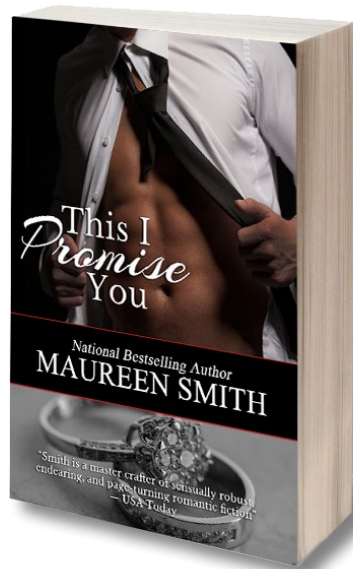


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **THIS I PROMISE YOU**

Chapter 1

It was the sunlight that awakened her.

A flood of golden warmth that poured through the double French doors of the bedroom she shared with her husband. The sunlight was bright, much brighter than it should be at dawn.

Slowly opening her eyes, Lexi squinted at the alarm clock on her nightstand until the red digits came into focus. She was surprised to see that it was nearly eight-thirty. She'd slept in later than she usually did on Saturday mornings. So had her child, apparently.

Reaching across the nightstand, she picked up the baby monitor. She could see her six-month-old son on the small color screen. Quentin Junior lay fast asleep on his back, his arms flung out at his sides, his sturdy little chest rising and falling with each tender breath he took.

Lexi traced his image with her fingertips, a soft smile curving her lips.

“Is he waking up?”

At the sound of her husband's deep, sleep-roughened voice, Lexi was instantly attuned to the heavy warmth of his arm draped over her waist, the strong cradle of his muscular thighs framing her bottom.

“No,” she answered, setting down the baby monitor. “He’s still sleeping.”

“Good,” Quentin growled, rolling her onto her back. “That gives us time to finish what we started last night.”

“*Finish?*” Lexi sputtered with a laugh, staring up at him. “You wore me out, Quentin! What more is there to fin—”

He leaned down and kissed her, his warm mouth sliding possessively over hers.

She closed her eyes as her breasts swelled, nipples hardening as he traced her bottom lip with his tongue before slipping inside. When she twined her tongue around his, he made a growling noise in his throat as his thick shaft pulsed against her bare thigh.

She drew her arms around his neck, sighing when he tugged down the bedsheet and cupped her naked breast in his large, heated palm. She shivered as he stroked her tight nipple with the callused pad of his thumb, sending tingles of pleasure through her.

As the flesh between her thighs grew hot and moist with arousal, his hand moved from her breast down to her navel. He circled it with his fingertips in that slow, maddening way he knew would drive her crazy.

“Quentin,” she breathed against his mouth.

“Open your eyes,” he commanded, low and husky.

When she obeyed, she found him watching her with a lazy, seductive gaze as his hand trailed lower, finding the silky heat between her trembling thighs. She parted them in invitation, whimpering softly as she did. When he touched her clit, sparks of electric need shot through her body, igniting every inch of her skin.

Quentin parted her slick folds, slid one and then a second finger inside her, his thumb brushing over her clit.

A thready cry leaked from her throat and she arched against him, urging his fingers to slide deeper.

“You’re so wet,” he murmured approvingly, his eyes glittering as he watched her lids grow heavy with pleasure.

He stroked inside her, the heel of his palm rubbing her mound with just enough pressure to bring her hips off the bed.

“Quentin,” she moaned, writhing against his hand. “Oh God, baby...”

He set a sensual rhythm, slowly pistoning his fingers in and out of her. Tension coiled low in her belly and her breathing quickened, becoming shallow and labored. He knew just where and how to touch her to make her unravel and lose control.

Rubbing the swollen hood of her clit, he leaned down to lick at her lips in time with the circling motion of his fingers.

Seconds later she came with a loud cry, her hips arching off the bed as her muscles clenched and spasmed around him. He groaned with husky satisfaction, keeping his fingers deep inside her as she rode out the fierce contractions.

It was only when she stopped gasping and sank back down to the mattress that he slowly withdrew his hand. Opening her eyes, she watched as he licked his drenched fingers, his eyes half closing as he savored her essence.

A delicious shiver ran through her. She bit her bottom lip, staring up at him.

He was so handsome he often took her breath away. His skin was a rich golden hue, and he had the most beautiful hazel eyes framed by long dark lashes that cast shadows on his cheeks when he looked down. His smooth black hair was cut close to his scalp, revealing a wavy texture that came courtesy of his biracial father. His face was all hard angles and planes—a masculine composite of slashing black eyebrows, chiseled cheekbones, a straight blade of a nose and a square jaw darkened by rough stubble. The only feature that came close to softening his face was his full, sensual lips. Juicy lips that Lexi loved to kiss and suck, loved to feel on her breasts and between her thighs.

Gazing down at her, Quentin murmured, “Good morning, sweetness.”

She smiled demurely. “It certainly is.”

His eyes glinted. “What were you saying about being worn out?”

She gave a breathy laugh. “Um...I don’t remember.”

Quentin grinned, tenderly brushing her tousled bangs out of her face. After he got through with her last night, she’d been too exhausted to get up and wrap her hair and put on her satin scarf.

She poked him in the chest. “If my hair’s a hot mess, I’m blaming you.”

He laughed. “I can live with that.” Capturing her hand, he raised it to his mouth and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

Her pulse fluttered as she smiled up at him. Even after nearly two years of marriage, she still couldn’t believe he was hers, still had moments when she wanted to pinch herself to prove she wasn’t dreaming. She and Quentin had been best friends since college. They’d been closer than close—and in complete denial about their true feelings for each other.

Until the night Quentin kissed her at a New Year’s Eve ball, changing the rules of the game forever.

“What’re you thinking about?” he murmured now, watching her beneath the thick fringe of his lashes.

She lifted her hand to his cheek, her fingertips brushing the sexy dark stubble. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined becoming his wife, having his child, sharing a home with him, living this perfect life. She couldn’t believe how lucky she was. It was too good to be true. It had to be.

“Not gonna tell me?” Quentin prompted, reaching down to stroke the curve of her hip.

“What I was thinking,” she purred, rubbing her thumb over his soft lips, “is how much I want you to make love to me.”

He grinned wolfishly, his heavy cock lengthening against her thigh. “Thought you’d never ask.”

She laughed, admiring the flexing muscles in his chest and arms as he levered himself above her. When he settled between her legs, she wrapped them around his waist, shivering as the wide head of his shaft nudged her slick opening.

As he bent to kiss a trail up to her neck, she closed her eyes and ran her hands down his broad back to grip his round ass.

He shuddered, his cock throbbing hotly as he circled his hips against hers. Just when he was about to slide into her, a plaintive cry erupted from the baby monitor.

Quentin and Lexi stared at each other, then let out laughing groans and shook their heads.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Quentin said.

Lexi grinned sheepishly. “At least he slept later than usual.”

“Not late enough,” Quentin grumbled. But he was smiling as he leaned down and nuzzled her neck, making her giggle before he heaved a deep, resigned breath and reluctantly rolled off her. “I’ll get him.”

“That’s okay. I’ll get him. You can heat up his bottle and oatmeal.” Lexi slid out of the warm bed, stood and stretched her arms over her head. After grabbing her smartphone off the nightstand, she padded across the bedroom suite to retrieve her robe from the silk chaise by the fireplace—which was where Quentin had undressed her last night before carrying her off to bed.

When a low whistle came from across the room, she glanced over her shoulder to see him sitting on the edge of the king-size bed, shamelessly ogling her naked body.

“My, my, my,” he murmured appreciatively.

She blushed, turning away with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Oh, please.”

“You most certainly do,” he drawled wickedly. “You please me *very* much, woman.”

Lexi couldn’t help smiling as she pulled on her black silk robe and knotted the sash. Since giving birth six months ago, she’d been more self-conscious than ever about her body. Although she worked out regularly and had shed most of the pounds she’d gained during pregnancy, her stomach still wasn’t as flat as it used to be. And it seemed that no amount of cocoa butter could completely erase the faint stretch marks on the lower part of her belly.

Those stretch marks are your badge of honor, Quentin’s mother had admonished her when she’d complained one day. Wear them with pride!

Lexi sighed, gathering her hair in the back and looping it around itself in a makeshift ponytail.

Quentin was a virile, insanely gorgeous man who attracted female attention wherever he went. Even when they were out together and he was focused solely on her, she didn’t miss the way other women reacted to his startling good looks. At clubs and restaurants, waitresses flirted with him and giggled like schoolgirls, and women seated at other tables craned their necks to stare at him. Lexi could only imagine the kind of attention he received when she *wasn’t* around.

Although he’d never given her any reason not to trust him, a small part of her still bore the emotional scars inflicted by her cheating ex-husband. So it meant everything to her that Quentin still found her beautiful and sexy, stretch marks and all.

Walking over to him, she curled her finger inside the waistband of the dark pajama bottoms he’d put on. With a lazy smile, he reached down and cupped her ass, pulling her up against his rock-hard erection.

“Oh my,” she breathed. “Is that for me?”

“You know it is.”

“Mmm.” She rose on tiptoe and slid her tongue along his lush bottom lip, delighting in the shiver that ran through him.

“We’ll finish this later,” she whispered against his mouth.

“Hell, yeah,” he growled, squeezing her butt.

She laughed and stepped away, backing slowly toward the door. He watched her, his hot gaze sliding over the fullness of her breasts, hips and thighs in the clinging silk robe.

As she turned and sauntered out the door, she heard him say in a marveling tone, “Dat ass tho.”

She laughed all the way down the long hall to their son’s nursery.

When she entered the sunny room, Quentin Junior was gurgling quietly to himself, distracted by the elaborate mobile suspended above his crib. His bright eyes tracked the colorful floating dinosaurs as warm air from the vents blew them in a lazy circle.

As Lexi approached, he turned his head and stared up at her, his chubby cheeks splitting into the adorably toothless grin that always melted her.

“Good morning, Cuddlebug,” she cooed, lifting him out of the crib and kissing him all over his face. “How’s my sweet baby boy?”

He gurgled at her and kicked his legs as she cuddled him against her, nuzzling the silky tufts of black hair on his head.

When a familiar ripe odor hit her nostrils, she laughed. “Uh-oh. Smells like someone has a little present for mommy this morning.”

The baby grinned as she carried him to the changing table and gently laid him down. He cooed at her as she unsnapped his onesie and removed his soiled diaper, playfully wrinkling her nose at him.

With his beautiful hazel eyes and golden complexion, Quentin Fraser Junior was the spitting image of his father. At birth he’d weighed almost nine pounds and was twenty-three inches long—three inches longer than the average newborn. Everyone predicted that he would grow up to be as tall as his father, who was a commanding six foot five.

When Lexi finished changing her son’s diaper and wiping him down, she replaced his onesie with a long-sleeved teddy bear romper that would keep his legs and feet warm. Then she scooped him up and headed downstairs, stopping in the bathroom to wash her hands before she continued on to the kitchen.

The home she and Quentin shared was over six thousand square feet and featured three stories of vaulted ceilings, huge picture windows, gleaming hardwood floors, plush carpets and elegant columns throughout. It was beautifully decorated, every room like a page out of an interior design magazine.

The scent of brewing coffee greeted Lexi when she reached the kitchen, where Quentin was getting the baby’s breakfast ready. He’d thrown on an old Morehouse College T-shirt. The well-worn fabric hugged his muscular torso and arms with loving familiarity.

The moment he turned and saw his son, his face broke into a grin so huge one would think he were seeing the boy for the very first time.

“There’s my little man.” He crossed the room to pluck his son out of Lexi’s arms. As he lifted him high in the air, the baby let out a delighted squeal. Laughing, Quentin lowered him to his chest and blew raspberries against his neck while Junior giggled hysterically.

Lexi watched them with a tender smile. There was nothing more heartwarming than the sight of a man bonding with his child.

Padding across the restaurant-sized kitchen, she retrieved the baby’s warm bottle and brought it to Quentin with a knowing grin. “You’d better feed him before all that happy laughter turns to irate wails of hunger.”

Quentin grinned. “Good idea.”

Like his father, the baby had a voracious appetite that kept Lexi pumping out breast milk, which she’d recently begun supplementing with formula and cereal and the introduction of solids.

While Quentin sat at the table and fed their son, Lexi got started on breakfast.

The ultramodern gourmet kitchen was a chef’s dream. It featured top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, a backsplash made of quartz mosaic tile, custom cabinets with glass-front panels, and a built-in espresso machine. The gas cooktop boasted retractable burners, and there was a large butler’s pantry connecting the kitchen to the formal dining room. A bank of windows overlooking the rear terrace provided tons of natural light, and the huge center island gave Lexi all the space she needed to create her culinary masterpieces.

As a chef and author of two bestselling cookbooks, she’d always loved to cook. She especially loved cooking for her husband, who devoured everything she made and always asked for seconds. If the way to a man’s heart really was through his stomach, she’d never have to worry about losing Quentin.

The thought made her smile as she began preparing a crab and Gruyère cheese omelet, melting butter in a pan while she deftly sliced garlic and wild mushrooms.

Across the room, Quentin finished giving Junior his bottle and transferred him to his high chair. “What time is Mr. Haley picking you up?” he asked, referring to the driver of his longtime friend Manning Wolf.

“He’ll be here at eleven o’clock. I’m going to Reese’s house so he doesn’t have to make two stops on the same street.” Lexi and her best friends were having a spa day courtesy of their generous husbands, who would be working while their wives got pampered.

As managing partner of a top law firm, Quentin normally avoided going into the office on Saturdays, reserving weekends for spending time with his family. But he and his partner, Marcus Wolf, were currently exploring a potential class action lawsuit, and today was the only time all the plaintiffs could meet.

Lexi added the garlic and mushrooms to the heated butter, enjoying the fragrant aroma that wafted up from the pan.

“Mmm, that smells good,” Quentin said. “Damn, my mouth’s already watering.”

Lexi grinned, watching him feed a spoonful of oatmeal to Junior. The baby waved his arms and kicked his feet while Quentin made goofy faces at him.

“Sure you don’t want me to drop him off at your mom’s before Mr. Haley gets here?” Lexi offered. “I don’t want you to be late for your meeting.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Quentin said.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive, babe.”

Lexi smiled, whisking eggs in a bowl while sautéing the crabmeat in another pan. “I’ll give him a bath after breakfast.”

“No, you won’t. You’re supposed to be taking it easy today. Besides,” Quentin added with a chuckle, “Ma already said she’d give him his bath when I drop him off. You know how much she loves taking care of him.”

Lexi laughed, pouring the eggs into the sizzling pan. “*That’s* an understatement.”

Georgina Reddick had prayed for a grandchild for years. She’d wept for joy when Junior was born, and had been doting on him ever since.

With practiced ease, Lexi loosened the edges of the omelet with the spatula before folding it over and letting it cook.

When it was finished, she slid it onto a plate and added a sprig of fresh parsley for garnish. Oozing with sautéed crab, mushrooms and melted cheese, the omelet looked so mouthwateringly perfect she couldn’t resist pulling out her phone and snapping a picture to send to Quentin’s best friend, Michael Wolf, a world-renowned chef and Junior’s godfather.

Michael texted back: **Showoff.**

Laughing, Lexi responded: **Don’t be jealous. I learned from the best.**

Lol, he wrote back. **Well played.**

Grinning, Lexi tucked her phone back into her robe, then poured a cup of coffee for Quentin and carried his meal over to the breakfast table.

He’d just finished feeding their son. When she placed the steaming plate in front of him, he breathed in deep and grinned at her. “You’ve got me so spoiled, baby.”

She smiled, stroking his hair. “I could say the same about you.”

Quentin winked at her, then picked up his fork and dug into the omelet. His rumbling groan of appreciation made Lexi grin as she wiped oatmeal off Junior’s chin and kissed the top of his head.

When she saw the way he was eyeing his father’s omelet, she said teasingly, “I think your son wants you to share.”

“Uh-uh, buddy.” Quentin huddled over his plate, one arm circling it protectively. “I’m already sharing your mama’s titties with you, boy. Don’t even think about coming for my food.”

When the baby poked out his bottom lip, Quentin and Lexi burst out laughing.