



Sweet Addiction

By Maya Banks

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**FROM NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE
BREATHLESS TRILOGY MAYA BANKS**

He awakened a need within her.

Cole is successful beyond his dreams. He can have any woman he wants, but there's only one he can't stop thinking about: his childhood sweetheart, Renita. He's never forgotten his first taste of innocent love and the desire that consumed them—or the pain he brought upon her...

But now she belongs to another...

Her long-ago brush with submission awakened a longing in Ren that drove her to walk the darker edge of desire. She has become a beautiful woman at ease with her sexuality and unapologetic about her need for a dominant man. When Cole finds her again, he's gutted that she belongs to another. Ren's current master agrees to give her to Cole for a short time, but then she must return to his keeping. And though Cole agrees to this bargain, he knows he will never be able to let Ren go again...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the novels of Maya Banks, author of the *Breathless Trilogy*

“[For] fans who prefer torrid temperatures.”—*Midwest Book Review*

“Definitely a recommended read . . . filled with friendship, passion, and most of all, a love that grows beyond just being friends.”—*Fallen Angel Reviews*

“Ignites the pages...Exciting erotic romance.”—*The Best Reviews*

“Grabbed me from page one and refused to let go until I read the last word . . . When a book still affects me hours after reading it, I can’t help but Joyfully Recommend it!” —*Joyfully Reviewed*

“I guarantee I will reread this book many times over, and will derive as much pleasure as I did in the first reading each and every subsequent time.”—*Novelspot*

“An excellent read that I simply did not put down . . . A fantastic adventure . . . covers all the emotional range.”—*The Road to Romance*

“A must-read author . . . her [stories] are always full of emotional situations, lovable characters, and kick-butt story lines.”—*Romance Junkies*

About the Author

Maya Banks resides in Texas with her family. She is the author of the KGI Novels including *Shades of Gray* and *Softly at Sunrise*, the Colters novels including *Colters' Promise*, and the *Breathless Trilogy*, among other titles.

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PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF

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(with Karin Tabke and Sylvia Day)

sweet addiction

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Table of Contents

PART 1

lucas

CHAPTER 1

Her laughter was the first thing that caught his attention. Vibrant and shining. So effervescent and full of unfettered joy that it arrested him and he couldn't remember what he'd been thinking just moments earlier.

He turned, seeking the source of the captivating music. And then he thought he'd heard it before. When he was much younger.

A lifetime ago.

Ren.

The memory of her still had the power to make him ache.

So much regret. Guilt. Wishful thinking. If only he had it to do all over again.

He hadn't thought about her in a while now. Not because she'd slipped from his mind, but because he'd willed himself to stop thinking of the beautiful, shy eighteen-year-old girl who'd meant the world to him when he was in his early twenties.

It still hurt him to bring her to mind years later. She reminded him of mistakes he'd made. How he'd hurt her when it was the very last thing he'd ever wanted or intended.

He scanned the interior of the restaurant, his eyes sharp as he took in each table. But he couldn't find the source of the burst of laughter, nor did he hear it again.

"Is something the matter?" Damon Roche asked.

Cole turned back to his friend and dinner companion and cast an apologetic glance in Serena Roche's direction.

"No, nothing. I just thought I heard... I was reminded of someone I once knew."

Damon slid his hand from Serena's arm and picked up his glass of wine. His touch never strayed far from his wife. His now pregnant wife. If Damon had been possessive before—and he was forbiddingly possessive of Serena—he was even more so now that she was round with his child.

The two shared a nontraditional relationship. Serena was submissive to Damon's dominance in and out of the bedroom. It was a relationship that made Cole envious, dangerously so. Spending time with the couple he called friends made him face his past mistakes. Made him realize that if he'd only been more careful and mindful in the past, he could even now be enjoying a relationship like Damon and Serena's with a woman he'd loved with everything he had.

But he'd hurt her in his impatience and ignorance.

He'd met many women in the years since. Women who were beautiful, submissive, willing to submit to him on a permanent basis, but none had captured his heart like Ren. The one woman he couldn't have.

Until recently he hadn't done more than touch or prepare women who frequented The House, the exclusive club devoted to sexual largesse, owned by Damon Roche. Cole was a frequent visitor. Damon trusted him. Only Cole had been trusted with Serena, Damon's beloved wife, and even then his role was just preparation.

Only with Angelina had he allowed himself to become more intimate, to actually have sex and open himself to the pleasure of having a woman go quiet at his touch and command. But a part of him realized that

Angelina had reminded him of Ren. And Angelina belonged to Micah, another of Cole's friends, one he shared with Damon.

All of the women he'd allowed himself to soften around belonged to other men. Maybe that was why he was willing to indulge with them, because he knew they were no threat to his heart and soul.

"Is the food to your liking, Serena mine?" Damon asked.

Serena smiled. "It's divine. I only wish I could eat more. I swear this kid is wrapped around my stomach, squeezing for all it's worth. I can't eat more than a small amount at a time, but then I get hungry. The result is I eat all day!"

Damon chuckled and lifted a glass of water before pressing it gently to her lips. "You need to eat. You've not been sleeping well lately. Our child is wearing you out. The calories will give you more energy."

"Or just make me fat and lazy," Serena muttered.

"Are you still set on not knowing the sex?" Cole asked, trying to maintain polite conversation. But he was rattled and the laughter had opened the door to his past that he tried to keep shut at all times.

A wistful light entered Serena's eyes. She was a beautiful woman. Startling blue eyes and shiny black hair. He'd been drawn to her as well even though there had never been a question of her belonging to Damon. But again, there was something about her that had reminded him of his childhood sweetheart, and he often found himself unable to look away from Serena. And wish that he hadn't messed up so badly with Ren, that they could have been older. Cole could have been wiser. Could have guided her as Damon had guided Serena. Maybe Ren would still be with him now. His. Beautiful, submissive, his treasure.

"There are days when I really want to know," she said. She glanced over at Damon and smiled. "I made Damon promise not to let me cave even though he wants to know very badly whether we're having a son or a daughter. He really wants a girl. I don't care and maybe that's why I want to be surprised."

"Another girl in the fold would be entertaining," Cole said. "I imagine Damon will be just as bad as Micah when it comes to his little girl."

Serena rolled her eyes. "Oh God, don't you know it?"

"She's threatening to make me wear one of those damn baby carriers that Micah parades around in," Damon said dryly. "He's lost his goddamn mind ever since Nia was born."

Cole snickered. "I'm going to remind you of this conversation when your own child is born. You're overprotective of Serena as it is. I can't imagine you'll be any less so of the baby. Especially if you have a daughter."

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean I'm going to wear her twenty-four seven," Damon said darkly.

Serena just grinned and stroked her fingers over Damon's hand. Cole winked at her as if to say he agreed with her private assessment.

Distant laughter sounded again, sending a cascade of chill bumps up his neck. This time he reacted much quicker and jerked around, his gaze honing in on the source.

Finally, he saw her.

All his breath left him in a ragged rush. She was facing away, which was why he hadn't been able to find her the first time. He could just see the hint of her profile. Smooth, dusky skin, creamy, beckoning his touch. A cascade of black hair tumbled down her back, going so low that he lost track of it.

She was petite. He could tell from here that she was a small woman, probably not much more than five feet. Her features were delicate. As she turned, he caught a glimpse of the slim column of her neck, but then she reached up and pulled her hair over one shoulder, baring the expanse of her back.

Her dress was backless and he froze as his gaze lighted on the tattoo trailing down her spine.

He couldn't breathe. His fingers curled and uncurled as he stared, riveted to the sight. Almost in dread, he raised his gaze to her right shoulder, just over the blade. Would it still be there? Had the years been kind and diminished the reminder of his inexperience?

He couldn't tell from this distance. Or maybe he didn't want it to be there. A scar. Evidence of the care he hadn't taken with a woman who trusted him with her heart and body.

Ren.

What was she doing here? It was her. The tattoo was unmistakable. Delicate and feminine. Just like her. A thin, scripty flowering vine from the small of her back to her nape. He'd traced it many times with his fingers, his mouth and his tongue.

Before he could get to his feet, the man sitting with Ren stood and extended his hand to her. She took it and gracefully rose from her seat. The man's hold was possessive and intimate, a clear signal that he considered her his.

But when Ren turned where he could see her fully, Cole saw the wide silver band encircling her neck. It was a fist to his gut and he could only stare, so stunned that he couldn't draw a breath.

He knew the significance of that piece of jewelry. It wasn't decorative, although it was beautifully rendered and drew attention to her delicate features.

It was a sign of ownership.

A gift from a master to his submissive.

Serena wore such a symbol, but hers was a band that encircled her upper arm. Damon wasn't a fan of collars. He found them demeaning. Cole agreed.

The surge of jealousy—and anger—that bolted through his veins took him completely off guard.

The man put his arm protectively around Ren, and she smiled up at him as they made their way to the exit. Power emanated from the man—a worthy adversary.

"Do you know him?" Cole asked urgently, glancing quickly back at Damon.

Damon's gaze jerked up, his brow creased in confusion.

"The man there, with the Asian woman. They're walking out now."

"Why would you think I know..." Damon frowned and leaned forward. "Yes, I do, actually."

“Who is he?” Cole demanded.

“He’s visited The House before, but not often. He prefers to keep to himself.”

“Who?” Cole asked again, his impatience an edgy burn under his skin.

“Lucas Holt.”

“What’s his story? Is he into the scene or is he just someone playing at the game?”

“He’s serious,” Damon said slowly. “His background checked out or he wouldn’t have been admitted to The House. He’s wealthy. Successful businessman. Owns several clubs both in Houston and Dallas. I think he recently opened one in Vegas. He spends a lot of time in Vegas but he has residences in Dallas and Houston as well.”

“Have you ever seen *her* at The House?” Cole asked. How close had she been all this time? Had they barely missed each other? Had she been present in the very place he frequented?

His pulse ratcheted up and he stood, the urge to go after her so strong that he was almost in motion when Damon spoke again.

“Sit down, Cole. Don’t make a scene. I’ll tell you what I know.”

Reluctantly, Cole retook his seat but watched the pair until they disappeared from view.

“Who is she?” Serena asked in a low tone.

She put a gentle hand on his arm, a gesture of comfort he appreciated, though it took everything he had not to snatch his hand back and go chasing after Ren.

Ren.

God. He couldn’t believe it. She was here. And she belonged, *really* belonged, to another man. There was a clear stamp of ownership for the world to see. He couldn’t even wrap his mind around it. He’d never imagined that Ren would have gone from their failed experimentation into a submissive relationship.

Jealousy. Anger. Rage.

Excitement.

Longing ate at his gut until his stomach churned and the food he’d eaten knotted into a giant fist.

“Tell me,” he rasped in Damon’s direction. He ignored Serena’s question for now. He had to know all he could about Ren.

Damon calmly sipped his wine, almost as if he were trying to infuse some of that calm into Cole. “I haven’t seen her at The House. But it’s been quite some time since I’ve seen Lucas. He isn’t big into the scene or into public displays for that matter.”

“Who did you see him with?” Cole bit out.

“He doesn’t bring his submissives to the club. When I saw him last, he was simply there to observe. He’s

extremely private. He only has one woman at any given time. He's loyal and he demands the same, but his relationships aren't permanent."

Cole frowned. "He's a player?"

Damon shook his head. "I never got that impression. I've spoken to him before. Had drinks with him. He finds comfort in the women in his keeping. Most interestingly, he is completely faithful to his submissive. However, he has discreetly inquired in the past as to men for his woman. I think he likes to watch. Perhaps he even participates. But he himself only has sex with the woman in his care."

"How the hell do you know all of this?" Cole demanded.

Christ, like he wanted to imagine Ren with other men while the bastard watched? He was a flaming hypocrite. He wasn't so pissed he didn't recognize the blatant hypocrisy in his anger. He'd had sex with a woman who belonged to another man. He'd indulged in Angelina more than once at Micah's urging.

Damon shrugged. "We've talked on occasion. He's asked for recommendations."

Serena's brow furrowed. "Are you trying to delicately state that you've been with some of his women?"

Damon smiled and lazily ran his fingers over her shoulder. "No, Serena mine. You of all people should know I don't share. Even another man's woman. I don't look down on the practice. However, it isn't for me."

"I need to see her," Cole said tightly. "I... *have* ...to see her."

"Is she important to you?" Serena asked, her blue gaze studying him intently.

"She used to be everything to me."

Damon lifted an eyebrow. "I wondered."

Cole sent him a questioning look.

"Let's face it. You've had your pick of beautiful, willing women all but throwing themselves at your feet," Damon said dryly. "And yet you've shunned them all. That speaks of a man whose focus is elsewhere."

"I hurt her," Cole said in a low voice. "I was young, arrogant, stupid. I abused her trust. She gave herself to me. She believed I wouldn't hurt her. I did."

Serena's face crinkled in sympathy. Damon simply stared back, silent.

"I need to know how to find her," Cole said. "I have to see her."

Damon sighed. "I can invite Lucas to The House. That's all I can do. I can't give you anything else. He's extremely private. Such a breach would be unforgiveable to him."

"Then invite him. Make damn sure he brings Ren," Cole growled. "I'll turn this whole damn city over if I have to."

Damon leveled his gaze at Cole. "What will you do if Lucas comes?"

"I don't know yet. But I'm damn sure not going to sit back and do nothing. I have to see her. Damn it, she

was mine.”

“And yet you didn’t keep her,” Damon returned.

Cole flinched at the reminder. No, he hadn’t kept her. He’d walked away. And he’d never found anyone who could occupy the same place in his heart.

CHAPTER 2

“On your knees.”

Ren slid gracefully to her knees, thighs open, lips parted, hands resting palms up on her legs. She waited patiently for Lucas’s next instruction, her gaze trained straight ahead.

“You were beautiful tonight, Ren. But then you’re always beautiful and graceful. I’ve no complaint in that area.”

“Thank you, Lucas.”

“As a reward, I’ll let you choose tonight’s instrument.”

“Your hand,” she said without hesitation.

He smiled and she thought he liked her choice. “Tell me why.”

“I like having the imprint of your hand on my skin. It’s a reminder that I belong to you. That you possess me.”

He nodded his agreement. “Open your mouth. Wider. No teeth. If your teeth touch me, you’ll be punished.”

The words were said more for effect than a true warning. Arousal rose, sharp and aching, within her. He knew how his words would fan the flames of her desire. Above all else, she enjoyed the sweet kiss of pain when he saw fit to give it to her.

If she weren’t so disciplined, she’d graze her teeth across his rigid length, but they played no games. No silly pretense of disobedience so he would punish her. They both had needs and they fulfilled each other’s need perfectly.

She supposed in a way that Lucas cared for her. Emotion had little to do with their relationship. He gave her something far more powerful than love. He provided security and comfort. He protected her, and in return, she gave him her submission, her complete obedience and her respect.

His cock slid over her lips and then over her tongue. She savored the first burst of musk and inhaled his masculine scent. He was rougher tonight, not as patient as he typically was.

He thrust deep, holding there until her chest burned. Then he pulled back and she sucked in a deep breath. He framed her face in his hands and slid his fingers around to the back of her head until they dug into her scalp. Then he thrust again, harder this time.

It was then she realized he was trying to draw her teeth. He wanted to punish her. He was in a mood tonight. He wanted to exert mastery over her, push her limits. For a moment she considered giving in and allowing him the bite of her teeth, but he wouldn’t want that either.

He was her master, yes, but he didn't want a weak woman or one who gave in too easily to his silent demands. Yes, she was obedient, absolutely. But only to commands he voiced. If he wanted to punish her, he would, but she wouldn't be an easy conquest for him.

She relaxed further around his impressive girth and allowed him to slide deeper into her throat. He made a sound that was a mixture of approval and frustration. He didn't want her to give in.

And for that reason, he withheld his release for longer than usual. He was rough, relentless, and he showed no mercy. He was determined to push her past her limits, and she was determined to show him she had none.

She purposely blanked herself to everything but the task at hand. Outlasting him.

With a muttered curse, he tightened his hands on her head and poured himself into her throat, forcing her to swallow every single drop. When he finally released her, she rocked back on her heels, dazed by the power of the exchange.

Lucas breathed harshly as he slowly withdrew from her mouth. His grip gentled and he slid his fingers back along the line of her cheekbones before wiping his semen from her lips.

"So fiercely determined," he murmured. "I wonder what it would take to break that restraint."

Ren didn't flinch because she knew Lucas wouldn't do it. He had no interest in breaking her. Eventually he'd grow bored with her just as he'd grown bored with his previous possessions. And when he did, she would be cast adrift again.

He saw her as a challenge. She knew without false modesty that she intrigued him far more than the previous women he'd owned. It wasn't intentional. It was just who she was. She knew what she wanted and what she needed. She had nothing to prove. She wasn't interested in impressing her master. She did only what she needed to do in order to have her needs met. Pleasing the man she gave herself to was a need.

He held his hand down to her and she accepted the wordless command. He helped her to her feet and then guided her toward the plush leather chair where much of her pleasure and pain were doled out.

He settled onto the seat, still nude, his muscular legs splayed. His cock was semi-erect. Thick and long, it lay over the top of his thigh and she stared, suddenly overtaken by the urge to have it deep inside her body, taking, demanding.

More likely he would thrust it into her ass when he was through spanking it.

He pulled her between his legs, allowing his hands to smooth up her body, wandering over her curves, up to cup her full breasts.

Her breasts were a source of fascination for him. She was otherwise slender. Slim hips, flat belly, slender legs. She was slightly built and delicate, and he loved that sense of fragility about her that hid a core of steel.

But her breasts were full and plump, a contradiction to the rest of her otherwise boyish figure.

He toyed with her dark nipples, plucking gently at them until they were hard and pointed. But he didn't do as she wanted. He didn't take them into his mouth and suck.

"I'm glad you chose my hand."

He bent her over, positioning her so that she was draped across his lap, her head toward the floor. He tucked his leg over the backs of her knees and then rubbed his hand over her buttocks.

She shivered and he chuckled softly. He loved to draw out her pleasure. Tease her mercilessly. He was hard. No doubt about that. He was ruthless, even. But he was fair and a generous lover. He knew what pleased her and never hesitated to give her what she needed.

Were their needs not so closely aligned, perhaps it would be a different matter. Perhaps he wouldn't be as generous as he was. But they craved the same things. Him taking his pleasure spurred her own.

The smack of his hand against her behind startled her from her sensual thoughts. Fire licked up her spine when he followed the first blow with another in rapid succession.

He alternated splaying his fingers and keeping them tightly held together so the sensation was different each time he struck her flesh.

She moaned and stirred restlessly but his hold tightened on her until she was powerless to move and it only heightened her desire.

This was what she craved beyond all else. To be held completely in a man's power. To know that she had no choice but to accept whatever it was he wanted to do to her. The knowledge was dark and edgy. It made her skate along that forbidden line where it was easy to fall off into complete darkness.

How far would she go? How far would she allow Lucas to go? She'd never answered that question. Had never entertained allowing things to go that far.

She trusted Lucas. Implicitly. But maybe even he didn't trust himself to push beyond the tightly controlled boundaries they'd erected.

He continued to mete out the spanking, but it was a ludicrous word that in no way described the dance they performed. This was no spanking for an undisciplined sub. This was as sexual as fucking, more powerful than kissing.

This was where she got her high. Where she got so pumped on lust that she'd literally let him take her wherever she wanted to go.

She was barely aware when he pushed her to the floor, forced her cheek to the carpet and held her head down, his hand tangled in her hair.

He mounted over her—rough, crude, possessive—like she was a bitch in heat. He thrust first into her pussy and then dragged his cock out and up the seam of her ass. With his free hand, he applied a liberal amount of lubricant, but tonight she didn't even want that. She wanted it hard. She wanted it to hurt. She craved the rough bite of pain when he forced his way past her unwilling opening.

His hand tightened in her hair and he growled low in his throat. "Open to me. Let me take what's mine."

As he knew they would, the words sent her over the edge. She arched up, desperate for his possession. He fit his cock to the tight ring and pushed hard.

She cried out but he yanked upward on her hair until she quieted.

"That's it," he said in a harsh, low voice. "Be silent and take it. You're mine, Ren. Never forget that. I own

you.”

He powered inside her and held himself deep, cupped over her body, covering every inch of her flesh.

She trembled. Her entire body shook as she fought the orgasm that built like a hurricane.

He laughed and reached underneath to press the flat of his hand to her belly. He slid his fingers down to the juncture of her legs and lightly touched her clit.

She clenched her teeth, closed her eyes and willed herself to control the reaction.

He was a master at knowing her body. Knowing what she loved. He knew how to talk to her, what words aroused her. How hard to take her. When to be rough and when to be gentle.

His fingers slid even lower, toying with the entrance to her pussy. He fingered her roughly as his cock twitched deep inside her ass. Then he withdrew, dragging that huge erection over distended flesh.

She moaned again and let out a sigh.

“No, Ren, you don’t get to come yet. I’m going to fuck you for a good long while and you’re going to be a good girl and you’re going to take it up the ass and keep taking it until I tell you to come. And then I’m going to fill your ass full of my cum and you’re going to beg me for more.”

And she would. She closed her eyes. She’d beg him never to stop. He’d come inside her and then he’d go back to fucking her until his hot liquid ran down her leg. And she’d love every damn minute of it.

CHAPTER 3

Ren stretched and glanced up at the clock. She grimaced. It was time for a break. Lucas insisted she not work to the exclusion of all else. It annoyed her sometimes, but the simple fact was, that if he didn’t interfere, she’d forget to eat, wouldn’t sleep and would work tirelessly until she collapsed.

And well, she was in touch enough with her feminine wants and needs to know that she loved that he took such good care of her. She needed that.

She put down the pencil she’d made preliminary sketches with, carefully pushed her drawings into an orderly pile and closed her sketchbook so the weight would prevent them from falling out.

Deadlines had little meaning to her. Once she got inspiration for the story she wanted to tell and the images began dancing in her mind, she was driven to work until the book was completed. Often that meant finishing well ahead of her deadline. It was an illness, this compulsion to be early. But it was who she was and it served her well in her career as an author of children’s books.

Rennie Michaels. A slight variation of her real name. It sounded light and fun and on the level with the children who she wrote for.

She got up from her desk and rubbed absently at a kink in her neck. When she looked up, to her surprise, Lucas was leaning against the doorframe, his lazy gaze stroking lightly over her body.

He didn’t often come into her studio. It was the one place that was hers. It was provided by him and he insisted that she be able to maintain her privacy here. Anywhere else in his home, she was his. There was no privacy. She belonged to him and he could intrude at will. But here was her work place and her place to be

alone with her thoughts. It was off limits to him, a condition he himself had put into place.

She stood still, unsure of what he wanted her to do.

He pushed off the doorframe and walked into her studio, hands shoved into his jeans pocket. He was barefooted, as he typically was in his home. For a man as wealthy and cultured as he was, in his private sanctuary he was a creature of comfort, usually in well-worn jeans, a T-shirt and sometimes flip-flops.

“We’ve received an invitation,” he said when he stopped in front of her.

She arched one eyebrow. She didn’t know anyone here. She and Lucas had met in his Las Vegas nightclub a year ago. She’d been out of sorts because her last relationship had been a complete disaster and he’d been an immediate source of security. He’d taken her home with him that night and they’d been together ever since.

She was honest enough with herself to know she’d used him in the beginning. He knew it also and was unbothered by it. She cared about him now. In a lot of ways, he was her best friend. Theirs was an odd friendship to be sure, but it worked for both parties.

“A friend of mine who owns a private club has invited us both to attend an intimate gathering in three nights’ time.”

She frowned. “What kind of private club and what kind of intimate gathering?”

He flashed that lazy grin. “You know very well what kind of club. You aren’t stupid, Ren.”

“Have I met this friend?”

He shook his head. “The last time I saw him was right before I left for Vegas the time you and I met.”

“And what are we supposed to ...do ...at this intimate gathering?”

He touched her then. Smoothed his hand up her arm, a gesture meant to reassure her. And it did.

“You know very well I’m not into public displays of dominance. I sense you aren’t either, though we’ve never really discussed it. I’ve been blunt about the fact I find it distasteful and we’ve adhered to my wishes on the subject. But tell me, Ren, does the idea of being played with in front of others turn you on?”

She wrinkled her nose. “What we do isn’t playing, Lucas. It’s not a game. And it’s ...private. At least to the extent of it not being a public spectacle. Is that what your friend wants?”

She knew that it was a particular kink of Lucas’s to watch while another man fucked the woman he owned. He’d told her about his past submissives and how turned on he was by watching another man not only possess her but command her.

Interestingly enough, he’d never invited another man to fuck her, and Ren couldn’t decide if she was happy or disappointed. She wouldn’t lie. In some ways the idea titillated her and made all her girly parts tingle. There was something extremely naughty and forbidden about having the man who owned you give you to another man to do with as he wished.

A shiver went up her spine and she decided that yes, the idea did turn her on. It turned her on very much. But the public display of mastery? Not so much. It reeked of showmanship. Of some fake, hyped-up display of testosterone that did nothing for her. She loved the quiet relationship she shared with Lucas.

“No, I don’t think that’s what he wants at all. I think what he wants is our company for the evening. He’s a lot like I am. We share a lot of the same tastes but perhaps he’s a little more possessive than I am when it comes to his woman.”

Both her brows rose at that and Lucas smiled. “He doesn’t share his woman under any circumstance. I find I don’t mind if the situation is right.”

“So he wants our company, but he wants us to come to his club,” she said slowly. “Why not invite us to dinner? Or out for drinks?”

Lucas shrugged. “For the same reason I entertain guests at my clubs. We’re both private people and as such I’m sure he’s as picky about who he allows into his sanctuary as I am. It’s a neutral place and yet perhaps more intimate than a restaurant or a bar.”

“If you wish me to accompany you, you know that I will.”

He nodded. “I know this. But I’d like to know if you have a desire to go or if you will go only because you think it pleases me.”

Her brow furrowed. This didn’t sound like Lucas. He was a man who commanded. He was arrogant. Not obnoxiously so, but he was very comfortable wearing the mantle of authority. He expected obedience. He’d never been particularly concerned with whether she truly wished to accompany him someplace.

It made him sound like an unfeeling bastard. It wasn’t so. If she wasn’t feeling well or was busy with work, he didn’t expect her to accommodate his wishes. He was very good at picking up on her moods and her health. He often knew before she did when she was getting sick.

He took excellent care of her. She had no complaint there. But if there was no solid reason for her to be unable to attend something he wished her to be present for, she went. He didn’t offer her a choice.

“I don’t know that I have a preference one way or the other,” she said honestly. “You know I love to please you. I don’t know this friend, so obviously I have no investment in seeing him. I suppose if there is kinky sex to view that might entice me to be more eager to go.”

She finished with a small grin and he laughed, shaking his head.

“I love how uninhibited you are and how unapologetic you are about loving sex. I wonder if you even know how desirable it makes you in my eyes. There is something intensely sexy about a strong woman who’s confident in her sexuality and furthermore celebrates it.”

Her cheeks grew hot at the uncharacteristic praise. His eyes were warm and he seemed so mellow today. It made her want to please him even more.

“Then we should go. You never know. Maybe we’ll learn something new and can practice it after we return home,” she said cheekily.

He pulled her into his side and stroked his hand down her back and down to cup her ass. She loved that he frequently touched her. And not just touched her but was possessive about it. He often did so in public, like he was telling the world that she belonged to him. That he was proud she belonged to him.

With his other hand, he absently ran a finger over the platinum collar around her neck. Then he slid his finger between it and her skin and pulled her forcefully forward until their mouths were a mere breath apart.

He kissed her, savaging her mouth until her lips were swollen and tender. After a moment, he removed his hand and carefully eased her away.

“We’ll go. I’ll buy something new for you to wear. I have something killer in mind. I may not want to demonstrate my authority over you in public, but I want every male in the place to look at you with lust in their eyes and know that you belong to me.”

She smiled because she loved it when he got all growly and possessive. He often took her to his clubs and for all practical purposes he kept her on a leash. There wasn’t a person in the club who couldn’t clearly see his stamp of possession all over her.

And for her part, she didn’t give a damn who knew the nature of their relationship. She felt no shame whatsoever for anyone to know that she served Lucas in all aspects and that she looked to him for absolute protection and care.

“Now let’s go eat. You need a break and I’ve encroached on your private quarters long enough. Afterward I feel a distinct need to fuck you for the entire afternoon.”

CHAPTER 4

Damon laced his fingers through Serena’s and brought her hand to his lips. It seemed such a natural action and Cole wondered if Damon even knew how frequently he touched and kissed his wife. It was done absently as if the habit was so strong he did it without realizing.

Serena was dressed tonight. Cole had noticed that since Serena’s belly had begun to swell and the evidence of her pregnancy was so clearly visible that Damon had clamped down, almost as if he wanted no one but himself to see his pregnant wife.

Before, it was a common sight for Cole to come into The House when Damon was present and see Serena spread, waiting for the kiss of the flogger. Often Cole prepared her for Damon, clamping her or tying her in various positions.

But these days, no one but Damon touched her, and he’d become intensely private about putting his lover on display. He damn sure hadn’t so much as touched her with anything but the most gentle of hands since the start of her pregnancy. He showered her with affection both in public and in private. Cole wondered if having a child would alter Damon’s practices on a permanent basis.

In fact, were it not for Damon having invited Lucas and Ren and wanting Serena to act as his social hostess, Cole doubted Serena would even be at The House. The further Serena got into her pregnancy, the more protective Damon became of her. He himself didn’t spend very much time at The House these days. He left the running to his manager and gave Cole leeway to oversee as he pleased.

Cole shoved his hands into his expensive slacks and looked at the entrance to the social room for the hundredth time since he’d arrived. Damon had assured him that Lucas had accepted his invitation and that he would be present, but Cole’s impatience was a living, breathing demon within him.

“Cool it, man,” Damon murmured beside him. “Go get a drink. Relax. Have you even given a thought to what you’ll say? You don’t want to cause an awkward scene. I don’t think that’s the impression you want to make when you haven’t seen her in so many years. And it wouldn’t do to insult Lucas. A submissive is quite protective of their master. If she feels you’re disrespecting Lucas, it could go badly.”

“I know all of that,” Cole said. “I may have been stupid once. But—”

Damon held up a hand in apology. “I have every faith in your knowledge, Cole. Or I would have never trusted you with what I treasure most in the world.”

Cole turned, taking Damon’s suggestion that he go collect a drink and calm the fuck down. He wasn’t used to the wildness of his emotional state. He was calm. He lived his life in a calm, reflective manner. Nothing rattled him.

Except Ren.

Always Ren.

She alone had the power to unhinge him.

He picked up a glass of wine and brought it to his mouth. The flavor was excellent. Damon had very good tastes. Expensive tastes.

He sighed and turned around, his gaze taking in the room once more. And then he froze.

Lucas Holt stood in the doorway, Ren at his side.

Cole drank in the sight of her. He couldn’t look away. While she’d always been beautiful, she’d grown into a gorgeous, mature woman who lacked the slight edge of youth to her features.

She was petite—she’d always been a small thing—barely reaching Lucas’s shoulder. Her shiny black hair was flowing over her shoulders and down her back, wild and beautiful like her.

And her eyes. The slight lilt at the corners signified her half-Korean heritage, but they weren’t dark. Instead they were a lush green with flecks of warm brown swirled until they became an unusual shade. They were vibrant, almost glowing, even across the distance.

She was so perfect she made him ache.

His gaze wandered over her as Lucas made his way toward Damon. She wore tight jeans that molded to her slim hips and ass. Low slung so that her belly button ring was bared and winked daringly at him.

Her top was barely much at all. She wore no bra and the silky material of her top clung to the generous swells of her breasts. It tied around her neck and completely bared her back and that tattoo Cole was so intimately familiar with. He’d taken her to have the ink done. To mark the occasion of her eighteenth birthday.

She smiled at Damon as Lucas introduced her. She sparkled. There was no other word for her. She wore a vivacious, confident smile. Not once did she look around to see if others were watching her or were curious about her. She was focused entirely on Lucas.

Jealousy knotted Cole’s gut. He hated that feeling. It was irrational. Jealousy was a stupid, pointless emotion that never brought anything but more frustration and a sense of helplessness. It wasn’t something he was familiar with. Until now.

He wanted her to look at *him* that way. She had once. She’d looked at him as though he were the only man in the world.

Why had she sought out a relationship like this? Cole hadn't imagined that she'd ever want any part of the lifestyle. He had botched things so badly with Ren. He'd been nothing more than a boy playing at being someone's keeper. He'd abused her trust and it was something that still ate at him to this day.

Damon glanced his way, but Cole was still rooted to the spot, unable to move as he stared at Ren. He suddenly felt unsure and he hated that feeling above all others.

He considered himself a confident man. He'd been successful early in life, driven by ambition that certainly couldn't be attributed to insecurity. His only missteps had been with Ren, and maybe that was why he was now faced with hesitancy.

Ren and Lucas moved away from Damon. Lucas put his hand to Ren's bare back and shot her a quick look of affection—and approval. Then he directed her toward the bar. Exactly where Cole was standing, staring at the only woman to ever fully capture his heart.

Ren glanced around the room, a little surprised by how posh and ...sedate ...it looked. It was like attending any other cocktail party. Who would even know that this place was devoted to sexual practices that didn't fall into the traditional realm.

Damon and his wife had been exceedingly gracious. Serena was elegant and most definitely submissive, but it was obvious that Damon adored her. And truly there was nothing more attractive to her than a man who clearly adored his woman.

"What would you like to drink, Ren?" Lucas asked.

She blinked and turned back from her perusal of the room. It was then she saw him, standing just a few feet away, his blue eyes burning into her. She stared back in shock, in awareness. Even after so many years, her heart leapt and her skin tingled in remembrance.

He hadn't changed. Well, maybe that wasn't entirely true. The youthful, handsome features of his early twenties had been replaced by the handsome ruggedness of age. He was tall but not as lanky as he'd been when she'd been with him. He'd filled out. Solid. Strong.

Power emanated from him. Controlled power. It was as though he boiled just below the surface but outwardly projected calm and confidence.

She shivered as his gaze skirted over her. He recognized her too, and she was instantly aware of the hunger in his eyes. She felt hunted, and it was a *delicious* sensation.

"Cole."

It came out as a whisper, barely discernible in the quiet din of mingled voices and random conversation. But he heard her. Acknowledged the address with a step forward.

"Ren."

She nearly moaned. Her name was a caress, sliding off his tongue with all the practice that had made her name an endearment. He'd always said her name like she was the most special thing in his world. With reverence. With ...love.

Lucas's hold suddenly tightened on her. She knew that touch. It was possessive. A clear hands-off to an intruder. It was his way of saying *mine*. It was rare indeed for Lucas to assume such a posture. He didn't

often see another man as a threat. The fact that he did so now told her all too clearly that the electric tension between her and Cole was plainly evident.

"It's good to see you again," Cole said quietly. "You look beautiful. But then, you always have."

Her heart squeezed and for a moment she worried that she'd be rendered unable to speak. She swallowed and tried to control the fact that her knees shook with nervousness.

"You're looking good too, Cole. How are you?"

It was an awkward, stilted conversation that only grew more uncomfortable with each passing second. Lucas sensed her disquiet and pulled her further into the protection of his body.

"Ren, introduce me to your friend," Lucas said in an easy, casual tone that completely belied the tension she felt in his coiled muscles.

Ren broke her gaze and looked up at Lucas. Then back at Cole. "Lucas, this is Cole Madison, an old friend of mine. Cole, this is Lucas Holt."

Lucas made no move to release her so he could shake Cole's hand, but then neither did Cole make an effort to do more than nod in Lucas's direction.

"A former lover," Lucas said, a slight lift at the corner of his mouth.

Ren nodded. She was always truthful with Lucas. Theirs was an open and honest relationship. She'd met Lucas's previous lovers in the past. He hadn't tried to hide them from her. Neither would she hide her previous relationship with Cole.

"We were a hell of a lot more than that," Cole said bluntly.

Lucas's eyebrow arched and he stared coolly at Cole. "Were you now?"

"*Were* is the operative word," Ren said quietly. "Cole chose a life that didn't include me. It's in the past."

It was strange to be having such a direct conversation. Weren't encounters with former lovers supposed to be filled with silly small talk and clear avoidance of the depth of the relationship? Weren't they supposed to pretend that neither mattered to the other?

"I made a mistake."

Nothing Cole said could have shocked her more than this. Her eyes widened and she went still against Lucas. An action that didn't go unnoticed by the man she belonged to.

"Then I must be very grateful for your mistake," Lucas said in a deceptively soft voice. "For she is now my greatest treasure."

Ren's eyes narrowed and she looked up at Lucas, baffled by his statement. They simply didn't have that kind of relationship. Did he value her? Absolutely. Ren had no doubt as to that. Friendship. Respect. He offered her protection. She gave him her absolute obedience and submission. But never had they been into flowery descriptors that came far too close at hinting at deeper feelings.

Or maybe it was a male posturing thing that had to do with entirely too much testosterone.

Suddenly the tension was too much for her to bear. She didn't want Cole to see how undone she was by his presence. By his admission that he'd made a mistake!

She turned her chin upward so she could look at Lucas. "Excuse me. I need to go to the ladies' room."

His hold loosened on her and he pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. "Of course. I'll be waiting here. What would you like to drink?"

"Something strong," she said, not realizing how much it said about her current state. "You choose."

She slipped away, not even knowing where the bathroom was, but more important, she just needed to get away to collect herself.

Once in the hallway, she glanced right and left and chose right since she and Lucas had entered from the left and she hadn't thought they'd passed a bathroom.

She finally found what she was looking for and slipped inside, locking the door behind her. She leaned against the vanity, her hands gripping the edge as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

She looked ...shocked. Unsteady. Her eyes had a bewildered look. Her pulse was too rapid and the pressure in her chest was ever increasing.

It wasn't as if she thought of Cole on a daily basis. Quite the opposite. She'd made peace with his defection a long time ago.

Really, Ren? Is that why you're standing here out of sorts? Because you made peace with the man you adored beyond reason who left you after awakening a fire inside you that has never been extinguished?

She ran water over her shaking hands but was careful not to mess up the light makeup she'd applied before arriving. She didn't want any sign of her disturbance to be evident.

When she finally managed to hold out her hand and see no noticeable tremble, she turned off the water and dried her hands.

A knock at the door startled her.

"Ren, open the door."

Lucas she might have expected. But it was Cole standing just two feet away and suddenly her hands shook so hard that she had no hope of regaining her composure.

CHAPTER 5

Ren briefly contemplated refusing but then she realized she was huddling in a bathroom *hiding* for God's sake. She opened the door, flicked her hair over her shoulder and arched one eyebrow as she stared back at Cole.

He filled the doorway. Big. Broad shouldered. So damn good-looking that she couldn't help but stare.

Users Review

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