

THE GIRL IN APARTMENT 1203

Sugar 101

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

Prologue

Luckily, they usually ordered the same thing from the neighborhood Chinese restaurant. It was close to a half hour before Jack and Keila came out of the bedroom, his arm around her shoulder and her snuggled into his side like there was no place either would rather be in the world.

Michael and Brianna looked up and watched them cross to the kitchen island. Keila sat and watched as Jack made her a plate, before making one for himself. He carried them both to the dining table, and when he sat down, they dug in like they hadn't disappeared all that time without explanation.

"Really, so you're just gonna sit down and eat and no one is going to explain what the hell that was about?"

"Brianna! Abort whatever mission you're about to start," Keila said through clenched teeth.

"No mission, but I'm so not walking away without my best friend saying something. A hell of a lot of something, now that I think about it. So?"

"Jack, I'm sorry. She's been a little worried about Keila," Michael offered by way of explanation.

"Understood. We didn't mean to worry you, either of you.

Kid, you should probably say something before Bri's mouth gets her in any more trouble."

"It would serve her right."

"Keila!"

"Right. Not the point, but we are going to have words, sister."

Brianna had the grace to look a bit shameful. She knew she had pushed a lot in the last few days, and maybe it had been too heavy-handed. It was hard to stop. She loved her best friend and wanted everything she, herself, had and more for her.

"Fair enough, but can you put my mind at ease, anyway? Even though I don't deserve it."

Keila rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out at her friend. They both started laughing, and soon the guys were joining in. The tension dropped by ten.

"I know where my stuff is going."

"I'm gonna need more words. Explain." Her food was long forgotten, and Brianna was on the edge of her seat, literally and figuratively.

"Jack and I talked, and I'm taking that profile down off of the website." As she glanced at him from the side, she added, "Immediately."

"So, what does that mean, Jack? Keila?"

"It means that Keila and I are going to work on our own arrangement. Slowly, but in the meantime, there will be no random dating, no sugar bowl, and absolutely no sugar daddies, other than me. She's taking the apartment upstairs."

She wasn't sure what she expected, but cricket silence wasn't the response. Michael and Brianna were staring at the two of them, not saying a word.

"I'll call the agent in the morning and get him a check."

"Not necessary. I'll be taking care of things from now on," Jack stated.

Then Michael just picked up his glass, leaned back in his chair, and made a toast. "Well, it looks like there's nothing left to

discuss. Here's to apartment 1203 and new adventures. It looks like we're all in for a world of change."

"I'll drink to that," Jack said, his intense emerald gaze never leaving Keila's face. She couldn't tear her brown eyes from him, either. One minute, she'd been filled with nothing but fight, anxiety, and the need to oppose everything, and the next, she was letting Jack swoop in to solve it all. She wasn't a hundred percent sure how she would explain any of it to anyone, and for once, she didn't care. Jack had her, and the feeling that had washed over her when she finally accepted it, would be worth whatever came next.

ONE

Keila

Sometimes you don't miss what you don't have. Then there are other times when all you can focus on is the missing piece of the puzzle. Keila Soriano had been a puzzle—framed and well put together—with a piece missing. If you didn't look too closely, you might not ever be able to tell there was a tiny imperfection, a little flaw that no one noticed unless they were up close. That missing piece was also something Keila tended to ignore and often downright denied, too. She was a little girl lost. At the end of the day, her missing piece made her stand out from the crowd. Keila had missed out on having a daddy. Then there was Jack.

They were nine months into their Daddy arrangement. Keila had officially, unofficially, dove into the sugar bowl back then. She didn't go through the website like her best friend Brianna did, but instead, she'd fallen for and came to an arrangement with Brianna's husband's best friend. When she met Jack, she was a girl, newly eighteen, who'd lived a pretty sheltered life under the rule of her mother and grandmother. Now, she was twenty-one and a college senior who was three months away from graduation, herself. Their arrangement was ever evolving, but as much as they agreed to incorporate discipline early on, all of

Keila's more romantic advances were held at bay by Jack. He wanted her to be sure. She felt it in her heart. But, he told her more than once that he didn't want her to feel obligated, because everything he did to take care of her was out of love. Although he never said the actual words to her—Keila suspected his own fears and insecurities at their twenty year age difference keeping him silent,—loved was exactly what Keila felt when she was with Jack.

Jack wasn't simply picked up and placed in the right spot, although he still would have fit that way just fine, but instead, over time, he occupied space. Jack completed her picture and made Keila start to feel more complete in a way that hadn't happened during her last twenty years. The problem was the thing that was making her feel the best she had in years was the very thing she was keeping as the most closely guarded secret of her life.

This was where her mind roamed. Anytime there was down time and Keila had an opportunity to overthink, she took it. Waiting for the elevator to take her to the twelfth floor of her building was one of those perfect thinking moments. It had taken her almost a month to stop going to the ninth floor, which was where she and Brianna had lived for more than two years. She missed her roommate tremendously but took comfort in the fact that she knew the girl was blissfully happy in her marriage to Michael. And, there wasn't much time for loneliness to seep in because Keila was busy with her senior year at the university and, of course, with Jack.

When the elevator dinged and the doors opened, Keila stepped in with her back to the building's lobby but turned immediately to press the number twelve. Two other girls were waving their arms at her, and she assumed it was so she'd hold the doors open for them, as she didn't really recognize them from a distance. They had a few grocery bags and she wasn't a jerk, so she happily kept her finger on the button. Instantly, she thought of how she would've probably hit the close button if it had been

any of the single guys from her school who lived in the building. It wasn't that she was paranoid or overly cautious, but she had been hit on one time too many since folks realized she now lived alone, and she tried to limit those types of encounters, in her own living space, as much as she could.

The girls nodded a thanks to her and promptly turned around to press the button to their own floor. They'd obviously seen the earbuds sitting in her ears and assumed that she had the volume turned up, because they proceeded to talk about her like she wasn't standing a foot behind them. Their efforts at whispering didn't seem like much of an effort at all. It came across more like a stage whisper that, honestly, could be heard clear across the theatre.

"That's her. No, don't stare."

"What's her story?"

"I don't know. Marcey just calls her the girl in apartment 1203. She used to live on nine, in that big corner apartment. We used to joke that it must be nice to have Mommy and Daddy footing the bills for this place, but her roommate moved out at the end of the term, and rumor has it that she married the man we thought was her daddy."

"Wow! How do you and Marcey find this stuff out?"

"Get your nose out of the books sometime and hang out with us when folks come over. You would know these things, too. You know nobody's seen her with anyone except the hot older dude who lives on her floor. Ron and Chris both got shot down when they asked her out."

Ding. The doors opened on eleven and those two heifers had the nerve to exit and then turn back and wave. Keila wouldn't give them the satisfaction of knowing she'd heard their petty gossip or was at all affected by it. She smiled, waved back, and immediately smashed the door close button so hard, the pressure shot through her hand and up her wrist. When the doors opened on her floor, Keila turned left to her side of the building then sprinted left and down the hall, grateful for the carpeting that

covered the hallway from the elevators down both ends of the hall on either side. The building had kept the elevator bank marble, which matched the lobby but would have made her rapidly falling footsteps echo like thunder with the chunky heel she was rocking. They weren't really uncomfortable, once she managed to walk further than the car to her chair, but they would never be as easy as her ballet flats. According to Brianna, though, no one would take her seriously at her internship if she looked all of fifteen years old.

Shutting the door behind her and turning both locks finally gave her a reason to exhale and quieted the voices still reverberating in her head of the girls from the elevator. Keila knew it was foolish to let silly building gossip break her down. Michael, Brianna, and especially Jack had all told her that, the first night they'd all been together again, once Jack was all moved into his own place across the hall and the happy couple had returned from their honeymoon.

"WHAT'S UP, Kei? You've been ridiculously quiet since we got in."

"Nothing, Brianna. Don't push, and please don't say anything in front of Jack. He thinks something is up, too, and I've been dodging his inquisition all day."

"Which makes me like a thousand percent more suspicious. Talk. Look, if we were still living together, I'd have all night to pry it out of you, but you'll be lucky if I'm here through dessert and coffee. Michael has been threatening to do all sorts of delicious things to me all day. You're really lucky I didn't just cancel. We got some new toys..."

"No! No, do not even think about finishing that sentence. Gutter, Brianna, gutter."

"No, it's not. He's my husband. It is no longer considered 'gutter' once you've taken vows. Fact. Now, stop stalling and talk."

Keila stepped to the kitchen door to make sure she could hear the guys still

talking in the living room. This apartment didn't have the open floor plan she and Bri had in their bigger place.

"I'm the fucking building gossip, Brianna. So, you know that girl Zenobia, who lived down the hall from us?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't realize she was graduating, too, and she moved out at the same time I was moving upstairs. I swear, she must've have been watching out of her peephole waiting for Jack to leave. She pounced on me like she was a lion and I was one of the hyenas from *The Lion King*. She grilled me. Told me she knew that Michael wasn't my father or yours and that she sure as hell didn't believe Jack was any sort of relative, either. She wanted to know what we were up to and if Michael was who you ended up marrying and what was our deal with the old ass men. Then she tried to 'soften' it by saying, 'I get it girl. Do what you gotta do to make that coin.' What the hell, Bri?"

"What a bitch!"

"Lower your voice. I know, but at least she's gone. My issue is now I feel like she must have told everyone who lives here and goes to school that I'm sleeping with the old guy next door to make my rent. I cannot spend the year answering attacks or dodging nosy neighbors. If I mention it to Jack, he's going to want to do something, um, meaningful to make it stop. You know he's all 'confront the problem head-on.' The next time we see her in the elevator, he will say something. Plus, it's not like I can move, and I don't want to, but this can get out of control fast. What if it gets back to school? What if the school gets in touch with my mother and grams? Oh, my God! Their heads will explode and then they'll explode all over me. I can't deal with this, Brianna. I should've just moved back to the dorms. Getting my own sugar daddy, by far the dumbest thing I've done since I came to college. I can't hurt Jack, but what am I supposed to do? This is insane. Are you listening to me?"

Brianna looked over Keila's head. Her hyper rambling friend didn't even need to ask. She knew from the look on her face that both men were standing behind her. Brianna took her hand and gave it a squeeze. It was a weird feeling, the double band pressed into her palm, but she was comforted by the temporary touch.

"Hey, babe, I think Jack and Keila need a minute. Kei, do you want us to carry anything out to the table."

Keila had never turned around. She didn't need to, though, because she could feel Jack's eyes searing through the back of her skull. The man had the most intense look, and when that look became a glare, it was even worse. Her only hope was that he hadn't heard as much as she thought he had. After prodding her all week about her mood and what was wrong, she had given him nothing, and Brianna is in the apartment for thirty minutes and her mouth is a running faucet.

"Why don't you guys grab the white wine from the fridge? The red is already open and breathing. Glasses are in the cabinet out there."

Keila heard the whispers get softer and softer from her friends and, still, she kept her back to the door. When she finally looked up from the floor, Jack was right in front of her, tall, handsome, smelling terrific, and looking as annoyed as ever. She didn't like that she was the reason why.

"I guess I should get the food on some serving trays at least. I mean, you did the bulk of the cooking, so it's fair."

JACK'S EYES kept following her as she moved from counter to counter in the small kitchen but never actually touched anything. His thought was to let her tire herself out in this little dance of a 1,000 avoidances she was doing, but the fact was that they did have guests. Guests they'd both been excited to spend time with, so he needed to move this along.

"Keila, come here to me, please." Jack took a seat at the small kitchen table and turned it out to face her.

"Why?" Some things hadn't changed yet. She still questioned constantly, her lilting voice going up and betraying whatever calm she thought she was portraying.

"Keila." Jack was more than capable of treating her to his particular style of I-mean-business voice.

He stood her between his knees and looked straight up and into her eyes. The fact that in her bare feet, she was only a few inches taller than his seated self-made that an easy task.

"Now, this time I'm going to ask you what's been going on, and you are going to tell me. Any sense of lying or half-truths will be dealt with in a most unpleasant fashion. Am I clear? I cannot help when you insist on hiding your problems from me."

He turned the chair beside him out toward her and maneuvered her to sit on it. To his pleasure, Jack watched her shake her head slightly and move onto his lap. Now, getting her to make eye contact was a different story. Keila knew how he felt about her keeping things from him, and she had obviously broken that cardinal rule, again. Both of her tiny hands grabbed onto his much larger one and held it in her lap.

"As cute as you are, and as much as I love holding you in my lap, I want answers, Kid."

There was absolutely no sweet talking that tone of voice. Keila opened her faucet and let the story and her worries flow. It took only a few minutes longer than it had with Brianna, as Jack had a number of clarifying questions.

First, he read her his personal brand of the riot act, and then he'd said what he'd been saying since they decided to embark on this little arrangement.

"Keila, whose opinion matters when it comes to our relationship?"

"Only ours. Not even Brianna and Michael get a say in what happens between us. As long as it works for us, then no one else's opinions, thoughts, or feelings matter."

"Now, when you say it like that, I almost believe that you believe it, but I know there'll need to be a lot more reminders."

Keila dropped her chin to her chest again. She knew that Jack was right. Even though she was more confident in it when she said it out loud, those doubts stayed right beneath the surface. It was one thing for folks to speculate, but there were two very important people in her life who she was hiding from, in shame. It was a shame she knew she didn't need to feel and was completely wasted, but it didn't make it go away in the quiet of the night or the solitary moments during her day. She tried really hard not to lie to Jack, but the reality was that she wasn't ready to blow all of their lives to smithereens on the off chance that her mother and grams wouldn't lose their shit if they ever found out the truth.

Jack placed his hand on her chin and lifted it more gently than Keila felt

she deserved, but that was Jack; he constantly gave her more than she could repay or that she thought she deserved. He placed a kiss, too chaste for her liking, on her lips and then on her forehead before standing them both up.

"Who's the most important girl to me?"

"After today?"

"Kid?" The warning was back.

"Me. I am. Thank you, Jack."

"Anytime, Kid, now can we go and find out all about our friends' fabulous honeymoon?"

"Yes. I have a feeling the group version is going to scar me way less than any version Brianna will tell me when we're alone."

PULLING HERSELF FROM THE DOOR, Keila dropped her keys in the bowl by her front door and went to change her clothes. All things being equal and traffic sucking, like it usually was, Jack would be in from Dulles at about seven. That was just enough time for a shower, some reading, and then veggie prep. Keila was ready to get lost listening to the symphony of the kitchen. Getting taken away by the clatter of dishes, the sizzle of sauces, meats, and veggies and even the flow of water over filthy dishes had become calming since Jack taught her the joy of cooking.

She made two promises to herself as she stepped into the steaming shower. One, she would not break her hollandaise tonight, and two, she would tell Jack about the incident in the elevator. She didn't want anything ruining their weekend.