



*Rent a*

**HITMAN**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# RENT A HITMAN

*It was just supposed to be another job.*

I'm a hitman, and my next target is attending a wedding. The perfect way to get close without causing suspicion. His quirky, bookworm, and cat-loving cousin was my best way in.

This is going to be so easy. A quick in and out, job well done, and cash in the bank... or so I thought.



# TALON

“Hello, Paul Marshall.” I study the image on my screen of a man smiling widely, holding up a fish he caught. “I’m the man who’s going to kill you.”

I don’t know why somebody wants this guy dead. I only know they do, and that’s enough for me. It’s not my job to ask questions. I’m sure that’s a part of what keeps me up to my neck in clients—and targets. My discretion. The fact that I can disconnect and simply do the job. Not everybody’s capable of that. They only think they are until the time comes to pull the trigger.

Paul Marshall is in his late twenties and looks like a real smug prick. The kind of guy who sees nothing but positive things in his future. He has no idea his future will be cut short.

Scrolling through his Facebook profile, I find the usual sort of things. Photos of his extended family during holidays and nights out with buddies, which sometimes include women draped over him. Fishing trips like the one he most recently took.

There are a few comments on that photo, one of which catches my attention immediately. *Are you going to be at the wedding?*

This photo was only taken a week ago, so chances are the wedding hasn’t yet taken place. Paul responded to the comment with a thumbs-up emoji. Now I know where I’ll be able to find him. I only need to find out when it’s taking place.

People are so lazy about protecting themselves. I'm sure he has no idea there's any reason for him to do it, though. Those in his position are rarely aware, making my job that much easier.

I click on the profile of the woman who left the comment. She is late middle-aged—a mother—and she posted more info about the wedding. The bride had her shower recently, so there are all kinds of pictures of her, the extended family, and friends.

I click the bride's profile next, and that's when I hit pay dirt. She's planning the entire wedding on one of those bridal websites and has been posting updates for weeks, leaving the link on Facebook like she's practically begging people to check it out. "Thank you very much, Caroline," I murmur, clicking the link and spending the next twenty minutes scrolling through the endless amount of information this girl has shared. Does she think people care this much?

Then again, what do I know? I'm not exactly what anybody would call a family man. Maybe this is how normal, regular people do things.

She even put the seating arrangement for the reception on here. "To make sure everybody is okay with their placement," I murmur, reading her words aloud. True, even I know nothing is worse than getting seated next to somebody you can't fucking stand and having to play nice. I click on the chart and scan the layout, searching for my guy. There he is at table five. I zoom in, studying the other names.

There's one that catches my eye. Ainsley Marshall. What sets her apart is the empty space beside her chair with a question mark instead of a name. Does this mean Ainsley's bringing a guest but doesn't know who yet? Or that they're keeping the space open in case she decides to?

Time to find out about Ainsley. It doesn't take long to find her on Facebook, and the fact that she's friends with Paul confirms I have the right girl.

Immediately, the difference between her profile and his jumps out. She's a librarian who posts a lot of photos of her

pets. There's Klaus, a hairless cat. Bob, the turtle, and Marley, the parrot. Bob Marley. *Give me a break.*

She's single, and there are no photos of her hanging out with friends or on vacations. She lives a quiet life, unlike the rest of her family. According to a post she put up only half an hour ago, her big excitement today is needing a new cat tree for Klaus. She posted a photo, and yes, Klaus tore that thing to shreds.

It's easy to find her address and to look up the nearest pet store to her apartment. I'm out the door within minutes, prepared to wait all day for her to show up if that's what it takes.

It doesn't take all day. In fact, when I arrive at the store, she approaches from the other direction on a bike, which she chains to a rack out front. Immediately, I'm taken aback by her odd beauty. Yes, odd. I'm not talking about the way the sun shines off her strawberry-blond hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. I'm talking about what she is wearing; it can only be described as an old lady dress with big flowers and pearl buttons, along with a light cardigan and a pair of Reeboks.

Completing the outfit is a clear backpack. Fuck me, she even brought the cat with her, and he doesn't look too thrilled at being crammed into the damn thing and riding on her back.

Even crazier, she still somehow manages to look beautiful. There is this childlike innocence surrounding her. Everything about her seems carefree and exciting. We couldn't be more different.

"Now, you be a good boy when we're in there." She's even talking to the poor creature. "We're going to get you a new tree, but you've got to promise to be more careful with it this time. Mommy doesn't have endless amounts of cash, you know." She's still muttering in a sweet, soft voice as she enters the store.

This is a strange girl, but she's intriguing. Kind of cute in an offbeat way. Even if I wasn't trailing her to find out more about her, I might still be tempted to follow her into the store.



As it is, I have no choice. I need to get close to my target, and Ainsley might be the perfect excuse. If I can score a seat next to her as her guest, my job's as good as done.



## AINSLEY

“*W*hat do you think? Are any of these speaking to you?” I stop halfway down the aisle, turning to the side so Klaus can see the range of choices we’re working with. “This one looks pretty nice. You’ll be able to see out the window and judge everybody outside the way you always do.”

I’m not crazy. I know he’s not actually paying attention or understanding me. I guess I picked up the habit since there’s nobody else at home to talk to.

At the moment, he only seems to care about something farther back in the store. He won’t shut up with the meowing as I compare prices. Finally, when I can’t hear myself think, I crane my neck to glare. “What is your problem—”

That’s when I see him. I didn’t notice him before, and I’m not sure how in the world I missed him.

He towers over me. I literally have to tilt my head, and he isn’t even that close. His enormous body is dressed in black from head to toe: T-shirt, jeans, and jacket. Mystery man might be handsome, sure, but I’m a little too busy focusing on the scary intensity in his gaze. Like he’s staring straight through me.

Goose bumps pebble across my skin, and an orange-sized lump forms in my throat. It feels like my tongue is velcroed to the roof of my mouth. That’s how dry it feels.

Klaus only meows louder when he takes a step closer. His deep-set green eyes move away from my face only long enough to glance at the cat before turning back to me. “Do you

recommend that?” He casually gestures to the box I’m holding. At least he tries to. Nothing this man does looks truly casual. There is a darkness surrounding him that he can’t shake even when he tries.

Funny, but I’ve suddenly forgotten how to talk. I choke out something that sounds like affirmation when really, all I want to do is run away. I don’t know what it is about him. Maybe it’s the skull tattoo on the back of his right hand, which disappears as he slides both hands into his jacket pockets. “I never saw a cat like that before.”

“Oh, yeah.” I need to get out of here. Of all times for there to be nobody else around. I saw somebody at the front counter, but unless I start screaming, I doubt they’ll come over here. “They’re not super common, but I’m allergic and hairless cats are allergy friendly.” The words bubble out of me nervously.

“I had no idea.”

He didn’t major in small talk.

“Yeah...” I glance toward the exit, wondering if I should just make a run for it now.

I can’t shake the feeling this guy is bad news. I know all about being awkward and having a hard time making conversation—it’s practically my life story. So for me to think something weird is happening, that’s saying something.

His gaze slides back and forth while he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “So how long have you had your cat?”

“I’d better go. I, umm, have things to do at home. It was nice meeting you.” I grab one of the trees at random, not even checking the price before hurrying up to the register. It doesn’t occur to me until I’m outside that I probably should have walked instead of riding my bike since I now have something to carry. I manage to balance the box across the basket before slowly pedaling home.

And if I didn’t know for sure I’d end up tipping the bike over, I’d be looking over my shoulder the entire time. What a creep.

I don't feel remotely safe until I'm a few blocks away, and I'm laughing it off by the time I collapse the bike, then carry it and the box up the stairs. "There's a reason I hang out with you all the time," I tell Klaus, who has also calmed down. "Sometimes, people are too weird."

It doesn't take long to assemble the tree, and Klaus is in heaven by the time I flop down on the couch. The invitation to the wedding is still sitting on the coffee table, where it's been for weeks. I shudder at the memory of my earlier conversation with my mother. *"You have to RSVP today. It's the cutoff, and even then, you're being rude by not having given your answer sooner. You realize they have to give a final number to the caterer, right? How do you think this makes me look?"*

Because, of course, that's what matters. She doesn't want anybody thinking her daughter is a flake. It's bad enough in her eyes that, unlike the rest of the family, I didn't choose some big career in law, medicine, or finance. It's not enough that working at the library makes me happy. Or that my little life in my little apartment is all I need.

Still, she's right. I need to piss or get off the pot, as my incredibly clever father likes to say. I roll my eyes at myself, forced to imagine yet another family function where I'll show up single. I can hear it now. The reminders from my aunts that I'm not getting any younger and my biological clock is ticking. Suggestions on how I could dress in a way that will attract men. I'll have it pointed out countless times that everybody else in my family is either married or in a serious relationship. I'll be the only one showing up without a date.

There won't be anybody to stick up for me when Mom or Dad or one of my cousins decides to make me the butt of their jokes.

"What should I do?" I ask Bob, who is happily munching away on a lettuce leaf I left in his enclosure. "Short of hiring somebody, I mean."

Wait a second.

Could I?

It's not like it would have to be anything sketchy. It's not like I'm going to cruise around town, picking up a guy off the corner and asking him if he has anything to do that evening. It's probably the craziest idea I've ever had, but I pull out my laptop anyway and ask the internet for help, typing 'rent a date to a wedding' into the search box. *Boy, Ainsley, you have fallen far.*

Right away, I see my problem. All of these sites are men in search of women. I click on one link, another, until twenty links deep, I start losing hope. Apparently, every woman in the world finds it easy to get a date. Everyone except for me. Like I need to feel any worse about myself.

"Forget it," I announce, and Marley squawks in response. I'm about to close out the browser before shutting the lid when one last link on the second results page catches my eye.

**Rent a date. Offering male escort services for a party/work event/wedding.**

**100% professional and safe.**

Interesting. When I click, I find it's a classified ad placed on a website devoted to local businesses. There's a description of my potential date: male, mid-thirties, six-foot-two. Dark hair, green eyes. Well-spoken, attractive, and available immediately.

This is ridiculous, isn't it? Probably, but it's the only thing close to a solution I've found so far. And I'm out of time. Either I do this, or I face the prospect of an entire evening filled with pitying looks and snide jokes made at my expense.

There's an email address included, and I shoot them off a message before I can stop myself. *Would you have anything available two weeks from Saturday?* Then I close the laptop and shove it away because I'm too embarrassed and nervous to even review the email. Besides, Klaus needs dinner, and so do I.

By the time I sit down again with a sandwich, a new email waits on my phone. *You're on the schedule. Please confirm the details.*

Wow. I'm actually doing this.

I'm actually going to Charlotte's obnoxious wedding website and RSVPing—with a plus-one added.

Now let's hope this is real and not too good to be true.





# TALON

I didn't expect it to be so easy to make this happen.

After she ran from me, I knew I had to dig deeper into her life. There was something so incredibly intriguing about her. Something that wanted me to know everything about her.

Plus, she was still my best chance to get into the wedding. I needed to be her plus-one, whatever it took. So when I hacked into her computer to see what she was searching for, I found my in. Creating a male escort ad didn't take much, and she was too desperate to question her luck.

For two weeks, I've waited, expecting her to reach out via email and cancel. I figured she'd come to her senses after a day or so. There was no such email, and stalking Ainsley on social media told me how she'd been preparing for the wedding: checking in at a dress shop earlier this week, then at a nail salon yesterday. She wants to look good for this, and that means having a man on her arm.

A little more background work on her family confirmed my suspicions. She's the odd duck. When I look through family photos posted by the middle-aged woman I now know is her mother, I find Ainsley standing alone most of the time, slightly off to the side. While they're wearing designer shit and sporting fake tans, she wears the same type of clothes I saw her in at the pet store.

I sort of admire her for that. She doesn't care about fitting in. We have that in common.

Now, here I am, wearing a suit and a tie, which I'm pretty sure is strangling me. The things I do for my job. The fact is, over the past two weeks, I've almost forgotten Paul Marshall's place in all of this—I was too busy deep diving into his cousin, Ainsley, and what makes her tick. Why a cute girl like her has to resort to renting a date. She might be odd, but she is also beautiful, funny, and smart.

My dick hardens under my slacks just by thinking of her tight little body and how good her plump lips would feel wrapped around my aching cock.

Fuck. I shake the thought away. Today isn't about her. It's about getting close to my target, so I can take him out. Since when is that something I have to remind myself of?

I'm five minutes early when I knock on her apartment door, and the squawking of a bird on the other side reminds me about her parrot. Her neighbors must absolutely love it.

"Just a minute!" She's breathless, her voice high-pitched. Nerves. I lean in, my ear close to the door, and I hear her murmuring. Probably reminding the cat how even though she's going out with an actual human being today, he'll always be the number one guy in her life. I can't make out what she's saying, but I'd be willing to bet money on it.

Suddenly, the door flies open, leaving me off-balance. I catch myself before falling against her, then take in the outcome of all the work she's put into today's look. She's been busy having her hair and makeup done. I've seen what the girl can do when left to her own devices—a professional handled her this time around.

That's not what makes my eyes widen, though. It's her dress. She's wearing a ball gown—like something out of a Disney movie. It's pale blue, a little shimmery, with a full skirt that makes noise when she takes a step back on recognizing me.

And she does immediately; fear washes over her face, making her flushed cheeks pale. Those enormous eyes of hers only grow wider. "You? What are you doing here?"

Before I have a chance to answer, she swings the door hard like she wants to lock me out. She's quick, but I'm quicker, wedging a foot between it and the doorjamb before it can close.

"Why are you not letting me in? You paid me to come here." Her eyes go wide as she realizes why I'm here.

"I-I didn't know it was you," she blurts out.

"What's wrong with me? And while we're on the subject, why would you invite some man to your house you know nothing about? You didn't even ask for a picture."

"I... because...I thought..." She stumbles over her words, unable to form a single sentence. Her bottom lip quivers, drawing my attention to it before her big baby blue eyes suck me back in.

"You thought what—"

"ATTACK!" She suddenly screams, pointing her small dainty finger at me. "Klaus, attack!"

I scan the room for her weird-looking cat and find him lounging on the back of the couch.

He doesn't move. Not even his ear twitches. That cat couldn't care less if I bent Ainsley over the coffee table and fucked her raw.

That thought has my dick stiffening again.

"Nice try, but even if your cat would care to move a paw, don't you think I could handle a ten-pound animal?"

"How dare you? Klaus is not ten pounds! You are going to make him feel fat."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't want to insult a cat and give him a complex. He might have to go to therapy. I hope you don't expect me to pay the bill."

"You're going to have to go. Now." She even points at the door. "I'm sorry. There's been a misunderstanding."

"Not much room for misunderstanding. You booked a date. I'm here. Where's the misunderstanding come in?"

I can hear her gulp. “It’s that... I didn’t expect you.”

“Are you that scared of me?” My lips twitch into a grin. Like the bastard I am, her fear only edges me on more. I take a step toward her, closing the distance between us. She mirrors my step in the other direction, desperately trying to get away from me until she bumps into her bookshelf. Now she has nowhere else to go.

She knows it, too; her eyes go impossibly wide, and the rustling of her dress is giving her shaking away.

“I-I just...” She bites her freshly glossed lip, and I wish I could be the one doing it. Everything about this girl screams at me that she needs to get laid. Big time. For a second, I wonder if she’s ever had a man. There is an innocence around her that other women don’t have. I shake that thought away. It can’t be. At twenty-five, there is no way she is still a virgin.

“You’re scaring me.”

“I know,” I admit shamelessly. Lifting my arms, I grab the sides of the bookshelf, caging her in with my body. She looks up at me with tears forming in her baby blues, and suddenly, I feel an ache in my chest.

“Please,” she begs, her voice so small and soft. All I want to do is wrap her up in a blanket and hold her until she trusts me not to hurt her.

I suck in one more deep breath, taking in her flowery perfume before I take a few steps back to give her some space. She basically slumps against the shelf, grabbing onto the edge until her knuckles go white.

“Is it really you?” she asks after a moment of awkward silence. “You’re the person who was assigned to me?”

“That’s right. And your deposit has already cleared, so we’re sort of locked in here. No refunds.”

“I know that.”

“You are safe with me if that’s what you are worried about.” Probably safer than ever before. I doubt she has been on a date with a hitman for hire. And definitely, not one who

would protect her like I will. I would kill someone for her... for free. And that's something I don't normally do.

She inspects my face like she is mapping my features. Her eyes move over my lips, jaw, nose, and forehead. I wonder if she can see the small scars covering my face. Suddenly, I feel exposed, a feeling I'm definitely not used to. I avert my gaze, ignoring how self-conscious she has made me.

"Maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I'm sorry I tried to slam the door in your face."

I clear my throat, looking her over again. "I'm sorry I scared you." Apologizing is another unusual behavior for me.

"It's okay. I mean, it's probably me, not you. My imagination runs wild sometimes. I shouldn't have assumed you are some kind of criminal just because you have a skull tattooed on your hand.

I nod, pressing my lips together, so I won't tell her that her instinct was spot on. She shifts her weight back and forth, and every time she does, her skirt rustles.

"Are you sure I'm dressed correctly for this? Is that the problem?" Just thinking about my tie has me adjusting it again. There's a reason I work in a field that doesn't require a suit.

"What? No! You look... very nice." She whispers the last part, her cheeks turning a hue of red.

"But you're dressed more formally than I am. Should I be wearing a tuxedo?"

She looks down at herself, then up at me, and I don't know if it's sad or touching, the confusion in her eyes. "I thought it was pretty." Holding her arms out, she does a slow turn. "The girl at the store said it looked like it was made for me. Do you think it's too much?"

Fuck me. This girl needs help. They're going to eat her alive at this wedding. I've never met any of her family, but I have good instincts when it comes to people. "Not at all. It does look like it was made for you." More importantly, Ainsley clearly loves this dress. Why should she change

because other people don't approve? "I just don't want to be the odd man out and have everybody wondering where you found me. The idea is for the customer to be satisfied with their experience."

"You look perfect too." Her gaze immediately falls to the floor, and something about that makes my dick twitch again. "I'm sorry I was so rude. This is all really new to me."

"What, you mean you've never rented a date before?"

It was supposed to be a joke, something that would make her loosen up a little. I don't need her walking around looking like a scared rabbit all night and attracting unwanted attention. The idea is to blend in. I doubt that's going to be possible with her looking like a wannabe fairy tale princess. I don't need her making it worse by looking at me like she's terrified.

Her features pinch together like she's pained. "Do you think it's pathetic? Is that what you're saying?"

"Not at all. I mean, what would it say about me if I did? This is how I make my living."

Some of the concern on her brow smooths itself away, but she still looks unhappy. "Maybe this was a big mistake. I probably shouldn't even go."

"Hang on a second." This is careening out of hand. The idea is to get close to Paul through her, and I can't do that if she decides to stay home and play dress-up with her cat. "Why don't we start again?"

Extending my hand, I offer a smile. "My name is Talon. I'm glad to meet you. And I think you look beautiful."

She accepts the gesture, placing her hand in mine. Like the rest of her, it's small and delicate. "You do?"

"I do. Like a princess ready to go to the ball."

"Thank you." Her teeth sink into her lip again. "Maybe you could say that when other people can hear you? Like, when we're around my family?"

This poor thing. And now I hate these people for her. Sure, she's a little strange, but they must make her life hell.

“Absolutely. You’ll have to let me know in the car if there’s anything else you want me to say. But we’d better get going if we don’t want to be late for the ceremony.”

“You’re right.” Still, she hesitates, her eyes moving around the room like she’s looking for an excuse.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” I catch her gaze and grin. “You might even have a good time.”

“Somehow, I doubt it.”

“Let me guess. Your family gets on your case about not having a boyfriend, and it’s especially bad at times like this when somebody is getting married?”

“I’ve been dreading it ever since they announced their engagement.”

“Family can be a pain in the ass. But here’s the thing: if you were the only person who ever went through this, there wouldn’t be a reason for guys like me to do the work I do. Right? You’re not alone.”

When her eyes light up, I know I said the right thing. “That’s true. I didn’t think about it that way.” Yeah, I’m sure good old Klaus isn’t so hot on offering advice. He’s currently licking one hairless paw while staring out the window.

“We better get going,” I remind her. “My car is outside. Let’s go have a good time—and to hell with the rest of them.”

“You’re right.” She throws her shoulders back. “To hell with them.”

“Good girl.” I have no idea where that came from, but she doesn’t seem to mind. In fact, when a flush covers not only her face but her exposed chest and shoulders, I make a mental note to praise her again later. She needs somebody by her side who makes her feel good, strong, and worthy.

Just why I care is a mystery. She seems like a decent person, I guess. I’ve never much liked seeing bullies pick on those smaller and weaker than them.

“Let me get my purse.” When she turns away, I’m shocked into jumping in surprise at the sudden appearance of a turtle,

which must've been hiding under her skirt.

She clicks her tongue at it, bending to scoop it up. "Now, Bob, what have I told you about breaking out of your enclosure?"

"Oh, you mean you weren't planning on sneaking him into the wedding? Are you sure there aren't any other animals hiding in there?"

After depositing the turtle in his fenced-off home, she gives her skirts a shake. "No. I think we're good."

"Because I doubt the bride would appreciate a random squirrel running around during the ceremony."

Her eyes sparkle, and her lips twitch. "Careful. You're making me wish I had a pet squirrel."

She's the one who'd better be careful because she's starting to make me wish I was doing this strictly for pleasure rather than for business. It won't be easy keeping my attention where it needs to be.





## AINSLEY

*M*y hands are shaking. I clasp them between my knees, but it's no use. Now it's my arms that are shaking. All because I'm in a car with a stranger who gave me the idea he wanted to kill me and wear my skin the first time we met. It wouldn't be the first time I've ever jumped to the wrong conclusion or jumped at my own shadow.

Okay, it's more than that. I need to stop downplaying my feelings—a habit after everybody around me has done it for so long, I guess. You'd think I'd be nicer to myself.

*If he was going to hurt you, he could've done it by now. At the apartment, while you were alone. Why would he wait until you were out in public, riding around in a ridiculously flashy sports car that's bound to attract attention?*

A good point, but I'm not in a place where logic has much room. I'm too busy trying to ward off nervous sweats.

I slide a look his way and try not to focus too hard on his sharp jawline—I might start crushing, and I'm still not sure I can trust him after he freaked me out at the pet shop. He's not awkward and creepy now. No, he's the picture of confidence behind the wheel, one hand on the gear shift as we zoom down the street.

How many dates must he go on to afford a car like this? I feel like I'm in some luxury car ad, only I am not the sexy, slinky bombshell one would expect to find climbing out from the passenger seat.

But I am with him. It's not a matter of deserving to be. I am, and we're approaching the church now. He drove me to our destination, not the woods, to be killed and dismembered. *Relax. Maybe it'll be fun.*

Now I see what he meant about feeling underdressed compared to me. Because compared to everybody walking into the church as we pull into the parking lot, I'm overdressed.

It seems like the only exception to that is the parents of the bride and groom. Aunt Lisa and Uncle Charlie, Caroline's parents, exchange a look with each other when they see me approaching with Talon at my side.

Right away, I start to feel clammy. I should've gone with a dress that had sleeves so I could put something under my arms to catch any sweat.

"That's the bride's parents," I murmur to Talon as we walk up the steps to where they're greeting guests at the entrance to the church.

"Got it." He doesn't seem the least bit nervous, but then why should he? He never has to see any of these people again. Me? I'm stuck with them for the rest of my life. And I have an entire lifetime's worth of inadequacy to fight against.

"Keep your chin up," he mutters out of the corner of his mouth just before we reach them.

My aunt makes a big deal of widening her eyes when she sees me. "Ainsley, that is a heck of an outfit you're wearing. You'd better be careful, or you'll outshine the bride." I'm going to take that as a compliment.

My uncle reminds me how much I've never liked him by laughing almost uproariously—way too loud for the entrance to a church. Something tells me he started celebrating a little early. "Please, we all know that's impossible. Nobody can outshine our little Car-Car."

Ugh. Like that nickname didn't get old by the time we reached puberty.

My aunt turns to Talon, and I know she's sizing him up when her brows lift. I've seen that expression enough times.

“I’m sorry, are you a friend of the bride or of the groom?”

“I’m a friend of Ainsley’s,” he explains. “So I guess you could say I’m on the bride’s side.”

“Our Ainsley?” And now I just know she’s going to waste no time tracking down my mother to ask for every last bit of information on him. Needless to say, she’ll be wasting her time, and I wish she wouldn’t make a big deal about it. But I should have known I’d be in for it. This is the first time I’ve ever shown up to an event with a date.

“And as far as I’m concerned, the bride is in trouble.” He slides an arm through mine, winking down at me. “It’s almost unfair.” My aunt and uncle are rendered speechless while I can’t help but thank my lucky stars that he happened to be the escort assigned to me. He knows just what to say.

We murmur our goodbyes before continuing into the lavishly decorated church. “It looks like there’s space for us toward the front,” I whisper, spotting my mother’s bright red hair a few rows back. Dealing with her will be the real challenge. We walk down one of the side aisles, and I pretend not to notice or care when I catch one person after another staring openly at me. Obviously, the gown was a bad idea, and not only because I have to be careful not to knock over the candles on stands at the end of every row—pressing the skirts to my side for fear of setting the place on fire.

But Talon thinks I look beautiful. I’m sure half of what he said back there was to make me feel better, but he seemed sincere when he complimented me at the apartment. He didn’t have to do that. It’s not like I wouldn’t pay him, but I guess he doesn’t know that. Maybe he’s looking for a tip? It’s not like I would know from experience, having never done this before.

He’s right. I should have at least gotten a photo of him or something, but I was too excited at the thought of having an attractive date on my arm to think about much else.

“Hi,” I whisper once we reach the pew where Mom is currently whispering something to my father, who hasn’t looked up from his phone since we walked in.

But he does at the sound of my voice, and I don't know whether his expression of surprise is thanks to my date or to what I'm wearing. Maybe both.

My mother, on the other hand, leaves no room for doubt. "What are you wearing? I swear, you're twenty-five years old, and you still need somebody to dress you."

Talon makes a strange, choking sort of sound that, for some reason, gives me confidence. He reminds me I don't need to take that, even if I don't really know how to respond.

"Hi to you, too," I settle for whispering before sitting between my father and Talon, who nods in acknowledgment but doesn't say anything. Mom is too busy shaking her head and whispering things to herself to greet him.

I'm so glad I found that ad online. Otherwise, I'd be sitting here fighting back the tears. Nothing I ever do is good enough, and nobody in my family has enough class to keep their opinions to themselves. For once, could somebody just let me feel good about myself? I'd feel more confident in a pair of sweatpants than I do right now.

"You know," Talon whispers, leaning in until his lips almost brush my ear. "I could still go outside and find a squirrel if it would liven things up a little. We could get out of here and go barhopping."

I have to cover my mouth to stifle a giggle. Once again, Mom glares at me. Her gaze then moves to Talon. I'm looking at her, not at him, so I don't see his expression. Whatever it is, it's enough to make her eyes snap forward real fast.

I wonder if he's available for the holidays, too?

At least the beginning of the ceremony is an excuse to turn my attention elsewhere. Caroline's radiant, as always, the way she's been our entire lives. She's always seemed to have that certain something I've never been able to touch. It goes beyond confidence. She just always knows how to behave, what to say, what to wear. It's all so easy for her.

It's so easy for all of them. I glance around, taking in the sight of so many familiar faces. A couple of them snicker

when they think I don't see, including my cousin, Paul. I guess Caroline's fiancé didn't care to have him in the bridal party. I can imagine why. He's always been the biggest jerk.

Thankfully, the ceremony is over quickly. "I was hoping there would be at least one person standing up to dispute the marriage," Talon mutters on our way out. I can't help but laugh. He seems to get it, like this is more than just a job. I'm not going to fool myself into thinking he actually cares, of course. I'm just grateful he's a nice person, and I feel bad for misjudging him when we first met.

The reception is taking place down the road, and along the way, I give him the rundown of who we'll be seated with. "My parents, of course. My aunt and uncle, who we met before the ceremony. My other aunt, Mary. And my cousin, Paul."

"You don't like him, do you?"

I look at him in surprise. "How could you tell?"

"The way your voice changed a little. Like you were angry." My surprise only grows at his answer. He is so perceptive, and I can't help wondering if he's like this all the time or just with me.

"When we were little kids, he stuck me in a toy chest and sat on the lid so I couldn't get out. I had nightmares for weeks and still get freaked out sometimes in small spaces." I can't believe I'm sharing something so personal with him.

"What a little prick."

"Let's face it. I don't like anybody in my family because they don't like me. They never did." I have to laugh at myself, more than a little embarrassed. "I'm sure that sounds so immature. I promise I'm not usually like this."

"You're not immature. You're human. What, do you think I can't see things for myself? I'm surprised you would even bother going to this wedding, the way they treat you."

It's like he sees me. So few people ever have. *Watch it, you. Don't go swooning over basic decency.* I need to be careful with this guy. It would be way too easy to let myself get the wrong idea about his kindness. And I can't pretend he

doesn't look good enough to eat in his gray suit and sky-blue tie, which almost matches my dress. If I didn't know better, I would think he coordinated with me.

It would be way too easy to develop a crush. I have to settle for knowing how impressed everybody will be to see us together.

And they are—but, of course, none of them can bother to be gracious about it when we find our table in the ballroom. Paul is already standing behind a chair with his suit jacket hung over the back, talking to Aunt Mary. He lifts his glass, smirking a little when we approach. “So Ainsley finally found a guy willing to be seen in public with her. This is a day for celebration.”

As usual, outrage swells in my chest, dangerously close to my heart. But if I let myself take anything he says seriously, I'd be in pretty sorry shape. He's been doing this to me my entire life.

He has not, however, dealt with Talon. “That's pretty big talk for somebody who doesn't have a date with him,” he points out. The smile he wears could easily be mistaken for a snarl.

“Hey, it's all in good fun. Ainsley knows that by now, don't you?” The worst part is he actually believes that. Like I should be able to take it on the chin because he's been treating me like this since he was old enough to talk.

“Talon, this is my cousin, Paul, and my aunt Mary.” I lean down to kiss her on the cheek, which she returns without her gaze ever veering away from my date.

“Tell me,” she says once I straighten back up. “If your date understood the dress code, how is it you became so confused? This isn't a black-tie event. And you know Michael's father does business with yours. How do you think this makes the family look?”

“I doubt Caroline's in-laws care one way or another,” I murmur, though I can't help but look across the room to where that side of the guest list is congregating.

“You know he can’t afford any negative talk in his line of business.”

“Tell me, ma’am.” Talon’s tone is respectful as he speaks up behind me. “Exactly how does Ainsley wearing a pretty gown affect a lawyer’s business?”

She sputters, blinking rapidly, then very deliberately turns back to Paul. We’ve been dismissed. Normally, that would bother me, but all I can feel right now is satisfied.

I turn to Talon, still a bit stunned. “How do you know my father’s a lawyer?”

“What, you think I show up unprepared?” he murmurs, careful to be sure nobody’s listening. “I like to know my client and anybody else who might be involved.”

“What else do you know about me?”

I expect him to make a joke, but he couldn’t look more serious. “I know you’re better than what these people put you through.” When he looks me in the eye, I can almost believe that.

“Ainsley.” Suddenly, Mom is here, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me aside. Maybe not a bad thing since I was dangerously close to swooning. “Honestly, could you not at least sit down to hide that ridiculous gown? Do you ever get tired of being the center of attention?”

“You know I hate attention.”

“Excuse me if I find that difficult to believe when you put yourself on display like this. And you know you don’t have the sort of upper body required for a sleeveless gown. Have you done a minute of weight training in your entire life?”

She nods, looking across the room to where Caroline and Michael are having professional pictures taken. “Do you think your cousin would be caught dead in a dress like that if she didn’t already have her upper body toned?”

“I know Caroline is the daughter you deserve.”

“I didn’t say that,” she whispers, huffy. “Just the same. If you see areas where you could improve, why don’t you go



through with it?"

"Pardon me." I didn't know Talon was listening in until now, when he practically places himself between Mom and me. "I was hoping to catch you when you weren't being overly critical of your daughter, but it seems I'm going to have to break in or else risk never getting the chance to introduce myself. My name is Talon, and I'm Ainsley's date this evening. And I think she looks just great the way she is."

It takes my mom only a few seconds to recover from the verbal slap, but I do appreciate those seconds of shock and embarrassment written all over her face. "Don't worry," she responds, laughing. "You don't have to go out of your way to compliment her, thinking it'll score points with me. There are no illusions between my daughter and myself. She loves nothing more than embarrassing me whenever she has the opportunity."

What a perfect time for Dad to wander over with a martini in hand. "We're used to it by now," he says with a dry chuckle. "Though I suppose the fact that she managed to get a date for once means she's getting out in the world a little."

He blurts out a laugh that tells me this isn't his first martini. "Unless she hired you or something like that. I wouldn't put it past her."

I'm going to die here and now.

"If she had, I'd be lucky to have such a kind, thoughtful, and charming client." Talon doesn't bother hiding his disdain as he looks my father up and down. "It's clear her upbringing had no part in it."

Whoa. This time, my mom is unable to hide her feelings. Her eyes are about to fall out of her head, while Paul just about chokes on his surprised laughter. Aunt Mary wastes no time hustling over to the bridal party, where my aunt and uncle are having their pictures taken.

"Was that meant to be an insult, young man?" my father demands.

“I’m only speaking the truth as I see it.” He straightens his spine, wearing a shark’s smile. “If that truth insults you, maybe that’s something you need to work on.”

This never happens. I thought he said he knew things about my family. That can’t be true, or he wouldn’t speak that way to my father. Nobody talks to him like that, not ever. As much as I’ve wished they would. If I ever found a genie in a bottle, that would be my first request. For somebody to take him down a peg or two. Now, I guess I’ll have to wish for a small fortune or something.

“Oh, look, they’re getting ready to serve dinner.” My mother wastes no time, grabbing Dad’s arm, practically shoving him into his chair as he sputters and growls and glares at Talon.

“I have to say, I admire your balls.” Paul lifts his drink in a mock salute. “What a shame you probably won’t have them by the time the night’s over. I would offer my condolences to Ainsley, but I can’t imagine her finding any good use for them.”

“Do you spend a lot of time imagining your cousin playing with balls?” Talon fires back in a light, almost playful voice. “Seems like a pervy thing to do.”

Okay, this is fun to watch, but unless he cools down, we’re going to end up in a viral brawl video before the night is over. “Enough,” I whisper once we’re seated. “I appreciate it—like, you have no idea. But I’m used to this.”

Talon’s eyes blaze when they meet mine. “That’s the thing. You shouldn’t have to get used to it. And I’ll be damned if I sit here and watch them tear you down. Not tonight.”

He’d better be careful. We both need to.

Or else I could end up falling for a guy I just met.



# TALON

If I didn't have a job to do here, I would grab her cousin by the back of his neck and smash his face into the punch bowl until he stops breathing. How dare these people take digs at Ainsley.

Can't they see the kind of person she is? She surpasses them in every possible way. She's gentle and kind, patient and understanding. I've seen evidence of that for myself in the way she's interacted with me. I've seen it in the way she withstands her family's cruelty without letting it harden her. I saw it throughout her social media—the animal charities she donates to and the shelter where she volunteers a few days a month. She genuinely cares. Maybe she sees some of herself in those abandoned or forgotten animals.

I'm losing my grip. That could be the problem. Like it's not bad enough, I spent way too much time stalking her and her family online. Now I'm making up stories about her in my head.

It seems I managed to shut everybody up, at least. Her aunt and uncle weren't here when I told her old man off, but their infrequent, stolen glances at me say Aunt Mary filled them in. There's not much conversation going on, probably as a result. What, did they not have anything better to talk about tonight than Ainsley?

When everybody's distracted by the couple's first dance, I take the opportunity to lean in and murmur in her ear. "Looks like I made it so they can't talk about their favorite topic. You."

“I still can’t believe you said those things to my dad.”

“I was only defending you.”

“Oh, I’m not blaming you,” she whispers, eyes wide. “I’m... grateful.”

“It was nothing. Hell, I enjoyed it. I would do it again.”

“Oh God, please don’t. I’m already in for a ton of grief tomorrow.”

I see what she means, but I’m still not sorry. “If anybody has a problem, you send them my way.”

Her smile is a little sad. “Remember, I wouldn’t know how to tell them to find you.”

“Good point.” I don’t need any extra complications, which is exactly what this girl presents. So why do I have to bite my tongue to keep from offering her my number? I have a job to do, and the last thing I need is to give my target’s cousin my phone number. That’s a rookie mistake, and I am no rookie.

But damn if it isn’t tempting. Especially when I remember how happy and proud she looked when I set everybody straight. She needs more of that in her life. She needs somebody like me to say the things she can’t find the words for.

At least now that the meal is over, there’s no reason for the family to sit together. All I got when I asked Ainsley to dance was a blank-faced stare, so I guess that’s out. Works for me since I’m not much of a dancer. That’s not where my skill lies. Instead, we walk around the venue, getting drinks at the bar before stepping outside, where other guests drink and smoke.

Paul is one of them, standing with a group of guys who probably shouldn’t get behind the wheel of a car tonight for the sake of everybody else on the road.

“Nah, it was too much of a hassle,” he announces loudly. “All the shit you have to do before the wedding? I don’t have time for that, and that’s what I told Michael.”

Ainsley snorts from our end of the deck, keeping her face turned forward. “He’s so full of crap. Michael didn’t ask him

because nobody likes him.”

“And there I was, thinking the guy couldn’t have any sense if he was marrying into your family.”

“They aren’t all bad, really. Caroline’s actually nice. Sometimes I wish she wouldn’t be, so then I wouldn’t feel bad for hating her.”

“You hate her?” Paul’s drunk as hell and destined to be worse still by the end of the night. A low railing runs along the perimeter of the deck we’re now standing on, and underneath it is what has to be a man-made stream, lined with decorative boulders on either side. It wouldn’t take anything to break the fucker’s neck and throw him over the side to make it look like an accident. I lean over the rail to look down. It’s at least a twenty-foot drop. There are no cameras out here, either.

Ainsley, unaware of this, shrugs. “Not really. You know what I mean. She’s so perfect. I can’t help it.”

Perfect? I look over my shoulder, and from where I’m standing, there is a clear view of the dance floor. The bride is dancing like nobody’s watching, as the saying goes, with her bridesmaids gathered around her. They remind me of a bunch of Barbie dolls—the Basic Bitch line. “She’s all right, if you’re into vapid bleached blondes.”

“You don’t even know her. You can’t say she’s vapid.”

“But she bleaches her hair.”

“Okay, yeah. I’ll give you that. But that’s not a crime.”

“As far as I’m concerned, if your cousin ever heard her brother talk to you the way he did today and let him get to the end of it without kicking him in the balls, she’s not worth my esteem.”

She tries to laugh it off until she sees how very serious I am as I stare down at her. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“Entirely. These people? They’re nothing. They don’t have a fraction of your character—and I don’t think I’ve ever complimented anyone on their character before, so that makes you unique.”

“How do you know about my character?”

“Same way I knew about your father’s job. I did my research.”

“You’d better be careful,” she warns, solemn. “You might be able to laugh it off, but he’s got friends in high places. I wouldn’t want to see anything happen to you because you were defending me.”

“I have nothing to worry about.”

When she lifts an eyebrow, there is a moment I have to ask myself if she knows more than she’s letting on. But that’s impossible. She doesn’t know me at all, only what I’ve shown her so far.

“I guess you do look like a guy who is not afraid of anything.” She squints her eyes, examining me curiously. “The tattoo on the back of your hand for example. What’s that all about?”

“It’s a long story. A family thing.”

“You have a family?”

“No, I hatched from an egg somebody picked up on the beach.” She only rolls her eyes while I chuckle at her reaction. “Yes, I have a family. Two brothers. I haven’t seen them in a long time.”

“Do they live far away?” I nod. “Do they have matching tattoos?”

“You got it. It keeps them with me, even though we’re not together.” Fuck, I shouldn’t tell her any of this. Ainsley has this way of making me want to tell her about me. The real me.

She shakes her head slowly. “You are a very interesting person. I’m sorry I misjudged you when we first met. You were a little intimidating.”

“Yeah, I guess I can come off pretty scary.”

“That, and I’m not used to guys like you coming up to me out of nowhere and trying to make conversation.”

“Guys like me? Scary guys with ink all over them?”

Her teeth sink into her lip before she looks out over the stream, away from me. “That wasn’t what I meant, but now that you mention it, yes. That, too.”

A breeze stirs her hair, making it brush against her cheek. I’m halfway to tucking it behind her ear before I stop myself. What the hell is this? I have to be careful, and not only because I’m here on a job. A girl who wears a miles-wide ball gown to a wedding because she thought it was pretty, a girl with nobody but pets at home to greet her tonight, might take that the wrong way. I can’t lead her on.

“All right, ladies!” The DJ’s voice rings out loud and clear, and we both turn to look inside. “You know what time it is. If there isn’t a ring on it, get out here on the dance floor for your chance to catch the bride’s bouquet!”

“Well?” I prompt when Ainsley remains rooted to the spot. A few of the girls dash inside, giggling, but not her.

“Well, what?”

“Aren’t you going in? You don’t have a ring on it,” I tease.

“Yeah, but... I don’t know.” She crosses her arms over her chest, trembling.

“Fuck them.” I nearly snarl before pulling back—I can’t afford to alienate her. “You have just as much of a reason to try to catch the bouquet as anybody else.”

“Who would want to marry me?” She catches herself, sliding me a guilty look. “I’m not really expecting an answer.”

“I didn’t think you were. And I still think you need to get your ass out there, and anybody who tries to get in your way needs an elbow to the face.” She bursts into helpless giggles while I take her by the hand and pull her inside. “Let’s go. I want to see you catch that bouquet, then hold it over your head and shriek like an Amazonian warrior.”

“Okay, I’ll try. But I can’t promise the whole Amazon thing.” At least she’s smiling now as she takes her place among the dozens of other girls vying for a chance. I make it a point to look around, searching for her mother—and it’s no surprise to find her shaking her head and rolling her eyes.



Some mother. It's times like this I'm glad I never have to deal with one of my own. Sometimes, not having one is preferable.

Caroline stands on the raised platform where the DJ equipment sits, and she turns her back to the girls. "Okay, ladies. Here we go!" The DJ holds up a hand, counting down with his fingers. "One, two, three!"

The bouquet sails through the air, and it's better than one of those Black Friday sale videos where everybody's elbowing each other, trying to get the last discounted TV. I can't stop myself from laughing, the way so many others do, as the girls fumble with the bouquet, which bobs over their outstretched hands like a boat on the waves. Nobody can seem to get a good grip on it.

Until one of them does. "I did it!" There's a lot of half-hearted applause from the losers, all of whom slowly back away to reveal the victor.

Ainsley spins in place, holding the bouquet over her head. She's glowing, smiling from ear to ear, and I have to smile with her. There's more than a little bit of jeering coming from behind me, out on the deck where Paul's still hanging out with his friends.

My job has never bothered me. I always assumed I was missing a vital piece that most people possess. That special something that separates the normal folks from murderers. It isn't like I take pleasure in my work. I don't mind it, though, either.

But tonight? It's different. Tonight, I'm looking forward to it.

"I can't believe I did it." She's not paying attention to Paul, her parents, or anyone but me, which is a good thing. "Isn't it pretty?"

"Beautiful." I'm not looking at the flowers. I can't see anything but her shining eyes and her flushed cheeks. This time, I go through with tucking her hair behind her ear, if only to make this look good to anyone watching.

"Now, all you have to do is catch the garter."

“Pardon?” Yes, now that she mentions it, Caroline is seated in a chair in front of Michael, who’s halfway up her dress as we speak. I don’t attend many weddings, so this is new to me. A quick look around reveals a handful of unimpressed guests—mostly the older ones, like Ainsley’s mom. She mouths the word, “Tacky,” to Caroline’s mom, who waves a dismissive hand.

Michael emerges, twirling the garter around his forefinger, earning applause from his groomsmen and a few knowing whistles. “Now, whoever catches the garter has to...” The color drains from Ainsley’s face. “They have to put it on the leg of the girl who caught the bouquet. Oh, dang it. I shouldn’t have assumed you’d want to.”

“I wonder who’s brave enough to catch it!” Paul calls out. “Good luck to whoever that is.”

I know what I have to do, even if it wasn’t in the plans to make myself visible to the entire guest list. The fewer people who remember me, the better. No way am I letting her down now, though, not with her asshole cousin, his friends, and even her father laughing in snide disbelief.

There aren’t nearly as many men out on the floor as there were girls, but once I step up, a few more join me. Paul shoves a couple of his buddies toward the floor, too. They argue and shove each other playfully, and I sure do hope neither of them ends up with a black eye by the time this is over.

But the odds of that happening improve when one of them glances at Ainsley, and they both snicker like assholes. They improve greatly.

Michael stands in front of us and turns his back. “Ready, guys?” the DJ calls out. “One... two... three!”

The garter sails through the air, and wouldn’t you know it, I accidentally elbow one of Paul’s friends in the face while hip-checking the other guy hard enough that his drunken ass stumbles and almost falls into a table.

But I end up with the garter, which I hold overhead in triumph. Could I possibly have gotten hold of it without

causing bodily harm? Perhaps, but the result wouldn't have been half as satisfying.

And it's all worthwhile once a very relieved, giggling Ainsley reaches me. She's sparkling, breathless, and I know why. Her date went to bat for her in front of everybody. For once, somebody went to bat for her. "You were determined to grab that thing, weren't you?"

As if I give a damn about some cheap piece of satin. "I'm not letting another man put his hands on you tonight."

Her mouth falls open slightly. "Oh." It's barely a breath, hardly audible. For a moment—the length of a heartbeat or the time it takes to blink an eye—I wish I wasn't here on a job.

"We all know what comes next!" The DJ is unaware of my personal bullshit and has a job of his own to get through. "Let's put that garter where it belongs!"

Ainsley's gaze darts around. "Oh, dang it." Like she just realized what this means.

"Relax. Take a breath. I'll be discreet." Taking her by the hand, I lead her to the chair where Caroline sat only minutes ago. "For once, let the spotlight shine on you."

"It's not the spotlight I'm worried about. It's the people on the other side of it." Right, like her mother, loudly complaining to anyone who'll listen about the tackiness of this tradition and how disappointing it is that her own daughter would participate. It's enough to make me consider diving under those skirts of Ainsley's and not coming up for air until her legs shake. Let them see it. Let them witness her being worshiped and pleased. Maybe dear old Mom would be a little more relaxed if her legs shook on the regular.

I drop to one knee and slip the garter over her foot, then her ankle. Slowly, ever so slowly, I work it up her slim calf. Our eyes meet, and the flush on her cheeks deepens.

That doesn't stop her from lifting her skirt a little, giving me more room. There are a few wolf whistles now, and any laughter ringing out behind me has lost its derisiveness. She giggles and ducks her chin but doesn't stop me, either. Up, up,

I slide the garter. Over her knee, then slowly up her thigh until I need to stop before I'm unable to.

I've never touched skin so smooth, and I'm sorely tempted to touch more. To find out if she's that smooth elsewhere.

Instead, I stand and pull her to her feet. "I need some fresh air," she whispers, shaky, laughing in relief now that it's over.

Considering how much I'd like to take her here and now, in front of everybody, I think I could use some fresh air, too. I follow her outside again, where the deck is currently empty. I doubt it will be for long, but at least we have a few private moments away from the thumping music that's started up again.

"Thank you for that." She's turned away from me, staring over the railing, down at the stream. "I thought this wedding would be another painful family event, but you made it special."

"I hope I did." I can't help it. I have to touch her. After a moment's hesitation—entirely unlike me—I place a hand on her shoulder, just above the fabric that wraps around her bicep and passes for a sleeve.

"You don't have to feel sorry for me." I can hardly hear her over the music behind me. There's no choice but to move closer until her hair, stirred by the evening breeze, brushes against my face. I lean in slightly, soaking in the scent.

"I never said I did."

"Nobody has ever been like this with me before." She turns her head until her profile is in view.

"Then they were idiots."

"You don't have to—"

"Don't tell me what I don't have to do." I turn her in place before taking her face in my hands and tipping her head back until our mouths are aligned. "I know what I'm doing."

That's a lie. I have no idea what I'm doing. This is more than simply kissing a woman—for me, that's never been more

than a means to an end. Step one, followed by step two, and so on.

This is something completely different. I can't put a name to this. This is craving, needing. Needing to know what her lips taste like. Needing to show her what I mean when I don't have the words to express it.

She sighs softly the instant my lips brush against hers, and I'm gone. That's all it takes for me to cover her mouth with mine, to test the sweetness and firmness of her lips, to soak in the scent of her, the warmth, the smoothness of her cheeks under my thumbs.

Who am I? Not the guy whose head spins because of a simple kiss, but that's how it feels. There's nothing simple about this. Nothing simple about the way she melts against me, the way she stirs every protective instinct I possess.

I want this woman. I need her. My cock begins to stir by the time my tongue slips between her lips—but it's when she moans in response that I go hard. I want more of her moans. I want to hear her moaning my name.

"Let's go somewhere," I whisper before kissing her again, driving my cock against her when I can't help it. "Alone."

She pulls back, eyes searching mine, wide and fearful now. "What?"

"There has to be a room we can—"

"No. Oh, no." She goes bright red before pulling away entirely and running into the ballroom.



## AINSLEY

*I* could die. I could just die right here in this bathroom stall.

“Stupid, stupid,” I whisper, covering my face with my shaking hands. The stinging pressure behind my eyes threatens a flood of tears that I have to frantically blink back. That’s just what I need, a face full of runny, smeared makeup. That would be a real cherry on top, wouldn’t it? It’s not bad enough everybody here seems to have a thing for hurting me. Like I need Paul calling me a clown for the rest of my life. He’d probably settle for that, too. It’s unimaginative enough for him.

I might not burst into tears, but inside, I’m in shreds. What was I thinking? Who in their right mind runs away when a man’s hands are all over her—and she wants them to be? That’s the thing, what I can’t wrap my head around. Why did I freak out? Like I’m ever going to have that opportunity again.

After all, I’m already a quarter of a century old, and that was the first really hot kiss I’ve ever had.

So hot. Hot enough that I’m surprised my underwear didn’t melt right off. My heart’s still racing, my body’s on fire, my nipples are hard, and I’m so wet it’s almost kind of alarming.

He couldn’t mean it. That’s why I had to run. My whole life, everybody’s given me crap about me being me. I’ve never been good enough, smart enough, pretty or cool, or any of that.

And all of a sudden, a man like Talon actually wants me?  
After only knowing me for a few hours?

Closing my eyes, I lean against the wall. The tile is cool, welcome relief against my overheated cheek. I wish it could cool off the rest of me since my lady bits are staging an uprising. They want more of what was going on before I ran away like a scared rabbit. All these years, they've been waiting for something like this, and I had to go and fumble the ball while I was practically in the end zone. I almost feel like I should apologize to them.

I should definitely apologize to Talon. He's been nothing but sweet all day, above and beyond. I can't believe he's this dedicated to keeping me happy.

Wait a second.

I push away from the wall, and now my heart is racing for a different reason. What if this is all an act to keep me happy? Would he go that far for a good review online? Maybe a little word-of-mouth business thrown his way? I don't want to believe he'd be that mercenary, but I don't know him. He could be capable of anything.

When I look at it that way, it's probably for the best that I stopped everything and ran off. We both have time to cool off and get our heads together.

And he definitely needed to cool off. I might be a virgin who's hardly ever been kissed, but I know how to tell when a man is aroused. Some people like to think of librarians as being meek and clueless, but I've read my share of books. I know all the signs, and something hard was definitely poking at me.

At me. He was hard for me. So it can't all be an act, can it? I don't even know what I'm thinking. I don't know what I want to be true.

Flipping down the lid on the toilet, I gather up my skirts and take a seat. Could I get away with leaving early, just putting this whole thing to rest? All that's really left is the cake cutting—otherwise, it's just a matter of partying from here on



out. I'm not exactly somebody who likes to party, so I doubt anybody would think twice about me going home early. Maybe I'll wait until I can snag a piece of cake and take it home with me. I could cry over the crumbs and beat myself up for passing up on what could've been the opportunity to finally lose my virginity to a guy who seems decent.

And hot. He is definitely hot. And he knows how to kiss—the memory of it makes me feel all fluttery and a little dizzy, like I was in his arms. Like the world was spinning faster and faster and all I could do was hold on to him to keep from flying off into space. I touch a finger to my lips and close my eyes at the memory of how it seemed like he was trying to devour me.

The sudden opening of the door shakes me out of my memories. A blast of loud music follows, along with the laughter of a couple of girls practically shouting at each other. Drunk or getting there. I roll my eyes and settle in to wait them out.

“He’s fucking hot. Like in a dark kind of way, you know?” The girl asking the question stumbles into the stall next to mine and must lose her balance since the wall between us shakes, and she mutters a curse. I have to cover my mouth to stifle my laughter.

The girl at the sink snorts. “You better hurry up and piss if you want a chance with him. Otherwise, he’s been practically glued to her side all night.”

Oh. Something tells me I know who they’re talking about.

“Where do you think she found him?” Both girls burst out laughing, and the sound of it makes me shrivel a little inside. I’ve been hearing laughter like that all my life.

“Maybe it’s one of those charity wish things,” the other girl suggests from the sink. I lean forward, peering through the crack in the door. She was one of the tall, willowy girls going for the bouquet, and now she’s touching up her makeup.

“Stop!”

“Well? What else could it be? What the hell is he doing with her?”

“Maybe his eyesight’s bad.”

She pouts her lips like she wants to kiss her reflection. I wouldn’t be surprised if she did. “But he caught the garter, didn’t he?”

“And he almost broke Craig’s nose. Craig is pissed.”

“Craig’s a dick, anyway. And if he broke his nose, maybe it would be an improvement.” She straightens up and fluffs her hair. “Anyway, if you’re gonna make a move, you better make it fast. Otherwise, I’m gonna have to jump on that dick. Law of the jungle, girl.”

The toilet next to me flushes, and the girl in the stall bursts out. “No fucking way, I saw him first. Don’t be a slut.”

“Who knows? Maybe he would take us both on at the same time. Did you see that tattoo on his hand? Under that suit, he’s bad. And you just know a guy that tall has a huge cock.”

Yes, it is huge—at least, from what I felt of it. And there I was, passing up the opportunity to do something with it, all so these nasty skanks could have a chance with him. I almost want to throw the door open and tell them I turned him down. Me! The one they’re laughing about, the one they think is a charity case. He wanted me, not them. He spent the whole night making me feel good about myself. Making me feel beautiful.

*But you’re paying him. Try to remember that.*

There go the tears, welling up in my eyes this time. I can’t let them do this to me. They don’t even know me, and from the way it sounds, I wouldn’t want to be friends with either of them. It’s not like I’ve never heard anything like what they were saying about me before.

This is different. This is like a knife to the chest. And instead of making me want to run out of here and go home and hide under a blanket, I can easily imagine myself tearing out fistfuls of their hair. Who are they but a couple of—what did he call them?—vapid bleach blondes.

I grit my teeth and nod because that's right. That's exactly it. He hit the nail on the head. He wasn't talking about them exactly, but they fit the description.

They're right about one thing—he isn't here because he likes me. He's here because I'm paying him.

But I wasn't paying him to kiss me like that. To stare into my eyes and stroke my cheeks with his thumbs as he kissed me so deeply, so completely, the whole world melted away. I didn't pay him to make me the center of attention by sliding that garter up my leg. I didn't pay him to stand up for me in front of my family.

No matter how many times I go over it in my head, it doesn't make any sense. Maybe I'm the problem. Maybe I've heard so many times and for so long that I'm worthless and weird that I can't believe anybody would feel differently. Especially somebody like him, who's just as hot as those girls made him out to be. They're still talking about him, plotting as they hurry out of the ladies' room.

What am I going to do?

What do I want to do?

That's a good question. What do I want? Because, as I see it, sitting here on this stupid toilet lid with around a million yards of fabric gathered in my arms, I have two options. I can either go for it and have a fun, naughty memory to look back on, or I can stay scared and play it small and sneak out of here, grab an Uber, and cry my eyes out to Klaus.

No offense to Klaus, but that's not what I want to do.

For once, I'm going to make the most of an opportunity. Even if it scares the bejesus out of me.

One thing is for sure: I need to get a move on before either of those girls gets their hooks into him. He seemed disdainful of most of the other women here, but that could have been something he said to make me feel better. And now, I left him hanging and hard, and for all I know, he could take one of them up on it for that reason alone.

How many books have I read where the heroine needs to dig deep and surprise herself by being brave? It looks like it's my turn to do that.

Stepping out of the stall, I take a good look at myself in the mirror. I don't look like a tomato in a dress anymore, so that's a plus. My skin is back to its normal color, though my cheeks are flushed with... what? Anticipation? Dread? It's a toss-up. I throw my hair over my shoulder and roll my shoulders back. He wants me. He wouldn't have kissed me like that if he didn't want me.

And I will be damned if I let some other girl get in my way.

Though I have to open the door and dart out of the room like it's on fire for fear of losing my nerve.

The music is blasting loud enough to make me want to cover my ears, but I manage to ignore it in favor of scanning the ballroom for a sign of Talon. Where did he go? He's not at our table, though I wouldn't expect him to be. He's not at the bar, either.

My heart sinks, and I feel sick. What if he left while I was in there? He probably got fed up. Maybe he figured no amount of money is worth getting turned down by a nerd like me.

"There you are."

His voice is enough to pull something out of me that sounds like a sob as I spin on my heel to find him standing there like he was waiting for me. "I thought you ditched and left me with these assholes."

"Were you out here all this time?"

"I took a couple of seconds in the men's room, if you're interested."

"No, I mean—never mind." He must have seen those girls, and they must have seen him. Did they approach him? If they did, he turned them down, or he wouldn't be standing here. Waiting for me.

He eliminates the space between us, overwhelming me with his nearness, his size, his... him. The aura around him now seems darker than before. Dangerous. He's now the man I met at the store.

"There's unfinished business between us." His eyes dart over my face, narrowing. "I don't like being run out on. And I'm not going to be denied what I want."

"What does that mean?"

"We're finding somewhere to be alone. Now." His hand shoots out and takes hold, a steel cuff around my wrist, eliminating the possibility of escape.

Oh my god.

*Me.* He wants me this much.

There I was, thinking this whole thing hinged on my choice of whether or not I wanted to be with this man.

Now I know I never had a choice at all.



# TALON

She's looking up at me with those baby blues that seem to see so much more than they should. It's like she sees through me—though she can't, that's ridiculous. If she could, there wouldn't be a question of whether she'd want to be with me or not. Somebody like her? Someone so innocent?

But she wants me now, and I'm not about to convince her otherwise.

There's a closet not far from where we're standing, and that's exactly where I'm taking her. With her wrist in my hand, I look back and forth to make sure no one's paying attention before opening the door and ushering her inside. I scan the area once more before joining her.

“Should we really be doing this?”

I answer her question the only way I know how: by taking her face in my hands and indulging again in the taste of her lips. So sweet, so quick to part when my tongue probes them. She's putty in my hands, mine to do with whatever I want.

I want her. I want to claim this precious thing for myself. Never in all my life has anything this beautiful, this innocent, belonged to me.

There isn't much room in here, and when I back her into a set of shelves, the bottles lined up there knock together while rolls of paper towels fall around us. “Ow!” she whispers when a bottle of something or other hits her shoulder, but she's laughing.

“Let me kiss that for you.” I press my lips to the tender flesh between her neck and shoulder. She melts against me with a soft sigh, making my already stiffening cock stand at attention. I would swear this woman was made for me, just for me. Everything about her.

“I can’t believe this is happening...” Her fingers tangle in my hair while I continue getting acquainted with her throat and chest. The swell of her tits is barely exposed, and god, I want to get her out of this dress. This isn’t the time or the place—if anything, being unable to have all of her heightens everything. I have to make do with what’s available to me, and I do just that, working her skirts up and sliding my hand up her thigh.

“Oh god!” I cover her mouth with mine to stifle what she can’t hold back.

I would never have imagined her like this, but it makes sense. She’s a volcano waiting to erupt. All she needs is the right man to set off the explosion. Already, she’s clinging to me, shaking, a steady stream of high-pitched whimpering passing from her mouth into mine as my hand continues its trek up her smooth thigh, then over the tantalizing curve of her ass. She tugs at my hair, tits heaving against my chest.

Her panties are smooth satin trimmed in lace, and I indulge myself in the texture while fondling her firm ass cheeks. If I didn’t know better, I would think a wild animal was in here with me, panting in the darkness. I dig my fingers into her flesh, and she jerks her hips, her pussy hungry for me. I grind against her through all those layers of fabric, and there’s enough pressure to make me shudder. We’re like a couple of kids in a frenzy, making out after cutting class. Knowing we could be discovered at any second.

She breaks the kiss just long enough to gasp one word. “More.”

Something tears, but that doesn’t stop me from working my fingers under that lace trim and delving into her already-flooded pussy. She goes stiff, almost like she’s surprised, her back arching, tits thrust against my chest. God, she’s so



fucking wet. Something about that reaches something in me, and now there's nothing I want more in this world than to make her come, feel her fall apart in my arms, and listen as she fights back her screams.

We both fumble with her panties, hands shaking, her dress in the way. Somehow, we manage to get them off, and I shove them in my pocket before freeing my cock. I take her hand and wrap it around my shaft. Fuck, yes, her touch is magic. She's hesitant, yes, but somehow, that only adds to the burning desire to defile her innocence.

"I... I'm not..." I stop her words when I crush my lips to hers, plunging my tongue deep inside her mouth until she's moaning again. I don't want to talk. I don't need to hear her tell me she's not good at this because the fact is, she's fucking perfect. She's everything I need.

Still, she stiffens when I lift her leg to prop her foot on one of the lower shelves. Afraid. I soften my kiss in response, stroking her tongue with mine, teasing one helpless whimper after another while, with my fingers, I explore the unbelievably soft skin of her inner thigh. As soon as I reach her swollen, slick lips, she's mine again, lost in sensation and hungry for satisfaction.

Not as hungry as I am. Precum dribbles from my cock by the time I drag it through her wetness. She grabs my shoulders, gripping them tight enough that I can feel her nails even through my jacket and shirt. I want to tease her and make her beg and plead and sob, and I will. Someday.

For now, I line up with her entrance and roll my hips, forcing my wide head into her tight tunnel.

So tight.

There's a momentary pause, like something's in the way, but I push on. She gasps, her body jerking like a current ran through it, and I understand. I should have known. I figured she was inexperienced, but I didn't imagine she was a virgin.

Was. Not anymore.

And oh, knowing I'm the one, the only one—it's enough to wipe my mind free of reason and control. The only thing stopping me from fucking her mercilessly is knowing it wouldn't be fair. I want to fuck her, but more than that, I want to protect her. She'll never be hurt again, especially not by me.

"You didn't tell me," I whisper once I'm buried balls deep in her. I pause, gripping the shelf behind her head and grinding my teeth. So goddamn tight, like her pussy is trying to milk me. Or snap it off.

"You didn't ask." Her laughter is shaky, with an almost tearful edge. She touches my face, cupping my cheek tenderly enough that it threatens to break my heart. "Don't worry. You won't hurt me. I know you won't."

There I was, thinking she couldn't be any more perfect. What I want to do to her. What I want to make her feel.

I take it easy, giving her slow, shallow thrusts, grinding against her clit while I do. I'm easing her into it, though I know it won't take long. She's already more than halfway to the finish, straining against me, caught between confusion and inexperience and her body's deeper wisdom. It knows what it wants and how to get it. All she has to do is get out of the way and let it happen.

"Does that feel good?"

"Yes!" she nearly sobs, her mouth close to my neck.

"And are you going to come for me?" I whisper.

"Yes, yes! Just a little more!"

I lower my head, my nose buried in her hair, the pulse fluttering in her throat. Yes, she's going to come, her already tight little cunt clenching around me.

All I can do is groan out the strain of holding myself back while she tightens, a high-pitched cry building in her throat. She presses her lips to my neck and screams softly before drenching my cock, her body spasming and her muscles now pulsing, drawing me deeper.

As much as I'd love nothing more than to bathe her womb with my cum, I pull out at the last second with a regretful grunt and aim for her thigh. Nothing in the world but the sweet relief and her even sweeter sighs fill my ears, the sound ringing in my head.

And now I wish we were somewhere else. I wish she could have had the kind of first time I would imagine her dreaming about. Something soft and sweet and romantic.

The hand on the back of my neck is gentle, her fingers running through my hair while she fights to catch her breath. And now that my eyes have adjusted to the darkness, I see she's smiling.

She was already precious to me, but now? I would kill for her. I would die for her. "Are you okay?"

She kisses my cheek, chuckling softly. "I can't believe we did that." And then asks, "Do you think anybody saw us come in here?"

"You wouldn't be the first person to have a quickie at a wedding," I point out before kissing her gently. "And if they did see us, good for them. This will really give your family something to talk about."

"Now I kind of hope they did notice."

"Good girl. That's what I want to hear." We disentangle ourselves, and I can't pretend there isn't regret in that. This is a day of firsts for both of us—usually, I can't wait to have it over with once I've come. As soon as the heated, desperate rush has passed, I'm over it.

We fumble around in the dark, and I find a wrapped roll of toilet paper, which I use to clean her up as best I can. "Before I forget." I'm regretful again when I pull her panties from my pocket since I'd much rather keep them as a memento.

"I guess we shouldn't both go out at the same time."

"Good thinking. I'll go out first." I check to make sure I'm straightened out before opening the door wide enough to see out. The coast is clear. "You sure you're okay?" I don't know why it's so difficult to leave her like this.

“I’m fine, really. Thank you.” I’m not sure what she’s thanking me for—for all I know, she’s grateful that she finally popped her cherry. Whatever the reason, the sweetness in her voice spreads tightness in my chest that finally propels me out of the closet before I do something stupid like ask her to marry me.

The party’s still raging on, the guests slightly sloppier now that they’ve been drinking for the past hour or so. I wander a few steps closer to the ballroom entrance, scanning the crowd, my mind back on business now that the heaviness in my balls has lessened.

There he is. Leaning against the bar—actually, draped over it is more like it. I’m surprised he’s still standing after all the drinking he’s done, and when he holds up his empty glass, it’s clear he’s waiting for another.

This will be easier than I thought.

I move quickly through the clusters of people standing between us, all of whom are either drunk or halfway there by now. A bridesmaid is getting discreetly groped by a groomsman, and a trio of girls dance with their shoes in their hands. No one’s paying attention to me, which is exactly how I need it to be.

I leave a few feet between us, careful to avoid his notice in case he wants to slur an insult or two. I can’t waste time like that. Ainsley will be out any minute. As it is, I doubt he’d notice the Easter Bunny hopping past. I watch as he fumbles with his phone, holding it up close to his face like he’s having a hard time seeing what’s on the screen.

I discreetly signal for the bartender before sliding a hand into my inside pocket like I’m fishing for money. What I’m really fishing for is the small, square packet full of tasteless, odorless powder. The bastard doesn’t deserve it, but it’ll be quick. A sudden, sharp pain in his chest, and lights out for good. By the time it happens, he’ll be home in bed, clear on the other side of town.

The guy behind the bar slides a glass of tequila in front of Paul. I settle for pointing at the beers stocked in a cooler, then

hold up one finger. It's now or never. I glance around quickly once the guy's back is turned, then reach over Paul's glass to leave a tip in the jar.

Dropping the powder into the tequila along the way.

The motion catches Paul's attention, and he grabs the glass. While I'm watching out of the corner of my eye, he raises it to his lips and takes a sip. There's nothing about him to hint at recognition of there being something wrong, not that I would expect it. Even if he was sober, he wouldn't be able to taste the difference.

The way he is now? I could've replaced his drink with a glass of piss, and he'd probably shoot it back without hesitation. By the time I have my beer, he's already halfway finished and still drinking when a couple of his buddies join him.

Ainsley's either still hiding in the closet or has ducked into the ladies' room. Either way, she's nowhere to be found. My job is done. It sort of seems like a waste of time to stick around when Paul's as good as dead. I even got my dick wet, something I wasn't expecting. A bonus.

The door isn't thirty feet from where I'm standing. I could be home in no time, preparing for my next job.

Yet I can't move. I can kill a man, but I can't abandon her. I just gave her what I now know was her first experience. After all the shit she's put up with, what kind of bastard would I be if I ruined things by leaving her now?

When did I grow a conscience? If I did, it was when I first set eyes on her and that ridiculous cat she talks to like a child. She's like some rare, precious thing that needs protecting from the assholes who like to take out their insecurities on everyone they decide is different.

I disappear on her now, and I become one of those assholes. I might be a murderer, but I'm not an asshole.

I happen to be looking in her direction when she emerges from the bathroom for the second time this evening. Our gazes

meet, and the knowing little grin she tries to hide does something to me. I made the right choice.

“Does anybody know, do you think?” She’s trying not to giggle as her gaze darts around.

“If you’re asking whether you’re wearing a sign telling everybody what we did, the answer is no.”

“Good.” She covers her face with one hand, shaking her head while the giggles she can’t hold back take over. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“I might make a bad girl out of you yet, Ainsley.”

When she looks up at me, something deeper than mischief dances in her eyes. “Is that a promise?”

“If you want it to be.” She’s like a magician or a witch or something, working her way inside me. I don’t flirt. I sure as hell don’t stare into a girl’s eyes and wish I’d met her sooner so she’d already be part of my life. Yet here I am.

As it turns out, there isn’t much left of the evening, anyway. A crowd is gathering around the cake table, and we watch from the fringes as the happy couple cut off a slice, which they carefully feed each other. “Come on!” Paul shouts. “Smash it in her face! Smash it! Smash it!” He looks around like he’s hoping somebody will join him in the chant.

I sure can’t imagine why anybody would want this jerkoff dead and gone.

Ainsley growls, rolling her eyes. “Only he would want to see his sister have her dress and makeup ruined.”

“He’s a real charmer.” I touch her hand, drawing her attention. “But then I knew that already.”

“Screw them. Screw them all.”

“I can almost believe you mean that.”

“I do.” She punctuates it with a firm nod. “I always figured they were the ones who were wrong, not me, but this is the first time I’ve ever had anybody agree with me.”

“You have that now.”

“I know.” My god, she’s glowing. “I know that.” How could I have ever considered leaving her alone?

It shouldn’t come as a surprise when she announces she wants to leave only a few minutes after the cake is cut. “It’s not like there’s anything else to do.” True, and we wouldn’t be the first ones to leave, either. A few other couples are already getting their things together and saying goodbye to the bride and groom. I guess some people really do only stay until after the cake.

“Do you want to go tell your folks we’re leaving?”

A wicked little smile tugs at the corners of her mouth. “They’ll figure it out. And it’s not like I need their permission. I’m a grown woman.”

“Yeah, you are.” She blushes when I wink and tries to hide her smile. She doesn’t know that’s a waste of time because she can’t hide anything from me. I’ve seen her from the beginning.

It’s only when we’re in the car, on the way back to her apartment, that tension bubbles up between us again. She’s nervous, and I know why. There’s no doubt in my mind she would say yes if I asked to come upstairs—and it’s tempting, so tempting I have to bite my tongue before I go through with suggesting I do so. No, it’s better for us not to be together tonight, in case she receives a phone call I don’t want to be present for. I doubt she’ll break down with emotion when she hears what happened to Paul, but I can’t run the risk of somehow giving myself away if I happen to be around when she gets the news.

This is new for me. Normally, I finish a job, and that’s it. There’s no connection to anyone else involved in my target’s life. Looks like we both experienced a first this evening.

Instead of making her sweat it out, I take it easy on her. “I really did have a nice time tonight. It’s rare in my line of work to genuinely enjoy a job.”

“You aren’t just saying that?”

“Not a chance.”

“I had fun, too.” She taps her fingers against her knees, staring out the window to her right. “How many of these jobs do you do? Like over the course of a typical week?”

“It varies. I generally have a decent amount of downtime, though.”

“I see.”

I pull to a stop in front of her building and fight back a smile as I turn to her. I don’t want her to get the wrong idea, like I’m laughing at her. She’s been through enough of that. “If you’re asking whether I usually fool around with my clients, the answer is no.”

“Oh, I wasn’t asking that. It’s none of my business, anyway.” She can’t pretend with me. I see her relief. She wants to know she isn’t yet another nameless, faceless fuck.

And nothing could be further from the truth. No, there’s no forgetting this girl. I close my fingers around her hand and lift it until my lips graze her knuckles. The little shiver that runs through her is beyond gratifying. “I’ll look fondly back on this night for a long time. I hope you had a good time, too.”

Her face goes roughly as red as a stop sign, but she nods. “I did. Like the whole thing. It was great. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” I look past her toward the building. “Klaus is probably wondering where you’ve been all this time, and that turtle of yours might be staging an escape as we speak.”

If anything, she looks relieved as she leans over and kisses my cheek. “Thank you, Talon.”

“You’re welcome, Ainsley.”

“Ten out of ten would recommend.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around?”

“Who knows? I might decide to get a hairless cat of my own one day, and we’ll run into each other at the pet store.” She’s laughing as she steps out of the car, then dashes up the walkway, holding her skirts in both hands so she won’t trip. I



savor the sight of her for as long as I can until she disappears into the building—a few moments later, a light comes on in one of the front windows on her floor.

“Good night, Ainsley,” I murmur, putting the car in drive as my plan for what to do next begins forming in my head.

I’m going to see her again, but it won’t be at the pet shop.

In fact, she won’t even know I’m watching.



# TALON

Strange. She struck me as a smart girl—offbeat and quirky, sure, but not stupid, far from it.

Yet she might as well be using a piece of gum to secure her front door. I understand there's only so much a person can do when they're renting, but she could at least have installed a better lock. Something that wouldn't be so easy to pick.

She could have also chosen a building with actual security. The day after the wedding, once she left for the library, I made it my business to study the building inside and out. I suppose, as a librarian, she doesn't make much money, which might explain the lack of cameras in the hallways and stairwells. Hell, it would be a miracle if the smoke detectors worked.

After my inspection, I headed out to my favorite electronics store, where the owners are discreet and never ask questions about why a guy needs half a dozen nanny cams. I'd already done my research, so there was no need for them to offer their opinion on the equipment I'd picked out. My money's good, which is all they care about.

She's working again on Monday. I wait, this time across the street from the library, sitting at a table near the window of a coffee shop. By now, somebody must've found Paul. Nothing about the way she carries herself suggests she's mourning in any way. Why would she? It's like the guy made it his life's mission to hurt her.

"You're welcome," I whisper as she chains her bike to the rack in front of the building. Today, she's wearing an ankle-

length flowered skirt and a lace-trimmed blouse. How she managed to ride her bike in that skirt is a mystery. Her hair's pinned up in a loose bun with pieces blowing free around her face. My hands clench against the desire to bury themselves in that hair.

What is it about her? I don't know whether I want to put her in a bubble so that innocence of hers goes untouched or if I'd rather bend her over that bike rack and fuck her senseless. Nothing about her way of dressing or living is meant to draw a man's attention—she's hardly showing any skin at all—but I'm hard as a rock, just the same. She was meant for me, simple as that. Everything about her was made for me.

It's like I can breathe easier now that I know she's safe. I can move on with my day. And I do, taking my coffee with me, heading to the car where I've already stashed the equipment in the trunk. Not many people will be in her building at this time on a Monday morning, if any at all. Everyone will be at work.

It takes me all of five seconds to pick the lock on her front door, and I blow out a frustrated sigh as I step into the apartment. She's lucky I'm the only person who's ever broken in around here.

I didn't get a chance to take much of a look at her apartment when I was here on Saturday, but now I have all day to familiarize myself with her. I can't help smiling a little as I look around.

It isn't until an ear-piercing squawk startles me into almost dropping half the equipment that I remember she has a fucking parrot. "Klaus is a good boy!" It shrieks from its cage.

"Are you serious?" I ask the bird.

"Klaus is a good boy!"

"She could at least give you something to say about yourself, Marley," I mutter. Honestly, what is the obsession with that cat? A cat who couldn't care less that a perfect stranger just strolled into the apartment. He barely bothers to glance my way before turning his attention back to the

window. There's nothing like a cat to make a man feel worthless.

"Fuck you very much, too," I mutter. It could be worse. He could've attacked.

I'm glad for his disinterest as I take a tour of the cheerful little place. It's exactly the kind of home I would imagine her having: tons of books stuffed into shelves that are all but overflowing, bowing a little in the center under all the weight. Plenty of plants—I'm not a plant person, so I couldn't identify any of them, but it's obvious she takes the sort of zealous care of them that she does of her animals. I ask myself how she manages to keep the cat away from them, but I get the feeling Klaus can't be bothered.

Some would say good boy; others would say lazy, pampered cat.

It takes no work to unscrew the grates over the air ducts and place the cameras inside. On the tablet I brought along with me, I pull up each feed one at a time. It takes a little strategic maneuvering, but I manage to obtain a clear view of her bed from the vent positioned diagonally from it. I even go so far as to lie down, making sure I'm visible the way she will be.

The bed smells like her. The entire apartment does. It's the shampoo she uses or the soap, maybe both combined with something extra. Something that's uniquely hers. I run my hand over the cheerful little quilt, snickering at myself. Since when am I so sentimental?

But it's Ainsley, and everything about her does this to me. Lying here, it's almost like I'm with her. Protecting her, watching over her, making sure the world can't hurt her anymore. I'm not a person familiar with miracles, but I know when I see one. The fact that there's still that spark of innocence present in her heart is right up there with the greatest of them all. After what I witnessed at that wedding, she has no business being so sweet and forgiving, and she sure as hell has no reason to be so damn determined to march to the

beat of the song that plays only in her head. That's the sort of thing that needs to be protected at all costs.

Like the cost of all this equipment. Not that it matters. Nothing would be too much if it meant looking after her.

Before leaving the room, I open her dresser and look around inside. The sight of her lacy, feminine panties makes my cock stand at attention. I take a pair and slide them into my pocket before making a stop at the bathroom to go through her toiletries. One sniff of her shampoo and I groan softly. That's it; that's where that light, floral scent comes from. I make a note of the brand before double-checking to be sure I didn't leave anything behind. One last test of the cameras to confirm the feed is working, and I'm out, down the stairs, and outside in no time. I never so much as crossed paths with a neighbor.

My heart is heavy as I leave, but I can't do anything about that. If I can't be with her, this is the next best thing. And I still can't guarantee it would be safe to walk back into her life so soon after Paul's death. Funny how a precaution that would seem like common sense at any other time is such a fucking hassle now.

One thing that keeps me moving and gets me into the car is knowing I wouldn't be able to see her if I went to prison. That's enough to get me rolling, stopping only at the drugstore to pick up shampoo before heading back to my own apartment.

Now that I've spent time in hers, where she's clearly bent over backward to make it really and truly her own, do I see the stark difference in my own home. I've never seen the point in going all-out—this is where I sleep, where I eat, where I do my research and occasionally watch a show or a movie on my laptop. Stepping into the almost sterile space, though, makes me sorry that I never bothered trying to make this a home for myself. But when you grow up without one, grateful to have enough food to get by and enough money to keep a roof over your head, you tend to overlook the little comforts. She's changing me in ways I couldn't have predicted.

For instance, I never imagined myself as a stalker—not when there wasn't a job involved, that is. Yet here I am,

settling in to watch tonight's show. There's no way she'll pick up on the presence of those cameras. Not a chance.

By the time my microwave dinner is cool enough to eat, the show begins. Her cheerful, high-pitched voice rings out, "I'm home!" What would it be like to hear her say that every day? Walking into our home?

She comes into the frame in her living room and immediately goes to Klaus. "He's not much of a guardian," I murmur, my eyes glued to my screen. She greets the bird and the turtle, asking them how their day went. If she only knew.

I reach into my pocket to pull out her panties and hold them to my nose, inhaling deeply. That's not enough—I can almost imagine myself peeling them off after getting her good and wet, then burying my nose in her scent. My cock is painfully hard, and I have no choice but to free it, wrapping the panties around it before I begin to slowly stroke.

She's doing nothing sexual, nothing I have any reason to be excited by, but I can't help it. The simple act of watching her as she goes about her night, feeding the animals, and holding one-sided conversations is driving me out of my mind. She fixes herself dinner in the kitchen, and I watch from the vent while she tests a spoonful of pasta sauce, licking the corners of her mouth to catch every last bit.

"Fuck me," I whisper, reaching for the bottle of shampoo. I pop the cap and close my eyes before inhaling, and in my head, it's her hair I'm smelling, hair that's fanned out across the pillow while I drive her crazy, worshiping every last inch of her. Claiming her for me, just for me. She'll never be anyone else's.

After one more sniff of shampoo, I'm gone, coming hard enough to make my ears ring and my breath come short and quick. By the time I return to my senses, her panties are covered in cum, and she's oblivious, sitting down and turning on the TV with a bowl of pasta in her lap while Klaus settles in beside her.

I know now this isn't enough. I could sit here every day, every night for the rest of my life, and watch every move she

makes, but that will never stack up to being in her presence. Touching her. Watching as she comes undone thanks to me and only me.

I won't get a minute's sleep tonight if I don't do something about this. I'm a junkie craving his fix, fighting with myself, knowing it's wrong but finding it difficult to care about right or wrong in the face of obsession.

Eventually, the obsession wins out. After watching her prepare for bed, where she reads for an hour or so before turning out the light, I grab my jacket and my lock-picking tools before heading out. If there's one skill I've mastered in my work, it's how to break in undetected.

Her building is quiet, and nearly all the windows are dark as I walk up the pathway leading from the street. Rather than park nearby, I left the car two blocks down, though I seriously doubt I'm in any danger of being discovered. People around here have no idea how dangerous a quiet little town can be when people like me are involved. They expect their boogymen to run around with chainsaws or assault weapons.

Thanks to the sheet covering the birdcage, there's no screaming from Marley this time around. This could have all ended before it began were it not for that. I step into the apartment and close the door slowly, silently. There isn't so much as a creak of the bedsprings in the other room to hint at her hearing my entrance. I creep toward the open bedroom door, crossing the living room with care now that it's pitch black in here.

When suddenly, a fucking goblin comes flying at me from out of nowhere. A hairless goblin with claws that sink into my neck when he lands.

"Motherfucker!" I hiss, shaking my body violently, hoping to fling him off, but he's not going anywhere, the fucker. In my surprise, I stumble against the coffee table, whose legs scrape across the floor, before I finally manage to shake myself free. Klaus darts away, and good thing. He's making me rethink my policy against killing animals.

"Who's out there?"



Shit. It's too late to run. She's already coming out of her room, holding something in one hand. "I have a weapon. Go, now, before I use it!"

She flips the light switch on the wall, and now there's nothing to do but watch as recognition washes over her. "You?"



## AINSLEY

No, this isn't happening. I'm still sleeping. I haven't been able to get Talon out of my head for days—of course, this is a dream about him, that's all. I'm going to wake up now.

"What are you doing?" he asks once I start squeezing my eyes shut and opening them, then squeezing them shut again.

"I'm waking up. I'm waking myself up."

"You're not asleep."

That's not what I want to hear. "If that's true, you just broke into my apartment."

"Yeah, and you came out wielding a hair dryer. What was that supposed to do? Blow-dry me to death?"

Holy hell, this is real. He wouldn't get snarky with me in my own dream.

I drop the blow dryer and make a run for it before I know what I'm doing, scrambling for the front door. I don't know what I'm thinking or what I plan to do. I only know I need to get out of here, now.

He reaches me before I can open the door, and once he's got an arm around my waist and a hand over my mouth, there's nothing I can do. He's too big, too strong, and all the kicking and swinging of my fists in the world doesn't make a difference. I might as well be fighting a brick wall.

"Stop it." He doesn't sound angry as he carries me back to the bedroom. Irritated, if anything. "You're wasting your time,

and there's no reason to fight me.”

He lowers me to the bed with his body half draped over mine. His hand is still over my mouth by the time he nearly touches his lips to my ear. “I didn't come here to hurt you. There is nothing to be afraid of.” I can only squirm and groan behind his hand. Who is he trying to kid? You don't break into a woman's apartment in the middle of the night, then act like this is just a normal visit.

“I don't want you to be afraid. I can explain all of this—and I want to trust you. Can I trust you? If I take my hand away, will you promise to listen and not scream or throw a fit?”

Can I promise that? Do I want to test this man? That's the real question. If he's willing to break into my place and sneak around, what else is he capable of? How could I have been so wrong about him? Tears well up in my eyes, then trickle onto his hand.

“Ainsley.” He sounds like a disappointed father. I should know since I've heard enough disappointment. “I would rather hurt myself than ever hurt you. I know that isn't easy to believe right now, all things considered, but it's the truth.”

The thing is, I want to believe him. Plus, I can't fight him and risk having him lose his temper. I nod in agreement, and as promised, he lifts his hand away.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper. I'm frozen in fear, almost sick with it. Now would not be the time to throw up all over the place. Though if it gets him off me, maybe I should consider it.

“I wanted to see you.”

“You know there's such a thing as a phone, right? I gave you my number when I booked the wedding.”

“I know that. But... I wanted to see you now. It's not easy to explain.”

“Give it a try.” No, I probably shouldn't give him attitude, but now that my first rush of fear has passed, anger is taking

its place. Rage. This is my home, the one place I should feel safe.

He was the one person who ever made me feel safe. Safe to be me with no apologies, no hiding. Now he's taken that from me, and I'm supposed to be happy about it?

He sighs. "I haven't been able to get you out of my head for a minute since Saturday."

I really wish my heart wouldn't skip a beat. I have to stop myself before I do something stupid, like blurt out that I haven't been able to get him out of my head, either. I can't encourage him.

"And I know this is unconventional," he murmurs. "I could have done things the normal way, but that's never been the way I do it. I'm sorry I scared you, but I'm not sorry I did this. Not when I've been dying to touch you for days."

Dammit. He's doing something to me, something bad. He's making me wish he would do more than just touch me. What is wrong with me that it's so easy for him to manipulate me this way? Do I even care? How can I? When I erupt in goose bumps every time his mouth skims my earlobe? I close my eyes and shiver involuntarily—and again when the hand he used to cover my mouth now slides over my throat. His touch is as light as a feather, and a soft sigh eases its way from between my parted lips.

I must be out of my mind, the way he so clearly is. Does it matter right now? Because every part of me—other than my brain—is screaming for more. There I was, thinking nobody would ever touch me again the way he did.

Now I have him here, and he is touching me gently, making me want to scream and beg for more, and he's hardly done anything at all.

"This is all I wanted. You. The excuse to touch you. Please, don't punish me for that." He presses his lips to my neck, and my back arches.

It shouldn't be like this. There's no reason it should be like this.

But I can't help it. Even though I know it's wrong—that I should kick him in the balls and call the police—I want him. I crave him. How is that possible when I've only been with him once? Is it because he was the only one?

Or was he the only one because somehow, I knew he was out there waiting for me?

For heaven's sake, it's bad enough my body is betraying me. I don't need to think stupid things like that on top of everything else.

*But look what he was willing to do to be with you.* Right. He was willing to break into my apartment rather than pick up the phone. What a hero.

Am I pushing him away, though? No. I'm arching my back again when he closes a hand over my breast, rubbing his palm over my nipple and making it harden in an instant. If he would only do that forever and never, ever stop. What's the use of fighting? Why should I deny myself this?

It's like he's reading my mind. "You know what you want. Take it." His breath is hot on my face, and I turn it toward him, my lips seeking his. A shudder runs through me when he brushes them against mine before probing with his tongue.

No, it's not enough to be touched like this. I want his skin against mine. If this is going to happen, I want all of it. Not a quickie in a closet and not a make-out session. "Touch me," I beg before he kisses me again and again until I don't know who or where I am.

I only know he's unbuttoning my shirt, and now I wish I was wearing something sexier than a pajama set with frolicking kittens printed on the fabric. It doesn't seem to bother him. No, when he thrusts his hips, he drives his hard length against my hip.

"What's wrong?" He freezes when I flinch, lifting his head, his eyes searching my face in the light coming from the other side of the open door.

"I never... you know." We might have had sex, but I was more or less fully clothed. "Nobody's ever seen me like this

before.”

“You’re beautiful. Every inch of you.” His lips touch my forehead, my nose, my cheek. “Everything about you. Let me see you. Let me taste you.” And as he whispers his words like a hypnotic spell, he slowly eases my shirt open until it falls to both sides.

I hold my breath as he stares down at me, his throat working when he swallows, his jaw tightening. His fingertips dance over my skin, massaging my breast while he plants gentle but burning kisses against my throat.

It’s so good it almost hurts. But that’s nothing compared to the feel of his tongue as it sweeps over my nipple. It’s like a shock blasting its way through me but in the best way possible. My god, how did I live without this? How did I live without him?

He’s so gentle, almost reverent, moving back and forth, teasing me until all I can do is groan my frustration. Now I am hurting, wet, and aching so hard it’s painful. I don’t realize I’m lifting my hips until he chuckles, releasing my nipple with a light popping sound. “Aching, aren’t you?”

“Yes!” I admit. I don’t care if it sounds pathetic. “Yes, touch me, please!”

“I am touching you. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Talon, please!”

“Relax.” He kisses his way down my stomach while almost playfully tugging at my shorts. “We have all night.” I like the sound of that. I don’t care about anything but feeling more of this, letting him wake me up to everything I’ve missed.

So even though I’m nervous, I lift my hips again, this time so he can work the shorts and panties down my legs. I don’t think I’ve ever been this scared, not even when I heard him out in the living room. My heart’s racing so fast that I think I’ll be sick, and I want nothing more than to cover myself with my hands.

“You’re so beautiful.” Again and again, he whispers it like a prayer, and slowly I begin to relax, letting my legs fall open when he nudges them. He slides down the bed a little until he’s between my thighs, and I’m caught between fear and pleasure again as he runs his lips over the insides. The scruff on his cheeks chafes my skin, but even that’s good, and it isn’t long before my fingers are tangled in his hair, and the room is filled with the sound of my breathless gasps and my moans.

I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe it’s happening to me. That this man wants me this badly, that it’s because of me he’s breathing so hard, grunting like an animal as he gets closer to where I need him most. I’m still scared, but more than that, I’m dying for more.

My body erupts in goose bumps when he blows over my wet, swollen lips. “Oh god, yes...” I close my eyes, every scrap of my focus tuned in to that single part of my body, concentrating on the delicious sensations that start at my pussy and radiate through me.

“Such a pretty pussy,” he whispers. Instead of cringing in embarrassment, I open my thighs wider. If he doesn’t let me come soon, I’ll die. I wish I had the courage to say it.

But I think he senses it. “I’m going to make you come with my tongue,” he explains in a growl. “And then, I’m going to fuck you. But first, I wanna make sure you’re good and ready.” I’m ready now, dammit, but thankfully, he touches his tongue to the seam of my lips, and everything else falls away. All thought, all fear, all of it.

“So sweet,” he rasps before licking me again and again with the flat of his tongue. But that’s not enough; I need more. I need him to go deeper. I need him to make the ache go away.

And then he does, easing his tongue between my lips, and the tension breaks all at once, without warning. My fists grip the sheets, twisting, while I shout out my surprise and relief, almost sobbing from it. But he doesn’t stop. No, he keeps going, hooking his arms around my legs to hold them in place while he continues feasting on me, grinding his face against me while his tongue works my clit.



Fireworks explode behind my eyelids, and something snaps in me, the last bits of self-consciousness falling away in favor of sheer pleasure. And all he does is laugh knowingly at how my hips buck and the way I moan his name again and again. The vibrations from his laughter are good, too. It is all so unbelievably, incredibly good. By the time I come again, I barely have a voice left.

“I could become addicted to the taste of you.” His words sink into my consciousness as I come down from my breathless high to find him licking me again, lapping at my skin. Something is so intensely hot about watching him do that, knowing he can’t help himself. I leave him helpless. Me.

And it makes me bolder, makes me reach for him, makes me sit up and push him up along with me. I’m almost frantic, fumbling as I pull off his jacket and tug at the hem of his T-shirt. He pulls it over his head, and now I can see him. I can really see him. If I had the time, I would study the tattoos across his chest and abdomen, but right now, I don’t have the time. There’s no time. I need him.

And he feels the same, quickly pulling down his jeans before he realizes he’s still wearing his shoes. He kicks them off, grunting, and I lie back and watch as he finishes revealing himself to me.

“You’re beautiful, too,” I whisper with my arms outstretched, my hands hungry for him. I want to touch him; I want to explore and memorize every inch. This is a hunger deeper than lust and arousal. I feel this in my soul, which leaps with joy because he lowers himself over me until I can wrap my arms around his shoulders and hold him close.

“Taste yourself,” he whispers before brushing his tongue over my lips, then inside my mouth. It feels so dirty to inexperienced me, which only makes it hot. I rake my nails into his back in response, and he groans into my mouth, and that’s what I like most, the give and take, the way he responds to me and vice versa. Pushing each other, driving each other out of our heads. Is it always like this? Or am I just extremely lucky?

All I know is when I feel the pressure from his head against my entrance, I'm not afraid like I was before. No, I could almost weep from relief because this is what I need most. My legs close around his hips, and I pull him in, silently urging him on.

He presses forward, and I gasp, arching against him at the unfamiliar but very welcome friction, the sense of fullness, being stretched and filled and claimed. "So fucking tight," he groans, his face inches from mine, his eyes closing as a look of pure bliss washes over his handsome features.

"More," I whisper, rolling my hips, and he delivers by pulling back before driving himself deep again and again.

I've never felt so wanted and cherished. The way he works his arms under my shoulders, holding me tight as he moves inside me, rocking me with every sure, sweet thrust. Every tender kiss, every time our gazes meet, and he smiles. "Ainsley," he whispers, and it's like I've never heard my own name before. "Sweet Ainsley."

Still, it doesn't take long for that sweetness to turn to something else as the now familiar tension starts to grow. It's bigger than before, stronger, and I'm almost afraid as I cling to him and let him take control since he knows what to do. He wouldn't hurt me. He already promised that, and he delivered, and he's doing it again here in my bed.

"Do you have another one for me?" he grunts, his teeth clenched, his thrusts harder, even deeper, sweat beginning to glisten on his neck and shoulders.

"Yes." I close my eyes and give myself over to it, my head rolling from side to side as every time our bodies meet, I'm pushed a little closer to the edge.

"Come for me. Come on my cock. Show me how much you love it." Oh, god, the things he says, what they do to me, all of it together, I can't believe how incredible it is, how incredible he is. I'm going to come again, I'm going to—

Tears roll down the sides of my face, but I'm smiling and laughing, my body wracked with sweet, lingering spasms.

“Yes... yes...” I can’t scream anymore. I can only whisper, and I do, repeatedly, so he knows how good it is. How glad I am that it’s him.

“Fuck... Ainsley, fuck...” He pulls back in time to take himself in one hand and come across my stomach. I forget all about my own orgasm as I watch his, almost fascinated by it. How helpless he is.

He’s still helpless when he falls to my side, propped up on one arm. “See?”

“See what?”

“See how right I was about coming to see you?”

I can only shake my head as I get up. “We’ll have to talk about that later.” As it is, I wish he hadn’t brought it up. It sort of takes the shine off the situation.

“I’ll get you something to wash up with,” he offers.

“No, I’ll go. You already tired yourself out.” We’re both chuckling as I leave the room, walking naked to the bathroom. It’s almost a relief to close the door and be alone for a minute.

What am I doing? What am I allowing?

I can hardly look myself in the eye in the mirror once I’m finished washing my stomach clean. On the one hand, that was amazing. Incredible. It went beyond the physical, down into my soul.

On the other hand, he broke in here. He might be a total psycho.

My heart is heavy when I return to my room, where he’s now under the blankets. I don’t have the guts to tell him to leave—and I don’t want to, either. I’m too conflicted.

I want him to hold me.

He opens his eyes and reaches for me, and I go to him because, in the end, it’s what I want more than anything. To be held. To be held by him.

I can figure the rest out tomorrow.



## AINSLEY

There's light in the room when my eyes pop open. Usually, I wake up a little bit at a time, by degrees.

This morning, it's like I flipped a switch. One second, I was asleep, and the next, wide awake and instantly regretting last night. Funny how it seemed like a good idea at the time—okay, maybe not a good idea by any rational standards, but my body was all-in. I was so desperate for him, so weak for his touch that I would have agreed to anything.

Now it's a different story. Now, I can hardly remember what I felt when I let him touch me, kiss me.

Talon snores softly with one arm over his eyes. He is the first man I've ever shared a bed with, and he's the man who broke into my apartment.

He's also the man who stood up for me when nobody else would. He made me feel beautiful and desirable and worth sticking his neck out for.

Does that excuse his break-in?

I have to get out of here. I don't want to be here when he wakes up. I wouldn't know what to say or do. And I doubt he'll leave if I ask him to. I already pretty much rewarded him for violating my privacy, so what could I threaten that he'll actually care about? Calling the cops? I doubt he'll blink an eye.

I grab my pajamas off the floor after rolling out of bed as gently as possible. Nobody would ever call me graceful, but he's still snoring by the time I reach the door and tiptoe into

the living room. Klaus winds his way around my ankles, but I shoo him away before putting on my clothes and jamming my feet into a pair of slippers.

My phone is on the coffee table, which is slightly crooked after Talon bumped into it last night. There are three missed calls from Mom already, and it's barely seven in the morning. She's a wreck after getting word of my cousin's sudden heart attack sometime over the weekend. He didn't report to work yesterday morning. I got the call yesterday afternoon from my hysterical mother. "We were just with him! He seemed so healthy and alive!"

Paul liked to party. I wouldn't be surprised if it was more than alcohol he was enjoying at the wedding. His heart probably gave out.

I couldn't bring myself to cry. Not that I'm happy about it or anything, but I'm not pretending to be heartbroken, either. I can't help but wonder what Mom would think if she knew I'm sneaking away from a willing man. Even if I told her he broke in, she'd probably call me an idiot. At best.

"Where are you going?"

Now I know what a deer feels like when those headlights wash over it. I'm afraid to move and definitely don't want to look at him. "I..."

"You're not trying to run away from me, are you?"

It's the way he says it. Like I'm a little girl who disobeyed the rules. This is my apartment, and he acts like I'm wrong to try to walk out. "What if I am? Even if it should be you who leaves. This is my home."

"Right. This is where you belong."

"So you're the one who needs to go."

"I'm not going anywhere." He folds his arms, and dang it, I wish he'd put a shirt on. At least he's wearing his jeans, but the fact that they sit low on his hips only makes my mouth water. I need to stay strong and not stare at the muscles cutting a V-shape that leads down beneath his waistband. Why does

he have to be so tempting? Why do I have to want him so much, even now?

My phone buzzes. I forgot I was holding it. “Put the phone down,” he murmurs.

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I want us to talk. No distractions.” He lowers his brow. “This is too important.”

I’m not going to argue about what’s important. I have more than a few things to say to him. Still... “My mom keeps calling. She’s not going to stop until I answer.”

“Everything okay?”

“Not really. She’s upset.”

“I’ve never had a close family, but I guess it’s tough to lose part of it all of a sudden.”

“I guess so.” I sigh, looking down at the screen to confirm she’s the one calling. “She won’t be happy until I burst into tears and—”

Wait a second.

My fingers close tighter around the phone. “How did you know that?”

“Hmm?”

I don’t dare lift my gaze. I can’t. I’m afraid of what I’ll see. But I need to know. “You guessed somebody died. How did you know?”

“Did I guess somebody died?”

“You said it’s tough losing part of a family.” Slowly, I raise my head. “What else was that supposed to mean? Don’t play games. We both know what you meant.”

His face is a blank mask. “Someone in your family died? I’m sorry.”

“Stop playing! It was Paul. How did you know Paul died? I only found out about it yesterday. There’s no reason you should know.”

“Oh, I...” His face scrunches up like he’s either constipated or mad at himself.

“Because if you know,” I continue, “you’re either listening in on my phone or...”

He waits, his face immobile until he prompts me. “Or?”

I don’t want to say it. But it’s right there in front of me, spelled out in mile-high, neon letters. I can’t avoid it. “Or you had something to do with it. But that’s not possible, right? I heard there were no signs of foul play.”

“How could I have had anything to do with it?”

“Then are you tapping my phone somehow?”

“How could I do that to a cell phone?”

“You tell me! You’re the one who broke in here last night. You’re the one who knows that my cousin’s dead when, as far as I know, the family’s trying to keep it quiet.”

He snorts and even rolls his eyes a little. “They would.”

“So?” He makes that constipated face again, and something about it gets my blood boiling. “I’m going to ask you for the truth right now. The whole truth. How did you know about Paul being dead?”

“The truth? You’re sure about that?”

Absolutely not. I’ve never been less sure of anything in my life. I can’t even trust myself or my judgment anymore because up until less than twelve hours ago, I thought Talon was a regular, decent person who never did things like breaking and entering. “Yes. The truth.”

“All right. Yes. I knew about Paul’s death because I caused Paul’s death. Because it was my job.”

Maybe it’s sick. Maybe there’s something wrong with me. Maybe it’s the deadpan way he says it; I don’t know. All I do know is a giggle bursts out of me because that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. “Okay. Right. I know it was a stupid thing to—”



“I’m serious, Ainsley. I was assigned to kill your cousin, and I did. And because I know how to do my job, there won’t be any trace of what I used on him in his system by now. And there’s no chance of them connecting him to me because even the account you sent payment to is under a false name.”

I try to laugh this time, but all that comes out is a choked whimper. “Are you serious?”

“But nothing between you and me was forced. I need you to believe that. I’ve been honest with you about Paul, so you’ll understand I’m telling the full truth. I have nothing to hide from you. I trust you the way you can trust me.”

“Trust you? I’m supposed to trust you? You just got done telling me you murdered my cousin! And the escort thing, that was all a lie? You set me up!”

“You were my only way to get close to him.”

“B-But who would want to kill Paul?”

He has the nerve to bark out a dry laugh. “I only knew the man for a few hours, and I wouldn’t bother asking that question. You’ve known him your whole life. Do you think there was any shortage of people who wanted him out of the way?”

I run a hand up my arm, where goose bumps now cover my skin. “Do you know who it was?”

“That’s not how my job goes. No, I never know, and that’s by design.”

His job. Only a job. That’s all it ever was. From the beginning. “All of it? Even when you came up to me at the pet store. You were following me.” I want him to tell me I’m wrong. I need it. This can’t be true.

“That’s how I do my job.”

“No, you do your job by killing people.”

“Yes, and I was preparing.” His face falls. “I never wanted to hurt you. Not in any way.”

“Oh, congratulations, you totally succeeded.” Sarcasm drips heavily from her voice.

“I know you’re upset.”

“Upset? No, upset doesn’t begin to describe how I feel.” I can’t find the words and can barely pull enough air into my lungs to get them out, anyway. My throat is tight, and the pressure in my chest is intense enough that I wonder if I’m having a heart attack.

When I touch a hand to it, Talon reaches for me—and winces when I flinch but doesn’t back away. “Are you okay? What do you need? Do you feel sick?”

“I don’t know...”

“I’ll get you some water. You just stay where you are.” Sure, because water is what I need right now. A glass of water will totally erase the fact that I gave my virginity to a hitman. That I slept with him again last night, and he’s still in my apartment, and I’m basically trapped with him. Water will make it all better.

“I didn’t want you to find out this way. I don’t know what it is about you.” I’m not even sure I want to know why he’s so at ease in my kitchen, opening the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle of water without hesitation. It’s like every time I turn around, there’s a new thing to be horrified by. “You make me forget everything I know.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

He stops abruptly halfway between the kitchen and where I’m sitting, gaping at me like I lapsed into a foreign language. “How could you even think that?”

“Don’t. Please. Don’t act like I’m out of line. You just got done telling me you’re a hitman, and the whole escort thing was some elaborate plot to get to my cousin. You set me up and had the nerve to...”

I have to look at the floor. I’m too embarrassed to look at him anymore. “And now you want me to have faith in you? How does that work? I know what you do for a living, and I

know you killed my cousin. I'm not supposed to guess the next step would be killing me to keep me quiet?"

I can't help but cringe when he sits down. "This might be hard for you to believe, but I've never been more serious when I say the last thing I will ever do is hurt you."

"You already have. You lied to me. You scared the shit out of me last night, and you're scaring me now. You're hurting me right now."

"I am so sorry for that. It was never my intention. Ainsley, I couldn't have guessed what you would do to me. How you would... reach me."

"You're just saying that."

"I could have left the reception after I gave him the powder. My job was done. I didn't have to stay, but I couldn't bring myself to leave you. I sure as hell didn't have to make myself visible to an entire ballroom full of people when I caught that garter and put it on you."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Why do you think? Because of you. I meant every word I said to you—everything I said about your family, everything I said to them on your behalf. The moment I stepped through that door and saw you in that beautiful dress, I changed. You changed me."

"What? I made you discover you have a heart?" I snort.

"I know you're not being serious, but yes. That's as close as I can come to describing it."

"Stop, please." I can't take it. My heart can't take it.

He slides closer until he's almost on top of me. I want to tell him to get away, but I want just as much to beg him to hold me. It's the sweetness underneath his intensity. Like he really means every word. He might as well tear me in half. That's what it feels like.

"No one in the world will devote himself to you the way I will. Never again will anyone make you feel small or like an

outsider. Not one more day. All I want is to take care of you, keep you safe, and make you happy.”

His hand closes over my knee. “You can’t pretend you don’t feel it. What’s between us is real. Don’t ask me to spend my life wanting you without being able to touch you.”

“What if I did ask for that?” I whisper with my heart in my throat.

“You’d be wasting your breath.” His tone flattens. “Because I’m not letting you go. We belong together. I don’t let go of what’s mine.”

“I’m yours? Says who?”

“Says me.” When his hand slides up my leg, he leaves me torn between knowing I should shove him away and shivering as my insides turn molten. “Stop kidding yourself. Isn’t it much better when you give in? We have fun together—dressed and undressed. I appreciate you. I’d even put up with your cat even though he obviously wants me dead. We could adopt a hundred more if it makes you happy.”

My eyes close as he leans in, brushing his lips against my jaw before whispering in my ear. “You can’t fight what’s meant to be, Ainsley. There’s a reason we were brought together, and I’m not letting you go.”

The worst part is how much sense he’s making. He shouldn’t. Nothing about this should make sense. Especially how I’m melting under the spell of his touch and his words combined.

“We’ll see,” I finally whisper as what’s left of my resolve vanishes.

# EPILOGUE

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## TWO MONTHS LATER

“*W*hy are we doing this?”

“Because you made me a promise.”

“When did I do that?”

“Two months ago.” Since it doesn’t seem like Talon is going to follow me into the shelter, I turn to him with my hands on my hips. “Remember? When you said I could get another cat?”

“I said that?”

“If I remember correctly...” I step up to him until the toes of our shoes touch. “You said something about me getting all the cats I want if it makes me happy.”

His eyes narrow when he scowls. “That doesn’t sound like me.”

“I know it’s been a whole eight weeks, but believe me, you said it. And Klaus wants a sister.”

“Oh? He told you that?” He can pretend all he wants to be stern and against the idea, but I know better. I see it in the way his lips twitch at the corners.

“Sure, he did. He gets lonely now that we’re always spending time together. It’s been a lot for him to adjust to, having you living with us.”

“Right, of course.” He nods slowly. “And the two of you are a package deal.”

“We always have been.”

He eyes the shelter door. “I rarely go through a day without a scratch from that cat. This is going to make it better?”

“You’ll see. It’ll be great.”

Finally, he drops the act. “Okay. Let’s see if she’s still here, waiting for you.”

“I swear. If somebody came in and swooped her up while we were out here having this pointless argument...”

“You think anybody else would be as crazy over a hairless cat as you are?” I have to bite my tongue since I know he wouldn’t love knowing I’ve overheard him having whispered conversations with Klaus, the same way he has with Bob and Marley when he thinks I can’t hear him.

He has a soft heart, no matter what he wants anybody to believe. No matter what he does for a living.

I try not to think about that. It’s something we keep between ourselves, and I don’t ask questions. When he’s deep in research for a new job, I stay out of his way and let him do his thing. There’s only one rule I insist on: he will never use a girl again to get to his target. I don’t want him falling for another girl like he did for me.

Sometimes, I take a step back and think about that. I’m more worried about him falling for someone else than I am about the fact that when he goes out, he may or may not be on his way to murder somebody. It’s the sort of thing I can’t help thinking about. Who could?

But at the end of the day, he’s never treated me any differently than he did that first day. When he picked me up for the wedding and changed my world—and the way I looked at myself. He changed everything. He was who he is now—nothing about him has changed. The version of Talon I started falling in love with that night is the same man who follows me into the animal shelter, who made breakfast this morning, who picks me up from the library every night to make sure I get home safe.

He's also the man who got into an argument with the landlord when he had new locks installed on the door. I wouldn't have wanted to be on the losing end of that fight. I was just grateful I didn't end up evicted.

In the end, doesn't everybody want to feel safe and protected? I've never felt that way before, not even in my own family. I've never felt like my happiness and my preferences were anybody's priority—even now, after a couple of months, I catch myself putting myself last. He always calls me out on it, too.

Not today, though. Today I know what I want: the sweet little cat who needs a forever home with us. "I have a good feeling about this," I whisper while we wait at the front desk. "She spoke to me."

"The cat."

"Yes."

"Spoke to you?"

"Didn't I just say that?"

"Through the computer."

"The moment I saw her on the shelter's Facebook page, our souls connected." He doesn't get it—or he pretends not to. God forbid the hardened hitman admits he has a thing for animals. Even animals who scratch him every day out of jealousy.

"You know, if you keep adopting animals like this, we'll need a bigger apartment." He slides his arms around me from behind, leaning down to murmur in my ear. "Maybe one with a second bedroom we could devote to playing."

Even now, out in public, my pussy moistens at the idea. "If we had a second bedroom, I'd want to turn it into a library to fit all my books."

"Why not both? Bookshelves on the walls for you, a spanking bench, and a swing in the middle of the room for both of us."



“We’ll talk about it.” One of the volunteers waves us back, and waiting for us is Cleo, cowering in a crate. My heart melts at the sight of her big green eyes. She’s mine. End of story.

Talon approaches the crate while I ask all the pertinent questions to confirm she’s fixed and has had her shots. “Her owners had to move across the country, and their new place doesn’t allow animals,” the girl explains. “But Cleo was loved. She’s in great health and came from a household with other animals.”

I’m listening to her but watching Talon. I’m almost afraid to breathe—it might break the spell. He’s crouching beside the crate, studying the cat while she studies him. Eventually, he pokes a finger through the plastic bars, and she takes an experimental lick before purring loudly enough to surprise the volunteer into silence.

“She likes you. You’re the first person she’s paid any attention to since she got here.”

Talon can pretend all he wants, but this pleases him. He stands, one hand wrapped around the crate’s handle. “We’re ready to go. What else do we need to do?”

Just like that. I bite my lip to hide a smile before signing the paperwork. It’s only when we’re outside that I clear my throat. “So. You’re suddenly a fan of the idea?”

“She needs us.” He’s so sure of himself, the way he is when it comes to just about everything. “We came to an understanding in there.”

“What? You mean the cat spoke to you?” I tease. “Because the last time I checked, you were giving me a raft of crap about that.”

“Laugh all you want.” He finally cracks a grin. “Come on. Let’s go home and introduce her to the family.”

Yes, because that’s what we are. I’ve stopped trying to make sense of it. All that matters is how I feel. The fact is, I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life. Happier than I ever imagined being. For once, I have the family I want, the family that warms my heart and makes me feel like I have a home.

When you find something like that, you can't overthink it.  
All you can do is hold on tight.

And that's exactly what I'm going to do—for the rest of  
my life.

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*updates*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Darcy Rose*

SEXY · TABOO · DARK

If you like your books short, taboo and dark, then a Darcy Rose book is perfect for you.

She 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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