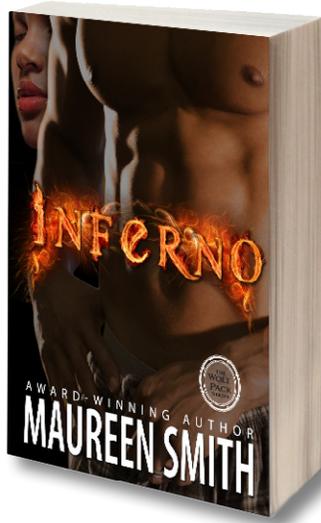


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **INFERNO**

Chapter 1

Coronado, Colorado
A suburb of Denver
November 1980

Prissy Wolf's body glistened with sweat as she thrust her hips upward, feeling her stomach muscles quiver as she held the position. She counted silently to twenty, then lowered her butt to the exercise mat with a grateful sigh.

“And up we go again!”

Prissy shot an aggrieved look at the smiling fitness instructor displayed on her television screen. The perky blonde hadn't broken so much as a sweat, while Prissy was drenched from head to toe. And she'd barely made it halfway through the thirty-minute aerobics video.

“Well, what're you waiting for? You heard the woman. Get those hips back up.”

Prissy whipped her head toward the amused voice.

Her husband stood in the doorway of her study, which doubled as her exercise room. He looked rumpled and sexy in black sweat shorts and a gray Coronado Fire Department T-shirt. The soft fabric clung to his broad chest and showed off thick, muscular biceps that Prissy never grew tired of admiring. Of course, when it came to Stanton Wolf's looks, there was plenty to admire. For starters, he was six foot five with rich mahogany skin and full, sensual lips framed by a neat goatee. His eyes were dark and heavy lidded, and so damn piercing that Prissy still shivered sometimes when he gazed at her.

The man had the kind of looks that were made for gracing the glossy pages of a firefighter's calendar—all twelve months. Which was why Prissy adamantly refused to let him pose for one. God knows he didn't need any more women fawning over him than he already had.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked him.

Stan's eyes glinted wickedly as he looked her over. "Long enough for me to gain a whole new appreciation for the female body—specifically, yours."

Prissy guffawed, hyperconscious of her soft belly and thick thighs sheathed in black spandex that was supposed to be slimming—the color, not the material. For the past year, she'd been trying to lose weight by exercising regularly and cutting back on the unhealthy sugar and carbs that had helped her put on unwanted pounds over the years. She was making progress, slowly but surely getting herself down to a size twelve.

Four times a week, she dragged herself out of bed before the crack of dawn and crept to her study, where she changed into her exercise clothes and popped in one of the aerobics tapes from her growing collection. She was usually finished by the time her husband came home from his shift and her sons began getting ready for school.

"Why are you frowning at me like that?" Stan asked, his deep voice breaking into Prissy's thoughts.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Because I could have sworn I locked that door, like I do every morning."

Stan grinned, his teeth flashing white against his dark skin. “Guess you forgot.”

Prissy’s frown deepened. “Well, I’m not finished yet, so...” She trailed off pointedly.

Instead of taking the hint and leaving, Stan stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Suppressing an exasperated sigh, Prissy sat up on the mat and grabbed the remote control to pause the aerobics video as Stan sauntered over and crouched down beside her.

“Good morning,” he murmured, leaning down to brush a kiss across her mouth. His lips were soft, and he tasted like fresh, minty toothpaste.

“If you wanted a workout,” he murmured, nibbling her lower lip, “all you had to do was ask.”

“Maybe I would have,” Prissy retorted, “if you’d actually been there when I rolled over in bed this morning.”

Stan tensed, then drew back to meet her accusing gaze. “You’re mad because I slept on the sofa last night,” he said evenly.

“What do you think?”

He frowned. “Pris—”

“I mean, come on, Stan. You work over seventy hours a week. You’re only here half the time, so is it asking too much for you to sleep with me when you are home?”

Stan heaved a ragged sigh. “Come on, baby. Don’t be mad about this. I couldn’t sleep last night, so rather than keep you awake with my tossing and turning, I got up and went to the living room.”

“Where you apparently had no trouble sleeping like a baby,” Prissy said bitterly.

Stan hesitated. “Not right away. It took me a while to doze off.”

“I wonder why.”

Stan frowned, staring at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Prissy met his gaze directly. “It’s not as though this is the first time you’ve snuck out to the living room during the night. Over the past few months, you’ve slept on the sofa almost as often as you’ve slept in our bed. So I can’t help but wonder if there’s more to your story than insomnia.”

“My story?” Stan’s eyes narrowed on hers. “Are you accusing me of something, Pris?”

She just looked at him, wishing she had the courage to come right out and ask him the question that had been tormenting her for the past several months, keeping her awake many nights and wreaking havoc on her soul.

A question that no loving, devoted wife should ever have to ask her man.

Are you having an affair?

The words hovered on the tip of her tongue—a powder keg set to detonate, an accelerant waiting to ignite the inferno that would blaze through their lives and destroy them.

“Look, baby, you have no reason to be upset,” Stan said calmly. “Whenever I’m having insomnia, it’s better for me to sleep on the sofa so I won’t disturb you. I know you have to get up early for work every morning, so you need your eight hours of rest. Hell, woman, I don’t understand why you’re not thanking me for being so considerate.”

Because I think you’re lying to me, Prissy silently accused. I think you’ve met someone else, but I’m too much of a coward—and too damn afraid of losing you—to confront you with my suspicions.

“Anyway,” Stan continued, gently caressing Prissy’s cheek, “I didn’t come in here to argue with you. I was hoping we could spend some time together before the boys wake up.”

Prissy knew what “spending time together” meant, and she wasn’t interested. Or so she told herself.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” she said archly, “I was in the middle of exercising.”

“I noticed.” Stan’s eyes glinted wickedly as he gripped the waistband of her leggings. “I came to offer my services.”

“Your services?”

“That’s right.” He began peeling the spandex over her hips. “You’re not getting a full-body workout. I can give you one.”

Prissy’s belly quivered even as she feebly protested, “Come on, Stan. I’m all sweaty.”

“And I intend to make you even sweatier,” he promised.