

The Hotter You Burn (Original Heartbreakers Book 2)

By Gena Showalter

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New York Times *bestselling author Gena Showalter is back with a sizzling* Original Heartbreakers *story featuring a troubled playboy and the woman he can't resist.*..Beck O'ckley is ruthless in the boardroom…and the bedroom. He's never been with the same woman twice, and vows he never will. With a past as twisted as his, meaningless sex keeps the demons at bay. His motto: One and done. No harm, no foul.Harlow Glass is the most hated girl in town. The beautiful artist is penniless, jobless and homeless. When she sneaks into Beck's home—her ancestral estate—for food, she's shocked by his early return…and her immediate, sizzling and intense attraction to him. For the first time in Beck's life, he can't get a woman out of his mind. All too soon, friendship blooms into obsession and he'll have to break her heart…or surrender his own."Sassy, smart characters and an expertly woven, unconventional plot, *The Closer You Come* showcases Gena Showalter in all her shining talent. " —Kristan Higgins, *New York Times* bestselling author

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The Hotter You Burn (Original Heartbreakers Book 2) By Gena Showalter Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #88849 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-08-01
- Released on: 2015-07-28
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review
"Showalter...rocks me every time!"--Sylvia Day, #1 New York Times bestselling author

"Showalter writes fun, sexy characters you fall in love with!"-Lori Foster, New York Times bestselling author

"Sassy, smart characters and an expertly woven, unconventional plot, The Closer You Come showcases Gena Showalter in all her shining talent."-Kristan Higgins, New York Times bestselling author

"Showalter makes romance sizzle on every page!"-Jill Shalvis, New York Times bestselling author

"Emotional, heart-tugging, kept me turning the pages!"-Carly Phillips, New York Times bestselling author

"With compelling stories and memorable characters, Gena Showalter never fails to dazzle."-Jeaniene Frost, New York Times bestselling author

"The Showalter name on a book means guaranteed entertainment."-RT Book Reviews

"The versatile Showalter...once again shows that she can blend humor and poignancy while keeping readers entertained from start to finish."-Booklist on Catch a Mate

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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Harlow glass stood on the porch of a hundred-year-old farmhouse that had more character than most people, waning daylight wrapping the structure in its loving embrace. Exterior walls once covered in chipped cream-colored paint that revealed crumbling, weathered wood now boasted new slats of paneling and a fresh coat. The broken seal on the bay window had been replaced, no more sheets of moisture collecting between the panes. Ivy used to climb all the way to the roof, but every stalk had been cut down.

She scanned the driveway. No cars.

She listened at the door. No suspicious sounds.

A smile stretched from ear to ear. After months of bad luck, something had finally worked in her favor.

Here's hoping it lasted.

Trembling, she inserted her key in the door lock. Hinges whined as the thick, wooden entrance brushed open, homey scents—fresh bread, vanilla and some kind of caramelized fruit—wafting out and making her mouth water. Her empty stomach grumbled and twisted painfully.

"Hello," she called.

No one cried out a startled rebuke.

She shut the door with more confidence and entered the living room, breathing a sigh of relief. *I'm ba-ack.*

Her childhood home creaked out a welcome, and for a moment, one of her favorite memories played at the forefront of her mind: Martha Glass pushing the sofa to a new angle, while Harlow straddled one of the arms, pretending to ride a bucking bronco. Her dad hadn't been home to sneer insults, thank God—*you 're pathetic, you're stupid, you're such a disappointment*— so a relaxed, almost giddy atmosphere had pervaded.

But the cherished recollection withered against the depressing heat of realization. This might be Harlow's childhood home, but it no longer belonged to her; technically she'd just committed breaking and entering. But only technically! She'd just…well, after all the work that had been done, she'd *needed* an inside look at the place. And if a few items of food happened to leave with her, she'd be doing the new owners a favor, saving them from nasty fat grams.

"You're welcome, everyone," she muttered.

The owners were the newest residents of Strawberry Valley, Oklahoma. Bachelors she'd watched from a distance for weeks. Lincoln West, the one she'd dubbed Most Intelligent. Beck Ockley—Most Beautiful. And Jase Hollister—Most Fierce. Men she'd never spoken to and never wanted to speak to, really. In Harlow's heart, the house still belonged to her, would *always* belong to her, making the guys the trespassers. She had been born here, and if all went according to her life plan, she would die here. Just hopefully not today.

This was her first time inside the house since the bank had kicked her out roughly seven months ago. Spinning slowly, she drank in the only love still part of her life. *Too many changes.* Gone were the scuffed, stained wood floors, the "imperfections" sanded away.

What was wrong with a few flaws? In a home, or even in a person, flaws proclaimed, "Life happened here."

The wallpaper had been peeled, Sheetrock repaired and painted the color of a caramel latte. Once decrepit crown molding and wainscoting gleamed with new life. There were a few feminine touches here and there to save the place from being a total man cave—throw pillows, bowls of potpourri and lace doilies—but she missed the cat portraits her mother had hung, random displays of china, knitting baskets, porcelain dolls and the gaudy lamps that once rested on lace-covered side tables.

Harlow braced for disappointment and headed for the bedrooms. Up first, the former guest room, now a man cave on steroids. A king-size bed with dark brown sheets dominated one side, while the large flat-screen suspended above a ginormous console stuffed with DVDs dominated the other.

How was a person supposed to relax in here?

The next bedroom—hers—boiled her blood. The princess paradise her mother had created for her as a child,

which she'd never had the heart to change, even as she'd grown up, had been transformed into a man-child's playpen. Multiple gaming systems cluttered a tiered platform, the controls scattered across the floor. In front of a gargantuan unmade bed towered a floor-to-ceiling projector screen. The walls where she'd once lovingly painted a magical forest were now beige. Beige!

Sure, the mural had come with defects, but she'd loved every inch of it, had spent weeks etching different designs, mixing colors, learning and adoring the entire process while allowing her imagination to sweep her away. Of course, she'd ruined the fruit of her efforts long before boring beige had done so, throwing handfuls of mismatched paint at the images in a fit of temper. Still. The sea of monotone was worse.

Before she gave in to the urge to find a marker and draw something to liven up the room, most likely a pair of hands with both middle fingers extended, she backed out and shut the door.

The master bedroom had been converted into a nerdy workaholic's dream, all traces of her parents gone. Computers and computer parts were stacked on the desk, on the bed and scattered across the floor, and oh, she couldn't stand this.

She made her way to the kitchen…where the wallpaper had been removed. But okay. No big deal. This change she understood. The design had been so faded the different clusters of strawberries had looked like swollen testicles.

The matching red laminate countertops had been swapped for sparkling white marble, but at least the cabinets were the same, even though they'd been sanded and painted black. Not bad… Just different.

A pang over what should and shouldn't be cut through her and might have broken what remained of her heart if she hadn't spotted the blueberry pie perched on the stovetop.

Jobless, penniless—homeless—she hadn't eaten a decent meal in forever. And a decent dessert? Not since Momma died.

Another pang, this one sharper, but again, the lure of the pie distracted her, and she moved forward, as though in a trance. Trembling, she traced her fingertip over the rim of the pan and caught a warm glob ofjuice.

One taste… Just one.

The moment the sweetness hit her tongue, her plan to make a sandwich with ingredients the Bachelors Three wouldn't miss completely upended. She rushed around, digging through drawers for the necessary supplies, growing indignant when she discovered nothing in its rightful place.

Gravel crunched. A door slammed.

Chilled to the bone, she dashed into the living room and threw herself on the couch to peer out the window.

Beck Ockley, Most Beautiful himself, helped a woman from the passenger side of his car. Beck…the man who reminded her of the shed out back, polished on the outside, crumbling on the inside.

He was a little over six feet and lusciously muscled, with an intriguing mix of light and dark brown hair, the strands always in a state of disarray. His just-roused-from-bed eyes were the color of melted honey and

framed by the longest, thickest black lashes she'd ever seen. But even a man like him should need a few hours, at least, to reel in a new fish.

Then again, he rocked serious man-magic, and with a single smile, he could probably drop a thousand pairs of panties.

Harlow's heart galloped, a racehorse in her chest as she returned into the kitchen to swipe up the pie. Probably best to eat the evidence of her impromptu house tour. *Hurry!* She sprinted to the back door…only to grind to a stop. Beveled glass revealed Jase and his fiancée, Brook Lynn Dillon, cuddled on the porch swing.

How had she missed them on her pre-break-in perimeter check?

Hinges on the front door whined. Crap! Beck and his date would enter any second. She darted into the living room, the hall, the first bedroom she came across—but the lock on the window was new and complicated, and no matter how much she jiggled it, she couldn't open it. Suspecting all other locks were the same, she headed for the living room. If she stood beside the door, she'd be hidden when it opened. If Beck forgot to close it, she could sneak out as soon as he—

"Now that you've got me here," a woman said, breathless with longing, "what are you going to do to me?"

Too late! Fear settled like thousand-pound boulders in Harlow's feet, and she wrenched to a halt in the hallway, blood rushing from her head, her lungs hemor-rhaging air as if survival had just become enemy one.

Tawny Ferguson walked backward. If she looked to the left, she would see a wild-eyed Harlow, pie in hand. *Don't look left. Please, please, don't look left.*

Beck slowly, leisurely prowled after the girl, radiating sultry heat and a carnal, predator-prey determination. He pinned Tawny's hands over her head, saying, "I'm going to do whatever I want."

Tawny arched her hips, rubbing against him. "Should I be afraid?"

"Honey, you should be grateful."

The sensual impact of his voice sent heated shivers through Harlow's veins, and she hated them almost as much as she loved them.

He leaned down, his mouth hovering over Tawny's to tease her with what was to come. "You're going to like every second of our time together. That I promise you."

Tawny quivered, a woman on the verge of ecstasy. "Oh, I know I'll like it. But what happens afterward?"

Crickets.

He stiffened, even as he nuzzled his nose along the line of her jaw. "Afterward, you'll be so weak in the knees you'll have to crawl home."

Tawny giggled. "No, I meant relationship-wise. I know your reputation as the one-night-stand king. Will you still want me in the morning?"

A moment rife with tension as Beck cupped her chin to ensure she wasn't able to look away from him. "I told you. I've never offered anyone more than a single night. There will never be an exception."

"But why?" Tawny asked with a pout, even as she played with his zipper. "I'd make a very…good…exception." With every word she uttered, she opened those metal teeth another inch.

His smile didn't quite reach his eyes, making it a cold, bitter thing. "A girl like you should have a happily-ever-after with a man carrying far less baggage."

"I don't mind baggage."

"Doesn't matter one way or the other." He ground against her, distracting her. "All that matters right now is whether or not you want *me."*

Tawny moaned, her eyes closing. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

No, no, don't stop, don't you dare—a slap of harsh reality brought Harlow back to her senses. While Tawny—and even Harlow—had lost sight of everything but Beck, he'd had no problem retaining his wits. He'd deflected masterfully. And she should know. She'd done the same in high school. Multiple teachers and counselors had pulled her aside to ask a single question.

Why do you insult your peers?

Her reply? *I'm not insulting them. I'm helping them by pointing out flaws in need of work.*

Meanwhile, a dirty secret had festered deep inside her. The insults she dished—and they were indeed insults—were nothing compared to the words her father hurled at her.

The only thing you 're good at, little girl, is making my day worse.

She cringed even now.

One day, a switch had just sort of flipped inside her, and she'd lashed out at a friend, making the girl cry. It was then Harlow realized she could affect the emotions of others, and with the realization had come power. Soon, verbally knocking down her peers had become the only thing capable of making her feel better about herself…for a little while, at least. Because that feeling of power had been nothing but an illusion, a house of cards kicked down daily by guilt and sadness, in constant need of rebuilding.

True power came not from tearing others down but from building them up.

"Beck," Tawny said, "let me have you. Tonight…and tomorrow."

"Once is for the best." The flatness of his tone caused Harlow to blink in surprise. No matter whom she'd heard him speak with—male, female, young or old—she'd only ever heard him tease and flirt. "Trust me."

"But—"

"Once or nothing," he said, every inch of him intractable steel. "Your choice. Decide now, or I'll decide for you and take you home."

If Tawny continued to push for more, would he truly do as threatened? Principles before pleasure, no matter how warped those principles might be?

The starch dissolved from the girl's shoulders, and she sighed, defeated. "Once."

As a reward, Beck tilted her head the way he wanted it and dived in for a scorching, earth-shattering kiss. Tawny melted against him, clutching his shirt, wrinkling the black cotton. Harlow almost covered her eyes. Almost. She had lost the ability to move, much less to breathe. Beck clearly knew what he was doing, and oh, he was hot. Licking, sucking…his hands doing delicious things to a woman who already sounded on the verge of orgasm.

A surprising ache throbbed low in Harlow's belly.

Beck and Tawny created a perfect study of passion: seductive, erotic and wanton. The very thing missing from her own life. But then, the man had created a perfect study of passion with *every* woman she'd seen him with.

She'd watched Beck perform this same routine many times before, only with different women, in different locations. The porch. The backyard. Even on the roof.

No one had ever turned him down.

He cupped Tawny's rear and commanded in a husky growl, "Wrap your legs around me."

Tawny complied, as they all complied, and Beck turned toward the couch, away from Harlow.

Sweet relief swept through her. *In the home stretch now… Just a couple more minutes…* And oh, crap, the sugary aroma of the pie ruthlessly taunted her.

Ever the traitor, Harlow's stomach chose that moment to rumble.

It was enough.

Beck's head snapped in her direction, his body going taut. He set Tawny on her feet and stepped in front of her, acting as her shield.

The gesture of protection proved hotter than the kiss.

Recognition lit his features. "You," he said, and he sounded awed rather than angry.

Confused, Harlow blinked at him. "Me?" He knew her?

"What are you doing inside my house?"

My house! But Harlow didn't stick around to correct him. Nothing would placate him or save her stupid hide, so she bolted around him, remaining just out of reach as she headed for the door, yanked it open and at last soared outside.

"Hey!" Beck called. "Stop."

She quickened her pace, aiming for the bank of trees ahead: a giant oak, several mature pecans and two magnolias in full bloom. Locusts buzzed. Grasshoppers sang. Birds squawked. The three created a macabre soundtrack as the familiar scent of wild strawberries and dewy roses lodged in her throat, forming a hard lump.

Almost there… Just a little farther…

While the fifty-two-acre spread had come with a greenhouse, a small dairy, two barns, three work sheds and multiple vegetable gardens Harlow had tried and failed to tend, there was a shadowed section in back filled with gnarled trees, sharp sandburs and crunchy brushwood where snakes and scorpions liked to nest. A section none of the guys had ever dared venture. It would have been the perfect place to hide if she hadn't set up camp there.

Once she passed the embankment, she veered in the opposite direction, whizzing by the towering oak she used to climb…the weeping willow where she'd experienced her first kiss…the tire swing her father had made during one of his rare moments of affection.

"Stop," Beck commanded. "Now."

He sounded close, too close, but he didn't sound winded. She clutched the pie closer—*try to take it from me, I dare you*—and glanced back. Crap! He was almost on her. She picked up the pace…until several burs lodged in her heels, causing sharp spikes of pain to slow her down. Any second now, Beck would overtake—

Hard hands snaked around her waist, two hundred pounds of muscle bearing down on her. As she fell, the pie went flying.

"Noooo!" she shouted.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Karen Keegan:

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