

DREAM CHASER

To Be Unleashed December 15, 2020

By Kristen Ashley

A Dream Team Novel

“Baby?”

I stopped feeling sorry for myself and focused on Boone.

His mouth came down on mine.

I thought maybe it was some weird, kinda-friends, kinda-not, should-be-lovers, but-weren't, never-gonna-happen good-bye kiss.

I realized it was not when his tongue came out and he traced the crease of my lips with the tip.

They opened.

Really, there was no way I could have kept them closed.

Just a taste.

I'd give myself just a taste.

A taste of Boone.

Even if that tasted like never.

He slid his tongue inside, and he didn't taste like never.

He tasted rich and decadent and heady and hot and *male*.

And he kissed like Boone.

Man and alpha and strength and protector and *Dom*.

Without a fight, without even a thought, I submitted to his tongue and his mouth and his kiss and *him*.

I was holding onto him, yielding to the plunder, my legs trembling, when he lifted his mouth from mine. With an eyeful of nothing but green, I heard him say, “Lock up after me, sweetheart. Get some sleep. I'll catch you later.”

And with that, he let me go, left me swaying in my living room....

And he was gone.

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Chapter One

Less and Less You

Ryn

I was wiped.

Even so, I was still heading up the walk to my brother's ex's house at seven o'clock in the morning regardless if I drove away from Smithie's after dancing at his club only four hours before.

This was because Angelica called me, sharing she had another migraine, and she needed me to help her get the kids to school.

My brother's kids.

My niece and nephew.

And Angelica did not call on my brother Brian because she knew he was probably passed out so drunk, if she could wrangle miracles and was able to wake him, he'd come over and still be hammered.

So she called on me.

I made the door, knocked, but knew the drill.

It'd be open.

The knock was just a formality.

I pushed in and saw immediately that Angelica had not changed her ways in the two days since I'd been there to get the kids and take them to my place to hang because her back was spasming.

Although the house wasn't filthy, it also wasn't tidy.

There was kid stuff everywhere. Toys and markers and such. A basket of laundry was on the couch that I couldn't tell if it was clean, and needed to be folded and put away, or dirty and needed to be washed. A wasted chip bag that, considering nutrition wasn't high on her priority list for her or her children, it was a toss up if it was left behind on that end table by Angelica, or one of the kids. Same with a can of Coke.

And...right.

Even not filthy, the carpet seriously needed to be vacuumed.

“Auntie Rynnie!” I heard a little boy’s voice yell.

I turned my eyes to the opening of the kitchen and saw my six-year-old, dark-haired, blue-eyed nephew Jethro standing there.

I mean, serious.

From birth to now, that kid was *adorbs*.

And I loved him with everything that was me.

Or half of that.

I loved his sister with the other half.

I smiled at him even as I put my finger to my lips and whispered, “Shh.”

His entire face ticked, the exuberance washing clean out of it, and my heart lurched seeing it.

Eggshells.

My two babies’ lives were all about walking on eggshells.

With Daddy and his hangovers, if they ever spent time with him, which was rare, but even so, he didn’t stop drinking through it.

With Mommy and her migraines, her bad back, her bum knee, her creaky hips, if they ever spent any time with her, which wasn’t as rare, but they were off to Auntie Ryn’s place, or one of their grandmas, and they were this often, because Mommy needed peace and quiet and rest.

Sure, it takes a village.

And I was *so* down with being part of that village for Jethro and his older sister, Portia.

But bottom line, a kid needed to be able to count on their parents.

At least *one* of them.

I moved to him, asking quietly, “Have you had your bath, baby?”

“Last night,” he whispered.

I put my hand on his thick hair, bent to kiss his upturned forehead, and as I straightened, I looked left.

My curly-blonde-haired, also blue-eyed Portia was at the table, eating a massive bowl of Cap’n Crunch.

I loved Cap’n Crunch.

I could make a pretty convincing argument that Cap’n Crunch was a major component of the meaning of life.

What I did not love was my seven-year-old niece horking down a huge bowl of sugary crunches that had no nutritional value, she'd burn it off in approximately fifteen minutes and then crash.

Another decimated bowl was beside Portia's, kibbles of cereal and smears of milk all around the bowl on the table.

Jethro's breakfast.

I said not a word because I knew Portia poured those bowls for her brother and herself. She "made" breakfast, seven-year-old-style, and did the best she could.

"Hey, honey," I called.

She had milk on her chin when she looked up at me and replied, "Hey, Auntie Ryn."

I smiled at her and then looked down at Jethro.

"Right, want your face cleaned up, bucko. Anything you need to take to school today?"

He looked like he was concentrating, hard, to remember if he was supposed to take anything to school.

Then again, it wasn't his job to keep track of that. Not yet.

"I'll poke my head in and ask your mom," I told him.

"She needs quiet." Having been reminded of this fact by me, he was still whispering.

But at his words, Portia made a noise like a snort.

A disgusted one.

A lot like the sound I was making in my head.

Though I didn't want Portia having this reaction about her mom, I had to admit, my niece had been displaying signs of impatience that were about twenty years older than she was, and she'd been doing this for a while now.

I ignored her and said to Jethro, "I'll be real quiet when I ask her. Now go wash your face. And your hands."

He nodded and ran off, so I looked to Portia.

"After you're done, honey, you too with the washup. Do you need to take anything to school?"

She nodded. "Yeah. But my bookbag is ready."

I hated to ask what I next had to ask because I had been that kind of sister to my brother when I was seven.

Keeping track of him.

Keeping track of me.

“Do you, uh...know about your brother?”

She shoved more cereal in her mouth and said in a garbled way I still could decipher before chewing it, “Show and tell day today. I put something in his bag. He’ll figure it out.”

“Chew and swallow, Portia,” I urged carefully, not her mother, but needing to be motherly, which pissed me off because I wanted to be Fun Auntie Rynnie, not Fuddy Duddy Aunt Kathryn. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

She looked down at her bowl and her cheeks got pink.

Crap.

Fuddy Duddy Aunt Kathryn *sucked*.

I moved to the table and started to clean up Jethro’s breakfast.

“You should make Mom do that, you know,” Portia said.

“When she beats this headache, we’ll just give her a little break,” I replied.

“Yeah, another one,” she mumbled, dropped her spoon in her still half-filled bowl and jumped off the chair she was using, having been sitting on her knees.

She took the bowl to the sink and dumped it in.

“I’ll finish that. We need to get sorted and go,” I told her.

“Kay,” she muttered, and didn’t look at me when she walked by.

I stopped her retreat, asking, “Did your mom get lunches packed?”

She turned, looked me right in the eyes and asked, “You’re kidding, right?”

Oh yeah.

Impatience.

And demonstrating a frustrated maturity that I was not a big fan of the fact that she was forced to be developing.

“We’ll make lunches in a sec,” I said.

She had no response to that. She just took off.

I rinsed the bowls, put them in the dishwasher, wiped down the table, put away the cereal and milk and then moved out to find and check their book bags.

When it seemed all was set, I finished my inspection by zipping up Portia’s bag and moved down the hall, hearing the kids talking low and quiet in the bathroom.

I knocked on Angelica's door softly then opened it to stick my head in, seeing complete dark and a lump on the bed under covers.

"Hey, I'm here, got the kids," I called.

The lump moved. "Heard. Um, can you come in a second?"

I slid in and closed the door behind me.

Angelica didn't turn on a light, but in the shadows, I saw her push up to an elbow.

"Listen, Jethro's got some end-of-year field trip he's going on and they need fifty bucks plus whatever money he'll need for lunch, which they say will cost fifteen to twenty dollars."

Fifteen to twenty dollars for lunch for a first grader?

I did not get those words out of my mouth before Angelica went on, "Brian's fucked me over for support again and things are tight this month. I'm already gonna hafta ask Mom to pay cable and electricity. But I don't wanna have to tell Jethro he can't go."

She didn't even hesitate anymore. Didn't lead into it.

No longer did I get a, "I hate to say this," or "This sucks I gotta ask."

Just, "I don't wanna have to tell Jethro he can't go."

Well, if you got a job and maybe cut the premium package on your cable, even if my brother is a deadbeat, you might be able to cover some of your bills and take care of your children, I did not say.

What I said was, "I'll leave some money on the table."

I said this a lot.

It was closing in on the end of May and I'd already given her three hundred and seventy-five dollars this month.

Last month, it had been over five hundred.

And next month, with the way the kids were growing, summer having already hit Denver, they'd need new clothes. And Angelica worried they'd be teased or bullied if they didn't have the good stuff, so I could plan on a plea to have a "Day with Auntie Ryn" which included taking them shopping. With the added asks that were sure to come, I'd probably be laying out at least a grand.

"Thanks," she muttered, the lump in bed shifted, and that was it.

I stood there a second, staring at her before I turned and left, clicking the door shut behind me.

My bad.

Conditioning.

I'd conditioned her.

Like I'd done with my brother.

When I started to get niggles of concern when there wasn't a get-together we had where he didn't get obnoxiously drunk, I should have said something.

And then it wasn't even get-togethers, just anytime I saw him, he'd be drinking, clearly on his way to being obnoxiously drunk, before he became that. Thinking he was funny. Or cute. Or waxing poetic about shit where he thought he was stunning all of us with his brilliance, when he barely made sense.

I should have said something then too.

I should have said, "Hey, Brian, go easy."

Or, "Hey, Brian, what in the hell-blazin' *fuck*? Honest to God, do you have to be fucked up *all the time*?"

I did not do this.

Like I did not tell Angelica maybe I didn't want to be a stripper for the rest of my life. Maybe I didn't want to need to have cash on hand to lay on her, or Brian when he came up short for the month, to help them take care of their own children. I didn't want to feel like I had to be careful with my time so I could be free—again, to help them take care of their own children.

I wanted to flip houses.

I wanted in on that from start to finish.

From finding a great pad, seeing the bones, dreaming what I could make it, negotiating a killer deal, then diving in from demo to design, and then negotiating another deal.

That's what I wanted.

I had a house.

A year ago, I'd driven by the perfect one, for sale by owner. Even in Denver's OTT real estate market, I couldn't let the opportunity pass. I'd been saving for my own place, so I went for it, and with the shape that house was in, I got it for a steal.

I started demo of the inside.

And now it had been sitting untouched for ten months because I didn't have the money—because I kept giving mine away—or the time—because I kept saying yes to Angelica when she needed me.

And my pride (yeah, I'll admit it) would not allow me to ask for help.

And my courage (yeah, I'll admit that too) wasn't up to the task of telling her, and Brian, to sort their shit out.

So now I was paying a mortgage on a house that was sitting there, rotting.

And I was still in a rental, helping my brother pay his mortgage, and his ex-partner pay his *old* mortgage.

It was my own damned fault.

All of it.

But when I walked down the hall to the kitchen and saw Portia helping Jethro make PB&Js for their lunch, all those curls, dark (like Angelica) and light (like Brian), it was hard to debate I'd made the wrong choice.

I looked and saw thin, little baggies filled to the brim with potato chips as accompaniment for the PB&Js and I fought back a wince because first, I agreed with my friend Evie that baggies should be outlawed, due to choking dolphins, or destroying the ozone layer, or some shit that I didn't really care what it was, none of it was good. And I kinda wanted my niece and nephew to inherit a decent world (not to mention, the kids I'd eventually have, maybe, one day, if I ever encountered a decent man). And second, the only thing that held merit in that lunch was kinda the peanut butter.

"How about we get you two some carrot sticks to go with that?" I suggested.

"Euw!" Jethro protested.

"Really?" Portia asked sarcastically over him. "We don't have carrot sticks. We don't have anything. This is the last of the bread and chips."

"Mom'll get us chips today, she sees we're out," Jethro declared.

No judge (okay, warning, there was about to be a judge), but I knew that was the truth.

Angelica put on twenty pounds with Portia, and I thought she looked cute, all new-mom curves.

Jethro was a surprise and came close on Portia's heels, definitely before Angelica had the time to lose her baby weight should she have wanted to do that. But with Jethro, she put on twenty more.

Now I'd guess she'd added another fifty.

It wasn't my bag, telling people what to do with their lives, what to put in their mouths, how to handle their bodies.

Be curvy and sassy, if that floated your boat.

Teaching your children that hanging in front of the TV was a major way to pass your time and having chips in the house was more important than getting them properly fueled and off to school, uh...

No.

Thus, there I was.

Three hours of sleep, mentioning carrot sticks and being sure to get the kids off to school, because someone had to make them understand there were people in their lives who gave a shit.

We stowed the lunches in their bags, hustled out into my car and took off.

I watched too many true crime programs to sit in my vehicle, let them out and watch them walk up to their school.

No way.

Predators were crafty.

I was one of those get-your-ass-out, walk-the-kid-in, make-eye-contact-with-an-adult, then-force-kisses-on-them before you let them go kind of school dropper.

And the teacher I made eye contact with smiled at me, probably because she'd seen me, or my mom, or Angelica's mom, more than she ever saw Angelica.

I didn't hang around, though.

I was dancing that night again, so I needed to get home and hit the sack, because stripping was a way to earn major cash. But strippers with shadows under their eyes who were too fatigued to pull off any good moves were just sad.

In other words, I needed to get home.

I had my phone out to text Angelica that the kids were safe at school, something I'd do sitting in my car because people who walked and texted drove me batty, when I noticed a mom who was also a walk-her-kid-in kind of mom nearly run into a column.

She was not texting.

She had her head turned.

I looked where she was looking.

And saw Boone Sadler. He was my friend Lottie's boy, her man Mo's bud, and an uncomfortable acquaintance of mine.

He was leaning against the passenger side of his gleaming black Charger, arms crossed on his broad chest, long, sturdy legs crossed at the ankles.

What the hell?

He had shades on, aviators, the sun was glinting in his dark blond hair, his skin was tanned, his biceps were bulging, and where I was at in my head and in my exhaustion, the weakness nearly couldn't be beat.

I wanted to sink to my knees and beg him to make me his any way he wanted to do that.

Here's the deal:

My dad was deadbeat too.

And I was Portia, plus twenty-two years.

The big sister who (a change to Portia's plight) saw my mom busting her ass to take care of her kids. So I got to a point where I helped with dinner, and the dishes. Then I *made* dinner and did the dishes. I also did my own laundry starting at age eight, *and* my brother's.

Dusting.

Vacuuming.

Tidying.

Making grocery lists.

And when I could drive, going out and getting groceries.

Mom hated it that I did it, but she needed the help.

I didn't bitch, because I loved her, and I knew she needed it.

But I'd been on the ball, or learning how to be on it, since I was six.

Now, I did not research this stuff, maybe because I didn't want to know, maybe because it didn't really matter.

But if you asked me, if I wasn't just plain ole born this way, I'd reckon that I needed a man to take care of business *in that way* because I was so... *fucking ...done* with having a handle on every aspect of my life, my brother's, and now Angelica's and the kids', I needed to give over.

Boiling this down, I was a sub, as in submissive, this being of the BDSM variety.

And Boone Sadler was a Dom, as in a Dominant, of that same variety.

He was also the guy my friend Lottie tried to fix me up with months ago.

Lottie had her shit together. Lottie had lived life and she knew how to read people.

Case in point, when she met her fiancé Mo, they knew each other maybe a few hours before she knew he was the one.

Second case in point, she set up Evie with Mo's bud Mag. They were living together within days of meeting (okay, so circumstances were such she had to move in with him, since her apartment had been torn apart, and that wasn't the beginning of the story, or the end). But they were now officially moved in together, Evie had been able to quit dancing at Smithie's, she'd gone full-time at her preferred job as a computer tech and was finally going back to college with an aim to finish it and earn her engineering degree.

Why I couldn't go there with Boone, I didn't know.

He was hot, like, mom-walking-into-column-at-the-sight-of-him hot.

He'd shared he was interested, this by asking me out to dinner three times, and also getting up in my shit after a lap dance I gave that he witnessed because he was a guy, a guy who'd asked me out, a guy who was into me, a guy who's job (not a joke) was being a commando.

And last, he was a guy who was a Dom.

As for me, I was into him. I was into him in a way I'd had so many fantasies about him—ranging from the many ways he could order me to take to my knees and suck his cock to snuggling in front of the TV with him after a long day—that I'd lost count of the dizzying varieties these fantasies took on.

But I just couldn't go there.

Maybe it was that my dad was a deadbeat, but he was also other things, like mentally abusive, serially breaking women's hearts, when the spirit moved him (which was rare) demanding his fatherly rights (even though he was a deadbeat, which circled back to mentally abusive, and breaking women's hearts) and generally just an asshole.

And my brother was an alcoholic deadbeat who was either clueless, in denial, or both.

And I'd had two semi-long-term boyfriends, both who, after I shared, didn't "get" my "kink" and thought I was a loser who wanted to be abused, instead of a submissive, who needed to give over and allow someone to take care of me (or put in the work to try, and get their reward, I was kind of a brat).

Last, I'd had a really shitty Dom who took things too far and once completely ignored me saying my safe word (that had not been fun, in fact, it'd been terrifying when he shoved that

scarf into my mouth after tying me up, so I was completely helpless, and not in a good way—exit said Bad Dom from my life).

So yeah.

Me: gun shy.

And Boone had given up, full stop. I knew this because he'd been seeing some other woman now for weeks.

I didn't blame him.

Though part of me did.

Because honestly, he didn't try that hard.

And sorry, not sorry, I was a girl who wanted to be won.

Like I said, put in the effort...

Get your reward.

It sucked and for some reason it hurt (a lot, too much, especially when logically, I knew I had no claim on the guy).

But he'd moved on.

So why was he there?

I knew one thing with the way he was right then uncrossing his arms, his shades locked on me, his hand going up, and his finger crooking at me.

No, two things.

One, I was in imminent danger of a highly inappropriate orgasm while standing on the sidewalk to an elementary school.

And two, he was not there playing bodyguard to some rich kid or because his new woman had kids he'd offered to drop off.

He was there for me.

Interesting.

I moved his way and felt a number of greedy eyes following me as I did.

When I got close, he pushed away from his badass car, straightened to his substantial height and tipped his chin down to look at me.

"Hey, what are you—?" I began.

"Your place," he growled. "Now."

And then I found myself standing there, blinking at him as he stalked around the hood of his car to the driver's side.

He'd opened the door, but didn't angle in, because I was still standing there.

"Now," he ordered.

Only then did he angle in.

All right, I was going home anyway.

But...

Again...

What the hell?

And, more.

Did he know where I lived?

Apparently, he did, because he made his point I needed to get my ass to my place by making his engine roar (and again, imminent orgasm, mine and probably a dozen other moms).

I hoofed it to my car, and once inside, glanced quickly at my reflection in the rearview mirror.

I'd pulled a brush through my hair because it wouldn't do to have semi-slept-on, teased out stripper hair when taking the kids to school.

But it was still a mass that was mostly a mess of honey-blond flips and curls.

No makeup, and serious, I was such a makeup freak, even if I was living my dream of knocking down walls to create great rooms and grouting tile, I'd have makeup on.

I always had makeup on.

Gray oversized tee. Black skinny jeans with rips in the knees. Powder Valentino rockstud slides.

In that moment, I wasn't my normal edgy Ryn Jansen who (if I did say so myself, which I did) made Kendall Jenner look like a novice at putting together streetwear.

So I felt vulnerable.

But he'd already seen me.

And he was on some mission.

So I might feel vulnerable, but I also had no choice.

I hit my pad which was the bottom quarter of a big house that had been broken up into four apartments in what loosely could still be considered Capitol Hill, on Pearl, a couple blocks south from Colfax.

There were parking spots out back, though I never bothered, because they were always taken by other tenants.

And even if street parking was always at a premium, Boone not only knew where my house was, he'd found a spot before I did, and I knew this because he was waiting at my front door.

"You wanna tell me what this is about?" I asked after I walked up to him.

"Inside," he grunted.

Oh shit.

With my morning and all that was Boone suddenly and unexpectedly invading it, I didn't even think.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Inside," he repeated.

"Evie all right?"

"Inside."

"Lottie?"

"Ryn, get your ass inside."

Here's the second part of the deal:

If you weren't working me up to an orgasm.

And you were a boss.

And you bossed me.

My first reaction would be to fight the urge to knock your teeth down your throat.

Even wired, tired, worried about what this was with Boone, and in a negative headspace, I successfully fought the urge to knock Boone's teeth down his throat (not that I'd achieve that, again, the dude was a commando, he'd probably ninja-move me, and it would end in humiliation).

I let us in.

So, my pad had character.

And not all of it was the good kind.

In fact, most of it wasn't.

The kitchen needed updating about two decades ago. It was small, cramped, had little counter space, a thin-piled carpet that had so many spills and smells and so much steam and grease soaked in, it was like a thin living stew (so I ignored it), but the rest...well, I was used to it.

We entered in the little vestibule/mudroom and I led him to the living room.

But down from the foyer was a narrow hall, where off to the left, first, was a tiny bedroom, down the way was a small bath, and at the back, was my bedroom, which was only slightly bigger than the tiny one.

Off my living room was a dining room (without a dining room table, or anything, it was a largish space in my smallish pad that I'd only found a rug for and then stopped trying because I was going to flip houses, but ended up taking care of someone else's kids) which fed into my aforementioned scary kitchen.

Both living room and dining room had fireplaces.

They were rad.

Straight up, if I had the cash, and the time, I'd buy this house from my landlord and restore it to its former glory. The mantles, the tile, the wood floors, the high ceilings, the cornices, the ceiling roses.

Sublime.

As mentioned, I did not have the time or money.

Boone walked directly to the built-in hutch at the end of my dining room and stopped.

Beginning to seriously lose patience with this, whatever it was, I followed.

And stopped.

"Boone, what the hell?"

With my head where it was at, I didn't notice he had a folder with him.

He opened it and tossed an 8x10 full-color glossy on the counter of the hutch.

I looked down at it.

It was a picture of Angelica, looking pretty damned good, messy topknot in her hair, cute formfitting tank dress...

Valentino rockstud jelly thongs on her feet.

I stared.

Boone tapped the picture and I forced my attention from the \$350 flip flops she was wearing to the sign above the place she was walking out of.

It was a fucking *day spa*.

My head jerked when he tossed another photo down.

Angelica enjoying lunch *al fresco* with a friend. Another cute outfit. A sparkling glass of rosé wine in front of her.

My breathing went funny.

Another picture landed.

Angelica browsing in what appeared to be a Bath and Body Works, a Kate Spade shopping bag dangling from the crook in her arm.

“Worth those lap dances, baby?” Boone’s deep, drawling, caustic voice broke into my brain, a brain that was paralyzed with shock and rage.

Oh no he did *not*.

My narrowed gaze went to him.

“Totally playin’ you,” he stated. “I bet you dropped money on her today, seein’ as she’s got a facial booked.”

Oh my *fucking* God.

This couldn’t be.

This...

This...

It just couldn’t be.

“You’re stalking my niece and nephew’s mother?” I asked.

His chin shifted to the side.

“Ryn—”

“To what?” I swept an arm out over the pictures on the hutch. “Make some point?”

“Well, yeah,” he replied. “And the point I’m makin’ is, you’re shoving your tits into horny assholes’ faces so this bitch can have bi-monthly massages.”

Bi-monthly?

I hadn’t had a massage in...

I didn’t remember the last time I had a massage.

And Angelica had two a month?

Off *my* back?

No, wait.

Her kids didn’t have fucking *carrots* and were eating Cap’n *Crunch* and *she* was getting massages?

“She gets child benefit,” Boone carried on. “She’s conned her mom outta at least a couple hundred this month. Your mom outta a couple hundred more. And I don’t know what she’s telling you, but your brother ponied up, and he pretty much always ponies up, and if he doesn’t, it’s because he’s a little short. Then you take up the slack. Even so, she went and reamed his ass, and after he handed over a check for fifteen hundred a week ago, he handed over another one for five hundred a coupla days ago, both of which, when she got them, she went directly to cash, *for cash*, and they cleared.”

This was...

It was...

“So she’s shaking you down,” Boone continued, “and your brother’s shaking you down so he can cover his own ass, and hers, even though he’s gainfully employed, makes good cake, though I’ve no fuckin’ clue how he manages to stay employed since what doesn’t go to her that he earns or asks for from you goes right to Argonaut Liquor. And you’re racing to her house to get the kids to school so she can sleep in. Because I can guaran-damn-tee you that woman does not have a headache.”

Oh no.

He did *not*.

“How do you know she called about a migraine?” I asked quietly.

“Ryn,” he bit down on my name impatiently. “I’m lookin’ out for you.”

“You’ve hacked my phone. You’re stalking me too.”

He drew in so much breath, his chest expanded with it.

It was a sight to see since his chest normally was pretty formidable.

But I could bite too.

And I did.

“You know, Boone, when I’m sucking your cock, you can invade my privacy.”

His green eyes got wide (and I had to admit, with that hair, that tan, that bone structure, those mossy green eyes were insult to injury I actually *wasn’t* sucking his cock).

“Are you outta your mind?” he asked.

“And since that’s not gonna goddamn happen, especially now, you can butt right the fuck,” I leaned his way, “*out*.”

“Kathryn,” he growled, a stern set to his angled jaw.

No.

Hell no.

He was not gonna Dom me without earning the goddamned privilege.

“Don’t you *even*,” I hissed.

“I cannot believe you’re fuckin’ pissed...*at me*,” it was him who swept his arm out to indicate what was on my hutch, “when your brother’s ex is fucking you over...” and then he leaned *my* way, “*huge*.”

“Don’t you have a girlfriend you can stalk, Boone?” I asked snidely.

“Just sayin’, I’m not interested in her right now because she doesn’t need a serious-as-fuck spanking, sweetheart.”

My breath whistled between my teeth, I sucked so much of it in so fast.

This was because I was ticked at Boone, furious with Angelica, and incensed that his words caused my nipples to get hard and a surge of wet to saturate between my legs.

And I didn’t need what happened next.

Boone proving what I’d spent countless hours wondering about since the first moment I clapped eyes on him knowing Lottie picked him for me.

That he was an intuitive Master.

I knew this when he didn’t miss my reaction.

At least not the part that served his purpose.

Which meant he got closer, not super close, but close enough I could smell the residue of his shave cream.

Oh *God*.

Yeah, an intuitive Master.

And a skilled one.

“Should start small, tell you to open your mouth for me,” he whispered. “Slide my fingers inside, let you taste who you belong to.”

I stood still and stared into eyes that had lost almost all the green, they were so dilated.

He was turned on.

Fuckfuckfuckfuck*fuck*.

“But right now, I’d rather see you on your knees,” he finished.

The words were trembling when I said, “Get out.”

He ignored me. “Though you’d rather be across mine.”

He was regrettably *very* right.

I fought back a shiver.

He dipped his face to mine.

And tore me apart.

“Your brother needs a fuckin’ program. His ex needs the verbal shit kicked out of her. But you’re so addicted to their dysfunction, set to be the enabler, you won’t do dick. Not to help guide them to a path that’s healthy for them, not to extricate yourself from a situation that is not healthy for you. You’re one of those chicks who likes chaos. Drama. Needs to be needed even if it’s dicked up how you gotta get your fix.”

His words felt like ice water fell from my ceiling, drenching me, chilling me to the bone.

“You know what’s good for them,” he continued, “but you won’t do dick about it. You know what’s good for you, and you won’t reach out and fuckin’ *grab it*.”

“Go fuck yourself, Boone.”

“Think I’ve made it abundantly clear, I’d rather fuck you.”

“That’s not gonna happen in *twelve* lifetimes.”

“Yeah, because you’re so hot to get off on the bullshit, you won’t grab hold of what’s good for you.”

“A macho asshole who thinks his shit doesn’t stink and stalks me and comes onto me when he’s got another woman in his bed?”

“We’re not exclusive.”

Seriously?

“Well, aren’t you proving with all of this you’re a keeper?”

His gaze moved over my face, down my body and back up. “Christ, you want it so bad, you’re tearing yourself apart.”

Of a sort, he was not wrong.

I was holding myself so still, if I moved an inch, it felt like my body would shatter.

“You’ve no idea what I want, Boone.”

“One thing I know, whenever I spend time in your space, what I want becomes less and less *you*.”

With that supremely successful comeback, he prowled out of my apartment.

I ignored the nagging sensation that, even with that scene, the loss of his presence felt like a physical blow, something I felt from the first time we met.

Instead of thinking on that, I looked down at the photos on the hutch.

When I could trust myself to move, I separated them and took all they displayed in.

I didn't mind stripping. I'd embraced my sexuality a long time ago. Not to mention, I made buckets at Smithie's, even if, at first, I'd done it as a means to an end for my real estate dream.

And one thing my dad taught me, giving a shit what people thought about you was for the birds. I'd wanted his love, I'd wanted his attention, and I'd learned early wanting either of those things was straight-up stupid, because neither were worth shit.

That said, my desired life trajectory had never included slithering oiled-up in nothing but a G-string on a reflective stage for horny assholes.

I'd left a hundred dollars for Angelica that day, raced to her house to take care of the kids, and she was getting a facial.

In the beginning, I got it. Brian's descent was dramatic. Good Time Brian became Drunken Buffoon Brian so fast, it was terrifying.

So she'd kicked his ass out.

Portia had been two, Jethro one, Brian and Angelica had started early, moving in with each other right out of high school, whereupon Angelica got pregnant in a blink.

So both of them were young, and she was suddenly a single mom with the man she loved, spent six years with, lived with him for four, bought a house with him, made babies with him...gone.

So yeah.

I got it.

A woman lost all that, she'd need to lick her wounds.

Five years of that at the same time fucking over someone who looked out for her and her kids?

No.

I heard an engine roar in the distance, and I knew it was Boone's Charger.

I looked to the window at the front of the house and put my hand to my throat.

One thing I know, whenever I spend time in your space, what I want becomes less and less you.

Well, that pretty much said it all.

And it hurt like hell.

But I wasn't going to cry.

The last time I cried was a couple of months ago. After I'd been in the midst of a firefight in the parking lot of a mall during a kidnapping (mine). But the waterworks only came because I thought a guy I knew and liked had been shot in said firefight.

So those were kind of stressy tears, and I didn't think they counted.

They weren't heartbreak tears.

The last time I'd cried before that?

When I was fifteen and in a frothy, tea-length gown, waiting on Mom's couch for Dad to show to take me to some father-daughter dance he had going on with whatever club that he belonged to.

Lion's Club?

The Masons?

Whatever.

He didn't show.

I sat on that couch all dolled up for a date with my dad, while Mom looked on, appearing openly like she'd gladly murder somebody. And I sat there until ten thirty before Mom got me out of that gown, unearthed the ice cream, and I sat in her bed, snot-nosed and bawling, but still shoving that frozen goodness in my mouth.

That was the last and only time I cried over a man.

So now...

Fuck it.

I wasn't going to cry because Boone showed strong signs that he'd be a delicious Dom.

I wasn't going to cry because, even if it was vaguely fucked up, finding that shit out about Angelica was something he spent his time and resources doing what he said he was doing, looking out for me.

I also wasn't going to cry because Lottie had Mo, and her serenity and contentment at finding a good man to love who loved her floated like pearlescent clouds around her everywhere she went.

And Evie had Mag, and the adoration they shared for each other sparkled like glitter anytime one was near the other.

And I had no one.

And I wanted someone, someone special, someone who would look out for me, someone who would partner with me to navigate life, someone who was *mine*.

No, I wasn't going to cry for any of these reasons.

I wasn't going to cry at all.

So I didn't cry.

I gathered the pictures up, pivoted, and walked out my back door.

Chapter Two

Garden Party

Ryn

I was sitting on Angelica's bed when she wandered out of her bathroom after her morning shower.

"Holy shit, Ryn!" she cried, jerking the lapels of her robe closed.

"So, is it an Aveda salon where you're getting your facial today?" I asked conversationally. "I know you're partial to Aveda, since I popped by there a couple of months ago to stock you up on your favorite hair-care products because I felt bad when you said you couldn't afford them."

The color drained from her face.

"I hope you don't mind, I helped myself to the return of my money you'd already put in your wallet," I told her.

She took a step toward me. "Ryn, I can ex—"

She halted when I stood up, picking up the photos I had on the bed beside me, and I spoke as I turned them her way and shuffled them, one after the other, showing her each.

"Now, here's what you're gonna do. You're gonna cancel your facial. You're gonna go to the store and buy eggs, and bacon, and whole grain bread, and carrots, and other shit that's good for the kids. Then, after you do the laundry, put shit away, and vacuum the freaking floors, you're gonna dust off your résumé because, tomorrow, you're gonna go out and look for a job."

"You had someone follow me?" she asked, her gaze riveted to the pictures.

"No," I answered. "Though someone who was concerned about me followed you. I didn't ask for it and I didn't know it, until he gave me these."

I waved the photos.

She lifted a hand and shook it in the air. "Okay, I'll admit, it was a crap thing to do."

A crap thing to do?

Seriously?

"I just..." she went on. "Things changed so fast, with your brother. I mean that was a big blow, for the kids, for *me*. I needed some time—"

"Five years, Ang?"

"You don't know," she said miserably, and with not a small hint of accusation. "I fell in love with your brother in high school. There's been no one but him for me. I—"

“No, I don’t know. I also don’t care. Bi-monthly massages, Angelica? Lunch with your girls? I don’t even want to *think* about how much cash you accepted from me, because honest to God, if I did, I’d rip your goddamn hair out. Cash I made fucking *stripping*.”

She took a step back and said, “Come off it, Ryn. Smithie’s is a huge hotspot. I know you make crazy-good dough there.”

“Yeah,” I bit out and slapped the photographs to my chest. “*I do. I dance for money. I straddle creepy assholes’ laps for a fifty and a tip. How in the fuck have you twisted it in your head any of it should go to you?*”

“Your brother fucked me over,” she spat.

“Is that what you call him giving you two thousand this month? Fucking you over?”

“Ohmigod!” she yelled. “How do you even *know* that?”

“Who cares!” I yelled back. “The pity party is over, Angelica. Taking your woes out on everyone around you is *over*. And if you don’t pull your head outta your ass, Mom sees these.” I waved the photos at her again. “And *Brenda* sees these,” I threatened her with her mom too.

“Don’t,” she whispered.

Oh yeah.

Brenda clearly spoiled her girl rotten.

But Brenda was good people.

She was also saving for retirement, a little house in a mature-persons’ development in Arizona. She even had the place picked out and was mentioning finding a job down there, selling her house here and going early, she was so sick of snow, and maybe, having a second family her daughter gave her to raise in her fifties.

So even Brenda would balk at Angelica being a straight-up grifter.

“Get your shit together. Get a job,” I demanded. “Pick up this house. Vacuum. Look after your *children*. Trust me, I know how much it sucks to have to grow up too fast to take on the role of an absent parent. Portia is facing that, times *two*. And one of her parents is camped out on the couch. Seriously, Ang, sort yourself *out*.”

“God, you know, it’s rich, you’re a fucking *stripper*, and you think you can stand in *my* house and act like you’re better than me?” she sneered.

“I don’t have to act, Ang. I showed up. I got your kids to school. They aren’t even mine, and I helped them pack lunches and cleaned up their breakfast dishes and took them to school while you snoozed. So yeah, I don’t have a real hard time feeling I’m better than you.”

“I had a migraine.”

“You’re a goddamn liar.”

Her spine straightened and her voice was cold when she declared, “I think we’re done.”

“You think?” I asked and made a move to get out of there.

“Ryn,” she called.

I stopped at the door.

And I braced at the catty look on her face.

“Forget seeing my kids again,” she said.

My stomach plummeted.

“Ang—”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate, them hanging around an aunt who strips for a living.”

Two could hit below the goddamned belt.

“You know,” I said quietly, “a mystery is unraveling. Suddenly, with this new, awesome you that you’re showing me, I’m finding it not so difficult to believe my brother preferred to spend time at the bottom of a bottle.”

“Fuck you, Ryn,” she snapped.

“You’ve already fucked me, Angelica. Ongoing for five years. But if you don’t allow me to see those kids, knowing what they mean to me, what I mean to them, after all I’ve done for them, *for you*, you’ll be killing me. More, if you care, you’ll be taking something crucial *from them*. Think about that, if you can tear yourself away from thinking about nothing but you.”

So, apparently, Boone wasn’t the only one who could deliver an awesome parting shot.

Because with that, I turned and walked right out.

“Hey, Rinz, you okay?”

I looked to the side, at Hattie, my friend and fellow stripper, who was sitting three makeup stations down from mine.

Her attention on me.

I knew why she was asking.

One, I was not a girl who hid her mood.

I wasn't bitchy or impolite, I just kept to myself.

But don't get up in my face when I wasn't feeling you, or my lock on those two things went out the window.

Two, I was putting *on* a thick coat of red lipstick rather than taking it off.

And Hattie noticed.

Our shift was over at Smithie's. Last call was done and gone, and the bouncers were clearing the place out while the girls were in our dressing room, showering or wiping down and changing in order to go home.

I usually showered. I didn't like getting oil all over my civvies.

Also, I endeavored total makeup removal with hydration at the end of a shift, because I was no raving beauty, but I wasn't tough to look at and I wanted my skin to serve me well...and for a long time.

But I was not preparing to go home and crash.

I was preparing to go out and get laid.

I'd only told my closest friend and fellow stripper Pepper about some of my more interesting life pursuits. The rest of my posse, Hattie and Evie, didn't know (I didn't think). Though Lottie guessed, I knew, since she picked Boone for me.

And fortunately, Pepper wasn't there, because she was the kind of chick who got up in my face about my moods.

Loved the woman, but that was annoying.

Hattie was soft-spoken, often just plain quiet, and with dudes (at least ones she was attracted to), she was shy.

Her breaking this ice was unusual.

"I'm good," I said, turning back to the mirror, adding another coat of ruby red and then rubbing my lips together before I finished with a *smack*.

"You know, if you need to talk about anything, I'm a good listener," Hattie said.

I looked to her again, understood the depth of her concern was what was making her crawl out of her protective shell to take a chance and broach things with me, pushed up to my feet and walked her way.

I then bent down to press my forehead to hers and pulled away, lying, “Honestly, I’m good. Really. Just some stuff on my mind. But it’ll sort itself out.”

If I blackmail my niece and nephew’s mother into allowing me to spend time with them by holding those photos over her head, I did not add.

I went back to my station, avoiding the eyes of the other gals with us, Dominique and Champagne, thankful Lottie’s set was over a while ago and she’d gone home, so she wasn’t around to interrogate me. Because she wasn’t one of those in-your-face sister friends. But she was the queen of our hive and she didn’t let shit slide for very long.

I tossed out a fake-breezy good-bye to everyone as I took off.

Smithie always had a bouncer waiting at the end of the hall to walk us to our cars.

That night, it was Dorian, and I realized I was really not keeping my shit tight when, after I opened my car door, he asked, “Things smooth?”

I looked up into his brown eyes in his handsome mocha face and lied, “Always.”

Dorian didn’t like my answer, but he’d been at Smithie’s for a while, was actually family (he was Smithie’s nephew), so he knew not to push it.

At least with me.

He shut my door after I folded in, slapped his hand on my roof, and shared he wasn’t all that thrilled with me blowing off his attempt to look after me by standing in the parking lot and watching me drive away with a look on his face so broody, I could see it in my rearview mirror.

As soon as I could when I was away from the club, I pulled over, and reached to my GPS.

I was involved in a few BDSM groups. It wasn’t frequent, but it was regular that there were parties happening and we’d get the news of them via group texts.

Parties as in scenes. Get-togethers of tight-knit, vetted players, where you could find a play partner and they were safe.

I’d searched out these groups and jumped through their hoops after that Dom who was a little too into pain and did not play by the rules got done with me (or I got done with him).

I didn’t go often, but a girl had to get off, and if she could, she had to do it the way she liked.

Pepper knew about this arrangement and didn’t like it. She thought it was dangerous.

She also knew about Bad Dom, and she wasn't in the life, so this was why she thought it was dangerous.

It wasn't.

At least these folks weren't.

That said, truth be told, I was only twenty-nine, not exactly ancient, but still, I was kinda done with the scene.

I wanted a man all my own.

And in that particular capacity, I wanted to belong to somebody who did it for me.

Variety, I was finding, was not the spice of life.

But I'd had a tough day and finding someone who could put me through my paces, even if he wasn't great at it, as long as it ended in a climax...

Well, I needed it.

I needed to let go.

I needed to give over.

I needed to let someone else work it out of me.

Tonight's party was at Corinne's. Small, intimate, but there would be a new sub, and two new Doms.

Man, I hoped one of those Doms held promise, and he was into me, because I was a deft hand with my vibrator, and that baby got a lot of use, but lately, it was getting old.

I also hoped, even though it was officially tomorrow, my shitty day would have a decent end.

I'd only been to Corinne's place a couple of times, so I needed to find her address in the GPS.

She lived out in Englewood in a massive six thousand square foot house. She was married, she and her hubby were swingers, they liked to watch other people going at their spouses, among other things, and even though she was a Domme (so she rode the other side of my fence), we got on and I liked her.

We had a lot in common. And I admired the fact they were in that six thousand square foot house not only because her husband owned a mortgage company that specialized in jumbo loans, but mostly because she was an attorney that specialized in kicking ass in the courtroom.

I found her address in my GPS, scheduled the route guidance to go, and pulled back out onto the street.

It was late, but I hadn't received the text the doors were closed, and with functions like these, they didn't start getting really going until midnight or later, so I thought the party was not over.

But when I arrived, there were only five cars in their massive drive.

It happened that people connected and took off to do their thing elsewhere.

Corinne had a playroom where she allowed multiple-person play, so it also happened that folks connected in her basement and, when they were done, they'd come back up to the common areas to have a drink.

She further had a guestroom where she allowed private play, and ditto with the done and drink.

The previous parties I'd been to at her pad had ended in Corinne laying out an expansive breakfast for stragglers, of which there were several, including me, and I hadn't left until nearly ten in the morning.

True, it was three thirty in the morning now, but all the lights were on.

As I was sitting in my car, I saw the front door open, Corinne silhouetted in the light coming from the house behind her, and she was giving me a beckoning gesture.

Okay.

Weird.

She was a friendly person and I hadn't seen her as a Domme (I didn't do the multi-player gig), but even though I RSVPed earlier that day, it seemed strange that she was waiting on me.

Being hostess and participant, even with only a few guests left, I couldn't imagine why she was looking out for me.

Maybe it was because she'd scoped out the new Doms and she thought one of them would suit me.

On this thought, suddenly, I wanted to put the car in reverse and go.

This wasn't right.

Because it wasn't Boone.

And that thought was just plain stupid.

He wasn't mine.

He would never be mine.

And after that morning, I wasn't even sure I liked him.

And he was less and less sure he liked me (buh).

What I knew, though, was I no longer felt like getting laid.

I didn't feel like socializing either, going in for a drink, getting looked over.

This was a bad idea.

I didn't even know what'd I'd been thinking.

But there was no getting out of it now. I'd RSVPed, Corinne saw me and was waving me in.

It'd be rude not to go in for a drink.

I'd do that, then I could go home to my vibrator and later, get my ass to a kickboxing class and work the rest of it out of my system.

I got out and walked up the winding flagstone walkway.

"Hey there, I think I texted this, but had a shift at the club, that's why I'm so late," I greeted when I got close.

Corinne opened the door further, and I wondered if she'd done her thing with whoever she'd chosen, because she was not in her normal, classy, formfitting dress and heels. She was in lounge pants, a tank and a fashionable, zip-up sports hoodie, with bare feet.

"Not a problem," she muttered, looking down at her toes.

Weird again.

Doms, and Dommies, were all about eye contact.

It was a sub who often wasn't allowed to look their Dom in the eye, depending on their instructions.

Though, Corinne had a rule that her common space was free space. Getting-to-know-you space. You slipped into your scene only when you were in her play space.

I stopped in her foyer with its enormous chandelier, looked into her brightly lit, humongous, but vacant great room, and turned in confusion as she closed and locked the door.

It was when she caught my eyes, a chill trailed down my spine, and she whispered, "I'm sorry. He's a client you don't say no to."

"What?" I whispered back.

And that was when I felt a cold press of steel against my temple.

My eyeballs shifted left and I saw the gun.

My first inclination was to freeze, which I did.

The second was to run, which I did *not*.

What was happening?

“He’s in here and he’s waiting,” the man holding the gun stated.

“He...who?” I forced out.

He (thankfully) took the gun from my skin and used it to indicate a direction.

I looked in that direction.

There were double doors that had always been closed when Corinne had parties.

Now they were open.

“Let’s go, he’s been waiting a long time,” the man said.

I looked to him, glanced at Corinne in a way I hoped it made her mess herself, wondering if Pepper was right about this life, it was filled with all sorts of losers and I should be done with it.

Then on lead feet, I moved toward the double doors, not knowing, or wanting to know, what lay beyond.

I mean, had I been looked over by these assholes and was now going to be sold into slavery, disappeared, never to see the kids again, my mom, my brother, my posse, Smithie...

Boone?

Was I going to be forced to be some kind of drug mule?

I mean, the possibilities were endless and the ones that ran through my head in those moments I walked across Corinne’s stately foyer were all unfun.

Until I hit the double doors and saw a man who was called Cisco sitting in one of two accent chairs in a semi-circular alcove in what was definitely a luxe home office.

He stood and smiled at me like we were old friends who ran into each other on the street.

Instead of what we were.

A couple months ago, he’d kidnapped me, Evie, Pepper and Hattie.

And some time before that, he’d killed a cop.

So we were not friends.

We were nothing.

At all.

“We meet again,” he declared expansively.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Come in and sit.” He gestured to Corinne’s accent chair that was opposite his like he’d picked it out himself.

“I don’t—”

“Kathryn, come and sit down. It’s late. I’m tired. And the longer I’m here, which has so far been a long fuckin’ time, the more exposed I feel, and I’m not likin’ that.”

Cop killer, kidnapper, bad guy Cisco not liking something, I didn’t know, I didn’t have a lot of experience with fugitives at large, but I reckoned that was a bad thing.

I didn’t seem in immediate danger he was going to bust a cap in my ass, or elsewhere, so I moved in.

I stopped and twisted when his henchman closed the double doors behind me with said henchman on the other side.

“Kathryn, you’ve been dancing. You gotta be tired. Come. Sit down,” he invited.

I looked back to him, then walked cautiously his way and sat down.

He sat down too.

“You look well,” Cisco noted.

“Uh...thanks,” I replied.

I did not tell him he looked well.

There were, I imagined, a number of women who would find someone attractive who looked villainous and pugnacious. And he had a good body. Not to mention, he was tall.

I just wasn’t one of those women.

“I like your lipstick,” he noted.

Ugh.

“Again, thanks,” I mumbled.

“I’ve been in hiding,” he shared.

“Yes, I imagined,” I muttered, considering the cops had his gun, with his prints, a weapon that he used to kill another cop.

I would hide too, if I did something so hideous, and the cops, literally, had the smoking gun.

“How’s Evan?” he asked.

Oh shit.

I forgot he had a crush on Evie.

Was that what this was about?

“Uh...good. Happy. All moved in and loved up with Mag. Starting school in a couple of weeks. Gonna get her degree. So she’s *real* good. Better than ever.”

He tipped his dark head to the side. “You like this Mag guy for her?”

“Yeah.” I bobbed my head. “Totally. Great guy. He loves her a lot. Shows it. Protective. Takes good care of her.”

“Mm,” he hummed, slouching back in his chair, putting his elbows on the arms, linking his fingers in front of him, appearing like an overgrown, sulking child.

“I...uh, am I here so you could ask after Evie?”

His focus had dimmed, but my question made his attention sharpen on me.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “And I wanted you to tell her I said hey.”

I sat there, immobile, and stared at the man.

Corinne had somehow faked a BDSM party that I foolishly RSVPed to. I was here. It was closing in on four o'clock in the morning. I'd had the single worst day of at least my last five years of life (maybe ten). And some fugitive from justice crime lord arranged all this just so he could use me to tell my girlfriend he said hey?

“You know, it'd be a big favor, especially to Evie, and I hope you take no offense,” I began. “I hope you get this is coming from a sister looking out for her sister, but she's happy. She's had a shitty life. And now she's happy. Honest to goodness, day in, day out happy. So it'd be cool if you let her have that happy without messing it up.”

My speech about Evie being happy didn't make Cisco happy.

But he didn't comment on that.

He said, “That's another reason you're here. I wanted to share with you, so you'd share with others, that I didn't do what you...and *she*...think I did.”

I said nothing to that.

“In fact, Evan isn't the only reason you're here. I have another message for you to deliver.”

Okay, how did I become this guy's messenger girl?

I mean, seriously.

I thought I'd already had a bad day.

But this whole scene was a new definition of a *bad freaking day*.

“Listen, Cisco—”

“Please, call me Brett,” he allowed.

I didn't want to call him anything.

I shifted in my seat, uncertain how to play this.

He was seemingly mellow.

The henchman with the gun was behind the double doors.

But I didn't want to upset that applecart because he was a man who'd order someone to guide a woman into a room with a gun to her head, and I wasn't the only one in our tribe who'd had that happen to her. He'd had a minion do it to Pepper during our kidnapping.

What I wanted was to get the hell out of here, do it still breathing, and get home, lock myself in, pull out my Taser and consider, after the day I had, moving to Maine before I fell asleep, Taser clenched in my hand.

"You were gonna say something," Cisco prompted.

"I've had a bad day."

I watched his head tick and I knew why.

My voice was suddenly strange in a way I'd never heard it be before.

Small.

Defeated.

"Like, a *really* bad day," I told him.

"Kathryn—"

"Ryn," I whispered.

Was I going insane, or did his eyes just warm?

Something about the fact that I couldn't deny it, his eyes had just warmed, made me blather on.

"My brother's a raging, uncontrolled alcoholic. With two kids. Two kids I adore. And I found out today his ex is a swindler who's been fleecing me for years, making her kids eat Cap'n Crunch and running out of food and laying it on thick so I'd take them shopping for clothes, while she's off using the money I gave her to have massages."

"Jesus," he said, sounding stunned as well as annoyed.

"I know, right?" I replied. "And I *liked* her. She wasn't just my niece and nephew's mom. She was a friend. I've known her for years. I can't say she's like a sister, because she's been having a pity party for a while now, and it's been getting aggravating. But I care about her. And now that I confronted her with the whole fleecing-me thing, she's threatening that she won't let me see the kids anymore."

I leaned forward in my chair, put my hand to my chest and kept blabbing, laying all my shit on this felonious dude who'd had one of his men put a gun to my head.

But I guessed when you had to get it out, it didn't matter who you were getting it out to.

"And those are my *babies*," I banged on my chest. "With Ang checked out like she's been, I've been like a *mom* to them." I leaned back. "Well, one of three of moms, my mom and Ang's mom have helped. But *still*."

"You learned that today?" he asked.

"Yeah, and I found all this out because this guy I like was looking into it because he's kinda, sorta a friend, when I want him to be *more* than a friend and I want that in a *big* way. You know what I'm saying?"

He nodded. "Mm-hmm. I know."

"But I was stupid, and I said no when he asked me out, so he moved on and got himself another woman, but he threw down with me today and he's pissed I got pissed that he was investigating my brother's ex. But I wasn't really pissed. I was shocked and hurt at Angelica, and you know, kind of mad he gave up so easily and went off and found someone else. I took all that out on him, so we had words and he pretty much told me he doesn't like me anymore."

"Going easy here, girl, but if he wanted you, he wouldn't have given up after asking you out only once."

"He actually did it three times."

Cisco/Brett's brows shot up. "And you shot him down three times?"

I made an *EEK!* face.

"I assume you know that wasn't smart," he muttered.

"Well, you know," I threw out my hands, "what am I supposed to do? He's *perfect*. He's handsome and he's got a good job and he swings the way I don't swing, if you know Corinne, you get what I'm sayin'."

One nod. "I get what you're sayin'."

"And he's super sweet to Evie and Lottie and what do I do with that, hunh?"

"At this juncture I'll remind you I got a dick, not a vagina, so my answer is bound to be wrong, but I'd start with saying yes when he asks you to go out with him."

Had he lost his mind?

"You don't get it," I huffed, looking away, crossing my arms on my chest and slouching in my own chair.

"You're right. I don't."

I sighed.

“All this happened today?” he asked again.

I looked to him. “Yeah, though I hadn’t gotten to the part where I had to do my stripping shift and then I got bamboozled into a semi-kidnapping.”

“You haven’t been kidnapped,” he said flatly.

“I had a gun held to my head.”

“I really gotta tell the boys to stop doin’ that shit to you girls,” he mumbled.

“Brett!” I snapped. “Seriously?”

“They get overzealous. I think they’ve seen too many movies.”

“Am I free to leave?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Sure, though I’d prefer you didn’t since we got more conversating to do.”

“But if I left, no one would shoot me.”

He pushed out an exasperated breath on his, “Hell no.”

“Then yeah, it’s time for a training sesh with the boys because guns may seem like accessories to you, but to those of us not in the life, they’re scary as shit.”

He inclined his head. “Point taken.”

“And I’m kinda tired and I realized when I got here that I shouldn’t come because I’m into this guy and we haven’t even kissed and he’s still ruined me for all other guys so I just want to go home and freak out I had a gun held to my head, then go to sleep. In other words, my sharing time is over. It’s your turn.”

“I did not kill Tony Crowley.”

Well, hell.

I sat still and said quietly, “That’s not a lot of words, but that’s a lot of sharing, Brett.”

“It’s important that’s understood.”

“Who’s Tony Crowley?”

“The cop who was investigating the filth in the Denver PD who got capped because he was getting close to somebody and whoever capped him stole my gun to do it. A gun that naturally, as it was mine, had my prints on it. I’ve been framed.”

Well...

Hell.

“You didn’t kill that police officer that everyone thinks you killed?”

“I did not.”

“You were framed.”

“I was.”

“And you’re saying it was another cop, a dirty one, who killed this Crowley guy.”

“I am.”

“Holy shit, Brett,” I whispered.

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“You know, they’re totally not gonna believe you,” I shared.

“I do know this. That’s why you have to relay this information to Hawk Delgado so he can look into this shit and get me outta hiding. It’s not like I have an office I can’t sit my ass in because I’ve been forced underground, but bein’ smoke is hindering my ability to earn, and I’m not down with that.”

“I don’t know if you know this, but it’s my understanding Delgado’s two best buds are cops. And I’m not tight with the guy at all, but you kidnapped one of his boys’ girlfriends. I haven’t been around him a lot, but he seems to like his boys. So he hasn’t shared, but I’d hazard a guess Hawk isn’t your biggest fan.”

“His business has interfered with mine on a more frequent basis than I’d like so I’m not his biggest fan either,” Brett returned. “But there’s a snake in the grass at the DPD. And when that’s the way, everyone gets bit in the ass.”

At this point, he leaned toward me, putting his elbows to his knees and tipping his head back to keep contact with my eyes.

“And, Ryn, darlin’, I would be sure to remind him, his two best buds who are cops got a seat right smack in the middle of that garden party.”

Well...

Fuck.

Chapter Three

Catch You Later

Ryn

I sat on my bed in the early morning dawn, Taser in my hand, and after getting the fifth “I’m sorry” text from Corinne that I did not reply to, I blocked her ass.

Then I checked my bedside clock, my phone clock, and I did this for the fifty-millionth time.

When it hit six (bedside clock first), and it was finally only semi-rude to do what I was going to do next, I went to contacts, scrolled down to Danny Magnusson and hit go.

His deep voice was sleepy, and I felt a tinge of envy at the fact it was also all kinds of sexy, when Mag answered, “Ryn, hey. Everything cool?”

“Cisco semi-kidnapped me again last night,” I blurted.

There was zero sleepy, but a whole load more sexy, when he demanded low, “Talk to me.”

“Well, see...”

I trailed off because, shit.

I couldn’t tell him I was headed out to a sex party.

Dammit.

I tried again.

“Okay, well, I was going to see friends after work last night and apparently one of my friends is legal counsel for Brett so when he said he wanted to chat, she set me up to chat.”

“Jesus Christ, are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Where was this?”

“A house in Englewood. But listen, Mag, he’s long gone by now. I got home a couple hours ago.”

Total silence, though after a length of it, I heard in the background Evie asking, “Is Ryn all right?”

“Yeah, baby, give us a minute,” I heard Mag answering. It took a few more seconds I imagined him climbing out of bed and moving away from Evie before he came back to me. “Let me get this straight, you waited two hours to call me after Cisco kidnapped you again?”

“I thought it’d be rude to call earlier.”

Mag said nothing.

“And anyway, it wasn’t that kind of kidnapping,” I told him.

“What kind of kidnapping was it?”

The kind where the bad guy, maybe not bad guy listened, played therapist, shared truths and generally was a pretty decent dude, notwithstanding the gun-to-the-head part, which wasn’t his fault.

“The friendly kind?” I asked as answer.

“Ryn—”

“Mag, he told me he didn’t kill Tony Crowley,” I declared. “He said he’s been framed.”

“Of course he said that shit, Ryn.”

“Well, call me crazy, but honestly, I believed him.”

Mag again said nothing, and I visualized him standing in the condo he shared with Evie working really hard not to call me crazy.

I lowered my voice like someone could hear me when I shared, “He says there are dirty cops behind this.”

“Fucking *fuck*,” Mag bit off.

Ohmigod.

“Are there dirty cops?” I asked hesitantly. “Do you know?”

“No, I don’t, but that shit is dark and even if there’s zero-point-one percent possibility it’s true, this is not good.”

“I thought the same thing,” I agreed. Then I went on, “He said the cop who got killed, Crowley, was getting close to something. He said Crowley was investigating the bad cops. Brett definitely shared it was a cop who killed him, though not which one. He also wanted me to be sure Hawk knew all of this. He wants you guys looking into it. But now I’m not thinking that’s a good idea.”

“Hawk isn’t in the practice of doing favors for felons.”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“So, why are you the go-between on this?” he asked.

“Well, because we have a mutual acquaintance, I suppose. I didn’t...” I blew out a breath. “Okay, at first, I was freaked way the fuck out. But he was actually very cool and when it was all done, he gave me a...”

I couldn't believe I was going to say my next like I couldn't believe it was happening when it happened.

But it happened.

And when it happened, Brett proved he was good at it.

"Hug."

"Christ," Mag clipped.

"It was very strange, but it was also kinda nice because I'd had a really bad day," I shared.

"Danny," I heard Evie in the background. "What's going on? Is everything okay with Ryn?"

"She's fine, honey, let me get what I need from her and I'll fill you in," Mag said to Evie.

Then to me, "You said the person who set this up was his attorney?"

"Yeah."

"Privilege," he muttered.

"You wanna go after him," I deduced.

"Ryn, he's kidnapped you, now twice, and Evie and the others once."

It was about Evie.

Brett had kidnapped Evie and it had nearly sent Mag over the edge.

He didn't care that Brett was innocent (maybe) of this (particular) crime.

He wanted him caught.

"Well, her name is Corinne Morton and I can send you her address," I offered.

"I can find it," he said. "Is that all?"

He wants me to say hey to your girlfriend from him.

"Yup."

He paused then asked, "You sure you're okay? You need us to come around?"

Such a good dude.

"I'll call Evie later, set up some girl time. I haven't seen her in a while. Catch her up with life.

But other than that, all cool."

"Sure?"

No.

But that wasn't Mag's sitch.

"Yeah," I lied.

"You said you had a bad day."

And there it was. More envy.

I mean, what guy heard that and remembered it and asked about it?

Mag did.

I wondered if Boone would.

I'd never find out.

But in the now, I had to rest in the knowledge that my friend had a guy like that.

So that was what I did.

“That was yesterday, today is today. And odds are slim I'll get kidnapped again so it's already destined to be better.”

“You wanna set something up with Evie now?” he asked.

“Later, babe,” I said. “I'm wiped. Danced last night. Then there was the semi-kidnapping. I need sleep.”

“Right, I'll tell her you'll call. May have some follow-up questions, Ryn. But if they come, I'll wait until later to get in touch.”

“That'd be appreciated.”

“Later, Ryn.”

“Later, Mag. Tell Evie I said hello and give her a hug from me.”

“Done.”

We hung up and I studied my phone for a second before I set it on the charging pad on my nightstand.

Then I took my Taser with me when I got up to change into a nightie.

I also took my Taser with me when I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

And I still had my Taser with me when I returned to my bedroom, drew all the blinds, closed the door, turned on my fan (gotta have my white noise to sleep), got under the covers and pulled them up to my chin.

I knew sleep wasn't going to come easy, so there was a lot of tossing and turning (all with my fingers clenched around the Taser).

But sooner than I would have imagined, I felt sleep overwhelming me.

This right when there was a great thundering at my front door.

I jerked awake, prickles forming over my skin, thoughts crashing through my head of Brett having more to impart or dirty cops thinking I knew something and coming after me, when I heard shouted, “Kathryn! Open this fucking door!”

Holy shit.

Boone.

I threw the covers back and absently took the Taser with me as I rushed out of my room and down the hall.

All while Boone kept pounding and shouting at me to open the door.

This only stopped when he heard the deadbolt go.

I opened the door.

“Jeez, Boone, I’ve got neigh—”

I got no more out because Boone rushed me.

I dropped the Taser, tripped over my feet while retreating, almost fell to my ass, and while I was righting myself, he twisted, slammed my door, locked it...

And then it was back to the rush and retreat.

This time, I stumbled over the edge of the rug in my living room, but I didn’t go down because Boone’s arm sliced around my waist and he hauled me to his body, to which I collided with a thud.

I didn’t get the chance to process how good Boone’s tall, hard body felt plastered to mine.

His face was in my face.

And he was *pissed*.

“You get kidnapped, Kathryn, the...fucking...*instant* you get free, you...fucking...*call me*,” he gritted.

“I-I don’t actually have your number,” I whispered.

“*Fuck!*” he barked in my face.

I stood trembling in his hold, staring at him by the light of dawn coming from around my living room shades, wondering how, in less than twenty-four hours, my life had gone completely insane.

When he said nothing, just glowered down at me, I assured, “I’m all right, Boone.”

“You know what it’s like to get a call from your brother that tells you he just had a firefight in the parking lot of Cherry Creek Shopping Center, the woman you want in your bed was in the line of fire, he had to stand down, and they took her?”

Oh man.

That was me in that parking lot prior to my last kidnapping by Cisco.

“No,” I answered.

“Not...” his face got even closer, “*good*.”

I could have guessed that, though I had to admit, I didn’t think about it.

Until now.

“And now he got to you again?” he asked.

“He had a message to relay.”

“I don’t give a fuck what he had,” he bit. “Email. Phone. Sky writing. Goddamn carrier pigeon. He does not corner you.”

“It’s over, Boone, and I’m okay. It wasn’t that bad.”

“There is not a single kidnapping that is not *bad*.”

Yesterday, I would agree with that statement.

Now, I could argue that because I was actually fighting liking Brett. He seemed pretty cool.

I did not share these thoughts with Boone.

“Do you get what’s happening here?” he asked.

“Well, he said that he didn’t kill that—”

I stopped speaking abruptly when his free hand came up, sifted into the back of my hair, and then gripped it.

I thought he had my total attention before.

But that grip on my hair sent electricity shooting from my roots to my toes with extra concentration between my legs, and I reckoned my eyes would start bleeding, he had so much of my attention.

“That’s not what I mean, Ryn,” he stated.

“What do you mean, Boone?” I whispered.

“Do you *get*...” His face got even *closer*. So close, the side of his nose slid down the side of mine and I could feel his breath on my lips. “...what is *happening here*?”

Okay.

Really.

I was a pretty tough chick.

But...

I give.

I could take no more.

I mean, how could this day get more whacked?

Or, as it was, a new day *start* this whacked?

“You’ve already been mean to me in the last twenty-four hours, Boone,” I told him in a weak voice. “I can hack a lot, but I ca...” unsurprisingly, that weak voice broke, but I pulled it together, “I can’t take anymore.”

I watched and could swear I felt his lashes sweep down when he closed his eyes.

“I lost the kids.”

His eyes opened and his head moved back a smidge.

“What?” he asked.

“I confronted Angelica. She says she’s not going to let me see the kids anymore. I had her using me this morning. You up in my shit right after. Her taking the kids away from me after that. Work. Cisco. Now you again, totally pissed at me. I can’t. I’m tired. And I’m freaked out. And I just *can’t*. Not today. Not from you. Especially from you. No more.”

His fist loosened in my hair, but he didn’t let it go, so I felt my hair, and his knuckles, glide along my jaw.

It felt amazing.

God!

Didn’t he hear me?

I couldn’t take anymore.

“You gotta go,” I said.

“Ryn, I’m seein’ you are not taking in what’s going on here.”

“You’re pissed at me again. And I can’t believe I have to point out that *I* didn’t kidnap me.”

“When did you call Mag?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe half an hour ago.”

“And where am I right now?”

I blinked, repeatedly, fast.

Oh.

“It sinks in,” he said softly.

“You told me you didn’t like me not twenty-four hours ago.”

“I was pissed at you not twenty-four hours ago,” he returned. “I want to take you out to dinner. I want to take you to my bed. And eventually, I wanna tie you to it. And I’m used to getting what I want.”

My toes curled.

My mind rebelled.

“You have a woman.”

“I’m seeing someone, and like I said, it isn’t exclusive. She sees other guys. She probably fucks other guys. That’s not my business because, again, we are *not exclusive*. And what I do isn’t her business either.”

Seriously?

He was *just not getting* that I could *take no more*.

“So...what? You want me to be the other woman?” I asked.

His head jerked.

“Thanks, Boone. That clears things up about how you feel about me. It’s all better now.”

He was back to speaking softly when he said, “That’s not what I meant.”

“You’re not getting it either,” I shared.

“I’m not getting what?”

“I don’t wanna be that to you.”

At that, for some reason, his beautifully formed lips twitched (don’t think I hadn’t noticed his lips, *frequently*), he dipped his head again, not as close as before, but close, and he said, “Ryn, sweetheart, we both know that’s a lie.”

“No, I mean, I don’t want to be the other woman. I don’t wanna be your spare piece of ass. I don’t want to vie with some other chick for your attention, with some vague hope I’ll win out in the end. I don’t want to wonder the last time your mouth was on hers when it’s on mine. Or when your dick was in her, when you’re inside me.”

“Ryn—”

“I want someone to be *mine*,” I stressed. “I really do. But before that, I want them to actually give a shit enough to work at winning me. Not making a passing attempt and then expect me to come to heel. I think you know I’m a sub, Boone. What I’m not is a doormat.”

He had nothing to say to that, he just stared down at me.

“And while we’re sharing,” I kept going, even though he wasn’t exactly sharing, at least not as deeply as I was about to, but to end this and maybe get some peace, I was going to. “I had two guys in my life for decent chunks of time, and they both ended up treating me like shit because I opened myself up to them and confided about my appetites. And they thought it was lame, or sick, or whatever they thought. What they made clear they thought is it gave them license to treat me like dirt. And I got hooked up with a shit Dom who ignored my safe word and took things too far and—”

“Stop,” he clipped.

“I’d like this, whatever it is, to be over, Boone. So let me say what I gotta say.”

“You had a Dom ignore your safe word?”

Okay.

Well, hell.

I was on such a roll, I forgot to pay attention to him.

With the feeling beating off him, and into *me*, I made note never to do that again.

“As you can see, I’m all right,” I assured.

“Name,” he grunted.

“What?”

I jumped when he suddenly thundered, “*What’s his goddamn name, Ryn!*”

For the first time ever, I touched him.

Curling my fingers around the side of his neck, I said quietly, “Calm down, Boone. I’m fine.”

“Give me his name, Kathryn, because if you don’t, I’ll find him anyway and be in an even worse mood.”

“Laszlo,” I muttered.

“Last name.”

“Boone—”

“Last name, Kathryn,” he clipped.

“Kovack.”

“Right,” he ground out.

Curiosity won over my need to end this torture, so I asked, “What are you gonna do to him?”

“He clearly didn’t have the proper training for the scene. So I’m gonna make sure he gets it.”

He wasn’t wrong about that first.

However.

“That’s not much detail.”

“That’s my way of saying you don’t wanna know, and you’re not gonna know, Ryn.”

I heard his tone, saw his face, and thus mumbled, “Gotcha.”

Honestly, I didn’t feel too badly about Laszlo catching Boone’s bad mood. Trust was paramount between Dom and sub. He didn’t break *a* rule ignoring my safe word. He broke *the* rule.

And he was probably still doing it to other unsuspecting girls like me.

Though I reckoned he wouldn’t after Boone got done with him.

“Can we be finished now?” I requested.

“No. Do you dance tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Do you dance tomorrow night?”

“No.”

“We’re going out to dinner tomorrow night.”

At this declaration, Brett’s words came to me, *I’d start with saying yes when he asks you to go out with him.*

But, I just...

Couldn’t.

“I can’t,” I told him.

“You got plans?”

“No, but—”

“Then we’re going out to dinner.”

“We’re not, Boone.”

“This dance is over, Kathryn.” He took his hand from my hair to curve his fingers around mine at his neck in order to make his point. “Are you not seein’ that?”

I tried to pull my hand free.

Boone didn't let me.

"Let me go, Boone."

"Ryn, baby—"

"I can't do this," I said.

"We'll talk at dinner."

"No, we won't because we're not having dinner."

"Kathryn—"

"I can't do this."

He snapped his mouth shut so fast, I thought I heard his teeth clack.

I knew why.

I heard my tone.

It was like it was when I got Brett's attention.

Small.

Defeated.

But worse.

A lot worse.

Because this wasn't Brett I really needed to listen to me.

It was Boone.

"I liked those guys," I whispered. "I wouldn't have given them chunks of my life if I didn't. And in the end, they treated me like trash."

His fingers still around mine squeezed.

"My own father stood me up for the Kiwanis club father-daughter dance."

His face softened.

Man.

Seriously.

That face?

I was totally at my end.

"Sweetheart," he murmured.

"Or whatever club it was, I don't even know because I didn't really know my father because he wasn't around often enough to get to know and that was his choice."

"Ryn."

“Bad Dom thought he could do whatever he wanted to me.”

“*Ryn.*”

“My brother’s an alcoholic. I lost him years ago. He let his wife go, his kids. He let me go, Boone. He didn’t just slip away. He let us go.”

“Christ, baby,” he whispered.

“I can’t with you,” I whispered back. “I just can’t with you. Because you’re beautiful.”

He stilled.

“You’re so beautiful, sometimes I look at you and I can’t believe my eyes.”

Closing his own eyes, he turned his head to the side, lifting my hand and pressing it to his mouth so I could feel his lips against my palm.

Really he did not get that I could take no more.

And he needed to *get it*.

“I need to be wanted,” I told him. “I need to be loved. I need to be *won*. You have another woman. I’m already second runner up. A man like you...with a man like you, I can’t, Boone. I can’t have and not have a man like you. It would tear me apart. I can’t have and maybe win and then maybe lose a man like you. That would destroy me. So I just can’t.”

His fingers closed around mine tight and he put my hand to the base of his throat, turning back to face me, and *God*.

I could live forever in the green of his eyes.

But I couldn’t.

Because I wouldn’t.

If I started this with him, he wouldn’t even be mine.

But I simply couldn’t start, because I wouldn’t be able to take the end.

I was winding up to the finish, which I hoped would lead to him leaving so I could shave my head or shove needles under my fingernails or something infinitely more enjoyable than getting it through Boone’s handsome, but thick head that we were not gonna happen.

So I said, “I’m good with what I’ve got. I’d rather have nothing than take a risk at losing everything.”

“All right, Kathryn.”

And there you go.

He was just giving up.

And I got it.

I wasn't worth it.

Dad had taught me that a long time ago.

And since Dad, the hits kept coming.

So it was just going to be me.

The stripper in the shitty apartment with a rotting house she never had time to fix up.

But I was going to find the time.

I was going to make something of myself.

Just for me.

"Baby?"

I stopped feeling sorry for myself and focused on Boone.

Not five minutes before, I'd made note not to lose focus on Boone.

And there I was doing it again.

I should not have forgotten.

His mouth came down on mine.

I thought maybe it was some weird, kinda-friends, kinda-not, should-be-lovers, but-weren't, never-gonna-happen good-bye kiss.

I realized it was not when his tongue came out and he traced the crease of my lips with the tip.

They opened.

Really, there was no way I could have kept them closed.

Just a taste.

I'd give myself just a taste.

A taste of Boone.

Even if that tasted like never.

He slid his tongue inside, and he didn't taste like never.

He tasted rich and decadent and heady and hot and *male*.

And he kissed like Boone.

Man and alpha and strength and protector and *Dom*.

Without a fight, without even a thought, I submitted to his tongue and his mouth and his kiss and *him*.

I was holding onto him, yielding to the plunder, my legs trembling, my breasts swelling, my nipples tingling, my sex drenching, when he lifted his mouth from mine.

With an eyeful of nothing but green, I heard him say, “Lock up after me, sweetheart. Get some sleep. I’ll catch you later.”

And with that, he let me go, left me swaying in my living room....

And he was gone.

***Dream Chaser* will be released December 15, 2020.**

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