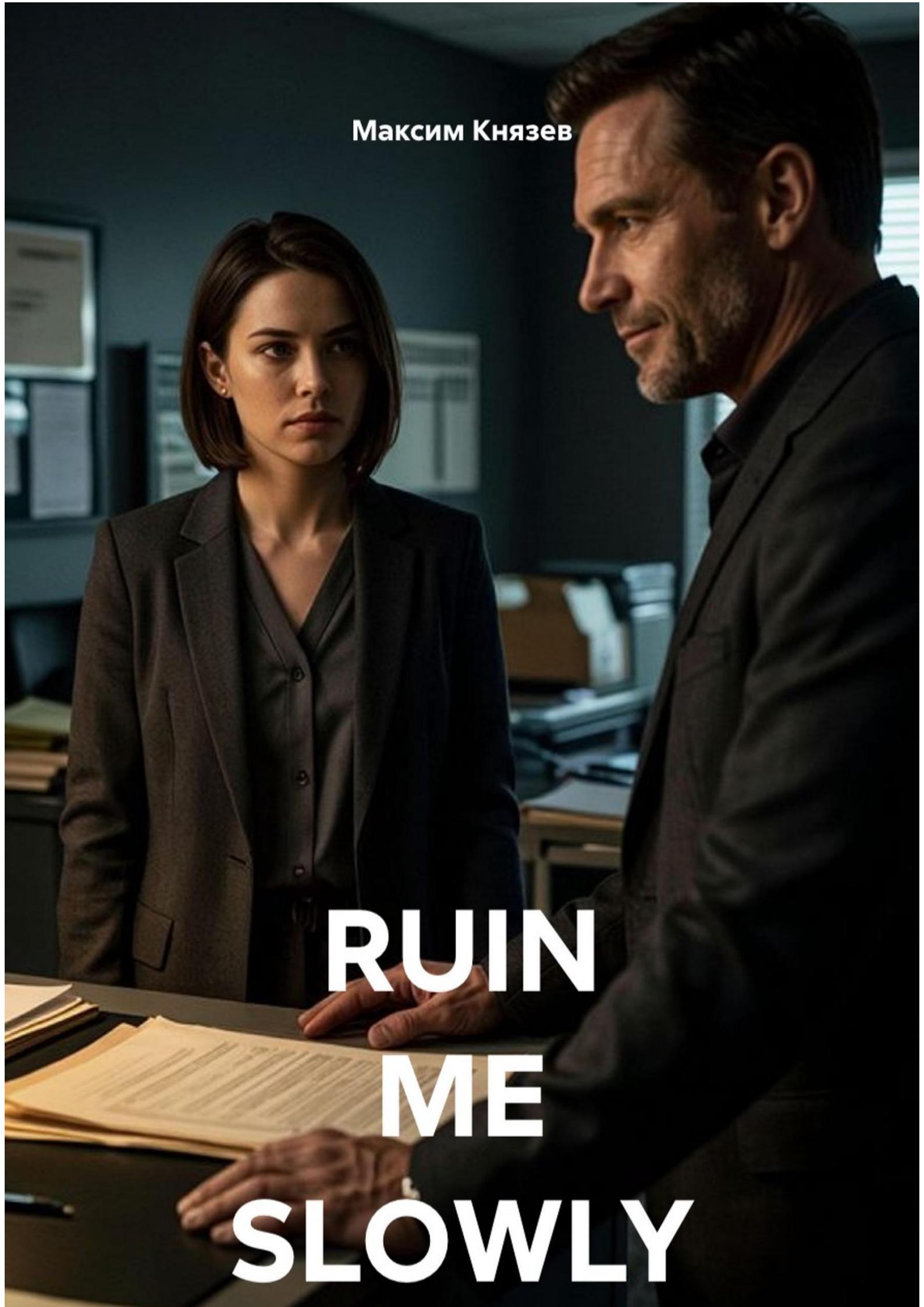




Максим Князев

**RUIN
ME
SLOWLY**

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«Автор»

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Князев М. А.

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She came to destroy him. He knew it from day one. And he didn't care. Evelyn Pearce spent two years planning her revenge against Dr. Julian Cross — the most feared psychologist in London. She gets hired as his assistant, gets close, and waits for the perfect moment to strike. But Julian sees through her lies. He knows exactly who she is and why she's there. And he doesn't want to stop her — he wants to play. What begins as a deadly game turns into something far more terrifying. Julian doesn't just want to break her — he wants to own her. Every secret. Every fear. Every dark desire. She should run. She should report him. But every time she tries, he reminds her: "If you walk out that door, I'll tell everyone who you really are, Evelyn. And you don't even know who that is yet." A twist you won't see coming A villain you'll hate to love A heroine who refuses to be a victim One click. One night. One book that will ruin you slowly.

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A Dark Academia Office Thriller

PROLOGUE

Three Months Before

The fire alarm was screaming.

Not the polite, beeping kind that tells you to evacuate. This was the old-fashioned, mechanical shriek that made your teeth vibrate in your skull. The kind they installed in buildings built before the war, before anyone cared about ear damage or PTSD.

I was standing in the stairwell of Harrington House, the most prestigious psychiatric clinic in London, watching orange smoke curl under the emergency exit door.

The smoke smelled like burning paper. Like secrets turning to ash.

I should have run. Every rational cell in my brain was screaming at me to push through that door, hit the street, and never look back.

But I didn't run.

I walked toward the fire.

Because inside that burning office was a man who had ruined my life before I even knew his name. And I needed to see his face when he realized the fire wasn't an accident.

The door was hot to the touch. I pushed it open with my elbow, careful not to burn my palm.

The office was magnificent. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Thames. A mahogany desk the size of a small car. Leather chairs that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.

And in the center of it all, surrounded by flames that were licking the edges of his Persian rug, stood Dr. Julian Cross.

He wasn't panicking.

He wasn't even moving.

He was sitting in his chair, legs crossed, a glass of whiskey in his hand, watching his life's work burn with the serene expression of a man enjoying a sunset.

"You're early," he said, without looking at me. "The sprinklers won't activate for another ninety seconds. I timed it."

I stepped closer. The heat was unbearable. My mascara was probably running down my cheeks like black tears.

"How did you know I was coming?"

He finally turned his head. His eyes were the color of winter sea — grey-green, cold, impossibly calm. He was handsome in the way that expensive things are handsome. Sharp cheekbones. A jaw that looked carved from marble. Dark hair that was just long enough to run your fingers through, if you were stupid enough to try.

"I know everything about you, Evelyn," he said. "I knew you were coming the moment you accepted the job."

"Then why didn't you stop me?"

He smiled. It was a terrible smile. Gentle and cruel at the same time, like a parent watching a child take their first steps toward a cliff.

"Because I wanted to see what you would do when you got here."

The flames reached the bookshelf. The leather-bound volumes crackled and popped, their ancient knowledge dissolving into black smoke.

"There's a folder in my bottom drawer," Julian said, gesturing with his glass. "It has everything you need to destroy me. Patient records. Financial irregularities. A confession, signed and dated, for the death of Marcus Webb."

My heart stopped.

Marcus Webb. My brother. The man who had jumped off the roof of this very building two years ago, leaving a note that said: *"Dr. Cross said the truth would set me free. It didn't. It buried me."*

I had spent two years hunting Julian Cross. Two years of sleepless nights, of pretending to be a psychology student, of ingratiating myself into this world, all to get close enough to destroy him.

And he was just giving me the evidence? Handing it over like a gift?

"Why?" I whispered.

He took a sip of his whiskey. The fire was spreading now, reaching the curtains. The glass in the windows was starting to crack from the heat.

"Because I'm tired," he said simply. "I've been doing this for twenty years. Fixing people. Breaking them. Playing God. It's exhausting, Evelyn. You have no idea."

"You killed my brother."

"I cured him," Julian said, and for the first time, something flickered in those winter-sea eyes. Sadness. Real, authentic sadness. "Marcus came to me with a darkness that was eating him alive. I pulled it out. I showed him exactly who he was — every ugly, twisted part of him. And he couldn't handle it. That's not my fault. That's the truth."

"The truth," I spat. "You call what you do the truth? You manipulate people. You break them down until they don't know who they are anymore. You're a monster."

"Perhaps," he said. "But monsters are honest about what they are. What are you, Evelyn? A grieving sister? An avenging angel? Or just a little girl who misses her big brother so much that she's willing to burn down a building and everyone in it?"

The sprinklers activated.

Water poured from the ceiling in thick, cold sheets. The flames hissed and sputtered. The smoke turned from orange to grey.

Julian stood up slowly. He walked toward me through the rain of water, his white shirt clinging to his chest, his hair plastered to his forehead.

He stopped inches from my face. Close enough that I could smell the whiskey on his breath. Close enough to see the individual flecks of gold in those green-grey eyes.

"You can take the folder," he said softly. "You can take it to the police. You can ruin my career, my reputation, my life. But before you do — I want you to understand something."

He leaned in. His lips brushed my ear. His voice was a whisper that cut through the sound of the fire and the water and the screaming alarm.

"Your brother was a monster," he breathed. "But you already know that. You knew it when you were twelve years old, and you walked in on him doing things in his bedroom that you still can't forget. You knew it when you were sixteen, and you found those photos on his computer. You knew it when you were twenty-two, and he tried to —"

I slapped him.

I didn't mean to. My hand moved before my brain could stop it. The sound echoed off the wet walls.

Julian didn't flinch. He turned his head back toward me slowly, and there was a red mark blooming on his perfect cheekbone. He touched it. Looked at his fingers. And then he laughed.

"There she is," he said. "There's the woman who's been hiding inside that perfect little victim. You're not a victim, Evelyn. You're a survivor. And survivors make excellent weapons."

He pulled the folder out of his desk drawer and handed it to me.

"Burn it," he said. "Or read it. Whatever you want. But I'm done."

I took the folder. It was thick. Heavy. Solid evidence of every crime he'd ever committed.

"You're just giving up?" I asked. "Just like that?"

He walked to the window and looked out at the Thames, dark and oily under the grey London sky.

"Marcus wasn't the first," he said quietly. "He won't be the last. I've built my career on destroying people like him — the ones who are so broken that they can only be fixed by being smashed to pieces. But I'm tired of being the hammer."

He turned to face me. The sprinklers had stopped. The fire was out. The office was ruined — water damage, smoke stains, shattered glass.

"So take your revenge," he said. "I'll be waiting in my new office. Same building. Seventh floor. Tomorrow at nine AM. The job offer is still on the table."

"The job offer?"

"You wanted to get close to me," he said. "So get close. Be my assistant. Watch me work. Learn everything about me. And then decide if I'm really the devil you think I am."

He walked past me toward the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Evelyn," he said. "Don't be late. I hate lateness."

And then he was gone.

I stood in the ruins of his office, holding the folder that held his entire life, and realized something that made my blood turn to ice.

He had let me burn down his office. He had handed me the evidence to destroy him. He had told me the darkest secret of my own life — the secret I had been running from for twenty years.

Julian Cross wasn't afraid of me.

He was fascinated by me.

And that made him infinitely more dangerous than I ever imagined.

PART ONE: THE INTERVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

Seven Hours Before the Interview

The first time Julian Cross fired someone, I was in the bathroom throwing up — not because I felt sorry for the victim, but because his voice on the intercom made me wet.

I'm not proud of that.

But I'm not a liar, either. At least not to myself.

I had been at Harrington House for exactly forty-seven minutes. Just long enough to fill out the employment forms, meet the HR director (a woman who looked like she'd never smiled in her life), and make a cup of instant coffee that tasted like regret.

And then the intercom crackled.

"Evelyn Pearce, please report to the seventh floor. Dr. Cross is ready to see you."

I froze.

I had been preparing for this moment for two years. I had memorized every detail about Julian Cross — his qualifications, his publications, his divorce, his reputation for destroying careers. I had practiced my fake smile in the mirror. I had rehearsed the lies I'd tell about my background, my education, my reasons for wanting this job.

But nothing — nothing — had prepared me for the sound of his voice.

Deep. Slow. Articulate. Each word wrapped in velvet, but with a sharp edge underneath, like a scalpel hidden in silk.

And my body reacted before my brain could stop it.

Heat. Low in my stomach. Spreading like wildfire through my veins.

I had to grip the edge of the sink to steady myself. My reflection in the bathroom mirror looked horrified. *Good* — that's the appropriate emotion. *Horror*. Not what I was feeling. Not the dark, shameful pulse of arousal that was making my knees weak.

"Get it together," I whispered to myself. "He killed your brother. He's a monster. You hate him."

But my body didn't hate him.

My body was a traitor.

I splashed cold water on my face and walked to the elevator.

The seventh floor was different from the rest of the building. Quieter. Darker. The carpets were thicker, the lighting softer. Everything was designed to feel expensive and intimate, like the lobby of a boutique hotel instead of a psychiatric clinic.

I walked down a long corridor lined with abstract art. The paintings were disturbing — blurred faces, contorted bodies, colors that bled into each other like bruises. I recognized the artist, of course. Julian Cross was famous for his obsession with Francis Bacon. The twisted, screaming figures in those paintings were his favorites.

The office door was open.

I stood outside for a moment, watching him.

He was at his desk, writing something in a leather-bound notebook. His pen moved slowly, deliberately. His posture was perfect — back straight, shoulders back, the confident ease of a man who had never doubted his place in the world.

The fire had been three months ago. The office was completely restored now, but the memory of the flames haunted me. I could still smell the smoke when I closed my eyes.

"Come in, Evelyn," he said, without looking up. "Close the door behind you."

I stepped inside.

The office was exactly as it had been before the fire. The same mahogany desk. The same Persian rug. The same floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Thames. The same bookshelf, rebuilt and refilled with expensive leather-bound volumes.

The only difference was the woman.

She was sitting in the chair across from Julian's desk, her back to me. She had perfect blonde hair and a perfectly tailored suit. She was crying. Silent tears were streaming down her cheeks, and she was dabbing them with a silk handkerchief.

Julian finally looked up from his notebook. His eyes met mine.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd changed your mind."

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said, my voice sounding steadier than I felt. "The HR paperwork took longer than I expected."

"Mm." He made a small mark in his notebook. "Three minutes and seventeen seconds. That's how long you were late. I'll subtract it from your lunch break."

The crying woman turned to look at me. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her face blotchy. She looked like she'd been crying for hours.

"Dr. Cross," she said, her voice cracking. "I told you everything. Everything. You can't — you can't just use that against me."

Julian sighed. It was a patient, almost paternal sigh, the kind of sigh you'd give a child who was throwing a tantrum.

"Margaret," he said. "I'm not using anything against you. I'm simply asking you to look at the facts. You told me yourself — that your husband doesn't love you. That you hate your body. That you fantasize about hurting your children."

"I was being honest!"

"And honesty is a gift," Julian said. "But it's also a weapon. You gave me permission to use this information to help you. So I'm helping you. The right thing to do is leave your husband. File for divorce. Take the children. Your life will be better."

"But —"

"No buts." His voice was gentle but final. "Margaret, you came to me because you wanted to be free. This is what freedom looks like. It's ugly. It's painful. But it's the truth."

Margaret stared at him for a long moment. Then she nodded, wiped her eyes, and stood up.

"Thank you, Dr. Cross," she whispered.

"Don't thank me yet," he said. "Thank me in five years, when you're happy."

She left the room, closing the door behind her.

I stood there, frozen. I didn't know what to say. I had prepared myself for a monster, for a manipulator who used his power to hurt people. But this man — this calm, patient man — had just helped a woman make the hardest decision of her life.

Was that manipulation? Or was it therapy?

Julian gestured to the empty chair. "Sit down, Evelyn. You look nervous."

I sat. The chair was comfortable. Too comfortable. It felt like it was embracing me.

"Your file says you're twenty-eight years old. Graduated from University of Manchester with a degree in psychology. Worked three years as a research assistant at a private clinic. No prior clinical experience. No published papers."

He read these facts from my file with the boredom of a man reciting a grocery list.

"Your references are excellent," he continued. "Your former supervisor called you 'diligent, thorough, and emotionally stable.' She said you're one of the most professional young women she's ever met."

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