

# LETTERS TO AN ENGLISH PROFESSOR

*The Connaghers* prequel

Published by  
Joely Sue Burkhart

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*The horse master is bringing his whip.*

## Letters to an English Professor

*I heard your voice, and I knew. I knew I had to be in your class.*

*I knew I had to be...*

**Yours.**

As an Accounting student, Rae Jackson has never cared much for poetry, but that all changes when she hears Dr. Connagher's distinctive voice quoting some dead dude in the hallway. One look at his face, and she falls. Hard.

Piercing blue eyes. Craggy face she could study for hours. And the forearms of a warrior. She can't sign up for his infamous class fast enough. At least he doesn't teach Calculus.

But an unknown student can't hide for long in an upper-graduate English class. He calls her to his office, and all she can think about is that gorgeous cherry desk while his rumbling voice rolls her deeper into her fantasies.

*Oh yes, Dr. Connagher. I've been a very naughty student indeed.*

## Chapter One

*Dear Dr. Connagher:*

*You don't know me. To be honest, I didn't know you before today. I didn't even know what classes you taught, but I ran down to the Registrar's Office and enrolled in your only open class anyway.*

*Thank God you teach English instead of Calculus, but I'm afraid a senior-level poetry class may make as little sense to me.*

*It doesn't matter. I have to be in your class. I want to be in the front row when you begin roll call on Monday. I want you to know my name, and see me, and maybe, just maybe, you might feel it too.*

*I know this is crazy. I'm crazy. You don't know me at all, and I'm just a student—an accounting student! But I heard your voice, and I knew. You weren't even speaking to me, or I might have done something thoroughly embarrassing. The thought of speaking to you, with your full attention focused on me, makes my tongue plaster to the roof of my mouth. My stomach quivers, my hands tremble, and so help me God, every muscle in my body clamps down with longing.*

*I have to be in your class.*

*No, I'll never send this to you. I don't want you to think I'm just another crazy stalker student offering sexual favors for a good grade, or screeching about improper behavior to blackmail you or get you fired. On the first, I'm not that kind of girl; on the second, I'm ashamed to say that I'd never complain about your improper behavior.*

*To be perfectly honest, I'd welcome your improper behavior. Wholeheartedly.*

*I heard your voice, and I knew. I knew I had to be in your class. I knew I had to be...*

**Yours.**

~ Rae Jackson

*“Round the decay/ Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,/ The lone and level sands stretch far away.”<sup>1</sup>*

The masculine voice froze her in place. Other students bumped into Rae, knocking her aside, impatient in their rush to purchase their books or line up for a coveted class before it filled, but she couldn't move.

*That voice...*

She turned and saw two men standing outside the dean's office, obviously professors by their air of respectability, experience, and age. The man quoting poetry in that incredibly sexy voice couldn't be more than ten years older than her, but it wouldn't have mattered if he was a doddering old man with a cane. His voice would have affected her the same way.

He quoted those lovely, haunting words of poetry in a rough, deep rumble that seemed to vibrate on the air with power. Her body thrummed in response, rippling with the subtle resonance.

If that incredible voice wasn't enough to send her body into overdrive, his dark good looks and rugged face only increased her attraction. He wore faded, soft denim that hugged his thighs and ass, work boots that had definitely seen the outdoors, and a plain baby blue oxford shirt. He'd rolled the sleeves up to his elbows, and the sight of his corded forearms made her breath hitch in her throat. His hands were large, his forearms lined with muscle and sinew as though he was used to hard physical labor.

What on earth had the professor been doing to earn the forearms of a warrior? She couldn't help but wonder if his hands would be rough and calloused to match, as powerful and commanding as his voice.

He laughed, but the lines remained on his face, deeply grooving his mouth and between his eyes. He looked grim and fierce, his eyes as blue as his shirt but steely, as though a thunderstorm roiled inside him. Staring at him, she ached to earn the right to smooth those grim lines from his face with her lips and tongue.

Heat seared her face and she jerked her gaze away. She didn't know this man. If he was a professor, then he was certainly off limits.

Her stupid body didn't care. Her mouth felt dry, her eyes hot, her muscles tense and eager. Her instincts demanded that she either flee or rush over and fling herself at his feet, warring back and forth between fierce attraction and downright terror. If a man could turn her on with his voice alone, what would it be like to kiss him? To feel those big hands sliding over her skin? Or better yet, to lie helpless beneath that power, bound for his every whim?

*Get a grip, Rae.*

She'd never had pervy thoughts about a professor before, but once her mind wandered into that territory, she couldn't seem to clear away the idea of the wicked professor tutoring his teacher's pet. Or punishing her.

"Enough, Mason," he retorted in a low voice that made her shudder. "You have no idea what I need."

Her heart stuttered in her chest and she couldn't catch her breath. Oh, God, but she could all too easily imagine what he might need. What was wrong with her? Why would she suddenly have visions of walking up to this man and begging him to allow her to strip off her clothes for him? She didn't know anything about him except that voice, and the torturous images he inspired. She didn't even know—

"Dr. Connagher, the dean will see you now."

He disappeared into the dean's office. The door shut and Rae felt as though a rubber band inside her had snapped. She stumbled over to rest her shoulder against the cold concrete wall, closing her eyes and concentrating on breathing.

His name was Dr. Connagher. His friend might not know what he needed, but the darkness in his eyes and the elegant roughness in his voice spoke volumes to her. As soon as she could walk without wavering like she'd just left a frat party, she headed for the Registrar's Office. She could only hope that Dr. Connagher taught something other than Calculus or Physics, because come Monday morning, she was going to be sitting in the front row of his class.

## Chapter Two

*Dear Dr. Connagher:*

*So it should have been a clue that if you were quoting poetry... you were probably an English professor. Which didn't sound too bad, until I found out that your only open class is a senior-level class on the Romantic Period. I admit, I was giddy and relieved, until I actually read the course description.*

*Then to make matters worse, my suitemates knew somebody who took your class last year. Thank you very much—now I'm terrified that I'll fail my first class at Drury. Why did your only open class have to be this one, your pet class, the one you use to "break" English majors too foolish to have changed their major to basket weaving already?*

*What hope do I have of surviving your class? Absolutely none whatsoever. Yet the thought of dropping out before I even meet you makes me want to cry.*

*You can thank [name redacted to protect the innocent] for warning me that you require all students to contact you in formal letters, which is exactly why I've lost my mind enough to write not one but two letters to you already. She also said that you despise the internet, and if anyone even brings up Google, e-mail, or Lord forgive us, cliffnotes.com, then we'd better get a head start for the Registrar's Office for that withdrawal.*

*So while all my friends are out partying one last frantic weekend before having to drag themselves to class with a hangover, I'm settled into bed with a foot-thick tome of poetry, a dictionary, and every resource the librarian could suggest for a dolt who knows absolutely nothing about Shelley beyond Frankenstein. Which I now know,*

*thanks to you, wasn't even written by the poet listed in the course description, but his wife.*

*I'm trying to concentrate on what I'm reading, but I keep picturing you in the hallway. There were deep grooves about your mouth and your eyes were like dark storm clouds. When I close my eyes, I can see your face, and I press kisses to each one of those lines until they fade away, and the only darkness that remains is in your eyes. That darkness gives me cold chills and sends my heart pounding like a jackhammer, but I can't look away.*

*I want your eyes on me. I want your darkness. I want you.*

*Now, as I read this poem for the hundredth time, I hear your voice reading it, and I've never heard anything sexier in my entire life. Just don't ask me what the poem actually means, please, until I've had time to study a whole lot more.*

*Why isn't it Monday yet? This is so stupid. I've done more work for your class than I've ever done in my entire life and the semester hasn't even started!*

*Still yours,*

*~ Rae*

*P.S. Would it earn me any extra credit if you knew that I'd hunted down that snippet of poetry you quoted in the hall yesterday?*

*P.S.S. I guess not—I used Google to find out that you were quoting from Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias."*

After preparing all weekend for the big introduction to the professor of her most erotic dreams ever, Rae wanted to scream and throw the ridiculously thick course book out the window. She'd been a nervous wreck last night and couldn't sleep, so of course, she'd overslept this morning. Whose God-awful idea was it to schedule class at eight o'clock in the morning anyway?

So instead of looking gorgeously and studiously prepared in her coveted front-row seat as soon as Dr. Connagher walked in the

door, she found herself hovering outside the door, frazzled, hair still damp in a frantic braid, and late enough that he'd already begun speaking. The thought of walking into his class, late, with only enough prerequisites by the skin of her teeth—while he spoke in that rumbling purr—made her want to sink into the floor and disappear.

At least there were only a handful of students to witness her shame.

Taking a deep breath, she quietly opened the door. It creaked like a hundred-year-old rusted iron hinge on a haunted house, and every single eye focused on her.

Including two steely blue ones with a deep canyon deep between them.

Ducking her head before those fierce eyes could lock on hers, she mumbled an apology and rushed toward a seat. Front row, but not center. Heart pounding, she yanked out the poetry anthology and stared at it without blinking until her eyes burned. She could feel his attention like a brand searing her flesh.

"Well," he finally said. "I suppose we beat the dean after all. Miss Jackson, I presume?"

Peeking up at him through her lashes, she nodded.

"We're very thankful for your late registration. If you hadn't joined us, I'm afraid this class would've been scratched off the schedule. As it is, this is the last year I'll be teaching the Romantic Period."

His voice growled with suppressed frustration. Now she knew why he'd been outside the dean's office on Friday.

"As with so many other niceties from an age gone by, I suppose it was only inevitable that this generation give up on poetry. We're too busy playing on the computer or watching television to sit down and read any book at all, let alone one that makes us think."

His voice had gradually neared until she knew he must be standing right in front of her. She could see the toes of his boots, a

different, cleaner pair in black leather than the ones he'd worn on Friday, and although he still wore jeans, these were black too.

Imagining him topping it off with a black leather jacket made her shudder.

"However, as grateful as I am for meeting the minimum quota of ten students to hold this class, I think it only fair that I warn you, Miss Jackson." He paused, waiting for her to meet his gaze.

Heart pounding, she slipped her trembling hands beneath the desk and gripped them so hard she felt her nails digging into her palms. This was it. Would he feel anything at all when he looked at her? Would he see the effect he had on her? Or would he only see a silly college student drooling over her sexy professor?

Hoping she didn't look like a crazed fangirl, she raised her gaze up to his.

"This is not a class for the faint of heart."

Beneath that steely blue intensity, her throat tightened but she managed to sound like a normal, intelligent student. Mostly. "I know this is a senior level class and no, I'm not an English major, I'm actually in Accounting, so I'm going to be behind, but I promise I'll work very hard."

She shut her mouth and swallowed hard to keep from saying, "*for you.*"

Long agonizing moments went by, each thud of her heart resounding in her head until it ached. She couldn't tell what he was thinking, let alone feeling. His eyes had narrowed, deepening the groove between his eyes. Frowning and silent, he stepped closer, forcing her to tilt her head back to keep her gaze on his face.

Sensing that strain on her neck, he bent down, keeping his attention locked on her. He was close enough that she caught a faint scent of his cologne, something spicy and rich, with a hint of old, treasured leather books with gilded edges and swirling embossed titles. He even smelled like libraries and knowledge.

She'd never been a fan of the library before, but damned if her mouth didn't water at the thought of pressing her face against his neck and breathing in that scent hot off his skin.

"Why are you in my class, Miss Jackson?"

Husky and low, he kept his voice soft, almost as if they were the only two people in the room. Now she heard the hint of a southern drawl in his voice. She knew from his biography on the campus website that he hailed from Texas. He wasn't married (or she wouldn't be here). He'd gotten his degree from Southern Methodist. Or was that where he'd gotten his doctorate?

Her mind babbled the facts she'd dug up on him because she couldn't think about his question. She couldn't answer him.

Literally, her mind blanked. She couldn't think of a single plausible excuse other than the truth, which would be too humiliating to admit to him, let alone in front of the rest of the class.

His previous students had whispered wide-eyed about his stringent requirements. He expected formality and immediate, well-thought-out answers, and if she didn't answer, he'd kick her out of his class so fast her head would spin. Or she could simply tell him the truth, and later, he'd be laughing while he told his friend all about the crazy student he'd had security escort off campus.

Silence weighed heavy in the room. None of the other students made a peep, as if they dreaded drawing his formidable attention to them instead. Her pulse was so fast and frantic that she could feel the side of her neck thumping away like a subwoofer. She couldn't sit here and *not* answer his question. It was like he'd injected her with a truth serum or something, but the thought of blurting out the truth in front of everyone made him swim in her vision.

*Your voice makes me hot and when I look at you, every bone in my body melts.*

Horrorified, she realized her eyes had filled with tears. Abruptly, he returned to the table at the front of the room, picked up an Expo marker, and began writing on the whiteboard. Dutifully, the

other students flipped open their notebooks and the busy scratching of pens filled the silence.

Rae sagged in her seat like a piece of wilted lettuce, relieved that he'd relented before she'd done something stupid. Damp and sweaty, her shirt stuck to her back. Her hands shook, but she managed to shove the book back inside her backpack. Now if she could only slink away quietly...

"Miss Jackson," he said in that wicked voice without turning from the board. "I expect you to stop by my office immediately after class to discuss my concerns."

Her heart soared at the thought of speaking to him in private, and then plummeted to the depths of hell. She swallowed hard. He wasn't the sort of man that ever lost a battle, let alone surrendered. In the privacy of his office—his personal domain—he'd want the truth.

And he'd have it, because she was terribly afraid that there wasn't anything she wouldn't give him.

Miserably, she whispered, "Yes, sir."

In the privacy of his office with Miss Jackson standing penitent before him, Conn found himself in what his Daddy would have called quite a pickle.

If he didn't allow this unknown student to stay in his class, he'd be forced to scratch it completely from the schedule, and the dean had refused to reconsider her decision. The class he'd personally created and taught over the years, his hallmark work at Drury University, would be swallowed by blowing sands. His life's passion would be forgotten. Instead of advanced poetry, he'd teach more remedial composition classes, because students couldn't figure out how to write a paper in complete sentences without LOL and BFF and whatever other ridiculous abbreviations they texted on a daily basis.

But if he were completely honest with himself, the fate of his favorite class was the least of his concerns. Deep down, he feared that if he allowed this frankly highly-unqualified student to remain, he'd do something unforgiveable. He'd never been tempted by a student before, but Miss Jackson spelled Temptation with a capital T and damn it all to hell, this was only the first day of class.

It was her eyes that did him in. Oh, she had a luscious body, no doubt about that, but he'd never been one to ogle the female students. In fact, his best friend and fellow Drury professor, Mason Wykes, had resorted to calling him Dr. Perfect. Conn had never even felt a twinge of interest in one of his students.

Until Miss Rae Jackson walked into his class and turned those soul-deep eyes on him.

Shyly, yet earnestly, she gazed at him, her eyes big and solemn and dark with emotion, and he felt his rigidly polite professional veneer crack. Somehow, she'd managed to pick up on his hidden dominant side. Some secret signal that he'd unconsciously broadcasted had drawn her like a moth to a flame, and she fluttered toward mortal danger, fully aware he would singe her wings clean off if she got too close, but still hopelessly unable to flee.

As soon as he focused on her, she bit her lip, her breath caught, and it was all he could do not to come around the desk, cup her face in his hands, and ask how far she'd let him go.

The devil on his shoulder whispered that he should test her. Give her a few simple, innocent little requests to see if she would obey as sweetly and quickly as he suspected. He clenched his jaws and flipped the mental bird at the evil bastard. The last thing he needed to get into was an improper relationship with a student.

Especially one that stared at him so hopefully, innocently, and naturally submissive. Did she even have a clue that she was sending off a "please gobble me up whole" vibe in waves—a vibe that was irresistible to a man like him? Son of a bitch. Mason would laugh

his ass off if he ever found out that Dr. Perfect had met his match and then some.

Conn softened his voice and tried to begin, “Why don’t you sit down—”

She dropped like a stone into the seat so quickly he couldn’t help but wonder what she would’ve done if there hadn’t been a chair available. Sitting behind his desk made him vaguely uncomfortable, as if he was abusing his position of authority as her professor, so he did something very rare during office consultation: he stood, came around to the front of his desk, and casually sat on its edge. It put him closer to her, making the devil cackle with glee, but hopefully took him out of the authority position.

“I’m not going to bite, Miss Jackson.”

Her eyes flared wider and her gaze dropped to his mouth.

Definitely not an improvement.

Quickly, before he could dwell on any inappropriate vision of which delicious bite he’d like to sample first, he rushed on. “That is, I’m not an ogre, despite whatever you may have heard. I’m truly concerned about your wellbeing” *and my sanity* “in my class.”

A hint of a smile flickered on her lips. “They didn’t call you an ogre, Dr. Connagher.”

“Troll? Demon? The wicked professor of Pearsons Hall?”

“You are rather famous,” she admitted, smiling wider and beginning to relax. “Everyone I talked to sincerely enjoys your classes despite your...quirks.”

“And what do they say about my Romantic Period class?”

“It’s the hardest class in the entire English department,” she replied sheepishly. “Casual English majors won’t take it because they don’t want to risk lowering their overall GPA.”

“And since it’s such a difficult class, non-English majors are too intimidated to sign up. That’s exactly the argument Dean Strobel presented to me when I protested her decision to cancel this class.” Sighing, he kept his face and voice equally soft. “So why were you

brave enough to sign up, Miss Jackson, Accounting major with barely enough English requirements for your business degree?”

She ducked her head. “It was your only open class that I haven’t already taken.”

“It’s very important that you be truthful with me.” He risked reaching out, slipped his fingers beneath her chin, and gently tilted her face back up to his. Risk indeed, because he found that once he had her in his grasp, he didn’t want to let her go. “Why were you looking for my classes in particular? Do you know me from somewhere that I regretfully don’t remember?”

Uncomfortable, she hesitated, clenching and opening her hands in her lap, torn between fleeing and blurting out the truth. He waited in silence, his gaze steady. *I’ll have her answers, however long it takes.*

“No, sir,” she finally whispered, earning a smile and an encouraging nod to continue with her explanation.

He felt her swallow beneath his fingers and she moistened her lips. The faint glimpse of her tongue made him suck in a breath.

What the hell was he doing? These little games might seem innocent, but once he accepted this challenge, he’d find it difficult, if not downright impossible, to back off.

*And I need to back off. She’s my student!*

“I heard you, Friday, outside the dean’s office. You quoted poetry, and your voice... I wanted to hear more. Poetry, that is.”

She winced at the rather lame excuse, betraying herself. She’d definitely wanted to hear more, and it wasn’t because she had a sudden interest in Shelley. She’d responded to the hard edge of anger in Conn’s voice, the desperate need to keep what was his, and she’d been drawn to seek him out in any way she could. Naked attraction shimmered in her eyes, darkened by her response to his voice, his presence, and most of all, his very position of control and authority that he could not violate one iota if he valued his career.

He forced himself to release her. Too many thoughts crowded his mind. The small challenges she’d unconsciously set for him to

master were adding up alarmingly. He already knew that no harsh word would be required to earn the truth from her; his unapproving silence and the strength of his will were enough. He also knew she found it very difficult to prevaricate even slightly. If she ever thought to lie to him, all he'd have to do was look deeply into her eyes to see every truth laid bare before him.

Now, the fledgling truth he saw burning in her eyes promised that she would be the greatest test of his life. Mastering himself with and for her would be like earning his doctorate all over again and a hell of a lot more pleasurable than slogging through another four years of graduate school.

Retreating to his chair, he put the desk between them.

Quickly, he ran through his options. He hadn't said anything that could be misconstrued later. She could walk out now, find an easier class, and perhaps they'd accidentally on purpose run into each other about campus. It would still be frowned upon for a professor to involve himself with a student, even if she wasn't in his class, but it wasn't worthy of reprimand.

However, if she remained as his student, she'd not only enable the last semester of his favorite class, but she'd also challenge him to keep that control he valued so much. He could test her, and she would test him and not even know it.

*If I can survive such a challenge to my self-control.*

He shifted in his chair, already rather uncomfortable. The longer he looked at her, watching as she tucked an errant strand of chocolate brown hair behind her ear and bit her lip, waiting for his decision, the more he responded in a way that no teacher ever wanted to feel about his student. Too young, too pretty, too damned sweet and innocent for a man like him. Every dominant instinct he possessed urged him to wrap his arms around her and set about finding each and every limit she threw up at him until she was utterly and completely his.

Irritated that his libido was running amok on the very first day of class, he muttered, "*The desire of the moth for the star,/ Of the*

*night for the morrow,/ The devotion to something afar/ From the sphere of our sorrow.”*<sup>2</sup>

“Oh. Okay. That’s your answer, then?”

He arched a brow at the quavering despair in her voice. “Do you know what I just quoted?”

She dropped her gaze to her hands and her shoulders slumped with dejection, but she nodded. “It’s Shelley’s *‘One Word is Too Often Profaned.’*”

At least she didn’t see the shock that must be written all over his face. How on earth had she recognized Shelley, let alone that particular poem? She was an Accounting major with absolutely no English poetry background, for God’s sake. If she knew that much poetry, why were they even discussing her right to remain in his class? “What line in particular did you think was my answer?”

She jerked her gaze up to his, and the fierce determination blazing in her eyes sent a jolt of unexpected delight through him. Ah, here, too was the rebellion and spirit that he would relish exploring.

“*‘I can give not what men call love.’* Or how about the line which gave its title: *‘One word is too often profaned/ For me to profane it.’* If you’re not interested, Dr. Connagher, all you had to do was say so. Dropping your class will be a hell of a lot easier than studying nonstop all weekend and reading everything about Percy Bysshe Shelley that I could get my hands on simply because everyone says he’s your favorite poet, all before the stupid semester even started!”

She leaped up out of her chair, whirled, and strode toward the door. Her braid swung dark and heavy down her back, drawing his gaze to the sweetest ass in tight blue jeans that had ever crossed his desk.

She wanted a chase. Good. He gave it.

In a heartbeat, he rounded his desk, planted his palms on either side of her flat against the door, and hovered at her back without touching her. Inappropriate, yes, but it wasn’t exactly physical contact. She froze with her hand on the doorknob.

“Rae,” he purred, savoring her name on a low rumble that made her shiver beneath him. “I never said I wasn’t interested. I’m cursing my own impossible desire as the moth is drawn to the stars.”

On a low moan, she started to turn to face him.

“No, don’t. Don’t look at me, not this close, or I’ll likely do something that we’ll both regret.”

“I won’t regret it,” she whispered, her voice ragged. “I was hoping—”

“You came to me as a student. *My* student,” he growled out next to her ear. “You defined the exam the moment you enrolled in my class. If you’re my student, then this is as close as we’ll be for the rest of the semester.”

“Then I guess I’ll be dropping your class, Dr. Connagher.”

“Conn,” he whispered, deliberately letting his lips brush her ear. “Right here, and only right now, I’m Conn.”

“Conn,” she repeated on a low ragged groan. “Are you sure I can’t turn around?”

“Absolutely sure, and although I know it would be easier for you to drop my class, I hope you don’t.” He chose his words carefully so she wouldn’t feel as though he were demanding she stay in his class, because he feared very much that she’d comply just because he asked. “Instead, I hope you come to class and torment me every single day.”

“But... but... don’t you...”

“If you decide to drop my class, leave your number so I can call you as a man and not your professor in a month or two. But—” he hardened his voice, stilling her immediate eager response, “I think a semester of getting to know each other in a controlled environment would be best for both of us. You’re testing my control to the breaking point already, darlin’.”

“Sorry.” She laughed shakily, although he didn’t think she sounded repentant at all. In fact, she backed that tempting ass so

she could rub her back against him like a cat. “When you say darlin’ in that smooth Texas drawl...”

“Yeah, darlin’? What does that do to you?”

“It makes me weak in the knees.”

“Good,” he drawled, rewarding the truth with a quick nibble on her ear. “Now I want you to march that delectable ass out of my office. I’m going to do some serious thinking about the course syllabus and how we can make this class fun and rewarding for you, for all of us, and who knows, in the end, we may come up with something even the dean will approve so I don’t lose my favorite class. Wednesday morning, I’m Dr. Connagher and you’re Miss Jackson. We’ll get to know each other as professor and student. I won’t say inappropriate things—like how much I want to squeeze your ass and haul you into my lap—and you certainly won’t rub said ass against me. And that’s the way we’ll behave until you’ve turned in your final and I’ve turned in your grade.”

She blew out her breath on a long, mournful sigh that made him chuckle. “I never thought I’d actually look forward to finals week.”

“You and me both, darlin’.”

## Chapter Three

*Dear Dr. Connagher:*

*For our first written assignment, you asked us to write you a detailed letter about what we'd like to get out of class. Are you insane?*

*Didn't we already have a little talk in your office about what sort of things were safe to discuss as professor and student?*

*Because what I'd really like to get is closer to you.*

*You've condemned me to a semester of hell. As we agreed, I've been coming to your office each week for "tutoring," all so painfully proper that I want to scream. You leave your door wide open. You call me Miss Jackson and I call you Dr. Connagher and we talk about Shelley and Byron, Blake and Keats, but while you drill me on all the extracurricular reading I'm doing (as you asked), I'm sliding my feet deeper beneath your desk, trying to wrap my legs around yours. Or I'm wondering what you'd do if I got up and very calmly walked over to your door, locked it, and then started taking off my clothes.*

*Really, what would you do? Would you send me to the dean's office? Would you kick me out of class? Or would you tell me to come sit in your lap?*

*Please, please, tell me the latter. Or better yet, maybe we could try out that big desk of yours that you so studiously keep between us.*

*I'd like to be between it and you for a change, if you know what I mean.*

*I can't stand it, Conn. There, I said your name. I broke your rule. What are you going to do about it?*

*I want you so badly that I lie awake at night and ache. This need keeps gnawing away, eating me alive. I need to know the strength of your hands. I need to hear your rumbling voice against my ear while you squeeze my ass like you threatened. I'm doing everything I can to*

*get your attention, to push you over the edge, but you just won't go, will you?*

*I know you won't. I don't want you to break, not really. But I'm breaking inside every single day. Each time that you call me Miss Jackson and ignore my every attempt to get even a finger of your incredible body on mine, it feels like a physical wound that I'll carry as a scar for the rest of my life.*

*So tomorrow, I'm going to wait until the very end of the day, and then I'm going to stop by your office right before you leave (yes, I know I'm borderline stalking you because I memorized your entire schedule) to inform you that I'm dropping your class. If I don't drop out by Friday, then it'll be too late. You'll have to give me a grade.*

*I don't want a grade, Conn. I don't even want an A. All I want is you.*

*Yours in agony,*

*~ Rae*

Rae stared at the closed office door, sighed, and sat down in the small waiting area outside the English professors' offices. Dr. Connagher was still here, she knew that much, but he'd made his rules about office hours very clear to the entire class from the beginning. When his door was shut, he didn't want any interruptions.

Running through the speech she'd rehearsed yet again, she lost track of time.

"Rae?" Jerked to full alert, she hadn't even heard him come out of his office. He must have been distracted to slip up and call her by her Christian name, because he was normally a stickler for propriety. "Have you been waiting long? If I'd known you were going to stop by, I would have left my door open."

She stood, searching his face to try and decide his mood. He looked tired and harried, glancing at his watch with that deep

frown between his eyes. "Sorry, I know it's late. I just wanted to tell you something."

Her voice quivered despite the endless hours which she'd spent practicing exactly how she'd tell him. His eyes narrowed, focusing intently on her face. *He never misses a thing*, she thought bitterly, *except how much I need him.*

"What is it?"

His voice remained soft but his face lined even more. This was the formidable face of the ogre of Pearsons Hall. Before her bravado waved the white flag, she said in a rush, "I've decided to drop your class after all."

"I see."

His eyes didn't flicker with emotion. His voice didn't rise. He certainly didn't panic and beg her to stay, or shout with elation that they'd finally be free to date. No, he simply watched her, eyes hooded and dark.

"If I don't drop out by tomorrow, you'll have to give me a grade."

"Midterms are only a few weeks away." He nodded slowly, studying her face as though he might find answers written for his every question. "Are you angry? Is something else wrong?"

"No," she whispered, fighting back the urge to fly at him and pummel him with her fists until that cold stone façade cracked. "I just don't want to wait any longer."

He glanced at his watch again and cursed beneath his breath, stirring her hopes. He'd only rarely ever lost his temper enough to curse, even in class when they were hopelessly lost. "I apologize, Miss Jackson, but I'm late for an appointment. Walk with me so we can discuss this further."

"I don't think that's a good idea." *Because you'll smooth talk me into staying in your class, and then I'll have another two and a half months of hell to survive.*

"Walk with me," he repeated, his eyes dark, but he deliberately lightened his voice. "I'll count it as extra credit."

Dread tightened her stomach, but she nodded. Of course she went with him. All he had to do was ask her to jump off a cliff, and she'd leap as high and far as possible, crying out his name all the way down to splatter on the rocks.

He lead the way downstairs and over to the next building in companionable silence. So why had he asked her to come with him? He didn't even ask whether she had the drop request prepared. Finally, she couldn't take his silence any more. "Where are you going?"

"We have a guest lecturer from Scotland on campus. He's talking about Robert Burns, which I thought you might enjoy." Dr. Connagher paused at the auditorium door and peered inside. "Damn, we're late. They've already begun."

"But—"

"Shhh, let's slip inside. Dean Strobel will nail my hide to the side of Pearsons Hall if she finds out I nearly blew off this lecture."

He stepped inside the darkened auditorium, and of course, she followed. She didn't have anything else planned, other than a quart of her favorite ice cream while she watched television, something she hadn't had time to do for weeks thanks to his class.

A man about fifteen years older than Dr. Connagher stood at the podium down in front with a slide projector. The audience was rather modest. Drury was a small private university with an even smaller English department. Despite the abundance of seats, he chose a row close to the back of the massive room and sat, arching a brow up at her in deliberate challenge at her hesitation.

"Extra credit," he whispered. "You need it, don't you?"

*You have no idea what I need*, she wanted to blurt out bitterly, but she clamped her mouth shut and sat beside him. What choice did she have? He had to initial the form or she couldn't escape.

The closest person sat dozens of rows ahead of them. A head turned, shooting a glare at them for the disruption, and Rae couldn't suppress a groan when she recognized the dean. Great.

Heat blazed across her cheeks. Evidently, he'd admitted to Dean Strobel that he had a student in his class for which he didn't entirely trust himself to be impartial. Therefore, Dean Strobel was grading all of her work to ensure Dr. Connagher wasn't giving Rae any special treatment. Is that why the dean had given her such a horrid look?

"Relax," he whispered way too close to her ear for comfort. "She's only warning me that I should be on my very best behavior."

Rae suddenly noticed that her thigh was practically touching his. The stadium seats had drop-down arm rests, but he hadn't put the one down between them. In fact, nothing would prevent her from curling against his side like a kitten.

Nothing except her own damned pride. He'd made it perfectly clear that she couldn't tempt him. Not that way.

She turned her attention to the lecturer. His lilting accent was lovely, and although his explanation about why Burns's difficult, archaic language was so important in today's study of poetry was rather long-winded, she found the discussion interesting.

Until she noticed that Dr. Connagher's thigh pressed fully against hers.

Between one breath and another, he'd simply taken up more space. She nearly swallowed her tongue with shock. Jerking her head around to search his profile, she hissed out, "What are you doing?"

The bastard didn't even look at her. "Shhh. Don't miss this part."

Heat burned alongside her thigh. His spicy leathery scent filled her nose and she whimpered softly.

"Outside of Shelley, Burns is my favorite poet. What do you think, darlin'?"

Damn it all to hell, why did he have to go and call her that, too? "It's too late for this." *So why is my heart galloping in my chest?*

"If you're going to drop my class, then I don't have to be so careful." Oh, God, his mouth hovered at her ear, so close she could

feel the moist heat of his breath against her skin. “You don’t like his accent better than mine, do you, darlin’?”

She couldn’t help but snort, and he chuckled softly.

“I’m afraid that I have a problem, and I’m going to need your help to fix it.”

Turning her head toward him, she stared up into his dark eyes, his mouth just inches from hers. “You know I’ll do anything for you.”

She didn’t expect him to wince. “That’s what I’m afraid of, darlin’. You see, you’ve been doing every single thing I asked you to do as your professor. Don’t pretend that you would’ve worked this hard for any other class.” She shook her head, and he sighed. “Even Dean Strobel has been impressed by the amount of work you’ve been doing. She’s thrilled with the revised syllabus I submitted, and I think with a few more tweaks, she’ll approve a brand-new exciting version of my Romantic Period class next year.”

Joy swelled within her. “I’m glad, Dr. Connagher. You deserve to keep your class.”

“Conn,” he whispered solemnly. “I wouldn’t have my class without you, darlin’. I’ve been busy submitting a mountain of paperwork to the dean, preparing for midterms, grading, and then we meet just about every single day, which I love, don’t get me wrong, darlin’. But in all that work, I’m afraid I neglected something that I shouldn’t have let slip so long.”

His head dipped toward hers and her heart thudded up into her throat. However, all he did was brush his nose ever so lightly against hers and then he turned his attention toward the speaker. The frantic leap of her pulse slowed, leaving her feeling dizzy and lightheaded. Disappointment weighed upon her chest, crushing the breath out of her lungs.

“I neglected to make sure you realized how much you drive me crazy.”

She couldn’t help but splutter out, “What?”

“Do you have any idea how hard it’s been for me to keep the Dr. Connagher mask on for you? I sit there in my office imagining all sorts of highly inappropriate things I’d do if you weren’t my student.”

“Like what?”

Staring straight ahead, he whispered, “Do you really want to know?”

She nodded jerkily, very carefully keeping her eyes locked on the podium, although she couldn’t hear a word of the lecture.

He eased closer, shoulder to shoulder, and leaned his head against hers. If the dean glanced back at them, it might appear as though they were conferring intently about Robert Burns.

She hoped.

“I imagine telling you to do something, just to see if you will. Oh, at first I wouldn’t ask you to do anything too inappropriate. Like I might ask you to wear only jeans, because, darlin’ this little white skirt you’re wearing is dangerous.”

“How...” she wet her lips, “dangerous?”

Without warning, his hand clamped on her thigh, his fingers digging into her skin. The sudden force of his grip made her jump. He didn’t hurt her, not exactly, but he’d never touched her so... so... hard. Shock and desire throbbled through her, stealing her breath. It was all she could do not to squirm and widen her thighs in hope he might slide that hand higher.

She’d wanted to feel the strength in his big hands and yearned to crack his constant control, but in reality, her immediate, fierce response to this hint of force scared her. She’d never had a man hurt her, even a little, yet heat built steadily between her thighs.

Her stomach felt jumpy, her nerves jittery, but she also wanted him more than ever.

“Very dangerous,” he growled out low and soft. “It makes me want to slide my palms underneath and find out what sort of panties you’re wearing, or better yet, maybe I’d find none at all.

And then I can't help but wonder when I might get you under my tongue."

She made a choked sound and he squeezed warningly. Her quadriceps ached beneath his grip, worsening her desire, a dueling tango of aching need. His heat burned along her left side, yet she shivered, sweating on one side and chilled on the other.

Worse, bizarre fantasies streaked through her mind. She imagined him rolling her onto his lap and using that powerful hand to grip her wrists behind her back. Or lying beneath him with her arms pinned over her head, the same theme over and over and over.

His hands, holding her down, strong, so strong, too strong for her to ever escape.

So why did she let out a low groan and arch her hips, burning for him to do it again, harder, longer?

He eased his grip but left his hand on her thigh, his fingers rubbing in gentle circles that took away the slight pain he'd given. "So you see why I haven't allowed myself to remove the professor mask, Miss Jackson."

"No," she retorted, jerking her head around toward him. "Don't go back to Dr. Connagher, not yet."

"I can only give you a taste right now, Rae. Did you honestly think I couldn't see the need in your eyes? Or that I'd fail to make sure I took care of that need, at least as much is within my power given our situation? You needed me to remind you that I want you as badly as you want me. You needed me to show you how it might be between us as soon as we're free.

"Rae, darlin', I'm burning up every single time I look at you. Not touching you is pure hell every single day, but you and I both know you're not a quitter. You're doing well in my class, darlin'. I'm so proud of you, and I swear that I'll make up for this agony once we're clear of the final exam."

"I can't keep doing this." She tried to keep her voice down, yet still convey her desperation to him. "We're playing games, but then

I forget which game we're playing, or maybe it's not a game at all anymore and I can't tell. You're all tangled up in my head. Dr. Connagher or Conn, which is it? I want to be more than your student, but even now, it feels like you're still playing the teacher role. You're still in control. While I... I'm confused. About you, and myself. I don't know who you are. How much of this is playacting, and how much is real?"

"This is me," he whispered, squeezing to emphasize his words. "But I'm the professor, too. The professor would like very much to do all sorts of inappropriate things, too. If you'll let him."

Applause signaled the end of the lecture. The lights slowly rose. People stood and began milling about. Frustration churned in Rae's stomach, along with unease and nerves, even while her body trembled with need. It was a good thing he hadn't gone exploring beneath her skirt, for she feared he would've found quite a mess.

"Stay in my class, darlin'. I swear I'll make it up to you as soon as you turn in your final."

"Promise?"

"Absolutely." He turned to face her, his eyes smoldering with desire and a great deal of wicked amusement too. Bastard. He knew very well what he'd made her feel, and he thought it was hilarious that she was going up like wildfire and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. Not in such a public location with the dean just waiting to catch them. "If you want me to sign your withdrawal, I will. However, I'd like to make one more improper comment before we let Dr. Connagher return."

He leaned closer, but she averted her face, carefully checking to make sure the dean wasn't watching them. He pressed his lips to her ear. "If you wear that skirt again, I'm going to bend you over my desk and spank that delectable ass."

Her eyes flared, every muscle went rigid, and her mind simply locked up, every gear frozen to a halt. Outraged, she curled her right hand into a fist and thought really hard about punching him

in the stomach, even though he'd probably only laugh. And threaten to do something even worse.

She couldn't help but remember the strength in his hand, the way he'd gripped her thigh, hard enough to hurt just a little. A subtle warning. Or a promise. What would it be like to have him hold her down on top of his big desk? To feel his hands coming down on her ass? Would he truly spank her? Hard?

Wouldn't it be worth it simply to get his hands on her again?

"Ah, you like that suggestion. Good. I hope you do wear it again."

"Oh no I don't, and if you even think about it, I'll... I'll..." She couldn't even come up with an appropriate threat, not when her mind kept flickering back and forth between his hand on her thigh, and the possibility of his big hand sliding over her backside.

"If the lecture had lasted another five minutes, we could test the validity of your protests, darlin'. But with the lights on, I don't dare slide my fingers into your tempting heat to prove my point."

She shoved him away and stood, shaking with the need to get away... or hurry him to someplace private. "Don't threaten me, Dr. Connagher."

"No threat, Miss Jackson, but a promise." He stood, too, and moved to exit their aisle, rudely, she thought, because he started to cut in front of her, but then she realized he'd done it intentionally. He pinned the back of her legs against the seat and used his body to block what he might do from the dean. "I need a promise from you too, darlin'."

He cupped her chin in his hand, and his eyes blazed like molten sapphires. His brow was heavily lined, his mouth too close. Hot, hard with muscle, and so demanding, he crowded her, trapping her against the seat.

She knew she ought to be mad, or afraid at least a little, but all she could do was tremble and stare at his mouth, aching for him to kiss her.

*Kiss me now, even if the dean sees, I don't care!*

“Always tell me the truth, no matter how awful you think it is, and most especially if you think it’ll piss me off.” His fingers tightened, making her focus back on his eyes. “I need to know then more than ever. Promise me, Rae.”

Staring into his fierce eyes, she knew a sudden truth of her own. When he held her like this, and he demanded something, anything...

She’d give it.

“I promise.” Rising up on her tiptoes she dared a quick brush of her mouth against his. “Dr. Connagher, sir.”

## Chapter Four

*Dear Dr. Connagher:*

*We made it.*

*In less than an hour, I'll be sitting down for your final exam. I just finished printing out the last page of my essay detailing how I'll personally use poetry in the future, not just at college but my whole life. Do you know how many versions I had to go through to get something clean enough for the dean to read? Because I want long hours in bed with you, listening to you quote poetry in that rough, ragged voice against my ear.*

*Now all I have to do for the actual final is write a letter to you in the blue book about my favorite poem and make suggestions for next year's class. For extra credit (ha), we can submit an original poem of our own. Even if I'm not quite brave enough for that, you've accomplished the impossible, Dr. Connagher. You took a student who knew absolutely nothing about poetry and made me love the rhythm, images, and feelings so wonderfully disguised in a few simple lines, and no, I'm not saying this because of the future I hope to have with you. I'll always remember this class and your passion for poetry.*

*You're a phenomenal teacher.*

*I love you, Dr. Connagher. I know that sounds strange since we've not had a single "official" date, but it's true. You did your worst to me as a professor, and as your student, I survived. I think I even excelled, at least far beyond my personal expectations. But as soon as I turn in your final exam, it's time for you to leave.*

*I want you to remove that professor mask and show me the real Conn underneath.*

*However, you made me swear to always tell you the truth, no matter how awful or pissed off I thought you'd be. So here's the truth, Conn.*

*You bruised me that night in the lecture hall. I wore your fingerprints in my thigh for days. Every time I looked at those bruises, I shivered with the memory. I wanted you there with me so you could do it again, and maybe this time, you'd kiss me. Maybe you'd pin me flat on top of your desk and have your wicked way with me.*

*When the bruises faded, my first thought was to do something bratty just so you'd have to do it again. Without those marks, I felt empty and lost, as though I didn't belong to you anymore.*

*That's what scares me. You said you'd give me just a taste of the real you. Are you going to hurt me so badly I'll have bruises all the time? Will I want those bruises, cry when they fade away, and then beg you to give me more?*

*When you pulled off your Dr. Connagher mask, you also pulled off mine, and I have to admit that I don't know the Rae underneath.*

*She's weak in the knees for you, Conn, vulnerable, scared to death, and so in love with you that she'll do anything to be with you. I think she'd let you do anything, Conn. Anything at all.*

*You gave me fair warning, so I guess I should do the same, although I know you won't ever read this.*

*I'm wearing that white mini-skirt to your final.*

*Dangerous, I know, but when I wear that skirt, I feel powerful. I see the darkness in your eyes. I know I'm flirting with danger, and I just can't help myself. But I also need to know the truth, Conn. I need to know how far you'll go when you're not Dr. Connagher, and how far I'll let you go when I'm not Miss Jackson.*

*Are you going to hurt me again? Will I let you hurt me again? How can I protect myself against you when I love you so much?*

*I can't.*

*Because what I'm really afraid of is that I might need you to hurt me.*

*Yours,*

~ Rae

Miss Rae Jackson sauntered into Conn's classroom one last time, wearing that slip of a skirt that bared every inch of her incredible legs to what had to be just below her ass. The top she'd paired with it wasn't much better: a heart-stopping red fitted tank that hugged her body and lifted her breasts like an offering for him. Everything fit well—it wasn't too tight, slutty, or slinky—and it was certainly blazing hot outside. It might be only June, but summer had come early with ninety-degree heat and miserable humidity.

A quick glance confirmed that the other students wore similar clothes. Hell, one student even wore a bikini top which made Rae look overdressed. The other student's tanned skin already gleamed with oil, making it very clear that as soon as she turned in his final, she was headed to the lake. However, none of them sent a fist of lust tearing through his stomach like Rae.

She took her seat, crossed her legs demurely at the ankle, and flickered a quick look up at him to judge his reaction. She'd worn her hair loose too, another temptation with all that bare skin. And that damned skirt. She knew very well what it did to him. What he'd promised.

While his students wrote their final letters into their composition books and turned them in to him at the front of the room, he forced himself to read their papers instead of tormenting himself about what she might have on beneath that skirt. He would not think about it.

*Damn it, I have more control than this!*

An hour crept by until she was the last student remaining. He watched her flip back through what she'd written, absently gnawing on her lip. *I'm going to have that lip in my teeth before she leaves this room.*

When Dean Strobel stuck her head in, he very nearly cursed out loud. Rae scribbled a few more lines and then quickly brought him her final. The dean didn't even let him get a finger on it—she took it directly from Rae's hand.

"And her paper," Dean Strobel demanded. She eyed the impressive stack of pages in Rae's essay and gave her a considering look. "I'll have my decision by the end of the day, Dr. Connagher, and then you can read and grade everything to see if we agree. I must admit, young lady, that you surprised me, and him, I dare say. I saw you at the lecture a few months ago, so quote me something from Burns, and it'd better be something other than *'A Red, Red Rose.'*"

Rae paled, shooting him an imploring look of panic. Neither of them had expected the dean to interrogate her in person. He tried to think of a way to help her, even opened his mouth to start a quote for her, but Dean Strobel silenced him with a fierce look.

Staring at his mouth, though, Rae must have suddenly remembered a Burns poem, although Conn couldn't say that he cared for her choice. At all.

*"Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!/ Ae farewell, alas for ever!/ Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee/."* She hesitated, a hint of color darkening her cheeks, but she finished the phrase, granted in a slightly ragged voice. *"Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee!"*<sup>4</sup>

Conn let his pride glow in his eyes, and hopefully a hint of the warring sighs and groans he was going to give her as soon as they were able to slip away.

The dean smiled widely, slapped Conn on the arm with the bundled pages, and headed toward the door. "I can't wait to read her final essay. Excellent work, you two."

He waited until the dean was surely well on her way to her office, and then he leaned in close to Rae. Her eyes locked on his mouth, her teeth flashing against her lip again, and it was all he could do not to haul her beneath him here and now.

His control felt ragged and frayed, like a rope which she'd been sawing away at day by day. They weren't safe yet, far from it. He certainly couldn't kiss her here where anyone could walk by. Until final grades were posted for the class, he'd continue to be under the dean's scrutiny.

Grimly, he turned away and began shoving all the blue books and essays into his satchel. He had to have a taste of her, soon, before he lost his mind entirely. "Do you remember what I said I was going to do if you wore that skirt again, Miss Jackson?"

Wide eyed, she nodded, her breathing loud in the empty room. He cupped her elbow in his hand to get her moving quicker. "Are you... were you... serious?"

"Hell yeah, darlin'." He squeezed her arm, watching her eyes darken, her lips part on a soft little sound that sent his blood pumping. "That's one thing you should know about me already," he growled out against her ear. "I *always* keep my promises. Now I expect you to report to my office immediately for the *real* final exam."

Rae stood in Dr. Connagher's office, her right arm still hot from where his hand had been. That hint of force had made her tremble again. Her knees felt watery and her heart pounded so hard that she barely heard him shut the door behind them.

However, the snick of the lock sliding into place nearly made her jump to the ceiling and hang there like a yowling cat straight out of cartoons.

Breathlessly, she waited for him to make his move. If he picked her up and tossed her on top of his desk, it'd be worth a spanking.

But he didn't touch her. Instead, he set his satchel on top of that glossy cherry desk she'd fantasized about all these months and added another stack of blue books into the bag. "Damn. I'm going to be grading for days. How does a week sound to you?"

Her voice cracked. "A week?"

"Let me finish grading for the semester, and by next Friday, it ought to be safe for us to date more formally." He sat in his chair and casually leaned back, his hands behind his head, but he didn't fool her. His eyes blazed and his arms were corded tight as though he were holding himself back instead of her for a change. "If you still care to see me, that is."

The blinds behind his desk were drawn, letting only slender slants of light cut across his face, leaving canyons and hollows she longed to explore. Now, at last, she wasn't his student. He wasn't her professor. They were going to date. However, despite his earlier threat, he seemed in no hurry to even touch her.

*A week my ass*, she snarled. *Two can play his little games*. Lifting her chin, she glided over to the desk and trailed her fingers across its glossy surface as she slowly invaded his space.

On his side of the desk, she hopped up on top and sat before him, hissing a little at the cool surface beneath her nearly bare bottom. "You know I do."

Gravely, he merely watched her, his face lined and dark, his mouth a firm slash.

She couldn't tell if he was displeased or thrilled at her bravado. "I've had a lot of fantasies about this desk."

"Like what, darlin'?"

"Oh, nothing." She ducked her head a little so she could peep up at him through her lashes. Deliberately, she licked her lips. His forehead creased even more and his eyes locked on her mouth. "Nothing I can admit to you."

The chair creaked as he leaned forward. He planted his palms on either side of her hips and fogged up the wood with the heat of his palms, but he still didn't touch her. "You will if I tell you to."

Her heart was beating double time now, that familiar anticipation and the beginning of dread curling through her. Yes, yes, this was Conn, not Dr. Connagher. The mask was slipping enough that he scared her, but she loved it. *I love him*.

If she pushed him hard enough, maybe he'd yank that mask clean away and take her right now on top of this big desk like she'd dreamed. "Will I?"

Heavy lidded and dark, his eyes narrowed. "I'm not in the mood for games, Rae."

"That's good," she whispered, snuggling close enough to brush her mouth against his. "What sort of mood are you in, then?"

He made a low ragged sound and snagged her bottom lip in his teeth, gripping hard enough she cried out. The sharp sting sent a wicked curl of heat through her. Shuddering, she opened her mouth more, silently begging for his tongue, but he released her immediately. Undeterred, she slid her palm into the neck of his shirt, relishing the velvet heat of his neck, the crisp hair barely peeking out of the top of his shirt. She even managed to get one button undone before he shackled her wrists and pulled her hands away.

"Rae, darlin', I can't take your hands on me right now. It's been one damned long semester, all this flirting and promising and teasing. I thought it'd be fun to give you a hot little spanking, but I'm too raw and ragged to pull it off without scaring the hell out of you. If I touch you right now, we'll have the dean breaking that door down and hauling me off to prison because I'll kill anyone who tries to keep me from you."

"Aw, poor Dr. Connagher. Have I been a very bad student?"

"Very," he retorted, squeezing her wrists harder. "Don't push my buttons, Rae. Not today. You won't like what you unleash. Give me a week—"

"No."

His eyes flared wide and his mouth fell open with shock.

She couldn't help it—she laughed out loud. In fact, she felt downright giddy. After all these months, she'd finally managed to knock him off balance. As his student, she hadn't dared antagonize him. Now... *that will be half the fun*. "Do you really think I slaved all semester in your class only to let you put me off again?"

Lazily, he dragged her wrists behind her, pinning them in the small of her back just as she'd imagined. She couldn't help but fight and twist, testing him, ensuring he really could hold her.

*I'm trapped*, she realized, and at the same time, she felt a surge of wet heat between her legs. *And more turned on than ever.*

"Do you really think you can get away with telling me no, Rae?"

"No," she purred, wriggling to the very edge of his desk to hug her thighs around him. "Make me yours, Conn."

"You don't have any idea what you're asking."

"I don't care. I'll do anything you want, just don't make me wait another week."

A growl trickled out of his lips. Before she could even yelp, he jerked and flipped her around so that she was on her stomach in front of him on top of his desk. He leaned in, pressing his chest against her buttocks to make sure she stayed put. Her arms ached, her wrists still clamped in his hand behind her. "Anything I want, Rae? Are you sure about that?"

Gasping, she tried to catch her breath, but the edge of the desk dug into her abdomen. When she didn't answer quickly enough, he pushed her wrists up incrementally, making her shoulders scream with pressure. "No!"

"No, you're not sure?" He released her wrists but kept his chest pressed against her, bracing his arms on either side of her on top of the desk, making his body a cage. "Or no to anything I want? Or maybe now you'll ask me nicely to let you go home to change this skirt."

"No." She brought her hands up beneath her, ready to scramble out from beneath him even if that meant crawling across his desk. "I won't go home, Dr. Connagher. Not to change. Not for a week. Sir."

“Well, darlin’,” he drawled, sliding his left hand forward to trap her hair beneath his palm. “I guess I get to give you that final exam after all.”

With her anchored in place, he casually rolled his chair over to her left side. She was completely free, except for her hair, yet she didn’t dare move a muscle. She barely even breathed.

“I warned you about what sort of thoughts ran through my mind when you wore this skirt.” His right hand kneaded a path up her hamstring. “I didn’t like sitting there watching you take my final and feeling like a damned pervert for wondering what sort of panties my *student* was wearing.”

With a quick flick of his wrist, the white skirt fluttered against her back.

Choking back her embarrassment, she shivered, imagining his dark eyes blazing, his face lined and grim. With the light-colored skirt, she hadn’t dared wear black or red panties underneath, so she hoped he wasn’t too disappointed by lacy but conservative white.

“How does it feel, Miss Jackson, to know that your professor is eying your ass like it’s my last meal?” Lightly, he traced the incredibly tender flesh of her cheeks that peeked out of the high-cut legs. The thought of him actually slapping her there made her breath hitch in her throat. “To know that soon, I’m going to strip these panties off so I can find out how wet you are?”

Her stomach churned, but she couldn’t resist arching her back in silent invitation, begging those sly fingers to explore just a bit deeper. “You are a pervert.”

“Only for you, darlin’. If you wanted to get my hands on your ass, all you had to do was ask.”

“*Nicely?*” she asked in a snide voice. She’d known a spanking would be embarrassing, but this was humiliating. Yet she knew exactly what he’d find when he stripped her bare.

“Very nicely,” he said with a knowing chuckle that still managed to curl her toes. “When I’m done with you, darlin’, you’ll beg me to do it again.”

His right hand cupped her bottom and he squeezed gently, far from the force she'd expected. "Here's question number one on this final exam: have you ever been spanked by a man you're interested in sexually?"

"No," she replied, and then because she couldn't resist digging her grave deeper, she added, "and I won't beg you, not now, and certainly not to do it again."

"Remember those words later, darlin'."

He molded her with his hand, squeezing just a bit harder, up and down the backs of each thigh, the curve of each buttock. It felt incredible, an erotic massage that had her arching her back and raising her hips, pushing into his caress. Slowly, he increased the pressure, turning her into a melted puddle on top of his desk, but he still hadn't hurt her.

"Question number two: I like control, Rae."

"That's not a question," she gasped out.

He leaned closer so she could feel his heat down her left side, and only then did she realize he was breathing as hard as her.

Sliding up to the small of her back, his hand trembled on its downward stroke across her backside. He pressed his forehead against her bare arm, and his face was hot and damp with sweat.

The realization hit her like a two-by-four across the head. *He wants me. Badly. He wants this.*

Knowing he was so turned on dialed up the heat as high as her internal boiler would go. On a low groan, she parted her thighs and pressed harder against his seeking hand.

"But do you know what that means, darlin'? Do you know how hard it is for me to touch you like this when my control is already frayed? Because what I really want to do..."

"Do it," she ground out.

"Rae—"

"I want to know the truth! I need to know what you want, what you *really* want. When you take off your professor mask, Conn, what are you going to ask me to do?"

He tugged the scrap of lace off one hip and then the other. “Step out of them.”

Heart pounding frantically, she did as he ordered, and he made a low, raw sound like a dying man as he touched her.

“I’ve dreamed of this, Rae. Dreamed of you quivering and trembling, bare to my touch. I wanted you helpless. I wanted you whimpering for me to hurry up, begging me to take you.”

In her mind, his whispered fantasies collided with her own.

She’d ached for his hands, especially since he’d gripped her thigh so hard. She’d daydreamed about him holding her down, pinning her, making her helpless. Knowing that he wanted the same only made her desire worse.

But now that she had his powerful, demanding hands on her, he wasn’t holding her down at all. She whimpered as he asked, squirming to get his fingers inside her. That’s when he pulled his hand back and smacked her right cheek. The sharp crack made her flinch, but it didn’t hurt. He didn’t smack her that hard.

She blew out a long, shaking breath, relieved, until he rubbed his palm against her skin, spreading the warmth from his slap. His fingers delved again and she groaned, louder, her back straining to push harder into him.

“Shhh, darlin’. I doubt many professors are still on campus since our final was so late, but the dean’s surely in her office just down the hall. I wouldn’t care to explain to her why my door was locked with you in here with me, would you?”

He slapped her again, harder, the sting burning straight through her core. How could he tell her to be quiet and then spank her harder? Fire built with each stroke, sucking her down into an endless black hole of need. He was devouring her, destroying her, turning her into a quivering mass of hunger, and the more she shook and whimpered as quietly as she could, the harder he spanked her.

“Are you ready to beg me yet?”

“Bastard,” she retorted, biting back the pleas that boiled in her mind. *Please, make me yours.*

“That’s my darlin’,” he purred against her ear. “Let me spank you longer. Harder. How far will you let me go?”

*As far as it takes*, she swore. Wound up so tight, she wanted to scream, grind herself against his desk, his thigh, anything to gain relief. As she struggled, the small pain in her scalp blended with the punishing need, the growing fire on her ass, worsening her desire.

She sobbed, not because he spanked her too hard—but because she needed him too badly.

Dropping his left forearm between her shoulder blades, he shifted his weight so that he was holding her down in earnest. Immediately, it felt like he’d hit some button in her that managed to winch every muscle in her body to a tight humming pitch. This is what she’d dreamed about. What she’d yearned to feel, and yet dreaded at the same time.

*Helpless, for him.*

Shaking, crying, she begged as he’d threatened. “Please, please, Conn, I can’t stand it!”

His hand stilled. “What do you want, darlin’? Do you want me to stop?”

“No, no, don’t stop,” she sobbed. “I want you. Please, Conn!”

His right hand left her momentarily. The sound of his zipper was loud despite their frantic breathing.

So primed for him, the thought of him sliding home at last almost pushed her over the edge. However, he didn’t move behind her. He didn’t take her on top of his desk as she’d dreamed all these months. Despite her best efforts, he evidently still possessed enough control to torment her with what she couldn’t have. She threw her head back, a desperate wail threatening to tear from her throat, and he slid his fingers deep inside her.

“Say my name.”

She opened her mouth to comply, but every muscle suddenly locked down so fiercely that she nearly screamed. Jamming her

right hand against her mouth to make sure she didn't draw the dean and every police officer in town to knock down his door, she reached, blindly, with her other, hoping to at least touch him. It helped that he was curled over her, using his weight to trap her.

She grabbed hold of his erection like he was the only lifeline that could keep her from drowning.

With a harsh, low curse, he pumped in her hand and shuddered against her. The thought of him coming inside her threw her so far out to sea that she didn't know if she'd ever make it back, but she managed to breathe out, "Conn."

Conn had just failed the biggest exam of his entire life.

He crammed the evidence of his failure back into his jeans and pulled Rae into his arms. "Hold on, darlin'. I've got you. Can you hear me?"

She was limp, her face wet with tears, her breathing ragged and wracked with sobs. Dear God, had she tried to tell him to stop? How could she? After his little lesson in telling him no, did he honestly think she'd dare refuse him again?

Drunk on her sweetness, he'd used her attraction and inherent desire to please him as surely as any rope to bind her, and then he hadn't given her any sort of safety net. She was the student in this as surely as she'd sat in his poetry class, and he'd abused her trust. He'd punished her without ever explaining the rules, or making sure she understood the game they played. And then like a fucking bastard, he'd compounded his crime by losing the last bit of control and coming like a pimple-faced jerk.

As a dominant, he'd done the unthinkable: he'd lost control of *himself*.

Curling into a tight little ball, she started to shake.

He held her tighter. "I'm sorry, darlin', so sorry. I shouldn't have taken you so far, certainly not on our first... hell, I can't even

call this a date. It was wrong of me to ask this of you before we ever talked about it. I've built up too many fantasies about you here in my office, and once you let me start, I didn't want to stop."

She tucked her face against his neck, but at least she didn't run wailing for the dean's office. "I didn't ask you to stop."

That didn't make him feel any better. "Could you have told me no, Rae? Honestly?" Her silence made his heart thud painfully in his chest. "That's what I thought."

He cupped her cheek tenderly and turned her face up to his, wiping her tears away. "This was my fault, Rae. It won't happen again until we've had a chance to talk long and hard about what you're comfortable with. I swear it, darlin'."

Someone knocked on the door and they both froze. "Dr. Connagher?"

He stared down into Rae's pale face, her eyes great dark pools of reproach. All it'd take from her was one cried-out plea to the dean waiting outside his door, and he'd be done teaching. Forever. After what he'd done to this precious student who'd trusted him enough to take the first step toward surrender, he deserved to be fired.

*No. I deserve to rot in hell.*

"Come down to my office in the next ten minutes and you can have your student's paper and final exam," Dean Strobel said. "Look them over this weekend and we'll touch base on Monday."

*My student. Rae, forgive me.*

"Sure thing, dean," he forced out. "I'll be there in a minute."

Rae slid off his lap. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself. She tried to laugh, but it came out closer to a quiet sob that sliced and diced his heart to ribbons. "It's a good thing she didn't ask to come in. I'll sneak out while you're in her office."

"No," he ground out, guilt strangling him. She couldn't even meet his gaze. "I don't want you sneaking anywhere."

She cringed at the roughness in his voice and he thought he would expire on the spot. He couldn't bear to see her fear. Not like this.

“Stay here, darlin’, while I change and take care of the dean. If my door is closed, no one will bother you. Then we’ll go somewhere and talk, just you and me, Rae, man and woman, not professor and student. I won’t even think about kinky shit until we talk through what just happened and I make sure you’re okay with it.”

He eased her down into his chair. She was still shivering, so he grabbed the spare jacket he kept on the back of his door and wrapped her in it. Looking at her so small, huddled and shivering, made him want to put his head through a brick wall. Every instinct told him to sweep her up into his arms and carry her away from here. Once they were alone, he could make her feel safe again.

He’d lay it all on the line for her.

*How much I love her. How much I need her.*

“I’m okay,” she whispered against her drawn-up knees. “You need to go. I understand.”

Still, he lingered, even knowing that he only had a few minutes to wash up before going to the dean’s office. “I don’t want to leave you, not like this.” He suddenly thought of the Robert Burns poem she’d quoted earlier, and a worse line came to mind. “*To spare thee now is past my pow’r, / Thou bonie gem.*”<sup>5</sup> Forgive me, Rae. I’ll fix this, no matter what you need. Just wait for me, okay?”

“In this evil hour, crush my slender stem.”<sup>6</sup> A ghost of a smile flickered on her lips, but her eyes still struck his heart with guilt. “I’m no mountain daisy, Dr. Connagher.”

“To see you was to love you.”<sup>7</sup> He cupped her face in both hands and lightly brushed his mouth against hers. Not a kiss, exactly, for he feared pushing himself on her too quickly again. Instead, he tried to tell her with his gentleness how much he treasured her. How hard he would work to regain her trust. “I’ll hasten back to you as soon as the dean is finished with me, but I refuse to say farewell. Wait for me, Rae.”

Later, he’d regret that he hadn’t made her give her word.

## Chapter Five

*Dear Dr. Connagher:*

*When you first left, I thought I was okay. Wrapped in your coat and your scent, hidden away in your office, I could almost believe everything would be still be fine. Without you there, I started to think. For myself. I couldn't sit still. I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't stop shaking. I just had to get out of there.*

*I rushed back to my dorm, stood in the bathroom with the door locked, and stared at my ass. I could still see your handprints in my flesh, red and angry like a fresh brand.*

*What have you done to me? Who is this person bawling my eyes out at the thought of losing you, despite the bruises I'll surely have tomorrow? The exact same person who begged you not to stop.*

*Standing there looking at your handiwork, I knew you were right. I would beg you to do it again, if that's the only way I can have you.*

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

*Because I'm standing here, checking my ass again in the mirror, and I still want you. I don't regret letting you spank me. No, my biggest regret is that I couldn't shake your control enough to get you inside me.*

*I'm scared, Conn, of me, not you. How far would I let you go? Will I let you abuse me, hurt me, break me, simply to be with you?*

*I need to clear my head. I need to remember who I am. So I'm going home this weekend, and honestly, right now, I don't know that I can come back to campus. I don't know that I can bear to come back to you in a week, because deep down, I know the truth.*

**I'll never be able to tell you no again.**

*If I were brave enough to stop by your office before leaving town, I'd slide my "extra credit" poem beneath your door. I couldn't write it*

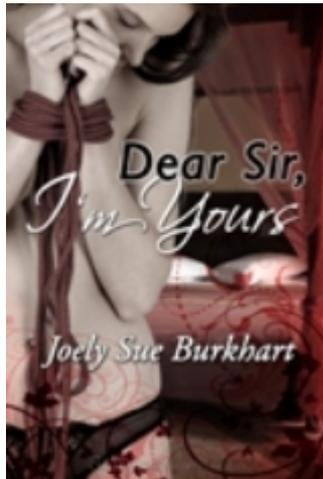
*before your final final exam. It's not iambic pentameter. Hell, it doesn't even rhyme. But it says it all, doesn't it? So I won't sign like I have been, because you already know the truth.*

*~ Rae*

Yours

Wild hearts can't be broken.  
Wild horses can't be tamed.  
But I never was wild  
—except for you—  
and my heart is hand-blown glass.  
You never promised to love me.  
You never promised to save me.  
You held my heart  
—in the palm of your hand –  
and squeezed.  
I'm so sorry if I cut you.  
I'm so sorry if I made you bleed.  
When you held me  
—I was already broken –  
and only shards remain.

Continue reading about Conn and Rae's journey in [Dear Sir, I'm Yours](#).



## The poetry quoted in this novella:

1 “Ozymandias,” by Percy Bysshe Shelley

2 “One Word is Too Often Profaned,” by Percy Bysshe Shelley

3 “One Word is Too Often Profaned,” by Percy Bysshe Shelley

4 “Ae Fond Kiss,” by Robert Burns

5 “To a Mountain Daisy,” by Robert Burns

6 “To a Mountain Daisy,” by Robert Burns: *“Thou’s met me in an evil hour,/ For I maun crush amang the stoure/ Thy slender stem:”*

7 “Ae Fond Kiss,” by Robert Burns: *“But to see her was to love her,/ Love but her, and love for ever.”*

## A Note to My Readers

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## **The Horse Master of Shanhasson**

*The horse master is bringing his whip.*

## Dear Sir, I'm Yours Excerpt

By Joely Sue Burkhart

With the flashlight gripped in her fist, Rae pushed her shoulders through the crawlspace beneath Miss Belle's back porch. Colonel Healy had designed the addition in honor of their daughter's birth nearly sixty years ago. Rae cast the light up at the floor boards. Nice solid heavy beams. They didn't build houses like this anymore. She checked the closest footing, digging dirt away from the concrete.

"The porch and addition are in good shape, Miss Belle. Let me check the foundation real quick, but I don't think you've got any problems outside the house. It's good, real good."

"Aren't you afraid of spiders?" Miss Belle demanded. "It's not natural for a young lady to be crawling around in dark spaces like that. Who knows what kind of creepy-crawlies are in there."

In Rae's experience, the creepy-crawlies weren't bugs under a porch at all but real live people. "I'm fine, Miss Belle."

She wiggled her shoulders deeper beneath the house to get a better look. The dirt was dry but rich, good smelling, not dank with mold or slime. Good stuff. But it was the foundation of the original structure that she most wanted to see.

She cast the light over the tight stones. This old plantation house put brand new tract homes to shame. "Looks good, Miss Belle. I don't think you'll have any leaking problems into your basement for years yet. I—"

"Why didn't you call me?" A male voice interrupted. "I want to meet your contractor before you sign anything."

Rae's heart slammed against her ribs. Every feminine instinct screamed a warning. She froze, glad she was mostly under the

porch. Except for her lower body. Shit, shit, shit. On her knees, ass in the air, dirt in her hair... And that voice...

Oh, God. Not him, please. Anybody but him.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Verrill. I can take care of myself.”

Relief washed over her and she let her forehead rest against her forearm a minute. She didn’t know any Verrill. Deep breaths, calm—she had no reason to be worried, let alone hopeful, excited, terrified...

“If you call me that, then I get to call you Grandma.”

“Oh, Conn,” Miss Belle growled out a laugh. Rae heard the slap on his arm. “I want you to meet someone.”

*Conn.*

She couldn’t breathe. Five years might have passed, but he still possessed the ability to reduce her to a twenty-one-year-old English student again, drooling over her sexy professor. Betrayal choked her. The old lady had set her up. Had he been in on the joke? Furious tears burned her eyes.

Maybe the fantastic old house would suddenly break apart and bury her in rubble. She’d rather die than face him again.

He gave a low whistle. “Hello, gorgeous.”

Her brain skittered with panic, her sudden intake of breath echoing beneath the porch. Great, just great. He was staring at her ass. Heat flared beneath her jeans as if he’d smacked her. *Again.*

*Maybe he won’t remember me.*

Her heart clenched in agony.

“The Fix-It Lady has accepted my offer. Rae Lynn, come on out and meet my grandson.”

Wait a minute, meet? So maybe Miss Belle didn’t know the whole sordid truth.

“Rae?”

The sudden intensity of his voice rocked her with panic. She scrambled deeper beneath the porch. He caught her foot, his powerful hands shackling her leg. She kicked back with her other foot, catching him solidly with her boot. Hopefully in the head.

He grunted but didn't let go. Weight trapped her lower body, his arms snaking around her legs, hauling her back. She grabbed at the footing, missed, dug in the soft soil for a root, anything to slow him.

Miss Belle shrieked. If she'd carried a parasol, the old lady would be beating him over the head with it. "What are you doing? Let go of her this minute, Verrill Connagher! Don't you know how to treat a lady?"

Grappled inch by inch backwards into the open, Rae wanted to die.

He flipped her over, his hands locked on her waist. One more tug and—

"Rae!"

Blinded by the afternoon sun, she swung her fist at his head, grateful she couldn't see. She didn't want to see the face she'd daydreamed about all these years. Those incredible baby blues, changing with his mood from steel gray to brilliant sapphire. One look from those eyes and she'd be lost all over again.

Her heart pounded, her skull split open, her mouth dried like an old bone. She bucked and fought, trying to kick him again.

*Don't touch him. Don't melt into his arms and burst into tears and wail that I wish—*

Pinning her hands on either side of her head, he leaned down over her to block the sun. She squeezed her eyes shut and averted her face. She strained in vain, knowing he was too strong, always too strong, as strong as she remembered.

"Stop it," he said gruffly, his voice tight. Anger? Or pain? Had he missed her? Why did the weight of his body against hers have to feel so damned good? "Are you hurt?"

She laughed, wincing at the ragged edge of pain and regret in her voice. "Get off me, Dr. Connagher."

"I take it you two know each other?" Miss Belle sniffed loudly. "Honestly, Verrill, do as she says and get up. You can't scare her off with your intimidation tactics—she's the best contractor around!"

“Look at me,” he whispered fiercely, lowering his face within inches of hers. Steel-clad velvet, his voice reached into her chest and tugged on her heart.

His panting breath was hot and moist on her cheek, the leathery musk of his cologne achingly familiar. The heat of his body burned into hers, driving her into the ground, and she felt her muscles softening. She arched against him helplessly, but not to escape. Not this time.

So weak, so miserably weak. She braced herself to bear the intensity of his gaze, the force of his will. *I can tell him no. I've learned that much in five years. Haven't I?*

Slowly, she turned her head and opened her eyes.

All hard angles and shadows, his face had aged, lined and worn but better for that aging. Like fine whiskey and Sean Connery, he merely got better, more distinctive and impressive over the years. His Oxford white shirt had a dirty boot print over his heart. Ironic, that.

Staring into his eyes, she felt her throat constrict with tears, her eyes filling. No, no, she wouldn't cry. Not here. Not now.

The chips of ice glittering in his eyes thawed at whatever he saw in her gaze, but he held her pinned beneath him. “Don't run out on me again.”

She nodded jerkily. He knew she wouldn't refuse him. She couldn't. That's why she'd run the first time. Evidently she hadn't learned a damned thing.

Immediately, he climbed to his feet and offered her a hand up. Belying the burning fierceness of his gaze, he said lightly, “Rae was a student of mine five years ago.”

“Oh!” Miss Belle clapped her hands, grinning ear to ear. “So you're the one he spoke of so often. Fabulous. What a coincidence. I hope he gave you an A, Rae Lynn.”

Heat seared her face. Oh, he gave her an A all right.

Talking about coincidence... Suspicious, she glared at the innocent little old lady.

With a breezy smile, Miss Belle flounced back toward the rear of the house. “I’ll see you for dinner, dear.”

“Oh no you won’t,” Rae retorted, her stomach twisting into knots. “I’m not coming back.” *Not if he’s here.*

Turning slowly to look over her shoulder, Miss Belle arched a brow at her beneath the broad brim of her big straw hat. That look would have scared General Sherman away from Atlanta. “You gave your word, Rae Lynn. You accepted my offer, signed our contract, and I don’t tolerate fools or liars. Besides, remember your slogan.”

With that, Miss Belle disappeared down the trail skipping like a little girl.

*Making It Right.*

Clenching her teeth, Rae shook her head. It was too late to make it right with Conn.

Five years too late.

Continue reading about Conn and Rae’s journey in [Dear Sir, I’m Yours](#).

