

Chapter One

Paige Fisher whirred through the Book Exchange's heavy revolving doors and stepped inside the boxy building's entrance. With its slabs of rough gray concrete separated by skinny rows of mirrored glass, the abomination of seventies design was considered by some a marvel of brutalism style architecture. To Paige, the windowless building looked more like a government institution than like America's largest book haven.

The glass doors swished, sucking away the humid June evening air and replacing it with dry climate-controlled atmosphere. The space hugged her burning flesh like a cool kiss and a shiver of excitement tickled her spine. Books covered every inch of the mega store's bunker-like, concrete walls. She breathed in the scent of thousands of years of learning, and warmth spread through her veins. She loved the smell of books – the tang of thousands of musty works; their folds explored by millions of fingers, some big and rough, others soft and delicate. As long as there were books in the world, nothing else mattered.

She walked to the back of the store and paused behind a stack of Encyclopedia Britannica. The green and gold spines of the 'Da's through to the 'Do's stood, tall and proud at eye level. Paige ran her fingers along them, lingering on one, caressing another.

She glanced toward the checkout corner. The owner's sister, Suzie Shields chatted with a customer, between end-of-the week rushes. With her sober navy blue sweater set and white hair pulled back in a tight bun she looked as dried up as the old books she carefully stacked on the shelves at the end of every day.

Paige knew from experience that under the blandest of clothes lay the hottest of fires. She stared down at her own sweater set and yanked the scrunchie out of her chestnut hair. At twenty-eight, she was too young to look and act like an old Suzie. A guy with a ponytail came in

and put two cups of coffee on the counter. The old lady laughed, turning a bright shade of pink. Paige examined him from behind her hiding spot.

He was one hell of a looker. Tall. Blond. Chiseled and tattooed. He leaned against the counter with the comfortable ease of a man who belongs no matter where he finds himself. He had to be the owner's son, T.C. Shields. She'd heard the playboy would be spending the summer working at their Detroit location. Apparently, Papa Shields wanted his youngest son to take over the family business.

Tony, one of the regional buyers, wheeled a container of used books down the aisle next to her, stirring the ever-present smell of old books. He cast an appreciative glance in her direction. "Hey, Page. Looking good."

Paige smiled, too overcome by the way his Old Spice mixed in with the fresh shipment of paperbacks and hardbacks to say anything in return. She licked her lips, then put her hand to her throat and squeezed until her breathing slowed. Ever since she'd made out with Bobby Baker in the high school library some twelve years ago, the smell of books turned her into a shivering puddle of desire. Her vision blurred and her excitement grew. Not yet. Not here. Lightheaded, she closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the stack for a moment. A large woman jostled by and gave her a strange look.

Paige offered her a weak smile and walked to the other end of the row. She stopped at an opening between the 'P's and 'Ph's where she could watch the Book Exchange's new employee without being seen.

He wore his thick shock of curly blond hair pulled back into a loose ponytail and, despite his bohemian air, appeared clean-shaven. His lightweight linen shirt clung to his sinewy body, revealing a well-developed physique, and a tattoo peeked out from under his right shirt cuff.

Paige had heard Mr. Shields' son was hot, but no one had told her he was a tattoo sleeve away from looking like a rock star.

She closed her eyes again and undressed him with her mind. In her fantasy, his musky scent mingled with the mossy smell of books. She wound a hand in his hair and pulled off the elastic band holding back his curls. A cascade of tangled blond locks tumbled to his shoulders.

One by one she undid the buttons of his shirt until it hung open revealing the angles of his muscular chest. She buried her face in the hollow between his pectoral muscles and breathed a kiss. Musk, patchouli and tobacco penetrated her senses and her nether regions grew heavy with desire. With her index finger she traced the contours of his full lips, then brushed his mouth with hers.

“There you are.” A thin, high-pitched voice interrupted her fantasy. “Miss Fisher, is everything all right?”

Paige's face burned under Old Suzie's scrutiny. She looked up from the books she'd been caressing. “Yes, thank-you. Just feeling a little light-headed. That's all.”

The old gal pursed her lips with disdain. “Well, come on. Don't just stand there. I want to introduce you to our new general manager.”

Paige hesitated, baffled. “General manager? But, I'm supposed to – ”

Suzie sniffed, gave her a smug look and turned on her heels.

Disconcerted, Paige gazed back through the spaces between the books to the checkout counter where T.C. stared at the clock in the foyer as though willing time to pass more quickly. Mr. Shields had promised her the general manager position. She'd been there almost ten years and she needed that raise. Suzie must have misunderstood. Paige followed her colleague, determined to get to the bottom of the situation.

As they approached the front of the store, Mr. Shields Jr. turned toward them and flashed an irresistible grin. “Hey, you must be Paige.”

Her defenses melted away. “And you must be T.C.” Paige extended her hand. “Welcome to The Book Exchange.”

T.C.’s grip was firm and warm and his hand lingered a moment too long in its hold. Paige’s heart skipped a beat and she pulled her hand away. “Uh, how’s your first day going so far?”

“Aunt Suzie’s been taking great care of me.” The warmth of his smile echoed in his deep baritone. His strong, velvet-edged voice sent a ripple of awareness up her spine.

Aunt Suzie blushed and muttered something about just doing her job.

“I understand you’ll be taking over as our new General Manager,” Paige asked, waiting for the inevitable misunderstanding to be exposed.

“Yeah. The old man wants me to learn about the family business.”

The old man had given his son the job. Of course he had. Why give it to some unrelated wallflower whose name he could never remember when he had a young, charismatic son? Her heart sank. “Oh. Uh, that’s great.” She glanced from his clear blue eyes to the pucca shell choker around his neck. He looked more like a surfer than like the general manager of the country’s biggest used bookstore chain. The bitter taste of defeat filled her mouth. No promotion meant no raise. And no raise meant she’d have to put off opening her own place for at least another year. She glanced at her surroundings, barely hiding her despair. The overhead fluorescent panel lighting cast a bright, unforgiving greenish hue on the brown carpet and overcrowded rows of books. Could the Book Exchange be any uglier? Her place would be warm and cozy. Patrons would come not only to buy books but to hang out and exchange ideas.

She realized they were both staring. How long had she been musing, oblivious of their presence? No matter. Everyone else thought she was nuts, he might as well join the party. Recovering, she said, “Well, that’s great. You’re in good hands.” She nodded in Old Suzie’s direction. “Miss Suzie knows this place better than anyone.”

Suzie’s mouth twisted into a thin smile. “Actually, you’ll be the one showing T.C. around. I’m off to the American Booksellers Convention in Chicago.”

“Oh. I mean, that’s great. The Booksellers Convention. Right.” Paige lowered her glance. Not only was Papa Shields’ baby boy getting her job, she was going to have to train him to do it. She swallowed hard and ran her gaze from Suzie’s smug pinched air to her nephew’s bronzed face. At least a few weeks in the bookstore would take care of that tan. The thought did little to cheer her up. “Well, there’s no time like the present.” Paige motioned to her new boss to follow her to the front of the store. “Let’s start with the tour.”

“How long have you been working here, Paige?”

The sound of her name on his tongue sent a delicious shiver up her spine and she hated herself for it. Damn hormones. “I started working here when I was in college. Almost ten years ago.” *Way to go, Sherlock. Might as well cut to the chase and tell him your age.* What did it matter anyway? Guys like him dated supermodels, not frumpy bookstore employees. She pulled her gaze away from his full lips. “And yourself? Which one of your father’s stores did you transfer from?”

“Transfer? Naw, I’m a photographer. Working here is my first foray into the world of used books.” He flashed her a beautiful, disarming smile.

An unwelcome angry flush crept into her cheeks. Great. Papa Shields had not only given her job away to his baby boy – a man who made her insides feel squishy every time he smiled –

but he'd handed it over to a man who looked as though he'd never read a book. She knew about as much about him as she wanted to. Enough with the small talk.

“As you can see, the ground floor is filled with magazine back issues. Our downtown location has become a favorite haunt for collectors or for people who've missed one of their regular titles. Here, we also house a large selection of classics, sports, hobbies, crafts, war, diet and health.” She stopped dead in her tracks and they collided. A mix of patchouli and musk filled her senses. He smelled just as she'd imagined.

He gave her right arm a squeeze. “I'm sorry. I can be a bit of a klutz. Did I hurt you?”

Not yet. She stepped back to get away from the troubling heat emanating from his body. “No, I'm fine.” Biting her lip, she looked away and kept talking as casually as she could. “As I'm sure you know, we're the largest chain of used bookstores in North America. Our prices vary between forty to eighty percent off regular retail prices.”

Tony came out of the back office. “This is Tony Pedari, one of our regional buyers. He comes in every Tuesday with a new shipment of books. Tony, meet T.C. Shields, our new general manager.”

Tony puffed out his chest, and seemed to size T.C. up with a glance.

If she weren't so miserable, Paige would have laughed out loud. Poor Tony. His five-foot-eight stocky frame was hardly a match for T.C.'s hard surfer body. Giving up his status as the store's only straight male would not be easy.

“Welcome aboard, T.C.” Tony held out his hand in a gesture that seemed friendly enough.

Paige knew better. One glance at the glum-faced buyer told her his words belied his true feelings.

T.C. grasped Tony's outstretched hand with enthusiasm. "Nice to meet you, man." He held Tony's gaze and grinned. "You'll have to give me the goods on this place over beer sometime soon."

Whether he was completely oblivious to Tony's palpable displeasure or just playing the game, Paige couldn't be sure. She pulled T.C. away from the impending cockfight and continued her tour. She'd seen a lot of employees come and go in the last ten years. She gave the same spiel every time. And none of them ever loved books as much as they ought to. "All of our employees are knowledgeable and capable of assisting customers in finding the books they're looking for. For retail bookstores looking for volume orders, we export 40-foot container loads of used books world wide."

T.C.'s initiation to the Book Exchange continued much in the same way, one floor at a time. He listened attentively, nodding and smiling at patrons – especially the female ones. By the time they reached the top floor, a throng of women seemed to have gathered around. Paige groaned and motioned to a nearby clerk. "Stephanie here can assist you with anything else you might need. I need to get back to my desk. I've got work I need to complete before the end of the day."

Paige retreated to her office on the second floor, while T.C. poured on the charm with Stephanie. The sound of his warm baritone and of the college girl's giggles faded in the distance as she zigzagged through the aisles, grabbing books in no particular order. She looked for leather bindings and broken spines. The older the better. Then, when she was sure no one was watching, she went to the small room in the back and closed the door. Her desk and chair were jammed between containers of boxed books and an old filing cabinet. It had to be the least

comfortable office space in the building, but Paige loved it. Hidden from her colleagues and patrons' eyes, it was private, warm and dark. Perfect for her flights of fantasy.

She squeezed into the chair and piled up the books she'd selected to form an extra wall between her and the rest of the world. Then, she slid her hand behind the cabinet. There it was. The book. Her book.

She curled her hand around its well-worn spine and pulled it out of its hiding spot. She thumbed through its pages and in mere seconds landed on her favorite passage where the spine was broken from frequent use.

She always pictured herself as the heroine – an easy task since they shared the same name. But that's where the similarities ended. Where the heroine was voluptuous and feminine, Paige was tall and geeky. Where make-believe Paige charmed and seduced, the real Paige stuttered and offended. But when she escaped between the pages of her favorite book, boring old bookstore Paige became everything she dreamed of – a beautiful and beguiling seductress. The hero mostly remained faceless.

She leaned her forehead against the stacked books and breathed in their scent. Ripples of desire tore through her body, filling her groin with a heavy need. With one last glance to the closed door, Paige began reading.

He leaned in and kissed the pulsing hollow at the base of her neck, putting an end to all discussion. He set her body on fire, searing a path from her throat to her mouth. She wound her hands through his long curly locks and devoured his lips with a hunger she never knew she possessed. He moaned and slipped his hands under her blouse. She guided them, encouraging him to explore.

“Oh, yes.” He growled the words, and his raspy admission knotted her insides. She looked at him through the haze, his damp clothes clung to his body, revealing the hard lines of his chests.

Paige glanced up from the dog-eared pages of her book and listened to the sounds of the Book Exchange’s second floor. Save for the distant whir of the old air conditioning system, all was silent. She bit her lip and closed her eyes again. The sexy stranger dark features blurred and morphed into those of a handsome blond surfer with a tattoo sleeve.

He unbuttoned her blouse with adept fingers and buried his face in her cleavage. A delicious shiver of anticipation hardened the tips of her nipples. He slipped a finger under her lacy bra, his gaze locked on hers. His eyes blazed with the promise of the pleasures to come and all coherent thoughts left her mind. He deftly undid the clips, and eased her back against the building. She leaned back and surrendered to his embrace. His tongue explored the rosy peaks of her breasts, tantalizing then withdrawing. They firmed instantly under his touch sending little burst of pleasure through her body with every lick. Warning bells sounded in her mind. Giving herself to this man was wrong.

A familiar flutter tickled the pit of her stomach. Giving herself to these flights of fancy was wrong. Paige bit her lips and squirmed in her seat. Just this one last time, then she’d give it up. She’d take the book home and leave it there. Her glance caressed the passage she knew so well.

Pushing the unsettling feelings aside, she licked the misty rain from his flesh as it pooled in the hollows at the base of his neck. She pulled away and looked into his eyes, then laughed softly. “What is it about you that makes me want to be a bad girl?”

The stranger wound his hands through her hair and kissed her, nibbling, then sucking on her bottom lip. His answer came in the form of a tormented groan.

Paige went to work on the buttons of his shirt, her entire body trembling with anticipation. One by one, they gave in to her fumbling hands to reveal more of the stranger's sinewy torso. The warm golden light of the burning candles painted the peaks and valleys of his every muscle with an amber hue. A shiver rippled through her. He was even more virile than she'd imagined.

Her body ached for his touch, for any touch, for the fulfillment only an orgasm could bring. She slipped her left hand under the waistband of her skirt in search of her pulsing wet core. She pushed her cotton panties aside, and - there. A delicious shiver pierced her body when she made contact. Her fingers explored the silky flesh, stroking, prodding and savoring each moment.

She pressed her face against his bare chest and breathed in his scent. Cinnamon, sandalwood, and musk mingled with dizzying effect. Her blood coursed through her veins like an awakened river. To hell with propriety. She pushed away the urge to cover her bare breasts and teased the tip of his nipples with her tongue. She'd go back to being demure tomorrow. Tonight, she was a wanton goddess of love.

Passion pumped blood from her heart to her extremities and her body ignited as though half ice half flame. She heard the distant sound of a knock on the door. Not now. Now when she was so close to releasing. She breathed in and bit her lip forcing herself to be quiet.

The stranger's pecs hardened at her touch, and he urged her on with a muffled moan. She explored the lines of his chest with her mouth and covered his stomach with wet kisses. She brushed her lips against each muscle, lingering here and there to lick or tantalize with her

tongue. The closer she got to his sex, the harder his erection pushed against the material of his jeans. Emboldened by his desire, Paige unfastened his belt and pulled the zipper down. Once released his rigid member sprang out. Hard. Heavy. Ready. A hot ache grew in her throat.

Waves of ecstasy throbbed through her and she gasped in sweet agony.

“Paige.” A warm masculine voice snapped her attention back to reality. T.C. Shields stood in her office. “Are you okay? I thought I heard...I’m sorry, I knocked but there was no answer.” His gaze slid down her body.

She stared wordlessly at him, heart pounding.

“Suzie sent me to get you.” A flame smoldered in his eyes.

With a jerk, she snapped her book closed and leaned into the desk to camouflage her right hand – still deep inside her panties. Shock siphoned the blood from her face. How long had he been watching? She was too surprised to do anything but nod. Her groin throbbed with the delicious agony of unfinished business and she struggled to slow down her breathing.

T.C.’s glance traveled from her eyes and the book she clutched against her chest down to her where her right hand disappeared, conspicuously hidden under the desk. He smiled and licked his lips. “We’re closing in fifteen minutes.”