

RUNNING FOR HIM

A PREVIEW OF THIS ROMANTIC SUSPENSE
NOVEL

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PROLOGUE

TO ANYONE PASSING BY, the massive house situated at 212 Sand Lodge Lane looked like any other in its affluent neighborhood. Not quite a mansion, but it came close with its hand-cut stone walls, its sparkling swimming pool shimmering under the moonlight, and its sprawling lawn, carefully cultivated to perfection. But one detail of the house stood apart in stark contrast from the others.

In an area where security measures came as naturally as breathing to its residents, the massive front door to the house stood ajar. An unspoken invitation to anyone who may be passing by to come on inside and make themselves at home.

A hooded figure stood on the sidewalk studying the house, and decided to take the homeowners up on their invitation. A quick look around showed nothing else out of the ordinary – no one else watching – while a careful listen turned up nothing but the sounds of crickets chirping and their own feet quickly approaching the front steps.

Reaching for the door, the pale hand of the intruder, with its soft skin and manicured nails, trembled slightly as it pushed

the fixture open wider on its hinges. Stepping inside, the door was closed with a quiet click, followed by the louder snick of the lock. It wouldn't do to have someone else come along snooping.

The interior of the house felt like a tomb. There were no lights on, with the exception of the one glowing from the stove light in the kitchen down the hall. The air was still; no fans blew, no pets stirred. The only sound to be heard was the hushed ticking of the massive grandfather clock from its place of honor in the living room.

After the eyes of the intruder adjusted to the darkness, a study of the rooms showed the house held a respectable number of priceless items. Rococo style chairs flanking a dignified Aubusson rug could be seen from the foyer, gracing a living room where Waterford crystal held hot-house roses on the end tables. A Duncan Phyfe table dominated the dining room, where original paintings by famous artists hung on silk-papered walls and the light fixtures hanging from the ceiling dripped with crystals. Even the foyer, with its Persian rug, mahogany telephone table and Tiffany lamp, whispered elegance to visitors.

Oh, yes. There was money here.

Muffled noises from another part of the house caught the ear, drifting down the curving set of stairs from the second floor. So, the house wasn't empty after all. Following the sounds, it soon became clear whoever was upstairs wasn't alone and was oblivious to the person now making their way up to the second floor.

The footsteps on the stair treads were silenced by thick carpet under dark boots. The bare hand gliding along the polished banister, pale in the moonlight filtering through the clouds and windows, no longer shook with nerves. With each step climbed, the volume of the noises escalated until they

could be followed with ease to the master bedroom. The squeaking bed springs, throaty groans and breathy sighs left little to the imagination as to the acts taking place.

At the entrance to the room, a set of pocket doors missed meeting by mere inches, seeming to have been closed with haste, almost daring someone to witness the sins being committed on the other side. With quiet, measured moves, the boot-clad feet stepped up to the doors and, through the narrow gap, the current candidate for Senator could be seen ruthlessly banging a well-known socialite in the bed he usually shared with his wife.

The blue eye pressed to the gap in the doors narrowed at the sight. This just wouldn't do.

Even as the thought echoed through the brain, the couple on the other side of the doors rolled over the bed, so the socialite now sat astride her enthusiastic companion. She was quite beautiful, her Italian heritage coming through in her damp dusky skin and the long, dark hair disheveled by her lover's hands. Yes, she was gorgeous, as any of the tabloids following her every move could show you. Wouldn't those tabloids have a field day with this scenario? Especially when given the fact elections were right around the corner. The prominent politician, cheating on his wife with a wannabe celebrity with some very enthusiastic sex.

The socialite continued to ride her lover – who was enjoying himself if the smile spread across his face and his groping of her breasts were any indication – to oblivion. As the pair climaxed and screamed together into what they thought was an empty house, the figure stepped away from the scene, making its way down the stairs and out the front door once again.

No, this simply wouldn't do. There was some planning to be done, as infidelity couldn't – and shouldn't – be condoned.

It was clear. Somebody would have to pay.

Plotting and planning was best done in solitude. And since the house was currently occupied, another secluded area needed to be found nearby. Strolling the grounds behind the home, the silhouette of the guest house could be made out in the moonlight.

Perfect.

Gaining access to the guest house took a little more work than just walking into the main building. Ironic, how the little apartment with nothing to hide was closed up tight, while the doors to the main house were open and secrets abounded. A testing turn of the handle had the door opening with ease, allowing the figure to slip inside, unnoticed, to sit in the dark. To watch, to think, to plan.

Taking a seat by the window looking out over the lush back-yard, the individual seated there was deep in thought. While it was true someone would have to pay for this indiscretion, the question was...who? The politician who was breaking up his family because he couldn't keep it in his pants, or the social climbing whore who was screwing a man everyone knew was married? Tapping a finger on the small dining table, the person in the hoodie contemplated the fate of the two people. And decided, when it really came down to it, there was no need to debate the question at all. The man, while a cheating scumbag, had a family and prospects. He could be blackmailed, or if it came down to it, framed. And when he was, he'd toss his mistress aside like yesterday's paper.

So, yes, the woman it would be. But how?

She had been in the tabloids for years and had pretty much become a household name. Ariana Gallaccio had no known talents, other than being a beautiful woman who snagged rich, famous men to take as her lovers, thus keeping her in the spotlight for any potential source of income. And since she'd never

shied away from the press or interviews, the information available on her was abundant.

Taking a phone from the deep pockets of the hooded jacket, slim fingers tapped out the search information. Pale eyes skimmed over numerous articles and interviews, looking for information useful to the cause. A weakness, a fear, anything could be exploited for the only acceptable outcome of ridding the senatorial candidate of his mistress. But as the search continued, nothing leaped off the screen.

What if the information wasn't fact? A well-placed rumor in the proper ear could cause all sorts of trouble, whether it was true or not. The filthier the rumor, the more speed it would pick up as it traveled the grapevine. And since Ariana was enthusiastic in sex – and appeared to be quite practiced at it – it seemed like a good place to start.

The pieces of the idea were shifting into place when movement caught the eye from the other side of the window. The woman in question strolled along the skirt of the pool, now dressed in a blood red gown, its skirt flowing with each step. Ariana's looks reflected her lineage, even if certain aspects of them had been refined under a plastic surgeon's hands. Her long hair, its wild dark curls, fluttered in the breeze. Her dark skin was almost luminescent in the pale shafts of moonlight reflecting off the water as she lifted her skirt to sit on the side of the pool. Long legs dipped into the water's smooth surface, causing ripples as she moved them back and forth. The motion caused the small teardrop diamond pendant, worn on a simple gold chain around her neck, to sparkle as it caught the light reflected from the water. She sat, smiling to herself, pleased with who and where she was. Her smile went wider as her lover came outside, also dressed to go out, and walked over to kiss her thoroughly.

Narrowed eyes watched through the window of the guest

house. It was one thing to screw someone other than your wife in the marital bed, but another entirely to kiss the one you cheated with for anyone to see. Unmoving, the hooded figure continued to watch as the man of the house walked away, listened as the car in the driveway started and made its way down the road.

It was time to take care of the situation.

Moving with quick, quiet steps, the thin figure left the guest house and made its way to the pool.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Brown eyes, stunned like a deer in the headlights, snapped up at the sound of the voice from across the pool.

“Who are you?” The accent was thick in a voice of whiskey and cream.

“It doesn’t matter who I am. It matters who you are. Or more specifically, who you’re not.” Eyes grew narrow again behind glasses slipped on during the trek poolside. “Sex with another woman’s husband, in her bed?” A single finger shot up to wag in disapproval. “Tsk, tsk.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ariana pulled her feet from the water, the red polish on her toes gleaming to match the dress she wore.

“Oh, but I do.” A pale hand held up the phone, gestured with it. “A picture’s worth a thousand words, *bella*. I’ve got about five of you and Mr. Livingston pursuing your, shall we say, extracurricular activities upstairs. That’s about five thousand words.” A devious smile began to spread across a pale face. “At a dollar a word, isn’t that about equal to your going rate?”

“I’m sure I don’t understand.” Ariana reached up to toy with her necklace, her nerves showing in not only the gesture, but her eyes as well.

“Oh, a little birdie told me you were once an escort. A call

girl. A high-priced slut who would spread her legs for large sums of money. And from what I witnessed up there,” the thin hand pointed to a darkened window, “I’d say you earned every penny and then some.”

“This is a lie.” Ariana’s cheeks flushed at the accusation. “I don’t have sex for money.”

“Don’t you?” Now moving in slow, deliberate strides around the pool, the figure kept talking. “You hook up with attractive men, each and every one of them with more money than sense. And you’re telling me you don’t sleep with them? They don’t give you money or buy you things?” A shake of the head. “I know better.”

“What do you want?” The ball of fear in Ariana’s belly could be heard in the shaking of her voice.

“I want you to leave. Leave Mr. Livingston, leave town. And don’t come back.”

“I can’t do this thing you ask. I live here, it is my home.”

“Will you really want to live here once word gets out about your previous profession? True or not, there are some who will believe it. And then, once they connect you to Livingston, where will it leave him? Likely divorced. His children would disown him. And he may as well forget about being a senator, or even a politician period. He’d be ruined, and it would all come back to you.”

Ariana stood silent, nervous fingers still toying with the pendant of her necklace as she watched this person’s every move with wide, frightened eyes.

“You wouldn’t want that for him, would you? Not if you love him. I’m sure you can start over somewhere else. Smart girl like you? I’d say you have tidy little nest egg, set aside for a rainy day.” Coming to a stop an arm’s length away, the voice grew colder. “And honey, it’s pouring.”

“But –” Her voice halted as at last she got a good look at the

face inside the hood, her eyes narrowing in recognition. “Wait. I know you. You’re –”

Quick as lightning, thin arms whipped out to connect with the woman’s shoulders. Caught off balance, Ariana reached out with a shriek before falling over the side and into the pool’s cool water. The splash wasn’t nearly as satisfying as the flailing and sputtering Ariana did once she breached the surface. The hooded stranger watched with pleasure as she struggled to keep her head above water.

Looked like the poor girl couldn’t swim. Too bad.

Somehow, she made her way to the edge of the pool.

“Please,” she pleaded, reaching out as she coughed up water. “Help me.”

“Now, why would I do that?” Without a qualm, a booted foot came to rest on top of her head and pushed. Choking, Ariana reached out again, scratching at the concrete surface of the side of the pool, her fingertips scraped bloody and her nails ragged as she struggled to find a handhold. She pushed at the foot on her head and fought for air, just one single breath. The harder she fought, the more pressure the boot placed on her head. Until finally, her body jerked one last time before she went still, and the icy blue eyes behind the glasses watched the body sink to the bottom of the pool.

One problem solved, and a new one to deal with. At least this one could have some assistance. The phone came out once more, numbers were dialed, and the command was given.

“Get over here now. I need your help.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

There's just something about a small town that makes relationships interesting, whether they are romances, long-running feuds, or life-long friendships. These are the relationships H.C. Bentley enjoys discovering and exploring. Well that, and the fact she just loves a good happily ever after or second chance story.

A southern girl at heart, H.C. calls Kentucky her home. After opting to join the military to pay for college, she spent three years stationed in Wiesbaden, Germany before returning to her hometown in rural western Kentucky, where she and her husband live with their two daughters.

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