
MR. BLUE SKY

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

"MR. CUNNINGHAM, it's very nice to meet you," she said, intoning under her breath but loud enough for him to hear as she made the sign of the cross at him with her index and middle fingers, "and may God have mercy on your soul."

It was intended to be funny, of course, but he stood aside to allow her to come in, and then she allowed her hand to be enveloped in his and immediately had to suppress the desire to snatch it back.

Not that he'd crushed it with what was obviously his superior strength, nor was his hand damp with nervous perspiration—as hers most certainly was. She'd spent so long sitting out front, psyching herself to come in, that all she'd managed to do was give herself a nice panic attack. No, it was the exact opposite of those two things that was her problem.

Instead, his hand was warm, squeezing hers with a grip that was at once both comforting and firm, such that—alarmingly quickly—she never wanted him to let it go. But even worse for her already belabored psyche, there was the

way he was looking down at her—with an intensity that made her at once uneasy and yet thoroughly welcomed, at the same time, somehow. It was as if he was quite certain she knew all the answers to life's most mysterious questions and there was nothing he'd rather do in the world but expend untold amounts of what she knew was his rare down time to sit down with her over a cup of tea and listen to her enlighten him.

An Eton and Oxford educated summa cum laude graduate listening, enraptured, to someone who had barely made it through high school. Yeah, that was definitely going to happen. If anything, it was much too likely to be the other way around.

Despite her occupation, she'd never believed in the idea that someone could get "lost" in someone else's eyes, but as of that moment, she was a doubter no more. It was a good thing he let go of her hand. If it had been up to her, they would have remained in that position until someone else came through the door.

The fact that he smelled incredible didn't help release her from his spell, either. His cologne had the usual masculine woodsy notes, but there was another scent in there, too, in the background, that kept her enthralled and guessing, making the scent wonderfully appealing and slightly mysterious, too.

It beat the hell out of the Aqua Velva she could remember her father and uncles smelling of, as they were old enough to be of the era where that was one of the few choices, besides Old Spice.

Her hand free, she felt momentarily bereft, as if she'd lost something very precious and desirable, which was patently ridiculous since this was the first time they'd ever met. Regardless, it left her a bit off balance.

"Please call me Jon. It's very nice to finally meet you, Ms. Dunham, I think." He sounded a bit skeptical, brows drawn slightly together over his patrician nose. "But why does God need to have mercy on my soul—or shouldn't I ask?"

"Call me Rachel, please," she replied, reminding herself repeatedly that whatever weird feelings he might stir in her, which she would fight tooth and nail, he would never, ever be interested in someone like her. And the easiest way to guarantee that was really just to be herself. "Oh, I just said that because it's not advisable for anyone to meet me at any time." She grinned up at him.

"Oh? Why is that?" Again, he gave her the impression that every bit of his considerable attention was focused entirely on her.

And that was a daunting thought on an entirely different level, too, considering how good looking he was. Unlike a lot of actors, he was tall—well over six feet—a little thinner than she usually liked but still well-muscled, with a full, luxurious head of black hair that was at that just-right length between too short and too long, where anyone who bothered could notice that the hair at the back of his head was trying—but not succeeding—to curl in on itself, producing, instead, a beautiful wave.

His eyes were a stunning green shade that grabbed her like his big hands might if they were involved, his complexion a bit pale for her tastes, but then, he was British. And it was all she could do not to stare indecently at his full lips.

"Well," she tapped her index finger on her own lips pensively before answering facetiously, "I'm not housebroken, I haven't had my shots, and I most definitely have distemper."

One black eyebrow rose at that, and he took an exagger-

ated step away—making her laugh—as he said in disbelief, "You're not housebroken?"

"Well, that might be a slight exaggeration. I'm housebroken now, since I really don't drink much. But when I was with my husband and we would imbibe, it was sometimes a matter of not killing myself tripping on an animal on the way to the bathroom."

"And you haven't had your shots?"

She could feel herself blushing a little. "That's a bit of exaggeration—okay, it's a lie. Like about ninety-nine percent of everything I'm going to say to you this weekend, it's really just designed to try to make you laugh. If anything, I lean towards hypochondria, truth be told, so I've had my shots and your shots and shots for things I will never encounter in this lifetime."

He laughed softly.

"But the distemper—that I definitely have! I turned forty and my sunny disposition just evaporated."

"Ah, I doubt that."

"You really shouldn't, and by the end of this weekend, I can promise you that you won't. I'll leave here about ten or so on Sunday morning, but it won't take you anywhere near that long to start counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds until I'm gone."

"I highly doubt it." He chuckled, reaching down automatically—without asking—picking up her bags, and heading towards the stairs.

"Uh, could you leave me the Shaw's bag, please? It's got stuff that goes in the kitchen," she asked.

"The Shaw's bag?" he asked, puzzled.

"Sorry. The orange bag." She'd expected him to know a bag when he'd probably never been in the grocery store where she'd gotten it.

He handed it back to her, moved to turn and continued climbing the stairs.

"Thank you for doing that." It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she could do that herself, but she didn't want to seem rude.

There'd be more than enough time for that over the weekend, she was quite sure—multiple instances of it.

"You're welcome."

She took her coat off and put it on the hall tree, then headed to the back of the house with the bag, which she put on the counter in the kitchen and immediately began to unpack the contents.

"What's all that if you don't mind my asking?"

He was in the good-sized room with her, and it immediately seemed to have gotten much smaller, somehow. Rachel was glad that she had things to do, so he was less likely to notice how nervous she was around him.

"Well, I didn't realize that your mother wasn't going to be here. We've been chatting via email and talking about chili recipes. Mine, if I do say so myself, is pretty good. So I thought I'd bring it as a meal, so that she wouldn't have to spend all weekend cooking."

"Oh, thank you. That was very thoughtful of you."

Again, with the blushing. Another thing she would have to worry about him noticing.

"Well, it's easy enough to make. I leave it relatively bland and brought a collection of hot sauces, with which you can adjust the heat to your liking. I also brought other things with which you can adulterate it—cheese, Saltines, tortilla chips, sour cream, jalapeños, some bags of Fritos so you can make Frito pie—"

"Sorry for interrupting, but what's Frito Pie?"

Rachel smiled. "I think it's a Texas thing, but don't quote

me. You take a bag of Fritos—a small, snack-sized bag—and crush them up. Then you can either butterfly it open in a bowl, or just pour them into the bottom of the bowl. Add as much chili as you want—adulterated in whatever fashion you prefer—and eat. They add a really nice crunch—and a ton of salt. I should really give bottles of a diuretic with each bowl."

He chuckled heartily. It was a positively magical sound, and she knew she could easily become addicted to it.

"You don't mind people messing with your recipe?"

"Absolutely not. I'm going to add Fritos and a bit of mild hot sauce—which seems like an oxymoron—and a ton of cheese, but you do you. The same goes for everything I've brought. Eat it, don't eat it—I couldn't care less. Whatever doesn't get eaten, I will gladly take home and live off quite happily for the next month or so."

"What else did you bring?"

"The homemade cole slaw is in the fridge. It's sweet—it's got pecans if you're allergic to nuts—and chunks of pineapple, plus raisins, in a kind of tartish sauce that offsets the sweetness. I have ingredients for cornbread, but what I like is more like corn cake, so it's the only thing I've brought that isn't homemade. I use a Jiffy cornbread mix added to a Jiffy yellow cake mix, and it comes out the way I want it." Everything was put in its rightful place, and the crock pot—which she bought in-country, so it would be the right kind of electricity—was keeping the chili nice and warm. "The nine by thirteen glass pan with the aluminum foil is a homemade sour cream coffee cake."

He actually moaned at that, and her lady parts literally contracted at the sound. "Really? You made it?"

"I did. I like to bake and cook, and I don't have anyone to do that for anymore."

Her sentence slowed and trailed off a bit at the end, and

he watched any trace of amusement leave her face as if it had never been.

The contrast was incredibly stark, and he found himself desperately wanting to help her feel better.

"Would it be okay if I had a piece with my tea?"

That seemed to snap her out of it, as he had hoped it might. "You can have it for tea, or dessert, or a midnight snack, or with breakfast. It's very good warmed with a little butter on top. But I'm the northern version of Paula Deen. I like butter with everything." Rachel moved her hands in the air down her body. "Obviously."

Jon frowned at the dig she made at herself but didn't say anything.

Suddenly, the room was quiet, and he was looking at her even more intently than he had before, which made her very self-conscious. "I'm sorry. I've only known you for seventeen seconds, and I've said a hundred thousand words. I'll shut up now."

"There's no need for that," he reassured warmly. "We're a very verbal family."

She smiled. "I know and I love it. My family is the same way." Then she corrected, "Was."

He kept stepping on land mines right and left with her. "I heard that your sister had died. I'm very sorry for your loss."

A halfhearted smile appeared on her lips, but it was gone almost as soon as he noticed it. "Thank you."

"Now it's just you and your oldest sister?"

"Yeah. Yes, I'm the youngest—that'll become glaringly apparently over the course of the weekend, too. Avery is the eldest, and she's my closest friend, really. Dar—Darleen—was the poster child for middle child syndrome. If you looked it up, there was a little picture of her next to the description. I'm a pessimist, but she had me beat, hands down. Not only

was the glass not half empty, but there was no glass, no water, no table, no room..."

His chuckle washed slowly over her, tightening her nipples. She was glad she was wearing a sweatshirt over her t-shirt. Rachel had stood that morning, looking around the room at her clothes and trying to decide whether she should dress to meet him later that day, and she had decided that she would dress casually and for comfort, instead of to impress—not that she had anything to wear that would impress him. Someone who had been on the red carpet at the Oscars would hardly be impressed by anything in her meager wardrobe.

Jon Cunningham was an acclaimed, top shelf actor who spent ninety percent of his time with the most gorgeous women on the planet—sometimes making love to them, even if it was just make believe.

There was no hope of her ever competing with that, nor would she try. She'd known her hosts—his three sisters—more than long enough that they wouldn't expect—or want—her to dress any differently.

She just had to remember to keep telling herself all of those things, apparently—especially, she was unhappy to find, the bit about him not possibly being interested in her in any way at all. Her brain had accepted that fact, even if her body hadn't.

"It must've been very hard, what with your husband and..." Too late, he realized he should have kept his fat—usually chivalrous—mouth shut. Her eyes had clouded over immediately, and she looked much more stricken than when he had mentioned her sister.

He wasn't usually such an inept idiot with women. In fact, most women found him to be quite empathetic, especially the ones to whom he had been closest.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up—"

"Don't be," she interrupted, voice broken by grief as tears filled then overflowed her eyes as she reached up and carelessly brushed them away, as if it were something she did a thousand times a day, and—at that moment—he could believe that it was. "Even though it hurts to remember him, I don't ever want to forget him."

Jon nodded slowly, wanting desperately to pull her into his arms and hold her tightly as she cried. But he didn't have the right to do that, and he seriously doubted she'd allow him to if he asked.

So he did what was probably the most merciful thing he could and said, "So you come over here from the States every year?" to change the subject and give her a chance to recover.

"Yes. It costs me about double to live here, so I go home early May each year, live like the proverbial church mouse for six months, and come back after Thanksgiving."

"How did you end up coming here?" He took a seat on one of the bar stools that was tucked under the island.

"Can I get you something? I'm going to make myself a cup of coffee."

"No, thank you." His eyes were glued to her as she moved about the kitchen, obviously having made herself to home on previous visits—she knew where everything was.

"Well, I live in Maine, and it was February, during one of the coldest winters I can remember. I was doing last call for the dog—so it was about ten-thirty or eleven or so at night, and I was standing in the backyard with her. I remember that I saw the stats for that February later that year, and the average temperature for the month was six degrees Fahrenheit."

"Brrrrrr."

"Yeah. So I'm out there, and I had glanced at the thermometer before we went out—which is always a masochistic

thing to do in Maine in the winter—and it was already twenty-five below. Which means that the dog was trying to do her business while holding all four feet in the air, and I was following her around while various body parts are freezing and falling off behind me every time I take a step. I was probably harassing her, too, because, Jesus Christ, she's finding a place to pee, not the best place to put the Eiffel Tower, for crying out loud! Pee, and let me get back into the house while I still have some of my extremities intact, for fuck's sake!"

He laughed again, and she felt her entire body suffuse with a delicious kind of warmth she hadn't felt in a long time.

"So she's finally found *the* spot and I turned to look back at the house. Our—" Rachel corrected herself ruthlessly, "—my bedroom is in the front of the house, in what should have been the living/dining room area of the house. But the room has two eight foot sliding glass doors that overlook the pond, and we wanted to see as much wildlife as we could—it's one of the few advantages to living in the middle of nowhere—so we took that big space for our bedroom. I am standing at the back of the house, and it looks absolutely dark. As if it were deserted.

"It's just me and the dog, and I felt more isolated than I ever had in that house, and suddenly I just didn't want to do another winter there."

She leaned against the island, a little ways down from him on the other side and continued, sipping on her coffee, which he'd noticed she'd put cream and a sugar substitute into.

"So, the next day, I called my sister, and I was like, 'I am going to snowbird next year. Where should I go?' Everyone in New England goes down to Florida—it's a straight shot down I95—hell, 95 begins in Maine and ends in Florida. But

my folks had a house down there, and I don't know. It's just meh as far as I'm concerned. I've lived in Albuquerque and Texas, and I loved both places. Oregon, too, but not enough to move back, I didn't think. Then my sister calls me back the next day and says one word: 'England'. And I was like, fuck yes." She colored. "Excuse my French. I've lived here before—"

He frowned. "You have? I hadn't heard that."

Rachel grinned. "I shudder to think what you've heard about me from your family."

"All good stuff, I assure you."

"Well, in that case, whatever they told you is bald face lies—all lies—but I'll tell them that the check is in the mail, regardless. So I ended up here. I'm a confirmed Anglophile, and I friggin' love it. I spend all my time here people watching. I go to Bath every month or so, because it's my second favorite place after London."

"Oh, mine, too!" he enthused.

"I just love the history. There's nowhere in the States that compares to any of what you guys have, historically. I mean, Roman ruins! Hell, baths built two thousand years ago that—if it weren't for the lead lined pipes—we could still use! There's nothing that we're building nowadays that will last more than two minutes!"

Jon nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I'm a bit of a history buff, myself, and I love the architecture, too—like the Crescent Houses."

"Absolutely!" she agreed enthusiastically. "So I got myself a teeny-tiny apartment in Croydon that's barely big enough for me to turn around in—"

"But I'll bet you got a good price on it."

"I did. I could have gotten something bigger, but, at heart, I'm a homebody, and I knew that if I got a flat I liked, that's where I'd stay. So I took a place I hate and it

forces me to go out, which is why I moved here in the first place."

"You know yourself well."

Rachel shrugged. "I try to. I don't always get it right, but I did with this. And when I'm in Maine, I save all my money to get back here. I visit my sister—who is about two hours south of me, or so, and my best friend who is three hours south, once or twice, and I get together with my husband's friends and/or my father-in-law, because I don't want to lose touch with any of them. Sometimes I get together with some author friends I have, but we can't always make our schedules work. But mostly, I stay home and write and save money."

"Sounds like you've got it all worked out."

"As much as it can be, yes."

At that moment, his sisters all arrived, and she got caught up in the whirlwind that was being enthusiastically greeted by three very gregarious women. Rachel wasn't much of a hugger, but the Cunningham family was, and she was not allowed to beg off, not that she really minded.

"Sorry we're late, " the oldest sister—Rose— said, as everyone brought bags into the kitchen and starting putting things away. "I assume you two introduced yourselves?"

"We did, and we were just having a nice chat when you rudely interrupted us," her brother teased.

He got three smart smacks on the shoulder for his impudence, which he took in his stride.

When everything was ship-shape and Bristol fashion, they all sat down in the living room. Rachel took one of the barrel chairs so that she could sit by herself. She had a feeling that the sisters might try to make it so that she had to sit on the couch with Jon, who actually didn't sit at first and, instead, inquired, "I'm going to get myself a drink. Can I get anything for anyone else?"

Rose requested a white wine, Terri a Guinness, and Jennifer, the youngest, asked for a splash of whiskey on the rocks.

When he looked at her, she said, "I'll have a Diet Coke, please."

The sisters looked at her as if she were crazy.

"You're not drinking?"

"I don't usually drink when we get together."

"You did last time."

"I did."

Rose piped up, "So have a drink with us now. You don't have to get drunk—although we all know Terri's going to. It'll help you relax."

"You know, I never felt peer pressure to drink while I was in high school. It's kinda weird to face it now."

Jon spoke quite firmly. "Don't let them bully you into doing something you don't want to do, Rachel."

She smiled at him with a soft laugh. "There is no longer anyone on this planet who could get me to do something I don't want to do, much less your sweet sisters."

They all preened exaggeratedly at that, while their brother rolled his eyes at them.

"If you don't mind, I'd like a small amount of whiskey—maybe two fingers—but neat, please."

"Certainly," he answered, serving her first when he came back.

"If acting hadn't taken off for you, you'd make a great waiter."

"He did make a great waiter," Terri supplied.

"Oh?"

Jon expertly handed drinks—with coasters—to everyone. "I worked as a waiter every summer I could while I was going through school."

Rose added, "It didn't end up being a lot of summers, because he was always taking extra classes, the suck up."

He put the tray he'd been using away in the kitchen, then came back to his own drink, with which he sat down on the couch with Jen.

"So, how's the writing going?" Rose asked.

Rachel shrugged. "It's going."

"That's right. You're a writer," Jon mused. "That's wonderful."

She surprised him by laughing. "Thank you, but not really."

His gave her a surprised look. "It's not?"

Not wanting to sound ungrateful, she continued, "Well, I thank you for the compliment, but I've never considered it much of a skill, frankly. I'm a wordy person. I'd known you for about five seconds before I'd talked you into a stupor."

"You did not." He frowned, perhaps more fiercely than he needed to, but she didn't seem to be daunted by it in the least.

"Still. I type really quickly, and I write exactly as I speak. It comes almost ridiculously easily to me, so I think of it more like a stupid human trick than anything else." They all gave her a blank look, so she translated for them. "David Letterman had a late night talk show, and he used to do something called 'Stupid Pet Tricks'—you know, someone's golden retriever dunking a basketball or whatever. I stole the concept and modified it for myself. Everyone has some kind of weird, innate ability. I have perfect pitch—I can tell you what note you're playing on the piano. I remember really long numbers really easily, so never say your credit card number out loud in front of me, or you'll start seeing dog stuff and stuff for the house delivered to Maine," she kidded. "My sister knows what time it is without a watch and what temp without a thermometer. So I've never thought of it as

some great artistic endeavor. It's just a movie in my head, and I'm just writing down what's happening in the movie."

"Do you write under a pseudonym?" he asked.

"Hell yes! If I didn't, I would've told you I worked for a bank, which I've done in the past, for more than long enough that I could make you think that I still do."

"If I recall what my sisters said, it's romance novels, right?"

"Yeah, and I'd bet my bottom dollar that you've never read one in your life."

"I've read the Brontes—"

Rachel held up her hand. "Don't even go there. We are so not talking "literature" here. We're talking bodice busters, and beyond. The kind of stuff I started reading much too early, but after Darleen eschewed books in a household full of readers, my mother was really just happy that I liked reading. We always spent all of our time shopping for books rather than clothes or shoes, and that woman would have bought me *The Joy of Sex* without realizing it, of course, if I'd just put it down at the checkout face down."

"I take it you weren't very well supervised as a child?" he asked, taking a sip of his drink.

"Bingo." Then she rethought. "Well, it's not like I was neglected or abused in any way, shape, or form—"

"It was a benign neglect," Jon stated, as if he knew already.

"Exactly. I was—and still am, really—spoiled rotten. Both husbands—the mistake and the love of my life—spoiled me just as badly. I just don't have anyone around anymore who'll do that for me. I never buy stuff for myself. I got almost everything I wanted as I was growing up. Luckily for my parents—and for me—that was mostly books. And now I write—sort of—what I grew up reading."

He was entirely too quick, and seemingly entirely too

interested in what she was saying. "Sort of?" Of course, he'd picked up on exactly what she really hadn't wanted him to.

Rachel didn't look at him, but rather at his sisters, saying, sotto voce, "Did we tell him anything beyond the party line?"

They all shook their head solemnly. "No."

Then she turned her attention to him. "How old are you, again? I know you're between Terri and Jen—"

"I'm thirty-seven."

"Oh, pshaw!" She leaned towards him a bit. "Your sisters were being truthful with you. I do write romance novels, but romance is not the only thing they contain. And some of them—granted, a pretty small percentage—don't contain any romance at all."

"Oh?" He found himself more intrigued than he wanted to be, really.

"Yeah. Frankly, when I first started to read them, entirely too many years ago, they were soft core porn then—especially the big, thick historicals, with Fabio on the cover, and girls who have their boobs cinched up beneath their chin by bustiers that are groaning under the strain of containing their pulchritude. You can imagine what they're like now."

Jon smiled. "Good word for it—pulchritude. And I imagine I can."

"And if you want me to tell you what else my books contain, I would be glad to, but that's your choice. You have to decide how much you want to know about me when you've just met me, but don't feel pressured in the least. It's entirely up to you, as I said."

"But my sisters already know?"

Rachel nodded. "Yes."

"And my mother knows?"

She had the grace to look uncomfortable. "She does."

"Can I get back to you?" He definitely wanted to know

but didn't necessarily want her to tell him in front of his sisters, for some reason he didn't want to examine too closely.

"Of course!"

Somehow, she doubted that he would ever do that, for which she was—for some reason—eternally grateful. She'd never been shy about telling people what she wrote if they asked. But in Jon's case, Rachel found herself in the unusual position of hoping that he didn't.