
ALL MAXED OUT

Red Light Fantasies - Book Three

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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.

Chapter 1

Today was the day.
I was doing it.
I was going back to work.

So why the hell wasn't I moving?

I stood fully dressed in the middle of Max's living room and stared at the hallway leading to the garage—stared being the operative word. Fear froze me to the spot. No, fuck frozen; I was paralyzed.

Since my attack at the hands of a madman two months earlier, the world outside the safety of these walls had slowly become my enemy. Actually, enemy wasn't the right word, but I couldn't think of a better one. My therapist called my reaction PTSD, but I called it losing control of my life. For the second time in my almost thirty-four years, my world was crumbling around me, and like last time, I was powerless to stop it.

Except, I *had to* stop it. I wasn't a helpless child this go-around. I was a grown-ass woman. I could do this. I *would* do this.

I just wish I knew how.

I closed my eyes and immediately regretted it. *He* always skulked in the darkness. Théo Roux—my attacker—waited,

watched, readied to kill me again, and I was terrified he'd succeed, afraid that I wouldn't be able to fight him off this time, that the blade which had pierced my kidney would find its way to my heart.

From behind, Max wrapped his arms around my middle, and I flinched. I hated the automatic reaction. In that split second before realization and reality could pull me back, a fucking autonomic response had its claws in me. Fear had me strung so tightly that, when I wasn't actively expecting it, a single touch could send a spike of terror shooting through me—even if the touch came from the man I loved more than life itself.

But as I'd asked him, Max didn't let my reaction stop him. Pulling me possessively and protectively against him, he nuzzled his nose against the side of my neck. "Nothing says you have to do this today, my sweet." What I'd termed his Americanized British accent weaved through his words. "Wait another week or two. Wait however many weeks you need. Forcing yourself back to work faster than you're physically *and* emotionally ready will only make the anxiety worse."

He was right. Deep down, I *knew* that. Nothing was forcing me out the door today except my sheer will to not let Théo beat me; it was also a fact that had been true yesterday—and the day before that. Every morning for a week, I'd found myself right here, facing the hallway leading to the garage and trying like hell to muster the courage to walk out of here with my head held high, to get back to my old life, to go to work, to perform the job I loved. To start living as if I hadn't been brutally attacked by a maniac who was still at large.

Fuck.

I turned, banded my arms around Max's middle and held on to the man who'd been my rock. He'd sat by my side while I'd recovered. During my convalescence, he'd helmed much of his global business empire from within these walls, only leaving when he had no other option. He'd held me at night when the night-

mares came, and they always came, images bathed in death, blood and Théo Roux.

"I have to do this, Max. I have to. I can't let him win. I have to find a way to get back to my life."

He pulled back and, finger to my chin, tilted my face toward him. "This isn't a battle, my sweet; you've already won. You survived. You beat him. You're free, and he's in hiding. His assets are frozen, and he's being hunted by every law enforcement agency on the planet."

Not to mention the private army Max had hired to hunt him down.

"Which makes him that much more dangerous, don't you think?" I challenged. "He killed Giselle in cold blood. She was nothing more than a pawn in his sick little chess game. I don't even want to think about what he's capable of now that he's been backed into a—"

"Shh." He silenced me with a quick kiss. "Théo Roux will never hurt you again. I won't let him."

And here, within these walls, I believed that. Max had made sure of it. He'd upgraded the house's security system. He'd hired scores of security personnel to parole the perimeter. He'd turned his home into a fortress to keep me safe, but somewhere along the way, these locked doors had begun to feel like a prison.

"You'll get through this, Bree," he assured me. "*We'll* get through it. Just give it time, my sweet. Dr. Marcus said being scared was normal after what you'd been through."

Dr. Marcus was my therapist; I'd begun seeing her after the nightmares had started. I liked her. She was smart and understanding. Like Max, she had more faith in my ability to pull through this than I did.

"Scared? I'm not scared, Max. I'm fucking *terrified*. All the damn time. Every time I think about leaving your house—"

"Our house," he corrected.

"Our house," I reluctantly agreed, still not used to the idea.

Before my attack, Max had asked me to move in with him,

but I'd said no. I'd told him we shouldn't rush things, that we needed to do things right this time, but then, as I'd been muddling through my recovery, he'd asked again, and I'd said yes. Before I could take it back, Max had sent someone to clean out my apartment, so for better or worse, we were living together. I still wasn't sure how I felt about it.

I loved Max more than anything, and I wanted to live with him. Hell, I wanted to marry him, but all the reasons I'd given him for saying no before still stood. We were skipping steps. We were still wading through past secrets, him more than me. He had a lifetime's worth of pain hidden away, and although he'd slowly begun sharing that pain with me, we had a long way to go—and that was all before we factored in overcoming the aftermath of my attack. Intellectually, I knew we were moving too fast, but when the nightmares had started, the panic attacks had followed shortly after.

Fighting the fear had become my most pressing problem; I'd started pushing other things aside so I could tackle the "big issues." At least, that was what I kept telling myself, but I couldn't help but feel as if we were making the same mistakes all over again, only the aesthetics had changed.

"Whenever I think about going out there," I said, gesturing toward the hallways, "being at the store where *anybody* could walk in, I'm petrified. I keep picturing Théo with a knife and—"

I cut myself off, willing the image to retreat back into the box in my head where I tried to keep it locked away, but it was too late. I'd already triggered a panic attack.

"Fuck, I can't—"

Breathe.

But I couldn't get the last word out.

The world teetered, and a searing heat spread to all points in my body. I tugged at a non-existent neckline, my chest tightening. I felt as if I'd been hooked to a low-voltage car battery. The hum of the electricity coursed through me. I couldn't stop it. My lungs burned, and my heart hammered unrelentingly against my ster-

num. The world spun faster and faster around me until I was on the verge of passing out.

"Breathe," Max crooned, drawing me back against him. "Just breathe, my sweet. You've got this, and I've got you. Just breathe..."

I closed my eyes and, quickly, before pictures of Théo assaulted me, imagined a closet door in my mind. Dr. Marcus had instructed me to store overwhelming memories in the closet until I had time to deal with them, so I did just that. Using precise imagery, I opened the closet door and removed an empty box. I plucked out one of the dark images swirling around me and placed it in the box. I repeated the process until nothing but a calm void, the sound of my heartbeat, and Max's gentle words surrounded me. Only then, did I lock the lid on the box and return it to the closet.

I wasn't sure how long the process took, fifty seconds or fifty minutes, but Max never released me. He'd rubbed my back and whispered comforting words until I pulled back just enough to snake my arms up his chiseled chest and around his neck. Calling him my rock didn't do the term—or him—justice.

I pushed onto my tiptoes for a proper kiss, and Max didn't disappoint. God, he made me dizzy. He was my heart.

Giselle and Théo's plan had left Max and me shaken, vulnerable, but not broken. Fractured maybe but still intact. We were on precarious ground, though; the not-quite engagement ring on my right hand was a constant reminder of the things we still needed to fix, as well as everything we were fighting for.

"Give it another week," he said after he'd pulled slightly back. "I meant what I said earlier. Don't feel you have to rush this."

"I have to get back out there, Max. I can't stay holed up here like some unwanted houseguest who sits on her ass all day and eats all your food. I—"

"I'm going to stop you right there, my sweet. For starters, you're not an unwanted houseguest. You live here. This is your *home*. As for that last point, I'd much rather have you camped out

in my bed and eating all my food than the alternative, so please don't let any of that be something that adds to your stress level, okay? I love you, Bree, and I *want* you here. In my house, in my bed, and most importantly, in my life."

Tears pressed against the backs of my eyes. "I love you, too, Max. I do. So much so, but I *need* to get back out there. I need something to get my mind off Théo, something besides having sex with you. Even if sex with you is bone-meltingly incredible."

The left side of his mouth tipped up, and he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Oh, the sacrifices I make for you, my sweet."

I couldn't stop my own smile or that all-too-familiar tingle between my legs that made me shiver. Sex with Max, aside from being one of my favorite things to do on the planet, had become my go-to avoidance action. Whenever I woke from a nightmare, what I always needed more than anything was a way to stop thinking about the nightmare, and sex with Max fit the bill in every way. He knew exactly how to touch and to pleasure.

"If you need to get out and do something to distract yourself," he offered, "it doesn't have to be work. Call Vivian and see if she wants some company at the club. No one's getting into Restrained Fantasies. You know that."

Yes, I did know that.

Restrained Fantasies was a local BDSM club where Max was a member in good standing. Well, we both were now. If someone wanted to get into the place, they'd have to bypass not one but *two* fingerprints scanners.

"Actually," I said, "that's a great idea. Viv texted me earlier and asked if I wanted to meet for lunch one day."

"Why not make *one day* today?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"You can have food from Ravenous delivered. I'll even call Brock to make the arrangements. I'll drop you myself on my way to work."

I could already feel excitement replacing panic. Although I'd

only met her about a month before, I really liked Viv. Her boyfriend—and Dom—was one of the club's co-owners.

"And speaking of work..." His expression softened. "I know you want to go back, but I don't want you to feel like you *have* to. I do make just enough money to support us both."

I chuckled, which was probably his goal. Maxwell Penn, aside from being the hottest, most adorable man I'd ever met, was also one of the wealthiest men in the world. He helmed a global business empire with so many fingers in so many pies that I couldn't keep it all straight.

"Are you sure?" I drawled, easing him and his sexy lips back toward mine. "Absolutely positive we won't descend into abject poverty without me contributing my measly paycheck to pay *our* bills."

"Measly paycheck? Tell me... are you angling for a raise, Ms. Jennings?"

"Angling? Never. I've got my boss wrapped around my little finger. Trust me, if I wanted a raise, I'd be able to get one."

He laughed, a sweet sound I didn't hear nearly enough from him, especially since my attack. He harbored so much guilt over what had happened to me, what that maniac had done to me, and no amount of absolution on my part lessened his agony.

I hated that I needed to turn the conversation serious again, but I had to explain myself. "My desire to go back to work is a different kind of need. I'm not worried about going hungry or keeping a roof over my head. I have to prove to myself I still can, that fucking Théo hasn't beaten me."

Max nodded solemnly. Had he considered my need to return to work from that perspective? Considering the dawning realization blooming in his sky-blue eyes, I doubted it, but he was considering it now.

"Okay, you need to work," he began after a moment. "That's important to you. Why don't you come to work with me, then?"

"At Whitecliff's main headquarters?"

He nodded.

Okay, I hadn't expected *that*.

I always felt... odd going into Whitecliff's main headquarters. At first, that unease came from the fact I'd been secretly screwing the man in charge. Then, it had come from the fact that, in the eyes of Max's plethora of employees, I'd been the pariah with her sights on the man in charge. And now, it was because everyone looked at me as if I were a victim. To be honest, I wasn't sure which I preferred: the pariah or the victim.

"You can work on Red Light's inventory and purchasing from one of the company servers," he continued. "I can set you up with a temporary workstation in my office, so I'll be right there if you need me. Or I can arrange for you to be set up in an empty office. Plus, the building's secure, so you won't have to worry about safety, either."

God, I wanted to cry all over again. "Are you serious? You'd do that for me?"

"Of course, Bree." He kissed the tip of my nose. "I want you to be happy. Watching you struggle to return to work this week has been hard for me to watch; I won't lie about that. And true, I didn't realize just how much you needed to do this until now, but even before I learned that, I've been playing around with the idea of offering you a new position within the Whitecliff International family: director of Whitecliff Charitable Foundation."

"You want to, to—*what?*" I didn't know Whitecliff International even had a charitable foundation, not that it surprised me. Didn't most big companies have something similar?

"That may not end up being the company's name. I haven't exactly formed it yet." He brushed away a tear as it slid down my cheek. "Do you remember when I told you I'd donated all my earnings from Dubois Fashion to charity?"

I nodded. How could I have forgotten the conversation? We'd had it the night Giselle had leaked my past to the media and my world had flipped upside down. A girl tended to remember those sorts of things.

"I'd donated that money to charity, but I hadn't done it out of kindness. I'd done it out of spite. I knew how much it would anger Théo and Giselle to know the money they desperately wanted to get their hands on was going to charity. That selfish decision on my part backfired exquisitely when I almost lost you."

Like it so often did when he spoke of my attack, his hand drifted to the spot on my flank where I'd likely forever carry the scar from my assault, where Théo's blade had penetrated and lacerated my kidney, where the surgeon had gone in and tried—and ultimately failed—to save that kidney.

"And now that Dubois Fashion has been dissolved, I want to take those profits and use them to start Whitecliff Charitable Foundation. I also want to match those funds with a personal donation, but most importantly, I want *you* to run it and to choose where those funds go. You, Bree, with your big, beautiful heart."

"Oh, Max, I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything today," he said quickly. "I just want you to think about it. I want us to form this from the ground up. Once everything is set up, you could work from home, from the office, or a combination of both. I can set you up with your own office here at the house. We can renovate my office at the company into a double office and work together. You can have a separate office at Whitecliff. Hell, if you even want your own office complex away from the main building, we can do that, too. Whatever you want." He paused. "Whatever you *need*."

Flabbergasted.

I knew the word, knew what it meant, but I'd never truly experienced it until now. When I'd been working on my MBA, landing a job like this had been my ultimate goal, but with this offer, a pang of sadness reverberated throughout my heart. I loved managing Red Light Lingerie. I'd landed the job fresh out of grad school, the ink on my MBA still wet. Running a company for one of the most recognizable corporate organizations in the

world had put me over the moon, so yeah, I'd miss the job terribly.

I'd miss Aimée and Chad more, though.

Over the years working together at Red Light, Aimée and Chad had become my family. During my convalescence, they'd picked up the slack and kept the place running smoothly. Aimée had stepped up and taken over my position, and she was doing a fantastic job. Chad was doing everything he could to pick up any other slack. So yeah, I loved them dearly, and I'd miss them. But could I genuinely pass up an offer to run the charitable arm of one of the world's most renowned companies?

Then again, if I took it, would I be forever haunted by the possibility I'd only been offered such a prestigious opportunity because of my relationship with Max?

Closing my eyes, I buried my face in his chest and just held on. If I took this job, I didn't want my decision to have anything to do with fear, Théo, my attack, or questions about whether Max's decision to hire me was dick-driven. There'd be time to weigh all the pros and cons later.

I lifted my head and placed a palm softly to Max's cheek, to his handsome face. "You're so good to me, Maxwell Penn. I just wanted you to know that. Sometimes, I think you forget."

Guilt swam in the blue eyes I loved, and his hand dropped again to my flank. I swore I could hear the gears in his head churning, but I didn't want a rehash on his usual response. I knew he harbored an intense amount of self-hatred because of my attack. He thought it was his fault because his past, his shadows, set the stage, but I didn't blame him. I couldn't. I loved him too much to ever blame him for actions that were out of his control.

Did his past play a role in the series of events that ultimately had Théo Roux walking into the poolroom with that letter opener? I'd be stupid to believe otherwise, but Max hadn't been malicious. More importantly, he hadn't been in control of Théo's actions—only Théo had. One day, I might get Max to accept

that, but I had a feeling we had a long way to go on that front. So, I did what I—*we*—so often did when emotions threatened to overwhelm: distract the other with our bodies.

Wrapping my arms around him, I pushed onto my toes and took his lips in a hot, desperate kiss—a kiss Max took instant command of. He buried a hand in my mess of brown hair, grabbed on tightly and giving the strands a tug, forced my face up so he could kiss the ever-loving shit out of me. It was the only way to describe it. And me? Well, I let him, willingly surrendering to his breathtaking control.

Maxwell Penn wasn't just a billionaire business mogul.

He wasn't just my boss and my boyfriend.

He was my Dom.

A familiar tingle sparked between my thighs, and I relished the heady rush of surrender, lost myself in the passions he so effortlessly conjured. Being with him, succumbing to him, *surrendering* to him had become some of the only times I felt like myself anymore.

Max was such a beautiful distraction. He overwhelmed me on good days, and on bad days, he was my respite from the storm. I loved it. I loved *him*. More than that, I needed him like I needed coffee—for a coffee addict like me, that said a lot.

Breathless, I pulled back so I could look at him, this man who was as broken as he was beautiful. "Take me to bed, Sir," I murmured. "One more morning off, and then, after lunch, we'll go to Whitecliff and talk more about this job offer."

He opened his mouth to answer, but his house phone interrupted. Not his cell, which I thought was odd. Not many people had Max's unlisted home number, and he preferred it that way.

To my knowledge, the only people who knew were me, Max's long-time housekeeper, his executive assistant, his head of security and his two oldest and dearest friends, Karen and Garrett Lanyon. Wait, my mother had it now, too. Max had given it to her after I'd officially moved in, but she still usually called me first. His executive assistant and head of security both usually

called Max's cell first, and his housekeeper was upstairs cleaning. That likely left one option.

I couldn't help the smile curling my lips as I thought of Garrett and Karen. Garrett had been Max's best friend since childhood, and Karen was Garrett's wife—and Max's lover before I'd come along and joined their strange, sensual family. Max and Karen were still lovers in a way, like Garrett and I were lovers.

The four of us had a quasi-sexual relationship that was complex and satisfying in ways I was still trying to get my head around. We had clear boundaries. Karen and Max, as well as Garrett and I, were free to engage in fun bedtime romps, but there was never any full-on intercourse across couples. Max had insisted on that, and apparently, before I'd come along, that arrangement hadn't been the norm.

Max got off watching his lovers orgasm. Didn't even matter to him whether he was the one invoking the orgasm or not—that changed slightly with me. Oh, he still enjoyed watching others with me; he'd just drawn one harsh line, though: assuming we both agreed, men could play with me but no cock except his had access to my pussy. Ever. No exceptions. He and he alone had that pleasure, and I was perfectly okay with that because he offered me the same. No other woman's pussy would have his cock, either.

I gave Max a playful push toward the phone. "Go tell Karen or Garrett you'll need to call them back. You, Sir, are about to be very busy orgasming me into oblivion."

He grinned. "Only if you're a good little sub."

"Aren't I *always* a good little sub, Sir?" I crooned in the purring lilt he liked.

"You are indeed. I've trained you well in the art of submission."

"Indeed you have, Sir." A shiver danced along each of my vertebrae. It always did when the dynamic between us shifted

from that of equal partners to a Dom and his willing, needy sub—and yes, when it came to my Dom, I *was* needy.

Early in our relationship, the idea of being so needy had bothered me. I didn't like a man—well, anyone, really—holding so much power over me, but my neediness didn't bother me anymore. I loved Max, and he loved me. The way he made me feel, emotionally as well as physically, was more potent than any drug I could imagine. He always left me wanting more of him. *All* of him. What was so wrong with that? Not a goddamn thing in my book.

The only flag on the playing field when it came to our Dom/sub relationship was that it had cooled since my attack. We still had sex—lots of sex, in fact. He still took control and employed multiple methods to rocket my lust into the stratosphere, but our sex life had lost the dangerous edge of pure, passionate power exchange.

He hadn't used my favorite riding crop on me since the attack. He hadn't restrained me, either. In the immediate weeks after the incident, that had been okay. Hell, it had been a damned necessity. I'd been fucking stabbed; I'd undergone emergency surgery. I'd needed gentleness, but as the physical pain drifted into memory, our sex life had never returned to what it had been. It was something I wanted to remedy.

He plucked the phone from its base just after the fifth ring. "Hello."

A smile tugged at my lips. Seeing him answer his phone as just Max, not Mr. Penn the business mogul, was positively adorable.

I was about to mouth, "Is it Karen or Garret?" when Max turned an ashen color and swayed backward. He was a marionette whose strings had just been cut. His hand slapped against the wall as if he were desperately trying to catch himself, but there was nothing to grab onto—only me.

I rocketed into him and wrapped my arms around his middle just in time to help him ease to the ground instead of hitting it

with a *smack*. The phone clattered beside him. He hadn't hung up; his hands had likely gone too numb to hold the device any longer.

"Max?" I cupped his cheeks with my own suddenly shaking hands. "What's wrong?"

Fear was blooming inside me again. This wasn't a panic attack exactly, but many of the sensations were similar, including my spiking heart rate.

Max's gaze was a thousand miles away, as vacant as I'd ever seen.

"Max, love." I maneuvered myself and tugged until our gazes finally met. "What's wrong?"

His voice was barely audible, but it was still loud enough to break my heart. "My mum's dead."