

Dear Sir, I'm Yours

Joely Sue Burkhart

Dedication

For my beloved sister.

Chapter One

Dear Dr. Connagher:

A simple letter probably isn't the best way to tell you all of this, but I need to write this out as much for myself, as for you. If we talked on the phone, I don't think I could get it all out—fear, longing, turmoil, and most of all, the agony. Every moment I'm not there with you is torture.

If I'd met you this past Friday night as we agreed, I couldn't have sat there on our first real date and told you the truth. It's not that you'd intimidate me, or scare me, exactly. It's me. I lose my will when I'm with you.

I'd do anything to be with you, which scares me to death.

So this really is for the best. I know it. But it doesn't make it any easier.

Daddy was in an accident Friday afternoon at his jobsite and nearly died. I've spent the last few days at the hospital, waiting with my family to see if he'll live, how badly he'll be handicapped. He's never going to be the same, and he'll have years of physical therapy and doctor's visits. I need to stay here. I need to help Mom, try to find a way to pay his medical bills, and save his business. I don't know when, if ever, I'll be

returning to Drury University. Finishing my degree is the last thing on my mind right now, even though I only have a few semesters left.

Every single word of that is true. However, it's also true that I didn't have my car loaded to come back to campus before the accident. I hadn't decided to come back to you.

Self-preservation, Conn. I have to protect myself. When I'm with you, I want what you want. I don't even know what I want. You hurt me in your office. You embarrassed me. And yet you made me feel incredible, too. You made me want you to hurt me. How messed up is that?

Yet I lie awake at night remembering, and it's all I can do not to jump in my car and drive straight to you.

I know you'll never read this. You hate e-mail. It would be better to mail it to your office. But what if someone read it by accident? True, again, but it's also true that maybe deep down in my dark, scary place only you've seen, I really don't want you to read this at all.

~ Rae

Current Day

The job was perfect, she needed the money badly, and working for a college professor's elderly grandmother should be a piece of cake. Yet butterflies the size of Texas crashed and burned in Rae's stomach.

The little old lady couldn't possibly know the truth: Five years ago, her grandson had bent Rae over his desk the last day of finals, spanked her, and given her the best orgasm of her life.

She hadn't seen him since, although not a single night had gone by that she didn't remember...and ache for him to do it again.

Besides, Conn wouldn't be here—a fifteen-minute drive into the country from campus—in the middle of the semester. He certainly wasn't the kind of man to live at home with his grandma. The ridiculous thought made her laugh out loud nervously.

Idling her truck, Rae stared at the dilapidated iron gate and gnawed on her lip. Someone had attempted to put up a shiny new sign that read *Healy House* but it hung askew, revealing *Beulah* written in rusted ivy. A nice pile of cash would go a long ways to keep the hospital bills from swallowing her parents' meager disability income, but the real lure was the promise of restoring a fantastic old house.

That's why she hadn't told the old lady no on the phone as soon as Miss Belle bragged about her college professor grandson. Fixing up houses was Rae's specialty, the older the better. According to Miss Belle, her house had been built in 1850. Turning a Missouri plantation house into a Bed and Breakfast would be a challenge for "The Fix-It Lady".

Driving her rusted-out Ford truck down the oak- and maple-lined driveway, Rae felt her heartbeat speed with anticipation despite the

queasy, gnawing pit of nerves in her stomach. The ancient trees would be gorgeous in a couple of weeks once the leaves started to turn color.

At last the house appeared. Peeling white paint, wide grand front porch, two stories—the house took her breath away. She parked the truck and got out for a better look. The roof needed some work, she thought, noting bubbled-up shingles. Scraped and painted, the porch would look as good as new. With climbing roses running wild all over the railing and up the columns, the air was filled with incredible spice and color.

Rae wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans, cleared her throat in preparation, and raised her finger toward the doorbell.

“Coming, dear!”

Reflexively, she went ahead and rang the doorbell anyway. The old lady must have heard her truck drive up. Beveled glass sparkled in the rich mahogany door, but one pane in the lower right-hand corner must have fallen out. The hole was covered with a brown paper bag and masking tape. A stained-glass panel would look gorgeous framed in the ancient door.

Moments later, the front door opened and Miss Belle invited her inside. From her floppy, wide-brimmed straw hat tied with a pink scarf to her shirtwaist pink dress and her perfect white heels, Miss Belle was the epitome of a southern lady. Her silvered strawberry hair probably would have clashed dreadfully with the pink dress twenty years ago,

before age toned it down. Sharp eyed and smooth skinned, the old lady looked about fifty or sixty instead of the eighty she must be.

“I’m Rae Jackson, the Fix-It Lady. We talked on the phone?”

Miss Belle looked her up and down, noting her jeans and boots. She’d probably examine Rae’s fingernails too and sniff with disdain. She hadn’t even bothered to put her hair in a ponytail today.

“Come in, Miss Jackson, and let’s have a nice long chat. I need to get to know you better before I decide whether to hire you or not.”

So that’s where Conn had gained the habit of formality with his students. The memory made her cheeks burn. He’d always been a stickler in class, polite and formal with his quiet command of respect. In his office, though...

Pushing away those painful memories, she glanced about frantically to assure herself he really wasn’t there as the old lady led her deeper into the house. The rooms had already been decorated and refurbished with fresh paint in lovely Victorian colors on the walls and antique furniture. The plush velvet divan and delicately carved chairs with cushions of dusty rose just about made Rae swoon.

The library was even more fantastic. Built-in shelves from floor to ceiling were loaded down with leather-bound books. Sunlight filtered in through white sheers, casting lacy patterns on a massive cherry desk positioned before the bay window.

Miss Belle took off her hat and set it on the desk as she sat. “Tell me a little about yourself, Miss Jackson.”

Rae sat in the sapphire blue wing-back chair before the desk. “I’ve worked on several restorations and can—”

“No, no.” Miss Belle leaned forward, her pale blue eyes sharp. “I know all about the jobs you’ve done. I want to know about you.”

Most people wanted extensive references before investing thousands of dollars in an unknown contractor. What kind of checking had Miss Belle done on her? “I was born and raised here in Missouri—”

“Where?”

“Outside Bolivar. My—”

“Does your family still live there?”

Giving up control of this interview, Rae nodded. “Daddy had a contracting business for years. He was injured some years ago—”

“When?”

“Five years. He was electrocuted and nearly died.”

“Oh dear.” Miss Belle took out a hanky and lightly dabbed her eyes, although Rae didn’t see any evidence of tears. “Five years ago, when you left Drury?”

“Yes.” Rae shut her mouth, determined not to go into more detail about that last semester of college, let alone that last class with the old lady’s grandson. Daddy’s accident had required she stay home to help

take care of him, and that was all Miss Belle needed to know. “He’s still in a wheelchair and can’t speak very well, but he’s doing okay.”

“And so you took over his business?”

“Not exactly.” She fought not to drop her gaze from the old lady’s. “I’ve worked with Daddy for years, but ran into difficulties with his business. We were forced to shut it down about a year ago.”

Wow, that was certainly a vanilla, polite way of saying her ex-husband had run the company—and her—into the ground. Of course, her clients didn’t need to know the gruesome details of a business and marriage gone bad.

Miss Belle hummed, low and soft, the complete opposite of her eyes. Rae fought not to squirm in her seat like an unruly kid. “And so the Fix-It Lady business is all yours.”

“Daddy’s motto was to fix it right the first time. That’s what I aim to do.”

“*Making it Right.*” Miss Belle smiled, a flash of shark’s teeth. “Your slogan.”

“Absolutely,” Rae said, leaning forward slightly. “I love old houses, and I know the good sub-contractors thanks to working for Daddy all those years. I don’t do all the work myself—I pick the best people for the job and then babysit them so you don’t have to.”

“Ah, now, that’s what I want to discuss. I’m looking for more than a general contractor. I want someone on site twenty-four hours a day.”

Rae blinked and sat back, stunned.

“I’m opening a Bed and Breakfast here as soon as Beulah Land—” She huffed and slapped her hand on the desk in irritation, making Rae jump in her seat. “As soon as *Healy House* is in top shape. It’s an old house and I expect little things to come up all the time, plumbing issues, whatever. I want someone here with general fix-it knowledge who can call in the big guns when necessary.”

Disappointment welled, actually burning her eyes. She definitely needed the money, but she would’ve loved to fix up this old house. “You want a maintenance person, not a contractor.”

“I want both,” Miss Belle insisted. “I want you.”

Her stomach pitched, rolled, and sank as rapidly as the Titanic. How much did the old lady know? “Why me?”

“I’m looking for a property manager who’s able to do light maintenance as well as manage the books down the road. That’s why I must be able to trust the person I hire. That’s why I want you.”

This got weirder by the minute, but Rae didn’t sense that the old lady knew her personal history with her grandson. So far, she hadn’t even mentioned his name. “I’m a contractor. I don’t know how to keep books.”

“What did you major in at Drury?”

Rae’s head spun. *Please, please, don’t ask me about his class.*

“Business Administration.”

“And Accounting, right?”

“Well, yeah—”

“There you have it.” Miss Belle smiled triumphantly.

No condemnation or the dreaded inquisition she’d feared, but Rae felt manipulated just the same. “I never finished my degree. I’m good with my hands, not books.”

“Balderdash.” Miss Belle laughed gaily and reached into a drawer for a file folder. When she raised her gaze, Rae flinched at the sudden intensity. “Here’s the most important question, Miss Jackson. Are you a woman of your word? When you make a promise, do you keep it?”

A trickle of icy cold settled on her neck and Rae shivered. She’d better check for drafts from the cellar. “I can’t tell a lie to save my life, Miss Belle.” Which had gotten her into a heap of trouble, oddly enough. “When I give my word, I do everything in my power to keep it.”

Including marriage oaths to a jerk well past when a sane woman would kick his ass out.

The chill disappeared and Miss Belle pulled out a piece of paper. She smiled and slid the paper across the desk. By the hard cold gleam in the old lady’s eyes, Rae picked it up as gingerly as a snake.

“This is my offer. I had my attorney draft a contract for me.”

Attorney, shit. Shaking her head, Rae scanned the paper. Her jaw hit the floor.

A forty-thousand-dollar salary with a two-grand signing bonus. Room and board included. Stipulations for three weeks off the first year. Another stipulation that as soon as she finished her degree, she would automatically be promoted to business manager with a hefty bonus and increase in salary. Tuition reimbursement, of course.

In addition, a percentage of the profits would make her a part owner in the venture. All with a thirty-day trial and initial commitment period, after which she could break the contract for any reason and still keep the bonus.

She could work here indefinitely and be handsomely compensated.

Blinking back tears, she scanned the document again. Did the old lady have any idea what this meant to her and her family? She'd be able to pay off her father's lingering medical bills and hire a part-time nurse. She'd be able to go back to college.

It was a dream come true.

She scanned the document again. Even uniforms and work clothes were covered with a ridiculously large monthly expense allowance. How many pairs of jeans did she need? “What's the catch?”

“No catch,” Miss Belle said smugly. “It’s all there in black and white.”

Rae was tempted to pull out a magnifying glass and scan the edges for secret phrases. “What if the Bed and Breakfast flops? If you can’t get enough people in here to keep the doors open?”

“Money is not important to me, Miss Jackson. Thanks to Colonel Healy, my dearly departed husband, I have no need to make money on this venture. It’s purely entertainment for me. If we get a few customers per year, then I’ll be happy.”

“Why me?” Raising her gaze, Rae searched the old woman’s face one last time. She wanted to ask about Conn, but his name choked her. If there was any chance at all that he might come here... Hope and dread, both, twisted her stomach into knots. Why couldn’t she simply forget him? “I’m not qualified—”

“Bullshit.”

Rae flinched at the harsh tone and language from the southern belle.

“Do you honestly think I didn’t thoroughly investigate your background before ever extending an invitation to come for an interview? I already knew you were the one I wanted to hire before you drove onto my property. I just needed to make sure. You had to pass one last test.” Miss Belle grinned and winked suggestively. “Well, two actually.”

Oh, God, how much does the old lady know? Rae blushed, remembering another *test* years ago in Conn's office that could have gotten him fired. She'd been such a naïve idiot! Instead of writing him pathetic letters all these years that she never had the courage to mail, she should have reported him to the dean. Maybe then she wouldn't still be haunted by the memories of him, his low rough voice at her ear, the glide of his big palm across her back and down her buttocks...

Swaying slightly, she forced that memory away, but his scent lingered.

No, not him. The rich scent of old leather books permeated the entire room. Conn had smelled exactly like a library mixed with spice and the dark, subtle scent of a very dangerous man. He'd been far from the long-haired tweed-coat wearing, pipe-smoking English professor she'd expected.

"Take my offer, Miss Jackson."

Until Miss Belle spoke, Rae'd forgotten she was even there. The old lady's knowing little wink sent another flutter of dread through her stomach.

"I assure you, this venture will be very profitable for both of us."

Biting her lip, Rae scanned the document again, even flipping it over to make sure she hadn't missed something on the back. Everything was in order. She'd be a fool not to take such a lucrative offer.

And if I run into Conn again...?

I'll kick him in the groin like I should have done the first time he laid hands on me.

Miss Belle held out a pen with a huge pink feather on the end. Rae took it, scanned the key points again. Her palms were sweaty, but her fingers felt cold. Chills crept down her spine again, hair rising on the back of her neck. Goose bumps raced down her arms. Pressure built behind her eardrums, like she was driving up Pike's Peak.

She signed her name.

Snatching the pen from her numb fingers, Miss Belle quickly scratched her name below Rae's and her ears suddenly popped. The sudden release made her jump.

Miss Belle smiled widely. "Welcome to Healy House."

Something tinkled rather loudly. Rae glanced up and the crystal chandelier rocked back and forth above the desk, casting rainbows around the room wildly.

Miss Belle sighed. "Also known as Beulah Land over sixty years ago. Let me give you the grand tour, Rae Lynn."

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 leathered 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.

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