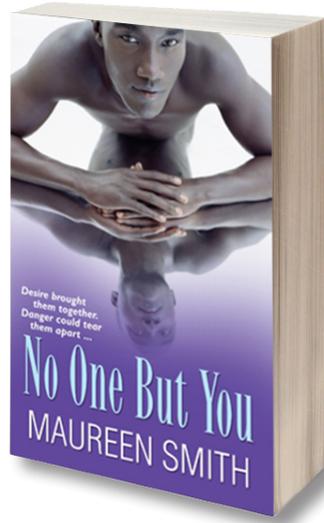


# MAUREEN SMITH



## AN EXCERPT FROM NO ONE BUT YOU

As Althea reached for her margarita, she felt a light, prickling awareness ripple across the surface of her skin. As if guided by an invisible force, she turned her head and homed in on the sexy stranger she and her friends had been ogling earlier.

He was already watching Althea, a silent, focused observation that made her pulse go haywire. He seemed oblivious to the rowdy antics of his friends and the addition of three scantily-clad women to their party, one of whom was openly vying for his attention. He was only interested in Althea, gazing at her as if he could see through the stretchy fabric of her form-fitting dress, through her silk thigh-high stockings and lace underwear, right down to the shivering flesh beneath.

As Althea returned his hot, bold gaze, she, too, lost track of her surroundings—the loud music, the flashing strobe lights, the sea of writhing bodies on the dance floor, the buzz of laughter and conversation. Everything faded into a distant blur as her world narrowed to focus solely on *him*.

Dark, handsome, virile. Utterly mesmerizing...

At that moment he glanced away, bending his head toward the beautiful woman at his side as she murmured something in his ear. He listened briefly, then nodded. With a smile full of seductive promise, the woman rose from the table and sashayed toward the restrooms near the back of the club.

Without a second thought Althea downed the rest of her margarita and stood, drawing curious looks from her friends.

“Where are you going?” they asked in unison.

Althea smoothed her silver jersey dress over her thighs. “To dance with the birthday boy.”

She moved swiftly and purposefully through the crowd, like a woman on a mission. Which she was. She’d seen something she wanted, and now she was going after it.

*You only live once.*

When Althea reached the noisy table across the room, several pairs of eyes swung in her direction. But she only had eyes for the birthday boy, who stared at her with an expression of surprise mingled with unmistakable pleasure.

Althea gave him her most beguiling smile. “Would you like to dance?”

“Absolutely,” he said, his voice a deep, husky growl that made her belly quiver. He unfolded his lean body from the chair and stood with a fluid grace that reminded Althea of the leashed power of a panther prowling through the jungle.

He was tall, towering over her five feet six inches. She'd thought he was good-looking the moment she laid eyes on him, but seeing him from across the crowded room was nothing compared to the up-close-and-personal view. But even as gorgeous as he was, it was his eyes that ensnared Althea. They were black as midnight, heavy-lidded and penetrating. They stared down at her with a searing intensity that scorched her nerve endings and left her feeling a little weak.

Swallowing hard, Althea slipped her palm into the warmth of his big hand and steered him away from the table, not missing the knowing looks and grins his friends gave him. Normally she would have minded the lewd innuendo reflected in their gazes, but tonight was different. Tonight she didn't care about anything but having a good time, and she'd found just the right man to help her achieve that all-important goal.

The dance floor was packed with couples swaying to a slow, sensual number beneath a mirrored disco ball. Althea led her partner through the crowd, finding an available spot somewhere in the middle.

As he drew her into his arms, she slid her hands up the hard, muscled wall of his chest and curved them around his neck. The moment their bodies came together, heat sizzled through her veins, igniting her blood. He stared down at her, their faces a scant few inches away. Her heart thundered. The look in his eyes pulled at something deep within her, something that made her ache with an indescribable longing.

She managed a soft, demure smile and lowered her head to his shoulder as they began swaying to the music. He smelled incredible. Like soap mingled with just a hint of an expensive, woody fragrance. Probably Armani.

“What’s your name?” he asked. His voice was an intoxicating baritone—deep, potent and incredibly sexy. It made the back of her neck tingle, as if he were caressing it with his hands, his lips, his warm breath.

She almost forgot he'd asked her a question until he chuckled softly.  
"Ah, a woman of mystery."

Althea lifted her head from his shoulder and smiled into his dark eyes.  
"Althea."

He nodded, his mouth curving in a smile that revealed strong white teeth. "Damien."

So that was his name. *Damien*. A strong, masculine name. It definitely suited him, Althea decided.

"Happy birthday, Damien. Hope it's been a good one."

"It is now," he said huskily.

She felt a thrill of pleasure at his words. *Don't get carried away*, an inner voice warned. *After tonight you'll never see this man again. Remember that.*

"How many years?" she asked.

"Thirty-four."

Althea nodded, mentally processing the fact that he was eight years older than her.

Glancing over his shoulder, she spied the beautiful woman who'd been seated at his table earlier, vying for his attention. She stood just beyond the edge of the dance floor, nursing a drink and openly glowering at them.

Althea felt only the slightest twinge of guilt. After all, it wasn't *her* fault that the other woman had left Damien unattended long enough for Althea to make her move. And if it hadn't been Althea, it would have been someone else. God knows there had been no shortage of women ogling him that evening.

“I know this might sound like a bad pickup line,” Damien said, gazing down at her, “but you look familiar to me.”

Althea gave him a wry look. “You’re not going to tell me that I look like Kerry Washington, are you?”

He chuckled. “No, I wasn’t. But now that you mention it, you *do* bear a striking resemblance to her. Why? Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. I think she’s gorgeous, and I love her movies. But if I had a dime for every time someone told me I look like her...Well, you get the point. Anyway, I was thinking the same thing about you. You look familiar to me, but I know we’ve never met before.”

Damien shook his head. “There’s no way I would have forgotten meeting you,” he said huskily.

Althea’s insides melted. She gave him a sultry smile. “I thought the same thing.”

He smiled, soft and intimate, and pulled her closer.

As the slow, seductive ballad segued into another, she resettled her head upon his shoulder and closed her eyes, emptying her mind of everything but this moment. She reveled in the strength of his arms around her. The hardness of his chest and abdomen rubbed against her breasts, the friction enough to make her nipples pucker against her lace bra. His firm, muscled thighs slid along hers as he turned her slowly in a circle, one hand at the small of her back, the other at her waist. The heat of his touch seared her, penetrating the soft fabric of her dress. When his hip brushed against hers, she felt the thick, rigid length of his erection. A soft gasp escaped her throat. Desire pooled between her legs.

She fought to control her ragged breathing as his arms tightened around her, holding her closer. As they danced in slow circles, their bodies moving as one, it was as if nothing and no one else existed outside their embrace. The heat emanating from every point of contact seemed to forge them together.

With her head resting on his shoulder, Althea's gaze riveted on the full, sensuous curve of his bottom lip. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him, to feel those soft, sexy lips gliding against hers before they trailed lower, to the aching swell of her breasts, and lower still, to the hot, pulsing flesh between her legs.

When she lifted her eyes to his, she found his dark, smoldering gaze already fixed on her face, as if he'd intercepted her thoughts.

Her lips parted, but before she could draw her next breath, Damien slanted his head over hers and seized her mouth with such searing possession she felt as if she might drown. She arched into him, moving higher in his arms to match herself more equally to his height. It didn't matter that they were in public, or that he was a complete stranger to her. All that mattered were the explosive sensations he aroused in her, almost terrifying in their intensity.

She pressed her aching breasts to his chest, and felt the deep timbre of his voice vibrating through her body when he groaned. Her hips ground mindlessly against his, seeking the enticing bulge she'd encountered just minutes before.

With another husky groan, Damien deepened the kiss, sliding his silky tongue past her lips and devouring her mouth until she was breathless and clinging to him. Soon they were both panting hard.

Althea pulled back and stared up at him. Her face was hot, her lips parted and swollen as her breath sawed in and out of her lungs.

Flashing strobe lights revealed the raw hunger in Damien's dark, glittering eyes as he gazed back at her. "Althea—"

She pressed a finger against the seam of his warm, soft lips. "Shhh." Reaching on tiptoe, she drew his head down to hers, leaned close and let her lips brush his earlobe, making him shiver in response.

"Take me home," she whispered in his ear.

He lifted his head and stared down at her, searching her face as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd heard.

Althea cupped his face in her hands and kissed him so boldly and provocatively there could be no doubt in his mind what she wanted.

When she drew away, Damien grabbed her hand and started purposefully from the dance floor, plowing through the crowd as effortlessly as Moses parted the Red Sea.

Althea gave a breathless little laugh as he tugged her along. "Where should we—"

"Whoever lives closest," Damien growled over his shoulder. "I'll drive."