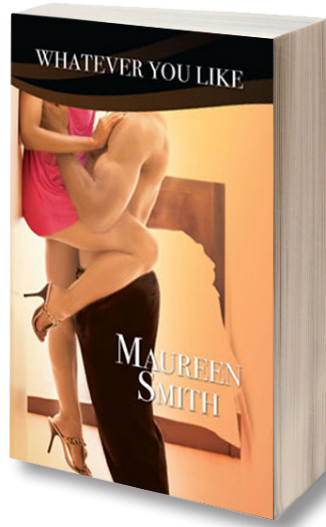


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **WHATEVER YOU LIKE**

“Are we almost there?”

The uniformed chauffeur met Lena Morrison’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “About five more minutes.”

Nodding briskly, Lena slid a tube of MAC lipstick across her mouth and surveyed her reflection in the compact mirror she’d removed from her evening purse. The lustrous red color made her full lips look as juicy and inviting as ripe mangoes dangling from the bowed branches of a tree. Smoky eye shadow accentuated her wide, dark eyes and high cheekbones. She’d exchanged her conservative office attire for a sexy black dress that hugged her curves and had a plunging back. Diamonds glittered at her ears, throat and wrists.

She looked like a million bucks. Felt like it, too.

So it was only fitting that tonight she was escorting one of Chicago’s most eligible bachelors to a glitzy party aboard his private yacht.

Roderick Brand, president and CEO of a multinational energy conglomerate. Educated at MIT. Recently named Businessman of the Year by Forbes. Net worth \$2.4 billion.

Lena had done her research, of course. As a professional escort, it was her job to learn as much as she could about her wealthy clients. The more she knew and understood about them, the better she could serve their needs.

“Here we are.”

The Bentley limousine had glided to a stop in front of a sleek glass high-rise located on Lake Shore Drive. At the canopied entrance to the building, a doorman greeted elegantly dressed couples heading out for a night on the town.

From the backseat of the limo, Lena watched as the driver spoke into the car phone. After a few moments, he hung up and met her eyes in the rearview mirror. “Mr. Brand will be down shortly.”

Lena nodded, smiled. “Thank you.”

As a rule, she never entered her clients’ residences. While most of them understood that she was paid to accompany them to social events, there were always a few who expected more from her. After being groped, propositioned—even cornered in a bathroom—Lena had decided it’d be easier to maintain professional boundaries if she never stepped foot inside her clients’ homes.

Her need for boundaries was what prompted her to get up and move to the opposite seat. She felt more comfortable sitting face-to-face to her clients, rather than side by side. And it worked out great for the ones who enjoyed ogling her legs across the aisle, hoping for a glimpse up her dress. Wryly she wondered if tonight’s client—

Suddenly Lena gasped, staring out the window.

The most gorgeous man she'd ever seen had just emerged from the building. At least six foot three and powerfully built, with wide, muscular shoulders and endlessly long legs that carried him forward with purpose. Lena had escorted some of the richest men to countless black-tie affairs, but she'd never known any man to wear the hell out of a tuxedo. Until tonight. Roderick Brand couldn't have looked finer if he'd just completed a cover shoot for *GQ*.

As he reached the waiting limo, Lena mouthed to herself, *Oh. My. God.*

The driver had gotten out to open the back door for Roderick. Lena's stomach clenched as he lowered himself into the plush leather seat across from her.

Their eyes met.

It was as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the car—or out of Lena's lungs, at the very least. Suddenly she had difficulty breathing.

For several moments neither of them attempted to speak.

As Roderick's dark, glittering gaze traveled over her face and body, Lena shamelessly returned the favor. None of the photos she'd seen of him could begin to do the man justice. He was devastatingly handsome, with black slashes for eyebrows, sculpted cheekbones and a square jaw. His skin was a deep, molten brown that made her think of the most decadent chocolate dessert she'd ever eaten. But what had her mouth watering were his full, sensual lips that brought to mind all sorts of erotic images—skin moving on skin, limbs entangled, mouths and tongues working, two bodies thrusting between hot, twisted sheets.

A slow, legs-spreading smile curved Roderick's lips. As if he'd hijacked her thoughts.

"Hello." His deep, dark voice was as sexy as the man it belonged to. "You must be Lena."

She smiled. "Either that, or you've climbed into the wrong limo."

He laughed, a husky sound that made her nipples harden. "A sense of humor. I like that."

Her smile widened. "I aim to please."

"Oh, you do," Roderick murmured, giving her another one of those slow once-overs. "You please me very much."

His words sent an illicit shiver down her spine. Her loins tightened, and her clit pulsed and tingled until she had to shift in her seat to alleviate the pressure.

"Would you care for a drink?" she offered abruptly.

Roderick smiled. "I'd love one."

The limo was equipped with a fully stocked minibar. Roderick watched as Lena went to work fixing him a dirty martini with three olives. As she passed him the glass, their fingers brushed. Heat shot through her veins, making her skin tingle.

"Mmm," Roderick murmured after sampling his drink.

"Good?"

"Very." He held her gaze over the rim of the glass. "You seem to know exactly what I like."

Lena smiled demurely. “If I didn’t,” she said, settling back against her seat, “I wouldn’t be very good at my job. And I am.”
Something hot and wicked flashed in his eyes. “How good?”

She returned his gaze, pulse thudding. “Good enough to know better than to answer that question.”

He chuckled, raising his glass to her in a mock toast. “Well played.”

Lena grinned. It went through her mind that Roderick, with his heavy-lidded eyes and bone-melting smile, could easily pass for Idris Elba’s brother. Have mercy.

As Roderick sipped his martini, she stared at his hand holding the glass. His fingers were long, broad and masculine. He oozed testosterone, confidence and power, and possessed an unmistakable swagger. Wearing an expensively tailored tuxedo, a gold Breguet wristwatch and John Lobb loafers, he looked right at home in the luxurious limousine. Yet even in his fancy threads he exuded danger, a ruthlessness that warned Lena that Roderick Brand would be formidable in a heartbeat if ever crossed. He hadn’t gotten where he was without having a street fighter in him, courtesy of his South Side roots.

“It doesn’t seem fair.”

Lena’s eyes snapped to Roderick’s face. “What?”

“This setup. The fact that you know so much about me, and I don’t know nearly enough about you.”

Lena gave him an amused look. “What would you like to know?”

“Your last name, for starters.”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

“Both.”

“Why?”

Lena couldn’t help smiling. “You know why. Those are the rules.”

“Whose?” he challenged. “Yours or the agency’s?”

Torn between laughter and exasperation, Lena shook her head at him. “Are you always this persistent?”

“Absolutely.” His voice dipped low. “And the more I want something, the more relentlessly I pursue it.”

Lena’s mouth went dry at the thought of being pursued by this virile, gorgeous man. And what would he do to her once he caught her? she wondered, even as she imagined being tied to a bed, naked and spread-eagle as Roderick took her roughly from behind.

She swallowed hard, giving herself a mental shake to erase the erotic image. “All you need to know about me, Mr. Brand, is that I take my work seriously and I’m committed to serving your needs.” At the suggestive gleam that entered his eyes, she added, “Not those kind of needs. You hired me to be your companion this evening, so that’s what I intend to be. Nothing more, nothing less.”

His lips curved in a lazy half smile. “In that case, I have a request to make.”

Lena was almost afraid to ask. “What is it?”

“I’m feeling kinda lonely over here. I’m sure that wasn’t your intention.”

“Of course not,” Lena murmured.

Roderick patted the seat beside him. “Then come join me.”

Lena knew it wasn’t a request. This was a powerful man who was used to giving orders and being obeyed. She doubted anyone ever refused him. And the reality was that he was paying good money for her company. The least she could do was sit beside him—even if doing so tested every ounce of her self-control. Because if ever there was a man she needed to keep at arm’s length, it was Roderick Brand.

“Much better,” he said approvingly as she moved to his side. “See? I’m perfectly harmless.”

At Lena’s skeptical look, he laughed. They both knew he was about as harmless as a bloodthirsty wolf on the prowl for its next meal.

As he set aside his drink and leaned back against the seat, she watched the way the fabric of his pants stretched over his muscular thighs. She could feel the heat radiating from his body. The subtle, woody scent of his cologne teased her senses, tempting her to lean closer and inhale deeply. Somehow she managed to resist.

“So,” Roderick began conversationally, “how long have you been with the agency?”

Lena hesitated. “Three years.”

He nodded slowly. “Zandra tells me that you’re twenty-nine, you have a master’s degree in communication and you speak fluent Italian and Japanese.”

“That’s right.”

As the owner of Elite For You Companions, Zandra Kennedy prided herself on hiring escorts of the highest caliber. The women she selected were not only beautiful; they were intelligent, polished and able to discuss politics, world affairs and a variety of other subjects in any social or business setting. The wealthy clients who anted up for one of Zandra’s escorts knew that they were getting more than just arm candy. They were getting a companion who’d be admired for her beauty and brains.

“I can definitely see why you’re one of Zandra’s most popular employees,” Roderick drawled.

Lena arched a brow at him. “Is that what she told you?”

He grinned. “Are you denying it?”

“Oh no,” Lena said with mock solemnity. “Far be it from me to call my boss a liar.”

Roderick’s grin broadened. “Especially after she said such nice things about you.”

Lena’s lips twisted wryly. “If she had to resort to bragging about her escorts, you must have been a hard sell.”

“Let’s just say I needed a little, ah, convincing.”

“Oh, I see.” Lena gave him a knowing smile. “You’re a virgin.”

He chuckled softly. “If that’s what you call clients who’ve never hired escorts, then yeah, I’m a virgin.”

Lena’s belly quivered. “So I’m your first.”

“You’re my first.” He smiled, slow and sensual. “Lucky me.”

As they stared at each other, the air between them crackled with the kind of raw, scorching energy generated by two people who wanted to screw more than anything, but knew they shouldn’t.

After several moments Lena dragged her gaze away and stared blindly out the window. The limo was gliding smoothly through downtown traffic, busy even at this time of night. Soon they’d reach their destination.

The sooner, the better, thought Lena.