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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOne womanchanges everything a man has ever known about dominance and desire in the final scintillating novel in the Breathless trilogy. When it comes to sex, Ash McIntyre has always explored his wilder sideextreme and uncompromising. He demands control. And he prefers women who want it like that. Even the women hes shared with his best friend, Jace. But Jace is involved with a woman he has no intention of sharing. And now even Gabe has settled into a relationship with a woman who gives him everything he needs, leaving Ash feeling restless and unfulfilled. Then Ash meets Josie, who seems immune to his charms and his wealth. Intrigued, he begins a relentless pursuit, determined she wont be the one who got away. He never imagined the one woman to tell him no would be the only woman whod ever drive him to the edge of desire.ExtraitAsh McIntyre stood on the concrete walkway of Bryant Park, hands

stuffed into his slacks pockets as he breathed in the spring air. There was still a nip in the wind, carrying with it hints of winter fading to spring. Around him, people sat on benches and in chairs at the small tables where they drank coffee, worked on laptops or were listening to iPods. It was an absolutely gorgeous day, not that he usually indulged in things like a walk in the park or even being in a park, especially during business hours when he was usually entrenched in his office, on the phone or typing emails or making plans to travel.

He wasn't a stop and smell the roses kind of guy. But today he was restless and cagey, he had a lot on his mind, and he'd found himself here without really realizing that he'd planned to end up in the park. Mia and Gabe's wedding was a few short days away, and his business partner was up to his eyeballs in wedding preparations as he sought to ensure Mia had the wedding of her dreams. And Jace? His other best friend and business partner was in a very permanent relationship with his fiancée, Bethany, which meant that his two friends were otherwise occupied. When they weren't working, they were with their women, and it meant that Ash didn't see them except at the office and on the occasions they all got together outside of work. They were still close, and Gabe and Jace ensured they'd stayed solid, including him in their changing lives. But it wasn't the same. And while it was good for his friends, Ash still hadn't quite come to terms with how rapidly all their lives had altered over the last eight months. It was weird and life-changing, even though it wasn't his life being impacted. It wasn't that he wasn't happy for his friends. They were happy. That made him happy. But for the first time since the beginning of their friendship, he was on the outside looking in. His friends would vehemently dispute that. They were his family. Much more so than his own batshit crazy family whom he spent most of his time avoiding. Gabe, Mia, Jace and Bethany, but especially Gabe and Jace, would deny that Ash was on the periphery now. They were his brothers in all the ways that counted. More than blood. Their bond was unbreakable. But it had changed. So in fact he was on the periphery. Still a part, but in a much different, smaller way. For years their motto had been play hard and live free. Being in a relationship changed a man. It changed his priorities. Ash got that. He understood it. He'd think less of Gabe and Jace if their women weren't their priority. But it left Ash out of the loop. The third wheel. And it wasn't a comfortable place to be. It was especially hard because, until Bethany, Ash and Jace had shared most of their women. More often than not, they fucked the same women. It sounded asinine that Ash wouldn't know how to function outside a threesome relationship, but there it was. He was restless and edgy, in search of something, he had no idea what. It wasn't that he wanted what Gabe and Jace had or maybe he did and refused to acknowledge it. He just knew he wasn't himself, and he didn't like that fact. He was focused. Knew exactly what he wanted at all times and had the wealth and power to make it happen. There were no shortage of women who'd be more than willing to give Ash what he needed or wanted. But what was the point when he himself had no clue what it was he wanted or needed at present? He scanned the park, taking in the baby strollers being pushed by mothers and nannies. He tried to picture himself with children and nearly shuddered at the thought. He was thirty-eight, almost thirty-nine, a time when most men had already settled down and produced offspring. But he'd spent all of his twenties and a good chunk of his thirties busting his ass with his partners to make their business the success it was now. Without using his family's money, their connections, and especially without their help. Maybe that was why they hated him so much now. Because he'd thumbed his nose at them and basically told them to fuck off. But the biggest sin he'd committed was in making more of a success of himself without them. He had more wealth and power than even the old man did. His grandfather. For that matter, what had the rest of his family ever done but live off the old man's largess? His grandfather had sold his successful business when Ash was still a boy. None of his family had worked a day in their lives. He shook his head. Fucking leeches, the lot of them. He didn't need them. Damn sure didn't want them. And now that he had surpassed them and his grandfather, he sure as hell wasn't going to allow them back into his life to reap the benefits of riding his star. He turned to go because he had shit to do that didn't include standing around in a damn park self-reflecting like he was in need of a shrink. He had to get his act together and start focusing on the one thing that hadn't changed. Business. HCM Global Resorts had projects in various stages of work. The Paris hotel was a done deal after their having to work fast to replace investors that had backed out. Things were moving along and progressing well. This wasn't the time for him to drop the ball, especially when Gabe and Jace couldn't give work the time they had in the past. Ash was the only one not distracted by his personal life, so he had to step up. Take some of the slack for his friends so they could enjoy having a life outside of work. As he started to stride back in the direction he'd come, he saw a young woman sitting alone at one of the tables outside of the primary traffic area. He stopped mid-step and let his gaze settle more fully on her, taking in her appearance. Long blond hair that drifted just so with the breeze, revealing a startlingly beautiful face with striking eyes that he could see even

from the distance at which he stood. She was wearing a funky long skirt that swirled with the wind, baring the long expanse of one leg. Blingy flip-flops adorned her feet and he could see the bright pink polish on her toes and a toe ring that sparkled when she moved her foot to shift position. The sun caught on a silvery ankle bracelet, drawing even more attention to her slender leg. She was busy sketching, her brow furrowed in concentration as her pencil flew over the page, and beside her was a huge bag stuffed full, with rolled-up papers extending from the top. But what most caught his attention was the choker she wore around her neck. It didn't fit her. He made that instant assessment. It was tight around her neck, resting just at the hollow of her delicate throat. But it didn't fit her. It didn't reflect her at all. It was gaudy on her. A diamond choker, obviously expensive and probably not fake, but it didn't go with the rest of her. It stood out, out of place. His curiosity was piqued because when he saw a piece of jewelry like that on a woman, it meant something far different than it did to most people and he was seized with interest to know if it was indeed a collar, or if it was just an ornament, chosen by her. And if it was a collar, the man who'd chosen it for her had done a piss-poor job. The man didn't know her, or maybe he didn't care to ensure that such an important adornment suited the woman he called his own. If Ash could make that judgment after mere moments of studying her, then how the hell could the man making love to her not see the same? Maybe the collar was more a reflection of her dominant, which was arrogant and idiotic. A collar should represent his care of his submissive, how in touch with her he was, and it should fit the woman wearing it. He was making a hell of a lot of assumptions. It could just be a simple necklace the woman had chosen herself. But to a man like Ash, that piece of jewelry meant something more than just an accessory. How long he stood watching her, he didn't know, but, as if sensing his gaze, hers lifted to meet his and her eyes widened and something like panic entered her expression. Then she hastily slammed her sketch pad closed and began to shove it into her bag. She half rose, still stuffing things into that huge bag, and he realized she was leaving. Before he was even aware of it, he hurried forward, intrigued. Adrenaline rushed through his veins. The hunt. Discovery. Challenge. Interest. He wanted to know who this woman was, and what that collar she wore meant. And even as he strode toward her, he knew that if it did mean what he thought it did, he was trespassing on another man's territory, and furthermore, he didn't give one fuck. Poaching another dominant's submissive was one of those unwritten no-nos, but then Ash had never been one for rules. At least the ones he himself didn't make. And this woman was beautiful. Intriguing. And perhaps exactly what he was looking for. How would he know unless he got to her before she bailed? He was nearly to her when she whirled around, bag in hand, obviously preparing to walk away, and she nearly bumped headlong into him. Yeah, he was absolutely invading her space, and he'd be lucky if she didn't scream the park down. He probably looked like some stalker about to attack. He heard her quick intake of breath as she took a step back, banging the bag into the chair she'd vacated. The bag tipped over, coming loose from her grip, and the contents spilled, pencils, brushes and papers flying everywhere. Damn it! she muttered. She bent immediately, grabbing for the papers, and he chased after one that had been caught by the wind, taking it several feet away. Ill get them, she called. Please don't trouble yourself. He captured the drawing and picked it up, turning back to her. It's no trouble at all. I'm sorry if I startled you. She let out a shaky laugh as she extended her hand for the paper. You did that for sure. He glanced down, taking in the drawing as he started to hand it over to her and then blinked in surprise when he saw himself on the paper. What the hell? he murmured, ignoring her hasty grab for the drawing. Please just give it back, she said, her voice soft and urgent. She sounded scared, like he was going to freak out, but he was more mesmerized by the small expanse of her side that had been bared by the loose-fitting top when she'd reached for the paper. On her right side he'd glimpsed a tattoo that was vibrant and colorful. Like her. The brief glimpse he'd gotten told him it was flowery, almost like a vine, and that it likely extended a hell of a lot farther up or down her body. Maybe both. He wished like hell he could see more of it, but she let her arm drop and the hem of her shirt settled back to the waistband of that full skirt, depriving him of further view. Why were you drawing me? he asked curiously. Color invaded her cheeks, making her skin rosy. She had fair skin, just barely kissed by the sun, but with her hair and those gorgeous aquamarine eyes, it looked beautiful. She was beautiful. And evidently very talented. She'd drawn him perfectly. He'd had no difficulty in recognizing himself in the pencil drawing. His thoughtful expression, the distant look in his eyes. She'd drawn him as he'd stood there, hands shoved into his pockets. That moment of self-reflection, and clearly that was evident in the drawing. It made him feel awkwardly vulnerable that a complete stranger had been able to capture his mood in just a few moments. That she'd seen him in that vulnerable moment and had picked up on what he hid from everyone else in the world. It was just an impulse, she defended. I draw a lot of people. Things. Whatever captures my attention. He smiled, never dropping his gaze from hers. Her eyes were so

expressive, capable of swallowing a man whole. And that damn choker stared back at him, taunting him with the possibilities. So you're saying I caught your attention. She flushed again. It was a guilty flush, but also one that was telling. She was checking him out every bit as much as he was checking her out. Perhaps more subtly, but then subtlety had never been one of his strong points. You seemed out of place, she blurted. You have very strong features. I was itching to get them down on paper. You have an interesting face and it was obvious you had a lot on your mind. I find people are a lot more open when they think no one is watching them. If you'd been posing, the picture wouldn't have been the same. It's very good, he said slowly as he dropped his gaze to once more take in the drawing. You have a lot of talent. Can I have it back now? she asked. I'm late. He looked back up, lifting his eyebrow in question. You didn't appear to be leaving until you saw me coming toward you. That was several minutes ago, and I wasn't late then. Now I am. What are you late for? Her brows drew together in consternation and then her eyes flashed in annoyance. I don't think that's any of your business. Ash, he said at her pause at the end. My name is Ash. She nodded but didn't say his name. And right then he'd have given anything to hear his name on her lips. He reached forward, brushing his fingers over the collar at her throat. This have anything to do with what you're late for? She took a step back, her frown deepening. Your Dom waiting for you? Her eyes widened and her fingers automatically went to the collar where his fingers had been just seconds before. What's your name? he asked, when she remained silent. I gave you mine. The polite thing to do is return the favor. Josie, she said barely above a whisper. Josie Carlyle. And who owns you, Josie? Her eyes narrowed then and she clutched her bag, shoving the remainder of her pencils into it. Nobody owns me. Then did I misunderstand the significance of that collar you're wearing? Her fingers brushed over it again, and it made him itchy. He wanted to remove it. It wasn't right for her. A collar should be carefully chosen for a submissive. Something that matched her personality. Something made especially for her. And not just any woman. You didn't misunderstand, she said in a husky voice that sent shivers down his spine. Her voice alone would seduce a man in a matter of seconds. But nobody owns me, Ash. And there it was. His name on her lips. It hit him deep, filling him with inexplicable satisfaction. He wanted to hear it again. When he was pleasuring her. When he had his hands and mouth on her body, drawing whispery sighs of contentment from her. He lifted one eyebrow. Then do you misunderstand the significance of that collar? She laughed. No, but he doesn't own me. Nobody owns me. It was a gift. One I choose to wear. Nothing more. He leaned in, and this time she didn't back away. Her gaze fixed on him, curiosity gleaming, and even anticipation. She felt it too. That magnetic pull between them. She'd have to be blind and in denial not to feel it. If you wore my collar, you'd damn well know you belonged to me, he growled. Furthermore, you wouldn't regret for a moment that you gave yourself wholly to me. If you were in my care, you'd definitely belong to me. There'd be no question. And you wouldn't hesitate when asked who your dominant was. Nor would you say it was a gift like it was nothing more than a piece of jewelry thoughtlessly chosen on a whim. It would mean something, Josie. It would mean fucking everything, and you'd know that. Her eyes widened and then she laughed again, her eyes twinkling. Then it's too bad I don't belong to you. With that she turned and hurried away, bag over her shoulder and him still standing there holding the drawing she'd done of him. He watched as she walked away from him, hair sliding down her back and lifting in the wind, a glimpse of the flip-flops and the ankle bracelet that tinkled softly when she moved. Then he glanced down at the drawing in his hand. Too bad indeed, he murmured. Ash sat in his office, door closed, brooding over the report in front of him. It wasn't a business file. No financial chart. No email he had to respond to. It was a file on one Josie Carlyle. He'd acted quickly, calling in a favor from the same agency he'd used to do a background check on Bethany, which had solidly pissed Jace off at the time. They were good, and, more importantly, they were fast. After his meeting with Josie in the park, he hadn't been able to shake her from his mind. Hadn't been able to shake his fixation with her, and he wasn't even sure what he'd call it, other than he was acting a lot like Jace had when he'd first met Bethany, and Ash had been quick to call his friend on the stupidity and rashness of his actions then. What would Jace think if he knew that Ash was basically stalking Josie? Jace would think he'd lost his damn mind. Just as Ash had thought Jace had lost his and well, he'd over Bethany. According to his report, Josie was twenty-eight. An art grad who lived in a basement studio apartment in a brownstone on the Upper East Side. The apartment was leased to her. Not another man. In fact there was little evidence in the report of this other man's presence, other than him arriving to pick her up at different intervals. The report only spanned a few days, since it had only been since then that Ash had met Josie and immediately requested the information. More often than not, she spent time in the park, drawing or painting. Some of her work was displayed in a small art gallery on Madison, but nothing had sold, at least in the amount of time since Ash had someone keeping an eye on her. She also

designed funky jewelry and had a website and an online shop where she took orders for some of her handmade stuff. From all appearances, she was a free spirit. No regular work hours. No regular schedule at all. She came and went seemingly on a whim. Though it had only been a few days, it seemed that she was also a loner. His guy hadn't spotted her with anyone other than the man Ash assumed was her Dom. It didn't make sense to him. If Josie was his, he damn sure wouldn't spend so little time with her, nor would she be alone so much. It appeared to him that Josie was an itch this guy was scratching and that either he, or she, didn't take the relationship that seriously. Was it all a game? Not that Ash had anything against people doing whatever the fuck they wanted, but in his world, submission wasn't a game. It was everything. He didn't play games. Didn't have time for them, and they just pissed him off. If a woman wasn't into it with him, then he was out. If she wanted a fucking game where she played at being submissive, complete with cute role-playing and yanking his chain to earn a punishment, he cut her loose quick. But then most of the women he'd fucked, he'd fucked with Jace. They had their rules. The women were clued in from the start. Bethany had been a complete game changer, and a complete rule breaker. Jace hadn't wanted to share, and Ash got that.

He hadn't at first, but he got it now. But it didn't mean that he didn't miss that connection with his best friend. On the other hand, with Jace out of the way, Ash was solely in control. He didn't have to worry about tripping over his best friend, pissing him off, or playing by anyone else's rules but his own. That appealed to him. It appealed a damn lot. He'd always known that people misunderstood his personality. Looking at the three of them, Gabe, Jace and Ash, people assumed Ash was the easygoing one. The I don't give a fuck kind.

Laid-back. Maybe even a pushover. They were all wrong. Of any of them, he was the most intense, and he knew that about himself. He'd held back when he and Jace were with the same woman, because he knew he'd take it a hell of a lot further than Jace ever would. So he played it Jace's way and held that part of himself in check. The part that would take over completely. And, well, there hadn't ever been a woman who tempted

him to let that part of himself go. Until now. And it was stupid. He didn't know Josie. He knew about her, yeah. The report was detailed. But he didn't know her. Didn't know if she'd even respond to what Ash would give her. What he would take. That was the biggie. What he would take. Because he'd take a lot. He'd give a lot, but his demands would seem extreme even to someone well-versed in the lifestyle he lived. He glanced down at the report again, pondering his next move. He already had a man on her. The idea of her being alone so much bothered him. Not that he didn't think it was perfectly okay for a woman to do whatever the hell she wanted in the city. But it bothered him for Josie. A lot. Would her supposed Dom even have a fucking clue where she was during the day? Did he give her protection? Or did he just hook up with her when he wanted someone to fuck? A low growl rumbled in his throat and he swallowed it back. He needed to calm the fuck down and get his shit together. This woman was nothing to him. But even as he thought it, he knew he was a

damn liar. She was something. He just wasn't sure what yet. His cell phone rang, and he looked down, frowning when he saw the contact. It was the man he had watching Josie. Ash, he answered shortly. Mr.

McIntyre, this is Johnny. Just wanted to let you know what I just observed. With what you told me, I figured you'd want to know what's going down. Ash sat up in his chair, his frown deepening. What's wrong? Is she hurt? No, sir. She just came out of a pawnshop. She sold some jewelry. I was in the shop, heard her talking to the pawnbroker. Said she needed the cash to make rent. He asked her if she wanted to sell it or pawn it and she said sell because she doubted she'd have the money to get it back unless something changed. Didn't say what that change would be, but thought you'd want to know what she did. Anger splintered his mind. What the fuck was Josie doing hocking jewelry in a goddamn pawnshop? If she needed cash, then why the hell wasn't her Dom providing for her? Why wasn't he protecting her better? The hell she'd be in a fucking

pawnshop if she belonged to him. Buy it, Ash clipped out. Buy every piece. I don't care what it costs. And you bring it to me. Yes, sir, Johnny said. Ash hung up and then leaned back in his chair, his mind working furiously. Then he rose abruptly, his phone to his ear calling for his driver to meet him in front of the office building. He nearly ran over Gabe in the hallway. Ash, you got a second? Gabe called when Ash continued down the hall. Not now, Ash ground out. Got shit to do. Ill tag you later, okay? Ash? Ash stopped, impatience simmering as he turned to look at his friend. Gabe's brows were drawn together in concentration and concern gleamed in his eyes. Everything okay? Ash nodded. Yeah, fine. Look, I've got to run. Ill catch up later. Gabe nodded, but there was doubt in his eyes. No way Ash was sharing what was on his mind. Gabe had enough to keep him occupied with his wedding. Shit, that was tomorrow. Which meant Gabe probably wanted to talk shit about the wedding and the ceremony. Ash stopped at the very end of the hall and called back to Gabe. Everything okay with the wedding? Mia okay? You need anything? Gabe paused at his office door and smiled. Everything's fine. Or at least it will be when the fucking ceremony is done and she's mine. We still on

for tonight? Jace is determined to throw me a bachelor party, which is not making Mia happy. I doubt Bethany is any happier, but he swears its just drinks at Ricks and nothing that will piss either woman off.Damn it. Ash had forgotten about it all. In his preoccupation with Josie hed put the wedding and the night out with Gabe and Jace solidly out of his mind.Yeah, Ill be there. Eight, right? Ill just meet you and Jace there.Gabe nodded. Okay, see you then. Hope everything works out.Gabe was fishing again, but Ash ignored him and turned for the elevator. He didnt have much time if he was going to make it to the art gallery before it closed. Ash walked into the small gallery and quickly glanced around. It was apparent that this was a small dealer with not a lot of well-known artists displayed. He probably dealt with independent artists. Those yet to be discovered. Those displaying in hopes of being discovered.His eyes settled immediately on a painting on the wall, and he knew without confirming that it was one of Josies works. It just looked like her. Bright. Vibrant. Carefree. He felt her when he looked at the painting. Saw her, remembered the way she smelled and when shed smiled, those ocean eyes he could drown in. Yeah, it was definitely hers. He wasnt wrong about this.Can I help you?Ash turned to see an older man smiling at him. He was dressed in a worn suit with scuffed shoes and wore glasses that drew attention to the lines in his forehead and around his eyes.Josie Carlisle, Ash said bluntly. You display her work here?The man looked surprised but then smiled again and turned, gesturing toward the wall. Yes, I do. Shes good. Not focused though. I think its why she hasnt caught on. Shes too all over the place and her style hasnt emerged yet. One thats identifiable, if you understand my meaning.No, I dont, Ash said impatiently. I like it. I like her work. Is that all you have, there on the wall?The mans eyebrows went up. No. Not at all. I have several pieces of hers. I only take a few at a time. I have to utilize the space to display what sells, and Ive only sold one or two of her pieces, regrettably. Ive actually cut back on the work of hers I display, just because it isnt moving well.I want them all.The surprise was still evident in the mans face but he hurried immediately to the wall to take down the painting that had first caught Ashs attention. It was framed. Not well, and hed definitely replace the frame with something more worthy of her talent. But first he had to buy up all her work and let the man know that anything else that Josie brought in was his.After a few minutes, the man had taken down the last painting and started toward the desk in front of the gallery. Then he paused and turned, a thoughtful look on his face.I have one more. In the back. She just brought it in two days ago. I didnt have the space to hang it, but I didnt have the heart to tell her no. Not when Id already told her I wouldnt be able to take anything else until I sold something.I want it too, Ash clipped out.Sight unseen?Ash nodded. If she did it, I want it. I want every piece of hers you have.The mans expression brightened. Well, then. Perfect. Shell be thrilled! I cant wait to tell her.Ash held up his hand, halting the man before he went to the back to retrieve the painting.You tell her whatever you want, but you do not give her my name or any information about me. I want complete anonymity or the deal is off. Understand? Furthermore, Im going to leave you my card. If she brings in anything else, you call me. I want whatever she brings in. Ill pay you double for everything you currently have as long as you make sure she gets her cut. And I will find out if you stiffed her, so dont even think about it. But that extra money also ensures I get first option on whatever else she brings youand I will buy whatever she bringsso it would be in your best interest to let her bring in whatever the hell she wants.O- of c-course, the man stammered out. Ill arrange it however you like. She wont know anything other than someone took a liking to her work and wanted everything I had. Shell be thrilled. I, of course, will tell her she is free to bring in anything else she has.Ash nodded. Good. Then we understand one another.Absolutely. Let me just get the painting in the back and bring it out. Would you like to take them all today or have me deliver them?Ill take the one with me, Ash murmured, gesturing toward the first painting hed seen on the wall. The others you can have delivered to my apartment.The man nodded and then hurried to the back, returning a moment later with an unframed painting wrapped in a protective covering.A moment later, Ash handed the dealer his credit card and watched as the purchases were totaled. He wasnt sure what the breakdown on the commission was, but with what he paid, Josie should have enough to solve any money issues for the short term.The long term? He wasnt that worried about the long term, because while Josie had no clue of Ashs intentionsyethe very much intended that the long term would include him.At ten minutes past eight, Ash walked into the private box where Gabe and Jace were already sitting, enjoying a drink. They looked up when he entered and Jace waved a greeting.Whats your poison tonight? Your usual? Jace asked when Ash took a seat next to him.A woman appeared wearing a sexy smile and propped her arm on Gabes shoulder.So sorry to hear youre off the market, she said in a flirty voice.Gabe looked pointedly at her arm and when he didnt say anything, she swiftly took it away and then turned to Ash.What can I get you?He wasnt in a drinking mood, but he didnt want to be a damper on his friends evening. And it was in fact their

last evening as bachelors. Well, it wasn't as if Jace and Ash were married, but Jace would be. It was the last evening with the three of them still single, and it signaled an end to nearly twenty years of living free and playing hard. His friends would argue that they weren't free or playing hard. He was sure they were doing both just fine. Mia and Bethany weren't any hardship for the men, and they certainly had no hesitations about embracing a permanent relationship. Scotch, Ash finally said. Was it that hard of a decision? Jace drawled. Ash grinned, though it felt more like a grimace. A few moments later, the waitress returned with Ash's drink and he held it up to his two friends. Here's to Gabe, the first to take the plunge. Well, the first and the second, Ash amended, referring to the fact that Gabe had been married once before. He tended to forget that and he was sure Gabe would prefer it that way as well. The marriage hadn't lasted that long and it hadn't ended well. Predictably, Gabe scowled, though he did raise his glass. Mia is the only one that counts, Gabe said. Jace nodded. Definite upgrade from Lisa. You did good. Says the woman's brother, Ash snorted. Jace lifted an eyebrow in Ash's direction. You saying Mia's not a good choice? As if. Don't give Gabe any reason to want to kick my ass. Don't want the man wearing a black eye for his big day tomorrow. Gabe snorted. Who the hell says it'll be me wearing the black eye? I'll wipe the floor with you, asshole. Ash rolled his eyes and sank back into the comfortable chair. So is this what it's come down to for us? Sitting around like old farts the night before the wedding? Yeah, well, you don't have a woman to go home to and explain anything wilder, Jace said dryly. Mia and Bethany would both have our asses if we had anything resembling a true bachelor party. So yeah, this is as good as it gets. Sorry. We're getting too old for that shit anyway, Gabe muttered. Acting like a bunch of frat boys with their first piece of ass isn't my idea of a good time anymore. I'll drink to that, Jace said. Well, when you put it that way so will I, Ash added. Damn, were we ever that bad? Gabe laughed. We were a bit more discerning, but yeah, you can't tell me you don't remember our days in college. Lots of drinking and sex. Not necessarily in that order. At least I remember all the women I slept with, Jace said. That's because you have Ash to remind you, Gabe shot back. I don't tag team so I don't have someone to remind me of everyone I fucked because I wasn't fucking them with best friends. Now there's an image, Ash drawled. That's probably the only thing we never tried. A foursome. Jace laughed. Even Gabe joined in as they continued to give each other shit. Several drinks later, Gabe kept checking his watch and it amused Ash. The man couldn't wait to get home to Mia. Forgoing any of the traditions of not seeing the bride the night before or day of, Gabe would be going to bed with Mia, waking up with her in the morning and probably make her late for the ceremony by getting a head start on the honeymoon. Don't let us keep you, Ash said dryly. Gabe's head yanked up, guilt flashing in his eyes as Jace laughed. How long you and Mia going to be gone on your honeymoon? Jace asked. You never said and I didn't see that you'd cleared your calendar at work. Gabe's expression darkened. Not working for two weeks. Not even bringing my phone or laptop with me. So if the company goes to shit in my absence, I'm not going to be pleased. Fuck you, Ash muttered. Jace and I do all the work anyway. You just sit back and obsess. Surprised you're only going to be gone for two weeks, Jace said. I figured you'd go off and we wouldn't see you for a month at least. Can't say I'm not tempted. But for now, two weeks will do. I plan to be taking a lot more vacation from now on, though. There's a lot of places Mia wants to see and I'm going to make that happen for her. You deserve it, man, Ash said sincerely. You've worked your ass off. Already had one bad marriage. You've got a good woman now and more money than you'll ever spend. Time to go out and enjoy the fruits of your labor. Make sure you don't fuck it up with Mia. She'll love you forever, which is more than I can say for your bitch of an ex. Let's not ruin my night by discussing my ex, Gabe growled. Any plans for babies yet? Jace asked. Has she talked you around on that? She doesn't have to persuade me, Gabe said with a shrug. I'm not getting any younger. My only concern was whether she was ready for children yet. She's still young. Lot of years ahead of her. I'd wait if that's what would make her happy, but she insists she wants a big family, the sooner the better. In other words, you're doing your best to knock her up as soon as possible, Ash drawled. Gabe tipped his glass in Ash's direction and Jace winced. He visibly shuddered and then took a long swallow of his drink. We need to stop now. This is my sister we're talking about. Now I'm going to have to go home and bleach my eyeballs over the images you're invoking. Gabe rolled his eyes and Ash chuckled. Then Gabe sobered and stared between Jace and Ash. Glad to have you both at my back. Means a lot to Mia that you'll be there tomorrow, but it means even more to me. We've been friends a hell of a lot of years. There's no one else I care about having there. Wouldn't give a shit if no one but you and Mia were there. And Bethany, of course. Very eloquent speech there, man, Jace said, amusement thick in his voice. Meant it, Gabe said simply. Ash extended his arm with a closed fist to bump Gabe's. Congrats, man. I'm happy for you. Take care of Mia and you'll never have to worry about Jace and I having your back. Jace nodded. So what was up your

ass earlier? Gabe asked. Ash blinked, realizing Gabe was talking to him. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair as Jace turned his attention to Ash as well. Nothing, he said. Just had shit to do. You looked pretty intense when you damn near knocked me over coming out of your office, Gabe said. Anything I should know about before I make myself unavailable for two weeks? It had nothing to do with business, Ash said in an even tone. And that's all you need to worry about. Fuck, Jace muttered. Is it your goddamn family again? Are they still jacking you around? Thought you told them to fuck off for good after the dinner with the old man. Ash shook his head. Haven't spoken to any of them in weeks. I saw the old man. Did my good deed. Played the dutiful grandson. Then told my parents to fuck off. Gabe chuckled. Would have loved to have been a fly on the wall for that. Jace was still scowling. Ash appreciated the fact that his friends got so pissed off on his behalf when his family started their crap. Gabe and Jace had always had his back when it came to his family, but more recently, he'd not wanted them involved. He didn't want Mia or Bethany exposed to his family's venom. Especially Bethany, who was a hell of a lot more vulnerable and would have been an instant target for their vitriol. You sure they're not giving you shit? Jace demanded. Gabe will be out of town on his honeymoon, but Bethany and I are here. You know well stand with you. I'm a grown boy now, Ash drawled. I can stand up to mommy and daddy without help. But I appreciate it. And no, they aren't giving me shit. They've been suspiciously quiet. I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Well, if everything's okay, and you two are going to be okay running the ship without me for the next two weeks, I'm heading home to Mia. Sooner this night is over with, the sooner she's my wife and the sooner we take off on that honeymoon, Gabe said. Speaking of running the ship, Ash cut in before everyone rose to go their separate ways. You never did say why we dropped Charles Willis like a hot potato. With him out and losing the other two investors, we barely managed to salvage the Paris deal. Anything you haven't shared with us? Gabe's expression became shuttered, his lips drawn into a tight line. Jace looked questioningly at Gabe as well. All Gabe had shared at the time was that Willis was out and then the other two dropped without explanation as well, one of whom was a wealthy Texan who they couldn't afford to lose. But with the scramble to replace those investors, neither Jace nor Ash had asked questions. They'd knuckled down, did what had to be done to get back on track. He wasn't right for the job, Gabe said darkly. I knew it in Paris when we met. Knew I wouldn't work with him, no matter his bid. Business decision. It was what was best for the company. My call. I know you're my partners, but we didn't have time to get into the whys and wherefores. We needed to move to get the situation in hand and the plans back on track. Jace frowned. It was evident he didn't quite swallow Gabe's explanation. It didn't wash with Ash either, but Gabe's face was implacable. And him saying it was a business decision was bullshit. It was personal. Ash didn't know what the hell had gone on in Paris, but whatever it was had turned Gabe solidly against Charles Willis. The man had dropped off the face of the earth after being cut loose from HCM's operations. Ash shrugged. All he cared was that they'd salvaged the whole bloody mess. He wasn't going to get into what had gotten Gabe's underwear in a knot over the whole thing. It was behind them. No harm, no foul. Now if we're done, I'd really like to get home to my future wife, Gabe drawled. Gabe rose and Jace followed suit. Christ, they really were getting old. It wasn't even ten yet, and they were already folding up the tent for the night and schlepping home. But then, they had women to go home to. In their position, he wouldn't be so eager to spend a night out with friends either. He walked out with them and watched as Gabe got into his car. Jace turned to Ash. Want a ride back to your place or is your driver on standby? Ash hesitated. He wasn't in the mood to talk, and, no doubt, after Gabe's questions, Jace's curiosity would be piqued. But if he refused the ride, Jace would be even more convinced that something was bugging him. It would be better if Ash just sucked it up and took the ride. How's Bethany doing? Ash asked, when they'd gotten in. He figured if he got Jace talking about Bethany, he wouldn't pry into Ash's business. Jace's expression eased into a smile. She's doing good. Excited about going to school. What's the latest on Kingston? He still being a dumbass? Jack Kingston was Bethany's foster brother. He was also the man who damn near killed Bethany and was currently in rehab. Personally Ash thought Jace had gone far too easy on the other man. Ash would have beat the shit out of him and then nailed his ass to the wall, but in an effort not to hurt Bethany any more than she already had been, Jace had helped Jack get a plea bargain that included rehab and probation. We don't hear from him, and I'm good with that, Jace said. Ash arched an eyebrow. But is Bethany good with it? Jace sighed. She has good days and bad. When I can keep her focused on me and us, things are good. When she has time to think, she worries. She knows he fucked up, and she hasn't gotten over that. I doubt she ever will. But she still loves him and is sick over what he's done. That sucks, Ash murmured. Yeah. They pulled up to Ash's building, and Ash was relieved that Jace hadn't had time to pry into his head. Because he would. Just like Ash would do to him if he sensed something

off about Jace. But knowing hed do the same didnt mean he was lining up to have Jace do it to him. It made him a flaming hypocrite, but oh well. See you tomorrow, then? Jace asked as Ash started out of the car. Yeah, wouldnt miss it. You walking Mia down the aisle? Jaces face softened. Yeah. Shouldnt we have had a rehearsal or some shit like that? Ash asked. Granted, his experiences with weddings had been confined to Gabes first, but rehearsals were normal for weddings the scale of Gabes and Mias, surely. Jace laughed. Yeah, man, it was last night. You didnt show. Not that you have to do anything but stand there with Gabe. Mias going to give you shit about ducking out. I covered for you and said you had shit with work and that you stayed so Gabe could make the rehearsal. That appeased her. Christ, Ash said. I feel like an ass now. I swear I didnt remember. I wouldnt have remembered the wedding was tomorrow if I hadnt seen Gabe at the office earlier. You havent been around much lately, Jace said, curiosity in his voice. Everything okay with you? Work hasnt been that bad, unless theres something youre not telling me. Things have been pretty damn quiet since Gabe went on a tear trying to get everything worked out before he left for his honeymoon. Just been preoccupied, man. No big deal. Jace leaned forward before Ash could close the door. Look, I know things have been . . . different. Ever since me and Bethany. I get that. But I dont want things to change, Ash. Youre family. Things did change, Ash said softly. Nothing to be done about it. Im dealing. Dont make it an issue that it isnt, Jace. Be happy and make Bethany happy. Are we cool? Jace asked. Because youve been off lately. And its not just me noticing. Ash cracked a smile. Yeah, man, were cool. Stop acting like a goddamn nanny. Go home to your woman. Ill see you tomorrow in my goddamn tuxedo. Only for Mia would I do this shit. Jace laughed. Yeah, tell me about it. Bethany and I are so eloping. Set a date yet? While Jace and Bethany had become engaged at Bethanys twenty-fourth birthday party, they hadnt set a date, at least not to Ashs knowledge. But then, hed been so far out of the loop lately that it was possible he just didnt know about it. Not yet, Jace said. Was waiting until this shit with Jack blew over. I dont want that hanging over her head when we get married. After he gets out of rehab and gets his shit sorted, Ill plan a trip somewhere and well get married on a beach. Sounds great. See you tomorrow, okay? Ash closed the door and slapped the side to signal the driver to pull away before he turned and walked into his apartment building. Once inside his apartment, he walked into his bedroom and his gaze fell on the painting the art dealer had pulled from the back. The one that was still wrapped and not on display. The others hed put against the wall in the living room, but hed put this one in his bedroom, intending to look at it when he got home. Now curiosity was eating at him, so he carefully pulled away the wrapping and turned it over. Holy shit, he breathed. It was . . . stunning. Provocative and sexy as hell. It was her. Or rather her tattoo, or what he imagined had to be her tattoo. Granted hed only gotten a glimpse when shed bared a thin strip of her waist, but this was in the right place and it resembled the flowery vine. The painting was of a nude womans profile. One hip was presented, arms covering her breasts, but the barest hint of one soft mound peeked tantalizingly from underneath her upper arm. And down her entire side was a colorful, flowery tattoo. It curved over her hip and disappeared between her legs. It had to be on the inside of one thigh and now he was dying to know if this was an exact replica of her tattoo. The one hed seen on her body. Jesus, but he was dying to know. Dying to trace the lines with his fingers and his tongue. He stared at the painting, absorbing every detail. The art dealer had been a fool not to display this one. Had he even looked at it? It was erotic as hell and yet still tasteful. Long blond hair flowed down her back, the ends lifted as if she was caught in a breeze. Her arms were hugged to her body, her fingertips splayed over the arm pressing down over her breast. Delicate. Utterly feminine. And so damn beautiful it made his balls ache. Holy fuck but he was obsessed with a woman hed only met in person one time. And this painting wasnt helping a damn bit. Tomorrow this was getting framed and it was going over his bed so hed see it every time he entered his bedroom. Or, even better, hed put it on the wall opposite his bed so it would be the first thing he saw when he woke up in the morning and the last thing he saw before he went to sleep at night. Yeah, he wasnt just obsessed. He was all sorts of fucked up over this woman. He had to get a grip. Johnny was bringing her jewelry by the office day after tomorrow since the entire business would be shut down for Gabes wedding tomorrow. Ash then had to figure out how he was going to get it back to her. He could just mail it to her, but then he wouldnt see her. And he definitely planned on seeing her again. Soon. Ash sat in his office the day after Gabes wedding and studied the small box containing the jewelry that Josie had pawned. He examined each piece before carefully returning it to the tissue so it wouldnt get damaged. It was quality. He wasnt an expert but it looked vintage and real. Definitely not fake. It was worth far more than Josie had pawned it for, and the pawnbroker knew it, judging by the price it had cost Ash to get it back. He didnt like the desperation in that single act. Of pawning jewelry for a fast buck and taking far less than it was worth because she had no other choice. He was going to give

that choice back to her. But other choices? Not so much. Not if he had anything to say about it. It made him arrogant and demanding, but he knew himself to be both, so it didn't bother him. It was who he was. He knew what he wanted, and he wanted Josie. Now he just had to put the ball in motion. His intercom buzzed and he jerked his head up in irritation. Mr. McIntyre, your sister is here to see you, Eleanor, his receptionist, said in a crisp voice that sounded pissed off. But then it wasn't a secret how Ash and Gabe and Jace felt about his family. Eleanor had been with them for years and it likely hadn't pleased her to buzz him with this kind of information. What the fuck was Brittany doing here? Had his mother resorted to having his sister do her dirty work for her? He could feel his blood pressure rise, even knowing he had to stop allowing them this kind of power over him. Send her in, Ash said grimly. No way he was going to air family shit outside the privacy of his office. Whatever it was Brittany wanted, Ash would give her a few minutes and then let her know she wasn't welcome at his office. None of his family was, and for that matter, none of them had ever stepped inside the HCM offices. They saved their venom for holidays and family get-togethers. If they ever set foot inside the HCM offices, they'd be forced to acknowledge his success instead of treating it like a dirty secret no one talked about. They'd be forced to see firsthand that he didn't need them and he'd succeeded without their help or influence. No way they were going to do either. A soft knock sounded at his door and he voiced a come in. The door slowly opened and his sister walked in, apprehension written all over her features. She looked more than nervous. She looked terrified. Ash? she asked softly. Can I talk to you for a minute? Brittany was a replica of his mother. Not that his mother wasn't a beautiful woman. She was. And Brittany was every bit as beautiful, if not more so, than their mother. The only problem was his mother was ugly on the inside and it forever marred his perception of her looks. Because he knew what resided behind that pretty face. It was a cold and calculating mind. He firmly believed she was incapable of loving anyone but herself. It was a mystery to him why she'd ever had children. And not just one, but four. Besides Brittany, Ash had two older siblings. Both brothers and both firmly under the grasp of their mother and father. Though younger, Brittany was approaching thirty. Or maybe she'd turned thirty already? He couldn't remember and he didn't spare an ounce of sadness over that fact. And she was as solidly under the family thumb as their brothers. Perhaps even more so. Their mother had handpicked Brittany's husband. An older guy she'd married Brittany off to when she was barely out of college. Wealthy. Influential. All the right connections. The marriage had barely lasted two years and Ash's mother blamed that squarely on Brittany. Never mind that in Ash's digging, he'd found a hell of a lot of skeletons in Robert Hanover's closet. He was not a man he'd want his sister or any woman married to. But Brittany had meekly submitted to her mother's desires despite Ash's warning to her that Robert was not the man he seemed. At least she'd had the balls to get out of the marriage. That had surprised him. What's up? Ash asked in an even tone. He gestured for her to sit in the chair facing his desk. She eased into it, perched gingerly on the edge, nervousness and uncertainty evident in her body language. I need your help, she breathed out. He cocked one eyebrow upward. What's wrong? Get into an argument with mommy dearest? Anger flashed in Brittany's eyes as she stared back at Ash. Please don't, Ash. I know I deserve your mockery and scorn. I deserve a lot of things. But I want out. And I need your help to do that. It shames me to have to come and beg for help from you, but I don't know where else to go or who else to turn to. If I go to Grandpa, he'd just tell Mom and he probably wouldn't help me anyway. You're his favorite. He can't stand the rest of us. Surprise gripped him at the earnestness and urgency in her tone. He leaned forward, his gaze narrowing at her. You want out. What does that mean exactly, Brittany? I want away from them, she said shakily. All of them. What the hell did they do to you? Ash demanded. She shook her head. Nothing. I mean nothing more than usual. You know how they are, Ash. I've always envied you so much. You tell them to fuck off and you've made your own way. All I've done is marry a man my mother wanted me to, try to make the best of a bad situation and fail miserably. I got nothing in the divorce and I was okay with that. I just wanted out. But I have nothing without Mom and Dad's help. And I don't want it anymore. Because their help comes with strings. I'm thirty years old and what do I have to show for my life? No life, no money. Nothing. The desolation in her voice hit Ash deep. He knew exactly what she meant. It could have easily been him in this same situation. His brothers certainly were. He didn't like the shadows in her eyes and the beaten-down look she currently wore. As much as she'd been a bitch before, mimicking their mother, he'd take that over this whipped-puppy look she now had. What do you want to do? he asked quietly. Is it pathetic that I don't know? I don't even know where to start. I came to you because I had no one else to go to. My friends aren't friends when the chips are down. They're more than willing to support me when things are good, but I can't count on them for real support. Ill help you, he said in an even tone. Jace owns an apartment that Mia used to live in, and more recently his fiancée lived there. But it's empty again and

just sitting there. I can probably buy it from him or at least use it until we get you situated somewhere else. Her eyes widened in shock. Do you have a job? he asked. She flushed and dropped her gaze. Im not criticizing, Brittany, he said softly. Im asking so I know what kind of help you need. She shook her head. No. Ive been living with Mom and Dad. Its not that I dont want to work, but what am I good at? You could be good at a lot of things, Ash said. Youre smart. You have a degree. Youre just afraid to try and get out there in the real world. She nodded slowly. I can get you a position in one of the hotels, but Brittany, you need to know. It would be a real job with real responsibilities. I can pull strings to get you hired, but if you arent doing the job, you dont get to keep it. Understand? I understand and thank you, Ash. I dont know what to say. We have been horrible to you. Tears filled her eyes as she stared earnestly back at Ash. They hate you because they cant control you. And Ive let them control me. Now that Im not going to do that anymore, theyre going to hate me too. Ash reached across the desk and curled his hand around hers, squeezing reassuringly. You dont need them, Brittany. Youre young and smart. You can make it on your own. You just need a little help to do that. But be prepared. Youre going to have to be strong. Our mother is a bitch, and she wont hesitate to use every weapon in her arsenal on you as soon as she figures out what youre doing. Thanks, she whispered. Ill pay you back somehow, Ash. I swear it. He squeezed her hand again. The best thing you can do for me is to live your own life and dont let them beat you down again. Ill help. Ill do what I can to shield you from that shit. But its going to take a lot of strength on your part as well. Id like to think we could actually be family again. She curled both her hands around his, her eyes shining as she locked gazes with him. Id like that too, Ash. Let me call Jace and see where he stands with the apartment. If we cant get you into that one, well have to take a look at what else is out there. Do you need me to go with you to get your stuff from Mom and Dads? She shook her head. I packed everything. My clothes and stuff I mean. Nothing else to pack. I brought it with me. My suitcases are in the reception area here. I took a cab to your office. Wasnt sure what I was going to do if you refused to see me. Okay, then let me call Jace and well get your bags. For tonight Ill put you up in our hotel. Im sure the apartment will need restocking. Ill work on that today and also set up an account for you and deposit enough cash to get you through to your first paycheck. Take a few days to settle in and then come back to see me about that job. By then Ill have something lined up for you. She rose and then was suddenly around the desk, throwing her arms around his neck. He caught her, rising from his chair, still holding on to her so she didnt fall, and he returned her hug. Youre the best, Ash. God Ive missed you. Im so sorry for the way Ive treated you. You have every right to kick me out and never see me again. Ill never forget what youre doing for me. Never. The fervency in her voice made Ash smile as he patiently waited for the hugfest to be over. Who would have thought today would bring his sister into his office for a family reunion of sorts. Gabe and Jace werent going to believe this one. Although it would be two weeks before Gabe knew anything. Jace would likely think hed lost his mind for helping his sister out. But Ash couldnt just turn his back on her. Even if it was what his family had done to him. Brittany was still his little sister and perhaps this would be a new page for them. Ash didnt like the estrangement between him and his family. But theyd given him no choice. He wanted what everyone else took for granted. A solid family unit. People who had his back. People who loved and supported him unconditionally. *Revue de presse* Praise for the novels of Maya Banks If you havent read this series yet, you totally should... Incredibly awesome... I love Maya Banks and I love her books. Jaci Burton, *New York Times* bestselling author A must-read for... Christine Feehan and Lora Leigh fans. *Fresh Fiction* Everything I love in a good book suspense, romance, a twist, hot sex. Bring on the next one! *Red Hot Books* Maya Banks... really dragged me through the gamut of emotions. From... Is it hot in here? to Oh my GOD... Im ready for the next ride now! *USA Today* [A] one-two punch of entertainment that will leave readers eager for the next book. *Publishers Weekly* For those who like it naughty, dirty, and do-me-on-the-desk HAWT! *Examiner.com*