

Chapter 1

The blue filing folder. Blue, indicative of a roster for a graduate course. At this Ivy League school blue stood for the elite. The educated.

Christ. Grad students. Professor Frasier glanced over the list in the blue folder as he held it in his hand. The names appeared ordinary enough, sure, but as he adjusted his thick tortoise shell glasses down his nose and peered out at the silent, alarmed students situated haphazardly up the five rows of auditorium seats in the small seminar room, he inwardly rolled his eyes.

Not that he wasn't entirely grateful for the opportunity to work in the Master of History programs, nor was he unappreciative of the fact that the prestigious university had unabashedly poached him from his position at an elite New York private school, but he liked his *undergrad* students much more than these MAH suck-ups. He was only teaching this course as a favor to a friend.

The turtle-necked young women with their muted dark hair always pulled tightly into buns or headbands continuously raised their hands with asinine questions; he suspected because they just wanted his attention. He was, after all, pretty good looking.

The hipsters who wouldn't wear bras simply shouted out their opinions and he had to constantly remind them to respectfully raise their hands.

There were some gentlemen in the class who chose to wear collared shirts and ties in tradition with the university's past dress code, but most of them looked as if they'd just rolled out of bed five minutes before class and always had a roundabout answer to everything. The hipster boys seemed to have boys' names but were dressed so androgynously in skinny jeans, tight shirts, and razored bangs that sometimes he wasn't sure.

They were all there for their own reasons, but they also had something in common. They were smart. Too smart for their own damned good most of the time.

He scanned the class of about twenty impatiently. Time was wasting and he didn't have the patience for a five-minute answer that simply danced around the subject. His undergrad students would have trembled in fear at his mere presence and quickly mumbled some kind of answer. He put on an angrier face and was pleased when a few of them cringed.

Dropping the blue folder back on the long, wooden conference table centered at the front of the room, he picked up the recently printed list of grades. Since they were currently covering (and arguing) his recent exam questions and their (not surprisingly) inadequate answers, he decided to choose whoever received the highest score and have them read their response to the class.

A 99?

He pushed his glasses up his nose as he stared at the top of the list. No one made 99s on his exams. Ever. He'd have to give his TA a good talking to after class. They'd shared in the grading responsibilities on most things, including this exam.

Sighing, his eyes scanned over to the name and he looked out at the subdued room. “Miss Tucker?”

Everyone automatically turned the page in their blue books and groaned at all of the red marks and comments slashing through their once perceived perfect answers.

Professor Frasier sighed and removed his glasses, folding them and tucking them into his crisp white shirt pocket, loosening his navy tie. “Miss Tucker?” he asked again, a hint of force in his voice. Where was this kid? Everyone was in attendance to get their exams back.

Heads began to turn up and gaze at him in the front of the room, then turn right and left, looking for the elusive Ms. Tucker.

He dropped the list of scores on the tabletop and folded his arms across his broad chest. If someone had fallen asleep on his time he was going to absolutely lose it. And around campus he was *famous* for losing it.

“Miss Tucker!” he loudly said, causing everyone to sink in their seats and completely lock onto his imposing figure. He rested his hands on his hips, his belted navy slacks resting low on his trim waist. His eyes finally stopped searching the students as they fell to the only head in the room looking down.

Light, strawberry blonde hair fell over to the desk with a pale hand scribbling furiously over the blue book, and absolutely no clue that all eyes were now on her. Professor Frasier dropped his hands to his sides and took the steps up to the last row of seats two at a time, pausing next to her and calmly folding his arms across his chest. God, she *still* didn’t notice him, even then.

A couple of hands shot up around the room but he continued his visual assault on Miss Tucker. He was an intimidating 6’3” and could pierce any soul with a single glare. As soon as she noticed him and looked up into his eyes she would be very sorry.

Though... she needed to actually become aware of his presence, first.

“Professor Frasier?”

He rolled his eyes at the sound of Miss-Know-It-All-And-Sits-Front-And-Center Roberta Greer’s voice. “Not now, Miss Greer,” he firmly replied, trying to unclench his jaw as he grew angrier by the second. A student had never ignored him before. *Ever*. God, he hated grad students. Thank goodness it was only one class.

He placed his hands on either side of the wooden desktop that flipped out from the armrest of the auditorium chair and cleared his throat. “Miss Tucker?” he repeated through his teeth. He was used to being the center of attention. The center of everyone’s world. It was what had drawn him to become a professor in the first place. He was king of his domain.

And he wasn’t about to let one little girl depose him.

Mary Tucker had arrived to class early as usual so that she could claim her spot in the back of the room. She preferred sitting with her back to a wall. She preferred melting into the crowd. She truly just wanted to go unnoticed.

That day her Historiography class would be receiving their first graded exams of the semester. For her, that meant pure excitement. Her fall semester at the prominent, world-renowned university had proven that hard work and diligence could earn you a high grade point average... no matter where you come from. She wanted the spring semester to go equally as well. So far, so good.

As the person in front of her handed back the blue covered test booklet, she took a deep breath, laid it on her cracked wooden desktop and opened it.

99! Her highest grade yet! She knew those long nights in the library would pay off. It didn't matter that she didn't really have any friends yet. With grades like these she'd graduate and be able to move anywhere, work anywhere, and her friends from home would just come to her.

She grinned to herself as her professor began asking students to read off their answers to the fifteen essay questions on the exam. Sighing with glee, she leaned over and began to study the virtually red-mark-free pages of her booklet.

Her mind began to wander after the fifth question, the only one with the red comments in the margin.

Nice insight. Correct factually, but next time focus more on the "why" instead of the "how."

Only one point off, she could live with that. While her mind remained centered on the subject of the question, though, she began to write on the back of the page. Why? Bending lower over the paper, she started writing. More why, less how.

Suddenly two large hands with long fingers and an expensive silver watch appeared on the corners of her desk. What the hell? She quit writing, hating that she was losing her train of thought in the third paragraph, and turned her eyes up in frustration.

Holy shit. The frustration promptly drained out of her and was replaced with fear. Professor Frasier. He was at her desk, leaning over it, staring down at her with large, brown eyes burrowing into her. Oh God, what had she done?

Professor Frasier tried to maintain his "serious stare" as two of the brightest blue eyes he'd ever seen peered up at him. He was suddenly very aware of everything about her. Her pink lips parted to suck in a terrified breath. Her cheeks flushed to match her lips. Her eyes simply stared right back at him, locked in. Flashes of every important event in his life suddenly inundated his mind as he took in her scent. She wore Chanel, like his mother.

Standing up and clearing his throat again, he raised a stern eyebrow and glared down at her. "Are we boring you, Miss Tucker?" he asked, a little more maliciously than he'd intended.

Her cheeks flushed deeper as she continued to stare up at him. Oh God, everyone was looking at her now! She hated that. What in the hell did he want? Her palms slipped from the desktop as they began to sweat and clam up.

"Uh, u-um," she stammered as all eyes burrowed into her.

Professor Frasier waved one hand around. "You were the only student to answer the last question correctly, Miss Tucker. Is it too much to ask for you to read your paragraph to the class?"

Her brow furrowed as she glanced down at her exam. She was the only one who knew the answer? Wait, which question were they on? Did he say the last? Her fingers shook as she fumbled, flipping to the last page of her blue book.

"Sorry, Professor Frasier?" the young man sitting next to her asked.

"Yes?" he snapped, still staring down at Mary Tucker and wondering what in the hell was wrong with her.

"Sorry, sir, but it's after 5:00."

He looked down at the large white face of his Tag and sighed heavily. "See you all on Wednesday," he dismissed, and then raised his voice as people began shuffling around. "And be sure to check our discussion board online!"

Mary bent to grab her simple black satchel and realized the shiny black shoes laced up very tightly were still standing in the stairway. She sat up quickly and brushed a wisp of hair off of her face, slowly turning her eyes upwards.

“May I speak to you for a minute?”

Before she could reply, he turned and walked back down to the podium and long table, gathering his notes and papers up.

Son of a bitch, she thought. He was going to kick her out of class for not paying attention. Oh shit, what if he was going to tell her advisor? Would she get expelled from the program entirely? She took her time carefully placing her folders and pens into her bag, then slowly stood, placed the nylon strap over her head and across her chest, then slowly descended down the steps in her own private death march. Getting expelled would be like dying. This graduate program was all she'd thought about the last couple of years. When she'd been accepted she'd known her life was about to change forever.

Time to lay down the law, he thought, stacking papers. He turned and frowned as she stood in front of him. She was not what he expected out of her mousy first impression. Her hair was long and glossy, parted deeply to the side and sweeping over her forehead. Her skin was porcelain, stained with two pink patches on her cheeks. Her white shirt was as crisp as his, tucked neatly into her tight black pants and unbuttoned further down than any of the Upper East Side New York students in his class would dare to wear to school. The deep purple cardigan hung just below her hips, buttoned only at her waist, and her shiny black boots hung open just below the knee, like she couldn't quite fill them out.

She gripped the bag strap across her chest tightly as he realized it was Prada. Frowning as he continued scrutinizing her, he found her shoes were also Prada, and that cardigan had been somewhere before... perhaps on a model at one of the fall fashion shows he'd attended with his mother. How in the hell could he have not noticed this girl until March? She was impeccable. Flawless.

He cleared his throat and took a breath. “Miss Tucker, do you enjoy wasting the time of your classmates and professors?”

She turned her eyes down immediately and shook her head.

“What was that?” he asked callously, trying to get her to turn those huge blue eyes back up to him.

She swallowed loudly and replied in a soft, sweet voice, “No sir.”

Her head remained down. He rubbed his face in exasperation as students began trickling in the seminar room for their 5:20 class. He peered down at the strawberry blonde head. “Look at me.”

That commanding voice didn't leave her much choice. Her eyes turned up to meet his obediently. She noticed his hair was a wavy dirty blond, not brown, as she'd once thought. It appeared to be neatly combed to the side, but she could tell it was long and shaggy, probably how he preferred it outside of work. The way it slightly curled over his ears was strangely very appealing.

“Miss Tucker!” he snapped, wondering why she was just staring at him, not ardently trying to defend herself or spout off everything she knew about the subject matter like his other students often did. She just stood there silently, annoying the crap out of him. “If you don't mind terribly, I'd like you to post your answer to the last exam question on our class discussion board tonight.”

She sensed his sarcasm and knew he was annoyed with her. She was just a little... well, frightened, really. It was easy to intimidate her and it didn't help that she was timid around people, either. Nodding, she gathered up all of her courage and turned her head up to him. "Yes sir."

"Thank you," he huffed, totally exasperated as he grabbed his things up and stomped out of the classroom and towards his office. God, if she was like that in all of her classes she was going to get chewed up and spit out of the program before summer rolled around.

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head as she walked out into the cold, early evening. Could she be any more of a moron? He'd just caught her off guard, of course, but she didn't feel any less idiotic. She wrapped her cream cashmere scarf around her neck and stalked through the melting snow on the old campus, weaving through manicured gardens and towering trees.

Her phone vibrated in her bag but she didn't feel like talking to anyone. The chance that it was her parents drunk dialing her from the French Riviera was inordinately high and she really didn't want to repeat everything she said three or four times just so that they could hear her. She loved them, but since she and her sisters had graduated high school and college their parents had taken it upon themselves to travel the world and see everything.

Walking in her front door, she dropped everything on the side table and immediately walked into the kitchen, grabbing the white wine from the fridge and pouring a large glass. Then she made her way back to the tall windows in the front living room, grabbed her white laptop and opened it up.

There was an email in her inbox. That must have been the vibrating from her iPhone in her purse. She caught her wine in her throat as she opened it.

Miss Tucker,

Please note that your response to the exam must be posted by 7:00 pm this evening, Monday, March 1. Anything posted afterwards will be considered a late assignment, resulting in a lower grade and therefore dragging down your currently perfect homework average. As you know from the class syllabus homework counts for 50% of your grade, while exams are 40% and participation 10%. I see from Mr. Adams, my Teaching Assistant's notes here that your participation in class is 0%. Let's see if we can work on that, please, Miss Tucker. I would hate to see your entire grade point average suffer simply because you don't pay attention in class.

Dr. M. Frasier, PhD

History Department

Eastland University

Dr. Frasier leaned back in his dark leather desk chair and heaved a hearty sigh as he rubbed his eyes and removed his glasses. He didn't normally follow up with students like that, and he definitely didn't check up on their grades or make suggestions as to how they could improve. He liked being distant from them; it helped them to not form attachments. His high school students had problems with that, but he'd managed to keep them at bay and had landed this coveted job at Eastland. His record was clean.

Looking out to his left into the vestibule where his TA, Brad Adams was working diligently, he reached into his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of scotch. He poured himself a healthy helping and then rubbed his eyes again.

Her eyes were bluer than anything he'd ever seen before.

Scowling, he sipped his scotch and looked out at Brad again. This was the first time in his year and a half at Eastland that he'd had a male TA. He preferred women... for one reason only. They were usually seniors in one of his smaller advanced classes, and they were always the ones he'd picked out on the first day of class. They sat in the front row, stared up at him admiringly, let their shiny dark hair fall around in waves over their shoulders, chewed on their pens as he spoke about expectations during the semester, crossed and uncrossed their legs covered in panty hose as they had a prestigious internship to attend to, and always — *always* — asked for a meeting in his office after class.

He would say they couldn't meet until 5:00, they'd say something about having to stay at work for their internship at Goldman Sachs or Random House, he'd suggest a time when the history offices would be all but empty, they'd comply, show up, and the relationship thus started. The girls would feel all naughty having an inappropriate relationship with their professor, and he would take great comfort in the fact that these girls were so swamped with schoolwork, internships and his TA work that they wouldn't have time to be clingy and bother him with girlfriend stuff. He would just sleep with them and know that they would have to scurry off to a study group or a class. And then they'd graduate. It had been perfect.

But this semester Brad Adams had requested a chance for the position, and Dr. Frasier really liked him. Smart, clever, confident, and they had fun hanging out with Brad's elite social club.

"Brad!" he called, downing his scotch and opening the bottle. "Drink?"

"Dr. Frasier, you're meeting your parents for dinner at The Chop House in half an hour!"

"Shit," he sighed, slamming his glass down and checking his schedule on his phone. "Fine, then, I guess we should smoke a bowl?"

"Leave now, Dr. Frasier, and you'll only be ten minutes late!" Brad called, leaning over and pointing a red felt pen at him. "I'll finish these Western Civ. 101 exams and post the grades."

"Thanks, Brad," he quickly nodded, briskly walking past the small TA desk stacked with papers and not slowing as he grabbed his tan trench coat and scarf. His mind flashed only for a split second as to what it would be like to have Miss Tucker walk through his office door and his eyes scanned back over the blue roster folder. Her eyes peered up at him. Shaking those images out of his head, he knew he would never look at the color blue the same way again.

Mary posted her response promptly on the class discussion board, sitting back with her wine and removing her boots slowly, just waiting for the onslaught. Part of their homework required them to post once a week about a posed question and everyone's responses... and everyone always seemed to pick on her. It wasn't only that she didn't have any friends at this school. Everyone went out of their way to hate her at this school.

She didn't blame them. History was her thing, after all. And if history had proven anything, it was that people ostracized those who were not like them. She wasn't from around there and everyone seemed to have a fancy New York private school and Ivy League undergrad colleges in their resumes. She'd gone to public high school in the suburbs and a state college and the only reason she'd even been *considered* as a candidate for the masters program at Eastland was because of her semi-successful book she'd penned about the last battle of the Civil War.

Now enrolled in three classes with only seven more to go, she was well on her way to becoming "legit," according to her editor, who'd suggested a higher degree if she desired any

more success in her writing career. Like everyone else in the country, she'd wondered what it would be like to attend Eastland with all of its tradition and prestige. And now she was here. Fuck everyone else.

Grinning as her computer pinged, she set her wine glass down and prepared to retort each and every snooty response from her classmates as they popped up on the discussion board.