



Rent a
BODYGUARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DARCY ROSE

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BLURB

Dakota needs a bodyguard and fast. Assuming someone is watching her, she goes to the police, but they find nothing. Things get worse when she hires a private investigator who cannot find anything, either.

Dakota's fears mount, and when she meets Bane, a huge, muscular mountain of a man, at the coffee shop, the only thing she can think of is to hire him as her live-in bodyguard. She needs protection, and he seems like the man who can offer her that. But Bane gives her so much more than protection. He makes her feel loved.

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DAKOTA

I SHOULDN'T HAVE LEFT THE APARTMENT.

Something is off. I just don't know what. That has been my problem for the past few months.

It's not like anybody has come up to me. Nobody's bumped into me or even stared at me an extra second too long. It only feels that way, which I know is the result of my paranoia.

Even if I don't have proof that somebody is following me, watching me, I just know.

I barely stifle a yawn as the line moves, and I move with it. When was the last time I slept for more than minutes at a stretch? No matter what I do, I can't seem to get more than that. I know I need it—my brain feels sluggish, a little off. It takes a conscious effort to shuffle my feet and move up in line in the café when another customer steps aside. And when I do, I look over my shoulder just in case somebody really is watching, maybe from outside the shop. There are so many windows for a person to look through.

And now, even the smiling guy behind the register leaves me feeling prickly and uncomfortable. "What can I get for you?" he chirps. He must drink a lot of the stuff he sells.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. I can't even do this. How many times have I ordered the same drink in this very shop? "Um, an iced latte?"

He stares at me for a beat. "Size?"

“Large. Sorry. Oat milk,” I add since I know that’s what he’ll ask next.

“Your name?” He holds a marker poised over a cup.

Now I know what a deer in headlights feels like. It’s the simplest question in the world, right? One I’ve answered countless times. Usually, I get a raised eyebrow or an appreciative grin when I tell them my name is Dakota since it’s sort of unusual.

But the idea of announcing myself in front of a bunch of strangers makes my skin crawl now. Sweat beads on the back of my neck. I should never have left the apartment. “Um, Maggie,” I mumble, using my mom’s name.

He rings me up and is probably glad to be rid of me by the time I step aside. I know I would be, especially when the place is this busy.

This is no way to live. I might as well be a prisoner in my own head. But it’s the little things I can’t shake. The way the plants on my fire escape are sometimes out of place in the morning when I go to water them. Last week, there was a handprint on the bedroom window, like somebody had leaned over the railing running around the escape ledge to look in and touched the glass to steady themselves. Not coincidentally, that’s the last time I slept through the night.

I’m not making it up in my head—I’ve never been like this, the kind of person who makes connections between unrelated things. Sure, plenty of blogs are dedicated to conspiracy theories and that sort of thing, but it’s not what I do. That’s not how my brain works.

At least, it wasn’t until now.

“Maggie? Iced latte for Maggie.” I barely register the girl holding the drink up over her head, looking around to find its owner. She plops it down on the counter before I remember having used that name. Jesus, I need to sleep. Maybe when I get home, I’ll try to grab a few minutes. It’s daytime, so it’s less likely for somebody to be able to sneak around.

I try to wedge my way between a couple of customers, sliding my arm through to reach for the drink. Except one of them moves, knocking me off balance. My slow-ass reflexes leave me stumbling, and I realize I'm going to fall. It all happens so fast, but in my head, it might as well be slow motion.

Only I don't hit the floor. I hit a wall instead, one made of muscle. "You okay?" The man's voice brings to mind a big, rumbly truck. And when I look up at him, that image only crystallizes. This is a mountain of a man, almost absurdly enormous.

And he has his massive hands around my arms. I stiffen, even gasping softly, and he gets the hint.

"Sorry." He holds up his hands, palms facing out. "Reflex. You were about to go down."

And I feel like such a fool for assuming he was a bad guy. "Thank you for catching me."

"Anytime." He even smiles a little, but that doesn't make him any less intimidating.

But I wouldn't exactly say I'm intimidated. A little shaken up, sure, but I'm not afraid of him. Maybe it's like the kind of thing animals go through when they meet a stranger. They know right away if that person is trustworthy or not.

Did I just compare myself to a dog? I really do need to sleep.

When I look up at my oversized hero, he's frowning. "Sorry," he rumbles when he notices me watching. "But are you feeling all right? You seem a little shaken up."

Reflex leaves me wanting to ask why it's any of his business. I've lived on my own in the city for a long time, so that kind of reaction is ingrained in me now. Not rudeness, not exactly, but more like self-preservation. A lot of creepy people are out there.

But again, something about this man leaves me feeling less defensive. He has a calming sort of presence, like a gentle

giant—if I was in the mood to be super corny and cliché. “I’m just tired,” I murmur with a helpless little shrug. “That’s all.”

“Hence the large latte,” he offers with a grin. “I hope it helps, Maggie.”

“Dakota,” I correct before I think about it.

His head tips to the side, confusion narrowing his eyes. “What was that?”

“My real name. Sorry, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Forget I ever said anything.” Right, because it’s as easy as that. I’m sure by the time he’s out of the shop and on his way to whatever he does with his life, I won’t even be a memory anymore. That’s the only thing that gets me through the embarrassment.

He scrubs a hand over his short black hair before shrugging those insane shoulders of his. “Whatever you say. You’re sure you’re all right?”

“Of course,” I reply with a laugh at myself. “Sorry. I’m fine.”

He doesn’t look convinced but takes his drink and leaves anyway. Not without one last look my way, though, and even that doesn’t freak me out. It’s the strangest thing. I was practically crawling out of my skin only a few minutes ago, wishing I could be invisible or that I had never left home at all. But when he looks at me, I feel safe. I bet being around him would give me a little bit of peace. No person alive would want to tangle with a guy that big.

Oh my god, what am I doing? Why am I still standing here? The answer is obvious, or at least it is to my exhausted mind. Maybe if I wasn’t so drained, I would think twice about this, but as things stand right now, it seems completely reasonable to run out of the café and follow him.

“Hey!” I wave an arm over my head as I run after him in case he can’t see me on the crowded sidewalk. I’m not as big as he is.

He stops and turns on his heel, frowning, his head tipping to the side. “Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” I ask once I reach him.

“Wave your arm over your head.” He gestures toward my bubblegum-pink hair. “You already stand out.”

I guess I do. And now that he’s looking at me the way he is, I forget what I wanted to say. “Um, I know this sounds crazy,” I begin, as my cheeks start to get hot because this really does sound insane. “But are you looking for a job, by any chance?”

He folds his arms, looking me up and down. “What makes you ask me that?”

“No offense or anything. Not that you look unemployed.” This is getting worse by the second, and I probably shouldn’t have chased him down. “But I could use a bodyguard, and you’re... the sort of man I would imagine hiring.”

“A bodyguard?”

“Yeah, you know. I’ve been thinking about hiring one, and I could pay you well. Very well,” I add when he sort of scoffs. “We can arrange all of that. I just need to know if you’re interested?”

Ten minutes ago, I didn’t know this man existed.

Now? My whole existence hinges on whether he’ll agree.

I can’t believe how much I want him to say yes.

BANE

THE GIRL IS CRAZY. SHE HAS TO BE. WHO ASKS A COMPLETE stranger to be their bodyguard? She doesn't know the first damn thing about me.

And if she did, she would run the other way.

So she's probably crazy. She's also gorgeous, even with that bright pink head of hair. It makes her interesting, at least to me. I would like to know more about this pink-haired, coffee-drinking Dakota who gives fake names to baristas. Like what she looks like without her clothes on. We could start there.

"Sure," I offer, trying not to laugh at how batshit crazy this situation is. "Yeah, I'll be your bodyguard. What do I do first?"

Either she doesn't hear the laughter in my voice, or she doesn't care. Maybe she's too grateful. "Wow, great. Um, do you want to see my apartment?"

I've seen porn that starts off like this. But when I search her expression for any hint that she's fucking around, all I see is sincerity. She's touchingly young and naive, which goes a long way toward softening my sympathy. If she's for real, she's desperate. I wonder who would hurt a girl like this. I can't imagine anyone would. Maybe she's just watched too many scary movies. Or maybe there is more. I don't have enough information to say for sure yet.

"Yeah, if you're inviting me. Where is it?"

She jerks her chin. “Just a few blocks this way.” Immediately, I’m more intrigued than before. That’s a pretty nice area, confirming that she wasn’t kidding when she said she could pay. Only people who are loaded live there. Mostly old money. Trust fund baby is the first thing that comes to my mind.

I know what we must look like, walking down the street together. Compared to my six-foot-five frame, she may as well be a child at my side. Mid-twenties, I’d say, casual but well-dressed.

Silence settles over us for a minute, and the energy between us changes. “You’re sure you’re not luring me there to rob me?” I joke to lighten the suddenly tense mood. Is she having second thoughts? She should.

She blurts out a disbelieving laugh. “Are there people stupid enough to think they could overpower you?” That’s the right answer. If she acted all surprised and offended, I would know something was off. But that was a genuine reaction. It eases the rest of my apprehension, and I follow her into the lobby of an upscale apartment building. There’s no doorman and no security at the front desk. I keep that in mind as we cross the marble-floored space before getting on the elevator.

“So what’s the story?” I ask, sipping my coffee but watching her closely.

“There’s not much to tell.” She looks at the floor, biting her lip. A nice, full lip I would love to suck on before sucking on other parts of her. “For the past few weeks, I’ve been sure somebody’s following me. Or at least watching me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I can show you when we get inside.” Is she for real or merely paranoid? No matter what, she believes it’s real, and that’s all that matters right now.

“Do you have roommates?”

“I live alone,” she answers quickly. Another mistake on her part. She shouldn’t let a stranger know how easy of a target she is.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I run a blog,” she explains with a smile. I’m not exactly sure what work that entails, but the twinkle in her eyes when she talks about it tells me she loves her job.

“Any angry exes running around?” That’s usually the case. Angry exes do stupid things, and jealousy can make a guy extremely dangerous.

She shakes her head. “Seriously, I’ve never dealt with anything like this before. I know I must sound completely nuts, but I know something’s wrong.”

“So no crazy exes?”

“No exes at all,” she confirms shyly. Another interesting fact I store away for later.

We step off the elevator a few floors from the top, and she unlocks the door before swinging it open to reveal an enormous apartment with huge windows that allow tons of sunlight into the wide open space. I don’t know what I was expecting. Mismatched IKEA furniture, maybe, or something she thrifted. But this place is a showroom.

“And you said you run a blog for a living?” I ask, noting the art on the walls and the expensive, shining appliances in the open kitchen with its marble countertops.

“Yeah, entertainment, fashion, stuff like that.”

I turn to her, prepared to ask more, but she seems to have already anticipated the question. “My dad gave me this place for my eighteenth birthday,” she explains with a shrug as she drops her bag onto an oversized chair. “I didn’t pay for any of it. It’s all taken care of.”

My first thought was spot-on. Trust fund baby. “Wow. That’s pretty nice.”

She frowns down at her drink. “He just wanted me gone,” she murmurs.

And to think, I came along with her almost as a joke, thinking it might be a way to get my dick wet. Now I’m feeling sorry for her, wishing I could say something to make

her feel better. “It could be a lot worse,” I offer, doing a cursory examination of the locks on the windows. “A lot of people have families who don’t spend time with them, and there’s no enormous apartment involved.”

“I know I’m lucky,” she quickly replies. “And generally, I like living alone. No roommate to deal with, no rules from anybody. But at times like this...” She looks around like she is trying to come up with a new subject. She clearly doesn’t want to talk about this anymore.

So I throw her a lifeline. “Did you say you wanted to show me something when we got here?”

“Right. This way.” She leads me down a wide hall, open doors revealing a dining room that looks like it never gets used and a library full of books, along with a desk and a laptop where I suppose she does her work.

At the end of the hall is the bedroom, complete with a view of the city I bet would be spectacular at night. “So you see, the fire escape is over here, accessible by my office.” She goes to the window and points to the right, where that room sits. From here, I see the railing. Then she points at one of the windowpanes closest to the frame, and I see exactly what she’s talking about: a handprint on the glass.

“Somebody could leave it if they were on the fire escape and leaning over to look into this room,” she murmurs, her voice tight. “It hasn’t rained or anything since I found the print there. It’s a constant reminder of somebody trying to get in.”

Either that or Spider-Man paid her a visit. There’s no other explanation for a handprint on the outside of the glass when we’re this far up. “No window washer?” I ask, hopeful.

“Nope, not until spring. They only come twice a year.”

I nod slowly, glancing around the room. From where the guy was watching—and it’s certainly a man from the size of the print—they had a clear view of her bed. “I can see why you’d be concerned.”

I hope she didn’t notice that it’s his left handprint, which means he was using his right hand for something else.

Probably jerking off. Immediately, my stomach sours. Not only with anger but with unexplained jealousy as well.

“So you don’t think I’m crazy?” She asks it like nothing less than her entire life hinges on my answer. I wonder how many people haven’t taken her seriously.

“Has there been anything else?” Her head bobs up and down, and she crooks her finger, silently requesting that I follow her to her office.

“I keep my plants out here, though I probably shouldn’t since it crowds the landing, but everybody does it. Sometimes they’ll be out of place, like somebody moved one of them out of the way and didn’t put it back correctly.”

“You find it like that in the morning?” Her head bobs up and down. I see what she’s thinking. That somebody has been on her fire escape, watching her as she sleeps. “Has this window ever been tampered with?”

“One morning when I came in, little bits of paint were chipped off the frame, lying on the windowsill. I thought maybe somebody was trying to force it open, but I always lock it.”

I swallow down the words “good girl” and instead say, “Good thinking.”

“And there are other things. I’ve stopped going anywhere because I always feel like somebody’s watching me. I know it’s probably paranoia, but—”

I shake my head. “Don’t do that to yourself. Too many women do. And they end up wishing they hadn’t.”

“You’re the first person who’s taken me seriously.”

“Who else have you spoken to?”

“I called the police, but they told me there was nothing they could do. I even hired a private investigator, but that went nowhere.” Her voice shakes a little bit, and the vulnerability in it touches something deep inside me. Every protective instinct I possess leaves me wanting to wrap this girl up in a blanket,

tuck her in, and tell her everything will be okay. A far cry from what I first thought when she ran after me on the street.

“What about your family? Have they offered to help you?”

She blurts out a laugh. “My family? My parents don’t even call me anymore, and when I call them, all I ever get is their voicemail. They’re probably not even in the country right now—always traveling, you know? So I’m sort of on my own.” She wanders out of the room, and I follow her until we come to the living room.

No wonder she was so desperate for help that she would stop a stranger.

I have to wonder if I’m the right stranger, is all.

The longer I spend in her presence, the more I’m inclined to believe I am. Because the thought of anyone hurting this girl has my stomach in knots, and seeing how vulnerable and trusting she is with a stranger like me makes me see red.

She needs protection. She needs me. But first, she needs a lesson.

DAKOTA

I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW INCREDIBLE IT FEELS KNOWING somebody actually takes me seriously. The cops were so damn condescending, they might as well have patted me on the head. The private investigator only wanted my money and was quick to tell me everything was fine once my payment hit his bank account.

But this man? He doesn't know me. He has no reason to flatter me or give me lip service. He hasn't even asked how much I plan on paying. Maybe I'm really crazy, but I think he might actually care.

Granted, he hasn't accepted the job yet, either, but I get the feeling he will. He seems genuinely concerned, and he's asking what seems to be the right questions. I like how he takes it upon himself to examine the windows, too, making sure everything's in working order. Like he cares.

I look up at him, ready to ask if he's interested in negotiating a salary when something in his face stops me. His bushy eyebrows draw together, and his eyes are blazing as he glares down at me. What did I do wrong?

"Let me get this straight," he begins, taking one menacing step after another while I back away, confused. "You live here all alone."

"Right," I squeak out. What the hell is happening? Why is he acting like this all of a sudden?

"And nobody checks on you? No family, no friends?"

This was a bad idea. This was a very bad idea. I should never have let him in. What was I thinking? I basically told him I have a rich family, for fuck's sake. I don't even know the man's name, but he knows my parents aren't in town and don't care what happens to me.

"Not really." Shit, this is getting worse. "I do have friends, but it's not like I see them all the time." *Shut up, Dakota.* Jesus, this is going downhill fast.

"And you thought it was a good idea to invite a complete stranger into your apartment?" Finally, he backs me into a corner. There's nowhere for me to go, and he is so big. There's so much of him, too much for me to slip past if I wanted to run. Which right now, I do. Very much. How could I have been so wrong? How could he go from being kind and helpful to being so angry and menacing at the drop of a hat?

"I thought..."

He snickers. "You thought? This ought to be good. What did you think?"

Fear clogs my throat until all I can do is croak out, "Uh, you seemed nice."

"Nice?" he asks, barking out a bitter laugh that makes tears spring to my eyes. "Is that all it takes? No wonder somebody is following you around. You're an easy fucking target. Don't you know what could happen when you let a stranger into your apartment? Especially now that you've told me nobody even cares if you're in trouble." The note of concern in his voice is enough to make me think for a second he might be doing this out of worry, but that thought disappears faster than it popped into my mind when he leans in and almost squashes me into the corner, thanks to his sheer size.

"You know nothing about me. And look at you, so small and weak. It would take nothing for me to overpower you. To hurt you. To kill you."

That's what breaks me. That's what makes me scream loud enough that he takes a step back, and it gives me just enough room to slip past him and scramble for the door.

“What are you doing?” He grabs me before I can get out, pulling me away from the door. I would scream again, but I can’t breathe. I gasp for air, struggling for a single breath.

He’s going to kill me. He could be the man who’s been following me all this time, and I let him in here. Why did I do that? What was I thinking?

“Dakota.” I barely hear him over the pounding in my ears. “Dakota!” He turns me around, gripping my arms tight and holding me in place. “Calm down. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Let me go,” I gasp, trying to twist my way out of his grip. “Just let me go, please!”

“Stop this.” He still sounds so angry, and all it does is make my pulse race faster than before. I’m going to pass out if this doesn’t stop soon. As it is, the world is starting to go gray and fuzzy around the edges.

“Hey.” He loosens his grip, now rubbing my arms instead of holding them so tight. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you like this. I only wanted to scare some sense into you. You are too damn trusting... You’re okay. I promise. You’re safe with me.”

“How... do I know... that?” I can barely get a word out at a time. My breathing is too shallow. I can’t calm myself down. Because, oh my god, he could kill me. Why would he even say that if he didn’t mean to do it? That’s not the kind of thought a normal, sane person has, is it?

“I’m sorry. I went about that the wrong way. Take a breath. Try to relax. Nobody is going to hurt you. You’re safe now.”

I want to believe him. I want to be safe and protected. When I force myself to look up at him, to lock eyes with him, they’re not so hard and angry anymore. He’s softer now, quieter, even gentle. The way he was back at the café when he convinced me to go through with this without even trying.

“That’s right,” he murmurs, his eyes darting over my face while his hands gently rub my arms and shoulders. “One breath at a time. Check in with reality. Right now, you’re in your apartment with someone who won’t hurt you and should

have handled that better than he did. I'm sorry. It doesn't mean I want to hurt you. Okay?"

"Yeah." I'm still a little breathless, my heart still pounds, but I can think again. I'm not operating completely on instinct, like an animal ready to chew off its own foot to get out of a trap.

"Come on. Let's sit down." He leads me to the sofa like I couldn't get there on my own and has me sit, then goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water, which he uncaps on the way back to me. The bottle looks like a toy in his huge hand.

"Now, sip this. Take your time." I accept the bottle gratefully since the caffeine in my iced latte would probably only make me more jittery. A few sips of cold water revive me a little, clearing my head.

When he sits beside me, I tense up before I can help it. "You're safe with me. I promise," he repeats again. Something about the way he says it, the calm reassurance delivered in that deep voice, unravels the last of my tension. "I didn't mean to scare you like that. I really didn't. Sometimes I forget to check myself. I was concerned for you, that's all."

Concerned for me. When was the last time anyone was concerned for me? "Thank you," I murmur before taking another sip.

I'm shaking, though. I can't stop shaking. When a little bit of the water splashes out of the bottle, he gently removes it from my grip and places it on the coffee table. "Come here. It's okay." He holds his arms out, motioning for me to come closer. When I hesitate, he goes all the way, picking me up like I weigh nothing and settling me into his lap.

Here's a plot twist I didn't see coming. On the one hand, being this close to him when I don't even know him is sort of weird and a little uncomfortable.

At the same time, it's also sort of nice. I don't have to worry about anything when I'm like this, wrapped in this man's strong arms. Now the rest of the tightness in my chest

loosens, and I can breathe freely again. No fear, no panic. Just... relief.

“You’re not alone anymore,” he murmurs, stroking my back until I lean against him, resting my head on his shoulder. “That’s right. Relax. You’re safe now. You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

“How can you be so sure?” I ask in a soft voice.

“Trust me. I know what I’m talking about. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. You have my word on that, Dakota.”

And I believe him. I probably shouldn’t, but I do. Just a minute ago, my heart could have exploded in panic. Now, it swells with relief as a sense of peace washes over me. I’m so tired, weak from it, especially after coming so close to a full-blown panic attack.

“Close your eyes,” he murmurs, still stroking my back. I hope he never stops. “Get some rest. I’ll keep watch over things. You don’t have to worry about anything. Not anymore.”

I open my mouth, prepared to thank him—but sleep catches up to me before I can do it, pulling me under the instant my eyes close.

BANE

I HAVE NO RIGHT TO BE DOING THIS. I SHOULDN'T EVEN BE here.

Holding this girl while she sleeps is the simplest, sweetest feeling I've ever known. Being trusted. Being needed. She doesn't know the first thing about me, and a few moments ago, she was scared out of her mind, but she still fell asleep in my arms. A part of me is still angry with her for being so reckless, but an even bigger part of me holds on to the belief that she is only this carefree with me. Can she sense I won't hurt her?

She's out cold now, too, her body limp, her breathing smooth and even. She needs sleep. I wonder how long she hasn't slept peacefully, worried that someone might break in and hurt her.

I figured she was being dramatic at first, but that little freak-out she went through opened my eyes. She's terrified, afraid she'll open her eyes and find someone watching her, or worse.

I can't imagine why anybody would want to hurt someone so precious and innocent, but then I know how the world works. I know there doesn't have to be a reason, at least not a logical one. Some people just want to hurt others. It's the only way they can derive satisfaction.

And me? I take care of things. I get them out of the way. I don't get any sick sense of pleasure from it, but that doesn't change anything. I still am who I am.

And if this girl knew what I did for a living and that I don't need the money she's willing to give me—however much that is, since we haven't discussed it—she would jump up from my lap like it was on fire and throw me out of here.

I doubt she's ever slept in the arms of a hitman.

I should tell her. She deserves to know the man she wants to trust has taken more lives than he could keep count of. Not that I would try to—I'm not some perverted asshole who likes to keep track of his kills. It's a job, nothing more than a service to others. I get paid to get rid of people like the one Dakota is afraid of, but for her, I'll do it for free.

And if he exists, and he was in front of me at this very moment? No doubt about it. He would breathe his last in this room, here and now.

She mumbles something in her sleep and curls up a little tighter in my lap. Something in my chest swells and warms. Is this me? I barely recognize myself, holding still while she makes herself more comfortable, reluctant to wake her up when she's finally sleeping.

Being a protector is new. I've always been the enforcer. The muscle. An unspoken threat. People look at me and don't see a man who will save their life. They see the man who's going to hurt them—whether I actually do is another story. But then again, it's not up to me to force people to look beyond their preconceptions. They're going to assume what they're going to assume.

But she didn't. She looked at me and didn't think *big, scary guy*. No, that only happened when I gave her a reason by scaring the shit out of her.

She isn't scared anymore. She's sleeping, peaceful, and hopefully having a nice dream.

She's also shifting in my lap again, this time rubbing up against my crotch. It doesn't take much to get me hard. Dammit. Like I wasn't already distracted by her warm, tight little body. She moves again—this time, whimpering softly along with it.

Mother of God. She's going to kill me. Either I need to get her off my lap or I'll end up with a mess in my pants. "Hey," I whisper, my lips close to her ear. It's so easy to be tender with her. I'm not a tender man by nature.

"Hmm?" She lifts her head, eyes half closed, her voice thick with sleep. Suddenly, she sits up straight, and her face goes red. "Oh. Oh god, I'm sorry. What am I doing?"

"You don't have to be sorry."

"I fell asleep in your lap. What am I, a child?" She tries to wiggle her way off, but that's not helping my already raging erection—not to mention the way she rubs against me, tits brushing my chest and arm. There are limits to a man's self-control, and she's testing them.

"It's all right." Meanwhile, I'm trying to hide my hard-on so she won't get the wrong idea. "It was sort of nice."

"Nice?" She arches an eyebrow. "You sat here with me drooling all over you, and it was nice?"

"You don't know what I consider a good time."

When she blurts out a laugh, I can't help but laugh with her—and it must be that easy, gentle laughter that leads me to brush aside the hair stuck to the side of her face, caught between her skin and my shoulder all this time. Jesus, how is her skin so soft? And her eyes, the deepest shade of blue. Eyes that now stare deeply into mine.

It's just as natural as anything else having to do with her, with us. The way I take her by the back of her head and pull her close while leaning in to touch my lips to hers.

There's no jolt of surprise. No stiffening, no gasp. Without hesitation, she melts into my kiss with a sigh. Like she was waiting for the chance to do this. I shouldn't, even with her acting all eager the way she is. I should be the smarter person. The stronger one. She doesn't need a man like me touching her like this, indulging in the feel of her ass and her firm, full tits and everything I can get my hands on.

I shouldn't help her straddle me either, but here we are. I'm holding her by the hips and pulling her down, grinding her

against me while lifting my hips to grind back. “Oh my god,” she whispers, eyes closed, her head falling back as I drive myself against her pussy. The thin leggings she wears allow me to trace the curve of her ass until she moans.

Then she opens her eyes, her head snapping up. “What’s your name?”

“Bane,” I grunt, thrusting upward before lapping at the smooth, soft skin of her throat. She sucks in a surprised little breath when my teeth graze her, but the way she digs her nails into my shoulders encourages me to do it again.

“Bane...” She takes my face in her hands and tilts it so our mouths meet again. I plunge my tongue inside, and she meets it with hers, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and holding on tight while she does. Clinging to me like I’m the only thing keeping her alive.

“Are you sure you want this?” I ask between kisses. She needs to make up her mind quick because I don’t know how much more control I can exert here. Not when every inch of skin I touch makes me crave more.

“Yes.” She pulls her sweater over her head and throws it aside like she wants to prove she means it. I bury my face between her tits, and she moans my name. Nobody has ever said it the way she does. It’s like hearing your favorite song for the first time, knowing you will never stop loving it.

She reaches back to unhook her bra, and the instant it’s off, I take one of her rosy nipples between my lips and suck until she’s jerking against me, grinding her perfect pussy over my cock. She’s like a cat in heat, and I can’t wait to sink deep inside her.

When I can’t stand it any longer, and the need to take her overcomes me, I ease her back and slide a hand between us, unbuttoning my jeans while still working her nipple into a taut peak with my tongue. She tastes amazing, and I want to lick a path all over her body before sinking deep between her thighs.

“So good...” she moans and rakes her nails over my scalp, arching her back when I nip her nipple with my teeth as a

reward. Perfect. She's fucking perfect.

Once I finish unzipping myself, I tug her leggings down far enough that I can delve into her wet pussy. "Fuck... you're so wet..." Her warm heat clenches around my fingers as I fuck her deeply.

"You're making a fucking mess, beautiful. Your pussy juices are drenching my hand."

I let out a feral grunt, sinking deeper before snapping back when I find her clit with my hand. My fingers slide against the sensitive bundle of nerves. She's so turned on and ready for me, which intensifies my need for her.

"I need to fuck you, Dakota. I need to fuck you so hard that when I'm done, neither of us can do anything else but stay in bed together. I want to make sure you feel me for days, that your soreness reminds you of what we did. You want that, don't you?"

With my other hand, I sink my fingers into her hair and hold her in place, working my fingers against her clit in tight little strokes until her moans turn to high-pitched whines.

"Tell me you want me to make you come. Tell me, and I'll do it. I'll make you come so hard you see stars," I growl into her ear.

Her eyes shine and become hazy. I can tell she's close, and I need to push her over the edge. Moving my finger against her clit faster, I pepper her throat with kisses. Speaking against her skin, I whisper, "Say it!" It's not a question but a demand. If she wants to come, she needs to be a good girl and tell me.

Finally, she breaks, and the words rush out of her like a dam holding back water. "Please! Please, make me come."

Like the bastard I am, I smirk against her skin and continue my assault on her clit, knowing it's only a matter of seconds before she goes off like a rocket. She goes stiff, and her mouth pops open in a silent scream that breaks and dissolves into a hoarse cry.

"That's right. Come for me. Let me hear it." Her sweet juices coat my thighs now, and I wish like hell it was my cock

she just came around.

She's still moaning when I turn her, laying her flat on the sofa and peeling off her leggings and thong. Her thighs fall open, and I take in the sight of her slick, pink pussy. Her lips glisten, and the musky aroma of her cum hits my nose. My cock twitches, dripping with precum after waiting for what feels like an eternity. She's a drug I could never get tired of consuming, one I could lose myself to. Gripping her by the hips, I lift her and kneel between her legs. I pull her forward and look down at our bodies. The head of my cock is swollen and red. I'm ready to fucking explode, but I need to be inside her before I do.

I line myself up with her entrance and thrust forward without warning. I need her like I need my next breath.

"Bane!" Her eyes fly wide open, and shock followed by pleasure fills her eyes. That burst of surprise is followed by a long, low moan as I stretch her to the limits of her tight channel.

"Oh god! I think you're going to tear me." Her teeth sink into her lip deeper with every inch I go.

"I won't. You can handle it. I know you can. Your pussy takes my cock so perfectly. Like it was made for you." I peer down between where our bodies join and watch as I pump in and out of her, our collective juices glistening along my length. I'm sure I'm the biggest and thickest she's ever had, and after tonight, she'll continue to feel me even when I'm not inside her, which is what I want. I want her to remember tonight.

With one slow, deep stroke after another, I claim her. I don't know what it means or whether it will last, but right here and now, she's mine. She moves with me, undulating like a wave, using the leverage against my chest to fuck herself on my cock. I reach down to hold her tits, and she arches her back, giving more of herself to me. Who the fuck is this woman, and where has she been all my life?

I'm at the edge of my control when she tightens, almost holding me in place. "More... more!"

“Like this?” I wrap my arms around her thighs, then pummel into her hard. Our skin slapping against each other and our deep breathing fills the air. I’m hitting her deep. Her juices coat my cock and run down my balls, and fuck, I want to make this woman come. I want to make her come again and again because I’ve never been with anyone like her. The sweet, innocent girl who fell asleep in my lap is a goddess, too.

“Bane! Oh god, Bane. I think... fuck!” she whimpers, her cheeks flush, and her eyes glazed like she’s on some high she can’t escape.

She’s nearly sobbing out my name as her orgasm hits, pulsing around me until I have to pull out before I lose myself in her. “Bane... oh, Bane...”

I close my eyes with the sound of her moans and fist my cock. My grip is tight, and my strokes are a blur over my cock until I feel the sweet ache in my belly, and I know I’m about to come.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” I grit through my teeth a moment before I explode across her stomach. It’s the purest, sweetest release, going on and on until my ears ring and my legs are weak.

When I open my eyes, she’s smiling up at me. “I hope you don’t think that’s the kind of thing I hired you for,” she whispers with a soft giggle.

“Knowing how good it is? I wouldn’t care if you only wanted me for that. I’d work for free.” I lean down to kiss her and try to ignore how good it feels when she cradles my head in her hands.

Getting up, I find something to wash her off with as an excuse to break the moment before it becomes impossible to keep from getting my feelings all wrapped up in this. If I’m not careful, I could get much too involved with this woman. Something about her is impossible for me to resist. Even now, barely having caught my breath, I want her again.

It's the kind of wanting that might never stop, and that's terrifying as hell.

DAKOTA

“CAN I INTEREST YOU IN A SHOWER?” I ASK, SUDDENLY A little shy. I am basically naked, while he is still mostly dressed.

My body hums with satisfaction, stated by what he just did to me, but this new foreign feeling has me off balance. He made my wildest fantasies come true, leaving my body in a state of bliss I’ve never known before. Should I tell him that he was the first man I have slept with?

“You sure can.” He gets up from the couch and pulls off his shirt, exposing a chiseled chest covered in tattoos. I gulp at his sheer size, which is now even more noticeable somehow. He discards the rest of his clothes on the floor next to us. “Our activities have gotten me a little sticky,” he teases.

I look down at his semi-hard cock, and wonder if he is ready for more. “I’ve never done this before,” I blurt out.

“What do you mean?” His eyebrows rise.

“Well, technically, I was a virgin until just now.”

His eyes go and possibly wide. “What?! No. That can’t be. I didn’t feel...” His face pales, and he starts pacing back and forth, his cock swinging from side to side like it’s trying to hypnotize me. “Oh my god, did I hurt you?”

“No, no! It felt so good. When I was little, I would go horseback riding. I did some competitions in my early teens, and I lost my hymen doing a jump,” I explain. “It’s not uncommon for horseback riders and gymnasts to lose their hymen.”

He suddenly stops his pacing. “Are you sure I didn’t hurt you? I still wish you would’ve told me. I could’ve been more careful, made it special for you.”

“What are you talking about? This was special! I loved we just did. I’ve been fantasizing about having sex like this for a long time. I use vibrators on myself thinking about how could it would feel if it was an actual man’s cock inside me.”

“Jesus Christ.” At the mention of his cock, his dick jumps up to attention, as if it’s voice-activated. “If you don’t stop talking dirty like that, we’re gonna have to go into round two soon.”

“In the shower, maybe?” I suggest, which only makes Bane groan and throw his head back in frustration. His cock is hard again, and I wonder if that’s normal.

“Let’s go in the shower, sweet cheeks.” He holds out his hand, and I take it to lead him to the bathroom. I turn on the water and wait for it to get hot before stepping under the spray.

“Now tell me why and how you managed to stay a virgin this long.”

The biggest reason was that my parents sent me to an all-girls school. I didn’t even have a chance to talk to a guy until college, and since I opted for online classes only, dating through a computer seemed unappealing to me. Plus, I’ve always been awkward around guys.

“You’re not awkward around me.” Bane takes a bottle of my shower gel and squirts a small amount in the palm of his hand. He rubs them together and starts rubbing the soap into my heated skin.

“I know. I don’t even understand why, but I am different around you. For some reason, I instantly felt safe, which is why I let you into the apartment so easily.”

“I’m sorry again that I scared you earlier.”

“It’s okay.” I close my eyes, enjoying the way he massages my skin. “You are definitely making it up to me right now.”

Once he finishes with my front, I turn around and let him wash my back. He starts on my shoulders but quickly moves down to my lower back and my butt. I instinctively arch my back, making him squeeze my ass cheeks tighter. I place my palms against the cool tiled shower wall.

“Can we do it like this next?” I glance over my shoulder at him.

“You’re killing me,” he groans. “Are you not sore?”

Using my newfound confidence, I reach back, pulling my ass cheeks apart to show myself to him. “There is another hole we could use,” I offer.

Excitement fills my veins. This is another fantasy of mine. I’ve read so many romance books with anal scenes, and I always wanted to try it. I’ve used some little butt plugs on myself before, but nothing like his thick cock.

“I don’t know...” Bane seems unsure. My heart sinks, and embarrassment spreads inside my chest. I let go of my butt and spin around to face him.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.” Damn, he probably thinks I’m a slut or something. Suddenly, I feel so ashamed.

“What, no! Baby, trust me. I would love to fuck you anyway and anyhow you want to. I want to claim every part of you, and every hole, but I don’t have any lube, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Oh, I have lube,” I offer. “I used toys on myself all the time.”

I catch a Mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Go get it.”

Nodding quickly, I slide the shower door back open and slip out of the stall. I grabbed the lube from above the sink and quickly hop back in the shower and hand it to him.

“Turn around,” he orders, setting my core ablaze. How did I manage to go without this for so long? “Put your hands on the wall like you had them before.”

I do exactly as he orders, placing my palms against the cool tiles. Then I arch my back and stick out my butt toward him. A shiver runs down my spine, despite the hot water pounding against my skin. My excitement grows when I hear him flip open the bottle of lube to squirt some onto his dick. My ass puckers up when I feel his finger slide between my cheeks, but I quickly relax when I realize he's only gently massaging my hole with his fingers.

"Relax, I'll take good care of you," Bane promises. "Trust me, I won't hurt you. This is going to feel really good. I'll make you come so hard you'll see stars."

His finger circles my back hole before gently pushing the tip inside. The feeling is foreign but not in a bad way. More like a naughty way.

He pushes deeper inside me, and a moan falls from my lips. He pumps his finger in and out before adding a second finger, stretching me slowly. My breathing quickens, and my heart races in my chest with excitement. He adds a third finger, and for the first time, there's a bite of pain that makes me jerk a little.

"You okay?" He pulls out all three fingers, and I whine at the loss of his touch.

"Please don't stop."

"Your wish is my command." He goes back to playing with my ass with his fingers. Massaging and stretching until I'm moaning with every touch.

"Are you ready for my cock, baby?"

I nod my head rapidly, sending wet streaks of hair flying in front of my face.

"Use your words, sweet cheeks," he says as he plunges three fingers deep into my back hole.

"Yes, please. I'm ready for your cock."

A guttural groan rips from his throat and echos through the bathroom. He removes his fingers and replaces it with the tip of his very hard dick. I feel what he's doing, but I can only

imagine what it would look like. The swollen head making its way into the tight ring of muscle.

“Oh my god.” I throw my head back while Bane peppers open-mouthed kisses along my neck and shoulders while he so very slowly sinks his dick inside me. Too slow for my taste. I arch my back and jut my butt out, forcing him to go deeper faster. We both groan together.

He lets me adjust for a minute before starting to slide in and out at a steady pace. And it already feels so good, but nothing prepared me for the sensation of his finger on my clit. He sneaks his arm around and finds the small bundle of nerves, rubbing small circles over it. It doesn't take me long before the first orgasm hits me. It's different from before. It's all-consuming. My knees go weak, and if it wasn't for Bane's strong arm around my torso, I would definitely be in a puddle on the shower stall floor.

“I'm going to blow a fat load into your ass. I want you to feel my cock throbbing in your hole.” Bane picks up speed. Thrusting into my ass violently now, he holds me like a rag doll, using me for his pleasure. Though he never stops his assault on my clit. I didn't think I could come again, but that's exactly what I do when Bane reaches his orgasm, I'm right there with. We come together and Bane gets his wish, as I feel his cock expanding, throbbing inside me as he empties himself deep into my ass.

“Wow,” we say in unison. Wow in deed.

My knees are still wobbly, but Bane doesn't seem to mind holding most of my weight up. He rinses me off and helps me out of the shower as I'm still disoriented from my intense release. “I definitely never felt like this when I made myself come.”

“I still can't believe today is your first time. I keep forgetting. Are you okay?” he asks for what feels like the hundredth time.

“I promise I'm okay. You don't have to keep worrying about me.”

He nods, but the concern in his eyes tells me he's not convinced yet.

“So are you taking the job?” I grin.

“No.” He shakes his head, and I feel like I just got slapped in the face. “Turn that frown upside down, sweet cheeks. I’m not taking the job because you are already more than that to me. I know it’s crazy since we just met, but I don’t want you to pay me for protecting you.”

“Oh...” That’s all I manage to get out, stunned by his words.

“I think it would be best if I stay here tonight. I don’t want you to be here alone until I have a full security system in place.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Mind?” he repeats with a chuckle. “Where have you been the past few hours? I’d love to stay with you. If nothing else, then out of my own personal need for you.”

“Good.” Because my own needs demand him to stay as well. “Will you lie down with me and hold me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

DAKOTA

I FEEL SO GOOD. WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME I WOKE UP feeling this good? This rested and refreshed? It took weeks of insomnia to make me appreciate a good night's sleep.

And who wouldn't sleep well after being with Bane yesterday? My cheeks flush before I've even opened my eyes; the memory's so fresh and strong. And hot.

How unexpected. This whole situation, from beginning to end.

But now he's here, and I don't have to worry anymore. I believe him when he tells me that. I've never felt so safe, not even when I was a little kid. Probably because I didn't understand how unsafe I could be and how ugly the world is sometimes.

You can't appreciate safety until you've experienced the opposite.

I stretch an arm over my head, yawning, smiling to myself. I'm actually hungry, which is something else I haven't felt much of lately. My appetite has been nonexistent. Now, I could eat a horse. I open my eyes to a sunlit bedroom, wondering if Bane would be interested in going out for breakfast.

I'm about to ask him when I realize he's not here, at least not in the bed. The space next to me is empty; the ruffled pillow is the only sign of him ever being here at all. Did he sneak out?

And there goes my appetite, along with the little peace and quiet I enjoyed. “Bane?” I call out, but the only thing that answers is my own echo. “Bane, where are you?” I know I’m talking to myself, but I can’t help it. The alternative is accepting the fact that he ran out on me and couldn’t be bothered to say goodbye.

He was using me. That much is clear as I wander the apartment, feeling lost and alone and so, so stupid. All he wanted was to get laid, probably from the very beginning. He never cared about me.

And now I want to search the entire apartment, looking for anything he might have taken while I was asleep. There I was, practically announcing myself as a trust fund baby, thinking he wouldn’t latch onto that and use it to his advantage. Stupid, stupid Dakota. So desperate for protection and connection that she’d welcome a perfect stranger into her home and basically let him have the run of the place.

And the thing is, it isn’t like I’ve never met grifters before or people who only wanted to be my friend because they knew about my family’s money. But this feels different because this felt sincere. I actually believed him when he said he’d protect me. I let my guard down and gave every part of me to him, and how did he repay me? By reminding me how stupid it is to ever trust anybody. People are only out for themselves.

I gaze out the window in the living room, watching people down on the street. Always in a hurry, these people. Lost in their own worlds, living their own lives, unaware of what’s happening above them. They probably don’t even know they’re being watched.

And somewhere out there is the man who likes watching me. Maybe I should just let him go through with whatever he has in mind. It might be better than spending the rest of my life in fear—because what kind of life is that, anyway? Never being in the moment, always looking over my shoulder. Sleeping during the day, then sitting awake all night. I’ll go crazier than I already have, and that’s saying something because look how crazy I was yesterday. Thinking I had found the hero I was looking for.

I'm on my way to the bedroom, prepared to strip off the sheets and maybe never use them again because they remind me of him—when the rattling of the doorknob sends fear rocketing through me. My head snaps around in time to see it jiggling, and I'm running before I know it, flying down the hall and into the bedroom. He's back, whoever he is, and I'm all alone. What am I supposed to do? How do I protect myself?

I duck into the closet and pull the door closed before I hear a voice ring out. "Dakota? Are you awake yet?"

Bane.

Relief doubles me over, or maybe that's my body trying to catch up to the insanity that's run through my brain the past few seconds. With my hands on my knees, I take a few deep breaths, torn between laughing at myself and hating him for not at least leaving a note.

"Dakota?" He sounds more concerned now. I guess since he hasn't gotten an answer. His voice is louder, too, like he's coming down the hall.

I stick my head out of the closet. "I'm in here. I'll be right with you."

"What are you doing in there?" he asks when he finds me on my way out, shamefaced.

"I thought... you know... I thought you left."

Immediately, his expression pinches like he's in pain. "I'm such an asshole. I'm sorry. I should have left you a note, but I figured I'd be back before you woke up."

He came back. He was always planning on coming back. I can't believe how happy this makes me. It fills my heart with warmth and contentment. He didn't take advantage of me. He meant what he said when he promised to keep me safe.

"It's fine," I tell him when it's obvious he won't forgive himself. "Did you say something about breakfast?"

"Oh, yeah. I picked up bagels and everything. Coffee, too." He waves me after him, and I follow happily until we reach

the kitchen, and something else occurs to me.

“Did you take my key with you?” Otherwise, how was he unlocking the door?

“Oh, yeah. I hope you don’t mind. I had a copy made.” He fishes my keys out of his pocket and leaves them on the counter. “I figure if I’m going to be here, I might as well have a key.” A part of me wonders if it should bother me that he took it upon himself without thinking to ask, but on the other hand, I’m just too happy that he’s in this for the long haul to complain about a single thing he does.

“Great. I’m glad you did that.” And I’m glad he picked up food—bagels so fresh they’re still warm, along with cream cheese, smoked salmon, and all kinds of other extras. The coffee is good and strong, too, and I add plenty of cream and sugar.

This all feels so absurdly normal. We’re just two people fixing breakfast, the most average everyday activity I can think of. There’s no awkwardness. Even our silence is companionable, not uncomfortable. In other words, I could get used to this.

The first bite into my bagel is like heaven. I can’t help but moan a little—and when I open my eyes, I find him grinning. “Normally, I like to be the one to make a woman sound like that.”

A flush heats my cheeks. “And you’ve already done that.”

“I’m just saying, I might need to reassert myself.” There’s hunger in his eyes when they meet mine, and I don’t think it’s hunger for his bagel.

“Maybe you’ll have to,” I tease back. Who am I? Is this really me? How is it I already feel so comfortable and easy around him?

“So,” he continues, “what’s your average workday look like? You said you run a blog, right?”

“I have a pretty big following, too. But I’ve been at it for a few years, so I’ve built up my readership.”

“What do you write about?”

“I analyze pop culture and entertainment trends. Some fashion too. Nothing earth-shattering or groundbreaking. But people seem to like it.”

“That’s great. And it’s just you doing the work?”

“I’ve had guest bloggers in the past. Trying to keep up with creating new content can be a lot. I have to churn it out, you know? Sometimes I need a bit of a break, and I use guest posts to fill in the blanks.”

“No partners, though? Nobody who might want to take everything for himself?”

“Sorry. I know it’s difficult to figure out what’s happening here.”

“It is kind of an enigma,” he muses with a frown.

I seriously need to let go of my prejudices because I wouldn’t expect a man like him to use a word like that. He’s obviously much smarter than meets the eye, but then again, I’m sure people could look at my pink hair and make all kinds of assumptions about me, too. They could also find out my parents are rich and assume I’m lazy and sponge off them.

“Can I ask you something? Since we’re talking about work. What do you usually do? You haven’t told me much about yourself.”

It’s invisible, but I feel it anyway. The wall that goes up between us. “I’m sort of a freelancer.”

“What kind of work? Writing? Editing, designing?”

“Nothing to do with the arts or anything like that.”

I’m not loving the way he’s sidestepping the question. “Do you, like, work as a bouncer or security or something? No offense, but it would make sense.”

“Something like that.” I’m ready to ask exactly what that means when he leans over and kisses me. He tastes like coffee and cream cheese and safety. It’s pretty clear he’s trying to

distract me—I don't mind very much, though, since the man knows how to kiss.

He pulls back with a little grin before turning toward the fridge. "Do you have any plain milk in here?"

"Sure, help yourself." Of course, I can't help but watch as he bends over since who could resist? His body is mind-boggling.

It isn't his tight ass or those ridiculously thick thighs that make my heart skip a beat, though. It's the sight of a gun tucked into the back of his jeans, visible once his shirt shifts when he moves.

My eyes are wide when he turns around.

"What?" he asks with a frown.

"You're carrying a gun?"

"Oh. Yeah." He lifts a shoulder, suddenly very interested in uncapping the milk and adding it to his coffee. "For protection. No better time, right?"

He makes a good point.

BANE

AFTER A FEW DAYS OF PEACE AND QUIET, I CAN'T HELP BUT wonder if Dakota's problems were short-lived and maybe blown a little bit out of proportion. I would never say that to her, of course. I'm not stupid. And I wouldn't want her to think she's only being patronized. This could be a case of a girl nobody has ever listened to, with no one to care about her, overreacting out of loneliness.

It isn't until I notice soil strewn around the potted plants outside the office window three days after meeting Dakota that I start paying closer attention. I'm about to make an excuse—a neighbor's cat, a stray, or some particularly active birds, even—until I notice some of the stems are broken and the leaves dangling. As if somebody had been leaning over them and crushed them with their leg.

And when I go out in the morning for coffee, I notice the welcome mat sitting crooked in front of the apartment door. It wasn't like that before, and there haven't been any deliveries.

Dakota might not have been looking for a man exactly like me when she decided she needed a bodyguard, but it turns out my skills and experience lend themselves to this sort of work just the same. I've had to train myself to look for clues and hints. Weaknesses in a target's security system, any signs they might have changed their routine recently, thus leaving me needing to change my plans.

Today, as a result of these little clues, I make a decision. "You need somebody to come out and secure these windows."

“You think so?” She turns to me, ignoring the movie I’ve only half paid attention to.

“They’re too old. The locks? Too easy to break.”

“I can’t just put new windows in, though. There are limits to what I can do since I don’t own the building.”

“Mechanisms can be installed without having to replace the entire window. Don’t worry. I made an appointment for the morning.” She accepts this with a smile, snuggling closer to me and telling me I made the right call by reaching out to an acquaintance who does that kind of work for his security clients. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to talk her into it, but she’s still just as grateful as ever for my input.

She’s yawning before the movie’s even over, so it’s clear what has to happen next when the credits begin to roll. “You should get to bed.”

“I should?” She sits up, smirking as she looks me up and down. “Just me, by myself?”

There’s a reason she’s yawning so hard at barely ten o’clock at night, and it isn’t because she’s losing sleep over fear. Not anymore. I can’t help but indulge in her, just like she can’t seem to resist me. Not that I’m about to tell her to try.

While she’s in the bathroom, I double-check the door and the windows. My buddy will be installing a camera over the front door tomorrow, as well. Just an extra touch I insisted on. I need to know if somebody has been creeping around her door, trying to rustle up the courage to break in. I need to see the fucker’s face for myself.

By the time I finish checking everything, she’s already in bed. “You better hurry,” she teases, one of the straps to her nightgown sliding down her arm when she shrugs. “I might fall asleep, and wouldn’t that be disappointing?”

“I’ll be as quick as I can.” She’s giggling softly when I pass the bedroom on my way to the bathroom. It’s amazing how this place has come to feel like a second home in just a handful of days. Aside from a quick trip to my apartment for

clothes and whatnot, I've spent all my time here. She could become a habit, one I'm not in any hurry to break.

Anticipation makes me speed my way through my nightly routine. I've just finished brushing my teeth when a scream rips through the air.

Dropping my toothbrush in the sink, I burst from the bathroom and rush to the bedroom. Dakota is sitting up in bed, screaming with the covers pulled up around her chest.

She's staring in horror at the man standing at the foot of her bed, his hands clenched at his sides. She turned out the light after I left her there, but I can make out enough of him from the light coming through the windows.

Reflex takes over, sending me across the room to where the sniveling little fuck stands over her. I clap a hand on his shoulder and turn him my way, making him sputter in surprise. "Wait a sec—"

Anything else he felt like saying is gone forever when I twist his neck quickly and powerfully, snapping it like a twig. I don't feel anything as I watch the life drain from his eyes, his lips freeze in a permanent shocked O, and his body crumples to the ground in a heap.

Dakota gasps, her hands over her mouth. I turn to her. "Are you okay? Did he try to touch you?" I ask, snapping my fingers when all she can do at first is stare at the body on the floor. "Answer me. I need you to stay with me here. Are you all right?"

When I sit beside her on the bed, it seems to startle her out of her shock. "You killed him. I mean, I'm fine," she adds, still staring at the body. "But you killed him."

"I did. And now, I'm going to need you to put some clothes on. Stay far away from him and get yourself dressed. We have to get out of here for a while." As I speak, I pull my phone out and dial up a member of my crew. "Yeah, I'm going to need cleanup." I give them the address and end the call with a five-minute ETA.

“I don’t understand any of this.” She’s made it off the bed but is standing stock-still on the other side, her eyes wide and haunted.

“I’m going to have to tell you the truth now. You’re safe with me—you’ve always been safe with me and always will be. But my line of work?” Here goes nothing. “I’m a hitman for hire. That’s how I freelance. This is not the first man I’ve killed. But it meant protecting you, and that is my priority over everything else. Now, we have to get out of here so the team I work with can clean this up and make sure there’s no evidence this man was ever here.”

She takes it well enough anyway, though she doesn’t say a word while pulling on sweats without bothering to take off her nightgown. By the time there’s a discreet knock on the front door, she’s fully dressed, keeping her eyes averted on her way out the door rather than introducing herself to any of the team. I know this has to be a tremendous shock, so I’m not going to push her to give me more than she’s capable of right now.

She doesn’t seem to come to her senses until we’re already in my car, which I brought over here and parked in the garage after picking up my things. “Where are we going?” she whispers.

“I’m going to take you to my place for a little while. Until things are cleaned up. Don’t worry,” I remind her. “You’re safe.”

“How did he get in? I don’t even know who he was. I have never seen him before that I know of.”

How did he get in? That’s a good question. One that makes me tighten my hands around the steering wheel until my knuckles ache. I checked everything, didn’t I? How the hell did I miss something?

I still have no answer to my question by the time we reach my place, which is a lot smaller than hers but clean and furnished well, thanks to the generous compensation I receive for my work. At least I’m not embarrassed to bring her here.

“You’re going to be fine now,” I tell her once we’re inside. She takes a seat on the sofa, wrapping her arms around herself. She hates me. She has to. There’s no other way this could go. It’s not that I didn’t want to tell her who I am and what I do. It’s only that I knew this would be her reaction. Keeping her safe meant more than anything, so I made sure to avoid telling her the truth.

Well, she doesn’t need me anymore, anyway. I’ve taken care of the problem. And I realize now the idea is almost enough to break my heart. The thought of her being unable to forgive herself for opening herself up to a killer like me.

We both jump when my phone rings. It’s one of the guys from the crew, and I hold up a finger to signal for silence before answering. “Speak.”

“He got in through the office window—the lock’s broken.” Dammit, he must have got in not a minute after I last checked it. Did he somehow know I was there? If he had, why would he bother breaking in? “ID says his name is Hugo Clark.”

I look at Dakota. “Do you know a Hugo Clark?”

I expect confusion or fogginess. Instead, she gasps, her eyes blazing. “Yes! He’s left, like, hundreds of comments on the blog! I just figured he was a lonely guy with too much time on his hands. He always signed his comments, too.”

Wonderful. “Then we’ll be purging him from your blog,” I say before confirming her place will be clean within the hour, then ending the call.

“I never thought he was a legitimate threat. I feel so stupid.”

“You have no reason to feel stupid,” I assure her, taking a seat on the other side of the sofa so she doesn’t feel crowded. “You can’t go around assuming everybody is a threat. Now you’re safe. We’ll have your window fixed and better locks put on, and you’ll be fine from here on out.”

“What about...?” She glances my way before averting her eyes. “You know. What about us?”

“After what you saw tonight, you want there to be an us?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I can be with you knowing what you do.”

“I understand.” I clear my throat. Let me drive you to the hotel, somewhere safe until we get your apartment cleaned up.”

She stands up, wiping her palms over the front of her shirt. “I’m actually gonna call a cab.”

“Are you sure?” I knew this would come. I knew she would run the other way once she found out who I really am. It doesn’t make this moment hurt any less.

“Yes, I’m sorry.” She shakes her head as she walks toward the door. Everything inside me tells me to stop her. “I just need some space and to clear my head. Today... and the past few days were a lot. I’m sorry, Bane. I have to go.”

My feet are cemented to the ground, watching her leave my place. The door falls shut behind her, shutting me in with a loneliness I have never felt before.

DAKOTA

WALKING INTO MY PARENTS HOUSE, I'M NOT SURPRISED TO find the luxurious home, borderline mansion, quiet. "Mom, Dad?" My voice echoes through the long foyer and up the rounded staircase.

Nothing but eerie silence meets me.

Pulling out my phone, I dial both of my parents' numbers, one after the other. Neither one of them answers so you're up for a text message.

Me: Hi, I'm at your house. They finally caught the man who broke into my apartment.

It doesn't take long for my dad to answer.

Dad: That's great. We're not home.

My heart sinks. I'm not sure what I expected. I shouldn't be surprised by that nonchalant answer, but would a little concern for their daughter be too much to ask? How is a hitman I met a few days ago more concerned about me and my well-being than my own parents?

What am I doing here?

I'm so stupid. Bane is everything I ever wanted. He protects me and cares about me. He makes me feel good in any way and does it all without asking for anything in return.

Spinning around, I run outside, hoping the cab driver hasn't left yet. I need to go back to Bane. I need him, and I think he needs me. I push the front door open, hoping to see

the yellow car still parked outside. Instead, I find something even better.

“Bane!”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, and I’m sorry I followed you here, but I promise I just wanted to make sure you’re safe—”

I cut his confession short. Running toward him, I jump into his waiting arms. “I’m sorry I left. But I think I had to come here to realize what we have. I do wish you had been honest with me,” I admit in a soft voice. “But you saved my life. And now... this will sound cheesy, but I feel like I have more reason to live my life. I don’t feel so alone. It’s okay for you to tell me I’m off-base here, by the way.”

“I don’t want to because you aren’t. Like you said, it’s crazy since we really just met, but I feel like we’re meant to be together.”

“Yes, we are meant to be, and I know that now. It took me seeing my old home and how empty it is. I don’t mean physically empty. I mean empty of love, empty of the kind of family I always yearned for.”

His arms tighten around me, and I bury my face into his sweater. “So this is where you grew up?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” It’s pretty from the outside but very disappointing on the inside.

“Is your old room still your room?” He glances past me at the house.

“Yes. My parents never changed it. It’s not like they’re using it. They have five empty bedrooms.”

“Maybe we can make one more of your fantasies come true. Remember what you told me about the other day.”

It only takes me a second to remember what he is talking about. “Ohhhh, yes.” I twist in his arms, pointing at my window. “That’s the one.”

“Well, run along, sweet cheeks.” He gives my ass a little slap, and off I go.

I run back into the house and up the stairs. Peeling my jacket off, I throw it on the floor in the hallway. My feet pound against the plush carpet before I burst through the door into my room. I haven't been here in months, but the cleaning ladies must be here weekly because there isn't a speck of dust on a single surface.

Slipping my shoes off, I placed them next to my bed before heading over to the window. Bane already stands beneath. His hands are in his pockets and he leans against the large oak tree I used to climb.

I unlatch the window and push it open. "Can I help you?" I yell down.

"I was wondering if I could climb up and stay in your room with you tonight."

"Umm, I don't know. My parents are here, and I would get into a lot of trouble if I had a boy in my room."

"We'll be quiet. I promise, sweet cheeks."

I bite my lips. "I guess, as long as you don't have any funny business in mind."

"I can't promise you that."

I roll my eyes. "Come on up, big guy."

Opening the window as wide as I can, I watch as Bane starts to climb up the side of the house and into my window. He is so big, dressed in his usual black attire, and covered in tattoos. Seeing him in my pink room is comical.

"What would your parents say if they knew you had a bad boy in your room?" Bane asks once he is inside.

I close the window behind him and start taking off my shirt. "They would probably be upset and yell at me for being a bad girl."

"You are being a bad girl. But don't worry, I won't yell at you for that." His voice turns seductive as he steps closer.

"What else will you do?" I reach back and unhook my bra, letting the fabric fall off my body and exposing my breasts to

him.

“Mmm, those tits are going to be the death of me.” He cups both, running his thumbs over my sensitive nipples.

I reach for his dark jeans and start to unbutton him. By the time I finish, his cock is already so hard. It basically burst through his underwear.

“I want you to bend over the bed.” He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

Scurrying across my room, I place my palms on my mattress and bend at the waist.

“More,” Bane orders. “I want your cheek pressed against the bed.” I oblige without objection. Sinking deeper, I lay my torso on top of the comforter and stick my ass in the air.

Bane comes up behind me, palming my butt before smacking it a few times. The sharp bite of each slap heats my core, making my pussy drip with my own personal lube. Dipping his fingers into the waistband of my leggings, he pulls them down in one swift move.

“Dirty girl, I can see how wet you are through your panties. You are dripping for me?”

“Yes, I want you so bad!” The words come out like a plea. I’m so horny I can’t stand it. “Please.” Bane wastes no time pulling down my soaked panties and delving a finger into my pussy. I moan at the sensation, but his finger is not enough to satisfy me. “Please, I need your cock.”

Immediately, he pulls his finger out and places the tip of his hard cock at my opening. He shoves his dick inside me all the way until he touches the deepest part of me. His hands find my hips, and then he starts fucking me in earnest. I know right away that doggy style is gonna be my favorite. The way he handles me, his fingers digging into my skin, the way his cock hits just the right spot, and his balls slap against my clit. It all feels so fucking amazing.

It doesn’t take me long to come for the first time, knowing that the second is right around the corner.

“Come for me again, sweet cheeks.” And I do. Over and over again, all night long.

EPILOGUE

BANE

THE PAST FEW MONTHS HAVE FELT LIKE A DREAM. I NEVER thought I could have a life like this. A quiet, normal life with a woman waiting for me at home. Dakota is everything I could ever hope for and more. Every day, I love her a little bit more than I did the day before, and I don't think I will ever stop.

I slide across the space between us and take her hands in mine, engulfing them easily. "Hey, sweet cheeks, I heard your blog is taking off, and you've been invited to some major events."

"Yes, would you like to accompany me?"

"If you think you might still need a bodyguard, I could use the work."

She giggles, finally looking at me. "I do like having you around. A lot," she adds, squeezing my hands. "I could use a guard around me just in case things get scary again. You're the only good thing that's come out of this, and I don't want to lose you."

I pull her in for a hug, my heart swelling when she rests her head on my chest. "And you never will," I promise, meaning every word.

"So you'll take the job as my full-time bodyguard?"

I pull back and lift her chin so our mouths are aligned. "Dakota, I'll be anybody you need me to be. Always."

"What about baby daddy?"

“If you want a baby, I’ll put a baby in here right now.” I’m not joking either. I can’t wait till she’s round with my child.

Dakota laughs, a sound I’ll never get tired of. “It’s a little too late for that, big guy.”

“Wait, what?” I look in her face, making sure she isn’t messing with me.

“I’m pregnant.”

My heart swells. “Fuck yes, baby. I’m so fucking happy.”

“Okay, but we will have to work on the potty mouth when we have a little one running around here.”

“Anything you want, baby. I will do anything and everything you say. I promise I’ll be the best dad I can be. And husband too.”

“Was that a proposal?” Dakota laughs.

“No, that will come sometime this week after I buy the biggest ring I can find.” I’ve already been to three jewelers but haven’t found the right one. I’m just gonna have one custom-made.

“I don’t need a big ring. All I need is you, my big guy.” She snuggles closer to me.

I wrap my arms around her tight. “And all I need is you, my sweet cheeks.”

Darcy Rose

SEXY · TABOO · DARK

Darcy Rose is a USA Today Bestselling author of steam novellas with a dark edge.

If you like your books short, taboo and kinky, then you have come to the right place. Darcy writes about shy and innocent heroines, to match them up with dark and intense heroes who have only eyes for one girl.

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