
NAMING HIS PRICE

Starting Over, Book Two

JESSICA LYNNE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

She looked into the full-length mirror at her eyes—his eyes. Everyone had always said she had his eyes. She looked into them as if they weren't hers, into their depths.

Inside those wide, blue eyes she saw a yearning, a longing, a plea. Was it for him, the one she used to know? Was it for herself, for acceptance and self-love? Was it for a longing that was unmet in her life—for a prince to come and sweep her off her feet? Maybe it was all those things.

She watched as a tear formed and pooled in the bottom of her eyelid, lingering, until it spilled over the rim but she didn't sob. She held that moment, that feeling, creating a photograph in her mind.

Her inner voice spoke to her, *'Little girl, it's okay.'*

Her gaze lowered to her breasts, bare and round, cast in a gray light in the darkened room. Her hands reached up to caress them, feel them. This was womanhood.

Her gaze lowered and she reached down to trace the tender folds between her legs. The soft skin was bare and clean-shaven. She had always disliked this part of her body. She looked like a girl down there with just the hint of an inner lip.

Her fingers caressed the intricate folds and a shudder ran through her. She wasn't looking to be turned on, just to connect with herself. She wasn't sure about anyone else in her life, and the one person she couldn't afford to lose sight of was herself.

Her gaze dropped lower and she grimaced at the sight of her thighs. She had always hated the way they touched. She hated the way her shorts caught up in her creases and the way the cellulite bounced when she walked.

Her hands came up to her hips. Were they supposed to be so curvy, so rounded? She admired the girls with the straight hips, who could wear the low-cut jeans. Were her arms too meaty? Was her hair too flat? Her lower lip came out in a pout and her tears turned hot. Was this why he'd left her? Was this why he'd traded her in for a new girl?

Her mother called up the stairs, "Maria, I made breakfast. Come and eat before you head out today. Hurry up, you don't want to be late."

She was never late, but her mother liked to be supportive. She loved her mom, the only one who'd ever really been constant in her life.

"I'll be right down, Mom," she called.

Turning back to the mirror she stared into her eyes again, commanding herself silently, '*This stops now, little girl. You have things to do.*'

She wiped her tears and began pulling clothing from her underwear drawer and a sophisticated outfit from her closet. She was heading for an interview today and the woman she was needed to be front and center. It was time for the little girl to go back into hiding until later.

'*Be a good girl,*' she thought, '*and we'll get through this.*'

After she dressed, she fixed her hair and makeup in the bathroom before heading down to the kitchen to join her mother, amazed at herself for the way she was able to transform so

quickly. No one would ever suspect the real Maria she held inside. The child was gone.

Her mother's brown hair hung in curlers as she flounced around the kitchen in her bathrobe, a spatula in one hand and frying pan in the other. Carly was the perfect picture of a 1950's housewife although her lifestyle was anything but that. A woman in her mid-forties, she'd had Maria when she was just twenty years old, and a newlywed to the man who had fathered her daughter. After a few years of raising Maria he'd run off and had an affair with another woman and they'd only heard from him off and on over the years. Rumor had it that he'd fathered another daughter with his new fling but she was uncertain of the information.

She sidled close to her daughter sliding scrambled eggs with melted cheese onto her plate.

Maria's tummy growled and she sighed. She hadn't been hungry before this but now she would have to eat.

'We can take care of that before you go,' her inner voice told her.

That inner voice was like a mentor, always guiding, always advising. She supposed it was what Freud coined the alter ego.

Her mother sat across from her with her own plate, eyeing her.

"You always look so deep in thought. You nervous about today?"

Maria glanced up and shook her head, smiling slightly.

"Not really, just have a lot on my mind."

Carly frowned. She'd give anything to know what Maria was thinking. Truth was she could hardly ever tell. She knew there were things her daughter didn't tell her, hell, of course there were. But she also knew she struggled in ways she needed to tell someone and it was unhealthy to keep it bottled up to herself. Everyone had secrets but Maria's could be harmful to her health.

“I have to work at the office all day today, but I want you to text me after your interview and let me know how it goes. Maybe tonight we can go out for a bite to celebrate.”

Ugh, the last thing Maria wanted to think about was more food. Although she loved to go out to eat, it would just mean she’d have one more problem to take care of that day.

“Mom, no one ever gets hired on the spot anymore. It just doesn’t happen,” she teased rolling her eyes. “I swear you live under a rock.”

“All right, smart-ass...” her mother jeered playfully. “What do you plan to do after your interview?”

She tried not to sound like she was prying but she worried about her. She had too much time on her hands since she’d left her position with the home care agency. She’d questioned her when she gave her resignation before graduating with her BA this past spring. She knew Maria’s goal had been to work with special education children but felt she should have another position in place before leaving her current one. When she’d asked her daughter about it though, she’d just said she needed to take some time off to get her head straight before graduating and pursuing other opportunities. Carly hadn’t questioned any more, not wanting to pry too much. Her daughter was a responsible young woman and she was confident in her ability to care for herself. She just worried about her on an inner level. She worried about what was below the surface where eyes couldn’t reach.

“I don’t know,” Maria shrugged. “Maybe I’ll head to the park with a book or something.”

Carly lifted her brows and nodded, while sipping her coffee.

“There’s an idea! It’s supposed to be a beautiful day. Mmm... coffee? Let me pour you some.” She rose from her seat to grab a mug from the cabinet.

“No, Mom, it’s okay,” Maria gestured to her. “I have to use the bathroom before I go and I’ll stop at Dunkin’ on my way there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” she nodded getting ready to stand, shoving the last forkful of egg into her mouth. “An iced coffee would be perfect today.”

Her mother, convinced, sat back down. “Now you’re talking,” she agreed. “I may do that myself.”

Maria rinsed her plate in the sink and slid it into the dishwasher along with her fork.

“Thanks for breakfast, Mom,” she said.

“Sure thing, babes,” Carly replied. “Don’t be nervous. You’ll do great.”

Maria smiled, giving her a quick, one-armed hug. “Thanks. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

She headed up to the bathroom and locked the door behind her. Putting the water tap on at full capacity she knelt down and slid a finger down her throat.

Maria sat in the front office of the agency trying not to fidget while she waited to be interviewed. She clutched the manila folder that held her resume on her lap and tried to look confident. She had purposefully left her phone in her purse to resist the temptation to glance at it as she waited. She knew how important it was to make a good first impression.

She looked around the room at the small tables and chairs and children’s toys that sat in the corners. It had always been her dream to work with special education children and she had finally managed to finish her bachelor’s degree, which would give her enough of an educational background to begin her career in teaching. She planned to go back for her Masters but she knew she had time for that. It had taken her until she was nearly twenty-three to finish her bachelor’s degree because she needed to work in order to fund her classes. While government grants

covered some of her education, it was hardly enough. She'd have had to take out a huge amount in loans if she hadn't held a job to come up with some of the money. Her mom had helped as much as she was able but Maria knew she couldn't give her much. It had always been tight for her as a single mom and she didn't want to burden her any more than she had to.

The longest job Maria held was when she worked for the home care agency. They'd given her a steady job working for a man named Ralph who needed an aid to work with his mother who suffered from dementia. Maria had been able to work the second shift, which worked out perfectly with her class schedule. After taking her classes in the mornings she would head over to take care of Ralph's mother, Barbara, until the night aid arrived at eleven o'clock. All had been going well with her job there, and she would have stayed until accepting a teaching position if things hadn't begun to go downhill last spring before she graduated from the University. Just months before she was scheduled to graduate Ralph had brought another woman to his home, a woman he was supposedly helping obtain some work experience in the medical field. At first, Maria had been afraid she was a new girlfriend of his but he'd explained to her that she wasn't. He'd asked her to allow the girl to shadow her with Barbara and Maria had been okay with it. After time though, she could see that he and the girl were becoming increasingly interested in each other. Before long it seemed, they were holding hands and kissing by his car. It became clear to her that what he'd said in the beginning either wasn't true or had changed.

To be honest, that wasn't really the reason she'd left though. Although she'd had a thing for Ralph, which she'd never let on to, her disappointment wasn't what caused her to leave her position. Something had happened while she was staying at the house with Barbara that had made her uneasy. It seemed to come out of the blue one day that Ralph told her he might be having trouble with some sketchy people and ever since then he

hadn't let any of the workers or his girlfriend leave the house unattended. Every day he would walk the girls to and from the house to make sure they were safe. It had given Maria the chills, especially after the night some questionable men showed up. She'd heard a shot ring out from the other side of the house and before she knew what was happening Ralph's girl had come running over, yelling for her to call the police, wearing a bed sheet no less. Luckily no one had been hurt. Maria stayed on at the job a couple weeks after that but it wasn't long before she gave her notice. She felt jumpy after all that had happened and needed time to regroup before graduation and pursuing her new career path. So here she was. It was a great feeling to be pursuing the beginning of something she worked so hard for.

As she sat in her chair looking at all the child-sized things in the room and educational toys she began to daydream about what her future with children would look like. She'd always wanted to teach, well ever since the fifth grade anyway. When it had been her job for a month to lead the pledge of allegiance and her teacher had said she looked like a real educator standing in front of the classroom leading the others, she'd known it was what she wanted to do when she grew up. It was the only thing that truly gave her joy and inspiration when she thought of it. Well, that and when she pictured her dream man...

A woman appeared in the doorway.

"Maria?" she greeted with a smile.

Her dark, auburn hair was cut into a chin-length bob around her sweet, middle-aged face. She walked towards her with her hand outstretched and Maria took it.

"Hello, thank you so much for having me," she said bashfully.

"Oh, my pleasure. Thank you for coming. My name is Grace and I'll be conducting your interview. I enjoyed reading over your resume," she said leading the way through the door she'd come out and down the hallway.

“I brought a paper copy just in case you needed it,” Maria replied holding out the manila envelope.

“Wonderful,” Grace replied accepting the folder. She laid it open on her desk when they came to her office.

“Please have a seat,” she gestured toward the chairs on the other side as she took a seat in her own.

Maria sat and took a subtle breath, trying to gather her bearings and avoid seeming nervous. Self-confidence was the key to getting what you wanted in life. She needed to believe in herself so others would believe in her. Wasn't that what people always said?

Grace looked up at her, her hands around the edges of her resume and smiled.

“So, I see here that you graduated from the University this past spring, congratulations!”

“Thank you,” Maria said brushing a strand of hair away from her face, a sure sign that she was nervous.

“I looked over your grades which were all excellent,” Grace exclaimed. “Tell me now, have you always wanted to teach?”

“For as long as I can remember,” Maria replied. “It's the only career I could ever see myself having.”

“It certainly has its rewards,” Grace nodded. “And I see you also worked as an aid with the elderly. Is this a home care agency that you worked for?” Grace pointed to the spot on her resume where it listed her work history at Ralph's.

“Yes,” Maria nodded. “I worked through the agency for a client who had dementia. It was an in-home position and I worked the second shift. I held that position for four years, from the time I was nineteen.”

“Okay,” Grace replied reading over her resume. “And before that I see you worked a couple of retail jobs?”

“Yes, ma'am, when I was in high school.”

“Now, what made you leave your position with the home care agency?”

Grace pulled out a gel-point pen and yellow pad, preparing to take notes on her answers.

Maria thought quickly. She didn't want to say anything negative about her experience at Ralph's but she also wanted to be honest. She had always tried to be as forthcoming of a person as she could be.

"I felt I needed to take some time off to get ready for graduation and the pursuit of another career path," she replied hoping it sounded believable and not too cheesy. She didn't want to give the impression she was leaving anything out or had anything to hide.

Grace jotted her answer on the notepad and nodded.

"Understandable. Graduating is a big deal and you've got a lot going on at your age, lots of changes."

She finished writing and gave Maria a smile noticing what seemed like a sigh of relief.

"Relax, hon, you don't have to be nervous around me. I'm going to tell you a little about the job before I take your references."

Maria nodded, her heart beating a steady rhythm inside her chest.

"The positions we are looking to fill are for early childhood teachers. If we were to hire you, you would be sent to the homes of children who are diagnosed with developmental delays who need assistance that we offer through specialized, play-based learning. Under the guidance of a licensed BCBA, you would provide the child in your care with a certain number of hours per week of play-based sessions that would help the individual achieve their own specific goals and objectives. Let's say, for example, Sammie needs to learn how to brush his teeth. Our BCBA would do an assessment of Sammie to determine where the difficulty stems from. It could be that Sammie is unsure of the function of the toothbrush, or perhaps he doesn't like the feel of the toothpaste in his mouth. The BCBA would then deter-

mine the best play-based approach to helping him grasp the new concept. For example, he might learn best by brushing a doll's teeth if the issue were functional, or perhaps he needs to eat something gooey to get used to the texture of toothpaste. Your job, in that scenario, would be to take the direction of the BCBA and perform trials with Sammie based on what they recommend."

Maria nodded. "Okay," she said nodding. "Would I have more than one client or be assigned to one child?"

"That would be up to you. We require that our teachers work a minimum of fifteen hours per week but most obviously want more. On average, most of our teachers work approximately thirty or more hours per week and some of our clients have as much as fifteen hours a week of care."

After giving her more information on the company, Grace had Maria fill out her references on paper and handed her a requisition for drug testing at the lab. Before sending her on her way, she took Maria's hand in her own.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, Maria. I will be replying to all the applicants by phone within two weeks' time."

Maria shook her hand and thanked her before turning to go, taking a huge breath of relief on her way out.