

Disorderly Attachments

A Kristin Ashe Mystery

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PROLOGUE

Some people, it takes time to despise.

Not Carolyn O'Keefe.

She made me wary the minute she walked into my office twenty-nine days ago.

Something in her mannerisms gave me pause—her smug arrogance, her detachment, her false relaxation. While I couldn't define my fears, I nonetheless decided to turn her away.

Yet before the end of our first appointment, she had uttered two words that guaranteed I would do as she asked.

Words that could never be taken back or forgotten.

My temper started to crack the second I agreed to do her bidding, and the fissure widened over the days that followed. I suppose I could have accepted help or sought intervention, but I was on a path that could not be corrected.

Each decision I made from this boiler of anger has led me to where I am today.

I can see that now as I lie in wait for Carolyn O'Keefe, but I remain certain in my convictions.

Especially one.

When she comes into sight, I will kill her.

CHAPTER 1

“I have thirty days to decide whether to have an affair.”

Those were the exact words Carolyn O’Keefe used, over the phone, to secure an appointment on a Tuesday morning in late July. She would identify herself only as Lynn, but she promised to stop by my office within the hour.

By the time she walked through the door four hours later, I was fuming, an emotion that disintegrated when she placed a rubber-banded bundle of cash on my desk.

“I assume you’re Kristin Ashe,” she said in an authoritative voice.

I nodded.

“Thirty days, that’s the deadline. I’ll pay you ten thousand dollars to retrieve information to aid in my decision.”

I offered her a seat, but she declined.

This put me at a disadvantage when I lowered myself into the leather swivel chair behind my desk, but I had to bear it. I couldn’t very well take notes standing up, and sitting put me closer to the cash.

Ten grand.

I smiled inside. That would pay a lot of overhead for a lot of months.

“Tell me more about the affair,” I said noncommittally.

“I’m in a long-term partnership, but recently, I’ve become uncontrollably attracted to someone else.”

“A woman?”

“Yes.” In her mid-fifties, my prospective client wore a designer tan pantsuit and heavy jewelry, large rings and bracelets with rainbow-colored stones. Reading glasses rested on top of tiger-colored hair that swooped up in a girlish, straight style, and thin eyebrows, plucked to perfection, set apart wide eyes and drew attention to a high forehead, which was now wrinkled.

“You’re afraid this will threaten your relationship with your partner?”

“That’s the least of my worries. We have an open agreement that’s tolerated a number of trysts. My concern is that in becoming intimate with this much younger person, I might create a messy entanglement.”

“How did you meet, you and the younger woman?” I said as my gut tightened.

“I can’t disclose the exact circumstances, but let’s just say in a professional context,” she replied, her eyes never leaving mine.

Since she arrived, her stare hadn’t wavered.

Nothing on my desk would have distracted her, because I kept it stark, no personal photos or mementos. Only a blank blotter, a digital clock, a laptop and two empty in/out baskets. But the items on my colleague’s desk—the pinwheels and kaleidoscopes, gumball machine, tabletop Zen garden with pen-size rake and dozens of framed snowboarding photos—something should have elicited a reaction.

Unable to tolerate her gaze, I pushed back from the desk, held a legal pad close to my chest, and concentrated on taking notes. “What happens in thirty days?”

“I have the opportunity to go away for the weekend with her, without varying my routine or arousing suspicion.”

“This woman you have your eye on, does she share your feelings?”

“She does.”

“You know this because...?”

“I know,” she said harshly, then her voice softened, almost disappearing. “We’ve fallen deeply in love, without words or touch.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You haven’t said anything or made a pass?”

“No.”

“She hasn’t made a move on you?”

“I believe she has, but not in a provable manner. For example, there have been quite a few lingering touches.”

“Meaning?”

“When we shake hands, when our knees touch below the conference table, subtle overtures.”

I fastened my gaze on the wad of cash. “What do you expect me to do?”

“I want you to follow her, around the clock.”

“I have a full caseload,” I said, stretching the truth by three-quarters of a caseload.

She said briskly, “I’ll purchase as many hours as you can spare. I want you to make this your highest priority. I must know where she goes, what she does, who she knows. You’ll be with her in the morning when she leaves her house and at night when she pulls into the driveway. I’m paying you to interview her co-workers, her neighbors, her associates. You need to get inside her and find out everything there is to know.”

“Background checks? I can run a civil check, a criminal check and a credit history. I could have those reports to you within twenty-four hours.”

“Those are fine, but you’ll have to go further. I want to make sure she’s emotionally stable. You’ll bring me information on her character, her values, her likes, her dislikes, what she eats, what makes her laugh, why she cries, what scares her, what delights her.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier for you to uncover those yourself, er, naturally, as the relationship unfolds?”

“You have no idea who I am, which we’ll leave at that, but I hold a position of extreme trust. My career is in the public eye, scrutinized at every turn. I can’t afford a dirty breakup, or blackmail or, worse, a widespread outing. I’ve been burned in the past, very badly. I must act with more caution.”

“If you’re so concerned, why risk an affair at all?” I said neutrally.

“She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. I won’t squander the opportunity.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what are you attracted to in her?”

Lynn/Carolyn stood perfectly still, hands clasped loosely in front of her, and remained expressionless. “Where do I begin? The curve of her smile, the sound of her laugh. The way she dresses, the glow of her skin, the jewelry she wears.” She checked herself, before continuing in a carefully controlled tone. “I could live in the light shining off her golden hair or lose myself in her green eyes, tender pools made radiant by the sun. Her touch is electric, and she smells fresh, of oranges and flowers.”

I suppressed a cough. “Is this woman in a relationship?”

“Discovering that is your first order of business. I don’t enjoy competition, but if I must fight for her, I’ll win.”

Honestly, the whole scenario gave me the creeps, but the tower of bills beckoned.

“How can I contact you?” I said, stalling.

“You can’t. I’ll call for updates, but we mustn’t meet again.”

“I’d like to know your last name, for my records. And a phone number, in case of emergency.”

“Absolutely not.”

“I have a standard contract that clarifies and protects your interests and mine,” I said, opening a drawer to retrieve the one-page document.

“No. These are my conditions.”

I slammed the drawer. “You trust me with the money, but not your name?”

“The money is replaceable. My reputation isn’t. I can’t afford to jeopardize it in the event of a misstep.”

“I rarely make mistakes,” I said, tense.

“I’m aware of that, or I wouldn’t have hired you.”

“How did you hear about me? Do we have a mutual acquaintance?”

“We certainly do, but I’m not foolish enough to reveal her name.”

“Fair enough,” I said with an easy smile as I fingered the money.

“You’ll do as I ask?”

I had no intention of working for this woman, but I did pose one more question, out of idle curiosity. “What’s her name, the object of your lust? I assume you can reveal that.”

She measured me before saying, “Don’t mock me.”

I pushed away the money, back toward her, almost off the desk, when she uttered two words that suspended my movements.

Two words that I’d heard and screamed and whispered a thousand times.

Two words that jumpstarted my rage.

“Destiny Greaves.”

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