



A
STUDENT
TEACHER
ROMANCE

Educating
KERYN

ARIA COLE & RIVER WEST

EDUCATING KERYN

ARIA COLE
RIVER WEST

Contents

1. [Keryn](#)
2. [Max](#)
3. [Keryn](#)
4. [Max](#)
5. [Max](#)
6. [Keryn](#)
7. [Keryn](#)
8. [Keryn](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More from the Authors](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE

“My name is Max. Max Stern. But call me Max. Don’t call me Mr. Stern. Mr. Stern the teacher sounds like one of those books. You all know the ones I mean.”

There’s a murmur of polite laughter, mostly from the girls, as his dark eyes scan the rows of students. Dark eyes beneath a brow so strong and prominent it seems to constantly shroud them in shadows, despite the bright overhead lights. A neatly-trimmed beard surrounds his mouth and chin, shaved clean along his powerful jawline. Dark chocolate hair swept sideways and then back. Old-fashioned, perhaps, but classic.

A little shiver hits me, and I squeeze my legs together, sitting straighter and drawing a deep breath. There’s something about him, or maybe it’s just wishful thinking but... My mind goes to the little diary under my bed, the one where I write the fantasies I won’t even let my best friend read.

Fantasies of being ordered to do things. Of someone else taking control. Fantasies of a hand around my throat or a knife against my back. Love, yes, but not the kind of love you read in poetry books. The kind of love that consumes, obsesses, makes you crazy. The kind of love that borders on sick.

The kind of love that a modern woman isn’t supposed to have anything to do with.

His gaze seems to miss me at first, then it’s like he does a double take, eyes snapping back to mine, skewering me to my seat, making me squirm, making my nipples...oh, God. I feel the heat rush to my face as I fold my arms over my chest,

glancing around to make sure nobody noticed the twin hard points suddenly jumping to attention. The blue and pink dress I'm wearing is a genuine fifties classic in thick cotton, but it doesn't stand a chance of hiding what he's doing to me.

But when I look back, he's moved on.

"Questions," he says, his voice seeming to fill the lecture theater in a way that Dr. Heathfield's never does, radiating from his wide, firm chest rather than his mouth. As he turns, nodding to someone in the corner, I see a silver scar running from just beneath his ear, down his neck and disappearing under the collar of his pressed white shirt.

"Where's Dr. Heathfield?"

"Your name?"

"James Moss, sir."

James. I hardly recognized his voice. Until now it always sounded so manly, so gruff. I was surprised on our first day, nearly three years ago, to find out that he was eighteen like the rest of us.

In comparison to Max Stern, he sounds like a child.

"Not sir, just Max. Dr. Heathfield got into an accident. She's fine but she's broken a leg and an arm and she's in a lot of pain." His gray suit flows over his body like water, barely creasing as he moves. I'm not sure what it cost, but it was worth it. "She won't be back this semester, so I'm covering her classes. Any other questions?"

"Will you be giving any...extra tuition?" Cyn's deliberate pause raises a few giggles from other girls near us, and I shift uncomfortably as Max's eyes spin to her where she sits right beside me, then snap to mine, making me gasp involuntarily.

Did I just wet myself? Oh, God, this isn't fair.

"Come see me in my office after class," he says, eyes still on me. "Dr. Heathfield's office."

"So—is that a yes?" Cyn continues, apparently unaware that right now, he isn't paying her any attention. "I really

really need to pass this class. I'd be willing to do *whatever* it takes. Max."

His eyes stay where they are, reading every secret I ever had. "As I said, come see me after class," he tells *me*, even though the words sound like they're for Cyn. Finally, he looks away. "Any more questions?"

And just like that, class begins and Max Stern is in teacher mode. The next hour seems to go by in seconds, and a couple of times when I catch Cyn's eyes she grins at me like the cat that got the cream. Trouble is, I don't much like the idea of her kitty getting his cream, I want to keep it all for myself.

No, that came out wrong.

I'm sure it came out wrong.

When it's over, he dismisses us with a single "thank you", and leaves before even the first student can stand. It's like there's a switch he switches between teacher mode and mysterious loner. And it's intoxicating.

"Wait up a moment and I'll walk with you," Cyn says, and I barely even look her way, blushing at my own thoughts as I fall into step and we file out of the class.

She's been my best friend since I came here, and the truth is she's one of the good ones. She doesn't much care what anyone else thinks of her, which is just as well because they seriously disapprove of her hanging around with me. I mean, I'm the freckly four-eyed freak, always was since high school, and she's...

Well, she's basically a tall glass of perfect blonde bombshell with enough brains to know how to work it.

"Ker, where are you going?"

I turn just before I push open the door and find her standing a few paces back. "Home?" I suggest doubtfully.

She shakes her head. "I have a date to keep with *Mr. Maximum*." She wiggles her eyebrows. "His office after class? Honestly, did you even notice the way he was looking at me?"

Talk about a stand-in teacher. He can stand in for a lot more than Dr. Heathfield if I have anything—”

“OK, OK,” I interrupt, crossing the hall back to her. “Let’s go. Not that I know why you need *me*.”

The way he was looking at *her*?

I thought he was looking at *me*...was I wrong? One of us was wrong, and it does make a *lot* more sense that he was distracted by Cyn than by me. I mean, look at her, like some sort of goddess of style and grace, while I’m...

Well, I’m me. No excuses, but nobody has ever been distracted by me.

“Are you kidding me?” she laughs. “*You’re* the lookout while I lay back on his desk and drizzle my bare tits with chocolate sauce.”

God, the pictures that’s putting in my head. The thought of doing it, of laying myself out like that for him, of allowing myself to be that vulnerable. It’s now *all* I can think of.

“You won’t,” I mutter, and Cyn rolls her eyes.

“Obviously. Where would I get the chocolate sauce? But there’s nothing wrong with fantasizing. No, the plan is, I unfasten this button.” She smirks as she pops her shirt open. “And this one. And then from now on he’s so busy thinking about what’s on the menu he accidentally bumps my grades up a notch. Honestly, it works so well with Mr. Butler. I’ve told you about him before, right? Media?”

I nod. I’m not taking media, my focus is completely on the software programming side of things.

“Such a lecherous old man,” Cyn continues with an eye roll. “I swear I’m only smart enough for a D at best, but I’m averaging a B. He’s a law suit waiting to happen but what do I care? That’s the school’s problem. If I gave him a flash of my panties he’d probably keel over. Maybe I should, then Max could take over *that* class as well.”

She giggles and spins to face me, and I try to smooth out the frown I can already feel etching lines into my face for

when I'm older.

“What’s up, Keryn?” she asks, stopping dead. “You look like you’re trying to pass wind.”

What’s up?

I liked the fantasy, that’s what’s up. And without meaning to she’s stolen it from me.

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head. “Just, I need to pass this year, you know? I’m way behind on studying and I can’t concentrate on anything. If I fail, that’s it.”

Cyn is immediately by my side, wrapping her arm over my shoulders and leaning her head in to mine. “Things no better with your grandpa?”

I shake my head. “If anything, he’s worse. Aunt Lydia is doing what she can, but she wants to sell the house and put him in a nursing home.”

“This is the weird aunt who disapproves of girls going to college?”

“She isn’t weird, she’s lovely. She’s just...”

“Sexist.”

“I was going to say old fashioned.”

Cyn sighs as she starts walking again, pulling me along with her so we’re not stood in the middle of the corridor. “Same thing, sweetie.”

“I’m worried about Tabby. Grandpa will make sure she uses her inheritance for college, like Mom wanted, but if she ends up living with Lydia I *know* she’ll talk her out of it.”

“Would she take the money away from your sister?”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t think so. But she’s persuasive and Tabby’s...not that strong. You met her, you know.”

“Maybe she has hidden depths.”

“She does for sure, just not when it comes to telling people *no*.”

“It will work out,” Cyn says. “Things always do. You need to concentrate on *you* and make sure you pass. You do that, you’ll be in a fantastic job this time next year and even your aunt will have to admit college is no bad thing.”

I nod. She’s right. It’s just easier said than done when I have all this hanging over me.

“Right,” she says, stopping outside Dr. Heathfield’s office. Max’s office now. “Wish me luck. Hair up or down?”

She grabs her hair in a fist, pulling it into a tail behind her and raising one eyebrow.

And for a moment, I just gawp. All I can think about is Max pulling on my hair like that, tilting my head back, forcing me to open my mouth, tongue lolling, ready to lick and suck and...

I shiver, forcing myself back under control and reminding myself that Cyn is my best friend and I want her to pass in the best way for her.

Anyway, she looks like a million dollars either way. I couldn’t scupper her chances even if I listened to that little devil on my shoulder.

“Down,” I tell her. “You want sexy girl next door, not sexy librarian. Nerds don’t need extra tuition.”

I almost add, *believe me*, but then remember the direction my own grades have been taking since my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

“Good point.” She drops her hair, shakes her head to let it settle perfectly around her shoulders, then grins. “OK, here goes.”

I step to the side as she knocks on the office door, and hear Max’s voice, smooth as whiskey: “Come in.”

She’s in there barely five minutes.

Even knowing I shouldn’t be listening in, I catch a few words.

Apply yourself...

...grades are going in the right direction...

I'll be offering extra class tuition on Tuesday afternoons.

I flinch at each one, imagining the look on her face.

I know Cyn well. This whole happy-go-lucky thing, the flirting, using her body, it's *her* but it's not *all* there is to her. She admitted to me one night, when we were sitting on my bed doing each other's nails, that she's also still a virgin, and that she plans to stay that way until she finds the right one for her, no matter how long that takes. She just knows what her body does to men.

She might act like she doesn't have a care in the world, but she desperately wants to pass. Cyn has big plans for the future, and the first step to getting there is passing college.

The door opens and she steps out, turns to me and rolls her eyes, not even dropping her voice. "Why are the hot ones always gay? I mean, not even a *glance*." She waves a hand dismissively at her cleavage. "He wants to see you."

"Me? I'm..."

"He knows you're here, Ker. Don't ask me how he knows, he just does. I'll meet you at the machine, I need a coffee."

I turn to watch her go, hands reaching for her shirt to refasten the buttons.

"Keryn, right?" His deep voice behind me makes me jump. "Come in, please. Close the door behind you."

Even if I wanted to say no, I couldn't. Not to the authority in those words. I shiver as I sheepishly step out from the cover of the doorway, and meet his eyes. And feel like I can no longer swallow.

The way he's looking at me right now isn't appropriate. He takes me in, head, shoulders, chest, hips, legs. The dress is fitted, hugging my curves in a way that should be embarrassing but instead is...exciting. So exciting I nearly keel over. His assessment is unhurried, without a hint of shame. It's like he doesn't even care that we're teacher and student, like there's nothing but us. When he points to the

chair opposite his, all I can do is follow instructions, pushing the door closed behind me so I don't have to take my eyes off him, then crossing the room to take a seat.

“Mr...”

“Max.”

“Right. Max. I—”

“Keryn Brinson,” he says unhurriedly, enunciating each syllable like my name is a new flavor he's enjoying for the first time. “Excellent grades. Until this last year. Then something seems to have happened. What was that?” He opens his hands, inviting me to talk as he leans back, dark eyes studying my lips.

I want to bite into something. I want to lick my lips. I want to make little squeaking noises just to release the tension. Straightening my skirt without looking down, I shift uncomfortably in the seat, praying to god I'm not leaving a wet mark where I'm sitting.

He remains silent, waiting for me to speak, but what can I say?

“I don't...” I clear my throat. “Max, I only came here to support Cyn. I'm not here for me.”

He draws a breath through his nose, fingers drumming on the table. “No,” he says. “You're here for me.”

TWO

Max

Finally, that draws a reaction. A silent stare of discomfort mixed with interest. I like to see her like this. Uncomfortable. I like to see her squirm. Call me a psycho, but I need her on edge and I can tell she needs it too.

Too many distractions in her life, I'm guessing. But now her focus is all on me.

I can't tell if she's offended or excited, but I'll take either. They're close cousins anyway, and I can work with it if she wants to slap me. Actually, I'd kind of like to see that happen.

Fuck, this girl is something else.

I shouldn't be doing this. Not with her. Not only is she twenty years younger than I am, she's now my student. It goes against every rule. I should just walk away, but I can't. I have to see where this path ends.

"Max, I don't know what—"

"Yes you do. You know exactly what I mean by that." Fuck, the way she's blushing is so adorable. Little dark freckles lit from behind in red light. I have to slip a hand down beneath the desk, pushing my hard-on to the side to let it expand in a little more comfort. And I don't miss the way her eyes dart down, or the way she gulps, her imagination in overdrive. "Let's talk about your grades," I say, switching gears, enjoying the mewl of need it pulls from her.

"My grades...?"

“Your grades. They’ve been slipping for a while. Slow but steady. It’s not because you’re not smart enough, so there’s something else. Tell me what that is.”

She’s got a whole vintage thing going on. Like a cross between fifties diva and cute girl next door. She could have a boyfriend, but I don’t think so. And if she does it’s over now.

“Is Cyn right?” she asks suddenly, azure-blue eyes narrowing at me from behind those gorgeous round glasses.

“Cynthia doesn’t need a personal approach,” I tell her, keeping my eyes fixed on hers, keeping her on edge. “I want to see her succeed, but hand holding will only drag her down.”

“She’s smart, I know that. But is she right?” she insists, not backing down.

“Is she right about what?”

“Are you gay?”

I almost grin. So that’s it. Cyn told her I’m gay, just because I didn’t respond to her advances. I don’t have anything against her, but she should understand that Keryn is different. Keryn is the world and everything in it.

No bullshitting this girl, though, that’s for sure. When she wants to know something, she goes straight for it with no fear.

“Would that bother you?”

She frowns. “I’m not homophobic, Max.”

“I didn’t say you were. There are other reasons it might bother you. Would it?”

“I just want to know, that’s all.”

“And if I said I was, what would you do with that information?”

I don’t miss the frustrated little growl. “I...I’d...” She trips over her words, and I can’t help noticing the hard, round twin peaks pressing out on the bodice of her dress, same as they did in the lecture hall.

“Why does it matter so much to you?” I press. “Tell me, Keryn. What are you hoping to get out of this meeting?”

She shakes her head. “Don’t put words in my mouth, Max. You told me to come in here.”

“I did,” I acknowledge, leaning back a little and watching her almost gasp a breath, like I was taking all the air from around her. There’s something else I’d like to be putting in her mouth, but that can wait. “I’m not gay.”

She nods, trying to act like it’s no big deal, but the relief washing over her is palpable. The idea that I might be unobtainable didn’t just upset her, it bothered her. And I understand. From the moment I saw her in that lecture hall, from the moment our eyes met, I knew there was some connection, something deep, something primal.

Soul mates. Fate. Whatever you want to call it, but it’s more than that for me. I sense something from her. A kindred spirit. She wants the same things I want, I’m sure of it. But this is complicated, for both of us.

I’ve tried and failed with relationships in the past. I’ve even had sex once or twice, though it’s never been an obsession for me. Not like it is with every second I spend looking at Keryn. I’m a loner by nature. Ex special forces engineer, doing the kind of jobs governments don’t admit exist. And with an attitude problem that got me kicked out in the end. Truth is, I studied for a teaching certificate because I was bored, not because I wanted to teach. I certainly didn’t need the money.

This is the first time I’ve used it, and only now because an old friend of my mother’s got into a car accident.

“So. Your grades.” I purse my lips. “Why are they slipping?”

“It’s personal. I’ll be fine, I just need to find time for study.”

I nod, jumping back into teacher mode, trying to get my errant cock to calm the fuck down. “You need self discipline. I get it. I was the same once.”

She narrows her eyes. “You? No offence, but you seem kind of neat and organized, like everything has to be just so.”

“Now, yes. I found that was what I needed. I had to be tough with myself or my world would fall apart.”

“I don’t think I can do self discipline.”

“Everyone’s different,” I tell her. “For me, I needed to take control. But maybe you need someone else to do that for you.”

“I think that would be better.” She meets my eyes, and I don’t think it’s even conscious when she chews on her bottom lip. “I’m good at following commands.”

The way she fixes her eyes on me, it’s my turn to feel the discomfort. I shift in my seat but it’s no good, my hard-on is raging now and I can feel it dripping with need. Good at following commands? She has no idea what she’s saying, but still, that’s no coincidence.

I’ve tried the upscale clubs. I’ve tried the underground communities. None of them quite catered for what I needed, and now I know why. None of them had her. She’s so perfect and she doesn’t even know it.

Innocent, but not too innocent. She knows what she’s saying, and she’s waiting for me to respond.

“I could give you that discipline.” I don’t look away as I say the words. There’s no uncertainty in my voice. If she wants this, I will give it to her.

She nods. “Can we start right now?”

All I can think about is that dark hair twisted into my fingers. Pushing her down to her knees. Listening to her plead for what I’m going to give her.

“Not now,” I tell her. “My place, tomorrow afternoon. I’ll make you dinner.”

THREE

Keryn

Borrowing one of Cyn's dresses is one of the wilder things I've done in my life.

The little floaty skirt feels like it's going to flash *everything* if the wind blows just a little harder. And I'm certain my boobs are going to slip out of the bodice. Apparently, wearing a bra with this thing is simply not done.

Well, it is today.

I wouldn't let her talk me out of that. In the end we compromised on a strapless bra.

As I step off the bus, I'm sure the driver is judging me, and I don't blame her. She probably thinks I'm a hooker. I try to smile at her, but she just frowns.

And looking around, I can see why.

I do not belong here.

The only glimpses of the houses I get is between tall trees and over high walls. Security fences sparsely line the street, maybe a half dozen residences in a space as large as my entire block. Once the bus pulls away, it's so quiet I can actually hear a bird twittering an evening call somewhere nearby.

A warm breeze gently tousles my perfectly-styled hair, a gift from my best friend and room mate. Despite my insistence that this is just a meeting to discuss my grades, we both know it's more. I still can't dismiss the little voice in the back of my head that says I'm wrong. That he wasn't looking at me the

way I wanted him to. That I can't ever hope for someone who'll take me the way I want to be taken. That life simply won't ever give me that chance.

But even so, Keryn has helped me prepare all morning, doing hair, makeup and this admittedly ridiculous outfit.

"You have a banging body, Keryn. You need to realize that. Honestly, if I was into girls... This guy will be putty in your hands."

"You told me he was gay."

"Well, it looks like I was wrong, doesn't it? Just not into me, that's cool. You like him?"

"He's a teacher."

"But do you like him?"

I didn't exactly answer that.

Because *like* isn't exactly the right word. Infatuation, maybe. Desperate need, for sure. I can't get him off my mind? Yes.

Like? The jury is out on that one.

What's a teacher doing living in a street like this anyway? How does he make enough for this? And he's not even a regular teacher. He didn't have an office, which means he doesn't work at the college, he's just a stand-in. So what? He robs banks in his time off or something?

My phone buzzes and I drag it out as I walk, looking for the right house. Max offered to pick me up from home and bring me here, but I told him a definite no. The last thing I needed was Cyn making comments to him as he drove me away.

It's not difficult to find though. All the entry gates have metal signs with carefully-etched numbers beneath security panels with buzzers and numeric code locks. I stop at the gate to number 4 and read the message on my cell.

Cyn: If you're back early, don't worry if I'm not here. I'm dropping off another package for Brandon.

I roll my eyes as I text back.

Me: Wish you wouldn't keep doing that. I don't want to visit you in jail. Or end up in the cell next door.

Cyn: LOL. It's just weed. And it helps pay my half of the rent. Have fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!

I can't think of a reply for that, so I don't bother. Her half of the rent? Her family is *minted*, but she insists that she can do everything herself. I admire her independence but not the way she chooses to make her money.

Tucking the phone back in my purse, I step up to the buzzer on the gatepost. As I'm reaching for it, the gates click, then whir as they start to open. Neat. And a little creepy. I look around for a security camera to wave to, but it must be well hidden because I can't see one.

The gravel drive curves around to the left, passing between tall pine trees before switching direction and climbing a short way to the right. I follow it in a kind of daze, wondering just how much houses in this neighborhood actually cost, before it widens out into an open area, bordered by grass and leading up to the front door.

Where Max stands.

Gone is the suit, but he's still dressed to impress. Pressed gray slacks and a black shirt, rolled up to his elbows as he holds a kitchen knife and a potato, slowly twisting the two without even looking, peeling the potato in one long ribbon. I can't help noticing his bare feet, but my gaze is pulled to his forearms. Not only because they're gorgeous, which they are. Hard angles of muscle and thick dark hair. God. No, not just that. It's the tattoos that really strike me, curling and snaking all the way from his right wrist to where they disappear beneath the shirt. Bright colors and symbols, letters I can't read just yet. I'm fascinated by the art and curious about what it all means.

He smiles and nods as I approach. "Right on time. I'm just preparing dinner."

"It smells fantastic already. Is that what you do?"

Max narrows his eyes as he steps back, allowing me entry into a polished hardwood lobby, stairs leading up and a scent of *him* in the air. Like whiskey and masculinity. “What I do?”

“You know, when you’re not teaching? Are you a chef?”

He laughs, a deep rumbling chuckle from his chest, not his mouth. “No, I’m not a chef.”

“Well you’re not just a teacher. There’s no way that paid for all this.”

“No?”

“Come on, don’t play with me...” I hesitate at the double-entendre. “Y—you don’t get a house in this neighborhood on a teacher’s salary.”

“Maybe I inherited it. Maybe it’s the house I grew up in.”

My turn to laugh as I shake my head. “No way. This place is ten years old at the most, and you’re...thirty?” I realize as I’m saying it that I have no idea. He’s older than me, that’s for sure. But in some lights he looks like he could be in his late twenties, in others...

“Is that how old you think I am?” he asks as he takes my coat, hanging it up and leading us through to the kitchen. It’s all chrome and marble, with a large window looking over a back yard that you could keep a horse in. “I like your dress, by the way. Surprised it isn’t vintage, or was that just a one off?”

I feel my face heat, wondering what he *likes* most about the dress. The fact it’s so short it almost doesn’t cover my ass, or the way it’s threatening to expose a nipple at any second?

“Vintage is my thing. This is Cyn’s.”

“Ah. Still, I’m sure it looks better on you than it ever did on her.”

“Be careful, that’s my best friend you’re talking about.”

He laughs a deep, throaty laugh as he turns his head, meeting my eyes, and my breath stalls. The potato has been chopped in his hand and tossed into a pot of water that’s just

starting to simmer, and he's picked up another one, doing the same trick with the knife. "How did that happen, anyway?"

No apology for the almost-insult to my friend. I haven't knocked his confidence, that's for sure. This isn't small talk. This is a question that goes right for my jugular, even if he isn't aware of it.

"I mean, you and her, you seem like...chalk and cheese, I think the saying goes."

"On my first day," I say with only a slight quiver to my voice, "she saw me sitting all alone in class. I heard what some of the others were saying about me. I'd heard it all before but it still stings, you know? Cyn could have chosen to sit anywhere. You've seen her, there's no way anybody would have told her to find somewhere else. But she asked if she could sit with me. Actually *asked*. Like there was an option for me to say no. Like we were equals. I know she comes across as a megabitch, but she isn't, she..."

"Has a secret side?"

I nod, a little pride closing my throat. She's a good friend, and a good person, and I'm lucky to know her.

"And how about you, Keryn? You come across as innocent, shy, perhaps a little inexperienced. Do you have a secret side?"

He eyes me as he peels and chops, and I feel myself shrinking back. Not physically, but mentally, a little. Looking for that small safe space that is Keryn Brinson. Someone nobody ever notices. Because being noticed can be dangerous.

Except now *he* seems to have noticed me, and I'm not sure I entirely dislike it.

If anyone else knew the fantasies that run through my mind while I rub myself at night, I'm sure I'd be without friends or family before you can say ball gag. But him? I'm not sure. It seems like maybe, just *maybe*, he would understand.

"I think you do," he continues. "I think you want things you don't know how to ask for. Am I right?"

I feel a shiver run up my spine. Did he really just ask me that while looking at me in a way that could easily be misconstrued as...lust?

My heart is pounding, my skin tingling. I don't know how to respond, and I know he can see what it's doing to me. I know he can read everything about me like a book.

"I'm forty-two," he says, breaking the tension, allowing me to breathe again as he turns away to continue with the cooking. "And you caught me. I don't exactly need the teaching gig. I'm a bit of a nerd, deep down. Always have been. I wrote an app a few years ago, then sold it. I'm not going to be making any rich lists anytime soon, but I'm comfortable. More than comfortable, actually. But that's a discussion for another time. The table's already set, but why don't you go pick some music? This won't be long now."

An hour later, I'm as relaxed in Max Stern's company as I've ever been with another person, except perhaps Cyn. It's like I can tell him things, like I can just enjoy being here with him. Nothing I say seems to be judged, and nor does he seem bored by tales of my life, such as they are. He's sympathetic when it comes to the way people have treated me in my life, more sympathetic than I'd expect, not interrupting, just listening.

It's not like he's the teacher and I'm the student, more like I'm just someone he's getting to know. And I like it.

"So," I say after I've swallowed the last delicious mouthful of *mushroom bourguignon* and cheesy mash. "This was supposed to be about more than just dinner."

"Indeed it was," he says, his eyes gently caressing my mouth, my throat, my chest. "I believe we were talking about discipline?"

I can't help the blush, or the sudden urge to look anywhere but into his eyes. "Y—yes," I stutter, my fork clattering to my plate.

He nods, a little grin pulling at the corner of his lips. "You seem nervous. What do you think is going to happen here?"

What do I *think* is going to happen? Or what do I *hope* is going to happen?

Because those are two very different things.

I'm expecting some sort of homework assignment, or instructions to set an alarm, or a rota that clearly marks studying time and leisure time. But what I want is for him to take control. For him to tell me what to do. And not just with my studies, but...everything.

Every single thing.

"Stand up, Keryn," he tells me, using *that* voice. The same one he used when I was outside his office. A shiver traverses my spine, but I obstinately stay where I am. And he smirks. "Bratty. That's good."

I gasp. I can't help it. Did he really just call me a brat? Why is it making me tingle all over? Why do I want him to say it again? Why do I want to hear him praise me for doing well and admonish me for being disobedient?

God, this is too much. Isn't it? My brain is racing ahead and I'm going to be disappointed.

"I should leave," I tell him.

"I don't think so."

"I do." *Move, legs. Move. Why aren't you moving?* "This is wholly inappropriate."

He laughs that throaty laugh all over again. "Wholly inappropriate? Are we in a Jane Austen novel?"

He pauses, eyes roving over my chest as if imagining me in one of those period-drama dresses that make the girl's boobs look amazing. I think I actually have one back at home, bought from a vintage clothing fair and never worn.

"You're right though," he continues, "it definitely is inappropriate, Miss Brinson. I'll make you a deal, anytime you want to leave, the door is right there. I'll let you go. I won't come after you. Cross my heart and hope to die, and all that."

I don't believe him. Would he lie?

Yes. I think he would.

He pushes his seat back and gets to his feet. “Now do as I say and stand up.”

I should go before I get myself in trouble.

He’s playing with me. This is a game, surely? Like those trust things where you fall back and hope the other person is going to catch you. There’s no way someone like *him* would be interested in someone like *me*. Especially not in the way that my mind is conjuring. This is all just a part of his whole discipline shtick.

So why not do as he says?

Shaking, I stand as he walks toward me, my mouth going dry at the thought of what he might do. The touch of his fingers on my bare arm pulls a desperate noise from my throat. I want more, but I know I shouldn’t. I mustn’t. Even fantasizing about it is so wrong. He’s my *teacher*, for God’s sake.

He continues, slowly walking around me, behind me, apparently unaffected by the fact I’m almost panting, almost collapsing in a boneless heap.

When his fingers leave my arm, it tingles. I can’t see him anymore. I can’t feel him. But I can sense him, standing right behind me. I don’t dare turn, I just stand, staring ahead like... like I’m being disciplined.

I squeeze my legs together but it’s no good. My panties take a hit as I bite down into my bottom lip to keep from crying out.

Then I hear his voice. “Very good, Keryn. Now, remove your dress.”

FOUR

Max

“What?” Her voice is a hiss, a near shriek. She tries to turn to look at me.

“Eyes forward,” I tell her, and a little thrill shivers through me as she immediately obeys. “Good girl, now the dress.”

She’s barely staying on her feet, and if she falls into the seat I won’t punish her for it. Not this time. I know how much she wants to run, how much she wants to go back to the safe little world she used to inhabit. I also know how much she wants to stay and explore this. It’s exciting, it’s new, and it’s making her so needy I can almost taste her in the air.

“I mustn’t,” she says in a whisper.

Not *don’t want to*. Not *won’t*.

Mustn’t.

I know what she’s thinking, I know how difficult this is for her. Society doesn’t approve, and stepping outside society is dangerous. She doesn’t think she’s brave enough to go against those rules that have been drummed into her. That women should be polite and dainty, not needy and voracious. But whether she knows it or not, she has courage.

She just needs to trust me to keep her safe.

“You want to, Keryn. I can feel it. Just start with one shoulder strap. Push it aside, let it fall. The dress will stay where it is, but it will be a first step.”

“What will you do? If I follow your instructions, what are you going to do to me?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I—”

She shakes her head, as if the thought of voicing her desires is too much. I get it. From what she’s told me, life hasn’t been easy for her, but all that changes today. I’m going to make sure she has whatever she wants, from this day forward. I’ll spend every waking moment fulfilling her every whim.

“You have to help me,” she says, her voice quivering. “I can’t do it. I want to but...you don’t know what it’s been like for me. The thought of rejection—”

“I would never reject you. Never.”

“Then please. Help me.”

Breathing out through my nose, I consider the situation. I want her to do this, but it has to be her choice. This first time, I need to see her take what she wants. If I help, am I taking that choice away from her? Am I forcing my will? But then, isn’t this *her* will, to ask me to help? I step forward and reach out a hand, and see her flinch as I hesitate an inch away from her soft, perfect flesh. I didn’t make a sound, I’m sure of it, but we’re so connected right now that she can feel the change in air density.

And then I make my decision.

When my fingers touch the back of her neck, she cries out, a little wordless mumble on an exhale. I brush aside that wondrous dark hair, then run my palm over her right shoulder as she drops her head, ready, waiting. The first step is the hardest, I know, and normally I’d insist on her taking it. Heightening the moment.

But she needs my help. She asked for my help.

As the strap slips over her shoulder, the dress goes loose, and I can’t help myself. I lean in and press my lips to the side of her neck, enjoying her gasp, then her groan, the way her

back arches as she fights to hold on to herself. I slip my hand down, around her waist, and press my body against hers as I kiss beneath her ear, the ridge of my cock settling so perfectly into the valley of her ass.

She must feel how hard I am for her right now, how much I want this, but she doesn't grind against me, she just leans back, breathing steady, little whimpers mixing with every breath.

Until I pull away.

“Don't stop...” she pleads, whimpering, her shoulders rising as if to capture the feel of my lips on her flesh. She almost turns, then thinks better of it and stays in place. “Please don't stop...”

“The other strap,” I tell her. “This time, it has to be you, Keryn.”

She nods, but still it takes her an age to make a move. And I wait. I can be patient for her. I'll wait for the rest of my life if that's what it takes, even though it would kill me. I'll wait until she feels ready, until she feels comfortable. I'll stand right here until she releases me.

But I don't have to, because with a final, long exhale, she reaches up, right hand going to her left shoulder, and pushes the shoulder strap aside.

The bodice drops, loose, but is still held in place by her breasts. The bra she has on underneath is strapless, but the dress falls far enough to reveal a line of black edging along the back.

“Unzip me,” she says, and finally—*finally*—it sounds like a command.

My queen. My princess. Finally discovering her power.

I couldn't be prouder.

Stepping forward, I feel like I've been given a sacred duty. I savor the moment, taking her in, the set of her hips, the way her head is held high right now as I've never seen it. She's starting to believe, in herself, in us.

As the zipper lowers, her arm goes to her tits, holding the dress in place, but I no longer have any doubts. She would tell me to stop if she wanted me to stop. The dress goes loose as I reveal her back, the black and gray of her bra, the indent of her spine, then lower to her waist and stopping just above the line of her ass, where a tantalizing glimpse of her panties has my mouth watering.

“Perfection,” I whisper, stepping back. “Let it drop.”

And she does. The dress falls as she removes her arm, and I hear her sharp inhale as the cool air touches her. As the fabric settles around her ankles, and just when I think she can't be any more perfect, she steps to the side, gently kicking the discarded garment away. Standing there in her bra and little black thong panties, the round globes of her ass so perky and perfect, I know that now is perfect timing.

Any concerns I had are assuaged by the way she holds her head high, proud, commanding.

“Well?” she says, her voice only faltering a little. “What are you going to do now?”

“That's entirely for you to decide, my queen. You've done very well, but you need to learn to ask for what you want. Voicing your desires is the first step to achieving your goals.”

“What if I want you to surprise me?”

“Is that what you want?”

She nods. “Yes. Surprise me.”

I grin. Surprise, huh? I'm good at surprises.

She's still facing away from me as I approach, leaning forward, blowing warm air on the back of her neck and watching her flinch away. Her moan of desire only drives me on, and I know what I want to do.

With a fingertip, I trace her shoulders, then lower to one knee, hooking my finger under the waistband of her panties, watching her buttocks clench in anticipation.

“Tell me to stop, Keryn, and I'll stop.”

A moment's hesitation. Just a moment. Then, "Don't stop."

"Good girl." I grin, and pull down harder, lowering the thong, sliding the fabric down through the valley of her round ass. She gasps, but she's already given her command, and I won't ask again.

Leaning forward, I kiss first the right cheek, then the left, as I slide my hand between her legs, gripping her pussy hard through the loose fabric of her panties.

"Oh, God," she moans. "Please. Max, I..."

She squeals as I move my face between her cheeks, and take a long lick up through that sacred groove. I swirl my tongue in the puckered tightness of her asshole, moving my fingers against her dampening slit as she wriggles and mewls, back arching as she tries desperately to hold on to her control.

"Let it go, baby," I whisper, before going in to lick again, continuing up to kiss the point where her ass meets her back. "Let it all go. I want to taste it. I want to swallow anything you can give."

"Oh, God," she moans as I massage and lick, attacking her both from behind and beneath.

And then she stiffens, and I know she's holding on for dear life. Without warning, I grip her panties from between her legs, tugging them down, and in the same moment I shove my face into the gap, pushing my nose and mouth against her slit as she cries out.

The taste of her as she comes, coating my tongue with her juices, is like the sweetest wine. I gulp and swallow, but it's not enough. Reaching up, I insert two fingers inside her, making a come hither motion as Keryn gasps and goes up on tiptoes. Her cream leaks out, coating my fingers, running down my hand, and I sigh contentedly as I watch.

"Mine," I murmur, bringing my fingers to my lips. I take a long inhale, then lick my palm as I stand.

I pull her hair to the side, then lean forward, and as she turns her head I take her lips with mine. As we kiss, I bring my

fingers up, and insert them between us, sharing her flavor, licking my hand clean and letting her taste herself.

“My...you put your tongue inside my...”

“Your ass,” I finish for her. “How did it feel?”

All she does is nod, her cheeks going red in that gorgeous, adorable way that she has, dark freckles punctuating her embarrassment.

“You want more?” I ask.

“I want to... Oh, God... I want you to take it, I want you to force me. I want you to take control...”

Suddenly, it's like the spell is broken. She turns and drops her head, and even as I try to grab her chin she steps away from me.

“Sorry!” she says. “I'm sorry, I don't know what I was saying. You'll get in trouble. I shouldn't do this. I don't know why I... I'm sorry. Please, I've got to go.”

“Keryn, stop,” I tell her, but she's already grabbing her dress. The thong is still on my floor, and without thinking I stoop, grabbing it, crushing the damp fabric into my palm as I tuck it down inside my pants pocket. “Keryn, we're doing nothing wrong. Finish that thought, baby.”

She shakes her head. “No. I can't. I want to, but...” Again, a little shake of her head as she pulls the dress into place, covering everything, fastening it hastily as she makes for the door. “I want to but I have to go.”

And just like that, she's gone.

FIVE

Max

The sound of her voice is driving me fucking crazy.

We haven't spoken for a week, and I'm trying to give her space to process the emotions she almost shared with me, but there's giving her space and then there's whatever the fuck I'm doing right now. The illusion of space, I guess you'd call it.

Am I obsessed with Keryn? Sure. I can admit that. It's unhealthy, but it would be a fuck load less healthy to sit at home and brood, rather than sitting here in the apartment next door to hers, listening to her voice amplified through the speaker system I set up. I finger her thong in my pocket, pressing it against my hard-on as I watch her on the hidden cameras installed by the *gas engineer* I hired after I bought this building.

Gas engineer? Hardly. Private investigator would be closer to the mark, although you won't find my guy in any listings. Strictly word of mouth, since his methods could get him arrested. We worked together a couple of times when I was special forces, and I always found him reliable and professional, and most importantly without a shred of moral fiber.

He *is* a qualified gas engineer though. I had him set Keryn's heating so I could control it from here, since she and Cynthia have been avoiding using it because it costs them more than they want to pay. Fuck that shit, I own the building now and there's no way I'm letting them go cold, either of them.

“How’s everything with your sister?” Cyn asks, but her voice is a distraction. I zoom the kitchen camera in on Keryn’s face as she looks up from her text book.

I’ve got to say, since our *session* last week, her studying seems to have improved. A little surge of pride spreads through me thinking about that.

“Aunt Lydia has actually found her a job. Maid at a hotel. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but Tabby is eighteen, she should be allowed make her own decisions. I *need* to pass this year, Cyn, so that there’s at least something for her to use as a defense. She already has a college place lined up! But I can see her pulling out if Lydia has her way.”

A third voice pipes up. “Your grades are improving though, right?”

That’s Brandon Nolan. He thinks he’s Cyn’s boyfriend, but from what I can tell she just lets him hang around with them, mostly because he’s a Teaching Assistant for one of her professors and she thinks being nice to him gives her an edge. Honestly, if that girl applied as much thinking to her classes as she does to using her looks to cheat on them, she’d be headhunted by NASA.

Keryn nods. “Yeah, this last week I’ve gone from—”

Her face drops as her head spins toward the sound. I hear it too, because it’s right outside in the hall between our apartments. Someone knocking on their door so hard it sounds like the whole thing is going to cave in. What the fuck?

I don’t have cameras in the hall, and now I wish I did. I’m torn between leaving my post to check through the peephole in the door, and staying here where I can watch what happens on my screen when—and if—they open it.

“Expecting someone?” Keryn asks, glancing between the other two.

“Nope.”

“Uh-uh. Nobody. See who it is, Brandon? Please?”

As I zoom out from Keryn, and add the living room camera to my monitor, Brandon screws up his face. “It’s your house, babe.”

“Pleeeeeease?”

“For fuck’s sake.” Brandon huffs as he stands up, and Cyn hides her chuckle behind her hand as he heads for the front door.

And I realize my heart is pumping fast all of a sudden. Something isn’t right. Something about how hard they knocked? I don’t know, I just...

I should get out there. I need to do something.

“Who is it?” Brandon asks as he heads for the door. “If you’re selling religion or any of that shit, we don’t want any.”

My headphones are off, and I’m standing up from the couch. *Don’t open the door.* The words tumble through my mind as I head for my own door. Whoever it is, I can get rid of them, but only if Brandon doesn’t—

I watch him open the door on the screen.

And he’s knocked over on his ass as the men force their way inside. I hear silence, then screams of shock.

Fuck.

Four of them. The one in front has a shotgun, the two behind him are carrying themselves like this isn’t their first rodeo while the last one hangs back. Professional. Practiced. It looks like that last guy is concealed-carrying, probably a pistol, as he turns to watch the corridor. No way I can get the drop on him. Maybe if I was on the next floor or something, but not from here. What the fuck?

All I can do is put my headphones back on and listen in. If they touch a hair on her fucking head, I’ll kill them all. Sure, they can shoot me, but it won’t stop me. I’ll drag them all down to hell if I have to...

The sound of the girls screaming is louder through the headphones, and I have to grit my teeth.

“What’s going on? Who are you?” This from Cyn as she backs away, joining Keryn. Probably not a good tactical move, making one target rather than two, but the look of relief on Keryn’s face as she slips her hand into Cyn’s is a comfort to me.

“Which one of you is Cynthia?” Shotgun is grinning, and I want to punch every one of his teeth in.

“I—I am. What’s this about? I don’t know you—”

“Well, perhaps your boyfriend can introduce us. Joe, bring that little fuck Brandon in here.”

I watch as Brandon is marched into the kitchen, looking dazed and terrified. He knows who these men are. What the fuck has he gotten those girls into?

“Steve, look, man, I don’t know—*fuck!*” Brandon doubles over as shotgun Steve drives the stock of his weapon into his gut. Cyn and Keryn both jump, their eyes wide, then scream as Steve points the barrel their way.

And I’ve had enough.

I don’t fucking care if they have numbers and a tactical advantage. This isn’t my first rodeo either. I’m not proud of being dishonorably discharged, but my two years in special forces taught me a thing or two.

One of those was that a determined man can achieve a lot that others would think impossible.

I’m dimly aware of Steve’s voice still droning on through the headphones as I toss them aside, grabbing a kitchen knife off the counter before approaching my door at a crouch. My one advantage: they still don’t know I’m here. Better make that pay.

The door isn’t locked, but I still have to reach up to turn the handle.

“Whoever you are, go back inside. This is police business.”

Fuck. The guy at the door is a cop? I couldn’t see it from the angle of the living room camera next door, but he’s

wearing a badge and everything. I fucking hate dirty cops.

“I said, go back inside. This is none of your concern—”

His eyes are focused at normal height, as you’d expect. I mean, who would be coming out of their door at a crouch?

Me, that’s who.

I roll into the corridor, and his reactions are slow. By the time he’s reaching for his sidearm, my knife is slicing across the side of his right thigh. I’d go for the Achilles’ tendon on anyone else, but cop boots are likely to stop a kitchen knife in its tracks and I don’t have time for a second go.

He shouts out, but he’s already collapsing, and any thought of grabbing his gun is forgotten as he puts his hand out to stop himself. I slam my elbow into his face and he goes limp, unconscious, as he drops to the floor. I snag his weapon as I come up.

Killing him is a complication we definitely don’t need, but I have to remind myself of that as I watch him squirm.

Any surprise advantage is gone, but I know where the other three are situated. I raise my leg and kick out hard at the door to Keryn’s apartment, then follow it through and whip the butt of the gun at head height into the space behind it. It’s guess work, but it’s effective. The second guy falls to the ground screaming, clutching his exploded nose as I round on Joe, Brandon and shotgun Steve.

“Who the fuck are you?” Steve seems more curious than put out, and again I have that urge to knock his teeth down his throat.

“I’ve seen you around.” Brandon’s eyes are wide. You’ve been at the college. “Mr... Stern?”

“Max,” Cyn corrects. “He...he likes to be called Max.”

“W—what are *you* doing here?” Keryn sounds confused and terrified, and I don’t want to hear that tone in her voice ever again.

“Let them go,” I demand.

Steve actually laughs, even with a gun pointed at him. “Max. Mind if I call you Max? Look, this isn’t your fight, but I guess you’re making it yours anyway, so I’ll explain my predicament. I don’t know who the fuck you are, but Brandon here works for me. Usually, he’s pretty reliable, I have to admit. Degenerate gamblers always are, in my experience. They’re not like other addicts, in between fixes they work hard. I know he uses girls like Cynthia to move our product, but the thing is nobody looks twice at them. It’s a good arrangement. Distribution can be a nightmare, and these college girls make it run like a dream. Easy on the eye, too. Anyway, last week he picks up two pounds of good quality cocaine. I pride myself on that, you know? The quality, I mean. It’s kind of my thing. I’m a wholesaler and my customers like to cut it themselves. But when Cynthia delivered the package, it wasn’t good quality anymore. It’s been cut so it’s barely forty percent pure. So somewhere between pick up and drop off, someone’s stolen half my product. I just want it back, that’s all, then we can all go back to our lives.”

“*Cocaine?*” Cyn almost spits the word at Brandon. “I thought I was delivering marijuana. Fuck. I could go to prison, Brandon, you little...”

She falls silent as Steve fixes his eyes on her. And I have to agree, we need to move this along. At any moment cop guy or broken nose could regain their senses and have me surrounded. The only reason Steve’s even talking to me right now is he knows a firefight could go either way.

“Cute story,” I mutter, thinking on my feet. “But right now we’re at an impasse. I haven’t called the cops, but you can be sure someone in the building heard all that.” I nod at the doorway where cop guy is still unconscious. “I don’t know what happened to your drugs, and I don’t much care. It has nothing to do with me, or Keryn, and Cyn didn’t even know what she was delivering.”

“So she says,” Joe murmurs.

I glare at him, but continue speaking to Steve. No point talking to the trained monkey. “Get out of here, take your

friends with you, and I'll make sure all this is cleaned up. We all just go our separate ways."

"Steve, you can't seriously—"

"Shut the fuck up, Joe. He's right. This whole thing is a shit show. These girls have no idea what the fuck we're talking about. We'll take Brandon, and get the truth out of him."

I nod. Steve has the kind of face you want to throw darts at, but he's not unreasonable.

Brandon starts to struggle as I lower my gun. "No! Please. I don't know anything! Mr. Stern—Max!"

"Let him go!" Cyn starts around the table, heading for Brandon, but I put an arm out to stop her. "They'll kill him! No matter what he's done, he doesn't deserve that!"

She's wrong though. For putting the two of them in danger, he deserves everything he gets. If he stayed here, I'd probably torture him myself just for bringing Keryn into all this.

But when *she* speaks, I'm done.

"Max, please..."

Fuck. I can't help myself. My eyes fall on hers, those azure-blue gems sparkling even in her fear. Those perfect lips that my mind immediately imagines glossy with spit as she wraps her mouth around my shaft. Jesus. My whole body betrays me, wanting her, wanting to do anything for her. No matter what she asks of me, I'll do it.

"Stop!" I grunt, a little growl of frustration as I tear my eyes away from hers. "Let him go."

I raise my gun, even as Steve does the same, confusion in his eyes.

"You don't want to do this, Max. We're out of here. Right now, I have no beef with you. The ladies are out of it. Brandon is going with us."

I shake my head. "No he isn't."

"Are you absolutely sure this is what you want, man?"

“Try to take him and I’ll kill you.”

Steve huffs, then turns to Joe and nods. Joe is glaring, but Steve has his people under control. It’s barely a fraction of a second before he lets Brandon go, and the two of them back away, helping broken nose to his feet and lifting cop guy between them.

“This isn’t over,” Steve says as he goes through the door, then they’re gone.

Brandon, sensibly, avoids my eyes as he collapses in a crying heap by the wall, but all my focus is on Keryn.

“Pack a bag. You’re coming with me,” I tell her.

Keryn

“I didn’t know...” I start as he drives, and he glances my way, smoothing out the frown on his forehead as his eyes meet mine.

He reaches over and puts a hand reassuringly on my leg. “I know you didn’t.”

Max gave Cyn money for a hotel and told her not to go back to the building. He didn’t even look at Brandon as we walked out. I get the feeling if he had, he might have done something he didn’t want to do. Or maybe he did want to. I don’t know. There’s a lot I don’t understand.

I know I should be afraid right now. I saw what Max did. One of them was a cop, and he was bleeding pretty badly. Max says he’ll be fine, but still. It should be terrifying to be sitting in a car with someone who can do that. I had no idea he even knew what to do. How is a teacher even capable of something like that?

But I’m not frightened. Not at all. If anything, I feel completely safe with him, like nothing can get past him to hurt me.

And those men *were* going to hurt us. One of us, all of us, I have no idea, but they weren’t there just to look mean. He saved us all, even Brandon.

“How did you know how to do that?”

He sighs, removing his hand from my leg and taking a right turn. “I wasn’t always a teacher. Coming out of high

school, I didn't really know what I wanted from life. I knew a lot about computers and I had a lot of aggression. School was hard for me, my family didn't have much money and that made me a target. I learned to fight back and I learned to not take any shit. Unfortunately, that can make it difficult to fit in, and can make you a target for being led down some dark paths. I needed direction and I needed..." He smiles, and that smile could light up a room. But it's bitter as well as sweet. There's sadness in his eyes at the memory. "I needed discipline, baby. I thought the marine corps would give me that."

"You joined the marines?"

"For a while, yeah. I did. Then special forces after that."

"And did it help?"

"No." He shakes his head. "I just wasn't ready right then. But I was good at close combat and hacking enemy systems. I'm sorry. I can't..." He sighs. "Can't talk about that part of my life, Keryn. Sorry."

"The things you did were classified?"

"Yeah, that. But also a lot of them I'm not proud of. It's not a part of my life I'd want to revisit. Trust me, I wouldn't inflict that on you."

I shiver a little, and see his face twist with concern. Without looking, he reaches into the back of the SUV, and the next thing I know he's wrapping a blanket around me.

"Thanks."

"You might be in shock. Perhaps we should take you to the hospital..."

"No." I shake my head. "I'm fine. I'll be fine. With you, I mean."

He chews on his bottom lip for a moment, studying me between glancing at the road, then nods. For the rest of the drive, I just watch his hands on the steering wheel, tracing the pattern of the tattoos visible when the cuff of his dress shirt rides up. The scar on his neck that I noticed in the lecture hall

the first time I saw him seems to have a new history now. I wonder if he got it on one of those missions he can't talk about, or whether it happened before, or after. When we reach his house, the gate automatically opens and he drives right in, and a few minutes later he's insisting on carrying me inside.

I don't put up much of a fight because, well, it's kind of nice to be treated like royalty for once in my life.

"So now what?" I ask as the lights go on in the lobby. My arms are wrapped around his neck, and I won't pretend I haven't noticed the way his hand feels, wrapped in my legs and dangerously close to my ass.

"Now I put you to bed, and in the morning we discuss living arrangements."

I frown. "Really?"

"Really."

"I thought..." My heart is pounding. Am I really going to be *that* version of me? The one that knows what she wants and knows how to get it? Apparently I am... "I thought you might want a reward. You know, for being my knight in shining armor and all..."

He shakes his head. "I don't need a reward. I was just in the right place at the right time. You've had a shock and you need to sleep."

Without even putting me down, he starts up the stairs. It occurs to me that this is the first time I've been upstairs in his house. Whose bedroom am I going to exactly anyway? Can I persuade him to join me?

I should never have run out on him like that last week. It was stupid. I can't even remember why I was frightened.

"Hold on," I say, starting to go back through the events. "What were you doing there anyway? Not that I'm complaining, it's just...you were *right there*. When those men broke in, you were there within five minutes, coming to the rescue. Don't tell me you were just passing."

"No. I bought your building."

“Excuse me?”

“I bought your building last week after you left here. I’ve been staying in the apartment next door.”

I open my mouth to say something else, then close it again. He did what? He bought my building? “You said if I left you wouldn’t come after me.”

“Yeah. I lied.”

“But why?”

“Because I needed to be near you, Keryn. I needed to know you were safe and I couldn’t do that from here. I know what you’re going to say, invasion of privacy and all that shit, but frankly I could care less about your privacy. It’s a damn good job I did what I did because—”

I can’t help it. I pull myself up against him and crush my lips to his.

And he responds.

We crash into the wall so hard the window pane at the top of the stairs shakes against its fitting. His teeth and tongue force themselves against my own, biting, twisting, devouring. My breasts are squished into his chest as he releases my legs and I jump up, wrapping them around his middle as his hands explore my back, my waist, my ass.

“Shut up,” I husk in between kisses.

He chuckles. “Shut up? You’re telling me to shut up?”

I nod, wrapping my fingers around his face as I pull him in close, his lips going to my throat and making me moan as my stomach clenches and releases. Are we really about to do this? He’s my teacher, and yet I can’t stop.

And I don’t think he can either.

“Baby, I should punish you for speaking to me like that,” he says, peppering kisses along my jaw. “But I think you’d like that, maybe a little too much.”

I draw a quick breath, licking my lips as I imagine what he could do to me. Pain, sure, but a little pain can heighten the

pleasure. “What sort of punishment were you thinking of?”

His hand dips between us, running thick fingers along my slit through the fabric of my 80s leggings. Then he grips tight and I cry out, throwing my head back.

“Oh, God...”

“What does God have to do with it?” he asks, fingers pressing hard into me as I rock against him, using his arms for leverage. “You aren’t showing much self control right now, little girl. We should correct that.”

“Punishments, corrections. What are you waiting for, permission?”

“Fucking brat,” he laughs. “I was trying to be a gentleman.”

“Well maybe I don’t want a gentleman. Maybe I want—”

I draw a breath, looking away and down.

This is why I ended things before, I remember now. I started to show him that deeper, darker side of myself, and got so frightened he’d reject me that I backed away. The blush rises to my face as I think about what I was about to say. Maybe I want discipline. Maybe I want a master. Maybe I want someone who takes what they want without asking.

But it’s wrong. Nobody should think those things. I shouldn’t have those thoughts.

He grabs my chin and turns me back to face him. It isn’t gentle, and the light I see in his eyes is predatory.

“Baby, I’m going to ask permission. Just once. Right now. Refuse me, and I won’t ask again. I won’t let you go even if you do, I can’t. I have to have you. But I think I know what you were about to say. I think it’s the same thing that’s in my mind too. I think we share a connection we haven’t dared tell anyone else before this. I just need to hear you say it *once*.” He stares deep into my eyes, and despite the urge to flee, I nod. “Do you want me to take this from you? Do you want me to ignore your pleas for me to stop?”

My heart thunders with excitement. This is it. This is what I want, and yet, I'm about to give up everything. All control. I'm about to hand it to him, not knowing what he might do. It's exciting. Thrilling. And at the same time it's the most terrifying thing I've ever done.

"Yes," I tell him on an exhale. "Yes, that's what I want. Is it wrong?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing can ever be wrong for us."

Leaning forward, he takes my lips with his, then without warning his fingers are at my left nipple, and I don't have time to pull away before he pinches hard. I drop my legs to the floor, flinching away, trying to retreat, but he's right there with me.

"Ow. Wait—"

"No," he says, and before I know it I'm turned around, shoved up against the wall, with him leaning in hard. My breath is coming fast as he pulls my hair to the side, and I tense up when I feel his breath on my earlobe, then his teeth grazing the soft flesh, not biting, but if he wanted to he could. "I'm going to strip you right now," he murmurs, fingers delicately stroking the back of my neck. "Then I'm going to tie you to my bed, face down. Even if you beg me to stop, Keryn, I won't."

My whole body tingles with the thought of it. "What are you going to do to me once I'm tied up?"

"Oh, now that would be telling."

He presses his body against mine, squishing me into the wall, and I feel the hardness of his cock against my ass. The thin leggings, the little panties, they're nothing. They couldn't stop him. He said he's going to strip me and I can't do anything about it except submit.

The wait is excruciating, the touch of his teeth against my ear making me wonder what he might do. I've told him he can do anything. I've given him permission to ignore any pleas for him to stop.

“Wait,” I say. “I think we need to establish some ground rules—”

My voice turns to a mumble as he clasps his hand over my mouth and nose, cutting off my breath. I moan an unintelligible complaint, then try to suck in a breath, but I can barely get any air past his fingers. Not enough. I feel like I’m suffocating.

“No ground rules,” he says. “You follow my rules now. I’ll never let you come to any harm, Keryn, but that’s my responsibility, not yours. From now on, all you have to worry about is pleasing me.”

His hand leaves my neck, and a moment later I hear a click. I try to wriggle out of his grip, but he has me held tight. What are we doing? What is he about to do to me?

“You know what this is?” he asks, and I feel something cold against my leg, about the thickness of a finger. Panic sets in, even as I try to keep completely still. Do I know what it is? “Nod if you do.”

I nod.

What else could it be but a knife? Trailing up the back of my thigh, meeting the point where my ass connects to my leg through the thin nylon. How does he know that I’m excited by this, that the tingle in my pussy is nearly making me quiver with need? Has he read my diary? He doesn’t seem to care about my privacy, so it’s possible.

But somehow I don’t think so. Somehow, I think this is just us, what we both want. What we both need.

The point presses into the soft flesh of my ass. I didn’t know he was going to do that. It’s new and enticing and I try to focus on the sharpness of it, on the way it makes me squeeze my thighs together.

I want to feel it, the sting of it, the coldness. Where will he put it next?

“Self discipline, Keryn. You need to stay completely still. Bad girls who wriggle and try to pull away get cut. That’s not

me making threats, that's the danger of having a knife against your skin. You understand?"

Trying to breathe is so difficult through his hand. I get half a breath for every attempt to inhale, the oxygen deprivation making the world seem dreamy, unreal. I nod, trying to mumble my understanding. Part of me wants to flee, to get away from all of this, and at the same time I want to slide a hand down inside my panties and finger myself to completion.

But I can't do either. Because Max is in control.

The point of the knife trails lightly up, over the curve of my ass, then slides to the center, the fabric of my leggings and panties bunching up as he presses them down with the tip. I straighten as I feel it scrape against the small of my back, then gasp as it swirls a circle.

"Such a beautiful ass," he says.

The spank is unexpected, making me cry out, losing the breath I'd managed to suck in through the gaps in his fingers. I can't help straightening, and feel the sting of the knife.

"Oh, bad girl," he says. "No wriggling, remember?"

I nod my agreement, and hear him laugh. *Fuck me, please*, I try to say. *Or cut me*. But all that comes out is a mumble that turns to a moan of disbelief as the knife tears into the fibers of my crop top, slicing up. Is it just my imagination that the blade is trailing along my flesh, or will I find a cut right across my back when I next look in a mirror?

The top falls loose, and I feel his warm breath against my shoulder blades just a moment before his lips kiss the spot where I thought I felt the knife. "No bra, I see," he says, putting the blade aside on the table. I wonder if he intends for me to see it there, how sharp it looks, the tiny spot of blood on the tip. "Bad girl, walking around like that for all the world to see. From now on, you'll wear what I tell you to wear. If I want you on display, so everyone can see what's mine, that's how you'll be. And if I want you covered, so no other men can get a glimpse of you, you'll do it. Understand?"

"Mm hmm."

“That’s better. But it doesn’t change the fact that all those men saw you with just this little top, and as far as you knew I wasn’t even there to enjoy them desiring what they’ll never have. Were you teasing them, Keryn? Were you trying to make me jealous? Because I am, you know. I’m a very jealous man. The thought that they could have seen these beautiful little nipples poking through this thin fabric...” He punctuates his point by sliding his hand up the front of my ruined top, fingers lightly stroking my left nipple as I squeeze my legs together, trying to cry out. “...is making me want to kill them. I could. You know I could.”

I nod. I know he could. But would he? Just for seeing something they shouldn’t?

“But I know they’ll never have you,” he continues. “You’re mine now. My slave, my mistress, mine to do with as I will. Nobody else will ever touch these tits except me. Nobody else will ever kiss the back of your neck like this.” I moan as I feel his lips. “And nobody else will ever, *ever*, know what it feels like inside this tight little pussy.”

His hand shoots down, sliding inside my leggings, inside my panties. I feel his fingers against my bare flesh and can’t help myself. The surge of fluid makes me gasp another half breath as he cups me, fingertips digging in hard, lifting me up onto tiptoes. Finally, his hand leaves my mouth and I gasp a breath.

“Please...” I moan on the exhale, forehead dripping with sweat from being denied any air. “Please, I want more.”

His hand snakes around my throat, but he doesn’t squeeze as he moves his fingers against my pussy. I’m aware that if he wanted to, he could cut off all my air right now and there’s nothing I could do about it. My breath comes in mewls and squeaks as I shift against him, feeling his cock hard against my ass.

“What will you do for me, Keryn?”

“Anything. Name it. Or just force it from me. Max, please...”

“Desperate little Keryn. Such a good girl for me, willing, ready. All your holes are mine, aren’t they, little girl?”

“All of them. Whatever you want.”

His hand lowers from my throat, down my chest, pulling the torn fabric away from me as my nipples pull tight at the rush of cool air, breasts bared now where anyone looking in the window could see them. I try to turn, to kiss him, but I’m held too tight, and his fingers pressing into my pussy make me whimper and quiver. I watch him pick up the knife, and hold my breath as it goes to my bare waist, drawing a cool, shivering line from my belly to my side, then snicking under the edge of my leggings and tearing through the elastic. They go loose and he pushes them down, fingers leaving me for just a moment.

I hear the clunk and whip of his belt being unfastened, and feel the heavy length of him resting against my ass a moment later.

“Suck it,” he says. “Right inside your mouth. Down your throat. Get it good and slick, ready to go inside you, Keryn.”

I nod, barely holding on as I move against him, feeling him rub against my ass. Then I turn, meeting his eyes as I kick down my leggings, standing in front of him in nothing but a pair of black panties. He’s powerful, no doubt about that, but in his face I see love too. Care. Wanting to know that I’m enjoying this and willing to give what he desires. I hold his gaze as I reach out, and slowly but surely I unfasten each one of his shirt buttons. Pushing it aside, I rest my palms against his massive chest, feeling the hair curl between my fingers. The tattoos that cover his arm reach all the way up to his shoulder, twisting colors almost licking the flesh at the base of his neck. I trace them with my eyes, then finally glance down.

His cock...it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen. It’s not that I haven’t seen a cock before. Not up close and personal like this, but sex ed and the internet have left me in no doubt about what I should be seeing. But his is longer than I anticipated, thicker too, with a thick blue vein zig-zagging along the top from a trimmed halo of hair at the base to the almost completely

hooded swollen bulb at the tip where a single drop of liquid glistens.

I draw a deep breath, slightly intimidated by the prospect of trying to get all of that in my mouth, but excited by the idea of tasting him for the first time. I lick my lips, then lower myself to one knee, keeping my hands on him, sliding them down over his stomach, his hips. I settle in front of him, then wrap my fingers around his shaft and run my thumb along the silky underside.

“That cock is yours to take care of from now on, Keryn. It needs regular care and attention, and since I met you the thought of doing it myself, without you there, hasn’t even entered my mind. Those balls are filled to bursting with seed, waiting for when I first get inside you. I’d love to fill your mouth with it, would love to see it dripping from your chin, but this first load has a mission.”

I gulp. “I...I want it. But I can’t make any promises. I’m a virgin, I’ve never even touched a man like this.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he rumbles, sounding angry. “If anyone had ever done this with you before, I’d have to find them. I’d have to...” I glance up to see him shake his head. “Just be glad they haven’t,” he finishes, and I nod, staring again at the length and girth of what God gave him.

“I am glad. I’m glad that you’ll be my first. And my last. But what if I’m not good enough, what if I can’t please you —?”

Suddenly, his fingers are on my chin, lifting my face to look up into his. “Don’t ever say that. Never. You’re my good girl and you should believe in yourself. Good enough? Good enough doesn’t cut it, Keryn. You’re perfect. Amazing. I’m not a virgin. I’m sorry about that, I wish I was. I wish this was the first time for me, it would be the only thing that would make this more perfect, but you’re not my first and I won’t lie to you. It’s been a long time though. So long my dick doesn’t even remember, and there haven’t been many others before you. None of them meant anything to me. That’s not an insult to them, I’m sure I meant nothing to them either. But you?”

You're an angel, a princess, my perfect girl. This, right here, seeing that look of anticipation on your face, means more to me than life itself. Nothing you could ever do would be anything less than heavenly, trust me on that."

His words make me surge with pride, even as a little part of me cries out at the thought of any other woman ever having him. But they really did mean nothing, that much is clear not just from his words but from the way he said them. This, us, is all that matters.

I nod, drawing another deep breath, and lean forward to kiss the tip of his cock.

Sweet, salty flavor explodes over my tongue from the spreading drop of precum. Max groans, making me squirm as I drag my fingers down his length, and feel his hand go to the top of my head. He grabs a handful of hair, pulling sharply, and the sudden sting makes me mewl with need. I squeeze harder on his cock, watching it swell, watching the head emerge from its hood, then pull it forward and open my mouth.

I love the feel of him, long and thick, swelling against my tongue, pressing at the back of my mouth. Using his hand in my hair as a guide, I move back and forth, sucking and twisting my fingers around his girth as I raise my other hand to take his massive balls in my palm.

"Fucking perfect," he growls. "My perfect good girl."

He grips tighter into my hair, and I feel myself pulled forward, his cock hardening inside my mouth, then once again tickling the back of my throat. But he goes further, pulling my head deep onto his length so that it swells in my throat, making me choke. I squeeze his balls hard as the saliva gathers in my mouth, and my panties take a hit. The thought of him coming right now, down my throat, right into my stomach, makes me quiver with need even as I fight for breath, swallowing against him, but it only draws a growl of need from him.

I start to panic as my breath begins to run low, but it feels like an age before he finally pulls me back, and I gasp air as I

watch his cock quiver in front of my face, swollen, red. How close was he?

My fingers squeeze around the base, and I lean forward, lapping at the tip, listening to him groan. “What are the tattoos for?” I ask.

He draws a quick breath, then strokes his fingers into my hair, gently massaging my head. “I told you I had problems at school?”

“And then went into the marines.” I swirl my tongue over his red, swollen head, then take it just a little inside my mouth. Part of me wants him to fill my mouth with his seed, but another part wants to see him hold back. “Yes.”

“Right. Well, there’s a reason the marines and special forces didn’t work for me. By then I was already hooked.”

“Hooked?” I glance up and see the darkness in his eyes. The hurt and pain are clear, and I can’t any longer continue with my ministrations. I stand up and wrap my arms around his neck. “Drugs?”

He nods. “Cocaine.”

“What does this have to do with the tattoos?”

“The drugs almost killed me. I was in a really low place, willing to do anything to get my next fix. They were killing me from the outside and I was doing it to myself inside.”

I put my lips to his mouth, aware that I must still taste of him but he doesn’t seem to care. “I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I can’t even imagine how bad things must have been for you to need that.”

“I wasn’t always like this. Discipline wasn’t something anyone had ever been able to give me, and I sure as hell didn’t give it to myself.” He draws a breath through his nose, then shakes his head. “I never thought I’d get hooked. Just a little to take the edge off the moment, that was what I was looking for.”

I kiss him hard and he pulls me in close. I feel his hardness bumping at that special spot between my legs, and I want him.

I lift myself up against him, and he presses me into the wall, moving his hips so that his cock brushes against my pussy through the friction of my panties. I gasp at the feel of it, and move with him, lifting myself against his massive strength, mouth open in a silent “o” as I feel the pressure begin to build all over again.

“But I got clean,” he says. “More than ten years ago. Each one of those years has been a blessing, a year I had no right to expect. That’s what the tattoos are about.”

Max points to a swirl of color near his wrist. Looking closely, I can see now that it’s a birthday cake.

“That was the first year I was clean. I hadn’t seen my mom in three years, but I got to go to her birthday party. We reconnected, she told me she loved me and that she was sorry she hadn’t been better to me growing up.” He laughs, shaking his head, then leans his forehead against mine. “As if she wasn’t the best mom in the world. I told her that she had nothing to apologize for, that I loved her, and that memory was the one in my head when I went to the tattoo parlor.”

“So the... Oh, god...” I lose my train of thought as the head of his cock presses into my mound, finding my clit and sending a wave of pleasure up my spine. “Oh...”

His hand slides down between us, but I barely register it as a wave of liquid heat spills from me. I vaguely feel his fingers dipping inside my panties, a fingertip swirling my swollen button before pulling the fabric covering me aside.

“The...the tattoos are about that?” I manage, and he nods against me, the head of his cock inching inside.

“Each tattoo represents something I never would have had if I’d continued down that path.” He takes my mouth with his, teeth clashing as our bodies move together, slick with sweat. “Something I’m grateful for, something to remind me why I can’t go back there.”

There are tears in my eyes as I cup his face with my hand. “My parents...”

I suppress a sob and turn my face away from his, then feel him drag me back, and he presses his lips to mine, wiping away a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

“Tell me, baby.” His cock presses in gently, but I moan with pain and pleasure, more liquid spilling from me in an attempt to ease his passage. “Tell me, please.”

“I don’t want to ruin the moment,” I say, shaking my head, and he laughs on a grunt.

“Keryn, this is our first time. If we can’t share our feelings now, what do we have? I love you, and if all this is too much, and you want to stop, we can stop. It will kill me, I can’t lie. That might be the end of me, but I’ll do it.”

I nod, sobbing and moaning all in one. “I don’t want to stop. My parents died,” I tell him, and feel the pain all over again as I think back to that first death. “Dad...he was in a car accident when my sister was still a baby. He didn’t die there and then, they... Ow. Oh, more, faster... They took him to hospital but he never came out again. I thought that was the worst week of my life but it wasn’t.”

I lean my head against his shoulder as he finds his rhythm, sliding deeper with each thrust as he strokes my hair. “It’s OK, baby.”

“Mom...got cancer, six years later. It was inoperable and she knew it long before she had the heart to tell us. She provided for us, made sure we were going to be OK when she was gone, but it hurt. It hurts... God, Max, you’re too big. It hurts...” I kiss him to cut off the scream that’s building in my throat. His cock is now deep inside me, thrusting near my cervix. How I’ve taken all of him is a miracle, but I can feel the need building, coming close to the edge, the crescendo. “I want it. I want it. Please...”

He rakes his fingers through my hair, pulling my head back and attacking my throat with his lips, his teeth. “You’re so strong, baby. So strong. My perfect, strong, brave girl. Having to cope with all that, and coming through it the way you have. I’m so proud of you. I’m going to fill you so full of

cum it will be dripping out of you for a week. I'm going to make your legs tremble in a way they've never felt before."

I cry out as he increases his speed, wrapping my legs tighter around his core as he thrusts so deep. Waves of pleasure cascade through my body, my stomach clenching and releasing, my bare nipples rubbing against the thick hair across his chest.

With each movement of him inside me, I build closer, closer. But it's not until I feel his finger pressing against my ass that I start to quiver, trying to hold on, to prolong the moment. When it slips inside, adding pressure from behind, I'm done.

My whole body quivers, my kegels clenching, trapping him inside as the first burst of his seed fills me. I cry out, my nails digging into his shoulders as he grunts, thrusting again, again, again. Another jet of hot cum, and another. I can feel liquid dribbling down my thighs. I know he's taken my flower and I must be bleeding, but I don't care. I want this, I want us, I want him.

"My perfect girl," he murmurs as I arch back, groaning with an overload of sensation. "My perfect, wonderful girl. Don't think I've forgotten about tying you up. That will have to wait for another day..."

SEVEN

Cyn: Brandon is fucking gone. Man, that loser. Should have done it ages ago.

I chuckle a little to myself when I read Cyn's message on my phone, then glance at Max beside me in the bed, half illuminated in the morning light. It's the first moment that he's moved enough for me to wriggle out from under his arm. Not that I'm complaining, being held so tightly and securely that nothing can touch me is wonderful. But it has given me a chance to get a look at my messages.

Slipping out of bed, I'm completely aware of not only my nakedness, but also the soreness of every inch, above and below the waist. That sublime soreness that reminds me, as I take one more glance at my sleeping giant, that I'm loved and claimed and protected.

I pad through to the bathroom, grab one of his shirts from the laundry, and pull it on over my head as I slip out into the hall and dial Cyn's number.

"Hey, girl, what's going on with you?"

I can't help but laugh, chewing on my bottom lip as I wrap my arms around myself, smelling Max's scent all over me. Taking a seat on the top step of the stairs, I can't help glancing around at his home. Could it be *our* home? "Oh, you know..."

"You and Mr. Ripped to the Max? That's a thing, right?"

"Uh huh." I giggle, grinning, and hear her little squeal of delight on the other end.

“Oh my God, this is huge. *Huge.*”

Huge... She has no idea. “You can’t tell anyone about us, Cyn. You have to promise. I have no idea how we’re going to navigate...*all this.*”

“Oh, you’ll figure it out. You like each other, that’s what matters. Everything else is just logistics. But my lips are sealed. Did you get my message?”

“Yes, and *good.* About time you kicked that loser to the curb. You do it by text?”

“Nope. Invited him here in person and told him to his face that if I ever see it again I’ll punch him right in his stupid drug-dealing nose.”

We both start to laugh as I stand and wander down the stairs. I’ll make some breakfast for me and Max, then we can see what today brings.

“So. Juicy details. I want to hear all about it. What’s he like in bed? Gentleman or monster?”

The word monster makes the hair on my neck stand on end. The things we did... Cutting off my breath. Forcing me to my knees to take his whole cock right down my throat. *Cutting me.* I know a lot of people would have seen it as abusive, would have thought that I was being harmed. But that’s not it at all. I loved it, every minute of it. I loved being made to endure him, being forced to beg. I loved feeling like the center of his attention and the object of his desires.

“It was fun,” I tell her.

“Details, I said.”

“And I can’t give you details. That’s private and it’s going to stay that way.”

“Oh, come on!”

I laugh as I grab eggs out of the fridge. “Nope. I’m not going to kiss and tell. Just know that I have absolutely *no* complaints.”

Cyn huffs on the other end of the line as I put the phone on speaker and start cracking eggs. “Ugh. Fine. I guess that will have to do. So what are your plans for today? I’m going to check out the spa here at the hotel in a bit, if you want you two could join me. Unless I’d be a bit of a third wheel...”

“I’m not sure what we’re doing, I’ll have to let you know. But don’t take this the wrong way... I kind of want him to myself. This is all new and—”

“I get it, no explanations necessary. I’m just happy for you.”

“Thanks. Me too.”

“Sweetie, I’m going to go. If you need me, you know where I am, but you enjoy this. And know that I’m going to want *more details* when I see you in person.”

She laughs, but hangs up before I can come back with anything. I don’t think the grin on my face is ever going to fade. Sure, the circumstances of what happened yesterday were terrifying and if Max wasn’t there who knows how it could have turned out? But he *was* there. And he saved us. And now I get to have him all to myself.

“I don’t remember saying you could leave our bed.”

I turn at the sound of Max’s voice to find him standing in the doorway. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to hear that you’re not going to kiss and tell.”

I stifle a laugh as I mix the scrambled eggs. “You heard that, huh? Could you get us two plates? This will be done in a moment.”

“Your wish is my command, princess.”

I watch him move as he heads for the cupboard. Naked except for a tight pair of boxer shorts that don’t leave anything to the imagination. A thick ridge falls down and to the left, outlined beneath the cotton. I can’t help admiring what’s all mine. How strange that it’s only a week since I was last here, but so much has changed in that time.



“SO WHAT *ARE* we going to do today?” I ask as we eat, while I watch Max pouring me a tall glass of orange juice. “Because Cyn invited us to go to the spa with her, and normally there’s no way I’d pass up a day of pampering.”

I point my fork in his direction with a grin, but his face is serious as he answers.

“What do you want to do? I mean it when I say your wish is my command, baby. You have my balls in your hand and there’s nowhere else I’d prefer them to be. You want a spa day, we’ll have a spa day. You want to spend time just us, we’ll do that.”

“Well, there is one thing...”

He raises an eyebrow. “Name it.”

“There’s a vintage fair,” I tell him, feeling my heart soar just at the words. I’m never happier than I am looking through piles of clothes that transport me back to another time. “I’d like to go, but I don’t know if it’s going to be very interesting for you. We can do something else?”

“Vintage fair it is,” he says on a shrug. “Let’s finish this and head over there.”



“WHAT DO you think of this one?” I ask, holding the thirties-style dress up against me.

“You’ll look amazing,” Max says, peering over the top of his sunglasses as if to get a better view. Then he winks. “Can’t wait to see you model it for me.”

I tingle a little under that gaze, especially the way he looks so masculine and sexy doing it, but that wasn’t what I was asking.

“But this one or the sixties jeans?”

“I like them both.”

“Ugh. Yes. But which one should I get?” I stamp my foot, then get frustrated when he starts to chuckle.

“Baby, get them both.”

I shake my head. “No, I only treat myself to one when I come to these things, otherwise I’d go home with everything.”

“Then go home with everything. I’ll build you a new wardrobe.”

I stare at him, trying to decide whether I like that idea or whether I’m annoyed that he won’t help me make a decision. I *could* get both. It wouldn’t break the bank. It’s just, this is my way of limiting how much I buy.

“You really think I should get both?”

“Get both, baby. And don’t think I didn’t notice you eyeing that skater dress, either.” He digs out his wallet, then takes a small pile of hundreds from inside and holds them out to me. “Get them all. Otherwise, I’ll come back and buy you the ones you left behind.”

“I can pay for my own things.”

“Sure. But I can pay for them too, and I want to. My treat.”

I bite into my bottom lip as I watch him, and feel the blush rise on my cheeks. “Really?”

“Really.”

I snatch the money before he can change his mind, then point at a stall we passed on the way in. “You should get some of those old games you were looking at.”

“No. This is your day.”

“And I’m going to be a moment grabbing these. Go take a look. Get what you want. What was that console you pointed out to me?”

He grins. “A Sega Genesis. I used to have one when I was a kid, that’s all. I don’t need it.”

“Of course you don’t *need it*. Do you think I *need* any of this? Go!”

Max laughs. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

I watch him go, then notice the stall holder grinning at me. We chat about old fashions as she grabs the jeans from the other end of the stall, and I find out she met her husband at one of these fairs. It feels so nice and normal to just talk about our lives together, like we share something beyond our love of vintage clothes: a love of men who like to indulge us.

When I’m done, I start for the stall where I saw the skater dress, but before I can even take a step, I hear a voice that makes me groan.

“Well, well, look what the cat dragged in.” Brandon sneers as he saunters over to me. “Thought I might find you here, you little freak. You know Cyn broke up with me because of what you did, right?”

“What *I* did?” I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “What did I do? Was I selling drugs, Brandon? Did I bring those people to our house and put us all in danger?”

His eyes dart around, and sure, there are people looking our way at the mention of drugs, but I don’t care. I didn’t do anything wrong, he did.

“I could have handled it if you’d just let me,” he mutters. “I could have looked like a hero instead of that...weirdo teacher.”

I narrow my eyes. “Weirdo teacher? Do you mean Max? The man who saved all our lives, yours included?”

“What’s with that though? Why does he insist you call him Max when he’s a teacher? And what’s he doing jumping in like some sort of commando?”

I don’t even know why I’m arguing with him. All of this is his problem, not mine. “Get lost, Brandon. And leave Cyn alone, she doesn’t want to see you.”

I turn away from him and start for the stall, then whip around when I feel a hand on my shoulder, and to my surprise

he jumps back.

“Touch me again, asshole, and...”

“And what? You ruined things for me and Cyn, I want you to fix them, you little bitch.”

I draw a sharp breath, barely able to believe what I’m hearing. But I’m not the only one.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the huge shape looming up, and don’t even manage to turn my head to see who’s coming before Brandon’s nose explodes in a shower of blood. He stumbles back, but before he can recover, Max’s hand goes to his throat, cutting off his airway, starting to lift. People scream, and I take a step back, but I’m not going to try to stop him. Brandon deserves everything he gets.

“Leave her alone,” Max says. “I should have fucking let those guys take you.”

“What...what are you doing here?” Brandon’s voice is choked as his feet scramble against the dirt. “Let me down!”

“No fucking way. I ought to kill you for what you just said to her. Put your head on a fucking spike.”

“To her? What do you care what I say...oh, fuck, I get it.” Even held as he is, Brandon is grinning as his eyes dart my way. “You and him? Really? Oh, that’s priceless.”

Max doesn’t wait for another word. He thrusts Brandon away, letting him stumble back, trying to keep his footing but ending up on his ass. Then Max walks to my side and puts his arm protectively around my shoulders.

Brandon is laughing, even as he struggles to breathe, winded by the fall, and my heart is in my throat.

“These two!” he shouts, looking around at the small crowd of onlookers that’s gathered at the spectacle. “He’s her fucking *teacher*. Fucking *disgusting*. What’s the deal here, Keryn? You suck his dick and he gives you a good grade, is that it?”

I don’t intend to respond, I’m too shocked, but I hear my own voice. “It’s not like that. We love each other. You have no...” My eyes dart to those same onlookers, and then I glance

down, embarrassed. How can I expect any of them to understand?

“You fucking little shit,” Max says, and he starts to take a step away from me, but I wrap my arm into his.

“No, don’t,” I beg. “Please, don’t do anything. Just...let’s get out of here.”

EIGHT

Keryn

“They’ll split us up,” I murmur, tears in my eyes. “We should have known this could never be. Did you see their faces?”

We’ve stepped away from the stalls, back to Max’s car, but in my mind’s eye I can still see the shock and amusement on the faces of those that were around us. And Brandon’s stupid smug little face, knowing he had the last word. Everyone except the stall holder who sold me the dress and the jeans was shocked. She told them all to stop staring and distracted them while I fled, but I know they were all judging us. Judging me. Brandon knew exactly what to say to get to me, and it worked.

“I don’t care what they think, baby,” Max says, pulling me in close to him. “They don’t know what we know, they don’t know how we feel about each other.”

“It doesn’t matter though, does it? The authorities won’t allow this. The police will probably be at your place the moment we get back. It doesn’t matter that we love each other, you’re a teacher and I’m a student, and that’s all they’ll see.”

My phone dings in my purse. Then dings again. Then starts ringing. I screw up my face in annoyance, but I’m working on reflexes at this point and automatically reach for it.

“Baby, nobody is going to split us up. I promise. Try to calm down. Look, I wasn’t going to tell you this until—”

I cry out, my hand going to my mouth, the phone falling to the ground, and Max steps forward to catch me as my legs give way.

“What is it? Keryn?”

“Cyn. They...” How can I explain it? On top of everything else?

Max leans down, still holding me tight, and grabs the phone off the floor, turning it over as he stands back up. I see his brow scrunch up, his nose flaring in anger as a low rumble comes from his chest.

“They’re fucking dead,” he mutters. “Fucking dead.”

“We have to call the police,” I tell him, grabbing his face to turn his eyes my way, away from the phone. “They’ve taken Cyn, Max. We have to get the police involved in this.”

He shakes his head. “No, baby. You think these guys care about the police? That just complicates things, means Cyn is a witness they don’t need any longer.”

My mind is racing, thinking how scared she must be right now. The text message was from the drug dealers, saying they followed Brandon when he met up with Cyn at the hotel, and since he was being too cautious, sticking to the main roads where there were plenty of people, they thought they’d just snatch her instead. Now they’re demanding money in compensation for their drugs and the injuries Max caused, otherwise they’re going to...

God, I can’t even think about it. I can’t even bear to let the thought enter my mind of what they said they’re going to do with her. Kill her, sure, but not before they’ve... Oh, God, this is my fault. *Should have let us take Brandon*, the message said, and they’re right. If I hadn’t told Max to save him, none of this would have happened.

“Fucking Brandon,” Max murmurs. “You going to be OK here for a moment, baby?”

I nod, and he lets me go, unlocking the car so I can sit in the passenger side. And I watch him go. I don’t know where he’s going, but a few minutes later he’s back, with Brandon stumbling along in front of him as he guides him by the collar.

“Fucking let me go, man! There are witnesses to all this, you do anything to me and—”

“Shut your fucking mouth and get in the car. You tell us the way or I’m going to tear each of your fingers off one by one and feed them to you.”

“I don’t know where they are! How am I supposed to know that? Why don’t you just wait for them to tell you where to go? Ow!” Brandon’s head slams against the side of the car.

“Oops,” Max says as he pulls open the door and shoves him inside. A moment later, he’s climbing in the front, starting the engine. “Directions. Now.”

“I don’t fucking—”

“They have Cyn!” I scream, turning in my seat as Max clips my seat belt. “Brandon, if you have any sort of backbone, now is the time to show it. Tell us where to go!”

Something in my tone must hit home, because he pulls away, slumping back in his seat, and nods. “OK, fuck it. Fucking...” He gulps a breath, shaking his head, then his eyes light up. “There’s a warehouse, I bet that’s where they have her. Down on the docks. I’ve picked up from there before. Quiet, out of the way, nobody would hear her shouting.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, breathing a sigh, then settle into my seat as Max starts the car.



ON THE WAY, Max stops at the bank and picks up a massive bag I can only assume is filled with money. He tells Brandon that he’s going to be paying it back, but I have no idea how anyone could ever make that kind of money, especially if what they said is true about his gambling.

“Why don’t you just wait for the fucking exchange?” Brandon asks as we head onto the docks, gunning it for the warehouse he told us to make for.

Max sighs. “Hostage exchange is the most dangerous part of the process, for both sides. They’re going to be jumpy. I can’t take that chance. We turn up here, and I offer them more

money than the drugs you stole could possibly be worth, and hopefully they'll take the deal just to get rid of us.

"I didn't steal anything."

"Yes you did. I could see it in your face yesterday, and so could Steve. You stole from them and let Cyn take the blame for you. I'm paying them back."

Brandon is silent as we drive, pulling around the side of the warehouse. Then he grunts. "I needed a bit extra, OK? Kind of a debt to this guy I know... I didn't think anyone would notice. Crackheads, man, they don't care if it's pure, they just need a fix."

"Where is it now? The half you stole, where is it?"

Brandon shrugs. "Crawl space under my house. It's all still there. I don't do drugs and like I said, I needed it."

Max nods, pulling the car to a stop, then gets out. I reach for my door, but he grabs my arm.

"You stay here, Keryn. Me and Brandon are going in alone, and we'll be back with Cyn, I promise."

"What the fuck? I'm not going in there." Brandon laughs from the back seat, and I grind my teeth.

"I'll come in with you," I tell Max, but he shakes his head.

Grabbing my hand, he brings it to his lips and kisses my fingers. "Baby, I don't want you in there. I don't want to take the risk. I promise I'll bring Cyn back." He turns to Brandon. "Out of the fucking car. You're coming. I don't trust you out here on your own."

"They'll know I told you how to get here. They'll fucking kill me, man."

"No they won't because I won't let them. And they're going to know who told me either way. Now get out."



EVERY MINUTE FEELS like a lifetime without Max, without Cyn.

I stare at the doorway, gripping the edges of the seat as I try to keep my heart rate under control. What if they don't just want the money? What if they want to punish Max for standing up to them? What if they've already hurt Cyn? They said they wouldn't but who knows what they're capable of?

I can't do this. I can't just wait.

But what choice do I have? Go in there on my own, and maybe scare them into doing something stupid?

God, this is a nightmare. It's the worst day of my life—

“Cyn!” I'm out of the car before I even know what I'm doing, rushing over to her as she and Max exit the warehouse.

It's clear she's been crying, eyeshadow dripping down her cheeks, her clothes filthy. But she doesn't look physically hurt. And when she sees me she picks up the pace, rushing to throw her arms around me. We hug as she sobs, and Max ushers us both back towards the car.

“Where's Brandon?” I ask as we help Cyn into the back, and she lets out a sob.

“They kept him, baby. I thought they might.”

“What are they going to... Will they kill him?”

He shakes his head. “No. I made Steve promise. They won't kill him and they won't seriously injure him either. They just want to find out where he hid the drugs.”

“But...you know where he hid them... Couldn't you just tell them?” I climb into the car and strap myself in as he gets behind the wheel and starts it up.

“He'll crumble fast, believe me. Brandon will tell them where to find the cocaine, but not before I've told the cops what to expect.” He pulls out his phone and starts dialing. “They'll offer Brandon a deal, he'll turn state's evidence, it'll all work out.”

“He deserves it,” Cyn mutters, and I can't say I disagree.

“Wait,” I tell Max before he can finish dialing. I hold the phone and try to pull it away from him, then frown when he

won't let me. "What about...you know. Us. Do you really want to bring any of this to the attention of the police?"

"Keryn, I told you, we're doing nothing wrong."

"But—"

"But nothing. This is what I was trying to tell you before. I'm not your teacher. All I was doing at the college was stepping in for a friend. Technically I'm just an outside consultant. And besides any of that, I already told them I quit. As soon as I knew what was happening between the two of us, I handed in my notice. And, well..." He sighs, and I just sit here, reeling from the information he just gave me, as he pulls the car over to the side of the road.

"You...you didn't have to do any of that. Not for me. This is your career and—"

"Keryn. Princess." He grins as he turns my way, and I glance back at Cyn, who's finally starting to smile herself. "This isn't my career. Nothing is as important to me as you are. That's why I've had this since the day I met you."

He reaches across, and I think for a second he's going to pull me onto his lap, right here with Cyn watching. But instead he flips open the glovebox and pulls out a little white box.

"Keryn, I knew from the moment I saw you what I wanted. And hopefully you're sure about me too."

I laugh as he puts the box into my hand. Is this really what I think it is?

"Open it, baby."

With a spluttered laugh, I pull open the box, and there nestled on a cushion is a ring with a diamond that must have cost as much as a house. My hand goes to my mouth on a gasp. I can't believe what's happening.

"Marry me, Keryn. Make this all official. I want you, you want me. Say yes."

I nod, tears rolling down my cheeks, and say the only word I know right now. "Yes."

Epilogue

Five months later

The anticipation is killing me.

I can't see a thing through the silk blindfold. I can't speak because of the ball gag. I've been tied up for what feels like an hour, and occasionally Max says something to me. Telling me I'm being very good. Telling me my pussy looks so pretty spread wide like this with my limbs tied to the four corners of the bed. Telling me I'm going to get a prize.

But then at other times he's completely silent and I listen intently, wondering if he's left me here on my own.

He hasn't told me what the prize will be. There's never been a prize for this before, but I've never been tied up this long before either.

"Please..." I mumble around the ball gag, saliva filling my mouth, making the word come out as nothing but a mumble.

I flinch at the feel of his hand on my belly, tracing the way it's swollen with our child. "So beautiful," he whispers. "So perfect."

His hand slides down, stroking along my mound and trailing through my damp slit, and I shiver. Is this my prize? Is he finally going to finger me to completion? Or use his oh-so-talented mouth?

These last few months have been a roller coaster. Cyn heard from Brandon, begging her to bail him out, and in the

end she relented and got a bail bond. Apparently, he was a bit shaken, a few bruises, but mostly unharmed. The last she heard he was going to take a plea deal, but she's left all of that in the hands of the bail bondsman. When she said she wanted nothing more to do with Brandon, she meant it, and I can't blame her. All I know is, those scumbags that took Cyn are going away for a long time.

As for our exams, we both passed. Cyn finally stopped relying on her looks and started using her brain, and of course it paid off. She's super smart. And my newly-found discipline meant I was able to study without distractions, and between us we pulled off a bit of a miracle. First class honors for us both. And as for Aunt Lydia? She couldn't argue with the facts, because I landed an internship at a top flight software company the week after my exams. It's not where I see myself long term. Max and I have plans to do something together, a company of our own, but for now it's getting me experience and industry contacts, and that's something money can't buy.

And by then, I was already three weeks married.

Our perfect destination wedding in the Bahamas, just me, Max, Cyn, Tabby and the stall owner and her husband from the retro fair. The wedding night from heaven as he stripped me slowly and gave me a brand new toy, a butt plug with a silver handle that made my orgasm that night the most explosive yet.

I gasp and cry out as something drips onto my breast, just above the nipple. Warmth spreads from it, just this side of too hot as I strain against my bonds. *What is it?*

"Don't worry, baby, it's a body safe candle," Max says, amusement in his voice as he answers my unspoken question. "I checked with the woman at the sex store, it's absolutely fine to use during pregnancy. You like that?"

I don't respond at first, concentrating on the feel of it as it cools and hardens against my skin. Then I nod.

It's something we haven't tried before, something new and exciting. And the sensory deprivation? It adds another layer as I try to figure out where he's going next.

Cyn's father wasn't too pleased when he heard what had happened with Brandon, and that his daughter had effectively been working as a drugs mule for almost a year in order to get the money for her half of our rent.

The truth is, her family is the one percent of the one percent, and he's furious she didn't just ask him for the money rather than always trying to do everything for herself. He's insisting that since she doesn't have a job lined up, she goes back home for the winter, but she's stressing about that whole idea. Her dad is actually away on business right now and there's no clear idea of when he's going to be home. In the meantime, Cyn's stepbrother Andrew is taking care of the majority of the family's investments. Apparently, they've never gotten along. Andrew's a lot older, and especially after his mom cheated on Cyn's dad with another man, it caused a rift between them. The thought of spending potentially months alone with him is putting Cyn in the mood to break furniture.

I arch my back against the bed as I feel the wax drip onto my nipple. The burning sensation is somewhere between pleasure and pain, and I want to cry out but I can't. I writhe against the bed, as far as my bonds will allow, but it's not enough. The feel of liquid spilling from my core is only increased as I feel Max's tongue take a long, slow lick up through it, leaving me a quivering wreck as drops of wax drip on the underside of my breast, then my stomach, making me flinch at each and every one.

Today, I went with him to the tattoo parlor. It was time for his annual visit, and the swirling symbol he had inked on his body made me feel so special. A single "K" set beside an "M", spreading onto the base of his neck. The two of us, together, marking the thing he's most grateful he got to experience this year, something that if he hadn't kicked his habit, he may never have lived to see.

And I got a matching tattoo, at the top of my thigh, just below my ass. That way, it will remind him of what we have every time he puts me over his knee for a spanking, something I try to provoke as often as I can...

“Such a delicious girl,” he murmurs from between my legs, his breath warm on my damp lips. “I wonder if we’ll ever stop being teacher and student.”

I hope not. I hope he’ll always have something new to show me, the need to discipline me, the desire to instruct me and have me obey.

It’s what I love about him, and it’s what I love about us.

More from the Authors

“I... Please can I see your boss?” Heat rises to my face as I say the words, feeling out of my depth. “It’s urgent.”

I try to ignore the thoughts intruding on my mind. The memory of my father lying there, face bloodied and bruised, one knee broken, struggling to hold onto consciousness. We barely had time to say a few words, me trying to keep him calm, him admitting he owes money to the man that runs this place.

Then the ambulance was there, medics, my father losing consciousness. The hospital room, the doctor telling me he was stable but critical, in and out of consciousness, that the next 24 hours would be crucial.

And then coming here, almost in a daze. I barely remember the walk, even as I’m aware of the ache in my feet. It’s miles, and I’m in heels. Low heels for work, but still, not practical footwear. I don’t drive. I probably should have got a cab, but it just didn’t occur to me.

“Think you’ve got the wrong place, sweetheart.”

“Please just tell him Malta Green is here. I’m...” My voice cracks on the word and I swallow back, my heart thundering. “I’m the daughter of Winston Green.”

I don’t miss the way the man’s eyes appraise me, sliding from my ankles to my waist, lingering on my breasts before meeting my eyes. He’s at least two heads taller than me, and looks like he could bench press a tank. The February air isn’t just cold, it’s positively freezing, and I’m wishing I’d changed into something that covered me a little better. Then again, maybe my court outfit will give me an advantage.

A practical skirt suit and silk shirt? Not exactly a femme fatale, Malta.

I’ve never used my sexuality before. The idea of doing so now fills me with dread. But I have to do something.

“You don’t look like a whore. Boss expecting you?”

“I’m a lawyer. He isn’t expecting me but I need to see him.” I try to keep my voice even, ignoring his comment. How often do prostitutes come here? Should I have pretended to be one? “Will you tell him I’m here please?”

He sucks his teeth for a moment, then glances around the alley as if it might be some sort of trick, a ruse to get him to leave his post.

I feel like pointing out that there’s no way I’d be in this part of town under any other circumstances. I’m not tricking him, I’m just trying to deal with a situation that’s none of my own fault.

“Daughter of Winston Green?”

I nod. “That’s right.”

“Wait here.”

He turns and has to duck to go in through the door, his shoulders barely squeezing through the gap. I fold my arms over my chest and shiver as I take a step back, glancing back down the alley. It’s dark here, but there’s a street light on the main street, illuminating the front of the Volos Bar, and I stare at it for a moment. There’s no signage here, no advertising to tell you what this place is. My father just called it *The Den*.

Opposite the Volos Bar, down the alley. Whole place stinks of shit, but not dog shit,
Rebecca told me when she arrived. My best friend since preschool, a shoulder to
sob my heart out into as we stood in the hospital corridor. She rolled her eyes at my
look of confusion. *I'm a cop, Malta, it's my job to know all the worst shitholes this
fine city has to offer. You want me to come with you?*

The door opens and I hear a shout of frustration from inside as the doorman steps
out. "Boss says to send you in. After I search you for any weapons." He grins.

Rebecca warned me this might happen. When I insisted I had to go alone, that the
last thing I wanted to do was spook them, she told me exactly what to do.

"Fine," I say, raising my arms. "But if you touch me in a way I find inappropriate,
I'll spend tomorrow morning talking to everyone I know at the courthouse. I'll have
law enforcement on your ass 24/7. If you step out of line you'll be arrested and
prosecuted like a f—"

My voice falters. Rebecca used the word, but I can't. I don't talk like that. *God,
please help me.*

"Like a dog," I say, removing the curse word from the lines Rebecca made me
repeat to her until I could say them. "You'll get the worst judge, the least competent
attorney. Anything I can do to make your life hell, I will. But go ahead and search
me."

He hesitates for a moment, and I can almost hear the cogs whirring to life as my
words start to sink in. There must be a dozen girls he could have his way with
tonight if he wants to, why bother taking the risk?

"Nowhere for a weapon to hide in that getup. Go on in," he says, stepping aside.
"Head straight through and into the back room. Don't interrupt anyone's game."

"Thank you."

I'm just glad my ruse worked. There's no way I have that sort of pull, but he
doesn't know that.

There's no pretense with this place. The interior is very much as you'd expect from
looking at the exterior. Peeling paintwork, grimy corners, a few men sitting at tables
losing money they don't have, an old television set showing a cage fight that looks
like World War Three.

It stinks of dirt and sweat and cannabis, and feels slightly on the cool and damp side
of comfortable.

"Ah, fuck!" shouts one of the patrons at a table nearby. "You're fucking cheating
me!"

A dark-suited bouncer is there in an instant. "Sit down, Jack."

"I want my money back."

"I said sit down. Game's not finished and nobody's cheating. I've been watching."

"Then you're in on it! It's not fair, I can't afford—"

"I said sit the *fuck* down. Am I going to have to make you?"

The patron takes a swing at the bouncer, and I step back, releasing a shriek of
surprise as he's swiveled around in an instant and slammed against the wall. Eyes
turn our way and I shrink into myself, hurrying away from what's happening,
following the instructions I was given and making my way to the back room. How
can anyone enjoy their time in a place like this? I can almost understand the appeal
of a casino, the glamour and excitement, but here?

I see the door marked private and don't even bother to knock, turning the knob and pushing it open, heading inside into an office that's only a little nicer than the room I've just left. It's cramped, a space barely large enough to accommodate the wooden desk, its top so ringed with coffee-cup stains you'd almost believe it was designed that way.

"You the priest's daughter?"

A man in his fifties sits behind the desk, a cigarette drooping from bored fingertips an inch from his chapped lips. He doesn't exactly have a beard, it's more that he either doesn't bother to shave regularly or doesn't pay much attention when he does.

"Yes. Malta Green."

"Malta, huh? Like the country? You can call me Dan. Thought priests weren't allowed to have kids. Not allowed to fuck, right? That's Catholics, right? A vow of celibacy. Thought Winston was a Catholic priest."

He places the cigarette lightly to his lips and sucks on it like he's drawing poison from a wound, bulging eyes staring my way. He's so skinny, it gives his face a kind of amphibious look, like his eyes are too big for his head.

"Winston raised me. He's the only father I've ever known."

"Ah, I get it. And your real dad?" He coughs, bringing up phlegm and swallowing it back down. "Biological they call it, right?"

"I'm here to settle my father's debt," I tell him, not wanting to discuss personal family business. What does it matter to him? "Tell me how much he owes and I'll cut you a check."

"You'll cut me a..." He grins, then starts to cough again. The cigarette drops into a glass ashtray, joining a half dozen other butts as he leans forward, struggling to clear his throat.

Anyone else, I'd bang their back or something. But right now I can't help thinking if he died it would solve a lot of problems.

Unfortunately, that's not on the cards. The coughing ends and he takes a deep breath, still chuckling as he picks up the end of his cigarette again.

"You'll cut me a check? You think that's how this works?" He laughs, shaking his head. "That's not how this works, sweetheart. Cash. I don't care who pays it, I don't care if Winston is your real daddy or just some guy who felt sorry for you, I don't care if the notes are tied together in nice neat thousand-dollar piles or covered in shit because some fucker just used them to wipe his ass. A quarter of a million, that's the damage. You got that hidden in that dress somewhere? You gonna make me play hide and seek? 'Cos I will, but I have to tell you you're not my usual type. No offense. Russians, Eastern Europeans, they're my weakness. I might even give a discount if you had a bit of an accent."

"Quarter of a..." The words slip out, my head feeling woozy like I might collapse at any moment.

How could my dad lose that kind of money? Why didn't he tell me he was in that much trouble?

"You should see your fucking face!" Dan's laughing again, but it's barely registering through the shock. "Yes, little girl, a quarter of a million dollars. I'm guessing you don't have that, right? Not even if you cut me a fucking check. But see, there are other ways you could pay."

Involuntarily, my eyes snap to his, and I can't keep the look of disgust off my face, but he shakes his head, still chuckling.

"Not like that. Get your mind out of the gutter. Like I said, you're not my type. But Leroy says you're a lawyer, and that means you're in luck. I've spoken to my bosses, the higher-ups I guess you'd call them, and they have work for a lawyer. You do us favors from time to time, represent our people if it's needed, get us information from the courthouse, that sort of thing, and I'll let Winston's debt slide. Good deal, right? Quarter of a million bucks just disappears, vanishes into thin air, and you and me? We get to be friends." He grins.

I'm caught like a fly in some sort of spider's web. I know how this goes, I've seen it before. Once I do him a favor, that's it, I'm in and there's no getting out.

But what choice do I have? If I don't settle my father's debt, next time there won't be an ambulance.

There'll be a hearse.

"Tell you what," he says, "I'll even sweeten the deal. We both know old holier-than-thou Winston isn't going to suddenly stop playing cards or putting the church funds on the roll of a die. Next time he gets himself into debts he can't cover, I'll make sure you're told about it first, give you a chance to settle up before it gets out of hand. I'll even let you cut a check. Can't say fairer than that, right?"

He stares at me with those bulging, toad eyes, expecting a response. Only I don't have one. I'm in way over my head here and I can feel my lungs starting to burn. I thought I'd come in here, pay a few thousand dollars and go home. Clean up the house and then head back to the hospital to sit there the rest of the night.

None of this was part of the plan.

"I—"

Just as I'm about to tell him I need time to think, there's a commotion from the room behind me. Shouting, the sound of furniture shifting, tables being overturned.

"What the fuck is going on out there?" Dan stands from his desk and I step aside, hoping not to get caught up in whatever this is. "Give me a sec, would you?"

Something thumps heavily against the door and I yelp, shrinking back. I don't belong in this sort of place. I don't belong in this part of town. I hear muffled words as Dan slides open a drawer in his desk.

"Look at that, Leroy, you clumsy fuck," I hear through the door, a deep voice that trembles every nerve in my body. "You're not supposed to try to open the door with your head, buddy."

"Please, this is my job, man. You're making me look bad. Fuck—!" Another thump against the door and I see Dan pull out a gun. "Fuck, that hurts!"

"We should try the handle. Maybe it's unlocked? No need for you to crack your skull open, Leroy."

Dan raises the gun, pointing it at the doorway as the knob turns. I need to be away from here. I can't be a witness to a gang murder, I just can't. In one afternoon my life has been turned on its head.

Everything I've worked for...gone, just like that.

Leroy's face comes inside first, and I see that he's bent double. But it's hard to believe that the man standing behind him, holding his arm twisted at an angle that looks like it's about to snap, managed to overpower such a giant. Sure, he's big. Built like a bull, shoulders so wide they look almost unnatural. But he can't be

more than a few inches taller than my 5'6". With dressier heels, I bet I'd be almost at eye level with him.

He turns his face up to look at me, a cocky grin pulling at the corner of his lips, and my body's reaction is instant. My mouth is dry, my hand going to the crucifix dangling on my chest like I need extra strength to resist this...this *pull*. Each breath is shallow, my eyes unblinking. A moment ago I was terrified for my life, but right now all I can see is *him*. I'm drawn to *him*. It's all wrong, I hate the way my stomach clenches, hate the urge to bat my eyelids like some sort of cartoon bunny smitten by the cartoon wolf.

I've never had a reaction like this. Well, not since...

But that was a long time ago. I'm sensible, untouched. A good girl who was brought up right, went to Catholic school, got her law degree and works hard. I don't go all gooey for men with tousled black hair and sun-roughened skin.

And I can't help feeling like there's something vaguely familiar about him too, like we knew each other in a past life or something. I'm aware that I'm gazing longingly into his dark eyes, wondering how his stubble would feel against my skin. How his infuriatingly sexy lips would feel when he kisses me.

Oh God, what is happening?

It's just a crazy moment, I tell myself. I'm out of my depth, looking for anyone that seems friendly in this place. And not Dan, who's friendly for all the wrong reasons.

"Oz, what the fuck, man?" Dan slams the gun down on the desk in front of him. "I could have fucking shot you. We've operated side by side for years, why you gonna manhandle my bouncer like that? Where's that fucking hellhound of yours?"

"Not afraid of dogs are you, Dan? I'm just here for the girl. Any debt she owes you is settled, got it?"

Dan and I answer in unison: "What?"

"You two know each other?" Dan looks at me with his mouth hanging open, bug-eyes bulging. "Jesus, lady, why didn't you just say so? Hey, I don't want beef with the Volos family."

"The..." My mind is racing. It's too much. The Volos family? I went to high school with... I mean, my first boyfriend—*only* boyfriend—was...

I turn and look at the man who's just come in through the door. *It can't be*. Can it? Is that why he looked familiar?

No.

No.

Try as I might to fit him with the shy, skinny kid I once knew, it just doesn't make sense. And it's not because this compact, confident, irritatingly charming specimen of man meat looks like he just stepped out of the pages of *Drool* magazine. It's not because the way he looks at me makes my knees tremble and my pupils dilate. It's not even because I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life wishing things had gone differently with the only person that's ever occupied that part of my existence I tentatively call *love*.

It's because of one very important, immutable fact.

"He *hates* me," I say, shaking my head, tears brimming in my eyes. "Ody Volos hates me."

[CONTINUE READING...](#)

About the Author

Aria Cole is the pen name of a USA Today bestselling author who published her first book in 2012 and began writing contemporary romance long before that. She's published more than 65 independent titles and her books always feature possessive alpha men and the sassy, curvy, nerdy heroines who love them. She lives with her dreamboat husband and two sassy children on the Great Lakes and lives for long walks on the beach with a hot coffee in hand.

Sign up for new release alerts from Aria [here](#).

Follow Aria on Amazon [here](#).

More from River West:

River West writes genre romance with a generous helping of smuttiness and an optimistic outlook. Always with an HEA and no cheating, the couples in her fiction are undeniably meant to be together, they just have to figure out how to get there.

Follow River on Amazon [here](#).

Follow River on Facebook [here](#).

[Stepbrother Anonymous](#)

[Under Construction](#)

[Fighting for Faith](#)

[Under Siege](#)

[Under Fire](#)

[Under Her Hood](#)

[Under Her Skin](#)

[Ryker](#)

[Yes, Prime Minister](#)

[Rough Rider](#)

[Secret Heir](#)

[The Duke's Broken Angel](#)

[The Prince's Pet](#)

[Claimed by the Hitman](#)

and many more-[all available in KU](#).

[With River West](#)

[Savage Saint](#)

[Beautiful Scamp](#)

[Brutal Scoundrel](#)

[Cruel Lover](#)

Lost to the Kingpin