

## CHAPTER 1



"Good afternoon, Assistant District Attorney Barstow."

Although she jumped at the sound of his voice, it was because she hadn't realized he was there, not because she didn't recognize it. A low, slightly gravelly tone that dripped with sensuality, even when he was merely saying hello—attached to a man like that who exuded sex unselfconsciously from every pore—was the farthest possible thing from forgettable. That was an uncomfortable truth that Allyria Barstow knew all too well, from first-hand experience.

He was leaning his impressive self against the frame of her office door, arms folded over his broad chest, one leg crossed over the other at the ankle. He was still wearing the same tux from last night, she noted, swallowing hard, noting that the bow tie was hanging by what looked like a thread from his open collar, revealing the long, tanned column of his neck. The fit was extraordinary and obviously hand tailored, accenting the pure masculinity of his frame, the jacket clinging lovingly to the muscles that lurked beneath, the pants doing so to an eye-opening extent in certain areas that she had a hard time keeping her eyes away from,

although she finally managed to drag them back to the neutral zone of work that was piled on the desk in front of her.

He continued smoothly, easing away from the door, "I'm not surprised to find you here, although I had hoped that, after your ordeal last night, you'd be taking it easy at home instead of trying to work yourself to death."

She refused to take that bait. Instead, she went on the offensive. "What are you doing here, Mr. Bove?" Allie frowned. "And, more to the point, wasn't the door downstairs locked?"

He had the grace to blush slightly—although not much—but he didn't sound in the least apologetic as he took several steps into the room, making the relatively good sized space seem much too small for the two of them to occupy at the same time, since he seemed to have sucked all of the air out of it. "I'm afraid that I have rarely met a lock that was much of a match for me."

"Shades of a misspent youth, no doubt," she commented acerbically, avoiding his eyes while trying not to seem as if she was trying—and failing miserably—to remain inured by his presence.

"Something like that." He inclined his head, turning to close the door behind him, although why he bothered, she would never know.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and she was the only person who was enough of a workaholic to be in there. Everyone else had a better sense of self-preservation or, beyond that, an actual life to live outside of the office.

The sudden realization that they were alone didn't frighten her anywhere near as much as it should have. Instead, desperately wishing that she hadn't decided against wearing a bra, she felt her nipples hardening into aching peaks beneath what she hoped were enough layers of clothes to either hide her unwanted response from his sharp gaze or render him disinterested, considering the disreputable state of the mismatched set of sweats she'd thrown on over an ancient t-shirt this morning.

But she couldn't possibly be that lucky. Lucas Bove wasn't the kind of man who missed much—or he wouldn't likely have gotten to the lofty, if questionably legal or moral—position he currently occupied, and she could literally feel his gaze flickering over those distended points as surely as if it were his tongue, rendering her breath even more ragged than it had been.

"I had rather hoped that we would be on a first name basis by now, Allyria." The slow, deep rumble added fuel to the fire she had no way of dampening.

Allie fought the urge to fidget—to cross her legs and lean into that dominant stare, knowing it would be a useless act to find some measure of ease in his presence that he would never allow.

"But you continue to resist me at every turn, in even the most benign things such as that." Lucas came to stand in front of her desk, easily dwarfing both it and her. "Despite what happened between us not so long ago."

There it was. He always brought it up—her one moment—okay, night—of weakness, and he never failed to remind her of it.

"Perhaps it's *because* of what happened between us," she threw back.

Coming around the desk with an elegance that belied his size, he hitched a hip onto the corner—much too close to her. But she could hardly allow him to see it affect her in any way. So, Allie leaned back in her chair, folding her hands over her stomach as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Did I leave you unsatisfied?"

It was a highly impertinent question on so many levels—but mostly because she knew that he knew, beyond any conceivable doubt, that he hadn't. Christ, she'd damned near died on him more than once during those long, devilishly unforgettable hours she'd spent in his arms.

On that basis, she refused to answer him, merely raising her eyebrow, and receiving a wicked, knowing grin in return.

"And yet you disappeared out of my life the very next day, refusing to return my calls or respond to my texts."

There hadn't been very many of either, but she wasn't eager to point that out to him.

"If I didn't have a healthy ego, I might have been hurt."

She didn't bother to suppress her outright snort at how preposterous either of those ideas was. He could have pretty much any woman he wanted—some in ways she thought she might not like to contemplate—and she highly doubted that anyone had the ability to hurt him in any way. It was much more likely to be the other way around.

The smile she was expecting from him didn't appear. Instead, he continued to stare at her intently before he moved again, this time leaning back against her desk right next to her chair, those long legs stretched out before him, effectively, quietly barring the most obvious escape route.

She saw his hand coming towards her long before it touched her with exquisite gentleness, but she still flinched a little when it did, and a flicker of her eyes to his caught his grimace at that, but she couldn't suppress it and wasn't in the mood to want to bother to try, either.

"You've got a nice shiner going there. How's the lip?" Try as he might, even with his considerable will, he was entirely unable to keep the edge of concern from his tone. Although he'd been released from jail less than an hour after he'd gotten there, he'd succeeded in keeping himself away from her all night, but he'd finally reached the end of his rope and now, here he was, that soft cheek in his palm, bearing the absolutely unacceptable evidence of the fact that he had failed to keep her safe.

"I'm fine, thank you, Mr. Bove," she replied primly, standing abruptly—unable to stifle a bit of a moan at doing so that had him frowning deeply. Allie made her way—somewhat less than gracefully in favor of expedience, not wanting to give him the opportunity to actually trap her there—around the other side of the desk,

desperately needing to put some distance between them. "Is that why you're here? To assess the damage?"

Although she did, indeed, find respite from his nearness by standing in front of her own desk, she realized her tactical error as soon as he appropriated her chair and she felt the balance of power shift in his favor. As if it hadn't already been heavily weighted towards him from the moment they'd met.

Again, he managed to sound somewhat insulted. "I came here, Miss Barstow, to ascertain for myself that you are—indeed—all right."

Allie crossed her arms over her own chest, partly in anger, but also knowing it might help conceal at least parts of her body's highly inappropriate reactions to his proximity. "If that is true," she responded, her tone conveying the idea in no uncertain terms that she highly doubted it. "Then you can leave now, because I am, as I just said, perfectly fine."

For a long moment, he simply considered her with those disturbingly intent eyes of his, remaining annoyingly still when she couldn't manage not to tap her foot and glare at him expectantly, as if he was going to instantly obey her, when she knew full well that she was the one who was expected to obey him.

When he stood suddenly, she flinched, but refused to allow herself to take a step back, even when he rounded the desk again. Allie anticipated that he was going to try to embrace her or touch her somehow, tensing in a way that hurt, but she ignored it in favor of being ready to resist him.

Instead, he walked right past her to pull the shades, so that they were instantly plunged into semi darkness, even further cut off from the rest of the world—however empty it was outside her office.

"Wha—what are you doing?" she asked, damning the tremulousness of her speech.

When he answered, he was standing directly behind her, and she would have sworn she could feel his deep, surprisingly soft

voice reverberating through her entire body, lighting unwanted fires within her that she hadn't the wherewithal to put out.

"I thought that might make you feel a little bit more comfortable, since I intend to discover for myself whether or not you're telling the truth."

Allie had no illusions about just how he intended to go about doing that, and she'd already turned to face him and begun backing away as he advanced towards her. In her haste, she misjudged the placement of the furniture, causing her to back up into the desk and nearly lose her balance because of it.

Luckily, he was there to keep her from falling, but when he wrapped his sure arm around her waist to steady her, she yelped embarrassingly.

Seconds later, she found herself sitting on his lap as he occupied her desk chair, trying to ignore the look of blatant concern on his face. "I'm so sorry to have hurt you," he murmured, holding her as if she was as fragile as a bubble. "I hope you know I didn't mean to."

He sounded terribly sincere, but she couldn't resist digging, "As opposed to the times when you *did* intend to, you mean?"

There was that endearing blush again. "Well, every girl needs to be spanked every once in a while," he teased, blush rapidly disappearing on his cheeks and reappearing on hers as his tone lowered to an even more intimate level. "I think good girls like you need to be punished more often—and much more strictly—than naughty girls, in order to ensure that you continue to behave correctly."

Her hips rolled against him—once—of their own volition as she gasped, "Lucas!" But then she ruthlessly reined in her desires and tried to strain away, finding that—although she couldn't get away, he was in no way hurting her as he held her right where he wanted her.

He smiled mischievously. "That's much better than Mr. Bove, don't you think, although not quite as good as 'Sir'?"

Allie wasn't about to answer that. "Let me up." She pushed experimentally—and tentatively—against him, not wanting to

touch him any more than she absolutely had to. She knew what lay down that road, and although her body was quite willing to run full speed down it again, the rest of her was *not*. Or so she kept telling herself.

He looked down at where her hands lay on his chest muscles, then up at her expectantly, saying with unmistakable quiet, "Allie."

It had only been one night, but she had learned so much about him and they had connected on such a deep, visceral level that that was all it took to make her shiver, her body harkening back to that short time-out from reality that had been those sixteen or so hours that they had spent together, and her hands left him immediately.

She had been taught that anything less than instant obedience was unacceptable and she would be made to thoroughly regret any hesitance he saw in her about doing so. Those lessons were still ingrained in her consciousness, even now.

"Good girl," he praised, and she felt herself unable to hold back the floodgates of warmth that coursed pell mell through her body at his usually hard won approval.

He began to undress her then, slowly, as if he had all the time in the world. And, as far as Lucas was concerned, he did. He would personally annihilate anyone who disturbed them. She was here with him, sitting—more docilely than he could have hoped—on his lap, obviously aroused and just as obviously reluctant about being so.

There was very little he enjoyed more than convincing a woman—most particularly this one, for some reason—to abandon her morals and her rules and her deeply ingrained scruples in favor of yielding herself to him—and the heavenly sins in which he would indulge the two of them. To get her to do so—when he'd grown to know just how closed off she was, how tightly wound and tense and downright cloistered her existence—was an even more delicious experience than he'd ever had before in his life.

He knew all about her—probably more, even, than she did about him. It behooved him to know his enemy, and he had done

his research with relish when she'd been brought on and added to the department that handled his usual type of legal case—ones that called into question the business practices of his family and associates on an annoyingly frequent basis.

She *was*, as he had just called her, a good girl—an almost zealous rule follower—in every way that mattered to most people, not his usual type at all. She was a model daughter to her parents, got amazing grades in high school and college, graduated at the top of her class from Harvard Law, spent a few years clerking in prestigious positions that most in her profession would have given their arm, a leg and three feet to be in, and then she disappeared for a year or two.

He'd hoped that meant he was going to find out something juicy about her past, but it had turned out to be the exact opposite, as he came to expect of her. He found out that she'd been working for a small but well regarded firm in her hometown in order to take care of her ailing parents, who died within weeks of each other.

Within the next few months, after what appeared to be devastating losses she mourned deeply—although privately—she'd been welcomed into the department in which she was currently a rising star, winning an impressive amount of the cases she was given—even the most challenging ones—and sending business associates and even the odd family member of his to jail right and left.

She kept her nose clean—drank very occasionally and never to excess, eschewing all other vices, too, as far as he could tell. There weren't even any messy romances—or, indeed, any neat ones in her past—and he'd looked as far back as high school.

Whereas he'd always been able to do things like this and remain quite distant from the facts he was digging up about someone, something was different about her. He devoured every bit of information he could collect about her, desperate to find something—anything—about who she might have been involved with, coming up with a big fat zero, which had led him to a conclusion he had



found incredibly tantalizing. What if the illustrious Miss Allyria Barstow was a virgin?

Lucas shook his head, forcing himself to concentrate on the present. How his mind could possibly have wandered so far when she was in his arms, he would never know, but then, he tended to react differently around her from anyone else.

The hoodie fell unheeded to the floor around them, his eyes immediately gravitating to breasts he already knew the weight and delicate texture of, noting with not a small sense of pride the shadowed peaks of her nipples beneath the worn fabric. At the sight of them, his own hips arched his hardness against her, although the sensual gesture was cut short when his wandering eyes caught sight of the alarming blue splotches that were unmistakably fingertips on her fore and upper arms.

He sat up abruptly, a big hand splayed on her back, keeping her from falling as he caught her wrists gently, holding her still before him as he catalogued each and every mar on that otherwise pristine surface. His face grew more and more menacing as he pushed up the loose sleeve of her t-shirt to reveal a large handprint that wrapped almost entirely around her upper right arm.

Allie heard an unmistakable growl as he checked her other side to find an almost identical bruise there before he lifted her off his lap and stood with her in his arms, moving to the end of her desk to sweep everything off it with one long arm as he set her down atop it with supreme tenderness and reached for the hem of her t-shirt.

Before he could lift it over her head, though, her hand settled lightly onto his. "Lucas, please, don't," she whispered, eyes downcast when she knew they needn't be. She was hardly the cause of the bruises she wore.

Neither was he, and she knew that was what was making him crazy at the moment. He *had* marked her quite considerably that evening, but they were confined to her bottom and the backs of her

thighs, and, later, when she was alone, she had reveled in the sight of them.

But these—even though she knew she was not at fault and she fought against the feelings with everything she had—they still made her feel a bit ashamed.

Lucas tipped her chin up, not allowing her to avoid his eyes. "You must let me, kitten," he ground out, the endearment softening the ferocity of his command. "I will bind you if I have to—you know I will—but I would prefer not to so that I don't take the chance of hurting you."

"But they will just make you madder," she whispered, horrified to find that she was having to fight back tears.

He actually flinched at her admission that there was more that he wouldn't want to see, but he wouldn't relent; she could see it in his eyes. "Remove your hand from mine, young lady," he ordered, although his voice was velvety and soothing—for the moment. But she knew the unyielding steel that was behind it that would come to the fore if she resisted his will.

Slowly, reluctantly, she obeyed him, putting her arms over her head as he drew the t-shirt off her body and lay her back on the desk before him, revealing several purplish red bruises near her collar bone, as well as the unmistakable imprint of a hand that had cupped her breast from underneath and squeezed very hard, blue fingers clearly visible to either side of the nipple on her left breast, and, lastly, a large angry bruise over her right ribcage.

His hand floated near that area but carefully didn't touch her. She watched him swallow hard, his eyes glued to the sight. "Is that where you hit the radiator after he flung you away?"

"Yes—the hospital said bruised ribs."

"I would imagine so." His reply was surprisingly neutral sounding, although his tone and his expression became murderous when he continued. "I should have finished him off right then and there for putting his filthy hands on you."

Regardless of his temper, the fingers that tucked themselves

beneath the elastic waistband of her sweats were so soft they were almost tickling her. Although her hands automatically reached down to prevent him from removing one of her last lines of defense against him, they hesitated and came to a stop well before touching him and instead ended up back on either side of her hips.

In this vulnerable, submissive position, his "good girl" at her small surrender to him was even more potent to her, and she could feel herself literally leaking onto the panties he was just about to relieve her of.

When they—and her sweats—were off her and thrown onto the pile, his eyes swept over her, relieved beyond measure to see that no further contusions had been revealed, but he wasn't about to assume anything. "I want you to turn onto your left side, honey, really quick. I just need to check your back. I'll help you as much as I can and I'll be quick about it."

He was as good as his word, although it did hurt her a bit and she could see how upset he was that she was in any kind of pain at all, but he was glad he'd done it anyway as he helped her onto her back again, because although there was only one relatively faint bruise, in comparison, it was a full handprint of someone having slapped her ass cheek hard. And he knew exactly whose hand that was, too.

His own hands formed into fists at his sides, but Allie diverted his attention by trying to get up.

"You can't do anything to him, Lucas. You can't. You know who he is—he'll find something—anything. He'll make something up if he has to and use it to send you away for a long time; you know he will."

"Kind of like you're trying to do?" he sniped, regretting the comment immediately.

She tried more urgently to push her way past him, but it was like trying to move the Rock of Gibraltar. "Which is why we've already decided that this will never work."

Before she knew it, she was lying back again, pressed gently but

firmly down merely by his presence over her. He hadn't hurt her in the least, but she wasn't going anywhere, she knew, until he allowed it.

"That was something you decided, not me. They're mere impediments, if that is how we choose to see them." With Allie refusing to meet his eyes, Lucas dropped what was an argument he knew was not right for this moment. "Regardless," he rasped. "I cannot help but want to claim the beauty and bounty that is laid out before me."

Allie shook her head. "You can't, Lucas."

Misreading the reason for her protest, he brushed the hair back from her face, gazing down at her with such longing and raw potency that Allie was nearly lost just from that. "I will be very careful of you, kitten," he promised solemnly, letting those big, but still somehow elegant and incredibly gentle hands of his roam everywhere over her, as if he was physically reestablishing his claim over her.

"I know you will, Lucas," she answered quickly, not realizing what she was revealing to him so blithely.

"You do?" He smiled down at her.

Allie sighed, rolling her eyes a bit. "Yes, I do. I know that you would never treat me the way the chief of police did. You're better than that, at least with me."

A bit of an unnecessary qualifier thrown in at the end, but he would take it. "I'm glad you realize that, because you're right."

"You're a very gentlemanly..." she gasped as his hand brushed over an eager, swollen tip "...mobster. You mother..." another soft moan as he bent his head to the same distended berry, suckling strongly, flicking his tongue over her as she arched wantonly in his arms "...raised you right—in some ways," she finished, already breathless from his attentions.

"Thank you, I think," he murmured against her breast, but she could feel him smiling as he said it, wandering lazily over to the orphaned breast, pausing for a few beats to stare down at the disgusting discoloration of her flesh.

Allie could see the muscle working in his jaw, but when his head descended, it was only to apply the slightest touches of his lips to the affected area, as if he would kiss them away, and that pure, exquisite gentleness—which had been such a surprise to discover in a man like him—was almost her undoing as she felt him, finally, claim her nipple.