue gaze of her eyes, something told him to tread very, very carefully. The idea of being another notch in her bedpost just didn't sit right. And as much as he

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wanted to dip his head and plunder her mouth like any good pirate, he held himself back.

With a metallic screech, the elevator began its decent again.

He kept his eyes locked with hers for the remaining seconds of the ride.

The doors opened with a ding.

"I've got to go," she whispered.

It was difficult, but he pushed back, glanced away, and let her go. He stared after her until the doors began to close. At the last second she stuck an elegant hand inside and dropped a card on the floor. The doors slid closed and she was gone. Garrett looked down and shook his head, trying to decide if he'd dreamed everything. But the card was real enough.

He picked it up, running his thumb over the high gloss card. It was black with a white silhouette of a naked woman, and an address. He flipped it over and found a phone number scrawled in hot pink ink.

That night, Garrett sat at the desk in his home office and stared at the hot pink scribble. He'd picked up the phone half a dozen times, but each time he'd put it back down. This time he picked up the glass of scotch and took a long sip, relishing the slow burn. Mind made up, he drained the glass, grabbed the phone, and punched in her number.



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### Chapter Three

"Hello?" Garrett heard her say.

"Hi Crystal." His stomach was in knots. Damn, he needed another drink and a cold shower. In all his years, no woman had ever affected him this way. Not Suzy Thompson, his date to prom. Not Shelly Roberts, the woman he'd lost his virginity to after a college football game. The team had lost, but he'd won that night. Even Marissa Harmon hadn't turned him on this much, and she was one of the hottest women in Miami.

Until he'd met Crystal.

"Hi. I was wondering if you'd call." She sounded pleased.

Truth be known, he was having a hard time remembering what Marissa or any of the other women he'd dated looked like. None of that was important anymore. "Hope you don't mind."

"I wouldn't have given you my number if I did."

She'd given him more than that. She'd given him her club's card. She'd made an extreme effort to keep quiet about where she danced before and during the interview. The details weren't in her book, either. He supposed she couldn't be too careful. There were plenty of freaks in Miami.

"So what are you doing on a balmy Friday night?" she asked.

He propped his feet on the desk and imagined her stripping out of her pink suit. Or better yet, standing in the doorway of his office stripping out of that pink suit. The dim light of the old banker's lamp his grandfather had given him casting a warm glow on her lightly bronzed

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skin.

He could see her hands on the buttons of the jacket. Slim fingers, perfectly polished nails undoing each one, revealing that luscious body underneath.

"Garrett?"

Damn. He had to get a hold of himself. Judging by the bulge in his jeans, he knew that was going to be a hard ticket to fill.

"What am I doing? Thinking about that damn suit you were wearing today. Do you intentionally try to drive men crazy?"

"Only when I'm dancing."

He felt as much as heard himself groan. "So, do strippers have a theme song?"

She laughed. "Of course. Into the Groove, by Madonna."

He groaned again. "Appropriate."

"We think so."

He heard something that sounded like water. "What are you doing on a hot Friday night?"

"Honestly? Taking a bath."

Garrett clinched his fist and tried to keep his blood from rushing south. "Sounds...enjoyable."

"You have no idea. I haven't been home in months. Every day I've seen a different bathroom, a different shower. No baths. And my feet are exhausted."

He had no trouble imagining her chin deep in bubbles, running her slick hands over her curves.

"Garrett?"

"I'm here. Just thinking."

"About?"

"You." Wasn't it obvious? At least it was to him and his raging hard-on. Damn, the woman was hot. And she wasn't even trying to be. She was just sitting there trying to relax after a long book tour, and here he was thinking about sliding between her sheets, between her thighs...between the silky lips that would surely be waiting for him, warm and oh-so-wet.

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"Mmmm." Crystal tipped her head back against the faux marble and thought about the sexy radio host on the other end of the line. Amazing how she could just sit there with him on the other end of the phone and feel so incredibly connected.

She could still feel his hard body against hers, see his gorgeous eyes.

"I had a good time today," he murmured.

"You sound surprised."

"I was."

"Gee, thanks."

"What I mean is, I expected something—someone—different."

"What did you expect?" She asked, closing her eyes.

"A stuck up man-hating bitch." He laughed a little, lightening the mood. "Actually, I wasn't sure what to expect. It's like you're part pearl and part barracuda."

"I'm just gonna nod and smile."

"I have a confession," he said.

"Me too."

"You go first."

"I really wanted to kiss you today," she admitted.

"I wanted to kiss you, too."

He sounded adorably frustrated. She could tell that Garrett was a man who got what he wanted. And she was a woman who got what she wanted. But the question was, what did she want?

What did he want?

Her hormones were running high. She'd been on tour for two months. Little sleep combined with jet lag didn't seem to be curbing her lust for the jock. It was entirely possible that she was just attracted to Garrett because he was hot and available.

But she was starting to doubt it. She'd never reacted like this before. Never felt so feminine. Or nervous. And she knew it was because a man like Garrett Vartan had the power to break through her resistance, smash her self-control, and possibly break her heart.

"Why didn't you?" she asked, her voice surprisingly husky.

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"This is going to—you're going to laugh. This is pretty lame but..."

"Garrett, just say it. I'm a big girl."

"I didn't want to be just another guy in the line of guys."

Her jaw dropped open and a shallow "oh" escaped her lips.

"I told you it was stupid."

"That's not stupid," she countered. Dear God, where had he been all her life? Whew. Suddenly the water seemed way too warm. She looked out the window at the night sky and wondered if he was looking at it too. Deep midnight blue and dark inky purples swirled outside. "What's your confession?"

"I really want to see you again."

"That could be arranged," she said, the corner of her mouth tugging up into a grin.

"What are you doing this weekend?"

She chewed her bottom lip as she mentally opened her schedule.

"Working. What are you doing for the rest of the night?"

A long silence stretched after her question. Maybe she'd been too bold.

"Well, that depends," he replied.

"On?"

"You."

"I haven't eaten yet. Care to come over for a late dinner?"

"I'd love to..."

She could do this. Dinner with a gorgeous man. She would not make an idiot out of herself. Would not! "Great." She rattled off her address.

"I'll bring the wine."

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### **Chapter Four**

Garrett stared at the elevator doors and felt like a heel. How many other guys had raced over to her house with a bottle of wine? How many had she invited? He didn't want to think about the others.

All he knew was the she was totally under his skin. Like a splinter that he couldn't get out. It wasn't just her delicious body. It was the way she talked; so confident and yet endearingly innocent. The way she smiled; so sincere and yet so sexy. If she were any other woman, it would have felt like an act. Like a game she played in order to seduce.

But Crystal wasn't like that. She was far too honest, even if she did seem to keep a part of her self reserved. He could tell from her book, from the look in her eyes, the questions she answered and the ones she refused to answer.

And the way she walked. Damn. He looked up at the ceiling and mentally put a leash on his run away libido. Not that he could help it. She had a runway strut that came from years of wearing high heels and skirts that would bring any man to his knees. Like the pink heels she'd had on today. Good Lord in Heaven, he'd almost swallowed his tongue when she'd walked into the station. In classical slow motion movie style his eyes had started at her feet. And those sinful pink heels.

The elevator doors whooshed open, pulling him from his memory. It was probably a good thing too. Just the thought of her long legs made him hard. He strode down the hall and searched for the right apartment number. He knocked on Crystal's door and tucked the bottle of wine

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beneath his arm, a smile on his lips as the memory took over again.

The pointy stilettos had a tiny open toe that let her perfectly polished toes peek out. Then the shimmering material wrapped up around the sides of her feet only to open again and show off her heel. His mouth had been watering at that point. But his eyes continued upward to where the shoes' laces wrapped up around her ankle a few times and tied into a sexy little bow. It was like her feet were a Christmas present that he couldn't wait to unwrap.

But then his eyes continued their journey, up her long legs, past the thin skirt to the form-fitting jacket that outlined her luscious curves. It was amazing he'd even been able to say hello without drooling on her. But he'd never drooled on a woman, and he never would. Drool *over* them, yes. Drool *on* them, no. Besides, his mother would rise from the grave and beat his ass if he ever did anything so crass.

But Crystal's clear blue eyes captivated him even more than her body had. Captivated, held and had tortured him since the moment he'd met her. All her secrets were buried there in their icy blue depths.

He heard a pitter-patter and then the turning of the locks. The door opened wide and there Crystal stood, her hair wet and stringy, a fluffy white towel wrapped around her body. All the air squeezed out of his lungs.

"Sorry. Lost track of time. Come on in. I'll go put some clothes on." When he didn't move, she reached out, tugged him across the threshold and closed the door.

Her hand was warm and soft, and he ached to pull her into his arms and see if the rest of her skin was as silky.

Crystal looked up to see Garrett's eyes darkening. Slightly embarrassed that she hadn't gotten out of the tub sooner, she turned and rushed down the hall to her bedroom. "I'll just be a minute," she called.

When Crystal had opened the door and looked up over his strong features and that kissable mouth, a surprising urge to drop her towel and jump into his arms had washed over her, drowning her with its power. She had to get in control of herself.

Slipping into satin pinstriped pajamas, she tried to think of

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anything other than the gorgeous man waiting in her living room. She thought about her dance routine, getting back to the club, calling her editor come Monday.

It was no use. She was wound as tight as a violin string and doubted there was anything she could do about it. Well, maybe there was one thing.

She found Garrett looking over the books on one of the shelves that flanked the TV armoire. She studied him for a moment, taking him in. He was a big man. She'd dated lots of men, but none like him. None so exquisitely put together. She doubted he worked out at some fancy gym. His muscular physique could only be designed by good old-fashioned hard work, heavy lifting, and push-ups. She liked that. Really, really liked that. Solid was good. Strong legs were good, too. Man, she'd never seen such a great looking butt in her whole life.

His broad shoulders stretched the T-shirt, and she started to reach out to touch him. She knew she needed to take it slow, even though every little cell in her body was demanding that she speed things up. Snatching her hand back, she looked away. He'd poured two glasses of wine and set them on the coffee table. What would he think of her apartment? She'd always gone for comfort over style.

When he turned, she was unable to escape the look in his eyes, her own desire, the reality of how good he looked standing there in front of her collection of history books and pop fiction.

"Hi," he said, and stepped closer.

"Hi."

"I liked your towel." He grinned, and she felt her stomach flip-flop.

"I'll just bet you did. It was a bit drafty."

"Is that right?" He stood inches away, regarding her. He reached up and tugged on a strand of her still-damp hair. "Would I sound like a total jerk if I said I like you with wet hair?"

"Most men would, but you don't." He definitely wasn't most men. She'd met lots of *them* on her book tour. Some real class acts. Some days she'd made a beeline for her hotel room and took a hot shower. At least when she danced at the club there was no pretense about why they were

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there. The men knew it, and so did the dancers. It was an honest transaction. But men outside the club were a different story. They saw nothing but a pretty face and a great body.

Which led her to wonder why he didn't seem like a jerk. Did he see past her face and body? Probably not.

"I like to think I'm not most men, but that sounds pretty clichéd."

"Very," she agreed. "But I don't mind clichés. They are what they are for a reason."

"I poured the wine. Hope you don't mind," he said, turning back to the honey-colored coffee table where the wine glasses sat.

"No, I'm glad you did. I'm glad you could find everything. I'm afraid it's going to take me a few days to get reacquainted with my own kitchen."

He smiled at that and handed her a glass. "Tell me what you think. I haven't tried anything from this vineyard before."

She sniffed the pink liquid and then took a small sip. "Delicious." She eyed him for a few seconds over the top of her glass.

"What?"

"I would have pegged you for a Heineken man."

"Oh, I enjoy a good Heineken, but I love to try new things. Wine, beer, coffee."

Women? she wondered. Maybe the wine was going to her head.

"What shall I cook for dinner? I stopped at the store on the way home. And before you ask, yes, I can cook."

"Is this from chapter nine?"

She laughed. He must have read her book.

"Whatever you'd like is fine with me."

"Oh, good answer. Your mom must have taught you well," she said as she strolled into the kitchen.

"She did, God rest her soul."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up. I just—"

He put a finger to her lips. "How could you have known? And it's no big deal. I can talk about it."

"What was she like?"



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"Great mom and wife, fabulous cook."

"Uh oh. So I have a lot to live up to, huh?"

"She made the best lasagna."

"That so?" She pulled a package of Ritz crackers from the pantry and spread them on a plate.

"Yep. Being Italian and all, it was expected, I guess."

"You must have been spoiled with great food."

"Yep." His face lit up.

"Well, I thought we'd start off with an easy little horse dover, aka hors d'oeuvres, of crackers and cheese. And then have chicken, salad, and garlic bread. How's that? Allergic to anything?"

"Not allergic to anything, and you know what they say."

She raised an eyebrow in question.

"Quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

"Well, then let's see how close I can get. It's nothing fancy, so don't say I didn't warn you."

"How close do you want to be?" he murmured.

Oh boy, that was a loaded question. One she wasn't about to try to answer now. She gave him a teasing smile. "How close do you want me?"

He pulled her flush against him. She could feel every hard plain of his body. Oh... "That's pretty close," she said on a breath, wishing she could look into his eyes.

"Hope you don't mind." Garrett trailed his hands down her sides. The smooth fabric of her pajamas made it easy to explore.

His cock grew harder by the second and he knew she could feel it. She made a throaty little noise that made his blood boil. He wanted to hear it again and again.

More gently than he thought possible in his heated state, he turned her in his arms. She gazed up at him and he wondered what she was thinking.

He backed her to the counter and held her in place with his body. "I think I'm going to get that kiss now," he whispered, cupping her face in his hands.

"By all means..."

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He touched his lips to hers, half sure that this flame he was feeling was because he hadn't been with a woman in several months. But as she came alive in his arms, he knew he was wrong.

Her arms wound around his neck, her fingers tangling in his hair as she opened her mouth beneath his. His tongue danced into her mouth and hers danced right back. He couldn't get enough of her, of the feel of her lips beneath his, her tongue.

Blood rushed so quickly to his groin he thought he'd faint. He jerked away from her and moved to the other side of the kitchen, trying to catch his breath.

"Wow," she whispered, her fingers against her lips.

"I'm sorry. I just—"

"Shh, I know." She stepped closer and brushed a kiss against his cheek before turning to the fridge. "We'll take it slow. Slow is better anyway. Gives time to build anticipation." She looked down at the bulge in his jeans.

They helped themselves to the cheese and crackers she'd set out while Crystal set about cooking dinner. Garrett didn't say much, but she sensed his thoughts. Why he hadn't pushed harder, tried to go farther, she wasn't sure. But she was pleased he hadn't. Whether or not he knew it, or wanted it to be true, he was a gentleman. And she found that really sexy. It also helped her get control of herself. She'd felt like a train without breaks going down Mount Everest.

"What can I do to help?" he asked from across the bar that separated the kitchen from the dining room.

"How are you with tossing salad?"

"I've been known to toss a salad or two in my day." Humor lit his eyes and she found the corners of her mouth tugging upward again. It was great to smile. To *really* smile. Not just the saucy grin she stuck on her face when she was at a book signing or yet another interview with some chauvinistic DJ.

"Great." She dropped the lettuce and the tomatoes into a bowl. "Just rinse them off and toss it all together." She handed him a bag of croutons. "Do you like red onion on your salad?"

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"Sure."

She turned to the chopping board and went to work slicing the onion.

"You're way too organized."

She turned to find him looking through the fridge.

She laughed. "It just makes it easier to cook later."

"If I'd just gotten home from two months away, I can guarantee that I wouldn't have stopped by the store, and that I'd be in bed right now."

His words seemed to hang in the air between them. It was almost as if she could read the words "in bed right now" in big bright letters in the air between them. Did he want to be in her bed right now? She supposed he did.

"I actually thought long and hard about not bothering."

His eyebrows shot up and she retraced what she'd said. Then her hand involuntarily slapped over her mouth. "No pun intended," she said through her fingers. Her cheeks grew hotter; she must be blushing a thousand shades of red.

"Sure," he teased.

"Really, I—"

"After my bed comment, it was to be expected. Which dressing do you want on this?" he asked, his eyes on the salad in front of him.

"Whichever you want is fine." She slid the onion slices into the salad and then turned back to the chicken. A home cooked meal was a novelty lately. And all the delicious aromas swirling around in her kitchen were too wonderful for words. It had been a long time since she'd entertained at home. Her apartment wasn't large enough to have too many people over at once, but she'd bought it because of the large bathroom and huge closet. A girl can never have too much closet space. She tossed the chicken in the pan and watched it sizzle. She was pretty close to sizzling herself, with Garrett sharing her kitchen.

"Want me to set the table?"

She looked over her shoulder at him and stared. Set the table? What planet was he from?

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"What?" Oh god. She'd said that out loud. "I mean, really? That'd be great." She pulled the silverware from the drawer. "Here, before you change your mind. Thank you." He raised an eyebrow again, and she knew he thought she was crazy.

He was simply too good to be true.

A few minutes later he was done with the table and the chicken was almost ready. She could feel him standing behind her and she desperately wanted to lean into his warmth, explore the desire that was steadily building.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his hands on her hips.

"What's wrong is, you seem too good to be true," she said, keeping her tone light.

"I'm just me."

And humble too.

She pressed herself against him, loving the feel of him at her back. He wrapped his arms around her fully, as she waited for the chicken to turn golden brown. It was hard to concentrate, to do anything but feel his warmth. His arms.

His erection. Poor man.

It had been a long time since she'd been so close to anyone. Touching someone was another luxury these days. She never touched the guys at the club. She didn't need to, she knew what moves turned them on.

Garrett reacted to her. Just her.

Or did he?

Should she test him? Better yet, did it matter what his motivations were? He'd be a fabulous lover, and she wouldn't be a fraud anymore.

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

"Just thinking." She pressed closer, running a hand over his strong forearm.

"About?"

"You." She stepped to the left and he followed. Arranging the chicken on each plate, she took extra care placing the fresh garnish.

"What about me? Anything you want to know?"

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"There's plenty I want to know. How you got your start in radio. Hobbies... You know the drill."

He nibbled on her neck before answering. "What are you *really* thinking?" he asked, backing away from her. She instantly felt cold from his absence.

He was entirely too perceptive. There was no use beating around the bush. While it was fun to flirt and tease, she didn't play games where her heart was concerned. And Garrett Vartan was quickly chiseling away at her barriers with his killer smile, charming words, and easy going manner. If she were to take him to her bed, her heart would most certainly be involved. She knew enough about herself to know that sex and love weren't a far cry from each other.

At least not in her book. And truth be known, she'd been falling for him since the moment she'd laid eyes on him. Even with that dangerous air about him, she trusted him.

The atmosphere around them crackled with electricity and at the same time grew incredibly serious. She shuffled from one foot to the other trying to find the right words.

"Why are you here, really?"

"What?" His eyes widened and his chin tipped up a notch.

"I'm sorry, I just... I'm enjoying your company. I just—well, I wanted to make sure that you're here for the right reasons."

His arms folded across his chest, his biceps bulging. She couldn't have noticed them more if they'd been outlined in flashing neon lights.

"What are the right reasons, Crystal?"

"Is it because I'm a stripper?"

"No." He answered immediately. "It's because you're you."

"But we don't really know each other, do we?"

"I know more than you think. I know that you've finally come into your own, yet you've built this shell around yourself that everyone sees. But you still lose your self-confidence every now and then."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"I know you're adorable, smart, beautiful, and sexy as hell, even when you aren't trying to be."

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She nodded, feeling oddly insecure. She looked down at the plate of chicken in her hands too avoid his all-seeing eyes.

"Where'd this come from? Is there a chapter I missed somewhere?"

"I'm not a book," she shot back more forcefully than she'd intended.

"You're right. Definitely too curvy to be a book."

She laughed at the thought and looked up to find him grinning.

"That analytical mind of yours is taking over, isn't it?"

Putting the plate on the counter, she stepped across the kitchen toward him. "I'm sorry. I just had to know. I feel something. Something more... I didn't want to be some fantasy come true." She laced her fingers, fiddling, despising her nervousness.

"And I don't want to be a notch in your bedpost."

He'd said as much earlier, but now she felt like she'd been stung.

It was on her lips to tell him exactly how many notches were on her bedpost, but she didn't.

"You're definitely not a notch in my bedpost," she admitted and stepped toe to toe with him, mustering all her courage as she laid a palm against his muscular chest. "Can you forgive my need to be sure about this—you? Us? About my stupid self-consciousness?"

He stared at her for so long that her stomach soured. He thought she was crazy. When he pushed away from the counter and set her away from him, she knew he was going to leave and panic gripped her. It was terribly painful to her pride and her foolish heart. How the hell had she become attached to him in only a few hours? She was nuts. It had to be the jet lag. The exhaustion. The...

"Of course. But don't touch me until dinner is over with."

Her eyes widened and Garrett knew she'd misunderstood him.

"Why?" she asked, her voice squeaking.

Could she really be as innocent as she seemed?

"I'm trying to be a gentleman, and you make it so damn hard when you keep touching me like that. I'm liable to die from this condition," he said, indicating the ridge beneath his jeans.

She hid her smile behind her hand, her eyes twinkling.

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He grabbed the plate of chicken and they headed for the table. It seemed so natural. So familiar to be eating with her. Even after her moment with the Confidence Snatcher.

The wine and the food disappeared quickly, but there had hardly been a second of silence during the meal. They'd talked more in one hour than he had during some of his entire past relationships.

Garrett knew right then that she was different. Totally, completely, utterly different than any woman he'd ever known. She had so much to talk about, so many interesting ideas and opinions. The things she knew blew him away. And when she turned that secret smile his way, he knew he was a goner and that his pledge to be a gentleman was vanishing just as quickly as dinner had.

"Thank you for dinner."

"You're welcome. Thanks for bringing the wine."

"I'm glad it's over," he murmured, his gaze locked with hers.

"That bad, huh?"

"You're deliberately misunderstanding me. Come here," he said, his expression serious. "Pretty please," he added, holding out his hand.

When she stepped around the table and placed her hand in his, he tugged her onto his lap.

"With sugar on top, I hope," she whispered, her arms tucking neatly around his shoulders. A delicious shiver raced across her skin as he feathered kisses across her forehead, down her cheekbones to her chin and everywhere in between.

"I've been dying to do this all day. I've wanted nothing more than to have you right here in my arms where you belong. Where I can indulge..."

"You make me sound like a drug," she murmured, her head tipped back, giving him access to her throat. He took full advantage, his tongue swept down her skin, across her collarbone and back up to the sensitive spot below her ear.

"You are. A very wonderful, heady drug. I'm quickly becoming addicted, you know."

The glow of her face told him he'd pleased her. And as much as he

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wanted to sit and stare at her, he couldn't stop himself from kissing that gorgeous mouth now free of lip-gloss and tasting like wine.

They sat there for endless minutes while he tasted her, felt her every curve against his body, beneath his hands. She smelled of sweetly scented bubble bath, coconut maybe, her silky pajamas warmed under his touch. The tiny, delicate sounds she purred when he touched just the right spot let him know she reveled in the foreplay as much as he did.

"Good Lord, woman. What are you doing to me?" he murmured. Her fingers flexed against the muscles in his shoulders, then his chest.

"Me? I think you're the one seducing me, mister." The corner of her mouth hitched up and he leaned forward to kiss the perfect little crease. He couldn't stop staring at her lips any more than he could stop breathing. He was fascinated by the shape and color of them. The way her tongue snuck out to moisten them.

"I think you've got that backwards. I can't think straight."

"Neither can I."

"I can't remember much of anything before you."

"I don't want to," she whispered as she shimmied closer, her hip pressing against his growing erection. He groaned.

She was exactly like a drug. And even as he cupped her breasts, her soft flesh filling his hands, he couldn't get enough of her. His mind was cloudy with the desire that raged through him. He honestly couldn't remember anything before her. And it should have scared the hell out of him, but it didn't. Because the only thing he could feel right now was the pleasure she gave him.

But he needed to be closer. Scooping her up in his arms, he settled her against his chest and set off for her bedroom. He kissed her all the way down the hall, his mind overloaded with need, desire, and contentment.

He kicked open the door he'd seen her disappear into earlier, and slowly let her slide down the length of his body until her feet touched the floor. Her fingernails grazed the back of his neck as she nipped his lower lip. Heat surged through him until he was completely hard and on fire for her. And as much as he was enjoying the slow push and pull of their



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foreplay, his control was waning.

He slid his hands under the soft fabric of her top, feeling her warm, silky-smooth skin. The urge to rip away her clothing, to touch and lick every secret part of her, nearly overwhelmed him, but he forced himself to go slow, take her gently, and wrapped his fingers around her waist, holding her close.

Her breath came in short, shallow pants against his cheek as he nibbled on her earlobe. Her breasts rubbed against his chest, turning him into a beast, needing to growl and be set free of his constraints. The urge to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off to a cave, to claim her as his, took him by surprise.

Damn, he *had* to slow down. Think about golf or taxes. Taxes, that would work. He wasn't going to get that moving deduction this year.

"I love your shoulders," she whispered, kissing him there. "And your chest." She smiled shyly before hiding her face against his T-shirt.

A fresh stab of desired coursed through him. He ripped his shirt over his head and then started on hers. Her hands were right there with his, pulling the shimmery material over her head. She wrapped it around his neck and pulled him down for another tongue-thrusting, fire-igniting kiss. Naked skin met naked skin as their chests came together. If he *had* been a beast, he would have howled when her hardened nipples pressed into his chest.

He raised his hands, bringing them up and over her breasts, caressing her, kneading her soft flesh. Her nipples beaded even harder under his fingers. His tender taunting pulled a moan from her throat and he caught it in his mouth, taking advantage and sweeping his tongue between her lips.

Never breaking contact, they shed the rest of their clothes and she pushed him back on the bed. Her mouth hot on his, her fingertips danced over his skin, down his thighs and back up again, finally wrapping both hands around his cock where he needed her touch the most.

Jerking his mouth from hers, he couldn't have stopped the groan that erupted from his lungs even if he'd wanted to. She smiled in a demure, sexy way as she slithered down his body. Propping himself on

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his elbows, he didn't want to miss a second.

She used one hand to stroke the length of him while the other cupped his balls. The look of concentration on her face, her single-minded determination on his pleasure, almost made him come.

Taxes. He had to think about taxes. He couldn't get the deduction for interest paid on a mortgage either. Not that he really cared right now.

She rolled his balls and he almost launched off the bed. When she locked gazes with him, he clenched the bedspread in his fists and couldn't look away. Her mouth slowly lowered toward his cock, her sweet tongue came out from between her lips, and she licked her way up his length. He had to get her away from there or he'd be off like a rocket. But when she took him into her mouth and swirled her tongue around the top of his cock, he lost all ability to think.

He dug his fingers into the cool cotton bedspread as she moved her mouth up and down over him. Occasionally she'd stop to lick him all over, maintaining the perfect rhythm with her hands. Every muscle between his shoulders and his thighs tightened like guitar strings and his breath came in short, shallow pants.

He was reciting multiplication tables in his head when she started sucking. Seven times seven was forty-nine and that was all he could take.

"Crystal," he warned, trying to ease away from her.

She looked up, her eyes filled with terror, her mouth hanging open ever so slightly. "Did...did I do it wrong?"

The vulnerability in her voice almost killed him. Especially when she was such a warm and giving lover. Never in all his years had he ever met a woman who gave so much pleasure without taking any for herself.

He cupped her cheek in his hand and pulled her up. "Sweetheart, you did it perfectly. A minute longer and I'd have been perfectly complete." He smiled, but she still looked mortified. He rubbed his thumb across her trembling lower lip. He pulled her down on top of him, until she was flush against him, and then kissed her slowly, gently, hoping to ease her concern.

"Aren't you going to ask me to dance for you?" she murmured.

"No. Maybe later. Right now I want to make love to you." He

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kissed her again, and she melted against him.

He let his hands roam over her curves and then rolled her over so his lips tasted her sweet skin. Blood throbbed in his ears and his groin as he nibbled at each breast. Then he kissed down the smooth plain of her stomach, traced her belly button with his tongue, and continued south. She crossed her legs, and he chuckled.

He couldn't figure out why she was so openly seductive one moment, so shy the next. Her modesty made him smile. And the little noises coming from her lips drove him wild.

Slipping his hand between her legs, through the small stripe of blonde hair there, he found her wet and warm, just as he knew she'd be.

"What are you grinning about?"

"You're a natural blonde," he said matter-of-factly.

"Was there ever any doubt?" she asked, her legs falling open as his fingers stroked her.

"There's only one way to tell these days," he murmured against her throat. He teased her to the brink, but pulled away before she could climax.

Her fingers stabbed into his shoulders, and she groaned his name. There was something so subtly primitive and demanding in her voice that he found his control snapping. He pulled away in search of his wallet. The small foil packet practically disintegrated between his fingers and he rolled the condom on. It was the longest thirty seconds of his life.

In one lithe movement, he was on top of her, running his hand down her thigh and pulling her leg up around his hip. And just as he started to slide home, he looked down at her gorgeous eyes and hair fanned around her head.

"My God, you're beautiful." He slowly pushed inside, amazed at how tight she was. She locked her legs around his waist and gave him a gentle squeeze. Damn, she was flexible. And strong.

The corners of her lips curved into a soft smile and he realized he'd spoken out loud. She cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand and her eyes darkened like the ocean before a storm. He knew then that they'd crossed the invisible barrier from ordinary sex to something far more

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intimate.

He felt an unfamiliar ache somewhere near his heart and found himself planting kisses across her face. He pushed the rest of the way, encountering a brief resistance before heaven welcomed him. She gasped and bit her bottom lip.

He withdrew slowly, holding his breath, contemplating the times tables again. Her legs clenched him tighter as he pushed back inside. And then it hit him. She was a virgin.

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Five

"Why didn't you tell me?" He stared down at her, unsure what to do. What was the protocol for a situation like this? He had no clue. He'd always been with experienced women. Crystal's innocence made his blood boil.

"Tell you what?" she asked, her voice shaking. Hell, her whole body shook.

A string of curses flew through his mind, but he kept them locked inside. "That you were a virgin. Why didn't you tell me you were a virgin?" Which must have been why she'd looked so mortified and asked if he wanted her to dance. She'd been stalling.

"What?" she squeaked. At least that's what he thought she said.

"You didn't think I'd figure it out, sweetheart?"

"Ohmygod." She pushed at his chest. Pushed like a wild cat. "Get off me." Tears welled in her eyes just before she jumped off the bed and ran into the bathroom. The door slammed behind her, followed by the click of the lock.

"What the hell?" he muttered, staring up at the ceiling. If he wasn't sure his head was attached, he would have sworn it was spinning. Maybe the world was spinning. Now it was his turn to wonder if he'd done it wrong. He'd never had a woman run from his bed before, virgin or otherwise.

Unsure of how the rest of the evening would play out, he dropped the condom into the trashcan next to the night stand, headed for the

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bathroom and knocked gently.

"Crystal, honey. Come on. Open the door. There's nothing wrong with being a virgin."

He heard the water turn on. He knocked again, but she didn't open it. Nor did she unlock it. He was about to break it down when he noticed he could unlock it from the outside. Grabbing a coin from his jeans, he turned the screw in the middle of the knob and heard the lock click open.

He found her sitting on the toilet, her head in her hands. He turned off the water and squatted down in front of her.

"I'm such a fraud," she croaked, looking at him through tear-soaked eyes.

"No, you're not."

"Yes I am. I'm a stripper who's never gone all the way."

"So what? You're more than a stripper."

"And the title of my book..." She groaned.

"Big deal." He shrugged and cupped her cheek in his hand, wiping away a tear with the pad of his thumb. Amazement poured through him. He couldn't believe this beautiful woman had never shared herself with anyone. Or that he was her first. God, he was an idiot. And an ass. He shouldn't have assumed she was experienced just because she could turn a man on like a light switch.

"You're not upset that I lied to you?"

"You didn't lie to me." He took her hands in his and kissed them softly. "I'm sorry I wasn't more gentle."

"Hah. You didn't know."

"Nevertheless. I lost my control, and I shouldn't have."

"Promise you won't tell anyone," she whispered, her eyes searching his.

"I promise. Now let me take you back to bed and make love to you properly."

She gave him a ten-thousand megawatt smile that lit up her eyes. They sparkled like blue diamonds, and he groaned low in his throat.

"One track mind." She laughed softly before leaning forward to kiss him. He met her half way, his mouth devouring hers.

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"You'll be thanking me for that later," He assured her.

They stood up together, kissing and touching. Somehow they made it back to the bedroom and she pushed him onto the bed. He loved the excitement playing across her features.

"Grab my wallet," he murmured between hot, wet kisses.

She gave him one hell of a naughty grin and did his bidding. He grabbed another condom from his wallet, his last one, and tried to open it with unsteady hands. But she was right there helping him, rolling it on. He thought he'd pass out from that small touch alone. Good grief, it'd been a long time.

Obviously not one to sit around and let life pass her by, she straddled his lap. Hot as fire and oh-so-slippery, she rubbed herself against his length. His jaw hardened as he tried to concentrate on anything but the pleasure she was producing. Unable to help himself, he slid his hands up over her hips to the curve of her waist. She tilted her pelvis just so. This time when he slid home, he found her smiling and meeting him thrust for thrust. Together they found a rhythm that took his breath away.

Her fingers flexed into the muscles of his chest as she steadied herself. He watched, fascinated, as her hair seemed to slap her skin in a blond shimmer. Passion threatened to consume them as they climbed toward completion. She gave one final thrust and tossed her head back, screaming his name.

At that moment, even through the fog of his own climax, he knew that he'd lost his heart to this sexy creature. Now he had even more reason to carry her off to a cave somewhere and keep her forever. She was his. Whether or not she realized it.

## Slow Burn

### Chapter Six

"Crystal?"

She opened her eyes slowly, trying to figure out which hotel bed she was in today. That chair looked awfully similar to the one in her bedroom. So did that painting of Key Largo. Her surroundings and memories of last night seeped into her sleep deprived brain.

The late morning sun glared through the window of her condo. She rolled onto her back, groaning at the aches her movement brought on. Garrett was a dynamite lover, but being her first time, her body had used muscles she didn't even know existed. Dancing on stage with a pole was way different than igniting lust and acting on it. It was a hell of a lot more fun.

She looked up into Garrett's eyes. Eyes that she'd watched grow dark with desire and then bright with release time and again.

"Mornin' gorgeous," he drawled.

"Morning handsome."

"I found donuts," he said and flipped back the sheet, then plopped a sugarcoated donut onto her naked stomach. "Oops. Looks like I'll have to clean that up."

She laughed. The donut wiggled.

"I made coffee, too."

"Mmm. That's it. I'm keeping you." She stretched. This time the donut slid down her stomach.

"You're keepin' me, huh?"



## Madison Chase

"I'm going to have to now. I've never been treated to breakfast in bed."

"Really?" He sounded disbelieving.

"Nope." She took a deep breath and thought she might pass out at the delicious smell of fresh brewed coffee permeating her apartment.

"Hard to believe, huh?"

"Yeah. Momma used to bring me breakfast in bed when I was sick or needed cheering up."

"I think I would've liked your momma."

"You'd have loved her. She would have loved you to bits." His deep brown eyes were bright with happy memories, but then his gaze landed on the donut and the brown of his irises took on a golden fire. "Two firsts in one morning," he murmured and leaned over her, planting kisses over her skin. Each kiss seemed to bloom into a full body heat, igniting her.

"Two?"

"Morning sex and breakfast in bed."

Crystal couldn't stop the moans climbing up her throat as his tongue danced over her skin. He slowly nibbled away at the donut and took turn after torturous turn with each of her breasts. Her nipples were rock hard and she was dying to rub them against his chest.

"We could go for three."

"Three?" she asked, giving him her sexiest smile. The phone on her nightstand rang, jarring her from her pleasure-filled haze. "Hold that thought."

She rolled away from him and grabbed the receiver.

"Lo?"

"Hey girl. You're back from your trip." It was her friend Lacey from the club.

"Yeah. Just."

"Did you have a good time? Meet any hunks?"

"No, not really. And yes, actually."

"Really?" Her friend was always on the watch for some hot young thing. And not enough of the men who visited the strip club met Lacey's

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exacting standards.

"Mmm hmm."

"You'll have to tell me *all* about him. You working tonight?"

"Uh—" Crystal glanced over her shoulder at the Greek god in her bed. "That'd be a no. Tell Sid I'll call in next week sometime."

"K. You'd better meet me for lunch then. I'm dying to hear all about your trip."

"I'll call you."

"Toodles."

"Bye." She hung up and rolled back toward Garrett.

"You were saying something about three..." She prompted, her eyebrows raised.

"Sure was." He kissed her shoulder, his hand gliding down her side. "*Morning sex* in that *huge tub* of yours and *breakfast in bed*."

"But I didn't even get my coffee yet," she said with a mock pout, sticking out her lower lip.

He laughed. "You really want coffee?" he asked, one of his eyebrows rising in a sexy arch. He kissed her protruding lip and then nibbled on it. He heard a delicious gasp that made him want to eat her up.

"I think it can wait." Her frown turned into a seductive grin, and he felt a punch in the heart.

"Good." He pulled her out of bed and threw her over his shoulder. She giggled as he carried her into the bathroom, her long hair tickling his ass.

"Garrett!" She smacked him on the butt. "I can walk."

"I know you can, gorgeous. But can I help it if I want to carry you?" By now she was dissolving into giggles. And when he stood her up in the middle of her bathroom, she leaned into him, kissing his chest. Her arms wrapped lazily around his waist, and he kissed the top of her head.

"Stand right there," he ordered, setting her away from him. Mr. Happy was already standing at attention as Garrett turned on the water.

"You're spoiling me," she said.

"And I'm enjoying it." He stepped into the tub and held out his hand.

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"Such a gentleman," she said as she took his hand and lowered herself onto his lap. She straddled his legs and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He hugged her close, inhaling the sweet, warm scent that was distinctly her.

"I'm not feeling particularly gentlemanly at the moment," he confided before dragging his tongue across her collarbone. She tossed her head back, giving him easier access. "You're delicious."

He felt her hips tip forward as she rubbed against his cock. A groan rumbled out of him and she gave an infectious laugh.

"Feel good?"

"You know it does." He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her thoroughly. She tangled her fingers in his hair. When he couldn't breathe any more, he moved her away from him and inhaled sharply. "You're going to be the death of me, woman. You make me forget to breathe."

"Well, why don't I wash you then..." She gave him a saucy look. "...while you catch your breath." The tub was filled up around them, steam floating in the air. She reached for a bottle on the side of the tub and flipped open the top. "Hold still," she whispered and squirted a zigzag of body wash across his chest. It was all he could do to sit back and let her have her way. What he really wanted was to pull her against his chest and lather them up *together*.

Her hands followed the soap and disappeared beneath the water. She cupped his balls and swirled them around in her hand. His hips launched from the water and she gave him a knowing smirk.

"I was getting to you," she told his cock. Then she wrapped her slippery fingers around him, stroking him from base to head. She massaged his sweet spot with her thumb, and his eyes drifted shut. She alternated between his cock and his balls, teasing both, driving him mad with wanting her. All of her. When she wrapped her fingers around him and squeezed, he was holding on by a thread. The water and gel provided the perfect lubrication for her talented hands.

Crystal could tell he was ready to come. His eyebrows were drawn together in intense concentration, and his hands clasped the edge

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of the tub. She let go of his cock and rinsed off his chest. His breath caught as she ran her fingernails down his torso.

"What else should I wash?" she asked, turning the water off before the tub overflowed.

He lifted a foot out of the water. She grabbed a washcloth and lathered it up before setting about the glorious task of washing his legs. He was incredibly toned. And tanned. She made it to his thighs without drooling on him and that was a major accomplishment.

"How about these?" she asked, flexing her fingers into his biceps. His smile said, *sure thing babe*. She straddled his legs again and he wrapped his arms around her. "Now that's not playing fair."

"You're not playing fair."

"I am to," she said, even as she ground against him.

"I don't think so, babe. You're gorgeous and seductive, and you've got this cute way that you hold your mouth when you're concentrating on something, and it's driving me wild."

"That so?" Her heart melted. He noticed how she held her mouth?

"Sure is. But since you ask so sweetly," he said, taking a kiss from her lips, "and you play so nicely...I'll hold still."

She sat back, and he rested his arms on her shoulders, giving her a cocky smile. She took her time washing his arms, memorizing every inch.

"Can I just say how gorgeous your arms are?" she asked as she rinsed the suds off.

"Can I just say how gorgeous you are? *All* of you?" He splashed water over her skin, enjoying the way it turned pink from the heat. "I think it's my turn." He took the washcloth from her and started with her hand, moving up her slender arm. She was toned but still soft and feminine. He washed her shoulders, collarbone, and then her other arm, fighting hard for each second of control.

Testing his control further, he picked up a foot and set it against his chest. She teased his nipples with her toes, and he gave her a stern look. She giggled and sank down in the water, giving him complete access to her mile-long legs.

Once he was through cleaning and exploring, his gaze met hers.

## Madison Chase

"Turn around." When she was facing away from him, he studied, washed, memorized and caressed her back. From her shoulder blades to her spine to the gentle dip of her lower back, his fingers glided along her skin beneath the water. She made a soft little moan, and he knew he was a goner.

He pulled her against him, her gorgeous ass nestled between his legs. Mr. Happy leapt toward her. She laughed softly.

Somehow he managed to take his time as he ran his hands over her sides, down her stomach, and then up again to cup her breasts. He rolled each nipple between his finger and thumb until she moaned. He kneaded the soft flesh, loving the fact that she was all-natural. And a perfect handful at that. Not too big. Not too small. A perfect fit.

She shimmied against him, one arm curling around his neck. He nibbled on her ear as he let one hand drift down to her pussy. He used his legs to spread hers for his questing fingers. She was so slippery wet. It wasn't the water, it was all her. He dipped a finger into her heat and her arm tightened around his neck.

"Ohhhh." Her pussy clenched around his finger. He used the pad of his thumb to circle her clit until she was gasping for breath.

Her other hand snuck between them and squeezed his cock. Without much room to maneuver, she twisted it gently between her fingers, concentrating on that sweet spot just beneath the head.

It was hard to believe that he'd met her less than twenty-four hours ago. And last night she'd been a virgin. Her shyness was gone and in its place was a warm, wanton woman.

He let go of her nipple and used both hands to pleasure her. Her back arched, pressing herself onto his fingers. Her hand gripped him tighter. The sight of her naked in his arms, the warm afternoon light washing through the window, his hands beneath the water between her folds, was his undoing. He felt his climax hit him as his control finally snapped.

He rubbed her clit harder and thrust three fingers into her heat. She cried out and he kept going. Rubbing, twisting, thrusting. Amazingly, she came at the same time he did. He felt her pussy clamp around his fingers.

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Her whole body tight as a guitar string. Her cheek pressed tightly against his.

“Yes,” he groaned as he emptied himself into her hand.

“I agree.” He looked over her shoulder at her gorgeous breasts and hard rosy nipples. Good God, he’d never ever get enough of her. He had to be out of his mind, but right now all he could think about was rinsing them off, pulling her back into bed with him, and making love to her again later.

## Madison Chase

### Chapter Seven

Crystal had lunch with Lacey Wednesday afternoon. Over hamburgers and fries Crystal told her about Garrett, and they debated the longevity of the relationship.

"So you guys met on Friday, and you've seen him every day since," Lacey was saying.

Crystal had to jerk herself away from the thoughts that were traveling below the belt. "Yep." She almost giggled at the thought of it. Of him. Of all the things she'd done with him. They'd spent every waking moment together when one of them wasn't working.

"Are you in love with him?"

"It's too soon, don't you think?" She felt like it was too soon. But she was almost certain she'd fallen for the dark-haired Texan who commanded her fantasies and body with equal passion and care.

Lacey shrugged and popped another fry in her mouth.

"How many people do you know who've gone head over heels in five days?"

"Not that many," her friend admitted.

"How long have those relationships lasted?"

"Well Meemaw and Papaw have been married for sixty-one years, and they met and fell in love over a weekend."

"Wow."

So maybe she wasn't as crazy as she thought. Was it possible that they were on a super warp speed courtship?

## Slow Burn

"Maybe you guys are just on a fast track. Maybe it's destiny. Who knows? Why are you worrying about it when you're having such a great time with a guy? You've hardly even dated since that asshole Don. I say have fun."

Crystal winced at the mention of Don. She'd worked hard to forget the bastard. She'd been ready to give herself to the jerk when she'd found him in bed with another woman. Typical, no good —

"Did you tell him about Don?"

"Not yet. We've been having so much fun."

"And you should continue having fun."

"What if I'm over-thinking everything? What if I'm just a fling to him?"

"It doesn't sound like you are. He sounds just as into you as you are into him."

Heavens, she hoped so. But it was so hard to tell with men. She saw the lustful looks every night at the club. Crystal took a sip of her drink and looked around the old art deco diner. They were far enough from the club that no one recognized them, not that she cared any more.

Garrett was different. He appreciated her for more than just her body. He'd never even asked her to dance for him. He was always asking her questions. They'd played trivia last night and she'd won. Tonight they had plans to rent a movie and cuddle on the couch.

"You're right." She pushed the basket of fries away. The fries and the burger would mean an extra hour on the treadmill, but they were totally worth it. Forget Rocky Road, just give her some greasy fries with extra salt and pepper. Perfect comfort food. "Garrett's totally different. And if he has a thing for strippers, it'd be obvious if I quit, right?"

"You're going to quit?" Lacey practically shouted.

"Well, if we stay together I probably will. I doubt it'll be fun if I'm in a relationship. In fact, it'd be kinda gross. I'm just saying, if he doesn't have some stripper fantasy, then he wouldn't care if I quit."

"Yeah. Okay. Whatever. So are you going to dance this weekend or what?"

"Of course."



## Madison Chase

"I just thought you might be snuggling with your beau while us girls have to work."

Crystal rolled her eyes and her friend laughed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Crystal couldn't believe it had been over a week since she'd first made love to Garrett. And she really couldn't believe how happy she was. They'd seen each other every day and every night since then. He was, without a doubt, the best thing that had ever happened to her. And he'd claimed her heart that first night when he assured her she wasn't a fraud and that he was thrilled to be her first lover. Deep down she hoped he'd be her only lover. He knew exactly how to touch her, how to kiss her, how to look at her.

This was her first night back to the club since she'd gone on tour. The dressing room was crowded with dancers. Garments and shoes were scattered over chairs and across the floor, makeup covered every surface and the scent of perfume and hairspray hung heavy in the air. But she enjoyed the chaos. There was a pleasant sisterhood among the dancers.

She had one more show to do before she could head home. To Garrett. She smiled at the thought of his handsome face.

She slipped on sheer black stockings and then searched around for her shoes.

The door swung open and one of the other dancers stormed in. "Those guys are nuts tonight. I've never seen it so packed."

'Crystal's eyebrows rose. Packed was generally a good thing. It meant more tips.

"Must be a full moon," one of the other girls said.

Crystal resumed her wardrobe change, and then twisted her hair up into a bun.

"Crystal, I think it's you they want," Lacey said as she rushed through the swinging door. That's when she heard it. People were chanting her name. Goose bumps erupted over her skin and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

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She snuck backstage, the chanting getting louder and louder. She heard a loud crack and looked out to see a man swinging a chair at another guy. And before her eyes, the whole club broke into a brawl.

This couldn't be happening. Why were they calling her name? How did they— No. She knew that was wrong even before the thought had finished forming. Garrett wouldn't have told anyone where she worked.

The bouncers couldn't break up the fighting. She saw Sid, the club owner, kicking people out the front door. Beer bottles shattered and the other dancers screamed as they ran offstage. She ran back to the dressing room with them, her stomach revolting.

She lost her lunch over a trashcan as Sid burst through the dressing room door and bellowed her name. "They're going to burn the place down."

"Sid, I'm—" she choked.

"I don't care whose fault it is. Pack your stuff. You're outta here."

She stared at him in disbelief. The feeling of furious adrenaline that rushed through her was the same as the last time she'd heard those words.

"Take care of yourself, kid." His voice was kind and he looked sorry to let her go, but that didn't make the pill any easier to swallow. "Everyone's got the rest of the night off."

The other girls murmured, pulling on street clothes and packing their stuff.

Crystal was devastated. She packed her belongings, pulled on jeans and then headed out the back door without a word. She could feel the other dancers staring at her. Outside, guys flooded the front of the club. She ran to her car, hoping to go unnoticed. But as she pulled away, she saw the van. And on the side, written in bright yellow lettering, was the name of the radio station Garrett worked for. That's when she lost it.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been twelve excruciatingly long hours since she'd been fired. Since she'd made her escape into the night. Since she'd learned of

## Madison Chase

Garrett's betrayal. She'd hid out at a hotel all night, crying her eyes out. She was done crying.

She'd only asked one thing of Garrett. And he'd sworn never to disclose where she worked. It was a stupid idea to give the man her card in the first place. He was a radio personality after all.

She leaned against her car, waiting for Garrett to show up for work. Her heartbreak was a physical ache. She clutched her chest, staring at the ground. Her eyes were so dry and scratchy she wanted to claw them out. But she heard the familiar sound of Garrett's SUV and her pain turned to fury.

Her head popped up and she watched as he leapt from behind the wheel and strode over to her.

"Where were you all night? I was so worried." He looked so concerned she almost faltered. Almost. But she remembered the breaking beer bottles, the look on Sid's face, and her one request to this man. To keep her private life private.

The moment he was within reach her hand arced through the air and connected with his cheek. "You son of a bitch," she hissed, anger taking control. She wrapped her arms around her waist, trying not to see the surprise, the pain, in his eyes. "Did you think it was funny? Fuck the little virgin six ways to Sunday and then tell all of Miami which club she stripped at?" Her carefully created façade slipped into place like a shield. Titling her chin up, she stared him down, daring him to deny it. Praying that he would.

He rubbed his jaw and looked down at her like she was growing horns. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I saw the van from the station last night as I was trying to get away. I only asked one thing of you Garrett. I guess it was just too much to ask."

And though she'd thought she'd cried all her tears, she found fresh ones running down her cheeks. And that infuriated her even more. She wouldn't let him see her cry. Spinning away from him, she jumped behind the wheel of her car, locking the door just as he reached for the handle. He banged on the window, but she turned up the radio and put the car in

## Slow Burn

gear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garrett felt like he'd been shot. He had no idea what was going on, but when he found out...

He marched into the station, looking for his boss. He was going to need the week off. Bradley from the morning show was coming out of the break room.

"Hey man, did you see the show last night? That Crystal girl never did make it onstage."

"What show?" he said through clenched teeth.

"At the club. You know. The card you had on your desk. Looks like I guessed right. Half of Miami showed up, but your stripper didn't."

Garrett never had liked Bradley. Which is why when he swung back and punched the asshole right in the nose, it felt that much better. The loud crack was followed by a string of curses and a lot of blood.

"If you ever come near her again, I'll kill you. Got it?"

Charlie, his boss, came rushing at the commotion.

"Consider this my notice," Garrett spat. "She specifically asked us to keep her personal life private. And you let this blubbering idiot blast it all over the radio waves."

Before anyone could respond, he spun on his heel and headed for the door. He had a lot of damage control to do. His hand fell to the ring box in his pocket. He just hoped he wasn't too late.

He must have run every red light between the station and Crystal's apartment; he didn't remember. The heavens opened up and poured down rain, but he made it there in record time. By the time he'd gotten from the car to the door of her building he was soaked to the bone.

The ride up to her floor was the most excruciatingly long three minutes of his life. Water dripped off of him and puddled at his feet.

He ran down the hall to her door and pounded like a mad man. There was no answer. Panic finally set in like a lead ball in his stomach. He pounded harder and then listened, but heard nothing.

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This time he really did break the door down.

The world seemed to move in slow motion as he raced down the hall to her bedroom door and pushed it open. She turned toward him, a stack of clothes in her hand, her beautiful blue eyes wide and bloodshot.

She hurled the clothes at him and started for the bathroom, but he caught her before she made it. She screamed at him, but he ignored her. He just held her close.

She stomped on his foot and he bit back a curse.

"It wasn't me," he said. "I didn't tell anyone. It was Bradley from the morning show. He saw the card on my desk."

But she wasn't listening. Her beautiful body was racked with sobs. "Are you happy now? They fired me!"

He took a half step back and looked down at her. "We'll get it sorted out."

"There is no *we*." She balled up her fists and he could tell she was fighting a battle inside.

"Sweetheart—" He touched her cheek.

"Garrett, please..." she said, even as she rubbed her cheek against his palm. That one tiny action gave him the hope and courage he needed.

"I kept my promise, Crystal. I'm sorry it happened. I'm sorry those jerks fired you. But I'm not sorry about us." Her gaze met his, and he was dying to know what she was thinking. "I'm not sorry I met you. I'm not sorry I fell in love with you."

She blinked away the tears. "What?" she said in that squeaky voice he loved.

"I said I love you. I'm *in* love with you."

She shook her head. He reached out to pull her close again, but she swatted his hands away. She connected with his sore knuckles and he sucked in a breath.

"I punched Bradley in the nose," he explained.

"For me?"

"For us. That jerk deserved it and more."

"A lot more." She sniffed.

He cupped her face in his hands. She didn't fight him. He kissed

## Slow Burn

her gently and was rewarded when she melted against him. She came alive as she always did when he kissed her. Her arms wound around his neck and she clung to him.

"Enough with the tears," he whispered.

"These are happy tears." She stared up at him, aghast.

"Happy tears?" He groaned. "Woman, are you going to make me wait forever to hear the words?"

Crystal knew she was playing with fire, but she loved teasing him. She loved everything about him. Her heart had started mending the moment he wrapped his arms around her. It had mended even more when he'd told her what had happened. But her heart blossomed when he'd told her he loved her.

Her lungs filled till she thought she'd burst. He was starting to look concerned. She gave him a shaky smile. "I love you. Of course I love you. Do you think I'd be this upset if I weren't head-over-heels, madly, passionately in love with you?" She poked him in the chest with her finger to punctuate her point.

A wide, goofy grin lit his face. He wrapped his arms around her waist and swung her around. There was a squeal of delight, but she couldn't tell who'd made the sound.

He dug into his pocket, then grabbed her hand as he slid to the floor on one knee. "Marry me. Marry me and make me whole. Sleep beside me every night. Let me make love to you. Let me hold you and kiss you whenever I want. Teach me things and read me stories. Strip for me and me alone."

Crystal was sure she was going to faint. If that wasn't the most romantic thing she'd ever heard, she didn't know what was. And it was directed at her from the man she loved with every bit of herself. Speech eluded her.

She could only nod and smile. He let out a whoop and jumped up to hug her again. When he got done spinning her around this time, he slid an exquisite diamond ring onto her finger. The stunning combination of sparkle and platinum brought words back.

"It's beautiful."

## Madison Chase

"Just like you."

"I love you."

He kissed her and they were quiet for several long moments. She sucked in a deep breath of air and tipped her forehead against his. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too, sweetheart. Your editor called yesterday, by the way. She wants another book. *The Sex Life of a Stripper*, 2. What do you think? Maybe it could actually have sex in it this time." His grin made his dark eyes sparkle.

She laughed.

"You're going to need a new title, Romeo. I'm not a stripper anymore, remember?"

"Will you punch me if I say I'm secretly glad that they fired you and that you won't be getting naked for anyone else?"

"No." She kissed his chest. "I would have quit anyway."

"Speaking of quitting... I gave my resignation today."

"What?"

"After I punched Bradley, I told Charlie that I quit. I'm not working for a place like that or people like them."

"Oh you big—" He silenced her with a kiss, and she happily wound her arms around his neck. When he pulled back to take a breath, she looked at the ring on her finger.

"So we're both unemployed, huh?"

"Well, what do you think of Texas? There are plenty of stations there."

"I can write from anywhere."

He smiled.

"I can't wait to marry you," he murmured against her lips.

"Ditto."

"So what will you write next?"

"I might just try my hand at a love story."

"I'd say you've got a good one to base it on."

"I agree."

"And I'll even volunteer to help with research." He wiggled his

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eyebrows.

She laughed and kissed him soundly on the mouth.

The End



## **Madison Chase**

### **Author Bio**

Since she was little, Madison Chase has been addicted to love. Now she spends her days and the occasional night, weaving stories of romance and love conquering all. And that's fine by her. The ushy-gushy-mushy love stuff doesn't bother her a bit. When not writing, Madison can be found snuggling with her hubby, playing with her dog, petting her cat, or sitting outside in the sun reading a book. She loves hearing from readers so write to her at [madisonchase@madison-chase.com](mailto:madisonchase@madison-chase.com) or visit her website at <http://www.madison-chase.com>

## Slow Burn

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### Chapter One

“Damn.”

Victoria switched off the radio and resorted to humming to herself. All of the decent radio stations were crackling with static, and she hated the quiet.

With a brief glance up at the rearview mirror, she noted that no one was behind her. Since dinner at the rustic little café, she’d been the only one on the road, a fact that was strangely comforting and disturbing at the same time. Her only concern at the moment was finding a rest area. Three cups of coffee with her hot chicken and Swiss sandwich had proven too much for her bladder, and she was having a difficult time clenching her thighs together while driving. As a green sign loomed in the distance, she crossed her fingers. *Please, oh please.*

REST AREA 1 Mile

Victoria let out a sigh of relief and sat up straighter in the seat. She’d never been partial to going to the bathroom outside behind a bush. Especially alone. Remote or not, anyone could be out there, waiting for the opportune moment. She put on the blinker and slowed, taking it easy pulling into the rest area. The parking lot was empty. Not even the typical row of truckers snatching up a catnap en route was present. It unsettled

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her to be the only person in the vacant lot. Parking under a dim street lamp, as close to the women's restrooms as the wide sidewalk allowed, she turned off the engine and drummed her fingertips on the steering wheel.

"Get a hold of yourself girl. You've watched one too many episodes of Unsolved Mysteries."

Only a sliver of a moon peeked through the dusky sky. The drab cement building loomed in front of her. Taunting her. She'd traveled miles to find this one, so waiting for the next rest stop might be unwise. Pee her pants or use the desolate looking toilet. She took a deep breath and decided she had no choice but to go in.

She threw open the car door and made like when she was a little girl needing to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, knowing full well there were monsters under her bed. She didn't care if she looked like a scared little girl. She dashed for the restroom, fearful those same monsters loomed in the shadows and beneath the car.

Her uncomfortable heels pinched her toes as she sprinted into the foul smelling restroom. The first three stalls were backed up and looked unpleasant. Only the handicapped stall was usable. She crossed her fingers that some elderly woman in a wheelchair wasn't going to come in right then. Up went her skirt. Down went her black nylons and black silkies. Relief spread throughout her body.

In her haste to go, she'd forgotten to check one very important thing. No toilet paper. She sighed and reached for her purse, but remembered it was still in the car, safely tucked away from prying eyes beneath her jacket.

The sound of a car engine bothered her, but there were more pressing matters than another vehicle pulling into the rest stop. Like toilet paper. She rummaged inside the pocket of her skirt and came up with a crumpled tissue. It would have to do.

Victoria reached for her nylons and managed to make a sizable run in them. She pulled them off in frustration and shoved them in the metal box on the wall. The cruel edge of her shoes raked against the back of her ankles as she slipped them back on. Blisters were unavoidable. She got

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situated in her clothes, flushed the toilet and walked to the sink to wash her hands.

The reflection in the mirror displayed a tired, worn out looking woman in her late twenties, who was seriously deprived of any fun in her life. There was no reason to try and fix her smudged make-up, in another four hours she would be in a luxurious hotel running a warm bath.

Sick from the putrid odor of the unkempt facility, she hurried outside. Then her knees nearly buckled. A stranger on a motorcycle was parked where her car should be.

This can't be happening, she thought. Her car was *gone*!

She wasn't sure whether to approach the biker or not. In a black leather jacket, faded jeans with holes in the knees, and a look on his face that had trouble written all over it, he didn't exactly radiate a warm welcome. Men who rode bikes were bad news. At least that's what she'd always been told.

Anger took the place of her immediate concern and she marched up to him, propped her hands on her hips and pinned him with a glare. "Okay, asshole. Where the hell is my car?"

He pulled a cigarette from behind his ear and flipped open a silver lighter. The bright orange flame lit up the night, along with a pair of refined green eyes that studied her. Impatiently she watched him take a drag from the cigarette, then blow out the smoke from the corner of his stubble-framed lips.

"I hope you aren't referring to me. Most women give me at least five minutes of their time before labeling me an asshole."

She crossed her arms and cocked out her hip. A stab of pain shot up through her calves. The killer heels were going to be the death of her. They had looked comfortable enough, but appearances were deceiving. Much like the jerk-off in front of her. Gorgeous but most likely deadly. Still, she was mad and had every right to be.

"Do you see anyone else here? Of course I'm talking to you. My car was right here when I went into the restroom, and then I come out to find you. Where the hell is it?"

The stranger shrugged his shoulders and flicked the cigarette. Stray

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bits of ash circled around his head before floating to the cement.

"I'd expect better manners from a fancy looking lady like yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why do you assume I'm involved?"

She didn't have time for twenty questions. "You know what? I don't owe you any explanations. My car was stolen. If you didn't have something to do with it, did you at least see anyone when you pulled up?"

He shook his head, the shaggy ends of his dark brown hair brushing against the shoulders of his jacket. "Nah. Place was deserted when I got here."

"That's impossible. I wasn't gone for more than a few minutes!"

"Then they couldn't have gotten very far. Want me to ride up a ways and see if I can catch them?"

"What, and leave me here all by myself?"

"Could you whine a little bit more? You're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. This is the real world and unfortunately in the real world, shit happens. Why don't you call the police and report it missing? There's a phone over there."

She turned her head in the direction he pointed and then smacked her hand to her forehead. "I can't, I left my purse in the car."

"You're a bit naïve. Why would you do something so stupid at a rest stop? Don't you watch TV?"

Victoria didn't care for his smart-ass tone. "I was only going to be gone for a few minutes. There was no one else here when I pulled up."

Using the bottom of his boot, he crushed out his cigarette and carelessly tossed the flattened butt to the ground. "I'm Levi, by the way. Since you haven't bothered to ask."

"Victoria."

With a half-snort, he shook his head.

She tapped her toe impatiently. "What?"

"I figured your name was something on the lines of Alexis, Claire, Barbie or Victoria."

"Meaning?"

"Forget it. I don't have all night to sit here and shoot the breeze."

## Slow Burn

Victoria looked over at the phone again. Her throat tightened up. "But...if you leave, I'll be all alone."

"So?"

"Could you wait until I at least make a call?"

"Nope. Sorry. Do what you need to do. You're a big enough girl that you can handle yourself." He handed her a quarter and positioned the bike upright. "I've gotta be off."

"What else can I do? Anything else you'd suggest?" She had to shout over the roar of his motorcycle engine. It was easy to see that he would rather be anywhere else than talking to her.

"I suppose I can take you into the nearest city if you want. I drive fast, so I don't want to hear you bitch about my speed."

She eyed his bike, her stomach already in knots. "I've never ridden one of those before." The thought was revolting and scary. She wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole. Well, under different circumstances she'd like to find out how long his pole might be.

"This is the only ride around for miles." Levi pushed his bike back from the curb.

"Wait!" Being stuck alone in the dark frightened her more than a fast ride. "Okay. If you could drop me off somewhere with a phone and people, I'd appreciate it."

"Climb aboard, princess. Can't get anywhere if you stand around talking all night."

"Fine." She tried to raise her leg up over the seat but the hem of her skirt restricted her movement.

"I can't. My skirt..."

An unmistakable look of irritation crossed his face. "Women."

He put the kickstand down and jerked his body off the seat. Victoria couldn't help but notice his jeans fit his body like a second skin.

"Where were you headed, a wedding rehearsal?"

She looked down at her normal, everyday attire. "No. I was coming home from a business trip."

"And you got all dressed up just to drive?"

"I'm not dressed up at all. This is the kind of outfit I always wear."

## Madison Chase

You've never seen a woman in a blouse and skirt?"

"Sure, but not that fancy. You have two options, princess. Hike your skirt up to your thighs or let me make a quick adjustment."

She had no idea what he was talking about. Adjust what? "I'm not pulling my skirt up to give you a cheap thrill."

"Not interested in what you're peddling, princess. Now stay calm, I'm going to help you." He took out a pocketknife. The blade reflected the dim lighting around the rest stop.

She opened her mouth to scream, but then watched in horror as he ripped a slit up the side of her skirt, tearing apart most of the threading. Then he did the same to the other side.

"There. All fixed."

Pissed wasn't even the right word. "You *animal*. You ruined a perfectly nice Christian Dior skirt, thank you very much."

He got on his bike and walked it close to her. "Is that someone I'm supposed to know?"

"Hello. Designer label."

"Oh. Then pardon my French, but I don't really give a shit. You have bigger problems than a couple slices in your precious skirt. Whoever has your car and purse knows exactly where you live and how to find you." He handed her a helmet and revved the engine. "Now get on."

This time she swung her leg and felt the cool seat beneath her bum.

"You're going to have to hold onto me. Like I said, I go fast."

"Whatever."

She rested her hands on his sides, but kept a good distance between their bodies. The musky scent of his leather jacket, mixed with his own masculine smell was a distraction she refused to acknowledge. He turned the bike toward the road and like a shot they were back on the highway, her hair flailing behind her head. Victoria screamed and slammed her body up against the stranger, hanging on for dear life. In that moment she was certain she'd made the biggest mistake of her life.