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By Gena Showalter

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Gena Showalter is the New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author of over fifty books, including the acclaimed Lords of the Underworld and Angels of the Dark series, and the White Rabbit Chronicles. She writes sizzling paranormal romance, heartwarming contemporary romance, and unputdownable young adult novels, and lives in Oklahoma City with her family and menagerie of dogs. Visit her at GenaShowalter.com.

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Katie James coasted her fingertips across the muscled chest before her. Warmth tingled through her arm, a drugging warmth more intoxicating than expensive champagne and moonlight kisses. Her lips parted on a wispy catch of breath as images of silk sheets, entwined bodies and slow, delicious caresses filled her mind.

How could this man affect her so powerfully, almost *magically*? How could he affect her at all when he'd never spoken a word to her? His face was beauty personified, yes, but that wasn't enough to entrance her like this, to leave her weak and shaky every time she glanced at him.

There had to be something more to him, something elemental. Something beyond physical beauty that lured her every feminine desire. At the moment, though, she could not think past his physique, and slowly, so slowly her gaze moved over him. He was granite-hard, his abdomen ridged with sinew, his shoulders wide and firm. All of this gave his tall, sculpted frame a dangerous aura—dangerous and utterly sensual. He belonged in the woods with raw, naked branches surrounding him. Yet he stood out side among a brilliant crimson and yellow drapery of azaleas, somehow the absolute essence of masculinity.

"Mmm," she sighed, her eyelids fluttering closed. Her hand dropped to her side. "If only you were real..."

But he wasn't. He was formed entirely of smooth, gray stone—a beautiful statue, nothing more. This was one of the ironies of fate, she supposed, that the first man to ever truly captivate her belonged in a museum and not in her bed.

Why was she surprised by her infatuation with a beautiful, silent, unreal man, anyway? Having grown up with five older brothers, she knew just how annoying real men could be. They burped and scratched in public, cracked derogatory jokes, and somehow managed to charm the pants off women before losing interest and moving on to other conquests.

Her stone warrior could not offend her. He couldn't choose someone else if he thought her unattractive or too tall, because he was permanently mounted to the colored marble base that stood in her garden gallery. A marble base she now stood upon.

Another sigh slipped past Katie's lips, and she fought a deep, primitive urge to touch him again, to hold him, to discover some sort of comfort or acceptance she'd never gained with the procession of men she dated.

This is wrong. I should walk away.

But she didn't.

The cool Dallas breeze ruffled the tight constraints of her ponytail but did little to cool her ardor, and with each passing second the stone warrior's stare unraveled the very fabric of her reservations. Finally, Katie gave in to her craving. She dragged her fingers across his jawbone, loving the slightly bearded texture that reminded her of a man just before his morning shave. She traced the curved outline of his ears and imagined what he would feel like had he been the flesh and blood man she so desired.

Fiery heat rippled across her nerve endings.

Of their own accord, her fingertips wandered lower, caressing his neck. His shoulders. His chest. She even circled his small, puckered nipples. A soft moan of pleasure wafted to her ears, the timbre low, raspy and masculine.

Katie jerked back in surprise. After a moment she relaxed, even experienced a twinge of disappointment when she realized her imagination was simply running wild. Again. Hadn't she sometimes felt his breath upon her face when she drew close? Hearing him moan was no more fantastical than that.

Gravel crunched as a car meandered along her driveway.

Katie jerked around and watched wide-eyed as a black sedan halted just in front of her dilapidated, Victorian-style mansion. Tendrils of mortification raced up her spine, heating her cheeks. She'd been so lost in her scrutiny of the stone warrior, she'd forgotten about prying eyes and midday sunlight.

Just what had this intruder seen?

She scrambled from the dais. The moment her feet hit the soft grass, she counted to ten, using the time to calm her racing heart. She should have resisted the statue's allure; instead she'd acted like a teenage girl kissing her favorite rock star's poster. *Well, no more*, she thought, determination stiffening her spine. *There will be no more touching the statue. In fact, there will be no more looking at him, and absolutely, positively no more thinking about him.*

She watched a handsome, familiar male emerge from the sedan. Never one to back down from conflict, she maneuvered around the bushes and flower beds of her "pleasure garden"—so dubbed by the previous owner because the entire enclosure was littered with naked sculptures similar to *the warrior she wasn't going to think about ever again*—and marched to the driveway.

"Damn it, Gray. What are you doing here?"

Her visitor grinned, not the least put out by her brusque tone. Above them, the sun breathed peacefully, its powerful rays illuminating his tall frame and wide shoulders with an orange gold halo. "You owe me a quarter for cussing, little sister."

Frowning, Katie dug into her pocket, snatched out a quarter and tossed it to him. "I only cursed because you surprised the shi—" Thankfully, she stopped herself in time. "You startled me, okay. For God's sake, call before coming over."

"I called. You didn't answer. You were supposed to be home."

"So you started to worry," she said. For some reason, all of her brothers still thought of her as a delicate flower in need of twenty-four-hour, seven-days-a-week protection. So what that she was now six feet tall and in top physical condition. So what that she'd attended numerous self-defense classes.

Gray shrugged, sheepish. "Yeah. I started to worry."

"Did you consider I might have just stepped out?" She flashed him an exasperated but loving grin. "Don't answer that. Just tell me what you need."

"I wanted to see your newest acquisition. From out here it looks like a dump, by the way," he added good-naturedly, motioning to the house with his chin. "Why aren't you painting or laying tile or doing something to fix the place up? That's your job, isn't it?"

At that moment, Katie's tense muscles relaxed. Gray hadn't seen her with the stone warrior. Otherwise he would have been cracking jokes at her expense instead of inquiring about her activities. "I worked on the upstairs bathroom all morning and needed some fresh air."

He gave the mansion another once-over. "Fresh air? I don't think so. My guess? You feared the walls were about to cave in and got out while you could."

"Ha, ha."

"Honey, I sure hope you knew what you were doing when you signed the deed."

"I've been buying, fixing and selling houses for four years. Give me some credit." She might have chosen an unusual career for a woman, but she loved what she did. Even better, she had an instinct for real estate, knew when and what to buy, knew when to sell, and she almost always made a profit.

A dedicated skeptic, Gray remained unconvinced. "Please tell me you negotiated a good deal. I seriously doubt anyone will ever snap this baby up."

"I'm willing to bet I sell this house for more money than you make in an entire year."

"I'll take that bet." Grinning, he stroked his fingers over his jawline. "To even the odds, you only have to make five thousand dollars over the purchase price and restoration costs."

Katie didn't hesitate. "Deal."

"If you win, I'll wear a dress to the next family luncheon. If I win, you have to have dinner with Steven Harris. He's a new detective in my unit," Gray rushed on before she could protest. "Everyone likes him."

She groaned. Her brother meant well, he truly did, but she wasn't going out with any more of his friends. The last cop he set her up with had spent the entire night discussing—in minute detail—the way a bullet had once pierced his chest cavity. All of the fascinating details were delivered while she tried to suck down chopped tomato spaghetti.

"I've changed my mind," she said succinctly. "The bet is off. I'd rather be staked to an anthill wearing nothing but a bologna bikini than go on another blind date."

Her brother remained undeterred. "Are you seeing someone?"

"No." She didn't elaborate, knowing it would only encourage him. In the last year, she'd endured end less evenings of bad food, bad movies and even worse company. She had finally come to the conclusion that she suffered from a severe case of First Date Syndrome.

The only symptom—which was proving fatal—was that she always found something wrong with her love interests within an hour of meeting them. Richard ate his peas one at a time. John's voice had a high, nasal pitch. Quinn walked with his knees bowed out. Mitch was too clingy. Worse, all of them were shorter than her own six-foot build, and she hated, *hated* looking down at a man. That was how she'd made it to her twenty-fifth birthday without a single male ever making it past the getting-to-know-you stage.

That was also how she'd made it to her twenty-fifth birthday without a single male getting inside her pants.

Deep down she truly desired a man to cuddle with, a man she could look up to (literally) and share her hopes and dreams with. A man who would kiss and lick every inch of her naked, quivering body. But how could she find such a man when she turned away the few who wanted her?

Maybe she *should* go on another blind date.

Gray uttered a long, drawn-out sigh. Thankfully, the sound whisked away her foolish musings. "If you're holding out for perfection," he said, "I'm afraid you're doomed for disappointment."

"Are you kidding me?" Though she was amused by his assumption, she sounded properly disgusted. "I already know there's no such thing as a perfect man. My brothers taught me that lesson very well."

"Smart-ass."

"I'll take my quarter back, thank you very much." Grinning smugly, Katie held out one hand, palm up. She only had four quarters left, and she didn't think they'd last through the day, much less another five minutes with Gray. Earning a little money back was an unexpected boon.

Her brother crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not the one who's trying to quit cussing, therefore I owe you nothing more than an apology for soiling your pretty little ears with my crudity."

Her grin quickly faded. "You have the worst potty mouth ever, and I swear you're the one who taught me every dirty word I know."

He shrugged as if to say, *You damn well shouldn't have listened.*

"There's a patch for smoking," she grumbled. "Do you think they make one for cussing?"

"Absolutely not. Soap is the only cure." The tinge of amusement in his voice told her Gray was recalling the many times during their childhood that he'd washed her mouth with soap. "So, when do I get the official tour?"

Though she longed to wash *his* mouth out, she said, "Now, if you've got time."

"I do."

"Then let's get started. Since we're outside, I'll show you the garden first." Oh, he was going to love this, she thought, suddenly bubbling with anticipation. "Come on."

They walked the distance, playfully arguing over whose morning had been worse. He won, of course. Who could compete with being accosted by a delusional psychotic intent on ruling the world? When they reached the garden's entrance, Katie stopped, gave Gray a moment to absorb the ambiance, then splayed her arms wide.

"Welcome to my playground," she said.

Silence greeted her. Impatient, she tapped her foot and waited for some sort of reaction from him. One minute passed, then two. He hadn't moved an inch, hadn't emitted a single sound. Finally, she could stand it no longer. "So...what do you think?"

"Holy sh—"

"Don't say it," she ordered with a laugh.

"But those statues are—" His eyes widened with incredulity as he studied one statue, then another. "They're getting off."

"I know."

Seven statues guarded the entrance. Three were male; four were female. All were nude and posed in different stages of self-gratification. Though he stood just around the lush, green thicket unobservable from where they stood, Katie knew *her* stone warrior had his hands at his sides. He wasn't pleasuring himself, but he was obviously aroused. Magnificently aroused. His body as beautiful as any Greek statue. What he offered a woman, however, could not be covered by a fig leaf.

Why am I thinking about him? Stop!

"I take back my comment about the house being a dump." Gray strolled to a female sculpture whose expression of utter rapture complemented her I'm-ready position. He ran his hand along the curve of her spine. "Hell, I'll even buy the place from you."

Katie's chuckle floated across the daylight, mingling with the sudden eruption of her brother's beeper. He checked the number. In less than a heartbeat of time, his shoulders tensed and his facial features hardened. He was no longer her teasing older brother; he was now a seasoned detective, distanced and in control. "I've got to go," he said, his tone dark with secrets.

"I'll visit later this week, and you can give me the grand tour then."

She barely had time to nod before he placed a swift kiss on her cheek, said, "Be good," then raced away. Just like that she was alone again.

With nothing else to do in the garden, Katie strolled to the house, allowing herself only one backward glance. Inside, she blinked away the orange and red specks clouding her vision. Thick cobwebs filled each corner of the dining room, both high and low. Dirt stained every wall and the white paint was yellow and peeling. As she moved into the kitchen, her shoes crunched on the broken shards of what once must have

been a magnificent chandelier.

The house needed major renovations to be considered even halfway livable, and at that moment, all the work required threatened to overwhelm her. One task at a time, she reminded herself. One task at a time. Earlier, she'd finished tiling the bathroom walls, so the only chore left on today's To Do list was stripping the kitchen floor. First she had to remove the layer of carpet, which covered a layer of linoleum, which covered a layer of God knew what else. Tomorrow she would replace the wood trim and baseboards in the bathroom.

With a sigh, Katie punched play on her CD player and "Born to be Wild" rocked from the speakers. Two hours ticked by unnoticed as she pulled up and discarded the thin, dirty shag and matting. When she finished, she settled herself and her toolbox on the lime-green linoleum.

Users Review

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