



Undeniable: Tempted by Her Innocent Kiss Undone by Her Tender Touch (Pregnancy & Passion)

By Maya Banks

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(Pregnancy & Passion)** By Maya Banks

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Maya Banks lives in Southeast Texas with her husband and three children. When she's not writing, she loves to hunt and fish, bum on the beach, play poker and travel.

Escaping into the pages of a book is something she's loved to do since she was a child. Now she crafts her own worlds and characters and enjoys spending as much time with them as possible.

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There came a time in a man's life when he knew he was well and truly caught. Devon Carter stared down at the brilliant diamond solitaire ring nestled in velvet and acknowledged that this was one such time. He snapped the lid closed and shoved the box into the breast pocket of his suit.

He had two choices. He could marry Ashley Copeland and fulfill his goal of merging his company with Cope-land Hotels, thus creating the largest, most exclusive line of resorts in the world, or he could refuse and lose it all.

Put in that light, there wasn't much he could do except pop the question.

The doorman to his Manhattan high-rise hurried to open the door as Devon strode toward the street, where his driver waited. He took a deep breath before ducking into the car, and the driver pulled into traffic.

Tonight was the night. All of his careful wooing—the countless dinners, kisses that started brief and casual and became more breathless—was a lead-up to tonight. Tonight his seduction of Ashley Copeland would be complete, and then he'd ask her to marry him.

He shook his head as the absurdity of the situation hit him for the hundredth time. Personally he thought William Copeland was crazy for forcing his daughter down Devon's throat. He'd tried everything to sway the older man from his aim to see his daughter married off...to Devon.

Ashley was a sweet enough girl, but Devon had no desire to marry anyone. Not yet. Maybe in five years. Then he'd select a wife, have two-point-five children and have it all.

William had other plans. From the moment Devon had approached him, William held a calculated gleam in his eye. He'd told Devon that Ashley had no head for business. She was too softhearted, too naive, too...everything to ever take an active role in the family business. He was convinced that any man who showed interest in her would only be seeking to ingratiate himself into the Copeland fold—and the fortune that went with her. William wanted her taken care of and for whatever reason, he thought Devon was the best choice.

And so he'd made Ashley part and parcel of the deal. The catch? Ashley wasn't to learn of it. The old man might be willing to barter his daughter, but he damn sure didn't want her to know about it. Which meant that Devon was stuck playing stupid games. He winced at the things he'd said, the patience he'd exerted in his courting of Ashley. He was a blunt, straightforward person, and this whole mess made him grit his teeth.

If she was part of the deal, he'd rather all parties know that from the outset so there would be no misunderstandings, no hurt feelings and no misconceptions.

Ashley was going to think this was a grand love match. She was a starry-eyed, softhearted woman who preferred to spend time with her animal rescue foundation over board meetings, charts and financials for Copeland Hotels.

If she ever found out the truth, she wasn't going to take it well. And hell, he couldn't blame her. Devon hated manipulation, and he'd be pissed if someone was doing to him what he was doing to her.

"Stupid old fool," Devon muttered.

His driver pulled up to the apartment building that was home to the entire Copeland clan. William and his wife occupied a penthouse on the top floor, but Ashley had moved to a smaller apartment on a lower floor. Various other family members, from cousins to aunts and uncles, lived in all places in between.

The Copeland family was an anomaly to Devon. He'd been on his own since he was eighteen, and the only thing he remembered of his parents was the occasional reminder not to "screw up."

All this devotion William showered on his children was alien and it made Devon uncomfortable. Especially since William seemed determined to treat Devon like a son now that he was marrying Ashley.

Devon started to get out when he saw Ashley fly through the door, a wide smile on her face, her eyes sparkling as she saw him.

What the hell?

He hurried toward her, a frown on his face.

"Ashley, you should have stayed inside. I would have come for you."

In response, she laughed, the sound vibrant and fresh among the sounds of traffic. Her long blond hair hung free tonight instead of being pulled up by a clip in her usual careless manner. She reached for his hands and squeezed as she smiled up at him.

"Really, Devon, what could happen to me? Alex is right here, and he watches over me worse than my father does."

Alex, the doorman, smiled indulgently in Ashley's direction. It was a smile most people wore around her. Patient, somewhat bemused, but nearly everyone who met her was enchanted by her effervescence.

Devon sighed and pulled Ashley's hands up to his waist. "You should wait inside where it's safe and let me come in for you. Alex can't protect you. He has other duties to attend to."

Her eyes sparkled merrily, and she flung her arms around his neck, startling him with the unexpected show of affection.

"That's what you're for, silly. I can't imagine anyone ever hurting me when you're around."

Before he could respond, she fused her lips hungrily to his. For God's sake the woman had no sense of self-control. She was making a spectacle here in the doorway to her apartment building.

Still, his body reacted to the hunger in her kiss. She tasted sweet and so damn innocent. He felt like an ogre for the deception he was carrying out.

But then he remembered that Copeland Hotels would finally be his—or at least under his control. He would be a force to be reckoned with worldwide. Not bad for a man who had been told that his sole ambition should be not to "screw up."

Carefully, he pulled her away and gently offered a reprimand.

"This isn't the place, Ashley. We should be going. Carl is waiting for us."

Her lips turned down into a momentary frown before she looked beyond him to Carl, and once again she rushed forward, a bright smile on her face.

He shook his head as she greeted his chauffeur, her hands flying everywhere as she spoke in rapid tones. Carl grinned. The man actually *grinned* as he handed Ashley into the car. By the time Devon made it over, Carl had already reverted back to his somber countenance.

Devon slid into the backseat with Ashley, and she immediately moved over to nestle into his side.

"Where are we eating tonight?" she asked.

"I planned something special."

As expected she all but pounced on him, her eyes shining with excitement.

"What?" she demanded.

He smiled. "You'll see."

He felt more than heard her faint huff of exasperation and his smile broadened. One thing in Ashley's favor was that she was extraordinarily easy to please. He was unused to women who didn't wheedle, pout or complain when their expectations weren't met. And unfortunately, the women he usually spent time with had high expectations. *Expensive* expectations. Ashley seemed happy no matter what he presented her with. He had every confidence that the ring he'd chosen would meet with her approval.

She nestled closer to him and laid her head on his shoulder. Her spontaneous demonstrations of affection still unbalanced him. He wasn't used to people who were so...unreserved.

William Copeland felt that Ashley needed someone who understood and accepted her nature. Why he thought Devon fit the bill Devon would never know.

When they married, he would work on getting her to restrain some of her enthusiasm. She couldn't go through her entire life with her emotions on her sleeve. It would only get her hurt.

A few minutes later, Carl pulled up to Devon's building and got out to open the door. Devon stepped out and

then extended his hand to help Ashley from the car.

Her brow was creased in a thoughtful expression as she stared up at the building.

"This is your place."

He chuckled at her statement of the obvious. "So it is. Come, our dinner awaits."

He ushered her through the open door and into a waiting elevator. It soared to the top and opened into the foyer of his apartment. To his satisfaction, everything was just as he'd arranged.

The lighting was low and romantic. Soft jazz played in the background and the table by the window overlooking the city had been set for two.

"Oh, Devon, this is perfect!"

Once again she threw herself into his arms and gave him a squeeze worthy of someone much larger than herself. It did funny things to his chest every time she hugged him.

Extricating himself from her hold, he guided her toward the table. He pulled her chair out for her and then reached for a bottle of wine to pour them both a glass.

"The food is still hot!" she exclaimed as she touched the plate in front of her. "How did you manage it?"

He chuckled. "My superpowers?"

"Mmm, I like the idea of a man with super cooking powers."

"I had someone in while I was gone to collect you."

She wrinkled her nose. "You're horribly old-fashioned, Dev. There was no reason to collect me if we were spending the evening at your apartment. I could have gotten a cab or had my father's driver run me over."

He blinked in surprise. Old-fashioned? He'd been accused of a lot of things, but never of being old-fashioned. Then he scowled.

"A man should see to his woman's needs. All of them. It was my pleasure to pick you up."

Her cheeks pinkened in the candlelight, and her eyes shone like he'd just handed her the keys to a brand-new car.

"Am I?" she asked huskily.

He cocked his head to the side as he set his wineglass down. "Are you what?"

"Your woman."

Something unfurled inside him. He wouldn't have considered himself a possessive man, but now that he'd decided that she would be his wife, he discovered he felt very possessive where she was concerned.

"Yes," he said softly. "And before the night is over, you'll have no doubts that you belong to me."

A full body shiver took over Ashley. How was she supposed to concentrate on dinner after a statement like that? Devon stared at her across the table like he was going to pounce at any moment.

He had the most arresting eyes. Not really brown, but a warm shade of amber. In the sunlight they looked golden and in the candlelight they looked like a mountain lion's. She felt like prey, but it was a delicious feeling, not at all threatening. She'd been waiting for the moment when Devon would take their relationship a step further.

She'd longed for it and dreaded it with equal intensity. How could she possibly keep pace with a man who could seduce a woman with nothing more than a touch and a glance?

He'd been a consummate gentleman during the time they'd been dating. At first he'd only given her gentle, nonthreatening kisses, but over time they'd become more passionate and she'd gotten a glimpse of the powerfully sensual man under the protective armor.

She had a feeling that once those layers were peeled back, the man behind them was ferocious, possessive and...savage.

Another shiver overtook her at the direction of her thoughts. They were fanciful, yes, but she truly believed her assessment. Would she find out tonight? Did he plan to make her his?

"Aren't you going to eat?" Devon prompted.

She stared down at her plate again. What was it anyway? She wasn't sure she could eat a bite. Her mouth felt as if it was full of sawdust, and her entire body trembled with anticipation.

She moved the shrimp with her fork so that it gathered some of the sauce and slowly raised it to her lips.

"You aren't a vegetarian, are you?"

She laughed at the look on his face, as if the idea had just occurred to him.

"Tell me I haven't been serving you food you won't eat all this time," Devon said with a grimace. "You would have said something, wouldn't you have?"

She put the shrimp into her mouth and chewed as she put the fork down. When she'd swallowed she reached over to touch his hand.

"You worry too much. I would have told you if I was a vegetarian. A lot of people assume since I'm so active in my animal rescue organization that I refuse to eat meat of any kind."

The relief on his face made her laugh again.

"I'll eat chicken and most seafood. I'm not crazy about pork or the more uppity stuff like veal, foie gras and stuff like that."

A shudder worked over her shoulders.

"There's something about eating duck liver that just turns my stomach."

Devon chuckled. "It's actually quite good. Have you tried it?"

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Sorry. I have a thing about eating any sort of innard."

"Ah, so no cow's tongue for you then."

She held up her hands and shook her head back and forth. "Don't say it. Just don't say it. That's beyond disgusting."

"I'll make a note of your food preferences so that I never serve you animal guts," he said solemnly.

She grinned over at him. "You know, Devon, you're not as stiff as everyone thinks you are. You actually have quite a sense of humor."

One finely arched eyebrow shot upward. "Stiff? Who thinks I'm stiff?"

Realizing she'd put her foot solidly in her mouth, she stuffed another shrimp in to keep the foot company.

"Nobody," she mumbled around her food. "Forget I said anything."

"Has someone been warning you off of me?"

The sudden tension in his voice sent a prickle of unease over her.

"My family worries for me," she said simply. "They're very protective. Too protective," she finished with a mutter.

"Your *family* is warning you about me?"

He acted as though it was the very last thing he expected. Was he so sure that her entire family was pushing for a match between them?

"Well no, not exactly. Definitely not Daddy. He thinks you hung the moon. Mama approves but I'm sure it's because Daddy does. She thinks he can do nothing wrong so if you have his stamp of approval you have hers."

He seemed to relax in his chair. "Who then?"

She shrugged. "My brother wants me to be careful, but you have to understand he's been saying the same thing about all the guys I've ever dated."

Again that eyebrow went up as he raised the glass of wine to his lips. "Oh?"

"Yeah, you know, you're a philanderer, a player. Different woman on your arm every week. You aren't serious. You just want to get me into bed."

A blast of heat surged into her cheeks and she ducked her head. Stupid thing to blurt out. Stupid!

"Sounds like a typical older brother," Devon said blandly. "But he's right about one thing. I do want you in my bed. The difference is, once you're there, you're going to stay."

Her lips popped into an O.

He smiled, a lazy, self-assured smile that oozed male confidence.

"Finish eating, Ashley. I want you to enjoy your meal. We'll enjoy...each other...later."

She ate mechanically. She didn't register the taste. For all she knew she *was* eating cow's tongue.

What did women do in situations like these? Here was a man obviously determined to take her to bed. Did she play it cool? Did she go on the offensive? Did she offer to undress for him?

A bubble of laughter bounced into her throat. Oh, Lord, but she was in way over her head.

Firm hands rested on her shoulders and squeezed reassuringly. She yanked her head up to see Devon behind her. How had he gotten there?

"Relax, Ash," he said gently. "You're wound tighter than a spring. Come here."

Users Review

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