

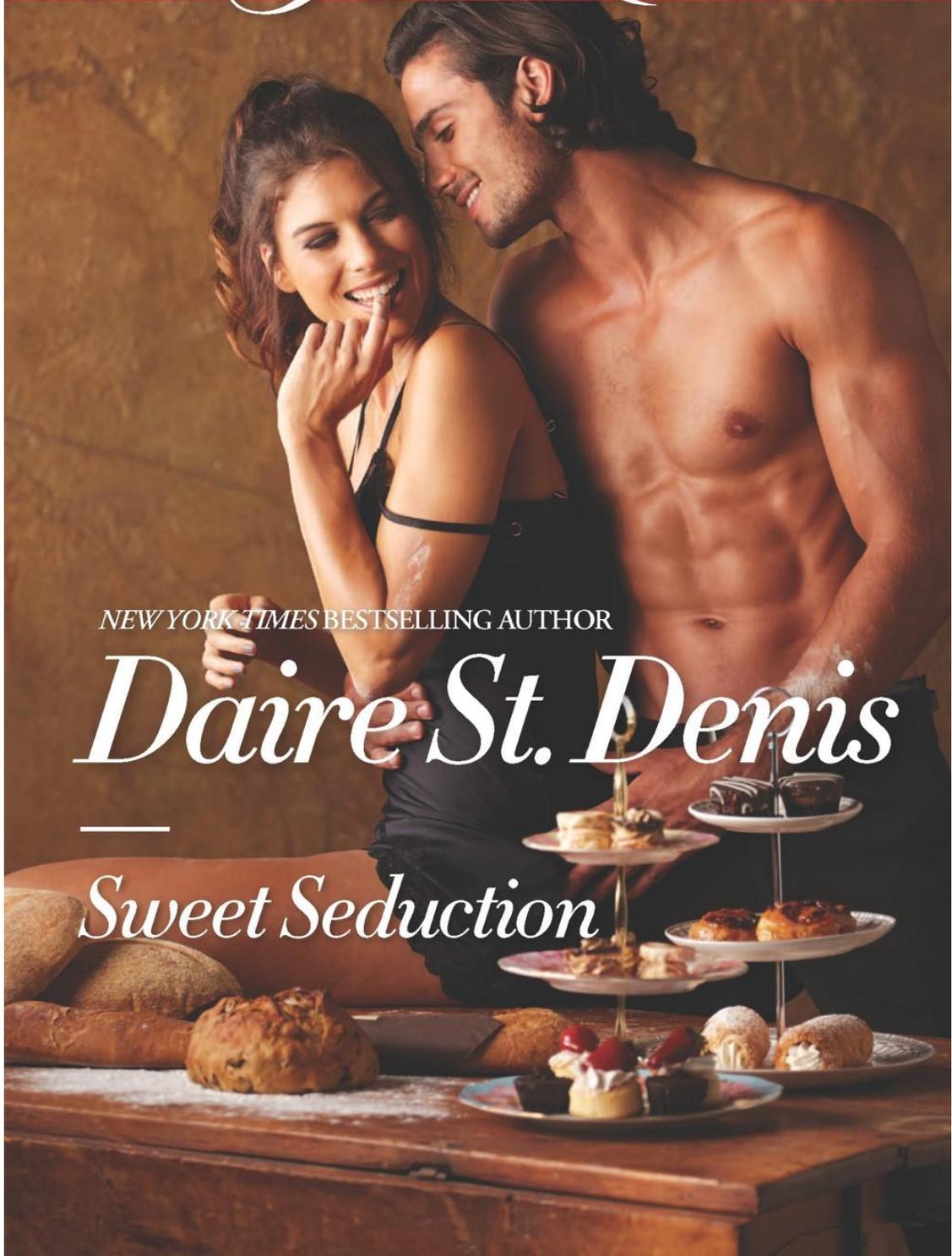
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Daire St. Denis

Sweet Seduction



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An Excerpt...

New York Times and *USA TODAY* bestselling author **Daire St. Denis** is an adventure seeker, an ancient history addict, a seasonal hermit and a wine lover. She calls the Canadian Rockies home and has the best job ever: writing smoking-hot contemporary romance where the pages are steeped in sensuality and there's always a dash of the unexpected. Find out more about Daire and subscribe to her newsletter at dairestdenis.com.

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Excerpt...

DAISY SINCLAIR'S PHONE came alive on her desk, jumping and jiving to "Candy" by Foxy Brown. She'd been so absorbed in entering information into Accounts Payable that the sudden noise startled her silly.

"What's up?" Daisy said aloud, picking up the device and checking the message on the screen. It was the reminder she'd set four weeks ago. Four *hellish* weeks ago. And now, four weeks later, the reminder was telling her it was *time*. Time to face the music. Time to see whether the torture she'd put herself through had all been worth it.

After nudging the scale out from beneath her desk, Daisy tiptoed to her office door and shut it. Then she gave herself a once-over in the full-length mirror on the back of the door. There was a streak of flour on her cheek that she rubbed off with the back of her hand before her gaze dropped. Hmm. The apron she wore made her look boxy.

She untied it and slipped it off.

Unfortunately, the well-worn jeans and loose cotton blouse weren't much better, so she stripped those off, too, dropping them in a pile by the door.

There. Now she could see what was what. She'd avoided the full-length mirror for four weeks for just this purpose. The celebrity gala that her mother had managed to get her a ticket to was on Saturday, only five days away, and she was determined to look her best in her fabulous new red dress—hence the month of hell she'd endured. Daisy swiveled in front of the mirror, eyes narrowed, searching her figure for the changes that had to be there.

Generous hips.

She turned to check out her butt.

Round ass.

Standing in profile, she cupped a hand under her breasts.

Biggish boobs.

Daisy sighed. She looked *exactly* the same.

Healthy. Nana Sin's voice was so clear it was as if her grandmother was standing right beside her, smiling, holding a tray of freshly baked caramel-nut cookies.

Stubborn cow was the *endearment* Daisy's ex-jerk-of-a-husband had for her. But then, she'd had a few choice names for him, too, over the course of their short marriage. The divorce would have been done with by now if it wasn't for Nana Sin's bakery.

Ahh, the bakery. Daisy closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The cinnamon buns must be fresh out of the oven because the aroma of cinnamon with an overtone of raisins, sweet and sticky with brown-sugar yumminess, was heavy in the air. Heaven. This had to be what Heaven smelled like.

Okay, once this business with the scale was over, she was going to reward herself with a bun. She deserved it.

With a deep breath and then another, she stepped up onto the scale and peered cautiously over the tips of her candy-floss painted toenails.

Daisy blinked.

She blinked again.

No.

She stepped off and checked the setting on the scale. Yes, it was at zero. She gave it a

few good shakes to reset it—or whatever a good shake was supposed to do—and carefully stepped back onto the thing, thinking the lightest of thoughts. An image of impossibly thin phyllo pastry, brushed with melted butter and filled with nuts and honey, came to mind. She envisioned herself sliding the baking sheet out of the oven, the phyllo a golden brown. She could practically taste it, light as a cloud, melting on her tongue, honey trickling sweetly down her throat...

Hmm. Those were probably the wrong kinds of “light” thoughts to be having.

Daisy squinted hard at the number dial on the top of the foul instrument sent from Lucifer himself.

No, no, no, no, no!

How could she have spent four weeks on the Summer Size Diet Plan and not have shed one pound? Not only that, how could she have gained five? It defied sense. It was contrary to reason!

Four weeks of abstaining from tarts and pies.

Four weeks of drooling over sweet breads and butter-frosted cupcakes, only to pass them up.

Four weeks of avoiding cheese buns and chocolate mousse tortes and baklava and angel food cake and whipped cream and apple strudel and...all for nothing?

Daisy paced her office while she contemplated the miserable joke the universe had played on her. It wasn't fair. She'd been a saint, exercising and cutting back and avoiding the baked goods, which was tantamount to pure torture when she owned the flipping bakery. And her bakery wasn't just *any* bakery, but the best damn bakery in Bucktown, the city of Chicago, the state of Illinois—why, maybe even the whole country, for all she knew. Sure, that was hard to prove, but the point was, she'd managed to abstain from some pretty fine friggin' food and the result was a gain of five pounds?

Daisy kicked the scale.

Dammit!

She lifted her foot to massage her stubbed big toe while hopping around on the other. Once the throbbing stopped, she picked up the offending scale and waved it in the air, speaking to whoever might be up there listening. “Do you think this is funny? Do you think you can knock me down? Ha! I'm not some fragile waif, so bring it on, Universe. Come on. I dare you. I can take whatever you dish out.”

With the scale poised above her head, its destruction imminent, she watched the door to her office open. A tall, broad and, most importantly, *clothed* man walked in.

He was followed closely by Lizzie, her assistant baker, who ended up bumping into the back of him because he'd stopped to stare—with his mouth hanging open.

“Boss!” Lizzie cried. “What the—”

Her heart went *thrum* and Daisy felt her face turn the shade of maraschino cherry juice.

“Oh.” The man—who was so conveniently dressed—just stood and stared.

Daisy tried in vain to cover her bits and pieces with the scale. “Get out!” When the man didn't move, she shouted, “Hello? Out!” She pointed to the door.

Lizzie scampered through the door but the man did not. He stood frozen like the ice-cream cake stashed at the back of her freezer.

“Is something wrong with you?”

He shook his head, not embarrassed in the least—horrible, horrible man! He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then stopped himself and finally ducked out the door. Before

Daisy had time to collapse in mortification, the door opened a crack and the guy stuck his head back through. "Break that thing."

"Oh, my God!" She hugged the scale to her chest. "Go away!"

The door shut and Daisy kept the scale close until she reached her pile of clothes. She dropped the scale and then struggled into her jeans before fumbling with the buttons on her blouse. Once dressed, she looked up, catching a glimpse of her haphazard appearance in the mirror. Her cheeks were flushed, making her eyes overly bright. Daisy covered her face, hoping the action would block out what just happened.

No such luck.

There was a tentative knock at the door, and Daisy wrenched it open to find Lizzie standing there looking sheepish.

"Oh, so now you knock?"

"Sorry, I—"

"Why on earth didn't you knock the first time?" Daisy demanded.

"I did," Lizzie explained. "I thought I heard you say 'come in.'" She frowned. "You were saying a bunch of stuff. I didn't catch the last part. Something about bringing a dish out?"

Daisy pressed her fingers to her temples. "That makes no sense."

"I know. But you're always saying stuff that doesn't make sense. I was sure I heard you say 'come in.'" Lizzie tilted her head, thinking. "Or maybe it was 'come on.' Either way."

Daisy collapsed in her chair. "So, who's the guy I indecently exposed myself to?"

Lizzie cleared her throat. "Colin Forsythe." She forced a smile.

The name had Daisy sitting up straight in her chair. "Oh, God. No. Tell me I didn't."

"Mmm, you kind of did."

"As in food critic and columnist from the *Tribune*, Colin Forsythe?"

"That would be the one."

"No." Daisy dropped her head into her hands, the world collapsing around her. She buried her face, hoping she'd get sucked into the black hole created by the implosion of her life.

There was a knock, and Daisy whipped her head around to stare at the door in horror.

"The man himself beckons." Lizzie twiddled her fingers in the direction of the door like an amateur magician.

"Tell him to go away. Tell him I'm Maisy, Daisy's deranged twin sister, and that the real Daisy will be back from vacation next week."

"See?" Lizzie said, pointing at her. "This is what I'm talking about. You say these things sometimes. Then I think you're telling me to come in when really you're doing some weird underwear dance. What were you doing, by the way?"

"Oh, God."

Lizzie reached across the desk and patted Daisy's arm. "You know what? So you traipse around in your office naked-ish. Who cares? You're the boss. Just get out there and pretend like nothing happened. Do it with a smile." She demonstrated an example of a big, fake smile. Not helpful.

It was easy for Lizzie to tell her to face the man with a smile when she wasn't the one who had just been discovered pacing her office in her unmentionables. Daisy plucked her blouse from her chest for a quick peek to remind herself exactly which unmentionables she was wearing. Well, at least it was her new Victoria's Secret satin set. So, her undies were nice; that was hardly a consolation.

"Ms. Sinclair?"

She looked up at the man standing in the doorway to her office. Yes, he was Colin Forsythe all right. His wavy brown hair might have been a bit longer than in the picture beside his column, but he had the same square jaw, the same nose—though in person it was a little crooked—and the same full lips. While he was recognizable, his byline picture did not do him justice. In that picture he came off as stern, albeit in a well-coiffed, intellectual sort of way. Actually, his picture made him look snooty. In person? Wow. He looked anything but. His eyes sparkled with irreverence, his lips turned up at one side as if he was trying to keep a sinful smile in check, and he was just...bigger. More like a professional athlete than a distinguished foodie.

His eyebrows rose under her appraisal. “Do I pass?”

Daisy cringed. Good-looking. Big ego. No surprise. Obviously, he was going to make this impossible for her. But he was Colin Forsythe, and she’d been anticipating this interview ever since taking over Nana Sin’s bakery three years ago. Of course he had to show up today of all days. That was just her luck. Someone, somewhere had a warped sense of humor where she was concerned. Daisy paused, cocking her head. Weird. Sometimes she was sure she could hear her grandmother chuckling, as though she was standing right behind her.

“Is everything okay?”

She sent an incredulous look at the much too tall, far too self-assured man standing in her doorway. “Are you kidding me?”

“Please don’t be embarrassed.”

“Can we pretend, for my sake, that we’re meeting for the first time, right now? That you didn’t just...” Daisy paused to take a deep, composing breath. She stood, shoulders back. “Hello, Mr. Forsythe.” She walked around her desk, hand outstretched. “I’m Daisy Sinclair. Welcome to Nana Sin’s.”

He rubbed his jaw as if trying to massage his face into a serious expression. It didn’t work. When she was close enough, he took her hand and shook it firmly. She thought he might take the opportunity to say something crass, but all he said was, “It’s Colin.”

“Colin.” She set her lips in a grim line and sauntered past, head held high. At the door she turned. “Shall we?”

“Shall we what?”

Daisy rolled her eyes. “The bakery.” She indicated the kitchen with the motion of her head. “Aren’t you here to see the bakery?”

In one step Colin was beside her, looking down at her. Damn, the man was tall. Not fair. And what the hell was he doing, blasting her with that sinful smile of his?

“I’ve already seen everything.” He grinned.

She groaned.

His gaze held hers for a second before flicking toward the front of the building. “I’m talking about the bakery. I spent the last half hour in the front, interviewing customers and your staff.”

“You did?”

“Yes. Customers here all ask for you. By name.”

With a shrug, Daisy said, “The bakery’s been here a long time. People are loyal.”

“Only when they have a reason to be.”

“I suppose...”

He came closer, spoke more softly. “What I’d really like is a taste.”

The way he looked at her made Daisy think he wanted to taste *her*. Of all the ridiculous, embarrassing, appealing ideas she’d ever had, this one took the cake. With a huff, she marched

past him into the kitchen, her jaw clamped shut, ignoring the deep rumbling sound of his chuckle. Wicked, wicked man. When she caught sight of Lizzie punching some dough, she snapped. “Lizzie, it’s the morning rush. Julia can’t handle the store alone.”

“But the dough...”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Lizzie scurried out through the double doors to the front, leaving Daisy with the dough and Colin Forsythe. After donning one of the extremely unattractive hair nets—she was beyond caring how she looked—and thoroughly washing her hands, she took over Lizzie’s job. Punching dough was exactly what she needed right now.

“You’re really letting that dough have it.”

“Some doughs need a gentle touch. Others need a good, hard spanking.” Daisy regretted the words the second they came out of her mouth. “Please don’t quote me there.”

“Shame. It’s a good quote.” Colin said, coughing to cover up a laugh. “I thought bakeries did all the baking in the early hours.”

Daisy scratched an itchy spot on her chin with her shoulder and then gave the dough another punch, getting less satisfaction than normal from the warm, airy flour as it enclosed her fist and the smell of yeast that always accompanied the task. At the very least, his question was professional, so Daisy answered, hoping her voice sounded more composed than she felt. “It’s one of the reasons we’re so popular. We offer fresh baking all day long, featuring different bestsellers every day of the week. Tuesdays are cinnamon-bun days. These should be ready for lunch, and we’ll do another batch for the after-work crowd.”

“You’re always this busy?”

“Always.”

“How many people do you have working here?”

“Two full-time girls at the counter, although Chrissy’s sick today, and Lizzie and Bruce help me in the kitchen. Then I’ve got five part-timers for evenings and weekends.” It was then that Daisy noticed Colin Forsythe had no pen. No paper. He wasn’t even recording this. She frowned. “You’re not taking any of this down?”

He tapped the side of his head. “It’s all up here. Don’t you worry.”

After finishing with the huge bowl, Daisy covered it with a clean, damp cloth and placed it in the warmer to rise. Then she started on the next. She found it much easier to talk to Colin when she didn’t have to look at him and her hands were busy, keeping her mind focused on something other than the fact that he’d seen more of her than any man had in a *very* long time.

Colin pulled up a stool and sat down, watching her work. “How do you keep up with it?”

“It’s easy.” She glanced up. “I love it. Spending my time here isn’t work. And the staff—well, we’re like one big family.” The only person missing from that family was Nana. God, how she missed her.

“The sign on the door says Nana Sin’s been around for fifty years. How did you acquire it?”

“It was my grandmother’s. After she died, I inherited it.” And it did belong to her, no matter what Alan’s lawyer said. Daisy glanced down. Seeing her ex’s face superimposed on the bowl of dough, she gave the lump a good hard whack.

“How long have you worked here?”

“I can’t really say. I’ve basically spent most of my life here.” She glanced around the big kitchen. Though she’d made some updates since taking over three years ago, the kitchen still evoked the same memories. It didn’t matter that it looked different than it did when she was

growing up. The smell was the same. Yeast, brown sugar, cinnamon, baked butter—it was synonymous with her grandmother, synonymous with safety and security and home.

“Tell me, Daisy...may I call you Daisy?”

“I think we’re past formalities.”

Colin chuckled deep inside that stupidly big chest of his. “When do I get to sample something?”

She blinked at him. A strange heat crept up the inside of her ribcage to settle at the base of her throat. Did he intend to sound suggestive? Because all Daisy could think about was Colin Forsythe sampling something much more...intimate than cinnamon buns. Her mouth and bare skin, for example.

Dammit, Daisy! Just because he saw you in your hot pink undies does not make him hot for you. Besides, he’s clearly an ass. Isn’t one ass in your lifetime enough?

The thought made her simultaneously hot and cold.

Colin grinned as if he knew exactly what she was thinking and motioned to a half dozen fresh buns sitting on cooling racks.

“Oh. Of course.” When he went to grab a bun, she slapped his hand, an automatic reaction, but one that felt way too familiar. She cleared her throat. “Not those. They’re for Johnny.” Daisy grabbed a plate from the cupboard and separated a bun from the others cooling. When she passed him the plate, she made certain their fingers did not come in contact.

No more touching. No more thoughts of touching.

Colin leaned over the plate and took a deep breath. His brows drew together, and a look of bliss came over him. It *almost* redeemed him in Daisy’s eyes.

Almost.

He lifted the bun and held it in front of his face before taking a big bite. His brows lifted and then dropped. “Mmm.” He turned to her, rapture written in the gleam of his eyes. He slowly took another bite. And then another. After his fourth—not that Daisy was counting—he said with a still partially full mouth, “Wow. So good.”

“Thank you.”

He finished chewing and then turned the plate in his hand, inspecting the last bite. “It’s perfect. You know that, right? The outside is crisp, the inside soft. They’re sweet and sticky, but the sweetness is balanced with the freshness of the bread.” He cocked his head to the side and asked, “Aren’t you having some?”

Daisy pressed her lips together. The buns were her all-time favorite, and witnessing Colin’s unrestrained enthusiasm—the groans, the finger licking, the orgasmic look on his face—evoked an aberrant longing that made it hard to breathe.

Orgasmic look? Where the hell did that thought come from? Sheesh!

“Here, have some of mine.” Colin held out the remaining bite for her.

Daisy backed away because the pull to lean forward and take the bite—with her mouth, right from his hand—was overpowering. “No, thanks,” she said, staring at his fingers, a vivid image of herself licking them ricocheting inside her head.

“You don’t eat your own baking?”

“Oh, yeah. All the time. Just not today.”

He narrowed his eyes. Under his scrutiny, Daisy felt like the shy, insecure kid she’d once been, desperate to please.

“Please tell me that *you*, of all people, are not on a diet.”

“What if I am?” Daisy asked defensively.

“I’d say stop.” He leaned back, crossed his arms on his broad chest and let his eyes wander over her body.

Daisy blew out air through pursed lips. “Whatever.” She waved dismissively at him. “Can we get back to talking about Nana Sin’s—”

“Can I tell you what I see?”

“It’s really none of your—”

He got up, and his swift approach made Daisy forget what she was about to say. With him standing so close, she was forced to look up at him, *way* up at him. His presence overwhelmed her, as did his cologne. What was it? Something masculine. Something that contrasted with the sweet and savory aromas ever-present in the bakery. Something that had her blood pressure rising in direct proportion to each and every incredible inch he towered over her.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You mean big-boned.”

“No. That is not what I mean.”

Daisy tried to shrug away from this presumptuous man, but for each step she backed away, he took one to close the distance. She hoped to sound light and breezy when she said, “If I’m not big-boned, that only leaves me with one other descriptor.”

“Yes.” His voice dropped an octave as his eyelids lowered to half-mast. “Curvy.”

“You mean plump.”

“I mean perfect.”

Oh, my God. Did his eyes just drop to her boobs? “This is not appropriate.”

“Probably not. Though neither is greeting me in smokin’ hot underwear.”

She covered her face, and he pulled her hands away, dropping his head toward her. “But that’s not the best part.” For a startling moment, Daisy thought Colin Forsythe was going to kiss her. More surprising, Daisy *hoped* he would. Oh, good lord. There was something wrong with her!

Colin didn’t kiss her, however. Oh, no. What he did was almost more intimate in Daisy’s estimation. He shut his eyes and took in a long, slow, deep breath. His smile grew as leisurely as his exhalation.

“Vanilla, orange zest, cinnamon...” He paused to inhale even more deeply right by Daisy’s cheek. “And rosemary. That last one is unexpected, but very nice.”

Daisy stared at him. At his lips, more specifically. Her heart pounded like a meat tenderizer whacking away in her chest. She’d made rosemary and orange crisps early that morning. How on earth had he detected that? Was it possible that for the first time in her life, she’d met a person with a sense of smell as powerful as her own?

No, it couldn’t be.

But even more unbelievable was the fact that this much too tall, far too arrogant, nosy man was licking his lips like the next thing he wanted to sample was Daisy herself.

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