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Charlie just wants to kick back, play good tunes and eat Chinese food. He's not interested in becoming famous. But he *is* interested in Allie. And after all, what harm is a little chemistry between friends?

But suddenly their one-night stand has become a four-week addiction. Night after night on the airwaves, his voice seduces her...and all the other women in town. He's a hit. It looks as if Charlie's solved all Allie's problems...except one. What is she going to do when he leaves?

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Editorial Review

Review

". . . [Cruise] has a wicked sense of humor, keen insights . . . and a way of making her characters seem genuine . . ." -- *Booklist*

"Cruise has a gift for concocting nutty scenarios and witty one-liners. . ." -- *People magazine*

About the Author

Jennifer Crusie is the New York Times, Publishers Weekly, and USA Today bestselling author of Tell Me Lies, Crazy for You, Welcome to Temptation, Faking It, Fast Women, and Bet Me.

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Allie McGuffey knew a yuppie bar was a lousy place to find a hero, but she was desperate, so she had to make do with what she had on hand.

Unfortunately, what she had on hand was pretty pathetic.

She shoved her horn-rimmed glasses back up the bridge of her nose with one finger and peered at the row of stools at the bar. Businessman. Businessman. Empty seat. Businessman. Businesswoman. Empty seat. Empty seat. Thug. Businessman.

She swallowed the lump that had been in her throat for the past fifteen minutes. Okay, fine, if that's what she had to work with, she'd work with it. But it was going to have to be the thug, because she was never going to have a relationship with a suit again as long as she lived. Even a relationship that was only going to last five minutes.

And he really wasn't a thug. Allie tried to drum up some enthusiasm before she made her move. His dark blond hair was shaggy over his collar, and his brown leather jacket had seen better days, and his jeans were authentic grunge, but he was big and clean and most important of all, he made a nice contrast to all the charcoal suits that looked like Mark. And what Allie wanted more than anything right then was a not-Mark.

She knew she was behaving like an idiot, but given the bomb that had just exploded in her face, the fact that she was not sitting in a trance was a step in the right direction.

It had not been a good day.

Allie had hit the radio-station doors that afternoon at her usual clip, banging them open like saloon doors. If they ever locked those doors, she was going to seriously hurt herself, but they never did since everyone had to be buzzed in from the street level four floors below. So she'd gone charging through as usual, happy to be there. As usual, what seemed like forty people converged on her.

Allie beamed as they pounced, loving the feeling that WBBB couldn't run without her, that without her there would be dead air and dust. This was who she was, Allie-the-producer, Allie-the-brains-behind-The-Mark-King-Show, Allie-the-savior. She knew she was probably a little whacked to depend on a radio station for

her identity, but compared to all the other psychological problems running loose at the station, she was in relatively good mental health, so she didn't dwell on it.

At first it was just Karen, the receptionist, who called out "Allie!" but that alerted Lisa, her former student intern, who popped out of the hall looking miserable and said, "Allie, I—" and who was promptly pushed aside by Albert the financial manager, who said, "Allie, the ratings—" and who was overrun by Marcia, the two-to-six-time-slot barracuda, who said, "Allie, I heard—" and who was shouldered aside by Mark, Allie's ex-lover and present boss, who said, "I need to see you in your office. Now."

Allie pushed her glasses back up her nose so she could see him better. The silence that settled over the reception area was a tribute to how bizarrely Mark was behaving. Usually, he made his presence known through talking too loudly, dropping names and laughing heartily in the wrong places. Allie had once felt sorry for him, but she didn't now, having been dumped as his lover two months ago when he decided he'd look better standing next to Lisa than he did with her. He was right, of course, but it still hurt to look at him now. He stood in the entrance to the hallway, quietly superior, and it was such a change that everybody shut up and she followed him to her office without question.

Once inside, he closed the door behind her, went around to her desk chair and sat.

Allie fought back a snarl. All right, she wasn't territorial, but this was her office, no matter how tiny and cluttered, and her desk, and that was her desk chair, and he was making her a visitor in her own domain. So she scowled at him and said, "What is this?"

Mark crossed his arms and leaned back in her chair, which tilted so that he was almost horizontal to her vertical, and then he said, "There's no good way to tell you this, Allie, so I'll just say it. I know it's going to be hard, but I also know you're an adult and you realize that things change. People grow. Change is good." He let his head fall back and addressed the ceiling as he began to wax philosophic. While Allie waited for him to get to the point, assuming he had one, she considered how amazingly good-looking he was, and how mad she was at him, and how much she wanted him back.

This was the great mystery of her life. He was an insecure twit. So why had she fallen for him and why was she still hung up on him? Why did she miss going to dinner with him and lying in bed with him, all the while listening to him talk about himself? Of course, that had been research for the show, but still... As he droned on and she automatically began to edit his speech for broadcast purposes, the possibility dawned on her that what she'd fallen for was the edited Mark King she'd created on the radio, not the real Mark King who sat in front of her now, boring her to tears. And that what she was most mad about was that she'd created him, and then he'd taken her work to another woman.

Mark was still waxing. "So that's why—" Allie cut in, more exasperated with herself than with Mark. "Look, I've got things to do here, so if you'll just cut to the chase, I'll get back to keeping you a hit." Okay, that was below the belt, but he'd started the fight by sitting in her chair, the louse. Not to mention dumping her for a younger woman.

Mark sat up straight and put his palms flat on her desk. "All right, here it is. You're not going to be working on my show anymore."

The room spun. Allie dropped into the remaining chair in the room and said, "What?"

"I've sensed a certain hostility since our breakup, and it's affecting my performance. So Bill and I have

decided it's best to put Lisa in your place since you've trained her. That way, the show won't suffer at all."

Allie sat stunned.

Mark smiled at her and spread his hands, *fait accompli*. "Lisa is producing the show, starting now. It'll be better for all of us."

"All of us who?" She took a deep breath. "Not all of us me. You have the drive-time show. I'm the drive-time producer. Unless I get the slot while you and Lisa move someplace cozy, this is not better for me."

"Well, of course I'm not moving." Mark sat up straighter in the chair. "I'm the talent."

He was the talent? Then what was she?

"And you're not fired or anything like that. We do appreciate what you've done," he went on, and Allie jerked her head up, anger finally evicting her panic.

"Of course I'm not fired. Why would I be fired? This makes no sense."

He plowed on through her anger. "And Bill's going to give you another show to produce. I made sure of that."

Good old Mark. Taking care of her. What a pal. She stood up, refraining from killing him where he sat only by Herculean effort. "Well, gee, Mark, thanks for the support and good luck in the future. Now get out of my chair."

He stood, doing what she'd said as if by instinct. After two years of doing everything she said, it was probably a hard habit to break. He moved toward the door, brimming with patronizing goodwill. "Look, why don't we go out for a drink? Just to show there are no hard feelings."

She wanted to scream at him, *Of course there are hard feelings, you jerk. If I could, I'd beat you senseless with one right now*. But she was too adult for that, and too rattled, so she lied instead. Mark might have kicked her in the teeth, but she still had her incisors.

"Sorry, I've already got a date. In fact, I have to go now. Maybe some other time." She ducked out into the hall in front of him, trying not to cry. That would be a real mistake because she never cried. If she did, people would probably assume somebody had died. And then she'd have to tell them that, tragically, Mark still lived.

Mark followed her, so she speeded up.

Karen yelled "Allie" again as she went past the receptionist's counter, and this time shoved an envelope at her. "Bill—"

Allie took the envelope without slowing down, flashing the best smile she could under the circumstances, and bolted for the elevator with Mark still in pursuit.

Then Karen called out to him, too, and stopped him, and Allie caught the elevator and escaped to the street.

She'd been fired. She still had a job, but her career was gone with Mark. Allie stuck her chin out and tried to fake defiance—well, big deal, she'd just build another great show—but it was no good. She'd spent two years making Mark's show a hit, taking surveys, researching topics, devising contests, doing everything she knew to showcase Mark's strengths. She'd majored in Mark King, and now he'd expelled her.

For a moment, outside the restaurant across from the station, Allie felt a moment of pure fear.

What if she couldn't do it again? What if Mark was right and he was the talent? What if she really was a loser? Nobody coming to her for help, nobody relying on her.

No. She'd find a way back. She gritted her teeth and went into the restaurant.

The hallway divided the restaurant from the bar, a sort of DMZ that separated the eating yuppies from the drinking yuppies. Allie stopped there and opened the envelope Karen had thrust at her. She found the kind of note the station owner was famous for: short, tactless and to the point:

I'm taking you off Mark's show and giving you to Charles Tenniel, the man taking over for Waldo Hancock. Meet him tomorrow, Tuesday, five o'clock, my office. Bill

Weird Waldo had the 10:00 to 2:00 a.m. spot. She'd just been demoted from producing the radio equivalent of *Oprah* to the radio equivalent of an infomercial.

She shoved the note back into the envelope and looked around the hallway. Her roommate Joe who was supposed to meet her wasn't there to comfort her. The hell with it. She was going home.

She turned around to go back into the street, but outside the door was Mark, greeting people who greeted him back as if he were a celebrity. Which, of course, he was.

And he was going to come into the bar and find her alone after her big talk about a date because Joe was late again. Not that Joe would have been very impressive as a date, but he would have been more impressive than no date at all.

So she went into the bar to find a date, and there were all those suits and the thug. She couldn't face another suit, and at least the thug looked like a change of pace, so she went over to the thug and said, "Hi!" as vivaciously as she could. She wasn't vivacious by nature, so she sounded as if she'd been sucking helium, but he turned and looked at her anyway.

Allie didn't know what she'd been expecting. Maybe some fantasy guy who was even better-looking than Mark, which, in all fairness to Mark, would be impossible, but this guy wasn't even in the running. He had the kind of face that the big, good-natured kids in the back of high-school English classes always have, slightly dopey and comfortable.

He looked nice. That was about it, but after Mark, it was pretty good.

Allie plopped her bag down on the bar. "So! You meeting someone?" she asked, still on helium, and looked over her shoulder to check on the Mark situation. All she had to do was keep the thug in conversation until Mark walked in, saw she was with him and left.

Mark didn't like competition.

"So, are you?" Allie smiled like a telemarketer. "Meeting someone?" She sat down beside him, praying Mark wouldn't come in.

And he said, "No. What are you doing?"

Shortly before Allie picked him up, Charlie had been contemplating his future. It looked complicated and possibly dangerous, so his best plan was to lay low, not make waves, do the job and get out. Investigating the source of an incriminating anonymous letter to a radio station in Tuttle, Ohio, couldn't be that hard. The station wasn't that big. Hell, the *town* wasn't that big. His biggest problem was going to be pretending to be a disc jockey, and how hard could that be? If his brother had done it stoned, he could certainly do it straight. And he'd made it clear to everybody concerned that he was only around for six weeks, tops. He had things to do, he'd told them, places he had to be in November.

He hadn't decided yet exactly what place he had to be in November, but he was positive it was somewhere uncomplicated and remote. Especially remote from his father who had taken to asking weird favors lately. Like "Check into this radio station for my old friend Bill..." This was what came of going home for his father's birthday. From now on, he'd just send a card. And as soon as he was done, he was out of here and someplace else. Someplace where he could do something simple for a while, like raise pigs. No, too complicated. He'd raise carrots. You didn't have to feed carrots.

He'd stopped thinking when somebody had squeaked, "Hi!"

Charlie had blinked at her, mildly surprised. She didn't look like the vivacious pick-up-a-guy-in-a-bar type. Her sharp brown eyes gleamed behind huge, round, horn-rimmed glasses, and her glossy gold-brown hair swung in a tangled Dutch-boy bob. There was nothing wrong with her nose or mouth, either; good standard-issue all-American-woman features. She just seemed sort of scrubbed to be trolling for guys. The long flowered skirt and oversize vest weren't right for a pickup, either. She looked like a nice, clean kid. Well, she was no kid. Early thirties easy.

She raised her eyebrows so high they disappeared under her bangs and batted her eyelashes. "So! You meeting someone?" She looked over her shoulder and flopped her bag down on the bar. It looked as if it was made from very old blue flowered carpet. Charlie had never seen anything quite like it so he poked his finger into it. It was fuzzy.

"Are you?" She smiled at him again, a sort of strained, too-many-teeth, trying-too-hard smile. "Meeting someone?" She sat on the stool beside him.

"No." Charlie looked at her with interest. "What are you doing?"

"Picking you up?"

Charlie shook his head. "I don't think so. What are you really doing?"

The artificial smile morphed into a genuine scowl, and her perky voice dropped an octave. "I don't believe this. Can't you even pretend on the hope you'll get lucky? "

"I never pretend. I'm the natural, open type." Charlie considered moving away from her and then rejected the idea. If he left her, he'd never find out what she was up to. And besides, when she'd scowled at him, her voice had gone husky. She had a great low voice. He smiled down at her, trying to make her talk again.

"Why don't you just give me the drift, and then we can take it from there."

She lowered her head a little and stared at him over the rims of her glasses. "Look, the drift will take too long, and besides, it makes me look pathetic. All I ask is that you pretend to be having a drink with me." He must have looked skeptical because she added, "I swear that's it."

Users Review

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