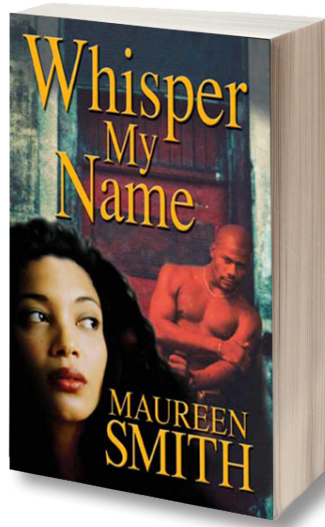


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **WHISPER MY NAME**

Francesca's gaze collided with a pair of piercing gray eyes set in the most arrestingly masculine face she'd ever seen.

Her breath caught in her throat, forcing the coffee down the wrong way. She choked and sputtered, setting her cup down on the tabletop with a loud clatter. Curious heads swung in her direction, and Alfonso hustled over to her table and hovered worriedly like a mother hen.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Francesca croaked out, feeling incredibly foolish for the minor commotion she'd caused. She accepted a handful of paper napkins from Alfonso and dabbed at her mouth and chin.

At Alfonso's summons, a young, pretty brunette appeared with a glass of cold water and handed it to Francesca with a friendly smile.

“Thank you, Jennifer,” Francesca murmured gratefully to the waitress. She took a careful sip of water, assiduously avoiding the other side of the room.

After Jennifer left, Alfonso continued to hover. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. I just swallowed too fast, that’s all.” As was her custom, Francesca masked her embarrassment with droll humor. “Don’t worry, Alfonso. I’m not going to choke to death without paying my bill first.”

He scowled and rolled his dark brown eyes heavenward. “Why do I even bother?” he muttered before shuffling away to tend to a more deserving customer.

Francesca picked up her cup of coffee, then reconsidered and set it back down, reaching for her textbook instead. But she couldn’t concentrate on a single word of what she’d been reading, and after just two minutes, she succumbed to temptation and stole another glance across the room.

To her shocked dismay, the stranger was still watching her. Hard angles and planes carved in rich almond sketched a tough, compelling face that was softened by heavy-lidded gray eyes and a wide, sensuous mouth framed by a neatly trimmed goatee. Even from this distance, Francesca could tell he was tall. The black cotton of his T-shirt strained against broad shoulders and sinewy biceps. His clean-shaven head only accentuated his rugged, undeniably dangerous appeal.

His focused, silent observation of Francesca sent heat crawling up her neck, and she couldn’t help wondering what it was about her appearance that had so captured his attention. She was, and always had been, a realist when it came to her own strengths and shortcomings. With a Ph.D. in entomology, Francesca could discuss molecular biology and argue the ecological importance of arthropods

with the best of them. She'd been called gifted, exceptional, even brilliant as she tenaciously climbed her way through the ranks in a male-dominated field of study.

But she was not the kind of woman who turned heads—especially not the heads of sexy strangers like the one across the room.

As he sat at a table in the corner drinking coffee and watching her, Francesca wondered who he was, and where he'd come from. She was a regular at the Espuma Coffee and Tea Emporium, and she'd never seen him before. She definitely would have remembered him, especially since he didn't strike her as the type to frequent a place like the Espuma. The quaint little café had been converted from an old house and featured cozy, well-lit rooms decorated with the works of local artists. The menu catered mostly to vegetarians, offering an eclectic blend of grilled vegetables and cheeses, and pita breads and pesto sauces served with iced Vietnamese coffees. Francesca, who lived within easy walking distance, scarcely let a day pass without making a trip to the Espuma, armed with her reading materials and papers to grade.

As the sexy stranger's silent appraisal continued, Francesca found herself wishing she'd had the foresight to wear something other than the shapeless tropical-print muumuu she'd thrown on before leaving the house that morning. And it probably wouldn't have hurt to actually comb her hair, instead of just shoving the kinky chestnut-brown curls into an unruly knot atop her head. As if to taunt her, an errant lock of hair suddenly sprang free and tumbled over one bespectacled eye.

One corner of the stranger's mouth curved upward, and Francesca's heart thudded in response.

What was going on here? Could this gorgeous man be flirting with her?

She threw a quick glance over her shoulder, half-expecting to see some sultry-eyed, leggy vixen seated nearby. But the few tables behind her were empty.

She turned back around slowly. The man's gray eyes glinted with faint amusement. As Francesca watched, unable to tear her gaze away, he downed the rest of his coffee, dropped a large bill onto the table, and stood.

Francesca realized two things at once: The first was that she'd been right about him being tall. From where she sat, she judged him to be at least six-three, with a body that could have been hewn from solid rock.

The second thing she realized was that he was coming straight toward her!

Panic fluttered in her belly. She froze, cemented to the chair even as every gut instinct warned her to get up and run in the opposite direction. But she was powerless to do anything but sit and watch with mounting alarm as the handsome stranger sauntered toward her. Something about his relaxed, confident strides hinted at raw, unleashed power that quickened Francesca's pulse and turned her palms sweaty. He wore loose khaki trousers that hung low on his trim waist and rode his long legs in a way that would make Giorgio Armani proud.

A few feet away from her, he stopped suddenly and pulled out a cell phone clipped to his waist.

Francesca thought she heard him say "Durand," or something to that effect, but he wasn't near enough for her to be certain. And she was too distracted by the sound of his voice—a dark, smoky drawl that made her stomach clench in reaction.

He listened into the phone for a moment, his expression turning grim, and then he said, "I'm on my way."

Francesca held her breath as he sent her one long, final look before turning on his heel and striding purposefully from the café.

And somehow, inexplicable though it was, she knew she hadn't seen the last of him.